

For POTTERY IN AUSTRALIA: Focus on Victoria issue.

JANE SAWYER

Jane Sawyer made her first contact with pottery making while training as a teacher in Melbourne in the early 1980's. She was one of those students who experience an immediate recognition, excitement and strong connection with clay as a material. Here was the beginning of a significant change of direction in her life. From this point onwards her previously held, barely acknowledged dream of being a professional artist began to flourish.

A small group of tea bowls, softly thrown, quirky and off-centre, yet elegant and beautifully crafted -souvenirs of her sister's holiday in Japan - excited her interest. The work of these Japanese potters embodied qualities that lay in direct contrast to those she had previously experienced - those being stiffer, more controlled and lying within a European aesthetic. The relaxed and confident approach to making that produced those tea bowls; the, at times, uneven finish; the crazing of the glazes; the inclusion of small rocky outcrops in the glaze surfaces; all these qualities attracted Jane Sawyer greatly and introduced her to a more sensuous and refreshing approach to pottery.

A chance meeting with Andrew Halford, a Sydney based potter who had trained in Japan, further strengthened Sawyer's desire to become a professional potter. Three productive years of training and working with Halford followed (with the assistance of an Australia Council Crafts Board Training Grant) before it was time to move on.

The need to further develop her skills and make closer contact with the aesthetic qualities that she so admired then took her to the west coast of Japan. Here, at Shussai Gama - a well established co-operative pottery of the Mingei tradition - Sawyer was accepted as an apprentice. This involved learning traditional Japanese methods of clay and glaze production, wheel throwing and press molding, decoration and wood firing. An apprentice usually fulfills all of the unskilled tasks in such a pottery, then gradually progresses to making simple press moulded items before being allowed to use the wheel. In recognition of Sawyer's already well established proficiency, she was quickly able to begin working on the wheel.

This period of training in Japan was an important formative time. For two years Sawyer immersed herself in a new culture: learning new techniques, new languages - both visual and verbal, and discovering attitudes to working that were fresh and exciting. The potters at Shussai Gama were committed to making high quality, hand made functional work- decorated simply with every mark on the surface relating strongly to the forms. Functional items of beauty were treasured and enjoyed. In stark contrast to attitudes that were developing in

Australia at the time, the making of useful objects is considered to be both culturally valuable and artistically expressive in Japan.

In 1987, her formal training complete, the desire to travel took Sawyer to Europe, settling temporarily in Edinburgh, Scotland. This move provided important physical and mental space to develop a more personal style through the consolidation and assessment of the previous five years work. A range of pieces were produced and exhibited over a two year period working in freshly-thrown, reduction fired stoneware and decorated with deceptively simple brushed slips (*hakeme*).

Jane Sawyer returned to Australia in 1990 and established her current studio in Melbourne. Moving away from, but clearly related to, her previous work she now uses a fine ground terracotta clay, making a range of useful, expressive, slip decorated items. The use of slip as decoration has been a constant source of motivation - the inviting, fluid quality that it takes on just before it dries - no longer shiny, yet not quite matt; the way that the surface of a pot can convey the freshness of the touch of its maker - confident, fluent and vigorous. With this strong affinity for both process and material, she is developing a new range of work that further explores the plastic mobility of the clay. Distorting wheel thrown forms from the inside arrests the circular motion of the making process in a manner similar to a shoulder or hip pressing through skin. Pushing the wet clay from the outside alters the flow of a curve. Forms become more challenging and invite further investigation.

A major solo exhibition in Japan at the Kusa Mingei Gallery in Osaka in March 1996 will provide a fitting venue for this new work.

by PRUE VENABLES