

# copper red, tea dust and temmoku

The coalescence of flamboyant glazes and refined, unadorned forms found in **Kirsten Coelho's** ceramics are accompanied by the artist's sensitivity towards the Zen Buddhist concept of 'perfection in imperfection', writes **Wendy Walker**.



The ceramic vessels of Kirsten Coelho are perfect ellipses of porcelain: small, weightily substantial cups without handles, teapots simultaneously sturdy, yet refined. There are echoes of the Bernard Leach/Hamada legacy, of Lucy Rie, Edmund de Waal and Joanna Constantinidis. But it is Coelho's dramatic, cool-warm, calm-chaotic interplay of iron oxide glazes—temmoku, copper red, celadon and teadust—that is particularly arresting.

Oxides of iron had, by the late twelfth century AD, been employed by Chinese potters to provide a palette of coloured ceramic glazes, including red, yellow, green, blue, amber, brown and black.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, as Nigel Wood asserts in *Chinese Glazes*, 'In some ways the whole early history of Chinese ceramics can be regarded as a systematic exploration of all the colouring potentials of iron oxides—in bodies and glazes, in low-fired and high-fired wares and in both oxidising and reducing atmospheres.'<sup>2</sup>

Earth, clay, sand and rocks owe their colouration to iron compounds, which are ubiquitous in their presence in both the natural and man-made worlds. In Thomas Riedelsheimer's extraordinary documentary, *Rivers and Tides: Andy Goldsworthy working with time*, 2001, there is a riveting segment in which Goldsworthy breaks apart an iron ore rock to reveal the startling red of its interior. Grinding and emulsifying this mineral matter, Goldsworthy observes that it is also the presence of iron that makes our blood red. He then proceeds to fling the iron ore paste into a rockpool, as the river—from which the stones were originally sourced—slowly and, in a moment of exquisite symmetry, begins to trickle and then gush, blood-red.



The intense flush of the ox-blood glaze, the richly glowing ebony of temmoku that cedes to molasses-brown at rims and handles, and 'the floating golden spangles of teadust'<sup>3</sup> form a striking contrast to the pale celadon-blue interiors of Coelho's vessels. This duality is most pronounced in Coelho's temmoku/celadon tea set for the Jam Factory's *Ritual of Tea* exhibition, 2002, and the ox-blood/celadon cups of her solo exhibition *Ellipse: New porcelain*, 2002; it is most discreet in the celadon cups with iron oxide inlay that appeared in the same exhibition. The complex and wilfully flamboyant disposition of Coelho's glazes has led to her pursuit of simplicity and unadorned clarity of form. Her teapots, for instance, appear to flare rather than taper at their bases, in accordance with Coelho's preference for a rhythmic purity of uninterrupted line.

Nevertheless, one suspects that Coelho, who has always imposed rigorous control over her ceramic forms, relishes the sense of chaos and impossibility of an aesthetically determined outcome engendered by the unpredictability of the iron oxide glazes. Coelho admits that she is increasingly attracted to the Buddhist notion of perfection in imperfection, memorably recorded in fifteenth-century Zen priest Murata Shuko's lyrically stated preference for 'the moon partially shrouded by clouds' and the 'muted beauty of simple, imperfect objects.'<sup>4</sup>

Two beakers from the *Ellipse* body of work may signal a new direction. With a crumpling of their pristine celadon surface and a dimpled abstraction of form, they seem, however slightly, to be collapsing from within. Having survived her ongoing encounters with the fugitive Chinese iron oxide glazes, it appears that Coelho—in a melding of Japanese philosophy and Chinese aesthetics—is now prepared to confront and disrupt her hitherto (closely-held) perfection of form.

**Wendy Walker** is an art critic and writer, and is the current chair of the Adelaide Visual Arts Critics Circle.

## Endnotes

1. 'This widespread use of iron oxide as a glaze colourant in Chinese ceramics is actually in marked contrast to another major ceramic tradition of the Old World—that of the Middle East. In Islamic ceramics in particular, the oxides of copper, cobalt, manganese and tin played far more important roles as glaze colourants than iron.' Nigel Wood, *Chinese Glazes*, G+B Arts International Ltd, London 1999, p. 159.
2. *ibid.*
3. Stephen Bowers, *Ellipse*, exhibition catalogue, Jam Factory Craft and Contemporary Design, 20 July – 15 September 2002.
4. Soshitsu Sen XV, *Tea Life, Tea Mind*, Weatherill NY & Tokyo, 1979, p. 44.

Opposite page, top: Kirsten Coelho, *Cups*, 2002, porcelain, copper red glaze exterior and celadon interior.

Opposite page, bottom: Kirsten Coelho, *Temmoku Tea Pot*, 2002, celadon interior, temmoku exterior.

Left: Kirsten Coelho, *Cup*, 2002, porcelain, celadon with inlaid iron (detail). All photos: Grant Hancock.