

Les Blakebrough

My Place

Sturt Gallery, Mittagong

8 June–20 July 2014

Les Blakebrough was interviewed by Kathryn Wells

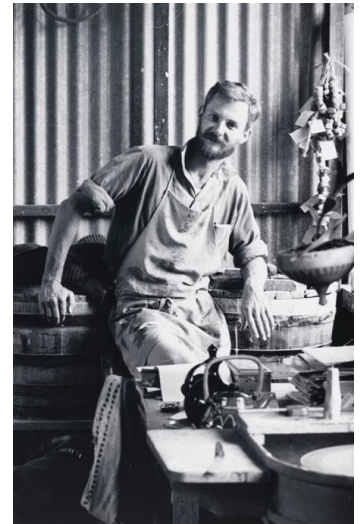
Les Blakebrough is one of Australia's most highly regarded ceramic artists, noted for his development of and work in Southern Ice Porcelain. While his vessels may be glazed inside, the outside remains unglazed. The pieces offer a meditation on sights and sounds, a balance between movement and stillness. At the same time, they offer a sense of vigour, conveyed in the transformation of light transmitted through the porcelain and in its dance on the clear interior glaze. His new show, My Place, the first at Sturt since 2000, confirms his resolution of form, presence and engagement with ceramics for over 55 years.

You began working at Sturt in 1957, as the assistant to Ivan McMeekin in the pottery workshop, replacing but crossing over with Gwyn Hanssen-Piggott, and later headed the workshop, from 1959 and then Sturt from 1964 until 1972, after spending a year as an apprentice in Japan in 1963. At Sturt you trained 17 apprentices and invited potters-in-residence from Japan and England. Why did you consider this type of training so important?

The training of apprentices and inviting international potters began after I returned from Japan. The training at Sturt was in the Leach – Cardew tradition, the same kind of training I had received myself under Ivan McMeekin, and from Peter Rushforth at East Sydney Tech, broadened considerably by what I later learned in Japan.

It was training from actually digging up clay and preparing it to turning it into ware that was saleable. It involved knowing the materials, and enough geology to understand their chemistry. The workshop researched local clays, including porcelain and glazes. Understanding and being able to control the mysteries of a wood-burning kiln was a key feature.

The training at Sturt meant becoming familiar enough with all these varied skills to eventually be able to make a personal statement with your works.



Les Blakebrough, Sturt, Mittagong, 1962 by David Moore, courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

In 1967, you accepted a commission from architect Robin Boyd for a 500-piece dinner set from Sturt to go on display at the World Expo in Montreal. What were the circumstances at Sturt that made you confident to accept this commission? How did you go about it?

In Japan, I had learned some specific and quite complex techniques of making moulds, and using saggars and setters that made it possible to undertake a commission at that scale. At Sturt I had a large enough kiln to fire it. This was the wood-fired three-chambered climbing kiln I built in 1964. It had a capacity to fire 3000 pieces per firing. We used local clay to make the ware as well as locally occurring refractory materials for the saggars and setters.

It was a very busy time as Shigeo Shiga came in 1965 and was there at Sturt when the commission was made. Nicholas Lidstone was an apprentice at the time who worked with me on it. However the responsibility for the commission was mine. Many other commissions and apprentices followed.



Forest Floor 3, thrown, Southern Ice Porcelain by Les Blakebrough

As Head of Ceramics at the Tasmanian School of Art in 1973, you invited Gwyn Hanssen-Piggott to Tasmania (after her period in England and France), to explore clays and glazes, developing glazes with names like Coles Bay Blue Glaze. A decade later, then working independently, you returned to research the development of porcelain for ten years. What qualities were you looking for in Southern Ice Porcelain and how did you resolve them in the creation of the clay?

I had been working in porcelain for some years and I had found all the clays available, even the imported ones, to be 'wanting'. They were physically difficult to work with, they were not translucent enough, they were not white enough, and overall shrinkage was too high. The dilemma in creating this porcelain was that it began as an ideal in the 'mind's eye', and therefore, it was hugely difficult to achieve. However the research project we carried out over five years in the Ceramic Research Unit at the University of Tasmania did eventually produce very good results. I wanted a name for it that would reflect where it came from, hence Southern Ice Porcelain. The fact that it was good to work with, fired to a cool white colour and was very translucent made it the best available porcelain worldwide.

Your resolution of form has been discussed* in terms of an inverted dome, and with reference to architectural lines and volume. This is referenced in your earlier works and exemplified in your later work. Can you explain your influences and approach to these considerations of form?

Ideas about form go back to early training as a painter, the reading I did as a student, my abiding interest in architecture generally, and then training in ceramics. The influences are fairly catholic; I was always drawn to the lines boat builders were able to achieve, not to mention classic motorcars.

One piece of advice I clearly remember being given, is that the inside of a bowl needs to have a generosity to it; it follows that this feature will affect the outside form as well. It is even more important that volume is up high rather than down low. There needs to be air under the lower section of a bowl to allow it to float. Clearly this concept cannot apply to all ideas of a bowl, but these are the concerns most often at play when I start to throw one.



Surf's Up, Southern Ice Porcelain by Les Blakebrough

In your new environment at Coledale on the NSW south coast, nestling on the Illawarra escarpment, you have observed new sights and sounds finding their way into your work. What are the differences and continuities you find in your new works created at Coledale?

For me it is always a question of being aware of one's surroundings and giving rein to that physical presence in the work.

My being aware of the patterns and textures of the ocean in its quieter moments came from living by the Derwent in Tasmania. Those patterns, made by trailing a brush across a form, are still present in the work. Along the Illawarra coast there's usually a good surf running, a kind of poetry in action. The new 'Surf's Up' bowls have been inspired by that sight and the sense of excitement that goes with it.



The Kelp, large oval form, Southern Ice Porcelain by Les Blakebrough

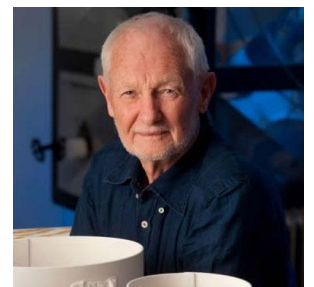
Over the years you have engaged in a continual refinement of ideas, materials and processes. Yet your work has consistently explored presence and engagement with the natural world as well as human emotions, expressed in the treatment of the surface layers. Can you tell us about your fascination with surfaces?

In all my work in porcelain, there is a surface that's open to exploration. For example, the fineness of the clay allows me to make calligraphic marks in wax or shellac resist that will hold extraordinary detail in the finished piece. I find this immensely satisfying, that the brush mark can be perfectly 'held' in this way. By taking great care when washing away the background surface, several of these layers can be created.

There are bodies of work where I've used text rather than image on the surface. I had often admired painters who made use of text in their work. Colin McCann, the New Zealand painter, comes to mind, and many others. When, after losing my partner to ovarian cancer, I found a journal she kept during her illness, I felt a need to explore text in my work. It was a small body of work, important at the time.

Whilst your ideas can take a long time to ferment, to visualise the images and take form, and although you have had at least one solo show a year for ten years; what is on your mind for the next body of work in your new environment?

I am not yet finished with the ideas regarding the kelp forests of the Southern Ocean, so there is more work to do there. In all probability that work will become bigger - nothing like a technical challenge! The thrown bowls that tilt are very new and demanding - enough for me to follow into new territory. Whatever emerges it will be a challenge, engaging, and interesting.



Les Blakebrough in his studio at Coledale, photograph by Anthony Browell.

*Acknowledgements: Patsy Hely and Grace Cochrane, *Les Blakebrough*, Bett Gallery Monograph, 2010 with reference to Robert McFarlane, review, Sydney Morning Herald, 10 September 2003. See Sturt at <http://www.sturt.nsw.edu.au/> and Les Blakebrough Ceramics at <http://www.lesblakebrough.com.au/>