



## To go somewhere beautiful

*In her ceramic practice Jaime Jenkins pushes and pulls at the extremities of clay, creating environments and imbuing them with feeling. The artist talks to Lucy Jackson about her work and her imagined worlds.*

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All artworks by Jaime Jenkins, courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery.  
 Left: *Cobalt Bell Chain*, 2020, stoneware, 500 x 500 x 50mm  
 Right: Jaime Jenkins in her studio, 2020. Photo: Jane Keam

I'm sitting at Jaime Jenkins' studio table. My hands clasp a handmade mug, a ceramic platter (or is it a slab?) holds freshly made chocolate slice, and a teapot with a gritty surface is full of green tea for us to share. Long, thick, angular vases host a few pansies in the middle of the table. Off centre above our heads is a ceramic mobile of chains and bells that Jenkins has hung gingerly from her mezzanine floor. Beside me there is a cornflower-blue, star-shaped pillar. With its celestial colour and unapologetically obvious shape, it pulls me into a galactic environment. Finally, on the shelves surrounding us there must be at least 30 ceramic bells. It is a real treat to be in this space with Jenkins and her abundance of ceramic objects.

Jenkins' studio is split into two sections that I'm tempted to read as the two areas of her practice – the functional and the aesthetic. Where we drink tea is the functional area, full of domestic ware like cups, pots and saucers. But the divide isn't clear – the pillar, mobile and bells tell me I'm in an artist's studio for sure. Beyond this area and through the doorway is Jenkins' workshop, with shelves upon shelves of artworks, ready for firing. Jenkins glides seamlessly from one world into the other seamlessly, with purpose and an understanding that her work can exist for both practicality and beauty. Outside, the kiln is nestled in leafy green bushes, ready to be filled with creations for galleries – or kitchens.

Jenkins is a fellow Taurangian, and we have friends in common. There's something easy about our sharing of references, and we have a mutual familiarity with the physical and social landscape we grew up in. Whereas I left, Jenkins stayed and explored the Bay of Plenty, gaining an Advanced Diploma in Visual Arts from Toi Ohomai Institute of Technology. Later, she completed internships in London and New Zealand, and completed a residency at Driving Creek Pottery in the Coromandel.

As a contemporary ceramicist, Jenkins exploits the potentiality of clay while also pushing the material to the edge of its performance capability. While in one half of Jenkins' studio I brush my hands over the knobs and gnarls of objects meant to be used, the other half breaks the functional mould. The usual touchstones of ceramics – vases, pots and reliefs – are both grasped by Jenkins and thrown to one side. She uses her malleable material to create strong structural forms such as ledges, tiles and pillars; but also sweet and fluid organic forms – daisy chains or leafy tendrils. The two extremities touch on human-made objects, like shelves and tapestries, and on naturally occurring ones like leaves. Finding a careful



balance, Jenkins uses her pushing of ceramic to make what she wants to see. "I want to create my own versions of things," she says.

An example of a Jenkins' "version" is the hanging mobile, complete with bells, in her studio. In 2019 Jenkins was part of *Dirty Ceramics* at The Dowse, alongside nine other New Zealand ceramicists described as "rule breakers". In the exhibition, two of Jenkins' mobiles hung, ombré in colour, their bells moving from earthy browns to creamy yellow. The works were large and swayed a little as visitors walked past them. When I visit Jenkins at her studio she shows me how she perfected their all-in-one, counter-weighted forms. The creation is made by joining together all the parts of the mobile – hangers, chains, bells and clappers – before the clay dries, resulting in the entire work being fired as one piece. This is not a mobile for hanging over a baby's crib.

Jenkins' other object of fascination is the bell itself. I was not exaggerating the number I could see around me in the studio. Ranging variously in size, some are glazed, some painted; others are neither. Why is Jenkins so drawn to this object? She says it's to do with "the shape and the sound – but also how the bell as a symbol brings together and links past times and people in moments of celebration, ritual and shared feeling". We sound a few bells together, commenting on the differences in their pitches; and they continue to tinkle in the background of our conversation, ever present.





While Jenkins takes inspiration from the natural world, the influence is not literal and she is hesitant to say she is “inspired by the landscape”. She explains that part of her practice involves transferring the feelings she experiences while in nature – walking in the bush, swimming in a river – into her artworks. Embodying the memories of “being filled up by nature” while she works with the clay, Jenkins hopes that these feelings translate into the final pieces. By then placing these works within the four walls of a gallery, Jenkins wants to create an environment for others to feel filled up, too.

Creating environments is not a new process for the artist. Reflecting on her childhood, Jenkins describes how she was always trying – and still is – “to go somewhere beautiful”. Jenkins sought to ‘visit’ past eras, such as Ancient Greece or Victorian England, in her childhood, and in adulthood finds herself inhabiting similar histories and their environs. Jenkins tells me that as a child she would renovate her bedroom into a past era in the hopes of experiencing a different way of life. Reimagining herself in a world two centuries ago, when she was around eight years old Jenkins transformed her bedroom into Victorian England by bringing in an old wash basin, wearing her Grandma’s lacy, floor-length nightgown and even making a four-poster bed out of rakes from the garden shed.

In Jenkins’ exhibition *Break a Fig* at Jhana Millers Gallery early this year, she successfully created another

environment – only this time it was for visitors. Her artworks flitted across the walls and up to the ceiling. Reliefs of clouds, star cut-outs, amoebic shapes and a bread shelf appeared; chains hung in rainbow colours. The works were placed in synergy with each other, balancing earth and sky, ritual and pleasure – their whimsies dictating an experience of the space.

The subtlety of the ritual seen in *Break a Fig* is a core element of Jenkins’ work, whether that subtlety is embodied in the object itself or expressed by her method of making. Jenkins pours into her objects the memory of a natural, almost spiritual experience. But beyond this, Jenkins is inspired by objects that themselves have religious or spiritual meaning, such as her bells, or the Catholic wall hangings featuring a figure of the Virgin Mary that she saw while visiting Spain. In her new exhibition at Jhana Millers, *Stone Age*, this influence can be seen in her various shelves: *Stone shelf*, *Rounded shelf I (Mustard)* and *Rounded shelf II (Tiny Boulder)* (all 2020). Although Jenkins does not want to push a direct religious interpretation of her work, she does hope that visitors feel peace and a sense of reflection when they enter her gallery world. In *Stone Age*, when I visit, I certainly do.

The exhibition also speaks to Jenkins’ interest in exploring past places and times. The show is made up of 23 artworks, ranging in size, colour, position and texture. The celestial star pillar that I had seen in the studio several



Far left: *Star Pillar*, 2020,  
stoneware, 540 x 460 x 460mm

Left: *Listening to trees*, 2020,  
stoneware, 540 x 370 x 116mm

Right: *Stone Shelf and Stone Vase*, 2020,  
stoneware, 450 x 350 x 240mm

Below right: *Brown Vine I (Straight)*,  
2020, stoneware, 440 x 100 x 50mm



months earlier is present; and a cobalt blue, all-in-one mobile hangs on the wall. Darker and richer colours now glaze her forms, with night-time blues, deep reds and bronze browns departing from the rainbow colours of *Break a Fig*.

The title, *Stone Age*, references the deep lineage of pottery. Jenkins has tried, she explains, to reimagine a past world with her own versions of things present. She has always been interested in “past ways of building things” and in how the intersections of the practical and ornamental were balanced, carefully, in the past.

The act of making with skill and care is inherent in Jenkins’ practice. This, she says, is “a bit of a retort to growing up in a household of plastic and convenience”. Relying on convenient disposable items is certainly easy and efficient – understandable for those running a busy household – but in her practice Jenkins goes the slow and thoughtful opposite way.

With effort, care and channelled emotion, Jaime Jenkins is making the objects she wants to see, instead of settling for near-substitutes. And for those of us who cannot make our own desired versions, Jenkins’ ceramic forms sit purely and happily in our world, with ease and reference to places, times and feelings just outside of it.

*Jaime Jenkins’ Stone Age was at Jhana Millers Gallery from 8 to 31 October 2020.*

