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Jeff Mincham

Epiphany: a flash of deep recognition, a rare moment of profound personal insight, a realization that washes over you, catching your breath away.

The moment of epiphany occurs differently for every person. For some it is the spectacular mountaintop experience, for others a profound realisation of a personal truth during a time of deep contemplation. For Jeff Mincham it occurred while stopped at traffic lights.

As he had for the past 22 years, Mincham was spending the day at a local high school demonstrating the raku process with a few pots that he had grabbed hurriedly from around his studio that morning. Surrounded by curious students he was paying scant attention to the firing process as he demonstrated his techniques. 'I was sticking glazes on this bowl to show the boys what it would do' he recalls 'I wasn't paying the least bit of attention. I wasn't carefully timing, I wasn't checking in the kiln to see whether it had melted, I wasn't taking it out very carefully and putting it in just the right spot.'¹ As each demonstration finished the fired pots were carelessly placed in the grass where they remained for the rest of the day while he continued his teaching and demonstrating. Driving home that evening one of the pots, a raku tea bowl, was rolling around rather precariously on the passenger's seat. While stopped at traffic lights Mincham picked up the bowl, intending to put it somewhere a little more secure. As he rather absently brushed some ash and grass off the pot his breath caught in his throat as realisation dawned. As soon as the lights changed he pulled over to the side of the road and slowly turned the tea bowl in his hands as the full impact of its beauty dawned on him. At this moment of personal and artistic epiphany, Mincham recalls, his first, disbelieving thought was "where the f###k did that come from!"²

Mincham's studio sits high in the leafy Adelaide Hills, about 30 minutes from the centre of town. The old timber studio is surrounded by the accumulation of over 30 years of pottery production – shards, rejects, bits of equipment, pots too interesting to discard but not quite perfect enough for the galleries. Inside are kilns, pottery wheels, brushes and tools of every description and vintage jostling for space with works in progress, a wood stove and a collection of sailing paraphernalia.

Mincham sits by his pottery wheel, relaxed and friendly. On the wooden bench beside him sits a small, dark, clay box with a handcrafted wooden lid which contains, I am told, the pot he loved so much that he kept it for himself. He is highly articulate, engaged, intense. It is quickly apparent that his art is not a set of abstract propositions or interesting theories. It is his driving force, a powerfully held conviction that goes to the very heart of his humanity. We talk of belonging and of home, of faded heroes and steadfast friends, of self-doubts and inspiration. He gestures to the large, clay-spattered window behind him. Breath taking views tumble downwards into a deep, timbered valley before climbing up steep, distant slopes grey green with silver trunked eucalyptus.

As far as the eye can see the hills fold into the smoky distance. 'Look out there and tell me you don't want to be an artist' he laughs. 'Magnificent clouds appear this time every year,

the rainbows hanging across that valley like a gigantic handle. It makes you want to do something, makes you want to say something.'³

However, just as you are about to be entirely seduced by the magical beauty of the unfolding landscape, you are jolted back to a frightening reality of the Australian bush. A vast, savage, blackened scar punctuates the valley— a reminder of bushfires that just months before had roared terrifyingly close to home and studio. Mincham reflects on the experience. 'Something changed, it completely cemented my relationship with this place, re-engaged me in a way that made me see it again, differently, more intensely.'⁴

This is an oft-recurring theme in both the life and art of Jeff Mincham. A profound sense of connectedness, an almost visceral relationship to the 'places' in his life, is the wellspring of his artistic imagery and personal narratives. It is this deeply emotional sense of belonging which finds its expression in the powerfully evocative ceramic creations of this complex man.

I ask about those moments of 'lostness', of uncertain doubt that are often the recurring companions of the creative spirit. What does he do, where does he go to restore his artistic equilibrium? The answer is simple. 'Home. Back to the landscape of my childhood. I go once or twice a year. There is a particularly subtle and graceful fall of the land, its shape and its form, it looks out across the lake, glittering in the distance. I can turn around one way and look back to where my grandfather's farm once was and I can look out (the other way) and see where my father's farm was. It was the entire world I knew until I was twenty.' He pauses reflectively. 'Sometimes I have gone (back) there and not felt much better. But over a day or two it will put things back in my head, you feel a great inner sigh, a recognition of what you are and where you are. As long as this is here somehow I will always find it, I'll get back.'⁴

It is a surprisingly candid insight into one of Australia's most formidable ceramic artists. Mincham's work is represented in dozens of major collections. He has been involved in almost two hundred exhibitions, both in Australia and internationally as well as having the rare distinction of being one of only two ceramic artists ever to be awarded the title of 'Living Treasure: Master of Australian Crafts' for a lifetime of contribution to the arts in Australia.⁵

Our conversation turns back to the small, dark box at his elbow. 'This is my experience with raku' he says quietly. 'This is my understanding of a set of aesthetic ideas which underpin everything I do. The hard part of this game,' he continues 'is to do what you have to do to survive in your studio and in your life and in society and keep you're own council, hold your act together, because you have got plenty of pressures in society to corrupt you.' He touches the lid gently. 'This piece holds me together.'⁶

Mincham lifts the lid. 'In here is a raku tea bowl' he says quietly, almost to himself, as he removes the pot. 'It has every attribute of the wabi aesthetic. It is casual, it is spontaneous, it is richly endowed with flecks of colour and movement, you move from the outside to the inside and it is like you have entered another world altogether. There are little blushes of pink and blue, there are these spectacular flashes like you might find on the wing of a moth.'⁷ His eyes have not left the piece as he turns it slowly in his hands, as if seeing it for the first time. 'The tea bowl has become a thing for me. It is (my) pathway to understanding a set of aesthetics ideas that the Japanese came up with 400

years ago. They were on the edge of abstraction, they grasped the intense experience between the emotional nature of the human being and the world of nature itself, how the two could connect and create a dynamic of mind that was intensely pleasurable and deeply important to your humanity. The tea bowl is my pathway into that. When I get lost I go back to the tea bowl.⁸

'In any one year only eight or nine will ever leave this workshop. I don't want to mess this up. This is not production. I'm not going to crank this stuff out – it's too important. I hope one day long after I'm gone these things will be terribly valuable. People own these things with a real passion.'⁹ The irony is that not a single one of Jeff Mincham's tea bowls is in a public collection. 'I have hundreds of pieces in public collections'¹⁰ he shrugs, a little bemused.

The small black-and-cream tea bowl is returned to its box, the wooden lid carefully replaced. What is contained in that small, dark clay box is, for Jeff Mincham, far more than a fortuitous moment of serendipitous ceramic magic. It is his touchstone, his muse. He nods in agreement at the suggestion. 'It is one of those core things that is your safe ground, it's your castle keep. This is where you keep all the things that maintain you, maintain the vitality of your intellect and your passion.'¹¹ 'I made it and it happened, I have some responsibility for it. But there were forces at work way beyond me that made this bowl.'¹²

1. Jeff Mincham, Recorded Interview, 16 July 2013
2. Ibid
3. Ibid
4. Ibid
5. Osborne, Margot, Jeff Mincham Ceramics, 1st Edition Living Treasures... Masters of Australian Craft, Craftsman House Publishers 2009
6. Jeff Mincham, Recorded Interview, 16 July 2013
7. Ibid
8. Ibid
9. Ibid
10. Ibid
11. Ibid
12. Ibid