



Meg Patey packing the kiln, 2022. These two lustre kilns are gas-fired and stoked with additional small slivers of pine wood.
Photo: John Lascelles

LINEAGE

THE CERAMIC ART OF STEVE HARRISON, SANDY LOCKWOOD AND MEG PATEY

by John Freeland

The ceramic art works in the exhibition *Burning Curiosity* are quite distinctively the work of Steve Harrison, Sandy Lockwood and Meg Patey, so much so that the casual observer might have difficulty identifying any commonality other than the 40 years each has worked in the Southern Highlands region of New South Wales, their friendship and their mutual professional respect. Despite this, their works spring from the same historical and aesthetic wellsprings in the post-war studio pottery movement inspired by Bernard Leach and Hamada Shōji and championed in Australia in the 1950s and 1960s by, among others, Harold Hughan, Ivan McMeekin and Peter Rushforth.



Left: Steve Harrison in the studio; photo: Janine King



Right: Sandy Lockwood in front of her studio; photo: Michael Wee

In *A Potter's Book* Bernard Leach argued that pottery and its traditions are part of a nation's cultural inheritance, an essential avenue to a unity of life and beauty. He believed that the nature of, and criteria for, beauty are inherent in the work of non-individualistic, ego-free, unknown craftspeople at one with their culture, making simple, unassuming utilitarian wares for everyday life (Leach, 1940, 8–9). The clarity and intensity of his idealised representation of the studio-potter/artist-craftsman resonated with many people who at that time were seeking less materialistic and more cooperative creative alternatives. Leach's influence permeated technical college pottery courses across Australia from the late 1950s to the 1970s. Studio potteries emerged at this time, as individuals were drawn to the idealised yet difficult life of a self-sufficient potter, and the subsequent commitment to functionality and beauty through giving expression to clay.

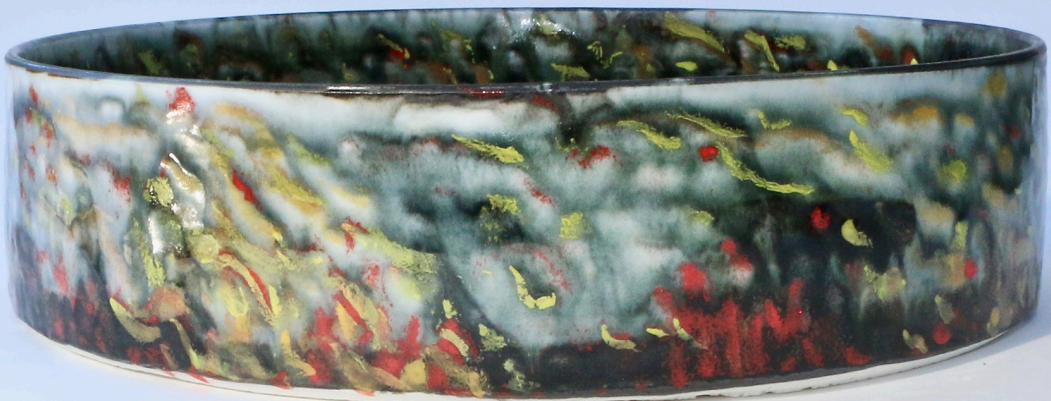
Meg, Sandy and Steve received their initial training in the heady days of the 1970s – Steve at East Sydney Tech under Peter Rushforth in 1971–72 followed by an apprenticeship with Shiga Shigeo; Meg as an apprentice at Cuppacumbalong, Tharwa, ACT in 1976–79; and Sandy working in a production studio and then studying at East Sydney Tech in 1979–80. Building on these foundations, they each established studios in the Southern Highlands: Steve with Janine King in Balmoral Village in 1977; Sandy also in Balmoral Village in 1980; and Meg in Colo Vale in 1981.



Left and below:
Steve Harrison
Bushfire Trauma
series, porcelain dish
1300°C reduction
w.30cm; photo: artist

The diversity of their practice and work appears, on the surface, to confound any notion of their common origins as Leach-inspired studio potters. This diversity is a testament to the depth and richness of each of their individual philosophical and technical journeys, which reach more broadly and deeply into ceramic traditions than solely those espoused by Leach. Each maker gives eloquent expression to the clays, rocks and minerals they use. Each has explored the difficulties, potentials and subtleties of firing; and each has responded to the beauty and the dangers of their lived experience of the Southern Highlands.

The work of all three is unapologetic in its commitment to beauty. It synthesises both physical and emotional functionality and as such negates the tired yet still powerful craft/art and conceptual/functional binaries.





Meg Patey's early studio training in England and France gave her a love of traditional folk earthenware and the expressive rawness of clay and decoration captured in the lower firing range. Using traditional methods, she combines slips, glazes and metallic pigments as a springboard for her slip- and lustre-ware.

The work is twice-fired and some of the pieces are selected for reduced lustre decoration involving a tricky third firing. This allows Meg to explore brushwork, revealing the energy and rawness of every stroke. Meg has said of her work:

It springs from my traditional training but moves beyond this to capture the tension between emptiness and line, restraint and movement, using the expressive qualities of brushwork with slip and reduced lustre pigment.



Above: **Meg Patey**
Leaves and Twigs Platter
detail, 2022

Left: **Meg Patey**
Golden Leaves Platter
2022, slab-built
earthenware, 1100°C
then 650°C, diam.35cm
d.6cm; photos: artist



Of the three, Sandy Lockwood's woodfired, salt-glazed work is the most intimately related to her environment: weathered, patterned, complex, organic and tactile. It is as though she has sought, through immersion and quiet observation over many years, to see and understand the very essence of her surrounding bush, and then represent that essence through her work with clay and fire. Her less sculptural vessels, with their fluidity of line and pleasingly tactile surfaces, seem to capture the contemplative stillness which so frequently pervades the midday Australian bush.

For those familiar with Steve Harrison's work, the pieces in this exhibition will come as a surprise. Steve spent some 20 years replicating the ancient Chinese techniques and processes (that go back over 1000 years), of converting hard single rock porcelain into 'somewhere near plastic' and creating a range of exquisite small porcelain bowls (in his *5 Stones* odyssey). Much of this work was destroyed in the 2019 Black Summer bushfires.

Reconstructing his fourth studio in 46 years has been demanding and exhausting for both Steve and his wife Janine. As a part of this process Steve has turned to giving expression to his experiences and their after-effects by decorating his pieces with memories of his fire experiences and subsequent dream sequences. We can see the familiar Harrison materials, techniques and aesthetic, but it is new, brave work.

The Southern Highlands bush, its beauty and its unpredictable softness and harshness, has seeped into the sensibility of the three exhibiting artists; their ways of seeing, being and making. Similarly, the work reflects their deep appreciation and understanding of long traditions of ceramics practice while also being creative responses to the landscape and testament to the importance of long years of experience, and consummate understanding of and facility with their materials and kilns.



Work by **Sandy Lockwood**, own formulation stoneware with inclusions woodfired, salt-glazed 1320°C

Photos: Colin Todd

Opposite: *Fire Platter* handbuilt, diam.30cm

Left: *Jar*, wheelthrown h.19.5cm, w.17cm

Below: Sandy Lockwood 'rocket' firing

Their work has presence with no need for song and dance. It has a capacity to communicate with people across time and culture. It is testament to the inherent richness of their shared studio pottery heritage. Integrity and quiet beauty are the hallmarks of their ceramic art. It delivers a calm satisfaction to those who have the time to look, appreciate, understand and see what lies within.

References:

Steve Harrison, *5 Stones: A Ceramic Journey*, Hot and Sticky Pty Ltd, Balmoral Village, revised edition 2018

Bernard Leach, *A Potter's Book*, Faber and Faber, London, 1940

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John Freeland is a retired academic. He directed Freeland Gallery (ceramics) 2006–2010 and is a passionate collector of, and writer on, ceramics.

