Angela Valamanesh: quiet in nature

Catherine Kenneally

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Front cover: Been here and gone, 2006, no. 7, unglazed ceramic, 5.5 x 43 x 54 cm. Collection of the artist.
Back cover: Natural Histories – Cell, 2008, unglazed ceramic, 37.5 x 26 x 2.5 cm. Private collection
End page: Lung 3, 2009, two parts, unglazed ceramic, 31 x 31.5 x 4.5 cm. Collection of the artist

Angela Valamanesh thanks Hossein Valamanesh. Angela is represented by Greenaway Art Gallery, Adelaide.
ANGELA VALAMANESH

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‘I think there are some similarities between making functional or non-functional objects . . . the same care and pleasure . . . the differences are to do with ideas; the objects remain small in scale, often in a group or sequence, and quiet in their nature.’ Ceramic artist Angela Valamanesh sidesteps valorising the conceptual strand of her work, the bulk of her output for over a decade, above the functional. She also avoids eulogising her most frequently chosen material; it is the one that most often fits her purpose, it’s versatile, she has the skills to make the most of it, but claims she is not ‘in love with’ clay. Yet her material does seem to the observer to bespeak what Angela Valamanesh is about, or has most often been about in a practice spanning three decades since her art school days. Clay has something crucial to say about being in and of this planet, Earth, as so many human myths reiterate, making siblings of us all, animate or not.

More and more, Valamanesh has chosen to foreground that material without glazes or decorative surfaces, and in her treatment of it to employ only a restricted palette of earthy hues from forest, desert or shore. Unlike other South Australian ceramicists who spring to mind, say, Gerry Wedd or Margaret Dodd, Valamanesh rarely works against her material with ironic intent – no blobby Holden cars, no giant mock-triumphal urns or Delftware thongs. At the same time, her work is by no means humourless; its philosophical implications are playful and irreverent as well as deeply pragmatic.

Lung (1 and 2), 2007 and 2008, might be considered a representative Valamanesh work: Lung 2 unglazed, uninflected, swamp-green in colour, a flat pair of honeycombed lung shapes, the dead and desiccated obverse of Lung 1, two fuller, rounded, solid, swampy grey-green shield shapes covered in shallow surface indentations. Taken together, Lung encourages meditation on living, breathing animality, pointing in contemplative fashion to the necessary end of each organism’s life. One piece is brittle and dry, the other full and matt-glossy, their ceramic fabric the perfect vehicle: form and content, material and theme sing together. ‘Somehow the use of clay . . . feels appropriate to the subject matter . . . a common material, that we are all connected to.’

When Angela Valamanesh returned to study to undertake a Masters degree, she rubbed shoulders with colleagues, contemporaries and near-contemporaries, multimedia and installation artists of an emphatically experimental cast, the likes of Helen Fuller, John Barbour and Paul Hoban. It was during this period, and during her immediately subsequent studies in Glasgow, that the artist moved decisively away from the creation of functional items and, temporarily, from her signature material: ‘I quite deliberately decided for a long while there were only plants, 1997, plaster, longest 60 cm. Collection of the artist
that I wouldn’t be making work with clay.’ In the drawings and pieces she made during that Glasgow scholarship period are to be found conceptual seeds that have borne fruit right up until the present, though she has returned to clay to realise her vision.

*Been here and gone*, 2006, (and many more recent works) began during my residency in Glasgow School of Art in 1997... the starting point was a large collection of pen-and-wash drawings I made on paper, which were coated in wax, pinned in a disorderly grouping on to the wall, and titled: *For a long while there were only plants.*

The 2005 suite of ceramic objects, *Been here and gone*, are muted, in dirt and sand and leaf colours, grey-green, pink-brown, ochre. An elegant, stylised frond form with tapering fingers, coagulated bubbles of frogspawn or alveoli, pierced flat discs like lily roots, coral-like, long, tuberous pods. Certainly ‘quiet in their nature’, modelled from nature, elemental, organic shapes and shades, unglazed, clay being permitted to speak primordially loud and clear. Another South Australian, Stephanie Radok, suggests herself as kindred spirit, an artist who has been obsessed with the structural qualities of global plant and seed forms, imprinting...
Inlaid vase, 1993, unglazed ceramic, 42 cm high. Collection of the artist.
Inlaid vase, 1993, unglazed ceramic inlaid with coloured clay, 42 cm high. Private collection
A bowl is a bowl is a bowl . . . , 1995, unglazed ceramic, 20 x 17 cm maximum size. Private collections
A bowl is a bowl is a bowl . . ., 1995, unglazed ceramic, 32 x 9 cm maximum size. Private collections.