

# **New Ceramics**

## **The International Ceramics Magazine**

**Issue 3/2023 May**

**Wandering journeyman, seasoned ceramicist (English)**

**Wandergesellen, gestandenen Keramiker (Deutsch)**

Terry Davies (Shrewsbury, 1961) is every bit an adventurer as he is a ceramic artist. Hearing him recount his life story and experiences – about his exploits on a tiny isolated island on the Dorset coast, living hand to mouth throwing pots in Colombia, odd-jobbing his way from one studio to another around Australia and New Zealand, where his talents were in high demand, and diving for sunken ceramic treasures in the Philippines – you could easily be under the illusion that you were listening to the intrepid adventures of a nineteenth century explorer. It would take a book-length biography to do real justice to this restless Englishman, who spent a large portion of his early career as a wandering journeyman before actually 'settling down' in the idyllic landscape of Tuscany. Besides being an adventurer at heart, Davies is also a multifaceted artist who literally lives and breathes ceramics.

Hardly surprising then to learn that Davies' first memory of ceramics was as a young boy. He recalls visiting Jersey Pottery, a popular tourist attraction in its day, during a family holiday and being mesmerised by the whole atmosphere of what he witnessed there. But it was through the foresight of his perceptive mother – herself a creative enamel craftswoman who was keen to feed his enthusiasm – that he joined a local workshop aimed at introducing youngsters to various arts and crafts. So at the tender age of ten, Davies was already discovering the rudimentary skills of handling and working with clay. He enjoyed it so much that he remained there, throwing pots and assisting in the workshop, during all his free time. The seed had been sown and it was the first step on the road to a long career in ceramics.

Natural talent alone, however, would not be enough and on leaving school a period of uncertainty and frustration followed. Lacking the formal qualifications needed for an art school education he was nevertheless helped on his way by Derek Emms, who ran the ceramics department at North Staffordshire Polytechnic. Emms put the young man in touch with a local stoneware pottery where he would spend the next few years learning the ropes, mastering the techniques of throwing and the disciplines and routines of workshop life that would stand him in good stead for the rest of his career. After working in a number of other small-scale potteries, he received a grant from the Welsh Crafts Council to set up his first studio off the beaten track in mid Wales. It was his first real taste of independency. But he also quickly came to realise that making ends meet as a professional potter was extremely hard graft, particularly during the austere economic climate of the day. Such harsh realities were also evident when it came to breaking into the rather insulated environment of studio ceramics, especially when he visited galleries to discuss the possibility of selling or exhibiting

his work. But he is also adamant that such experiences went some way to help him build resilience, perseverance and self-belief, as well as convincing him to pursue a more 'natural approach' in his work.

It was probably during his eighteen-month stay as sole inhabitant on Green Island on the south coast of England that really kick-started his career in ceramics. He arrived there to run the studio set up by Guy Sydenham of Poole Pottery fame. Without mains electricity, using a handmade kick wheel and hand-crafted tools, he learned from notes how to operate the cumbersome kerosene-fired kiln, drip-feeding it with seawater to vapour-glaze his work made from the Dorset blue clay he dug from the beach. It was a wonderful experience and a huge learning curve for him as a studio potter and where he says he learned to make pots with spirit. It was also during this period of intense productivity that he was invited to exhibit some of his salt-glazed work together with Mick Casson and Walter Keeler at Barbara Ling's influential Candover Gallery in Hampshire. From Green Island, Davies travelled to Greece and from there to La Borne, where he spent a productive year before moving back to England to set up his studio in Stapehill Abbey, a successful project which he ran for three years. With the money he saved, however, there was no taming his adventurous spirit and he decided to hit the road again, first to South America for a year, studying pre-Colombian ceramics, and from there to an extended stay freewheeling around Australia and New Zealand. Using the earnings he made throwing pots, he travelled on to the Indonesian archipelago, visiting the women potters of Lombok and studying closely their techniques and traditional firing methods, before moving on to the Philippines, Borneo, Malaysia and Thailand.

After a three-year round trip, Davies returned to Europe and took up an opportunity offered at the *La Meridiana* ceramic school in the heart of Tuscany, a region where he would ultimately remain and make his home for the coming decades. It is here where he believes he has developed his true artistic temperament, culminating in what has become his signature aesthetic based on organic abstraction, textured earthy vessels founded on Anglo-Asian traditional forms. Despite his masterly throwing skills, Davies has opted to throw caution to the wind by literally pushing the boundaries of the clay body to its limits. He has adopted and personalised a technique that he first observed during his time in La Borne from the Korean ceramic artist Seung-Ho Yang. For Davies, the process used in producing these distinctive surfaces involves coaxing a thrown vessel coated with layers of dry powdered clay into the desired shape while maintaining structural integrity. An extremely tactile procedure. He adds thicker lumps of clay and the occasional impression of a shell or thumbprint to accentuate the desired effect, but also to leave behind a trace of the person who made it. He is also not averse to using a porcupine quill to score the vessel's skin in a natural fluid movement, enabling the vessel to breathe and mirror the rhythms of nature. A naked flame and strong reductive firings are essential to provide his warm tones. Although to achieve his unique colour range of ochre hues, russet browns and especially burnt sienna pigments, Davies incorporates iron-rich sand he collects from the nearby Gulf of Baratti, once the site of Etruscan foundries, and uses a coating of the same Dorset ball clay he has been fortunate enough to procure. Tiny rivulets of glaze occasionally ooze along the surface fissures, providing the promise of sustenance to this primordial landscape. Now and then a porcelain inclusion breaks through the surface from below. And to contrast with the austerity of the exterior, the cool relief of ash glazes coat the walls of the cavernous interior, often revealing a deep pool of emerald green at the bottom, like a hidden oasis. In essence, therefore, his work has a more geological foundation than biological aspirations, even though the form is quintessentially organic in its expression. It is also impossible to ignore a direct link, whether

premeditated or unintentional, to our prevailing concerns regarding the environment and the ongoing climate crisis. Indeed, such vulnerabilities are also reflected in his complementary series of work labelled 'icescape' vessels, smaller in scope, yet equally expressive, forming an interesting juxtaposition to his more recognisable work.

Davies might be a seasoned traveller, but paradoxically he is also someone with his feet planted firmly on the ground. He has a sincere sense of pride in the traditions of the ceramic roots he has inherited and continues to develop. But he has also become deeply attached to his adopted homeland and locality. Not only as a source of inspiration and for raw materials but also for promoting greater interest in pottery through local ceramics associations, workshops and educational programmes, as well as engaging with the community through his dramatic alternative kiln-building and firing performances, a spectacle not to be missed. That said, it would be impossible to tie down this charismatic personality for long and he is often found on the road throughout the year, participating in ceramic fairs and holding demonstrations around Europe, engaging with the public and fellow ceramicists with equal enthusiasm. It is evidently an inherent feature of his life he cannot do without.

Neale Williams