

CRAFT VICTORIA

31 Flinders Lane
Melbourne VIC 3000
Australia
Phone
+61 3 9650 7775

Email
The Craft Blog
Facebook
twitter

Gallery and Shop
Monday to Saturday
10am-5pm
Closed public
holidays

The Fundamentalist Urge in Contemporary Ceramics

By Kevin Murray

This is an edited version of the keynote address delivered at the Consequence of Material conference, Red Deer College, Canada June 2004

The Cave

The Cave by Portuguese novelist Jose Saramago is a Kafkaesque tale worthy of much thought. The story is about a ceramist whose work is increasingly marginalised by a force simply called 'the Centre'. The Centre is a huge expanding complex where people work, rest and play.

The Centre is the ceramist's only buyer, but orders are increasingly hard to obtain. Its isolation from the world outside means that the Centre has little regard for the handmade product. Early in the novel, the Centre discloses that it is about to launch a range of imitation crockery made from plastic. Though there are obvious advantages in price and durability, the ceramist tries to argue that the very fact that earthenware cracks makes it more appropriate for human use:

The difference is that earthenware is like people, it needs to be well treated. So does plastic, but you're right, not nearly as much. (21)
Jose Saramago *The Cave* (trans. Margaret Jull Costa) London: Harvill, 2002 (orig. 2000), p. 12

This kind of plaintive humanism does not register at the Centre.

The Cave is the kind of novel designed to send a shiver of apprehension down the spine of all those involved in crafts. The Centre conjures up images of hypermarkets like IKEA, where huge economies of scale have enabled them to sell mugs for as little as 50 cents each. There have never been more things in the world, but they have never meant less than they do now.

It is natural to feel dismay at this situation. We are pushed into an antagonism against the modern world, seeking an alternative to the manic excess of consumerism, where there is an ever increasing range of products for an ever reducing cost. But there are hazards in this position. In this paper I'd like to outline those hazards and consider how the path of ceramics leads us around them to what are some new and positive developments in the art of clay.

It's getting harder.

Scepticism towards modernity has been around as long as modernity itself. However, recent events have complicated matters. There are now figures in our world who share a distaste for aspects of the modern world, but subscribe to radically different means of resolving the situation. We hear them say, 'The spectre of fundamentalism haunts the west.' This familiar sentence is the shadow cast over the bold new millennium.

Just when globalisation delivers its bounty of luxury and freedom to the west, a well of violent resentment springs from the east to threaten these gains. Increased security awareness means that our lives are ever more clouded by threats to our way of life. We learn to live with suspicion. At regular intervals, the media uncover another gowned hirsute man living amongst who is linked to overseas terrorist cells.

So Bilal Khazal is discovered in a Sydney suburb. This Qantas baggage handler compiled a book entitled *Provisions in the Rules of Jihad—Short Wise Rules and Organisational Instructions Which is the Concern of Every Fighter and Mujahid Against the Infidels*. The book, posted on the website, was written in Arabic under the name of Abu Mohamed Attawaheedi. Khazal had drawn sections of it from the text of other authors as well as his own words, the court was told. He had referred to war and the enemy throughout, and promoted violent acts against people and countries, including Australia.

To an extent, we are familiar with this sort of situation from the cold war. However, the enemy then was communism, with an identifiable agenda linked to the protocols of international relations. It was even possible to identify with elements of their cause—championing the repressed and seeking collective good above individual greed. Terrorist networks like Al Qaeda, however, have no rule book of action and a fighting for such a grim world it defies even the most imaginative to consider it redeemable.

Fundamentalism looms thus as a complete 'other' to the West. Writers like Stuart Sim *Fundamentalist World: The New Dark Age Of Dogma* (Cambridge: Icon Books, 2004) depict this force as a cancer eating away at our freedoms—not just the Moslem variety, but also the market fundamentalism of the IMF as well as the other nationalisms in countries such as India. It seems indeed that fundamentalism is the antithesis of western values.

There are calls now to combat fundamentalism not just as a threat from Islamic extremists, but also within the west. Free market fundamentalism is seen as an ideology of the World Bank which has had dire consequences, such as the collapse of the Argentinean economy. And of course many see the Iraq conflict as a battle of fundamentalisms – the noble Jihad of Moslem ideals versus the God-given American way. Tariq Ali calls it the 'clash of fundamentalisms'. Elsewhere in the world there is Hindu nationalism, Jewish orthodoxy and even the Earth Liberation Front.

It is quite plausible to see fundamentalism as a disease that is taking over the world, like some atavistic force from the dark ages threatening to overwhelm advances in freedom and tolerance.

It might be something about being an Australian, perhaps it is similar in Canada, but faced with binary oppositions I feel compelled to seek some kind of mediation. The other side of the coin is still the same coin, you might say.

The question I'd like to ask is this: In casting fundamentalism as our 'other', are we denying ourselves an important modality in our creative life? This question has particular pertinence to the crafts, and special relevance to ceramics. I'd like to begin considering the creative force of fundamentalism in ceramics, and then proceed to consider how contemporary practice might be understood as a dialogue between fundamentalism and its other.

To begin, let me clarify what I mean by fundamentalism -- beyond the spectacle of men with angry expressions wearing strange clothes. I see fundamentalism as a call for the return to basics. It sees a situation of decadence, where power has gone to rulers' heads, life has become self-absorbed and dysfunctional, and there appears to be little overall direction. In this situation, one might look to the 'founding' principles, as articulated in canonical texts and sacred traditions. Fundamentalism sees the opportunity for renewal in returning to society's mission statement.

While positive as a galvanising force, fundamentalism contains within it a measure of Thanatos. The Freudian understanding of the death instinct points to our desire since leaving the womb to reduce the unwelcome complexities of life to the tranquillity of non-existence. Like pruning a garden, the fundamentalist urge seems best as part of a natural cycle, complimented by periods of growth. The antithesis of fundamentalism is the chaos of life, reflected in Libido and its desire to made connections between things. But left unchecked, growth will eventually stangle itself.

There are reasons why ceramics lends itself particularly to fundamentalist tendencies, and equally good reasons why it also shows signs of resisting this urge.

Fundamentalism in ceramics

Indeed, it would be hard to think of a material more fundamentalist than clay. We can go straight to the Bible and look to the origins of man. To quote from Harold Bloom's translation:

'Yahweh shaped an earthling from clay of this earth, blew into its nostrils the wind of life. Now look: man becomes a creature of flesh'. ... Yahweh, unlike the rival creator-gods of the ancient Near East, does not stand in front of a potter's wheel. Instead, he picks up the moistened clay and molds it in his hands, rather like a solitary child making a mud pie or building clay houses near water... Adam is fashioned out of the *adamah*, or red clay, as a tribute to the earth, and so as a tribute to humankind.

The very word Adam comes from the Hebrew for red clay—Adamah. There seems little more fundamental than literally returning to the soil in order to make things.

It's a long journey from the origins of culture to the sophisticated technological world of today, but there are some stepping stones for us to straddle.

The Greek legacy has granted Western culture with a hierarchical understanding of ideas as transcending things. For the Greeks, thought was more important than action. And in the Christian church, the path of contemplation was preferred before the path of action.

But there are contrary forces, as ever. The Reformation wrested religious life from the specialised domain of the church and placed it in the common world of work. The Arts & Crafts movement of the nineteenth century obviously borrowed from this Protestant spirit in asserting the dignity of labour above the luxury of consumption.

Bernard Leach

Many of these ideals were taken up in the twentieth-century by the patriarch of modern ceramics, Bernard Leach. Leach railed against the 'high-collar' lifestyles of middle class urban elites and championed hand-made pottery as a direct language of expression. The studied self-consciousness of the individual artist was seen as a barrier to the innate creative expression of the humble artisan.

The Leach vision was founded on layers of timeless truths. In ceramics, it was the 'standard ware' appropriate to each culture. Beyond nationality, there was a universal language of the body.

It is not without reason that important parts of pots should be known as foot, belly, shoulder, neck and lip, or that curve and angle should often be thought of as male or female. Beauty of ceramic form, which is at once subjective and objective, is obtained in much the same manner as in abstract (rather than representational) sculpture. It is subjective in that the innate character of the potter, his stock and his tradition live afresh in his work; objective in so far as his selection is drawn from the background of universal human experience.
Bernard Leach A Potter's Book London: Faber, 1940, p. 19

Leach offered a common horizon by which each follower could direct him or herself.

The reaction against Leach's self-righteous conservatism is probably not as intense today as it was in the rush of postmodernism in the 1980s. But he is still hard to warm to. His kind of fundamentalism seems to quite limiting, enforcing a uniform Sung standard by which ceramics of quality should conform.

Bernard Leach is certainly not an Osama bin Laden, but there are still reasons why we would not feel comfortable limiting our horizons to his vision today. Our path ahead now branches. There are those who would pursue his spirit by less constrained means, and those who deny it altogether.

Studio Ceramics

The English studio ceramic movement encourages experimentation yet retains a commitment to the Modernist dictum of 'truth to materials'. Two figures who may be seen to play an active role today are Edmund de Waal and Julian Stair. Their writing and making form a backbone to contemporary craft. Both are critical of the Leach legacy, though they promote a purity of style with a particular Zen resonance.

Their work accords with the standards of simplicity and repetition held as a Leach ideal, though their artistic sensibility is modernist rather than nationalist. The work Edmund de Waal showed last year at Contemporary Applied Arts adhered doggedly to a Leach-like repetition of form. However, the verities of the vessel were subtly undermined by creating false bottoms. The inner gap between wall and base makes a subtle distinction from utility. The gap instead is charged with an ineffable meaning.

The Australian scene is closely connected to Britain and many of our leading artists reflect the modest poetry of Studio Ceramics. Gwynn Hanson Piggott presents Morandi-like assemblages that offer a precious theatre for subtle variation in glaze.

For Prue Venables, the variable of experiment is more form than colour. Her classic shapes make reference to simple kitchen utensils, Limoge porcelain offers a special dignity to these ordinary objects. Her forms are quite modernist in their avoidance of excess, either in colour or shape.

Recently at Craft Victoria we experimented with a context that would suit the logic at play in Venables' work. The One Bowl Show attempted an exhibition reduced to absolute essentials: one bowl for one day in one gallery. It was common practice in the nineteenth century to have one painting shows, particularly panoramas, which toured the provinces. What was noticeable in this instance was the power granted the object by the surrounding negative space. It was as though all the energy distributed in the gallery was concentrated on a single object. Here was an opportunity to enjoy the timeless qualities of the vessel.

Likewise, Jane Sawyer has created a language of form and colour that makes a virtue of humility. Jane Sawyer trained at Shussai-gama, a traditional Japanese pottery based on Mingel principles. Though she maintains a Japanese rigour in her work, she breaks certain traditions attached to materials. She has defied the lowly status attached to terracotta clay and created objects that accentuate its rich orange-red colour. This colour is highlighted by the white slips that partly conceals it. The slip is applied while the vessel is moving, so that the result reflects the process of making. Sawyer has found a natural medium of expression.

Ceramic fundamentalism has read heavily from the book of nature. While this has traditionally been those chapters concerning the soil beneath our feet, the Adelaide ceramist Robin Best has uncovered earlier texts. Australia is known as the oldest continent, and much of its substructure has been exposed by the elemental forces of wind, rain and sun. This has brought to the surface striations that tell stories going back to the Gondwana age, when all the continents of the south were once connected together. Her Sugarloaf Hill and Blackcliff pieces are based on the geological site at Hallett Cove, on the Fleurieu Peninsula in South Australia. The sedimentation in this area can be traced back 280 million year ago when an ice sheet melted forming a lake. In Best's more recent work, she has drawn from the underwater calcification at play in coral formations. 'Brain Coral' and 'Membrane' both celebrate the fine textures that are the by-product of reef life. While Best's work strays from the traditions of the vessel, her primal focus complements the direction of fundamentalist ceramics.

The broad school of what we might call 'Studio Ceramics' share a particular craft sensibility. It seeks through repetition and modernist discipline a poetic reflection on elemental meaning.

Miscegenation in Ceramics

As we know from the physical world, for every effect there is a counter-effect. And while there are many who seek purity in their calling, there are others who seek to lighten the tone by mixing in other influences, mucking things up.

One obvious means of straying from the true path is through the carnivalesque. The carnivalesque usually indulged in a straight inversion of hierarchies, such as medieval feasts of fools where beggars are made kings for a day. There are ceramists whose work elevates what are considered low art forms, particularly kitsch. Richard Slee is an obvious candidate of a ceramist who seeks a playful engagement with tradition, drawing on popular idioms such as the Toby jug. In the context of the Puritan-like rigour of the Leach tradition, Slee's work as a welcome irreverence.

Turner prize winner Grayson Perry is best considered not in a ceramic context, but in the rarefied world of Charles Saatchi, and his stable of Young British Artists. Here, the very fact that Perry is a ceramist is enough to make him from the other side of the tracks -- he certainly isn't lauded for the technical quality of his pots. And the personal stories that he paints on these vessels are quite maudlin and personal.

Merely being a ceramist in the ultra cool world of new Brit artists confirms his audacious will to expose his vulnerabilities. On accepting the Turner Prize, Perry appears as his alter-ego Claire, wearing a patterned lilac satin knee-length dress with a high waist and puffed sleeves. He commented, 'I think the art world had more difficulty coming to terms with me being a potter than my choice of frocks.' By their very nature, the carnivalesque ceramists are unlikely to nurture schools of followers. Certainly, Perry's status rests on his very uniqueness as a potter.

Ceramics and breadmaking

The carnivalesque counterpoint to Puritan seriousness is to be expected. Alternative opposition comes from attempts to develop links between ceramics and other forms of creation. As the Russian philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin wrote, 'To be means to be for another, and through the other, for oneself.' So where might a dialogue with ceramics be formed?

One of those links can be found at the fundamentalist heart of ceramics. Repetition was so central to the Leach philosophy that he presented the humble baker as the ideal model for ceramists.

Repeat work is like making good bread. That is what it is, and although one is doing repeat work it is not really deadly repetition; nothing is ever quite the same; never, cannot be. That is where the pleasure lies.

Ceramics and bread-making have a fundamentalist common ground that seem to complement each other perfectly, hand in glove. If we go back to Saramago's *The Cave*, we find that the beleaguered ceramist begins to question his calling and compare his lot to others:

there is not much different between what happens inside a kiln and what happens inside a bread oven. Bread dough is just a different sort of clay, made from flour, yeast and water, and just like clay, it can emerge from the oven undercooked or burned. There may not be much difference inside, Cipriano Algor admitted, but once out of the oven, I can tell you that I would give anything to be a baker.

How many times have we each wished we were in some other occupation? In such situations, it is tempting to look to those in another field, but which is parallel to one's own. It was with this in mind that I tried out a curatorial method to make connections between crafts and partnered careers. Symmetry: Crafts Meet Kindred Trades and Professions invited crafts practitioners to make work that reflected their chosen partner. The jewellers made work for dentists, glass blowers for jazz trumpeters, weavers for journalists, word artists for surgeons, and ceramists for bread-makers.

To quote from the catalogue:

They bake. Their working substance is moist and elastic so that it can be formed by hands into discrete forms. After fashioning, the form is left to rest while it settles into its own shape. Sometimes a glaze is applied to improve appearance. And then it is placed with its batch in the oven. Their techniques are paradigmatic of the art of civilisation.

One draws on the earth, while the other takes from the grain that grows in the earth. One squeezes air from the substance to make shapes that hold food, the other aerates the forms so they are edible. The goods of one endure through millennia, whereas the others are worthless the next day. One makes utensils, the other makes food.

One of the binding forces in these dalliances was the very human quality of 'mutual envy'.

For the breadmaker, the life of a ceramicist is an impossible romance. Day after day, loaves are no sooner produced than they disappear leaving only a trail of flour dust. What is there to show for it all? Sure, there are certain batches that win special acclaim, but their fame comes in a finite number of slices. Imagine that this loaf, this perfect loaf, were to achieve such greatness that people would be tasting it for generations to come. Where in posterity is there a place for master bakers which matches the heritage of master ceramicists?

Even to acquire fame that lasts a day is not an easy thing. 'The best thing since sliced bread...' may be one of the most pervasive superlatives of modern consumerism, but it is also a deadly attack on the subtleties of daily bread production: the seasonal quality of the wheat, how humidity affects the leavening, how hot the oven was fired today, which way the wind is blowing, etc. Chris Downes, founder of a contemporary sourdough bakery Natural Tucker, laments: 'Bakers have become food technicians instead of craftsmen.' The demands of making our daily bread deprive bakers of any space like a gallery where their art might gain recognition beyond the mouths they feed.

The two ceramists who responded to this brief were Neville Assad-Salha and Rod Bamford. The three structures built by Neville Assad have an allegorical reading. The first enclosed structure presents four bowls of water, the second contains grains of wheat and the third suggests the convections of the oven: water, grain and fire—these are the elements of bread, all housed in these clay structures.

Assad-Salha has spent long periods in his Lebanese village, working in a simple pottery 'Furren-El-Shibbeck' means 'window to the oven' and refers to that part of the village where oven-work is conducted, including both bread-making and ceramics.

As an act of homage, Neville Assad's work can be read as both allegory and testament. One of the striking aspects his work is the intense fingering of the surface. The outside of the clay forms has suffered a rainstorm of digital impressions (from fingers, that is). The shared space of clay and bread is suggested in the physical act of making.

For Bamford the comparison with bread-making is a way of focusing on the organic quality of clay. For instance, during the Sung dynasty it was practice to store porcelain at the base of a newly made communal pit lavatory. Urine and dung create a bacterial brew that absorbs the oxygen from clay and makes it pliable enough to use.

Bamford's forms are roughed kneaded shaped from which has been extracted the shape of breads and ceramics. Also in his installation were fired DNA structures. 'Dividing line' is a complex allegory '

More recent examples can be found of other conversations with ceramics. I believe many of you in Alberta will be familiar with the work of Fleur Schell, West Australian ceramicist. Fleur has a life-long love affair with porcelain. Unlike Prue Venables, she does not honour her material by seeking its essential form. By contrast, she uses it as a versatile language for translating other mediums. Her musical instruments introduce porcelain as a foreign material that contributes new aesthetic experiences. The contrast between the hard ceramics and the soft velvet references the bagpipe but also contains its own ineffable feeling.

It is not only bakers who find themselves mixing with ceramics. Sue Robey is a fine ceramist from Melbourne who has found her art after a successful career as an architect. She uses paper clay to create ceramic forms that make reference to buildings. Her shapes have a unique expression that evokes the security of shelter while doing so in an effervescent and deliberately slipshod way. As often seems the case, a person moving from a profession to an art seeks a compensatory gesture. In Robey's case, an architect who feels constrained by delays and building codes, turns to a form of ceramics that celebrates its immediacy and lose expression.

Like the carnivalesque ceramists, these hybrid pairings are unique. For someone else to follow these paths would be seen as imitative.

New fundamentalism

So to return to the fundamental question in this paper, how can ceramics be seen in healthy opposition to the excesses of capitalism while avoiding the negativity of harsher fundamentalisms? The Bernard Leach school is tightly patriarchal and based on racist ideas about innate creative powers. The contemporary Studio Ceramics in England is beautiful but overtly formalist in its bearings. The closest we could get is an association between Jane Sawyer's slow clay and the Slow Food movement established in Italy in 1986 to champion local produce. The maverick hybridists are certainly exciting and innovative, but do not form a coherent school. We seem left between a rock, a hard place and mid-air.

Offline

I'd like to begin again with a couple of curatorial interventions. These are designed primarily to create a space in which the social aspects of contemporary craft might be brought into profile.

The first, Offline, considered the new dispensation of craft as an unplugged medium. In our time there are ever-increasing demands on us to be connected, whether by phone or email. It is almost the case now that broadband is considered a basic human right along with food and water. At the same time, there is fascination for the problem of how one might survive such isolation, as evidenced by the number of survivor programs on reality television. Going offline today seems to have the same sense of adventure that sailing the high seas used to have in the previous centuries.

This plight of the connected world seemed an interesting context in which to present craft. Offline brought to the fore the experience of being in a gallery itself. Visitors were encouraged to experience the exhibition as something on its own. They were offered placebo pills on entry and given a map rather than refer to labels next to works. Naturally, they were advised to switch off mobile phones.

Offline was presented in an arts festival setting, which gave visitors licence to enjoy this ruse. In this atmosphere, the ceramics on show was mostly unglazed. This was presented as part of the minimalist experience of immediacy in the gallery. The texture of unglazed clay is very difficult to reproduce in printed form. The result was a playful exhibition that opened visitors experience to the sensory qualities of craft.

Heresy

Just recently opened in Melbourne is a more sober positioning of craft. Heresy: The Secret Language of Materials is an exhibition of warmly modernist craft that is presented as going against the tide of image culture. Playing on the idea that the roundness of the world was once heresy, these works are gathered as a testimony that the world is three-dimensional.

The local context for this exhibition is the recent development of the new state gallery of fine arts in what is called Federation Square. The architecture of this gallery was designed to reflect a cinematic experience and thus its only really suits two-dimensional works. With no room for plinths, there is very little facility for showing ceramics.

Heresy includes ceramics by Prue Venables as well as Neville French. They are placed alongside makers who adopt geometrical form in order to profile the texture of their materials. Like Offline, this exhibition was framed in a way that would give a broader context to work that has its own intrinsic qualities. The exhibition attempts to give these modernist works an aura of alchemy

This exhibition was introduced by a manifesto that made reference to Dogma 95, developed by the Danish film-maker Lars Von Trier. Heresy outlined a series of six neo-Puritan craft principles:

No expression without material
Art is hard
Skill grants meaning
The hand knows
Know your place
Stay in touch

These seem obvious enough precepts for those involved in the crafts, but worthwhile making public now and again. However, as a creative act they are largely afterthoughts to the creative process.

Franciscan ceramics

While curatorial gestures like Heresy are occasionally important, there is another more spontaneous movement in contemporary ceramics that engages with consumerism in a more subtle way.

Honor Freeman is an Adelaide-based ceramics whose work relates to forms of street art, such as stencilling, which is proving quite a vibrant new public art form. Freeman's work relates directly

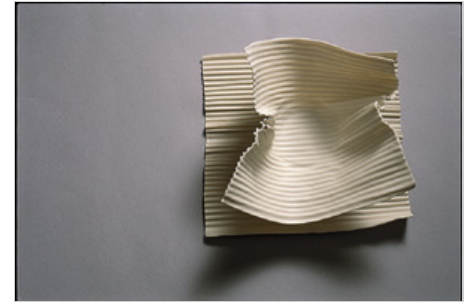


Honor Freeman outdoor installation

with our dumb acceptance of things by making subtle interventions into non-art space. She places false ceramic power-points on the outside of buildings. In doing so, she turns the plainest of objects into a decorative element and inverts the relationship between the private domain of the consumer and the outside sphere of the public. Her intervention is subtle enough to be missed by most passers-by, but once noticed, its presence becomes haunting.

There is little in Freeman's work that might reflect the eternal verities of clay, but she is seeking a truth that is just as meaningful in terms of her own existence as a modern consumer floating in a sea of objects. She gives expression to the spirit of fundamentalism which is to give a quiet dignity to things.

David Ray is a Melbourne ceramist who has an enduring interest in popular trash culture. In this installation made for the exhibition *Goodbye Kind World*, Ray reflects on the ubiquity of fast food by constructing a table setting dedicated to what he calls 'clown food', after the patron saint of consumerism, Ronald McDonald. The product has a Dresden-like excess, a baroque splendour that makes ironic its reference to the most common form of consumption.



Nicole Lister Wrapping Cloth porcelain 2001

More sober in their construction is the work of ceramist Nicole Lister. Nicole's work also makes reference to disposable objects like paper cups. Her wrapping series made a thing of beauty in its own right out of the packaging in which ceramics is normally contained, but then thrown away. Like Freeman, she inverts the relationship between inside and outside.

To an extent, Lister shares with the Studio Ceramists a discipline of repetition. However, we don't look for subtle variations in the works. Repetition is more conceptual in nature, reflecting the serial nature of consumer production. Lister also strays from the 'essence' of clay in its familiar forms. She shares the rigour, but adds the conceptual leap into the real world of commodification.

Lastly, an artist who seems to defy categories is Sally Marsland. Though a jeweller by reputation, she has an abiding interest in the life of simple objects. For her the process of casting provides a means of reflecting the inner qualities of objects without usurping them. She uses materials such as paint to cast objects that accentuate the artificiality of the process. Casting seams are treasured. Objects are obtained by chance, from what Australian's call Opportunity Shops. They are most humble in the order of things. It is the act of honouring them which we can appreciate Sally Marsland's work.

Though widely different in their references, what these young ceramists share is a commitment to the conditions of the world in which they live. While their works embody what might seem the antithesis of ceramics – in the disposable world of avaricious capitalism – they actually fulfil the broader mission of clay to express the fundamentals of life.

Of course, one cannot deny the presence of irony in certain works. In some cases, they indicate the absence of meaning through their work. But this, still, is part of the drive to be true to one's experience of the world, rather than evoke a remote purity.

So as part of the continuing history of ceramics as a cycle of purity and contamination, I would like to posit as a new and creative form this Franciscan style of work. It seeks dignity in the most common of things.

Conclusion

In his introduction to *Persistence of Craft*, Paul Greenhalgh described craft as a 'consortium of genres'. I would like to see it as more than that.

In the late modern culture the crafts are a consortium of genres in the visual arts, genres that make sense collectively because for artistic, economic and institutional reasons, they have been deliberately placed together... They have no intrinsic cohesion; they have no a priori relationship that makes them a permanently peculiar or special gathering...

For me, the persistence of craft is not its institutionalisation in museum collections. The enduring role of craft is as an essential counterpoint to the excesses of capitalism, which devalues the material world to mere 'stuff' for either consuming or wasting.

To see where things are heading, I would like to return back to The Cave. The reference in this title is to Plato's allegory of the prisoners who are bound inside a cave so that they only see shadows on the wall. They believe these to be actual things rather than their representations. The hero finds that the entire edifice of the Centre is built on an actual functioning version of this arrangement in its basement.

The society of spectacle does seem to be turning to its own kind of cave. New home furniture has been devised that offers theatrical seating for the home cinema. La-Z-Boy furniture has produced a new collection titled Matinee which includes roles of seats. They feature not only cup holders but also special Tempur-Pedic cushioning that conforms sensitively to the body. This is the same material they use in hospital mattresses to prevent bedsores among the chronically ill.

It is the spectre of consumerism as much as fundamentalism which should be seen as haunting the west. While there are many who see craft as a mere nostalgic vestige of the 70s and unrelated to the real world of contemporary markets, there is one message that craft has to offer: get real. Harold Bloom *The Book of J* (trans. D. Rosenberg) New York: Grove Widenfeld, 1990, p. 175.

The anthropologist Levi-Strauss makes broader claims for clay as a common ground on which the idea of culture is fashioned.

Every art imposes form on matter, but, among the so-called arts of civilization, pottery is probably the one in which the transformation is the most direct, involving the smallest number of intermediate stages between the raw material and the product, which comes from the craftsman's hands already formed even before it undergoes firing.

Clay extracted from the earth is also the 'crudest' of all raw materials known and used by man. With its coarse appearance and its total lack of organisation, it confronts man's sight and touch, even his understanding, with its primacy and the massive presence of its shapelessness. 'In the beginning, the earth was without form and void', as the Bible says, and it is not without reason that other mythologies compare the work of the creator to that of the potter. But imposing a form on matter does not mean simply imposing a discipline. The raw material, pulled out of the limitless range of potentialities, is lessened by the fact that, of all these potentialities, only a few will be realized: all demiurges, from Prometheus to Mukat, have jealous natures.

In the case of pottery, restrictions imposed on the raw material are the source of other restrictions: as a container the waterproof vase will keep shapeless liquids within its walls, and it will keep tiny solids, such as grains of wheat, from being scattered and lost.

Claude Lévi-Strauss *The Jealous Potter* (trans. E. Chorier) Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988 (orig. 1985), p. 177

Notes

Bernard Leach *A Potter's Challenge*, p. 17

Jose Saramago *The Cave* (trans. Margaret Jull Costa) London: Harvill, 2002 (orig. 2000), p. 187

Paul Greenhalgh 'Craft in a changing world', in (ed. Paul Greenhalgh) *The Persistence of Craft: The Applied Arts Today* London: A & C Black, 2002, p. 1

Kevin Murray is Director of Craft Victoria

Related items (by tag)

Manningham Victorian Ceramic Art Award
Contemporary Judaica
Gerry Wedd : In the Woods exhibition
The Creative way : A Journey along the ceramic path
Art in a Bucket of Sand

More in this category: [« Between Place](#) [Postcard from Denmark »](#)

[back to top](#)

EXPLORE

What's On
Exhibitions
(Upcoming)
(Past)
(Apply)

Public Programs
Window Space
(Past)

Craft Hatch
Fresh!
Craft Cubed

SHOP

Online shop
New Craft
Apply to sell

MEMBERS

Members
Join or Renew
Discounts
Craft Work
Craft Maker
Life members

RESEARCH

Research
Craft Work
Craft Culture
- 2008
- 2007
- 2006
- 2005
- 2004
- 2003
- 2002

Craft Almanac
Craft: where is it?
Craft TV

ABOUT

About Us
Contact Us
Board & staff
Media
Donations
Annual Reports
Green Policy
Venue Hire
Volunteers
Disability access

Subscribe to Craft Almanac e-news

email address

