



PHOTO: MICHEL BROUET

'Construct I', 2007, stoneware paperclay, woodfired, 57 x 22 x 33 cm



PHOTO: GREG PIPER

'Red Construct', 2008, woodfired stoneware, 52 x 48 x 29 cm

ALL THAT IS SOLID

The ceramics of Barbara Campbell-Allen

A survey of the practice of Barbara Campbell-Allen over the past three decades reveals the evolution of an individual aesthetic which is formed and informed by an abiding connection with the creative possibilities of earth and fire.

TWO thousand and nine marks 25 years as a ceramic artist, writer, curator and educator for Barbara Campbell-Allen. It is timely then for an overview of the development of an individual aesthetic and educational philosophy which grows out of a deep personal commitment to working with clay. In Campbell-Allen's practice we see an evolving aesthetic which continues to respond to shifts in the cultural, social and economic landscape of the last three decades.

Campbell-Allen's curriculum vitae reveals the exceptional scope of her practice. She is internationally recognised as a writer, conference speaker, curator, educator, ceramic artist and ceramic technician. She has made a significant contribution to the field of contemporary ceramic practice in the areas of research and education. She has held seven solo exhibitions in the past 10 years and participated in many group and award exhibitions in the local, national and international arena. In her teaching position at the



PHOTO: GREG PIPER

'Five Bottle', 2008, woodfired stoneware, tallest 13 cm



'Turquoise Vase', stoneware, firebox natural ash glaze, woodfired, ht 9 cm



'Open Form', 2007, stoneware, shino glaze, woodfired, 16 x 48 x 38 cm



'Forest', 2007, stoneware paperclay, firebox natural ash glaze, 4 x 58 x 41 cm

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Workshop Art Centre, held since 1988 she imbues her students with a solid grounding in technique, history and aesthetics. As President of the Australian Ceramics Association in 2005–06 she was instrumental in the introduction of a group insurance scheme which ensures that ceramic artists nationally have access to affordable product and public liability insurance.

Her development as a ceramic artist began as a high school student under the tutelage of Sandra Taylor, who was then employed by the NSW Education Department as a specialist ceramics teacher. After completing a BA at Macquarie University she decided to pursue a career in ceramics and belongs to a generation who studied at East Sydney Tech (NAS), in the early 1980s. At the time the emphasis was on training in production techniques and obtaining a thorough technical grounding to prepare for studio production of functional wares to supply galleries, markets and retail outlets. Changes in the global economic landscape in the mid '90s saw the market flooded with good quality cheap imports and individual studio potters found it much harder to survive in this climate.

For Campbell-Allen, and for many others, there was a conscious shift away from making production ware as a means of economic survival. During this period she engaged in intensive specialised research into historical, aesthetic and technical aspects of woodfiring at Monash University. In 1994 she gained a Graduate Diploma of Arts and in 2000 a Master of Visual Arts, both from Monash University. The findings of her research into process and aesthetics have sustained her art practice in the past decade. Her Masters exhibition "One Dream Too Many", held at the Mary Place Gallery, Sydney in 2000, was an installation comprising a series of burst spheres and spire forms made from woodfired paperclay.

The publication of aspects of her research in national and international ceramics journals has contributed to the broader knowledge base and gained Campbell-Allen national and international recognition for her work. Her articles focused on the use of paperclay bodies for woodfiring, the development of fired colour in the anagama kiln, and aesthetic developments in contemporary woodfired ceramics. The links between kiln design, fuel type, claybody and firing and cooling cycles, with regard to the way colour develops in the kiln, is described in articles such as "Contemporary Anagama Practice" (*Ceramics Technical* No.4, 1997) and "Anagama Firebox Colour" (*Ceramics Technical* No.12, 2001). In 2000 she was engaged as a technical consultant to a ceramic company in Egypt that exported pottery to Europe. She advised on the adaptation of traditional Egyptian ceramics to a European climate.

In 2003 Campbell-Allen was invited to curate the Australian Ceramics Association's national exhibition, held at the Manly Art Gallery and Museum. Titled "Beyond Earth – Exploring the Plastic Limits of Clay", her curatorial essay (*Journal of Australian Ceramics* Vol 43#3) encapsulates many of the themes and ideas which form the foundation of her own explorations. The basis of the exhibition was to offer a counterpoint to the minimalist design aesthetic which she describes as being 'static and sterile in nature', often 'disengaging the viewer, because there's no evidence of the making process or sense of the work being handmade'. She sought work from artists who engaged with 'the essential sculptural quality of clay as a medium most responsive to the human hand ... and employed an individual language that utilized clay's plasticity to communicate ideas'. Artists were urged to push clay to its plastic limits – to fold, to weave, to impress and to stretch. It is this sense of plastic possibility and pushing aesthetic and technical boundaries



'Corners', 2007, stoneware paperclay, natural ash glaze, 47 x 21 x 14 cm and 55 x 28 x 14 cm



'Ash-glazed Bottle', 2008, stoneware, woodfired natural ash glaze, 13 x 7 x 7.5 cm



'Construct with Curve', 2008, woodfired stoneware, 49 x 19 x 18 cm



'Blue Bottle' (detail), 2008, woodfired stoneware, 12 x 7.5 x 7 cm

which characterises Campbell-Allen's recent works.

Firing with wood introduces the element of chance in determining surface and colour effects. Much of her work over the past 20 years has been fired in her anagama-style kiln – fondly referred to as “Ana”. Landscape and its social, historical and environmental contexts are points of inspiration and exploration. In recent years she has exhibited two major bodies of work which draw on her experiences canyoning and walking in the Blue Mountains National Park, west of Sydney. She describes the thought processes and sensory experiences which underpin these works, in her artist statement of 2001: ‘My sources lie in my experience of the natural world, in rocks and stones, canyons and chasms.’ In works such as *Bungonia Creek* the artist uses slabs of porcelain clay to make textured block-like vessels which capture the colour and form reminiscent of these landscapes.

It was this engagement with landscape and its associations that led curator Margaret Farmer to invite Campbell-Allen to participate in a major exhibition at the Ivan Dougherty Gallery in Sydney in 2004. In her curatorial essay for the show, entitled “Terra Alterius – land of another”, Farmer describes how 12 artists (six indigenous and six non-indigenous) were asked to imagine ‘a land in which indigenous and non-indigenous cultures first meet and interact with respect for each other’s existence, differences, laws and culture ... to imagine an Australia that was recognised as *terra alterius*, land of another, rather than treated as *terra nullius*, land of no-one’. Campbell-Allen’s response was to make *Old Rivers*, a floor installation consisting of 12 large woodfired disc forms. She describes the pieces as a ‘collection of places or microcosms; a collection of memories, experienced at a particular point in time’. Each of the 12 components was sparked by a particular memory and together they became her response to “the Australian land”.

This fascination with landscape and the earth’s processes, both constructive and destructive, are themes further explored in *Slowtime*, her most recent exhibition at the John Freeland Gallery in Sydney. In her catalogue statement for the exhibition Campbell-Allen describes her response to the landscapes of two ancient ports – Paphos



'Black and White Construct', 2008, woodfired stoneware, 31 x 44 x 19 cm



'Old Rivers', (installation detail), stoneware paperclay, natural ash glaze, 12 individual components, each 50 x 50 x 15 cm



'Blue Ray', 2007, stoneware, with feldspar glaze, 17 x 47 x 31 cm

and Salamis on the island of Cyprus.

This work reflects an environment rich in the memories and actions of others, but over time, natural forces have melded an ancient metropolis to an empty field, punctuated by the foundations of once imposing civic buildings ... Amongst colossal fallen columns, only the corners remain standing, a reminder of the impermanence of our existence yet affirmation of our resilience.

In works such as *Construct I* and *Construct II* (2008) we see the combination of angular and soft-folded clay elements which capture a sense of the fusion of human construction with timeless landforms. The integration of random colour and surface qualities caused by the action of flame and ash on the pieces echoes the action of weathering and reminds us of the powerful elemental forces which govern the natural world.

In her article "Magic and Ash", (*Ceramics Monthly* October, 2000), she acknowledges that: 'Woodfiring is irrational in economic terms, but the beauty and uniqueness of the surfaces continually reassures me that this magical process is worth pursuing.' Underpinning the poetics and chance effects of woodfiring is the application of meticulous research and sound methodology.

Two thousand and eight marks the end of a firing era for Campbell-Allen. "Ana" has come to the end of her working life and her demise marks a transitional period for the artist. Through research and experimentation she had identified the different zones which produced specific colour ranges and surface textures. These effects formed the palette which has characterised her work for the past 15 years. Large slab-built paperclay wall panels such as *Forest* (2007) and *Constellation* (2007) exploit such nuances to their maximum impact – the surfaces and colours evoking the drama of light, shade and tonal variation in weathered Australian landscapes.

Her new kiln "Matilda" is the vehicle which will play a part in determining the aesthetic development of her work in the future. The design of the kiln is the result of the combined experience and knowledge of herself and Korean-born artist Kwirak Choung who collaborated with her on the project. The pair are still experimenting with stacking variations and firing and cooling cycles in order to determine the scope of fired possibility within the different zones of the kiln. In her essay "Waltzing Matilda" (*Journal of Australian Ceramics* 46 #3, 2007) Campbell-Allen describes how the new kiln was designed to maximize firebox opportunities and capture ash. It included features which have become popular in contemporary woodfire practice, such as a "sutema" which is placed behind the main chamber before the flue exit. The sutema is an area where the concentration of flame, heat and ash is allowing new and exciting aesthetic possibilities. Campbell-Allen has discovered that her small asymmetrical bottle forms are ideal for placement in this area of the kiln.

Over the past 25 years she has devoted herself to the intense creative and physical demands of working with clay and firing with wood. In her work we see an evolving aesthetic that continues to engage with the destructive and constructive power of the earth's processes and the temporal and illusory nature of 'all that is solid'.

Trisha Dean

Trisha Dean is a ceramic artist and writer, and former editor of the Journal of Australian Ceramics. She lectures in ceramics at Sydney College of the Arts and metropolitan TAFE colleges in NSW. The title of this article is inspired by Marshall Berman's book 'All that is Solid Melts into Air' (New York 1982), a line he originally derived from Karl Marx's Communist Manifesto (1848).

An exhibition of Campbell-Allen and Kwirak Choung's new body of work will be held at Skepsi on Swanston, Melbourne in April, 2009.