

Never enough

HELEN STEPHENS EXPLORES NEW
WORK BY GWYN HANSSEN PIGOTT



Gwyn Hanssen Pigott at
her studio in Netherdale,
North Queensland. Photo:
Helen Stephens.

Christine Abrahams Gallery, Richmond, Victoria
7 November — 3 December 1998

THE DAY BEFORE GWYN HANSSEN PIGOTT'S EXHIBITION AT CHRISTINE ABRAHAMS GALLERY WAS INSTALLED IN NOVEMBER 1998, at least a dozen people had lined up at the gallery to see the work and have first option to purchase. When the exhibition opened it was a sell-out at prices that ranged from \$1,500 to \$10,000. It was her second exhibition only at Christine Abrahams Gallery in Richmond, Melbourne—the first was in 1995. In between the two Melbourne exhibitions, Pigott had exhibited in Sydney at Rex Irwin, in Perth at Craftwest, in Munich at Galerie B15, in New York at Garth Clark Gallery, and in Canberra—an exhibition called *Small Works*—at Narek Galleries. The Queensland Art Gallery held a survey exhibition covering 20 years of Pigott's work in 1996.

Recognising that Gwyn Hanssen Pigott now has a large following of collectors and admirers, both in Australia and overseas, one still needs to ask the question: what is it about the work by this artist that has so much appeal? So much so that we can't get enough of it. In a recent paper delivered at the Shepparton International Ceramics Conference, I wrote that it would seem that at the end of the millennium, Australia is finally beginning to develop a ceramic style of its own. It is not the Hamada/Leach tradition; it is not American Funk. It is a style which accords with our own temperament and our immediate time. It comes from our environment and lifestyle—a love of simplicity, of colour and a trace of narrative. I argued that these pure and simple forms have a big

impact and a broad appeal. The ceramics of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott have been a key factor in the development of this style over the past 10 years.

Hanssen Pigott has herself written extensively and poetically about her work and its development. In an article titled *Notes from Netherdale*, a small hamlet near her home in North Queensland where she has been living in relative isolation for the past 10 years, she described the environment which protects her solitude and nourishes her thoughtful and persistent creativity. At Netherdale, she is surrounded by the distant mountains of the Eungella National Park on three sides, and in the foreground, canefields and a forest of eucalyptus and rainforest trees. She noted that the dominant theme is silence.¹

Hanssen Pigott said that in making her forms, which she now presents in 'family groups' or still life groups of up to 23 individual pieces, she dared herself to go to the edge of formlessness and she wrote: "To my delight the pared down forms remained pots; glazed, strong, usable. What is more, this eccentric presentation, unframed, unboxed, completely floating on an idea, was accepted". She said she started the groupings because she wanted the pots to be "looked at,

considered" and the title, *Three Inseparable Bowls*, given to related but different bowls, "might raise a question, lengthen a glance".² In fact they have done more than this. Groups with their titles such as *Exodus II*, *The Peacemakers*, *Gathering* and so on, provide a solace and a comfort. They are at one time emotionally calming and mentally stimulating. Jason Smith, curator of Contemporary Art at the National Gallery of Victoria bought two groups of works by Hanssen Pigott at Christine Abrahams. He said: "We have been following Gwyn's work for a long time and we have been waiting to purchase a major piece to add to our collection. She has been an important donor to this gallery. We had a *Still Life* from 1991 and we wanted to add new work to the collection that would make the connection between the earlier work and the work she is doing now".

The Gallery purchased *The Listeners* (1998), which Smith says is a signature piece that speaks strongly about her family groups and her arrangements of objects. "*The Listeners* is a piece that audiences will respond to", he said. Smith suggested it was a more formal arrangement and includes the bottle forms, bowls and beakers. He said he chose a second work, *Waiting* (1998), to act as a counterpoint to the more formal quality of *The Listeners*.

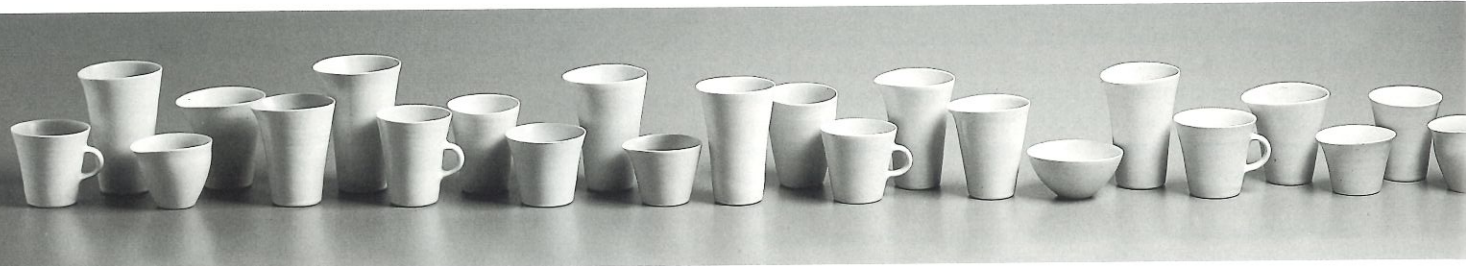
Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, *Echo*, 1998, limoges porcelain. Photo: Christine Abrahams Gallery.



"Waiting has a more conceptual scheme. Its arrangement includes beakers and bowls and cups, and it relates to Hanssen Pigott's earlier production work—to her utilitarian forms. *Waiting* is more silent, almost melancholic and nostalgic. I thought it would be interesting to see the connection between her early utilitarian forms and these more recent but similar forms. The two works (*The Listeners* and *Waiting*) show the two strains of Gwyn's work".

Smith says Australia is fortunate to have many eminent potters who are working outside the narrow framework of ceramics. "Gwyn is an artist and I will show her work in the context of Australian Contemporary Art in the Gallery in June. She is internationally renowned, and has been a key figure in elevating ceramics out of the narrow definition of decorative arts". What exactly is it that people respond to? According to Smith, "Gwyn's work has a material and technical refinement but also an indefinable aesthetic beauty. These are careful and considered

The exhibition at Christine Abrahams Gallery took up the whole of the main gallery—a large, light and airy space, perfect for displaying contemporary works of art—and a side gallery which contained six more still life groups. One, *Promenade* (1998), was arranged against the backdrop of a window through which the early morning light shone, emphasising the soft glaze tones of pale greens and greys and the translucency of the Limoges porcelain. It was November and the arrangement—of bottles, beakers and small jugs—evoked a memory of new buds in Spring. In the main gallery, nine still life groups were arranged on specially constructed plinths placed against the wall, allowing visitors the pleasurable experience of approaching each group from a distance. Each plinth, long and narrow and to a height of around 1.2 metres, provided an excellent platform for the multiple presentation of pots arranged in their particular groupings, such as *Still Life with Four Bowls*. Some of these still life groups have as many as 11, 14, 18 and up to 23 pieces.



Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, *Exodus II*, 1996, woodfired porcelain. Photo: Brian Hand.

arrangements and there is a dynamic between the pieces in her arrangements. They instill an emotional and a complete response. People respond to them at an emotional and a visceral level. Gwyn speaks of each of the pieces in the groups as organic entities and this has liberated for me the way I interact with her work".

Gwyn Hanssen Pigott majored in Fine Arts and English Literature, and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from the University of Melbourne in 1954. She trained with Ivan McMeekin at Sturt Pottery at Mittagong and in the late 1950s worked with Ray Finch, Bernard Leach and Michael Cardew in the U.K, and she also became friends with Lucie Rie. In 1965 she established a pottery studio at Acheres in central France and remained there for almost 8 years. On returning to Australia, Hanssen Pigott started a studio in Tasmania and five years later moved north to become potter-in-residence at the Queensland University of Technology in Brisbane. In 1989 she was able to buy a small house at Finch Hatton in north Queensland, about an hour's drive inland from Mackay, where she has established a studio. She has consistently worked at her craft for 45 years and was presented with a Visual Arts/Craft Fund Emeritus Award in 1997 and an Australia Council Fellowship in 1998. This year she will represent Australia in Tokyo at the Hokkaido Museum of Modern Art, and in Italy at the Museo Internazionale della Ceramica in Faenza. She has recently completed a commission, part of a project with the Queensland Artworkers Alliance, to install a 24-piece group in Limoges porcelain in a specially constructed window of the Queensland State Office Neville Bonner Building in Brisbane.

There is an extraordinary refinement but also a strength and purpose in these grouped forms. Her work has moved away from the more sturdy, utilitarian forms of a decade ago to individual pieces which are more refined, rarefied and ethereal forms. They seem to serve a different purpose. In some ways they represent not so much one style that we might instantly recognise, but a series of individual movements. Gwyn has spoken to me about her scepticism towards design. "I am wary of design... skill is one thing but a pot has to breathe".

The exhibition at Christine Abrahams Gallery paid tribute to a pure form of life that we are beginning to recognise in the common domestic object. Pigott has spoken about the love for the common object she shares with the still life artist, Morandi—"his searching, excessive, describing of the common object..." In these not so common objects, Pigott manages to describe life itself with an instinctive understanding of our needs and our immediate time. These groups have a meditative value. We take time out to consider them in the rush of life. People who purchase these groups set aside alcoves, shelves, and specially designed locations for these object groupings. Their strength and individuality; their cool composure; their certainty; their lightness and depth have the power to move and reassure.

endnotes

1. Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, 'Notes from Netherdale', *Ceramics: Art & Perception* No. 27 1997 p.79.
2. Ibid. p.80

Helen Stephens is a writer, curator and craft practitioner based in Sydney.