WENDY FAIRCLOUGH

Wendy Fairclough was born in New Zealand and grew up in sight of the volcanic Mount Ruapehu on the Whanganui River, both of which are substantial markers of nature’s authority. Leaving the North Island at the age of eighteen, Fairclough traded heavy skies for the wide horizons of Australia, settling in Adelaide and undertaking studies in printmaking and sculpture before the alchemy of glass caught her quick, if not easy, devotion.

The artist’s early work was partly driven by the migrant’s longing for home and, along with many of her peers, Fairclough has reflected on the status of the settler/colonist in both New Zealand and Australia. While acknowledging the primacy of Maori and Aboriginal culture, Fairclough is alert to the dangers of romancing ‘the other’, and has been drawn to the lights of Western art history in the landscapes of Colin McCahon, New Zealand’s sacred modernist, and the tranquil still life paintings of the Italian, Giorgio Morandi.

Fairclough works with the eternal nuances of still life to powerful effect, her sculptures arcing beyond the domestic with its genteel and gender implications. Matching the crisp realism of Vermeer, functional implements from the studio workbench sit beside more classical vessels of containment, performing like renegade queens in a compelling chess game. There is a temptation to see this translation of the ‘ready-made’ (bucket, broom or jug) as straightforward, but the objects’ easy grace could not be more misleading. The process of blowing, and especially glass casting, is laborious and exacting, attended by countless positive and negative reversals through numerous moulds and methods. Rubber, silica, wax, plaster, breaking out, cleaning, heating, cooling, grinding, polishing and sandblasting succeed one another in a slow realisation of a sharply defined vision.

The works in HEARTLAND are quietly open in their narratives, breaking away from the conventional plinth to operate in subjective and theatrical ways. The modest figurative gestures residing within these perfectly pitched forms all relate to the act of cleaning, mopping up, restoring. Human ordinariness and vulnerability are implicit throughout the assemblages, but so too are the elemental extremes beyond our control. With empathy rather than reproach, Fairclough’s familiar but displaced objects belie the introspection of the still life genre, relating instead to the outside world and its climactic and environmental shifts. The wreckage of floods and the desiccated promise of empty clouds are both evident in the scatter of these opaque, translucent vessels, which float with an enviable lightness of being, despite their anchor to the real.

In what appears to be a casual gathering, four lead crystal brooms rest against the wall, corroborating an alarming material paradox: the rudimentary home appliances are evidence of labour but are as fragile as breath, elegantly impossible. Beyond the private household, these metaphorical portraits of the global superpowers, America, India, China and the UK, are less about political or economic tyranny and more about the humble and universal needs and desires of humanity. To order, to ritual, to shelter.

UNA REY

p. 40 Wendy Fairclough, born Wanganui, Aotearoa, New Zealand 1958, artist’s studio, Crafers, South Australia, 2013 photo: Nici Cumpston
p. 42 Commonality, 2010, Bridgewater, South Australia, cast lead crystal, acrylic rod, 140 x 105 x 75 cm
p. 43 Acquiescence, 2009, Bridgewater, South Australia, hand-blown glass, sandblasted, acrylic bucket handles, found objects (straw broom, stepladder), acrylic paint, 102 x 200 x 150 cm © courtesy the artist