



ARTIST PROFILE

ASHES TO ASHES

Yasmin Smith's site-specific ceramic installations reveal the history, ecology and culture of place.

WORDS: RACHEL TOLOSA PAZ
PHOTOGRAPHY: JACQUIE MANNING

WHEN IT COMES to the work of Sydney-born artist Yasmin Smith, process is paramount. The artist has developed a highly rigorous and forensic approach to her ceramics practice, which she uses to investigate the world around her. Her major exhibitions over the past four years – including her most recent large-scale and public-participatory installation *Drowned River Valley* (2018) at Cockatoo Island as part of the 21st Biennale of Sydney – are complex, site-specific explorations of the Australian landscape that reveal the history, ecology, geology and culture of place.

After graduating from Sydney College of the Arts in 2010 with a Master of Fine Arts and participating in the excavation of an archaeological site in Spain, Smith feels that the turning point in her practice came in 2014 when working with the Hermannsburg Potters in Ntaria in the Northern Territory. “I was living in a house in Ntaria that was surrounded by a fence that had all of these branches stuck to it,” she tells me. “Formally, I saw that fence in the landscape and I wanted to appreciate the object for what it was. And I started thinking about how I could use the materials themselves, rather than just try and reproduce it.”

The outcome, *Ntaria Fence* (2015), was a sculptural installation shown as part of a solo exhibition of the same name at The Commercial in Chippendale, Sydney, where Smith has been represented since 2012. Smith’s individually cast branches were attached to a makeshift wire fence, reflecting the original object in a new way. The branches were glazed with ash collected from local Ntaria fireplaces and cooking spaces using a wood-ash glazing technique the artist continues to refine today.

This wood-ash glazing provides Smith with a way to investigate the history of place: the ash determines the colour of the glaze, revealing a given environment’s past narratives. In Smith’s installation, *Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker* (2017) – her Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award finalist work exhibited at



“I was interested in her ceramic works due to their nature of using fire, water, wood and earth to represent the Wu Xing concept and the ecology of the universe.”

MAMI KATAOKA

OPPOSITE PAGE: Process detail of Yasmin Smith’s *Drowned River Valley*, 2018, 21st Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, Sydney.

THIS PAGE: Installation view of Yasmin Smith’s *Drowned River Valley*, 2018, 21st Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, Sydney.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND THE COMMERCIAL, SYDNEY.
PHOTO: ELLE FREDERICKSEN.

Shepparton Art Museum – Smith cast 100-year-old pear branches from a local orchard. “The glaze turned out to be very green and that came from the copper fungicidal sprays and copper oxide sprays that were used up until the 1970s to make the pears turn brown,” says Smith.

In her Biennale installation *Drowned River Valley* – an iteration of which will exhibit at The Commercial in June/July – Smith again utilised the wood-ash glazing technique to expose the contained history of locally gathered timbers on Cockatoo Island. The work also had a participatory element: as Cockatoo Island marks the tidal exchange between the salt waters of Sydney Harbour and the fresh waters of the Parramatta River, Smith wanted to explore the performative nature of salt-harvesting collectives in early colonial history. She built a salt kiln on site to fire pinch pots made by the Biennale visitors. “Having the public as the labour is beneficial for me as an artist,” Smith explains. “People get to engage with the work, and it allows me to provide them with a direct explanation of the glazing techniques and the materials involved. This in turn gives them an insight into their environment.”

The finished salt-glazed vessels and the stake-like, ash-glazed casts of mangrove and wharf were laid minimally alongside one another in a sparse, spatially generous wood-drying shed on the Island. “I wanted to give the pieces a lot of space,” says Smith. “There is so much inside the material that to add any more subjectivity would just overload the work.”

Exhibiting within the limits of the gallery space later this month, Smith will arrange the 276 pinch pots within a towering metal stack. The cast sleepers and mangroves will be wall-mounted, providing audiences with an intimate, vertical view of the deep connections and stories Smith contains in her ceramic processes; and collectors with an opportunity to acquire their own piece of this incredibly complex, multi-layered undertaking that epitomises Smith’s practice.

YASMIN SMITH’S *DROWNED RIVER VALLEY* SHOWS AT THE COMMERCIAL, SYDNEY, FROM 23 JUNE TO 28 JULY 2018.

MAMI KATAOKA

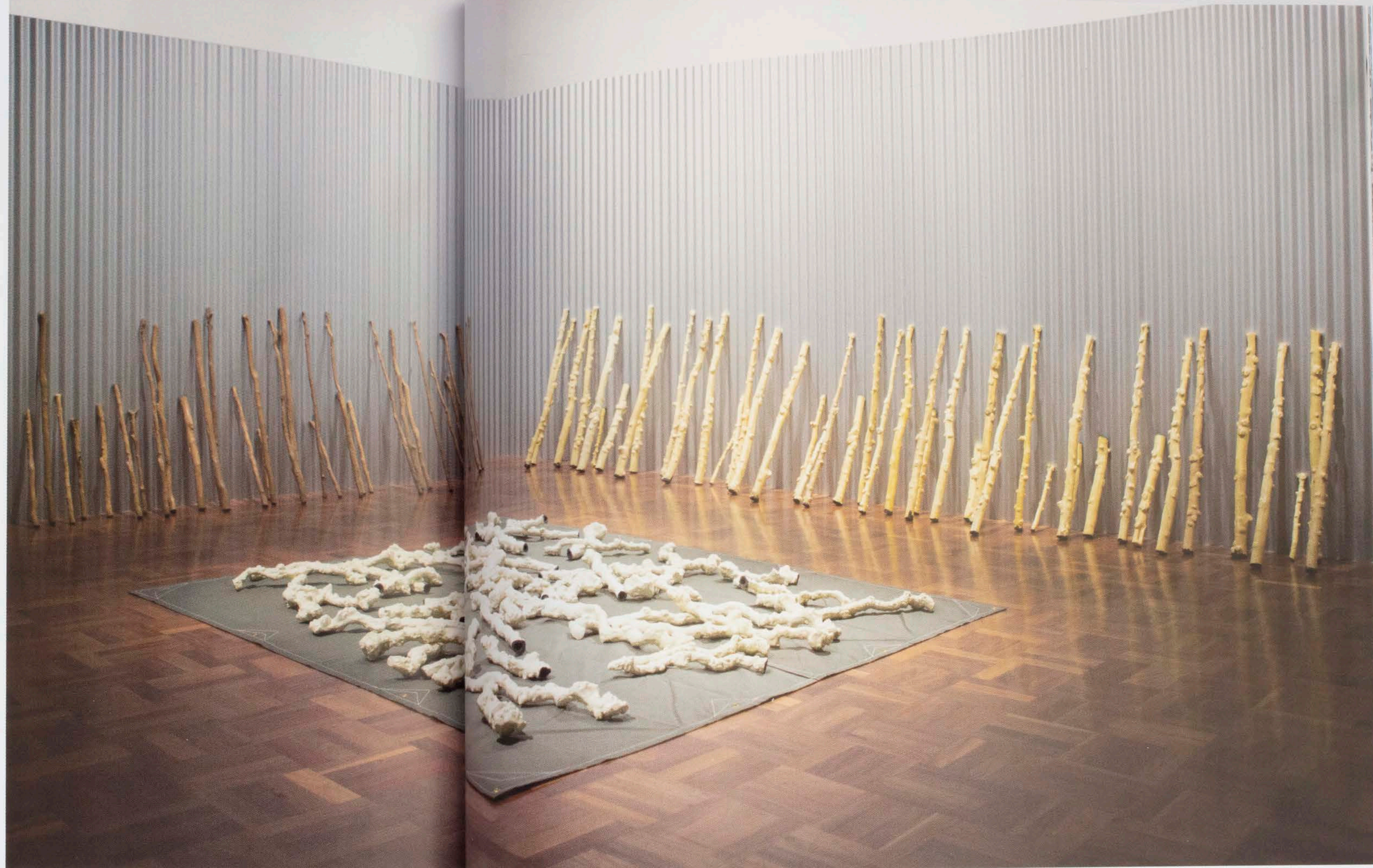
Curator and Artistic Director, 21st Biennale of Sydney

In her role as artistic director of the 21st Biennale of Sydney, *SUPERPOSITION: Equilibrium & Engagement*, Mami Kataoka commissioned Yasmin Smith to create the site-specific ceramic installation, *Drowned River Valley*, exhibited at Sydney's Cockatoo Island.

During the process of selecting artists for the Biennale, Kataoka was particularly concerned with seeking out those who were working within a holistic, *Wu Xing* view of the world: a Chinese philosophy that explores the relationship and interactions between the five elements of wood, fire, earth, water and metal. In regard to Smith's art practice, Kataoka says: "I was interested in her ceramic works due to their nature of using fire, water, wood and earth to represent the *Wu Xing* concept and the ecology of the universe."

As part of her research into Smith's practice, Kataoka had viewed her work *Contours of our heart* (2016) at Barangaroo and was impressed by her ability to work with the public. "As the idea of engagement was one of the crucial perspectives for the Biennale, I was looking for local artists who could make a longer commitment with the visitors and communities after the opening," says Kataoka.

A culturally relevant artist working to reflect both the local climate and natural conditions, "Yasmin was one of the best artists to be able to achieve both of the above", says Kataoka. "This was in addition to her scientific approach of making glazes and use of local materials such as sea salt and mangrove, which I highly valued."

**AMANDA ROWELL**

Director, The Commercial, Sydney

Amanda Rowell has represented Yasmin Smith since 2012, though they first worked together on a curatorial project in 2009. "I was hugely impressed by the originality and beauty of her work," says the Sydney gallerist. "She was completely doing her own thing – very ambitious, large-scale ceramic installations. She had single-minded focus, great energy and confidence."

In recent years, Smith's considered blend of science, archaeology and art has been attracting more and more attention. In 2017, her work for the Sidney Myer Fund Australian Ceramic Award was acquired in full by Victoria's Shepparton Art Museum. "It would be one of the largest ceramic installations in an Australian public collection today," says Rowell.

"The awareness of and high level of interest in her work from influential international curators is rapidly increasing – especially since the Biennale." Smith's forthcoming exhibition at The Commercial will see Smith's Biennale installation re-configured together with some new works of a more domestic nature. "They will indicate a departure and future development in the work and will most likely be less than \$10,000," says Rowell.

"Yasmin's works are both highly intelligent in their consideration of site and immensely labour-intensive," says Rowell. "Collectors who appreciate that kind of content would be very much attracted to her work. The next stage for Yasmin is creating site-specific works for private collectors. That might be an architectural tile work for inside or a free-standing, tile-clad sculpture for the garden – with her beautiful, site-specific glazes." ■

"Yasmin's works are both highly intelligent in their consideration of site and immensely labour-intensive."

AMANDA ROWELL

OPPOSITE PAGE: Process detail of Yasmin Smith's *Drowned River Valley*, 2018, 21st Biennale of Sydney, Cockatoo Island, Sydney.

THIS PAGE: Yasmin Smith, *Open Vase Central Leader Widow Maker*, 2017. Slip-cast ceramic objects, 3 types of wood-ash glaze, corrugated iron and canvas tarpaulin, dimensions variable.

COURTESY: THE ARTIST AND THE COMMERCIAL, SYDNEY. PHOTO: ELLE FREDERICKSEN.