

Ceramics

Art and Perception

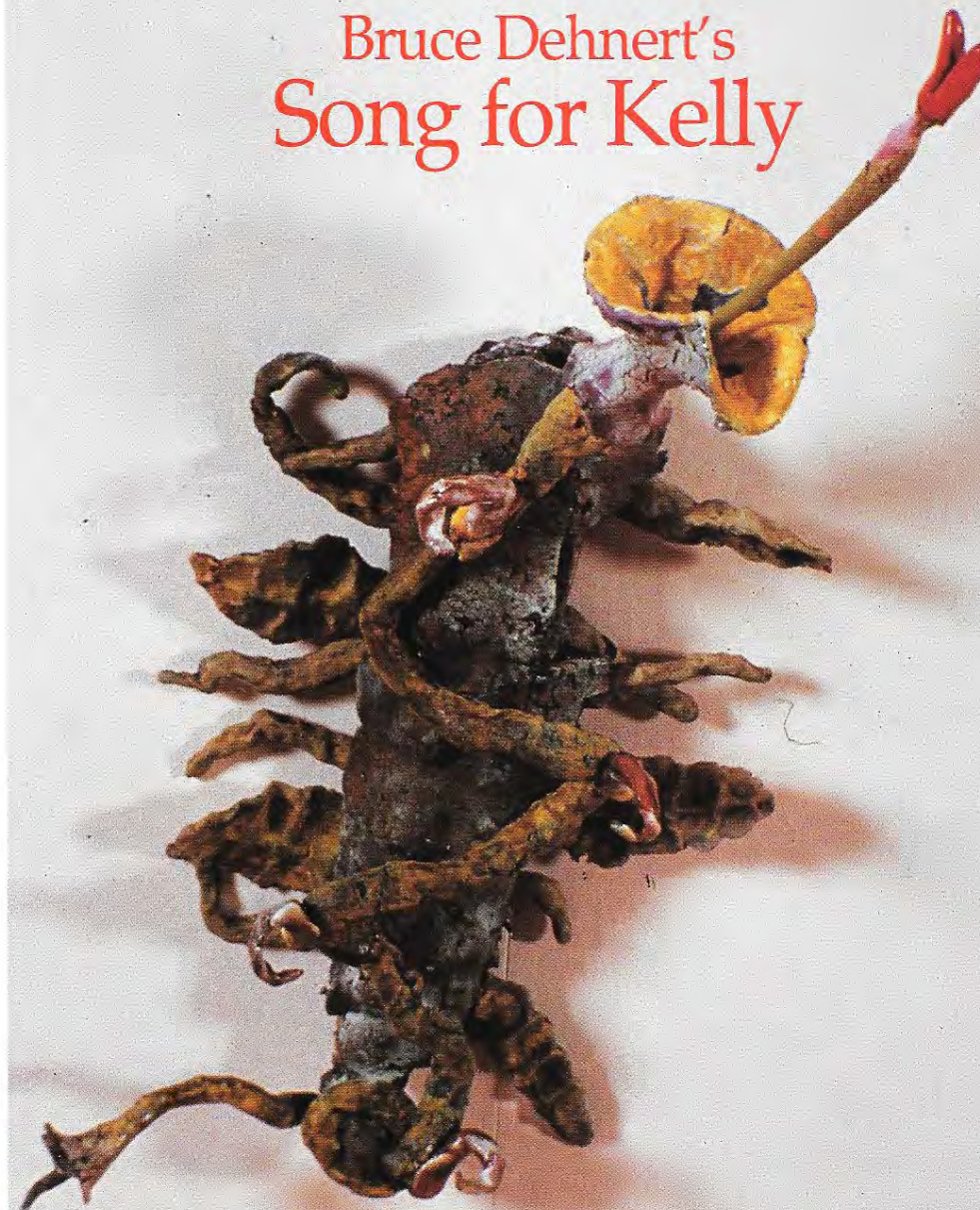
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Bruce Dehnert's *Song for Kelly*



Article by Christine Thacker

BRUCE DEHNERT EXPERIENCES HIS WORLD AND translates it into clay. His expressive interpretations are not from the rational quarter, however, but more the result of giving rein to subconscious thoughts about his life and family interactions. His explorations are presented as an unfolding narrative, one that is personal and particular, although ambiguity and latitude and longitude are as much sought after as any clear messages. First viewing of Dehnert's clay exposition *My Song for Kelly* brings to mind an aesthetic

collision between 20th century European expressionism and 18th century rococo ornamentation in an equatorial setting. It is a wildly dynamic work made up of 10 wall-mounted autonomous pieces and has achieved for Dehnert a merit award at the 1995 Fletcher Challenge Award and exhibition held in Auckland, New Zealand.

Dehnert, a New Zealand-based American, is currently a ceramics tutor at Dunedin Polytechnic and his work tells of the New Zealand physical environment



as he sees it and the culture of the American family as he knows it. *My Song for Kelly* is set out as an altar contained at either end by large baroque-looking dry-blue vases with lilies. These refer to Easter time at the Dehnert family's local Episcopalian church. They are the formal components in the work and the lily, as a Christian symbol for purity is, in Dehnert's iconography, a symbol for change and spiritual renewal.

Central to the work is a trumpet and Kelly, from the title, is both a trumpet player and Dehnert's brother. It is their relationship which is the starting point for this personal foray into family dynamics. Kelly's life as a jazz musician and his desire to live a joyful and simple life centred on music, his faith and his family, is contained in this bright-yellow freely modelled instrument. A plant with five leaves on which can be

seen little faces emerges from the golden trumpet depicting the musician and his family. Dehnert celebrates his brother in this work.

The theme of music and the song is explored in four tangled, triffid-like, rampant plant forms between which personal family-derived emblems float. The plants look colourful, tropical, sticky and exotic. Apart from being obvious images of growth in our environment and working as visual impressions of the process of improvisation within a song, Dehnert sees the plant forms which tie his assemblage together as critical carriers for his themes of personal growth, change, transformation and reproduction.

The twists and contortions in the stalks and leaves demonstrate a remarkable facility with clay and Dehnert likens the working process with clay to the



improvisational nature of free-form jazz. His feeling about the "squeezable, movable, living character" of clay, as he describes it, is evident in the deftly pinched and prodded forms. It is important to him that glazing and firing treatments do not overwhelm the life force of the material and, to this end, vibrant earthenware colours have been applied which seem to spring from the forms rather than envelop them.

In between these burgeoning plant shapes is the framework of a house, pointing to Dehnert's love of architecture, references to his architect father and the family home; and a chair which has autobiographical connections and thus represents the artist in the scheme of things.

A further representational piece in the work is a vaguely heraldic looking form inspired by the shape

of a trumpet mute. The idea of muteness adds interesting counterbalance to what is otherwise a visually resounding work.

While his themes are grounded in the particular, that is, his family and, specifically, his brother who is far away and consequently in his mind, Dehnert is using formal architectural and ornamental motifs and expressive elements to examine the nature of wider relationships, the light and dark shades of existence, the overlaying of modern and classical forms, and all executed by the hand of one celebrating the nature of the material of clay and life itself.

Christine Thacker is a ceramic artist and writer from New Zealand. Illustrating this article is *Song for Kelly*, showing a detail on page 71, and the full work across pages 72 and 73.

ceramics

M O N T H L Y



CLAY CULTURE

pottery handbook by Jessica Knapp

For those of us who learn best with a combination of text and demonstrations in real time, Simon Leach's new book, which combines a comprehensive text on wheel-throwing basics with a DVD of demos, is the perfect fit.

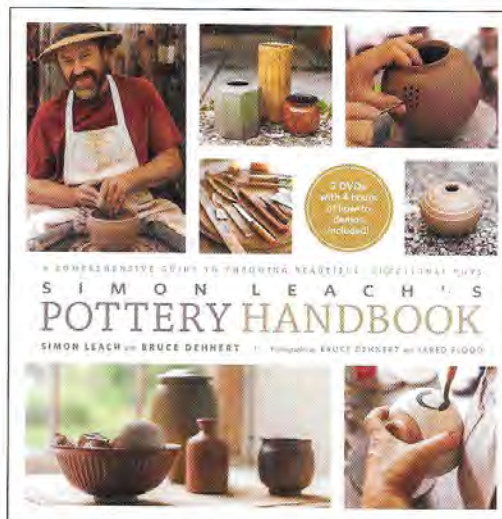
Simon Leach is the third-generation of potters in the Leach family, following his father David and grandfather Bernard. He has recently expanded on his popular YouTube video demonstrations, which have helped many people learn new techniques, by combining a selection of clips on compilation DVDs with a comprehensive book for beginners. The how-to book, written with Bruce Dehnert, covers core throwing, trimming, assembling, decorating, and firing techniques in text that are reinforced by the two DVDs, giving the reader multiple ways to process the information.

Leach explains how his path to pottery was a bit circuitous, perhaps surprising based on his family history, and his path to posting videos on YouTube wasn't planned. It started in 2007 with a suggestion from a friend to post a video, and grew after people started commenting on the clips and he realized that it was a way to connect with and help other potters. He felt he had a lot to say about pottery and studio practices, enough, in fact, to fill over 900 clips to date on his YouTube channel. He also enjoys the way that, through YouTube, he can interact with people all over the world despite living the relatively isolated life of a potter.

Leach's easy-going style and focus on maximizing both quality and efficiency in the wheel-throwing process is evident in both the book text and the collected video clips. While demonstrating techniques, (from the basics of throwing a cylinder through to lidded forms and teapots) he explains why he has developed a certain style, how to analyze a form, and how to save time by focusing on throwing the best pot possible from the start, minimizing the need for trimming and fussing with it later. He goes on to discuss decorating, glazing, firing, and even a bit about building a raku kiln and converting an old electric kiln into a gas kiln. The videos included with the book are just a sampling of the hundreds of videos available on Leach's YouTube channel, so for demonstrations in the book that don't have a corresponding video included on the DVD, a related clip is likely just a few clicks away online. Follow the link through his website: www.simonleachpottery.com.

While his grandfather's text, *A Potter's Book*, launched the studio pottery movement over a century ago, Simon Leach's video projects and now his book, have made use of a combination of platforms available today for sharing techniques as well as ideas on aesthetics and the practical aspects of life as a studio potter.

Simon Leach's *Pottery Handbook* by Simon Leach with Bruce Dehnert. Hardcover (spiral bound, includes DVD), 240 pages. Stewart Tabori & Chang, an imprint of Abrams, New York, New York, 2013.



Top: The cover of Simon Leach's book. **Above:** A step-by-step photo series demonstration of how to make a convex cylinder from Simon Leach's *Pottery Handbook*. Image courtesy of Stewart, Tabori & Chang, an imprint of Abrams.

PRODESIGN

The magazine cover features a photograph of an interior design scene. On the right, a mannequin stands wearing a long, red, fringed dress. In the center, a tall, slender, orange sculpture with a twisted, organic form stands on a silver, curved base. To the left, a wooden table holds a small, ornate crown. The background consists of white curtains and a warm, yellowish wall. The magazine title 'PRODESIGN' is printed in large white letters at the top, with a small 'N 2810' label to its right.

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**THE MAGAZINE
FOR PROFESSIONAL
DESIGNERS AND
THEIR CLIENTS**

*Official Journal of
the Designers Institute
of New Zealand*

Book design – is there any?

Wheels driven by design

**1996 DESIGN
EDUCATION**

the annual Fletcher Challenge Ceramics Award is one of the top ceramics events in the world, and the exhibition is idiosyncratic and often unpredictable.



"IT'S AMAZING ... IT'S, IT'S AMAZING, it's just amazing!" Takeshi Yasuda, this year's international judge for the Fletcher Challenge Ceramics Award, struggles to convey wonder at the ability of such a prosaic material to be shaped and altered, pushed, pulled, blasted with heat, and emerge in so many different forms. A man with an assured command of English, after 22 years of living in the West from his native Japan, he hits the nail on the head with this unsophisticated observation – and the range of work at the exhibition further bears out the truth of it. For the first time in quite a few years, a judge has been whose philosophical and technical bias is toward what could be called domestic traditional ware. Yasuda took some offence at the titles and the possibility that they might devalue the work, preferring to regard functional

ware as an integral, and major part of the clay spectrum – adamant that all human acts involve an element of spirituality, although he notes that "good design" often neglects humanity. Yasuda gives the impression that "art and design" is almost an oxymoron. His own work – fluid, relaxed, tableware with runny glazes and beautifully crafted handles and feet – throws the viewer and handler straight into the dilemma of trying to shove one platter into several pigeon-holes at once ... "art", "craft", "functional", "non-functional". But pigeon-holing is not an option for Yasuda, despite a background firmly based in the Mashiko tradition, his selections for the ceramics award show include all current international approaches to clay.

The selection procedure for this award is unique in the international ceramic world. One judge has the responsibility for selecting not only

the final winners, but also the 150 or so award exhibitors, from over 800 entries, submitted from all over the world. The judge, thereby, has the chance to put his or her stamp on the show. This results in an idiosyncratic and sometimes unpredictable exhibition; often the winner one year will be unselected the next, and the substance of the show will change annually. This year, for example, the emphasis is on smaller pieces, with more colour than those selected last year, when the Czech judge, with a background of pure sculpture and virtually no Leach/Hamada baggage, emphasised large and extravagantly-worked clay.

It must be pointed out, that international exhibitions such as this – and after 19 years the Fletcher Challenge award is now one of the top three in the world – tend to inevitably attract the more sculptural, experimental and technically accomplished (and fashionable) work – and the quieter, functional clay pieces have to exhibit an added dignity and elemental integrity to make it to the final selection.

This year's winner (premier prize of \$10,000) – a group of three jugs by Prue Venables (Australia) – is such a piece. With a quiet and balanced presence, the three jugs are subtly altered porcelain cylinders, glazed in a high-fired blue/green celadon. You cannot get much more traditional than that. But it is actually a relief to be able to recognise and enjoy the uncomplicated honesty of this work, and not have to fish around for meaning, message or technical answers.

The layout and design of the exhibition stands was the work of Jeannie van der Putten, a Grey Lynn potter with a family background in design, she is the daughter of a prominent designer of the 50s, John Crichton. Van der Putten decided to present the work on a combination of sleek blond wood (kauri and rimu veneer) and black or white painted surfaces. The mainly rectilinear profiles, along with a group which are curved, are clean and uncluttered, and do what exhibition stands are supposed to do – display the work without taking over, but at the same time present the viewer with an integrated and elegant display.

Work on show ranged from the exuberant, spontaneous, colourful wall piece of ex-pat American, Bruce Dehnert (Dunedin) with "My Song for Kelly" (his musician brother), a \$2000 prize-winner, which he later revealed was not

BY PETER LANGE. PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK ADAMS AND JANEK CROYDON.

the result of intense design preparation, but rather an expressive "seat-of-the-pants" approach to clay. The irony is that he works in a New Zealand polytechnic environment, and there seems to be a favoured approach to design in our polytechs that requires the student to carry out a lot of careful planning, produce working drawings and prepare carefully – often at the risk of extinguishing the original concept under an avalanche of planning detail.

Steve Heinemann's (Canada) untitled bowl, also a \$2000 prize-winner, is a simple black and white (slip-cast and altered) boat shape with an internal unglazed clay base – curiously and coincidentally in almost exactly the same tones as the display stand. It carries a four-petal motif inside, which lends a definite Pacific feel, but which may be simply the result of internationally practised imagery.

The beautiful blue bowl "Corolle" by Joelle Bellenot (Switzerland), bought by the Auckland Studio Potters for their collection, is technically fascinating. It involves virtually no clay, instead an Egyptian paste (a turquoise blue glaze) has been secured to a wire-mesh frame and then fired. The wire is mostly burnt out, leaving a double layer of perforated glaze.

Next year is the Fletcher Challenge Ceramics Award's 20th Exhibition. The



Opposite: Jeannie van der Putten's design and layout of the exhibition presents an integrated and elegant display.

Above: Joelle Bellenot's blue bowl is not only beautiful, but also technically fascinating.

sponsorship is secured until then, and hopefully for another 20 years. It has been one of this country's longest running and most successful art/industry collaborations, and New Zealand potters have benefited greatly from the sponsorship – with access to generous prize-money, inspiring international judges (who are required to give ceramic schools while they are here), and a huge variety of work from leading overseas ceramists to absorb and study for one month of every year. New Zealand potters continue to be selected for the award each year, at about the same rate, and often at a better rate than major ceramically-active countries. The challenge of competing with the rest of the world has done local potters no harm. This year, Christine Thacker from Waiheke Island was the only other New Zealander in the award list of 16, making 1995 one of the least successful for New Zealanders, but there is a lot of good work being produced in this country, much of a standard to win one of the top prizes. The judge is the unpredictable factor, and that is what makes each year's exhibition so interesting. ■

Left: A Canadian entry, this simple untitled bowl by Steve Heinemann has an interesting Pacific look.

