

# RENEE SO PROVENANCE

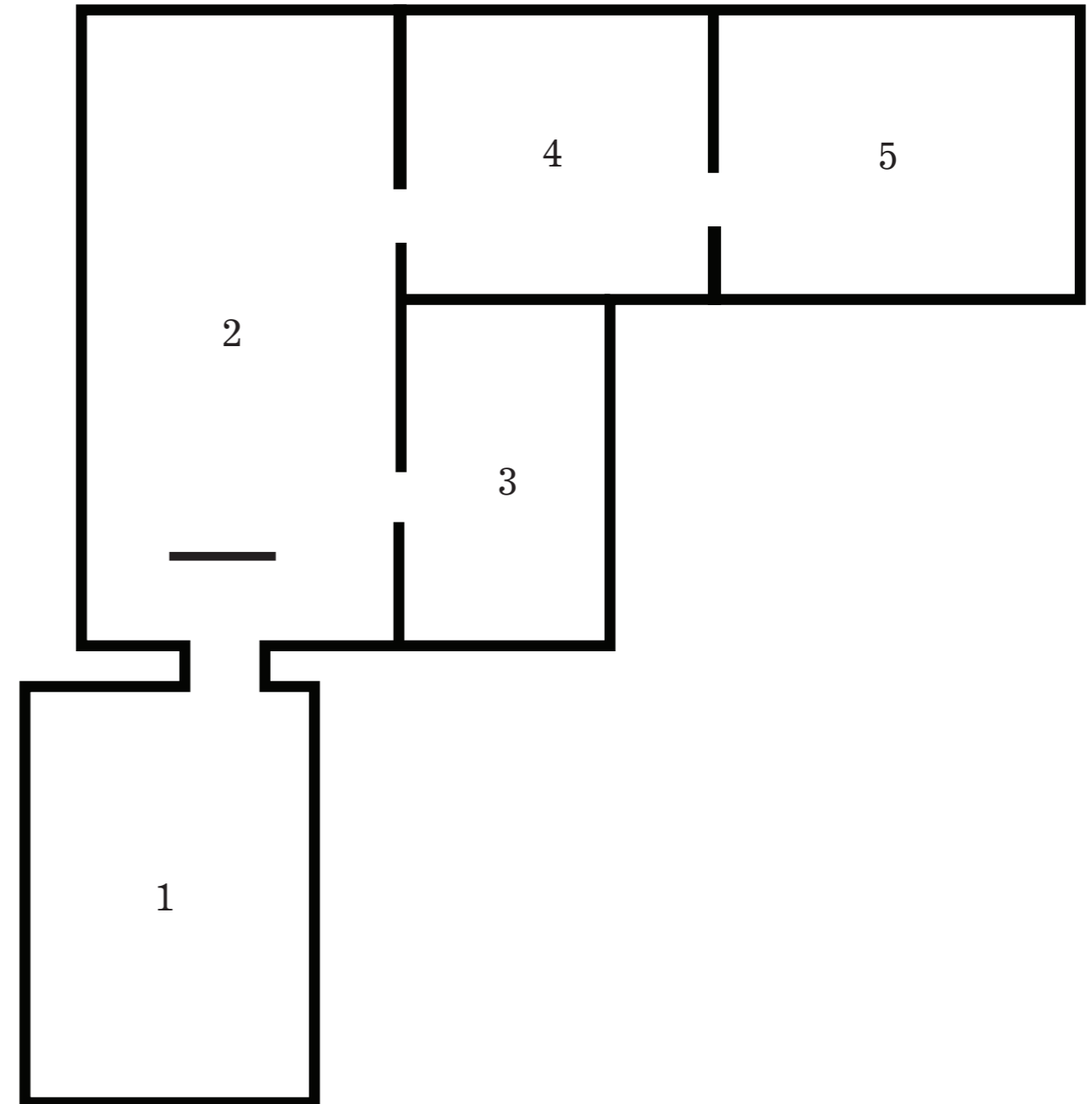
Curated by Charlotte Day

18 August – 19 November 2023  
UNSW Galleries

Renee So's practice is distinguished by its embrace of craft methods and cross-cultural thinking, an underlying sense of the comedic, and a persistent feminist worldview. While So's early work used motifs of bearded men, full bellies, and boots to explore popular archetypes and representations of (mostly) masculine authority, she has increasingly turned to representations of women's bodies, drawing on artistic precedents from prehistoric to modern times.

The sixteenth- and seventeenth-century German Bartmann ('bearded man') or Bellarmine jugs that So encountered in London's Victoria and Albert Museum have been a dominant source of inspiration for her 'knitted paintings' and ceramic objects. Other references have included classical sculpture, the Assyrian collections of the British Museum, the glazed brick bas-relief of the Babylonian Ishtar Gate, c.575 BCE, and 'Venus' figurines dated between about 40,000 BCE and 10,000 BCE. Recent ceramic works also consider the legacy of the mid-nineteenth-century British and French 'Opium Wars' in China, during which countless objects were looted from Yuanmingyuan (the Qing Dynasty Old Summer Palace), influencing Western imaginings of Asia.

*Provenance* is the first major exhibition of London-based Renee So's work in Australia, where she grew up after migrating with her family from Hong Kong at a young age. The exhibition brings together more than a decade of art-making alongside new work, surfacing narratives within her evolving practice.



1.

This group of heads are some of the first ceramic characters Renee So made and, unlike her artworks to follow, are individually named. From early on in her practice, So's take on portraiture was characterised by cartoon-like stylisation and a focus on archetypes, theatricality, and masquerade. As she notes, "simplifying a face or figure makes it look unserious, especially when it involves an outline and flat colour... I started looking at kids' cartoons and historical political cartoons, and their visual language began to influence my work in turn."

L—R

*Alvaro* 2008  
glazed earthenware  
Artbank Collection, Sydney

*Pax* 2007  
glazed earthenware  
Private collection, Melbourne

*David* 2008  
glazed earthenware  
Private collection, Melbourne

*Lee* 2008  
glazed earthenware  
Private collection, Melbourne

*Kwan* 2008  
glazed earthenware  
Artbank Collection, Sydney

*Bellarmino* 2010  
knitted acrylic yarn and oak frame  
Shepparton Art Museum Collection, Shepparton

2.

For close to a decade, Renee So focused her artwork on representations of power, in particular male authority, through images of bearded men, big bellies, and military style boots. After the birth of her son Gene, So turned her attention to representations of women, taking inspiration from some of the oldest forms of pottery and, in particular, 'Venus' statuettes from the Valdivian culture of Ecuador (4,000–1,500 BCE). These clay figures are characterised by their standing poses and distinctive hairstyles, as are So's own women.

So became fascinated with the five-thousand-year-old bird-faced Venus in the Brooklyn Museum with its similarity to the more recent imaging of a clitoris based on research undertaken by Melbourne urologist Helen O'Connell in 1998. As So notes, "they look so similar, yet they are millennia apart. I cannot make any connection between them beyond their shape... The bird-faced Venus appears to be a celebration of femininity and the ancient Egyptians had gods and goddesses to celebrate love, sex, fertility and pleasure." A related bird-like shape appears in many of So's artworks including *Internal Life* and *Downstairs*, both from 2022, presented in this exhibition.

She finds inspiration for her work from a wide range of historical and contemporary sources while maintaining an overarching interest in representations of gender and power. The title of *Woman Sans Culottes XV* 2022, references women being banned from wearing trousers in Paris as well as the protest culture of the French Revolution. Dissenters called 'sans-culottes' wore striped work trousers (similar to today's jeans), which women were stopped from wearing to prevent their participation in protests and from finding employment in Paris. This law, put in place in 1799, was only formally lifted in 2013.

L—R

*Boot Leg* 2019  
glazed earthenware, cotton shade, LED light, wood and aluminium rods  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Opium by Yves Saint Laurent* 2022  
glazed earthenware

*Venus of Valdivia* 2019  
glazed earthenware and oil paint  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Woman I* 2017  
stoneware  
Buxton International Collection, Melbourne

*Woman II* 2017  
stoneware  
Private collection, Melbourne

*Woman VI* 2020  
earthenware  
Buxton International Collection, Melbourne

*Woman XIII* 2022  
stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Ear* 2022  
glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Looking Out Beyond the Hills* 2022  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney  
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

*Internal Life* 2022  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney  
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

*Anatomy 101* 2022  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney  
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

*Downstairs* 2022  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney  
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

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In 2019, Renee So was invited to create an exhibition for the modernist De La Warr Pavilion in East Sussex to mark the centenary of the influential Bauhaus art and design school. So approached the commission by learning to weave: an act of homage to the women students of the Bauhaus, for whom weaving was compulsory. The Bauhaus weaving workshop was so commercially successful that its income significantly underwrote the funding of the school. So's *Learn to Weave* 2019 is a nod to the gendered nature of education and art-making at the 'progressive' Bauhaus as well as the often under-recognised nature

of women's labour. So's *Flow State* 2019 was made in response to the seaside location of the De La Warr Pavilion itself as well as the Bauhaus students' love of yoga.

*Flow State* 2019  
glazed earthenware and aluminium frame  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Learn to Weave* 2019  
glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint, and oak frame  
Collection of Sandra Cohen, London

*Unknown Woman* 2019  
glazed stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Woman Holding Cup XVI* 2022  
stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Woman Sans Culottes XV* 2022  
earthenware  
Monash University Collection, Melbourne

*Woman IX* 2021  
stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Woman XI* 2021  
stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Mythical Creature* 2022  
stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Woman X* 2021  
stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

3.

Renee So has long been interested in ‘art loot’ stolen from the East and traded in the West, including artefacts that end up in museum collections. Snuff bottles are one such item, prized for their cultural and associated social status, and perhaps for the allure of the narcotic they once contained. Qing dynasty (1644–1911) snuff bottles continue to influence the visual identity of many well-known contemporary perfumes—including Opium, Addict, Poison and Snuff—with their implicit exoticisation of the East. So’s oversized snuff bottles draw attention to these histories of trade, the insatiable desire for collecting, and the status and power conferred through such ownership and objectification.

L—R

*Bronze Vessel* 2020  
glazed earthenware and oil paint

*Mom Jeans* 2022  
glazed stoneware

*Scholar’s Rock* 2022  
glazed stoneware

*A Foot Bath for Bound Feet* 2022  
glazed earthenware

*Snuff Bottle* 2020–22  
glazed stoneware

All works courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

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These are the first artworks that Renee So has made in stained glass and continue her interest in working with various craft practices as well as the genre of portraiture. The rays radiating out from heads relate to the composition and suggested positive psychological energy of the artwork *Flow State* 2019, which appears in the previous gallery, while also being reminiscent of the bars that indicate the strength of wireless internet connectivity. These stylised portraits are specific to the internet age in which we live; it’s possible to imagine a future viewer forming their own assessment from them about our twenty-first-century state of mind.

L—R

Renee So and Piotr Frac  
*The Information Age (Monocolour)* 2022  
stained glass, lead and oak frame  
Collection of Piotr Frac

Renee So and Piotr Frac  
*The Information Age (Technicolour)* 2022  
stained glass, lead and oak frame  
Collection of Renee So

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*‘Opium’ Snuff Bottle* 2022  
glazed earthenware

*‘Snuff’ Snuff Bottle* 2022  
glazed earthenware

*‘Poison’ Snuff Bottle* 2022  
glazed earthenware and acrylic paint

*Imperial Pekingese Dog* 2022  
glazed earthenware

*‘Colony’ Snuff Bottle* 2022  
glazed earthenware

All works courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

4.

In 2010, Renee So began to work with the form, symbolism, and traditions of the Bellarmine jug after seeing a display of them at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Popular drinking vessels for wine and ale, Bellarmine jugs—featuring bearded men—were made in large numbers from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries in Frechen near Cologne, Germany, and exported throughout Europe and into the United Kingdom. So’s interest in these jugs connects to her broader research into ceramic traditions and their popular cultural forms and iterations, as well as to representations of gender in daily life. Beards, boots, and bellies appear in exaggerated forms across So’s practice.

L—R

*Still Life* 2022  
glazed earthenware and aluminium frame  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Bellarmino XVII* 2016  
stoneware  
Private collection, Sydney

*Bellarmino XI* 2013  
glazed earthenware  
Collection of Peter McDonald, London

*Bellarmino Holding Bellarmino (Version II)* 2020  
earthenware  
Powerhouse collection, Sydney, Barry Willoughby  
Bequest Commission, 2020

*Cross Legged Man* 2018  
stoneware  
Collection of Helen Seales, Melbourne

*Bellarmino XIII (Version II)* 2019  
earthenware and boot polish  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Bellarmino XV* 2016  
stoneware  
The State Art Collection, The Art Gallery of Western  
Australia  
Purchased through The Art Gallery of Western  
Australia Foundation: TomorrowFund, 2019

*Untitled* 2012  
glazed earthenware and steel  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Bellarmino VIII (Version II)* 2019  
earthenware and boot polish  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Guitar* 2018  
glazed earthenware, oil paint and aluminium frame  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

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For Renee So, artworks are vessels for reflecting upon often entrenched social and cultural norms and associated behaviours from both the past and present. She also works with the vessel as a form in and of itself and is interested in the way substances are transferred from objects into human bodies—which are also vessels—including the flow-on effects of such transference. Through her practice, she brings us closer to our material culture and to the lives and aspirations of its makers.

*Boot* 2015  
bronze  
Bosci Collection, Melbourne

*Cigarette* 2015  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Vintage Wine Lover* 2015  
glazed earthenware and Jesmonite  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Bottle* 2015  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Martini* 2015  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Cosmopolitan* 2015  
glazed earthenware and Jesmonite  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Elephant Foot* 2015  
glazed earthenware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

For close to a decade, Renee So's work focused on representations of masculinity through motifs of bearded men and military-style boots. The Duke of Wellington designed black knee-high boots for himself to wear in battle which became immediately fashionable with the English aristocracy and which are now waterproof boots better known as wellies or gumboots. The Duke of Wellington was a war hero and two-time Tory Prime Minister. Playing with these forms and up-ending them in ways reminiscent of playing card illustrations and anthropomorphic ceramic traditions, she also introduced vulnerability through inebriation. The pantaloons in *Bellarmino* 2010, connect to a historical artwork that has been an important reference for So. Working at the turn of the seventeenth century, Japanese artist Kanō Naizen's gold-leaf and tempera paintings on lattice, called Namban screens, c.1606, depicted European contact with Japan in 1543. As So notes, "I like that the scenes are seen through an Asian gaze... The European dress of baggy pantaloons, black tights, hats, capes, ruffles and flowing gowns would have looked totally odd."

L–R

*Reflections of a Reclining Male* 2019

knitted cotton and acrylic yarn, and oak frame  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Going Out* 2016

knitted linen and acrylic yarn, and oak frame  
Collection of Abigail Hargrave, Melbourne

*Black Captain* 2012

knitted acrylic yarn and oak frame  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Boots* 2012

knitted acrylic yarn and wool, and oak frame  
Buxton International Collection, Melbourne

*Nightfall* 2019

knitted acrylic yarn and wool, and oak frame  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Sunset* 2016

knitted acrylic yarn and oak frame  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Drunken Bellarmino II* 2023

knitted acrylic yarn  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Bellarmino and Bootleg* 2019

stoneware and steel  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Bellarmino V* 2011

glazed earthenware  
Monash University Collection, Melbourne

*Steatopygous Bellarmino* 2022

glazed stoneware  
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Relaxation* 2019

glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint  
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London;  
and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney  
Buxton International Collection, Melbourne

*Renee So: Provenance*

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UNSW Galleries stands on an important place of  
learning and exchange first occupied by the Bidjigal  
and Gadigal peoples. We recognise the Bidjigal and  
Gadigal peoples as the Traditional Custodians of  
this site and acknowledge them as the first artists  
to inhabit this Land. We pay our respects to their  
Elders past and present, and extend this respect to  
Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people from all  
nations of Australia.

