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Chris Weaver Teapots and More

Article by Moyra Elliott



Teaset. Stoneware, laminated wood. 1993.

THE TEAPOT IS BLACK – A SEMI-MATT, RICH IRON black that takes on an edgy gleam where an incised spiral sweeps dynamically up and around the form echoing the making process – for this is a wheel-thrown teapot despite its oval configuration. The spiral leads the eye upwards as does the silhouette – wide at the base, the tapering sweep of clay is continued up to the smoothness of the solid, curved, wooden handle that loops over and is anchored by small matching pegs. The spout is architecturally angled and perfectly aligned with the flat top – you just know that it wouldn't dare drip. It is sturdy, solid and oddly comforting. That comfort largely coming from the realisation that here is an entirely efficient implement.

The maker, Chris Weaver, based the concept on his great-grandmother's flat-irons – remarkably heavy, pointy-ended, oval cast iron numbers that were

heated on the kitchen coal range and which crushed and pressed Victorian starched cottons into submission while maintaining a cool hand, for the users, with the wooden handles. Victorian households usually kept several, replacing them on to the stove top once they had cooled and a fresh one taken up. Weaver thought them comfortable and well balanced and the functionality appealed to his design sense.

A television arts program called the teapot 'a masterpiece... and one of the great icons of New Zealand design – a classic that references our colonial past'. For Weaver this has meant that he has had great difficulty supplying all the folk who somehow tracked him down in his fairly remote studio, in former gold mining country on the South Island's West Coast, to request 'just one more.' Now, realising that these demands are restricting more interesting directions he has decided it is time to move on.



Teapot. Porcelainous stoneware. 1998. 12 x 14 x 17 cm.

A graduate of Otago Polytechnic Fine and Applied Arts course, with an extra year in ceramic design, Weaver has, in the 10 years since he made that first iron-inspired teapot, established himself as New Zealand's most successful maker of soundly and strongly designed functional ware. Success has come in the form of many awards – he has won something major in most competitions – sometimes more than once. While the accolades have been a great boost – psychologically as well as financially, his satisfaction has come from his development of inventive and appropriately functional tableware.

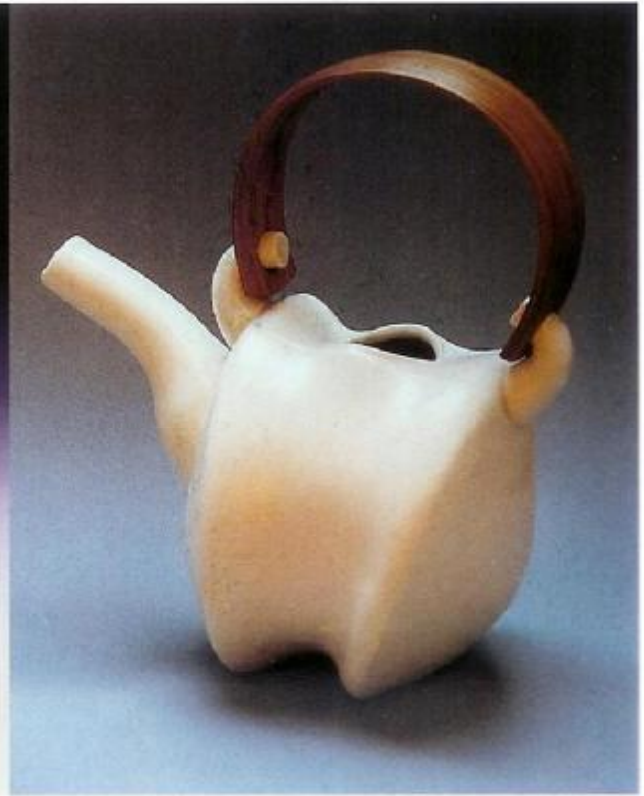
The flat-iron teapot gave rise to a family of jugs and mugs, serving dishes and variations on the teapot theme which all used the oval format and many the wooden handles and pegs. He played with variables like rocking bases and raised feet – which softened the metal references. He pierced the clay handles – which

magnified them. His eye turned to other metal archetypal forms and another series of serving dishes cited the elegance of ancient Chinese bronze vessels and the tall stilted legs, again in oiled wood, elevate these to celebratory status for dinner party rituals.

Such signature works have not happened overnight but have evolved, over time, from a considered design process that solves many of the problems before committing clay to the wheel-head yet leaves elements open for exploration during making. Towards this end he has made for himself a set of handsome tools from driftwood, washed ashore on the turbulent coast near his home. Sea bleached colours cover a range of softly greyed browns and creams that display streaks of grain and the occasional knot. Ribs and scribes, brushes and even knives and turning tools have all been carefully fashioned. Their handles, in places swollen and fat, in others slender and



Teapot. 2001. Stoneware. 17.5 x 15 x 9.5 cm.



Pouring pot. 2002. Porcelain, laminated wood. 17 x 15 x 9 cm.

curved, are smoothly finished offering the eye a haptic knowing of the pleasure there would be in their use.

Weaver extends this satisfaction in making to the formation of the handles for his teapots. The round early handles were laminated from twelve strips and clamped to bend. The strips all came from the same piece of timber and were glued together in order so that the grain continued; this gave the appearance of being steam-bent from one piece, like the handles on the irons. They were dried then routed for a round profile and sanded to finish. Small pegs that maintained the attachment within the clay sockets anchored them. A labour-intensive process but the only way Weaver could effect the outcome he wanted.

Later teapots have flat handles which are laminated and sprung, some even inlaid with differently coloured wood. Their inherent tension holds them in place against incorporated clay projections.

This latter development was simpler, and a more elegant solution to the constantly intriguing and evolving problem-solving that is entailed when teapot making. Weaver posits a willingness to farm out tasks such as handle-making but his satisfaction in process and in simply making something work well, plus a streak of perfectionism, backs up his assertion that he just cannot find anyone to make them as he would wish. He learnt the basics from a furniture-making friend living near-by, and remains self-sufficient.

Weaver has now left metal forms, as primary inspiration, far behind. Instead, he embarked upon an

exploration of other properties he enjoys in clay – its impressionability, pliability, malleability... all those plastic characteristics that intrigue and appeal to makers in the first place – before the intellect takes over. Keeping within the disciplines of functional ware, Weaver has developed, in steady increments, an entirely new cluster of pieces.

On the way he revelled in sessions of sophisticated play as pieces were forming and still on the wheel-head. Lengthening, widening, extending and expanding, a slice with a rib here, a flick up from the base with a scribe there, turn the freshly thrown pot on its side and re-cut the back with twisted wire, stretch and fold, and then partly unfold. But nuance rather than statement while all the time watching carefully for the possibilities as they evidence and for that point where the exploration has to pause or be mute. Further refinements once the clay has firmed a little, for crisper lines and sharper edges. Again, being vigilant to just what is happening and using experience and instinct to judge what further changes might be wrought by the heat of the kiln.

The new work has an immediacy that was not there in the metal form-based pieces. Yet they retain vestigial traces of those early developments in the way the laminated handles are attached and in some of the appendices such as the spouts. But these works push through to a softness of surface; a freshness and energy that was not in such evidence before. I can only liken them to Takeshi Yasuda's new work.



Left: *Pouring Pot*, 18 x 16 x 10 cm. Right: *Sauce pot*, 2003, 12 x 14 x 9 cm.

While Weaver's work manifests differently from Yasuda's, there are cross-links where there is such apparent revelry in process and delight in boundary stretching that has resulted in an entirely new body of work which relates to what has gone before but is, when thought about, a unique approach with no precedents.

Weaver takes the pouring vessel form and literally turns it on its side so that the exaggerated throwing corrugations produce something akin to an unfolding concertina and the sprung handle seems to encourage further outward thrust through the tensions evident across the mid-section. It is almost a surprise to touch and find the body hard rather than still springy.

There are others like those puffy-plump Oriental dumplings – fat and bulgy with smaller creased dumplings as lids and sexy side handles. The expectation of red bean paste inside is almost overwhelming. But they function best for green tea. As always, decoration is restricted to a choice of glaze that complements the surface quietly while it highlights the defining details. Apart from the black there is an occidental shino, a stone-like warm-white, salted cobalt or iron slips. Nothing intemperate to detract from the form.

So Weaver continues, challenging himself at intervals so that his attitude remains fresh and the interest factor is kept high. Setting up problems and then finding a solution, both practical and elegant, one discovery setting up a channel of engagement for the next.



Oil and Soy Sauce pots, 1999, 13 x 13.5 x 5 and 15 x 11 cm. Porcelain stoneware.

He travels regularly giving workshops, relishing the change from the isolation of the South Island's moody west coast where thick mists swirl in between the protective hills, and headlands are lashed by great rolling waves that have had an uninterrupted run from deep in the Southern Ocean. He welcomes the break but returns with much appreciation to his quiet studio and warming pot-belly stove, protected by enclosing bush and overhanging Blackwood trees. Here he can listen to his favourite Norwegian electronic jazz music and reflect on the next developments in the series.

Moyra Elliott is a maker, writer and curator based in Auckland. She is currently working on a history of the Anglo-Oriental clay movement in New Zealand.