

Development trend of Contemporary ceramic art -Australia

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From humble beginnings, through the influence of Bernard Leach and Japanese arts and philosophies, the ceramic arts flourished into the 1960's and 70's as part of a wide spread community art and craft movement which saw the development of the Potters' society of Australia. The 80's was a time of enormous growth and success for artists, with a flourish of new techniques and skills. The 90's however, saw a contraction in ceramic practice, tertiary training closed its doors and many ceramic artists sought alternative employment - the boom days were over. In the last 20 years ceramics has continued, as ever it will, in a diversity that incorporates conceptual work, sculpture, narrative, installations, new technology, the traditional, and an ever increasing respect for the artists working in this medium. This thesis will review not only my own studio practice, but also focus on some important contemporary Australian artists.

The first Australian studio potters worked in the early part of the twentieth century and produced simply decorated earthenware, often featuring motifs from the Australian landscape. William Merrick Boyd held what is thought to be the first exhibition of studio pottery in Australia in 1912. He was successful as an artist potter as were his children. His son Arthur Boyd worked in collaboration with John Percival (predominantly painters) in the 1950's/60's to create ceramic art work at a time when ceramics was becoming accepted by many artists as a fine art.

The period after World War 2 was a time of great change and many returning soldiers were introduced to the world of ceramics as they attended art schools under the Commonwealth Retraining Scheme. 'Peter Rushforth was one such artist and is thought to be one of Australia's most significant pioneer studio potters. He creates high fired stoneware vessels using Jun (Chun), Temmoku, limestone and ash glazes....He says of his work, "Dominating my pots are the processes themselves, fire, clay and the earth materials that form the essence of individually made pots" It was during his training that he was introduced to Bernard Leach's, A Potter's Book published in 1940 and thus an interest in stoneware and oriental ceramics. 'This book became a fundamental text for Australian potters, both for its technical information and its philosophical attitude to their practice. Leach's work developed as a melding of Japanese philosophy and tradition, and mediaeval English pottery.' Ivan McMeekin also became interested in ceramics after the war, during a period of work in the merchant navy where he spent time in China. McMeekin then spent several years working with Michael Cardew in England who had the practical knowledge to help him learn to make the type of ceramics that he had so admired in China. 'This led to a passion for perfecting glazes in order to emulate the works he had seen.'

'Another Australian potter associated with the Leach style of pottery was Harold Hughan. He would contribute a chapter to Australian ceramic history by staging the first major exhibition of stoneware ceramics in Melbourne. Rather than making identifiably Australian pottery, Hughan actually worked in what was a powerful global style, that of Anglo-Oriental ceramics. Although the decorations were based on Australian wildflowers, they represented Leach's timeless standard in ceramics. Leach's influential philosophy and aesthetic emerged as a major influence on Australian practice as is evident in the works of Peter Rushworth, Harold Hughan and Col Levy made during the 1960's. Peter Rushworth helped to sustain this attitude to studio practice after visiting Japan and encouraging some leading Japanese potters to visit Sydney and the Technical College that he was

teaching at.

'In 1954 Ivan McMeekan established the Sturt Pottery Workshop and recruited student assistants including Gwyn John (later Hanssen Pigott) and Les Blakebrough, these names are now synonymous with ceramics in Australia . Sturt became a vital studio based training production workshop and a centre for international exchange and residencies. Ivan McMeekan, Ivan England, Mollie Douglas and Peter Rushworth founded the Potters' Society of Australia, and its journal, Pottery in Australia.' This was a time when artists' developed a thirst for knowledge and a substantial growth in the number of artists practicing ceramics developed. Many artists were influenced and even visited Japan and subsequently reported their experiences through articles in Pottery in Australia.

The Leach traditions seemed to be very dominant, however some artists were moving in a different direction. Modernist forms with little decoration and an emphasis on design were beginning to arise, and dry matt glazes, particularly iron/cobalt glazes were developing. The pursuit of traditional Asian glazes did continue to be a major focus for many potters, however some 'like Greg Daly and Les Blakerough extend the potential of these glazes by experimenting with their interaction with dry glazes and multiple layers.'

International contact and ideas were responsible for energising ceramics in the 70's and 80's. Changing social values, contemporary debate and feminist voices influenced a rejection of traditional ceramic practices, a time of anything goes. Bright colours, earthenware clays, body stains and even house paint were used.

It was in the eighties that I began my training in Ceramic Design at Monash University in Caulfield Melbourne, where influences from all cultures and traditions were explored. During this period my own work was influenced by the primitive firing methods of pit firing and saggar firing. My contemporary's explored inlay and slipware, raku firing, majolica and lustre ware and a variety of intense surface decorations as well as hand building, moulding techniques and wheel throwing. It was also at this time that I was introduced to more sculptural possibilities and architectural ceramics. I remember being inspired by the rich incised surface decoration and combination of thrown and hand built works of Jeff Minchum. By the end of the 80's ceramic artists were abundant and successful artists were highly collectable, with their works fetching high prices. Important artists of the likes of Janet Mansfield were recognised nationally and internationally. The 90's however, heralded an era of contraction in ceramics, art schools began first to collapse ceramic courses and then abandon them all together. The financial pressures and lapsing student demand were to be blamed. But it's possible that more fundamental issues were a contributing factor, such as the feeling that ceramics as it stood, placed in an academic setting, never did really break into the realms of a fine art and was always perceived as something less. This could possibly be due to an historical relationship with functional everyday items and/or the flooding of the market with cheap mass produced ceramic functional and decorative wear.

The question now is how has ceramics developed in the last 20 years. A thought that is causing much debate in the ceramic world suggests that a tertiary academic approach is not suited to the teachings of ceramics. "Moving ceramics too far into the academic mainstream in Australia has coincided with, if not caused a serious decline in public interest in ceramics." 'The academic rather than practical methodology has had significant impact on the output of ceramics in recent times...and the ceramic artist is most likely to be a part time practitioner and this has narrowed the field considerable' It is possible that this is in fact the case and it is apparent that there seems to be less full time ceramic artists however, those who are, are making great advances. There also appears to be a great divide in the development trends and therefore a fabulous diversity of works. Most obvious are those who favour the conceptual or sculptural, including those who benefit from the advanced technologies available to produce sculptural, interactive or installation works. In addition the development of new materials and techniques

offers artists new ideas and possibilities. There are also those whose work stems from traditional philosophies and functional vessels and then there are those who meld all these ideas together.

An important trend development in contemporary ceramics is the recognition of those who work in clay as 'artists'. As an artist I want the viewer to associate what they see with the word 'artist', not the word ceramicist or potter. There is an important distinction between these two. An 'artist' is often thought of as an important, highly skilled individual who produces artwork to be admired, artwork that asks questions or makes comment on society. On the other hand a 'ceramicist' is often perceived as a highly skilled maker of 'things from clay'. This obviously is a fairly generalised view, but from my own experience, quite accurate. Ultimately we should not label ourselves based on what medium we use. I am a sculptor who happens to use clay as my preferred medium. The label 'artist', given to those who work in clay is an important trend and can only help take the use of ceramics as a popular medium into the future. Let us hope that the skills and knowledge gained by these artists can somehow be passed on to the next generations of artists. How we do this is yet to be determined, but the growing consensus is that and academic environment is not the most effective option. The challenge for the future is to somehow find a happy medium between acceptance in the arts and the development of highly skilled and knowledgeable artists.

One of Australia's important 'artists' using ceramics as her medium and working with the 'vessel' is Pippen Drysdale. Drysdale is from Fremantle in Western Australia, has a Bachelor of Arts - Fine Art and an Adjunct Research Fellow from Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia. She has been a resident artist in 6 countries and been involved with various cultural exchanges and international exhibitions. She has had over 40 solo exhibitions over the last 20 years, has been the recipient of a multitude of grants and is represented in collections in major institutions in over 10 different countries around the world.

'Although an urban artist, she seeks out places that have a special character or resonance, such as the Tanami Dessert in central northern Western Australia or the Hunsa Valley at the end of the Karakoram Highway in Pakistan. Once she has absorbed the sight, she carries its colours, patterns and ambience back to the studio, where she patiently re-creates their glow and echo in the delicate web of glazes etched into the brushed on surface of her elegantly shaped forms' Drysdale works in series but each porcelain work with its vividly coloured, glazed and incised line work is a one-off. She predominately works in the form of the vessel and her work is a personal relationship with the landscape. "the fine lines winding around the forms are sometimes even, sometimes broken and in some places course, evoking traces in the sand"



Pippen Drysdale, Exhibition at John Curtin Gallery, Photo by Adrian Lambert-Acorn Photo Agency

"We flew through the Tanami Desert and camped in the BungleBungles with all those wonderful ochres and red iron linear grooves that circle around them. I'd like to think I've captured something of the macroscopic quality of light, the linearity and the oldness of our continent."

Artist's who search for opportunities to incorporate new technology and materials seem to be becoming more prevalent in contemporary ceramics. Less emphasis is placed on the artist crafting the whole artwork and more on the conceptual development of the piece. One such artist is Roderick Bamford. Bamford says "the difference is in the nature of the crafting required to validate the concept, the materiality and the timing of the execution." He is an elected member of the International Academy of Ceramics. His work is represented in public and private collections, including the Powerhouse museum and the National Galleries of Australia and Victoria. Bamford has worked as a freelance artist and taught extensively in tertiary institutions.

He utilises the skills of others and the technology available to manufacture parts of his work during the development stage, allowing him much more artistic freedom, as seen in his 'Sonic Loop' series. It requires the production of a rapid prototype and then a plaster mould to create porcelain works. Each piece is glazed and some are finished with linear and abstracted patterns using screen printed decals. Bamford says of his work that "the shape is far more accurately made by a machine, and this precision is essential to the realisation of the concept, reflected in the form"



Pippen Drysdale, Kimberly Series 1, 2008, Porcelain closed forms



Roderick Bamford 'Serpentine' 2007, Cast Porcelain 400x400x50mm

I consider myself a re-emerging (to coin a new phrase) ceramic artist, returning to a medium I made a connection with many years ago, searching to claim my place as artist. I have a Bachelor Degree in Ceramic Design from Monash University, Caulfield, Melbourne. I have also completed a Post

Grad. Diploma in Secondary Teaching - Visual Art and I am currently completing my Masters Degree in sculpture at Monash University, Gippsland. I've completed two ceramics residencies, one in Melbourne and one in France. My work is sculptural with a strong aesthetic value and an emphasis on form. I draw on historical ceramic and stone sculptures and carvings from ancient cultures as my inspiration for form. Each series of sculpture is a comment on themes or issues that are of personal relevance. I am wholly dedicated to what I can do with clay and I pay little respect to glazed surface treatments. My current work is looking at the strain created by using fluid forms in rigid clay to reflect 'tension' - opposing forces working against each other. It tells of the tensions felt by being an artist, full time teacher, mother and wife and the tension felt by working with clay in a sculptural realm.

The development trend of ceramics in Australia began with rudimentary earthenware vessels and functional ware and then moved to stoneware reflecting a strong Japanese influence. From here a growth period of experimentation, changing society values, an influx of international ideas in art, development of new materials and an expansion of practising artists influenced the rapid development of the ceramic arts. A multitude of reasons saw its eventual downsizing and a thus its perceived value in the arts. In looking at only a few artists I cannot begin to represent what is happening in ceramics in Australia today. There is a plethora of artist's contributing to development of ceramics. Debra Halpern, and her colourful mosaic sculptures, Penny Smith from Tasmania who specialises in slip cast porcelain and the wonderfully textural vessels of Simone Fraser are just a few that come to mind. It now seems that ceramics is, not so much making a comeback, but those artists dedicated to the medium are lifting its profile and creating an ever increasing respect for the art form, allowing themselves to be well positioned as 'artists' in the world of fine art.



Sally Walk 'Flow' 2008, Earthenware, 700x550x300mm