

Perfect is the New Junk

Steve Harrison

In this age where everything is a cheap import from China and nothing has any real value anymore, where every foreigner coming here is a potential terrorist, our politicians have terrorised us into sacrificing some of our hard fought for rights and freedoms, and we seem happy to meekly sign them away as long as interest rates stay low and we can have lots of cheap plastic junk. I believe that we are entering the new dark ages where humanism, education and the rule of science are being eroded, to be replaced with the new voodoo, ignorance, superstition and fear.

I have been interested for some time with aspects of the real, the tangible, the hand made, a sense of place, the 'terroir' of a locality. I have no interest in the fast track and the cheap throwaway. I want real things around me, things that will stay around me and develop a patina of age and a meaning born of context and familiarity.

There was a time when people aspired to the most perfect work that could be produced and it was up to the very best craftsmen to hone their skills through a lifetime of practice to the level where they were as close to perfection as possible. Early machine made product was considered junk. Now we have computer CAD and CNC machines linked to robots, such that very near perfect products are now made without the touch of the human hand. Everything is now perfect and cheap. Perfect is now the New Junk. A white vitreous, perfect glaze fit dinner set for \$8. Chip a cup and throw the whole lot out and change colour, reinvent yourself through retail therapy. Go blue, add a new tablecloth, placemats and curtains to match, all for under \$50. On a whim you can throw the whole lot away and make yourself over in a new fashion.

My parents were lucky enough to have a place called 'away'. I've been looking, as have others and now we find that there is no such place as 'away' to throw things anymore. Every thing has to be thrown somewhere. We are all going to have to deal with our consumer, throw away, 'just-junk-it', air conditioned, globally warming, energy wastefulness.

The hand crafted intentionally imperfect is an antidote to the New Junk. The work in my latest exhibition is the result of this approach and the last two years research. It follows my last show here of local bai-tunze porcelains. This new work is dark and not made from clay in the normal sense. The material is an interesting mixture of decomposing basic igneous rock fragments and dirt that I collect locally. This 'clay-like' unusual stuff does not respond to normal clay working procedures. It tested me and defeated me for some time, but as Giacometti once said, "every failure is one step closer to success".

This is a very interesting material. From the look of the sample, it appeared to be a weathered syenite. It had the same appearance as the Mt Alexander syenite, with the same hollow pock marks, possibly from the weathering out of feldspar crystals. However, this material is reasonably crumbly, possibly due to weathering. The colour of my first test tile showed that it had a very high iron content and as it fused across

the whole range of the tile, it was assumed that it was not high in silica, the sample was quite soft and easily crushed, possibly indicating some degree of kaolinisation. The high iron content may indicate nontronite, but there is virtually no plasticity, This may indicate that the weathering profile of the dirt may be leading towards the formation of a bauxite or another related mineral with some kaolinite on the weathered fracture boundaries.

I have tried many combinations of crushing, milling, grinding and washing etc. the final approach involved slaking, blunging and levigating. This represents the most ancient of strategies, it is a very slow and painstaking process. It involves the slow separation of the weathered clay fraction from the decomposing rock. This small fraction (around 30%) has to be concentrated and treated before it can be used for the making of ceramics. This involves the beneficiation of the clay minerals using sodium hexametaphosphate water softener, then flocculation by pH adjustment, followed by decanting and solar concentration on a linen fabric.

After examining the reduction fired test pieces I found the dense black clay body intriguing, I found some similarities with the ancient Song dynasty Ge ware. As this has been an interest of mine for many years, I found the opportunity irresistible. Ge ware was produced exclusively for royalty. And uncannily, the first piece of this work that I produced was as a gift for a King. Here the similarities end and the romantic associations begin. The Song dynasty potters spent centuries developing and perfecting this very difficult technique. I have the benefit of modern technology to speed the process and have condensed the exercise down to two years. Some of the subtle quality of the Ge wares was due to the use of a friable black clay body and the application of an unrelated pale feldspathic glaze fluxed with slaked quick lime.

I found that I was only able to throw the most basic forms with this magic dirt due to its lack of plasticity. This strange and unusual material is composed almost entirely of equal parts of Silica, alumina and iron oxide.

This material did not appear to be a kaolin, due to its lack of plasticity and very dark colour, although the material did have a slight white tinge at the fracture planes. The process of slaking and levigation that was developed seems to have extracted and concentrated the clay minerals present to the extent that it is just 'throwable' on the potters wheel.

I have taken the Chinese references above (and these are the only Chinese imports in the show) and developed a series of works that reflect this venerable and ancient tradition. There are references to the traditions of the tenmoku bowl, which have been an enduring preoccupation of mine, the Song Guan bowl, Longuan celadons as well as the work of the late Ivan McMeekin.

I am lucky that in and around my home in the Southern Highlands, I have found quite a few small volcanic plugs and dikes that can be coaxed into the most wonderful range of subtle stoneware glaze surfaces.. The glazes are most ordinarily simple, with only two or three components. What makes the result so special is the continued development of these seemingly simple glaze concepts and their

interaction with the special dark bodies. This in combination with the particular firing techniques that I use produces my own special visually soft and waxy, deeply satisfying glaze surfaces.

I have used the whole range of igneous rocks available to me in the making of the glazes, from the basic basalt rocks through the intermediate trachytes and syenites to the acid volcanics, porphyry and weathered Australian bai-tunze porcelain stones. The glazes are rich and varied, but always subtle in their finish.

I used to fire my kilns to very high stoneware temperatures around 1320°C. Over the years that I have been researching various ancient ceramic techniques, I have found myself firing lower and lower. Such that much of my work recently has only been fired to 1200°C. There are some works in this collection that were fired as low as 1175°C! This is cone 5 and is starting to morph into the territory of high fired earthenware. This is an area of research that has seen very little exploration in this country. I have been led into this area by simply following my materials to where they needed to go to produce this very authentic "terroir" based aesthetic. I think that I am possibly making my work in very similar ways to those practiced by potters one thousand years ago. This is akin to Christopher Hogwoods playing of early music on original instruments. To this end I have named many of the pieces in this show after some of the distinct landmark igneous intrusions of my locality with such wonderful names such as; Mount Jellore, Flora, Wanganderry and Ginginbullen. This places the work firmly in, and of, the Southern Highlands.

In the Pacific region there is a term 'Mana' with some currency that describes a power that can reside in objects. This power is created in the object at the time of its creation by the maker. Sometimes, it is bestowed on the object by an observer, and at other times it is passed into the object by association. Not all makers create objects with mana and not all objects made by a particular maker are imbued with mana, but when these two circumstances coincide the result is powerful. When an object charged with mana by its maker is passed to another, the mana is passed along with it and empowers the receiver. I don't believe that this power in an object is so much like magic, as I am of the post industrial age, but rather, it is more akin to a sense of wonder in the beauty of some particularly special object that enriches the lives of those that are able to appreciate it both in its making and in its use.

Many of the works made from this dirt are flawed with pin holes, crawls, glaze runs and warping, but delightfully so, they are the dirty little secrets of my fossicking, I sense that I have imbued some degree of mana into them through my efforts and I sincerely believe that they are treasures, possibly to become heirlooms and not just more of the New Junk.

Greenhill road, three dikes brown sample

Sample No.211. Three dikes brown. (. % oxide weight analysis XRF, Dry basis.)

SiO ₂	30.85
TiO ₂	3.66
Al ₂ O ₃	20.94
Fe ₂ O ₃	19.89
MnO	0.27
MgO	3.16
CaO	2.18
Na ₂ O	0.35
K ₂ O	0.89
P ₂ O ₅	0.75
SO	0.193
BaO	0.03
LOI	17.63
TOTAL	100.80

Samples dried at 105oC. LOI, loss on ignition at 1050oC, BLD, Below level of detection (<0.01%)
Philips PW2400 XRF, Rh end-window tube, "superQ" software., Analyst: I.E. Wainwright,
Reference: Norrish, K. and Hutton, J. T. 1969. Geochimica et Cosmochimica Acta, 33, PP 431-453.