

As Within

Curated by Alexandra Lawson

'As Within' is an exhibition by Clairy Laurence and Monica Usher, both artists whose work explores the notion of the relic, as an object or article of significance from the past, with remains or memories embedded deep within.

This essay is based on a conversation the artists had with me about their work, which identified similarities of ideas and making processes. By way of background, Laurence and Usher are sisters, their mother had a ceramics workshop and a studio under the house, and Laurence talks about the home being full of artwork. Born into the same family, maybe it's not surprising that their work has an unspoken overlapping of ideas and aesthetics - although some of the links and cross overs were surprising to the artists.

'As Within', was conceived after Usher and Laurence had work in a group exhibition called 'As Above', the first show they've been in together since the 90s. 'As Within' was the next logical step, referring to the passage by Hermes Trismegistus that reads, 'as above, so below, as within, so without, as the universe, so the soul'. It is said that someone who understands this phrase holds the secrets to the universe. This reference is appropriate, as both of the artists' works have a connection to the unseen, through the use of light, darkness, motifs, and the creation of the layers in-between, depicting things unseen and unspoken.

'As Within' refers to something precious being housed within, it relates to a *rellequie*, a term often used to describe a religious artifact (for example, a piece of wood, or a nail from the cross, or the skeleton of a prophet) which is said to hold mystical powers. The *rellequie* therefore is a highly desired object, and it is not uncommon that pilgrimages occur to visit certain *rellequies*.

Laurence's early figurative works were titled 'wayfarers' which is another term for pilgrims on a spiritual journey. Her work at large deals with 'other dimensions', with fractals (a never-ending pattern) in the seven layers of heaven, spirituality, death and with an individual's shift to a 'different place'. Usher's work captures an embodied experience that has generally occurred in the garden, identifying themes including wonder, the sacred object, and the human condition.

Both artists say they're on their own spiritual journeys, and although these are quite different, they are connected through their inner search. This enquiry of their inner world informs an intuitive process that informs both artists' making processes. Laurence expresses ideas via the presence of symbols, stars, and eyes in her works. Usher is not as literal in her paintings - she speaks about her works creating this 'otherness'; using darkness as a trick to create an uneasiness in the work, painting around the image to make the negative space more intentional and to unbalance the viewer. Usher does this to put forward an alternate way of thinking, the dark colours in the paintings create a fine balance between what she chooses to show and what she hides. Usher explains that often the edges of her paintings are transparent, which is another tool she uses, allowing the viewer to see what's behind the object as well as what's in front of it. This is the feeling of 'something other', created through her treatment of oil paint.

The artists identified that they employ some of the same techniques to articulate their ideas, they both use detail, and muted colours. Both artists' works are not busy with colour, but with detail. Working in this way, they explain, allows them to draw attention to what they want to bring to light.

The artists in conversation, discussed their potential links as being ‘the innate within us’, occurring as genetic rather than experiential, even though they’ve shared conversations their whole lives. This body of work is therefore, a conversation about life, death, change and rebirth, ‘as above, so below, as within, so without, as the universe, so the soul.’

Monica Usher is a Toowoomba based artist, she has exhibited both her ceramic and painted works in numerous group shows and a number of solo exhibitions which have been critically acknowledged and well-received by both collectors and the public audience at large. Usher has recently shown at Alexandra Lawson Gallery, Toowoomba Regional Art Gallery and Greydon Gallery New Farm.

Clairy Laurence is a Brisbane based Ceramic Artist. Laurence has had works collected by collections and collectors across Australia. Laurence has recently shown at PaperBoat Press (Brisbane), Gatakers Artspace (Maryborough), The Studio (Paddington), Art Nuvo (Buderim), Artisan (Brisbane), Juggler’s Artspace (Brisbane), Gradon Gallery (New Farm), Studio41, (Brisbane)

Alexandra Lawson (curator) is based in Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia. She completed a PhD in visual art in 2015, owns the Alexandra Lawson Gallery and works as an academic at the University of Southern Queensland.

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