

Kate Fitzharris

New Familiar

RDS Gallery

March 2020



New Familiar:
Work by Kate Fitzharris

By Joanna Osborne

An essay on the occasion of the exhibition of
ceramic sculptures by Kate Fitzharris
held 6-28 March 2020

RDS Gallery,
6 Castle Street, Dunedin

New Familiar: Work by Kate Fitzharris

New things become familiar as they are integrated into the existing ways we perceive the world around us. A familiar is a close companion or spirit that serves and watches out for someone. Objects can fulfil this role within our domestic lives: they contain something of our experiences, our memories of the past or our hopes for the future.

Kate Fitzharris

Kate Fitzharris's *New Familiar* comprises recent works alongside those completed at the 2019 Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park artist residency in Shigaraki, (Kōka District, Shiga Prefecture), Japan. One of the highlights of her residency was being able to explore an extensive array of different kinds of clay and her findings are celebrated in this exhibition. Shigaraki is a heritage site, one of the Six Ancient Kilns', known for wood fired pottery, local clay beds and *yakishime* (unglazed pottery).

In Shigaraki, Fitzharris was impressed by the saturated presence of boutique stoneware for public use. This inspired her to incorporate a utilitarian, domestic use for ceramics into her previous approach, which emphasised the figure. She was also inspired to explore the colour range of clay in her use of slips, as well as

traditional reduction firing techniques that brought out differing colour qualities.

In this exhibition, Fitzharris has included larger works alongside her usual practice of working on a miniature scale. Her arrangements of personified domestic objects evoke narratives for the viewers. Simplified objects accompany and contextualise the main pieces. Small bundles of dark clay rods, for example, represent the ubiquitous bundles of wood that she saw in Shigaraki, while referencing the process of firing clay itself.¹

New Familiar explores connections between cultural and personal spheres. The use of the *Sheela na gig*² has accompanied her practice for some time, finding its way into new contexts and assemblages in her exhibition portfolio. As well as evoking fascination because of its mysterious and ancient cultural origins, the figure has personal presence for the artist. In the piece 'Here we are', the *Sheela na gig* adorns the top of a vase, in part mirroring the quite different emblematic character of the *tanuki* (racoons) that are prevalent in Shigaraki ware, while also functioning as a signature of her practice.

¹ A snake-like spiral form alludes to a poster, seen in Japan, advertising an exhibition of mosquito-coil holders by local potters. The coils 'felt a bit Celtic', in the artist's words.

² *Sheela na gig* refers to stone female figures equipped with obvious genitalia. These decorated European Romanesque churches, particularly in Ireland, and are a source of inspiration for Fitzharris.

Fitzharris's travel to Japan also sparked an interest in the traditional practice of assigning poetic names (*mei*) to objects, with reference to literature, or in accordance with the physical characteristics of particular pieces. Traditionally, names are only given to objects of significant warrant. Naming a domestic object affords it presence, meaning and significance. The personifications of Fitzharris's vessels heighten the poetic and named associations of the arrangements. Domestic objects are given a life of their own, in name and appearance.

Fitzharris maintains a feeling for the significance of the relationship between maker, audience and material. The medium of clay has importance for her as a direct point of connection with the earth. She is also conscious of the relationships that develop over time with the objects and artworks people choose to live with. *New Familiar* continues to explore these concerns in a cross-cultural-geological sense.

Joanna Osborne

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Note: The text above has been developed in conversation with the artist.

Kate Fitzharris (b. 1974, Wellington, New Zealand), completed a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the Dunedin School of Art, with a major in ceramics, in 1996. She has held a number of residencies, including: Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park (Japan, 2019), with additional funding provided by the Blumhardt Foundation and Creative New Zealand; Tylee Cottage (Sarjeant Gallery, Whanganui, 2018); and Doris Lusk Residency (Risingholme Community Centre, Christchurch, 2017). Among her other honours, she was a finalist for the 2019 Wallace Arts Trust Awards, and received Portage Ceramic Merit Awards in 2014, 2010 and 2002. The Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park Foundation, the Dowse, the James Wallace Arts Trust, and the Waikato Museum include her work in their collections. Her ceramic figures have been shown at galleries across New Zealand, including solo exhibitions at Masterworks Gallery, Sarjeant Gallery, the Lopdell House Gallery and the Blue Oyster Art Project Space, among others.

Kate's primary medium is ceramics, though she also explores the use of 'found materials', such as vintage fabric and wild clay. Typically constructing small-scale, often anthropomorphic, objects, the artist asks viewers to look closely, to examine her diminutive creations in all their intricate detail of surface, colour and shape — ultimately to reflect upon how contemporary culture rarely encourages us to engage with the subtleties of our environment and its ever-proliferating collection of mass-produced, characterless objects.

Joanna Osborne recently completed a doctoral thesis that considered the nature of interdisciplinarity at the nexus of art history, religion, and theology, titled ““Black light” / “Whiteness rests my mind”: Evocations of the Spiritual in the Art and Practice of Ralph Hotere and Joanna Margaret Paul’ (University of Otago, 2019). She has published on Joanna Margaret Paul, Ralph Hotere and Allie Eagle, most recently ““The flowers remember / the sugar bowl remembers”, Quotidian Wonder and the Painter/Poet Joanna Margaret Paul’, in *Thresholds of Wonder: Poetry, Philosophy and Theology in Conversation*, ed. Jennifer Reek and Francesca Bugliani Knox (Routledge, 2019).

References

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<http://www.masterworksgallery.co.nz/artists1/ceramics/kate-fitzharris/>;
<https://nzartsite.com/artists/kate-fitzharris.html>;
Sarjeant Gallery Te Whare o Rehua Whanganui, *Kate Fitzharris: Things Don't End at Their Edges*, 2019.

Cover Image:

Shigaraki Sheela (Kate Fitzharris, 2019, ceramic, h 180mm)

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Neil Lowe

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