

## **Sarit Cohen: recent works**

by Ann McMahon 2009

Sarit Cohen is looking forward to a four week residency in 2009 at the Jingdezhen PWS (Pottery Workshop) Experimental Factory in China. She anticipates that the experience of living and working in this traditional centre for porcelain manufacture will be inspiring and she intends to focus on developing her surface design skills. Cohen's recent work is distinguished by a strong graphic sensibility through which she expresses conceptual content that complements messages conveyed by her forms. In 2008 her work was selected into the International Triennial of Silicate Art, Kecskemet, Hungary and she created a major installation for Placement, which opened at Craft ACT Craft and Design Centre in May – June 2008.

Curated by Craft ACT Jas Huggonet, Placement consisted of installations by Cohen and Kaye Pemberton. In Cohen's body of work, sustained technical, aesthetic and conceptual interests coalesced. Table settings were invoked by horizontal installation, while another group of vertically mounted wall pieces suggested a complex set of conceptual and spiritual references using text. These distinct placements relate to Cohen's artistic concerns and reflect on the social and cultural context which constrains, informs and defines an individual.

From childhood Cohen recognised the rituals of hospitality as a focus for family and religious life. The offering of food marks the rhythms of daily meals as well as the annual cycles of festivals and significant dates in the Jewish calendar. Through the preparation and offering of food Jewish women have traditionally shown care and affection for their loved ones and honour their guests. Personal milestones that litter the path of life are celebrated with the sharing of food. Cohen uses the platter shown in a horizontal orientation at table height to symbolise these practices. It is significant that they are universal in nature and transcend the boundaries of religious and cultural difference. Hospitality is about sharing, showing mutual respect and consideration, developing personal bonds and overcoming differences.

Cohen's experience of migration informs and enriches her work, making her acutely aware of relationships to place. She is mindful of the geophysical qualities of ceramic media. Over a number of years Cohen's use of strong earthy colour has evoked Australia's iron rich soils, where Cohen has lived for the past 25 years and recalls the parched basaltic landscapes of southern Israel where the artist was born and grew up. Strong tonal contrast between the clay body and slips suggests the harsh light that is present in arid places. It creates stark contrasts juxtaposing deep shadows with high keys, while mid tones are bleached out. Heat and sunlight dry and shrivel soft organic matter until all that remains is the earth itself.

The desert is harsh and constantly reminds inhabitants of the preciousness and fragility of life. Against this backdrop social obligation and the traditions of hospitality take on an urgency informed survival imperatives. The histories of these ancient lands reach back into antiquity and beyond. Cohen's choice of ceramic media recalls the use of clay tablets in Mesopotamia and the subsequent evolution of alphabetic writing from Phoenician script. It is a precursor of Modern Hebrew, which Cohen incorporates into her work to honour her first language and to acknowledge her Jewish heritage. The deliberate, rhythmic marks of the scripted text exert a compelling visual fascination for audiences.

The application of oxides and clay slips recall rock art and the ritual body and ground painting practiced by Australia's Indigenous people. In remote areas these traditional visual practices are an integral part of an ancient and ongoing culture. Songs and stories recount the origins of ceremonies, the exploits of generation after generation, sea level rises and falls, age upon age. It

is significant that these cultural records do not accord with Western historical methodology. By definition, history is focused on the written word and it is informed by cultural traditions that developed in the Middle East.

Cohen has been working with text for some years. Hybrid Life, her 2002 solo exhibition was an example in which three dimensional forms were abstracted from the shapes of Hebrew letters. Completed after a residency in Denmark, the show featured a series of hand built blade like forms. The black and white pieces addressed essential visual principles; repetition, contrast and balance to suggest social interpretations relating to political and historical conflicts of the Middle East. During her Danish residency Cohen began adding shredded paper to her clay, extending the porcelain body and altering its qualities to suit hand building.

The mixture has a firmer handle, it is more flexible to work and when fired, it is strong, light in weight and has a rough papery texture. Using techniques including pouring, rolling and casting, Cohen characteristically creates strong and distinctive shapes. She majored in ceramics at the Canberra School of Art, but also completed complementary studies in printmaking, which informs her treatment of surfaces. She sees the residency in Jingdezhen as a wonderful opportunity to focus on surface design. In particular she wants to experiment with decals to add new techniques to her repertoire.

Cohen's incorporation of pattern into her work might be attributed to a rich Jewish/Indian and Turkish heritage. The influence of Islamic design pervades the Middle East and the subcontinent, where lavishly used decoration is redolent with cultural values and signification. While Cohen has previously used motifs such as the Indian hand, which appeared in *Given Words*, at Gallery 289 in 2002, she made use of stencils in 2007 in *Surface*, a group exhibition shown at the Australian National Capital Artists (ANCA) Gallery Canberra. Central motifs composed of a stenciled pattern of circles represented women as a distinct social group; as vessels within a vessel. The conceptual basis of the work was an exploration of sexual division of labour and social practice within traditional Jewish society. The work iterated Cohen's knack for conveying distinct ideas through both surface and form.

In the manner of a print-maker Cohen respects her surface, honouring the mutual relationship of positive and negative space. She is also part of a movement of artists who make deliberate material choices that invest their works with inherent meanings. Paper, which Cohen incorporates into her artwork, has been a principle carrier of historical and cultural information since its development. As a material, paper has a certain authority; we rely on it to carry our history, our words and thoughts. From sacred religious texts to sublime, inspiring poetry and the everyday banality of a shopping list, language is integral to our existence. In *Placement*, iconic words including: peace, love, pain, song, celebration, hope, forgiveness and trust become Cohen's motifs, both in visual terms, but also by their meanings. Silent visual declarations, the words are constituent elements in a compositional context. Surrounded by formal borders a central image is the focus of each work.

The words are given privileged status by the space and formal elements surrounding them. It is no surprise that religious texts, manuscripts and calendars have been Cohen's visual reference materials. The border is a visual device derived from these sources, but it can be associated in a broader context with concepts such as individuality, sovereignty, geographic and political division. Observation reveals that Cohen's borders entertain incursions. Textual and patterned elements intrude into and out of the central spaces. Edges suggest the curling of a page, allowing a glimpse of the converse view. It is Cohen's assertion that while borders are contested spaces,

they are also junctures where opposing views are expressed; where debate and exchange occurs. While there is a tendency to focus on conflicts in these zones, they are privileged places that also present opportunities.

Between ideologies, cultures and regimes, mutual respect may be embraced; points of difference can be clarified and negotiated; compromise can be explored and conciliation is possible. Cohen's work has always reflected on these themes. Conflict and debate are necessary not only in the global arena, but within communities and they occur everyday among friends and enemies, strangers and family over the breaking of bread. The microcosm of the dinner table is an allegory for community and international relations. Cohen's family always thrashed out differences, agreed to disagree and endlessly discussed life dramas and vicissitudes over the dinner table. It is a ritual informed by practice and tradition that she greatly values. She contends that mealtime hospitality provides a climate of mutual respect in which the airing of grievances can be accommodated.

Dialogue, Cohen proposes, is the basis for mediation and for growing mutual understanding and acceptance. Her emblematic words hover, framed within their borders, like lingering fragments of mealtime conversation. In her Placement wall installation her chosen words gained authority and invited interpretation with reference to another set of conventions. Wall mounted ceramics with mnemonic rather than practical function include commemorative and souvenir plates, inferring a personal sphere of experience. As wall pieces, Cohen's platters are publicly declarative and operate in a manner comparable to plaques. Strategically placed so as to infer a specific relationship to place, plaques communicate via text. Cohen's installation is theatre, which is enacted in the gallery. The viewing audience is challenged to interact with and respond to the staged and choreographed arrangement.

Wall mounting intimates a relationship to painting and by implication to its heroic status. Like icons, Cohen's platters rely on formal composition to inspire a sense of order and her chosen words voice spiritual ideals. Like Cohen, icon painters are intent on evoking metaphysical concerns. Icons are painted without shadows indicating directional light sources and so, appear to be lit from within. This asserts that the subject matter is sacred and further, that the artist's purpose is divine. Cohen creates a similar effect by honouring her surface and privileging the negative spaces in her designs. The high key porcelain shines through her applications of rich earthy slips. Like votive paintings or offerings Cohen's platters petition for open and mutual dialogue. These are works that imagine a more positive and co-operative future.