

SLOW CLAY CENTRE

1. *Slide: Flyer:* Thanks Bruce (Nuske) for the introduction.
Firstly, can I ask who in the audience are students? (hands up) I want to congratulate you for coming to this conference! These events are just as much about your education as any formal study you have done or will do. It was at a conference such as this in 1980 that I first had a taste of the varied careers that were possible in clay and it gave me a lot of motivation to finish my studies and ultimately to decide to become a potter.
I have been invited to speak today about a new ceramics education venue called Slow Clay Centre in inner-city Melbourne. SCC grew out of my small studio classes that have been running almost continuously for 20 years. At the new expanded SCC we run classes and guest artist workshops in a broad range of ceramics. We are an independent education provider with no affiliation to any institution and we receive no outside funding. Our aim is to create a community of learning with ceramics education at the core and spin-off activities associated. I'd like to tell you about the background and some of the thinking that led to what we are doing.
2. *Slide: Dr Kevin Murray:* We started teaching in April but SCC was officially opened in June by Kevin Murray. Many of you will know Kevin was the director of Craft Vic for many years and is a writer and curator. He was also the one who gave me the name Slow Clay about 10 years ago. We had discussed the similarities b/n Slow Food Movement and Crafts and I posed the question "what if Craft Victoria could do for craftspeople what the Slow Food movement is doing for farmers?" The same problems existed for Crafts as they did for specialty foods: Crafts were dying, training opportunities were in decline, cheap imports were killing local production and the subsequent rich specialisation and innovation that comes from regional differentiation using local materials was under threat from fast food. This is an ongoing issue for the crafts, exacerbated by the further recent cuts to arts funding but, at the helm of Craft Victoria, an organisation that represents craftspeople, Kevin Murray helped influence our local culture and, in Melbourne at least, managed to turn crafts around from relative obscurity into something cool and fashionable again with a younger generation.
3. *Slide: Crafts are popular again:* It might also be the zeitgeist at work but Crafts and the hand made are now increasingly and once again seen (yes, I am old enough to remember it before!) in homewares magazines and blogs, specialist retailers, fashion houses, restaurants and even fine art galleries.
So, after those discussions with Kevin Murray, he started to refer to my work as Slow Clay and the name just stuck. Whilst doing an MFA in 2002 I was experimenting with techniques of making that were deliberately slow, revealing the touch of the hand and there was a resonance with the Japanese techniques that I was teaching students in my studio, that is, using soft clay, getting in tune with the material, allowing it to have a voice and embracing the underlying commitment

to skill that was necessary to work in this way. *Slow Clay Centre might be riding on the back of the new-found crafts wave but it is also this dedication to what is a long, proud tradition of skill development that underpins what we do.*

4. *Slide: Teabowls:* My own background with ceramics started during an art education degree majoring in ceramics in the 1980's. During this time my sister returned from Japan with some very strange looking teabowls, not dissimilar to these, that sparked my curiosity and interest in Japanese ceramics and I wanted to learn more. I should declare here that I love pottery and I enjoy using pottery that is challenging and interesting to me. I find it just as intellectually stimulating as conceptual work (which I also love!) and won't be an apologist for it. *At Slow Clay Centre we teach a grounding in pottery skills but we are also equally invigorated by sculptural and conceptual ceramics and we try to do both in an atmosphere of open enquiry.*
5. *Slide Andrew:* After uni I undertook 3 years further training with Andrew Halford in his Terrey Hills studio north of Sydney. Although I was training with Andrew there were many potters based in the studio renting space from him and I had access to all sorts of people and styles. The wonderful (late) Lex Dickson, some of you may have known, was also working with Andrew then and it was an exciting time for ceramics. Andrew's firings would sell out within hours of him opening the kiln door. We would have many visitors and I was able to meet many other potters including the awesome Janet Mansfield who has supported my work ever since. Many young people today would not find this training appealing because for the first year it involved making one shape repeatedly until I could get consistency and confidence. But I loved it and later I graduated to decorating many of Andrew's exhibition pieces.
6. Andrew had received this style of training himself from many teachers including Shiga Shigeo, Les Blakeborough, and Shimaoka Tatsuzo in Japan so I gained from his confidence and commitment to the workshop model. It was the old-fashioned apprenticeship system but without the public funding, although I did receive an Australia Council training grant for one of those 3 years. Andrew's work really influenced me although you might not see immediate connections. His throwing style is strong and sure with heavy feet and defined rims yet his work also exhibits a softness and gentleness of touch.
7. *Shussai-gama:* Andrew helped me to move on and find a position in Japan and I was able to secure a 2-year position at Shussai-gama, a community pottery run as a cooperative with a very committed approach to training and development. I didn't know it then but I had decided to become a potter at a time when it would soon rapidly decline in fashion but I was very lucky that both Andrew Halford and Shussai-gama still had a huge demand for their work which in turn provided me with a wonderful training. It is impossible to describe everything I learnt in these two training experiences. They were both incredibly wonderful. But one major difference between Uni and

workshop training is that it's not about you - you are there to learn but you also have a responsibility and expectation to fit in, work hard and to give back in return. Part of that is to not interrupt or demand anything from your teachers.

8. *My work*: Much later I did an MFA in Ceramics at RMIT with Prue Venables as my supervisor. It crystallized some things in my own work at the time and one of them was to enjoy seeing links to those two important training experiences in my work, and even to see links to my teachers teachers whom I might not even have met! Reading the touch of the maker in the work is one of the things I love about being part of a continuum in history, it's like our family genes. We often rebel against our teachers as we do with our families but we can just take what is meaningful and keep developing we will make work that is real for us. For many years I scratched some sort of a living from making pottery in combination with a bit of teaching from my studio. I also had children and was time-deprived!
9. *Preshil*: Over the years, particularly since doing the MFA, my work has become less commercial and more obscure so I decided to take the pressure off selling and took on other teaching jobs when they became available at TAFEs, Universities etc. The most recent was at a K-12 private school. A lovely one day a week job revitalising ceramics in the school that turned into a major permanent position as a senior art teacher.
10. *Web site*: During this time I had a web site made for my private studio classes and was experiencing increasing numbers of enquiries. I couldn't teach any more classes in my studio - it was already stretched at the seams, and students tended to stay for a few years once they got in so the demand was more than I could cope with. Someone suggested auctioning places on ebay and I was tempted! There was no advertising other than a badly optimised web site, but people were finding me and when I counted up the waiting list one day it revealed I had over 250 people on it. I wondered if it could be turned into a business and that's when I really thought about expanding. It had been a long-term goal and I had seriously considered it as early as 10 years ago but without the demand for classes then I just couldn't take the financial risk.
11. *Staff*: A fundamental long-term aim of mine has been to create an opportunity to expand awareness and appreciation of ceramics and to broaden the opportunities to support other ceramic artists and craftspeople by connecting them with a community of eager learners. I figured if I could have such a demand for my classes that I should be able to create it for others too and I have been extremely lucky that the first three people I asked to join me accepted and have jumped in to significant roles at SCC. Prue Venables, Shane Kent and Louise Morrison. A major question was how to involve more teachers in a way that harnessed their particular strengths and enabled them to teach to their strengths so Prue has started by teaching Porcelain workshops, Shane focusses on developing student's repertoire off the wheel and

Louise is in charge of children's classes. My experience at Shussai-Gama in Japan has underpinned my confidence in a community pathway even though I am taking the financial risk and guiding the decisions.

12. Keele St: About a year ago it became clear that to fulfill my vision I needed to transition from a home-based studio to a commercial space. I took a year's leave from my teaching position and I've sort of fumbled my way through this with no real business training, learning as I go. The search for an appropriate building was haphazard and irregular, mostly on the internet but finally found this building.
13. Sink: When I saw this sink I had to take a closer look – after all, potters love their sinks - and the building turned out to be perfect with a side lane for access and light and 3 main rooms for teaching in plus a kiln room and office. The lease was negotiated & signed in November last year and the planning application submitted December. It was a financial risk and whilst waiting for the permit I couldn't allow investing in equipment in case I didn't get the permit.
14. Investments: Finally in March we received the permit and we were able to purchase equipment and start teaching there in April this year.
15. Bowl tag: Although the building is in the middle of Graffaland and had been bombed, it cleaned up quite well and with a bit of judicious tagging myself it has mostly been kept clear of since!
16. My original bowl logo is still being used - somewhat simplified for tagging – a mysterious pink bowl tag is appearing in Collingwood...
17. Inside: Three main rooms: Throwing, Prep and clean up, and handbuilding.
18. Prep-clean up room
19. Core skills underpin our teaching but always within a framework of open-ended enquiry.
20. -21 Throwing off the hump - we start beginners on the wheel with a particular method I have developed over many years of teaching which is a synthesis of Japanese and western techniques. We have found a niche market where we specialize in this technique as a foundation and then develop students further on an individual basis.
22. Inside throwing room
23. -24 Glazing, slipping, individual teaching.
25. Exhibition space: we have a very small exhibition space and have changing displays on a monthly basis.
26. Guest Art workshops We also offer Guest artist workshops about once per term and had a fantastic printing on clay workshop with Petra Svoboda in May, a woodfiring workshop with Rob Barron is planned for October and a recycling using conservation techniques with Penny Byrne in December. We have also linked up with a friend to take a small group to Japan for a ceramics and craft Mingei tour in April 2013.
27. -29 examples of advertising. We haven't had to pay for much advertising by using social networking, FB, and simple flyers.
30. Contact info: Thank you for inviting me to speak about SCC. It's difficult to know how to present the information without sounding like I'm trying

to advertise the centre but I hope our story can inspire others. Please contact us if you have any ideas for interesting workshops or classes!
www.slowclay.com