

# Mutant Hybrids

## Penny Smith's Recent Stoneware and Porcelain

*Article by Jonathan Holmes*



*Forbidden Fruit. 2007. Two slab moulded stoneware cones with turned exteriors and 'jelly mould' interior/exterior.  
Cone 60 x 50 cm. Photo by Peter Whyte.*

DURING THE LATTER PART OF 2007, PENNY Smith, was invited to mount a solo exhibition at the Carnegie Gallery in Hobart, Tasmania. This non-commercial gallery, run by the Hobart City Council, has been showcasing small survey exhibitions of prominent artists working in Tasmania for several years now and it provided an excellent opportunity to review her recent work in porcelain and stoneware.<sup>1</sup>

On a number of occasions in what is now almost forty years of professional practice as a ceramist and designer, Penny Smith has produced exhibitions with a carefully defined theme – both of her own work and in a number of exhibitions

that she has curated over the past 20 years. In this latter career as a curator, she has been responsible for researching and developing several historically important exhibitions including *Common Earth: Alive and Unfired* [1985], an exhibition that was generated out of a series of artist-in-residencies held in Hobart; *Insite: Art for Public Places* [1988] which was shown at the Plimsoll Gallery, University of Tasmania and which was accompanied by an informative catalogue documenting works of public art in Tasmania;<sup>2</sup> and *Profiles: International Tableware Design* [1991-1992] for which she was guest curator at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery [TMAG].<sup>3</sup> This significant exhibition, which toured



**Bittersuite 2.** 2007. Slab moulded stoneware upright vessel with silver leaf finish and slipcast porcelain pod forms with silver and gold leaf (1) and copper leaf (2). Upright vessel: 25 x 15 cm. Pods: 7 cm.

to the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney, brought together a comprehensive contemporary collection of tableware by leading international designers and manufacturers. The exhibition entered the TMAG collection and now provides important documentation of then-current styles of tableware.

*Profiles* reflected a long-standing interest that Penny Smith has had in the field of production tableware and in her own practice this has been a relatively constant theme. She has undertaken a number of research trips to Europe and North America since the 1980s to increase her knowledge of small-scale industrial processes and was awarded an influential artist-in-residency at the Arabia tableware factory in Helsinki, Finland in 1995. This led to an exciting and productive period of research and manufacture of slip-cast and press-moulded ceramics, first in Helsinki and later in Hobart, particularly in the Ceramics Research Unit, which she and colleague Les Blakebrough developed in the 1990s. Two fine themed exhibitions emerged from this research – *Lightworks 1*, shown at the Arabia Gallery in 1995 and a substantial survey exhibition, *Lightworks 11* which was shown in 1996 at the Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery.<sup>4</sup> As their names imply, these two shows had as their principal motif the theme of light, a theme that was carried in a series of elegant forms that had first been

imagined in Barcelona in 1992 when she stayed with partner John Smith, who had been awarded the Australia Council residency that year.

Employing an abstraction of the shape of a bull's horn, a number of forms were designed and developed and then transferred to a series of slip-cast moulds that allowed her to reproduce limited production series of vases and lamps. One particularly beautiful series, further developed at Arabia, is a group of 'horns' – about half a metre high – that begins with a conical form that has a radical curve at its centre; three further conical forms then gradually straighten towards the vertical so that one gets a sense of a serial unfolding. Each 'lightwork' sits on a striking textured stoneware base which, with its black glaze, helps to emphasise the quality of lightness and translucence of the sinuous and curvy bone china forms. Decoration is limited to a surface of sgraffito curlicues each of which is pierced at the centre and, with the introduction of electric light, each becomes an ethereal ambient lighting source, with a warm glow spreading across the whole form while sharp pinpoints of light shine through the piercings.

Very careful attention has been given to the design of the work that emerged from the Arabia residency and the moulds that were created at the time meant that, over the ensuing years, an almost infinite number of subsidiary slip-cast works could be created utilising the simple device of segmenting the form after it had emerged from the mould. The exhibition, *Lightworks II* demonstrated this to great effect with, for example, the *Arabia Widetops* [1995] being a sequence of variously sized vases that, as their name implies, were created through the simple expedient of inverting and segmenting the conical form. Hilka Hiltunen, Chairwoman of the Arabia Foundation observed in 1996 that, as well as seeing the shape of the bull's horn in the larger works, "many also perceived the form of a bird in the shapes, giving a warning call for all to hear".<sup>5</sup> In the vases, with their coloured interior glazes, one is also reminded of fledgling chicks waiting for food to arrive!

Upon her return to Tasmania, in a further commitment to fine design, she organised the exhibition Alvar Aalto: Points of Contact [1996] to be brought to the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery. She has continued to curate important exhibitions of significant design in the ensuing years including a landmark show of furniture design created by designers working in Tasmania as well as designers based in the United States who have lived and worked in Tasmania for a period of time. *Convergence: Crossing the Divide. The Studio Furniture of Tasmania and America*, curated by Penny and John Smith and Wendy Maruyama from the San Diego State University, California, after first showing in the Carnegie Gallery in Hobart in 2005, toured to



the US to critical acclaim.<sup>6</sup>

It has been the aim of this brief introduction to show how a number of persistent themes have been dominant in Penny Smith's practice over more than three decades – a commitment to industrial processes has been a regular feature; seriality is a hallmark of her oeuvre; and her output is invariably underpinned by carefully planned design. It perhaps helps to explain why her work tends to be ideas-based and concept-driven rather than intuitive and expressionist.<sup>7</sup>

A further prominent theme in her oeuvre has been a long-standing commitment to environmental issues. Twenty-five years ago, for instance, she produced a range of tableware with an environmental theme. *Vanishing Landscapes* was shown at the Adelaide Festival Centre in 1981 and later toured to Ararat, Canberra and the Craft Centre in Melbourne. In March 1983 she was arrested on the Crotty Road off the highway to Queenstown, Tasmania when she, along with many other Tasmanian artists and craftspeople, demonstrated against the proposed damming of the Franklin River. Her continuing engagement with the conservation movement and environmentalism was also reflected in her ceramics research for her Master of Fine Arts degree at the University of Tasmania. [1985]

It is this theme to which she has returned in the recent work shown at the Carnegie Gallery. She has titled the exhibition *Mutant Hybrids* and the metaphor has allowed her to represent a number of levels of meaning that are embodied in the work created. As a concept the process of mutation comes easily to ceramists because fire transforms their medium from one state to another – from plastic and malleable clay to a hard and structured porcelain or stoneware body. Likewise, ceramists have little problem with the idea of hybridity because they combine clay with metals or acids in the form of glazes or washes to create singular objects that incorporate structural strength and an almost infinite range of finishes and textures – hybrids, so to speak. In one sense, then, Penny Smith's decision to call her recent body of ceramic sculptures and vessels *Mutant Hybrids* perfectly describes what they actually are – clay transformed into elegant and highly resolved stoneware and porcelain objects.

As with *Lightworks II* there are a number of striking forms that are a highlight of the *Mutant Hybrid* series. Penny Smith has employed both a large cone and a slightly smaller rounded bowl form as two of the key design elements of this series and, depending on which section is being assembled, she has press-moulded, slab-moulded or slip-cast the part. So, for instance, in *Forbidden Fruit* [2007], two elegant matching cones have been created. The cones lie on their sides and what would normally be the base becomes a featured highlight – in this case forms taken from plaster casts of the interior



*Arabia Widetops*. 1995. Slip cast stoneware with matt glaze inside. 32 x 10 x 12 cm. 35 x 10 x 10 cm.

Photo by Uffe Schulze.

and exterior of a jelly mould. The matt black glaze of the cones is sharply contrasted with the sensuous crimson-pink of this exotic 'fruit'. It's as if the two cones have been carefully split apart to reveal a strange hybrid kernel.

In this work there is also the reference to the Nick Cave song of the same title with the lyric: "You're one microscopic cog in his catastrophic plan/Designed and directed by his red right hand". And there is also word play in the reference to Nick Cave's band – *The Bad Seeds*.

In *Rubus Fruticosus* [2007], a cone of the same dimensions as those in *Forbidden Fruit* has been created. Penny Smith has then formed a second hollow cone, which has been joined to the base to create a further cone-shaped interior. An elegant slip-cast porcelain vase has been made exactly to fit the negative space of the interior of the cone. Stencilled imagery of the blackberry plant [*Rubus Fruticosus*] has been created on both the cone and vase thus linking the work to the theme of mutant hybridity. The blackberry is, of course, an imported



*Great Pacific Gyre Patch. 2007. Slab moulded stoneware nautilus form with press moulded porcelain bottle forms. Nautilus form: 50 cm diameter. Bottles: 4-15 cm. Photo by Peter Whyte.*

plant that has the capacity to devastate the environments it colonises. Introduced to Australia from the UK in the mid-19th century, the blackberry not only survived the transition but also adapted itself and then thrived in temperate conditions. As with many of the works in *Mutant Hybrids* there is a certain equivocation in Penny Smith's approach. On the one hand she acknowledges that the blackberry is an 'unnatural', that is, non-endemic species that has mutated to survive in its new environment; yet at the same time she seems to be acknowledging that its continuing presence is now a fact of life and that in a certain context it is quite beautiful with its attractive and much loved fruit. This helps to explain why the pristine, albeit dark, formality of the work has been brought into play here. There is an element of threat in its demeanour at the same time as it is very seductive.

The same threatening seduction is there in *Forbidden Fruit* and in *Strange Fruit* which, as its name implies, refers to the hauntingly beautiful but horrifying song by American jazz singer Billy Holiday about the lynching of Black Americans: 'Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees'.

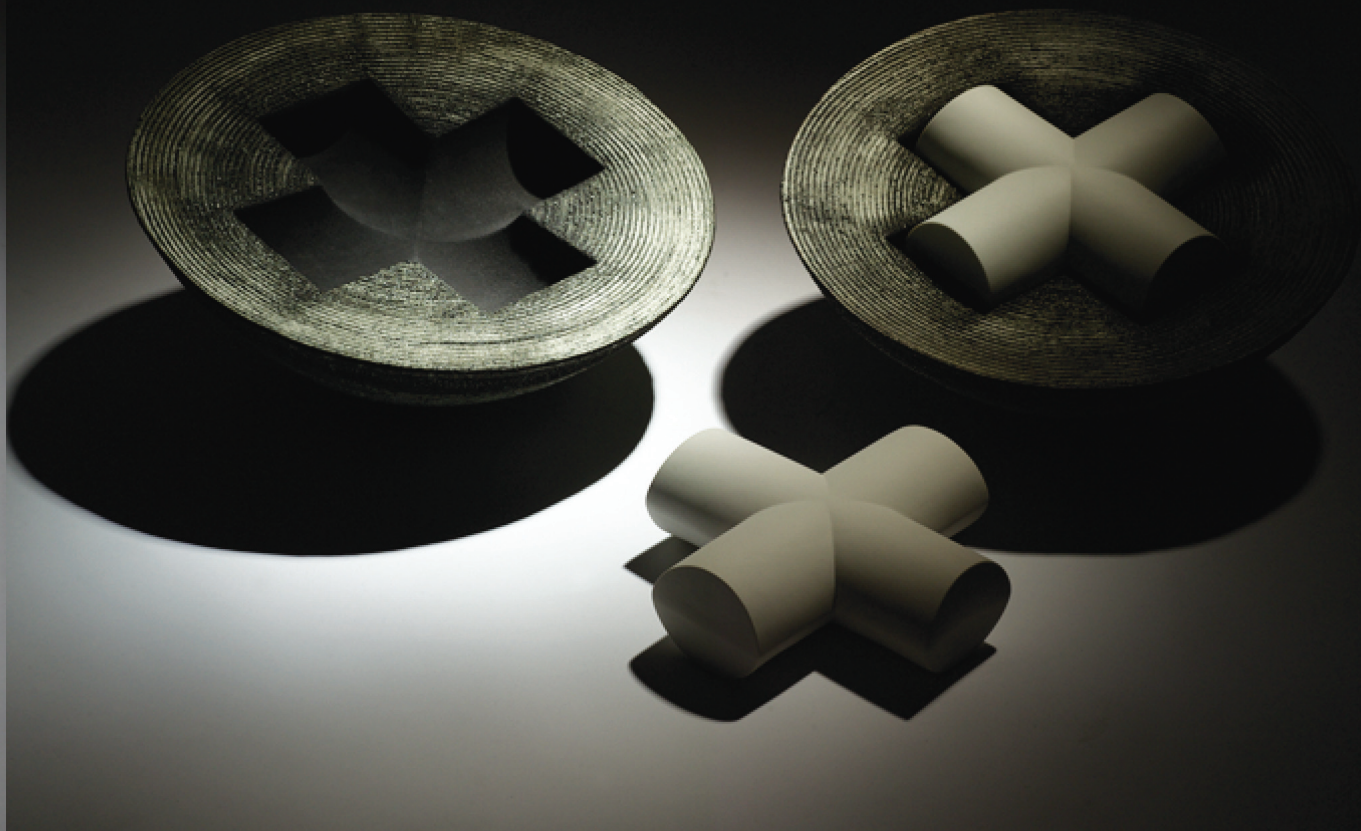
In *Bittersuite I & II*, a play on one of the names of Deadly Nightshade, *Solanum dulcamara*, Penny Smith has created another cone-shaped but upright stoneware vessel. This vessel has been slab-built

using a conic mould. Coloured a smoky grey, the vessel's top has been sealed and, cut into the cover, are three concave, slab-cast pod-forms fashioned from a 19th century biscuit mould. The same biscuit mould has been used to create slip-cast seed-forms that can sit snugly in their pods or can be strewn beside the vessel. Again, there is a sense of equivocation – at once poisonous, Deadly Nightshade is another introduced species that, in certain contexts, has certain ameliorative qualities, and Penny Smith has emphasised this in the pristine formalism of the work.

A jelly mould has also been utilised to create the intriguing work *Interlocked* [2007]. In this work two hollow cones have been created and the positive and negative forms of the jelly mould have been used to construct convex and concave shapes on the bases of the two cones. As with *Forbidden Fruit*, the two cones in this work are an exact fit; but here they are laid open like strange cogs in order to display the method of their interlocking.

In a number of the works in *Mutant Hybrids* the idea of one object nesting in or slotting into another object dominates. That sense of cohesion and connection is a typical trait and can be seen as a continuing concern in her oeuvre – the mixing and matching of things. There is, too, a clinical austerity and 'fitness' in the works but this is usually softened





*Crucibowls. 2007. Slab moulded stoneware bowl forms and slipcast porcelain cross forms. 25 cm diameter.*

*Photo by Peter Whyte.*

by the methods of decoration – the use of gold and silver leaf, the embossing, the sgraffito, the colouring, and the application of texture. Nowhere is this more evident than in the *Crucibowls* [2007] – three similar slab-moulded works the hemispherical shape of which is created from a steel mixing bowl. The *Crucibowls* take their name from the slip-cast cylindrical cross-forms that are nested in their matching slab-moulded shells embedded in the sealed tops of the bowls. There is a sharp contrast between the pristine white cylinders and the various tones of grey and grey-black used to colour the bowls. In all of the work in *Mutant Hybrids* discussed there is the implied suggestion that the objects can mutate or change from one state to another. Works can be assembled in various different ways and as they do, so their meaning will change. The viewer is invited to visualise this change and so, for instance, in the *Crucibowls*, one can imagine two of the hemispheres being joined to create a sphere where the cylindrical cross becomes a locking device to hold the hemispheres together.

If mutation is primarily a formal device in the works referred to so far, in *Great Pacific Gyre Patch* [2007] and *Flotsam and Jetsam* [2007] the idea of mutation and hybridity are altogether more directly sinister. Using discarded clay in a literal reference to the waste that is the subject matter of *Great Pacific*

*Gyre Patch*, Penny Smith has created several dozen porcelain bottle forms moulded from the shapes of commonly used disposable plastic bottles. These plastic bottles not only find their way to vast garbage dumps around the Pacific but tonnes and tonnes of waste also spews out into the sea as a result of wind and rain. According to Kenneth Weiss in a Los Angeles Times article in 2006, this inundation into the seas is causing havoc for wildlife and in the North Pacific it has led to the development of a huge garbage dump slowly rotating en masse on the ocean's surface. He quotes one researcher, Curtis Ebbesmeyer, who commented "when it gets close to an island, the garbagepatch barfs, and you get a beach covered with this confetti of plastic".<sup>8</sup> Albatross chicks, for instance, stuffed with plastic bottle tops, plastic cigarette lighters and other slowly degrading plastics, are dying in their tens of thousands as a result of this scourge.

Penny Smith has taken this increasing disaster as the theme of her *Great Pacific Gyre Patch* in which a large slab-moulded stoneware nautilus shell, like a modern cornucopia, expels its evil delivery of waste. As with other works in *Mutant Hybrids* there is a kind of sinister beauty to this work: the bottle forms are ruggedly pressed together by the artist but once fired and pristine white they spill out of the elegant nautilus form with a certain grace and



*Rubus Fruticosus*. 2007. Press moulded stoneware cone with slip cast stencilled imagery and slipcast polished porcelain vase with sandblasted imagery. Cone: 50 x 60 cm. Vase: 25 x 15 cm. Photo by Peter Whyte.

fluidity to create a sense of a slowly rotating whirlpool of forms.

In the case of *Flotsam and Jetsam*, the artist has created three press moulded bottle forms using scraps of waste porcelain clay; they sit in an 80 cm high torsion frame, half submerged as if floating in water. They represent the kinds of plastic bottles that Coca Cola distributes in their billions each year – some recycled but huge numbers that find their way into the oceans as flotsam and jetsam. This is a world that is mutating rapidly as a result of human rather than natural intervention.

If there is a driving intention in Penny Smith's *Mutant Hybrids* series, it is to use the medium of clay to draw attention to the many ways in which human agency has been the cause of so much environmental and social degradation. For the most part she creates strange hybrid forms that seem to have some connection to the world of machines and utensils but which are now transformed into objects that signal a future of uncertain shape. The works have an austere beauty but equally there is a strong sense of foreboding, a foreboding that is every bit as much a result of her engagement with environmental issues as it is with the skills she has as a designer and maker of objects.

#### REFERENCES:

1. Penny Smith's *Mutant Hybrids* exhibition was shown at the Carnegie Gallery (City of Hobart) in August, 2007.
2. Smith, Penny *Insite: Art for Public Places* Plismoll Gallery, University of Tasmania, 1988, 40 pp.
3. Smith, Penny *Profiles: International Tableware Design* Hobart, Tas: Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery, 1991, 47 pp.
4. Queen Victoria Museum and Art Gallery *Lightworks II: Recent Work by Penny Smith* [Curated by Glenda King] Launceston, Tas: QVMAG, 1996, 22 pp.
5. *Lightworks II*, p. 5.
6. Smith, J, Smith P, Maruyama, W. *Convergence: Crossing the Divide*, San Diego, California: Oceanside Museum of Art, 2005. 50 pp.
7. This is emphasised in her most recently curated exhibition, *Alice at the Allport – Mad Hatter's Tea Party*, which was developed for *Ten Days on the Island* (March 2007). In this exhibition she invited seven ceramic artists to respond to Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*. Andrea Hylands, Fiona Murphy, Jenny Orchard, Julie Bartholomew, Nicole Lister, Rod Bamford and Ruth Hutchinson were each invited to create work to be displayed in one of the Allport Museum's display rooms at the State Library of Tasmania.
8. Weiss, Kenneth *Plague of Plastics Choke the Sea*, Los Angeles Times August 2, 2006; article viewed at <http://www.latimes.com/news/local/oceans/la-me-ocean2aug02.0.3130914.story> [May 26, 2008].

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