

CERAMICS IS DEAD.
LONG LIVE CERAMICS!

Kevin Murray

Clay is moulded to make a vessel, but the utility of the vessel lies in the space where there is nothing... Thus, taking advantage of what is, we recognize the utility of what is not. LAO TZE

The archaeology section of most museums is a reminder of the key role played by ceramics in preserving the distant past. The logic of the modern studio ceramics movement also involves capturing time, particularly the creative process. In the raku technique, the vessel bears the traces of ash and salt from the kiln, frozen in time by the firing process. Even artists from the Otis group that rebelled against ceramic form, such as Peter Voukos, sought to capture the highly gestured making process in a durable and collectible product. Like the modern art of photography, studio ceramics has sought to hold back time, freezing a moment of alchemical interaction in the fire and choreography at the bench.

In the contemporary era of 'liquid modernity',¹ the post-war anxiety about preservation of culture in museums is giving way to a more hydrological concern to channel information flows. While, last century, the challenge of digital technology was to be storing information, in the 21st century it is more about directing currents of data—the feeds, tweets, streams, Instagrams, Facebook updates, chats and snapchats that flood screens once mobile devices are turned on.

This flux now enters the very institutions once designed to contain it. In 1995, Ai Weiwei captured on camera the act of dropping an antique Han dynasty vase. Various interpretations, Weiwei hoped it would be seen as a critique rather than a celebration of the destruction of culture in contemporary China.² This destruction can be realised in more slow-moving ways. Artists like the Swiss duo Fischli and Weiss use unfired clay to depict a world that is provisional and changing. As a result, the ceramic work isn't always the same at the end as it was in the beginning of the exhibition.

In the context of the *Assembly* exhibition, I want to consider the relationship between these two worlds—the craft of product and the art of process in ceramics. Is studio ceramics a dinosaur destined for extinction with the meteor shower of process-based lifestyles? Before considering this in a local Melbourne context, it is worth looking at the broader international trend towards ceramics as process.

This trend is often presented in an elegiac tone. In the West, many of the traditional ceramic workshops have closed, often moving to the industrial centres of China and south-east Asia. After a series of financial misadventures, the legendary ceramics workshop Wedgewood was forced to go into administration. In 2009 it was taken over by the multinational professional services firm Deloitte, who inevitably transferred production to Indonesia. In response, Neil Brownsworth has made an artistic career out of laying the tradition of English industrial ceramics to rest. Elsewhere the deserted factories have been eulogised in the haunting photography of Grzegorz Stadnik, depicting the ruins of the Ksiaz Porcelain Factory in Walbrzych, Poland.

For some artists, this process of decay can have a critical purpose. The 2013 work *Shams (Sun)* by Algerian Adel Abdessemed consists of a gallery wall covered entirely in a clay relief, depicting workers on a building site, hoisting sacks of materials up ladders. Its display in Qatar evokes the toiling immigrant workers who construct these new mega-cities from their labour, for which they receive little. By the end of the installation, the clay dried and elements had fallen to the ground. Also last year, Fischli / Weiss exhibited *Suddenly this Overview* (1981–2006) at the Venice Biennale, including 200 unfired sculptures representing various kinds of human endeavour. By contrast to the monumentalisation of labour in the 20th century, these works reflect its evanescence, in which hidden toil has replaced honourable craft. Finally, the Argentinean Adrián Villar Rojas used unfired clay as a medium to produce a body of work about the tragic rock star Kurt Cobain, whose form cracks apart with time, even sprouting potatoes.

As well as drying out, unfired clay is also more vulnerable to water. The Korean artist Juree Kim has produced a striking gallery work *Evanescent Scape* (2011), in which a clay reproduction of classic architecture gradually dissolves into sludge during the course of the exhibition. From a more spiritual perspective, the Australian artist Pip McManus uses video to capture the gradual dissolution of a clay Buddha when submerged in water.

It is easy to associate this breaking, cracking or dissolving of ceramics with a type of loss—a melancholy reflection on the decline of cultural longevity. But there are ways in which it can be precisely the opposite, even a celebration. Many social rituals express an explosion of joy in wilful collective destruction of material things. Besides the breaking of plates at Greek functions, there is the smashing of the glass at Jewish weddings, the breaking of the champagne bottle at the launch of a ship and the Russian tradition of tossing vodka glasses into the fire. In George Bataille's reading, religion is 'a matter of detaching from the real order, from the poverty of *things*, and of restoring the *divine* order.'³ Despite the role of things in connecting people together, as celebrated in Actor Network Theory, objects can also get in the way. Their violent destruction can orchestrate an ecstatic solidarity.

This more positive celebration of ceramic destruction can be found in the photographs of Martin Klimas. His *Flowervase* series captures the moment when the base of a vase has been hit by a steel ball, recording an explosion of fragments in the millisecond when the top of the vase still remains temporarily intact. In the other series, *Porecelain Figurines* are dropped from three metres, the sound of their impact triggering the camera shutter which captures the moment of joyful abandon. Klimas' photos have a contagious centrifugal energy of wilful demolition.

Complicity in destruction can be a powerful experience. Until prevented by health concerns, the act of walking over the pieces in Ai Wei Wei's *Sunflower Seeds* at the Tate Modern afforded an act of collective defiance. Such complicity in destruction evokes an ethical space for ceramic art. The US artist Rocky Lewycky's series *Is it Necessary?* contained ceramic works cast from consumer products, which he proceeds to destroy. The 2012 exhibition at Craft Victoria by Jasmine Targett *Crumbling Ecologies* forced gallery visitors to walk over ceramic tiles, their destruction evoking responsibility in the decline of ceramics education. These works put the gallery visitor in the position of Ai Weiwei himself, letting our heritage slip through our fingers.

Australia's studio ceramics reflects the international movement, but with a local twist. The Japanese values that informed Australian pottery in the 1960s identified beauty with the effects of nature. As Soetsu Yanagi said, 'the world is natural'.⁴ A generation of Australian artists including Les Blakeborough, Col Levy, Jeff Mincham, Milton Moon and Gwyn Hanssen Pigott adopted the Japanese methodology to harness the beauty of the world through use of local clays, timbers and glazes. These values were articulated by the English potter and writer, Bernard Leach, who advocated the 'Sung standard' for ceramic practice, which he described as 'the subordination of all attempts at technical cleverness to straight-forward, and un-selfconscious workmanship.'⁵ Though this authenticity was presented in a gilded oriental frame, it contained a very Anglo disdain for display—never judge a book by its cover. The craftsmanship this embodied saw value in the durable quality of the work, which would outlast fashion and retain its humble functionality.

An alternative pocket of ceramics emerged in Melbourne, centred on the St Kilda studio of Stephen Benwell, which eschews both function and technical finish. David Ray takes this beyond classical reference to reflect an assembly of facets of Australian suburban culture, using the William Burroughs cut-up technique. And Vipoo Srivilasa expresses a more extroverted Thai aesthetic involving fantasy. Like the English potter Grayson Perry, this studio emphasises personal narrative rather than an authentic expression of nature through material and process.⁶

With its kilns and benches, the St Kilda studio seems a world apart from the visual arts studios elsewhere in the city. Yet there is a particular Melbourne intonation in this work that has been evident since the 1980s. The generation of artists that emerged from the beginning of Gertrude studios in Fitzroy sought to domesticate the monumental into personal space. This included Tony Clark's landscape dioramas, Stephen Bush's self-portraits in Wild West costume and Kathy Temin's feminist rendering of modernist masters in fake fur. This was articulated for the next generation by Robyn McKenzie's *Like* magazine, where ideologues such as Philip Brophy advocated a lounge room aesthetic. While predominantly the work of painters, there was a side road in ceramics. Linda Marrinon has used clay for her personable busts, and recently Angela Brennan has translated her meandering colour-scapes into the third dimension.

We see the fruits of this in the next generation of artists working with ceramics for the present exhibition. This group emerged in shows such as *Figure and Ground*, curated by Jane O'Neill and Utopian Slumps director Melissa Loughnan in 2012, which highlighted the unskilled nature of the artists involved. Rather than tightly contained in bowls, the works drooped, oozed and exploded clay. Solo shows by Brendan Huntley and Rhys Lee involved poignant human faces with an effortless puncturing of clay.

1. Zygmund Bauman, 2000. *Liquid modernity*. Polity Press ; Blackwell, Cambridge, UK; Malden, MA.
2. The unintended readings of this work were felt recently when a visitor to Perez Art Museum, Maximo Camino, dropped one of Ai Weiwei's painted vases on the floor.
3. Georges Bataille, 1988. *The accursed share: an essay on general economy*. Zone Books, New York. (orig. 1967), p. 7
4. Soetsu Yanagi, 1989. *The Unknown Craftsman: A Japanese Insight Into Beauty* (trans. Bernard Leach) Tokyo: Kodansha International, (orig. 1931), p. 101
5. Bernard Leach, 1940. *A Potter's Book* London: Faber, p. 6n
6. A link between these two schools of Australian ceramics can be found in the work of Jane Sawyer, who worked in a Japanese pottery yet came out with a distinctly original methodology of 'slow clay', where the results of the wheel retained the impressions of the hand.

The artists working in clay for *Assembly* follow highly individualised paths. The works by Katie Lee, Sanné Mestrom, Jake Walker and Sarah crowEST develop original methodologies for combining form and material. Otherwise, Stephen Ralph and Richard Grigg engage with a figurative style that is more evocative of the Melbourne domestic school. And Andrew McQualter's work stands apart for its relational process – though using clay, it is more an act of drawing than throwing, bringing a fresh dialogical dimension to the ceramic medium.

These works emerge in the institutional framework of the Margaret Lawrence bequest to the Victorian College of Arts. A keen collector of ceramics, her generous gift to the art school included her extensive collection, ironically around same the time that the college stopped offering ceramics in its undergraduate course. It is likely that this bequest helped bolster the retention of the facilities for ceramic production, overseen by sculptor Mark Stoner, even if they weren't being used for teaching. Some interesting developments have ensued. Zoe Churchill strayed into the kiln room and developed a punk ceramics, using stencils on trays moulded on takeaway containers. She has since taken the unique position as a ceramic dramaturge, coaching Aboriginal actors on the use of clay on stage for the production of *Ngapartji Ngapartji*. Meanwhile, Tina Lee has been witness to the collection as an expression of ceramic art.

To what extent can we say there is continuity between the art and craft of ceramics in Melbourne? There are some clear divergences. Though ceramic craft embraces the handmade, it still retains the story of its tradition. Even the dappled lumpy works of trained ceramicist Robyn Phelan allude to the long history of Chinese porcelain. By contrast, artists using clay seek to be free of medium-specific references in an attempt to embrace the immediate, adopting a discipline of creative freedom.

The default narrative here is art's transcendence of craft. This follows the conceptual turn which rendered technique of little value. As reflected in the recent critiques of studio ceramics by US writers Glenn Adamson and Garth Clark, the anxiety to reproduce a form of visual arts within the craft medium has entailed the denial of its dimension in design, thus losing its living connection to everyday life. The production of collectable works limits the movement to the accumulation of timeless fired objects. But as we've seen, visual artists have brought the bull into the china shop in a way that can seem to reflect the temporal dimension of clay—its progress from mud to shard. Despite the destruction, this could be seen an inevitable liberation of ceramics from its commodification as a timeless collectible art work.

Nonetheless, it could be argued that the value of process-based art ceramics comes partly from the traditions that it transgresses. The evidence of hand could be even more obvious in a medium like papier-mâché, but this medium does not inherit a history of mastery. Ceramics contains within it the memory of exacting techniques honed by craftspersons over millennia. Our daring disregard for this skill bites more than it would for the use of a more ephemeral medium, just as dropping a Han dynasty vase has more impact than one purchased from IKEA.

Given this, we can expect to see cyclical returns to craftsmanship, if only in order to renew the value of its subsequent transgression. In Melbourne, this has already been established with the periodic revivals of painting as skill, featuring artists like Louise Hearman and celebrated in recent years through exhibitions at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Skill and technique will return as an exceptional capacity to speak with fluency the language of clay, building up the authority of ceramics as a medium to be one day again overturned. All the more reason to keep the kilns at the VCA.

Ceramics is dead, long live ceramics.

Dr Kevin Murray is an independent writer and curator, Adjunct Professor at RMIT and Research Fellow at University of Melbourne.