

The Condition Report

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Above: *Tintaldrá Tank*, 2005, Stoneware clay and copper glaze, H 27 x W 37 x D 30 cm Photographer: Greg Piper

Artist Interview: **Merran Esson**

Interviewed by Shellie Cleaver

Merran Esson has been making works of art using clay for over 30 years. She was awarded the Port Hacking Award in 2000, Nava Marketing Grant in 2006, the Gold Coast Ceramic Award in 2005 and Poyntzpass Pioneer Ceramic Award in 2008. She was a resident in the National Art School studio at the Cite International des Arts in Paris in 2006 and has been a visiting artist in China, Korea, Scotland, Sweden, Taiwan and Pakistan. Esson has exhibited in The National Gallery of Australia, The Art Galleries of South Australia and Western Australia, The Victoria and Albert Museum London, Galerie Rosenhauer in Germany, Gaffer Gallery in Hong Kong, also Korea, Taiwan, Sweden, Pakistan and numerous galleries in Australia. She is currently the Head of Ceramics, at The National Art School in Sydney.

Could you tell us how you came to be an artist?

I didn't plan to become an artist; I didn't really plan out my life, but I knew I wanted to make things. My childhood was spent in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains near Tumbarumba and I can see now that my early experiences growing up on a farm have led me to this point. I always thought I would return to the land and when I discovered ceramics I imagined a studio behind a wool shed somewhere. The women in my family have all been artists, my mother and her Sydney cousins were painters, and when they came to stay we would spend time drawing and painting farm machinery and grand landscapes of the mountains. I am a practical girl, and watched my father and grandfather fix things as farmers do; it was not always beautiful, but over time a patina builds up and something once practical takes on its own beauty. My father was a glider pilot and I flew over the farm and mountains with him, learning to

navigate and understanding the aerial view of the land. I am still fascinated by the markings of both man and nature on the earth below. My grandfather used to fire up an old forge and hammer out plough shears and horseshoes, I became quite fascinated in how metal changes under heat. It never occurred to me that all these experiences would lead me to where I am now. I rejected the grand landscape and became fascinated by the minutia of rural detail. Drawing it and later creating aspects of it in clay. In the 1970's I studied Ceramics at Caulfield Institute of Technology in Melbourne (now Monash University), and on completion I moved to London. This was to really open my eyes to the breadth of contemporary ceramics. I was introduced to a much broader art world. My studio practice is now an urban practice, it includes teaching, exhibiting, writing, curating and making. There is still a yearning for a farm studio, recent works although rural in origin have an industrial scale.

Which core ideas inform your work?

The British writer Peter Dormer wrote in 1994 'Function is the subject matter, not the purpose; the purpose is art.' This quote has informed my work over my whole career. The core of my practice has always had its roots in function as first understood as a potter, and in rural and industrial objects as memory. Combining these two influences to create an artistic practice has always been the challenge. It still underpins my work and gives me endless subject matter. The rise of China as a producer of many things that we need, especially ceramics, has reinforced my need to make work that does not compete in the domestic marketplace.

How important are the materials you work with and how particular are you about these aspects?

Clay is such a willing material, I can leave my imprint on any clay and it will stay there forever. I like my clay made by someone else and delivered on my doorstep wrapped in plastic and ready to use. I have found a couple of clays that I like and tend to stick with them. In ceramics one takes time to develop an understanding of what a particular clay body will do under firing conditions. Perhaps my practical background also means that I am less fussy about a specific material.

What materials do you use?

My main clay is a fine hand building clay made by Clayworks in Melbourne. It's strong and easy to manipulate. I do cover it with a very fine white engobe, which is a type of slip and gives the appearance of a much smoother clay body. It covers and hides the structural body beneath. I have been working with a green glaze, which gives my work a soft matt surface. Developed over a number of years from a base recipe, I use a range of glaze ingredients including copper and lithium carbonate to achieve the surface.

When choosing materials to use do price, brand, quality and range affect your selection?

Not really. Clay is fairly cheap and abundant. The translucent porcelains are expensive, quite hard to work with but give some beautiful results, so one has to just go for them. Most artists using clay are constantly testing materials to understand and recognise changes. Of course some glaze materials are expensive. I always go with what is needed to give the best result.

Do you consider the longevity of your artworks when creating them and making choices about materials and techniques?

One of the reasons that I work with clay is that it lasts a very long time. So in some ways I do consider longevity. Clay is part of geology and rocks are the basis of ceramic glazes. Clay is derived from weathered rocks, so technically by combining the two (clay and glaze), ceramic artworks should last forever. Of course they don't because human beings don't always look after them. I do have some pieces that I gave to my mother as my career was developing; a teapot with a cracked handle and a coffee mug with a crack in it. My mother never used any of my work, so I surmised that the flaws in my work would never be discovered. When she passed away I collected all the work and was reminded that longevity can be a problem when the work is not made very well. It's a reminder of one's own flaws. I have since destroyed them. I contemplate casting in bronze one day. However, I do keep returning to clay and I think I just know intuitively that it is the right material for me. I have not always made sturdy work, but as my experience has grown I realise that clay is strong when it is fired to high temperatures. Clay is heavy, so it needs to balance on a sturdy base.



Above: *Collision*, 2012, Stoneware clay and copper glaze, H 18 x W 45 x D 18 cm Photographer: Greg Piper



Above: *Pod Stack*, 2014, Stoneware clay and copper glaze, H 66 x W 40 x D 20 cm Photographer: Greg Piper

In your practice do you work on one piece at a time or several?

I prefer to work on several pieces. I work in series and like to follow a particular subject matter. It's good to have different pieces in the studio, it helps me to see the links between different works and it refreshes my decisions, particularly in how to complete the forms. If I get stuck, I just wrap work in plastic and return to it later. Clay needs to stiffen for ease of modelling and construction, so there are often works in different stages of construction waiting to be worked on.

Do you revisit old works and make changes?

Yes. Of course it's impossible to add new clay to objects after firing, but I love to refire works that are unsuccessful. Sometimes I will refire years later when I have discovered a 'rescue' glaze. If a glaze hasn't worked but the form is good then it's worth persevering. I like to live with work for a while, some pieces are ahead of their time and need to sit and wait on shelves until the time is right to show them.



Above: *Jagungal Series*, 2007, Stoneware clay and copper glaze,
 Sizes variable Photographer: Greg Piper



Above: *Pot Shot*, 2009, Stoneware clay and copper glaze,
 H 64 x W 44 x D 43 cm Photographer: Greg Piper

How do you document your art practice and body of work?

I use a very good photographer who knows how to capture a three dimensional object into a two dimensional image. Images are so important now with social media and online opportunities. Keeping files organised and up-to-date is always a challenge. I have a stack of CD's from my photographer. I just need to file them properly.

If one of your artworks of yours was damaged, would you want to repair it yourself or would you prefer/be happy for a trained conservator to make the needed repairs?

I like to repair my own work, and I think I am quite good at it. Most of the objects that I make are large and take a few days to make, so if a crack appears I have all sorts of experience at repairing works that are unfired. I have repaired my own completed work when something has been damaged. It takes time and patience but I don't mind doing it. When a piece of ceramics breaks, the glue or filler takes up space so the pieces never set back together exactly as they were. Thankfully I haven't had to repair much at all.

Do you know much about the work conservators do?

I am fascinated by the work conservators do. I remember watching a program on the conservators in Florence after the Arno River flooded and damaged so much artwork. I thought in my next life I would quite like a job like that. It would be exciting to work on a great old master. On a trip to X'ian in China I visited the area where the terracotta warriors were being restored. Of course the Chinese are dab hands at repair and camouflage.

Do you think the knowledge conservators have about materials and techniques could be useful for practising artists?

Yes, definitely. I think that if one is going to repair work it must be done well. In ceramics I have spoken to Penny Byrne, a Melbourne artist, who trained as a ceramist and then a conservator. She has very specialised skills and I know that there are many products that have been invented in the dental industry that make invisible repairs on fine china. These materials and skills are important when repairing works of great value. I am often asked by galleries and collectors about where to get damaged work repaired, so I believe that a greater awareness of correct and successful conservation practices would be very useful for practising artists.

How do you think the relationship between artists and conservators could be improved?

The really sensible answer would be to watch and learn from each other, but to be honest, I never think about my work being damaged. I make art because I need to, because I take great pleasure in making and when it's gone from the studio I return to the table to make another one that is better. I have on a few occasions repaired work by other artists. It's lovely to handle someone else's work and try to match up colour and surface. It's a slow job and requires fillers, glues and paint. The Japanese have a tradition of repairing pots with gold called "kintsukuroi". The Japanese have always accepted imperfection in pots and so repairing a broken pot adds beauty and does not seek to hide flaws.

Merran is represented by Stella Downer Fine Art in Sydney, and Gaffer Gallery in Hong Kong - gaffer.com.hk
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