



# Philip Cornelius (1934–2015)

**P**HILIP CORNELIUS WAS BORN IN SAN BERNARDINO, California, and spent his youth among the orange groves east of Los Angeles. He showed an early interest in art during his adolescence, yet his choice of study at San Jose State University was biology. He was drafted into the US Army before graduation and was stationed in Europe where he spent his leisure time visiting museums and art galleries, reaffirming his interest in art. Back in the US he finished his studies in 1960 with a Bachelor of Arts in Life Science. During his last year at San Jose State, he took a ceramics class with Herbert Sanders and found clay interesting and challenging. His interest in art and his encounter with clay led him to enrol at Claremont Graduate School to study ceramics under Paul Soldner. He earned a Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics and Drawing in 1965. That same year, he started his teaching career at Pasadena City College from which he retired some 40 years later.

I met Philip in the mid 1980s at John Wilson's Lakeside Studios. We were both at Lakeside during the summer of 1988 and, through Lakeside's Exchange Program Wilson arranged for us to travel to the USSR as guests of the Soviet Artist Union. I got to know Phil on that trip and more so during my sabbatical replacement positions at Claremont Graduate School in 1988 and Pasadena City College in 1993–1994. I had the added pleasure of getting to know him and his work early on through three month-long symposiums that we attended together in Lithuania. For nearly 30 years, I gained the utmost respect for Phil as a caring teacher and as an extraordinary and remarkable artist.

As a teacher, Phil was mentor to an amazing group

of artists, ranging from beginners who went on and established themselves in the field to mature artists with graduate degrees. He organised an efficient, workable studio that functioned like clockwork and had the technical capability to engage any part of the ceramics spectrum. His teaching style can best be defined by his students' comments:

"The man is insane. Brilliant, coherent but does not suffer fools."

"Phil is always available for discussion, and when he seems to drone, remember there is always a thread and a context for you to follow."

"Chew you up, spit you out, light your ass on fire."

And, from a colleague at Pasadena City College, "he was a straight shooter."

As an artist, Phil had an amazing vocabulary of skills in working with the clay and addressing the surface in a commanding manner. Within a few years of his degree he was establishing his presence within California through the Crocker Museum's *California Crafts* competitions and nationally through the Everson Museum's *Ceramic National*. I recall his pots from the late 1960s and early 1970s; large bulbous jars with drawings in glaze referencing mythic winged idols and icons. His interests in the field were wide-spread, ranging from prospecting and using local materials and clays, to woodfired tea bowls, which he called bourbon bowls, to large stoneware platters decorated with gecko imagery, to casual pottery perhaps influenced by a 1977 visit to Japan and Korea.

Cornelius is of course best known for 'thin-ware' and 'charcoal firing'. He developed the thin-ware

## *A Remembrance by Rimas VisGirda*



technology from noticing that, after wire cutting a large platter, there was a thin layer of clay remaining on the bat. With that observation, he developed a technology of creating 1/16 inch thick 'slabs' of porcelain and using them to handbuild forms. The resulting objects, often-abstracted teapots, were super-light and fragile while green yet amazingly strong when fired to maturity. Phil also developed a dynamic high temperature firing technique whereby crushed, chunky charcoal is introduced in and around the ware at the height of the firing. The resulting colours and fluxed surfaces have an earthy organic, rough, unsophisticated and rustic appearance. Charcoal fired thin-ware produces the ultimate of visual contrasts, the sophistication and delicacy of porcelain and the raw rugged effect of the charcoal.

Philip Cornelius leaves an international trail with travels to Japan, Korea, Taiwan, China, France, England, Russia, Lithuania, Peru, Australia, Denmark, Hungary, Italy, Poland and Switzerland. His work can be found in many prestigious museum collections including The Smithsonian Institution, Everson Museum, Arizona State University, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Victoria and Albert Museum, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, French National Collection, Taipei Fine Art Museum and The Racine Art Museum to name a few. He has been a visiting artist at Sevres Manufacture in France, Panevezys International Symposium in Lithuania, Sculpt Clay Gulgong in Australia, 1st Yixing Symposium in China, Guldagergaard Ceramics Research Center in Denmark, International

*Facing Page: Cornelius with handbuilt charcoal fired work.*

*Above: Thin-ware Teapot. 1995.*

*Below: Cornelius in Lithuania with international symposium group. 1992.*



Ceramics Studio in Hungary and Porcelain Another Way Symposium in Poland. Nationally he is the recipient of two National Endowment for the Arts Fellowships among awards and honours to numerous to list.

A Celebration of Life was hosted by the Xiem Clay Center in Pasadena on 1 August, 2015. Philip Cornelius is survived by his two sons, Charley and Chad and their families.

He will be sorely missed.

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