

The Myth of Control

POTTER – Salt and wood, soft forms and subtle textures, **EDMUND DE WAAL** looks at the work of Australian potter Sandy Lockwood.

PHOTOGRAPHY – JOHN LASCELLES



In Sandy Lockwood's pithy words her ceramics are about 'clay and salt, a lot of heat and the myth of control'. Writing about these pots brings you up against some of these great irreducibles, materials, processes and myth-making: the bare bones of pottery. To say that Lockwood has made an uncompromising stand for these irreducibles should not imply for one moment that she is a backwoodsman. These are sophisticated and eloquent objects: Lockwood is not one of those fiercely oppositional advocates of particular techniques who are so caught up in process that they fail to think about their pots. Lockwood mixes her own clay, builds her own kilns and is deeply passionate about the techniques of her work: this should not blind us to her sensitivity to the whole pot, form and volume and surface. This is a labour of love, not a Stakhanovite love of labour.

Sandy Lockwood was born in England of British and Argentinian parents, educated in England before emigrating to Australia at the age of seven. Two years later the family went to New Zealand where they lived for seven years before returning to Australia. After training both with Derek Smith in Sydney and at the East Sydney Technical College she set up the Balmoral Pottery in the Southern Highlands not far from Sydney where she has continued to

THIS PAGE INSET: Sandy Lockwood ■ **BELOW:** Stretched slab bowl, stoneware, wood-fired and saltglazed, H approx. 9cm ■ **OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT:** Pourer and cup, porcelain, thrown and altered, wood-fired and saltglazed, H pourer approx. 20cm ■ **TOP RIGHT:** *Short Black* cups, porcelain, wood-fired and saltglazed, H approx. 7cm ■ **BELOW:** Bowl with handles, slabbed, stoneware, wood-fired and saltglazed, H approx. 12cm.





work for over twenty years. Her early experiences of salt-glazing, helped by Peter Starkey's book and her encounters with the ceramics of Jane Hamlyn and Janet Mansfield, encouraged her to start her experiments. She is an inveterate experimenter and has a thoroughly grounded sense of the graft that is needed to learn. Alongside this grounded attitude, due perhaps to a peripatetic childhood, she is one of the new generation of genuinely international potters who can be found working at seminars and workshops in disparate parts of the globe. This gives her work a sense of ambition and reach: she is fully aware of the kinds of contexts her work will be encountered in.

Sandy Lockwood's pots have what might be described as immanence rather than transcendence. That is they seem to try to celebrate all the elements that went into their making rather than transcend them. Her pots are thrown slowly with wet clay so that the plasticity of the clay is evident in the ribbing of finger marks. Many of the smaller pieces seem to have been made with a single pull of the clay like an exhalation of breath. Handles are pulled with a similar directness. In the bowls and on the larger platters there is warping and even cracking. Many potters aspire to make pots to be handled. In the studio pottery tradition this has sometimes led to a slightly gauche attitude of making pots 'easy' for the user: the pot leading the user by the hand. With Lockwood's pots – most of which have a scale that encourages handling – there is a tension between the kind of gesture that is easy to make sense of and more complex latent feelings. They are slow-burn pots, offering up pleasures slowly. Though the user of her pots is keenly aware of the flow of gestures made by hand or knife or rib, as well as the movement of the flame on surface, she keeps this in check. She has described this well: 'There's a softness and responsiveness to clay that is seductive. It holds an attraction as a very direct expression of touch and movement... Salt-glazing hides nothing – it has a nakedness and simplicity that speaks directly to the viewer.'

In some of these pots the element of risk-taking is reminiscent of the Japanese tea wares fired in the traditional kilns of Tamba, Iga or Bizen. As with these great examples

of the willed loss of control, there is a play between an aesthetic of the accidental and the deliberate accumulation of knowledge.

Sandy Lockwood has not been trapped by this aesthetic, rather she has exploited elements of it by combining salt and wood-firing to achieve a softness of tonality. This means that her pots are not dominated by 'effects': the serendipitous drip of glaze or lick of flame is not achieved at the loss of proportion. In fact she is exacting in her aims: 'Wood-firing alone would not give me the richness I am seeking – a fairly fluid, wet looking surface. My commitment to using wood and salt is an emotional response to the unique mixture of things that happen when you use both.'

In Sandy Lockwood's work there is both the intuitive and the highly considered. This is a potter whose feeling for the 'myth of control', for the felicities of salt and wood and heat, are in an exacting balance with the knowledge of how myths work. **CR**

Events: International Ceramics Festival, University of Wales, Aberystwyth, July 4 – 6, www.internationalceramicsfestival.co.uk; *Art in Clay*, Hatfield House, August 1 – 3, www.artinclay.co.uk

Exhibitions: Alpha House Gallery, Sherborne, Dorset, July 5 – August 10; *Pots in the Kitchen*, Rufford, June 8 – July 20; Keramiekcentrum Tiendschuur Tegelen, Netherlands, September 19 – November 30.

Sandy is featured in several recent publications: *Pots in the Kitchen* by Josie Walter (Crowood), *Salt Glazing* by Phil Rogers (A&C Black) and *Salt-Glaze Ceramics* by Rosemary Cochrane (Crowood).

THIS PAGE LEFT: Teapot, porcelain, thrown and altered, wood-fired and saltglazed, H10cm ■ RIGHT: Square form, porcelain, wood-fired and saltglazed, H23cm ■ OPPOSITE PAGE: Bowl with crack, stoneware, wood-fired and saltglazed, H13cm.



Technical Notes

INSPIRATION

My childhood was filled with visits to antique shops and museums in England, and then later in New Zealand and Australia. My parents lived in Hong Kong for a while and we went to the Chinese markets and the antique shops and streets looking for old wares that had been part of daily living in another era. My mother collected simple everyday objects, which provoked a simple and direct emotional and visual response. She was intuitively aware of their *wabi-sabi* qualities. This poetic visual awareness of everyday objects has had a marked influence on my life and provides a strong background and inspiration for my work. I learned to 'see' during my childhood.

Naturally occurring patterns and markings, old weathered buildings, some architectural styles, old farm and household objects, have all contributed to my aesthetic expression.

CLAY BODY

With the exception of porcelain, I mix my clay from powdered components in an old dough mixer rather than buy commercially prepared clays. Important characteristics for a clay body are: plasticity – the ability to bend, move, be folded etc.; fired colour and texture; strength and the ability to soften at high temperature. I use a variety of different raw clays available in Australia including Clay Ceram, HR1 Kaolin, Eckalite Kaolin, FX Ball clay and Hallam Fireclay. In addition I have some crude local clay, which I add to some bodies.

Porcelain clays include Southern Ice and Limoges.

MAKING METHODS

I throw and handbuild my pots. I alter thrown work either at the wheel or soon after and like to work with soft slabs, manipulating them while they are flexible and responsive to touch. Slabs may be stretched on the ground – I am looking for a texturing reminiscent of old stone, wind patterns in sand and geological formations.

My work is raw glazed with simple shino and stoneware liner glazes. Slips and some glazes are externally applied. Some of my clay blends respond very well to saltglazing, and their coarse texture and colour do not need any slip or glaze. This is especially true of my stretched slab pieces.

DECORATION AND GLAZING

Decoration is mostly simple mark making and those of the hand from throwing. I aim to give the clay life with contours and rhythm. This adds to the highlights that saltglaze can give. On some porcelain work I brush cobalt and iron oxides on white glaze.

FIRING AND KILNS

My work is once fired in one of two wood kilns, each with bourry style fireboxes. One is long and low and is side stoked; I am building a small version of this kiln at this summer's festival at Aberystwyth. The other is a chamber kiln in which I fire most of my tableware. This is fired for 24 hours on gas and then wood for 36 hours. 20 kgs of coarse rock salt is introduced into the kiln (on pieces of bark in the firebox) when cone 10 is down. I fire to cone 11-12. The long kiln is fired more quickly but is still preheated on gas for 24 hours. This firing is usually 15-18hrs with wood.

STUDIO SET UP

I live on five acres of bushland, two hours southwest of Sydney and have plenty of space so my pottery and kilns have rather spread. Recycled sloppy clay is stored in bathtubs and added to each fresh batch to aid plasticity. Most of the clays are pugged except for the very coarse bodies, which I hand wedge. I run batches of one clay type through the pug mill and then change clays.

I throw on an electric wheel and also sometimes on a kick wheel. The kick wheel is great for changing spaces, for loosening up, for trying new things.