

Thinking along similar lines

Robert Nelson, The Age, November 23 2011

ALWAYS thinking, the ancient Greeks couldn't even let a jug stand on a table without giving it a voice. The same people who did their philosophy in the market square also painted their ceramics to tell stories, to show life as it ought to be or as it once was in the mythical age.

When the Greeks decorated their pottery, they designed an ornamental support for a window onto a world which was neither inside the vessel nor outside it but an imaginary theatre, rich in narrative. They painted the ceramic with borders, meanders and palmettes that relate the features of the vase to an other-worldly tableau where remarkable scenes would be staged.

A beautiful group of Greek ceramics, as well as some Middle-Eastern antiquities, has been assembled from private collections in Melbourne. It's hard to believe that so many exquisite pieces could be held by individuals in a town as relatively small and young as Melbourne, without having recourse to the National Gallery of Victoria or institutions such as the Trendall Research Centre at La Trobe University. The vases range from archaic times to the Hellenistic period, with many coming from southern Italy. All of them make me think of the cerebral gymnastics of Greeks themselves, able to live a practical life of trade, manufacture and war but also able to deliberate on aesthetics, politics and morality in the agora.

Like interlocutors in a dialogue, each Greek vase makes two propositions: first, it says that it carries water or pours wine or whatever its practical purpose is. There's a swelling belly, a tight neck, perhaps handles to the side and sometimes a spout, all underscored with ornament.

But second, through imagery, the vase also proposes that there's an ideal life that the wine and the water might equally nourish and inspire: it's a world of perfection or divine mischief or sexual fantasy. The scenes on the ceramic, all created by fine line-work, are often heady and naughty, unabashed in their confession of godly indulgence.

There's something brainy about drawing. The invitation to spell out the ways of the world through a line is analytical and gives thought towards how things are or might be. It doesn't reflect thinking so much as creates thinking; it's a way of thinking, which is perhaps why the curator, Irene Barberis, calls another exhibition *Lines of Thinking* at Langford120.

Like the Greeks, our artists are still capable of drawing on two levels. In its inquiring spirit, drawing today is more about showing something and at the same time showing the process of the drawing itself. In *Lines of Thinking*, even the most representational artists, such as Rick Amor, create this tension with powerful aesthetic results.

I was intrigued by Gosia Wlodarczak's *1826 Days Carpet*, which was made through a five-hour performance with pigment marker, acrylic and "human presence". The work of Anita Taylor stood out, with its direct evocation of the artist's physiognomy. Looking at the large-scale visage, you become conscious of the forceful quality owing not just to the human presence but the lights and darks that chase the contours with muscular determination.

There's still some good drawing around, as with Ginny Grayson at Place Gallery, whose figuration is curious and inquiring, as if always searching for the place, ratios and weight of her motif. Often owing something to Giacometti, the work of the lines is never concealed but activates the drawing with a kind of restless space-mapping.

For a radical approach to drawing, Laura Woodward's circuitry at Place Gallery is ingenious. Her wires create lines through the air, each one carrying electrical impulses that switch around according to two motorised armatures. Sharing a set of gates, the two machines converse with one another, plied by numerous wires that relay current between them.

The lines almost literally conduct thinking, which the artist theorises as "saltus", the jump or jerk which is so integral with consciousness.

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