



Owen Rye has been studying, practising, teaching and writing about ceramic art for 40 years. His contributions to the field are well documented: the list of publications, conference presentations and exhibitions spans seven pages in his curriculum vitae. He is a well-known leader in the woodfire movement in Australia and overseas, and his interest in all things involving clay and fire has made him a valued teacher across the broad spectrum of ceramics. He will retire from Monash University at the end of 2003 to focus on his studio work at Boolarra South in Gippsland, Victoria. It seems an appropriate stage for some reconnaissance, exploring the nuances of his new anagama kiln, and seeking new ideas and directions. His 2003 exhibition at the Ceramic Art Gallery in Sydney confirms he is doing just that.

Rye is an intriguing character with an equally intriguing history, demonstrating his capacity to succeed at whatever he sets his mind to. Born in the Snowy Mountains of NSW in 1944, he studied industrial arts at the University of New South Wales during the 1960s and was introduced to ceramics by Ivan McMeekin. He went on to complete a PhD in 1970, developing porcelain clay bodies from Australian materials at a time when no such bodies were commercially available. Contemporary students accustomed to buying bags of ready-made porcelain would do well to consider the significance of this research.



Academic opportunities coupled with his interest in ceramics led Rye overseas and into the world of archaeology. Funded by the Smithsonian Institute, he studied traditional potters and glassmakers of Pakistan and Israel, and later wrote a book on ceramics for archaeologists. Though he has no formal academic training in archaeology, his contributions were nonetheless outstanding, earning him a Ceramic Studies Award from the Society for American Archaeology. His monograph, *Traditional Pottery Techniques of Pakistan* (co-authored with Clifford Evans) was cited in 2000 as 'an unsurpassed model of ethnographic description and scientific investigation', and his book *Pottery Technology: Principles and Reconstruction*, as 'a classic, regularly used in archaeological ceramic classes throughout the country (USA) today'.<sup>1</sup>

Rye worked in the Department of Prehistory (Institute of Advanced Studies) at the Australian National University, then taught ceramics at Canberra School of Art before becoming a lecturer in the School of Visual Arts, Gippsland Institute of Advanced Education, in Churchill, Victoria, in 1985. Seven years later, the Gippsland Institute was incorporated into Monash University. As Senior Lecturer and Head of

Ceramics Studio, he was responsible for an innovative and influential distance education model of postgraduate ceramics courses.

Rye has been described as 'an adventurer in the world of anagama' <sup>2</sup> and 'a seasoned risk-taker'. <sup>3</sup> Norman Creighton once humorously noted Rye was reputedly, but mistakenly, 'an old, white-haired and doddering scientist.'<sup>4</sup> These descriptions serve to emphasise Rye's curiosity, his playful yet seriously inquiring approach to materials and process and his insistence on finding an individual way within or beyond ceramic tradition.



In Western countries like Australia, the cultural baggage that comes with anagama firing and kilns can prove overwhelming and aesthetically limiting, leading to work that seems out of kilter with both its Japanese birthplace and adopted homeland. Rye's work, in contrast, is identifiably Australian and uniquely his own. It has evolved in Australia, through his trial-and-error approach to learning the process. He never trained in Japan and cites no Japanese potter or style responsible for his development. He values the friendship of New Zealand/Australian woodfirer Chester Nealie, and acknowledges the influence of Alan Peascod's concepts of multi-layered surfaces. Rye also shares with Peascod an interest in Middle East ceramics.

Rye's choice of anagama may seem odd, set against his archaeological background in Pakistan and Palestinian territory. But it is fire itself that intrigues him. An anagama is simply a tunnel-shaped fire chamber dug into the ground or built upon it. The concept has been adapted by contemporary potters in many countries. The kiln's name relates to its Japanese origin, but he successfully has separated the kiln's cultural history from the aesthetics of his work.

Rye's own writing reveals his approach to the vessel form. 'The best forms derive from a mixture of intent and accident. I look for qualities of form which proclaim the fluidity of clay, the softness derived from a somewhat erratic movement, slowed down and frozen'. <sup>5</sup>

His forms are robust and forthright, yet with a softness and subtlety that suits the firing process as well as his aesthetic. Surfaces don't just sit well on his pots; they manipulate the forms through effects of fire, accumulated glaze and ash, and post-firing treatment such as sandblasting. Many reviewers have focused on the imagery of these complex surfaces.

The pots have 'an aged and ancient appearance as though they might have been lying under the ocean, encrusted with barnacles, for thousands of years.'<sup>6</sup> 'Rounded craters as from a photograph of the moon sit beside jagged scars where the fusion has glued pot to pots and the action of smashing them apart permanently grafts a piece of one to the whole of another.'<sup>7</sup> Rye often titles his pots with descriptive post-firing interpretations. But the work is highly abstract, generated from the development process

itself rather than literal references to landscape or natural objects. Balancing the known and the unknown, intention and accident, is fundamental to what Rye terms 'the art of uncertainty'.

As a scientist, he investigates the questions of why and how and aims for an understanding of the process. He values technical knowledge and sees no virtue in ignorance. At the same time, the complexities of anagama mean a particular firing can never be repeated, so one needs to accept variation as inevitable, along with a certain amount of mystery in results that cannot be fully explained. Rye's approach involves a continuous learning process and, interestingly, his acceptance of an advanced state of being lost. 'Is it really necessary to think about where you are going?' he asks, maintaining there is a fundamental difference 'between the frightened lost who search urgently and the delighted lost who hum and smile and anticipate the surprises over the next hill'.<sup>8</sup>

Rye's style has developed from deliberate questioning of what he was taught, consciously working out his own answers to questions of what is clay and what does he want from it. This determination to find his own way, to avoid copying or mimicry even at the habitual or unconscious level, is evident in the integrity of his work. Borrowing a phrase from Robert Hughes, it seems accurate to describe Rye as one of 'those stubborn talents to whom the lyrical and the private are more likely to be of value than the collective.'<sup>9</sup> Rye confounds those who attempt to pigeonhole or classify him. He is familiar with contemporary art theory but finds much of it at odds with his intuitive approach to work.



His sense of adventure, risk-taking, curiosity and insistent independence are now leading him in a different artistic direction: wire sculpture, and incorporating materials that are not necessarily ceramic. It is a bold new world for him, but perhaps not a surprising change for someone who has already moved from industrial design to archaeology, archaeology to anagama vessel maker.

Says Rye: 'If you are just doing the same thing over and over again you are not doing much for anybody. You are producing something standardised like Coca-Cola. It is in that category, and about as interesting. It doesn't matter what you're doing, you should keep on trying to advance the thing. You don't say 'that experiment has worked so I'll go on doing it for the rest of my life.'

The sculptural work has been developing over a few years, and even harks back to some experiments with metal during his student days. But it has only recently been exhibited publicly. The Reconnaissance work marks a critical point in Rye's development, featuring his more familiar anagama vessels as well as the new wire sculpture.

It all began, apparently, while wandering through the paddocks with Chester Nealie. Rye picked up an old piece of wire and marvelled at the naturalness of its twisted form. The next step was to begin adding

other old metallic objects. The first attempts at these sculptures were wire and metal compositions anchored to rigid ceramic bases. But the bases later became integral parts of the sculptures and in many cases ceased to be ceramic, offering new options of textures and surfaces. As familiarity with the media developed, the scale of the work began to expand. Unhindered by the physical limitations of clay and kiln capacity, there is the potential for some large-scale work to come. These wire pieces move; they sway, they dance, there is a dynamic balance to their composition. Rye is working abstractly, though intuitively, playfully doodling with wire 'lines' in three dimensions. The fluidity of the anagama vessels remains, but the movements, though still somewhat erratic, are no longer frozen.

There is lightness, freedom and spontaneity in this work, and also the absurd touches of humour, such as the gesture of a flattened eggbeater seemingly floating in the air. An apparent dilemma is how to anchor the wire forms to the earth, or whether anchoring is required at all. Many pieces exhibit a delicate balance of weightier objects connected by wire, where the bases have begun to lift off the ground. Some have even begun to tap-dance on the table. Having watched the evolution of this work, I wonder how long it will be before they sprout wings and fly.

The movement and balance of these wire sculptures invoke comparisons with the mobiles of American sculptor Alexander Calder, although Rye's preference for old twisted wire ensures his lines are more rustic and his forms more rugged. Rye has noted his admiration for the work of Japanese painter and sculptor Sadamasa Motonaga whose line drawings and wire sculptures, like Calder's, have a Miró-like quality. Acknowledgement of shared concepts rather than specific cultural influences are the key issues here.

A potter's move into ceramic sculpture is nothing unusual but Rye's choice to work in media other than clay raises some interesting questions. Has this master of clay and fire discovered that ceramics is not a suitable medium for his sculptural ideas? Can he forsake clay at this stage of his career for a new future in wire, wood, polystyrene and whatever material takes his fancy? This move is bound to cause some consternation in the ceramic world. On the other hand, Rye is unlikely to embrace the academic art theory of contemporary sculpture which he has found so foreign to his ceramics. A new Rye-styled aesthetic is emerging, still intuitive but less process-based than his anagama 'art of uncertainty'. He is exploring dynamic balance, three-dimensional interaction of line and form, the relationship of space to substance and the natural behaviour of materials.

The major shift in style at this stage of his career makes Rye even more difficult to pigeonhole. Perhaps that is his intent to further confound his audience as he goes about working in his own way. There is a refreshing energy in his willingness, or perhaps need, to experiment and change. He clearly delights in this advanced state of being lost, always curious about what is to be found across the hill.

As he approaches retirement from teaching, there are many who would mourn this end of an era in ceramic education but Owen Rye sees value in deliberately moving on, having created a mystique. It seems the same attitude prevails in his studio work, and we will be moved, provoked, confounded and delighted for some time to come.

References

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