

Material Evidence

The *material qualities* of an object are what we experience when we directly interact with it using our physical senses of sight, touch, smell and hearing. The *material qualities* of a ceramic work include its size and colour, its weight or heft in the hand, whether it is rough or smooth, its shape and balance. Experience of these material qualities is the fundamental way of 'knowing' the piece. This kind of experience is what underpins our non-verbal (bodily) response to objects.

Our material world surrounds and strongly influences our everyday lives whether we are aware of it or not. Most of us spend much of our lives in urban areas where our daily environment and artefacts consist predominantly of manufactured and constructed materials, many of which have smooth or shiny surfaces and straight lines. When we visit natural places we have a chance to experience all the complex richness and messiness of the processes of nature. This can connect us with our primal relationship to the natural world and evoke time scales of tens of thousands to millions of years. Some ceramic works offer a way of connecting to this larger scale of nature and time in a way that provokes an affective (physical and emotional) response. This response does not necessarily translate accurately into verbal language.

Affective response forms the basis for a non-verbal poetic language that touches us as we are touching it, hearing it, sensing it, breathing it, and feeling it. The grain exposed in an old piece of timber. The variation in colour and line and form of a stone lying in the bush. The rough bark falling off a tree and exposing a myriad of new colours and smoothness. The decaying corrugated iron of a shed rusting and patinating from many rainfalls producing a variegated and fascinatingly rich surface. The beach pebbles and chunks of glass on a shoreline that have been washed wondrously smooth by the sea. These objects and our associated responses are material evidence of a primal link between us and nature.

Our responses to this poetic material world are interesting and significant from another perspective too. They can help us to 'notice what we notice'. It is a way of bringing affectively derived attention into the conscious mind for consideration. This process is more complex than merely coming to a conclusion about liking or not liking an object. Noticing what one notices is one way of exploring the world of objects, forms, textures and colours, leading to perception of detail and subtlety and thereby unpacking deeper levels of meaning.

Relationships between objects seem to emerge. A detail of one object can evoke a memory of, or link to another object for no clear reason at first. Over time and with further attention these links and relationships can become clearer and can act as a foundation for creative insight and making.

In painting, a painter notices and tries to capture a landscape, a mood, a subtle softness, a hard edge, a mysterious quality. In ceramics there is the possibility of expressing these qualities, and because of its inherent nature, clay also offers tactility, touch, the actual feeling of weight and mass. It is uniquely placed to portray roughness and smoothness, to respond to the way light falls on a textured surface at different times of day. Spaces between ceramic objects offer multiple, complex and different relationships. A hole may invite a way through to another world. Tension, harmony and contrast between pieces can arise when seen from different viewpoints. Sometimes this three dimensional 'space between' is as important as the objects themselves.

24



24

Queen Series by Sandy Lockwood



25

25

Buried Axe by Sandy Lockwood

Clay is an incredibly responsive material. It has a unique ability to respond to touch from our hands. Tools are often not necessary in manipulating it into objects. When I throw, stretch, roll and push clay it responds directly and intimately and sometimes suggests what the next move might be. Making, for me is a kind of conversation with clay. Much of what I do arises from the direct interaction between my body and the material. I have come to notice subtle nuances and suggestions that can lead in unexpected directions. My work is material evidence of these conversations.

To this making process I bring my attraction to and engagement with forms, textures and colours found in weathered and worn objects and in nature. Some questions that have arisen for me have been, "Why am I so drawn to surfaces that show the action of time? How do these responses relate to the surfaces I produce when I am working with and firing clay? Is woodfiring and salt glazing a form of weathering? Do its results relate to the weathering of ancient objects?"

In Britain, whilst growing up, I had many opportunities to experience old sites such as Tintagel of King Arthur's Castle fame and Stonehenge. Wandering around these massive ruins it was possible to imagine past lives being lived. Spaces between the structures and window openings allowed the possibility of seeing through to another world. Detail, texture, shape and colour were all noticed. Stone ruins have such an ancient and a simultaneously living presence. Old monuments, timeless stone walls, old and weathered objects in visits to museums in the UK had a profound effect. My siblings and I played a game when I was young that enhanced my involvement with the natural world. When wandering in the forests in England my mother would







28

27

Metamorphosis Series by Sandy Lockwood

28

Queen Series by Sandy Lockwood



29

29

Axe Series by Sandy Lockwood

“ I learned this way of ‘seeing’, of ‘being’ in my childhood. This developed and helped me become aware of my affective responses.

send us on searches for such things as a smooth shiny leaf, a forked stick, a round pebble. We were noticing the detail of the environment we were in. I learned this way of ‘seeing’, of ‘being’ in my childhood. This developed and helped me become aware of my affective responses. I began to ‘notice what I noticed’ making a connection between experience, feelings and my developing attention.

As an adult, subsequent travels in Japan and Europe similarly offered old and weathered surfaces of stone, wood, earth and pots that had a natural patinated beauty and a timeless quality. They speak to me of something beyond the immediate, something of past peoples, and they echo humanity.

These experiences combined with my curiosity about woodfiring and weathering have led me to undertake research on artefacts from the Neolithic period (approximately 5,000 years ago) in Great Britain. After being made, used, lost, discarded, buried by earth, peat or water, subjected to wind and rain, these artefacts show the result of processes that add to their affective impact and visual complexity.

In woodfiring pieces are often buried in ember, crack, are pitted, show dribbles of ash and colour changes. Recovering my pieces from some parts of the kiln is not unlike an archaeological process. In the kiln it is heat more than time that does the work of weathering. These complex results are variable, unpredictable and serendipitous. Much of the outcome of making and firing arises from forces that are not entirely controllable. I can only judge later if they have something to say. Natural weathering processes are also unpredictable in the way they work on objects. It is this complexity and powerful evocation that I seek in making my recent work.

My pieces contain references to history, archaeology, entropy and the passage of long periods of time. Ancient artefacts tell a story of skilled hands, lives lived, time, weathering and imagined human activity. This is powerfully illustrated by Neolithic pots showing actual finger and nail imprints of the maker and evidence of grain residue. Likewise highly polished stone tools with holes bored in them by using a stick and sand. The objects

they made were thoughtfully and aesthetically created, beautiful beyond the mere requisites for function. They show evidence of the material and their making processes, and of their origin thousands of years ago as well as the time that has passed since. They offer material evidence of how these people lived.

As I have worked on my pieces they have developed, evolved and become abstracted material evidence of time, weathering and human activity linking our present lives to past humanity.

What then is the place and significance of works that use this particular visual language through the vocabulary of clay and woodfiring?

It is hoped that they may evoke a response and thereby offer a chance to relate affectively as well as thoughtfully to the natural world and our own humanity, placing us within, and not separate to or above nature.

Sandy Lockwood has been working with clay, wood fire and salt glaze since 1980. Her ceramic works have been widely exhibited and are represented in public and private collections in Australia, UK, USA, Europe, Korea, China and Japan.

Her work has been published in journals and books and her status as a maker has

seen her as a presenter on wood-firing and salt-glazing in Australia, UK, USA, Europe, Japan, Taiwan and France.

Sandy has a Master of Visual Arts degree and has taught at a number of tertiary institutions. She currently teaches at the National Art School, Sydney and is completing her PhD at the University of Wollongong.

She is represented by Olsen Irwin Gallery where her work has recently been featured with that of Yasuhisa Kohyama in an exhibition titled ‘Material Evidence’.