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The influence of context on the handmade ceramic vessel: A practice-led investigation into the potential of wheel-thrown vessels within the restaurant and art gallery environments.

AN EXEGESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF THE  
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## Declaration of Originality

I, ..... hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations and paraphrases attributable to other authors.

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# CONTENTS

<b>Abstract</b>	vi
<b>List of Illustrations</b>	vii
<b>Introduction</b>	1
Context	3
Challenges and Conclusions	6
Chapter Outline	7
<b>Chapter One: Craft and Hand Making</b>	8
Introduction	8
Historical Context	8
Contemporary Revival of the Hand Made and Ceramics	14
Conclusion	17
<b>Chapter Two: The Restaurant Context and Considering Practical Use</b>	19
Introduction	19
The Mocan Project	19
The Slow Food Movement and an Aesthetic Resolution	20
Ben Richardson	24
The Monster Project	28
Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Lines of Profile and Movement	29
Experiencing the Vessels at Monster	31



Transitioning to the Art Gallery Context	32
Conclusion	38
 <b>Chapter Three: The Art Gallery Context, Difference as Continuity and The</b>	
<b>Hybrid Object–Image</b>	39
Introduction	39
Studio Works	39
Repetition	42
Continued Studio Exploration	43
The Vessel Form	45
Kirsten Coelho and The Ceramic Still Life	50
The Hybrid Object–Image	53
Geert Lap and Abstraction	57
Final Studio Works	60
Conclusion	65
 <b>Conclusion</b>	67
 <b>Bibliography</b>	70
Works cited	70
Additional reading	72

## Abstract

My research explores the influence of context on the interpretation and artistic potential of the hand made ceramic vessel. My process has involved making a variety of objects and reflecting upon them within the context of two specific environments: the restaurant and the art gallery. Working in collaboration with two restaurants in Canberra, I explored the relationship between the Slow Movement and contemporary hand made ceramics. Making work for the art gallery context, I sought to challenge the traditional concepts of 'function' and 'use' by abstracting familiar tableware forms and surfaces. The restaurant and art gallery contexts offer different and unique qualities that influence meaning and creative potential of the ceramic vessel. My research investigates what is gained and what is lost in tailoring work for these two environments.

## List of Illustrations

All images not otherwise attributed are of the author's own work or photography.

**Fig. 1.** Les Blakebrough, *Teapot*, c. 1965. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 23 x 23 x 26 cm. Made for Sturt Pottery in NSW. Australian Art Sales Digest. <http://www.aasd.com.au/index.cfm/list-all-works/?concat=BlakebroughLes> (accessed 3 March, 2016).

**Fig. 2.** *Mocan Plate dark*, 2014. Wheel-thrown Stoneware, 30 x 30 x 2 cm. Photo: the author, 2014.

**Fig. 3.** *Mocan Plate light*, 2014. Wheel-thrown Stoneware, 30 x 30 x 2 cm. Photo: from the Mocan and Green Grout Instagram feed @mocanandgg, 2015.

**Fig. 4.** Ben Richardson, *untitled*, 2011. Wheel-thrown Stoneware, 20 x 20 x 12 cm. Photo: the author, 2014.

**Fig. 5.** Ben Richardson, *four untitled dishes*, 2011. Wheel-thrown Stoneware, 20 x 20 x 12 cm each. Photo: the author, 2014.

**Fig. 6.** *Monster Grouping*, 2014. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 100 x 32 x 5 cm. Photo: the author, 2014.

**Fig. 7.** *Monster Grouping* (detail), 2014. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 31 x 31 x 3 cm. Photo: the author, 2014.

**Fig. 8.** Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, *At the gates*, 2003. Wheel-thrown porcelain, 120 x 34 x 30 cm. From *Less is More: Morandi and Hanssen Pigott*, 5 Mar - 8 May, 2011. Newcastle Art Gallery, Newcastle, [http://www.nag.org.au/exhibitions/past/2011/artist\\_gwyn\\_hanssen\\_pigott\\_at\\_the\\_gates\\_2003](http://www.nag.org.au/exhibitions/past/2011/artist_gwyn_hanssen_pigott_at_the_gates_2003) (accessed 2 Feb, 2016).

**Fig. 9.** *Mocan and Monster Tableware* (exhibition detail), 2014. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 31 x 31 x 3cm each. Photo: the author, 2015.

**Fig. 10.** Julian Stair, *Quotidian*, wheel-thrown stoneware, marble, linen and wood 4 x 2.5 x 2m. From *Quotidian*, 13 Nov - 10 Jan, 2015. Corvi-Mora, <http://www.corvi-mora.com/news/132/34/Julian-Stair-Quotidian-13-November-2014---10January-2015/> (accessed 28 Mar, 2016).

**Fig. 11.** Julian Stair, *Quotidian*, wheel-thrown stoneware, marble, linen and wood 4 x 2.5 x 2m. From *Quotidian*, 13 Nov - 10 Jan, 2015. Corvi-Mora, <http://www.corvi-mora.com/news/132/34/Julian-Stair-Quotidian-13-November-2014---10January-2015/> (accessed 28 Mar, 2016).

**Fig. 12.** *Weight*, 2015. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 40 x 40 x 4 cm. Photo: the author, 2015.

**Fig. 13.** *Grouping no. 5*, 2015. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 50 x 40 x 20 cm. Photo: the author, 2015.

**Fig. 14.** *Grouping no. 6*, 2015. Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain, 40 x 45 x 16 cm. Photo: the author, 2015.

**Fig. 15.** *Shift*, 2015. Wheel-thrown porcelain, 220 x 9 x 13 cm. Photo: the author, 2015.

**Fig. 16.** *Hollow Study no. 5*, 2015. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 15 x 15 x 28 cm. Photo: the author, 2015.

**Fig. 17.** *Grouping no. 1*, 2015. Wheel-thrown stoneware, 160 x 60 x 16 cm. Photo: Yasmin Idriss, 2015.

**Fig. 18.** *Transition*, 2015. Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain, 155 x 60 x 16 cm. Photo: Yasmin Idriss, 2015

**Fig. 19.** Kirsten Coelho, *What We Thought We Needed* (2015). Wheel-thrown porcelain, matt and white glaze, banded iron oxide and saturated iron glaze, 60 x 25 x 22cm. From *The City of Hobart Art Prize 2015*. Tasmanian Museum and

Art Gallery, Hobart, <http://thisisnofantasy.com/exhibition/winner-city-of-hobart-art-prize/> (accessed 20 March, 2016).

**Fig. 20.** Geert Lap, *Mist*, 1985. Wheel-thrown stoneware. 35 x 25 x 20 cm. Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam. <http://www.stedelijk.nl/en/artwork/12549-mist> (accessed 2 August, 2015).

**Fig. 21.** *Blue Composition*, 2016. Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain. 50 x 30 x 25 cm. Photo: Art Atelier: Andrew Sikorski, 2016.

**Fig. 22.** *Peat Composition*, 2016. Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain. 42 x 29 x 29 cm. Photo: Art Atelier: Andrew Sikorski, 2016.

**Fig. 23.** *Grey Composition*, 2016. Wheel-thrown stoneware. 32 x 32 x 43 cm. Photo: Art Atelier: Andrew Sikorski, 2016.

## Introduction

My research asks how context informs our interpretation of the hand made ceramic vessel, and how it influences the artistic potential of the work. This research was motivated by a conviction that our understanding of ceramic vessels is dependent upon the context they are experienced within. Predicated on the assumption that objects of material culture contain meaning, my argument is supported by M. Anna Fariello's view that "the meaning of an object may be interpolated by reading it as a document, a metaphor or as an object of ritual."<sup>1</sup>

My project involved making and reflecting upon hand made ceramic vessels within two specific contexts: the restaurant and the art gallery. I wanted to compare opposite ends of the spectrum of user and viewer experience; the restaurant context which demands practical use and physical touch, and the art gallery which actively rejects it. For the first year, I worked on two distinct projects for two restaurants in Canberra: Mocan and Green Grout Cafe (Mocan) and Monster Kitchen and Bar (Monster). In collaboration with the restaurants' staff and chefs, I created handmade tableware to be used in their establishments. For Mocan, I intended to unite their Slow Food philosophy with the aesthetic resolution of the ceramic plates. Through reflecting upon the sensually holistic experience of these objects and those of related artists, I found three key terms that related to the nature of vessels for practical use:

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<sup>1</sup> M. Anna Fariello, "Reading: The Language of Objects," in *Objects and Meaning: New Perspectives on Art and Craft*, ed. M. Anna Fariello and Paula Owen. (Maryland: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2004), 149.

harmony, relationships and movement. For the Monster project I would explore these key terms through conscious decisions regarding form and glaze.

My second year of research concentrated on making ceramic vessels and objects for the art gallery context. I continued to explore the three key terms outlined for the Monster project, but experimented further with unconventional vessel forms and surfaces. I became interested in metaphorical interpretations of the vessel and specifically, the idea of the vessel's form being symbolic of balance. I made over forty groupings of ceramic vessels and objects during this second year and exhibited some of these in public exhibitions in order to receive feedback.

My research investigated how circumstances specific to the restaurant and art gallery environments would influence a responder's understanding of ceramic vessels. Some of these circumstances included: how the viewer would sensually experience the work and the kinds of conceptual framing the context provided. In addition, I considered how these contexts placed different requirements on ceramic vessels and reflected upon how this affected my formal and conceptual decision making. My process was cyclical. I would make a body of work and place it into a specific context. I would then reflect upon my work through discussions with colleagues, art gallery curators, restaurant owners, chefs and staff. Going back to the studio, I would carry forward what I had learned into the next body of work.

In addition, I studied and analysed works by artists relevant to my field of research, observing their operation within the restaurant and art gallery

contexts. Key artists informing my research were Ben Richardson, Julian Stair, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Kirsten Coelho and Geert Lap. I studied their works in person by visiting restaurants, gallery exhibitions and permanent collections, as well as through photographs. I participated in field research, travelling to Adelaide and Melbourne to view objects and interview key practitioners to my research, including Kirsten Coelho.

### Context

My research sits within a flourishing tradition of handmade ceramic vessel making and is exemplified by artists such as Lucie Rie, Hans Coper, Prue Venables and Edmund de Waal, along with the artists previously mentioned. The origins of this tradition stem from the Arts and Crafts Movement and the idea that daily life can be enhanced through the experience of aesthetically considered, handmade objects. The term 'handmade' refers to objects that have been created by the hands of a skilled maker, through the process of physically manipulating raw materials.

Traditionally, values such as individuality and freedom of expression have been embedded within the aesthetic qualities of the handmade. In addition, hand making is considered to provide physical and mental benefits to the maker and, potentially, to culture at large. I am aware there are problems with the way we ascribe value to hand making, for example: the unfair working conditions of artisans in developing countries or the fact that we ethically value hand made goods, but often fail to justify the financial expense. However, I am invested in the values of skill, care, the material experience and bodily knowledge that come with making by hand.



English potter Bernard Leach promoted hand making and ‘honesty to materials’ within the ceramic community internationally through his work, travels and key text, *A Potter’s Book*. He believed in the ‘ethical pot’: a utilitarian object that was quickly made, inexpensive to buy, served a common purpose and was ultimately egalitarian. He also believed a good pot should be a “balanced combination” of both practical function and aesthetic beauty, ideals which continue to be influential.<sup>2</sup> While I am committed to the values of making by hand and am interested in the inherent qualities of natural materials, I have felt limited by the practical requirements and authoritarian views about vessels that the Leachian philosophy prescribes.<sup>3</sup> Through my research, my work has both embraced and negated practical use in order to more broadly explore the aesthetic and conceptual potential of the handmade vessel.

Craft practice is directly connected to the socio-political situation in which it is created. The Arts and Crafts Movement of the mid-19th century, the Studio Crafts Movement of the 1960s and 70s, and today’s revival of interest in the handmade are all a result of social, political, cultural and economic moments of uncertainty and change. Considering our complex and digital contemporary environment, as a case in point, it is easy to overlook the importance of the hand made ceramic vessel. In Natasha Daintry’s essay *The Essential Vessel* she confronts this issue and asks why should we consider the vessel at all? <sup>4</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard Leach, *A Potter’s Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1954) 18.

<sup>3</sup> See John Britt’s “Confessions of a NEO-LEACHIAN (or How I Escaped from the Art Police)” for a comedic yet insightful discussion of the Leachian philosophy. <http://www.criticalceramics.org/oldsite/articles/neoleach.shtml>

<sup>4</sup> Natasha Daintry “The Essential Vessel” in *Breaking the Mould: New Approaches to Ceramics*, Natasha Daintry, Rob Barnard and Clare Twomey (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 6.

She argues that the vessel acts as a social reflection, illustrating our place in history and our current political and social values and concerns.<sup>5</sup> Today, hand making can be seen in relation to responses to globalisation and related phenomena such as the Slow Food Movement and the desire to reconnect with physical material experiences. Both the historical and the contemporary situation will be explored in depth in Chapter One.

Within the field of craft, the terms ‘function’ and ‘use’ have conflicting and confused meanings. They are often used to define objects that have a practical application and are commonly used in contrast with the term ‘sculptural’ when people are categorising ceramic objects. I have found these definitions confining, so for the purpose of this research I have chosen to adopt craft writer, Howard Risatti’s, definition of the term function. He states function is “that which an object actually does, by virtue of the intention of its maker, in order to fulfill a purpose”.<sup>6</sup> Purpose, he defines as the “aim to be achieved”.<sup>7</sup> Risatti’s definition brings the criteria for which an object should be evaluated back to the maker’s intentions, as opposed to social preconceptions. This allows the artistic potential of the ceramic vessel to be expanded, broadening our understanding of the form beyond practical use. Where necessary, I will use the terms ‘practical’ or ‘practical use’ to refer to the way in which vessels might fulfill utilitarian needs.

I will use the word ‘context’ to describe the framework and physical space where artworks are engaged with. Context determines how objects are

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft* (North Carolina: The University of North Carolina Press, 2007) 24.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

conceptually framed and how we physically engage with them, which in turn influences our perception of a work. Ceramic artist Edmund de Waal believes that context is a significantly important part of a work. He states, “It matters, because where you find things in the world, how near you are to them, if you can touch them or not, is as much part of the language of objects as their colour, their use.”<sup>8</sup>

### Challenges and Conclusions

The major challenges of my research arose when I tested the conventions of a specific context and the socially embedded understandings of ceramic vessels. During the Monster project, for example, my own artistic intentions began to conflict with the practical requirements of the restaurant, limiting the objects’ potential surfaces and forms. Ultimately, in the restaurant context the food and experience of dining limited the artistic potential of the ceramic vessel and how it was understood. Traditional definitions of function and use were challenging, if not impossible, to broaden. However, throughout my research where I found challenge I also found insight.

Within the art gallery context, ceramic vessels shared embedded social understandings of being capable of physical and practical use. However, there was increased scope to explore unconventional forms, surfaces and ideas about the ceramic vessel. The art gallery provided an isolated and stilled experience of works, enabling me to utilise arrangement and installation in service of my purpose. Within this context, I compared and contrasted ceramic

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<sup>8</sup> Edmund de Waal “Who Writes” in *Edmund de Waal*, ed. Emma Crichton-Miller (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2014), 210.

vessel and object groupings to the genre of still life painting and drawing. I found that my works and those of related artists, operated as hybrid object–images, working to both distance and bring the viewer closer.

### Chapter Outline

Chapter One contextualises my work within a historical and contemporary framework of craft and hand making. It explores the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Studio Craft Movement and the contemporary interest in hand making, discussing the social and political situations of each period. Chapter Two discusses the first year of my research, the Mocan and Monster projects, and related works by Ben Richardson and Julian Stair. In addition, it will discuss my shift to making work for the art gallery context, my interest in groupings, and the work of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott. Chapter Three considers my second year of research in which I made work for the art gallery context, challenging practical definitions of the ceramic vessel. I will discuss key artists Kirsten Coelho and Geert Lap in relation to still life painting and drawing. In the final chapter a prospective description of works and ideas for my final exhibition will be discussed.

## Chapter One: Craft, Hand Made and the Physical Making Process

“The role of making is to create new ways of thinking, through engagement with the materials, techniques and ideas.”<sup>9</sup>

### Introduction

This chapter will explore the connection between the periodic revival of interest in craft practices and times of political and social change. I will discuss the Arts and Crafts Movement of the mid-19th century, the Studio Crafts movement of the 1960s and 70s, and the contemporary revival of craft. Central to my discussion will be an evaluation of the values ascribed to the term ‘handmade’ and an account of the way in which I have used it in this research project.

### Historical Context

A hand made object can be defined as something that has been created by the hands of a skilled maker through the physical manipulation of raw materials. The idea that hand making has potential psychological and physical benefits for the maker, and potentially culture at large, stems from the Arts and Crafts movement which began in Britain in the mid-19th century and was led by writers and makers such as John Ruskin and William Morris. This was a social and artistic movement that spread to continental Europe and North America and continues to influence generations of makers worldwide. The movement’s

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<sup>9</sup> Martina Margetts, “Action Not Words” in *The Power of Making: The Importance of Being Skilled*, ed. Daniel Miller. (London: V&A Publishing and the Crafts Council, 2011), 43.

ideology sought to reassert the importance of design and craftsmanship in all the arts in the face of increasing industrialisation. Morris and Ruskin were influenced by socialists such as Karl Marx, who had strong ethical beliefs about the politics of work and was against the division of labor and mass production. Marx believed that whoever controlled the work and means of production controlled the world.<sup>10</sup> According to Paul Greenhalgh, in his essay *The History of Craft*, Marx believed that when work was segmented into components, rather than being completed from beginning to end by the individual, it resulted in the physical and mental debasement of the maker.<sup>11</sup> Greenhalgh claims that Marx's beliefs established a causal relationship between the conditions of work and the degradation of the human personality.<sup>12</sup>

The Arts and Crafts movement promoted small-scale handicraft where workers had full control over their product from design to completed object, and worked primarily by hand. Their beliefs were ethical and utopian; the integrity of making of objects by hand was to better the quality of life for both its makers and users. As Greenhalgh summarises, "ultimately, for craft pioneers, the movement was centred on physical and mental freedom. By uniting the work process directly to the demand for a higher quality of life, they had regenerated the idea that craft was synonymous with power."<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Paul Greenhalgh, "The History of Craft", in *The Culture of Craft*, ed. Peter Dormer. (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997) 33.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 35.

While the Arts and Crafts movement began to lose impetus around the time of World War I, the precepts ‘fitness for purpose’ and ‘truth to materials’ continued to be influential. During an active time of immigration, Arts and Crafts values were transported, reinterpreted and progressed in institutions such as the Wiener Werkstatte in Austria, the Bauhaus in Germany and Black Mountain College in the United States of America. A quote from Bauhaus-trained textile artist Anni Albers in 1937, almost 75 years after the Arts and Crafts Movement began, is an example of the persistence of the movement’s ideas and the importance placed on the value of working with raw materials: “civilization seems in general to estrange men from materials...but if we want to get from the materials the sense of directness...we have to go back to the material itself...and from there, partake in its stages of change”<sup>14</sup>

During the 1960s and 70s, the West saw a period of unprecedented social, political, cultural and economic change. Marked also by a resurgence of interest in craft, it gave rise to the Studio Craft Movement. As Grace Cochrane states in *The Craft Movement in Australia: A History*, “changes in thinking toward broader social and ethical concerns were direct criticisms of the longstanding ideal that ‘progress’ was related to ‘development’.”<sup>15</sup> At this time throughout the West, there was active questioning of political authority directly related to the involvement in the Vietnam War. Social and political issues such as racial equality, feminism and environmental activism were also prevalent.

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<sup>14</sup> Anni Albers, *Selected Writings on Design*, Ed. Brenda Danilowitz (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2000), 7.

<sup>15</sup> Grace Cochrane, *The Craft Movement in Australia: A History* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1992), 97

Social reformers believed the North American and Australian ‘dream’ had sold out to consumerism and much of their thinking was informed by a renewed interest in Marxism.<sup>16</sup> Counterculture movements, such as the ‘back to the land movement’ were associated with social protest and a desire for a more satisfying way of life. Cochrane offers Margaret Munro-Clark’s analysis of the development of rural communes in Australia during this time as “some basis for understanding the swell of interest in the simultaneous crafts movement”.<sup>17</sup> Cochrane states that previously, social and economic constraints of class, religion and gender had given people an unquestioned sense of identity and place, but that the modern world broke down many of these belief systems, provided multiple options for choice and left a need for people to pursue their own individuality and seek supporting social groups.<sup>18</sup> As Scott Watson describes in his essay, “Search for Integrity: Bernard Leach’s Canadian Apprentices”, studio pottery was integral to postmodern avant-gardism because of its ethos of locality and sustainability, and for blurring the distinction between art and life.<sup>19</sup> Makers of this time were also interested in the idea that craft was synonymous with power. Working with clay offered a literal and direct opportunity for tactile expression and the assertion of individuality.

A significant number of potters during this time followed in the tradition of Leach, who believed that the work of the individual potter was to “perform all or nearly

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 97-98.

<sup>19</sup> Scott Watson, “Search for Integrity: Bernard Leach’s Canadian Apprentices,” in *Thrown: British Columbia’s Apprentices of Bernard Leach and Their Contemporaries*, ed. Naomi Sawada, Jana Tyner and Scott Watson. (Vancouver: Belkin Art Gallery, The University of British Columbia, 2011), 31.



all the process of production with his own hands”.<sup>20</sup> Australian potter Ivan McMeekin travelled to Europe in 1949 and was apprenticed to English potter Michael Cardew (Leach’s first apprentice). Upon returning to Australia in 1953, McMeekin undertook a contract to set up a stoneware pottery at Sturt Craft Centre in Mittagong, New South Wales. Influential Australian potters Les Blakebrough and Gwyn Hanssen Pigott were apprenticed to McMeekin at Sturt. Hanssen Pigott also later travelled to England to work with Cardew and Leach. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Canadian potters John Reeve and Ian Steele travelled to St Ives Pottery to apprentice with Leach. Upon returning to their homelands, Reeve and Steele, along with others influenced by them, such as Wayne Ngan, Tam Irving and Glenn Lewis, set up pottery studios in the coastal area of British Columbia with the intention of making affordable, objects for domestic use.

In Garth Clark’s essay “Some Notes on Minimalism in Ceramic Art” he states that “the modern traditions of ceramic art have tended towards the expressionistic and the handmade”.<sup>21</sup> A common aesthetic amongst these makers was a literal interpretation of the hand made; finger marks and ridges were left on the surfaces of vessels. Les Blakebrough’s *Teapot* in Fig. 1 is an example of this aesthetic, where throwing lines are visible through the glazed surface and where finger impressions are left on the loop joining the pot and the handle. Some of these artists also used methods of brushing and pouring glazes that resulted in drip marks, highlighting the fluidity and materiality of the

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<sup>20</sup> Bernard Leach, *A Potter’s Book* (London: Faber and Faber, 1940) 1.

<sup>21</sup> Clark, Garth, “Some Notes on Minimalism in Contemporary Art” in Geert Lap: *The Thrown Form*, ed. Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, 1988) 11.

glaze and the individuality of each piece. In the case of Hanssen Pigott and Irving, whose works were less gestural, their objects remained imbued with the values of hand making. Their works were individually thrown on the potter's wheel and often fired in atmospheric environments, resulting in the unique surface of each object.

The hand made aesthetic of this time was in opposition to the streamlined and minimal aesthetic popular in industrial production. Clark believes this was because a minimal aesthetic illustrated an acceptance of the contemporary industrial landscape, machine made objects and materials.<sup>22</sup> These artists were ethically motivated and used an aesthetic that reflected their personal social and political beliefs. Cochrane argues that "work that implied expressive personal freedom was associated with a free democratic world and in traditional crafts media, it provided a way to be valued equally with 'art'".<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Grace Cochrane, *The Craft Movement in Australia: A History* (Kensington: New South Wales University Press, 1992), 101.



Fig. 1, Les Blakebrough, *Teapot*, Sturt Pottery (c. 1965). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 23 cm x 23 cm x 26 cm.

### Contemporary Revival of the Hand Made and Ceramics

In many parts of the Western world – England, Australia, Canada and the United States for example – another revival of interest in craft practices is occurring simultaneously with social and political uncertainty and change. Evidence of this includes the proliferation of hand made objects apparent in daily life and the success of enterprises such as Etsy, an online store promoting hand made goods. In addition, a recent proliferation of academic texts illustrate the response to this current revival.<sup>24</sup> We are witnessing the homogeneous effects of globalisation in addition to managing the speed and quantity of global

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, Howard Risatti, *A Theory of Craft: Function and Aesthetic Expression* (Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), Glenn Adamson, *Thinking Through Craft* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2007), the enterprise Etsy and the Australian Broadcasting Company's series *Bespoke*.

information bombarding us daily. We are attempting to manage a looming and immediate global environmental crisis as well as a large international refugee emergency. For many, it feels as though our world is out of control. There is a lack of contact with materiality and connection to making because of the automation, speed and digitisation of our daily lives.

In direct response to these issues, some people are seeking to regain individuality and a sense of locality. Reformers are trying to gain control over their daily lives. In relation to similar historical moments of uncertainty, counter culture movements, utopian ideals and a return to craft are gaining a resurgence of interest. However, contrary to reforms in the past where modern industry and technology were rejected, the current movement is embracing the new. In her lecture, “Slow Ceramics: The Art and Success of Decelerating”, Cathy Keys compares the current social resistance and interest in craft with The Arts and Crafts and the Studio Crafts Movements. She believes “that unlike resistance in the past, the current desire to decelerate is not anti-technology or anti-speed – it is about balance and quality, about deciding when it’s best to go fast or best to go slow – with the primary goal being to get the best quality product or quality of life”.<sup>25</sup>

My interest in the hand made has been fostered through my training and education with artists influenced by Arts and Crafts values, for example Canadian potters Gailan Ngan (Wayne Ngan’s daughter) and Fredi Rahn. In addition, I was raised in a family that valued hand made traditions. However, my beliefs have been developed and reinforced through ideas from people such as

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<sup>25</sup> Cathy Keys, ” ‘Slow Ceramics’: The Art and Success of Decelerating” (paper presented at the Australian Ceramic Biennale “Subversive Clay”, Adelaide, Australia. September 28, 2012).

Keys. I am interested in making work that is relevant and contemporary, reflecting upon today's social, political, economic and cultural contexts. My work embraces certain aspects of the hand made vessel tradition, such as the honouring of raw materials and throwing on the potter's wheel, but is also informed by minimal aesthetics and industry. Throughout this exegesis, I will elaborate upon my own and other artists' work, such as that by Ben Richardson, Kirsten Coelho and Geert Lap, who have taken similar, aesthetically-balanced approaches.

My particular interest in the hand made lies in its potential to re-balance our physical and sensual experience of the world. Ceramic materials offer unique physical qualities that engage the human body, both in the making process as well as the experience of finished works. In her essay, "The Essential Vessel", Natasha Daintry discusses the sensual nature of ceramic materials and puts forward a compelling argument for the potential of these materials to connect us with our own inherent materiality. To begin, she quotes from Rebecca Solnit's book, *Wanderlust*, which re-states Susan Bordo's claim that "if the body is a metaphor for our locatedness in space and time and thus for the finitude of human perception and knowledge, then the postmodern body is no body at all".<sup>26</sup> Bordo's statement reiterates the belief that in general, our current Western society disregards the value of physical experiences. But according to Daintry this is beginning to shift. She suggests that, "Perhaps the tables have turned. We used to make objects as a way of feeling our way back into the world, but now it could be objects, which lead us back to ourselves."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Natasha Daintry "The Essential Vessel" in *Breaking the Mould: New Approaches to Ceramics*, Natasha Daintry, Rob Barnard and Clare Twomey (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 6.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

This chapter discussed the connection between the periodic revival of interest in craft practices and times of political and social change. I reviewed the development of the Arts and Crafts Movement in relation to ethical, social and political resistance to the industrial revolution. This movement ultimately believed in physical and mental freedom and a higher quality of life and established a link between craft practices and power. These ideas were revisited in the 1960s and 70s during an unprecedented time of political, social, economic and cultural change, resulting in the Studio Crafts Movement. Reformers at this time resisted the idea that progress was related to economic 'development' and searched for a better way of life. Craft, yet again, saw a resurgence of interest because of its connection to individuality and power. A number of potters from this time embraced the literal marks of the hand and the materiality of ceramics, visually asserting their ideological distance from industry and large-scale capitalism.

Many artists and writers have critiqued the ideas of the handmade and much has changed since the Arts and Crafts Movement began.<sup>28</sup> However, the current interest in the handmade does share in some of the same concerns that Morris and Ruskin were interested: a positive human existence that values both physical and mental experiences of the world. In the current Western world, we are trying to counter the homogenous effects of globalisation, regaining our sense of individuality through hand making. In addition, reformers are

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<sup>28</sup> John Britt's essay "The 'Unknown Craftsman' is Dead" from *Ceramics Monthly*, 2000, gives an in depth account of the contradictory nature of Leach. For example, Leach had other potters throw work while he decorated, signed and sold the objects as his own. Edmund de Waal's book *Bernard Leach, St. Ives Artist*, 1998 is another critical review of Leach's ideals.

challenging the automation, speed and digitisation of daily life. However, contrary to reforms in the past where modern industry and technology were rejected, the current interest in craft is more balanced. Traditional hand made values are being embraced alongside industry and technology. The materiality of ceramics can contribute to the rebalancing of our sensual experiences, offering tangible and palpable qualities to both makers and viewers. This historical contextualising research contributed to my understanding of my own studio works and that of key artists. The next chapter will discuss the first year of my studio practice and explore the way in which I aesthetically connect traditional craft values to the contemporary Slow Movement.

## Chapter Two: The Restaurant Context and Considering Practical Use

### Introduction

The previous chapter discussed the history of handmade values and argued that the contemporary revival of interest in craft is seeking to find balance between fast and slow. In this chapter I will discuss the works made during my first year of research, the Mocan and Monster projects, in relation to two contemporary social movements – the Slow Food Movement and the Slow Movement. I will analyse the effect of the restaurant context on the interpretation of the objects and discuss the artistic limitations I found. I will explore the similarities and differences between my works and the works Ben Richardson created for Garagistes, a restaurant in Hobart, Tasmania. In addition, I will discuss my developing interest in object groupings, the still life works of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and Julian Stair's work, *Quotidian*, in relation to their operation in the art gallery context.

### The Mocan Project

In May, 2015, one of the owners of Mocan and Green Grout Cafe, a restaurant I was working at part time, approached me to design and make sixty plates for his establishment. Certain practical concerns governed the commission. Alcorn wanted a round plate approximately 29 cm in diameter. They needed to stack efficiently and fit in to the allocated shelving. The staff needed to be able to easily pick them up and pass them to one another, as well as carry two or three at a time plated with food to the tables. However, as well as fulfilling Alcorn's



practical requirements, I wanted to create objects that would align aesthetically and conceptually with Mocan's philosophy.

### The Slow Food Movement and an Aesthetic Resolution

Mocan operates with utopian ideals; valuing seasonal, locally-grown produce and handmade, artisan goods. They align their practices with the Slow Food Movement. Launched in Rome in 1986 by Carlo Petrini, the Slow Food Movement was a reaction against the proliferation of fast food chains and industrial farming. The movement promotes "fresh, local, seasonal produce; recipes handed down through the generations; sustainable farming; artisanal production; leisurely dining with family and friends".<sup>29</sup> Mocan sources artisanal products such as cheese and preserves from local Canberra makers; produces a number of ingredients in-house, including kimchi and smoked ricotta and grows their own garnishes out the front of the cafe. The Slow Food Movement is socially driven and believes that "a firm defense of quiet material pleasure is the only way to oppose the universal folly of Fast Life".<sup>30</sup> It places importance on the connection to raw materials and the notion that a positive experience of life can be fostered through a physical connection with materiality. Within the Slow Food Movement the appreciation of physical material experiences and slowness are intertwined.

These ideas are also promoted within contemporary craft and design. Architect and writer Juhani Pallasmaa has argued in his book, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*, that "instead of participating

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<sup>29</sup> Carl Honore, *In Praise of Slow: How The Worldwide Movement is Challenging the Cult of Speed* (London: Orion, 2005) 59.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

in the process of further speeding up the experience of the world, architecture has to slow down experience, halt time, and defend the natural slowness and diversity of experience”.<sup>31</sup> The physical, handmade ceramic vessel can also contribute to the slowing down and diversifying of our experiences. Through the process of hand making with raw materials, a ceramic artist engages with a slow and sensory experience. In addition, when the viewer engages with a finished work, they are asked to notice subtle detail layered within the rich material language of ceramics; surface texture, glaze reflexivity, colour and form.

The chefs at Mocan present food in a way that accentuates the natural colours, forms and textures of the ingredients they use. In Fig. 2 for example, the long thin tail of the carrot and parts of its green top, are left on for aesthetic purposes. But what this also does is present a less processed experience of the vegetable, as does presenting fish with its skin left on (Fig. 3). In my studio practice I already had an aesthetic interest in the inherent qualities of ceramic materials, so the opportunity to highlight these in Mocan’s objects was of interest.

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<sup>31</sup> Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture* (West Sussex, UK: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 2009), 150.



Fig. 2, Kelly Austin, *Mocan Plate dark* (2014). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 30 cm x 30 cm x 2 cm.



Fig. 3, Kelly Austin, *Mocan Plate light* (2014). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 30 cm x 30 cm x 2 cm.

I created a number of test tiles from industrially produced clay bodies and a range of neutral coloured glazes, fired in oxidized and reduced atmospheres. In conversation with Alcorn, we decided that half of the plates would be designed to accentuate the clay's literal geological connection with the earth. I chose a clay body that was unrefined and processed through a relatively coarse mesh. It had a range of different sized particles, including sand and iron. I wanted something people would recognise as symbolic of earth – dirty, gritty earth, the type of earth food is grown in. *Mocan Plate light* (Fig. 3) was my resolution of this idea. Comments from owners and staff likened them to river stones and granite.<sup>32</sup>

For the other half of the plates (Fig. 2) we decided to use a black, satin glaze over a smooth clay body. This surface was bold and refined, sensuous and rich. It spoke of the solid, flat colour found in liquid glaze or melted chocolate and functioned as a visual balance to *Mocan Plate light*. In total, I made forty plates for Mocan.

My objects aligned with Mocan's artisanal philosophy and were visual symbols of these values within the cafe. While guests look down to the 'Smith's farm free-range poached eggs on A. Baker toast' (both artisanally produced, local ingredients) the story becomes enriched with the framing of my handmade plate to eat it from. The Mocan plates illustrate Daintry's belief that the vessel functions to reflect current social values. Considering the context and broader social situation in which these vessels live gives us a far richer understanding of their significance.

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<sup>32</sup> Myles Chandler, personal conversation, June 14, 2014.

This understanding of the Mocan vessels was resolved through my own historical contextualising, contemplation and research. Unfortunately, I did not find the restaurant context conducive to this kind of critical engagement and discussion. This may have been because of the restaurant's focus on the sensual experience of dining or because of the lack of contextualising information about the objects. However, I did receive some feedback in situ about the plates. Co-owner Myles Chandler, for example, commented that once the staff knew they were handmade, their behavior shifted to being more considerate and careful with them in comparison with the commercially produced plates that were also used in the restaurant.<sup>33</sup>

### Ben Richardson

Tasmanian potter, Ben Richardson, was of particular interest to my research because of his similar experience of hand making ceramic vessels for practical use in restaurants. In 2010, Richardson was commissioned by Garagistes, a restaurant in Hobart, Tasmania to make their tableware. In an article from *The Australian*, Garagistes was described as “a totally new and brave kind of restaurant...it [was] part Slow, part Japanese, part natural/foraging and all communal”.<sup>34</sup> I had the fortunate opportunity to dine at Garagistes and experience Richardson's objects there. An untitled bowl in Fig. 4 is an example of one of the vessels.

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> “Earth, Sea and Soul,” *The Australian*, October 22, 2010, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/executive-living/food-drink/earth-sea-and-soul/story-fnda1do2-1225942364052> (accessed 10 April, 2014).





Figure 4. Ben Richardson, *untitled* (2011). ceramic, 20 x 20 x 6 cm.

Mocan and Garagistes share similar Slow Food values and artisanal approaches to both food and their interior design, so it is not surprising that both establishments use handmade tableware. What was different at Garagistes, however, was the considered slowing down of the dining experience. Our meal lasted over three hours with a number of small, shared plates being brought to the table. The slow and relaxed pace of the meal allowed me to absorb the details of the experience. At one point during the evening, I placed my hand on one of Richardson's pots and the woman next to me commented on how wonderful they felt. Her comment reminded me of the casual, yet intimate moments of which ceramic vessels are a part.

The way in which Richardson and I physically make ceramic vessels on the potter's wheel has much in common with the Slow Food Movement and more

encompassing Slow Movement, which supports the general slowing down of daily life and fostering of meaningful connections. In addition to wheel-throwing, Richardson sources black wattle by hand, as the source of heat and ash for his wood-fired works. What keeps things balanced and, I would argue, contemporary, is our equal embracing of speed when it is necessary. The pots at Mocan, Monster and Garagistes, for example, are made from industrially produced clays sourced from Australian mines. They are also fired in electric and gas kilns, saving significant time and keeping the cost of the objects down. I witnessed a similar example of balance while working at Mocan. Alcorn would often go out front of the cafe to pick garnish for the evening's dinner service, take a photograph of it with his iPhone and advertise it alongside the dinner menu, through social media. Richardson describes this kind of approach as "optimising."<sup>35</sup> In order to function as both a contemporary artist and a business, he has to make well considered decisions to maintain both the meaning of his work and his livelihood.

Throughout the evening at Garagistes, I experienced four different ceramic forms and surfaces Richardson had made. Some were experienced on the table in combination with one another and others were seen on their own. While reflecting upon the photographs I had taken, I was compelled by how beautifully the different glaze colours and surfaces complemented one another (Fig.5). This was most apparent through reflecting upon the work in photographs, where I could see them all together. In addition, I noted the four different forms and became interested in the artistic potential of groupings, as opposed to the single forms in repetition that Alcorn had chosen for Mocan. Richardson's work

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<sup>35</sup> Ben Richardson, personal conversation, April 12, 2014.



sparked my interest in the idea of complementary groupings of objects, which would feed into my next studio works, the Monster project.



Figure 5. Ben Richardson, *untitled, four plates* (2011). ceramic, approximately 20 x 20 x 6 cm.

I had become particularly interested in the relational quality of ceramic vessels. At Mocan and Garagistes, they were constantly experienced in combination with other things: people, furniture, food and other objects in the environment. While these things are different materially, formally and conceptually, they combine to create an overall experience and the elements are dependent on one-another in a harmonious relationship. The objects were also experienced



within a cycle of movement, as the dishes travelled from the kitchen to the table and back to the kitchen again. In the next project for Monster, I would explore these terms: relationships, harmony and movement through aesthetic compositions of colour, surface quality and form.

### The Monster Project

In August, 2014 I was approached by chef Sean McConnell from Monster Kitchen and Bar. He came to the studio with a more open request, stating he was interested in some new main plates and small side dishes. We discussed the practical requirements Monster had. These were similar to Mocan's and I noted his preference for a round main plate, 31cm in diameter. McConnell also requested a neutral colour palette. I spent time researching the restaurant itself and precinct of New Acton, of which Monster is a part. I would attempt to fulfill McConnell's practical requirements while exploring my own interest in relationships, harmony and movement in the formal elements of the vessels.

I discussed my ideas of dynamic harmony with McConnell while we looked through the sample forms together. It was clear that having a number of different forms and surfaces would allow me to explore this in more depth. Collectively, we decided on two different forms for the main plates and three for the small dishes (Fig. 6). Each form had a slightly different sensibility and I paid particular attention to the line of their profiles. In total, I made eighty plates and one hundred and twenty small dishes.

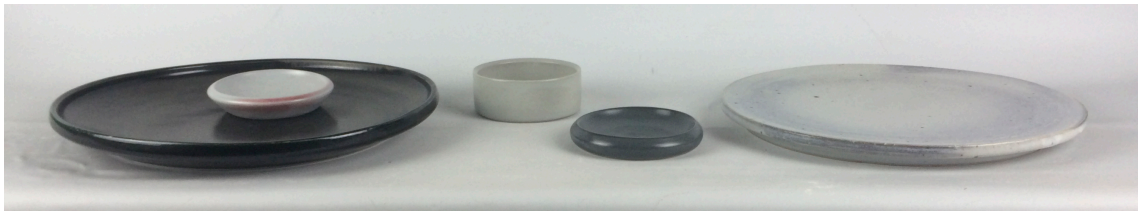


Fig. 6, Kelly Austin, *Monster Grouping* (2014). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 100 cm x 32 cm x 5 cm.



Fig. 7, Kelly Austin, *Monster Grouping* (detail) (2014). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 31 cm x 31 cm x 3 cm.

### Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Lines of Profile and Movement

I had been studying the still life works of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott because of her interest in groupings and familiar domestic forms. Hanssen Pigott worked primarily in porcelain on the potter's wheel, making subtle and minimal objects such as bowls, beakers and bottles. Her work has been related to the qualities of calm and quietness through her palette of light, pastel tones. However, in relation to their forms, the quality of calmness and stillness comes through the alignment of their profiles along a similar axis. In her essay, *The Rightness of Form*, she states, "when I speak about form I am, of course, speaking about

volume and line; and I love the way these interact...”<sup>36</sup> She is referring here to the silhouette, or line of profile, of her objects. Almost all of her still life works are photographed from a particular angle that privileges their profile. In Fig. 8, Hanssen Pigott's *At the Gates*, all of the objects' profiles are on a relatively similar vertical axis. There is something cohesive and calming about this alignment. It is repetitive, orderly and controlled in a way that contributes to the feeling of calm and stillness in her work.



Fig. 8, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, *At the Gates* (2003). Wheel-thrown porcelain, 120 cm x 34 cm x 30 cm.

For the Monster vessels, I was interested in a more active sense of motion and I would use a range of profiles to give a sense of dynamic movement between the forms. I explored this by including a range of horizontal, vertical and diagonal axes in the profiles of my objects. For example, the main plate on the far right of Fig.6 expands openly outwards, has a feeling of limitlessness and is aligned with a horizontal axis. The second main plate, on the far left, has a similar sense of broad space across the form's surface. However, this is strictly

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<sup>36</sup> Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, "The Rightness of Form," *Ceramic Review*, May/June (2004): 25.

contained by the vertical change in direction at the rim. This form moves both horizontally and vertically. The small, light grey dish sitting on the dark plate has a strong diagonal line in its profile, while the dominant direction of the grey one in the middle is strictly vertical. I found that the combination of different profiles, with a range of horizontal to vertical axis dynamic and brought a sense of dynamism to the grouping. The next step in my process was to consider how I could bring the vessels together harmoniously and I would do this with colour. With McConnell's preference for neutral tones considered, I worked within a range of nearly greyscale and values from light to dark. I found the result similar to a chord in music. While the individual notes are different, they have the effect of coming together and creating something unified.

### Experiencing the Vessels at Monster

I received positive feedback from McConnell and my peers that the plates operated to fulfill the restaurant's desires. However, they did not fulfill my artistic intention of being experienced in the grouping I had carefully considered. The restaurant environment wasn't conducive to having the five vessels seen together and this was essentially out of my control. The way in which the objects were arranged and the length of time they stayed in that arrangement was in service of the practical and operational requirements of the dining experience. Vessels were stacked categorically by form and stored in different parts of the restaurant. If there was a moment where my vessels landed on the table together, it was brief and fleeting. I had put a considerable amount of time and thought into the way the five vessels would operate as a grouping. However, the reality of the restaurant context meant that they became

separated, absorbed into the practical requirements and operations of the space. I realized that my artistic ambitions had outstripped the context of the restaurant. My objects needed time and space to be experienced and contemplated. They also needed a type of looking that facilitated meaningful thought and reflection and I began to understand the limitations of the restaurant context.

### Transitioning to the Art Gallery Context

This was a critical moment in my research. The Mocan project felt successful because it explored ideas that were complementary to their philosophy and what was achievable in the context. However, with the Monster project, my intention for the work exceeded what the restaurant context could provide. My ideas and concept were also overpowered by the restaurant's functionalist operation. I needed to have the vessels experienced within a context that eliminated some of the external elements such as food and the constant movement of objects. I was also interested in having more control over the arrangement of the vessels and having them engaged with at specific heights that highlighted their profiles.

In January, 2015, I had the opportunity to exhibit a selection of the Mocan and Monster objects at Craft ACT: Craft and Design Centre in an exhibition titled *Emerging Contemporaries*. This would be the first time I experienced this work in an art gallery context, where practical use was not involved in their experience. When displaying the objects, the curator Mel George and I

unpacked the work and unconsciously placed it in stacks of similar forms. I let go of my original intention of having the five Monster objects displayed together and arranged the vessels in stacks, the way they were used in the restaurants. Fig. 9 shows the installation, with photographs I had taken and printed to accompany the vessels. In the gallery, I experienced the vessels in isolation, no longer in combination with food or other objects. It was a focused, aesthetic experience and I became far more aware of the vessel's formal qualities: the nuance of glaze colour and the relationships between different forms.



Fig. 9, Kelly Austin, *Monster and Mocan Plates* (2014). Wheel-thrown stoneware, approximately 31 cm x 31 cm x 3 cm each.

At the same time as the exhibition at Craft ACT, English potter, Julian Stair was showing his work *Quotidian* (Fig. 10 and Fig. 11), at the Corvi-Mora Gallery in London. *Quotidian* consisted of a number of components: a large, set dining

table with wheel-thrown ceramic tableware and a stop motion film showing a dinner event held prior to the opening, in which the objects were practically used.

This work operates on a number of levels: the dinner is a work of performance art celebrating the ritual and legacy of formal dining, the film is an aestheticized reflection of the role of ceramic objects within this ritual and the actual objects, specifically composed atop a wooden table and linen cloth, operate as an installation. Stair's work explores and celebrates the aesthetic and conceptual combination of food, people, the dining experience and ceramic objects, but does so in a way that maintains a cool and aestheticized focus on the ceramic objects. He accomplishes this through the framing of the camera, excluding the faces of the diners and the social interactions they have. In addition, the formal arrangement of the vessels and marble plinths show no material evidence of the event. They are displayed in the gallery as a sculpture, as if nothing was ever moved, touched or soiled.





Fig. 10 Julian Stair, Quotidian (2014). Wheel-thrown ceramic, 4m x 2.5m x 2m.



Fig. 11 Julian Stair, Quotidian (2014). Projected still image



While I was partly critical of the contradiction in *Quotidian*, I could relate to Stair's desire for his objects to be the focus of the viewer's attention. As I found with the restaurant context, ultimately, the functional requirements of the establishment and the food overpower the ceramics. Roger Fry states in *An Essay in Aesthetics*, "it is only when an object exists in our life for no other purpose than to be seen that we really look at it... towards such even the most normal person adopts to some extent the artistic attitude of pure vision abstracted from necessity"<sup>37</sup> Stair's sculptural installation in the gallery allow us to look at the work in the way Fry suggests. However, the film ensures we know the objects could be practically used, if required.

Almost all of Hanssen Pigott's still life groupings were exhibited and analysed in the art gallery context, not the restaurant or the domestic. In her article *Notes From Netherdale*, Hanssen Pigott talks about 'looking' as a significant reason for the shift in her practice from tableware intended for practical use to still life groupings.<sup>38</sup> She states: "I started the groupings because I wanted the pots to be looked at. Considered. The title, *Three Inseparable Bowls*, given to related but different bowls, might raise a question, lengthen a glance."<sup>39</sup> Hanssen Pigott's transition to still life groupings didn't come without difficulty. I can empathize with her feelings of unease when she says "It is alarmingly contradictory; to make pots that are sweet to use and then to place them almost out of reach. To make beakers that are totally inviting and then freeze them in

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<sup>37</sup> Roger Fry, "An Essay in Aesthetics," in *Modern Art and Modernism: A Critical Anthology*, ed Francis Frascina and Charles Harrison. (London: Harper and Row, 1982), 82.

<sup>38</sup> Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, "Notes From Netherdale," *Ceramic Art and Perception*, no. 27 (1997): 80.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

an installation.”<sup>40</sup> However, the effect of placing them in the gallery context allows her work to operate in a way that is completely different to the restaurant. Removing them from the field of touch and temporarily freezing them in an installation within a contemplative and critical space allows the work to function in ways more familiar to the genre of still life painting. I believe that this was one of Hanssen Pigott’s most significant contributions to the field of ceramics. In an artist statement from 1988, Hanssen Pigott stated “bowls, bottles, beakers or teapots are meant as much for contemplation as for use.”<sup>41</sup> In what Damon Moon described as a ‘bellwether moment’, her statement contributed to a line of inquiry that would investigate the perception and artistic potential of the familiar wheel-thrown ceramic vessel.<sup>42</sup>

I shared in Stair’s and Hanssen Pigott’s desire for a considered and focused type of looking and realized I needed to make changes to the context within which my work was experienced. More importantly, I wanted to explore new forms and surfaces outside the restrictions of practical use and the art gallery context provided this freedom. With both the Mocan and Monster projects, there was little room for formal exploration because of the practical functionality demanded of the objects. This was one of the limiting factors I found in working within the restaurant context. The objects needed to literally serve and their form and surface needed to be supportive of this action. While Stair and Hanssen Pigott’s works still refer to practical use through their forms and surfaces (although less so in Stair’s unglazed objects), I had become interested

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<sup>40</sup> Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, “The Rightness of Form,” *Ceramic Review*, May/June (2004): 26.

<sup>41</sup> Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, “Statement,” *Pottery in Australia*, 27:1 (1988): 16.

<sup>42</sup> Damon Moon, “Gwyn Hanssen Pigott,” *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*, 53:3 (2012): 8.

in exploring and altering the vessels outside of this context. I felt an overwhelming sense of excitement to make future decisions about form, surface and the composition of vessels removed from practical use. I held onto Fry's words 'abstracted from necessity' as I made new work in the studio and its subject matter began to shift.

### Conclusion

This chapter has discussed the first year of my research which focused on two projects for the restaurant context. The Mocan project bridged practical daily requirements with current social concerns and in this context, I found my work participating in a contemporary counterculture movement. With the Monster project, I explored qualities inherent to the vessels at Mocan and Garagistes: relationships, harmony and movement, through the combinations of different forms and surfaces within a grouping. Reflecting upon both of these projects and the work of Richardson, Stair and Hanssen Pigott, I came to three important realizations. Firstly, that the practical demands of the restaurant context limited the artistic exploration of form and surface. Secondly, that the ultimate focus of the restaurant experience was the food and thirdly, that my artistic intentions had outgrown what the restaurant context could offer in terms of the experience of the work and its contextualisation. The next chapter will discuss my second year of research, where I transitioned into making work for the art gallery context and find new ways to consider the ceramic vessel.

## Chapter Three: The Art Gallery Context, Difference as Continuity and The Hybrid Object–Image.

“Practicing a craft with ambiguous reference to purpose and function one has occasion to face absurdity. More than anything, somewhat like a demented piano-tuner, one is trying to approximate a phantom pitch.”<sup>43</sup>

### Introduction

This chapter will analyse my second year of research in which I made works for the art gallery context and let go of the considerations of practical use. I will describe my initial studio works and discuss the challenges I encountered that motivated me to abstract the familiar wheel-thrown vessel form. This chapter will also discuss the work of Kirsten Coelho and compare it with two dimensional Still Life painting. Utilizing Paul Mathieu’s definitions of ‘image’ and ‘object’ from his essay *Object Theory*, I discuss their similarities and differences, proposing that Coelho’s and my later works operate as hybrid object–images. Finally, I discuss the idea of abstraction in relation to Gwyn Hanssen Pigott and Dutch ceramicist Geert Lap’s work before summarizing my final works for examination.

### Studio Works

In the studio, I tried to approach making vessels from an open, exploratory perspective without a preconceived idea of use and this was a challenge. The

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<sup>43</sup> Hans Coper, “Artist Statement,” in *Collingwood/Coper 1969*, (London: Victoria and Albert Museum, 1969), 7.

potter's wheel has a long history of being used for the efficient production of objects for practical use. The act of centering and pulling up even walls of clay has been passed down for generations. If I wanted to alter the forms I was making, I had to significantly change my approach to thinking and making on the wheel. I experimented with abstracting domestic tableware forms, thickening their walls and altering their proportions. *Weight* (Fig. 12) is an example of work from this time where I explored thickness in the vessel wall. I had found the quality of mass undesirable in most vessels for practical use, but it offered an unexpected tactile quality that I would explore further within my new work. The visual effect was grounding and gave the objects a sense of solidity. When people picked them up, it was surprising and cumbersome, directing their assumptions away from practical use. I continued to combine vessels in ways that explored the ideas of relationships, harmony and movement through form, colour and texture (Fig. 13 and 14).



Fig. 12, Kelly Austin, *Weight* (2015). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 40 cm x 40 cm x 4 cm.



Fig. 13, Kelly Austin, *Grouping no. 5* (2015). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 50 cm x 40 cm x 20 cm.



Fig. 14, Kelly Austin, *Grouping no. 6* (2015). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 40 cm x 45 cm x 16 cm.

I began including porcelain objects into the groupings because of its brilliant white colour and variety in glaze response (Fig. 15). I had little experience working with Southern Ice porcelain, so set myself the task of throwing a number of beakers to learn about its material qualities. The specific beaker form wasn't of importance, however the set of actions required to make them was. I repeatedly practiced centering, opening, thinning and stretching the porcelain on the wheel. When viewing them lined up next to one another, their repeated forms and quantity was compelling. I decided to glaze fire them and display them as a grouping. Each was individually glazed along a spectrum from gloss to matt and were displayed in the order in which they were thrown. I found the sense of movement slowed down with this grouping, as the shifts in form and surface between components was lessened.



Fig. 15, Kelly Austin, *Shift* (2015). Wheel-thrown porcelain, 220 cm x 9 cm x 13 cm.

### Repetition

Out of all the groupings I made at this time, *Shift* spoke most literally of the process in the studio at the potter's wheel. I commonly throw similar forms, one after the other. This kind of repetitive throwing comes from the history and efficient processes of production pottery. Once my body has gone through the set of actions required to throw one form, repeating it takes advantage of my muscle memory and reinforces the embodied action. Each subsequent repeated form becomes more intuitive and I move into a state of rhythm. All of the design, practical and conceptual elements of the objects slide away and

what I am left with is the isolated physical action of creating form in space and the materiality of raw clay. It is similar to the loss of meaning that occurs when you repeat a word over and over again out loud. The quality of the sound, the intonation and quantity of syllables become the focus, rather than the word's meaning.

In *The Transparency of Clay*, Doris Shadbolt elaborates upon the process of wheel-throwing and the control of pressure between inner and outer hands.<sup>44</sup> She believes the vessel is a metaphor for life; the give and take of pressure. The act of throwing is a balance of internal and external energy from the maker's hands. Shadbolt states "it is a dialogue of inner and outer forces of which the felt volume and the vessel contour are the witness, the symbol."<sup>45</sup> Shadbolt's statement enabled me to consider my objects as physical metaphors for my experience at the wheel. As a finished work however, *Shift* too literally referred to production pottery and the creation of objects to be practically used.

### Continued Studio Exploration

In the studio I made over thirty arrangements of different vessel forms during this time. I explored combining similar and contrasting colours and textures to see how they would affect each other (Fig. 13 and 14). I found that placing similar, but not identical colours next to one another created a feeling of unity with subtle difference. The three lighter objects in *Grouping no. 6* (Fig 14) are

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<sup>44</sup> Doris Shadbolt, "The Transparency of Clay," in *Ceramic Millennium*, ed. Garth Clark (Halifax: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 2006), 31.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.



an example of this. No single piece took priority, rather they came together with subtle differences that provided a tonal depth. I then explored contrasting these with a gritty, bold, brick-red coloured clay body. My eyes travelled from one object to the next and then back again, comparing colours and textures and I found that contrasting material qualities enhanced the uniqueness of each. The smooth surfaces of the lighter coloured objects seemed to become even more subtle, while the grittiness of the brick coloured clay felt even more rough. Combining different material qualities allowed me to explore movement in another way. Rather than the objects moving in space, the viewer's eye moved between objects in a grouping, comparing and contrasting.

However, in critique sessions, I was struggling with the dominance of the recognizable vessel form and people's presumptions about its use. The vessel is a powerful, socially embedded form often associated with practical function, daily life and use. Tableware forms specifically refer to the act of eating, the physical connection to the human body through use and the domestic environment. In *Seeing Things*, English ceramic artist and writer Alison Britton stated:

The ordinariness of the object field of table, cup, plate, bowl, jug, and the habitual rhythm of getting up, washing, drinking, eating, going out to work, and returning to eat again, give us, in the history of ceramic forms, an assimilated sense of bedrock understanding. There are good pots and awful pots, but we know where they are coming from.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Alison Britton, "Things and Work," in *Seeing Things: Collected Writing on Art, Craft and Design*, Alison Britton. (London: Occasional Papers, 2013) 240.

It was the latter part of her statement that I found most interesting. We have such powerful, socially embedded understandings of tableware objects, they are unchangeable. I no longer wanted people to instantly read my forms as tableware objects because I felt it limited their interpretation. If I was interested in making vessels, but not interested in them being practically used, then what were they about? Did I even need to make vessel forms?

### The Vessel Form

I answered these questions about the importance of the vessel form whilst experimenting in the studio. While further exploring thickness and solidity in my work, hollow construction arose in an attempt to practically resolve the technical and physical challenges of throwing solid forms. Although I had intended to make a vessel form, when constructing *Hollow Study no.5* (Fig. 16), I composed the pieces in a way that negated any concave surface. This experiment challenged my criteria for what a vessel form was. While it still had the potential to hold, as it contained air, it felt totally self contained. It was closed and distant and challenging for my body to imagine engaging with once it had been fired. It didn't reference anything familiar or even hint towards the idea of practical use. I wondered what would change if this form was a lidded container, rather than a solid enclosed form? Even if you didn't physically engage with the lidded container, you would know it had the potential to contain and to be opened. There would be a sense of familiarity through the metaphorical connection to practical use. What I did appreciate from this form however, was its ambiguity. It wasn't easily labelled or interpreted with pre-conceived ideas. With future work,

I would attempt to create forms that sat somewhere between ambiguity and familiarity and, in part, would utilise thickness to do so.



Fig. 16, Kelly Austin, *Hollow Study no. 5* (2015). Wheel-thrown stoneware, 15 cm x 15 cm x 28 cm.

Upon reflection, I can see that my hesitation to further explore this form was because of my preoccupation with the vessel. All of my previous work has sat within the tradition of the wheel-thrown vessel, however metaphorical, and it has contextualised my practice. I struggled to understand how *Hollow Study no. 5*

fitted in. However with hindsight, I can appreciate that this work was not as far removed from the handmade vessel tradition as I originally perceived. It still utilised hand making and the potter's wheel but it denied the reference to practical use. This work opened a potential door to explore the sculptural nature of wheel-generated form. Although I didn't follow this path at the time, I circled back to these ideas with my final works.

Paul Mathieu's concept of complementary difference in relation to the vessel form enabled me to think about my work in a new way. In *Object Theory*, Mathieu discusses the vessel as a form that establishes a transition between interior and exterior.<sup>47</sup> His belief is that this does not imply an opposition but a continuity and that the difference between interior and exterior is not absolute, but complementary.<sup>48</sup> He states:

...a container is a space where opposites are unified, where differences are reconciled....containers and objects combine in symbiosis the top and bottom, the front and the back, the interior and the exterior, the surface and the form, representation and presentation, image and object, material and concept, nature and culture, art and life, intellectual experience and physical experience, body and mind and all and any other binary oppositions we can conceptualize.<sup>49</sup>

Mathieu's way of considering the vessel allows us to consider the metaphorical and conceptual potential of the vessel form as a sculptural symbol, in the semiotic sense. My ideas about the vessel form had shifted toward the abstract,

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Mathieu, "Object Theory," in *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice*, ed. Ruth Chambers et al. (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007) 116.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

metaphorical and symbolic; however, I was still receiving questions and comments relating to the vessel's practicality. This motivated me to further abstract the familiar vessel form. I continued to thicken vessel walls, extended height and changed familiar proportions.

*Grouping no. 7* (Fig. 17) is an exploratory grouping from this time in which I was attempting to resolve two intentions. Firstly, I wanted to create forms that were a balance between the familiar and the ambiguous. Secondly, I was exploring harmony, relationships and movement aesthetically within the grouping. In relation to my first intention, working from left to right in *Grouping no. 7*, I found the first form unsuccessful as it remained too easily identifiable as a 'bowl'. The second and third, however, were engaging. They maintained elements of the familiar wheel-thrown vessel; the potential to contain and the fact that they were round, but they were not easily categorized by language. In regards to my second intention, I used the physical proximity of the objects to suggest close or distant relationships between the forms. Just like a group photograph, different arrangements of the same people can suggest different relationships. I found this arrangement relatively democratic as the spacing between forms was similar. However, placing the small disk form in front of the other three activated the three dimensionality of the grouping. In future works, I would explore the distance between the objects further. In regards to harmony, I considered a complementary palette of four different neutral tones and found their overall combination successful. Lastly, I had considered motion in the way the viewer's eye would travel amongst the works. This already occurred because of the physical placement of the works and the different tones, however, I also

considered how the forms could activate the sense of movement. I combined objects that were low, tall, narrow and wide with a variety of profiles. This resulted in the feeling of dynamic movement, while the palette balanced this with a feeling of calmness.



Fig. 17, Kelly Austin, *Grouping no. 7* (2015). Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain, 115 cm x 45 cm x 14 cm.



Fig. 18, Kelly Austin, *Transition* (2015). Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain, 155 cm x 60 cm x 16 cm.

I made a breakthrough with *Transition* (Fig.18). A fellow artist asked whether or not I intended the objects to be functional. This was a welcome response and sparked a conversation about the terms ‘use’ and Risatti’s definition of ‘function’. The forms had been altered enough that they were no longer easily labeled, but they remained familiar enough to bring up the idea of use. This work was successful in encouraging the considered looking and questioning about the ceramic vessel I was hoping for.

### Kirsten Coelho and The Ceramic Still Life

The use of familiar objects that refer to common, everyday things has traditionally been explored within the genre of the Still Life. Art historian, curator and writer Margit Rowell argues that “since its invention, at the beginning of the seventeenth century, the still life has indeed kept perpetually the same subject; the familiar, recognizable object, isolated or in a group.”<sup>50</sup> Within ceramics, Kirsten Coelho’s work has been of particular interest when considering still life groupings as it combines the recognizable with the abstract (Fig. 19).

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<sup>50</sup> Margit Rowell, *Objects of Desire; The Modern Still Life* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1997), 7.



Fig. 19, Kirsten Coelho, *What We Thought We Needed*, 2015. Wheel-thrown porcelain, matt and white glaze, banded iron oxide and saturated iron glaze, 60cm x 25cm x 22cm.

Coelho's forms are wheel-thrown porcelain vessels that borrow from traditional Chinese, Korean and Japanese wares, as well as a historical vernacular of Australian objects. In a recent catalogue essay, Wendy Walker gives specific examples of these forms: "a rustic 1870's foot bath, an early nineteenth-century salt-glazed tobacco jar and...the ridged interior of an old washing machine."<sup>51</sup> Coelho's work references the different cultural influences of migration into Australia and as Walker states, her "spare arrangements suggest the frugality of settler life."<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Wendy Walker, "Kirsten Coelho: In the Falling Light" in *In the Falling Light*, (Canberra, ACT: Drill Hall Gallery, ANU, 2015), 5.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.



Coelho's choice to work with porcelain is deliberate. Not only is this material imbued with cultural values of preciousness, but it is a very technically demanding material, requiring a high level of skill and care. These qualities contribute to the layering of meaning in her work. The fusion of traditional, Asian ceramic forms with common, vernacular Australian forms, in wheel-thrown porcelain, does two key things. Firstly, it levels our perception of different objects with different values. She places forms that refer to valued Asian vessels right next to forms that allude to common, inexpensive enamelware. Secondly, by hand making these objects in porcelain, she elevates the objects' aesthetic value. She pays particular attention to the material culture of daily existence and asks the viewer to contemplate and re-consider these objects.

The surfaces of Coelho's works are primarily different shades of white in a range of matt to glossy. As stated in her Master's exegesis, some of these glazes are based on Bernard Leach's celadon glaze and others are inspired by North Asian glazes.<sup>53</sup> Some of her objects have a banding of iron oxide around the rim that refers to the rusted rim of enamelware. This act of deliberately aging something is a mysterious trick that abstracts the familiar. She uses the material of rust, red iron oxide, to create these marks yet after the firing the iron is fused into the glaze. What looks like rust and is a similar chemical make up to rust, will never change. She has created an illusion of metal having experienced weather and time, yet her objects are porcelain with glaze and will never physically change over time.

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<sup>53</sup> Kirsten Coelho, "The Interpretation of the Metaphoric Through the Integration of North Asian and Western Ceramic Practices" (MVA exegesis, University of South Australia, 2004).

During my field research in 2015, I travelled to Adelaide to meet with Coelho. We discussed the ideas of function and use, considering that her objects, when experienced in the art gallery context, don't operate in practical ways. She believes that the word 'use' can be considered quite broadly and in the interview stated "there's the physical act of putting food in a dish, but use can also be an aesthetic and visual quality as well."<sup>54</sup> While someone may not use her work to physically contain, they may use it for conceptual, contemplative or experiential purposes instead. Coelho's definition of 'use' and Risatti's of 'function' are more able to be accommodated in the context of the art gallery, where objects aren't expected to be physically engaged with. Re-contextualising Coelho's objects in the art gallery allows her work to explore the "sculptural possibilities of domestic objects" and the viewer brings with them a special type of looking, one more familiar to the genre of still life painting.<sup>55</sup>

### The Hybrid Object–Image

Painting is inherently distanced from everyday reality because of its nature as an image. In German sociologist Georg Simmel's essay *The Handle*, he describes the work of art leading its life beyond reality. While the canvas and pigment of a painting are part of reality, "the work of art constructed out of them exists in an ideal place which can no more come in contact with actual space."<sup>56</sup> He describes the space of a painting as being self-enclosed and self-sufficient.<sup>57</sup> If we consider Simmel's description in relation to the viewer looking at a painting, it highlights the difference between the viewer, being a part of

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<sup>54</sup> Kirsten Coelho. Interview by author. Digital Recording. Adelaide, June 16, 2015.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Georg Simmel, "Two Essays: The Handle and The Ruin," *Hudson Review* 11:3 (1958): 371.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

reality, and the image, beyond reality. This situation creates distance between the viewer and the work of art. Paul Mathieu extends this discussion in his essay *Object Theory*.

Mathieu defines an image as a “cultural phenomenon experienced through sight alone” and states that a painting, photograph and even sculpture (although three dimensional) operate as images because of the way they are reduced to visual experience.<sup>58</sup> He believes the visual experience to be “one of distantiation, of removal, of separation” from the viewer and in similarity with Simmel, states that the image “exists in opposition to reality”.<sup>59</sup> Mathieu gives an example of a painted portrait of your mother. He believes that when you are experiencing the image it separates you from the actual physical experience of her because it exists in opposition to your own physical reality.<sup>60</sup> The image creates a new experience, removed from the reality of our lived experience and is always a representation. Mathieu believes that images always establish a fundamental opposition between two types of experiences and that “binary oppositions are intrinsic to images.”<sup>61</sup>

In contrast, objects exist within reality. As Simmel poetically describes, “the real object interacts with everything that surges past or hovers around it.”<sup>62</sup> Mathieu states that objects are of two main types: tools and containers. He believes that

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<sup>58</sup> Paul Mathieu, “Object Theory,” in *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice*, ed. Ruth Chambers et al. (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007) 113.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 115.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Georg Simmel, “Two Essays: The Handle and The Ruin,” *Hudson Review* 11:3 (1958): 371.

containment, the conceptual meaning of containers, has to do with the relationship between the object and its environment, establishing a continuity between the interior and exterior.<sup>63</sup> The object is engaged with reality, its surroundings and the viewer. Mathieu argues that objects are about “difference as continuity, not difference as rupture, the operative characteristic of images.”<sup>64</sup> Considering Mathieu and Simmel’s key arguments, the operation of images creates a situation of distance between the viewer and the work of art, where objects create a situation of closeness. While one functions to push things apart, the other brings them together.

According to Mathieu’s argument, the works of Stair, Hanssen Pigott, Coelho and my later works experienced in the art gallery operate as images because they are primarily experienced by vision. Therefore, these works then operate in opposition to reality and function to distance the viewer from the works. However, I do not completely agree with Mathieu’s argument. While these objects are experienced primarily through vision, they are still very much physical, material objects that maintain a relationship with actual space. The type of concentrated looking that occurs in the art gallery context heightens our awareness of the tactile qualities present in the ceramic objects and we relate these to our own physical bodies and reality. Through vision, we experience a familiar sense of scale with the objects and can imagine what their surfaces would feel like through the qualities and reflexivity of the glaze. The object’s wall thickness and the articulation of its rim also provide imagined, tactile information. We are sensually touched back by the objects in a way that only

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<sup>63</sup> Paul Mathieu, “Object Theory,” in *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice*, ed. Ruth Chambers et al. (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007) 116-7.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

three dimensions and materiality can do and our experience becomes embodied. In Natasha Daintry's essay, *The Essential Vessel*, she states:

I believe ceramics has a potent and underused language of material sensuality. It asks that you notice the minute differences between textures, tones of colours and forms. This attending to the physicality of things has the effect of locating you in the world and connecting you to your own physicality. It represents a way of felt experience, of being known and knowing the world through the corporeal.<sup>65</sup>

Within ceramics, we even call a vessel's glaze its 'skin,' the bottom of the piece, the 'foot' and different clays, clay 'bodies.' These terms are embedded in the felt and real world.

In response to Mathieu's argument, I am suggesting a potential middle ground, where ceramic objects primarily experienced through vision can be both object and image at the same time. This is how I believe the work of Stair, Hanssen Pigott, Coelho and my later works viewed in the art gallery function – as hybrid object–images. These works are primarily experienced through vision and function as images to distance the viewer from the works. However, they simultaneously operate as objects embedded in real space and create a sense of closeness with the viewer. Hybrid object–images have an active relationship with the viewer that shifts between bringing them closer and creating distance. These objects can engage with both reality and an imagined space beyond reality. This enables the hybrid object–image to explore ideas related to abstraction.

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<sup>65</sup> Natasha Daintry "The Essential Vessel" in *Breaking the Mould: New Approaches to Ceramics*, Natasha Daintry, Rob Barnard and Clare Twomey (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 12.

## Geert Lap and Abstraction

The work of ceramic artist Geert Lap informed my thinking about the ceramic vessel and abstraction at this time. Lap's work explores the aesthetic potential of the wheel-thrown form and surface outside the tradition of utility (Fig. 20). Some of his forms reference familiar objects, such as the bowl, while others borrow from the language of industry, for example: funnels or speaker cones. His work stretches our perception of the kinds of vessel forms that can be made utilizing the potter's wheel, however, they still maintain a direct connection to the tradition of the handmade vessel as they are consistently round and maintain the potential for containment. As with Stair, Hanssen Pigott and Coelho's work, Lap's work creates a situation of tension and ambiguity; the vessel form is familiar but how they operate within the art gallery context is less so. In this space, Lap's work functions to explore abstract ideas about combinations of ceramic form and colour. In an interview with Erik Beenker, designer Benno Premsele asks the questions "What should we call these objects? Are they vases or are they sculptures? It is a difficult subject, this transition of being between functional and nonfunctional, a riddle."<sup>66</sup> This type of questioning of the ceramic vessel can only exist within a context that does not have a pre-determined 'use' for the objects, such as the art gallery.

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<sup>66</sup> Erik Beenker, "Presence: Interview with Benno Premsele about Geert Lap" in *Geert Lap: The Thrown Form*, ed. Museum Boymans-van Beuningen (Rotterdam: Museum Boymans-Van Beuningen, 1988) 6.



Fig. 20, Geert Lap, *Mist* (1985). Wheel-thrown stoneware. 35 cm x 25 cm x 20 cm.

The surfaces of Lap's objects also borrow from ceramic tradition whilst contradicting it. Lap uses an ancient ceramic technique called Terra Sigillata on the surfaces of his objects. Historically, the colours of Terra Sigillata were generally dependent on naturally occurring colours and particle sizes of the clay it was made from. We are most familiar with these surfaces being a range of reds, oranges and black. The colour palette Lap works with, however, does not refer to the raw material of clay or the history of this technique at all. Instead, he uses particular shades of teal, coral and grey more familiar to industrial materials such as plastic and resin, challenging the conventions of ceramic materials. Lap's surfaces are nothing like Hanssen Pigott's glassy and tonally varied, wood-fired pieces or Coelho's reduction fired glazed porcelain, which

honor a specific ceramic history. However, he is using one of the most elemental ceramic materials for his surfaces, vitrified clay.

Lap's flat and uniform surfaces also operate in a way that renders them two dimensional, like a drawing or print. His surfaces have a delicate shine, similar to a screen print. This flatness confuses our perception of the depth of his objects. Lap's work functions in a similar way to a still life painting, but in reverse. While a two dimensional painting tries to represent three dimensional objects, Lap's work attempts to shift the three dimensional object toward a two dimensional representation and explore abstraction. This is enhanced by the fact that we often view art today through reproduction and hence through the form of a two dimensional photograph. The images of Lap's work are often highly aestheticized and photographed in a way that removes references to three dimensional space. With no horizon line present to symbolize real space, the objects float in a blank, white space, like a drawing. The same can be argued for the photographs of Hanssen Pigott's or Coelho's works, which are meticulously composed to represent a space beyond reality.

Hanssen Pigott was also interested in the exploration of abstraction in her work. The art gallery context was crucial for this, where she had control over the installation, contextual framing of the work and where the audience was willing to engage with abstract ideas. In *The Rightness of Form*, she illustrates the operation of the image within her hybrid object-images when she states:

From eye level a group of pots (a still life or parade...) might be at one glance severe and classical, with solid profiles, and slightly pompous stances. And then, with a slight raising of one's height, the lips of bowls and jugs can appear to outline floating ovals of suspended colour; the pots no longer anthropomorphic, but linear, seamless, like drawings...if



the porcelain is translucent there is a further dissolving of the solid and the line.<sup>67</sup>

I was intrigued by Hanssen Pigott's statement and began to consider how my own works could explore similar abstract ideas. I became more aware of the negative spaces I was creating between objects in the groupings and how crucial the viewer's perspective was in mobilising this aspect of the work.

### Final Studio Works

The final works have resulted from the culmination of my research over the past two years. I found the context of the art gallery more accommodating to the formal, conceptual and abstract exploration of the wheel-thrown ceramic object, so have created a number of independent and grouped works to be experienced in this space. *Blue Composition*, *Peat Composition* and *Grey Composition* (Fig. 21, 22 and 23) are examples of the types of works I will be exhibiting. I have chosen the word 'composition' as an overarching term in relation to my final works. The online Oxford English Dictionary defines the term 'composition' generally as "the action of putting together or combining....of things as parts or elements of a whole." In addition, this term creates a useful bridge to other creative disciplines for example, music, photography and painting.

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<sup>67</sup> Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, "The Rightness of Form," *Ceramic Review*, May/June (2004): 25.



Fig. 21, Kelly Austin, *Blue Composition* (2016). Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain. 50 cm x 30 cm x 25 cm.



Fig. 22, Kelly Austin, *Peat Composition* (2016). Wheel-thrown stoneware and porcelain. 42 cm x 29 cm x 29 cm.



Fig. 23, Kelly Austin, *Grey Composition* (2016). Wheel-thrown stoneware. 32 cm x 32 cm x 43 cm.

My final work will consider the formal qualities of form, texture, glaze and physical arrangement as elements within my compositions. Within each object and grouping, I will attempt to bring these individual components together to form a balanced, harmonious whole, considering Matheiu's idea of difference as continuity. For example, in *Grey Composition*, (Fig.23), I have created a rigid and angular form that can be seen in relation to an industrial component; a type of funnel or chimney. In an attempt to balance this sense of coolness, I have chosen a soft, neutral gray colour. This tone references materials from the natural world, for example: the grey of un-dyed wool, the grey found in the bark of Spotted Gum trees or the grey of heavily reduced stoneware. The satin surface of the glaze also enhances the feeling of subtlety and softness within the piece.

In regards to the groupings, the choice of forms is also a factor in their composition. For example, in *Blue Composition* (Fig.21), the low, wide and thick form on the right is countered by the two on the left, which reach vertically and are resolved with fine rims. In this work, a balanced range from light to dark tonal values are also incorporated, although that will not be the case with every final grouping. I have attempted to heighten the material nature of my ceramic objects by placing reflective surfaces next to matt surfaces and gritty clay bodies next to smooth ones.

My final works will combine different types of forms. For example, some of them will be vessels and sit within the tradition of handmade ceramic vessels. These forms refer to the domestic space, daily life and practical use. Other forms will not be vessels. Some of these will refer to pure geometric forms: solid cylinders or cones. Other non-vessel shapes will refer to forms found within the practice of wheel-throwing: a chuck, or the shape of plastic clay centred on the wheel before a thrower begins the act of opening. Other non-vessel forms will allude to objects such as components, parts and sections of familiar objects; lids, stoppers or pestles, yet their 'use' and name will be challenging to determine. These final works will be sculptural explorations of form that is created around the central axis of the wheel. This is a key difference I found between my work and the work of Stair, Hanssen Pigott and Coelho. While their objects explore the "sculptural possibilities of domestic objects," my final work aims to investigate the sculptural possibilities of wheel-thrown form in relation to the vessel and non-vessel.<sup>68</sup> While these non-vessel objects are less familiar and

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<sup>68</sup> Kirsten Coelho. Interview by author. Digital Recording. Adelaide, June 16, 2015.

operate in different ways than the vessel, they are linked by their material qualities and the process in which they were made. Placing familiar and unfamiliar objects next to one another is another way in which I will consider balance within the compositions.

I will utilise both wall mounted shelves and plinths to create different kinds of compositions and framing of the objects. In utilizing shelves, I intend the work to be more closely related to painted still lives, with a foreground (the shelf), background (the wall) and horizon line (created where the shelf meets the wall). While the wall mounted works will actively control the perspective from which the objects can be viewed, the viewer will be able to move around the works on the plinths, referring to sculpture. I am interested to observe how these two different modes of installation will impact upon their interpretation.

There is a compelling contradiction between my interest in the inherent nature of raw ceramic materials and the industrial and minimal aesthetic these final works utilise. This balance is related to ideas I explored in my first chapter about the contemporary revival of interest in craft and the current social, political, cultural and economic situation. While aesthetic resolutions during the Arts and Crafts Movement and Studio Craft Movement embraced the hand made (and the latter quite literally), they did so in a way that rejected the industrial. During both these periods, the handmade aesthetic was symbolic of an independence from mass production, industry and a particular vision of economic progress. While this traditional handmade aesthetic still exists today, some makers are choosing one that embraces the visual language of industry and technology as well.

In my final works, some forms will refer to industrially produced objects, such as plastic funnels, metal machine components and glass jars. Although I am still producing form by hand on the wheel, I use clay and ceramic stains that have been industrially manufactured. To remain relevant as a maker today, I do not believe in denying the industrial aspects of our world. While I recognise there are problems with industry, such as potential negative environmental impacts, there are also positive aspects, such as the production of sustainable energy. Taking an approach that aesthetically embraces parts of traditional handmade values and parts of the industrial world is contemporary. It is a realistic and balanced approach, while still being rooted in a desire for a better quality of everyday life.

### Conclusion

This chapter discussed the second year of my research where I made vessels and objects for the art gallery context. My interests had moved away from the practical requirements of vessels and towards their metaphoric and symbolic meanings. Paul Matheiu's idea that the vessel form represents difference as continuity reinforced my interest in the idea of balance within my work. The art gallery context allowed for more open discussions about 'use' and 'function.' In addition, I found the context more supportive of my artistic interest in groupings and abstract ideas about wheel-thrown objects.

This chapter discussed Simmel and Mathieu's theories of the operation of images and objects. Through discussing the work Stair, Hanssen Pigott, Coelho and my works for the gallery in relation to their definitions, I proposed a new



understanding of ceramic objects experienced within the art gallery context; as hybrid object–images. These objects both distance the viewer and bring them closer. Their operation as images allows them to explore abstract ideas in a space beyond reality.

My final works have been informed by the contextualising research discussed in Chapter One and are a response to what it means to be making by hand today. They embrace some qualities of the handmade vessel tradition, while reflect on contemporary life and attempt to stay relevant. While aesthetically reduced and minimal, my final works are layered with meaning, explore the idea of balance and embrace ambiguity.

## Conclusion

“Pottery is at once the simplest and the most difficult of all arts. It’s the simplest because it is the most elemental; it is the most difficult because it is the most abstract”<sup>69</sup>

My research concludes that context greatly informs our interpretation of the handmade ceramic vessel and significantly influences the artistic potential of the work. This project involved making ceramic vessels and objects and reflecting upon their operations in the restaurant and art gallery context, in relation to the work of Ben Richardson, Julian Stair, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Kirsten Coelho and Geert Lap. The starting point of raw ceramic material and the wheel-throwing process is similar amongst all the works I investigated. However, throughout my research I found that the interpretation and understanding of ceramic objects varies greatly depending on the context they’re experienced within.

Within the restaurant context, the understanding of ceramic vessels was linked to the way they were physically engaged with and practically used. At Mocan, Monster and Garagistes the plates operated to literally hold, carry and serve. They were relational, harmonious and dynamic. In addition, the objects went beyond pure utility, aesthetically enhancing the dining experience and conceptually connecting to the Slow Food and Slow values of the restaurants. They were a direct visual reflection of current social movements and the revival of interest in hand making. While the Monster project functioned successfully in

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<sup>69</sup> Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1931) 42.



ways similar to the Mocan works, my artistic ambitions had outstripped the restaurant context. In order to freely explore formal qualities of the wheel-thrown vessel and object, I chose to make work for the art gallery context. In addition, I was interested in more metaphorical and abstract explorations of the vessel and the art gallery context was more conducive to this.

Within the art gallery context, I found the definitions of 'function', 'use' and the ceramic vessel more flexible because practical use is alleviated. There was far more possibility to explore unconventional forms, surfaces and ideas about the meaning of ceramic vessels. In addition, the art gallery provided a broader critical space for reflection and dialogue. Mathieu's idea of the vessel form being symbolic of difference as continuity enabled me to think about my work in a new way. I began to consider my objects as metaphors for balance. The art gallery context provided an isolated and paused experience of works, enabling arrangement and installation to be in service of the artist's purpose and the exploration of abstraction to occur.

In addition, the art gallery provided a primarily visual experience of the works. In relation to this, I discussed Mathieu and Simmel's definitions of images and objects. According to these writers, ultimately the image functions to distance the viewer from the work and exists in a space beyond reality. In comparison, the object functions to bring the viewer closer to the work and exists within reality. Upon considering my and other key artists' work in the gallery, I proposed a middle ground, where objects operate as both objects and images; the hybrid object-image.

My final works for examination will continue to explore the idea of balance. They will do this through their functionality as hybrid object–images, existing to both distance and bring the viewer closer. In addition, the forms will mediate between the familiar and the ambiguous. While the viewer may associate my works with practical use, the constraints of the art gallery context will create a situation of complexity and unfamiliarity. Ideas about ‘use’ and ‘function’ will be contemplated. In addition, aesthetic explorations of balance will occur through considered compositions of form, colour, surface and object arrangements. My final works have been informed by the history of the handmade vessel and are a response to what it means to be making by hand today. They embrace certain qualities of the handmade vessel tradition, while also embracing aspects of contemporary life.

Future research within this field of enquiry could explore the context of the domestic, where practical, conceptual and aesthetic uses may be more equally valued. If we consider the potential lives of ceramic vessels in this context engaging with both the dining table and the display cabinet, it may be found that ceramic vessels in the domestic space move more fluidly between practical use and contemplation. Therefore, the meaning of ceramic objects within the domestic space may be even more broad and changeable over time.

Throughout this research, I have come to more fully appreciate the unique opportunities that the restaurant and art gallery contexts offer the maker. I have not abandoned making objects for practical use. Rather, I can imagine two streams of practice which explore related, but individual ideas and are in dialogue with one another.

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While the references listed in additional reading have not been quoted, they have been a valuable contribution to my understanding of the field of research.

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