

Southern Ice,

By **MEREDITH HINCHLIFFE**

LES Blakebrough is a household name amongst those with an interest in Australian ceramics. Blakebrough's career spans fifty years — he began with an apprenticeship with Ivan McMeehin at Sturt Pottery, Mittagong, in 1957, when he was 27.

In 1952 he enrolled in a painting diploma at East Sydney Technical College, but was encouraged to work in three dimensions by the artist Gerard Hawkes. He became immediately enthused with clay and its possibilities and transferred into the pottery department in 1955.

The 1950s were an exciting and innovative time in pottery in Australia, with Mollie Douglas and Peter Rushforth, two of the country's leading potters and teachers, teaching at East Sydney. Both were experimenting with local clays and glaze ingredients, as were other leading potters.

Blakebrough has always experimented and explored the unknown, searching for perfection.

"I suppose there is never an end to the research side of one's practice — whatever we call it," he said. "It somehow sits there as an idea in the mind's eye. It never lets up, and the quest to deal with it never quite makes it in reality. Trying to bring materials, process, and skills together to match this image in the mind's eye, sometimes gets close, but there is always a gap. It is what makes one continue to try putting ideas into reality."

In the past fifteen years, Blakebrough has been involved with perhaps the most fruitful period of his research.

"As an honorary research fellow at the University of Tasmania, I am still running a research project, and there is another in the pipeline with four highly skilled practitioners from all over the world, who are doing their own work. If it is successful, I hope it will extend the range of work from Southern Ice porcelain."

Southern Ice is a porcelain clay body of outstanding whiteness and lightness. His investigations began when Blakebrough started using kaolin from north-east Tasmania.

"I wanted [a clay body] that was tactile, white and fine without any clothes — no glaze. I was importing clay from Europe and the United Kingdom and these were the benchmark materials I measured Southern Ice against. But I wanted to make it better than its imported counterparts. Initially, the titanium content was too high, and firing it created all sorts of problems."

Eventually they achieved the high quality clay they were seeking. "Although reconciling the reality with the vision was always a tall order," Blakebrough said.

In the past, increasing the plasticity of porcelain has decreased its whiteness and translucency. Southern Ice combines both qualities and has a finish comparable to bone china.

"Big quantities of Southern Ice are now exported to the United States, the United Kingdom and through the British distributor, to many European countries. The royalties keeps the research unit ticking over," Blakebrough told me.

Over thirty works are included in this exhibition. Elegant and austere, the forms exploit the inherent translucency and whiteness of the unglazed clay body. Lyrical, evocative motifs, deep-etched into the surface, are the only decoration.

In the long grass with Claudia Rose is a motif he has repeated for several years, and refers to a time when playing with his granddaughter when she was two and was hidden in the tall, swaying grass.

Forest Floor is another motif Blakebrough has repeated, and the fallen litter of leaves and bark from the trees evokes the quiet stillness of forests.

The strength of the forms gives them a stunning presence, although to be seen at their best, the etched decoration on the vessels requires direct lighting.

ethereal beauty

Blakebrough is showing thrown forms, which he has pushed into gently shaped ellipses that are more informal and more relaxed.

In another area of investigation, Blakebrough experimented with the use of nitrates and metal salts to decorate the surface of the vessels, although the word 'decoration' does not capture the ethereal beauty of the surface treatment.

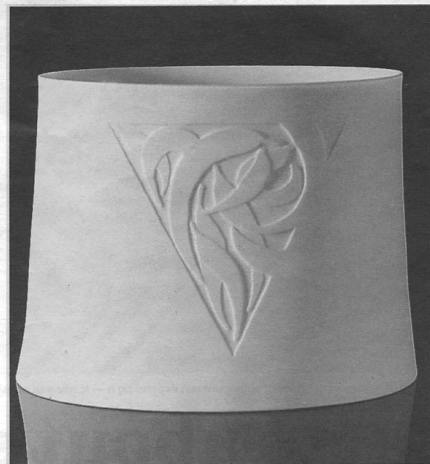
Two-footed bowls, the walls rising serenely from the foot, wear the minimal clothes of this embellishment.

This craftsman, who is one of three artists selected for the exhibition series *Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft*, modestly told me that, "My work has never been a firework [display], but you can see the evolution."

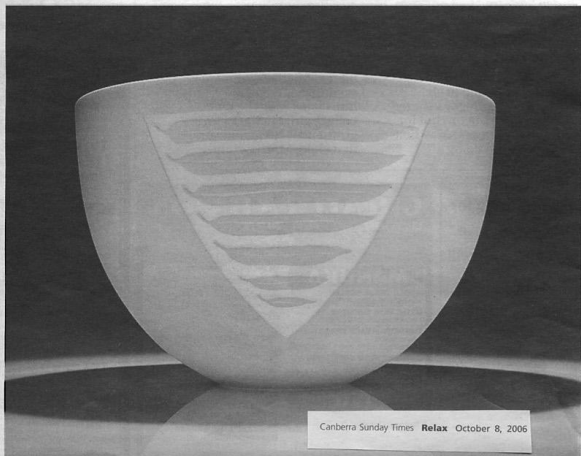
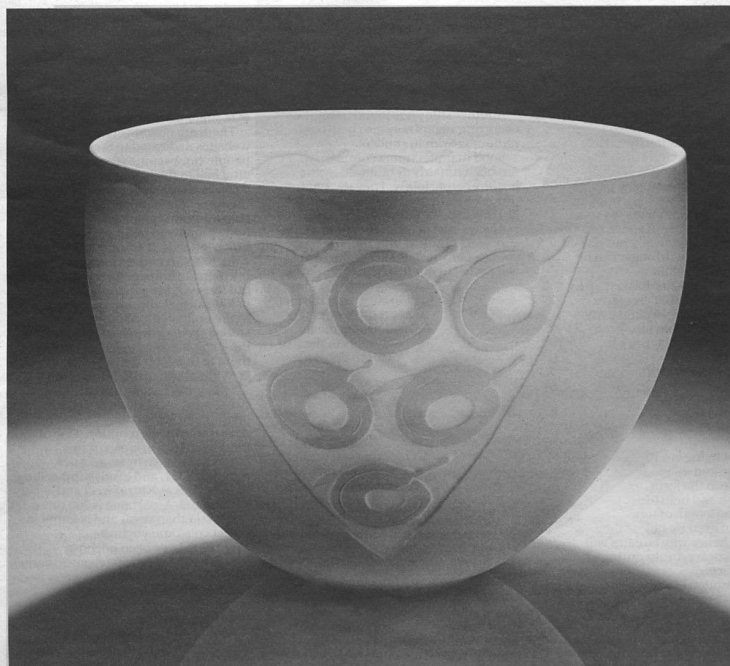
This exhibition captures the work of an artist/craftsman who brings together his heart, his mind and his hands and fifty years of knowledge and experience. It puts his research into perspective and we are left breathless in amazement.

Les Blakebrough: Ceramics, by Jonathan Holmes, Craftsman House in association with Object. Australian Centre for Craft and Design, was published last year. Cost \$49.95.

The New Porcelain — Ceramics by Les Blakebrough at Beaver Galleries, 81 Denison Street, Deakin, until October 16. Open daily 10am to 5pm.



Forest Floor, porcelain, deep etched, 18 x 16 x 9cm.



Canberra Sunday Times **Relax** October 8, 2006