



part



This work was produced on Yawuru country. A huge thank you to the following people for their support over the course of this project: Alex Romano, Chrissy Carter, Tanya Lee, Jacky Cheng, Kate Leah Rendell, Sam Frederick, Elya Stanbrook, Tahnee Roberts, Emily Rohr, Mikey Hutchinson and the rest of the Short St team.

This project is supported by the Department of Local Government, Sport and Cultural Industries, the Royalties for Regions funded Regional Arts and Cultural Investment Program and Regional Arts WA.

open

ANNA JOHN

**5-20 FEBRUARY
SHORT ST GALLERY**

2.

In her seminal essay, 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', Ursula K. Le Guin draws on the concept of the carrier bag to conceive of the novel as a kind of bag/ sack/ bundle – holding words, bearing meanings.

The carrier bag is a theory of human evolution that proposes our ancestors' greatest invention was not the weapon but the container: 'before the tool that forces energy outward, we made the tool that brings energy home'. Rejecting the triumph narrative of the knife and axe – 'the killer story' – Le Guin uses the carrier bag theory to suggest that we must start telling the other story; the unheroic stories of things gleaned and gathered, of the things we use to put things in.

Her theory makes me think of Nanna's folded skirt/ apron, scooped up and enveloped to hold the apples freshly picked from the tree, or the eggs brought in from the chook shed; the simple acts of conveyance imparted so casually to the young, often unremarked upon, yet worthy of our attention and wonder.

Like Le Guin's works of fiction, AJ's ceramics are 'full of beginnings without ends'. An observer and collector of things shapely, lopsided, ungainly, familiar, yet quietly strange, AJ's works resist the base; the white box plinth; the conclusion. Instead in *Part Open* we encounter a story more ambiguous and less precise. It's the twisted rope patterns of a well bucket. Louvre windows in their stacked form. Curtain folds interrupted by a face. Jellyfish tentacles. Chewing gum globs jammed into wall gaps. Puckered edges. Body parts as handles. Squiggle patterns from windy.com. Small ear shaped shells.

It is a practice that asks how to intentionally create the incongruous, to incorporate the random with the functional, to hold together these disparate stories?

Each piece evokes the impulse to reach out, to wrap your hands around. To feel the blobs, growths, tabs stuck on. It's these extremities, which gives the vessels intimacy – and it is here, between AJ's aesthetic, the random and the restless, we encounter the space where conflict and harmony become each other.

Le Guin writes, 'it sometimes seems that the [heroic] story is approaching its end. Lest there be no more telling of stories at all, some of us out here in the wild oats...think we'd better start telling another one.'

It is for this other story we gather, attentive to the puckered details and in awe of the humble vessel – made new and strange again in AJ's hands.

Words by Kate Leah Rendell



1.

"It is a strange realism, but it is a strange reality."¹

To wander the intertidal zones of Yawuru country on a spring low tide is to bear witness to an otherworldly scene. As the sea draws back, habitats and creatures unfamiliar and amorphous are revealed. Along the rock formations and fringing reefs, the wide expanse of blue temporarily gives way to colourful bursts of coral and algae, cathedrals of dripping crystal goo, crevices full of encrusting molluscs, globular sponges and iridescent sea slugs.

Drained of their watery embrace, the forms dangle and protrude into the air, caught unawares, waiting for the sea's return. Leafy plants – usually alert and waving – are rendered inert without their liquid buoyancy. Sea anemone tendrils hang limp.

The creatures often look caught out, sprung. Shocked even. 'Like a fish out of water.' No doubt for some it is beneficial and intentional to inhabit this intertidal zone (the life forms and corals of the Kimberley have, of course, adapted specifically for this). But there is still something so comical and seemingly accidental about the scene (apparently stressed and exposed coral release mucus as a defence mechanism to keep moist – only adding to the whole goopy vibe). It is hilarious to watch the hairy sea squirts shoot water on unsuspecting passers-by.

It is this joyous scene – with its daily performance of confused orientation – that has informed much of Anna John's recent ceramic work. It is not the only stimulus, nor is it present in every work. But it's force as inspiration speaks to the strange realism that I perceive in *Part Open*: the ways AJ's ambiguous forms in their defiance of linear interpretation, are deeply attentive to the realities of this place.

1. Le Guin, Ursula K. *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*. 1988. London: Ignota, 2019. pp. 23-27