



*'Doubleshot 2', 2002, handbuilt stoneware, 69 x 56 x 34 cm.
Collection: National Gallery of Australia, Canberra*



*'Corrugated Bucket', 2005, handbuilt stoneware, 56 x 51 x 43 cm.
Collection: Gold Coast Regional Art Gallery, Queensland*

CONTAINERS OF IDEAS

Deconstruction and reconstruction are the hallmark of Merran Esson's large-scale ceramic forms inspired by the contrasting landscapes of Scotland and Australia.

Text by Gordon Foulds. Photography by Greg Piper.

BORN to farming parents in southern NSW near Tumbarumba in the upper Murray region, Merran Esson has long been one of Australia's best known and most respected ceramists and teachers. The rural environment which she experienced so fully during her childhood and adolescent years has influenced both her work and her personal life philosophy, and manifests

itself in much of her current and past work. She is a full-time lecturer in ceramics at the National Art School in Sydney, a position Esson has held since 1997. She has taught and lectured overseas on a number of occasions, particularly in China and in Scotland, and although her experiences in these countries have had lasting impressions, both culturally and professionally,



'Towong Tank', 2007, handbuilt stoneware, 26 x 45 x 36 cm



'The Restraint of Function', 2005, handbuilt stoneware, tallest 38 x 26 x 22 cm

it has been her ongoing relationship with Scotland that seems to have had the most profound and enduring influence on her. Being of recent Scottish ancestry, she found much in the country that struck an intellectual and spiritual chord with her. She loved the weather, the cloudy skies, the rugged landscape steeped in history, the manmade markings, the roads, the mediaeval stone walls, the timeless quality of the villages and hamlets and the inscriptions on ancient graveyard headstones. She soon realized that these things were also a major part of her own cultural heritage. These signposts of humanity began to assume a significant role in most of her work since that time. Her husband Michael Esson, also an artist, who works in the visual arts was born in Aberdeen, and together with their two children, they have spent a number of years in that city and visited many other parts of Scotland.

Esson has a deep appreciation of her family, and the support which one receives from within the family unit, from which she learned about the need for balance,



'Starfish and Double Trouble', 1993, stoneware, 00 x 00 x 00 cm

PHOTO: PAUL GREEN



'Double Talk', 1999, handbuilt stoneware, 00 x 00 x 00 cm

PHOTO: PAUL GREEN

strength and fortitude in life generally, and incorporates these qualities in her work. We see the expression of these values in the work *Starfish and Double Trouble* of 1993, and again in the later work *Double Talk* of 1999. In the former work we see paired pieces where the handles, the legs and the jug forms themselves, supply the supporting base, while the negative space and the forms which represent negative and positive forms of each other, take the work well beyond the functional vessel form, and place it firmly into the genre of sculpture.

While the main forms might indeed retain a functional
'Corrugated Skuttle', 2004, handbuilt stoneware, 58 x 45 x 29 cm.
Collection: Westervald Keramik Museum, Germany



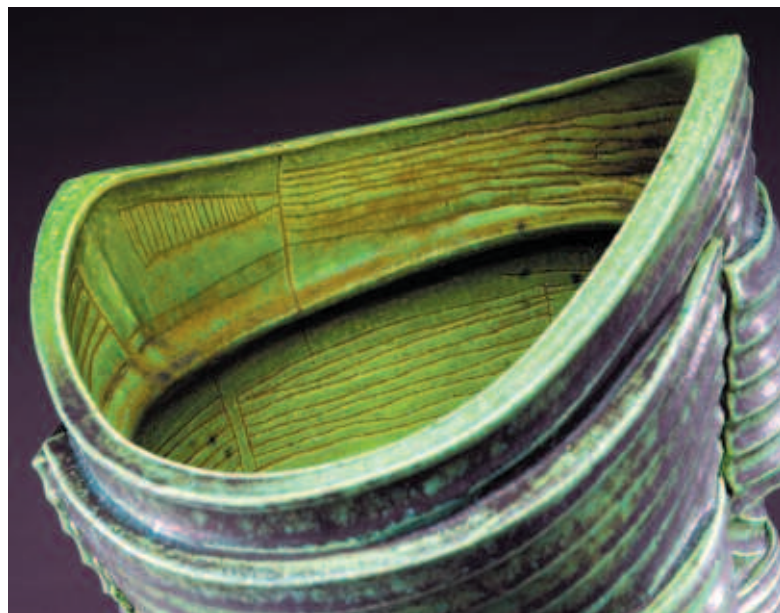
'Conical Construction', 2005, handbuilt stoneware, 32 x 25 cm



'Brindabella Lines', 2007, handbuilt stoneware, 58 x 28 x 26 cm

modality, they belong totally within the ambit of decorative sculpture. The legs and handles manifest very clearly Esson's personal philosophy of strength, balance and support, and are representative of the work that she was making at this time.

In *Double Talk* we see the same decorative curling legs, but by this time Esson had developed the green glaze and the markings on the body of the work which were to become the hallmark look of her pieces from that time, until the present. In this work we see two vessel forms which are initially separate, but which support each other and become as one. We also see the begin-



'Jagungal Series', 2007, rim closeup

ning of the surface markings which later take on a new and unique form.

It becomes evident, even in these two works, that Esson works within a tradition. However, she takes the tradition and makes it her own; she also takes it further than when she found it. And this summarizes her attitude to "tradition" which she sees not as something to be followed, but takes the individual elements of tradition and changes them, while at the same time taking them into new and unexplored fields of discovery.

There are many layers to Esson's work. Her ongoing fascination with landscape, both the Scottish and the Australian, found expression in a solo exhibition titled "Boundaries" (1999) at Mura Clay Gallery in Sydney, which saw the inception of her green coloured works. The green symbolizes the colour of the landscape, but it later began also to stand for the colour of the verdigris surfaces of ancient metal objects. Her father had been a fighter pilot during the World War II, and on returning to Tumbarumba he founded the local Gliding Club. Consequently, she spent many hours in a glider with her father, becoming familiar with the local landscape from a totally different perspective. She says that were she to see that landscape from above these days, she would still recognize it, as she had become so familiar with it during her years of gliding. She saw the boundary fences, the natural contours of the terrain, the homesteads and the marks and tracks that people leave on the landscape. These boundaries, sometimes real and sometimes abstracted into imagined shapes and signs, were the subject matter of her "Boundaries" exhibition.

She developed this further in a subsequent exhibition titled "Buckets and Boundaries", also at Mura Clay Gallery, and which was also presented at the Switchback Galley at Monash University in Melbourne. When we think of buckets today, we probably picture those ubiquitous vessels found in every household, made of either plastic or metal and of a fairly traditional shape. Buckets throughout history, however, have had varied shapes and functions. The first requirement for a bucket today is that it should be totally functional. But for Esson a bucket is much more. Her buckets are not about function, but rather are about form, and relate totally to a

Detail of 'Brindabella Lines'

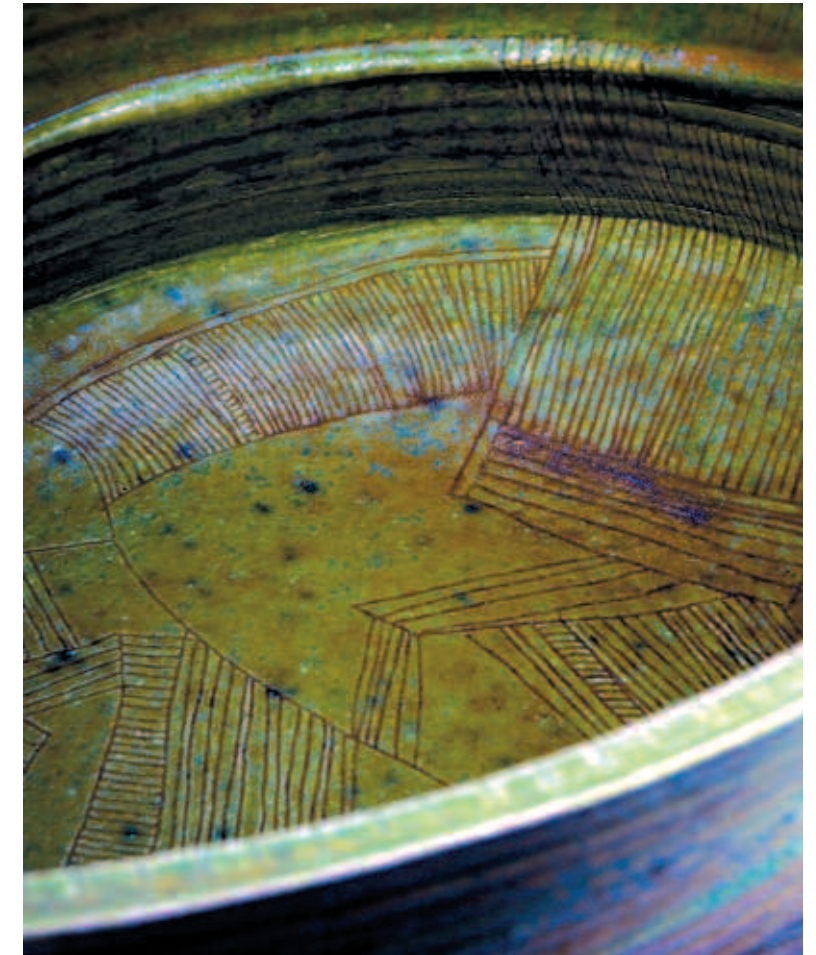


'Tumbarumba Series', 2005, average height 90 cm

statement by Peter Dormer, who wrote in his book *The Art of the Maker* in 1994: 'Function is the subject matter, not the purpose; the purpose is art'.¹ This was the statement about which Esson conceived and developed her Master of Arts thesis which was conferred in 2004. Consequently, in the four years leading up to the submission of her thesis, her work was mostly concerned with the idea of the bucket. The bucket assumed many forms and implied both narrative and concepts. In the piece titled *Unbounded by Time* (1999), a wide-mouthed vase form supported on three curly legs, she began to develop the idea that the interior of the work had a significance which added considerably to the narrative of the finished piece. The landscapes of both Australia and Scotland, their current appearance, their evidence of past human habitation, and their sensed spirituality, provided her with the inspiration and impetus to proceed. She found continuing inspiration in the marks left by people from an earlier time, the erosion and decay that nature and time leave to tell their own history or to imply their real and imagined narratives.

During this period she moved both home and studio, and found that the larger premises led to a scaling-up of the size of works. The new facilities allowed her to explore space in terms of the piece being an object in space and also explore the hollow space within the form. 'It is through my deliberate piercing of these objects that they lose any ability to be functional. Their success or failure relies entirely on their aesthetic quality, which the original bucket never possessed. My work examines the sculptural power that is dependent upon the volumes enclosed. Buckets are still containers for ideas. They invite inside/outside exploration, and the empty interior has become an additional exciting feature to acknowledge. The elements of form, base and rim are the components that I deconstruct and reconstruct. I am spurred on by this new work which I see as being somewhat alienated from the original buckets which inspired them. Christopher Frayling states: "There's no point in deconstructing something unless you reconstruct it, and that becomes magic".²

In this context, we are provided with a text and reference for examining specific works. *Coppabella Lines*, for 'Brindabella Lines', 2007, handbuilt stoneware, 58 x 28 x 26 cm



Interior detail of 'Towong Tank'





'Coppabella Lines', 2007, handbuilt stoneware, 69 x 38 x 32 cm. Detail below



example, is a bucket made entirely from curved sheets of galvanized iron. Because of the seeming lack of precision in applying and fixing the sheets, this piece represents a water tank that has been ravaged by wind and storm, and brings to mind derelict tanks which seem to litter many old farms and country houses. Whereas *Corrugated Bucket 05*, which won the 2005 Gold Coast Ceramic Art Award, is a more ambitious work. Like most of the works of this period, it features a complex application of glazes that gives the exterior surface a verdigris patina while the interior has been deliberately overfired to make the glazes run, thus giving it a rusty-yellow aged look. Esson decorates much of the surface area with her thumb as she assembles the piece.

As in previous works, the idea of support and balance is continued here as, seemingly, two pieces become as one. One of the pieces suggests the corrugated iron tanks which she knew as a child on a farm, and the whole work suggests the landscape which she may have gazed down upon while gliding with her father.

In *Corrugated Skuttle 05*, Esson brings together the elements of corrugated iron and green landscapes, while *Tintaldra Lines 05* features these same elements combined with a fence-like rim which adds another rural aspect to the work. She continues the theme of balance and support in *The Restraint of Function 05*, where we see two works, both of which consists of two separate pieces, each one unable to stand without the support of the other. The surface treatment of these works places them wholly within this period. *Conical Construction 05* also consists of two pieces, each dependent on the other for the ability to stand.

In the grouped *Tumbarumba Series* Esson introduces a change of colour, here using a beautiful sky blue which once again refers back to the period of gliding. In all the pieces from this series, she makes the joining of the various slab-built and coiled component a feature of the finished work. Whereas most handbuilt forms attempt to conceal the join marks, here they become very evident, adding to the narrative of the final piece.

Highly respected as a teacher and lecturer, Esson began her teaching career in visual art at the Kambala Girls School in Sydney, where she established the Ceramics and Sculpture Department and has gone on to lecture at a number of tertiary institutions in Australia. Her overseas appointments include that of visiting lecturer in ceramics at colleges in Scotland and China. Her work has been included in numerous group exhibitions in Australia and overseas, including "COLLECT" at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London in 2005, and she has had many solo shows. Her works are held in a number of major public collections in Germany and Australia, including the National Gallery in Canberra and the Western Australian Art Gallery in Perth. She also has work in numerous private collections overseas, and has been published in several publications both in Australia and internationally.

Merran Esson has always enjoyed, valued and learned from "received" tradition and, as a teacher, guides her students towards finding their own individual mode of expression. She has wondered about her own work, and how it will be seen and appreciated in the future. There is every indication that she will remain one of the Australia's most important ceramists.

Gordon Foulds

Merran Esson is represented in Sydney by Stella Downer Fine Art; in Germany by Gallerie Rosenhauer; and in Hong Kong by Gaffer Studio Glass Gallery.

1. Peter Dornier. *The Art of the Maker*. Thames and Hudson, London 1994. p72
2. Christopher Frayling. *5 Themes*: Eduardo Paolozzi, 1988