

WESTERN EDGE

COIL AND THROW IN WESTERN AUSTRALIA

by **Bernard Kerr**

Like many people, one of my first experiences with clay was constructing a coil pot in primary school. It wasn't as easy as it looked. Now many years and pots later, I employ the technique of coiling in combination with the speed and precision of the potter's wheel and a gas torch. Coiling, throwing and drying clay in this way allows me to construct vessels of a far greater height and consistency than I could achieve throwing directly on the wheel head.

Using coils of clay to construct ceramic vessels is one of the oldest ceramic fabrication methods, seemingly ubiquitous amongst all civilisations with a ceramic tradition. In most agricultural societies, large-scale ceramic vessels were created in order to store food and drink. Coils paddled rhythmically using the circular motion of a turntable to develop form and symmetry – the production of ceramic storage vessels has been a vitally important human activity.

In contemporary times, when combined with the control afforded by the electric potter's wheel and speed drying using a gas torch or heat gun, it is possible to construct a very large pot using coils in less than a day.



Bela Kotai, *Feng Three*, 2006, coil and throw stoneware form with added extrusions, fired to 1300°C, h.110cm, w.45cm; photo: artist



Bela Kotai, using the Throwmaster and adding a coil, 2023; photos: courtesy artist

This coil and throw method has particular resonance in Western Australia where ceramicists have utilised the technique to a significant degree. A key individual involved in propagating the technique is Bela Kotai. Kotai arrived in Western Australia as an infant, he was born in 1947 on the journey, as his family escaped the communist rule that developed in Hungary at the end of the Second World War. He was trained in ceramics by his father Francis Kotai, an influential sculptor and ceramicist. Bela subsequently graduated with a degree in design from the Western Australian Institute of Technology (now Curtin University) though he was already highly skilled from working with his father since he was a teenager.

A consummate thrower, Kotai started throwing large vessels in the late seventies to make a visual statement. His central European background drew him in a different aesthetic direction to the Leach-Cardew-Hamada style dominant at the time. The sculptural and monumental potential of the vessel form and making a 'loud statement' in clay was a quest. Large vessels develop sculptural power when they reach a certain size, especially when they begin to approach a human scale.

Kotai synthesised his coil and throw technique based on a number of discoveries and influences. Using a heat source to dry the vessel as it was being fabricated came from the veteran New Zealand potter Harry Davis. Davis visited Perth in the early 1980s and used flaming tins of methylated spirits inside the pot to facilitate drying. The charismatic American Don Reitz visited

Perth and Fremantle a few years later at the invitation of the doyen of Western Australian ceramics at the time, Joan Campbell. Reitz burst onto the nascent Perth craft scene full of energy and offered a vision of clay as a vibrant material full of expressive and experimental possibilities. He also looked at the ceramic medium in terms of fine art. Reitz worked on a large scale, manipulated thrown forms, and, like Davis, used a gas torch to speed dry his work during construction. Reitz had a rather galvanising effect on the local community, many of whom had been educated in the Staffordshire traditions of the bucolic English countryside and the quiet Zen path offered by Leach and his acolytes.

In Kotai's version of coil and throw, he first throws a narrow base, speed dries this with a gas torch and then adds coils onto the freshly stiffened clay. He throws the coils downwards to facilitate joining, then uses a rib or steel kidney to develop the form. This technique requires a particular methodology and a suitable clay body. Clays designed and used for small functional objects that vitrify are often unsuitable for a larger constructed mass and can lead to large forms distorting and slumping in the kiln. Clays for coil and throw pieces taller than 50cm or so should be somewhat refractory, have good standing strength and low shrinkage. Dunting may be an issue if the body is too high in silica and the firing too rapid, therefore additions of grog are often advantageous.

Another consideration in the coil and throw method is wall thickness, as irregular cross-sectional walls may cause issues. This technique depends on consistent and progressive drying to develop stiffness as it gains height. If thickness varies, sections will dry and shrink at different rates when heated. It can also be helpful to throw dry. The potter must also be acutely aware of the moisture content of the clay if inconsistencies in the visual flow of the form are to be avoided.

To counter some of these challenges, Kotai has devised a set of rotating wheels on long metal arms with an adjustable gap between them. They run on the newly joined clay wall to create a consistent thickness. With this invention, he is able to produce large forms constructed in one day that are incredibly lightweight. He has magnanimously allowed others to copy and manufacture the device in Western Australia where they are almost universally known as Bela's Wheels although he refers to them as the 'Throwmaster'.

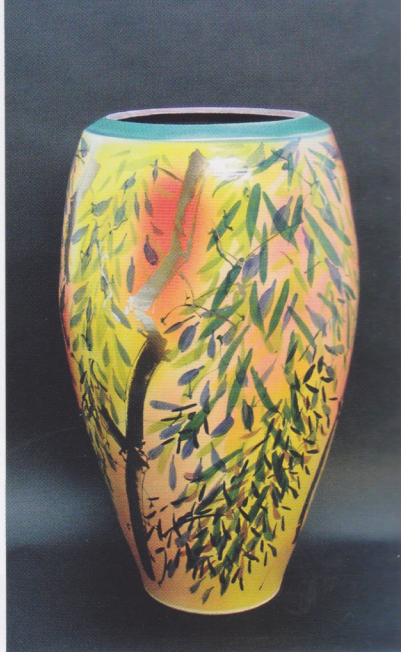
Kotai's coil and throw work is characterised by structure, scale and monumentality that has subtle somatic references. He approaches his work as an intellectual process of resolving visual puzzles. Classical music is an organising principle, with notions of tension and resolution, point and counterpoint, theme and motif central. Largely working in subdued monochromatic matte surfaces, Kotai produces forms of unified sculptural expression. These simple classical forms that foray into romantic subtexts communicate abstract ideas related to rhythm, unity and harmony in three dimensions.

Bela Kotai's influence on Western Australian ceramic artists through teaching and administering in the TAFE system has been profound. Many Western Australian ceramic artists (including myself) have developed their own version of the coil and throw technique. Notable amongst these are four makers who have been working in clay for decades: Gary Zeck, Warrick Palmateer, Lee Woodcock and Njalikwa Chongwe.

MATERIALS & PROCESS

Gary Zeck, *Sunrise*, 2010, midfire stoneware
fired to 1200°C, h.71cm, w.42cm
Photo: Jan Zeck

Gary Zeck worked with Kotai at Eastern Goldfields Technical College in the 1980s. Initially trained as a painter, Zeck became captivated by working in clay on a large scale. Zeck employs coil and throw using only his hands. The vessels are coated with an opaque glaze onto which he paints coloured slips, stains or onglaze enamels, then scrapes back to the substrate in a defining motif using specially developed tools with flat faces. These surfaces come alive with transparent gloss glazes, or glazes that break over the textured surfaces. The large-scale vessel enables Zeck to combine painterly and sculptural qualities.



Warrick Palmateer was a student of Bela Kotai's in his final year at Perth Technical College in 1988. He describes observing the coil and throw method as life changing, and was immediately inspired to make large works. As a studio assistant for Joan Campbell, one of his first achievements was to throw ten Spanish amphorae forms that were two metres tall and 1.2 metres wide.

Warrick Palmateer, 2018; photo: Matthew Bettinaglio





Lee Woodcock loading *Elemental* into his wood-kiln



Lee Woodcock, two coil and throw vessels; photos: courtesy artist

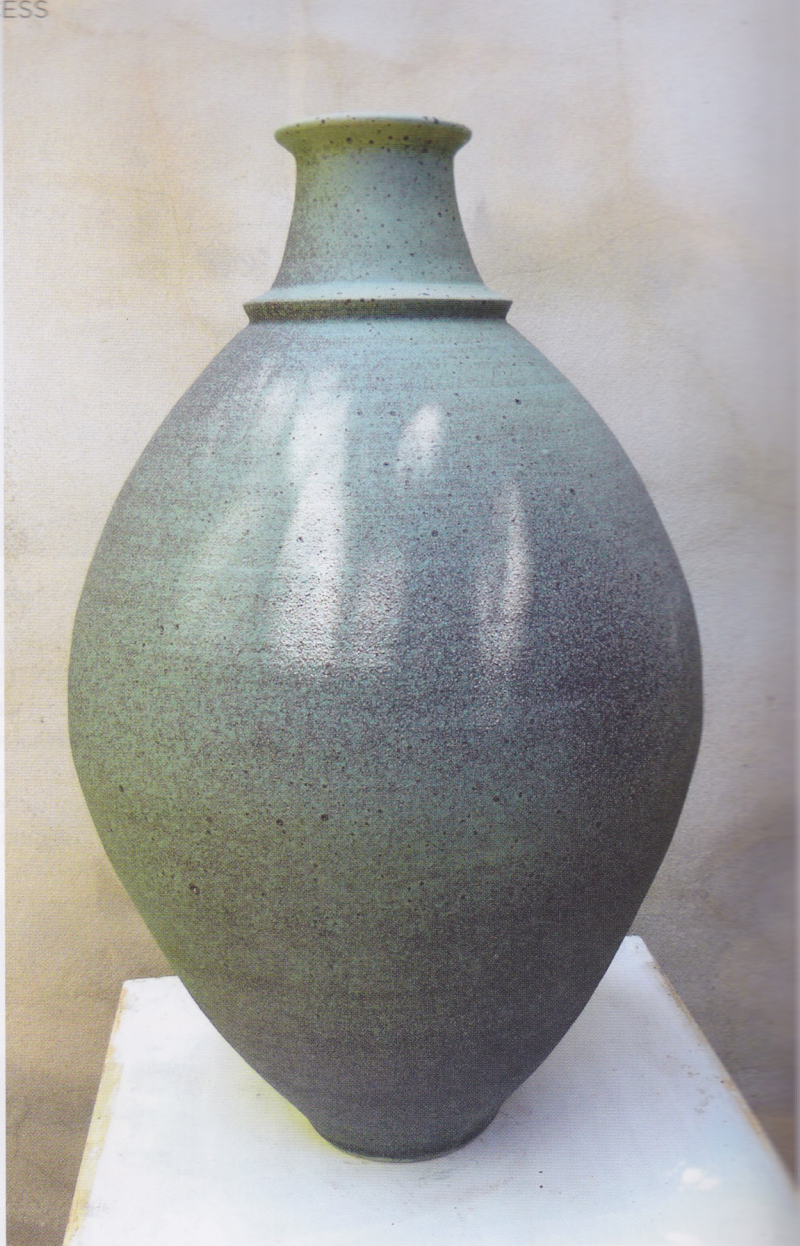
Palmateer rejoices in the technical challenge of producing large spherical works with small bases that balance height with width and have visual 'lift'. A keen surfer, Palmateer's inspiration is the marine environment of Western Australia. His work speaks of place – the fragility and ruggedness of the limestone and granite coastline, the clarity of the turquoise sea, wave motions and currents. He cites fishing floats, sea anemones, sea urchins and seashells as inspirations, but equally his superbly articulated spherical forms can be viewed as references to organic forms such as eggs, fruits or seeds, or, in a quantum leap of scale, suns, planets or moons. The opening in his forms suggests notions of inside and outside and allows the viewer's eye to be led to the top of the work. The surfaces of the vessels are covered with thick gestural slips and glazes, and are once fired.

A 2018 residency at Brikmakers (now Midland Brick) factory allowed Palmateer the opportunity to work in an industrial ceramics space and use specially developed brick clays, industrial firing techniques and machinery to construct twelve major works, the largest of which weighed over 200 kilos.

Lee Woodcock constructs anthropomorphic vessels of a human scale or larger in heavily grogged local clays that are woodfired. He came to coil and throw by an amalgam of influences. For him, work on this scale acquires a mystical quality. It references ancient votive figures and pan-cultural myths that speak of humankind being formed from clay. The work being 'forged by fire' is not unlike the trials and tribulations of the journey of life. His act of making and the alchemical processes of woodfiring embody patience, focus, ancient mythologies and connection with the earth.



Warrick Palmateer, *Meridian Arc IV*
2018, brick clay and porcelain, cone 5
h.70cm, w.70cm; photo: Robert Frith

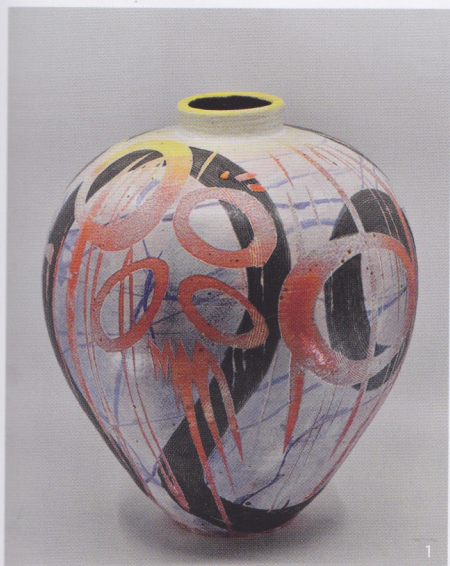


Njalikwa Chongwe

Water jar, 2022

1300°C; photo: artist

Njalikwa Chongwe is a former TAFE student and now a colleague of Kotai's who uses the technique to construct vessels based on antecedents from his Zambian heritage. His large forms are influenced by storage jars, utilitarian pots, woven objects, and wooden carvings from central Africa, but have surfaces that reflect aspects of the Western Australian environment. Chongwe's vessels are large and generous, glazed with a range of dry and matte surfaces. They possess a quiet solemnity and timeless presence and speak of the nurturing nature of vessels to store food and drink.



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Through a particular technique observed, attempted, practised and learnt, individual pathways towards artistic expression evolve. Since my first encounter with clay, and like these artists influenced by Kotai – Zeck, Woodcock, Chongwe and Palmateer – I have also developed an idiosyncratic method, responding to place. Observing and emulating coil and throw has been seminal to my practice, as it has been to many others. Coil and throw as a technique has contributed to a rich and diverse inquiry into possibilities related to the vessel in Western Australia.

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1 **Bernard Kerr**, *The Rites of Spring*, 2022, stoneware, layered stencilled slips, 1300°C, h.50cm w.40cm; photo: artist

2 **Lee Woodcock**, *Hearth*, 2022 coil and throw, woodfired, cone 12 h.135cm, w.40cm; photo: artist



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