Complex Simplicity
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The ability to simplify means to eliminate the unnecessary so that the necessary may speak. Hans Hoffman[1]

My four weeks with Gwyn Hanssen Pigott were a reaffirmation of the axiom, expressed in varying degrees of elegance in every culture, that simplicity is not simple to arrive at.

I was there to help Gwyn get ready to fire her woodfire kiln in Ipswich, Queensland, Australia. It had seen only one firing before this and there was still a lot of work to do before we could even think of packing the kiln.

There was clay, wedged and ready to be thrown, there were pots ready to be turned, there were pots already turned waiting to be damped down and altered, there were bisqued pots ready to be glazed, there were glazed pots ready to be fired… and there was Gwyn, working in the studio, the house, the garden, juggling several tasks simultaneously and in the midst of it all, making time to tell me stories about her time in France, about Ivan McMeekin and Sturt, her six years making pots in Tasmania, her pottery in a basement in London, working with Cardew, the Leach pottery, how Lucy Rie helped her, her serendipitous discovery of Giorgio Morandi's work, the experience of coming back to Australia, sharing studios and kilns in Sydney, Adelaide, Brisbane, setting up in North Queensland, planting trees and working by the light of a lantern during the long power cuts when it rained endlessly…

There was always an interesting little story waiting to be told every time we sat down to breakfast, coffee break, lunch, snack break, dinner… meanwhile the pots got thrown, turned, altered, bisqued. More often than not, the bulk of the work in the studio was done after sundown. When I wrote to Gwyn I'd offered to be a 'slave'… it was rather a plush life for a slave. While I watched movies and drank wine upstairs, there was Gwyn, pursuing what she called 'the hope, the possibility, of beauty'.

It was soon time to glaze, and the complexity of that entire process was quite an eye opener. Four shades of white, six of yellow, test rings of 'unknown grey' and several kinds of known greys, greens, blues, reds, browns, beiges and several blends of all of the above were unearthed and studied. Decisions were made on which of the glazes to use, with which of the pots. A different glaze for the inside of each pot, a different one for the outside. The extreme fragility of the bisqued pots made of the translucent porcelain body, making the glazing process even more exacting and intense. After the poured inside glaze was dry, the bowls were pushed down into the outside glaze up to the oval edge, held by the outward pressure of two fingers of each hand just inside the rim. Pulling them out against the suction of the liquid, and setting them down to dry was a precarious operation.

Then fettling the glaze on each pot, making sure the glaze was even. Every pot with a little note to tell which glaze was on the inside, and which one was on the outside, so that if a pot was accidentally knocked against another while packing the kiln, it could be touched up.

Apart from the pots made of translucent porcelain, there were also pots made of porcellaneous stoneware, which would be placed in the front of the kiln, to take the brunt of the fire. For this set of pots, there were the 'shino type' glazes to be sorted and sieved, once again, one glaze for the inside, another for the outside.

There was, meanwhile a film crew arriving from Melbourne to shoot various stages of the process. That and the fact that there was a show coming up at The Scottish Gallery in Edinburgh (UK) meant that the days were full, the nights long and we seemed constantly to be trying to catch up with an exacting schedule.

We moved the pots to the kiln shed. Gwyn started packing. I looked around for a measuring tape, wondering how she would decide when to put in the top shelf. There wasn't one in sight. Who needs a tape when you can just hold the tallest pot below the arch to 'see' if there would be room for another shelf?

The kiln is designed for her ‘old age’ says Gwyn. It has two doors, so that she doesn’t have to be climbing in and out of the kiln with heavy shelves. The stoke holes are just the right height and size, to make sure your face doesn’t get roasted every time you stoke. The wood is therefore cut and split to a size that’s easy to pick up with one arm (44.5cm – the length of two bricks) and place carefully in layers on the hobs of the double Bourry firebox. Built of insulating bricks the kiln is quite comfortable to be around, even in an enclosed space, as it doesn’t radiate heat.

The day of the firing dawned beautiful and sunny. Bird song filled the air. Bird books were unearthed to try and identify one particularly sweet songster. Halfway through the morning at around 10.30 am, the fire was lit on the floor of the firebox. In her element, Gwyn busied herself around the kiln, disappearing to buy a mirror, so she could see the chimney reflected in the mirror, when stoking. We used about two barrow loads of small scrap wood and one of old fence palings to reach 900°C in about four hours. Until then there had been no thermocouple in the kiln, the pyrometer was of doubtful vintage and Gwyn seemed not in the least concerned about it all. Her easy manner around the kiln now that the pots had been glazed and consigned to their fate, so to speak, was very telling of the confidence that can only come from years of experience. There were three sets of cones on each side of the kiln. The top of the chamber was way ahead to begin with, but gradually, by selecting different types and size of wood, Gwyn evened it out. There were several kinds of wood, all local eucalypts. The hardest wood, called ironbark is tricky to fire with, because, although it gives the most heat it has a short flame unless it is split very finely. The fine splitting then causes it to burn very quickly, so that several pieces could suddenly fall together after burning and cause the embers to build-up, blocking the mouth of the secondary air-hole. The softer wood, mixed in to lengthen the flame further, didn’t seem to produce enough heat. Wattle, I learnt, would be ideal to mix with the ironbark, and Gwyn is presently sourcing a supply for the next firing.

As the kiln got hotter, and she tried getting the bottom of the chamber to catch up with the top, Gwyn opened up all the mouseholes, raking frequently but gently to make sure that the throat arch and secondary air path were clear. We checked cones every half hour, making good progress as Gwyn worked out her stoke, using smaller pieces of wood, stoking more frequently, so as to prevent a big ember build-up. Ray Cavill arrived to help and finished the last hour of firing. As we checked cones one last time the log read ‘cone 12 flat everywhere!’

There was then the question of when to ‘mud up’. Gwyn didn’t want the possibility of any ash flying on to cooling pots. So in order to prevent the wood on the hobs from crashing down onto the embers below and sending in plumes of ash, Ray suggested slowing the burning down by mudding up right away. The primary air had already been closed earlier, leaving the mouseholes open to reduce the embers below. Now, all mouseholes except for the ones in the front were closed, and the damper was progressively closed to maintain a back pressure, indicated by a small blue flame shooting out of the kiln at the top of one of the doors. After 20 minutes the damper was down to just a 5mm gap.

We sat around, marvelling at the flame still shooting up the chimney, almost Aurora Borealis in appearance, and the little blue flame still flickering even an hour later. Eventually, about an hour and a half after the last stoke, we mudded up.

While the kiln cooled during the next four days, Gwyn packed and fired the small gas kiln. We then took two days off, treating ourselves to a concert in Sydney, an exhibition in Braidwood, and a day at the National Gallery of Australia in Canberra. Unpacking day dawned. As always, for me, anticipation and trepidation in equal measure. The gas kiln was opened first thing in the morning to reveal a partly oxidized firing. Gwyn had expected as much, as she had napped during the firing and started reducing later than usual. Her first reaction was that of a little disappointment with the very bright blues and lemon yellows. I thought they were rather cheery.

We started on the doors, removing the bricks, cleaning them as we went. Gradually the pots came into view. Beautiful, subtle yellows and blues, reduced this time, and I could immediately comprehend Gwyn’s reaction earlier in the day, on seeing the contents of the gas kiln. She later used the different effects, combining some of the oxidized and reduced yellows in Yellow Parade with Grey Bowl for her Edinburgh exhibition.

As the pots came out of the kiln, I carried them into the studio, revelling in the opportunity to handle them, but equally petrified at the thought of dropping or knocking them. There were the

most exquisite little pots in pale blue and grey; stunning shino glazed bowls with golden flecks of wood ash; bottles with a blush of ash on the rims; porcelain bowls with the texture and fragility of egg shells. Discussing the results with Ray that afternoon, plans were made to alter the bagwall. Lower the height perhaps. Definitely add more bleed holes for the ash to come through to the lower shelves which didn't get very much of it.

Almost immediately, Gwyn was in there, making little groups… bowl groups, still life groups, trails and parades… the pots had a life of their own now, dictating who their companions would be in life here after, how they would sit, how many in each group. I had a brief glimpse of the process that night, as I watched Gwyn putting together groups of bowls.

The next morning, there was a group of pots waiting to be refired. Some had only the tiniest little speck of grit on the glaze, and that was enough for them to not make the mark. Touched up with glaze, these pots were packed in the gas kiln in the afternoon, which was then fired late into the night. Thirty years from now, if I have half the energy and spirit of this woman, I'll be grateful!

I'm sitting here, across the seven seas as I write this, feeling incredibly privileged to have had the opportunity to meet, work with and get to know Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, maker of some of the most exquisite, ethereal pots.

Notes:
1. Hans Hoffmann (1880-1966) German-born abstract expressionist painter who lived in the USA from 1932.