



Small Solace Suite. 2007. Porcelain, metal. Assemblage 55 x 55 cm.

Photo by Greg Piper.

Louise Boscacci Form and Idea

Article by Brett Ballard

The increments of meaning are to be found in the form. At first, walk around the object and feel as you do a sense of the place it occupies in space and how that space relates to you. Consider each movement and each glance to be part of a gestalt, one which is created not by a set formula or rigid perception, but by each small increment contributing to the effect of the whole.

I AM DRAWN BACK EXCITEDLY AND REVERENTIALLY TO THE ceramics of Louise Boscacci. What strikes one at first encounter is the facility Louise Boscacci has with form and the variety of finishes she brings to her ceramics. These external visual qualities are what make a Boscacci object immediately compelling and familiar. With each new encounter comes the confirmation of a ceramic language which is particular to Boscacci. It is a language which speaks dually of place and of the well-made object.

Perhaps, also, my ideas about Louise Boscacci have developed from an *a priori* sense of rigour in her work which was apparent from her earliest exhibitions. It is something Boscacci has developed through experience and the persistence of each new body of work – one theme redoubling the other – to create what we know as her signature look in porcelain.

While the Australian art public may now recognise

Boscacci's ceramics, it is likely incognisant of the technical knowledge belying her forms: the essential nuts and bolts of making in porcelain. Boscacci's claim on the white and vitreous clay is emphatic but it is her embellishment of the medium with stencil, inlay and sgraffito which is exemplary. These techniques and those of porcelain, demand a thorough working knowledge of processes and their effective combination with forms. Porcelain can be a demanding medium but when harnessed it portrays a translucency unimaginable in other clays: fired forms appear solid yet are light of weight; walls – tensile of strength – became translucent when back lit. One thinks here of facsimile 19th century porcelain medallions of relief figures, made to be illuminated in sunlight.

We might also think of porcelain in the T'ang and Sung dynasties, arguably its greatest expression, and through time, to the factories of Sèvres and Limoges



Eight Unsaid. 2007. Inlaid, translucent porcelain. Group L. 55 cm.
Photo by Greg Piper.

when considering cultural and historical perceptions of porcelain. This resonance is something Boscacci acknowledges in her production and which she takes into her work, both practically, and at the level of metaphor:

"As in most of the series, translucent porcelain, simultaneously fragile, tough and culturally once as highly valued as gold, seems an apt material to speak of other fragile, precious and tough things."¹

The considerations Boscacci makes at the level of knowledge create interplay in her work. Boscacci is able to balance the visual and formal qualities of an object by intellectual associations. Her objects succeed, firstly, by invitation to the eye and senses, repaying the viewer with what Michael Cardew has described as 'the kindness of a pot'. But moreover, and perhaps most critically, Boscacci's ceramics engage the mind. How often can we say this of the many objects which we encounter in the world, those which we look upon, use and hold? It may seem a grand claim to make, perhaps an exhortation, but I feel confident in saying: to succeed, form must be realised as idea, simultaneously. Without this particular gestalt – one touched on in the introduction – where the greater effect is taken from the combination of parts,

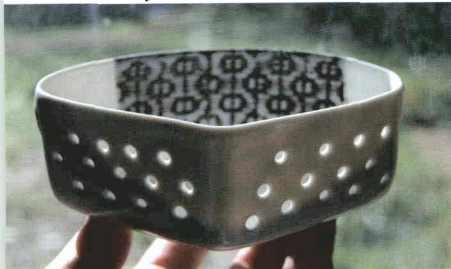
the qualities of form and idea are lost to us.

To illustrate this point, if we look to *Eight unsaid*, made by Boscacci in 2007, it becomes clear that the eight palm cups are both to view in various possible configurations but also to be held. Individual surfaces suggest netting, some carry words. Here the interplay is between the casual placement of the forms and the suggestion that the cups make an eight word sentence.

How then might Louise Boscacci achieve, in practice, a visual and conceptual parity in her work? Asking something of the history of ceramics is instructive but it may not fully describe to us the type of ceramic artist Boscacci is. We know Boscacci came to ceramics after a career as a zoologist and trained at The National Art School in Sydney (1994-6) under Diogenes Farri, a Chilean artist-potter who escaped to Australia in the 1970's; Julie Bartholomew; Trisha Dean, who imparted much by way of innovation and glaze technology; and the noted potter Steve Harrison.

The National Art School provided Boscacci with a necessary technical basis and the sound skills of

Studio Day. 2008. Southern Ice porcelain, noon light.
Photo by the artist.



Bowl for 264 Species. 2007. (Detail). Engraved, glazed stoneware. Photo by Greg Piper.





*Collecting Names. 2006–7. Translucent porcelain, wall series. 220 cm/l.
Photo by Greg Piper.*

making functional forms such as cups, bowls, plates, teapots and jugs. In a sense Boscacci's studio course replicated the practice of studio production, much as would be found in the working day of any potter producing functional ware. Although Boscacci went on to produce individual fine art ceramic pieces, she is no doubt mindful of the fact that, originality in ceramics is only possible by acknowledging the traditions of functional pottery.

With this view held in mind – that of a redoubtable working tradition – exemplified, for example, by the work and writings of Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew – we are able to draw comparison from the work of Louise Boscacci to the aesthetic school of ceramics, and that of the potters, Lucie Rie and Hans Coper. It is perhaps a crude comparison to make of the two schools, but provides nonetheless, a working definition. Here the well-made pot is seen in contrast to, and given primacy over, a functional ceramic. Certainly a cup or jug may carry certain meanings beyond its function, but for Boscacci symbolic content has a role to play in shaping forms.

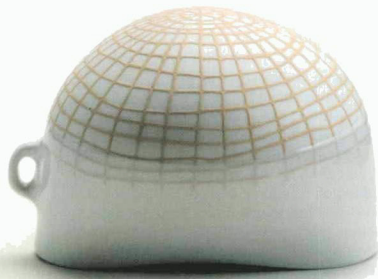
Indeed, it may be found that there is little difference in

the work of Louise Boscacci between symbolic content and symbolic object? It is an idea that Boscacci was able to grasp at once and to take into her production over time: the perception that reality – the quiddity of things – was a necessary touchstone to symbolism in her work. It must again be held in mind when considering Boscacci's source material and her note making, in particular, her locations and their significance. No less the things to be found within which are of interest to Boscacci – in present terms or as historical knowledge – to be thought of tendentially, viz. the environment; and as poetic forms: clouds, water and land.

Here are notes which Boscacci has made of the landscape. The first is of Dubbo. "It is country that seems to say: 'Wait, breathe, listen'."²

And elsewhere, Boscacci reflects on the changing weather of her immediate surroundings: "Wind, to regular gale and near gale, and the rapid flux of cloud against a dome of sky"... And further: "But it is the drama of the weather and sky that compels consideration, and dictates even the making of ceramics."³

Small Peat Carraugh. 2007. Translucent porcelain, inlay, glazes. 11.5 x 16.5 cm. Photo by Greg Piper.



*Notes from the Studio (bell bowl). 2006. Southern Ice porcelain, glaze, sgraffito. 10.5 x 16.5 cm.
Photo by Greg Piper.*





Above: *Bell Jug*, 2006. Photo by the artist.

Below: *Bowl for 264 Species*, (detail), 2007. Engraved glazed stoneware. Photo by Greg Piper.



"February brought the deluges of the northern lows. The tank and dam filled. Straw – dry grasses changed to soft, neon greens.... Jugs, ornithology and rain conversed daily here, from December to March. The jugs took on bird forms themselves."⁴

From Boscacci's evocation of place and of weather we can see how central the role of landscape is to her practice. As a diarist, Boscacci attends the technical knowledge of the field biologist, which of course she once was, to the landscape through which she walks. Indeed this walking 'around the ground' as she calls it is fundamental to her process. Her endeavour is twofold: at one level her impulse is to explore a place at ground level and factually; the names of flora and fauna are critical to her and become the titles of ceramics for exhibition. The other is to let impulses float freely, more akin to a free signifier where a single aspect in word or in three dimensions can take on a multiplicity of meanings.

The keeping of journals says much about Boscacci's process and the store which she places on observation in forming ideas. We could consider her notation as analogous to a painter's sketchbook but perhaps that would align her too closely to the tradition of landscape art in Australia, a tradition she is keen to clarify in light of her own art. It is not an unreasonable comparison to make but Boscacci has made clear in her writing that;

"I have wanted to contribute to a language of form (ceramic) and word other than 'landscape' or the 'Australian Landscape.' Historically in western art, landscape carries the implication of 'view', looked at separate from and passed through a description of territory, originally (*landschaft*). And often, particularly in an Australian context, of human absence or struggle with its harshness."⁵

The other aspect we are to gain from Boscacci's writing is a concept of time. For her, time is both memory and history; 'remembering and forgetting,' and these associations are carried into her many objects; the bowl, the bell and the mirror.

A piece such as *Small Solace Suite*, 2007 is a collection of six objects on a tabletop format. It seems a casual still life arrangement; a tableau of the everyday which includes bread board, a mirror and seed pod, but it is the individual components and their overlay of stencil and sgraffito which contribute to a reading beyond just an arrangement of things.

Boscacci has described it thus;

"A place setting as such, carrying elements of the personal, the particular and the political."⁶

There are two further pieces, *Collecting Names*, 2006 –7 and *Bowl for 264 Species*, 2007, which underline Boscacci's ongoing ecological concerns and her desire to explore themes in both groups and singular objects. Each piece is linked to the names of fauna species listed under the Australian EPBC Act List of Threatened Species.

In the first, *Collecting Names*, 2006-7 the five individual vessels are hung on the wall suggesting containers, derived perhaps, from something more functional and of usual purpose. One feels their weight and shape in space from the horizontal configuration, which in exhibition, was hung just above eye level. A dynamic of inside – outside is immediately apparent, some parts visible and others less apparent. After all the point is one of disappearance. The metaphor, appearing – disappearing, lies in concealment.

Boscacci's thoughts on *Collecting Names* tend to loss;

"The list overwhelms me – soft calico, collecting bags.....picking each up and holding in daylight. They may contain things other than names."

Bowl for 264 Species, 2007 is a bowl which updates the list described in *Collecting Names*, 2006-7, but as Boscacci has pointed out, it carries less than three-quarters of the scientific names compiled over the last 230 years. The names of species, fast disappearing, are written onto and around the vessel in a mesmeric inscriptive pattern that is head turning. What is written hardly reads as writing at all, more as an ancient hieroglyph. More emphatically, the reading is already there, it has been done – in memoriam. The bowl, incidentally decorative, and with a slightly off kilter shape, emphasises the weight of names it must carry. One can look into or around the bowl depending on the height of placement. Either way, movement is central to the perception of the object and returns us to the precept of a gestalt – something greater than the whole – where with each glance and different point of view our perception is added to, and redoubled in meaning.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Fr. *Hold, trace, listen*. 2008. A presentation at the Forum *Ceramics and Narrative* held in conjunction with the exhibition, *Australian Ceramic Stories*, April 12, 2008. Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, New South Wales.
2. *Ibid*
3. Fr. Artist Statement – *Blue chamber*, 2004.
4. Fr. Artist statement – *Waiting for La Niña*, 2007. The Jug Show, All Handmade Gallery, Sydney, 2007.
5. 'despite millennia of Aboriginal home-making.' Fr. Notes to the author, July, 2008.
6. Fr. *Hold, trace, listen*, *Australian Ceramic Stories*, 2008.
7. *Ibid*.

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Louise Boscacci is one of the artists invited to *Clay Energy*, Gulgong, 2010.



Above: *Untitled 2007*. Translucent porcelain, glazes. 10 x 4.5 cm.
Photo by Greg Piper.

Below: *Two Bowls*. 2007-8. (detail). Hand-engraved, glazed stoneware.
Photo by Greg Piper.

