

TITLE: The Function of Art, The Art of Function

SUBTITLE: Euan Craig and the aesthetics of sharing

Sometimes we feel very much alone. When I was young and the expectations and pressures of the world around me became more than I could bear, I would walk into the night and the mountains of trailings left in the Great Gold Mountain of Bendigo. Sitting alone on the heaps of mining refuse in the darkness, I felt embraced by it. The cool breeze would run its fingers through my hair and the pale moon rising over the far horizon would illuminate the world with its soft amber light. There is no judgement in nature, only acceptance. My loneliness would drain away and, more than any other waking moment, I felt like I belonged.

Since then I have striven to understand my place in this world, constantly seeking reasons for the life we live, not just excuses. So many preconceptions are forced upon us, and it is difficult to differentiate between those things which are real and those which are prejudices taught to us which we then accept as real. I have come to realise that there are many things which we are taught to accept as absolute truths which are, in fact, nothing more than arbitrary customs. It is these customs which separate us one from another, when in fact we share more in common than we realise.

By its very nature the universe is beautiful, its matter constantly rearranging itself into forms that find balance and harmony within the forces at work upon them through the course of time. It is a beauty born of constant striving for an ideal form, infinitely variable solutions to the changing conditions of the environment. For this brief time, the matter of the universe has found form in us, and within us a consciousness that is capable of abstract thought and, through experience and observation, can be aware of the beauty of nature. We are the universe made self conscious.

It is not surprising, therefore, to find that we humans share a common understanding of beauty. All people, regardless of race, creed or custom, can gaze at a sunset, for example, and be moved by it. There is a basic awareness of our ~~##selves##~~ in nature which forms our foundation as humans and transcends language and culture. It is an intuitive response to the environment of which we form an integral part. It is our nature.

We are, however, each blessed with a unique perspective of the universe. Our personal journey, every moment of every day of our lives, our perception of the world of sight, sound, taste, touch and smell, provides us with an understanding of life and beauty which is ours alone. No other consciousness has ever seen this moment as we have, nor felt these sensations, nor thought these same thoughts.

Giving a new form to that understanding, communicating our unique view of the world, enriches not only our own lives but the lives of others. It helps us to find meaning in our existence and to add to the cultural heritage of humanity, helping others in their journey for generations after our own journey has finished.

In common clay I have found an amorphous medium of expression which helps me give form to those thoughts. Clay, like all matter, tries to align itself with the forces that surround it: gravity, friction, torque, so many different influences. To that we add the force of consciousness, and wait for the clay to find form in the space between our fingers. There is an immediacy of expression which springs spontaneously from the vessel and can be

understood by the user without the clumsily constructed intermediacy of language. When fired, these expressions of our thoughts are given permanent form – a form that touches the lives of our contemporaries but will also last at least ten thousand years. Just as the works of potters from ages past speak to us of life and the human condition, so too will our works touch the lives of future generations. It is not an endeavour to be undertaken lightly.

As our experience of the world encompasses every waking moment, and quite often our dreams as well, surely the ideal culmination of our act of creation would be for those works to become an integral part of the everyday lives of others. The beauty of nature rediscovered through the guidance of our thoughts and the skill of our hands, touched by the hands of others in their most intimate moments. Seen in a multitude of different lights and contexts throughout the day – lifted gently to their lips, giving them warmth and sustenance, enriching their lives.

I have been blessed with the opportunity to use pots from antiquity, to touch them, feel them, and, on occasion, enjoy nourishment from them. Each vessel I have used has shared a different perspective on life, be it a thousand years old or fresh from the kiln. They all offer a new perspective on this wondrous life, a parallax which helps me to understand myself in this world. To this I add my own understanding, through the medium of clay, becoming part of a great conversation – a conversation that has been going on for hundreds of generations of human experience, which may continue for hundreds of generations to come, and of which we form the fulcrum.

By the work of our hands in the clay, co-operating with the forces of nature, surrendering to them when necessary, we create vessels which reach the souls of others through the touch of their hands, just as we would share our feelings with the ones we love. Above all, it is them for whom we make these works, yet the making of these vessels, this process of creation, is also for the sake of our own growth. I make my pots for the people I love, the making of them is for me.

When we create, it is not for strangers. It is for our beloved, our children, our friends. We strive to share with them this sublime beauty that makes our own lives so rich and fulfilling. We offer humbly to them a vessel which will feed their body and their soul. We also know that there are others, friends and loved ones we have yet to meet, who we may never meet, but whose hands and hearts will be touched by our work. We share our love of life with all of them through our vessels, whether it is today or a hundred years from today, whether they know us or not.

In an ever increasingly artificial world, handcrafted functional pottery provides a dose of real, natural beauty that can help restore the soul. It is a relationship between vessel, food and lifestyle and there is a role that functional ceramics plays as the most intimate of installation art, embellishing the lives of both the maker and the user. It communicates ideas in a form that will be relevant to all people in all cultures. This wholesome beauty offers nourishment for the spirit and a way forward for humanity and a healthy society.

Many years have past since I was alone in the dark, whispering to the wind, longing for someone to share my journey. I have come to understand that we walk this road together, hand in hand. We share this path with a myriad of peers over thousands of years. Our work is an exploration of ourselves in this universe, a conduit of our emotions into the lives of others. I stand on a foundation built in ages past and add to that my own understanding, living in the hope that there will be others who will carry this passion into the future.

It is not a soliloquy, it is a conversation. It serves to help us understand ourselves in this universe and, more importantly, to live rich and fruitful lives, every single day.

That is the function of art. That is the art of function.