



Turn Turn Turn

The Studio Ceramics Tradition at the National Art School, Sydney, Australia

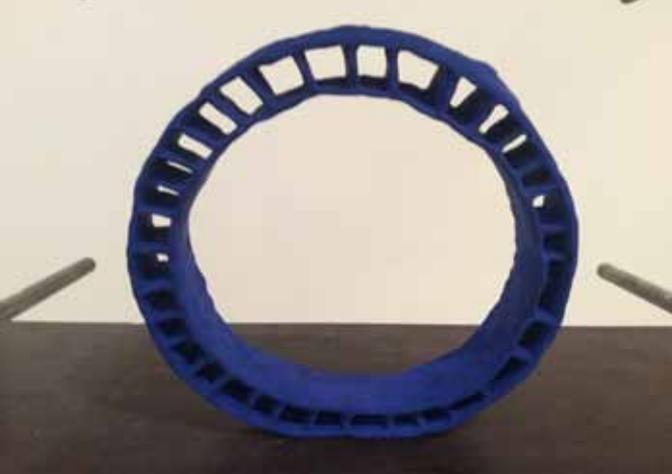
THIS EXHIBITION CHARTS THE 60 YEAR HISTORY OF THE renowned ceramics department at the National Art School, formerly East Sydney Technical College. The show contains an extraordinary depth and diversity of skill and style, beginning with the work of cornerstone educator Peter Rushforth, whose pots greet the viewer with sombre form and tone. Wheel formed, there is an earthiness to his robust pots that is supremely complemented by the depth of glaze that, although fixed in time, seems alive, in particular his *Chun Blue Blossom Jar* (undated) appears to flow with a meditative tidal pulse.

In contrast to this tranquility is Stephen Bird's *Wall Plates* (2012–2015) installation, mounted on a free standing wall that, like the spirit walls (*yingbi*) of traditional Chinese gardens, guard the entrance, restricting the progress of evil spirits and the gaze and forces the viewer to focus on the immediate. A curatorial triumph, this obstacle halts the viewer in his or her tracks and turns the mood from pensive contemplation

to titters, cackles and uproarious howls. Bird is, by his own admission, a painter first and self taught ceramist. His plates are big and heavy, as if formed by pugging fists rather than nimble fingers, but they provide an ample frame for the brilliant illustration of his sharp and pithy wit.

At times the humour is direct, expressed in daubed text only, such as his *Pope speaks out against round and brown pots*. Then there is the insightful *Death is postponed. Not cancelled*. His more layered comedy is supported with caricatured figures, reminiscent of naive early colonial sketches, with rubbery limbs and ill proportioned heads. In one example the gaze is reflected directly back at the viewer via text attributed to a silhouetted figure: "Why don't you stop looking at me?" or the fabulous anecdote, trimmed around the circumference in the colours of the Aboriginal flag, about a missing friend who has been looking for the way home for quite some time. If humour can energise one for tackling the rest of an exhibition, or if the curator sought to ensure only suitable spirits, capable of navigating around corners

A Review by David Hume

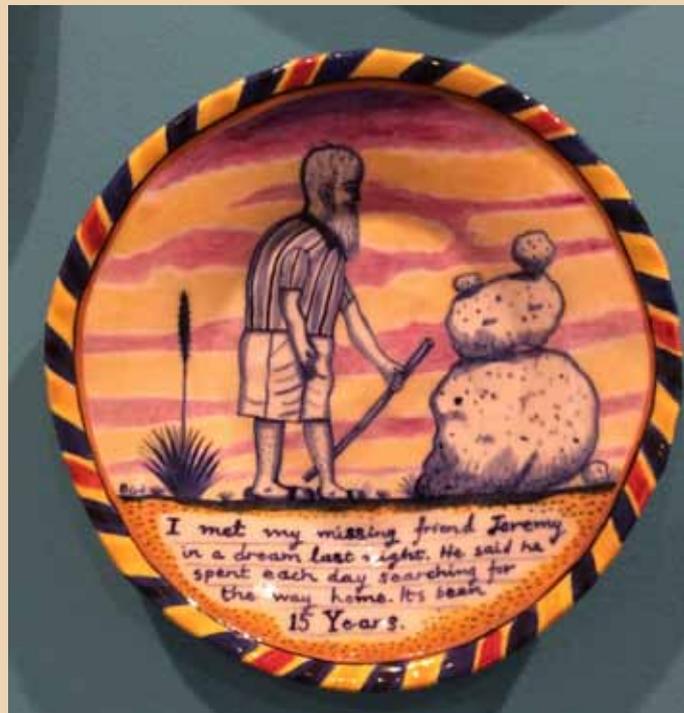


Facing page: Stephen Bird. *Wall of Plates*. 2012–2015. Clay, pigment, glaze.
 Top left: Peter-Noel Travis. *Origin of the Universe (Reverse)*. c 1970s. Stoneware clay.
 Top right: Sandy Lockwood. *Axe Series II*. 2014. Woodfired salt glazed porcelain and stoneware.
 Left: Alexandra Standen. *Blue*. 2014. Southern Ice porcelain.
 Below: Stephen Bird. *Wall of Plates (Detail)*.

progressed, it is harder think of work more suited.

Venturing behind the wall revealed a shift of curatorial style, not the austere formality of the hidden minimalist garden, but from shop window to workshop, storeroom, or in this case cluttered shared studio. Old wooden desks, benches and industrial shelving, shoved together, trollies tucked under tables, the delight of the bric-a-brac shop, the garage sale, each work matched to the catalogue via a minute number close to its whereabouts. Here were representative works of artists associated with the development of the school, jumbled together, a melee of art calling for sleuth-like interactivity, bending, crouching, neck craning, butt sliding along timber boards and above all inviting contravention of the ultimate formal gallery taboo.

Taking the path to the left, Peter-Noel Travis's *Origin of the Universe* (1970) is an astounding work of stoneware clay in polished and course raw finish, the contrasting split and polished geode texture set in a rough concrete-like ground, quite irresistible, even more so on the reverse. Sandy Lockwood's recent *Axe Series II* (2014), is equally appealing, demonstrating a similar use of contrasting surfaces, from a glass-like cutting edge mounted on an irregular pitted rock plinth. At ground level sat Mark Booth's *Head Study* (2011), three military helmeted heads finished with an oxidised metal glaze. Les Blakebrough's *The Kelp* (2014), offered a familiar form, conventional surface and ding. Caressing glazes,



stroking curves, my compulsive desire to finger pots was in full flow.

Sentinel-like in the corner stood Cameron Williams' immense *Crystalline Vase* (2014). Standing around five feet high its round body and fluted stem were resplendent in blue over tan. The study or colour and geometric analysis are represented respectively in Alexandra Standen's *Blue* (2014) that approaches an almost Yves Klein shade, over Southern Ice porcelain and Tania Rolland's *Uncertain Objects* (2014), shapes within shapes highlighted with ceramic pen. Wandering the central aisle Barbara Campbell-Allen's



Construct (2008) with its warm terracotta and ochre tones and gritty finish, as if hewn direct from the earth, re-invoked the impulse to touch. Likewise the convincing facsimile of Evie Core's *Boulder Series: Storm/Moon* (2014) demanded tactile inspection of their wrinkled surfaces. Artifice is also the feature of Joan Grounds' *Unknown Title* (package) (1973) that, with precise detail, re-presents a battered brown paper parcel, that in its detail makes comment on the travails of transporting fragile ceramics.

On the reverse of the free standing wall a haunting work from Linda Seiffert made the most of a rare expanse of negative space afforded in this section. *Hidden & Unseen* (2014) are two skeletal works of gigantic scale. They appear as spinal fragments, lengths of vertebrae salvaged from some giant beast, that the artist has manipulated into impossible loops. These deeply shadowed works returned me to the final row where figurative sculpture proliferated. *Platform Sublime* (2014), from Inge Berman, was quite captivating in its green blotched ivory finish. It takes the form of a seated nude (bald, vaguely Asian featured) figure, raising a small lichen filled planter for close scrutiny, in Taoist-like appreciation of nature.

Classical subject matter and contemporary technology are brought together in Roderick Bamford's *Sovereign Steward* (2011), a plaster-like bust, 3D printed from a combination of bone china and clay waste. Petra Svoboda similarly embraces a complex arrangement of media in the colourful *Street Cat* (2014), while *Mr Fox* (2013) from Charlotte Le Brocque is wisely separated in the space below. But it is he who has what matters in the space below. But it is he who has what matters seen as the residue of a meal, in the form of Danielle Dickson's perfectly balanced and simple slip cast *Emu Leg* (undated). The purity of a simplistic approach to production is also found in Nicole Lister's *Memory Sticks* (2012).

Perfectly situated at the exit point, Lister's *Memory Sticks* gestured to a space dedicated to the work of Thancoupie Gloria Fletcher, and a return to

formal museum presentation style, alone in perspex entombment. Thancoupie is arguably the most celebrated indigenous artist to work in the ceramic medium. A polymath, her works carry forward the stories of her culture through a fine balance of form and lively figures. Next to this space was one dedicated to Alan Peascod, of the institution's initial full-time student intake. Pots of metallic lustre and Art Nouveau style decoration greet the viewer but soon give way to irreverence in the form of the chimeric *Art Administrator Series: Leadership, Obsession and the Marking of Territory* (1990), a surly but ultimately whimsical creature of dubious pedigree.

Upstairs and the austerity of the formal gallery space becomes dominant, but the works no less exciting. Lynda Draper's fondant constructions: *Annette* (2013), *Genie bottle*, *Pearly Genie bottle*, *Where are you Pearly King* (2014), *Eric* (2013) and *Tiara* (2015) populate one corner, amounting to domed and piped architecture in glistening confectionary pastels. Tony Warburton's recent series, *Containers for Borrowed Views* (2015) are an unusual collection of sgraffito earthenware pots modelled on the form of old and buckled tin tubs, resonant of the countryside, mostly embellished with soft textured detail, beneath tin glazes. A seamless transition is achieved with the display of Merron Esson's work that also reflects the influence of objects that proliferate and deteriorate in a rural environment.

Of much more delicate form is Patsy Hely's *Microclimates A & B* (2015). Wafer thin porcelain



Facing page: Linda Seiffert. **Hidden & Unseen**. 2014. Ceramic.
 Top left: Inge Berman. **Platform Sublime**. 2014.
 Earthenware, acrylic fibre, dried lichen.
 Top right: Charlotte Le Brocque. **Mr Fox**. 2013.
 Earthenware and slipcast ceramic.

Below: Louise Boscacci. **In the Riverbowl**. 2013. Six pieces: stoneware wheeling, skins of terra sigillata made from remnant wetlands' clay collected in North Queensland, linear ceramic inlays, glazes.



sheets provide a canvas for water colour style washes, depicting the potters process, that are then lifted to 3D form through precise slotted construction. A complete contrast in form is found in a collection of Janet Mansfield's pots, their robust form and weathered surfaces, arranged like small hillocks, peaks and ranges, given plenty of space for the appreciation of their undulating topography. Of a different scale and arranged in uniform file, but with no less understanding of the environment, are Steve Harrison's series of *Untitled Small Bowls*. Unassuming in form and the scale

of modest rice bowls, it is the detail of materials and the production process that hold a fascination. Harrison's inquiry into the capacity of local clays and unusual plastic media set him apart as an artist exploring the process of ceramics in the minutest of detail, as demonstrated by the eloquent descriptive labels accompanying his suite of bowls such as: "*Untitled 2007*, unglazed woodfired *bai-tunze* bowl with natural green/transparent ash deposit and strong carbon inclusion in both body and natural ash glaze. Flashed body colour is pale orange to gold lustre. Some flame





bleaching on the fire face," echoing an oenophile reaching to encapsulate the complexities of a fine wine. Like a rare vintage, the complex finish of these simple bowls reward prolonged scrutiny.

If for the slightest moment I was concerned about my impulse for tactile engagement with many of the works, or an officious scowl, a ready made argument was to be found in the note accompanying the Louise Boscacci's *In the Riverbowl* installation from 2013. Central to her practice is tactile engagement and this is quite apparent in

a series of large spun pots, that, like Harrison's more diminutive bowls, are hewn from a complex matrix of ceramic material sourced from a particular environment. Not only do they attract the hand in their apparent woven texture, the varnish-like finish and concentric construction tease the light also.

Concluding this exhibition are the fearsome creatures of Juz Kitson's *Outside the Symbolic Order* (2015). Like the beasts of nightmares they are wall mounted as if trophies from the conscience of some archaic, or perhaps futuristic safari hunter. Of horn and tusk, trunk and wispy horse hair, bubbling metal and goitrous ceramic appendages they appear to be deliberately absent of apertures and therefore the ability to return the gaze. They are indeed, tantalisingly beyond the symbolic order.

In its curation this exhibition transitions well from formal display, through punk assemblage, to cool installation. From the formal to the casual, from hearthside guffaws through work of pensive consideration, to fearsome creatures. It is an exhibition



Facing page: Juz Kitson. *Outside the Symbolic Order*. 2015. Jingdezhen porcelain, Southern Ice porcelain, terracotta clay, horse hair, paraffin wax, merino wool, deer hide, deer horns, sandalwood, emu feathers, crocodile skin, cashmere goat pelt, marine ply, treated pine, PVD (physical vapour deposition).
 Top: Merran Esson. *Yarrangobilly Lines*. 2008. Stoneware, copper glazes. *A Different Skin*. 2015. Terracotta clay. *Kimbriki*. 2015. Stoneware, copper glazes. *Dear Henry*. 2014. Stoneware and terracotta clays, copper glazes. *And let the rest slip through*. 2015. Stoneware, copper glazes.
 Above: Janet Mansfield. *Five Untitled (Cups), Untitled (Jug), Two Untitled (Jars), Untitled (Vases)*. Woodfired ceramic.

of rare quality, that does not so much chart as assemble representative works of the department's tradition in a fabulously entertaining fashion.

David Hume is an art historian from Tasmania with special interest in ceramic art and cultural tourism. He is the author of *Tourism Art and Souvenirs: The Material Culture of Tourism* and writes the blog: a writer with a ceramic fetish (<http://www.davidhume.com>). All photos by David Hume.