

Rachel Wood: Sentient. Sturt Gallery Mittagong September–November 2019



✍ Peter Wilson 🕒 Ceramics: Art + Perception 116 2020 📌 Art + Perception 🏠 LATEST ISSUE HOME →

Through that closeness, her silent lens of observation in communicating with nature, has become the essential oeuvre of Rachel Wood's *Sentient*

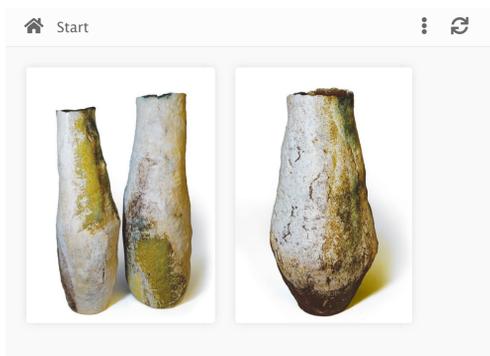
Sentient was UK-based ceramic artist Rachel Wood's first major exhibition in Australia following her residency at the Sturt Craft Centre in 2019. Wood's ceramics delight in a vision of the natural world, told through experiences of bushwalking and exploration of the remnants of Gondwanaland – from the southern highlands, the Blue Mountains, the Central Coast and the Warrumbungles – revealing the harshness and beauty of this unforgiving country. Her observations and subsequent interpretations of these landscapes have served as a basis for the exhibition.

To contextualize Wood's particular interest in Australia, her previous residency at Sturt was in 2013 where she produced a body of work entitled **Bark Vessels**. Here she cited the Australian bush and its pervading sensory presence; its eucalypts, ghost gums, scribbly gums, iron bark, their textures, their rawness and their unfettered natural state as being the basis of inspiration for her work. I was drawn to their compelling, powerful and leaning, yet fractured, forms... she stated at the time. Her exhibition, **Sentient**, is the next chapter in that story.

WOOD'S CERAMICS DELIGHT IN A VISION OF THE NATURAL WORLD, TOLD THROUGH EXPERIENCES OF BUSHWALKING AND EXPLORATION

To create her forms, Wood uses a combination of throwing, hand-building and assembling to which her personal intuitive touch is integral. She utilises the natural spontaneity of her forming and includes these marks, rips, tears and fingerprints on the glazed surfaces to reflect the journey of exploration and learning in each piece. The surfaces are layered with coloured slips and dry glazes, often heavily textured, tactile and energetic. This fusion of ideas and techniques underscores the materiality and elemental nature of her work and becomes the language of her interpretation of the landscape.

In residencies, especially far from home, the frisson of understanding new materials, different kilns, working conditions, shared studios and building a support network begin to mount. It requires a level of self-sufficiency, discipline and a willingness to be open to all possibilities.



How did Rachel Wood get to this point of being able to develop such a mature and considered body of work? After her initial college training and since the early part of this century, Wood has been working seriously with clay, as a practitioner and as a teacher of ceramics. A watershed moment came when, after having long admired the expressive and individual qualities of Robin Welch's work, she undertook a period as his studio assistant for a major sculptural project, after which he became her mentor and friend.

Robin Welch (23/7/1936 – 5/12/2019) was an important figure as a UK ceramic artist and painter. He was one of a small but influential group of artists who chose not to follow the Leach tradition but sought to create more organic, unique forms, thrown and altered with post-wheel additions heavily coloured and bold. The intuitive effects which are unique to ceramics were integral to his works. Welch and his family had strong ties to Australia, which is a story in itself, but suffice to say that his work in the Dandenong Ranges, Victoria, in establishing Mungerbar Pottery in 1960 with his art school friend, Ian Sprague, sparked a deep source of interest and inspiration in this country. Many subsequent visits followed and the textures and colours of the landscape became etched in his work.

INFUSED WITH THE CONFIDENCE GAINED FROM HER ASSOCIATION WITH WELCH, AND UNBURDENED FROM THE CONSTRAINTS OF THE UTILITARIAN, RACHEL WOOD HAS TAKEN HER OWN JOURNEY

Infused with the confidence gained from her association with Welch, and unburdened from the constraints of the utilitarian, Rachel Wood has taken her own journey. In *Sentient*, for example, walking into the light-filled space at Sturt Gallery, was like the sensory experience of walking into a tall stand of eucalypts. There were photographic images on canvas of sections tree trunks, close-ups of leaves, bark, forests. Her ceramics echoed the shapes, textures and colours of these images. There were wall panels, again exploring the qualities of bark through materiality.

Wood has exhibited extensively throughout the UK and Europe, undertaking residencies, workshops and international symposiums. Her work is held in public collections in Denmark, Germany and Australia. ■

As you set out for Ithaka, hope your road is a long one, full of adventure... don't hurry the journey at all, better if it lasts for years so you're old by the time you reach the island, wealthy with all you have gained on the way.¹



Endnotes

1 *Ithaka*, C P Cavafy. Accessed: <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/51296/ithaka-56d22eef917ec>

Image Captions

Sentient 2, 2019, stoneware clay, slip and glaze, (left: 70 x 23 cm, right: 73 x 26 cm).
Sentient 1, 2019, stoneware clay, slip and glaze, 55 x 27 cm. Image credit: Rachel Wood.
Image credit: Rachel Wood.

by Peter Wilson

Peter Wilson is a ceramic artist, writer and educator from Bathurst NSW, Australia. He worked in the UK at the Rufford Ceramic Centre in 2004 and 2007. His work reflects his interest in glaze chemistry and the effects of the fire.

Further info

Wood's workshop in Nottinghamshire is part of the Harley Foundation Studios on the Welbeck Estate.
www.rachelwoodceramics.co.uk

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