

Fresh Instincts
New ceramics by Andrew Halford and Jane Sawyer
Peter Timms

'You should present yourself', advised Matisse, 'with the greatest humility, completely blank, completely pure, ingenuous ... you must have left everything you have acquired behind you. You must have learnt to keep the freshness of your instinct.'

Some years ago, at a pottery at Onda in Japan, I watched a young man making teabowls on the wheel. In only a minute or two he transformed a lump of wet clay into a simple yet perfectly formed bowl, and hundreds of them were lined up on the drying racks behind him, all more or less identical. As he worked, he chatted with his companions, occasionally scanning the faces of the admiring tourists. He hardly needed to look at what he was doing, let alone think about it. Making those teabowls was as natural to him as breathing.

This is exactly the kind of hard, disciplined, repetitive training that both Andrew Halford and Jane Sawyer have put themselves through. And the skills they acquired they have learned to put behind them. As Andrew says, 'I strive for perfection of craftsmanship to the point where I need not be conscious of my hands.'

Andrew's interest in Japan and its ceramics traditions was sparked at an early age by his parents. After five years of working under master potters in Australia, including Les Blakebrough and Shiga Shigeo, he finally went to the source in the early seventies for two years of rigorous training under Shimaoka Tatsuzo. That was followed by three years with Shimada Haruo in south-west Honshu. On his return to Australia in 1978, already a highly skilled and widely respected artist, Andrew established himself in Shiga's former studio at Terrey Hills, north of Sydney.

There, one of his apprentices was Jane Sawyer, a young ceramics graduate from Melbourne. Having been a student at a time when any talk of venerable traditions was greeted with stifled yawns, she felt ambivalent about going to study in Japan. Useful, perhaps, for gaining a mastery of technique, so long as she could avoid what she called 'the extra stuff, the aesthetics or even the wood firing', all those aspects of the culture that smacked of ritual.

Shussai-gama, the pottery in which she found herself, would change her mind completely. Here prevailed the spirit of Mingei - the tradition of simple utilitarian pottery, produced co-operatively, free of artistic pretensions. From this rich and fulfilling experience, she learned fundamental things about respect for materials, sensitivity to process and gesture, and the necessity for decoration to arise naturally during the making rather than being added-on. By 1987, after two years at Shussai-gama, she understood the difficulty of making something truly simple.

It is indicative of the extent to which she has absorbed and internalised these principles that her works in this exhibition show little direct Japanese influence. Yet simplicity and sincerity remain at their heart. And eros is their guiding spirit. The slow, dreamy spirals that meander up the sides of her shallow

bowls, the unaffected informality of rim or contour, the way thick creamy slip flows as if by some natural, spontaneous means, all contribute to a feeling of relaxed insouciance. That some of these vessels have holes in their sides instead of handles adds a jaunty note of titillation. (The urge to put your fingers into them is irresistible.) These teasing vessels are finely balanced between awkwardness and elegance, indolence and vitality, playfulness and solemnity. They are forever in a state of becoming.

The rigour and architectural plasticity of Andrew's work seems, at first, to inhabit another world altogether. The forms and their decorations combine to make definitive statements, a satisfying air of wholeness and resolution contributing to their elegance. These are works of undemonstrative authority.

What he brought back from Japan, apart from technical proficiency, was a guiding philosophy by which to live, one that might best be described as concentrated, simple and free of distractions. It allows him to be, as he puts it, 'at one with the self'. His home in the Hawksbury River area, which can be reached only by boat, is as much a part of nature as modern life allows.

Unsurprisingly then, Andrew's work subtly circles around the highly contested relationship between culture and nature. Both his forms and their decorations (so interdependent that it seems wrong to refer to them separately) are adapted from observed nature. His geometric patterns, apparently so precise, are revealed on closer inspection to be living things, full of invention and caprice. Furthermore, his surfaces have an opalescent quality, inherent in the rock from which he grinds his glazes, which responds to the light, bringing the forms alive.

So, these two artists, formerly master and pupil, drawing on shared experiences and respectful of each other's approach, have nevertheless gone their own ways, responding quite individually to the same stimuli and, as Matisse advised, keeping the freshness of their instincts.

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