

Of Clay and Spirits

Peter Thompson - an appreciation

Peter Thompson is possessed of an expressive creative spirit. Gifted with an enquiring mind and a multitude of talents, he has spent his life polishing his ceramic craft into an exquisite fine art.

Born in 1945, Thompson grew up in Earlwood, a suburb of cosmopolitan Sydney. From his earliest years he was inspired and fascinated by the multitude of cultures that made up his neighbourhood. In 1965 he completed his apprenticeship as a shipwright/boatbuilder, which provided him with the skills to work with diverse materials and designs, and imbued him with a deep understanding of the aesthetics of *the fair line*. The time he spent at sea, working as a journeyman shipwright, influenced his life and work; his love of the ocean, its legends and myths, being recurring themes in his pots. There is contemplative simplicity and the occasional witty irreverence in his work. Importantly, the notion that vessels (whether nautical or ceramic) have an identity, has been a central characteristic of Thompson's mythology.

In 1975, amidst the tropical rainforest and alternative culture of Far North Queensland, Thompson built himself a superbly simple house and pottery studio which he named 'Five Treasures Workshop', in homage to the Oriental concept of the 5 elements: earth, water, air, fire and wood, which represent the essences of pottery. Thompson's intimate and knowing connection with the elements and his love and respect for Nature are prominent in all aspects of his life. He has always lived a humble existence, so as not to distract from the venture to perfect his art and to lead a happy life.

Peter Thompson's creative pursuit in ceramics was, like so many Western potters, guided by the European/Oriental influences of Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada. He was initially taught the basics of clay and the potter's wheel by Ray Harrison in Cairns. Then, once he was sure that making pottery was to be his life's work, he embarked upon formal academic studies in his chosen field. In 1989, a Diploma in Ceramic Arts Research at the National Art School in Sydney, furthered his technical interest and love of experimentation in all aspects of ceramic work. He then completed a Graduate Diploma in Visual Arts at Monash University, a valuable experience which widened his exposure to contemporary three-dimensional art practice in Australia, and developed the

interest and expertise in wood-fired stoneware ceramics which has evolved and matured during three decades to the present time. Thompson now acknowledged as one of Australia's leading wood firing practitioners. In 1995 he studied at Nanjing University and was awarded an Honours Degree in Chinese Fine Arts. During these studies he was afforded access to a veritable treasure trove of the ancient ceramic art of China - where the technique of high fired porcelain was first invented over three thousand years ago.

Peter Thompson's exceptional ability as a ceramic artist has been nurtured during the many artist-in-residence programs he has been invited to participate in, both in Australia and overseas. In particular, his experience with Dennis Parks at Tuscarora in Nevada, USA, exposed him to Abstract Expressionism in the ceramic medium. This involved free-flowing '*in the moment*' construction, including daring alterations such as spontaneous pokes, squeezes or slashes to the plastic clay body, with the occasional addition of *grass script* calligraphy, offering words of ancient wisdom or profanities. Thompson has truly mastered the difficult art of rendering classical and contemporary influences into his trademark blend of artistic expression. With eloquent abstractions of form and line, and themes based on both Occidental and Oriental historical roots, his profound understanding of the foundations of classical ceramic art is seamlessly matched with the liberties and spontaneity that is at the heart of modern artistic expressionism.

Thompson the artist is also a *barefoot* philosopher, a passionate scholar, and a witty social commentator, not shy to confront and amuse, or make one pause, in contemplation. His large, airy studio is a treasure trove which includes a vast library of clay, glaze, kiln- building and ceramic reference literature and a host of paraphernalia associated with his many other interests. The studio walls feature quotes and *bon mots* from the Bard of Avon, classical oriental scholars and poets, and many of his own flashes of wit; *a positive attitude invites good fortune* occupies a prominent place on a workshop wall. The gestural marks or glyphs on his pots are based on ancient Mesopotamian cuneiform and Chinese Oracle bone script. His domestic trade goods sport slogans and irreverent text. The script often contains spelling errors or a significant twists from the original meaning, However, one suspects it is yet another clever device in Thompson's artistic treasury; he is a philosophical, thinking persons' potter with a thoughtful message. Thompson's practice and his approach to the act of making are intuitive, relaxed and rely on spontaneous action and empirical knowledge. He describes it as *inspired clumsiness*.

The genius of Peter Thompson's art is that all of his pieces are unique and each one speaks for itself. The sophisticated interplay of surface and form lends many *faces* to the work; it brings them alive. The ease of his well-practiced craftsmanship and beautiful, subtle forms are indicative of his ability to encourage accidental effects throughout the making process. Such 'happy accidents' enhance the beauty, as well as lending aesthetic depth to his work. These gems are the result of a complete hands-on

approach, plus decades of dedication, experimentation and a personal penchant to constantly refine. From the act of design to processing the clay in huge tubs, formulating and making the glazes, firing his large owner-built *Anagama* kiln for 75 hours, (an exercise that consumes five tonnes of salvaged wood), each ingredient, coupled with the work's position in the kiln magically contributes to the final work.

Throughout the complex process, like an ancient alchemist, Peter Thompson imbues his works with light, and a spirit that makes them unique, timeless and beautiful.

Theo Utzinger