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Owen Rye: *A Daedal Gallimaufry*

Exhibition at the Barn Gallery

Montsalvat Victoria

March 7 – 22, 2020

Written by **Morag Fraser**

Owen Rye's autumn exhibition, *A Daedal Gallimaufry*, curated by Skepsi's Anna Maas, was a *tour de force* in many ways, not least in its fortuitous timing. The bushfires were doused, finally, and the virus a low whisper (in Australia) at the time of the show's opening. By its close, there was leisure and calm enough – just – for keen buyers to venture out to Eltham's Montsalvat to collect their treasures. The show's final day marked almost the last of what we once called 'normal life'.

But it was not just a quirk of fate that made this exhibition memorable. Owen Rye's pots have an elemental quality, a dynamic stillness that seems to exist outside of time, or at least outside time as we obsessively measure and spend it. His pots conjure rock strata, lava flow, crystalline recesses; they seem extruded from some molten core rather than fashioned with hands on a wheel. Yet they are also lively, hinting at the organic: the celadon glint of lichen on basalt or the tadpole wriggle of a mixed ash glaze as it forever seeks the centre of a perfect bowl. Sometimes his pots are stately, other times elegiac. And in the black carbon-trap gleam on his small, lugged and multi-fired vases, there is a stark echo of the burnt bases on the sentinel eucalypts that line the road to his Gippsland home – survivors of an earlier fire, portents of another to come.

This is a man, a potter, acutely responsive to the physical world he inhabits, and master of a medium that can give that world potent expression.

Owen Rye is seventy-five, but this was no retrospective exhibition. Large (one hundred and three pots) and diverse, it came out of a recent ferment of activity, and a calculated shift in his firing and glazing techniques. Long considered one of Australia's foremost woodfirers, he has taken the opportunity of the exhibition to 'correct a misperception'. Yes, most of the work he has presented publicly since the early 1990s has been woodfired in the great anagama ('an untameable beast') that hibernates downhill from his once-was-a-country-schoolroom studio. Now he has switched to a small wood-fire kiln and to solitary firings.

But change has been a constant, I believe, for Owen Rye. Throughout his life, this self-confessedly 'curious' man has explored a broad range of ceramic techniques and media. I remember once asking him whose was the delicate blue on white porcelain plate I'd found on a ledge in the corner of the studio. He chided me (gently, but definitely) for my implicit typecasting. 'Mine, of course. Don't assume I only make woodfired pots!' And then followed the indicative lesson from his store cupboards – his 'library' as he called it.

Bowl, 2019, stoneware, mixed ash glazes, dia: 18 cm.

The exhibition's title is apt: this is indeed a *gallimaufry*, an assemblage of works of great variety (which is one way of construing the word). But this potter always has a glint in his eye, and the title – his choice – is also an amiable nudge at fellow potter Col Levy, who 'always includes words that make me get out the dictionary'. So make what you will, with Owen's ironic warrant, of some of the OED's other definitions of *gallimaufry*. 'A hash of odds and ends' is my favourite – neither accurate nor just about this exhibition, but hinting at some calculated re-heating. I will come back to that.

What is not up for dispute (forget the wordplay) is the *daedal* part of the title. Owen Rye truly is a 'skilled artificer', a potter whose

work is 'cunningly wrought', and 'of the earth'. But more than that – he is a maker whose hand is distinctive, eccentric but recognisable. Even when he initially surprises you with a classic bowl form, or a fathomless blue ice glaze, you can sense his hand and technique (and some ruthless pre-exhibition culling) in the bowl's weight, or in a characteristic iron speckle. He is a master potter, unconventional in his work as in his person – a heteroclit (look it up), one whose long dedication to his art has more than earned him the right – and afforded him the technique – to experiment, to deviate from the usual, the obvious, to explore, to move backwards as well as forwards. And *always* to command your attention.

Below:
Bowl, 2019, stoneware,
blue ice glaze, dia: 18 cm.

Opposite:
Conical Jars, 2019-2020,
stoneware, Apricot glaze,
height (main) 23 cm.



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During my hours spent with the works in this exhibition I kept thinking back to some words written by John McDonald in his *Sydney Morning Herald* review of Peter Rushforth's 2013 survey exhibition at the S.H. Ervin Gallery:

'Pottery today is in a paradoxical position. Alongside the wraparound videos, sculptural installations and performance works favoured by the contemporary art museums, it seems decidedly unsexy. Yet, stand in a gallery in front of a great pot and it is hard to think of anything more sensual, engaging or reflective of the human hand or spirit.'

Whatever the position of pottery seven years on from that extraordinary exhibition, McDonald's unbridled enthusiasm (from a critic who normally rations his praise) and words still reverberate for me. And they chime with another striking remark, made by American potter-wordsmith (and friend of Owen Rye's), Jack Troy: 'Ours is an ancient, visceral aesthetics'.

Owen Rye's *Daedal Gallimaufry* has all that: sensual columnar forms that make one think of weathered caryatids supporting ancient Greek entablatures; visceral glazes that jolt your senses and cry out to be touched; great jars whose ash glaze drips like honey from the squared shoulder of one (in itself technically tricky), or like blown sea spray from another, and vessel forms of

such poise and radiance that they reduce one to meditative silence.

More than half the works in the exhibition were produced in a gargantuan burst of energy in 2019-20. A few – including some of the great jars – are earlier, and anagama fired. Together they are all testament to the potter's persistence with form, his risk-taking with new and different glazing and firing techniques – and his gambler's readiness to wait upon the will of ash deposits in both the anagama and the small woodfire kiln that he has now adopted – for functional and for personal reasons.

In his catalogue essay Owen reveals (uncharacteristic for such a taciturn man) that, after the death of his wife Barbara, in 2016, 'everything changed' – his personality, his desire to expend the time, effort and the group enterprise the anagama demanded. His health suffered. He needed to explore 'something new'.

The result was this exhibition. It contained enough earlier pots (roughly twenty percent of the exhibition) to chart a brief history (the oldest is dated 2004) and to illustrate the variety of his work. But the notion of a 'progression' was not the point. This was, and is, a potter experimenting as he has always done. And sometimes experimenting again with work already 'completed', if not to his satisfaction. The catalogue records a number of works in

Fat Jar 2, 2019, anagama fired, multiple firings, height: 22 cm.





Rectangular Platter,
2019, stoneware,
cracking glaze,
24 x 17 cm.

this way: 'Bottle, stoneware, anagama fired ash glaze, *multiple firings*' [my emphasis]. One particular classic bottle form, with a chaste opalescent glaze, bore only a single but unforgettable calligraphic streak to indicate that it had been back into the fire. Others, like the conversant group of small stoneware jars with lugs, wear their multiple firings like zany badges of honour. They are scarred, pitted and glowing with molten ash accretions. If only culinary 'hashes' of 'odds and ends' could be so enticing – and witty. Roughly seventy per cent of the pots in the exhibition 'have been fiddled with', Owen declared, with a certain refractory glee. In pottery, as in music, the elements can be endlessly recycled, improvised upon (jazz was

Quizzed about his 'odd glaze techniques' Owen can be gnomish. But he is always gracious and forthcoming about the potters from whom he has learned. 'If you just did this' is what Ivan McMeekin would tell him as they looked at a 'finished' pot. So everything was a stage on the way to what you did next. My questions about glazes Owen routinely deflects into what other potters told him once. Trade secrets. But gratefully acknowledged. Even the site for this exhibition – Montsalvat, with its formidable, soaring timbers and adobe-textured walls – was a silent prompt from Owen's affection and regard for Milton Moon. Milton's solo exhibition, also mounted by Anna Maas of Skepsi, was held in the same Barn Gallery in April 2017, two years

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once 'the only music' he listened to). By way of explanatory confession to other professionals he added this: 'For those who work with clay and wonder what I have done with some of these pots, the answer is that many of them are the result of very odd glaze application techniques'.

In the new works, particularly the 2020 stoneware group of conical jars, vases and bowls, coated with what he calls 'apricot glaze' (think of a heavy creamed mousse or a Melbourne dawn sky of evanescent sunlight interlaced with the palest blue), you can see the results – in subtlety of colour and a fascinating crawl and cracking of the glaze, sometimes into lizard skin, other times into jagged fissures. And on others, stoneware, tenmoku bowls, his 'white glaze' is a ghostly fish scale, slipping away under your fingers.

before Milton's death in 2019. There is a guild loyalty, a confraternity and freedom of exchange among potters, in Australia and internationally, that is admirable and exemplary in an art world that is too often shallow, self-regarding and ruthlessly competitive. At Montsalvat on the opening afternoon the fellowship showed itself, quirkily and affectionately, in fellow potter Colin Hopkins' percussive 'improvisation' on one of Owen's great jars (the most resonant one). The audience enjoyed Owen's look of surprised relief when Colin, who is a fine jazz pianist, shifted from jar to the Yamaha Grand to round out the entertainment.

Eccentric forms: Owen Rye expresses a preference for them, and it shows in many of the pots in this exhibition. He traces it to an early interest in abstract art, but don't discount this potter's other scholarly affinity (and expertise) – archaeology. He likes his pots to have 'the appearance of having had a hard life' – like vessels dug up, or patinated and distorted with age. Many of his smaller bottles and jars

do indeed have a worn, grunting vivacity; they sit in the hand like benign dwarves, bent and indented for handling. A number of the earlier ones (anagama-fired) have had multiple 'hard' and fiery lives. The later (2019) bottles and rectangular platters are an encyclopaedia of glaze texture and technique. Some of the vases – double-barrelled and lugged, or bellied and waisted – are enough to make one dream of the Cyclades.

Various Jars, 2019, stoneware, anagama fired and multiple firings, various heights, tallest 35 cm.



Further info

Owen Rye is a member of IAC, a maker and a writer over the past 58 years. www.owenrye.com

About the Author

Morag Fraser is a writer. Until 2018, she was chair of the Board of Montsalvat.

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Large exhibitions by a single potter are more infrequent than they ought to be in this country of clay, texture and light. One has to question why. I watched crowds coming through the Barn Gallery, young, old, knowledgeable and neophyte. All stopped, stared, walked around in circles, often many times around the one pot. They would smile shyly at the ever-encouraging Anna Maas as if to say,

‘May we touch? Can we run our fingers across the surface, or our hands down the flank of this great jar?’ Some just stood, in silent awe.

The exhibition was a rare opportunity, then. Gratitude does not seem enough to offer to Owen Rye for the beauty that is the yield of his energy and exploratory skill, or to Anna Maas for her entrepreneurial flair and long, joyful dedication to the potter’s art. ■

