

TRANSCRIPT for the podcast Object: Stories of Design and Craft

Season 2 Episode 2: Collecting ceramics with Brett Stone

Brett Stone: You really need to go and pick things up. They're tactile things. You need to touch them.

Going to commercial galleries is one of the great last free things that you can do in the world.

It's a great afternoon. You could do one, you could do five, you can go by yourself, you can go with friends. Go out and have a look.

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.

Brett Stone is an artist, an art dealer, and the founding director of Claypool

In this episode, you'll hear how to start a ceramics collection and the many different ways we can nurture ceramic practice.

Lisa Cahill: Today I have the pleasure of introducing ceramic artist and art dealer, Brett Stone.

I'm meeting Brett today in the studio, and we're here on Gadigal Land. Hello, Brett.

Brett Stone: Hello, Lisa.

Lisa Cahill: Thanks so much for taking time out today to talk with us for our, this special series of Object podcast and ceramics.

Tell me about your background as an art dealer. When and where did you start?

Brett Stone: I started in Perth in a mining boom in the 80s. I have a geography degree, a secretarial college degree. So, I could type, I could draw a map, I could drill holes in walls.

And then I was eventually offered a job with Rex Irwin in Sydney. I came here, and then when I decided to semi- retire and spend more time as a potter. Then Christopher at Utopia Art Sydney said, "Come and work for me part-time."

So I've been a gallery person, art dealer, potter.

Lisa Cahill: Fantastic. And Rex Irwin's gallery was an institution I think too, in terms of commercial art galleries in Sydney.

Brett: It was.

Brett: And I think because we were a general gallery and not a specialised gallery, a lot of people who were big collectors had never bought a ceramic work, as a work of art, bought a Gwyn Hanssen Pigott. And then went on and bought other things.

Lisa Cahill: Ahh very interesting. Ceramics seems to have increased massively in popularity in the past few years. Why do you think that is?

Brett Stone: I think the main reason is the rise and rise of the Danish sideboard.

Lisa Cahill: Somewhere to put them.

There was a great minimalist wave and then that all changed. And suddenly shelves were back. And as soon as shelves were back, then it was ok to start collecting.

Lisa Cahill: Do you have a Danish sideboard, Brett?

Brett Stone: No. No. I actually have a living room lined with shelves.

Lisa Cahill: Ah, and on those shelves are books and ceramics?

Brett Stone: Not many books anymore.

Lisa Cahill: Not many books, yeah.

Brett Stone: And have to say, during lockdown it was very nice to lay on the lounge and look around and every bowl has a story.

Lisa Cahill: Hmmm. And what's in your collection? Were you lucky enough to collect a Lucy Rie for example, or a Gwyn Hanssen Pigott back in the day?

Brett Stone: I have a couple of Gwyn Hanssen Pigotts. I have a very special one which is only a small still life, but it was from a firing that she did, that I actually went up and helped her pack the kiln.

I was supposed to help her fire, but she was very much a procrastinator. So I spent like a day sweeping the studio. And another day re-stacking the wood from one side to the other, and everything kept getting put off until I had to fly back. And so I didn't do it, but it was from that firing.

I have other things that I've been given and some very nice things that I've swapped with other ceramic artists and a lot of things that weren't that expensive but mean a lot to me.

Lisa Cahill: Yeah, that's wonderful. I think a varied collection is a more interesting collection and a very personal collection as well.

Brett Stone: Well, being a ceramic artist or being a potter myself, I would say 80% of what I have are bowls. I don't know what it is about the bowl.

My bowls that I make are very rarely single bowls.

My bowls are usually sold in stacks or in a, like a small group and I never try and make bowls that are exactly the same because if, you know, living in shared houses over my life and coming from a big family, nothing ever matched. So it's the way bowls live and to embrace that is a great thing.

Brett Stone: What Gwyn taught me about putting things together was, as she said, if you put one bowl on a table, do you look at it and go, "That's a nice bowl."

If you put two bowls on a table next to each other, what your mind does is go, "Oh, look at that. That one's slightly different to that one. But look at how they work together and look at the space between."

So by having shelves of bowls in my house, I rearrange them and I play with them and I stack like three or four people's work together. It's just a great way of interacting with the collection rather than it just being a static thing on a shelf.

Lisa Cahill: Yeah, that's the beauty of having your own collection at home, isn't it? As a curator and an art dealer, you have the opportunity to do your own exhibitions in your own home as much as you like.

Brett Stone: You do. It usually coincides every two months with a big dusting day.

Lisa Cahill: Dusting day, of course.

Lisa Cahill: What are collectors looking for when it comes to ceramics?

Brett Stone: Some people start collecting ceramics because they're looking for something that nobody else has. Or they are looking for something that's slightly nostalgic that reminds them of their childhood.

One of the things that collectors are looking for more and more is a unique voice.

And there are some amazing artists out there at the moment. There is Ebony Russell, Ramesh [Mario Nithiyendran], there's Glenn Barkley. There's Prue Venables who's very much a purist of form. There are people exploring all different ways of adding texture.

There are still the traditional wood firers that manage to imbue an amazing thing that's just theirs, like Sandy Lockwood. There are people working with other artists like Neville French working with Belinda Fox, and if you go out there and have a look, there are ceramic artists that are pursuing this path that either no one else in Australia has taken or even, like Juz Kitson, no one else in the whole world.

Lisa Cahill: Yeah. The diversity is extraordinary, and I think that you can see some of that diversity on show right now at the Powerhouse Museum in the *Clay Dynasty* exhibition and in Australian Design Centre's touring exhibition, *SIXTY*, celebrating the 60th anniversary of The Journal of Australian Ceramics.

Brett Stone: Both great exhibitions, and I hope this podcast comes out before those finish.

Lisa Cahill: Absolutely, we're only on venue three with *SIXTY* and there's fourteen venues to go so it will be out there for a long time, which is really great.

If I'm an art novice but interested in collecting ceramics, where do I start?

Brett Stone: The best way to start is to find a friend of yours who already collects ceramics and go with them to exhibitions. Or, when you are at someone's house for dinner and you notice that they've got nice things, say, where did you get those from?

If you were a novice and you just wanted to start out by yourself, there is Google. But Google is very misleading because a lot of ceramics don't photograph well, and you really need to go and pick things up and hold them. You nearly need to have the courage to say to the person who's yelling at you, "Don't touch that! Don't pick it up." to say, Well, can I please? And usually if they know that you're gonna, you know, be careful. They'll let you.

Going to commercial galleries is one of the great last free things that you can do in the world. It costs money to have a coffee. It costs money to go into a national park.

Lisa Cahill: And I think one of the great strengths of commercial galleries is that for an audience member, the shows are two or three weeks and they turnover very fast.

And so there's always new content and something new to see, which I think is you can spend every weekend, and in three weeks time go back to that same gallery again and see a completely new body of work.

And I think that's a great way to build your knowledge and educate yourself as an interested art goer.

Brett Stone: It is. And make yourself known to a gallery. If there's someone coming up that you're interested in, tell them and they'll let you know when the work's coming into the gallery.

One of the big misconceptions about commercial galleries is that nothing is for sale until the opening day. And that's not the case anymore.

If you let them know that you are interested in a particular work or whatever, then they'll put you on the 'Early Look' list.

Brett Stone: There was a great ceramic artist called Merran Esson, who sadly died recently.

One of the great things that she said is, when you're starting collecting, it's often about being in the right place at the right time and having the confidence to make a decision there and then.

Because often if you go back a week later or even ring the next day, it's gone. Um, Being in the right place at the right time, I think, is the key. And if you're not walking through the door and you're just relying on looking at websites, you're not going to get that.

Jenna Price: Some friends of ours said, Oh, we really love the work on your walls. we want to buy some art.

Lisa Cahill: Jenna Price and John Kavanagh are ceramics collectors.

Jenna Price: And we said, Okay, do what we do. We go out most Saturdays, we go to three, four, five, six galleries. And we've done that since 1983, even dragging children along.

Looking a lot is important. Spending a little bit more than you can afford is important.

Most gallerists will give you some time to pay. There's also various forms of paying for things over a long period of time. Maybe don't spend huge money on your first outing. . . What else?

John Kavanagh: I'd agree with that last point. I think a good idea at the beginning of any collecting, is to set a low budget. Because you buy things that are later on you, you think, Oh, maybe that wasn't such a good choice. Your taste does change.

Jenna Price: Oh yeah.

John Kavanagh: And once you get into it, you see more so you definitely, end up liking. Different things. And so some of the early things you buy, you think that was fantastic. I'm so glad I bought that. but other things you think, Oh, that was a bit odd. Why did I get that?

John Kavanagh: I think the other thing is, it's a social activity. You want to be part of going out, visiting galleries, meeting the gallerists, meeting the artists, and that adds a lot to it. That actually adds an incredible amount to it. So if you deny yourself that pleasure, you're missing an aspect of the work, which is extremely enjoyable.

Jenna Price: There is one other really important piece of advice for everyone collecting, which is to go to the student shows. Those art shows are the Juz Kitson's of the future. They happen a few times a year. Get in early. You'll be surprised at the wonderful things that you find. and you are supporting artists at the very beginning of their careers.

Someone once said to me, "Always buy artists who are the same age as you, so start early." But then I'm still buying young people cause I think they're fantastic.

Jenna Price: We don't do the themes thing. A lot of people have got themes or they want everything to be white or they want everything to be from a particular region.

John Kavanagh: The earliest things were things like plates and bowls.

Jenna Price: Yep.

John Kavanagh: Because they were functional. So you could justify spending that sort of money if you could also use it. And we still do use things. And as time goes by, you are less concerned about the utilitarian aspect of it. You start to branch out a bit.

Jenna Price: Exactly. So we're not the people who have the same things on the walls or on the surfaces every day. We've got finite wall space and ceramics can occupy surfaces.

John Kavanagh: You want a nice environment to live in and those things really enhance your home.

You can change the way a room looks a little bit by putting different work out.

You can change things around. That's quite an enjoyable thing to do. We do that quite a bit.

Because they're very portable and you don't want to leave them in the cupboards all the time. So instead of having it just sitting in a spot all the time, we put it away and then we bring it out. So every couple of months, it probably spends a couple of weeks sitting on a bench or a table, and then we put it away again.

Each time you do that, it feels fresh, It feels interesting. And we both enjoy doing that.

Jenna Price: Love it. And our grandchildren love it too.

John Kavanagh: And something else you need to be prepared for with ceramic. You will have breakages. Oh yeah, so we've got a little Jenny orchard figure with very pointed breasts.

Jenna Price: Yeah. Those breasts have broken off a couple of times. Yeah. you need to find a good, ceramic repairer.

Lisa Cahill: Do you think people understand the difference between production pottery and ceramics as an artform?

Brett Stone: Getting back to Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, I remember she told me she got very depressed when she thought, People aren't going to use my work anymore. I'm going to all this trouble to make a beautiful bowl to eat out of.

And people are getting to that point where they think these bowls are too expensive to use. And she would always love somebody who met her at an exhibition and said, I bought one of your bowls 30 years ago, and I eat my Weet-bix out of it every morning. And she would give them a hug and say "Thank you."

She had a great hesitancy about putting any of her work in a perspex box on a plinth because she didn't want it to become this cold, sterile thing.

So the production potters who are out there and who go to markets and sell their work and or sell it through a florist or the local gift shop or the state gallery bookshop.

They are doing a great and valuable work because they, that may be the introduction and the price entry point for a lot of collectors who then may think, Oh, this person is act these cups that I have, that person's having an exhibition. Maybe I'll go and have a look at their exhibition work as well.

So the, the potters who balance the two and their production work pays for. their exhibition work because the harsh reality is it's very hard to make money as an ex,

as an exhibiting potter alone. Mm-hmm. . Um, then there are the exhibition potters who kind of look down a bit on the production potters. Um, but.

Often their career is supported by them teaching, or they, you know, happen to live in the country where their cost of living is much less or whatever. So the division between production and exhibition pottery, it's a valid one, but for a lot of collectors, I don't think it's a question that comes into their mind..

Lisa Cahill: Are there any other ways Brett, that collectors can begin to build their knowledge of ceramics and build their collections?

Brett Stone: There are lots of collectors out there who never spent more than a hundred dollars on something. The open studio days and other market days like the Australian Design Centre run are great ways to actually meet someone face to face.

And the wonderful thing about this Instagram age is that people often get to meet face to face, someone who they've been following on Instagram for years.

Brett Stone: A great way I know is, and it could cost anything from \$50 each a month is form with your friends who have similar tastes or not similar tastes, a small art collecting group.

These often they can be as formal or informal as you want, and sometimes, um, I have done it with people where we've been and there's been a set of like six bowls and there's been three of us. And we thought, well, neither, none of us can afford these six, but if we bought two each, so we'll buy the whole thing and if we want to, we can borrow yours If we want to have a dinner party and have six.

And that becomes a great way of buying. The other way is, you agree on amount per each, per year and for a set number of years. So let's say you put in, let's say a thousand dollars a year and you have four to 10 members. And then between you, you buy a more substantial work a year, and at the end of the 10 years, you'll have 10 works of art, which you've all taken turns living with.

And then at the end of 10 years, you can either. decide to keep going and build the collection. You can have it valued and then your share is worth x, and then you can buy from that thing your share of what?

From the collection. You can sell the collection, or in the case of Jane Sawyer's group in Melbourne, you can donate it to a public institution.

Jane Sawyer: The Bluestone collection started in 2010, by a group of craftspeople here in Melbourne with the aim of collecting contemporary craft and donating it at the end of a ten-year period to an institution.

So by collecting contemporary craft, we're supporting both craftspeople and galleries who show contemporary craft.

We wanted to support galleries as well. We recognised that institutions were not collecting our contemporaries' work, as much as we felt they should be. I wasn't a founding member. I came to it a few years later, but I'm still a member now. And we're now onto Bluestone Two, which is our second collection.

We had 21 pieces at the end of Bluestone One, we donated Bluestone one, our first collection to RMIT Gallery, which is a perfect place for us to be because for those pieces to be because they're on display, and they're used as research by people who are studying art and researching art, which is great. It's a snapshot in time.

It's important to us to collect from Victoria, but not necessarily just Victorian artists. So we have got a few in a sprinkling of interstate people, but all bought from Victorian galleries.

We each contribute a small amount of money. So only like what is small is \$300 for us. And we can say that which is, you know, not a lot in the art world, but that gives us a few thousand dollars a year to play with.

And then we get together and we have wonderful discussions about what we're going to purchase and the reasons why we have a goal to help support, uh, crafts people who are not particularly well collected or who are doing things that are just a little bit off the edge and perhaps not as well, you know, regarded because of that.

And it's a broad craft. There are a lot of ceramics, but there are also a lot of jewellery and some beautiful metal, leather, wood. So there's a range of materials.

It's definitely philanthropic. And also we set up as a not for profit, so we can't sell it, we don't want to sell it, we don't want to make money out of it. It's there for learning and for a record of our, of our contemporary society through craft.

Brett Stone: Another way of being involved in collecting, which a lot of people don't think about is to join one of the public institutions. So you could become a member of the powerhouse ceramic Collector's Appreciation group. You could give them \$20 a year.

You could give them \$2,000 a year. You could start a relationship with the curator there, and she may say, "There's this wonderful thing we want to buy, but we don't have the money."

You could say, Look, here's \$50, here's 5,000. Your name will end up on a plaque. You don't collect it yourself, but you've been a part of supporting an artist and building a collection.

Lisa Cahill: Exactly, yeah. Fantastic.

Lisa Cahill: I imagine as a collector Brett, there's a certain amount of administration that you need to do to authenticate your collection? Would that be right?

Brett Stone: There is, you'll usually get a receipt and sometimes we get a certificate from the gallery with a picture on it. If you're buying something from an exhibition, take a photo of it in the exhibition context and keeping the records and not, not in a shoebox in the bottom of the wardrobe.

Getting back to the cultural gift things, you can leave institution things in your will. Like, I have a list of my collection and most of it goes to particular people who were with me when I bought something.

Or it may go back to the artists themselves because they may not have something from that period. But keep good records. You may need to insure it, and you need to have a record of what you have somewhere safe.

Lisa Cahill: Indeed.

Lisa Cahill: You're the founding director of studios in Sydney, Claypool. What is Claypool, how did that begin?

Brett Stone: Unlike a drawer or a painter or even a photographer, you can't really do pottery on your living room table. No, because it's messy and you need a kiln and you make a mess, and you need somewhere to recycle your clay and somewhere to keep your glazes.

So as property prices in Sydney increased, and also as every second warehouse in the inner city was being bulldozed down to make a block of apartments, In my gallery world, I realized that a lot of artists were having to move either out into the suburban fringe or Newcastle, Wollongong, Blue Mountains to get somewhere that they could have a studio.

So we knew that there was a need for this. At the same time as this was all happening, a lot of ceramic artists were enrolling perpetually in TAFE, so they would have studio and facility access..

And we thought at the time if we could get 20 members, we would be doing really well. That's nearly 10 years ago and we are now 60 members.

I see us as the springboard for a lot of people to come in, see if they can make a career of being a ceramic artist, either production or exhibition.

Lisa Cahill: Fantastic, so it's really nurturing new generations of potters and being the foundation for a lot of people to begin their studio practice, outside of Claypool and in other places.

Many years ago, I did a course at Claypool. I haven't become a member or started my own studio but I enjoyed my course at Claypool very much.

Brett Stone: And I'm finding people who are collectors. Want to know more, who will then enrol in a class and then come become members. So often someone who's been a collector of ceramics becomes a really good potter because they've been holding other people's work. They've been looking at things and thinking, "this is what a good bowl feels like, and this is what a good bowl or a good sculptural work looks like".

And they will come in and then start to want to make their own things. .

Lisa Cahill: And there's real satisfaction in the making, of course, as well. And I think many people who appreciate the work that artists do and begin to love the clay, and want to experience that too, the tactile...

Lisa Cahill: Brett, thank you so much for talking with me today for our series on ceramics. It's been fantastic.

Brett Stone: It has been, it's been, it's made me think about why I collect and why I make, and why I run Claypool, and why I work in a gallery.

Lisa Cahill: That was art dealer, and part-time potter, Brett Stone.

I learnt some useful tips from Brett about collecting.

To see photos of Brett's work and items from the collection of Jenna Price and John Cavanagh, go to our website: australiandesigncentre.com/podcast

In the next episode of Object you'll meet ceramics teacher, Jane Sawyer.

Jane Sawyer: All of the skills that I learnt in Japan, they came from the trade of pottery, from production throwing. One of them is just how to mix the clay. When that's done well, you can mix a large amount of clay without expending any more energy than you would a small amount of clay.

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