

The Professionalism of Ted Secombe

Article by Owen Rye

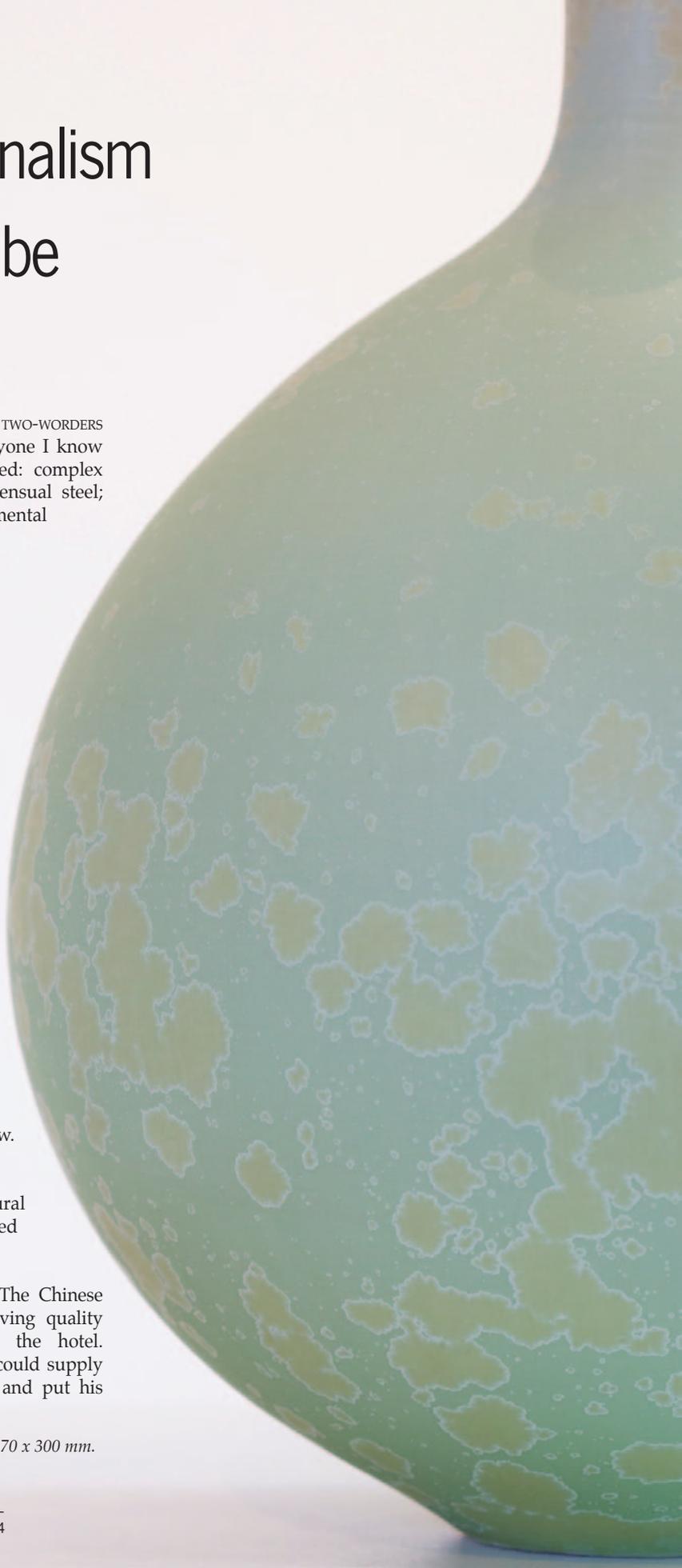
TED SECOMBE HAS ACCUMULATED MORE TWO-WORDERS characterising his work than anyone I know about. Commentators have noted: complex glazes; rich finishes; exquisite pots; sensual steel; simpler forms; sensuous curves; monumental size; meticulous planning, challenging techniques. Let's allow the images here to tell that story – we can all read pictures – and go straight to the bigger story behind all that, of his professional journey, his ability to get commissions and his approach to publicity. In these areas, combining good fortune and good sense, he is a master. Few Australians involved in ceramics have managed this aspect of their professionalism so well. He can teach us all something.

It begins with something we all know already; it is who you know that counts. But in real life that is only part of the equation. Once the contact has established the potential it is up to the recipient to make the most of the opportunity. Knowing the King of Sweden and having him ask you to make some expensive dinner plates is of no help if you cannot make dinner plates, or quickly learn how.

Secombe could take advantage of an opportunity when one arose – in spectacular fashion. The son of a structural engineer friend, Simon Gay, was involved in meetings with architects, engineers and others planning a high end hotel in Singapore, the Ritz Carlton Millenia. The Chinese investors expressed an interest in having quality art, including ceramics, throughout the hotel. When Simon suggested that Secombe could supply ceramics, Secombe flew to Singapore and put his

Round Vase Form. 2013.

Satin matte crystal glaze with copper on porcelain. 370 x 300 mm.

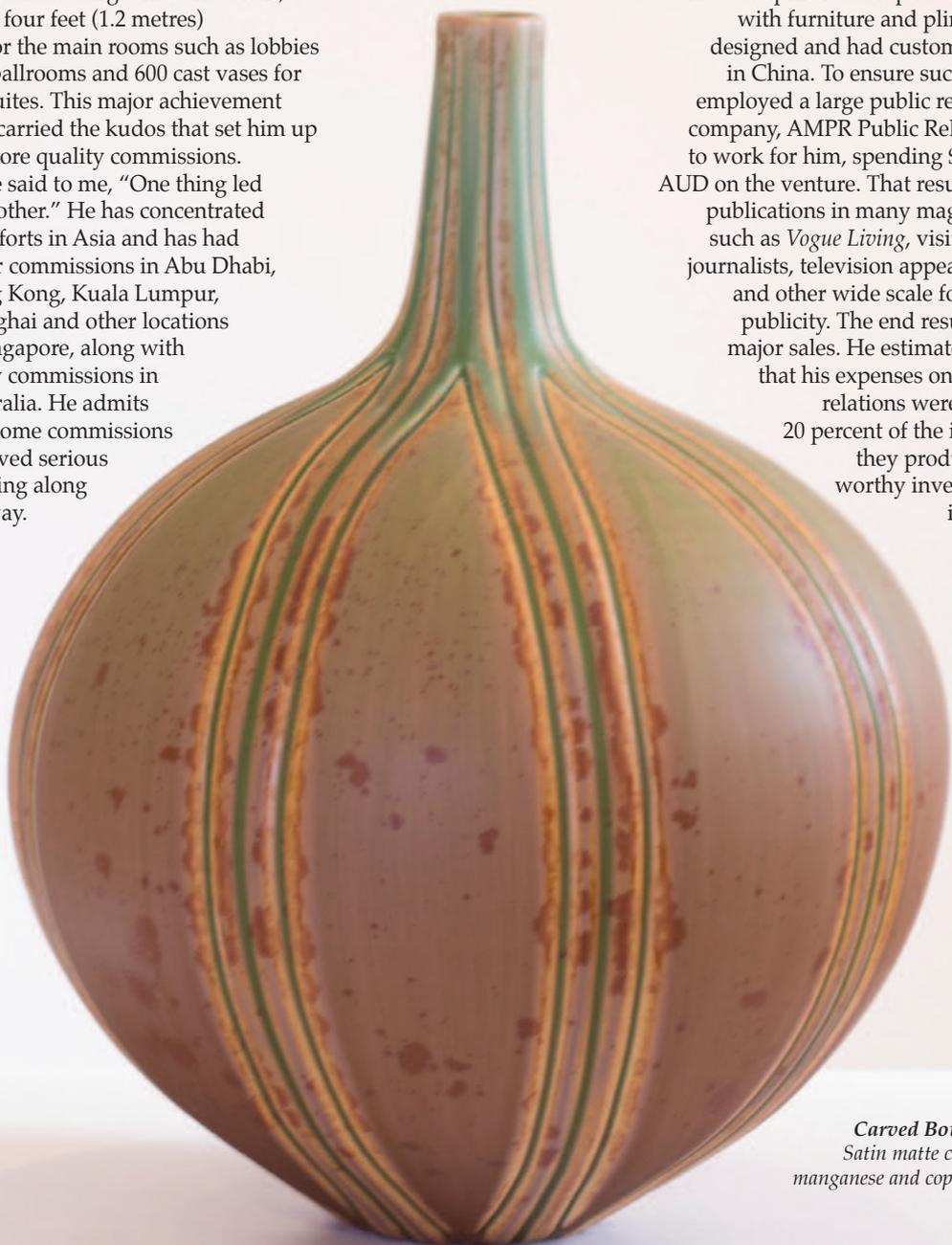


pitch to the organisers. With 20 years' experience in making ceramics he felt confident that he could do the job well. Frank Stella and Dale Chihuly were two of many other artists involved. Part of Chihuly's contribution is illustrated in his entry in Wikipedia and Frank Stella's *Cornucopia*, a three-ton sculpture fashioned from fibreglas, greets guests as they arrive¹.

A challenge such as this – and working in company such as that – would frighten most of us off, but Secombe decided that with 20 years of experience he had the skill and the confidence. In his words, "I was not shy, and had no shame." And so it came to be – in 1996 and 1997 he was commissioned as one of the suppliers of artwork for the hotel – 50 large thrown vessels, up to four feet (1.2 metres) tall for the main rooms such as lobbies and ballrooms and 600 cast vases for the suites. This major achievement then carried the kudos that set him up for more quality commissions. As he said to me, "One thing led to another." He has concentrated his efforts in Asia and has had major commissions in Abu Dhabi, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Shanghai and other locations in Singapore, along with many commissions in Australia. He admits that some commissions involved serious learning along the way.

These achievements would constitute a full and successful career for most people, but Secombe has taken it further, again through knowing the 'right person' albeit more indirectly. As a friend of the aboriginal artist Lin Onus, he purchased some paintings in 1996 for \$4000 AUD, a price he could manage. In 2004 he decided to sell the paintings because their value had risen exponentially. The income from this sale was \$78,000 AUD. Having access to this level of previously unanticipated funds Secombe made another major move, one that would probably not have occurred to many ceramists.

After several exhibitions in other venues he decided to exhibit in his home gallery, now a sophisticated space stocked with furniture and plinths he designed and had custom made in China. To ensure success he employed a large public relations company, AMPR Public Relations, to work for him, spending \$30,000 AUD on the venture. That resulted in publications in many magazines such as *Vogue Living*, visits from journalists, television appearances and other wide scale forms of publicity. The end result was major sales. He estimates now that his expenses on public relations were about 20 percent of the income they produced, a worthy investment indeed.



Carved Bottle Form. 2013.
Satin matte crystal glaze with
manganese and copper on porcelain.
420 x 330 mm.

In turn this led to many benefits including further sales from exhibitions organised at his home gallery, sales from exhibitions in other locations (both in Australia and internationally) and further commissions, all promoted by AMPR. Now, due presumably to general cuts in corporate spending, commissions come along more slowly and Secombe has taken a different approach. If offered a commission, he subcontracts it out to others, working in collaboration with them. He designs the forms, formulates the glazes and then has someone else make the work.

He has recently branched out into sculpture, utilising highly stylised bird forms. He makes the forms from clay and then has them made from sheet steel by skilled metalworkers in Xiamen, China. They are finished with chromed surfaces or with a lustrous fumed finish using a process termed PVD (physical vapour deposition). Up to seven or eight feet (two metres) in height, they are selling well for good prices.

Where did all this come from? We might assume a sophisticated education in the best possible art school followed by a masters degree in business practice; but the reality is far from that. Secombe started life as a scientist, with a degree in biochemistry but, after beginning work in the field, soon became disenchanted with the regimented and restrained lifestyle of the laboratory. He travelled in Europe in 1978 and on return shared a house with Roger Parker, who was apprenticed to the potter Philip McConnell. Secombe's mother had also made pots and so curiosity led him to dabble with clay, gradually becoming more interested in the challenge of making successful work. He has been a full-time potter since 1979. All along he has learnt from that wisest of old masters, curiosity; the guide that asks the fundamental creative question: 'What if...?'

An interest in copper reds and celadons produced a few years of genteel poverty and then in 1980 he built a woodfired salt glazing kiln. His long term *metier* was realised when he began to experiment



with exotic glazes. As a general category these would be classed as crystalline, but in the hand they are far from the garish colours and glittery surfaces usually identified with that class. The colour combinations, distribution of crystals and often the matte soft surfaces are unlike anything I have seen elsewhere.

A reasonable guess would be that his scientific background has led to a long series of careful experiments to develop these qualities, but he confesses to an approach involving a mental untidiness that is in complete opposition to the character of his finished work. He is oblivious to the condition of his 'pigsty' workshop. His wife Ann occasionally takes over and cleans it up. His 'notebooks' are an untidy jumble of unmatched pages randomly filed in a decomposing folder. His approach to glaze formulation is to test constantly, usually on the basis of wondering what would happen if he tried some combination of material and

Facing page: Pod Form (Detail). 2013.

Satin matte crystal glaze on porcelain carved. 430 x 150 mm.

This page: Group of 3 Vases. 2013. Satin matte crystal glaze carved porcelain. Pale Blue. 480 x 300 mm.

Shaded Vase. 400 x 160 mm. Bottle. 320 x 160 mm.





Above: Porcelain Bowl. 2014.

Satin matte crystalline glaze twice fired to cone 11.

Below: Group of 3 Vase Forms. 2014 Satin matte crystal glazed porcelain.

Pink. 285 x 150 mm. Green. 320 x 290 mm. Orange. 240 x 170 mm.

Facing page: Carved Pod Form. 2013. Satin matte crystal glaze on porcelain. 430 x 150 mm.

Facing page inset: Summer 2014 in my Studio.



firing that could never work (but sometimes does). The student of ceramics, however, should not be inspired to adopt such a seemingly random approach to glazes until they have many years of learning just what does what behind them, like Secombe.

He is obsessed with precision, helped by a superb sense of line and form and a level of skill rarely matched. Many of his forms for example are fluted – all by hand, but with millimetre-perfect lines. His work relates to no previous period in ceramics; it has an entirely contemporary and entirely personal style resulting from precision and skill. It is easy to see how it has drawn commissions placing it quite appropriately in contemporary architecture; it can and does sit comfortably on the pages of any contemporary design magazine. Surprisingly, Secombe has had little interest in seeing his work in ceramics magazines; there may be a message there.

And briefly – back to his artwork. His web site will provide the reader with a degree of detail not necessary to repeat here.

For the many who look at pictures rather than reading words there are images of pots and steel sculptures.

The pots are refined, elegant, even classical; the steel sculptures have a Brancusi-ness of curvaceous finesse.

Alluding back to the first paragraph of this story, his work carries some quality that brings out an almost unseemly excess of adjectives. In simple Australian language, this is good stuff. Straight to the pool room with it².

ENDNOTES

1. <http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/Singapore/PhotoGallery.htm> Other artworks are shown in <http://www.ritzcarlton.com/en/Properties/Singapore/>
2. A reference to the Australian movie *The Castle*. If you have not seen it, you should.

Owen Rye from Australia is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics and an editorial adviser to *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. His ceramic work is woodfired. He writes extensively. Ted Secombe (www.tedsecombe.com). All photos by Adrienne Gilligan Photography.

