

SAMSTAG / SPRING SEASON

# Kirsten Coelho/ Ithaca



KIRSTEN COELHO /  
ITHACA

*Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story  
of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
the wanderer, harried for years on end...*

— Homer, The Odyssey

Kirsten Coelho's *Ithaca* presents a series of serene, graceful ceramic vessels of soft white porcelain. The pots appear timeless. Their forms of varying shape and size exhibit ancient Grecian reference points: long curved handles, slender spouts, tall columns. They sit in irregular groupings atop a tall, slender plinth that looks as if it were made of porcelain and—discernible to the observant viewer—tapers ever so slightly upwards. At a distance, the work appears both ghostly and alluring: a pedestal with an abandoned monument turned to ruin atop; a mountainous landscape upon which sepulchral remains of a civilisation now lie. The near-perfection of the sleek silvery pottery draws us in, but the incline renders the pieces unattainable, just out of reach.

With this new body of work, Coelho considers the Ancient Greek poem *The Odyssey*, dated 900-700 BC. Attributed to Homer—although likely written by a number of authors—the story picks up after the end of Trojan War and details Odysseus's ten-year journey home to the mythological island of Ithaca, where he is King. The epic unfolds as an exploration of voyage, longing and transformation as Odysseus's eventual return is tarnished by the discovery that home is not as he had remembered it.

Coelho's *Ithaca* resembles, as does Homer's, the place to which we strive to reach yet which remains beyond our limit. Coelho has long been captivated by *The Odyssey*. Born in Copenhagen in 1966, Coelho moved to North America as a child before emigrating to Australia with her family in 1972. Her eventual return as an adult to both Denmark and the U.S. proved the relatability of Odysseus's experience. To Coelho, Homer's text is a reminder that 'home' is an intangible concept, abstracted by time and the inevitability of change. It is this clear moment of realisation that the artist looks to articulate.

'*He who grasps loses*' — Coelho references Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu to express the difficulty of searching for something elusive that was held in the mind, and the way perception and reality can be so very different.<sup>1</sup>

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*Our glance lingers over the debris of a triumphal arch, a portico, a pyramid, a temple, a palace, and we retreat into ourselves; we contemplate the ravages of time, and in our imagination we scatter the rubble of the very buildings in which we lie all over the ground; in that moment solitude and silence prevail around us, we are the sole survivors of an entire nation that is no more.*

— Denis Diderot, *Le Salon de 1767*

Coelho's ideas around the elusive nature of home run in parallel to her investigation of the ruin. The inspiration for this enquiry began during Coelho's 2018 Arts South Australia Fellowship, looking into the way our perception and understanding of objects is altered by historical and cultural context. Travelling to Greece and Italy, Coelho visited Pompeii, Athens's Acropolis Museum and the Museum of Cycladic Art, and the National Archaeological Museum in Naples. She witnessed degradation in the ancient vessels displayed in vitrines within museum collections, and the disintegration of classical statues and columns as they lay outdoors, vulnerable to nature's relentless advance.

A ceramicist is all too aware of the lifespan of material culture, impacted by time's passing and the influences of its environment. With *Ithaca*, Coelho deploys the ruin as metaphor for the inevitability of—and the possibilities held within—change and transformation.

A ruin, by definition, survives, considering of course the distinction between what is a 'ruin' and what is 'derelict' – one inspires poetry, the other calls for demolition. There must be a certain amount of a built structure standing for us to refer to it as a ruin rather than a heap of rubble. *Ithaca* reminds us of the ruin's ability—despite its state of mutable decay—to outlive us. Following this train of thought, it becomes clear that ruins embody a set of temporal and historical paradoxes. A remnant of a past long gone—its decay a reminder of the passage of time—a ruin also has the capacity to cast us forward, predicting a future in which our present will slump into similar disrepair or fall victim to some unforeseeable calamity.<sup>2</sup>

By calling on both an ancient text and the temporal expanse of the ruin, Coelho evokes a sense of being able to tap into the past but also speak to the potentiality of what lies beyond our present moment.

Presented at the University of South Australia's Samstag Museum of Art, *Ithaca* demonstrates Coelho's increasing sensitivity towards modes of display. The installation follows her contribution to the 2018 *Adelaide Biennial of Australian Art: Divided Worlds* which saw seventy-three vessels arranged along a fourteen-metre plinth, sparingly lit in the darkened gallery of Adelaide's JamFactory.

At Samstag, cool light offers the work a soft luminescence. Set within pale blue walls, reminiscent of an oceanic journey, or the Wedgwood Jasperware vase, and fortuitously titled 'Explorer Blue', the positioning of the vessels atop an ethereal, yet monumental, plinth evokes the island of Ithaca, and with it a sense of discovery and both timelessness and the passing of time. The surface of the plinth brings out the near perfection of Coelho's porcelain, and its size, shape and appearance convey a reference to the monument, the landscape, the ruin itself.

— Joanna Kitto

1 Conversation with the artist, October 2019

2 Dillon, Brian, *RUINS / Documents of Contemporary Art*, 2011, published by Whitechapel Gallery and the MIT Press, p.11



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Kirsten COELHO, *Ithaca*, 2020, installation view, Samstag Museum of Art, University of South Australia. Photo: Sam Noonan.

**KIRSTEN COELHO /  
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*Ithaca* curator: Joanna Kitto

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Kirsten Coelho is represented by Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.

Image: Kirsten COELHO, *Ithaca*, 2019, porcelain matte glaze. Photo: Grant Hancock. Courtesy the artist, Philip Bacon Galleries, Brisbane and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney.