The Stuff of Life

by Merran Esson

When approached to write for this education issue, I decided to reflect not only on my own pathway as a maker and an educator, but also on the thoughts and advice I would give to current graduates. I have quoted some other voices in this article, big voices that have led and inspired me through my questioning of assumptions, from the art world and my own practice.

Recently I came across a discussion on Sydney radio about how it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to achieve mastery in a field. This would mean between 7 and 10 years, which I think is probably about right. It could be very disheartening to tell a graduating student that it will take another 5 to 10 years before they have all the skills and experience required, but on average it probably will take that much time. It's not that the educational institutions are under-preparing graduates for their place in the world outside their institutional walls, but it is a reminder that good work takes time – time to develop and time to understand processes, and ceramics has a lot of processes.

British artist Eduardo Paolozzi said that it takes "a thousand tiny hand movements a day to create a work of art"[1]. These words have inspired me for over three decades, capturing the spontaneity that happens when I work directly with clay. The word 'touch' is integral to what we do. The invention of the iPhone and iPad has taken touch into the digital world. My son, who works in this digital world, says that the next generation will probably not know what a mouse was. The touch era has truly arrived for everyone. Ceramics and the handmade used be at the front line of this.

In my teaching practice, I talk about the excitement I feel when thinking about the fingerprint impression left in fired clay. I watch visitors to my kitchen marvel at handmade cups and teapots that I use when I create a morning tea or serve up food. I sense envy from them that I use such beautiful objects in my daily life. I am constantly amazed that I have to sell the idea that we can all do this; it is as though I have some magic entrée to a world of creativity that they don't understand. This is the challenge for all of us – how to create a desire within people to buy and use beautiful objects, especially those objects that we use: a cup, a mug, a bowl. All are handled, and offered to our lips on a daily basis. My first connection with the processes involved in making pots was at Bendigo Pottery in 1973. I watched transfixed as a row of throwers guided the clay under their expert fingers. I was hooked and from that moment on I knew I wanted to work with clay. Way back then I had no idea I would take this pathway as far as I have.

My view of contemporary and historical ceramics is quite broad, as it should be for anyone in education. Certainly in the 1970s in Australia, courses in ceramics were flourishing. We thought we were entering an era in which we would have much more leisure time, and working closely with the earth was an idea that many of my fellow students aspired to. The public responded to the handmade and to the lifestyle from which it came. But things began to change in the 1980s, and by the 1990s we

Opposite: **Merran Esson**, *To Hold The Best There Is*, 2016, slabbuilt stoneware, dry glaze, h.70cm, w.48cm, d.38cm; photo: Ian Hobbs

were being seduced by the clean lines of production. There was a large swing to industrial processes within educational institutions. I believe this is where we lost our way, both in education and with the public. This translated through into the new century with a drop in sales for ceramic art and a drop in enrolments in ceramic art courses. I believe that the spirit of the handcrafted object was thrown out. Interior designers decided that our taste should be white and sleek, pushing a minimal aesthetic upon us and, with the burgeoning graphic design industry, we were relegated to rows of white bottles on a single shelf as the contemporary interior design icon. The luscious brown pot with the maker's finger marks all over it and big globs of ash and melted feldspar was rejected, not held in any esteem, and certainly the knowledge and skill required to even fire a kiln or understand the alchemy of firing was not acknowledged or supported. It's no wonder that some clay artists turned to sculpture.

The 'style makers' who turned once-thriving craft galleries into design galleries reduced the public's opportunity to see the magic and spirit of handcrafted work. I think we have some creative problems here and we need creative people to solve them. There will always be cheap imports, as the ceramics industry has moved to Asia where the cost of mass production is low. As an educator, I recognise that part of my role is to sell the value of objects that have a place in our daily lives. The public often don't know the difference and as artists we should try to make sure they do. I have witnessed a serious assault on ceramics courses at college and university level. I believe many senior administrators are poorly informed and only see ceramics courses as a way to train graduates for an industry. The demise of the ceramics industry in the western world means that our courses are not seen as relevant to a job. This results in administrators reaching the wrong conclusions and making poor decisions.

At the National Art School in Sydney, ceramics is part of a Fine Arts degree, something that so far has worked to our advantage. The course attracts much interest from all disciplines, with many graduates returning to ceramics as they explore clay in their own projects. We are lucky to have potential painters, sculptors, printmakers and photographers coming through the ceramics studio at least once in their foundation year. They won't all develop a ceramics practice, but they all have the potential to be collectors, whether it is a special one-off piece or objects for daily use. However, they are not the general public. This is where we need to expand the knowledge of our practice and show the real value of both art and the handmade as a sustainable choice.

If we, the ceramics artists, can lead the way by creating work that entices the population to see each object as an item with value; even a simple coffee mug can be so special that it needs to be treated with care and may be passed down through the generations. Just watch the Antiques Roadshow on ABC TV and imagine your work standing the test of time. Now that is real sustainability. When speaking about the Arts and Crafts Movement in 1882, William Morris said, "If our houses, our clothes, our household furniture and utensils are not works of art, they are either wretched makeshifts, or, what is worse, degrading shams of better things."[2]

Perhaps this idea of Morris' is not so far removed as I search for where the Arts and Crafts Movement is positioned at the beginning of the 21st Century. I am interested in vessels that are a reaction to the factory-produced ware available through large department stores. In my own teaching practice I am much more attracted to the Bauhaus approach. Although the Bauhaus only really existed for a short while, it had a tremendous effect on the arts community and is lauded today. Walter Gropius, the founding figure of the Bauhaus, stated, "Our guiding principle was that design is neither an intellectual nor a material affair, but simply an integral part of the stuff of life, necessary for everyone in a civilised society."[3]

Merran Esson working in Square One Studios on two handbuilt slab-constructed forms, 2016
Photo: Sean Morris

In my own studio practice, I explore the role of subject matter in the making of art. My work examines the structure of pots and the exploration of function. My studio practice is located in an area that includes both pottery and sculpture. It is no longer just the work of utility, which meets the demands of society, but a reassessment of the meaning of purpose, challenging the philosophy of function. Throughout the last century the possibilities of working in clay have expanded to include objects that are finding their way out of the kitchen and into living rooms, boardrooms and public spaces. The range of influences in the contemporary world has meant that positioning work as either pottery or sculpture is a narrow view. Drawing on function as my subject matter gives me a freedom to explore and develop work that has its roots in many cultures and traditions, while at the same time allowing my work to exist within a framework that has a domestic allegiance. I enjoy the exploration of form, the decisions about surface, rims, handles and spouts. The work is located within a line of tradition – a line that is never straight, which digresses and blurs and is forever expanding. The exploration of the vessel is common to many artist potters, but the making process, the manual dexterity and the challenge of technique and dialogue with material and form result in a unique personal statement.

Making work for a sustainable society is what many of us do. I would suggest that we use the most ecological of all materials. We don't need technology to make clay, it is just there waiting. Personally I like it prepared in a factory by others and delivered straight to my doorstep ready to use, however I am just being lazy on this point. Once made and fired, it can last forever. It is durable and can be wiped clean for centuries. Last night I saw the Vivid light festival in Sydney and watched the beautiful projections on the sails of the Sydney Opera House. It reminded me of the wonderful political message, 'No War', painted in red paint on those same ceramic sails in March 2003. Who knew that a ceramic surface and a building had such potential?

I am fascinated about how we as artists create work that speaks of past, present and future. It is through the connections that society has to clay objects that we can learn much about our past. Excavated clay objects are significant and enduring symbols of many great civilisations, and confirmation that objects made from clay last long after the civilisations that created them have disappeared. To today's students, this can be a reminder that their work is what makes them unique, and good work carries within it a power of its own. If we could just stop and ponder the teachings of William Morris and Walter Gropius, then we might have a chance to create works that demand to be an integral part of the stuff of life.

Henry Glassie wrote in his book *The Potters Art: Material and Culture*:

It is good to be a potter. At work the potter manages the transformation of nature, building culture while fulfilling self, serving society and patching the world together with pieces of clay that connect the past with the present, the useful with the beautiful, the material with the spiritual. The one who can do all that has done enough. The potter has won the right to confidence. [4]

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1 *Five Themes and Variations of the work of Eduardo Paolozzi*, 1988: (video recording.) Produced by Channel 4 London, 55 minutes.
2 William Morris, 1882, *The Lesser Arts of Life*, Macmillan & Co, London, p174–232.
3 Walter Gropius, 1883–1969, Daily Icon; www.dailyicon.net/2009/02/icon-tac-tea-pot-by-walter-gropius-for-rosenthal/ accessed 25-1-2011
4 Henry Glassie, 1999, *The Potters Art, Material and Culture*, Philadelphia and Indiana Press, Bloomington, p116.

Opposite: Merran Esson's table at home; photo: courtesy artist