In October 1992, Australian artist-potter Peter Rushforth held a 40-year retrospective exhibition at Le Var, his studio on the Shipley Plateau at Blackheath in the Blue Mountains. As Peter’s neighbour, friend and bushwalking companion, I asked to lend a hand at that firing and spent two days contemplating the finished work - stoneware blossom jars, vases, teapots, bowls and platters - in the bush setting that, in part, inspired them.

It was a memorable experience and the basis for an article I wrote for OZ Arts magazine [Issue 6, April/June 1993], generously illustrated with photos that allowed the qualities of Peter’s pots to speak for themselves.

Nearly 21 years later, despite frequent visits to Le Var to have tea with Peter and his wife Bobbie and to admire the latest creations in the gallery, I stood in the midst of All Fired Up, a 60-year retrospective of Peter’s work at the SH Ervin Gallery in Sydney [12 July - 25 August, 2013], and had a moment of déjà vu. Just as I had back at Shipley Plateau in 1992, I experienced an initial shock of thinking: ‘How did one man produce all this?’

With 172 pots on display from private and public collections across Australia, All Fired Up was a well-curated survey of six decades of the artistic output of the man widely regarded as the father of Australian studio pottery. It was the biggest exhibition of his work since a survey at the National Gallery of Victoria in 1985.

The exhibition was timely as Rushforth, now aged 92, had conducted his last firing in June 2013. I was among the circle of friends and family who dropped into Le Var to mark the occasion and watch the round-the-clock shifts of supporters assisting with stoking the wood-fired single chamber kiln, the smaller of his two wood-fired kilns, filled with some eighty or so pots.

Making pots is physically demanding work in all its phases from kneading the clay and grinding the glaze, to throwing on the wheel to the long haul of a wood-firing that can last days. As I can personally attest as a fellow-bushwalker, Peter Rushforth’s fitness and strength has always been exceptional for his age. This final firing, delayed for three years with unfired pots waiting, meant that new work could be included in the retrospective. Three pots – a blossom jar and two vases – were given their own pride of place in the exhibition.

Long-time friend and well-known third-generation ceramic artist, Simon Reece, who also lives and works in Blackheath, assisted with this firing as he has with many firings over the last 15 years. ‘The last stoke happened around three o’clock on Sunday morning and Pete put the last pieces of wood in the kiln. And he and Bobbie were just sitting there in front of the kiln. And that was that. So it was beautiful.’
While I agree with art critic John McDonald that an exhibition celebrating the career of such an important artist should have been held at the Art Gallery of NSW, the SH Ervin Gallery provided a suitably intimate and contemplative space to spend time with works that demand our quiet attention. The glazes shone brilliantly against the white walls and plinths where pots were sympathetically grouped by colour, shape and texture or spotlit in glorious isolation.

Apart from being struck all over again by the astonishing diversity and beauty of Rushforth’s pottery in its many colours, moods, and shapes, I was overwhelmed by the prodigious amount of intellectual and physical hard work this exhibition represented. When asked about his initial reaction to the exhibition in an interview for ABC TV’s The Arts Quarter, Rushforth said: ‘I thought my family had returned to me. I didn’t realise I had made so many pots!’

This exhibition of works, spanning 1955 to this year, demonstrates Rushforth’s unrelenting commitment to the creative lifestyle of an independent artist and master-craftsman since his discovery of pottery as his calling in 1946. ‘Immediately I touched clay I found what I wanted to do in life,’ recalled Peter in his ABC interview.

Rushforth’s lifelong interest in the Japanese ceramic and aesthetic tradition came out of - in what can only be described as a remarkable transformative act of personal and cross-cultural reconciliation - his experience as a prisoner-of-war of the Japanese in Singapore and on the Burma-Thailand Railway in World War II.

As an Australian POW in Changi with access to the Singapore Library, Rushforth read widely about art and philosophy including the ideas of Dr Soetsu Yanagi. Alongside potters Shoji Hamada and Kanjiro Kawai, Yanagi’s mingei ‘folk-art’ philosophy of the 1920s advocated preservation of traditional Japanese ceramic forms and skills, and the beauty of hand-crafted objects made for ordinary, everyday use.

A seed was sown. In search of a meaningful life on his return to Australia, Rushforth turned to pottery while studying art at Melbourne Technical College (later RMIT which awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Fine Arts in 2010). At that time he met pioneer potter Alan Lowe and was inspired by his Ferntree Gully studio and self-sufficient artistic life.

Most pottery in Australia back then was influenced by the English decorative style of the manufactured wares of Stoke-on-Trent (such as Wedgewood, Spode, Minton, Royal Doulton). Almost all potters worked in low-fired earthenware but Rushforth was inspired by the collection of Oriental ceramics at the National Gallery of Victoria, particularly Song dynasty stoneware with its jun and celadon glazes. He shared this interest with Lowe and Harold Hughan who built Australia’s first stoneware kiln.

That first generation of post-war Australian potters embraced the philosophical and aesthetic ideals of the mingei folk-art potters Hamada and Kawai, translated for Western practitioners in English potter Bernard Leach’s iconic A Potter’s Book, published in 1940. With no local ceramic tradition or knowledge of local materials to draw on, Australian potters who wanted to emulate the qualities of the classical glazes of the East had to teach themselves from scratch: digging and testing local clays, experimenting with glazes, refining techniques by trial and error.

In his essay Studio Pottery (The Etruscan, vol 11, No. 3, June 1962) Rushforth wrote that in Australia ‘the studio potters have been compelled to be amateur geologists, chemists and kiln builders’. Peter built his first kiln and studio at Ferntree Gully in 1949 and continued to build kilns and studios as he moved from Ferntree Gully to Beecroft and then Church Point in Sydney and finally to the seclusion of Shipley Plateau in 1979.

Whatever Rushforth learned he was quick to hand on to others. He began teaching pottery as early as 1949 to returned servicemen at Concord Hospital where he met his wife-to-be Jean ‘Bobbie’ Roberts. In 1951 he was appointed the first full-time ceramics teacher at East Sydney Technical College (ESTC), now the National Arts School, and
over the next 27 years rose to the position of Senior Head Teacher of Ceramics before his retirement in 1978.

In 1967 Rushforth gained a Churchill Fellowship to travel to Europe, India and the USA to study aspects of education in ceramics and studio workshop practice. Rushforth gathered a team of talented potter-teachers at ESTC and invited distinguished potters, many from Japan, as guest teachers. The ceramics course there under his leadership became the most sought-after in Australia with more than 200 students applying each year for only 18 available places. Not surprisingly, the course produced some of the next generation’s most eminent practitioners.

‘Peter taught skills in making, skills in finishing, skills in chemistry,’ says ceramic artist Simon Reece, ‘If you do have all those skills, you can do anything within ceramics. Without those physical and chemical skills to make judgements and build an empirical base of knowledge, you are floundering. There’s also knowing how to finish things off, making a judgement in terms of its being resolved and finished.’

Rushforth wrote in his seminal essay The Good Pot: ‘Myself, I have always been impressed with the advice of the Zen teacher ‘Develop an infallible technique and then leave yourself open to inspiration’.

Throughout his years of teaching, Rushforth continued to pursue his own studio work with deeply held philosophical and aesthetic ideals to guide his practice. Fundamental to that practice over the years has been the search for beauty and transcendence as characterised by the Japanese aesthetic tradition of the Tea Ceremony with an appreciation of almost untranslatable Zen concepts such as quiet and loneliness, age and nobility.

This approach eschews decoration for its own sake. In his writing, Rushforth quotes from Fosco Maraini’s Meeting with Japan, first published in 1959: ‘...for the Zen masters, art is never decoration, embellishment, instead it is a work of enlightenment, illumination, salvation. Art is a technique for acquiring liberty.’

‘During the war we planned utopias together...we did discuss the idea of co-operative societies rather than a very competitive society,’ Rushforth told film-maker Christina Wilcox in her documentary Playing with clay: the life and art of Peter Rushforth, released in 2010. ‘[After the war] there were a lot of people who gave away their profession to be a maker and a builder.’ Art was about independence of thought and lifestyle as much as it was about expression and creativity.

Rushforth had seen the dehumanising effects of war on both his father, a traumatised veteran of the Flanders trenches, and first hand as a prisoner-of-war himself. It is little wonder that he then embraced a creed of art as a humanising and liberating force both on a personal and political level. In an interview with Peter Hylands in Bendigo in 2008, Rushforth quoted Dostoevsky: ‘Art will be the salvation of the world.’

‘Peter has influenced me in the way that I look at things,’ says Simon Reece, ‘but he has influenced me more about what it is to be a decent human being. We talk a lot about pottery but we talk more about politics and religion frankly. There is a commonality of purpose we share.’

Inextricably bound to this aesthetic is Rushforth’s strong craft ethic, drawn from the ideals of the English Arts and Crafts and Japanese mingei folk-art movements and expressed in Bernard Leach’s definition of craft as ‘good works proceeding from the whole man, heart, head and hand in proper balance’. The importance of the innate human impulse to create by hand as a counterbalance to the sterility of the machine-made and mass-produced has continued to be a motivating idea for Rushforth.

The mingei ethic of making work for ordinary, everyday use has seen Rushforth continue to produce utilitarian work such as teapots, cups, plates and bowls. Fittingly All Fired Up included a line of tea bowls in an arresting spectrum of colourful glazes and variations of forms. Since the 1990s, one of Rushforth’s biggest enthusiasts has been chef Tetsuya Wakuda who purchased not only art pieces for cabinet display in his Sydney restaurant but also a range of tableware for serving food.

The 94-page e-catalogue for All Fired Up available online is to be commended for its thoroughness. As well as an excellent overview by AGNSW curator Natalie Wilson, it includes detailed biographical notes, an exhibition history, a bibliography of writings by and about Rushforth, a gallery of photos and a checklist of all 172 pots. Most importantly, the catalogue includes

The second essay provides a subtly written investigation into how Australian potters cannot ignore the rich ceramic heritage of other cultures but should avoid becoming ‘absurdly dependent’ and derivative.

In 1963, Rushforth spent five months studying in Japan. He visited a traditional village of potters in Kyushu, studied with a master-potter who had been a pupil of Hamada and worked in a studio at Kyoto Art University. He had work fired in Kanjiro Kawai’s kiln which he exhibited on his return home. This valuable time abroad opened his eyes to the diverse threads within the Japanese tradition as well as an appreciation for asymmetry and imperfections and the accidental effects that natural flaws in the material can bring out in firings. In 1975 Rushforth’s was the first one-man show of pottery to be sent to Japan under the cultural agreement of 1974.

In The Good Pot Rushforth makes the point ‘...it is not a matter of simulating a traditional glaze or an aesthetic form from another country but of using this insight into pottery values to produce new glazes from our local material and our own philosophy to produce work that is valid to the Australian environment.’

The exhibition All Fired Up offered a rare opportunity to walk through sixty years of Rushforth’s own ongoing investigations and evolving approaches to creating ‘work that is valid to the Australian environment’.

‘What struck me about the body of work was a certain quiet focus,’ says Simon Reece about his own response to the exhibition. ‘The word that comes to mind is ‘quietude’. A very grand feeling of serenity.’

Curator Natalie Wilson’s essay identifies Rushforth’s early work as characterised by classical simplicity and purity of form in the Leach tradition with functionality foremost and minimal use of colour and decoration. She describes how from the late 1960s on Rushforth experimented with lustrous glazes applied to his own interpretation of traditional forms, embracing natural flaws and accidents as ‘essential qualities’. Since the move to the Mountains, experiments with these glazes have continued while the development of fire-effects and ash-deposits emerged as a strong interest with the long-firing times possible with his anagama kiln.

The central section of the exhibition was dominated by a row of imposing Jun-glazed jars and vases, a tribute to Rushforth’s exceptional skill and signature use of this opalescent glaze that, in his own words, ‘is rarely produced commercially because the variables are so great’.

The range of blues - from pale cerulean to deepest indigo - expressed in this glaze has frequently been perceived as reflecting the colours and moods of the Blue Mountains, as have other colours and effects: thick snowflake glazes, sandstone pinks and silver-gum greys, motifs of forked tree branches, waterfalls and mist, and splashes of bright bush flower colour. It is a view Rushforth has always welcomed.

‘Pots may evoke qualities of the environment where the potter lives...At Shipley, the valley and the mountains are an ever changing scene of mists, clouds, blue sky and sometimes, snow and rain. To me the scene is exquisitely beautiful.’

Beauty - exquisite, transcendent and soulful - is Peter Rushforth’s legacy. That legacy also consists of the skills, ideas and role model he provided to new generations of ceramicists in Australia. ‘Peter’s influence was to bring pots into the fine art world... as a completely satisfying discipline in its own right,’ says high-profile fellow-potter and close friend Bill Samuels.

‘That last firing was part of a continuum,’ says Simon Reece, ‘He may be stopping making but all those other people he has taught and inspired will continue to make.’

It is to be sincerely hoped that this retrospective and the renewed focus from art critics and mainstream media will contribute to a heightened public awareness of ceramics and even stronger commitment from curators and galleries to displaying new work.

And Peter? He still has a lot of books he wants to read and chess games to win.

Julian Leatherdale

All photographs at SH Ervin exhibition Jury Grimm
Next page: Peter Rushforth portrait by Peter Adams
REFERENCES

Essays by Natalie Wilson and Peter Rushforth in All Fired Up e-catalogue http://issuu.com/shervingallery/docs/rushforth_ecatalogue_130802


The Arts Quarter, posted 17 July 2013, ABC TV website http://www.abc.net.au/news/2013-07-17/the-arts-quarter/4826114

Peter's Pots: An Appreciation by Julian Leatherdale, Oz Arts magazine, Issue 6, April/ June 1993

Below: Peter Rushforth From Peter Adams’ book ‘The Street Wise’, this picture was a finalist in both the ‘Head On’ and ‘Moran’ portrait competitions of 2011. That year the Moran had 111,000 entries which were culled down to 60 images.