

the point of interest: function and the art of pottery

The work of Ian Jones

It's thirty three years since I first started studying pottery, and I am intrigued to find myself still as interested in making functional pottery as I was in 1974. Functional work doesn't seem particularly sexy in this world of post-modern ceramics so for the last few years, whilst exploring my fascination with casseroles and teapots, baking dishes and coffee cups, I have had time to think about what it is that has sustained me making these pieces for so long.

I keep coming back to a question which has some personal meaning for me: Where is the art of pottery to be found?

In these times of university-based ceramic training, it seems that ceramics is commonly viewed through the eye of related arts. If the decorated surface works in terms of painting, then it is successful art. If the form works in sculptural terms, again it is art. If the ceramic object makes a statement on the war in Iraq, or comments on the human condition, or is witty or cutting about modern times, it is art.

All of these are aspects that can give a ceramic object an excitement that generates the response in the viewer: this is art. However, this involves seeing the ceramic object through the filter of another art form, and often there seems to be no need for the object to be ceramic for the artistic statement to be successful. Gwyn Hanssen Piggott's wonderful functional pots are regarded as 'art' because they make reference to the paintings of Giorgio Morandi and are displayed in the form of still life groupings.

So back to my question: Where is the art of pottery to be found?

My personal answer to this question has evolved over time and has developed out of a phenomenon known to every production potter. On a ware-board of ostensibly identical wheel-thrown forms, there will be one object that is clearly better than the other objects. I cannot define why it is better, and, taken out of the context of the ware-board, all the objects might seem equally good or bad; but in the company of others on the ware-board there is some 'point of interest' which says to me, "This object works better." Marc Del Vecchio, in his book *Postmodern Ceramics*, quotes a line from Omar Khayyam (1048–1131) which shows that this is not a new observation: "along a wall stood pot after pot, some were articulate and some were not."

For me, the art of pottery is to be found in pursuing this point of interest. The art of pottery becomes an art of comparison where my visceral response to the point of interest in a series of objects leads me to the next decision, and the next series. These judgments are not objective; they are personal and individual. I believe that they lead the potter on an editorial and curatorial path which explores things which are fundamental, but which are not easy to put into words. Each pot is the record of a 'now', of a considered moment, and is at some level a statement about the potter.

As a young potter learning from Alan Peascod, I remember his contention that function and art were mutually exclusive. Peascod would make spouted vessel forms without openings for the spout, in order to deny the possibility of function. I was never able to accept his ideas on this topic and I think it was in reaction to the strength of his stated position that I later became a trainee with the excellent functional potter, Doug Alexander. I regret that I didn't revisit this discussion with Alan in more recent times.

The ongoing judgments of the potter have led to the resolution of aesthetic issues with outcomes such as the function-based Sung dynasty porcelains, and very few people would deny those works the title of



Jug, unglazed stoneware, fired in anagama kiln for 5 days, November 2007, h.21cm

[food + pots]

'art'. My personal view is that all art has function, even if that function is only to hide the stain on the wall, or to increase in resale value at a rate greater than the real estate market. I love functional ceramics and I think it is without dispute, that the most beautiful pottery ever made is both functional and the product of repetition.

The weight and balance, the feel in the hand of the glaze, the finish of the underneath and the back of a ceramic work are all important aspects of the art of pottery. For me, function is not an essential part of my judgments about a ceramic object but it is important, in large part because function is a great pickup line; it is an inducement to an intimate relationship, and I have a closer understanding of the qualities of a pot that I use regularly. The choices I make about using pottery become an ongoing dialogue with the object, and the maker of the object, and these choices feed back into the pots I make.

In the same way that the comparative judgments are made about the pots on the ware-board, or on Omar Khayyam's wall, selecting my current favorite mug for my morning cup of tea indicates something about my inner self. The Randy Johnson mug bought whilst in the States, or my mug that was knocked from the kiln shelf and into the side-stoke during the firing? What does this decision say about me today?

The use adds to a greater understanding of the pot, and that can be both a positive and a negative. I love the way that ripe tomatoes contrast with the blue celadon of the Paul Davis bowl in our kitchen; the way that sake enhances the interior of a wood-fired sake cup; the baked-on golden patina on my baking dishes in a friend's house. The relationship between the ceramic and its use add layers of memory, meaning, complexity and emotional response to the object. This use is a creative act..

The ultimate extension of this process (of creation by using an object) is the role played by the tea-master in the Japanese tea ceremony. The creators of the modern tea ceremony in the 1500s transformed objects by exploring new ways of using pottery made for farm use. A simple Korean rice bowl becomes a national



2 cup teapot, unglazed stoneware, 2007, h.13cm



top: *Casserole*, unglazed stoneware, w.24cm; bottom: *Colander*, unglazed stoneware, w.26cm

treasure. The object is 'created' by the new vision of its potential function. In its time this was a revolutionary act against the existing structures of the society, every bit as powerful as Duchamp's *Urinal*.

So for me the art of pottery is about trying to see the ceramic object without looking through the prism of another field of art. In a funny way this brings me back to Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's still life arrangements. These have been difficult works for me; I love the pots, but have been disturbed by the fact that their acceptance in the art world is due to the referencing of Giorgio Morandi's still life paintings. Recently I have started to see them in a different light. I don't know whether Gwyn would agree, but I now read them as a successful attempt at presenting a group of pots in a way that allows the viewer to make comparisons between the objects (something I see as important to understanding the art of pottery). I believe that in an act of subversion, Gwyn has used the bias of the art world to allow her to introduce the ware-board full of pots into the gallery.

So, where is the art of pottery to be found? For me it hides in the subtle differences that are the outcomes of the hand-made, and which generate what I call 'the point of interest'. It is found in the comparisons and judgments that are made when you look at a board of bowls or choose the mug for your morning tea. And the role of function? Function places the pot in a space which allows a dialogue between the maker and the user, a dialogue which illuminates subtle aspects of both parties.

All works were fired in Ian's anagama kiln for 5 days in November 2007.

The gallery is located at 1045 Shingle Hill Way, Gundaroo, 30 minutes from Canberra, and 10 minutes off the Federal Highway.

Opening hours: Saturday, Sunday and public holidays, 10.30 am – 5 pm

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Bowl, slip and ash glazed, 2007, w.15cm



Mug, 2007, h.11cm