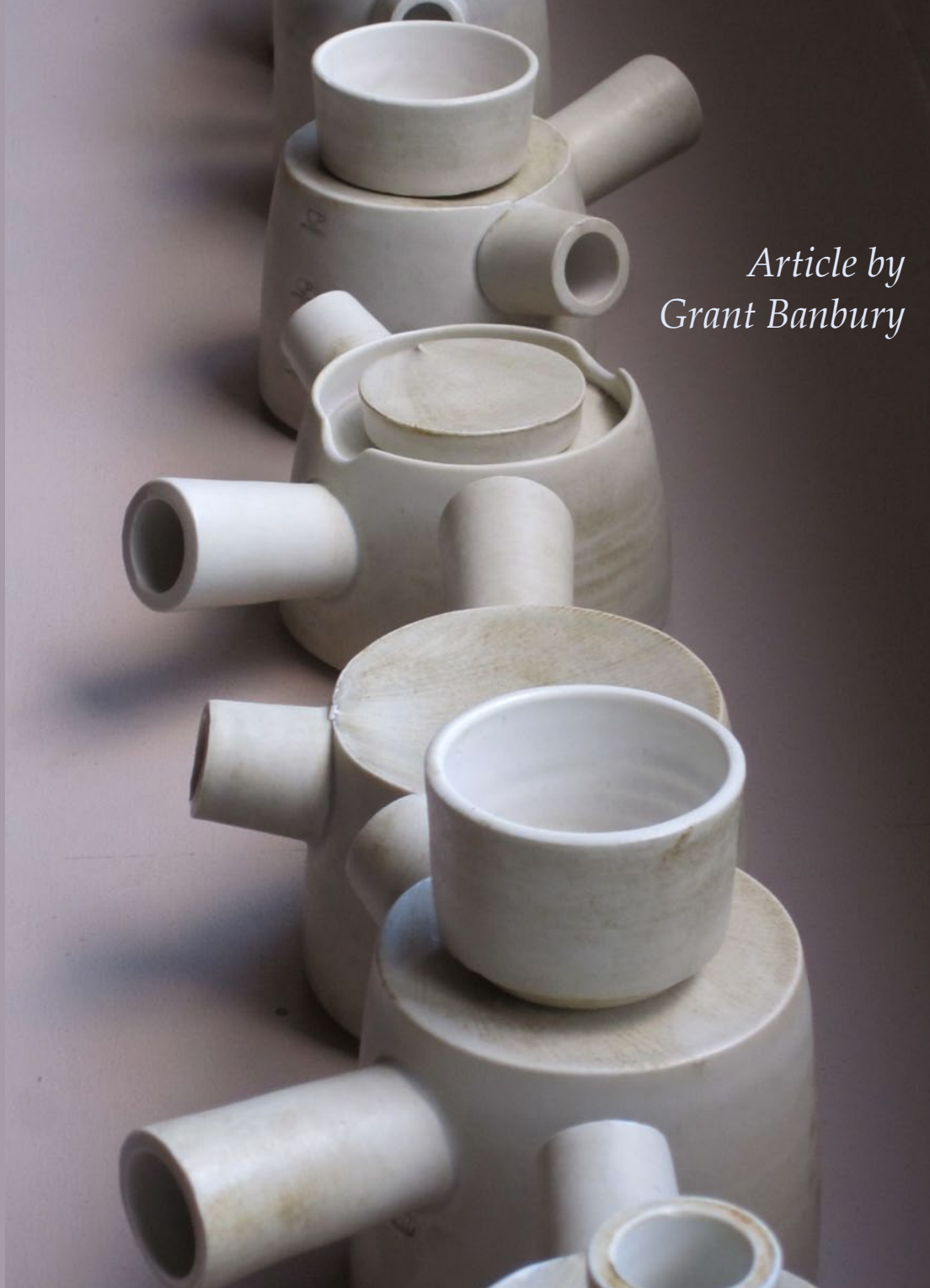


Article by  
Grant Banbury



*Housework 1. 2013. High fired porcelain.*

“THE TEAPOT AS A FORM OF EXPRESSION SATISFIES me most. I am able to explore form, meaning and function with this one object.”<sup>1</sup>

Throughout the second half of the 20th century and into this century the teapot, like the vessel, has become a touchstone for non-functional experimentation. Interestingly, in the light of such developments, New Zealand-based ceramist Chris Weaver has steadfastly kept his interest in functionality,

creating small-scaled domestic ware by altering wheel-thrown forms, then exquisitely glazing them. He states: “I can’t make anything that is whimsical or decorative. Tableware offers me the design challenges that I enjoy solving when developing new work.”

In the light of current movements and shifts in world ceramics, massive scaled ceramic works and the conceptual framework associated with much of

today's ceramics practice, it is significant in Weaver's case that his domestic teapots are selected for major contemporary shows. In 2011, his *Made to Measure Teapots 1 & 2*, a pair of elegantly crafted teapots with iron stained cream glaze had imprinted graphs on the exterior that read "one cup, two cups, three cups" and "1, 2, 3" won the Runner Up Award in The Portage, New Zealand's premier ceramics award. Each year an internationally respected ceramist or academic working within the field selects the final exhibition entries and the award winners.

The presentation of Weaver's most recent series of ceramic teapots was not a traditional affair. In sharp contrast to conventional gallery or museum environments with their controlled lighting, plinths and associated histories, his line-up of seven teapots, each titled *Preserve-ware*, was installed outdoors. Resting on a stand-alone mantelpiece against a backdrop of a wooden colonial homestead, Weaver's latest teapots resonated in surprising and unexpected ways.

As part of *Sculpture on the Peninsula*, an annual fundraising event held on a rural farm setting on the edge of a dormant volcanic harbour near

Christchurch, Weaver's teapots could easily have appeared insignificant, somewhat incongruous or out of place. Yet, in an exhibition dominated by an eclectic mix of outdoor sculpture of all forms – realist to highly conceptual – and executed in materials as diverse as bronze, wood, stone, metal, clay and ephemera, Weaver's ceramics held their own.

The most innovative and intriguing aspect of Weaver's entry was the use of transparent glass Agee jars (traditionally used for preserving fruit) and here forming the 'container' of his ceramic teapots. By gluing a screw-section of the jars existing metal lids (hidden from view in the final work) to the ceramic component and attaching this to the Agee jar, Weaver achieves a functioning teapot. The conjunction, however, of glass and ceramics was arresting, conceptually exploratory and, perhaps more importantly, evidence of Weaver's ongoing desire to find new forms of expression in a traditional domestic object. The results challenged many viewers' perceptions as to what constituted a teapot and the relevant importance of functionality to any ceramic-based artwork.

On closer observation the sculptural aspect of



Above: *Preserve-ware 1*. *Sculpture on the Peninsula*. 2013. High fired porcelain and found glass jar. 22 x 20 x 10 cm.

Top right: *Preserve-ware 2*. *Sculpture on the Peninsula*. 2013. High fired porcelain and found glass jar. 15 x 16 x 10 cm.

Below right: *Preserve-ware 4*. *Sculpture on the Peninsula*. 2013. High fired porcelain and found glass jar. 15 x 16 x 16 cm.



Weaver's *Preserve-ware* also carried weight. His care for detail in the construction and glazing, in this case a cream-coloured glaze with pale green coming through, was clearly evident. The structural, architectural components of the teapots were directly related to a body of experimental anagama fired teapots and pourers Weaver produced at Mittagong in Australia in July. The results appeared bolder, less refined than previous series, and more exploratory.

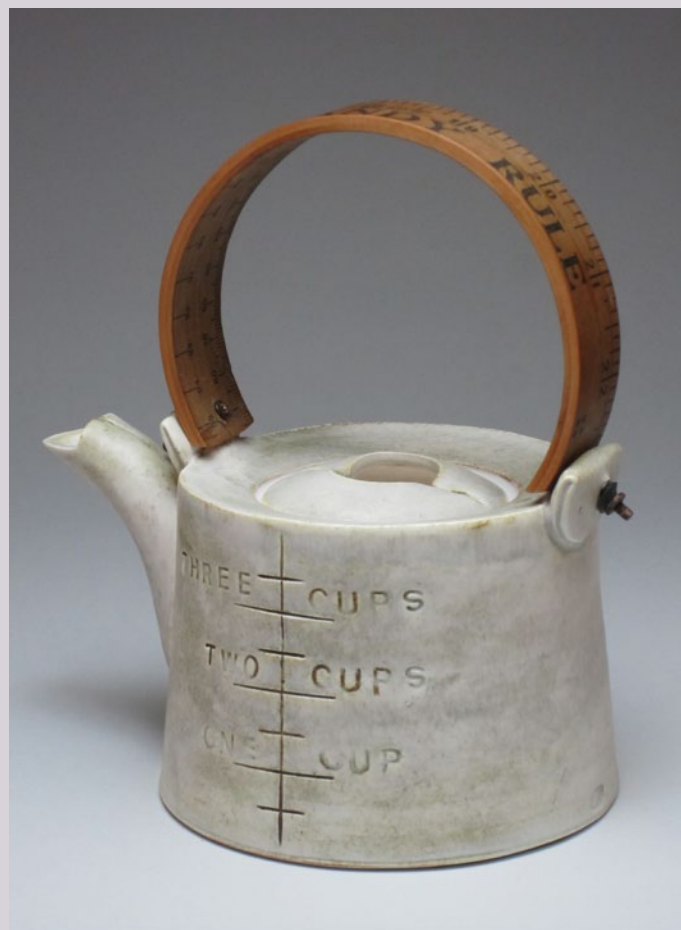
Weaver's first visit to Sturt Pottery in Mittagong Australia was in 2010 as Artist-in-Residence and this year he returned with a group of Australian and New Zealand ceramics artists who had been part of the Fuping Chinese Residency in 2007. The series of pots Weaver produced at Sturt this July, in an anagama firing that took four days, resulted in teapots and pourers with random areas of a rich orange on their exterior surfaces.

Compared to the spouts and handles on Weaver's earlier teapots, both spout and handle initially appear curiously interchangeable; sturdy, simplified tapering cylindrical forms. Overall the teapots are squatter and feel more grounded, similar to the

feelings generated in his earlier *Iron* series, based on his grandmother's pressing iron. Spouts and handles are positioned either at 90 degrees to each other or on a horizontal axis while other handles stand vertical, or diagonally reaching skyward. In some teapots lids are non-existent revealing unadorned circular openings. The form of the teapot as a whole takes on an exciting, charged ambiguity.

The forms evident in *Housework*, the first body of works made since his time in Sturt this year, reflect similar shapes to those Weaver created in Mittagong. One teapot contains a removable infuser – a perfectly formed small perforated sculpture in its own right. For well more than 10 years Weaver has experimented with wood in his domestic ware in the form of feet and handles. Perhaps the most notable, a signature statement, are the handles in his teapots, fashioned out of heart Rimu and evident in various incarnations in the series such as *Leaf*, *Iron*, *Pillow*, *Cut*.<sup>2</sup>

Several of Weaver's 2011 and 2012 teapots in his *Made to Measure* series are rather Scandinavian looking in terms of balance and design. Cleverly the title directly refers to his use of old rulers – splicing,



Left: *Made To Measure 4*. 2012. High fired porcelain. 16 x 16 x 11 cm.  
Above: *Made To Measure 1*. 2011. High Fired Porcelain. 17 x 17 x 12 cm.





curving and gluing them to make the handles (some have business names, street addresses and even telephone numbers), adding a quirky link to bygone days. In some teapots the handles are attached inside a raised rim allowing them to be neatly folded down. A matching pair of finger-sized cuts in the rim offer easy access to lift the handles back to a vertical position. The lids themselves are carefully crafted works of art with inverted rims.

Weaver's earlier solo show, *Slice*, held in a dealer gallery in Dunedin in 2009, is worthy of mention for its innovation in using found display stands. In this instance more than 30 pieces of small domestic ware – cups, plates, platters, sugar bowls, milk jugs and teapots – were 'staged' on old wooden tables, trunks and stools. Against the wooden floor of the gallery the installation breathed a sense of nostalgia and the contemporary, a casual but intriguing presence almost harking back to a rural New Zealand when studio pottery was in its infancy. Residue of flaking paint on one table created a weathered colonial setting.

Although Weaver travels internationally and gains much from shared experiences with other ceramists, both locally and internationally, he also lists ceramics artists Josef Benyon, Byron Temple, Walter Keeler and Takeshi Yasuda as inspirational for "their clarity of form and attention to detail".

Although he now acknowledges the benefits of the Internet, Weaver has lived and worked in his remote studio in Hokitika on the West Coast of the South Island since the late 1970s. When asked about working in such an isolated place he commented:

*Facing page: Preserve-ware 3. Sculpture on the Peninsula. 2013.  
High fired porcelain and found glass jar. 26 x 13 x 10 cm.  
Above: Sculpture on the Peninsula (Installation View). 2013.*

"I used to think. . . I was disadvantaged by living in isolation but I now think it has been to my benefit. I have become more resourceful and I am not so influenced by what others are doing which has been important in developing my own work. I probably saw more good ceramics because I only had books and when I did travel and could go to museums and galleries, I saw only the best."

Undoubtedly an informed dialogue occurs when viewing a series of Weaver's teapots together, particularly evident in *Preserve-ware* where he has taken greater risks and the results have moved his practice forward. Perhaps his time in Mittagong was a key factor in this, or a desire to experiment away from the rigours of making a living out of domestic ware.

Ultimately one is left wondering if any owners of Chris Weaver's teapots in fact use them as functional items? I suspect many, including myself, place them in view (perhaps on the mantle piece) where they can be scrutinised, handled, returned and appreciated as works of art that go beyond function.

#### ENDNOTES

1. Chris Weaver email to author, 15 August 2013. All other quotes are from the same source.
2. See Moyra Elliott, "Chris Weaver: Teapots and More", *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, No 53, 2003, pp. 84–87.

Grant Banbury is a Christchurch-based writer, curator and teacher in New Zealand.