

IN THE RED

by Jane Sawyer

I stumbled or slipped into the red quite by accident. After spending nine years working with stoneware in heavy reduction gas and woodfirings, I didn't know much about terracotta, and I never contemplated working with oxidised low-fired earthenware. I didn't realise then that searching for illusive reds would become a journey that would last decades.

My first introduction to the richness of red earthenware was seeing the collections of medieval English slipware in Japan that had inspired the Mingei artists. The Mingei were enamoured with the freshness of old English slipware. I wondered what it was that captivated them – was it the direct, raw, gestural mark-making or the physical movement of the potters themselves as they poured, dipped, marbled, swished and shook their wares in the luscious slip? My own training in slip decoration became a window into red clay, and it is still one of the most enduring aspects of my work.

At the time I was aware of the prejudices surrounding red earthenware bodies and occasionally I still hear them: earthenware is not strong; it crazes; it's porous. And having cut my teeth on stoneware,

Jane Sawyer, *Fluid Series: Teapots*, 2015, glazed red earthenware, slip, pigments, h.29.5cm, w.26cm, d.16cm
Photo: Nicholas Hannah



Jane Sawyer, *Rainshadows Water Bottle*, detail
2016, partially glazed red earthenware, white slip
h.29cm, w.9.5cm, d.9.5cm; photo: Andrew Barcham

why would I choose to work with earthenware, especially red earthenware with all its associations with industrial roof tiles, water pipes and lead glazes? Rather than listening to the criticisms I chose to embrace the positives. And there are so many! For example: low temperature oxidation firing saves fuel and has less impact on the environment; porous bodies insulate and hold heat better.

Over the years I've experimented with many red earthenwares, from dense, fine closed bodies to open sandy bodies. I like to see the personality of the clay, and I love the relationship that the raw, red clay brings to the work. It provides a perfect foil for slip decoration and I don't like to cover it up too much, however it has a strong personality and at times it needs softening.

Australian red earthenwares are robust. They allow me to do pretty much anything with them, and they have given me an unexpected gift: the ability to cut, alter, re-join and re-throw, in a fluid and off-centre way. I flip pieces upside-down, or I make surgical incisions in the clay body, re-throw them and even stitch them back up. They become like a skin that has healed, there might be faint scars, but only to the trained eye.

This way of working was new and exciting for me because it also enabled me to work with my body in a way that allowed for a greater interplay between two moving masses – it became about the wheel and me and less about my fingertips. Since then, I've embraced a more open and experimental approach to making where I use different parts of my body as tools, and with them I create a kind of choreography that I repeat with subtle differences of expression. It's also just great fun; working with red earthenware has enriched my life.

Jane Sawyer is a Melbourne-based ceramic artist renowned for her luscious slip-decorated red earthenware. She is also the director of the Slow Clay Centre, a vibrant community facility specialising in ceramics education in Collingwood, VIC.

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