

RENEE SO OBJECT LESSONS

Renee So's smooth, ceramic sculptures and witty knitted portraits seesaw between the jaunty and serious while unshackling weighty historical signifiers from their burdensome cast.

By Rebecca Gallo

"So much can be communicated through how men represent themselves – the pomp and grandeur," explains Renee So over the phone from London. She is talking about the motif of a bearded face – sometimes flipped vertically to produce a second identical head – which recurs throughout her ceramic and yarn works. "With the ceramics, I start with a really rough sketch in my head, or I make a miniature model. The tapestries are very planned out because it's all charted out on a grid – you have to know what you're doing before you start." These two mediums, very different in process and feel, have shared origins in craft. So was drawn to both for their rich historical precedents: ancient statuary inspires her ceramic busts, and medieval wall tapestries were the impetus for her knitted 'paintings'.

So travelled from Melbourne to London on an Australia Council residency more than ten years ago. She and her partner fell in love with the place, returning to Australia only to disperse their possessions and return, this time for good, with a suitcase each. The source material that fuels So's practice is drawn from the history of art, craft and design, and London provided access to important repositories of objects and information. As a welcome change from research that involved a lot photocopying at RMIT Library, So discovered that once in Europe "you can just go the V&A, or to Versailles, and it's all there... everything is so accessible." Rather than trawling library books for notes and pictures of obscure historical objects, So can wander museum and palace halls to see sculpture, tapestries and paintings in the flesh.

To reach her studio, So takes a 15-minute walk with her poodle through the rather grandly named park London Fields. Working from an Acme studio complex which houses 45 other artists, So's generous top floor space is shared between two and a skylight runs the length of the ceiling. In this light-filled space, So alternates between yarn and clay: between a long hand-operated knitting machine and a set of ceramic carving tools. The knitting process, called *intarsia* or picture knitting, is repetitive and finicky, and working with clay acts as a welcome buffer between sessions.

The imagery in So's large-scale knitted tapestries is economical in line and form, with stylised figures and blocks of flat colour. Men with legs like wine glasses, or lower bodies the shape of bulbous, bottom-heavy Bellarmine vessels, inhabit these frames. They strut with top hats, canes, wine glasses and cigarettes or pipes. The lower halves of their faces are completely obscured by beards that are outlined like cartoon clouds. These figures represent the assimilation of a number of influences that So has internalised and processed over the years. Neo-Assyrian carvings, dandyism, picture playing cards and Bellarmine stoneware rank as some the most potent and persistent. For work that incorporates so many influences, it is surprisingly spare and minimal.

From an initial interest in the way in which men of rank have adorned themselves throughout history to project power and authority, So has become more concerned with form and composition. The facial expressions of her men are almost completely obscured, and So explains: "my focus now is on the beard shape". What is a beard, then, without a face? It is an unanchored symbol of masculinity; an ancient signifier of strength and power rendered, toupee-like, as an absurd floating tuft; a conglomeration of organic fibres. It is insubstantial. Gossamer. A cartoon cloud.

The situations in which So depicts her characters also chip away at any authority they may otherwise wield. The legs of the eponymous double-headed character in *Drunken Bellarmine* (2012) have turned into wine glasses, and he hangs upside down into a pool of what we can only hope is their unfinished contents. The figure in *Smoking* (2015) doesn't seem to realise that he has a boot for a chin. For all their indications of authority and scholarliness, stretching back to Greek and Roman antiquity, beards alone cannot protect these men from ridicule.

Knitting machines are the frequent instruments of folk art and craft, low-wage labour and so-called women's work. That So has chosen to depict her dandies, dukes and drunks in this medium is quietly undermining, gently mocking their careful grooming and bourgeois accoutrements. Unlike an illusionistic portrait in which the medium is purely in service of the subject, So's tapestries foreground tactility and permeability in the warp and weft of knit threads, slowly accumulated in rows that speak of hours of careful labour. Instead of being glorified in the traditional language of portraiture, So's characters are rendered in a vernacular that is shared with picture sweaters from the '80s.



Top
RENEE SO
*Stand Up/Lay
Down*, 2014
knitted acrylic
and wool
200 x 100 cm

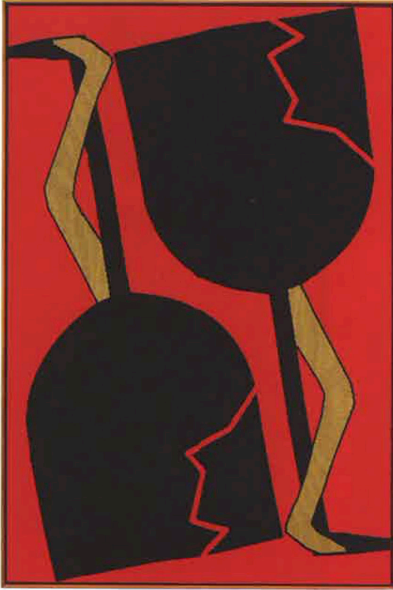
Opposite
RENEE SO
Bellarmino XIII, 2015
ceramic, glaze
22 x 36 x 14 cm

Courtesy the artist
and Hopkinson
Mossman, Auckland

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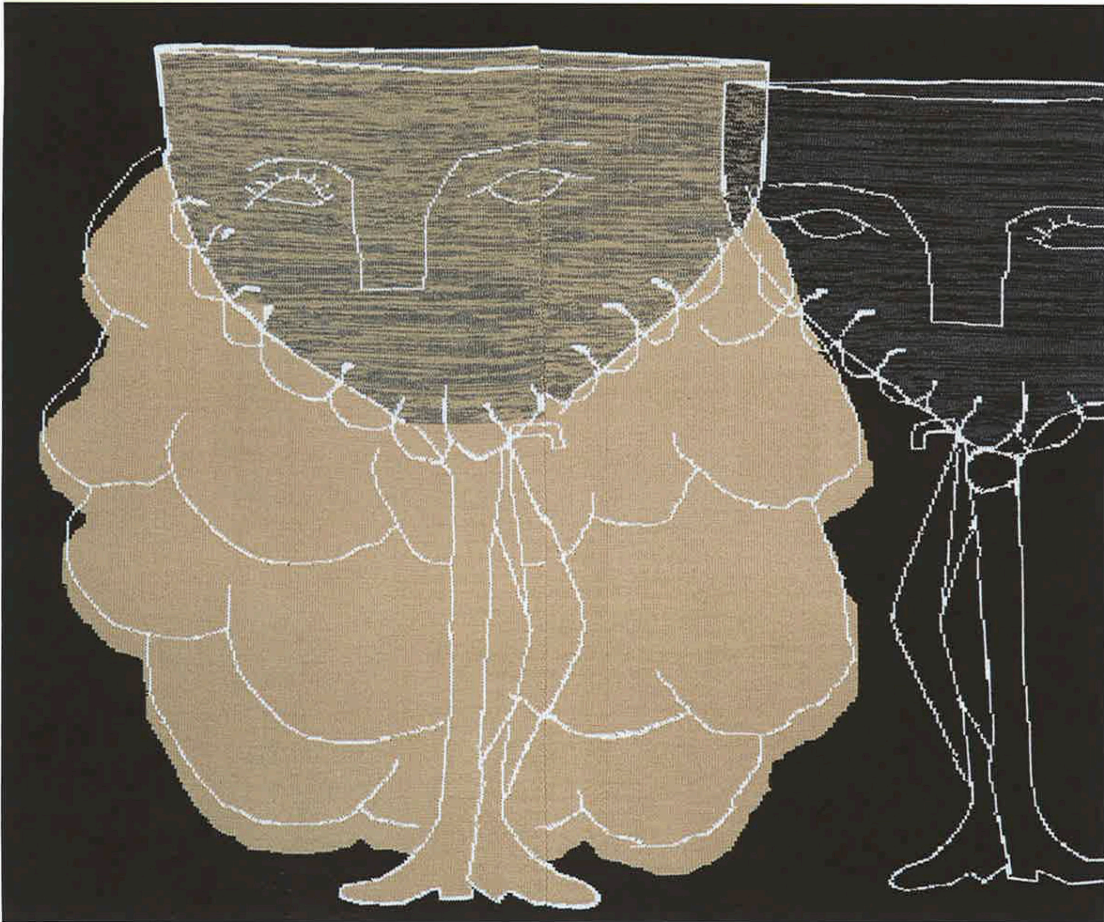
Top to bottom
RENEE SO
FRAGILE, 2015
knitted acrylic and wool
180 x 120 cm

RENEE SO
Wine Lovers, 2015
knitted acrylic and wool
102 x 120 cm

Opposite
Installation view
RENEE SO, 2012
Kate MacGarry, London

Courtesy the artist,
Kate MacGarry, London
and Hopkinson
Mossman, Auckland

THE SERIOUSNESS OF THE CERAMIC BUST IS UNDERMINED IN SO'S PLAYFUL EXECUTION. THESE MEN ARE MORE BUBBLE BATH THAN HUNTING PARTY, MORE SANTA CLAUS THAN JULIUS CAESAR.





Contentious relationships between form and content also arise in So's other medium of choice, ceramics. Her ceramic busts, although exhibited on tall narrow plinths like their classical counterparts, remain parodies of the genre. Almond shapes are carved into black glaze or excised from clay to delineate eyes. Noses are indicated by flat, rectangular slabs that are continuous with the forehead, carved out over the eyebrows like an armoured helmet. The ceramic beards are far more substantial than the cloud-like outlines of their two-dimensional counterparts, composed of interlocking spheres like oversize marbles. The seriousness of the ceramic bust is undermined in So's playful execution. These men are more bubble bath than hunting party, more Santa Claus than Julius Caesar.

So is currently working towards a solo exhibition in Sydney in late 2016 and a show at Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland, alongside Nicole Farquhar in September. Having returned to the studio after an 18-month maternity hiatus, she is continuing to refine her visual language and material process, focusing on "the ideas that didn't go away". The persistent granules, the words, fragments and images that continued to circulate while more extraneous matter was excised, forgotten. Time away from the studio has also left So feeling more free to experiment, and less attached to outcomes. Planning each show can be a laborious and exacting process, as So produces a scale model of the space and usually

decides in advance on the precise placement of each work. But for a solo show at Kate MacGarry, London earlier this year, she made a number of decisions on the spot. "I had way too much work actually...[but] the surprise element was more rewarding."

As part of that show, So presented a series of oversize, anthropomorphic ceramic objects. One is a smoking cigarette, its plume the beard-like mass of spheres. It has an accordion fold around the middle, as if compressed in temporary exertion as it smokes itself. Others are wine and cocktail glasses, each with a jaunty leg protruding from the underside of its bowl, heads thrown back in uproarious laughter. It's as if we have walked into a party where accoutrements are the protagonists while the humans skirt the walls, hiding furtively behind bushes of facial hair. These men have produced façades that render personhood obsolete. They have groomed themselves into oblivion, and it is their accessories that do the talking now. ▽

Renee So will show at Hopkinson Mossman from September 2 to October 1, 2016.

Renee So is represented by Kate MacGarry, London and Hopkinson Mossman, Auckland.

katemacgarry.com

hopkinsonmossman.com