



NEW DIRECTIONS: Les Blakebrough's *The Kelp Forest #1*, left, and *Open Wounds #1*, and *Escarment #1*.

Elegance and quiet beauty

Les Blakebrough – porcelain

Beaver Galleries, 180 Denison Street, Deakin.
Until November 27.

Reviewer: Kerry-Anne Cousins

Les Blakebrough has enjoyed a distinguished career in the visual arts and was the first artist to be featured in the *Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft* exhibition mounted by Object: Centre for Australian Craft and Design in 2005.

His first years as a potter in the early '50s were spent at the Sturt Workshop in Mittagong. After studying in Japan in 1963, he went on to become the director of the Sturt Workshop on his return in 1964. In 1965 he became a founding member of the Craft Association of NSW and has since played an impressive part in promoting the arts. In 1973 he moved to Tasmania and became involved in teaching and research at the Tasmanian School of Art at the University of Tasmania. In 2010 Blakebrough retired from academia and moved to the south coast of NSW.

Since the mid 1980s, Blakebrough has been preoccupied with using porcelain. A series of grants from the Australian Research Council beginning in 1994 enabled him to research and develop a white porcelain that was translucent, pure and easily worked that he called Southern Ice porcelain.

The current exhibition at the Beaver Galleries includes works in Southern Ice porcelain that illustrate the various themes that have occupied the artist over the last decade.

The Kelp series reflects Blakebrough's love of the sea and his time no doubt spent walking the wild surf beaches of Tasmania.

In this series, the pots are slip cast and ovoid in form. Their thin walls of clay are

folded into shape that sometimes overlap at the join. In these pots, images inspired by woven and interwoven strands of the giant kelp forests of Fortescue Bay, are deeply etched into the body of the pot so that the engraved line of white on white is defined by the light casting shadows.

I was drawn to sections where the interplay between overlapping strands is eloquently suggestive of soft pliable material.

The Contour series also uses the technique of deep engraving. In these pots the curved lines, also a white-on-white design, are wound sensuously around the full-bodied spherical form of the wheel-thrown pot.

These lines echo the flowing line and deceptively free brushstrokes of oriental calligraphy. They also indicate the integral influence of Japanese ceramics on the artist's work.

In the *Red* series, represented by three slip-cast ovoid-shaped pots, this same flowing calligraphic line is made by using a soft red glaze.

The About Fred series is in honour of Fred Williams, the Australian artist. A worthy homage from one esteemed artist to another, Blakebrough has designed a simple rectangular motive of free painted brushstrokes in dark blue, light blue and soft reds.

This deceptively simple design conjures up the landscape of sparse gum trees that Fred Williams inimitably made his own. In the exhibition this motif appears on both full-bodied thrown pots and slip-cast pots.

The *Open Wound* series speaks more directly of a personal loss. In 2006 the artist's partner Sally Sorell died of cancer.

In some of the works from the series (not present in this exhibition), the artist

uses fragments of text from the diary Sorell kept during her illness. *Open Wounds* refers to this text. In *Open Wound #1* Blakebrough uses a swathe of blue glaze as a "bandage" to envelop the ovoid form. The texture of an actual gauze strip has been impressed into the wet clay so only a ghostly presence remains – yet that presence has become part of the fabric of the pot.

The *Escarment* series comes as a surprise as it stands alone among the other works in the exhibition that have their genesis in the past decade of the artist's practice. This series of three slip-cast pots is particularly fine work. Their appeal lies in the contrast between the smooth cool porcelain and the sculptural "frieze" the artist has applied to their form as a central motif. This sculptural motif resembles the rawness of uncut rock but, because of its very whiteness, it recalls to me the rough hewn marble of an unfinished sculptural work and the power of its unrealised potential.

Blakebrough has always had a deep connection to the environment, especially to the sea and rivers of Tasmania. Now he has relocated from Tasmania to the south coast it may be that the rugged escarpments of the Illawarra district will continue to play an inspirational part in his work.

The latter works are a testimony, if one was needed, of Les Blakebrough's continuing quest for new ideas and new directions, even though he has a long and rich career behind him.

This exhibition at the Beaver Galleries is a tribute to an artist who during this long career has made a great contribution to the arts. It also celebrates a craftsman who continues to produce work of elegance, assurance and quiet beauty.