

RENEE SO PROVENANCE

27 April – 8 July 2023
Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA

Renee So's practice is distinguished by its embrace of craft methods and cross-cultural thinking, an underlying sense of the comedic, and a persistent feminist worldview. While So's early work used motifs of bearded men, full bellies and boots to explore popular archetypes and representations of (mostly) masculine authority, she has increasingly turned to representations of women's bodies, drawing on artistic precedents from prehistoric to modern times.

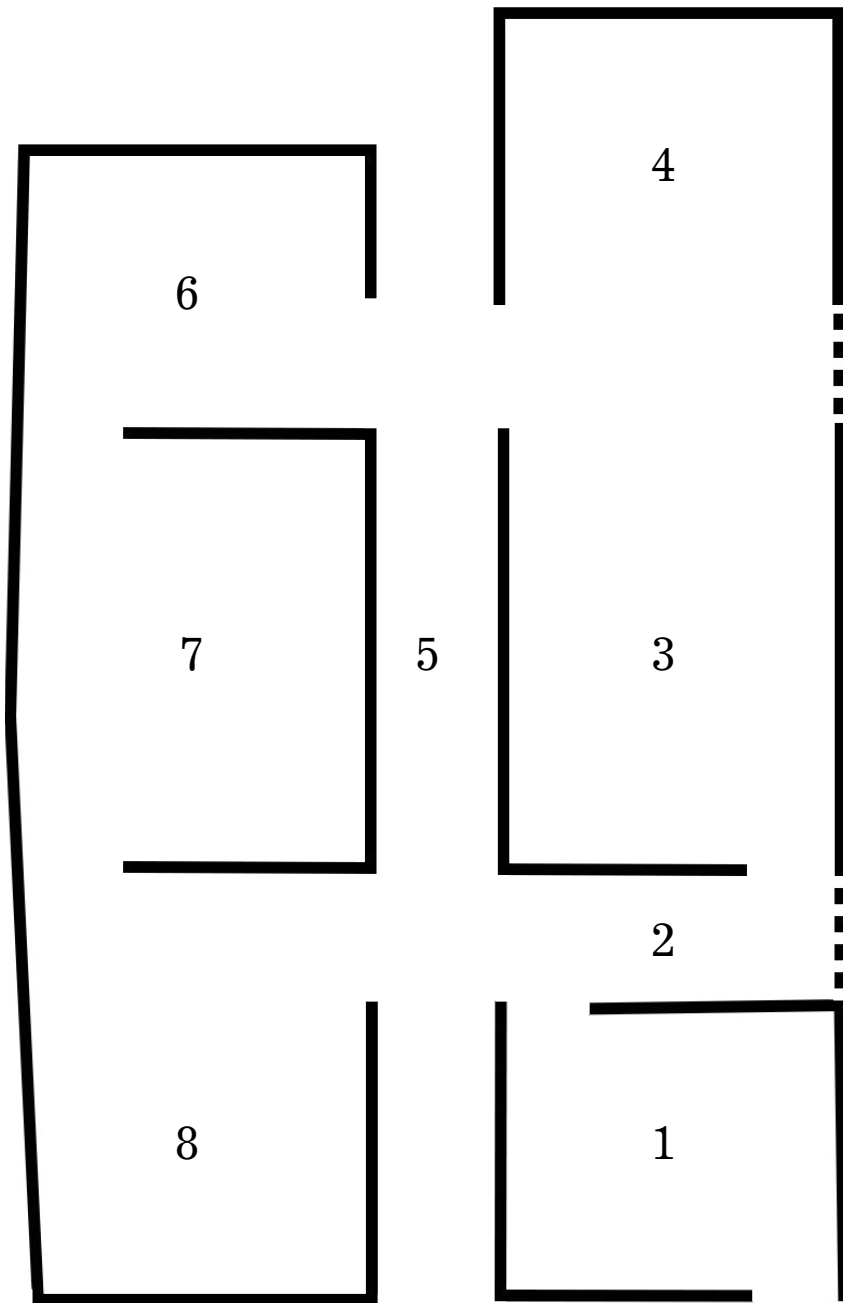
The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German Bartmann ('bearded man') or Bellarmine jugs that So encountered in London's Victoria and Albert Museum have been a dominant source of inspiration for her 'knitted paintings' and ceramic objects. Other references have included classical sculpture, the Assyrian collections of the British Museum, the glazed brick bas-relief of the Babylonian Ishtar Gate, c.575 BCE, and 'Venus' figurines dated between about 40000 BCE and 10000 BCE. Recent ceramic works also consider the legacy of the mid-nineteenth-century British and French 'Opium Wars' in China, during which countless objects were looted from Yuanmingyuan (the Qing Dynasty Old Summer Palace), influencing Western imaginings of Asia.

Provenance is the first major exhibition of London-based Renee So's work in Australia, where she grew up after migrating with her family from Hong Kong at a young age. The exhibition brings together more than a decade of art-making alongside new work, surfacing narratives within her evolving practice.

Renee So: Provenance is co-presented by Monash University Museum of Art | MUMA, Melbourne and UNSW Galleries, Sydney and supported by the Henry Moore Foundation. The exhibition will be presented at UNSW Galleries, Sydney from 18 August – 19 November 2023.

MUMA acknowledges the support of the MUMA Contemporaries towards the realisation of new works for this exhibition, Kate MacGarry, London for its investment in and support of this project, and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney for its support of the publication.





1.

Renee So has long been interested in ‘art loot’ stolen from the East and traded in the West, including artefacts that end up in museum collections. Snuff bottles are one such item, prized for their cultural and associated social status, and perhaps for the allure of the narcotic they once contained. Qing dynasty (1644–1911) snuff bottles continue to influence the visual identity of many well-known contemporary perfumes – including Opium, Addict, Poison and Tabac – with their implicit exoticisation of the East. So’s oversized snuff bottles draw attention to these histories of trade, the insatiable desire for collecting, and the status and power conferred through such ownership and objectification.

CLOCKWISE FROM FOYER ENTRANCE

‘Opium’ Snuff Bottle 2022
glazed earthenware

‘Snuff’ Snuff Bottle 2022
glazed earthenware

‘Poison’ Snuff Bottle 2022
glazed earthenware and acrylic paint

Imperial Pekingese Dog 2022
glazed earthenware

‘Colony’ Snuff Bottle 2022
glazed earthenware

Bronze Vessel 2020
glazed earthenware and oil paint

Mom Jeans 2022
glazed stoneware

Scholar’s Rock 2022
glazed stoneware

A Foot Bath for Bound Feet 2022
glazed earthenware

Snuff Bottle 2020–22
glazed stoneware

All these works courtesy of the artist
and Kate MacGarry, London

2.

These are the first artworks that Renee So has made in stained glass and continue her interest in working with various craft practices as well as the genre of portraiture. The rays radiating out from heads relate to the composition and suggested positive psychological energy of the artwork *Flow State*, 2019, which appears in the next gallery, while also being reminiscent of the bars that indicate the strength of wireless internet connectivity. These stylised portraits are specific to the internet age in which we live; it’s possible to imagine a future viewer forming their own assessment from them about our twenty-first-century state of mind.

L–R

Renee So and Piotr Frac
The Information Age (Monocolour) 2022
stained glass, lead and oak frame
Collection of Piotr Frac

Renee So and Piotr Frac
The Information Age (Technicolour) 2022
stained glass, lead and oak frame
Collection of Renee So

For close to a decade, Renee So focused her artwork on representations of power, in particular male authority, through images of bearded men, big bellies and military style boots. After the birth of her son Gene, So turned her attention to representations of women, taking inspiration from some of the oldest forms of pottery and, in particular, ‘Venus’ statuettes from the Valdivian culture of Ecuador (4000–1500 BCE). These clay figures are characterised by their standing poses and distinctive hairstyles, as are So’s own women.

So became fascinated with the five-thousand-year-old bird-faced Venus in the Brooklyn Museum with its similarity to the more recent imaging of a clitoris based on research undertaken by Melbourne urologist Helen O’Connell in 1998. As So notes, ‘they look so similar, yet they are millenia apart. I cannot make any connection between them beyond their shape . . . The bird-faced Venus appears to be a celebration of femininity and the ancient Egyptians had gods and goddesses to celebrate love, sex, fertility and pleasure’. A related bird-like shape appears in many of So’s artworks including *Internal Life* and *Downstairs*, both from 2022, presented in this exhibition.

She finds inspiration for her work from a wide range of historical and contemporary sources while maintaining an overarching interest in representations of gender and power. The title of *Woman Sans Culottes XV*, 2022, references women being banned from wearing trousers in Paris as well as the protest culture of the French Revolution. Dissenters called ‘sans-culottes’ wore striped work trousers (similar to today’s jeans), which women were stopped from wearing to prevent their participation in protests and from finding employment in Paris. This law, put in place in 1799, was only formally lifted in 2013.

CENTRE

Unknown Woman 2019
glazed stoneware
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

CLOCKWISE FROM WINDOW

Woman I 2017
stoneware
Buxton International Collection, Melbourne

Woman II 2017
stoneware
Private collection, Melbourne

Woman VI 2020
earthenware
Buxton International Collection, Melbourne

Woman XIII 2022
stoneware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Opium by Yves Saint Laurent 2022
glazed earthenware
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Venus of Valdivia 2019
glazed earthenware and oil paint
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Woman Holding Cup XVI 2022
stoneware
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Woman Sans Culottes XV 2022
earthenware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Woman IX 2021
stoneware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Woman XI 2021
stoneware
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Mythical Creature 2022
stoneware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Woman X 2021
stoneware
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

4.

In 2019, Renee So was invited to create an exhibition for the modernist De La Warr Pavilion in East Sussex to mark the centenary of the influential Bauhaus art and design school. So approached the commission by learning to weave: an act of homage to the women students of the Bauhaus, for whom weaving was compulsory. The Bauhaus weaving workshop was so commercially successful that its income significantly underwrote the funding of the school. So's *Learning to Weave*, 2019, is a nod to the gendered nature of education and art-making at the 'progressive' Bauhaus as well as the often under-recognised nature of women's labour. So's *Flow State*, 2019, was made in response to the seaside location of the De La Warr Pavilion itself as well as the Bauhaus students' love of yoga.

ANTI-CLOCKWISE FROM WINDOW

Ear 2022

glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Learn to Weave 2019

glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint, and oak
frame
Collection of Sandra Cohen, London

Flow State 2019

glazed earthenware and aluminium frame
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Anatomy 101 2022

glazed earthenware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Downstairs 2022

glazed earthenware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Looking Out Beyond the Hills 2022

glazed earthenware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Internal Life 2022

glazed earthenware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

5.

This group of heads are some of the first ceramic characters Renee So made and, unlike her artworks to follow, are individually named. From early on in her practice, So's take on portraiture was characterised by cartoon-like stylisation and a focus on archetypes, theatricality and masquerade. As she notes, 'simplifying a face or figure makes it look unserious, especially when it involves an outline and flat colour . . . I started looking at kids' cartoons and historical political cartoons, and their visual language began to influence my work in turn.'

L—R

Alvaro 2008

glazed earthenware
Artbank Collection, purchased 2008

Lee 2008

glazed earthenware
Private collection, Melbourne

Pax 2007

glazed earthenware
Private collection, Melbourne

Kwan 2008

glazed earthenware
Artbank Collection, purchased 2008

David 2008

glazed earthenware
Private collection, Melbourne

For Renee So, artworks are vessels for reflecting upon often entrenched social and cultural norms and associated behaviours from both the past and present. She also works with the vessel as a form in and of itself and is interested in the way substances are transferred from objects into human bodies—which are also vessels—including the flow-on effects of such transference. Through her practice, she brings us closer to our material culture and to the lives and aspirations of its makers.

CLOCKWISE

Guitar 2018

glazed earthenware, oil paint and aluminium frame
 Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
 and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Still Life 2022

glazed earthenware and aluminium frame
 Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
 and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Boot 2015

bronze
 Bosci Collection, Melbourne

Cigarette 2015

glazed earthenware
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Vintage Wine Lover 2015

glazed earthenware and Jesmonite
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Bottle 2015

glazed earthenware
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Martini 2015

glazed earthenware
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Cosmopolitan 2015

glazed earthenware and Jesmonite
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Elephant Foot 2015

glazed earthenware
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

In 2010, Renee So began to work with the form, symbolism and traditions of the Bellarmine jug after seeing a display of them at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Popular drinking vessels for wine and ale, Bellarmine jugs—featuring bearded men—were made in large numbers from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Frechen near Cologne, Germany, and exported throughout Europe and into the United Kingdom. So's interest in these jugs connects to her broader research into ceramic traditions and their popular cultural forms and iterations, as well as to representations of gender in daily life. Beards, boots and bellies appear in exaggerated forms across So's practice.

CLOCKWISE FROM GALLERY 6 ENTRANCE

Bellarmino XIII (Version II) 2019

earthenware and boot polish
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Bellarmino XV 2016

stoneware
 The State Art Collection, The Art Gallery of Western Australia
 Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2019

Untitled 2012

glazed earthenware and steel
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Bellarmino VIII (Version II) 2019

earthenware and boot polish
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Bellarmino and Bootleg 2019

stoneware and steel
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Bellarmino V 2011

glazed earthenware
 Monash University Collection, Melbourne
 Purchased 2013

Steatopygous Bellarmino 2022

glazed stoneware
 Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Bellarmino XVII 2016

stoneware
 Private collection, Sydney

Bellarmino XI 2013

glazed earthenware
 Collection of Peter McDonald, London

Bellarmino Holding Bellarmino (Version II) 2020

earthenware
 Powerhouse collection, Sydney, Barry Willoughby
 Bequest Commission, 2020

Cross Legged Man 2018
stoneware
Collection of Helen Seales, Melbourne

Reflections of a Reclining Male 2019
knitted cotton and acrylic yarn, and oak frame
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Boot Leg 2019
glazed earthenware, cotton shade, LED light, wood
and aluminium rods
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Boots 2012
knitted acrylic yarn and wool, and oak frame
Buxton International Collection, Melbourne

For close to a decade, Renee So's work focused on representations of masculinity through motifs of bearded men and military-style boots. Playing with these forms and up-ending them in ways reminiscent of playing card illustrations and anthropomorphic ceramic traditions, she also introduced vulnerability through inebriation. The pantaloons in *Bellarmino*, 2010, connect to a historical artwork that has been an important reference for So. Working at the turn of the seventeenth century, Japanese artist Kanō Naizen's gold-leaf and tempera paintings on lattice, called Namban screens, c.1606, depicted European contact with Japan in 1543. As So notes, 'I like that the scenes are seen through an Asian gaze . . . The European dress of baggy pantaloons, black tights, hats, capes, ruffles and flowing gowns would have looked totally odd'.

CLOCKWISE

Black Captain 2012
knitted acrylic yarn and oak frame
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Going Out 2016
knitted linen and acrylic yarn, and oak frame
Collection of Abigail Hargrave, Melbourne

Nightfall 2019
knitted acrylic yarn and wool, and oak frame
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Sunset 2016
knitted acrylic yarn and oak frame
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Bellarmino 2010
knitted acrylic yarn and oak frame
Shepparton Art Museum Collection, purchased 2010

Drunken Bellarmino II 2023
knitted acrylic yarn
150 × 110 × 4 cm
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Relaxation 2019
glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

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MUMA
Contemporaries



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Opening Hours

Tue–Fri: 10am–5pm

Sat: 12–5pm

Closed Sun

Mon by appointment

Entry is always free

We acknowledge and pay respect to the Traditional Owners and Elders—past, present and emerging—of the lands on which Monash University operates. We acknowledge Aboriginal connection to material and creative practice on these lands for more than 60,000 years.

