

# ARUSHA

GALLERY

## **Living by an Invisible Sun**

This is the age of the Grave Robber. Whilst our backs were turned and we were distracted, preoccupied, or otherwise engaged, a plague of tomb raiders, drunk on power, profit and plunder have slowly and stealthily taken over the planet, running riot, wreaking havoc, effortlessly swatting aside any opposition and neutralising resistance by deploying some of the most lethal weapons at their disposal in the form of misdirection, doublespeak, and manufactured consent.

This motley alliance of robber barons, ghouls and racketeers have been holding the globe to ransom; forfeiting the future by hijacking and trashing the public realm, fracturing social bonds and poisoning the very earth herself. The future appears to be crumbling before our eyes; collective histories, hopes, and aspirations reduced to ashes, promises and dreams mere landfill, consigned to oblivion.

Unmoored, punch-drunk and prone to elective amnesia, most of us are adrift in a limitless web of signs, overwhelmed with visual stimuli and bombarded with choices that are not choices at all. Our tormentors in chief seem to assume that our complicity and silence can be easily bought for the price of a poisoned apple or a handful of magic beans, that we will gladly forfeit all dignity when shiny gewgaws, knick-knacks, and worthless trinkets and trifles are dangled in front of our gormless faces, and that we will happily mortgage our souls in the pursuit of instant gratification, phoney fulfilment and the promise of a counterfeit eternity, a denial of death.

All is far from lost, however. Empires built on a foundation of lies, bad faith, hubris and gluttony contain the seeds of their own destruction and can never last. All-conquering institutions, puppet masters and players, accustomed to viewing themselves as the untouchable, unmoving centre of the universe are under threat, their aura of invincibility tarnished forever. Irresistible tectonic forces are at work and the edifices of power that once seemed so impermeable are becoming porous, cracked and may fall someday soon. The Spectacle that has held us all in thrall for so long seems to be imploding.

For art to maintain any relevance or resonance in these turbulent times, it must simultaneously bear witness to this implosion, whilst standing outside of time.

Rosie McLachlan's remarkable ceramic works are both utterly timeless and uncannily contemporary. Drawing on her background in archaeology and her extensive experience of fieldwork at ancient burial sites worldwide, she is creating a treasure hoard of artefacts that belong both nowhere and everywhere, existing beyond geography and history.

Rosie's work references ancient traditions of funerary art, drawing upon her in-depth research into comparative mythology and pan-global cosmologies. Her creations incorporate a multitude of universal signs and symbols gleaned from the collective unconscious, resembling mysterious artefacts disinterred from prehistoric burial chambers, or grave goods plundered from ancient tombs.

Over the course of the past few years Rosie has created a treasury of fantastical ceramic objects that appear to belong in some unbuilt thanatological theme park - vessels for use in subterranean rites of passage, or rituals of inhumation, exhumation, embalming and purification. Talismanic figurines,

apotropaic amulets, totems, fetishes, cinerary urns, representations of fertility and the Mother Goddess, chimaeras, half-human, half-beast therianthrope fantasies, essential accessories for those granted an audience with the Oracle or the Sibyl.

At first glance these ceramics may appear to be familiar-looking souvenirs of a mythic, imperfect past, objects created with some inexplicable ritual purpose in mind, but the closer one looks the more alien and disconcerting the works appear, resembling nothing less than relics of a civilisation not yet born.

To create her work Rosie uses clay dug from riverbeds and moorlands and her ceramics are wood fired over 4 days and nights in an anagama kiln, an ancient type of pottery kiln brought to Japan from China via Korea. Such kilns are often shaped like wombs or caves and other sacred spaces, and the act of firing has been compared with giving birth. In certain cultures it was even considered taboo for men to fire pots.

The lengthy firing process, an intense, alchemical ritual during which all four classical elements - earth, fire, water, and air - are brought into play, can become, for the ceramicist, an immersive, shamanic act of devotion, the result of which is the transmutation of common clay into solid-state objects of power imbued with mystery and magic.

*Hydriotaphia*, the title of this latest exhibition of McLachlan's work, is taken from the writings of the 17th century polymath, physician, philosopher and supreme prose stylist Sir Thomas Browne. *Hydriotaphia, Urn Burial, or a Discourse of the Sepulchral Urns lately found in Norfolk*, to give the work its full title, is one of the greatest, most influential essays in English literature. A profound meditation upon mortality, melancholy, "the ruins of forgotten times," the vicissitudes of fate and fortune. It is a treasure-trove of weird and wonderful erudition, arcane scholarship and illumination. In what is perhaps the most famous passage in the book, Browne writes:

*But man is a Noble Animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave, solemnizing Nativities and Deaths with equal lustre, nor omitting Ceremonies of bravery, in the infamy of his nature. Life is a pure flame, and we live by an invisible Sun within us.*

Rosie's work is an incarnation of that 'pure flame.' Blessed with a rare ability to glimpse eternity in a handful of clay and dream the world anew, she brings together symbols from across cultures and times, aiming to create 'artefacts from the world as it could be, not as it is.' Fieldwork for future archaeology.

Her ceramics appear both familiar yet ineffably alien. They satisfy our deepest atavistic yearnings and evoke shadowy folk memories whilst also breathing strange new life into ancient forms and subjects, confounding expectations and subverting the familiar.

Rosie McLachlan's creations are the unclassifiable products of a unique 'archaeo-futurist' vision, representing a defiant riposte to prosaic, earth-bound realism, re-animating and sabotaging tradition in ways that are both hopeful and utopian.

~ Stephen Ellcock, January 2024