

More Light than Heat - presentation for 2012 Subversive Clay ceramics conference panel discussion on critical writing.

My brother-in-law, Dr. Doug Munro, is a historian who specializes in the history of the Pacific Islands. For the past number of years he has been involved in writing the history of other historians, a field known as historiography. Recently he has specialized in examining the biographies of these historians, which I guess could be termed biographical historiography. Whether in his 2009 book 'The Ivory Tower and Beyond - Participant Historians of the Pacific' (Cambridge Scholars Publishing) or in numerous journal articles, he manages to take a fairly arcane subject and by treating it with a combination of scholarship and erudition renders the lives of those other historians interesting to the lay reader. There is an important lesson here, for those of us who write about another fairly arcane subject - ceramics - and who would try to do so in a manner which is both informative and critical.

The title of this paper is taken from Hamlet - 'These blazes, daughter, giving more **light** than **heat**, extinct in both' (Act 1 Scene 3)) although the phrase is now most often used reversed, as in 'more **heat** than **light**', meaning to enter into contentious argument without good effect, something a critical text should never provoke. In any case, it seemed appropriate for today's topic of discussion, and has the virtue of referring, at least obliquely, to the process of firing ceramics, which is important in terms of the craft of writing, in this case the craft of writing about craft.

I think we can agree there are many ways whereby a text about ceramics might be categorised as being a critical text, but when all's said and done it probably just gets down to a question of depth, something which is a bit hard to achieve in the thousand or so words that ceramics magazines – which are by far and away the ubiquitous form of the publication of ceramics writing – generally allow as a word count, and even harder to do if you are not used to the process of writing. On the other hand, the reality is that the short essay or article is the form that needs to be concentrated on, because it probably accounts for ninety-five percent of all writing about ceramics, so it's pretty important we get it right.

If you are lucky enough, as I have been, to have a magazine that allows you to write on a regular basis, then it's possible to establish a kind of overall style and approach, whereby a collection of essays might amount to something more significant than a single piece. Sometimes the opportunity might present itself to write a longer piece, a chapter of a book or even a whole book, and of course there is always the internet where anyone can have a blog and write to their hearts content, although I note that blogs don't seem to be used for lengthy articles. There is, or should be, a considerable amount of academic writing, although it seems that most ceramists choose to pursue higher degrees where

their research favours objects rather than text. A recent text-based PhD I'm aware of that dealt with ceramics is 'Constructing Craft Theory: Harmony and Conflict within the New Zealand Studio Craft Movement 1949 – 1992' by Dr. Vic Evans, completed through the history department of Massey University, and doubtless there are others. But, although PhD theses are potentially very useful tools for the researcher they are lengthy beasts and – depending on the supervisor and student – they often shun devices like narrative structure which actually make texts easy to read. In terms of the short form essay, the process of writing and researching a PhD might serve as a useful grounding for the writer, but it by no means guarantees that they can turn out an essay that is as engaging as it is learned, and surely we want both of these qualities to be present.

Possibly the best repository of professional expertise in this field, outside of ceramists themselves, is to be found in the curatorial world, both within state galleries and also in the activities of freelance curators, which often leads to the publication of valuable texts that are both learned and engaging, written in the support of the viewed experience.

We should recognise that the context and type of publication brings with it its own limitations and opportunities and, in terms of the essay or article, there is only so much you can do in one or even two thousand words, and it's just as easy to make a botch of it by trying to do too much as by doing too little.

The thing to realise about defining critical writing is that it is not a form in itself, but a quality. All of the available genres - biographies, autobiographies, essays, diaries, travelogues and even fiction - may offer the possibility for writing a critical text, but only the possibility. Even the form which seems most obviously to be critical, which is the review, is often merely descriptive, containing neither analysis or argument, or is simply so constrained by space that the reviewer has to resort to a few catchy one-liners in attempting to sum up an entire body of work.

There is one genre, though, which seems to offer at least the possibility of creating an interesting critical text simply by virtue of its own internal structure, and that is narrative non-fiction, otherwise known as creative nonfiction.

The genre of narrative non-fiction is not all that easy to pin down, in that it can be based around a discovery, or a journey, an object or a place or a person, or indeed it can encompass all of these things in the one work. As its name suggests, it takes something as its subject – for example a scientific discovery – and creates a narrative around that occurrence. A defining aspect of narrative non-fiction is that the subject is verifiable, that it be something real and not imagined. Another is that the text has been thoroughly researched and documented, and that emphasis is placed on the context or scene that surrounds or frames the essential points. Finally, the prose style should be literary, which

means that it should be lucid and free from unnecessary or specialist jargon. The story might be about something quite complex, but it shouldn't make a virtue of complexity in the telling of the tale, and it should seek to present a human face to the subject at all times.

Probably the best known example of this genre is the American author Dava Sobel's 1996 classic *Longitude* which tells the story of John Harrison, a self-educated clockmaker, whose invention of the chronometer in mid-eighteenth century England made it possible for sailors to make extended ocean voyages while being aware of their position, a discovery which had enormous ramifications for the entire world.

But there are far more prosaic topics that have been explored in the name of narrative non-fiction, and I have read books on the migration of eels, the history and use of salt, the creation of a geological map of Britain and the development of the garden lawn (the last a personal favourite of mine), all of which, to various degrees, have exhibited some or all of the qualities of the genre.

In terms of ceramics, there are only a few examples I can think of where a book or an article has taken something to do with clay as its subject and made of it a story worth reading in a form that might be described as narrative non-fiction. In a recent article for the Journal of Australian Ceramics I mentioned a wonderful book, published in 1961 as part of the Britain Alive series, by the author Mervyn Jones titled *Potbank: A Social Enquiry into the Life in the Potteries*, a term used in this case to describe the collection of towns that make up the locality of Stoke-on-Trent. This book exhibits all of the good qualities I associate with narrative non-fiction, albeit being written before the genre was ever named as such.

The trick is how to work at least some of the characteristics of long-form narrative non-fiction into an essay, and it's here that the skills of the writer come to the fore. Just as it would be unreasonable to expect someone to be able to make an accomplished piece of ceramics without some training, skill, aptitude and with almost no practice, it's no wonder that a great deal of writing about ceramics by ceramists simply falls short of the mark.

In the end it's a kind of dance between artists, editors and writers, and I think it's best if everyone knows where they belong and what their job is. This doesn't mean that a writer can't make ceramics or an artist shouldn't write or an editor can't do all three, but there has to be an awareness of what your job is at any given time, and also where your skills really lie, and to what area you should devote most of your time and energy.

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