

I COME WITH BAGGAGE

by Anne Kwasner

As a child, I always had a keen interest in the things my parents brought from Poland to Australia. In particular, I was fascinated by a coffee set that was given to my mother as a wedding gift. It was maroon, decorated with gold lustre painted around the outside of the cups and coffeepot like little cracks. Inside, the vessels were pure gold. I thought it was so beautiful, a tangible link to my history, but my mother did not possess the same attachment. She gave it to another Polish friend to impress her. I always felt sad that she didn't consider how much I adored it. It created a longing in me for things lost from my history, and now this sentiment underpins my work.

My mother took me to op shops in Mosman where Polish friends of ours were living. They couldn't believe these wonderful objects, still useful and beautiful, were discarded. Long after these childhood outings, I became a keen collector, with second-hand ceramics forming the basis of my final Masters art work at the National Art School (NAS) in Sydney, where I graduated in 2019.

I give new life to second-hand crockery by upcycling. Painting on them from personal photos, artefacts and everyday things gave me a new perspective on my family history. For me, this process acknowledges the strength of the bonds we create with our belongings and the significant emotions associated with them – they help make sense of immigrant life, as ciphers for separation and for a new home life.

Sustainability is a big focus today, and I try and practise it in my life, using recycled fabrics, second-hand clothes and responsible products. However this wasn't the reasoning for my artistic choices. The second-hand ceramic pieces that attract me have no 'real' value. What appeals to me to is their ordinariness. The fact that they may have been used and loved imbues the object with something more than its commercial worth.

There is so much unwanted stuff in the world, stuff that is no longer used. I sift through the crockery in op shops selecting plates, cups and vases. Friends know my habit of repurposing and offer me things, which I rarely turn down. I like to give them a second chance. I do, however, have a selective eye. The plates I choose have something that distinguishes them, be it an interesting image, a beautiful shape or embellishment. I also consider whether the original image completely dominates or could support what I might paint over the top.

I came to ceramics by a circuitous route. My art study began with drawing and painting at a traditional art school in Sydney, Julian Ashton. I hadn't intended enrolling in ceramics at National Art School, but I found myself entering into the only discipline that had a free place. In the end, my arranged marriage to clay was successful, as I explored handbuilding, slipcasting and drawing with a variety of ceramic materials. In my practice now I only use onglaze pigments on second-hand plates.



Anne Kwasner
Finest Anticipation
2019, upcycled ceramic
plate and cup, onglaze
h.22cm, w.20cm
Photo: artist



Anne Kwasner's studio at National Art School, Sydney, 2019; photo: courtesy artist

On the plates (all found objects) for my Master's series, *I Come with Baggage*, the imagery is of ordinary scenes. I sourced old photos from a collection my parents brought from Poland and from a Facebook page shared by my family on my mother's side, and I add to these images from books featuring historical photos of Poland. Through transposing these images onto the ceramics, I give focus to tiny moments, snapshots of the everyday things we do. Some of the figures are missing altogether, their existence blanked out, evoking the aching spaces left by lost or distant loved ones. The upcycled crockery and re-imagined images mingle to create a new narrative and emotional perspective.

My practice has always been underpinned by drawing; it's how I navigate my internal and external world. I started mark-making and drawing on my ceramics during my undergraduate years at NAS, increasing its use on three-dimensional handbuilt objects. Now, I am focused on drawing on the surface of upcycled ceramic objects and plates. I contextualise my work through installation – there is the individual piece then the collective narrative. Like a diaspora, it changes, breaks up and moves around, and is installed differently every time. People connect with this fragmented story



Anne Kwasner, *I Come with Baggage*, 2019, installation at Masters Graduate Show National Art School, 2019
Photo: Peter Morgan

often commenting on the melancholy evoked by the works. That's my aim: a visceral reflective response.

In giving objects a new life, their original function can become redundant. What I love is the merging of the utilitarian and 'dysfunctional'. Whilst there is a history attached to each object, very rarely do I know it. Perhaps if I did that would stop me interfering with it. It is my corrupted history tale, not dependent on facts. I'm not seeking 'the truth' in anything I make but imposing my imagined truths onto the objects.

Living in Australia with a migrant background means living a dual existence – here but not here, there but not there. It's this duality that I have become increasingly interested in. We navigate as best we can using 'things', rituals and objects to identify and bind our communities together

What markers do we use to show our belonging to a place? How do we reconstruct the space that represents the two worlds of our existence – the world we came from and the world we find

ourself in? In looking at the possessions my parents came with or chose to collect, I started to understand they were curating them into a new narrative.

The way we respond to what is around us is based on past experience, and with that comes a certain way of being in the world. My parent's reactions were not always appropriate to the given situation – they could be fearful, overly protective, and mistrusting of other people's motivations, always thinking they were trying to rip them off – even their GP. This led to cultural confusion and conflict for my brother and I, and social isolation for them.

I will continue to use recycled ceramics, including three-dimensional work, slicing up and re-assembling cups and crockery. This new series will look at nostalgia through the memento or souvenir. I would also like to include sculptural hand-built work again and I am always looking to include more craft skills to incorporate with ceramics. I always search for objects and elements to recycle and reclaim for my stories, to understand our sense of belonging and how these 'souvenirs' reflect our desire to do this.

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Anne Kwasner

- 1 *Eye*, 2019, upcycled ceramic with onglaze, diam.21cm
- 2 *Grandmother*, 2019, upcycled ceramic with onglaze, diam.21cm
- 3 *Location of War*, 2019, upcycled ceramic with onglaze, diam.27cm
- 4 *Mother and Child in the Street*, 2019, upcycled ceramic with onglaze, diam.20cm
- 5 *Unknown Father*, 2019, upcycled ceramic with onglaze, diam.27cm
- 6 *Unknown Grandfather*, 2019, upcycled ceramic with onglaze, diam.27cm

Photos 1-4: artist

Photos 5 & 6: Carolyn McKenzie-Craig



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TECHNICAL NOTES

I use onglaze colours in my work, painting it onto glazed surfaces. It's a powdered pigment which I mix with an oil base, so it's a little like an oil painting. Because the oil is an open medium I fire in between adding on layers of paint, building up the tones each time. I use an electric kiln, sometimes firing only twice but more often around 4-5 times, or until I'm happy with the tones and textures. Onglaze firing is at low temperatures – I fire at around 760°C. Onglaze can be used on unglazed porcelain but it soaks into the surface rather than gliding on and I love the effect. I have used it this way on handbuilt work. However, traditionally onglaze is used on top of a clear glaze that has coloured underglazes underneath. The crockery I work with has already been fired and I love messing with the images already on it.