

Sound vessels

An Idea Needing To Be Made: Contemporary Ceramics
Heide, Victoria. Until October 20

**CHRISTOPHER
ALLEN**



Contemporary artists working in clay explore the idea of the vessel and its continued use and reinvention

We sometimes tend to romanticise the life of the hunter-gatherer, particularly when we are deploring the worst aspects of modern life. Exasperated by obtuse materialism and the thoughtless destruction of the natural world in the pursuit of shortsighted gain, we can be tempted to think of subsistence ways of life as more authentic as well as less damaging to the environment.

This can be rather facile and ultimately hypocritical though, since none of us actually has the slightest desire to live with stone-age technology or social norms. For all the terrible problems with life in the modern consumer economy, it is hard to imagine that anyone would prefer a world without modern medicine, modern communications and the countless other conveniences we take for granted.

Less obviously but even more fundamentally, we cannot imagine turning back the clock on the development of the human mind. We probably don't really want to live before Homer, Sappho, Sophocles and so many subsequent authors taught us to understand our feelings, or before Socrates and his successors taught us to think critically. Nor would we choose to pass our lives in superstition and dread, locked in rigid social roles and atavistic tribal customs. And at the most elementary level, do we want to live from hand to mouth, struggling every day to kill or



C. Capurro

collect enough food to subsist on? For the real change in the human story, what begins the movement from prehistory into history, is the progressive mastery of agriculture — what is rightly called the Neolithic Revolution — which began about 10,000 years ago, after the last Ice Age, and led, about 5000 years ago, to the first complex civilisations.

Growing cereal crops allows a portion of the community to provide food for everyone, freeing the rest to develop other crafts and occupations: making clothes, shoes, tools and dwellings, managing collective resources and defending the new community against the predations of less advanced neighbours.

These new communities require government and management, because harvests are seasonal, and food must be stored and rationed to last for the whole annual cycle; it is also critical for the best of the crop to be set apart as seed for the next sowing. But how do you store large quantities of grain or any other produce in safe and dry conditions?

This is why ceramics can really be considered the first of the arts of civilisation, and why even the Neolithic Period is divided into the Aceramic and the Ceramic periods. Storage pots and jars were the first satisfactory vessels that humans developed, long before the working of metal and the later bronze vessels or even later wooden barrels held together with steel bands.

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the next generation of crucial advances in the production of food. One could not even begin to imagine fermenting grape juice to produce wine or extracting oil from olives without ceramic vessels to hold these new products. Milk, yoghurt and cheese all require jars either for production or storage. The same is true for beer and other early fermented drinks.

This is why ceramics are among the oldest artefacts we encounter in museums all over the world — this and the fact that fired clay is a breakable but virtually imperishable material, so that pots and their fragments live on virtually forever. Monte Testaccio, in the south of Rome, is an artificial hill formed by an ancient dump for used olive oil jars.

It is also why the art of ceramics, ever since, has been inseparable from the function of the vessel, whether large or small, jar, vase, bowl or cup. Ceramics have other uses, notably for tiles and even for strictly utilitarian things such as pipes, but their role as vessels is paramount, and it underpins all the subsequent aesthetic elaborations of the form. For ceramics are also a perfect illustration of the way that humans love to decorate the most functional items for both symbolic and aesthetic purposes.

The variety of interpretations of the vessel in recent and contemporary ceramics is the subject of this exhibition at Heide, curated by Glenn Barkley. It is well chosen and on the whole attractively designed, even if the collection of recycled and painted tables in the central room is a slightly distracting conceit and has entailed spoiling many of the tables by cutting notches out of their edges to fit them together.

What sets the tone for the exhibition is the homage to Gwyn Hanssen Pigott (1935-2013), whose works are beautifully displayed in the second main room. Pigott was an example to younger potters of the way that tradition and innovation, mastery of craft and poetic expression can be not only reconciled but synthesised.

The forms she uses include both bowls in the classic Chinese tradition going back to the Sung and Yuan dynasties, and more vernacular shapes derived from bottles and tumblers. But her bottles are never literally bottles; they have become ideal shapes, each with a subtly different character, higher or lower shoulders, longer or shorter necks.

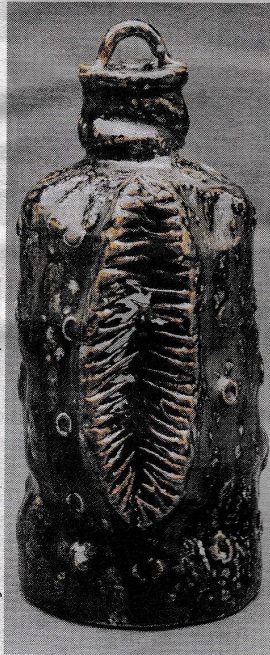
Her bowls, cups and beakers are all executed with exquisite refinement and light, elegant bodies, and glazed both in traditional celadons and in other different but equally subtle hues; often interior and exterior are glazed differently, evoking different sorts of dialogue between the inside and outside of the vessels, as well as dialogues between adjacent pieces.

As all who are familiar with her work are aware, Pigott showed her ceramic pieces in sets, inspired by the still life paintings of Giorgio Morandi. The painter was able to use the very minimalism of his material to evoke the figure groupings of history paintings, only stripped back to subtle suggestions of intimacy, distance, dominance and self-effacement.

Pigott achieves similar effects with her carefully composed assemblages, juxtaposing taller and shorter, overlapping, placing one in front of the other, and so forth. But a particular secret is in the way she plays with deliberate asymmetry: the mouth of a beaker or bowl may not be perfectly circular, but may stretch very slightly in one direction or the other; our expectation of perfect or near-perfect roundness is so strong, however, that this is enough to produce an irresistible sense of reaching or even yearning, and this imbues her compositions, for all their stillness, with a particular dynamism.

Pippin Drysdale's *Splendour at Black Rock, East Kimberley* (2018-19, detail), left; Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's *Soft Still Life*, above; Kang Hyo Lee's *Puncheon Mountain-water* (2013), below left; Laurie Steer's *Suck of Air* (2019), below; King Houndekpinkou's *I Swam in Polluted Waters ... Polluted of Sorrow* (2019), bottom

Courtesy the artist and Bowerbank Ninow, Auckland



Gallerie Vallois, Paris/NY; Minnato Gallery, Tokyo



Of the more recent artists, some take their cue from Pigott, like Kirsten Coelho, who similarly arranges her vessels in groups, and similarly seeks inspiration in vernacular forms, but in her case the enamel dishes and pots that were common in an earlier generation. Her work reminds us that ceramics has often drawn on either natural shapes like gourds or the forms produced by other arts, especially metalwork.

Coelho's work is largely white, but some of the other artists use colour more or less intensely. Pippin Drysdale, for example, also has a collection of vessels like Pigott, but they are larger, more colourful and less reticent and intense. They have their own drama, however, in the contrast between intense red interiors and outer surfaces glazed in more sober earth colours.

Vases have an age-old association with the female body and the womb, so vivid red interiors have sensual associations. Far more explicitly sexual and menacing are the strange little pieces by Laurie Steer, many of which have mouths armed with spikes, sometimes reminiscent of those traps designed to let fish get in but not out again, and one of which seems almost explicitly sexual in its vertical opening.

Also evoking marine associations, but hardly threatening ones, are the tactile and richly coloured vases by Simone Fraser — if one can call something a vase when its body is perforated with openings. I have observed Fraser at work and it is fascinating to watch how these complex walls are built up by hand; when coloured in particular they look almost as though made of coral.

I have also had the opportunity to watch King Houndekpinkou at the wheel, and he similarly uses a combination of complex hand building and highly coloured glazes, though Fraser uses dry glazes that produce a matt effect and he uses normal glazes, but in a remarkable range of colours to produce an effect that at first sight is one of decorative extravagance.

Houndekpinkou's work is not as fanciful as it may seem, however: the surface decoration is built up around a stable core form. Coincidentally, in an adjacent room that contains interesting complementary displays, he has included a diary, open to a page where he speaks of being bullied in his childhood, and learning not to care what others thought of him: the vases too have a theatrical exterior but a core of stillness and self-possession.

The exhibition includes several other artists, all worthy of consideration to greater or lesser degrees. Nicolette Johnson, whose work is on the cover, has some elegant forms, but the device of cladding them all in the same glazed balls becomes a bit mechanical. Kate Malone's work is interesting but a little self-conscious, though her Snapdragon Seed Bank is an intriguing and slightly threatening object.

In addition to the room containing numerous additional pieces or alternatively items of memorabilia by the exhibiting artists and even by the curators and others associated with the gallery, there is another small room with a display of test pieces, helping visitors to appreciate some of the complexity of this art: for in fact ceramics is a combination of three different crafts: wheel-throwing, glazing and firing, each of which requires different kinds of expertise.

A final room contains a surprising and striking display: three enormous hand-built and floor-standing vessels by Kang Hyo Lee, one of the most important living Korean potters, who spent years recovering the almost lost art of making the traditional onggi storage jars, which were once used for everything from storing water to preparing and storing pickled vegetables like kimchi.

The distinctive form and glazes of the onggi vases were developed in the 14th and 15th centuries, in the Joseon period, and replaced the more formal celadon glazes of the previous period. The onggi vase is low-fired, giving it the porosity and breathability that are favourable to fermentation, and the glaze is a combination of white slip that is brushed on quickly and spontaneously, and a celadon glaze to lend the pot a greenish hue.

These works have a profound quality of spontaneity and authenticity, like the deliberately rough cups made for the Zen tea ceremony, and yet the potter is said to have made and destroyed hundreds in his first years of learning to master the art. They are powerful vessels, mute and self-contained, and yet speaking of the care with which they have been formed and the centuries of humble and dedicated tradition from which they have arisen.