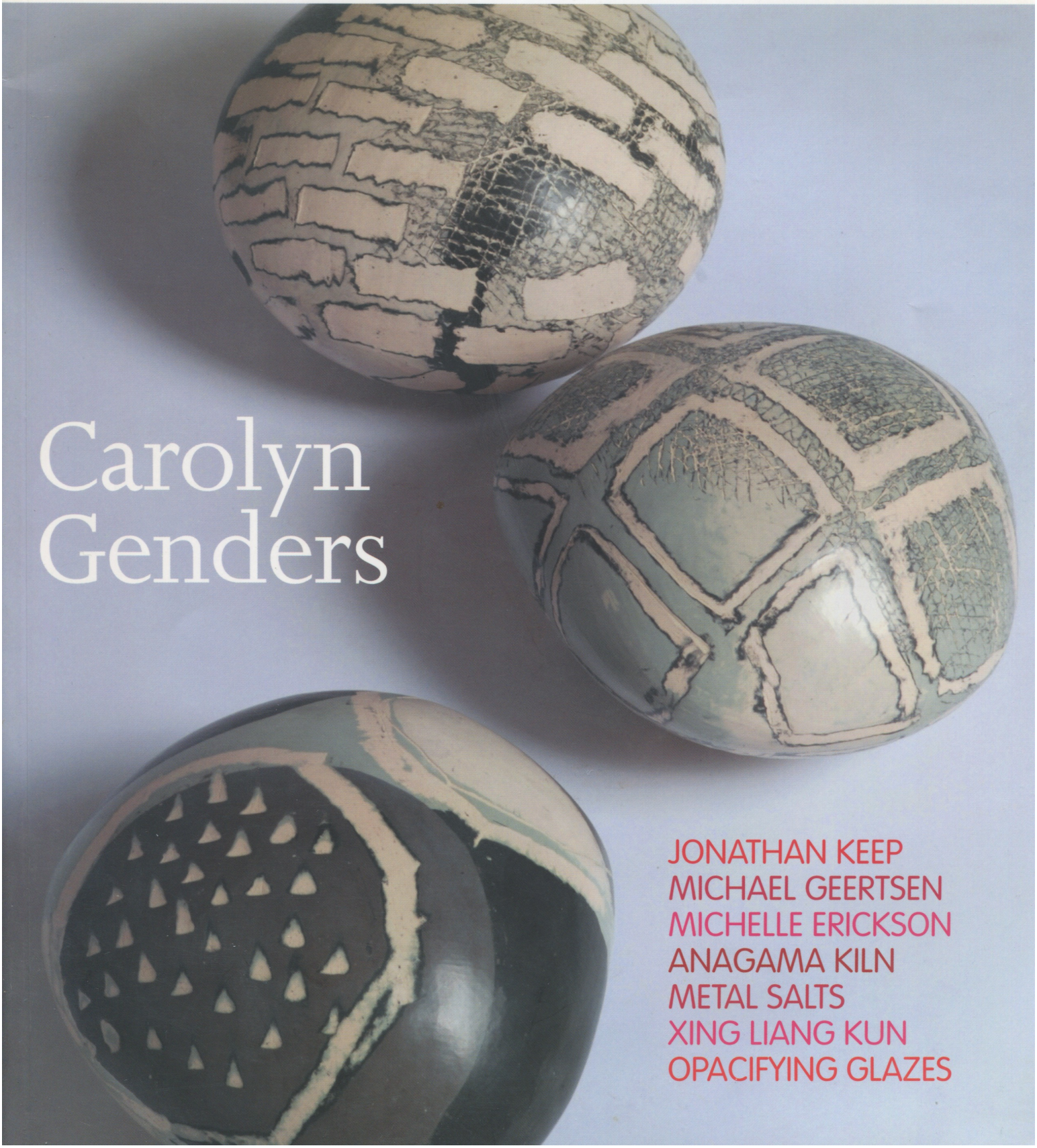
CERAMIC REVIEW

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Carolyn Genders

JONATHAN KEEP
MICHAEL GEERTSEN
MICHELLE ERICKSON
ANAGAMA KILN
METAL SALTS
XING LIANG KUN
OPACIFYING GLAZES

1 *Downlands Open Vessel*, 2007, H20cm **2** *Hues of Grey Round Vessels*, 2007, H17cm max **3** *Downlands Cobalt Deep Rocking Bowl*, 2007, H12cm **4** *Downlands Tall Open Vessel*, 2007, H43cm

Topographies

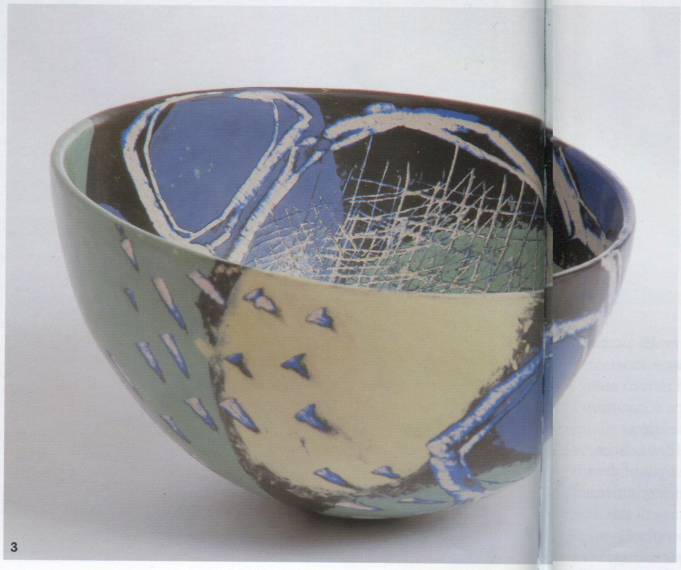
Contrasting landscapes are a source of inspiration for Carolyn Genders's bold vessels. *Jenny Whitmore* reports.

Carolyn Genders's studio is situated in the Sussex Weald between the edge of Ashdown Forest and the more distant South Downs. There is a harmony and intimacy in the patchwork of woods and fields in the Weald which contrast strongly with the disturbing remoteness and uneasy openness of the Forest. Over all loom the contours of the South Downs, Kipling's 'blunt, bow-headed whale-backed Downs'. Genders has now lived and worked for eight years at this crossroads of landscapes and it is from these that she draws the inspiration for her work. The hugely varied topographies combine with perfect balance to give her work a boldness and fullness to excite the imagination of the onlooker.

As collectors of ceramics – and having purchased our very first pot from her many years ago – we have followed the development of Genders' work with close interest. The pot was standing on a plinth in a garden and we suddenly came upon it, immediately feeling a thrill at its bold and rounded shape and narrowing neck. The swirling pattern in dusty pink and blue was the perfect surface decoration for the form. At that point we knew nothing of Genders's work and nothing about her sources of inspiration, so the pot was the pot and had to stand or fall on its own merits. We bought it and it continues to excite us to this day.


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NATURE Since then her work has changed, her ideas have evolved. In early work the vessel form served as a three-dimensional canvas but in her more recent work her approach is quite different. It is no longer a matter of decorating a vessel she has made with a pattern, treating the process as two separate activities, but rather a matter of marrying form and surface so that they become one indivisible unity, neither just vessel nor just surface but a single whole.

Today it is only by creating vessels where the form is inseparable from the surface that Genders can, with any certitude, convey the nuance of shape, balance and mass of the landscape to which she is responding or create the mood, atmosphere and feeling that she experiences when she is part of that landscape. It is because of these convictions that a subtle but important change in her work has come about. Her latest pieces have an even greater integrity and depth of perception which mark them out from earlier work.

To appreciate this change it is important to understand how the ceramist herself views her relationship to nature. Above all, it is the three-dimensional quality of the landscape that really seizes her imagination and to which she responds immediately. For some artists landscape is about its composition but for Genders it is primarily a physical engagement with the shapes and forms and the smaller details such as pebbles, rocks and stones. The ploughed fields on the Downs, the shadows of the swiftly moving clouds as they pass across the hills, serve to emphasise the forms still further. Genders has described sitting among the hills as being comparable to sitting surrounded by a Henry Moore sculpture.

In the same way that we cannot separate the physical bulk of the hills from the earth that covers them, be it the lush green grass of spring or the silvery white of the dew-covered grass in the early morning, so it is for Genders that form alone is not enough to convey her encounters with nature and the way she feels part of the landscape. The forms now have surface treatments that carry the work further and make it bear even greater meaning. The surface marks and colour – the layered effect of the burnished slip, the strong marks drawn across the surface – enable her to enhance still further the three-dimensional quality of her work. All these draw viewers back to the work; lead them to ponder it anew as a whole and in detail.

In her sketchbooks are strong, vigorous drawings of the Downs and downland landscape; there are images of pebbles and rocks of all shapes and forms and a myriad of other objects. They highlight texture, structure, shape, form and pattern. It is not difficult to understand how these drawings, even at an unconscious level, contribute to the eventual creation of a vessel. The experiences that Genders undergoes when drawing in the countryside are internalised rather than intellectualised by the ceramist. The shapes, colours and,



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above all, the mood are absorbed; they lie dormant; there is a process of unconscious germination and they re-emerge in the course of the long process of the making of the vessel.

MAKING It is wholly understandable that her preferred technique is coiling, for coiling enables her to continue the progression from the starting point of looking at and living in landscapes and skies to the ultimate expression of those natural influences in shaping the clay. For her the creative path is unbroken. We can see where it begins and where it ends, even though for stretches it disappears from view only to reappear later in a more developed form. The very act of coiling reflects exactly that continuous path, the single, unending thread of clay from which the shape of the vessel emerges. What she has is an idea, a feeling; the process of coiling enables her to give those imprecise beginnings steadily increasing substance and form. Coiling is quiet and peaceful, which allows the absorbed influences to find full and harmonious expression at the moment of that externalisation.

The idea that leads to the creation of a vessel is often multi-faceted, so that its full expression requires not a single piece but a series whose single origin is plain but which will permit, and indeed often demand, subtle variations of shape, texture and surface decoration.

Creating a series enables Genders to develop and sustain a rhythm which helps keep fresh the original idea until it has been fully expressed. Thus it is that she often works for a length of time on similarly shaped vessels but they can turn out to be very different as she plays with depth of colour and different markings in the decoration. By a dramatic use of black she can place emphasis on a particular characteristic of a shape but by using softer colours on a similar shape she can, yet again, change the way the viewer perceives the vessel.

The insides of her vessels are as important to her as the outsides. Occasionally a pale coloured work will have a vivid colour on the inside: a playful contrast. Often she will build up layers of colour on which she will make marks of varying degrees of depth, scratching through layers of slip to the original clay and frequently she will burnish the colours to produce a silky surface. For Genders working with clay is not enough. She seeks to achieve more than just a satisfying shape. Her vessels are the embodiment of ideas as they emerge from her creative memory. Texture, form, colour all have their part to play and each contributes to the final whole but the balance has to be right for her.

Fashions come and go in ceramics as they do in all art forms. Experiment and novelty often seem today to be prized above all else. But surely the ceramist who steadfastly pursues what for them is the path they have to follow has great merit too, ever refining and developing their own personal style and talent. Genders pursues her chosen path with confidence. Her work is never dull; it excites, surprises and satisfies the eye of the beholder. Vessels are a prism which she holds up delicately but surely to the natural world, giving us the privilege of reinterpreting so much that we take for granted. CR



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5 *Eau de Nil Sgraffito Tall Vessel*, 2007, H68cm **6** *Translucence Plate*, 2007, Ø41cm
7 *Divisions Open Vessel*, 2006, H35cm
8 *Hues of Blue Large Open Vessel*, 2007, H47cm

Technical Information See page 67
Upcoming Show The Gallery at Bevere, Worcestershire, 6-28 December 2008
Stockists Shirley Crowther Contemporary Art, Ditchling, East Sussex; Contemporary Ceramics, London; Cecilia Coleman Gallery, London; Quest Gallery, Bath
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