



Seize the clay

WORDS Michal McKay
PHOTOS Charlotte Anderson

The resurgence of ceramics has been referred to as 'the new yoga'. Certainly, those who've discovered the almost mystical experience of manipulating clay into a handmade shape would agree. Kay Bazzard reflects on the joy this art form brings to her life.

For thousands of years, pottery and its more wide-ranging compatriot, ceramics, have been a vital part of human culture. Think storage jars in prehistoric times to tiles in space shuttles and you get the drift. Whatever their boundaries – and there are some – they encompass one of the oldest forms of technology we have. Baking clay (after cooking meat) was one of the first things humans did to chemically alter our environment – on purpose. What’s more, you can’t cook rice without some kind of vessel, so the process is closely connected to agriculture. In fact, you could say our whole evolution is connected to clay.

The generic term for fired clay is ceramic and is used commonly these days. There is however a difference.

Real ceramics rely on other factors, which include the use of heat and many other materials, particularly glazes, which permanently change that base. Also, clay is chemically bonded to water, and if a dried clay object is put in water it will slake down. But if fired at an excessively high heat, that clay is converted to ceramic and will never dissolve again.



Figurines from Kay's forthcoming exhibition in the making

Ceramics also tend to be more of a free form. Pottery to most of us relates to the word pot: plates, jars, bowls – containers in general with a use. But for many a ceramicist, their creativity extends far further afield (garden goblins notwithstanding), ranging from the industrialist producing beautiful ranges of contemporary dinnerware to the artist making abstract forms purely for visual pleasure. Whichever form, both can be transformative.

For anyone working with clay, being given a lump of mud, a spray of moisture and the resulting almost mystical feeling of using your hands through friction and motion to mould that lump into something else – either useful or an art form – has been described by some as nothing short of magical.

Ask Kay Bazzard. She's an expert. A wife, a mother, a gardener and a journalist, she came to ceramics late in life. "I'd always been driven by a creative urge and loved English pottery [she married an Englishman], but I never thought I would become involved with clay. I did China painting just before leaving England



Kay's work representing the brilliant Mexican artist Frida Kahlo

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and had done drawing and painting, but most of my creative outlet went into upholstery, things which involved the practical side of family life. But when my husband died shortly after moving to Hawke's Bay, I struggled trying to find a new way of life. I studied art and design at EIT in 2004, which involved various areas of the arts – giving me a taste of this and that, and through that I discovered the joy of making clay sculptures. Nothing to do with bowls or mugs. It was the pleasure of manipulating a handmade form. That element of discovery. You can never predict how it will end up, and what will come out of the kiln. But it always excites me. And more often than not, they do turn out okay."

In the glorious garden (now dotted with her artworks), which surrounds her much loved John Scott home, was a potting shed, "doing not much. Originally, it was used to raise young trees. It had an earthen floor, and the wooden frame was rotting. So I made the decision to redo it. I had a lovely family painting from my husband and I consulted with his brothers, as I knew it was valuable. They're farmers, and they generously insisted it was mine to do with what I wanted. So it went to Webb's, was sold, and went back to its original home in Scotland, which made me happy." It also paid for the complete refurbishment of what was to become her potting shed of a different kind. "I had a craftsman for a builder and he did the most superb job. Cost far too much, but it is beautiful. And I certainly knew what I wanted to do with it." That was in 2005.

Kay joined the Keirunga Potters, got on the wheel, and became deeply frustrated. "But I had to do it to find out what I wanted. I started buying equipment – like the kiln – and soon discovered I was having a blissful time. There is no feeling like it. The intense concentration and the excitement of creating out of clay. It is amazing to be able to work on a regular basis in your own space, making your own decisions. I'd never done that before."



Examples of Kay's creations and the interior of her refurbished 'potting shed'



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP RIGHT: Kay with beloved border terriers Basil and Bertie; Mirthful political figures in ceramic form (Bill English on the left); A beautiful figure floating serenely in a secret birdbath; A headless form sits in the freedom of the garden; An outdoor wall hanging surveys the scene

She started as she terms it “seriously playing” in 2006 and participated in a variety of group exhibitions. During this time, she underwent a full-circle transition. “I started with nudes and eventually came back to three-dimensional sculpture. When making figures and form, it is easy to work out if something is not quite right; after all, the human anatomy is fundamental – a skeleton covered with flesh. What, of course, they don’t tell you about is how the law of gravity can thwart you. Proportions must be right and the weight of wet clay, particularly in large pieces, can be very challenging – lots of props required to keep limbs where they should be. And there are very few classes that focus on this creative style, so it’s a long process learning. When you think about the miracle of tiny ankles propping up about a kilo or two of clay above, you’ll understand that it isn’t all about having an image in your head and creating it. It’s the making which is the hard part.

“The human form is truly a miraculous thing. And so beautiful. That’s what keeps me doing it. There’s a sensuality in it – an appreciation of the movement of shape and curves.”

In 2017 Kay went to Tucson, Arizona to attend a standing-figure sculpture course. It was at a time when Trump’s position on migration was top of mind. And it inspired an exhibition called *Waiting* commissioned by the then director of the Hastings City Art Gallery, Toni McKinnon. Kay worked entirely in clay and as the twelve figures emerged on her workbench “I noticed they were very still, in the sense that they expressed not anger or fear as I imagined a migrant might feel, but as though they were patiently waiting for something to happen – helpless, defenceless, thoughtful – as if looking for a solution to a difficulty. And I thought this is just like my own life has felt at times when responsibilities have weighed me down with no freedom to make unfettered choices.

“As my hands worked on the clay figures I realised we all experience these feelings sometimes; that being a migrant and leaving one’s country for a safer, better future is at the more extreme end of the spectrum of powerlessness and finding solutions.” Her ‘waiting’ figures speak of the vulnerability of so many in a community: the homeless; solo parents; the lonely elderly; or those bound by unhappiness, a job or a marriage, or circumstances with limited choices. Those twelve figures are a poignant reminder of something universal in the human experience.

To view Kay’s work is a bit like looking into her soul. Some figures are outright characters, others caricatures; some make you laugh out loud, others create a sense of sadness. Many are whimsical, delicate, have a real lightness of being while others are almost brutal, but brave.

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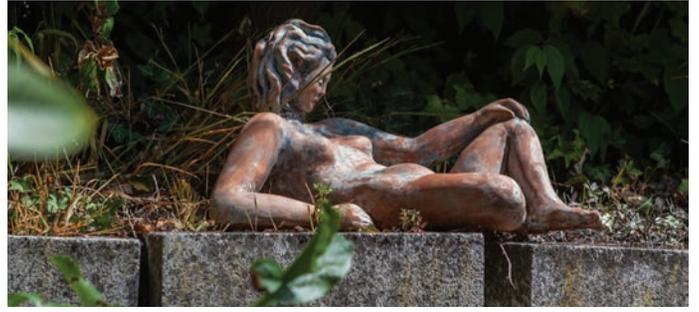
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Kay's beautifully rebuilt pottery shed now workshop, and some of her works which keep her company in the garden



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Currently she is working in collaboration with Sophie Lankovsky, also a talented ceramicist – completely different in concept to Kay’s works, but just as covetable. Her birds particularly. Sophie has a special kiln, which is allowing Kay to create her newest commission: a series of raku figurines titled *Earth, Wind and Fire* for Muse Gallery – twenty figures reflecting her love of the human form, with distinctly womanly attributes in which she accentuates the strength and fragility of the female. The raku process uses an outdoor kiln with a gas cylinder, “which,” as Kay describes it, “feeds the burner base. Inside the lightweight cylinder is a shelf on which you place your work. Then you crank up the gas.

“Within 25 or 30 minutes it reaches 1000 degrees and the clay takes on a glowing translucence. Using tongs, you very carefully pick up these tiny beautiful shapes and plunge them into a bucket of sawdust. There’s a lot of smoke and fire. Then you cover them with wet newspaper to block out the oxygen until it becomes exhausted. The carbon is absorbed into the porous clay, the glaze cools and crackles, and areas where there is no glaze turn black. It’s tricky, they can blow up – I know, I’ve tested – and weather plays a part as well. Don’t do it during a thunderstorm!”

Ever searching for new techniques and finishes, she regards herself as “really fortunate” in being accepted to attend a Merran Esson workshop a month ago. Here she researched surface treatments – not necessarily glazing, but other elements such as oxides, liquid clay slips, colour stains, “all very different from the shiny glazes that are an essential part of the functional pottery vocabulary.” She’s a great admirer of terra sigillata, a fine clay slip the ancient Greeks and Romans used in lieu of glaze. It can give a soft sheen if applied to bone-dry pieces or, if polished and burnished while still damp, may give a high glaze. “But such techniques have to be discovered. Terra sigillata can be of various clay colours and can give multiple finishes depending on the firing. For instance pit-fired in sawdust, resist and glaze or raku firing all provide myriad looks and finishes,” she explains.

“It takes a long time to make one piece. One day to make ready for the drying stages (that’s when the gravity issue arises), another half for the clay to firm up; the drying can take anything from one week to six, and in winter has to be indoors. Any piece with even a remote bit of moisture will explode in the kiln.”

HAWKE’S BAY WOOD TURNING COLLABORATION

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WHEN: 5th - 10th January 2020

AUCTION: 10th January, 4pm

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Some of the raku figurines which will be exhibited at Kay's next exhibition in Muse Gallery

She is constantly experimenting with multiple firings, surface treatments, materials, glazing temperatures and oxides. "Some I have fired up to three times for the effect I want to achieve. And often it just doesn't work. I frequently go back to revisit a piece until it is finished well enough to release."

Kay readily admits that the value of ceramics is in the eye of the beholder. "Look at it this way: a painting can fill a wall and therefore be justified by the buyer. But the good thing is that three-dimensional ceramics are having a real resurgence, with figurative ceramics especially causing lots of excitement overseas, particularly America, the UK, Germany and Denmark. Also, there is a growing appreciation of larger ceramic sculptures that take a focal point in a garden."

As she describes it, "Creating art is therapeutic. It allows us to process sometimes uncomfortable realities

while focusing on the moment of creation. (Perhaps better described as 'mindfulness?') The result is an artwork that resonates and communicates with others so they can share the experience. I hope that is what emerges when people look at my figures."

For Kay, the next steps in her love affair with ceramics are constant experimentation, reading, researching, attending workshops. "If you really want to follow this pathway you've got to be totally committed. It's a lifetime of learning."

There's no doubt of Kay's dedication – body and soul. 

Earth, Wind and Fire will be at Muse Gallery, 5 Havelock Rd, Havelock North from 16 December 2019 to late January 2020