

## **Kate Dorrrough: River Language**

'River Language' continues Kate Dorrrough's ongoing focus on the river as a fundamental source of fertility within the Australian landscape. In her large-scale paintings and hand-built ceramic forms, the Sydney artist posits the river as a vital life force, with its cyclical nature of renewal and destruction, whilst also considering its importance as a potent historical and cultural emblem embedded in our literature and inherited visual language. The works siphon memories of places experienced during Dorrrough's art residencies and travels in Australia, yet these are not portraits of particular landscapes – they are evocations, distillates, capturing the essence of things seen, felt and imagined.

In a country marked by droughts, floods and fires, water is the nucleus of our individual, communal and cultural life. Even though we identify with the river, Dorrrough renders it as a life force beyond our control; beyond our cognition. Drawing from this existential tenor of water, she envisions the river as a symbolic language to be deciphered. 'The river is political, and a place of remembering. Broad and strong, the river is a unifying symbol,' reflects the artist. She reduces the land to a sequence of abstracted calligraphic marks and incisions unfurling across canvas and clay. Scrawled like a scribbly gum script, these gestures conjure an implied language, or poetry, as Dorrrough acknowledges our need to understand the river in order to preserve its fragile ecosystems. The river, trees, rocks and broad spatial vistas become a series of totems demarcating the wisdom of an enduring Australian landscape.

Inspired by the forms of Ancient Greece and Etruscan vessels, Dorrrough's new series of River Heads mimic water jugs, yet their spouts and suggestions of handles are far from utilitarian. Water, here, is not as a resource to be used and consumed; but something to be venerated and preserved. These sculptural personifications of the river function as totems representing the destructive and the archaic, tempered with a hint of humour. The land becomes vessel, literally and symbolically. A vessel of life, of language, and of lost histories.

The cross fertilisation of hand-built ceramic forms with paintings on linen speak to the dynamism of the river, with its dualities of fluidity and solidity, transience and endurance. Limber brushstrokes, amorphous forms and gestural glazes dance in and out of recognition, while the stratified verticality of the compositions point to the memories and histories lodged and layered in the land. Dorrrough's stoneware ceramic forms evolve over time with numerous firings, where iron oxide bleeds through strata of glaze and slips, forming surfaces that summon the cool physicality of the river. Sensorial vignettes are evoked by Dorrrough's stained linen canvases and swathes of acrylic, which elicit recollections of swimming in warm, shallow, Gum leaf-stained river edges and cool mysterious umber depths. This alchemic process of layering paint and glazes echoes a rich reservoir of stories told and untold – the memories of the river.