

## Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Pottery and presence, interview

Kathryn Wells 24 June 2011

**Abstract:** Gwyn Hanssen Pigott discusses pottery and the presence she creates in her works, her engagement with wood-firing since 1955 and her new work shown in 2011 at Newcastle Region Art Gallery, the Sophie Gannon Gallery in Melbourne and Ipswich Art Gallery, Queensland. Hanssen Pigott is recognised as one Australia's leading contemporary potters with a retrospective in her honour at the National Gallery of Victoria in 2005.

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### Background

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott skipped her honours year in a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts) at the University of Melbourne to train with Ivan McMeekin at Sturt Pottery in Mittagong in 1955. Hanssen Pigott then left for the United Kingdom to work with legendary potters Ray Finch, Bernard Leach, and Michael Cardew before establishing a studio at Notting Hill in London with Louis Hanssen. As Gwyn Hanssen she was elected as a Fellow of Society of Design Craftsmen, London 1963. Six years later, from 1965 to 1973, Hanssen Pigott, established a pottery at Acheres, near Bourges, France.

Hanssen Pigott returned to Australia in 1973, settling in Tasmania in 1974, setting up a pottery workshop with her husband John Pigott with help from the Crafts Board of the Australia Council. Hanssen Pigott was then tenant potter at the JamFactory in Adelaide in 1980 before moving to Queensland, taking up a position at the Queensland University of Technology from 1981-88 and the Fremantle Arts Centre in 1989, before setting up her own pottery at Netherdale, inland from Mackay, at the base of Eungella National Park. Hanssen Pigott now lives in south-east Queensland exhibiting nationally and internationally.

Strongly connected to the development and history of international contemporary ceramics since the mid-1950s, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott continues to be a presence in the contemporary ceramic movement in Australia.

Craft Australia interviewed Gwyn Hanssen Pigott on the eve of her opening of the survey exhibition *Gwyn Hanssen Pigott: the alchemy of making* showing at the Ipswich Art Gallery, Queensland, July to October 2011. Craft Australia asked her about her engagement with wood-firing, her inspirations and her new works shown this year at Newcastle Region Art Gallery and the Sophie Gannon Gallery in Melbourne.

### Interview

**Craft Australia: What was your inspiration in pursuing your quest as a potter in the 1950s, through the 1960s to the early 1970s?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**In 1955, I was enrolled in a Bachelor of Arts (Fine Arts) program at the University of Melbourne researching an essay on Australian artist potters when I visited Ivan McMeekin at Sturt, Mittagong. McMeekin had established the Pottery workshop in 1953. I skipped my Honours year at Melbourne to work with McMeekin at Sturt as his apprentice for the next three years.**

I would not have become a potter if I had not met McMeekin. McMeekin had served in the British Merchant navy in China and had a collection and love of Chinese pots. [1.](#) I had seen and loved Chinese pots as part of the National Gallery of Victoria Kent collection and McMeekin's love of the Chinese pots continued to inspire me.

McMeekin had a clear vision of providing a teaching and production centre. Following the Chinese tradition, McMeekin taught that the use of locally occurring raw materials, both clay and also wood fuel was a top priority for a potter, although he warned me that clay-digging was very heavy work.

Another catalyst was the ideas of English potters Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew which emphasised local materials and small-scale production. [2.](#) McMeekin talked to me a lot about Michael Cardew, with whom he had worked in Cornwall until 1853. I thought that I would go to the source of McMeekin's teaching and travelled to England where I sought out Michael Cardew but, he was going to Africa. In the meantime I worked with Ray Finch for nine months at Winchcombe Pottery, and then Bernard Leach for five months at St Ives before working with Michael Cardew in Cornwall.

While the atmosphere was relaxed there was a strong ethical philosophy about being an apprentice potter and having standards of "fitness and beauty".

At the home of Bernard and Janet Leach I saw: Hamada cups, porcelain Tomimoto plates, country Japanese pots and the dense dark bottles and dishes from long-fired Tamba and Bizen kilns. [3.](#) I was very interested and loved these pots but I didn't feel strongly that I was part of that tradition. Instead, I responded to the European tradition of stoneware that I found in France.

At that time, I had thought that European pottery was primarily earthenware but this was not the case. In 1962 I saw an important exhibition of wood fired pots, *Potiers de Haut-berry*, from Central France, showing in Paris at the Museum of Folk Art and Tradition. This changed my life.

I discovered for myself a tradition of stoneware pots in France which were produced from a long wood-firing process. They were super pots. I wanted to learn more about them.

This inspired me to set up a pottery at Acheres, near Bourges, France from 1966 to 1973. During this time, in 1972, I saw a huge retrospective of the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi in Paris which profoundly moved me.

**Craft Australia: Since the 1950s, you have lived in regional and remote areas: Mittagong in the Southern Highlands, Australia, Cornwall in England, Acheres, near Bourges, France, on a hillside in Tasmania, Netherdale, inland from Mackay, at the base of Eungella National Park and then south-eastern Queensland. What is the importance to you of those regional and remote areas?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**In short it is logical, the main thing was the supply of wood. I also had to buy a house that was cheap. At Les Grand Fougères d'Acheres, near Acheres in France, the stoneware was plentiful, as was the wood supply. This was an ideal place to have a pottery. The furthest I ever had to drive was 35 kilometres to get any sort of supply. It was marvellous.**

It is difficult to have a wood-fired kiln in an urban area. The only exception was when I arrived in Brisbane in 1981 as the potter-in-residence at the Kelvin Gove campus of QUT (Queensland University of

Technology).<sup>4</sup> It was then a Centre for Advanced Education and I could build a wood kiln there.<sup>4</sup> I stayed there for seven years.

After that I returned to country areas to set up my pottery and wood kiln, setting up at Netherdale about twenty years ago. It was from Netherdale workshop that I showed my still-life groups with which I am still involved. . I first showed still-life groups after firing in *Heja Chong's Bizen style noborigama kilnat Cottles Bridge, Victoria.*<sup>4</sup>

**Craft Australia: Can you describe your exploration of negative spaces and how this evolved with your work?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**My exploration of negative spaces grew from my love of the paintings of Italian Giorgio Morandi, a painter and print-maker who specialised in still life.<sup>4</sup> Morandi's works have a great sensitivity of tone, colour and balance.<sup>4</sup> In his paintings and drawings, space is important in a way that architecture relates to space.<sup>4</sup> Space is always important.**

Morandi paintings of familiar bottles and vases are very simple and encourage a meditation and contemplation.

Hopefully there is a presence in my work which can emanate calmness and quiet presence as well as strength and certainty.

As part of acknowledging this influence, the Newcastle Region Art Gallery presented an exhibition this year *Less is More*<sup>4</sup> with paintings and etchings by Morandi and works by myself (March to May 2011).<sup>4</sup> The Director Ron Ramsey managed to get four of the five Morandi paintings that are in Australia as well as other Morandi works and present them alongside my works from the Newcastle and other collections from recent years.

This was a very important exhibition for me.<sup>4</sup> I was astounded by and loved the fact that my works were in the same room as the Morandi's beautiful works.

I am very interested in architectural spaces. Recently, I completed an eighty-two piece commission with the architects Cox Raynor for the Ipswich Courthouse.<sup>5</sup>

It was a wonderful project to make works to fit in with a window space that was six metres long and 42 cm deep . It has glass on both sides and so you can see it on both sides. I made clusters connected by single bowls.<sup>4</sup> This has led to my current work *free-standing groups of pots.*<sup>4</sup> More and more I am doing clusters which you can move around.

**Craft Australia: How much of the clarity of form you have achieved was related to the influence of Austrian born potter Lucie Rie who settled in London in the late 1930s, with whom you were associated with in the 1960s and the Hans Coper exhibition in London in 1965?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**I was good friends with Lucie Rie and I loved her work, attending classes with her for a short while.<sup>4</sup> However, it was the solo exhibition by Hans Coper in London in 1965 that inspired me with its use of negative spaces.<sup>4</sup>**

At the Hans Coper exhibition, it was the first time, when I walked into an exhibition, that I was confronted by the spaces between the pots, which seemed to still the air between them.<sup>4</sup> It was very quiet.<sup>4</sup> This was inspiring.<sup>4</sup> It was the stillness that impressed me.

I love it now when you walk into a solo exhibition and a mood is created that emanates from the works. I love that feeling that a curator or gallery can achieve for an artist's works. I think that this is almost impossible to achieve from a group exhibition although, the recent exhibition with Khai Liew had a lovely feeling, held together by his furniture.

Recently, at the Sophie Gannon Gallery in Melbourne (from 17 May to 11 June 2011), the gallery used the shape of the rooms to great effect and achieve a mood and feeling generated by my work. Different groups of work sitting in different structures meant each of these groups could be viewed as separate and yet be connected by a mood.

**Craft Australia: A review in 1995 described your vessels as an assembly of "characters", each group a family and each exhibition a "village". 6. What leads you to constructing this sense of character and narrative with pots when you present your exhibitions?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**I suppose they are like families. I give names to my groupings of pots based on how they look and feel to me.**

For example, a group of pots that are small and looking vulnerable, I might call "Exodus". This is because it reminds me of a group or trail of children who are refugees. Or, another group, I might call "Waiting" and it might suggest a group of people waiting at a gate, waiting to get in.

I don't design the groups beforehand. I make the pots and after the firing, I see how they might relate.

**Craft Australia: Your glazes are extraordinarily restrained and subtle, the opaque colour and finish responding to the form and character of the pieces, many of which are given life in a wood fired kiln. Are you still an ardent admirer of the tradition of the long wood fire kiln? How important is the wood kiln to you in defining the glazes?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**The wood firing is very important but I don't do it often. While I don't have a big wood kiln it is still quite a lot of extra work.**

I have only been working seriously with translucent porcelain for a couple of decades. I love its response to light and to glaze colour and its sturdy delicacy.

In the still lifes, nuances of colour are so important. Glazing is critical and time-consuming. Each piece has a different tone inside and out. Usually I fire with a gas-kiln but wood-firing on porcelain has an added subtle effect. It is not dramatic, sometimes only a soft cloudiness.

**Craft Australia: What do you search for in your pottery that sustains your practice?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**Beauty. It is something I hope for and feel.**

**Craft Australia: You have exhibiting internationally, participating in over 30 international group exhibitions since 1990 and nine solo exhibitions held overseas in Germany, UK, USA and Canada. What are your plans for future international exhibitions?**

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott:**

**Both the galleries that represented me in London and New York have recently closed and instead of looking for new galleries in these cities I have decided to focus on showing work in Australia. I am really enjoying the close proximity of showing in three Australian galleries this year.**

Next year I am invited as a resident potter to Shigaraki Ceramics Park studio, for three months. It follows on from an Australia Council Tokyo Residency grant I received in 2010.

At the moment I have just returned from Vancouver, Canada where I have been working with the Museum of Anthropology (MOA) where I was invited to make a series of groups from their collection. This follows on from a similar project in Washington DC at the Freer Gallery.

At the Freer Gallery, the idea was to present a fresh way of viewing the Freer ceramics collection from the viewpoint of a contemporary artist.

In Vancouver, at the MOA it is not only about ceramics; the museum holds about 38,000 objects of all kinds. The things that I have chosen to work with include: tapa cloth from the Pacific, model canoes, easter eggs, wool fibre, glass beads, fans, a Korean undershirt and Indonesian puppets.

It has been a very intriguing project so far.

*Kathryn Wells, Communications Manager, Craft Australia, June 2011*

## Acknowledgements

**Gwyn Hanssen Pigott is represented by:**

- [Rex Irwin Gallery, Sydney](#)
- [Sophie Gannon Gallery](#), Melbourne
- [Philip Bacon Galleries](#), Brisbane

## Related Links

- [Gwyn Hanssen Pigott: the alchemy of making](#), Ipswich Art Gallery, Queensland, July to October 2011
- ["Less is More"™ Morandi & Hanssen Pigott](#), Newcastle Region Art Gallery, 5 March - 8 May 2011
- [Gwyn Hanssen Pigott: Porcelain](#), Sophie Gannon Gallery, Melbourne, May - June 2011
- [Sturt Pottery](#)
- [Gwyn Hanssen Pigott](#),
- [Parades: Freer Ceramics Installed by Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, 2006-07.](#)

## Look, Listen and Play

- [A Potter's Film](#), depicting the artist Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Dir. Peter Hylands, Cowboy Films, Australia, 2008, 30 mins

## References

- Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Autobiographical notes, *The Studio Potter*, vol 20 #1, Dec 1991
- Ruark Lewis, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott: Recent work, Rex Irwin Gallery, Sydney, 4-29 April, 1995, Review published in *Object*, Vol 3+4, 95
- Peter Timms, Craft, *Art Monthly*, number 49, May 1992
- Peter Lane, *Studio Ceramics*, 'Ceramic Form', p.78, William Collins UK, 1993

## Footnotes

1. Song and early Ming Chinese pots.
  
2. Bernard Leach's *A Potter's Book*, 1940.Â Artist and author Edmund de Waal describes *A Potter's Book*: "[it] stands as both manual and polemic.... It is a book that seems to encode the whole meaning of being a potter and working as a potter, not simply the making of pots.Â Leach starts from the presumption that there is a need for a common standard of "fitness and beauty" and that such a standard is lacking in the West where the appreciation of pottery is a marginal activity.... the gravitas of Leach's book, though, lay in the feeling that art was not various but very particular indeed. It was the very absoluteness of Leach's "Song standards", "the ethical pot", that were to define the post-war agenda on ceramics."
  
3. See Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, 'Autobiographical notes' in *The Studio Potter*, vol 20 #1, Dec 1991
  
4. See [Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Still life- two bottles and a bowl, porcellaneous stoneware, 1988](#) held at Art Gallery of Ballarat.
  
5. [2010 Queensland State Architecture Awards](#), Art & Architecture Prize, Ipswich Justice Precinct: Cox Rayner Architects with ABM Architects Â
  
6. Ruark Lewis, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott: Recent work, Rex Irwin Gallery, Sydney, 4-29 April, 1995, Review published in *Object*, Vol 3+4, 95
  
7. Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, [Parades: Freer Ceramics Installed by Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, 2006-07](#).

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Document reference: LIBESS20041208SB

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