


In the frame  Louise Martin-Chew

Ships in crystal bottles



A SHIP in a bottle is one of the archetypal puzzles. How does a beautifully constructed, intricate model become encased in a slim-necked bottle?

The “how to” guides give the game away, describing simple collapsible masts constructed piece-by-piece inside the bottle.

Artist Nicholas Folland has taken this age-old puzzle and added a refined twist. Instead of using a stock-standard glass container, he’s chosen a pair of crystal decanters.

His boats are replicas of two vessels from Australian history: Matthew Flinders’ ship, the *Investigator*, and Nicholas Baudin’s *Le Geographe*. The two crossed paths at Encounter Bay, South Australia, in 1802.

Trapped inside these crystal decanters, their distinctive boat shapes are blurred by the pattern of the glass and they become barely visible flares of blue.

I imagine that Folland is thinking about history and the way our contemporary experience filters, and fractures, the underlying stories.

His treatment suggests a reference to the “history wars”, the debate about whether teaching should be of factual narratives or political interpretations. This has become a heated contest and Folland has a subtle take on it.

Even his choice of bottle — the crystal heightening its implied value — turns the “ship in a bottle” into an anachronism, an old-fashioned trophy



that may have once taken pride of place on a mantelpiece. Today, though, it might be regarded as kitsch, pretentious or an irrelevancy. The old contest between traditional safety and progressive point of view is on show.

In his exhibition at Ryan Renshaw Gallery, Folland chooses objects for their nostalgic and sentimental allusions. He is interested in nature and history — subjects fraught with contemporary anxieties. Climate change is one area where humanity has a malignant effect on nature, and Folland’s work suggests tension between natural chaos and human artifice. Two of the other works in this show, *Indian Blue* and *Pacific Blue*, use a grid to map the topography of ocean

depths. These minimal prints read as simple blue rectangles from a distance.

Water has significant baggage attached to it, from the drought which sees us with too little, to melting polar icecaps which give us too much. There is thought and research in this work, but whimsy and imagination in the way it is made is what saves it from the weight of theory.

Ryan Renshaw Gallery operates differently from other commercial galleries in Brisbane, showing work of emerging and mid-career artists with an interest in edgy conceptual art.

Nicholas Folland,
Ryan Renshaw Gallery,
137 Warry St, Fortitude Valley,
until July 18.