

## Notes From the Departure Lounge

(1.) This is the **connected** state isn't it? Has that ever been a South Australian slogan? The connected state. I recall observing as a kid how physically it's connected to all the other states except for one called Tasmania. Tassie made it hard for itself by utilising a particularly effective moat, part of which is called Bass Strait.

I don't know much about South Australia except that it seems one can be subversive and safe, maybe some sort of Dunstan (2) legacy. In Queensland the reverse applies, and maybe that's some sort of Bjelke Petersen (3) legacy. Here's an update on Queensland politics. Current premier Campbell Newman, (4) new man old crook, gained office persistently using a slogan **CAN DO**. Actually a unionist told me the other day that **CAN DO IS A CANT**.

As a hopefully not too obscure segway into this wood firing narrative (5) or if like me you'd prefer to say a beginning to a story....let's call it my first departure from the lounge.... **anyway** as a way of getting started I want to outline two methodologies when it comes to hunting feral pigs which may have some pertinence to the art of hunting pots. One methodology which was common practice when I was a kid was to track down some pigs, usually on foot, take aim at the one you could get closest to, and shoot at it. In my particular case the rules were never to go shooting alone, so that meant my younger brother tagged along, and we were only ever equipped with a single shot 22. The bounty on pigs those days was 20cents so about five pigs got you another packet of bullets. Things you took into consideration were which way the wind was blowing, the time of day, food sources, tracks etc.

Earlier this year I went **piggin**. (6) This is altogether a different methodology. The former described methodology has at its core a sort of man verses the wild and sometimes the wild wins. It's sort of like a collision of materials and intentions which provide a random outcome, one that ultimately will please either the hunter or the hunted. But each component has a definitive say in the outcome.

Nowadays when piggin....that's right no G needed..... the actual pig has no chance. **(7)** Instead of it being up against a couple of kids with a 22 the modern day pig contests with testosterone charged men in radio connected four wheel drive vehicles, six or eight dogs with GPS gear on their collars and armour on their chests, and in the sky above them a gyrocopter mustering them towards their clearly defined destiny. That's it.... **a clearly defined destiny**. No randomness here, no left field material outcome here, not a trace of man verse wild here, just a clobbering in store. I was left muttering what chance has the pig got.

**(8)**Sometimes I think that packets of modern day clay, and contemporary feral pigs, have a few things in common. You can get a bit of clay and with all the equipment available and a **clearly defined destiny** in mind plus a methodology to match you can belt the life out of that piece of clay. Some of you will be left wondering what chance the clay had. Now we know Industry has been doing this to chunks of earth for a long while. Zero tolerance to random, left field outcomes, it's a bit like boat people, but unlike boat people homeowners are actually encouraged to welcome these bits of clobbered dirt into their houses.

Personally, I am often attracted to art where it looks like material might have won the day, **(9)** or at least contested well into the fourth quarter. This can happen in any sort of kiln, though I believe those with the lightest carbon footprint, which happens to be well designed wood kilns burning slash pine toppings, ought to be employed. But not everybody can or wants to wood fire. I don't always. I want to wood fire to create the types of surfaces that I can't get any other way. I fire other kilns to create the types of surfaces that wood fire kilns aren't able to, or at least I haven't been able to make them. Yet. **(10)**

But in all my artwork, ceramic or not, I seek at least some material expression. I want components to speak up, argumentatively or not, and to tell stories. I also appreciate where methodologies have been employed to tame unruly material, like wadding has for ash, or in the design of early Chinese tenmoku bowls. **(11)** And I like to see some trace of the maker's hands.

This leads me into my second departure. Nowadays, is there much point in the type of ceramic art that negates hands? **Hands**. Most of us have two. And for most of us they link what's in our minds and our hearts to the clay we use. Two

of my favourite writers about ceramic matters, Barry Lopez and Jack Troy, have written about hands. Lopez observes that the education of the hands (and so the person) begins like a language: a gathering of simple words. To extend that metaphor the education of the ceramic artist inevitably begins with the gathering of simple techniques via the hand, leading ultimately to the creation of pieces of hopefully memorable ceramic art. Lopez contends that possibly we **delude** ourselves that our hands have a history independent of the mind's perception, (and) the heart's passion. Jack Troy writes about the '**heart hand**'. Is it possible that certain ceramic methodologies lead us into similar delusions as those outlined by Lopez? I think it is reasonable to assert certain methodologies better access our minds and hearts. Firing an electric kiln in solitude doesn't strike me as one of those. Practical perhaps, pragmatic yes. Clearly defined destinies in sight? Roger on that one.

Years ago I wrote how wood firing amounts to economic rationalist heresy. I was wrong. It's **lunacy**. One grapples with an energy field more than any particular instrument, and often in an environment of non programmable imprecision and random result. Schedules and budgets are consistently sacrificed in the interests of a broader dynamic.

However I did write

I wood fire because

.well designed and well managed wood kilns have less carbon footprint than gas or electric kilns

.involve a **communal** approach to art making

.impart **decomposition** effects on glazed and non-glazed surfaces.

Well a few things have remained the same.

What **continue** to attract me to wood firing are **not notions of romance** of the fire, or narcissistic artist suffering, but a certain **astringency** that in good work hallmarks both process and result. In wine tasting parlance, the wood fired art that now attracts me is unlike the sugary moselle I preferred to drink as a teenager. And that out of little cardboard boxes with plastic taps attached. This '**astringency**' usually results from a skilful **distillation** of elemental

components. Usually it does bear the mark of the hand, will be often characterised by what has been described as a ***condensing*** of geological time, and will show more than a healthy resistance to the ravages of fire. In fact it will be imbued by it.

Look, it's likely the best wood fired ceramic art won't bedazzle first time walk up art viewers. But not everything has to be designed to excite. No, they will have to contemplate, reflect, consider, before garnering a much more meaningful experience.

I wonder what the score is. Who kicked the first goal? Buddy Franklin or Adam Goodes?