



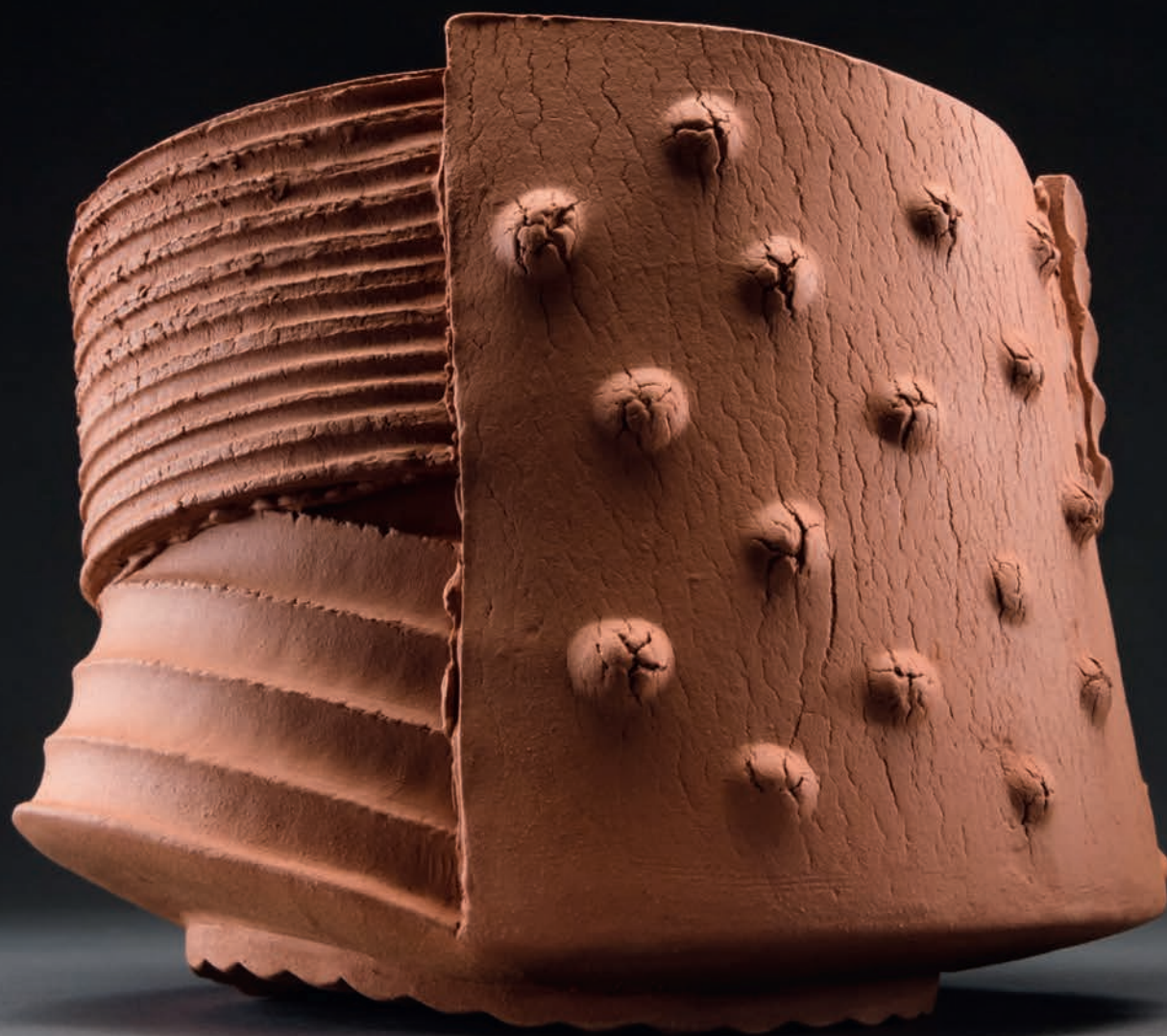
# MERRAN ESSON

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STORY **SARA SWEET**

A childhood spent around Tumbarumba in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains influences ceramic artist Merran Esson to produce works drawn from this early experience. The rustic characteristics of her ceramics reference the impermanence of the objects that served as vital tools for farm survival. Esson discussed her art-making practice with ARTIST PROFILE while she was attending the 47th International Academy of Ceramics Congress in Barcelona.





01 Jagungal Series, 2007, ceramic with copper glazes, photographer Greg Piper  
02 A different skin #2, 2014, terracotta clay, 16 x 18 x 20cm, photographer Greg Piper





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#### YOU GREW UP IN RURAL PARTS OF NSW – HOW

##### **influential has this aspect of your life been on your art practice?**

I always thought I would return to the land and when I discovered ceramics I imagined a studio behind a woolshed somewhere. I am a practical girl, and I watched my father and grandfather fix things as farmers do. It was not always beautiful, but over time a patina builds up and something once practical takes on its own beauty. My grandfather would fire up an old forge and hammer out plough shears and horseshoes, and I became quite fascinated in how metal changes under heat. It never occurred to me that all these experiences would lead me to where I am now.

##### **Why did you gravitate towards making ceramics?**

I rejected the grand landscape and became fascinated by the minutiae of rural detail, drawing it and later creating aspects of it in clay. In the 1970s I studied Ceramics at Caulfield Institute of Technology in Melbourne (now Monash University), and on completion I moved to London. Travel really opened my eyes to the breadth of contemporary ceramics and I was introduced to a much broader art world.

My studio practice now is an urban one; it includes teaching, exhibiting, writing, curating and making. There is still a yearning for a farm studio, and recent works, although rural in origin, have an industrial scale. I visited Bendigo Pottery in Victoria in the early 1970s and watched transfixed as potters were throwing on the wheel. I loved the sense of repetition and that clay could move so effortlessly through their hands. Science didn't interest me at school but I found science as related to ceramics, geology and alchemy to be very intriguing. I think we don't always choose our influences, they somehow choose us.

##### **You are interested in the contrast between the natural formations of the landscape and the artificial materials commonly seen dispersed across farmland. What triggered your interest in the relationship between these conflicting elements?**

I flew in gliders with my father, so viewing the earth below from an aerial perspective has had a lot to do with how I see the interference of man on nature. On one hand seeing a hedgerow of trees, planted to create a shade barrier for stock, also divides up the landscape in a way that fights with nature. Water tanks, which are a strong influence in my work, are so necessary for farm survival. An old water tank with its rusted metal and distorted shape often lies discarded in a farm gully or machinery yard, a reminder of the impermanence of material.

Farmers are great hoarders of “stuff”. A broken piece of metal might one day find a use when a repair is needed. So a store area overflows with things that just might have a function. Artists have a similar stockpile, either of bits of stuff, or of drawings and ideas, often as yet unrealised but there in storage until the right solution is found.

##### **Making clay requires a deep understanding of heat, pressure and time. Can you discuss your art-making process and how you control these variables in order to achieve your finished objects?**

Clay is such a willing material. My imprint on the clay surface will stay there forever. In 2011 I went to Fowlers Gap, near Broken Hill on a residency and used both rocks and tree trunks as textures to mould clay over. I returned to my Sydney studio with these texture slabs and have impressed the clay onto these to try to embed these influences into the finished work. To work with clay one does need some sort of understanding of geology and alchemy. Of course many artists such as Picasso and Miro worked in clay but they relied on ceramic artists to show them how to glaze and fire. I think patience and instinct play a great role in who succeeds with this material. In ceramics it takes time to develop an understanding of what a particular clay body will do under firing conditions.

##### **When you create your ceramics, do you start with an idea of the design or do you let the clay inform you as you continue?**

A little bit of both, when I start a new body of work I do drawings of things that interest me, but I usually close the book and rarely refer back. Marks from my hands and distortions during the construction process often lead the way. Making is my favourite part of all the processes.

##### **What are some of the difficulties that you have come up against while working with clay?**

Actually there are very few difficulties now. Time is a great teacher and I rarely lose a piece of work in construction. Materials change as

Opposite page clockwise from top left: Bezel, 2016, ceramics with automotive paint, 43 x 43 x 30cm, photographer Ian Hobbs; A Bowl for St Sebastian #1, 2015, Japanese Porcelain, 15 x 16 x 16cm; Displaced Places, 2008, ceramics with copper and chrome glazes, 85 x 53 x 46cm, photographer Greg Piper; Eurowie Rockface, 2012, ceramic with copper glaze, 20 x 34 x 30cm, photographer Greg Piper; To hold the best there is, 2016, ceramics with copper rust glaze, 70 x 48 x 38cm, photographer Ian Hobbs; Ochre Bowl, 2011, ceramics with copper and chrome glaze, 10 x 15 x 14cm, photographer Greg Piper.





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*Developing colour is often the result of a firing that has gone wrong. I quite like these problems as it forces me to embrace change and to solve problems.*



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clay pits get mined and new ones are opened up. The industry that supplies clay and glaze materials often doesn't inform us of these changes, so if an important ingredient changes then I won't find out about that until after a glaze firing when things don't turn out as they should. This can be very frustrating. I now have a few "rescue" glaze recipes that I can add on as an extra firing, so far these have often led to new solutions that continue to keep my work fresh.

**You apply luminous colours to your adaptations of industrial objects – what are you seeking to achieve with this effect?**

Developing colour is often the result of a firing that has gone wrong. I quite like these problems as it forces me to embrace change and to solve problems. There is a car repair business near my studio and recently I worked with them to use car paint to give brightness to the work. So if I continue with this it opens up a whole range of new metallic colours. However I'm not convinced that this is the way to go. Car paint is much more fragile as a surface. I like the unctuous surface that glaze and melt creates.

**The rust-like texture seen in your work is a recognisable feature. Did you experiment with a variety of styles in the lead-up to the works that you produce today?**

My output since 2000 is quite different from earlier work; prior to this the pieces were more about something that was under the sea, encrusted and aging due to water and time. Since then the works have become more land based. They are the containers of water, often appearing with rust glazes to show how time changes things. I think artists who work with clay and fire are always experimenting. I try to have at least one new experiment in my firings. I tend to work with only three glazes but by changing either an oxide or by layering glazes I have learnt how to manipulate materials to give me more than three results.

**What are you currently working on?**

I am currently in Spain attending the 47th International Academy of Ceramics Congress in Barcelona. I have been inundated with a sensory overload of tiles, murals, Picasso and Gaudi. I know this will take some time, probably at least a year, for new ideas and these influences to rust away in my imagination before new work bubbles to the surface. Before I left Sydney I completed seven new pieces of work for 2016 *Sculpture by the Sea*, so I am excited to install this new work in the landscape. The theme of this Congress in Spain is Ceramics in Architecture and Public Space. I think the exposure of my work on the shoreline of Bondi to Tamarama will lead me on to other things. Fired ceramics is durable in all weather, as we know from roof tiles; it requires no maintenance, so potentially my works could last outside forever. This is an exciting time for me. ■

[www.merranesson.com](http://www.merranesson.com)

[@merran\\_esson](https://www.instagram.com/merran_esson)

Merran Esson is represented by Stella Downer Fine Art Gallery, Sydney  
[stelladownerfineart.com.au](http://stelladownerfineart.com.au)

- 09 Tintaldr Lines, 2005, ceramics with copper and chrome glaze, 67 x 45 x 48cm, photographer Greg Piper
- 10 Coanda Lines, 2008, ceramics with copper glazes, sizes variable, photographer Greg Piper
- 11 Catchment Bowl, 2015, ceramics and copper glaze, 17 x 32 x 28cm
- 12 Catchment Bowl (detail), 2015, ceramics and copper glaze, 17 x 32 x 28cm
- 13 Merran Esson, photographer James Esson

Courtesy the artist and Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney