

Avi Amesbury



Elements of Place - a solo exhibition



Dreams of home Series 2015
Porcelain, clay glaze, black slip
Dimensions H:570 x Diam 140cm

Avi Amesbury. *Elements of Place.*



After the fires Series 2015
Porcelain, volcanic ash, clay glaze, black slip
Dimensions H:570 x Diam 140cm

As the title suggests the works in this exhibition are concerned with the expression of the artist's attraction to and relationship with the notion of place. For Amesbury place is both macrocosm and microcosm – the former embracing the natural and man-made environment, the latter the myriads of idiosyncratic constituent details that both populate and give special significance to each place. Significance holds many connotations but for the artist it is related to her individual experience of place and how that resonates with her emotionally, philosophically, imaginatively and aesthetically. For her any meaning of place is of course related to geographic and topographical uniqueness. However it is the combination of those real qualities with the more abstract attributes referred to above that provides the conceptual *raison d'être* that is given such eloquent articulation through the artist's creative imagination.

Each individual's experience of place is also closely associated with that place's history, with the present (experience) and the past (memory). The elision of experience and memory carries with it the universal and the particular, humanity and the individual. These simultaneous philosophical opposites incite a tantalizing intellectual tension that underscores the beautifully controlled visual vocabulary that is evinced throughout the works in this exhibition.

The exhibition is divided into a number of series – variously *After the Fires*, *Horizon*, *A land's journey*, *Elements*, *Unravel* et al. While each of these holds familial qualities each also speaks to the other works across the exhibition, investing the whole with an overlay of aesthetic affinities that demonstrates Amesbury's consummate control of her subject, complete understanding of the complexities of porcelain as an expressive medium and astute finesse in decorative language.

The *Horizon* series is exemplified by a multipartite installation of small vessels. The forms displayed are essentially the same viz. the vessel. Here each is small and constructed of finely walled white porcelain. The bases are curved and thus while they are physically stable there is an intimation of precariousness, a subtle reference to the intricate balance at play in nature. The decoration (predominantly browns) is delicately applied – dots, lines, marks – gathered collectively into bands that gently embrace the forms on which they sit. Each of the decorative marks evokes aspects of the natural world yet does not in any way describe that world. This is poetry not documentation.

The works in the *After the Fires* are beautiful visual expositions of both the artist's response to one of nature's most harrowing phenomena and the power of art to express those responses while asserting the aesthetic autonomy of the



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individual object. What Amesbury does here so effectively is to demonstrate art as object and its ability to hold within and concurrently express the artist's emotive reactions. There are a number of forms used throughout this series ranging from a large platter, small vessels (similar to those seen above) and a number of tall tubular vessels. The latter immediately present as tree trunks, a characteristic reinforced by their verticality. The artist though is not interested in explication but rather more in interrogative tantalization. The forms are open and the interiors decorated. This creates a very active spatial configuration that quietly echoes the cycles of the natural world. Each vessel is imbued with kinetic possibilities but these are conspicuously contained by the emphatic verticality of the porcelain shells. Apart from decorative additions in mostly browns, the forms are limited to a white palette sprinkled with the (real) ash from bush fires. This whiteness is tonally striking and its bone-like appearance a clever and nuanced reference to the effects of bush fires. The use of porcelain is important since its ostensible fragility (and natural "whiteness") denies its



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real strength, a plastic equivalent to the regenerative powers of nature and a clever aesthetic device instilling even more subtle consanguinities between concept and the material used to express it.

The sculptural simplicity of the forms is enlivened with (sometimes) elusive decoration whose graphic minimalism adds to the overall impressive elegance of these works. Decoration is physically embedded into the surface, dimpled swathes that evoke the unseen and unstated presence of those that have inhabited or traversed the terrain that is the "subject" of this series. Other decorative devices employed by the artist include glaze and slips that offer viewers a range of interpretative choices. They could for example read as the traces of insect life, the residual presence of sap, peeling strands of bark, plumes of smoke; it does not matter. They could be all or none of these. For the artist they are the imaginative traces of memories of places visited that hold particular (even if vestigial) significance for her. They are included to instigate each viewer's own journey as well as to aesthetically excite.



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Dimensions Bowl large: H:75 x Diam 140cm, Bowl small: H:50 x Diam 80cm

The tubular vessel is used to great effect and is almost signature throughout *Elements of Place*. In the *Elements* series the rich palette captures the density of our native forests. Each piece is either vertically or horizontally covered in bands or strips of decorative marks. The layering is especially compelling giving a direct sculptural individuality to each of the pieces and underlying the implication of upward thrust that is so strongly embedded in each. This thrust is contained however by the open mouth of the vessels. As above this device activates the internal spatial configuration creating a marvellous aesthetic tension between stasis and kinesis while simultaneously asserting the role of decoration in each work's formal construction. Each aspect of these works is part of a symbiotic whole whose aesthetic resolution is a metaphor for the natural world that is its thematic and conceptual source.

A particularly striking piece is from the *Dreams of home* series. The form continues the tubular vessel. The surface is heavily decorated with motifs from

the repertoire used in other works but with the addition of a range of other devices that give this work a distinctive air. The decorative variety speaks of the complexity of nature, of the layers of existence and memory that have the ability to move and affect us when we confront them. The drama of nature is beautifully present here.

The *Unravel* series is arguably outside the concerns of much of the other work but it is certainly about place and the impact of place on the individual. Amesbury's dialogue with Cockatoo Island in Sydney Harbour and the surprising personal connections she (and her partner) found there has resulted in a beautifully nuanced expression of nostalgia and reverence that is given equivalence in other works in her relationship to the natural world. Formally this series offers a clearly different taxonomy to the others. All of the work is wall-based, its imagery photographic (the images taken by the artist), its theme the man-made environment. That environment though has gone through a number of iterations;



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a cycle of manifestations that has led to its current state of site for Sydney's Biennale, an event of international import in the art world. The individual works capture aspects of the site that are presented as types of souvenirs or perhaps more poignantly memento mori of a place that was. Amesbury comes full cycle with this series as she celebrates the site as a whole (the macrocosm) with the unstated and private impact it has on her (the microcosm).



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Elements of Place is an arresting body of work marked by a sophisticated approach to its subject, a subject that speaks to the individual through its recollection of place through the vestiges of memory and experience and its wider implications of personal and wider identity. The works are beautiful and their poetic impact speaks of the integrity of the mature aesthetic imagination that has created them.

Peter Haynes
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Cover: *Horizon Series 2014 (detail)*
Porcelain, clay glazes. Dimensions variable

All photos by Art Atelier Photography

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