"ON THE CARE, PREPARATION AND CONSUMPTION OF HUMBLE PIE"

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When I decided to study pottery, I asked a friend who was an established Ceramicist and Sculptor to recommend a course. Her reply, was:

"You can either go to Institute X and collect feathers and bottle-tops to press into clay and so express yourself in your chosen medium - or - you can to to East Sydney Tech and learn how to make tea pots."

For me there was no choice. As a former Restaurateur I had ultimately serviced an apprenticeship in that field and had learnt the importance of learning the crafts of cooking, waiting and wine tasting. I also came from a family in which my father was a master mariner and boat­ builder, my mother a florist and had been brought up with the ideas of developing a skill through repetition and the practised hand.

There was another reason for choosing E.S.T.C. which was as fundamental to my choice of study as to commencing the course in the first place: LUCIE RIE.

I had become a great admirer of this potter's work; the union of craft and art that produced a quality I hold in the highest regard: beauty.

Beauty in art is not really all that fashionable nowadays. Critics tend to feel more anxious than reassured by its presence as ultimately it paralyses the analytic faculty. Be that as it may, as a collector and enthusiast 'I had been profoundly touched by her work, and, to be candid, wanted nothing more than to make work like hers. Besides, Lucie Rie made tea pots.

At East Sydney Tech there were wheels like Lucie Rie used as well as electric kilns. But there were also gas kilns that produced Reducing atmospheres and things called BOUREE BOX and ANAGAMA and double chamber wood kilns.

Some of these kilns were so primitive that they required hours and hours of firing using relays of "FIREES" in what was clearly a hazardous, time consuming - if not futile - effort.

Wood kilns produced all manner of brown pots that occasionally flashed, ash-dribbled or BIZEN marked that caused my teachers like Roswitha Wulff and Bill Samuels to assume far off and distant looks in their eyes and coo like pigeons.

As if this wood firing thing wasn't bad enough we had teachers like Steve Harrison droning-on about - wait for it - digging your own clay

....... composing glazes from crushed up rocks and ash swept-up from after the firing ???

With unusual generosity of spirit I undertook these parts of the course ostensibly with enthusiasm but secretly with incredulity. Why did they make it so difficult for themselves? A question I may have asked but not with much time to contemplate because of the break-neck speed of stoneware, RAKU, MAJOLICA, LUSTRE, SLIP-CASTING, JIGGER­ JOLLEY, HAND BUILDING, THROWING, HUMPING, FLOPING into

which I had been thrown.

As I pursued these projects I became aware that pottery was not tangential to my former profession, it was actually a continuation.

Both cooking and clay have their origins in application of heat, a chemical change, the taking of raw produce and its transformation.

The kitchen is divided into the savoury and the sweet. The former, like creating with clay, is its fullest expression. The sweet kitchen with its exactitudes and demands of proportions, equals the glaze. Ratio's of butter, flour and sugar are the fluxes, stabilizers and glass formers of cuisine. You glaze a tart.

The processes of sauté, roast and braise all equate to the Raku, midrange and stoneware of clay. You wedge clay as you kneed dough. Sieves, colanders and grinders all occur in the kitchen and the pottery.

Pottery was first used to cook food, to store it and eat from it. Pottery and cookery are the most ancient crafts still practised in our modern world.

The more I realised the parallel, the more I found myself doing as I had with food, searching for its heart. I had even gone so far as to develop an interest in the blushes and dribbles of wood-firing- not on its own terms - but out of a fascination to find out what they all saw in it; so much so that I nominated wood-firing for my final year.

Halfway through this third year I was experiencing great frustration with the clay I was using: it was too refined, lacking in vitality. I remembered that six months before I had dug some clay from a friends property in Goulburn N.S.W. I tested the clay: it fired to stoneware from the different clays I composed glazes that resulted in wonderful colours and body and glaze integration.

Although I finished the course, I still haven't gotten to the bottom of where those colours and qualities come from. And where am I now?

I find myself carefully collecting my white and brown and red clays, digging it, slating it down, drying it out: making clay while the sun shines. I have a big wood kiln and find myself spending long nights putting logs into a firebox in anticipation of a blush, a dribble or a flash. I spend this time thinking that there must be an easier way, but it doesn't get the results or produce the qualities I now hold so dear.

As for Lucie Rie, I regard her work all the more highly. I no longer want to make pots of that style or form, but I do aspire to the beauty. I also know that the realisation in itself I could not have arrived at, without a foundation of craft, and a working through of the traditions of pottery that the course at East Sydney Tech allowed.