

Vessels carry an elegant interplay of culture, language and form

The vessel in its myriad expressions is arguably one of the most potent ceramic forms and certainly one with an impressive longevity. Avital Sheffer clearly understands the power of the vessel as all-embracing, trans-temporal and transcultural.

These qualities are seductively clear in her exhibition, where she exploits the rich ceramic and other histories of her native Israel and its Middle Eastern and Mediterranean neighbours to create a layered and symbolically diverse body of work.

Sheffer's forms acknowledge their source, with works given titles alluding to classic Greek vase shapes or Hebrew culture. While ceramic progenitors provide a source, Shef-

Edge of memory

Ceramics, by Avital Sheffer. At Beaver Galleries, Deakin, until April 15.

Reviewer: Peter Haynes

fer's actual forms are defiantly particular to her unique morphological vocabulary. Each represents a contemporary interpretation of an original shape filtered through the artist's personal experiences and understanding of those experiences. The titles invite the viewer to see each work as part of a celebratory cultural continuum.

Sheffer is also aware that form alone supplies minimal aesthetic delectation and must be accompanied by decoration that simulta-



SEDUCTIVE: Avital Sheffer's *Hydria I*, left, and *Lagynos VII* explore the power of the vessel.

eously speaks to the form yet retains its autonomous aesthetic identity to achieve a fully resolved whole.

Language is one of the chief keys to understanding cultures other than

our own. The significance of language is perhaps nowhere more important in mankind's development than in the countries of the eastern Mediterranean.

Sheffer knows this. She also appreciates the inherent beauty of the written word and her incorporation of scripts from Hebrew, Aramaic and Arabic texts, while

being a conspicuously effective decorative tool, is an evocative allusion to the layering of cultures that characterises much of the history of the Middle East.

There are 15 pieces in this exhibition and despite familial stylistic devices being present, each work maintains its own individuality and character.

Askos III is an elegantly commanding work and will serve as an example for discussion. The full body flows gracefully upwards to the neck and spout. The handle, equally gracefully, drops back into the body, producing a subtle and insinuating spatial flow that accentuates the form while asserting the importance of the decoration sitting on it. The handle connects to thin bands of clay that divide the form into a number of decorative areas.

The simplicity of the bands is

conversely at odds with their role in providing definition to the swelling shape of the body, visually constraining the internal spatial configuration and containing the separate areas of decoration. The decoration is both text and floral, the latter derived from traditional textiles.

This visual dichotomy underscores a number of aesthetic and conceptual devices: text as both decoration and cultural indicator; fabric as women's domain; text as rigid linearity, as artifice; flora as spontaneous and lyrical, as nature.

The orange of the decorative elements also calls to mind the henna used in wedding ceremonies and the soft ochre of the arid earth of the

Middle East. The reference to the earth is underscored by the way the artist has invested the body of this and other pots with a visible friability – an overt indicator of the fragility of clay. But as Sheffer knows, clay objects have also withstood the test of time and remain as mute observers of our history.

The artist's work demands multiple interpretations. It is a clear expression of an artist who relishes the richness of the traditions of her homeland and the countries around it. Its layered evocations of nature and culture, and the interweaving of these throughout history, are beautifully revealed in this splendid and consummately resolved exhibition.