

## **TRANSCRIPT Writing about ceramics with Robyn Phelan Object podcast Series 2, Episode 4**

**Robyn Phelan:** I want the work to be accessible.

Good images. Simple, clear, interesting language tell the story.

<theme music>

**Lisa Cahill:** This is Object, a podcast about design and contemporary craft in Australia. I'm your host, Lisa Cahill from the Australian Design Centre.

In this series, you'll meet people from the most popular craft form - ceramics.

You'll hear about making handmade pottery on a large scale...

How you teach ceramics. We'll talk to writers and photographers of ceramics.

And we'll go behind the scenes with curators and art dealers to hear about collecting.

Robyn Phelan is a writer, a ceramic artist and an educator.

She writes regularly for *The Australian Journal of Ceramics*, and her other writing includes exhibition text and catalogues, reviews and articles.

In this episode, you'll hear how Robyn became a writer, what makes a good piece of writing about visual art, how we might get critique back into Australian arts commentary and her tips for new arts writers.

You'll also hear from fine art photographer Greg Piper on how to photograph ceramics.

And by the way, when Robyn or I mention "The JAC", we mean *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*, published four times a year by The Australian Ceramics Association.

**Lisa Cahill:** Robyn, thanks so much for taking time for this special series of Object podcast focusing on ceramics.

**Robyn Phelan:** Hi Lisa. I'm coming to you from Melbourne, Wurundjeri country and I grew up in this area too, in Naarm and have lived along rivers, the Moonee Moonee, and spent a lot of time in Taungurung Land as well, but all eastern Kulin Nations, all unceded lands.

**Lisa Cahill:** Robyn, can you tell me a little bit about your story particularly, how you came to ceramics?

**Robyn Phelan:** How I came to ceramics? I've always been a bit of a muddy person... Initially I did a degree in arts and crafts, secondary teaching. How specific is that? Like this is, this is seriously 1980s, isn't it? So I was a ceramics teacher in secondary school.

While I was loving the classroom and loved the students, I was starting to do a whole lot of little exhibitions.

And then I went overseas and when I was on a train in Italy, this girl was saying, oh, I just spoke to this other girl in Melbourne. She's doing this subject called Museum Management or something. I went, oh. So, I called a girlfriend and via fax applied to do the curatorial course.

I studied that and ended up with a life in registration at NGV [National Gallery of Victoria]

Again, obsessed with objects. The first time I put my hands on a Patsy Hely.

**Lisa Cahill:** What was that Patsy Hely work?

**Robyn Phelan:** I absolutely know what it was because it had found objects in it. You know, those 1960s and I grew up with these saucepans, with the anodised coloured lids and the little Bakelite lid.

**Lisa Cahill:** Oh yes.

**Robyn Phelan:** And the little Bakelite knobby handle?

Well, she had tiny little versions of those and she'd made beautiful porcelain vessels that fitted these pots. And my eye just went, "Wow, look at that. It's thrown beautiful ceramics, but it's contemporary. It's using found objects."

**Lisa Cahill:** But it was also an echo to domestic history, wasn't it, those pots?

**Robyn Phelan:** Yes, and everyday domestic history. This sat within this incredible collection of dec [decorative] arts and Asian arts of which Gwen Hanssen Pigott, was inspired to start making ceramics.

Oh, look at that! I can make a link to myself to Gwyn Hanssen Pigott!  
[laughing]

But yeah, walking through that collection is incredible.

Then I was pregnant and went, "I think I'm going to study ceramics." And my lecturer then was Prue Venables...

**Lisa Cahill:** Well, you've managed, Robyn, to mention people who are so pivotal and important in the history and the current field of ceramics in Australia today in just a few short sentences. So, that really goes to show that you are so embedded in the ceramics community. And I know as a writer, you know, you've been writing about ceramics and craft practice for a couple of decades now.

**Robyn Phelan:** Yeah. I first started writing for the local newspaper, the *Northwest Neighbourhood News*, because there are lots of little galleries around there, and I was a bit nervous about writing even though I do like to write.

I didn't feel I could pitch to a contemporary journal. I just didn't know how to do that.

I just would write about the exhibitions in the local newspaper and they were happy to take the content. And I did that for a couple of years and that really honed my skills.

The next thing I did I set up a blog. And it's called *Looking With Soft Eyes*, which is a statement that comes from the TV series *The Wire*. And the detective is talking about don't go in hard and try and find the evidence. Go in softly and see what comes to you. And that's how you see an exhibition.

**Lisa Cahill:** Right.

**Robyn Phelan:** I've also written for online journals. Artists ask me to write about their work. And then of course I offered to do the Victorian component for the *Journal*. which I did for free, but it was really good practice.

**Lisa Cahill:** Ahh so you did the Victorian report for the JAC [Journal of Australian Ceramics]?

**Robyn Phelan:** Yeah, for ten years! Yeah, theme. Get to the nub of it, good photographs. And I had to be down to 200 and 300 words. That's really good practice.

**Lisa Cahill:** I think that's part of the generosity that, you know, I'm stuck with in the ceramics world is, many ceramic artists are writing, teaching, passing on skill.

You know, it really is a very generous community, that I think the JAC [Journal of Australian Ceramics] as a hold all, I suppose, for that community, and then an expression of that community, through its writings and through its issues over the decades, has really encapsulated, do you think?

**Robyn Phelan:** Definitely, yeah. The visuals are there, which are important. See the visuals, and then go to the text so you can go deeper. But it's an intimate thing. It's in your hand as well. That A5 size, that's brilliant. It's armchair size. Bedside table size. It's good.

And then of course from the Journal I get to be asked to do exhibition writing.

**Lisa Cahill:** What makes a good piece of writing about visual art?

**Robyn Phelan:** I think you have to be in the exhibition. That's really important to me. Or you have to have been with the work.

I love that sense of, you know, embodying the work, embodying the work in space, and experiencing the work as is presented either by a curator or by an artist in a space because you need to be able to see the surfaces.

**Robyn Phelan:** And I think in a show, the opening lines are, What do you see? What do you feel?

That hook, something that breaks down the distance between the reader and the writer that says, here, I went here, I saw this, I felt this, I observed this with my eyes.

I think that's the first hook to start with.

And then really, and this is the hardest thing, is to have something to say that's interesting. Yeah.

**Lisa Cahill:** And so can you perhaps describe a piece of writing you've written, about a particular exhibition and what did you have to say about that show?

Was it easy to discover that? Or did you need to spend a lot of time with the exhibition and the work to find that hook?

**Robyn Phelan:** Damon Moon had this incredible series of exhibitions based on his skittle form based on a vase shape by William State Murray, who is a British designer. I wonder whether someone said, "Oh, Damon, that looks like a skittle." And so, he's continued to use that word.

It's quite large. It's probably about 40 centimetres, so probably a bit bigger than a bowling alley skittle and it's very modern, no ornamentation whatsoever. It's perfect for slip casting, which Damon uses.

This object can carry any glaze or any manipulation, and it tells this other story, which is what I loved about it.

Damon has densely layered academic theoretical details, but really it was about three different spaces at Bendigo.

So I said to him, look, I'm only going to do this if I can get to all the spaces and see all the works.

**Lisa Cahill:** So, it was about, it was about the object and also about, how the object was displayed in three different contexts?

**Robyn Phelan:** Yes, and I remember writing, I was imagining, especially

with one of the terracotta forms that had some punctuations, and I was just imagining him pulling it out of the plaster mould, this terracotta, chocolatey-coloured, soft, leather, hard thing and just poking his fingers around and thinking, "I bet Damon is a little boy at Easter, and got that bunny form and just crack. Did a real crunch onto the ear or maybe he was with that kid that broke it down. I was just wondering, you know, what did he do with his Easter eggs at Easter?"

**Lisa Cahill:** You might have to ask him!

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**Lisa Cahill:** Greg Piper is a fine art photographer. His work includes artist portraits, exhibitions, publications, and graphic design.

Greg Piper: So what makes a good photograph of ceramic artwork is very subjective. But usually, my go to is the selection of appropriate mood, based around intensity and shadow. Photography is not just adding light, it's adding shadows. Because shadows influence how an artwork appears.

And there are particular styles that you see radiate out of various parts of the globe.

The Japanese might have dark space and little kisses of light enveloping an artwork, it might be in a dimly lit mood.

At present there are trends of, what I tend to call bland shadowless, white on white images, where the artwork appears as a two-dimensional object and doesn't really reveal that it's got depth and roundness. But that's a particular style, a trend, and sometimes that's dictated by a gallery or a magazine.

We would be asking what is the narrative, first and foremost, how do I get my narrative across with my imagery? Has that been thought of in advance?

**Greg Piper:** So do you bring leaf matter or something green or the like into your shot to help? Convey that style, that influence, and of course it may be that the pieces are photographed in location, outdoors. We would then be looking at what are the features, the textures, the shape of form, the lighting appropriate, whether we put it in an isolated

context or whether it becomes something sitting within a, a room setting or something that is assisted with propping.

But that said, in the majority of cases it's important to be true to the artwork you produce and bring out the features that you have put into it.

So you may find the surface texture needs to be shown. That it's either rough or smooth terrain. You can have graffiti or other elements attached or etched into, decal, things like that. It's important that the viewer is able to see those elements.

Because it's trying to create a moment where the viewer will stop. And that's one of the things of mobile phone usage or iPad, is that people become skimmers and they are flicking through an abundance of imagery.

The challenge is trying to make the viewer stop.

**Greg Piper:** Then in turn the composition and the point of view of whether we are looking down on something or side or below. And I often ask an artist, "Well, where's your primary viewpoint? You have looked at this piece for days, weeks, months, and you must find that it sits in your gaze at a particular view."

**Greg Piper:** So is that the primary viewpoint that you go back to, or how about we look at it from this perspective, or let's rotate it.

So developing the way the audience will look at that work.

We often say, which is the primary, secondary, and tertiary viewpoints?

And then we have details. And often the artist is surprised when we reveal some minute element within and they go, "Oh, I didn't realise that was there."

So those combinations help develop you and your way of seeing your own work, and that becomes really, really important.

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**Lisa Cahill:** So with writing for an exhibition, Robyn, what are the features that where we would know that it was Robyn Phelan citation in an exhibition as opposed to someone else's?

**Robyn Phelan:** It would be short, no more than 200 words, maybe 180. And I'm hoping that it's not, doesn't use high-falutin language, you know, 'art speak'. And I'm hoping that it would capture you in the first few words. And I hope that it doesn't just tell you what you are already looking at, but it expands what you're looking at in the space.

**Lisa Cahill:** Fantastic. And as a writer and a researcher, do you write about your own exhibitions?

**Robyn Phelan:** I've actually got the first sentence for the recent exhibition, which I do like. I can read that now.

*Baskets hold. Gather and store the utility is enriched by their ease and fit to the human body as they assist in the labour of carrying skilled hands are required to carry or craft a basket form often with make-do materials.*

So what you were looking at when you read that text was a whole lot of heavily textured ceramic vases, really with big handles on them, suspended from the roof by twine made by my denim jeans. So you were looking at ceramic forms, but I'm telling you it's a basket. The language and the words add to the visual of the artwork.

And that's what I wanted people to hear, and to think about weaving as a surface, not just a ceramic surface. So that's that kind of idea of the supplemental information that adds to what you're actually looking at.

And the exhibition was called *The Wait of Waiting* and it combined works that I made during lockdown and pre lockdown. Playing with this idea of gravity and heaviness of that waiting time and also the weight of, of clay suspended using textiles that I plied from shredded denim jeans that my neighbourhood gave me during lockdown.

So the wall text is really important to me, but it can't be too long.

**Robyn Phelan:** We can fall into the trap of being too text-heavy. Think about going to a blockbuster shows and everyone's piling up at the threshold, reading this great big screed.

Ideas and words are visual as well.

I think you can have very subtle key words spatially arranged and they can add to a deeper understanding of the work or prompt ideas that are

really important to the maker to expand the work or give an insight on what I would like people to know.

**Lisa Cahill:** Just talking to you, Robyn, you can see that you have a love of language and that obviously finds its way into writing and, and then into your practice. And it's kind of circular, isn't it?

**Robyn Phelan:** Definitely, in a way. Definitely. Yes, it is. I do write with the work, so I do what's, which I now know is called field notes, and it comes from anthropology.

An anthropologist would be in a community with the people and writing at the time.

If I'm writing in my studio, I will write with the work.

It's not just, oh, I've used 2% of that stain. It's not process, technical process. It's about how I'm feeling, what I'm doing, what I've observed. And that's all, all in the journal at the same time.

**Lisa Cahill:** So journaling's a really important part of your practice as a ceramicist, but also your practices and writing?

**Robyn Phelan:** The journal is very important to me and that's, that's come from being a mum as well. So, I'm late to practice. I started studying when I had a six-month-old, so it's always the last thing on the list and sometimes you don't get to the studio. Oh, I don't have a studio, so the journals always there.

**Lisa Cahill:** Fantastic.

**Robyn Phelan:** There's sort of certainty Field Notes that I write at the time of making or how I'm feeling. Because my artwork is a lot about the combination of my body, material, which is clay or textiles and the site.

How I'm feeling as a person in the space at this time that I've chosen to make. So it's important that I write about what is just happening or is happening to me.

And we all have to write artist statements and I do teach the artist statement with my students, and I suppose the key tip there is, if you can get it down to a couple of sentences, but there's why we make art and why we feel creative in an artist statement.

And then the second part is, “What is this work about? What is this particular project?”

So there's two distinct things. You as an artist and what you like to do, then what is this?

And in this exhibition or in this particular Instagram post, “I'm doing this...”

So that's kind of two general tips to kind of frame what to write about, with an artist statement.

**Lisa Cahill:** Would you say, Robyn, that social media has provided a channel for your writing?

**Robyn Phelan:** Yes. I won't say 'yes' in, you know, an amount of words per day written, but when you write, it's important to have something to say, and what it is you want to achieve.

And with my Instagram, I see it as a diary really.

I tell a story of what I'm making or thinking about as far as my practices are concerned. I say to myself, I'll only post once a week, twice if that.

**Lisa Cahill:** But it's great though, isn't it? Because I mean, it gives you the visual, the work that you're working on and then it gives you, you know, a certain character limit of space to write about that work, and you are really constrained within the brevity of the medium.

**Robyn Phelan:** I prefer to write less for that, get a really succinct statement, almost like a title. It's just not the format in which to read long screeds, although I will do from other people.

But that's my thinking around Instagram. It's a great thing. It's probably why I haven't done much blogging anymore.

**Greg Piper:** The other reason to have your work photographed is it's archiving your work. "I made this; I did this". And drawing that material for exhibition invites and promotions the like.

You may find that someone is researching the style of your work and want to include it in a publication, which then means you've got to find high-resolution image.

It may be that you end up with three folders of data, some you may never use, but it is a starting point and it allows you then to act quickly. I give people a TIFF folder of images. I then give them a high res JPG folder of their images, and then I give them an SRGB folder, scaled and set up for Instagram and Facebook straight away.

Some mobile phones can and some can't provide you with that material or that level of quality.

**Greg Piper:** That if you are submitting images to a competition, often the archive is where you will draw your best image of a particular piece to submit straight away.

Often the pot or the plate or the artwork will be acquired and then disappear out of you, and then there's no evidence that it existed, but to a small select group of people. So that is why I feel an artist needs to have their work photographed.

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**Lisa Cahill:** What about when you're faced with a piece of critical writing that requires you to be true to yourself and your impression of a particular exhibition?

And when you know that might be a negative impression? How do you navigate that?

**Robyn Phelan:** Look, I'm going to be provocative. I don't think we have a critical review culture in Australia at all.

I've stopped reading the newspapers because they don't really review ceramics. And probably the last person that critically reviewed ceramics was Robert Nelson in Melbourne, and that would be the nineties.

There's so little critique around contemporary ceramic practice, and contemporary arts, I see it as a waste of time to be overly negative and horrible. Or not horrible, negative and critical if there's so little writing, make it optimistic and, impassioned and spread the good news stories.

If I have to write something critical in the past, and I have written for people, and I've mentioned something gently that I thought was an issue. And you do get pinged on it, but they tend not to change.

I would like critique. It is hard to get critique, but you've got to weigh up whether the person wants to hear it or not.

**Lisa Cahill:** Yeah, it's hard, it's a hard one, isn't it? I mean, you know, the theatre world is... I still read good critical reviews.

**Robyn Phelan:** But Lisa, I might be wrong. Do you think I'm wrong on that?

**Lisa Cahill:** I don't think you're wrong at all. I don't think you're wrong. And the reason I don't think you're wrong is because there are so few publications and so, you know, what do people want to read?

Well, do they necessarily want to read, you know, highly critical in so few pages that we have available to us?

But I think we should, I think we should be doing it more, because I think that's the only way that artists are going to really get a really good appraisal of the way their work appears in a public setting.

It's almost like we have to, we have to do it. If work is in a public setting, then it needs to be critiqued.

**Robyn Phelan:** I'm just thinking maybe critique isn't about critical critique. Maybe a critique will happen in the JAC [Journal of Ceramics] in the future around issues and concepts. So it's not pointing at a particular person's work output or work outcome, which we want to celebrate, cause it's so hard to get an exhibition together and up.

Maybe the critique is around something that's a burning issue and that's how we bring people in to debate things.

**Lisa Cahill:** Critical writing is good for the practice, it's good for the industry. It's good for the sector to have that critical writing that comes out. It doesn't all have to be about how great everything is.

**Robyn Phelan:** And if the writer or someone that you are opening is

saying, "Why did you do that there? Did you know about this here? That has the potential to be this." That's an expansion. Take it on.

**Lisa Cahill:** That's right. That's what I'm talking about. You know, not negative, but more, more constructive, expansive, generous.

Robyn, what would be your top three tips for emerging arts writers?

**Robyn Phelan:** Be warm and really engaging. When you write about the work, show that you love it and you are, do love it because you are writing about it.

Understand the history of the technique. You know, we stand on the shoulders of a long tradition of clay and ceramics. So, you know, always call that to attention.

And if you don't know, as a new writer, ask. There's plenty of established ceramic artists who say, in this pot here, does that look like, oh, who does work does this look like?

What part of cultural history or what Australian ceramic history does that belong to? Acknowledge the legacy.

Enjoy and savour writing about what you see in front of you and what you love about it. The glaze quality, the volumes, and the scales of the work and how it makes you feel and how you want to peer into it because it's a three-dimensional object and that's the joy of it.

Spend your time, do the work. Do some research, brainstorm some ideas and words.

You really just got to get the words down and spend the time and it will come to you.

**Lisa Cahill:** That was writer and artist Robyn Phelan.

What I took from this conversation was Robyn's thoughts about the power of writing in different contexts, to amplify the artist's work and ideas - in wall texts and catalogues, journal articles and social media.

I found it interesting how Robyn's writing practice extends to her own work in Field Notes and journaling. And I valued her guiding principles for writing about artwork - clarity, simplicity, and accessibility for audiences.

To see photos of Robyn's work, and links to her writing, go to our website <http://australiandesigncentre.com/podcast>

The final episode of Object for Series Two is about museums, public galleries and ceramics, with curator of Arts and Design at the The PowerHouse Museum, Eva Czernis-Ryl.

**Eva Czernis-Ryl:** So there's always a curatorial eye and everybody has a different one. And inevitably, you try as much as you can to be impartial, you always go for your instinct And you respond to it in your personal way.

**Lisa Cahill:** Object is a podcast of the Australian Design Centre.

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Object is produced by Jane Curtis, in collaboration with Lisa Cahill and Alix Fiveash.

Sound Engineering is by John Jacobs. Thanks for listening.

### **Show Notes links:**

Australian Ceramics: Writing about your work, why and how?

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Robyn's website [robynphelan.com.au](http://robynphelan.com.au)