



subject / object: the known known, the known unknown and the unknown unknown craftspeople.

Damon Moon responds to the collections of Shepparton Art Museum, Bendigo Art Gallery and the La Trobe Art Institute.

In 1972 Kodansha International published *The Unknown Craftsman*, a book originally written in Japanese by the craft theorist Soetsu Yanagi and subsequently adapted for an English-reading audience by Bernard Leach. The inclusion of a foreword by the Japanese potter Shoji Hamada completed an authorial triumvirate of enormous power and influence within the 20th-century crafts movement, a kind of craft-theory ‘mansplaining’ on an unprecedented level.

The Unknown Craftsman, together with Bernard Leach’s 1940 publication *A Potter’s Book*, defines an attitude to the crafts predicated on the philosophical underpinnings of the Japanese *mingei* movement. This theory, postulated by Yanagi, privileged certain objects: those that were produced by hand, were functional in nature, were made by anonymous craftspeople and, ideally, were representative of the region where they were produced, either by virtue of material and/or design.

That this theory was proselytised by a trio of blokes who became very famous indeed is not without its obvious ironies. Still, it doesn’t take away from the fact that, as with the 19th-century Arts and Crafts movement in Britain, the outcomes were often laudable.

As with the Arts and Crafts movement, *mingei* was a reaction to the industrialisation that Japan had undergone in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when the rapid shift from a rural agrarian economy to an urbanised industrial society had threatened the existence of a whole set of traditional crafts practices, often tied to village life.

How much of *mingei* was actually a construct is the subject of ongoing research and debate. What is important is the impact that this kind of craft theory had on the wider world, and in particular on the burgeoning crafts movements that sprang up during the 20th century, mostly in countries where a sophisticated and widespread industrial base had altered the nature of craft activity from the absolutely necessary to the purely discretionary.

Historically, Australia also had its vernacular crafts where, especially in the case of ceramics, simple, utilitarian wares were often manufactured right alongside building materials. Bricks and pipes, pickle jars and chimney-pots were produced almost from the start of the colony, following long-established models that were indistinguishable from their European roots.

Non-European immigrants, most notably the Chinese who had originally arrived with the gold rush and then branched out into other activities, including trade and agriculture, brought with them their own vernacular traditions. It is both these bodies of work that I’ve chosen to work with in responding to collections held by the Shepparton Art Museum and Bendigo Art Gallery.

In addition, my work at the La Trobe Art Institute addresses a different set of criteria, namely the fabric of the building itself and how objects can activate an architectural space and perform a role somewhere between an exhibit and a metaphor for the spaces that contain and define aspects of our visual culture.

From occupying two historic museum display cases in Bolton Court within the original building of Bendigo Art Gallery to the large, vitrine-like display at Shepparton Art Museum, and then inhabiting the contemporary architecture of the La Trobe Art Institute, this work engages with the histories of these institutions by exploring how the anonymous, the under-valued, the vernacular and the built intersect with the self-conscious product we call art. The known (that would be me) and the unknown (that would be the craftspeople) overlap in time and place.

The objects I’ve chosen to make for this project derive from a piece titled the *Washington Vase*, which I originally designed for an exhibition at the JamFactory Gallery in Adelaide in late 2016. This vase was loosely modelled on a series of anthropomorphic ceramic forms by the mid-20th-century English artist-potter Robert Washington, which he in turn had based on a famous 1930 pot called *The Bather*, made by William Staite-Murray, who had been Washington’s teacher at the Royal College of Art.

In re-interpreting an object that by virtue of now being cast in a mould is made reproducible, I am re-introducing a piece of studio pottery – an individual piece made as an art object – to the legacy of mass-produced ceramics, while at the same time being aware of the importance of the multiple within the wider field of contemporary art.

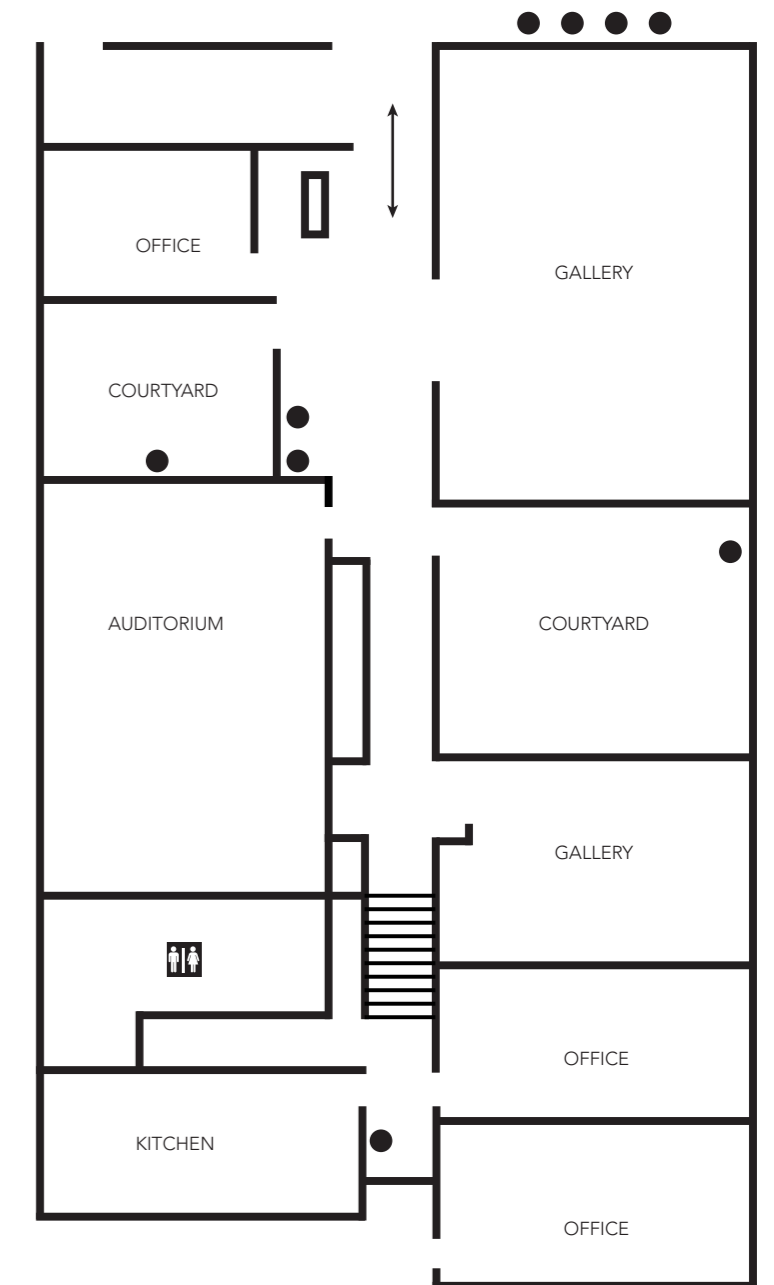
In addition, I have copied certain items from the collection of Chinese ceramics at Shepparton Art Museum. Closely following the materials and techniques of the originals, these contemporary reproductions serve as a bridge and are my acknowledgment of the value of tradition, my respects paid to the original makers.

Another characteristic of vernacular ceramics is their role as markers of status. If the original post-war generation of Australian studio-potters chose to ignore the inherent value of colonial-era Australian pottery (which they did), instead fetishising a reconfigured model of traditional Japanese folk craft, the founding fathers of institutions such as the Bendigo Art Gallery were also rather blind to the merit of this local work.

They collected the finest European porcelain to grace their grand houses and bequeath to the galleries, while this other pottery – crude, lumpen, proletariat and made just down the road – was consigned to its rightful place ‘below stairs’. Similarly, the finest Chinese ceramics were much admired, whereas the ubiquitous copper-green glazed ginger jars and the rough black and brown wares used for wine and food, as housed in the collection of the Shepparton Art Museum, were then seen as being unworthy of notice.

This complex narrative of aesthetics and status, of privilege and display, of cultural exchange and appropriation, is played out in these objects. This project, *Subject/Object*, is another contribution to the discourse around how the things we make take on meanings beyond their primary function. In working with ceramic objects and the fabric of display, I’m simply adding another layer of meaning to a conversation that was started a long time ago, and which will continue into the future.

Damon Moon
Adelaide, 2018



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Front:
Slip-cast altered Skittles, 2018.
stoneware,
dimensions variable.
image: Anna Fennech

Slip-cast altered Skittles, 2018.
unglazed low-fired stoneware,
40 x 14cm approx.
image: Anna Fennech

Slip-cast ceramic Skittle, 2018.
stoneware with 24 carat gold leaf,
40 x 14cm approx.
Gilder Bernard Goble.
image: Andre Castellucci

Reverse:
Slip-cast altered Skittle, 2018.
unglazed stoneware,
30 x 20cm approx.
image: Damon Moon

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La Trobe Art Institute installation floor plan courtesy
La Trobe Art Institute

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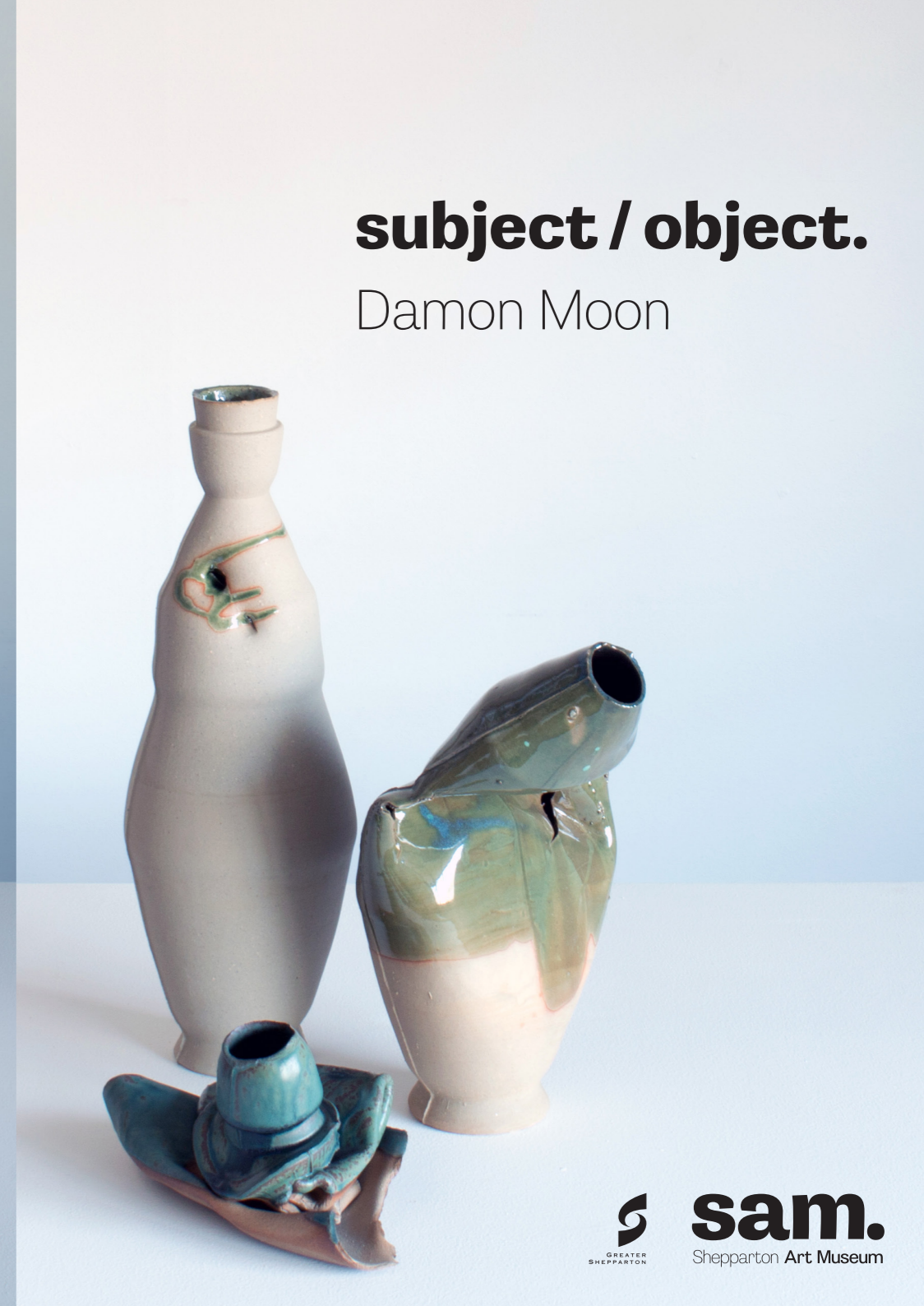
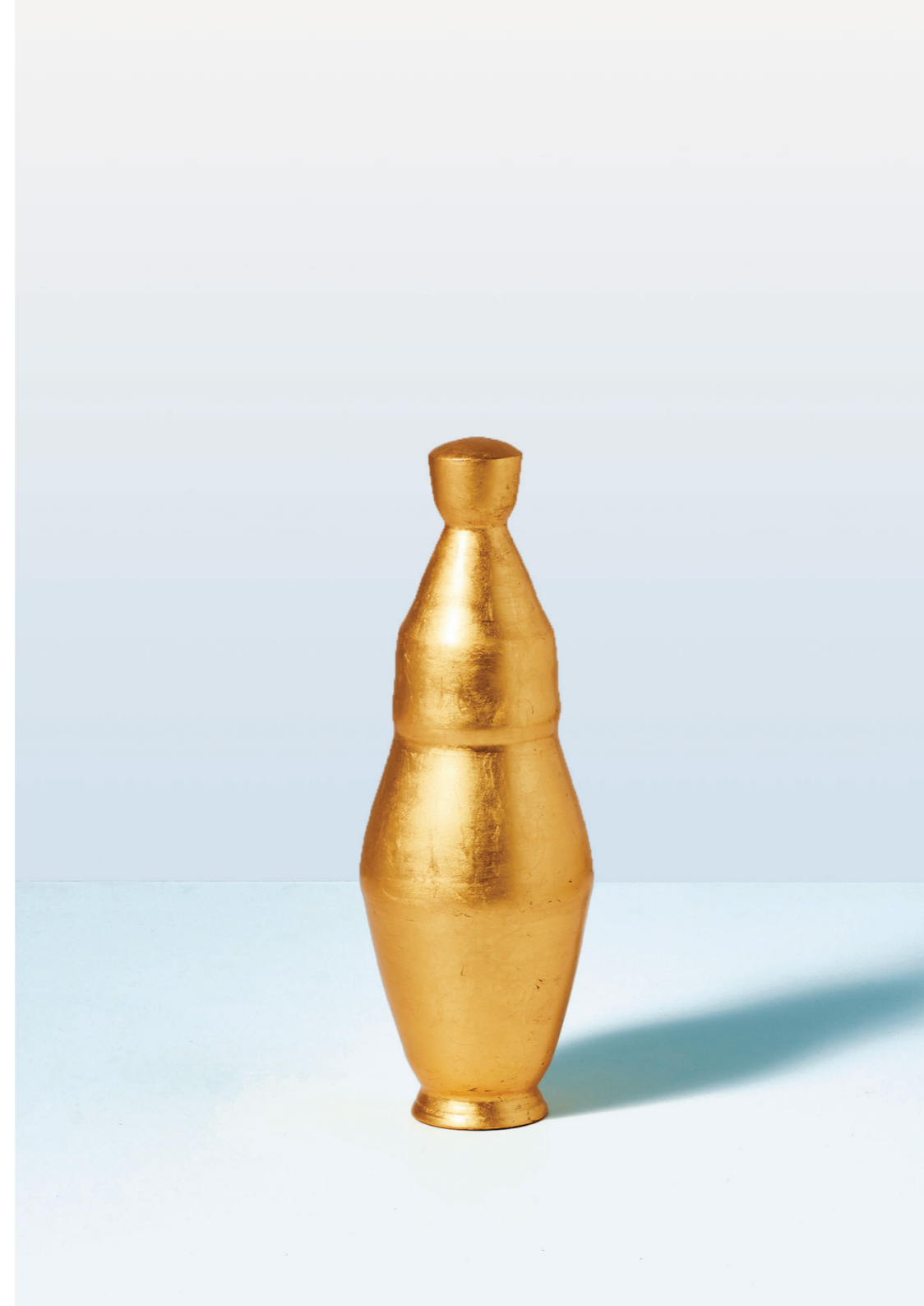
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