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.
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 unseverous, 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.”

1. L—R

Alvaro 2008
glazed earthenware
Artbank Collection, Sydney

Pax 2007
glazed earthenware
Private collection, Melbourne

Lee 2008
glazed earthenware
Private collection, Melbourne

Kwan 2008
glazed earthenware
Artbank Collection, Sydney

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

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 Women 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 protests and from finding employment in Paris.

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 2018 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 2018
glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint, and oak frame
Collection of Sandra Cohen, 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

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

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

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

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

Woman IX 2021
strocloware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman Holding Cup XVI 2022
stoneware
Monash University Collection, Melbourne

Woman X 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman IX 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Looking Out Beyond the Hills 2022
glazed earthenware
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

Looking Out Beyond the Hills 2022
glazed earthenware
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

Downstairs 2022
glazed earthenware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Downstairs 2022
glazed earthenware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Inside Looking Out 2022
glazed earthenware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Internal Life 2022
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman II 2017
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman V 2020
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XIII 2022
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XII 2021
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman IX 2021
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XI 2021
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman X 2021
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman IX 2021
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XI 2021
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XIII 2022
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

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

Learn to Weave 2018
glazed earthenware, acrylic and oil paint, and oak frame
Collection of Sandra Cohen, London

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

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

Woman IX 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XI 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XII 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XIII 2022
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman X 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Women Sans Culottes XV 2022
earthenware
Monash University Collection, Melbourne

Woman IX 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XI 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XII 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XVI 2022
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XV 2022
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XIV 2022
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XIII 2022
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XII 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman XI 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman X 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman IX 2021
stoneware
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne

Woman V 2020
Collection of Jo Horgan and Peter Wetenhall, Melbourne
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 inatissable 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

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 portals 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 (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 and acrylic paint

‘Imperial Pekingese Dog 2022 glazed earthenware

‘Colonel’ Snuff Bottle 2022 glazed earthenware

All works courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

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

**Bellarmine XVII 2016** stoneware

Private collection, Sydney

**Bellarmine XI 2013** glazed earthenware

Collection of Peter McDonald, London

**Bellarmine Holding Bellarmine (Version II) 2020** earthenware

Powerhouse collection, Sydney, Barry Willoughby Bequest Commission, 2020

**Cross Legged Man 2018** stoneware

Collection of Helen Seales, Melbourne

**Bellarmine XIII (Version II) 2019** earthenware and boot polish

Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

**Bellarmine 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

**Bellarmine VIII (Version II) 2019** earthenware and boot polish

Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

Gutier 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

Boci 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 Bellarmine 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.”

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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* 2018
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 Bellarmine II* 2023
knitted acrylic yarn
Courtesy of the artist; Kate MacGarry, London; and Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, Sydney

*Bellarmine and Bootleg* 2019
stoneware and steel
Courtesy of the artist and Kate MacGarry, London

*Bellarmine V* 2011
glazed earthenware
Monash University Collection, Melbourne

*Steatopygous Bellarmine* 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

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