CERAMIC EDUCATION AT THE NATIONAL ART SCHOOL, EAST SYDNEY

A Unit of the N.S.W . Institute of the Arts

I have been asked by David to strictly adhere to an 8-10 minute time allocation, so I am not going to address the wide range of ceramic courses offered by T.A.F.E. throughout N.S.W. - except to say that there are Certificate and Associate Diploma courses at selected colleges in metropolitan and rural areas. I am going to limit myself to discussing the Diploma of Arts in Ceramics

offered only at the National Art School, East Sydney.

Early Art Education in Australia was centred at the National Art School, Ea.st Sydney.

It was important in its offering of a wide range of Art courses from Commercial Art to Fine Art and indeed the only centre for Art Education in N.S.W .

Since that time the development of Art Education has produced numerous Art Colleges.

I am not here to bore you with the accolades of the National Art School, East Sydney, but to emphasise the differences between colleges as an important arena for discussion. In this era of government cuts and restraints it will serve us well to emphasise our particular strengths and philosophies.

I see a fundamental difference between the National Art School, East Sydney and other advanced level courses in ceramics -is its philosophical approach. The course deals with ceramics from its history and traditions and goes to the roots of the material, rather than using clay as another medium of fine art expression.

I would like to start with a quote by Marguerite Wildenhain from he Bauhaus, who criticised art education in the Introduction to 1.er book "The Invisible Core" :

"The average art student does not learn that to be a creative craftsman requires a specific and personal way of looking at the world, at life, at his fellow-men, at nature, and also at the future. His mind is never opened up to the fact that. there are some essential ethical and esthetical laws to accept; that the craftsman needs the complete understanding and the mastery of the materials and the processes he is using, old or new, simple or complex. Above everything else, he is never taught that it requires the complete devotion and the intelligence, feeling, and talent of the whole man."

So why go to the National Art School, East Sydney for ceramics?

The question that always comes up when discussing ceramics education, is whether an Art School training is better than an apprenticeship or Training in a Workshop. Both have their place and provide distinct, different and equally valid aspects .

I have had experience of both, in Australia and overseas.

In my opinion, the most obvious advantages of the Art School are:

1. A wide variety of teachers who are professional artists ·in their fields, and who have different skills and points of view;
2. Teaching resources, including libraries of books, films, videos, and examples of historical and contemporary work;
3. Close association with other areas of art, such as sculpture, painting and printmaking, with the benefit of a cross fertilisation of ideas;
4. Access to galleries;
5. Field trips and excursions; and most importantly
6. Time and encouragement -for innovation.

An apprentice in a workshop, on the other hand, will enjoy the advantages of:

1. Involvement in a production situation;

1. The rhythm and discipline of a daily routine; .
2. An appreciation of the hard reality of living and working as

a ceramic artist; and

1. Experience gained at someone else's expense.

The good news, is that the Diploma at the National Art School, East Sydney, combines the advantages of both the Workshop and the Art School.

Essentially, the Diploma course is studio based with extensive training in the practice and technology of ceramic art, as well as providing a comprehensive theoretical background and understanding of ceramics and art both historically and culturally. The student is encouraged in innovation and experimentation and in developing a personal vision and style. Because of the other art faculties at the College the student has access to a diversity of ideas and expression.

In essence, therefore, this environment offers students a choice of developing a ceramics career in either a contemporary or traditional field.

As I said before, the course deals with the History and Tradition of ceramics and goes to the roots of the material, rather than using clay as just another medium in the Fine Art movement.

The process and creative aspect are equally important. The course has three major components.

These are:

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| 1. | Art Foundation including: | Drawing, Design, History and |
|  | Visual Arts Theory. |  |
| 2. | Technology and Practice. |  |
| 3. | Creative Development. |  |

In the first component, in learning of the foundations. of art, the ceramics students join fine art students in discussion art: debate. The aim of this dialogue is to break down the barrier which still exist between potters and painters - Renaissance notions about the hierarchies in art as put forward by art theoreticians like Joshua Reynolds in the 19th Century.

The strong technological and practical nature of the second component of the course provides students with a foundation of the practice and discipline of a career as a ·ceramic artist. Here the workshop ideas are emphasised. During the first two years students make pieces in multiples up to one hundred depending on their complexity. This aspect has the intention developing a mastery over materials and processes. However, unlike the workshop where function is the primary concern, students are encouraged to consider the object in the light of artistic intention. A piece may have the outward appearance of a tea-pot or the elements of a jug, but unlike the tired workshop product, has the character and spirit coming from a background aesthetics and artistic intent.

In their technical and practical education the students begin master the wheel and the use of moulds and other methods of production. They build and fire complex kilns with fuels rang from electricity and gas to wood. Through the intense study the chemistry of clay and glazes, students are able to analyse firing results and devise testing strategies to improve clay glaze qualities, aiming to use these intuitively as a palette surfaces and colours.

ln the third component, undertaken in the final year, students really come to grips with creative expression in ceramics. The produce a body or work which shows a commitment to an individua approach and style.

The work must demonstrate a thorough mastery of the technical aspects of ceramics and a fluent expression as an educated artist.

In summary, again I say in this day and age of prolific art education, and in an arena of rationalisation and specialisation it is important for a college to maintain its specific identity so that students continue to have a choice.

In my opinion, this course is significantly different to other advanced level courses and the best and most comprehensive grounding in ceramic art education, giving the student an understanding that learning and enquiry is a life-long process

Thank you.

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