

The Ongoing Odyssey of OWEN RYE

Peter Pilven

There would be few potters, ceramicists or collectors of ceramics in Australia who would not be familiar with the wood fired work of Owen Rye. Indeed, his long and enduring career spans many decades as well as continents and ranges from educational, archaeological and artistic endeavours.

Superficially, it may seem unnecessary here to give a potted history of Rye and his work, [Owen detests superficiality] however there are mitigating aspects of his life that make for a more profound contextualisation of the man and his ceramics.

Owen Rye was born on the southern tip of the Great Dividing Range in the mountains near Cooma, New South Wales. At that time, in that part of the country, there were none of the conveniences we take for granted now. Electricity, gas and phones had yet to arrive; hence the obvious fuel of choice for this region was wood.

If homes or water had to be heated or food cooked, wood had to be collected, cut, split and stacked. A physical rite of passage for any self-respecting young mountain man.

As Rye was the eldest of his siblings, his education in bush skills and related timber knowledge gleaned from his father was thorough and insightful.

The chillingly dangerous Circular Saw featured prominently in this education and its function respectfully learnt and applied, as was the use of a range of axes, wedges and associated lifting devices for heavy logs.

The University of the Bush was to instil a life long curiosity in the young man from the mountains who was to subsequently study under Ivan McMeekin at the University of New South Wales in the 1960's. McMeekin's comprehensive research techniques and attention to detail were at once absorbed but robustly questioned as well by the young and inquisitive Rye.

The collected anecdotes and memories of these early experiences have been carefully filed away in the memory of a maturing man who savours them with relish when permitted.

As a consequence of these early experiences, the allied bush art of "telling a good yarn" still features prominently in Rye's conversation and is often a welcomed source of engagement during long nights around a wood kiln. Many of these stories are also derived from his international travels and experiences and highlight the eclectically varied sources that have fed his innate curiosity.

Time spent in the Middle East [funded by the Smithsonian Institute USA] on archaeological digs supplied the stimulus for the authorship of 2 books on the subject of archaeological ceramics that are widely recognised and held in high esteem in archaeological circles for their clarity and veracity.

History with its comparative timelines of art and economics have further fueled Rye's keenly observed perceptions, however this knowledge has never led to mere sentimental interpretation of objects from antiquity, moreover it has provided the

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catalytic stimulus for highly individual contemporary works in clay.

As Rye quoted in an article, first Published in *Ceramics Art and Perception* No. 10, 1992.

My conscious sources of inspiration lie in that sense of mystery; the mystery of past civilizations, evoked at a time when I was working as an archaeologist. This preoccupation with antiquity has no part in looking backward to vessels of any particular tradition, at least not consciously. It has far more to do with the general mystery of times past, the fascination with how things might have been, with a membership of a human family through time. An object can start that imaginary journey, and my work is to make that object for myself.

It is highly evident when reading any of Rye's writing [available on his website, <http://www.owenrye.com/index.html>] that he conjures up more questions for himself than he answers. It is this uncertainty that he and many others who fire with wood, have come to accept as a willful but necessary companion to the wood-



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fire process and its attendant aesthetic. Rye believes that as our world shrinks and becomes increasingly globalised, we as individuals have an innate need to assert some form of individual expression. Like the method of wood firing itself, the resultant critical dialogue as well as the objects made may at times be contradictory or even inconsistent, but herein lies the attraction for Rye.

Any discussion of Owen Rye, the man and his work, would be seriously incomplete if his contribution to education was not mentioned.

He lectured at the Canberra School of Art [from 1980 – 84] along side the late Alan Peascod, with whom he maintained a lifelong friendship until Peascod's untimely death.

From 1985-2003, Rye was Senior Lecturer at Monash University, Gippsland Centre for Art and Design. It was during this time he established

the highly regarded and respected Post Graduate Course, Distance Education. The course was a vital, rigorous program that stimulated its participants whose names read like a Who's Who of Australian contemporary ceramics.

An exhibition at the Mura Gallery in Sydney in 2003 titled the "Rye Crop" where the exhibitors were all past Graduate Diploma or Higher Degree students is a glowing endorsement of his teaching abilities and the respect his former students hold for him. His peerless knowledge of ceramics and art was ably supported by a vast general knowledge that ranged from engineering to history.

His teaching methods were unobtrusive but instructive, intelligent but not overbearingly intellectual, all delivered with a warm, succinct wisdom.

It is because of these many facets of his teaching prowess he has been justly lauded both nationally and internationally by the ceramics community.

In 2000, Rye was recognised by The Society of American Archaeology with an award for contributions to ceramic studies. He also received a Lifetime Achievement Award (Services to Education) in 2004 at the ClayModern Conference, Gulgong, New South Wales.

Although now officially retired, Rye continues to conduct workshops and lectures within Australia and the USA where he has maintained close contact since the 1970's.

It has been argued that a true appreciation of any art form is perilously subjective, however if honesty and integrity are worthy benchmarks to be thrown into the equation of assessment, then the ceramics work of Owen Rye is a palpable example.

If an art work reflects any of the character of its maker, then honesty and integrity cloak Rye's pots as lusciously as the natural ash glaze does on much of the work.

The most current work, exhibited at Skepsi Gallery, Melbourne continues his exploration of bottle forms, bowls and large voluminous jars with subtle but decipherable new developments of form and surfaces employed.

His forms, muscular and confident, possess an assuredness in the making and post making handling that implies an ease with their worldly presence. Deformations such as indentations on the shoulder of jars cunningly trap and collect glaze into molten rivulets that develop during the extended firing.

The feet on bowls are generous and in keeping with the weight of the coarse, stony clay used for much of the work in this exhibition. The lips and rims on the vases are full and slightly asymmetrical as if worn by the forces of nature and are further softened by the accumulation of fly ash.

Other more recent developments have seen Rye return to the

use of applied glaze.

A continuing development of calcium based glazes have provided a subtle, softer addition to the glaze palette with powder blues quietly contrasting the tonal warmth of the natural ash and Shino glazed pieces.

For the perceptive observer, there were pieces in this showing for every season and every contemplative expression.

Like the multi-layered career of their maker, many of the pots in this exhibition catalogue a record of the history of their creation, placement in the kiln and firing, simultaneously revealing and concealing subtle nuance's.

As Rye wrote in 2007, "*The wood-fired pot, unalterably unique, with its distortions and flaws, is not of a different world (it is also the consequence of a human act). But it reminds us of a different attitude, a different approach where logic is balanced by deviations in the plan, by accidents along the way, by a sensory response rather than an intellectual one. In our house the wood-fired pot provides a balance that reminds us of our human frailties and our sensory selves. With some flowers in it – it will remind us of a world out there that we may in our cleverness otherwise forget.*"

Finally, I thought it appropriate to finish this article with a wry "Ryeism" that eloquently captures some of the artist's profound perspicacity. The only conclusion I ever make is that making conclusions is creating a form of death; the death of ideas. Never conclude. Keep moving.

Peter Pilven has been a practising ceramic artist for over 30 years. He is currently Visual Arts Coordinator at the University of Ballarat, Victoria, Australia

Owen Rye from Australia has worked in many aspects of ceramics including archaeology, teaching postgraduate students, making and exhibiting woodfired work in Australia and internationally, delivering workshops on woodfiring in Australia and other countries, curating exhibitions, organising conferences, and writing books and articles for many ceramics magazines. He is a member of the International Academy of Ceramics.

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