

Rowley Drysdale talks with Gwyn Hanssen Pigott

I met Gwyn Hanssen Pigott on Platform 1 (and only) of the Nambour Train Station on a hot Saturday afternoon in January this year. She was carrying a small backpack. I commented that its smallness indicated to me a seasoned traveller. She pointed out she was only visiting for a night, then admitted it was 'mostly books' before requesting that, before anything else, we find a coffee shop.

Not long after ordering we were talking about ceramics. No surprise there, I guess. Chimneys and flue exits was one topic, which was illustrated with the liberal use of sugar packets spread across the table.

Some hour or two later, on the lakeside veranda at Quixotica we began a more formalised interview, which I recorded with an MD Walkman, while taking notes.

The interview had been arranged after I had emailed a number of questions, which Gwyn had replied to by canvassing the idea of visiting the Sunshine Coast and answering them verbally. I always stipulate that interviewees reserve the right to rewrite questions if it would make for a better answer, but a face-to-face interview was clearly Gwyn's preference.

Right from the conversation in the coffee shop, I was taken aback by the familiar use of legendary artists' Christian names – Bernard, Michael, Lucie and Hans etc. For her they were flesh and blood people, respected and admired; for me they were names on covers of books you should read.

Gwyn began talking about La Borne, France, a place she first visited in the early 60s, after seeing a wood-fired oil jar made in that region. Up to that time her taste had been nurtured by her study of the Kent Collection of Chinese ceramics in Melbourne, her years working with Ivan McMeekin (a dedicated sinophile) and later her time with Ray Finch and Michael Cardew among traditional British pots, and her growing appreciation of a European aesthetic.



Of course, her time with Bernard and Janet Leach, fresh from Tamba and Shigaraki, had opened her eyes to a Japanese tradition that was gaining growing importance to potters world-wide. Of this, she said:

"I loved the surface of Japanese pots, but the aesthetic was new to me. I didn't feel comfortable with it and the whole philosophy of (and I am simplifying here), the wabi sabi and the shibui and the accidental ... and humility ... troubled me.

"I mean, how can you *try* to be humble? When I saw that La Borne oil jar, I immediately fell in love with it, and I felt at home with it; it wasn't a judgement on the others. These were pots that hadn't been philosophised over. They came out of need."

It's obvious to me that Gwyn Hanssen Pigott has an extraordinarily good memory. She detailed shards she found around a La Borne wood-firing village fifty years ago; spoke about the practice of those French villagers using pillow cases of ash in their wash water, and then how that 'washed ash' became glaze material; commented that all the potters from another nearby village had been killed during World War I; described



Opposite: Oil jar from La Borne, Central France, early 20th C
photo: Gwyn Hanssen Pigott

Left: Stoking the three chamber kiln, Les Grandes Fougères, France, 1960s
photo: Gwyn Hanssen Pigott

Australian potter and her teacher Ivan McMeekin as 'her hero'; praised the work of contemporary Australian ceramic artist Sandy Lockwood; and later described in colourful detail encountering pilgrims in India, where she estimated their numbers by a unique counting system – "ten to the breath".

Here are her answers to a few of the questions that made it into our conversation.

RD: You have been interviewed on numerous occasions for craft magazines, documentaries and the national press; is there a question you thought or even wished you should have been asked but never have?

GHP: I don't often get a chance to talk about *trusting*. In my life anyway, and in a lot of potters' lives, there is a lot of trusting involved ... you set out on something and you have no idea. It's not something that's going to make you rich or anything like that, and you don't know where it's going to lead (but) I just found it to be a most extraordinary life ... things lead, and I felt really lucky the way things led. It is very much to do with trusting; trusting that if you do what you feel is the right thing for you everything opens up to you, opens out for you, and that happens; and even just living your life based on pottery, it's still like that. My income is based on now, an audience, and you can't oblige an audience to buy anything. I gave up teaching in '88; that was a big act of faith and since then it's just been pots. Follow intuition and trust, not worry (and) never try and do something that is not real for you. It will only make you sick.

(Sometime later, Gwyn returned to the subject and quoted an old proverb, "Trust in God but tie up your donkey", and explained the quote meant to her: "Take precautions but trust; you do what you can then trust; it's not just all go with the flow; well, go with the flow but tie up your donkey".)

RD: In the Creative Cowboys documentary, you made a point that Lucie Rie's electric-fired ceramics illustrated to you certain qualities ...

GHP: Exactly. If the quality is not there in a pot, wood is not going to help. It's just going to disguise it a bit until you start living with it. I'm very strict with students using wood-firing kilns – it entails so much work and is such a process. I say to them, only put something in a wood kiln that has some quality. Don't put something in it and think that it is going to be improved simply because it will be wood-fired ... by the surface.

RD: Speaking about surfaces, what did you think about those comments that good wood-firing surfaces can encapsulate a 'sense of elapsed time', or a sense of 'condensed geological time'?

GHP: You're talking about unglazed work, the long wood-fired thing, because with glazed work it doesn't apply; and it doesn't apply to my work. You do feel about those very long-fired, unglazed pots and, I don't know if I would use those words, they feel like they have been burnt to rock; there's something so basic and rock-like about them, and the denseness of them. Some of them are almost like ash themselves, like on some of Kohyama's pots – sort of crusty greys, dry almost, and it really goes with his forms.

RD: Are you tempted to create those surfaces when you go to Japan for your residency later this year?

GHP: I've been invited to help Kohyama fire his large anagama kiln. I don't expect to have work in it. But I have fired my own work a few times in Heja Chong's noborigama kiln in Dunmoochin and learned a lot! The first time I took down the sort of work I normally would glaze and fire in my own small Bourry-type wood kiln – teapots, mainly. They were all wrong. So then I started making pots especially for her kiln – simple Morandi inspired bottles and thick Italianate drinking bowls. In fact, that was the start of my still life groups.



Yasuhisa Kohyama, Vessel with ikebana at his home in Shigaraki, 2008; photo: Gwyn Hanssen Pigott

(Gwyn has written of Kohyama's mastery of the anagama firing process and how his work bears a "heightened sense of energy frozen." She details how, when taking a piece of drought-hardy grevillea and placing it into a Kohyama piece, there is "a new breath, a balance of sobriety and delicacy, a pure delight.")

RD: In the future, do you see yourself making work other than wood-fired?

GHP: Oh yeah, but while I can I like the wood.

RD: Do you refire wood-fired work in electric or gas?

GHP: I do a lot of test firing in my tiny gas kiln, and refiring. I grind grit and grot off, touch up with glaze and refire; but my work is glazed; it is not the Bizen type. Whatever gets the good results, fine. That's the thing; it's not a religion.

RD: If somebody asked you to recommend a must-read about ceramics, if not wood-firing, what would you recommend?

GHP: Oh, I think Leach's *A Potters Book*, much maligned, lovely gorgeous book; and Michael Cardew's *Pioneer Pottery* – especially the chapter about why he does it. Cardew is a wonderful writer.

RD: We have already talked about the notion of the romance of flame ...

GHP: Well there is romance of the flame. I wanted to experience that; I like to fire really quietly so you can hear the flame. I don't like the idea of a party or something. While you're firing you're just firing, and listening, because it is so much to do with sound ... and just sensing it.

RD: Do you have superstitions in the context of firing a kiln?

GHP: Superstitions? Well I like it to be a quiet thing. I would absolutely not tolerate the idea of throwing anything into the kiln that's not wood, especially a cigarette butt. That is a pet, well, not 'hate' – but you are working with this – the kiln is your partner.

RD: Talking, not about religion or spirituality ...

- 1 *Still Life*, 1987, fired in Heja Chong's kiln, Victoria; Powerhouse Museum Collection; photographer: unknown
2 *Shell*, 1999, wood-fired Limoges porcelain, Netherdale; photo: Brian Hand
3 *Two pale cups*, 2007, translucent porcelain; photo: Brian Hand



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Fade with four bowls, 2008, translucent porcelain; photo: Brian Hand

GHP: Well I don't use that word because I don't know what 'spirituality' means ...

RD: You spoke about 'lightness'...

GHP: That is basic, the possibility of lightness in your life, of transformation and that's what I love about translucent porcelain, the transformation, that's what I was saying. Quite on purpose I make very ordinary shapes that are neutral and, I think, about ordinariness. If I make a group of pots, I never have a leader; I want simplicity. But put these pots in the light and something incredible happens ... the whole thing, it's so extraordinary to watch the changes; I just love it, and I feel, 'that's it'. It's about that possibility of the ordinary being transformed into potential. It's something not really to be spoken about. These are experiences aren't they? And hopefully they are reactions.

RD: What do you think about my accountant's question concerning the amount of effort that goes into a wood firing: "I take it you wood fire because it gives you a higher success rate than any other fuel"?

GHP: In a way he is right! When they are more beautiful they are actually more successful than the gas. There is something satisfying about making something that surprises you with its loveliness. Isn't there?

RD: How are your hands and wrists?

GHP: Good.

RD: How's your back?

GHP: Not so good.

RD: How's your heart?

GHP: What do you mean heart? My ticker is good; my heart is fine; it's good, very good, thank you. That's the thing I try to nourish most.



Still life with two bowls, 2008
wood-fired porcellaneous stoneware
photo: Brian Hand