



*Stretch Series. Platter #3. 2007. 8 x 61 x 12 cm.
Thrown and stretched. Red earthenware, slips,
transparent leadless glaze.*

Exquisitely Related

Jane Sawyer's Terracotta & Hakeme Slipware

Article by Shannon Garson



*Stretch Series. Platter #6. 2007. 10 x 55 x 19 cm.
Thrown and stretched. Red earthenware, slips,
transparent leadless glaze.*



*Pillow Series. Dish. 2007. 33 x 33 x 55 cm. Thrown, hollow double wall rim.
Red earthenware, slips, transparent leadless glaze.*

Minestrina di Broccoli e Manfrigul

Mathematicians sometimes use the word 'elegant' to describe the grace and felicity with which elements of a mathematical proposition connect. It may seem far fetched to borrow the term and apply it to this most humble soup. But I believe it fits. It is certainly not elegant in the sense that it is fancy. It is elegant in the way the different properties of it's meagre ingredients are explored, developed and exquisitely related...."

From Marcella Hazan's *More Classic Italian Cooking* pp106 (1978) Alfred A Knopf, New York.

This passage is not only an example of the wonderful, evocative cookery writing of Marcella Hazan but also a lesson for artists to take to their hearts. It is hard to describe what makes a successful piece of work and I have not found a better description than that "the meagre ingredients are explored, developed, and exquisitely related"



*Pillow Series. Two Teapots. 2007. 21 x 12 x 27 cm. Thrown, altered, re-thrown.
Red earthenware, slips, transparent leadless glaze.*

LINKING MATHEMATICIANS AND BROCCOLI SOUP IS the work of Australian potter Jane Sawyer. Sawyer's work perfectly illustrates Hazan's Broccoli Soup Principle. Jane Sawyer's work is a contemporary interpretation of hakeme brushwork popularised through the Japanese mingei movement. The mingei movement was founded in the 1920s by Soetsu Yanagi and celebrates the beauty in everyday, utilitarian objects. For the past 20 years Jane Sawyer has been creating work with its roots in mingei. She

has exhibited nationally and internationally and in 2007 was chosen to represent Australia at the prestigious *Collect* exhibition at the V&A Museum in London with a range of hakeme and terracotta tea wares.

Sawyer began her career with an apprenticeship to Australian master potter Andrew Halford where she first became interested in mingei and slip decoration. She then went on to a further apprenticeship in the Japanese pottery Shussai-gama. Sawyer's vessels use line in a loose gestural way accentuating their soft



*Gesture Series. Two cups. 2005. 7.5 x 8.5 x 8.5 cm. Thrown, altered, re-thrown.
Red earthenware, slips, transparent leadless glaze.*

forms and emphasising the act of creation. The three simple elements: terracotta clay, white slip and clear glaze combine with the movement of Sawyer's body and hands to create these powerful statements on the physical world. One thing I admire about Jane Sawyer's work is that despite their abstract sculptural quality these pots retain their original purpose by being usable tableware.

In this way Sawyer's pots use form and brushwork to draw attention to the process of making and their tactility seduces the user into contemplating the connection between making and using. Carrying these pots to the table, passing them around and generally handling them encourages one to consider the link between the human body and the inanimate object. Sawyer's work seems almost edible in its tactility and the sumptuousness of surface. This is a sophisticated embodiment of the messy fun of eating and making art that crosses over so frequently in childhood.

In her latest work Sawyer has captured movement in clay. The terracotta slab pots epitomise what it is to be a potter. They are thrown then cut off the base and

flattened out. The firing process causes the pots to curl up again at the edges with the memory of their earlier shape. The finger holes in these pots create a violent punctuation, but when you put your fingers through them your whole hand is drawn into the vessel, through the soft smooth texture of the slip and glaze. This drawing of the hands into the pot creates an impulse to lift it – making them clever and funny and beautiful. An abstract drawing of tensions: pulling up the wall of the pot, flattening it out to make a platter, the drawing together of the hands through the finger holes and the final lift this creates.

Sawyer's double-walled pillow bowls evoke the softness of clouds or balloons full of air. This seems to be a gentle joke, using the hard medium of clay to create something so soft. These pots contain humour, playing with the viewer/user, inviting him or her to touch and consider the nature of the material and the relationship of the shape to the human body. The pillow bowls range in size from tiny hand-held vessels to large bowls that sit (or seem to float) on the floor.

The *Pillow Bowls* also refer to the Punch'ong ware of



*Pillow Series. Teapot and two cups. 2003. Teapot: 23 x 12.5 x 14.5 cm. Cups: 6 x 6 x 6 cm.
Thrown, altered, re-thrown. Red earthenware, slips, transparent leadless glaze.*

15th century Korea, in particular the huge Changgun bottles. These uniquely Korean vessels, designed to lie either on their sides or stand upright on end combine a sense of heaviness and volume and at the same time feel as if they might float away. The traditional slip decoration of a Punch'ong Changgun is so integral to the work that the lightness and energy in the brushstroke seems to fill the body of the vessel with air. Sawyer's vessels also capture the contradiction of heaviness and floating.

In keeping a link to their functionality, the space in which Sawyer's vessels sit is important; some of the larger platter forms entitled *Stretched and Hung* are designed along the Shaker principle of being able to hang the piece on the wall, out of the way. When the platters are hung on the wall they function as abstract sculptures, on the table they become practical vessels. Although they are not designed as groups Sawyer refers to her series of vessels as 'families', this is link to the intention of the piece rather than referring to a method of display. As in a real family she sees each individual as part of a progression and feels that they

are stronger in a group, each piece bringing references that illuminate the others.

Playing with conceptual art and bringing it into the earthy realm of feeding and families is one of Sawyer's enduring themes. Sawyer is a mother of two and refers to her working atmosphere as 'domestic chaos'. The dynamism, humour and affection captured in this term are evident in her vessels with their finger marks and soft indentations. Sawyer's vessels invite the user to share the joy and tactility that all potters know as an integral part of the making process. She says: "Having children awakened a whole sensual side to my nature that I somehow ridiculed before. I was brought up in an intellectual family and never valued the sense of touch for its own sake before. But fat babies wriggling and giggling and the gorgeous soft breath of a sleeping child made me aware of what joy the tactile offers."

Family life is invoked in the surface marks. Even the smaller pieces capture a sense of generosity in the throwing and the mark-making with the slip. In his keynote address delivered at the 'Consequence



*Nest Series #1. Bowl. 2007. 11 x 46 x 44. Thrown, altered, re-thrown.
Red earthenware, slips, transparent leadless glaze.*

of Material' conference in Canada¹, Kevin Murray likened Sawyer's philosophical and physical approach to making to the slow food movement and coined the term 'slow clay' to describe her vessels. These are pots that invite the user to pass them back and forth, laden with food and revel in the surfaces and obvious signs of the making process.

The integrity of Sawyer's vessels is evident in the way her philosophy is connected to the physicality of the making process and the finished vessel. The philosophy and the life experience of the artist can be felt as a sense of purpose running through Sawyer's entire oeuvre.

Art can illuminate the world we live in. Jane Sawyer's pots give insight into her domestic life on an intimate level and simultaneously comment on contemporary domestic life. What she captures in clay is sensuality, womanhood, humour and the joy of creating. This is uniquely Australian pottery referring

to the past and combining it with modern social and visual concepts. Sawyer's vessels create a visual language for contemporary domestic life, and a vocabulary for Australian ceramists.

REFERENCE:

1. Kevin Murray. 'The Fundamentalist Urge in Contemporary Ceramics', 2004, keynote address at the *Consequence of Material Conference*, Red Deer College, Canada.

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