

# Take it Out of the Garden

Manningham Art Gallery, Victoria, Australia

13th Feb- 6th March 2020

Written by Bernard Kerr

**R**ed, ruddy, rubicund, rosy, the earth at its most vivified, vital and vibrant: the ubiquitous and heartening 'baked earth' that is terracotta appears in all spheres of daily experience. It is a material of diverse character. Terracotta is everywhere. It is the most common house and building brick; it is used in architecture for its warmth and mutability; in sewerage pipes and plumbing and it is in almost everyone's garden in its most humble yet most efficacious form.

The exhibition *Take it out of the Garden* was held at the Manningham Art Gallery in suburban Melbourne, Australia from the 13th February to the 6th March 2020. The show was initiated by local ceramist Jane Annois and was linked to the 20th anniversary of the Warrandyte Pottery Expo. Both events included Richard Phethean and John Higgins, two invited artists from the UK. The exhibition brought together a total of seven ceramic artists who utilize terracotta as a medium of expression in their practice, and spoke of a wider context for the material.

Terracotta as a substance has a special voice. It speaks of different things than other clays. It is decidedly different from the obdurate inflexibility of grey or brown stoneware and most decidedly dissimilar from the aloof, almost adamant hardness of glassy white porcelain. The use of terracotta brings to the fore questions about why we value certain materials above others – why there has traditionally been a hierarchy of materials associated with making art and how material and context play into complex understandings associated with taste, purity and utility.

Terracotta is also a modeling material par-excellence, used by artists over the centuries for modeling portrait busts and sculptures that can stand alone such as those of the Majapahit empire in Java to the magnificent Renaissance portrait busts and the majolica glazed masterpieces made by the Della Robbia brothers. It is also used as a stage for constructing plaster moulds in the lost wax process on the way to making bronze statuary from ancient Greece to the present day. The ancient Greeks, of course, were also masters in the control of terracotta both as a material for vessel making and in their knowledge of the chemistry of red and black iron oxide for decoration.

It is the very conviviality of terracotta, its very primitiveness, plasticity and playfulness as a medium and its ubiquity as a ceramic medium in almost all cultures across the globe that signify a meaning as the red beating heart of the planet. What blood is to the body, terracotta is to the Earth. Terracotta, in its journey from mountain or hill, has co-mingled with various fluxes such as calcium and magnesium but, most characteristically, with the red oxide of iron. Just as iron is at the core of our lifeblood in the haemoglobin molecule, red iron defines terracotta. Iron is both its strength and weakness: warm and welcoming when fired to a thousand degrees, it readily bloats and turns into dark misshapen slumped and bloated forms if over-fired.

The artists in this show, who all worked with terracotta in the tradition of the pottery vessel in various degrees of context, were keenly aware of the nature of terracotta as a medium of expression, and the rich messages inherent in this particular clay.





**Collapse Falling #2**  
(detail), Jane Sawyer.



Richard Phethean, from Cornwall, presented work that consisted of thrown and altered forms. He utilized rich red terracotta as a substrate for a range of layered coloured slips applied in a painterly manner. This emphasized the texture of the brush strokes themselves within formalist hard-edged abstract shapes. One range used a narrow array of colours under a matt glaze and consisted of an austere black offset by a creamy Naples yellow and a glaucous blue-green on top of the ochre terracotta. Other works were decorated with warm butter and honey yellow, small blue and black combinations. Sections of the surface were both gloss and unglazed matt. The works developed a visual complexity that unified the abstract decoration by mirroring lines and shapes with the compressed forms. Using a paper stenciling technique and subtle overlapping shapes and colours, the works quote some of the ceramic works of Picasso where he had reflexively used an image of pottery in order to decorate a pot. This Cubist influence is also evident through reference to the still life paintings produced by the British artist Ben Nicholson in the 1930s to 1950s. These articulated forms are flattened so as to appear to have differing volumes and shapes when viewed from different angles, reinforcing their connections to Cubist still life paintings. Handles on some forms also suggest a flattened Cubist perspective and the interplay between two and three dimensions and differing viewpoints as they uncurl like a fern frond or a hand insouciantly held against the neck or head of the body of the pot.

John Higgins, also from the UK, is able to express in his works an exuberant enjoyment of the very act of making. There is a sumptuous balance between the sobriety of the deep, dark chocolate terracotta clay body he uses and his spontaneous immediacy of expression – of ‘being in the moment’ – in the way the works are decorated. Higgins’ work exemplifies a delicious balance between potential and kinetic energy.

*Right:*  
Articulated vessel,  
Richard Phethean, 2019,  
matt honey glaze, 63 cm.

*Opposite:*  
Bowl form, John Higgins.







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The explosive intensity of his gestural expressionist marks of contrasting white slip are pitted against accents of primary yellow, intense orange set against modest inflections of cerulean blue. They speak of both a freedom from the desire for control and a state of total absorption in the task of decorating by relying on intuition and emotion rather than reason. In this way, they form a delightful counterpoint to Phethean's equally aesthetic, yet more controlled and formalist approach. His works are loose, free, spontaneous and expressive; they bring to mind links to Zen Buddhism, Abstract expressionism and artists such as William Scott, Robert Motherwell and the artist Emily Kame Knigwarreye. Influences such as the ceramic artists Dylan Bowen, Jeff Shapiro and Jean Nicolas Gerard are also evident. There is a freshness and lack of pretension that brings such a joy to viewing Higgins' work. Genuine humility combined with a keen eye and an obvious delight in art making in order to express a sense of being in the world make these works sing.





The work of Jane Sawyer also expresses spontaneity and exuberance but is tempered with a quieter degree of control – no doubt developed during her training in Japan. Her works express a sensuousness and deep love of both terracotta clay and the act of making. Her loosely thrown deliberately asymmetrical forms of bowls and platters feature an undulating rim accented with subtle, generally monochrome slip or left unglazed with a mere hint of black to highlight the sinuous, asymmetrical nature of the form. The use of black and white slips on the terracotta body formed a powerful triadic archetypal palette of red, white and black and gave the works atavistic subliminal power. The result was an instinctive response to the joyous qualities of materials: frenetic marks of the fingers in creamy white slip produced a rich trace of the artist's energy whilst the surface was at its most unctuous and yielding, yet now set in glassy perpetuity by the firing process. There were also some calmer works with clearer Japanese references to Zen and

Shinto sensibilities and a celebration of natural phenomena such as sunshine and rain in mandala formations. Other works displayed on the wall also exemplified the inherent erotic flaccid softness and plasticity of terracotta.

The red surface is all but obscured by a thick warm white unctuous slip, like fat over flesh, in the work of Megan Patey. Her thrown and press moulded forms have a purity of form and well-considered proportions that are dramatically offset intensely coloured gestural brushwork in intense colours. Deep Prussian blue, almost black, is contrasted with complementary pairs of colours such as red and green. In other pieces, lustres are utilized to bring out subtle iridescences and a complex interplay of spectral colours that combine with lightly accented crazing on the glazed surface to add further to the pieces. This work is elevated to another level by a subtle hint of the warmth of the terracotta body showing through – produced by the casual wipe of a finger scored through the wet slip.

*Above:*  
**Collapse Dust #4 & #5**, Jane Sawyer.

*Opposite:*  
Platter, Meg Patey,  
2020, reduced lustre,  
pigment on white slip,  
clear glaze, 34 x 6 cm.



This judicious mark lends a humanity and idiosyncrasy to the work. It is as if the maker has not been able to resist the temptation to draw her finger through the wet slip much as one often cannot resist the urge to touch wet paint or put one's fingers into soft wet icing of a freshly decorated cake. In a similar way to Sawyer, but perhaps in a more restrained manner, the desire to interact with the unctuous material with one's fingertips has proven irresistible.

Such gestural marks and spontaneous interaction with both the terracotta clay body and applied slips, in the form of textures and brushwork, is a unifying theme in this exhibition. Jane Annois also applies spontaneous mark-making, using slips, to her work. In her case, the brushwork of the white slip is defined by stenciled hard edges that

contain the gesture and are covered by a triadic palette of high value transparent colours. A rich warm honey, a Lincoln green and a Persian blue in vibrant gloss provide a rich contrast to the matt surface of the high-fired rich and dark terracotta clay body. In these partially glazed works, the thrown and altered forms possess a similar quality to monumental modernist architecture. The thrown and altered works possess a purity of articulated form that unfolds as one views the piece from differing viewpoints. Her work uses the interplay between expression and control in order to provide a unified whole. Other works in Annois' oeuvre almost completely obscure the textured terracotta surface. Her three-colour gloss palette is combined into a play of polychrome highlights over the cream slip surface like the sumptuous glaze over a rich and sweet gâteau.





This spectral vibrancy is spared the possibility of becoming kitsch by being contrasted by a matt black glaze on the interior of the vessels that provides a deep counterpoint and bass note to the liveliness of the exterior surface.

Helen Fuller, on the other hand, produces work of quite a different sensibility. Her intricate, finely wrought multifaceted constructions reference a wide and eclectic range of ideas. Each side of her works presents a divergent range of patterns, textures, geometries and organic quotations. Fuller's works are very finely constructed using a combination of coil and pinch techniques. Often the seams between the coils are left unjoined displaying the method of construction resulting in a meticulous scarification of the vessel's surface. The indexical thumb and finger marks leave the form pockmarked and textured with evidence of the maker's hand. Lips, holes, spouts and gaps penetrate the works in unexpected places. The juxtaposition of pattern, motif and texture occur on each facet and the use of dry chalky surfaces, partially fluxed engobes and slips give the work an archaeological quality and hint to an eclectic range of sources. Possible interpretations range from scars, nets and patterns in textile to Victorian lacework and warning signs and

symbols. References to Cycladic, and Greek pottery from the ancient world collide with ethnic quotations from the New Hebrides and Papua and New Guinea and Modernist abstractions such as Colour Field painting to Pop references. These thin and delicate constructions of constant visual surprise draw the viewer towards a complex and somewhat disjointed but intriguing set of interpretations, as one perceives each facet or face of the work.

Whilst spontaneity, gesture and freedom abound, possibly the work possessing the most overt directness of expression, is that of Holly Macdonald. Her architecturally referenced oval, crescent or circular forms are like miniature stadia or sporting arenas with apertures or 'windows' cut into them. These holes lend continuity between the interior and exterior of the works. Her work presents a considered naivety and joy of expression including schematic, symbolic drawings and symbolic colours (green grass, brown soil, sky blue etc.) as found in the work of children. She also uses a range of strategies such as including several points of view (the "draw everything principle") and extends shapes and adds additional parts to fill the space available (the "fill the format principle").

*Below:*

**Lattice work.** Holly Macdonald, 2020, terracotta, stained porcelain, porcelain slip, underglaze, ceramic crayon, 15 x 25 cm.

*Opposite top:*

Textured bowl, Jane Annois, 38 x 17 cm.

*Opposite bottom:*

Helen Fuller, hand built coil, terracotta, oxide, porcelain slip, underglaze, 25 x 25 x 18 cm.

#### About the Author

Bernard Kerr is a practicing artist working largely in the field of ceramics. He has been Curriculum Leader for the Arts at Scotch College in Perth and Director of Teaching and Learning and Middle Years coordinator at Binus School in Jakarta and at Caulfield Grammar School in Melbourne. Bernard also works as a Field Representative and Workshop Leader in Visual Arts and Theory of Knowledge for the International Baccalaureate Organization.







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Imagery of such things as chalk drawings on the pavement and references to wire fences, playgrounds, public sporting venues and all the spaces that may reside in close proximity to the safe and familiar space of the home yet are most children's first encounters with the wider world, provide the work with visual interest. The warm, brown, thin terracotta, mud-like walls signify a different connection with the earth – that of unstructured play and of developing a sense of the world through interaction with this most ubiquitous of materials.

The semiotic qualities of terracotta speak of a range of emotional and cognitive states. Artists in this exhibition have, to paraphrase Marshall McLuhan, used the medium as an important part of their message. The use of terracotta in this exhibition to construct ceramic art speaks of a diverse range of notions of purity and ubiquity, humility and honesty and that of its purpose as a medium of expression and the rich messages possible in the use of this particular clay. ■