

TECTONIC SHIFTS

Merran Esson



Merran Esson has been working internationally for more than 40 years. Her own work is distinctive for the textures and large forms that express the contrast between the extremes of country and city. She uses clay and glazes to reference water tanks, silos, corrugated iron and trees, which remind us of the influence of history and place, and recall her rural childhood.

Esson recently retired as the Head of Ceramics at The National Art School in Sydney, and is currently Lecturer of ceramics at the Australian Catholic University. She has spent much time teaching in Scotland, including Glasgow School of Art and Edinburgh College of Art. Esson has exhibited in The Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Galerie Rosenhauer in Germany, Gaffer Gallery in Hong Kong, as well as being an exhibitor and visiting artist in Korea, Taiwan, Sweden, Pakistan, Spain and Japan.

During the flight from Sydney to Auckland I was very aware of how the next few days were going to affect the lives and careers of a number of people. Delighted to be the judge for this year's Portage Ceramic Awards, I was also riding a wave of my own success, having been selected and then announced as the winner of the Woollahra Small Sculpture Prize in Sydney. And now, after working with ceramics for more than 40 years, I find myself over here in New Zealand, looking at an award competition from the other side of the fence. But I'm no less anxious because I'm still likely to be judged again – this time as a judge.

The process of selecting the finalists began over a month ago when I received 256 submissions, initially as a PDF of 440 images, so I sat up late at night and just followed my instincts. I was searching for a sense of the human hand and of the thought processes that the maker may have had; I was looking for knowledge and experimentation with process, clay manipulation, firing results; in other words how concept and technical skills created the work. At the end of this task I had selected 81 images. I went to bed that night feeling chirpy. I remember emailing the organisers to let them know I had begun my deliberations and was excited about the scope of the exhibition. Two days later a heavy box arrived, containing three large folders with all the photographs, biographies and statements. This surprised me as so many award exhibitions like this are all online now, but I am a bit old school, so it was lovely to go back over all the applications, read statements, and to find out a little more about each proposal.

I have a very large dining room table, so I laid out the photographs, sadly not large enough for all 81 on the first cut, but I did it a few times until I saw the exhibition emerging. I left the work there for a few days at a time, moving things about, living with those images, looking down on the table from my bedroom as I descended the stairs each morning. An exhibition was taking shape and it was a huge privilege to have this overview.

Clay is a material that is continually evolving in the geological structure of the earth, and New Zealand is a country on the move. Geologically shaking as it boils and bubbles under the surface, and its inhabitants live with this on a daily basis. Potters understand these tectonic shifts because they appear in our studio practice.

What I found in those folders took me on a geography tour of New Zealand. I saw works of wild landscape and deep openings, small objects of white porcelain as well as dense and rich terracotta clays, luscious runny glazes, and the golden interior of bowls so glorious that I thought of the golden rings from Middle Earth having been thrown in here for spectacle. There were examples of the small shifts of melting layers of glaze presenting an insight into how the earth's materials have their own movement in the kiln. There is work of great technical mastery, built and modelled with precision, and knowledge of how to construct while creating a tenuous balance. All of this reminded me of the thrill of glazing and the perilous process of firing. Clay is also a sculptor's material, and I saw examples of artists stepping outside the boundaries of function and utility, and using a variety of surface finishes. Finally the selection was whittled down to a long list, the resultant work being invited to be delivered to Te Uru, and I headed off to Auckland for my final selection.

Arriving to personally view my choices was exciting, and as I worked through this selection process, I had the opportunity to examine the works closely. There was pleasure in lifting smaller pieces and inspecting their weight, to see the tool and finger marks of the maker, and to look deep inside vessels, observing what is partly hidden from the camera. Some pieces were stronger and bolder than indicated in the photographs whilst some did not hold their presence in the company of others. One thing that I learned from my own experience is that, as artists, we have to dig deep to find our own voice. I hope that my selections open up conversations as this is good for the field of ceramics.

So to all of you who submitted an entry, I want to compliment you on your submissions and congratulate you for entering such a prestigious award. From 256 submissions there are 55 finalists, so it was a tough gig to get into. As I have discovered in my own practice, entering awards and being selected is an affirmation from my peers that I am going ok. I have been rejected, and more recently after four decades of making, I am finally reaping my own rewards, more often as a finalist, and not always as a winner. However, this year has been a bit special. Understanding ceramics takes time and patience. I hope that my selection presents a story of the breadth of what is happening in New Zealand ceramics in 2019.

While on this first visit to Auckland I also presented a workshop in the Te Uru Learning Centre. We began with coffee and cake, and the sounds of conversation and networking was a reminder about how we as a community love to get together and share our own stories and experiences.

I would like to acknowledge the Portage Licensing Trust, the supporters of this award, which is amassing its own collection of contemporary ceramics. Awards such as this create excitement and an exhibition which entices New Zealand ceramic artists to submit works with the hope to be seen, to be acknowledged and ultimately to be collected. That's a great ambition for any maker. Collections are a great resource, they add to the historical culture of a community, and this is a worthy motivation for artists. The winner of this award will enter this collection and will be part of an historical New Zealand timeline. Awards last a very long time; they are documented on the winner's CV and can be talked about indefinitely. With formal courses shrinking in ceramics education, this event should be a great learning experience for everyone with an interest in ceramic education.

Finally, in selecting a winner I had to trust where my spirit and my instincts kept taking me. There was one vessel, which on taking it out of its crate, tore at my heartstrings. I felt my knees go weak, and my breath quickened. I was looking into the inner world of a drying and shrinking surface that was clinging onto the outer structure to survive and yet there was a fragile support between the outer and the inner worlds of this vessel. In this one piece there is a fine balance between success and failure. I returned to this piece throughout my considerations, I lifted it up and felt its weight, heavy enough to be robust, but just light enough to show the skill and mastery of its maker. This piece continued to reveal other sensations every time I looked into it, and as I walked around, it revealed different mysteries. It took me by surprise.

Thank you Te Uru for trusting me to be your judge this year for the 2019 Portage Ceramic Awards – it was a most fulfilling experience.

Merran Esson, October 2019