

TRANSCRIPT for the podcast Object: Stories of Design and Craft

Season 2 Episode 1 Plating Up with Ilona Topolcsanyi

[introduction with music]

Ilona Topolcsanyi: A random email from a chef came through asking me if I would be interested in collaborating with him to create a range of tableware.

I said, absolutely. I'd never done this before.

Ilona Topolcsanyi: There were so many parallels between what a chef does and what a potter does. Taking these ingredients from the earth.

We add water, we add heat, and then we serve it up. We serve it up for the enjoyment of others.

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 learn all about ceramics.

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

How you teach ceramics.

We'll talk to writers and photographers, and we'll go behind the scenes with curators and gallerists to hear about collecting.

Lisa Cahill: Ilona Topolcsanyi is a specialised maker of bespoke tableware for some of Australia's most notable chefs.

She's even made plates and bowls that world leaders have eaten from, like Barack Obama!

Ilona and her partner Colin Hopkins run their business Cone 11 in Naam, Melbourne.

Their tableware has subtle surfaces that range from shimmering pearly whites to rich encrusted terracotta.

In this episode, you'll hear Ilona designs, and makes by hand, large orders of beautiful, hard-wearing and functional tableware.

And how she works with chefs as a problem-solver, working out how to make plates that aren't noisy, to bowls where the sauce sits perfectly.

Lisa Cahill: Hi Ilona. Thanks so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to be part of this special series of Object podcast, focusing on ceramics.

Ilona, you're a ceramic artist and a production potter. Your business Cone 11 with your partner Colin Hopkins is based in Melbourne at Abbotsford Convent. So tell me a little bit about your actual studio.

Ilona Topolcsanyi: The Abbotsford Convent used to run a laundry and our studio is located in that old laundry. And our studio has big beautiful high ceilings and a bluestone floor.

A huge stainless steel laundry sink. And then it's an eight-metre space by about twenty metres divided up into sections.

Lisa: Oh wow.

Ilona: So it's quite a big space. And we're surrounded by small bespoke studios, ceramics, jewels, designers, printmakers. So it is a really beautiful arts, culture and learning precinct right in the heart of Melbourne.

Lisa: It is absolutely beautiful. I remember visiting a couple of times and feeling transported, like transported back in time.

Ilona: It is very idyllic. It has its problems being a heritage listed building cuz it isn't fit for purpose. Trying to trolley ceramics across a flagstone floor has its issues. But given its location you.. we put up with those quirks of a heritage listed building.

Lisa: Can you tell me a little bit about your story, particularly how you came to ceramics?

Ilona: My journey to ceramics was very long winded. I had lots of really strange jobs before I finally landed ceramics. You know, I worked at the Talking Book Library. I was a dental nurse. I was a masseur. I did a

Bachelor in Health Sciences in Chinese medicine and acupuncture, and. I was a travel agent. I worked in a call centre and eventually I did a short course in ceramics and had finally found this medium that I connected with. It was at Box Hill TAFE that Colin and I met. And that's when we set up Cone 11 ceramics at the Abbotsford Convent, around 2008.

Lisa: So not that long ago, really?

Ilona: No, no. I probably had been working full-time in ceramics for about twelve years. But prior to that it was definitely very much a part-time occupation.

Lisa: Mm-hmm. And being a non-ceramicist, I'm really interested in what Cone 11 means and how the name Cone 11 came to be?

Ilona: Cones are a little triangular ceramic material that you put in your firing and it measures the heat work. The average potter will go to Cone 9 or Cone 10. And one day Colin said just jokingly, Let's go to 11. Let's call ourselves Cone 11. You know, it was a take on Spinal Tap with the amplifier that went to 11. And it was just a joke that everyone else goes to 10, we're gonna go to 11. We're gonna take it to the next level. And it just kind of stuck

Lisa: Fantastic. I'm particularly interested for this episode Ilona, we wanted to talk with you about your work collaborating with chefs to create ceramics for restaurants. How did that all come about?

Ilona: I dabbled for a really long time in making functional work - jugs and cups and plates. I tried to do wholesale to design stores. I even tried to retail out of our own studio and nothing really stuck. I was terrible at doing direct sales.

Ilona: I learnt really quickly that was not going to sustain our practice. For my very first commission, I flew up to Brisbane to meet with Josh Lopez and to chat to him about what it is that he was after, and just the way he spoke about the food and the way he approached the food, I think we found a real affinity.

Josh Lopez: I knew the first moment I saw it, I needed to do this in Australia.

Lisa: Josh Lopez is one of Australia's leading chefs. He's talking about the moment he first saw food served on handmade, ceramic plates. It

was over a decade ago, when Josh was an intern in one of the world's top restaurants - Noma, in Denmark.

Josh Lopez: I've come back, and I've obtained a position at the Queensland Art Gallery and GOMA as their executive chef and I just thought I want to bring together food and art.

There's no point serving beautiful food if it's going to be in a mass-produced plate from China. And that's no disrespect, that's functionality. I know my parents still have plates mass produced. That's realistic, that's life.

But as a creative, why go to all this effort? Have all these mantras, philosophies - I source locally, I source ethically, biodynamically - and then serve it on that.

When you put your food on a handmade plate, that just adds another layer of integrity.

My wife, who I have to reference, is a visual artist. It was actually Crystal who started putting feelers out across Australia, because we worked out very quickly that Brisbane didn't have a ceramicist that was, in that sort of head space, I guess, at that time. And it hadn't really been done in Australia before.

Crystal just sent Ilona a little cold call email at the time. Would you be interested in developing, a series of plates for the Queensland Art Gallery, for the gallery restaurant? And there was a real... almost like symbiosis. It's one of my favourite words because she was keen to see why someone in the food space wanted to engage a ceramicist. And conversely I was just so excited to engage a ceramicist.

The most important thing that I needed in a plate was basically a frameless design. Because we do eat with our eyes. It's the old cliches. And the first thing is how can we make a plate that is frameless but the waiters can still pick up and is durable?

Josh Lopez: So we started off with the white plate and then we had the beautiful, earthy, two-toned bowl. And Ilona's point of difference is that she throws plates as opposed to cuts them out or...there's many ways to shape and to make a plate work.

Josh Lopez: I didn't realise when I was engaging with Iona that it was a traditional method. I know very little about that, but all I know is that when I feel a plate that's made by Iona, each one is hand-autographed underneath. It's got her little maker's mark, which is beautiful.

And everyone who used to eat for the first time at our restaurant with these plates, they used to do the whole "inspect underneath". That's always the truest sign of, I guess, admiration. To not only enjoy the meal, but then have an inquisitive look under there.

Because I always knew that what we were doing was something special because she never compromised on anything.

I think what Iona has done for Australia in having a relationship with chefs and creatives, I'm glad it was her to be, at the coalface, I guess originally. And she paved the way, which is wonderful.

Lisa Cahill: That's fantastic, isn't it? And it's inspiring to think that first chef, you know, that contacted you from the Gallery of Modern Art spurred off a new path for you.

And so what are chefs looking for generally, and how do you work with them to understand their vision?

Iona: What I've found is they're looking for a point of difference initially. For a unique design. But then at the same time, they're looking for a frame or a canvas for their food. So the plates in themselves can't be the focus. They can't be the object that you notice, I suppose, like good lighting or good music, it's a support act.

What I've realised over time is that I really needed to understand not so much the food itself, but the way that food was being presented and, and the structure of the meal, how people went to that space to eat.

With the Gallery of Modern Art, what I was making for Josh was oversized plates and the food had lots of space around it. And the meals that Josh was creating were works of art.

Lisa Cahill: Do the chefs visit you in your studio? How do you go about that kind of research that you need to do around the restaurant and what they're looking for in terms of their table?

Ilona: I've learned over the years to establish really quickly some, not boundaries, but some guidelines for what it is that they're after. I encourage chefs to bring in photos, to show me what it is that they have the things that they like of what they've got, the things that they don't like. And then we kind of start to talk about the problems with the things that they've got.

That's always a really good start because for me, I'm a problem solver.

So that's part of the design process is resolving some of the problems that they might have or the things that the existing tableware don't do that they need. That's always a really great place to start. Common problems that crop up in the design of the tableware about the movement of the liquids that surround the foods themselves.

Ilona: So often bowls if they're too, too shallow or too flat, the liquid will kind of move away from the food. There's a couple of solutions, the chef has to change the viscosity of the liquid, but then that changes the flavour. Or can I get a potter who can create the right curve on the inside of the bowl so that there's enough space around this food, but then the liquid pools in the middle.

"I don't want it too shiny, but it can't stain or it can't scratch". Or "it can't be too noisy", like the sound of a fork knife or the sound of a spoon scraping on a bowl, or can I create a dish that doesn't need. A fork, a knife. So there are a few dishes that we've created that basically are designed to pick up and put in your mouth, which I love.

They're my most favourite dishes. Because that's such an intimate object, isn't it? And how does that feel? How does that edge feel in your mouth? What does the glaze feel like in your mouth? So they're all, they're very, very subtle, subtle changes. Changes in surface, changes in colour, changes in form and direction that seem really simple, but then make such a big difference to the food and how it looks and how it sits.

And, you know, the chefs, the chef's happy.

Lisa: I think that goes back to what you were saying about, you know, your work being a support act for the chef's food. Yeah, I can understand that.

Ilona: Between understanding what the problem is, understanding what they've got, and understanding what they're like. It's a really great way for me to start.

And then what I will do is do some prototypes and give those to the chefs and say, "Use these." "Put them through service. Make sure that you are happy with them, that they're doing what it is that you need them to do".

And then if they don't work or they're not quite right, we'll go through another round of prototyping. It usually only takes about two rounds, I think, at worst case scenario. And then we go into production

Lisa: And there's just the two of you, yourself and Colin, making multiples of this tableware. That must be challenging.

Ilona: It is challenging. It is definitely challenging. I do most of the production work. Colin predominantly makes the porcelain and stoneware pendant lights, but he does step in every now and again.

So I'll sit down in the morning and, and I'll prep my work station to throw 30 or 40 bowls. In the middle of that, you know, I'll suddenly have this idea about this other thing that I'm doing. Or something may not go particularly right with this particular bowl that I'm making at the time, but I won't necessarily scrap it.

Ilona: I might just kind of keep pushing it. I'll push it in a different direction and think, Oh, actually. "That's interesting. Look at that little curve there or look at that. That doesn't necessarily fit this particular job that I'm doing now, but I'm gonna keep that because there's something in that. Yeah, this little kind of turn of the wrist has created a whole new, you know, angle."

So the production is always happening, but parallel to that production is always this idea of looking for something new. Often when a chef comes in and we'll start to chat and I start to get an idea of what it is that they're interested in, there are always one or two, ideas that came out of something else that weren't suitable that I would kind of think, "Oh, this might be an opportunity to pull this little idea out here that's been waiting for a home."

So that's a really beautiful thing about sitting there doing production work. You can stop in the middle of it, or if something hasn't quite

worked out, it doesn't necessarily mean that it's a failure, it just means that it's another idea that you can return to at another time and then go back to finishing those 30 or 40.

Lisa: How long does it take to make a set of 30 or 40 bespoke bowls for a restaurant?

Ilona: So the throwing will generally take a morning or an afternoon, depending. I try not sit there for too long because it is really physically demanding. I try and get up and stretch.

The next day, hopefully, depending on the weather, the next couple of days I'll have to return back and do the turning, which is where the pieces are turned over and the bottoms are finished.

Again, in that, there are always one or two pieces in that collection that don't quite belong. But they'll kind of be brought along for the ride. And then they'll get glazed. We also do a lot of glaze research, so in every kiln firing there is the production work, and then there are pieces that are just experiments.

It's not, "I'm gonna come in, I'm gonna do this, I'm gonna research this, and then I'm gonna move on to do that." When we're in production, that definitely happens. But alongside that is a lot of research, and experiment... well "play", I think is the right word for it - a playfulness.

Lisa: Could you tell us about how you collaborated with the restaurant Brae?

Ilona: The most important thing was understanding not so much the food and how it tasted, but how people went to that particular restaurant and how they engaged with the food. How long they were planning on being there, how many courses was the chef going to serve up?

At Brae, the meal is the event. It's an all-day event

Lisa: And Brae is a restaurant in Victoria?

Ilona: And so in Birragurra. Yeah, so one of the top 50 restaurants of the world. All of the food is local or comes off the market garden. The plates are small, the servings are very small, and they'll be 12 to 13 across the meal. So each of the dishes that we create served a very specific purpose in the way that the food needed to sit. All of those kinds of

things were really important. And then those canvases or those frames were created to sit and enhance the food - not to kind of take the focus away from the food.

Dan Hunter: Hi, I'm Dan Hunter from Brae. It's a small restaurant in Birragurra.

It's built around workmanship and craftsmanship and it's built around people and stories. Whether it be through producers or any of our suppliers or collaborators, as we like to call them.

And of course, Cone 11 have been part of that since pretty much the start of the restaurant.

It's a modern cuisine, but we're not just out there free styling and, and just throwing things at the plate. There's a lot of consideration. Hopefully we just get to tell some stories, so to speak of time and season and place and where we are and we just do that through all types of things.

Dan Hunter: We do that through the rainwater that we might serve, or through the plates that Ilona's made from clay from one of our dams.

I guess, in the nine years we've been on the property, we've been in the years where we've had no water. Two or three years into the project, our dams dried out completely and we were just without water and it's pretty sad.

But anyway, within that moment we did, we did seek the opportunity to take the opportunity to or Ilona did, to, to harvest clay from the dry dams. To take something that's pretty much useless out of a situation that's quite depressing and makes something quite beautiful and with integrity from that moment.

It was a really lovely... a really lovely opportunity to have that time to get into those shallow or dry dams and cut out clay by hand, which she did, and fill up buckets and take it back to Melbourne, to Abbotsford, and turn that into dinnerware for the restaurant.

We have a bread oven. I bake bread each day in a wood fired oven. And part of that process is to clean the oven and have the hearth nice and clean and hot. But there's always a residual sort of fine white wood ash left over from that. And they've taken that on quite a few occasions and,

and blended that into some of the glazes to give this sort of speckled pattern that I really like.

We approach the food or the menu and the farm to be serving items of place, but also serving them on dinnerware made from place, made from this place. And I think that's a really nice connection using fallen timber from the property, baking the bread, taking the ash, putting outta the plates, serving the bread on that plate.

It's a very nice complete picture of locality.

Lisa: So, have you eaten at all these restaurants? Have you eaten chef's food from your plates?

Ilona: Uh, no. No, not a lot of them. Colin and I actually had our, our engagement at Brae, which was fantastic.

Ilona: That was one of our, our most memorable meals. So 40 of our closest friends and family at Bray, which was pretty special. Our most, memorable meal would have to be one that I was not at, to be honest with you. It was the G20 summit in 2014. The heads of state dinner was held at GOMA [Gallery of Modern Art, Brisbane].

Ilona: And I worked with Josh again to make work for that dinner.

Josh Lopez: The first thing that I did was tell Ilona, "Look, I'm gonna need more of your plates, more of your bowls." Because at the time I think we had 16, 16 bowls. I'm like, "Ilona I'm gonna give you as much notice as I can, but I'm gonna need 60 this, 60 that."

I'm going to all this intent with my food, but how often do you get to cook for, you know, Barack Obama and, you know, they, you they, that they had to be served on handmade.

I know for my sake, Ilona's plates were the only thing that they were gonna see that night and, it was a very proud moment.

Ilona: So, you know, Barack Obama, Xi Jinping and Narendra Modi and Angela Merkel and Shinzo Abe were all there. Yeah, And there's no photos. It was tight security, but it's one of those things where I know that was something that I made work for, which is pretty special.

Lisa: Wow. That's an incredible story. Well, do you know what? When I'm eating my dinner from your plates at home tonight, I will remember that story. That's fantastic. Oh, well, thank you so much, Ilona. It's been really fantastic to speak with you about Cone 11, your studio at Abbotsford Convent, your work, and fantastic to talk to you about the world of production pottery as well.

[music]

Lisa: That was production potter Ilona Topolcsanyi of Cone 11. I was really struck by Ilona's fluid way of working, how even when she's in production mode and throwing bowls, she's also in design mode for the next set of tableware and holding all these things in her head at once.

And another takeaway for me was that there are no failures - only experiments, research and play.

You can see photos of Cone 11's bespoke tableware in the Show Notes for this podcast . You can also find links to Cone 11 and their ceramic classes in Melbourne.

[music]

In the next episode of Object you'll meet art dealer, Brett Stone.

Brett Stone: There was a great minimalist wave. And then that all changed. And suddenly shelves were back. And when shelves were back, you need things to put on them. Then it was ok to start collecting and people became obsessed collecting with something that not everyone else had.

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

We'd like to thank Visions of Australia, the federal government's regional exhibition touring exhibition for funding support towards this podcast.

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

Sound Engineering is by John Jacobs. Thanks for listening.

[music] END.