

## Feet of Clay

My first impression of the studio at the *Slow Clay Centre* is of warmth. It's a dull day in the middle of winter and I have parked my car a few streets over and walked the last little way with a fierce wind icing my cheeks and my fingers. I have my hands thrust into my jacket pockets and I'm thinking that I should have worn thick socks. I might have feet of clay but I want them warm. Inside, however, there's fire blazing in an iron stove. Students are stood about, their sleeves rolled up and aprons on. They chat or sip tea or warm themselves at the fire awaiting a quorum. Glancing around at the sinks, the slurry bins, the ceramic filled shelves, the place feels somehow familiar. There is, I suppose, a sketchy likeness to a kitchen. The hearth, ovens, sinks and shelves of tableware all contribute to an intimate rather than industrial feel - though there is some grandeur to the size and scope of the rooms with their high ceilings and spare white walls and a behemoth of a chandelier hung over a bank of potter's wheels.

We begin the lesson by preparing clay. Our teacher, who is also the founder and director of the centre, Jane Sawyer, demonstrates what looks like a simple and beautiful process. *Spiral* or *chrysanthemum wedging*, works the air out of a lumpen slab making it fit to throw and fire. She shows us how to use the body as a counterweight, lifting and turning the clay on itself - working the fine particles of substrate into a tight mix and the air out. Grit and bubbles are the enemies of smoothness. In the kiln, trapped air might pit the surface of a pot or worse still crack it in two. Did I say it looks easy? Well like any art it's not. We try our inexperienced hands and it's absorbing - exhilarating and impossible. Learning a task by touch is a world away from rote. Years of school has taught us to look for facts and test the truth against them. But to throw clay we must trust the body to teach us. In the studio, Jane tells us, it will be muscles that take the lesson home and not the mind. Already I'm in deep water. It's the age-old divide between the head and hand - between town and gown and I'm doing it all wrong. One moment I see the petals of the chrysanthemum form under my hand - the next they are lost - the process faltering, elusive and utterly addictive.

As we work, Jane tells us a story about perfection. At the *Shussai-Gama* studio in

Shimane, Japan where she was an apprentice, the collective held a monthly study group. Potters at every level of expertise would gather to observe beautiful pots or post mortem failures. An unfired bowl might be cut in half and examined for flaws - a beautiful cup passed from hand to hand. Each pot had something to teach them. She remembers one pot in particular handled with the greatest regard. Her Japanese was faltering but from the faces of her colleagues she could see that they were deeply affected. Her teacher called her over and showed her the foot ring. He pantomimed putting the trimming tool against the base of the pot. With one revolution of the wheel - the foot was shaped - it had been trimmed with a single stroke.

Jane's own work is all about us in the studio. The finished pots somehow retain the immediacy of wet, freshly thrown pieces. Wearing their white slip, (the Japanese say - *shiro kesshou* - make up like a geisha's) under a transparent glaze, they have the appearance of rain-slicked stones. There are no hard edges, the contours seem to belly and subside as the eye travels over them. They invite touch. As beginners we are humbled to have her oversee our fumbles.

When she has doctored our wedged lumps we take them to the wheel. Instead of beginning with enough to throw a single pot we work with a small mountain - forming a pot towards the summit - cutting it free and then forming the next and the next and again until we are slicing the last pot from the wheel itself. But first we must centre the clay and to do this we close our eyes. Having fixed our mountain to the wheel with a dab of water, we find the true centre not by eye but with our hands. Once again we are being asked to know the clay - not to know about it. The clay has in it a memory of the spiral, of one thousand petals, of off-centredness. We want it to forget, or rather to learn a new upright angle. We want symmetry so that the wheel and the hand can do their work. I close my eyes and feel for clues like a water diviner awaiting the telltale dip of the dowsing rod. But as a novice it's easy to read clay wrongly. My first pot forms under my thumbs and I see its evolution from a clod to a brief bloom as though in a flipbook - its life brief and jerkily animated before it tears away and collapses exhausted into itself. My clay is not properly centred am neither am I.

The class is made up of four beginners, of which I am one, and six continuing students. We newbies watch the old hands form pots that look like pots. Ours have wobbles and unevenness. They are the expression of tentativeness and uncertainty. We joke about making a collectively crooked tea service. By this stage I can contribute a highly irregular looking saucer. My neighbour, Felicity has created a three cornered cup and the two student architects across from us have a wabi sabi of beakers. We watch Jane again. She sits tall in the Japanese style - throwing from the top of her clay hill. Her hands move through a tai chi of deliberate gestures. From the lump she draws out an elongated orb and then something Buddha-bellied. It is something that fits the hand well – a cup or a poem, I can't say – but it would be a pleasure to touch the lips to. "I would go to the theatre to watch that", Felicity says. And so would I. It's a ballet of thumbs and fingers.

At the end of the lesson we wrap our pots. Over the week they will shrink and leather up. The clay will harden enough to be tooled – the foot rings (our clay feet), trimmed and the edges honed. They are on their way to becoming tableware. But for the moment they have a vulnerable nakedness and we love them with all their foibles and wrongness. They embody purity as well as inexperience. Like a child's drawing, Jane says, they are artless and innocent of all the rules - a snapshot of day one. They are who we were today before we knew anything at all.

*Carolyn Leach-Paholski July 2013*

Jane Sawyer was a protégé of master potter, Andrew Halford at *Kinka*, formerly the *Shigeo Shiga pottery* in Southern NSW and served an apprenticeship at the *Shussai-Gama* studio in Shimane, Japan.

The *Slow Clay Centre* is in Melbourne at 13 Keele St Collingwood and offers a range of classes for adults and children including wheel throwing, hand building, moulding, casting and restoration.

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