

Critwritingcaling Panel: What Robert Hughes might have said!

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In the early 1990s, I was involved in a seven-year collaboration in clay with one of Australia's top artists, John Olsen. He would on various occasions point out in reference to his work, there were two types of people, lovers and others and there were far too many others! In my view, one of the roles of a critical discourse is to inform the 'lovers' and educate the 'others'.

Several potential obstacles surround the development of this discourse immediately spring to mind, firstly, the diversity of ceramics which includes the object, vessels, sculpture, installation and performance. Each has its own narrative, language and history with the only common factor being the use of ceramic materials. This leads to the second point, the materiality of ceramics, which can create its uniqueness. This is caused by the nature of the materials and the process of making which is one of speculation, of trial and error learning in posing the 'what if' questions as we work, continually refining our ideas from our results. The studio is more akin to a scientist's laboratory but the outcomes are not scientific more towards aesthetic and poetic –hopefully!

Tactility is another aspect. How many artforms can be held in the hand and be used to drink or eat? Edmund de Waal in his book, *The Hare with Amber Eyes: a hidden inheritance* discusses these qualities in rich detail:

How objects get handled, used and handed on is not just a mildly interesting question for me. It is my question. I have made many, many thousands of pots. I am very bad at names, I mumble and fudge, but I am good on pots. I can remember the weight and balance of a pot, and how its surface works with its volume. I can read how an edge creates tension or loses it. I can feel if it has been made at speed or with diligence. If it has warmth.....I can see how it works with the objects that sit nearby. How it displaces a small part of the world around it.....I can also remember if something invited touch with the whole hand or just with the fingers, or was an object that asked you to stay away. It is not that handling something is better than not handling it. Some things in the

world are better to be looked at from a distance and not fumbled around with. (p16)

For ceramic artists and the broader community with whom we wish to engage, there needs to be a strong body of writing about our chosen artform. Things are more important when they are written about as this provides it with validity and legitimacy. This writing is published largely in the global world of ceramics journals, both print and online, eg the Journal of Australian ceramics, Ceramics Art and Perception, Ceramic review, Studio ceramics, Ceramics Monthly, etc, to name but a few and very rarely published in the mainstream media. The last review I recall reading in the SMH was John McDonald's review of Toni Warburton's *Kiosk Object installation* at the Mori Gallery in Sydney in 2003. This is in contrast to the earlier period in the 1960s and 1970s when, as Peter Rushforth describes, Elwyn Lynn and Jimmy Cook of the Sydney Morning Herald would write regular reviews of his exhibitions and those of Les Blakeborough, Col Levy, Ivan McMeekin et al, at the Macquarie and David Jones galleries in Sydney. Lynn and Cook were sympathetic to the pottery movement and the creative activity that stemmed from the crafts movement which manifest itself through the studio pottery.

I feel certain similar parallels could be drawn in other major cities.

Today I fear that in spite of what ceramics devotees think, ceramics, through its enduring links with utilitarianism and the Arts and Crafts Movement, is relegated to a minor part of the world of art criticism. To many, it is generally seen as a craft made by craftspeople, and as such is merely decorative and cannot express ideas. As well, there are a distinctly small number of known writers in the field, the end result of which being that many people who do write on ceramics are fellow artists, known to the artists who are then in some way obligated to respond positively to the body of work to avoid making themselves socially uncomfortable. Serious critical writing needs objective and opinionated debate, the likes of which have been seen from the late John Ruskin and Robert Hughes, as well as James Elkin and Peter Shjeldahl to name a few. Serious critical writing in ceramics needs these

fundamentals as well as an understanding of the unique qualities of the materials involved.

The form that critical writing takes is of utmost importance. It needs to engage the audience and to be accessible to a wider readership and to do this, it must avoid the clichéd artspeak, the impenetrable jargon with which contemporary art is often associated. John McDonald (2010) Sydney Morning Herald (Australia) Art Critic, in a reference to writing appropriately for the audience, suggests that critical writing is about:

sorting out the pith.... the writing must be accessible to the selected audience and quasi-theoretical language can be a barrier to this.

Writing critical discourse is a literary skill and ideally the critic is a person who writes with informed opinion and imagination and is able to develop a conversation between the artist and the audience concerning a body of work. The critic's task is to contextualise the work in terms of its history and relationships within relevant social or cultural movements. Works can appear differently in different contexts so this needs to be explained. Connections should be made with the artist's previous works, their inspiration and philosophical approach. It is their role to elucidate what the artist is trying to do and to assess their level of success in meeting these criteria. The writer should express their opinion of the work and then develop an argument in support of their ideas.

What are these criteria for success? Does the work demonstrate that they are making art as if the world matters? Is it fashion, installation, the crafted object? Does it live beyond the technical feats of its creation? Is it a multi-media work, a ceramic fusion with metal, paper, glass?

Importantly, the writing should not be mean-spirited nor a personal attack on an artist. It should be constructive from which the artist can take something positive. Adam Welch (NCECA, 2011) affirms the point that the critic should become the intermediary in a conversation between the work and its audience and explains that this helps the artist to see the works through the eyes of another and seek answers to questions raised.

The poet Pablo Neruda describes this phenomenon well in his *Ode to Criticism*:

from each page of my book sprouted the flower of my bread, I was blinded by my own rays, I was insufferably self-satisfied, my feet left the ground and I was walking on clouds, and then, comrade criticism, you brought me down to earth, a single word showed me suddenly, how much I had left undone, how far I could go with my strength and tenderness, sail with the ship of my song.

I came back a more genuine man, enriched, I took what I had and all you have, all your travels across the earth, everything your eyes had seen; all the battles your heart had fought day after day aligned themselves beside me, and as I held high the flower of my song, the flour of the bread smelled sweeter...

For the artist, there is also much to gain by looking critically at others' work as this helps you assess your own more objectively.

The late Australian art critic, writer and historian, Robert Hughes would beg to differ on this last point as he was not concerned about upsetting artists whose work he was reviewing. Never a sycophant, Hughes' main concern was with responding vividly and intelligently to visual art and architecture. He did so in an engaging, eloquent and truly insightful manner. He was admired for his brutal honesty, his opinions and the quality of his writing.

One of Hughes' strengths was that he riled against pretentiousness in art and the emergence of the art industry which had taken hold with the likes of Damien Hirst, Andy Warhol and Joseph Beuys, Robert Rauschenberg, Jeff Koons, Julian Schnabel and Gilbert and George to mention a few. To Hughes, these people were barely real artists at all, but grotesque market manipulators.

He believed that modern art had lost its great creative burst, had become debased and a mere plaything of the market and he said out loud.....*the emperor has no f.....ing clothes.*

He appreciated works that displayed evidence of a strong work ethic, originality and the crafted work for example, in his description of one of Lucien Freud's canvasses,

Every inch of canvas has to be won, must be argued through, bears the traces of curiosity and inquisition — above all, takes nothing for granted and demands active engagement from the viewer as its right.

Nothing of this kind happens with Warhol, or Gilbert and George, or any of the other image-scavengers and recyclers who infest the wretchedly stylish woods of an already decayed, pulped-out postmodernism. (Guardian, 2004).

It seems to me that critical discourse in ceramics needs a Robert Hughes as an advocate, a critic and importantly, an eloquent, engaging writer for he has elucidated many parallels with ceramics. He lent a nobility to what can often seem a petty way to spend your life.

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