

A 2 m Tall Cactus Spotted on Streets of Newcastle

*Helen Hopcroft interviewed
Sarah Symons and discovered how she
makes her large-scale forms*

Melesore. (Detail).



Left: Installation of exhibition.
Right: **Volisaca**. 2007.

Sarah Symons uses glazes developed by Janet DeBoos: "Two barium glazes that are fired to 1200°C (cone 5) and a Chrome/Strontium glaze that is fired to 945°C (cone 06). Results with the barium glaze changed according to the thickness and thinness of the application and the temperature, which gives an unpredictable quality."

I WAS WALKING ALONG BULL STREET in the city of Newcastle when I was confronted by a 2 m (6 ft) high psychedelic coloured cactus. It happened as I was passing the Back to Back Gallery. The gallery was closed so I had stopped to peer in the darkened window. I was greeted by the sight of a huge multi- coloured cactus sculpture surrounded by a posse of weird and wonderful ceramics that looked like cartoon characters from a Latin dance party.

They were so oddly attractive and fun-looking that I went around the back of the gallery and banged on the door of the collective artists' studio which manages the exhibition space. They were kind enough to let me in so I had the chance to inspect these large, fabulously-coloured ceramic sculptures up close in an empty room.

There were about five nearly human-sized pieces that resembled cactus and numerous smaller pieces whose forms reminded me of coral reefs, plant anatomy, sombreros, UFOs or tropical fish. From a distance the luminous surfaces looked velvety and as if they had been dusted with dry pigment, but when you touched them their surface was solid and as rough as a cat's tongue.

The forms are often modular and the large sculptures looked like they had been assembled from various individual pieces then threaded on to steel rods. The surfaces were covered with distinctive button-like circles that hammer home the cactus family resemblance; they brought to mind the slightly bulbous forms of the painter Philip Guston and the aesthetic of Frida Kahlo's blue house garden in Mexico.

I contacted artist Sarah Symons and asked her about her work. Symons trained as a ceramist at the University of Newcastle and the show represents work completed during her 2007 Honours year. She cites her influences as the multimedia artist Peter Sharp, ceramist Jenny Orchard, sculptor Bronwyn Oliver and US artist Virginia Scotchie. "Peter Sharp is influential, in the way



he creates bold forms and delicate layers within his paintings. He refers to the landscape and tries to see it in a different perspective. Sharp has varied rich textures within his paintings and I feel a similarity between these and the earthy textures of clay. I recently discovered Bronwyn Oliver's sculptures and through her forms and scale I found a great deal of inspiration. Her work is delicate and strong, detailed and large, ephemeral and solid. These are qualities I would aspire to in my own work. The work of Jenny Orchard is also intriguing and a constant reminder of the vibrant and playful side of art."

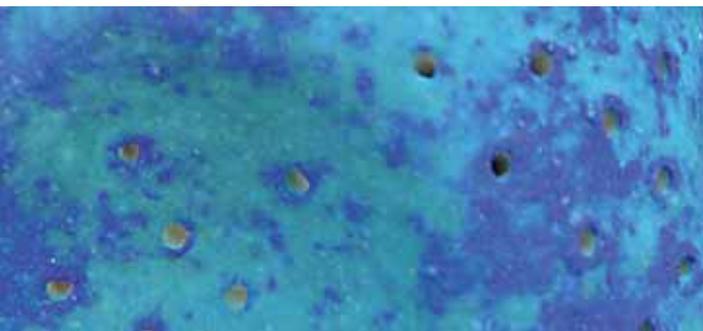
Symons' forms are inspired partly by Australian native flora and partly by personal history and memory. She acknowledges the work's playful and whimsical appeal but says that it also refers to the way events and objects can be distorted by the prism of memory and emotion.

She speaks of her work being suffused by a feeling of being 'caught between two places'; Symons grew up in a rural area and later moved to the city in order to attend university. She says that the way native plants and the bush defined her sense of place and self only became apparent once she was living in an urban area.

Her work process often starts with a sketch of a native plant, either something that she has picked and brought back to her studio or by using a botanical illustration as reference. She says that when she is drawing she tries to see the basic shapes in a complex form and further refines this into a design that she likes. "This process allows me to simplify a form and look at it in a different perspective, by seeing linear outlines and reconstructing the shapes within the form, to try and reveal a more truthful version of it. By using simple and detailed sketches I begin to develop a sense of how they could be translated into sculptures. Mostly I feel that the process is more intuitive and is a combination of playing with shapes and the 'right feeling'."

Left: **Munguts**. 2007.
Right: **Bugfia**. 2007.

Sarah Symons uses a pressure spray to apply her glazes and fires her pieces twice; bisque to about 1000°C with the glaze firing varying between 945-1200°C.



*Top: Aca-ica best kept in transient space. 2007 (foreground) and Melelasore; grows slowly to keep its balance. 2007. (background).
entre: Melelasand; needs to experience many places. 2007 (top) and Mature Mungut. 2007.
Above: Detail of barium glaze.*

Symons makes the jump across into the third dimension by building a small maquette of a promising form, using this scale model to help anticipate any problems with the construction or design of a larger work. A female plaster mould is then constructed and slab and coil techniques are used to build the form inside it. She starts by making a full-scale clay model of the form that she wants to replicate, then uses her hands to flick wet plaster on it. Depending on the shape of the form, she will either cover half or a quarter of the model with plaster. Once the plaster is dry she removes the clay and presses fresh paperclay (Blackwattle Stoneware paperclay) inside the mould, stuffing the centre with newspaper so it doesn't 'flop' when removed.

The pieces are removed just before the leather-hard stage and joined with slip. Once dry, Symons uses a variety of tools including wire rasps to further sculpt her forms. Some pieces are left rough with the tooth marks of the rasp still evident; others are sanded or burnished to a smooth sheen. A few surfaces are pierced with hundreds of tiny holes and look like bird bone cartilage or sea sponges; a range of pencils and paintbrush handles are used to create this effect.

The small cactus button knobs spotted over the surface of the works are constructed and fired separately, then attached with strong epoxy glue. In profile they look like buttons or mushrooms: a small stalk fits into a hole in the surface of the sculpture and is used as an anchor point. Symons jokes that she started making dozens of these buttons by hand until someone visited her studio and pointed out that it would be a much easier process if she used a mould. The shape of the buttons refers to stomata: the minute pores on the stem or leaf of a plant that allow it to breathe.

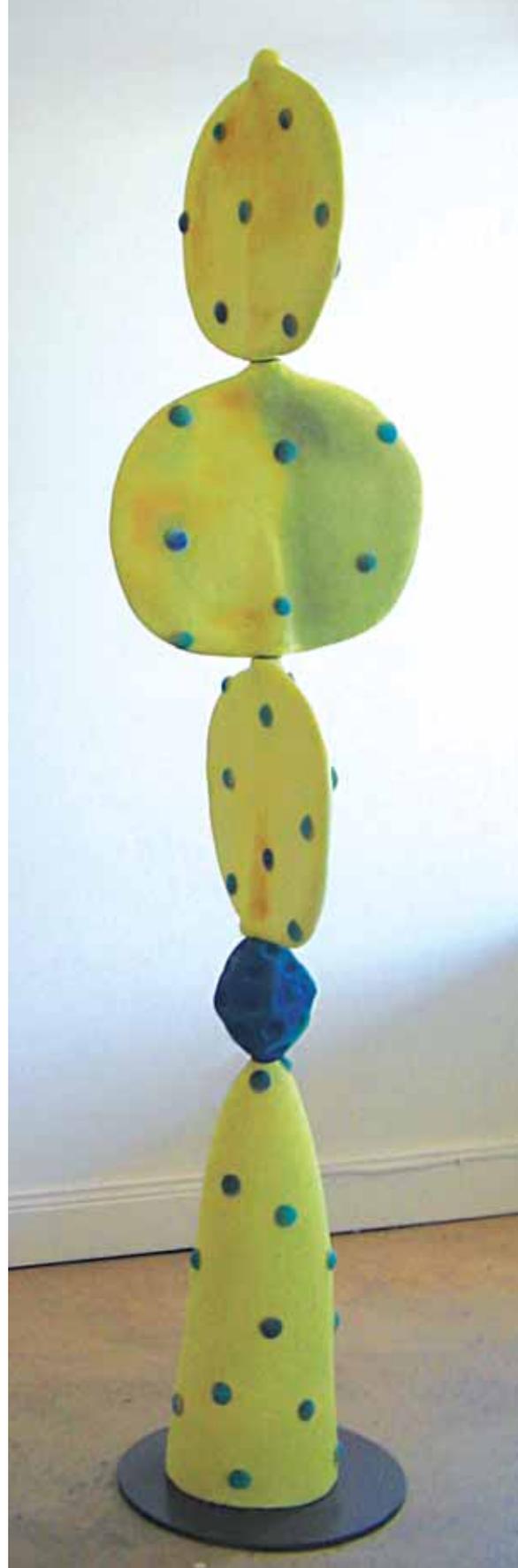
On the interior of the large modular pieces, Symons builds a structure to support the metal rod which the pieces are threaded on to; this structure holds the pieces in position and stops them rotating on the rod, and a rubber washer is added to prevent chipping. A heavy circular metal base provides stability. "During most of the year I was producing this work I had been trying to resolve how I would finish the pieces. To glaze or not to glaze... to begin with I had decided not to glaze and for about two thirds of the year I had been experimenting with inlaying and painting patterns in underglazes. I had wanted to achieve a white-on-white finish, subtle. It wasn't working.

“One day I decided I wanted colour, which I imagined as rich and plush. I envisioned similar colours and textures to the pigmented sculptures of Anish Kapoor. Yet this was a challenge, as I had only basic glaze knowledge, had never mixed a glaze or fired a gas kiln (which I needed to use). After asking many, many technical questions from friends and staff I came across Janet DeBoos’ dry glazes and took it from there. By becoming open to different finishes, I learnt much more than I ever thought I could in the small amount of time I had left of my Honours year, and am now able to say (much to my embarrassment) what a cone is.”

On the walls of the gallery were some small richly-coloured paintings. Botanical drawings executed in either pencil or graphite on decent quality paper had been stuck on to small square wooden supports then glazed with translucent paint. It is a clever way of presenting small studies that may otherwise look pedestrian. Symons said that she was torn between studying painting or ceramics, eventually choosing the latter because it gave her access to specialised equipment.

Sarah Symons’ sculptural forms refer to natural shapes without being explicit about it; you don’t feel like you are looking at a shop display or Mexican restaurant decorations. They manage the delicate balancing act of being likeable without being dumb or obvious. What is most appealing about them is their complete lack of cool: they are joyously and unselfconsciously executed, funky, fresh and up for a good time. They make you want to down tequila shots and grab someone desirable for a frenzied salsa session. It is art that’s lively enough to inspire a celebration, yet thoughtful enough to be memorable.

Helen Hopcroft completed a Masters degree in painting at London’s Royal College of Art in 1994. She teaches creative arts at Newcastle University and works as a freelance writer for a number of new media and print publications. She is currently working on her first novel and on paintings for a solo exhibition at Despard Gallery. An abbreviated version of this article was first published on the *ArtsHub* website in November 2007. The Space Place exhibition was opened by Dr Trevor Weekes from the University of Newcastle and ran from 2–18 November 2007 at the Back to Back Gallery (Newcastle Studio Potters Association). It is one of only many artist run spaces in the city of Newcastle. Despite the few commercial galleries that operate locally, the arts scene is burgeoning with relatively cheap studio space and a generally positive creative vibe.



Melelasore; grows slowly to keep its balance. 2007.