

*At the time of this interview Jan Guy was Studio Chair, Ceramics, Sydney College of the Arts.*

*Continuing a conversation concerning practitioners who focus on technology –*

You have to learn a certain amount of technology in order to practice, but some people become obsessed with say, glaze technology. Some are very good at it. It also appeals to another part of their mind, because it involves chemistry.

*Studio glass has a short history in Australia, but ceramics goes back much further.*

In terms of studio, it was a backlash to the Industrial Revolution. In Australia you've got the Boyds, yes, but even in the early period – colonial pottery in Australia, while they did pipes, water vessels etc., there were also small decorative pieces.

*Where do you see ceramics practice going now?*

There is certainly a strong diversification in ceramics, but there are also people such as the diehard wood-firers who believe in the Zen aesthetic and they are never going to move from that. They rubbish the conceptual ideas etc. because they don't see it as being important. Basically the bottom line is the dollar.

*For those involved in process?*

For some of them, yes and that's understandable. We have to be realists to some extent. I think particularly people who go through an art school such as this one [SCA], are more interested in thinking. We all have ideas, even those who claim not to be artists, but craftspeople.

Perhaps for ceramicists it has become very important to think about what we do, to explore the ideas that are possible and see how ceramics can still be a contemporary medium. Ceramics has been used throughout history as a gauge of culture. That is how archaeologists decide what went on. Ceramics leaves an object. It leaves traces, but also it leaves things that belong to the everyday. Ceramics can't be destroyed. You can smash it, but once it is ceramic that's it. You can't return it to the mud.

Ceramics has always been this gauge. Now in that way it can transform itself because it becomes a gauge of the age we live in. Five hundred years from now all the fantastic technology that we have in terms of new media will be redundant. Unless people keep archiving that material over and over again it will be lost. I see ceramics as being important in that way.

*A marker of its time. Glass is also permanent – like hardcopy.*

It is hardcopy and so it is important. In America at the moment there is a real shift amongst craft workers (and people in general) to return to, if not a simpler life, a more tangible life. You get things like 'craftivism', which is sort of an activism. That's to do with the environment and returning to a simpler way of living. That might relate to the sentiment of the 'Hippies'.

*Back to arts and crafts?*

The same thing, it's whenever you have a change like a surge of new technology (the surge of the Industrial Revolution). The speed of change in technology is so great now people sense we seem to be destroying ourselves and (whether you believe in climate change or not) it has created this movement. It is not people you would expect to find it in. It is in the really young – people in their twenties.

*The object as a meditative piece would reflect that spirit.*

It certainly does, but it has to be realised that that doesn't happen in just one form. It can happen in many forms. It can happen in ceramics that is used as installation, or in figurative work. It doesn't just happen in a domestic object.

*It is the nature of art.*

That's right.

*So what is special about the ceramic object?*

I have already spoken about that. It gives us our history.

Also if I make a piece in ceramics I use my hands, but when I'm making it I am considering the person that is going to use it. They are like me – they have hands and they have a body. It is though I have gone up to a good friend and embraced them. The same thing happens with the bowl. You know when you have a bowl that has been made by someone rather than something. You just know it, because it fits the body. It carries the trace or the gesture of the relationship the clay had with the maker.

*What do you call yourself as a practitioner?*

I call myself an artist. I was originally trained in ceramics, but I also paint and make sculpture. I don't limit myself. I am not media specific. I suppose I could call myself a sculptor – no, just an artist rather than a sculptor, but the thing that does drive all my work (I think this is from my early training) is the tangibility of things.

Materials are very important to me in how they can be read symbolically. How the viewer, the audience responds to them. I want a bodily response from them. I don't want a cut off visual, intellectual response. I want a felt response. I first want a bodily response. I want that first from my audience, before they start thinking too hard.

Part of the body is thought, but it is that initial reaction that I want. It has to be a bodily one for me. For me there is a lot of art now that is like wallpaper. I don't know if it is because I have seen so much art, but it has a cool distance. It has a surface that does not make me respond.

*Visual?*

There is always something visual. It is like learning to draw. When you are leaning to draw you are learning to feel objects from a distance. What I am hoping to do is give people some triggers in the form and the surface that evoke some sort of physical memory.

*With glass it is the eye rather than the hand that caresses.*

There is something else that happens with glass and you see it in a lot of classical literature. An example would be Virginia Woolf who wrote about a piece of glass she found on the sand and the glass always acts (strangely in a similar way to ceramics) as a catalyst for memory. That's because with the glass object, though solid, you can enter and go through it. In a way it absorbs its surroundings. Then there is the idea of the crystal ball – you can see into the future too.

Glass has this thing of absorbing its environment and having almost a mystical quality. It's the same as when ceramicists think of the inside of an object. We [ceramicists] always think of the inside. When you learn to throw you are not thinking about the profile, you are thinking about the space inside, which relates to the notion of the cave I suppose (and its long philosophical history).

*Is that what attracts you?*

In terms of just practice (the process of making) it's the fact that I actually hold it in my hand and make – that is very important to me.

*The touch?*

Yes, that's very important and perhaps it has become more important for people now more than ever because technology takes you so much away from the tangible experience. I watch my son and his friends. They take ages to learn to do things like tie their shoelaces, because they operate different parts of the brain. They have never rolled around in the grass. They have never had those times. They have been under surveillance from the day they were born. They have other amazing skills like the fine motor skills for 'game-playing'. (That will produce better neurosurgeons.)

*You said earlier there was a concern for the market.*

That's not exactly what I said. What I'm getting from some of them is that it is about the dollar. The commercial consideration seems simplistic to me in one way (but I have a good job – I haven't always). It is, "If I can't make money from it what's its use". That tends to be their argument against art schools and against art. They say they make an income from domestic ware. I can't see how that can be true because you have mass production in places like China. If I can get a good rice bowl for two dollars why would I buy six bowls that are going to cost me fifty dollars? The only reason I would buy them is because I know they are handmade and I know that is going to give me a different aesthetic. That is, I am buying it because I think it is art. I think they are making a big mistake if they ignore that side of their practice.

*Still the commercial imperative?*

It obviously has to be there because you have to make a living, but what I find for most ceramicists (the ones who come through SCA anyway and for some others I know) is that the practice is more important than making money.

Sure we all like to sell a work, but what is most important is the practice. Therefore you often find ceramicists in other situations. One of our ex-graduates is over managing *Ernabella*, an indigenous ceramics studio in South Australia. Another ex-student from SCA has done quite well as an artist and he does a lot of residencies in Asia. Other people write.

People will earn their income from associated activity, but they still keep their practice going. It might be management, or they might write. A lot of writing on the nature of practice happens in ceramics, more so now in the last ten years. There is a lot of critical writing. The girl who came up earlier to return a book – that was a book on critical writing gathered by Garth Clark. He is a collector of ceramics and did a lot of writing on ceramics. A lot of critical writing has come out of the UK as well because of their *Creative Nation* (which was Paul Keating's Creative Nation document). They have been very supportive of their arts.

*There hasn't been as much critical writing on glass.*

No, and I think there needs to be, but that has to come out of places like universities. We need to encourage people to think about what they do, and what their fellow practitioners are doing.

*What are the critical issues for ceramics?*

That's an enormous question and it's one that's asked over and over again. In the past there has been a tendency to navel gazing. People would write about their own work, but only as, "I make this". It was very descriptive with no reflective writing. People have become a lot more reflective. I think that is also because ceramics has moved into the university sector as well and that has made a change in the last decade to twenty years. You have to talk about tendencies in rather black and white terms. Twenty years ago I would have said there was little critical writing on ceramics, but that would have also been the time the first lot of people came through the university system in ceramics. There they would have been forced into having a broader art education.

That is what is so good about here (SCA). It may not be so for other studios, but for Glass, Ceramics and Jewellery, the students are forced to look further a field. That's the nature of theory. You start doing things like comparative analysis when you compare a vessel to a painting. Different things start to happen. When I look at the history of modern fine art I begin to see where the gaps are. I am not saying in the practice, but in the way fine arts has defined itself. It has often defined itself as what it is not and the qualities of 'what it is not' are a lot of the qualities that craft has. If you look at 'Modernism', there is the idea of the artist as the 'lone genius'. There is the connection to the machine made – no hand. These are all things relevant to the crafts.

*Fine Arts defined itself as 'not being craft'?*

Basically yes. It defined itself by all the things it was not. Craft has always been about collaboration. Even if you go into the individual studios there are still times when you have to collaborate. In glass you have to collaborate. In terms of the technologies you use, you have to collaborate with people in order to get the information you need to make your work. Take painting as an example, it has been projected as this idea of the 'lone genius', but if you look back through history there was collaboration in the studios.

People coming out of these institutions had a double education. They had a wider view and they began to think about their practice in a very different way.

*Ceramics is outward looking?*

It is most definitely. What I have always said is the beauty of ceramics is in its chameleonic nature. It can be anything. (The only thing ceramics can't be is as transparent as glass.) It could be translucent, but not only that. I could make this [wheel barrow] in ceramics and you would not be able to tell it wasn't that material.

There is this double thing with ceramics. It has that materiality, but it also has the fact that it can disguise itself as all these other things.

*Looking from outside what do you see in glass practice?*

In some ways there is a larger concern with formalism – modernist concerns. There would seem to be stronger commercial concerns. That's not necessarily for all artists, but it is rarer to find people with something to say in their work, that is some idea that they want to drive home.

*Is installation strong in ceramics?*

It is. Object is strong as well, but the people who I think are the top practitioners in the field are not making nice lovely pots. (There is nothing wrong with nice lovely pots.)

*Outside the arts schools ceramics would be seen as functional object.*

That's right and I spoke before about the reason a lot of people are making functional objects.

*What about collectors?*

There are most certainly ceramics collectors, but Australia is a small market. I assume it's the same for glass and jewellery (I don't have any figures on this). If you are going to financially base the continuation of your practice on collectors, you need to go further a field than Australia. One, because we don't have enough people collecting and two, the people we do have are generally not driven by a passion for the aesthetics of art.

*Are these collectors confined by 'ceramics'?*

Some are. I actually used to clean for someone who used to collect the best of domestic Australian ceramics. They had a piece by just about everybody I could name in Australia considered the top of their field in the last twenty or thirty years. That was in a small middleclass home.

*Not suited to installation.*

No, but installation rarely goes into a home. Unless they are very wealthy, they are not going to have an installed piece. They want something to fit within their home. There is nothing wrong with that, but it doesn't leave much room for work to develop in other ways.

I never have made art for money. That is not the reason I make art. I have never thought about that, even when I was very poor. It would be like not having my legs. I make art because I personally need to make art. Some of that is about being reflective on my own life experience, but I assume some of that life experience connects with

other people. I don't think I am unique. Art can provide us with meditation, or it can be uplifting. That is the function of art.

It is possible that I could sit down and produce a signature bowl that I could go out and market in such a way that people would buy it, but I would not get a lot of satisfaction out of that. I can throw. I have learnt to do what we call discipline throwing, where you throw one piece after another in a certain amount of time. I can sit at a wheel and throw a number of bowls without even looking at them.

*Questions glass artists should be asking?*

The main thing for glass artists is to talk to each other about their practice and to write about their practice, to get other people to reflect on the practice and get it out and get this dialogue moving. If the young can see what others before them have been thinking about then they can reflect on that and say I don't agree and this is why.

I don't have the experience with glass, but I feel ceramics is more open than glass. I know glass is a younger discipline in terms of the individual practitioner. It might be valuable for it to ask those questions that ceramics asked. Your wave will be slightly different – as all waves are.