

ARTIST CASE STUDY

MERRAN ESSON



Merran Esson

Broken buckets: broken boundaries 2018

stoneware, clay and glazes

"Influences from her rural childhood, combine with her city life to produce large objects inspired by old water tanks and buckets, often with distorted shapes, discarded in a farm gully or machinery yard; these are a reminder of the impermanence of material."



Merran Esson

Broken buckets: broken boundaries 2018 (detail)

stoneware, clay and glazes

ARTIST Q&A

What advice would you give to a person who is passionate about their artmaking but doesn't know where to start?

Art is a career that tends to choose you (the artist). If someone is passionate about their artmaking, just start making. Choose simple materials first, draw or paint or collage, it really doesn't matter what you do. My advice is to experiment with a range of materials and it will show you the way.

When I began my studies there weren't a lot of options, but it seems now that there is a pottery course or a drawing course in all sorts of different venues, from short courses at the National Art School where I taught for many years, to community centres and studios such as Claypool.

The best advice I was ever given ... 'It's better to whisper with your own voice and to shout with another's'.

What do you want your work to do? Is there a particular reaction you are looking for?

The great thing about ceramics is that it can be functional. When I began working in clay I was delighted when folk used my ceramics in their kitchens and dining rooms. However, I do enjoy making objects that don't have a direct utilitarian function. I enjoy the different reactions that my work evokes. Usually it is something to do with the familiarity of country, because my subject matter is related to landscapes and rural life – I'm always delighted when someone remarks on that. It's great to see recognition when someone recognises something familiar in the work.

Has your work undergone a particular development or transformation?

About 18 years ago I started to make work that challenged function. I followed a quote by the British poet Peter Dormer. 'Function is the subject matter, not the purpose; the purpose is art.' I became interested in exploring scale and taking the work out of the

kitchen and into the landscape and garden. I wanted work to be seen as art, I have been a finalist in Sculpture by the Sea (2016), Sculpture at Scenic World (2017 & 2018), the University of Western Sydney Sculpture Award (2018) and the Ravenswood Women's Art Prize (2018).

I have always been influenced by country, I grew up in the foothills of the Snowy Mountains in the Upper Murray area of Southern NSW and so I have used rural architecture, and building materials such as corrugated iron to influence my ceramic work. I am interested in the collision of man and nature, I watch the changing landscape and notice how we plant rows of trees, and put up fences, creating a man-made pattern in the landscape which constantly fights with the rhythms of nature.

Do you plan for exhibitions or do you produce works constantly then piece them together?

I like the pressure of an exhibition, and if the subject matter or topic interests me I will research new work. However, I do constantly make work that explores my own subject matter and so I like it when I am invited into exhibitions such as 'Beyond the Bowl' and I have work that will fit the theme. Every artist has their own way of working and exploring ideas, so I enjoy searching my stock shelves to see what might work.

What's next?

As I write this answer I am about to go to Mexico for a few weeks. I'd like to see the ceramics that are being made over there, but am also interested in cactus and so I wonder if this will create new work, new forms and new ideas. Travel is such a great education. I am having a solo exhibition in Brisbane in 2019, so I need to make some new work. I recently retired from full time teaching. I was Head of Ceramics at the National Art School, one of the best teaching positions available. It's exciting to have free time in the studio to develop whatever comes along.



MATERIALS & PRACTICE – ARTIST Q&A

Can you explain your technique and how you manipulate the clay?

I realised quite early on in my art practice that there are many throwers out there who are much better and much more committed to throwing on a potters wheel. When I discovered hand building I realised that I had enormous freedom. My techniques are the simplest ones that any student learns; pinch, coil and slab. These are the foundations of my work. Technique is fairly easy to learn and over time one masters the various techniques that suit clay, however, it's subject matter that is the most important asset to any artist.

Can you give us an insight into your artmaking process? Is your work pre-planned or created intuitively?

Most of my work is pre-planned but creating intuitively is very important, as clay often reveals marks and impressions that are worth exploring. I used to do a lot of drawing and sketch out ideas, sometime I would write down what I wanted to make hoping that I could capture the mood or moment of those words. Now I work intuitively, knowing what it is that I want to make, but allowing the process of working with the clay to explore previous boundaries and watching things break through that were unexpected

Do you keep a process journal or a collection of images for inspiration?

I do keep all my sketch books and doodles and jottings. Often when I look back at drawings, I realise that back then I really didn't know how to execute an idea, so I often revisit ideas and expand them into more resolved work.

Who are your favourite artists? Who do you draw inspiration from?

Marea Gazzard would be my first inspiration, as a student in the 1970s when the eyes of education were fixed on Asia and reduction firing, I saw an exhibition of Marea

Gazzard's work in the National Gallery of Victoria. Her work was European in influences, had textural surfaces and was hand built. I knew I'd found a path to explore.

Gordon Baldwin (UK), Ron Nagle (USA), Angus Suttie (UK), Masamichi Yoshigawa (Japan). I am mostly influenced by a piece of work that can take my breath away. I'm always hoping my own work will do that. I also draw inspiration from 'place', locations where I have lived and visited.



FRAMES

Subjective: Works are linked to memory and experience.

Structural: Visual symbols embedded in the material and form. Interpretation is conveyed throughout the artmaking process

KEY WORDS

Consumerist: Characterized by or preoccupied with the acquisition of consumer goods.

Imprint: A figure impressed or imprinted upon something; a mark produced by pressure on a surface; an impression, stamp.

Distorted To alter the shape of any figure without destroying continuity, as by altering its angles; to represent by an image in which the angles or proportions of parts are altered, as by a convex mirror.

Mnemonic: A device to aid the memory; (in later use) *spec.* a pattern of letters, ideas, or associations which assists in remembering something.

Impermanence: The fact or condition of being impermanent; want of permanence or continued duration.

DISCUSSION

Are there any movements that are bucking the 'throw away' mentality of today's society? Think about the ABC's 'War on Waste' program, keep cups, plastic bags and plastic straw bans in relation to Merran Esson's works.

QUESTIONS

STAGE 4

- List the techniques Merran Esson has used to create her works.
- Describe the patterns and textures you can see. What materials do they remind you of?

STAGE 5

- Looking at the landscape around you what can you notice that is a remnant of what used to be? What happens to things once they become no longer useful?

STAGE 6

- How has Merran Esson's use of scale and texture created meaning in her work?
- Analyse the relationship between Merran Esson's conceptual practice and material practice.

PAST HSC QUESTIONS:

How and why do artists express ideas in non-representational ways? In your answer refer to specific examples.

Explain how cultural experiences inform the practice of artists, art critics, art historians and /or curators.

FURTHER READING

MERRAN ESSON

- Merran Esson – website <https://www.merranesson.com/>
- Merran Esson – biography <https://www.daa0.org.au/bio/merran-esson/biography/>
- Video (1.00min) *Sculpture at Scenic world 2017* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8mw9OKpgnbY>
- Images - Tales of a red clay rambler <http://www.talesofaredclayrambler.com/episodes/2013/07/merran-esson-on-tales-of-red-clay.html?rq=Merran%20Esson>
- Audio interview - Tales of a red clay rambler http://hwcdn.libsyn.com/p/a/0/4/a04c3599b3f60bdc/Merran_Esson_Full_Podcast_Edited.mp3?c_id=5830281&cs_id=5830281&expiration=1542857401&hwt=189a872cfd1579a1db47cea0837429bb

TECHNIQUE

- Video (18.44min) *Clay technique: pinch, coil and soft slab* <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jq6oUtFbGWc>

Images courtesy of Merran Esson, 2018.

BEYOND THE BOWL

2 February – 18 April 2019

Hurstville Museum & Gallery

Beyond the bowl explores and celebrates the diversity and aesthetics of contemporary ceramics and glass, showcasing the works of Julie Bartholomew, Alexandra Chambers, Cobi Cockburn, Matthew Curtis, Merran Esson, Honor Freeman, Anita Larkin, Eloise Rankine, Kirstie Rea and Emma Varga. These artists push the boundaries as to what can be achieved when working with glass or clay.

This educational resource was created for *Beyond the Bowl*, exhibited at Hurstville Museum & Gallery. It is designed to assist Visual Art and Visual Design teachers and students from years 7 – 12. The images and suggested activities are to be used together with relevant syllabus documents and teaching resources, and should be used as a guide for teachers, adjusting activities to suit the needs of their students.

The efficacy of this resource can be extended by visiting the exhibition with students between 2 February – 18 April 2019. A hard copy of the exhibition catalogue is also available for purchase and is a valuable tool that can be used alongside this resource.

Hurstville Museum & Gallery, 14 MacMahon Street, Hurstville.

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