

The Art of Bell Ringing

Porcelain carries a backpack of history to this continent of contradictions. Long established in the cultures of China and Korea, it also totes its dark, enthralling origin in Europe with Böttger's captive experimentation towards an arcanum for 'white gold'. In a relatively brief time, the fickle paste led to factory output for porcelain collecting to ceiling-high excess by European gentry, in turn gently satirised by makers such as Meissen's Johann Kaendler. Porcelain does not let me forget this, here, southern hemisphere, 21C, whether handling buttery Limoges, Les Blakebrough's austral arcanum of 'Ice', or mixing it with paper pulp derived, at least in part, from contested remnant forests. I have long been under the spell of the symbolic object, and ceramics of no single genre nor prescribed technique, have a long and eloquently expressive history of conscious witness to place and time – both the intensely local and the culturally-reflective. If I can continue to offset my studio's greenhouse emissions, I would proffer the words of maker Lee Ufan in empathy: “One might say that artists are a dangerous and greedy species because they want to somehow, somewhere capture and stop the fleeting poetic moment that appears by chance and then immediately gives way to the everyday world ...”¹

My enthusiasm for paperclay and its permutations in the mid nineties, has led me ten years along a path to *Return (Porcelain; time, light, loss)*, an assemblage of thirty-two works exhibited in Sydney in July with follow-on works shown at the Melbourne Art Fair in August. Impulses and interests are a continuum walked even if the set of ceramic ‘clothes’ chosen in which to do so has changed, because as Olu Oguibe observes “every medium has its complex truth”.²

After a concentrated span of making and exhibiting between 2000 and 2004, a little weary and flat, I buried myself in the studio in 2005 to ponder and work a triad of Time, Light, Loss. A continuation of a thread I had been feeling my way along in relation to vessels and objects of the personal, historical, phenomenological: reaching for ‘the distilled’, beyond veneer or surface-only souvenir, and mindful of authentic and resonant expressions of the ‘present’ which acknowledge interplay of a mosaic of cultural ‘pasts’. For example, I am still learning much about who was home when the nineteenth-century Anglo-colonial frontier pushed north to the bay and river I grew up with in the following century, and the unfolding of what has become and is becoming of that collective home

place and those ‘backyards’ since. One cannot avoid the sense of a new tension between a larger, selective, cultural forgetting and remembering. In July, driving my ute there and back, I returned to that northern home patch to continue my process of farewelling my father to his realm of forgetting, and where long-familiar land places are rapidly being carved away under the protection of ‘progress’.

Other objects have encouraged me on this path. I think of exquisite black and white Mimbres bowls, found in graves to accompany owners in the long return to spirit life: not beside hand but beside or over head. To me, with the ‘kill’ hole knocked through the base, the bowl is an uncanny fit with the skull. To seventeenth century Dutch glass roemers carrying intricately engraved maps of territory, as much geopolitical markers as pruned drinking vessels. To ancient Roman glass unguentaria, loose, soft forms of medicine and commerce, specific to the unguent to be carried or stored, yet also carrying the scent of the sweep into the Middle East, perhaps. To the plethora of small wooden Russian and Greek icons of St. Nicholas, made for home and village, and carrying moral narrative or ‘miracle’ in time-crazed magentas, golds, creams, blues, greys and greens. To the finds of engraved bones as the first recorded calendars, and baked clay disks with the earliest writing and numerical records.

What came from the meeting of porcelain, time, light, loss? Vessels and objects carrying inlaid line and pattern, engraved image, private text and the transience of translucency. The into-surface workings and mark-making have been part of an evolving personal idiom over the past ten years. I have become increasingly engaged with these inlays and translucency, the play of embedded line, script, glaze and light, often layered. This has been elaborated variously with bone china and glaze stencilling on most recent works. Translucency speaks of transience: hourly, seasonal time in the passage and angle of light. The light in different places confers distinctive ‘feel’ and unexpected nuances to a translucent vessel. I imagine this as mobile, subjective cartography by object, in object. Across the span of day, light changes a vessel and one’s perception of it: a shape-shifter effect, if one is fortunate. I see no need to interpret the vessels and objects themselves. They are out there doing whatever they do. Illustrated, here, is a small selection.