

Simone Fraser's Vessel Forms

By Alan Peascod

Article from: Ceramics Art and Perception No. 60 2005 pp 47-49

IN 2004, SIMONE FRASER'S WORK WAS EXHIBITED IN THE Trinity Grammar School's Delmar Gallery's group exhibition. The show, entitled *The Hollow and the Whole*, surveyed contemporary ceramic trends. For Fraser the exhibition had particular significance for it saw the purchase of one of her new works by Robert Bell, curator for Decorative Arts at the Australian National Gallery in Canberra, for its collection. The purchase represents a milestone achievement in the artist's 23 year career since completing her foundation education in ceramics at the Canberra School of Art in 1980.

Fraser recalls her empathy for ceramics began when she was an impressionable 12 year old. Thanks to her mother Barbara Cauvin, a painter who came to use clay as a medium later on in her artistic life, Fraser saw the world from another perspective. As a child she was unaware why she liked making vessels. She just did. As a young maker she knew she preferred ceramic form as one for contemplation, not necessarily function. This clarity of purpose was to gain dividends for her in later artistic life. From the beginning, Fraser viewed her formal education in ceramics as a positive time. "It opened doors encouraging me to articulate thoughts and perceptions. It pushed and pulled me in different directions; to explore and test limits." As a student of ceramic history she embraced process. She appreciated the teaching philosophy that enabled her to explore the behaviour of materials. For her it was aesthetically liberating and one which granted her a creative independence. With material familiarity she was able to invent new surfaces which in turn suggested new forms.

From this she began to understand the important relationship between claybody, form, surface texture, glaze and firing that have been the drivers of ceramics aesthetic throughout its long and fascinating history. Two decades later, the artist has had time to reflect; to sift through and analyse those elements that are important to her. The artist says: "In 1997, during a commission for the Sultan of Brunei, I experienced a change with my work but not in the way one would normally expect. The commission required the filling of 200 niches with art works, of which I was to prepare work for 20. I was required to make vessels to a formula with surface decoration and gold leaf. The pieces were to be 60 cm high, decorative containers with lids and stands. Unexpectedly the commission aftermath left me feeling empty, as if I had lost something in the process. Having those feelings heralded the start of something new.

"I decided to undertake post graduate studies with Dr Owen Rye at the Gippsland Campus of Monash University in Victoria. Free from constraint, I was able to once again enjoy the sense of liberation when one is able to investigate new work again with a fresh approach, stripping back form to a simple purity. By using that surface as a canvas for self expression my new work emerged."

Fraser completed her studies in 2001 and since then she emerged stronger in her convictions. Her most recent work sees form whittled to a simple, elegant framework. These forms have a monumentality strengthened by complex surface textures. Her artistic experience, that of evolutionary changes in her work, is a direct result of experience and observation; analysis and selection and intuitive assessment of the behaviour of the materials with which she has chosen to engage. She concurs with Peter Dormer's statement "There is an evolution of ideas. Process allows the maker to change intention, and develop".¹



For Fraser it is the journey that offers discovery.

While viewing her work it is too simplistic to attribute the artist's motivation to the mimicking of age-encrusted surfaces. Her surfaces - colour and texture - are new; a deliberate refinement based on the artist's unique aesthetic judgement. Her colours and textures have no reference point, no equivalent in ancient ceramics. In this sense her work is contemporary. At the same time she has chosen to develop forms that are referential to the vessel. In this sense she is consciously embracing the continuum of wheel-thrown objects which have their roots some six millennia before the 21st century. Her work is unequivocally intended for contemplation and is the product of a maturing artist.

For Fraser, the traditional vessel shape has, aesthetically speaking, sustainability withstanding repeated analysis. Historian Herbert Read once stated that because ceramics was some of the most abstract forms of art practice it continually defied verbal explanation. For Fraser this is its attraction. As an experienced artist and teacher she is aware of the minefield created by the conflict between current views on art theory and the trend toward denial of process. She feels she needs to have clarity of mind about her own position and her students when undertaking art practice in an era that may seek to deny the importance of history. She feels there are inherent risks when theory becomes the dominant entity.

Her studio practice has taught her to question Modernism's rejection of previous collective experience. Conversancy with the complex and inseparable network of processes and technical detail is unavoidable if the meat of ceramics aesthetic is to be manipulated to any creative advantage. Dismissing the coding, the genetic pool, the DNA of information embedded in ceramics history just does not make sense. Her creative experience has taught her there is a certain amount of truth in Peter Timms' assertion that if there is no "conception of history" linear or otherwise - then you remain a prisoner of your own time trapped in a cycle of habit".² Timms' argues the case for a "reconnecting with nature, not by being about nature but by employing nature's 'methods of operation' a more poetic, romantic and idealistic art". Fraser believes the study of history enables clearer understanding of the mechanisms of spirituality.

Her point of departure from tradition occurs before the freshly-thrown form even leaves the wheel. There is the modification of surface through a complex network of textures and slip application. There is an impressive sensitivity. These rhythmic, skeletal textures are no accident for they represent the accumulation of observed phenomena that allow her glazes to do their work. Without these relationships the glaze just would not be what it is. "Process for me is one of the creative tools that have been critical in the evolution and resolution of my

ideas. Part of that process, of course, is the repetitive nature of making, creating a form and surface quality that only the wheel can achieve. For instance, the immediacy of wheelthrowing allows a wider exploration of defining and redefining form. To Fraser, surface is "the braille of life. To use too many words to attempt to describe these qualities can demystify the original concept. I think at this point my surfaces are made up of a myriad of experiences. Sometimes the simplicity of just a



fingermark in clay is evocative enough."

"Everything I observe is a preparation for new work. I have travelled, drawing and photographing cultural and artistic differences in various countries (especially in the realm of ceramics), culture, environments and architecture. I draw the general ideas before making work. I do, however allow a certain amount of spontaneous feeling for the clay to suggest new alternatives in making." In all cases she recognises intuition is central to her work, a constant since her childhood years.

While pleading the wisdom of studying what has happened before us Simone Fraser feels it must be in sufficient depth to develop a fluency in the language. Equally it is counterproductive to be slavishly tied to ideas and technologies that are not our own.

REFERENCES 1. Dormer, P. *The Art of The Maker - Skill and its Meaning in Art, Craft and Design*, Thames and Hudson. 2. Timms, P. *What's Wrong with Contemporary Art?* UNSW Press, Sydney, NSW, 2004.

Alan Peascod is a ceramic artist who has been practising for 40 years. He lives near Gulgong NSW. He is currently preparing an exhibition, "Acute Focus", with Karen O'Clery, Narek Galleries, Tanja, NSW November 2005-January 2006. Simone Fraser will be part of an exhibition, curated by Merran Esson called "Chilli", at Cudgegong Gallery, Gulgong from June 9-July 18 2005. Photography Michel Brouet.

Middle: Ceramic Form. Dry glaze, three firings. 62 cm/h.

Bottom: Two Ceramic Forms. Dry glaze, three firings. 38 cm/h.

