

THINGS THAT GO BUMP IN THE NIGHT

By Jan Guy

Two things happen only at night. If you walk around your house in the dark inevitably you will knock a piece of ceramics off a table, a mantelpiece, or wall, or you will curse and feel great pain when you kick some immovable ceramic object in your path. While you're out there in your shadowy lounge room turn on that box with the luminous glow (no not your bloody computer, the other one) I guarantee you within fifteen minutes you will see a ceramic object. And second, iconic and well-loved institutions are often demolished at night when regimes think no-one is looking; in the morning there is usually a large, empty vista with a mountain of bricks on its horizon¹.

This tells us quite a few things about ceramics in general and is also a wonderful metaphor for the critical status of ceramics education in Australia.

Ceramics is everywhere, therefore it would seem that it is well liked and in a powerful position to instigate subversive changes in the social fabric. But it is also often innocuous, pretty and bland- we have it in our homes and as backdrops for our early morning TV programs, precisely because of these qualities. Yet, also because of these qualities, it is often dismissed as a serious art form.

This paper will examine the role of ceramics in contemporary Australia in terms of its positioning within popular culture and as art object and consider why its quotidian and egalitarian nature is both a blessing and its downfall. Based on this premise, the paper will also consider the fragile

¹ In 1982, Cloudland Ballroom in Brisbane was demolished in the dead of night by the Deen Brothers under instruction of the (by then notorious) BjelkePetersen State Government.

and contentious relationships the discipline has had within Australian art institutions in the last two decades. Why is it hated by some?

Why it is so often dismissed as an essential player within the field of Contemporary Art? Is it the ceramics community's fault? And what solutions are possible for a more robust future?

What purpose does ceramics serve when it sits behind Kochie and Mel² in the morning? In terms of pure aesthetics it makes them appear three-dimensional and secondly, it acts like a mirror that makes the morning television show an extension of our lives. But it is for the most part invisible and ubiquitous – the forms are modernist (pure, but hardly exciting) and the surfaces reflective monotonies. Regardless of their quality, their presence 'behind the scenes' tells us that in contemporary life ceramics (read vessel) is still a sign of home, domestic and private. They help you subconsciously believe these television images are *real* people in your everyday life.

Ceramics has proliferated the world – the news story interview, the reruns of Seinfeld, the documentary interview series of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, and in feature length films where it helps position the viewer in a specific time period. Occasionally, its placement brings a very specific meaning to an image. For example, in June 2010 as news footage showed the then Prime Minister of Australia Kevin Rudd pacing the halls of Parliament House in Canberra with his entourage as he was about to be deposed, it also captured the ceramic work *My Bloody Oath* by Australian artist Danie Mellor, which is part of the Parliament House Art Collection. It was a passing glance, but in that moment it said more than the hours of footage that were to follow. A kitschy kangaroo posed as if to take an oath, give a promise, with its golden, tiled skin seeming like it was about to crack apart as it stood upon a white column representing the seat of Western civilization. The original intention of the artist may have been to make comment on the way Australia came to nationhood and the fragility and hollowness of the national identity that resulted, but in this moment it suggested that this foundation was still shaky. It subverted the pomposity and instead

² Channel 7 nationwide breakfast Sunrise hosts.

emphasized the farcical nature of the event that was unfolding. It is precisely ceramics' ability to blend in, to appear decorative and harmless that can give it great power as an art form.

Recently SBS television aired the documentary *With Gilbert and George* directed by Julian Cole.³ It follows four decades of the life and art practice of the contemporary British artists Gilbert and George and the pair welcome the viewer into their home taking us from room to room. They have a room completely dedicated to an assortment of ceramics and speak lovingly about their collection. At one point George displays a vessel of the nineteenth century designer Christopher Dresser and articulates how much he admires his work because in contrast to William Morris he made art that was affordable by all. This comment makes it understandable why these contemporary artists appreciate ceramics; for while their own work is internationally acclaimed their motto is 'Art for All.'

While the examples discussed so far all relate to ceramics' position in popular culture and it would appear, based on this, that ceramics has a strong though peripheral presence in our lives, a brief examination of its place in art institutions may reveal a more precarious position.

I live in Sydney and would expect to find the most esteemed and celebrated of contemporary art in the Art Gallery of New South Wales (AGNSW). The AGNSW does not have a ceramics collection except as it is represented through antiquities in the Asian wing. This would suggest that while ceramics from the past is valued as art (well at least as ethnographic art) contemporary ceramics is not, and even less, so if its origins are not Asian. The contemporary ceramic objects I have seen pass through this institution in the last three decades have been few. The attitudes within this institution towards it can be examined through several examples of ceramics entering its imposing, neo-classical entrance.

³ Julian Coleman *With Gilbert and George* See <http://www.sbs.com.au/films/movie/4696/With-Gilbert-and-George>

In 1995 the Australian artist and academic, Gudrun Klix, curated a small, but significant traveling exhibition in Australia; - *Peter Voulkos: ceramics in action*. One of its exhibition sites was the AGNSW. I went along to see this exhibition excited by the prospect of experiencing the iconic Voulkos's work in the flesh. I was not disappointed by the work itself, even though there had not been any possibility of his monumental work being on show (acquiring, shipping and insurance for it would have been exorbitant). The volcanic energy of the work lived up to expectations, but its placement felt like throwing a damp cloth over leftovers. Each piece sat flatly on an oversized plinth shoved into a tight space off to the left side of the top of the escalators. I doubt that Klix had much control over this. It is more likely that wider curatorial decisions made within the institution did not judge this work as having great significance or were unaware of its significance. While this is a very clear example of the near invisibility of contemporary ceramics within this institution, there have been other occasions where it has been given centre stage.

The work of Indonesian artist Dadang Christanto *They Give Evidence* (1996-97) was installed in the Asian wing of the AGNSW in 2003 and was later acquired. This is a powerful work that deals emotively with negative aspects of the human condition – oppression and injustice. Its evocative force is brought about partially because the figures appear to be made from clay – there is a long-established symbolic connection between the human body and ceramics that is unconsciously recognised by all, no matter our specific cultural heritage. The AGNSW collection listing for Christanto's work identifies the discipline as 'Sculpture, Installation', but its medium as 'terracotta powder mixed with resin/fibreglass'.⁴ Technically, there is no reason for ceramics to be mentioned because this is unfired clay and the purist amongst us would agree. The field of ceramics in recent years has expanded to include practices of the performative, filmic, and installation. However, Christanto's work emerges out of a ceramic figurative tradition and relies heavily on a specific materiality. It would appear

⁴ AGNSW collection listing for the work of Dadang Christanto See <http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/work/337.2003.a-ll/>

that the work's categorization and the artist's self-identification affect the way it is valued.

The 18th Biennale of Sydney (BOS) is over, but when I began writing this paper its artists had just been announced. Among the selected artists was a Korean ceramic artist named Young Sook Park. The usual fare of the contemporary art survey exhibition was there – video, digital prints, installation and did I mention video. It was surprising to find a series of contemporary, large, white Moon jars out of the tradition of this form from the Chosun Dynasty.⁵ And I had to ask the question – why?

The shape of Park's work, but perhaps not the virtuosity, is familiar to most of us. It's a form that often appears as backdrop to bleary-eyed breakfast television viewing. The artist's website⁶ didn't seem out of the ordinary, they had made these jars their life's work. They have emerged from 20 years' re-evaluation of an iconic Korean traditional form, and the innovation was mostly technical with new firing temperatures reaching 1350° celsius creating a more robust body and glaze. This was no explanation for its inclusion in the BOS - Contemporary Art doesn't generally concern itself with technique.

The artist's statement comes no closer to revealing this choice. It relates the form and process to the unfolding of the human condition – failure, striving for perfection, acceptance of the imperfect. This is not an unworthy idea, but it is not an uncommon articulation by potters when reflecting upon or as justification for their work. A brief visual investigation of the artist's work brought me no closer to an understanding of its inclusion.

The reason must be in the rationale for the exhibition. The Artistic Directors Catherine de Zegher and Gerald Mc Master claim that *All Our Relations* is built on

⁵ Chosun or Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910) Confucianism rose above Buddhism as the greatest cultural influence during this period in Korea. It was an era of growing national pride and a fostering of the arts, particularly those of painting, calligraphy and porcelain. See <http://koreanhistory.info/ChosonDynasty.htm>

⁶ PAHK NY Young Sook Park See <http://www.pahkny.com/>

notions of dialogue and storytelling.⁷ One could definitely claim this for ceramics in general, it has been a significant part of the history of the world.

Momentarily, I thought it might be because she is a female artist. There are many female Korean artists, but the world of ceramics, particularly in parts of Asia is still dominated by the male artist. I doubted this would have been the reasoning – feminism is out (a little bit like discussing your granddad's underwear) and the directors were probably unaware of the patriarchal structures from which most traditional ceramics emerges. However, De Zegher had curated several major exhibitions that would suggest otherwise: *An Elliptical Traverse of Twentieth-Century Art in, of, and from the Feminine* (1994–96), and two exhibitions of the most prominent female artists of the twentieth century Eva Hesse and Agnes Martin.⁸ In 2002 she wrote a paper called 'The Inside is the Outside: The Relational as the (Feminine) Space of the Radical' in it she discusses the clay works of Anna Maria Maiolino. It is evidence that she is familiar with the materialist and symbolic processes of clay and her concluding sentence clearly states her thinking on the position of women artists in the 21st century.

In the range of works presented, form is significant, though only in so far as it lies within relational and conversational models, which would undo the still overwhelmingly rigid conventions to exist in flux. If modernism was to be more and more dependent on alienation, separation, negativity, violence and destruction as strategies of the radical and inventive, the twenty-first century may very well be developing a changed criticality increasingly defined by inclusion, connectivity, attaching and constituting attitudes, and healing too. This surely results crucially, and in the greater part, from the work by women artists.⁹

⁷ Biennale of Sydney 2012 Exhibition Overview. See <http://bos18.com/exhibition-overview>

⁸ Biennale of Sydney See <http://bos18.com/exhibition-overview>

⁹ Catherine De Zegher The Inside is the Outside: The Relational as the (Feminine) Space of the Radical (2002) See http://www.rochester.edu/in_visible_culture/Issue4-IVC/de_Zegher.html#fn12

Therefore it would seem the point of the inclusion of Park's work is a feminist perspective (on the part of the curator) and the strategy of collaboration. Clay is seen as the vehicle of collaboration and the object as by-product. Park's collaborator on this project is another Korean female artist Yeesookyung. A generation younger, the artist takes the broken rejects of master potters and transforms them filling the cracks with 24 carat gold. In a similar manner to Park, she too relates the processes of ceramics to human experience – the cracks she calls wounds.¹⁰

If I take the event of the BOS as indicative of trends happening globally in Contemporary Art at this moment then attitudes and practices have truly shifted to art as predominantly post-object. This shift, coupled with the position of ceramics in popular culture, is causing changes in the way ceramics education is structured and delivered in art schools around the world.

While in Australia, numerous ceramics departments in tertiary institutions have disappeared in the last twenty years, it should be noted that in countries like Turkey and Israel student numbers in these departments are thriving. Perhaps, it is because they value the cultural heritage of its tradition and retain a tourist industry around this heritage. And the ceramics department at the Cardiff School of Art and Design in Wales has been kept while other studios have been scaled back in the aftermath of the economic cuts to British education.¹¹

The state of ceramics education has been of great concern for many within the ceramics art community in Australia, but it needs to stop waging war against itself and take a serious look at the state of play. We do not live in "la-la hippie land" where making is almost enacted as a right to self-pleasuring nor is academia some conceptual desert where object making is a sin. Practitioners and teachers need to consider how we are positioned in popular culture, within institutions and within the field of Contemporary Arts. It is no longer possible to retreat into some mythic tradition or to champion a "return to basics".

¹⁰ Yeesookyung's artist statement. See <http://bos18.com/artist?id=42>

¹¹ Laura Barnett 'British Art Schools: class dismissed'. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/2011/apr/10/art-schools-funding>

There must be a recognition that ceramics has a devalued position within contemporary life, but also a recognition that it is everywhere and that the spectrum of visibility that it inhabits actually gives it, potentially, great subversive powers. It is peripheral as a Contemporary Art form, but it is also partially this status that has seen it included in the 2012 BOS. It can appear kitsch and innocuous, but this sometimes gives it entrance to places other art forms can't go because of their overt criticality, instead its critique may "seep" from it or come as a glaring aside such as Mellor's *My Bloody Oath* in the hallways of Parliament House. In terms of the Art Market, ceramics is relatively inexpensive and therefore as Gilbert and George would agree, accessible to most. These are all positive qualities that need to be imparted and shared along with practical skills and knowledge with the next generation. Embrace the notion of a post-object practice for the time being (relational is what ceramics has always done best anyway) for what is a revolution, but to turn and face where we have begun.

Do what you do, but be mindful, when the contemporary art world engages you or you it, don't refuse to speak as if you are in a foreign country with no language, don't allow them to reclassify you as a sculptor because it seems more palatable or somehow gives you a greater status. Find new paths for yourself and your students. Don't bemoan the tsunami of cheap domestic ware from China, design and create right here in Australia enduring objects that people want to own for a lifetime and market them like a good piece of furniture. Don't sell seconds, smash them. Don't put mediocrity out there, wait until you are ready to give your audience the best that you can do and encourage your peers and students to do the same. Educate critically - hold to tradition, but also challenge it.

Its form and status may ebb and flow, but as I am hoping some of the examples I have used have made clear, ceramics is here to stay,