

White porcelain the work of a master craftsman

Gathering Light - Porcelain. By Les Blakebrough. Beaver Galleries. On until May 1. **Reviewer:** Kerry-Anne Cousins

Les Blakebrough has had a long and rewarding career as a ceramicist and teacher creating ceramics of quiet assurance and integrity.

This latest exhibition of his porcelain reflects the confidence of a master craftsman and the self-discipline of someone who works within clearly defined, self-imposed parameters. In this case the porcelain is essentially white, stripped of any overly decorated surfaces or ornate forms. In the main the works are cylinders and bowls with engraved decoration barely disturbing the surface of each form.

I am reminded of the English ceramicist and writer Edmund de Waal (known for his book *The Hare with Amber Eyes*.) De Waal's early ceramic practice was informed by British ceramicist Bernard Leach, whose studio pottery was both mindful of the function of the pot and the materiality of the clay.

De Waal has remained faithful to the creative experience of working with his material and appreciating its unique properties. In his later career he turned to porcelain, which now is his chosen material. It is a preoccupation with white porcelain that characterises his later work. In his recent book *The White Road*, published in 2015, De Waal writes about his search for the history of porcelain in China, Germany and England and his "journey into an obsession with white itself".

Blakebrough also came out of the studio pottery tradition – studying with Ivan McMeekin at Sturt Pottery in Bowral in the 1950s and in Japan with Takeichi Kawai. His early pottery showed the influence of Bernard Leach and, like de Waal, his later work moved gradually from the earthiness of the functional clay pot into the more refined and luminous area of white porcelain.

The collection of works in this exhibition is made in white "Southern Ice" porcelain using a combination of hand-built, slip-cast and wheel-thrown techniques. Southern Ice porcelain is an elastic white porcelain clay that Blakebrough developed in the late 1990s when he was head of the ceramics department at the Tasmanian School of Art in Hobart. It is very white and, as its name suggests, has a cool, ice-blue luminosity. It can also be worked so that it becomes very thin and almost transparent and responds especially to light.

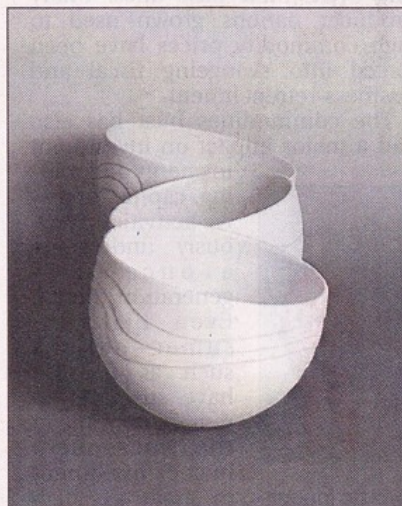
The ideas behind the series of



Les Blakebrough: *The Kelp* #30.

works in this exhibition have evolved over several years. The *Kelp* series, the *Surf's Up* series, *The Sea at Coledale* series and the *Escarpment* series are inspired by the sea and the coastal landscape of Tasmania and the South Coast of NSW.

The *Kelp* series has its genesis in the large kelp sea forests of Fortescue Bay in Tasmania. The tall cylinders are slip cast and the join has been left as a sign of their making. These works are left unglazed so that they glow with a soft light. The tangled and entwined mounds of kelp seen on the beach have been transformed by the artist into designs of gently waving ribbons. They are etched onto the



Bowls in Southern Ice porcelain, by Les Blakebrough.

surface of the pots and stretch out to embrace their forms like the waving strands of kelp in the sea.

The etching of these strands does not cut deeply into the surface so the effect is subtle. This draws the viewer closer to the pot to discover its more hidden narratives. Related to these works are the two key works, *The Kelp* #31 and *The Kelp* #30.

In these hand-built works, the

strands of kelp have been translated into actual strips of porcelain that are woven together to make open bowls. In *The Kelp* #31 the strands have been tamed and flattened into a more contained form but in *The Kelp* #30 there is greater exuberance with more rounded forms, an uneven lip on the bowl and a delicate play between the positive and negative spaces of the "weave". These are beautiful works where the discipline of the contained form is overtaken by a more playful and energetic approach.

The *Surf's Up* and *The Sea at Coledale* series are inspired by Coledale – a small seaside town near Wollongong in NSW. The motif of deeply etched, waving lines gently ringing the form of the bowl found in the *Surf's Up* series has an affinity with Blakebrough's earlier *Contour* series of 2012.

In the *Surf's Up* series spherical bowls etched with these contoured lines are, however, set on a slight axis, giving them a nice rhythmic balance.

The motif of waves in *The Sea at Coledale* series has been abbreviated to a series of marks etched into the pots so that they resemble flickers of shapes and lines like the ripples of water. Sometimes these marks are contained within an implied border or are flicked across the pot.

A good example of this flickering effect is found in the serene example of *The Sea at Coledale* #24 and *The Sea at Coledale* #10, which is the one work included in this collection that is also distinguished by a soft celadon glaze.

We are surrounded by colour, pattern and light so these pots that are so white and restrained can seem unassuming and remote. However, there is a lot to be gained by contemplation of their very subtle elegance and ability to create a mood of calm and quietude. They reflect their creator in their completeness, assurance and, above all, mature fulfilment of a personal vision.