

Sandra Black, Stack
Series 2 – Banksia pair
2014, ebony and white
porcelain, slipcast
carved, pierced, polished
black, h.36.2cm w.9.8cm
white, h.37cm, w.10cm
Photo: Victor France



Ceramics Elders: A Lifetime Journey

Compiled by Geoff Crispin

For those of us who have been working in the field of ceramics for many years, challenges are thrown up as we age – physical limitations, changes in workshop size and location, evolving skills and resolving current ideas, presenting a new approach to old established formats and maintaining the fires that drive us all. Issues can arise through the opportunities to pass onto the next generation skills and knowledge in a changing educational and social structures. Electronic media have changed the way generations interact and our opportunities to interact.

I surveyed six people who have been leaders in ceramics for many years and sought their views: Sandra Taylor (ST), Sandra Black (SB), Owen Rye (OR), Johanna DeMaine (JDM), Janet DeBoos (JDB), and Chester Nealie (CN).

Could you give a brief description of your current practice and the number of years you have been involved in ceramics?

ST: I poked my fingers in clay for the first time in 1960 and fell in love with it. Coiling up forms and painting on them was what I loved best. It's got to be simple for me. These days, I'm painting on paper and loving it more.

SB: My practice revolves around teaching part-time in community art programs. My studio practice is somewhat intermittent these days with intense bursts of activity as various deadlines loom for exhibitions and open studios.

OR: I started as a student in 1962, so I have been involved in ceramics one way and another for 56 years. I am working with a small woodfired kiln and a gas kiln, making work for exhibitions, although I do a small amount of production for various regional gallery shops.

JDM: I have been involved with ceramics now for 47 years. I have progressed from home-made earthenware clay and brush-on glazes and raku in the early '70s, to now, where I am throwing fine porcelain and using a variety of printmaking techniques in my overglaze decoration.

JDB: I've been making pottery for over 55 years (my mother was a potter) and did my formal training in 1970/71 at East Sydney Technical College. My practice has always been predicated on domestic pottery. There has been a development in that the actual objects are no longer the focus of my practice, but have become the things through which I maintain a practice.

CN: I've been potting for 54 years – making mostly vessels on a Leach kick wheel or coil throwing on a large hand wheel with some handbuilding. My pots are manipulated after they come off the wheel to create a dynamic asymmetry. I fire to high temperatures over a number of days in a wood kiln. Some pots are tumble stacked for ash effects; some are glazed then salted.

Has your practice undertaken major changes in your more mature years, and what has driven these changes or underpinned a continuity in personal idiom?

ST: From the early days, I've been fascinated with how we humans build up our lives and what we surround ourselves with, and that's what I've mostly made work about. The switch from 3D charms of clay to the hard-edged 2D surface has had its challenges.

SB: As the market has changed my focus has shifted from mainly making objects/vessels to sell in solo and major exhibitions, to making work that is more aligned to the domestic scale; i.e. small cups, bowls, gift and decorative items.

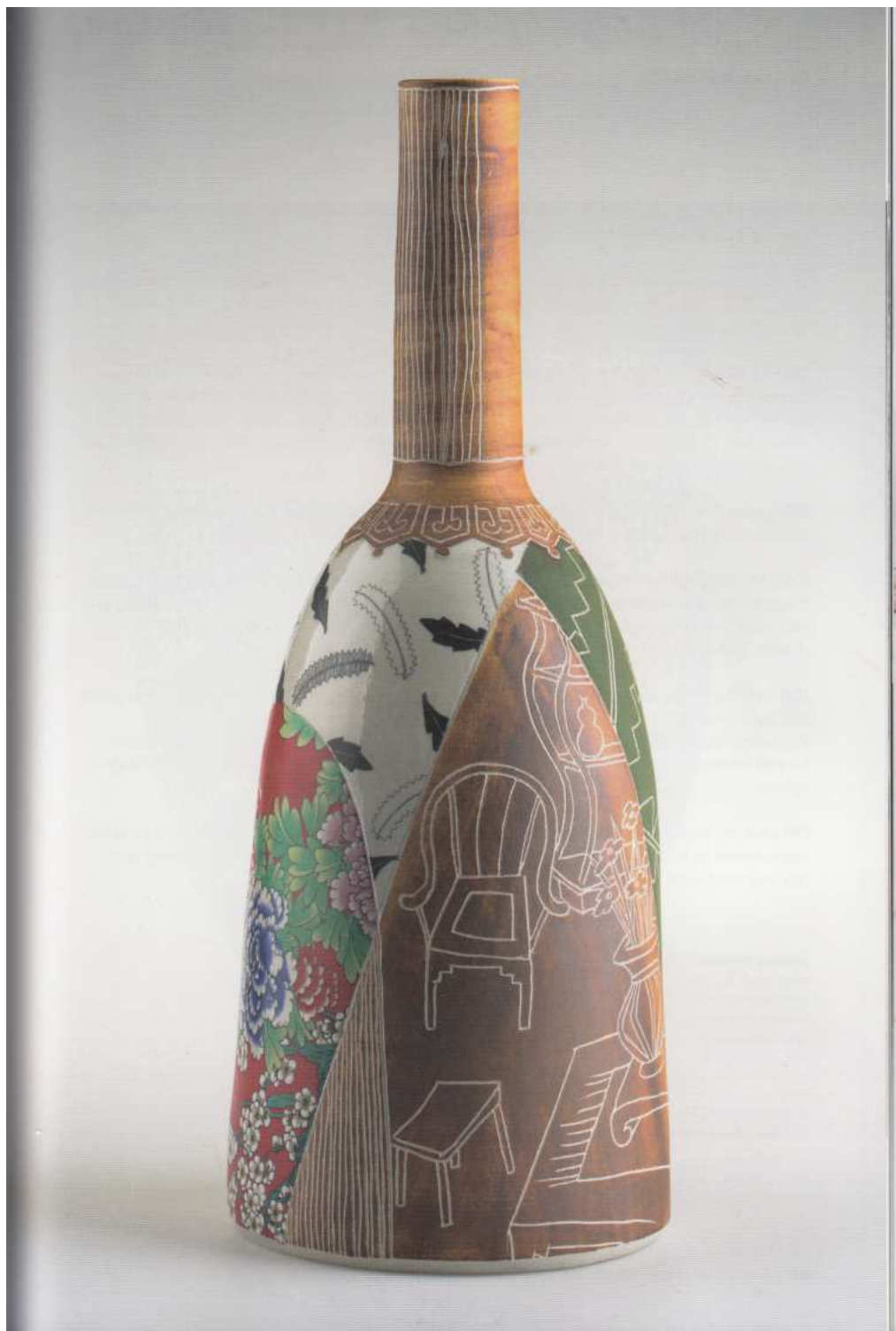
OR: I decided to stop firing my large anagama kiln; physically it's too much trouble loading and unloading it and I have lost interest in the aesthetic. Now with kilns that fire quickly there is little pause between thinking about something and seeing it finished. That allows for all kinds of experimenting and diversity and I am thoroughly enjoying it.

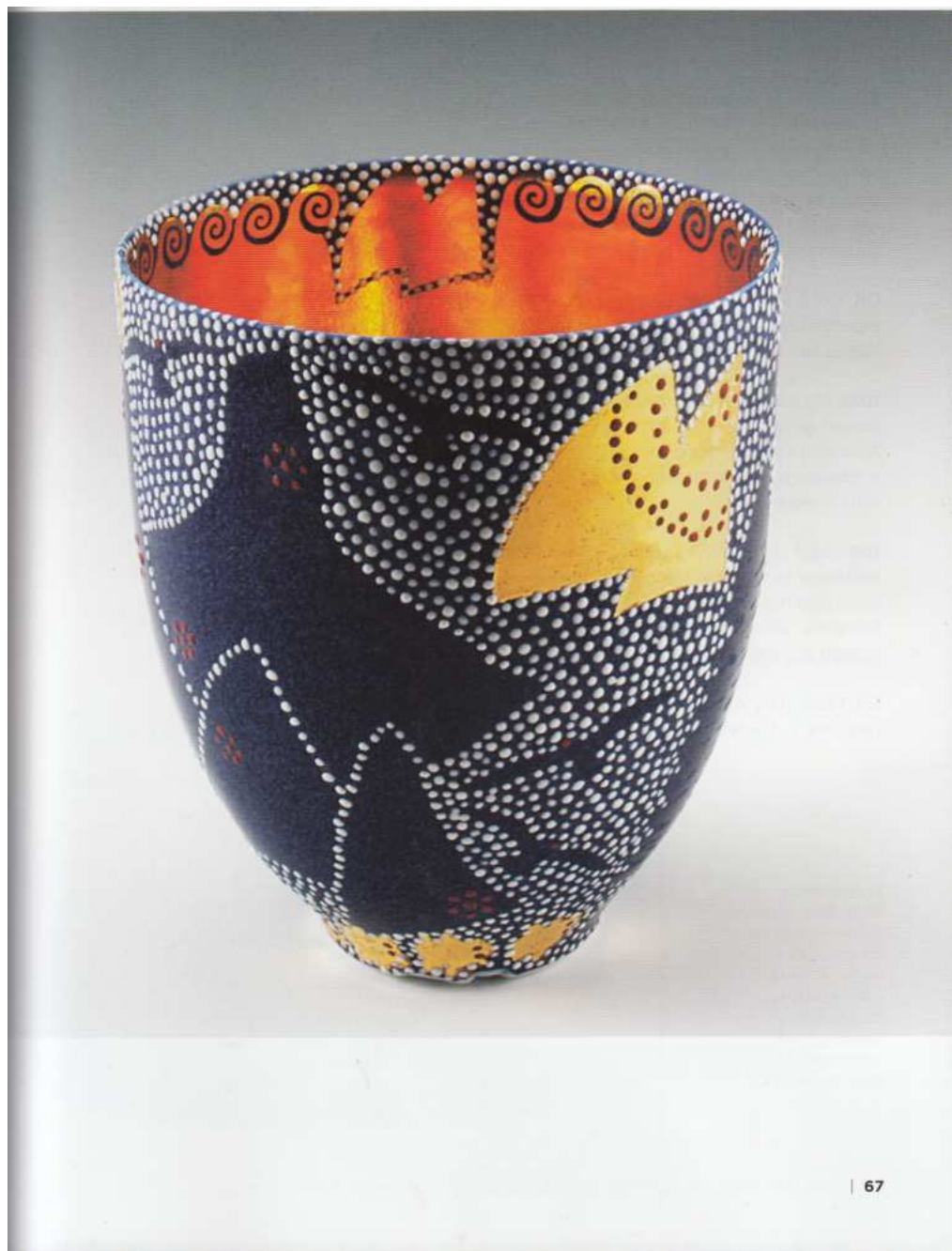
JDM: Being a self-taught potter, my work has constantly evolved with the level of skill I had at that particular time. My present challenge is to work in a collaborative situation. My new partner Tatsuya Tsutsui and I are establishing a brand, Kayabuki Koubou. Tatsuya, being a 40-year Arita porcelain master, will do the making, we will share the glazing and I will (initially) do all the overglaze. I will be teaching Tatsuya my skills while he is teaching me his.

JDB: I have used the domestic pottery object to make observations about the world around me. I am retired from teaching, but continue to work in a project-based or episodic way. I get frequent invitations to attend symposia/ residencies/exhibitions and I work to these ends.

CN: My basic practice has not changed. There has been continual development in technique and aesthetics. I have been preparing for my creative future when the physical effort of long woodfiring cannot be sustained. One way is to use different firing and glazing techniques I've long been attracted to, for example, Chinese Tang and Japanese Oribe glazes.

**Janet DeBoos, *Hybrid Series – Interior with Banksias*, 2013, thrown porcellaneous stoneware underglaze, Ernabella terra sigillata sgraffito clear glaze, hand-drawn overglaze decals; 1300°C oxidation firing, h.39cm w.15cm, d.15cm
Photo: Andrew Sikorski
Art Atelier**





Do you use social media to develop your professional presence and expand your networks?

ST: I don't use social media because I would not know how to; it seems like the stuff of madness to me, or at least it knows how to send me mad.

SB: I use social media to a limited degree: Facebook, LinkedIn, CAAWA website and email mail-outs. I am a member of professional organisations – The Australian Ceramics Association and Artsource. I find a lot of social media overwhelming and distracting. My galleries are better equipped to promote my work online. I would rather be in my studio than at the keyboard.

OR: Not really. The people who buy my exhibition work are often older and can afford the more expensive work, and they do not use social media. I do use social media to stay in contact with friends and colleagues in other countries.

JDM: My Instagram posts every few days drive my Facebook profile. However, I network with interest groups such Clay Prints and Ceramic Die Cutters and I manage two groups as well, Australian Ceramic Workshops and Ceramics of Excellence. I also have a personal website as well as two blogs, intermittent now with social media. I feel that a good website and social media work hand-in-hand.

JDB: Yes. I am an active Facebook user and I belong to several groups. I interact when I can contribute to technical and professional questions that are posted. My use of social media is predicated more on a love of verbal discourse rather than images – my FB 'friends' are writers, historians, scientists, journalists and politicians (as well as artists). I don't do online selling, but I support any online presence and direct people who enquire to Sabbia Gallery.

CN: I personally don't use a computer but my wife maintains a Facebook page for me, which keeps me in touch with some of my contemporaries around the world and promotes my book.

Chester Nealie

Bottle, 2014, woodfired
stoneware, shino slip
ash effects; fired in the
firebox of Chester's
multi-chamber kiln
(Goanna Ridge
Gulgong), h.48cm
Artist's collection
Photo: Ian Hobbs

Are you concerned about passing on your skills and knowledge to the next generations and by which means would you do so?

ST: Passing on one's skills and knowledge is important, if there is anyone out there who wants to know about them. When a student lets down their guard and begins to trust, real things begin to happen. I had wonderful teachers myself and hoped that I would be as good as they were.

SB: I am greatly concerned for the next generation of ceramic artists due to the loss of so many training courses. I am continuing to teach and workshop at whatever level I can to train and advise ceramic artists and enhance their survivability. I have also mentored students for periods of time in my own studio.

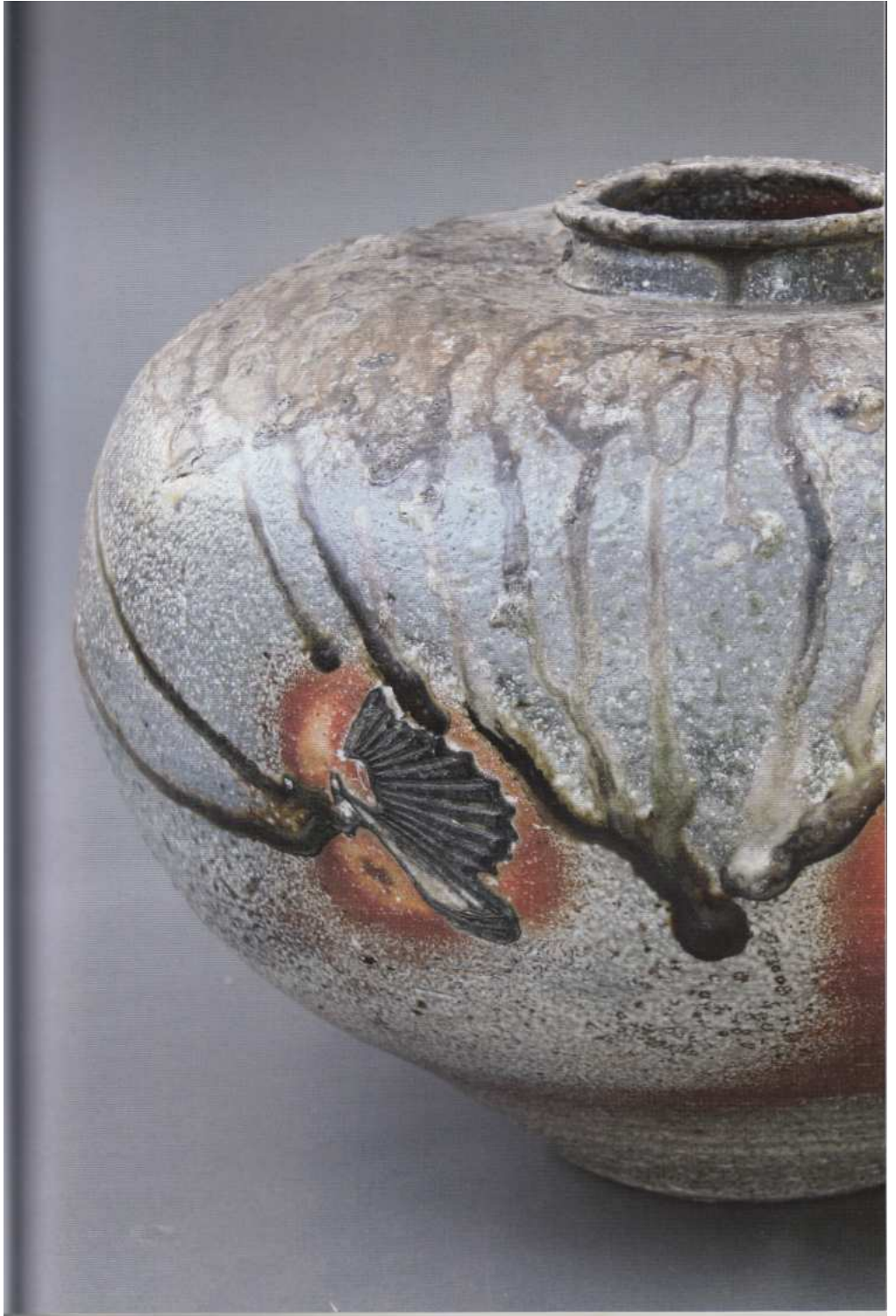
OR: No. I taught in art schools from 1980 to 2004 and that's enough. That included about eighty post-graduates. Now I prefer to work alone with no disruptions. Maybe talking at conferences or publishing my writing has some educational value – that's not for me to say; ask the recipients. I used to do workshops here and overseas but have decided to put that activity aside in favour of making new work.

JDM: Yes, I am concerned about passing on my skills. For a long time I participated in forums and freely gave on line. It was when I noticed that there was an expectancy to give all my research freely that I decided to hold the Master Classes at home. I feel our society has changed where people don't want to put effort into self-help. It seems to have to be an instant event, the acquisition of new skills. I will also continue writing.

JDB: Yes, I am. I have always been a teacher, even when not teaching in an institution. I get turned on by seeing a student have the 'lights turn on' – either by achieving a certain skill level or by comprehending something in glaze or clay technology. I am also interested in the history of Australian ceramics, and Greg Daly and I used to informally talk to students about the differences in our throwing/making styles because of the different cities/schools we were trained in.

CN: I'm passionate about passing on my knowledge to others. I have recently had a book published *Chester Nealie: Etched in Fire* which gets a lot of information out there. We have developed working and living spaces for visiting artists and students, providing opportunities to pass on knowledge and skills in my own working environment.

Owen Rye, Round Jar (Lola), 2014, woodfired anagama kiln, natural ash deposits, h.28cm d.35cm; photo: artist



How do you see the future development of your arts practice?

ST: I don't like to think about the future development of my arts practice – it all seems a bit too serious for the likes of me. I'll be happy to wake up tomorrow alive, find myself in the studio, and begin to feel at one with whatever it is I'm trying to resolve.

SB: I plan on continuing my practice, but not at the frantic pace I did years ago. Inspiration for new work evolves more slowly these days. My teaching is also planned to continue for as long as I find it satisfying and stimulating.

OR: I don't want to see the future development. I like to constantly experiment with materials, forms, questions – and I never know beforehand what will happen. All the fun would disappear if I knew the results in advance and there would be no point anyway.

JDM: I see the future development of my arts practice as being very exciting. Tatsuya and I will be living between Kyushu and Landsborough. I am living the life dreams are made of. We will work between our studios in Kasegawa and Arita as well as Landsborough. In one word: sublime.

JDB: I think becoming involved in groups/communities/organisations is vital to maintaining an active and engaged practice. In a similar way, being a mentor is important. I recently received the greatest of compliments from a young woman who had been a student of mine. She was telling her mentees that I was "simply the best of teachers". Why? "Because you let us make our own mistakes – and helped us up when we had made them."

CN: Fashion in ceramics is ever-changing and I am not one to swing into these constant changes. My development is continuous and focused with changes incremental and subtle. I still have a large bucket list of ideas fermenting. The passion is there. Time will tell.

Any other comments you would like to make?

OR: I am now at that delightful stage of life where I make work and don't care much what anyone thinks about it – apart maybe from just a few people whose perceptions I value. My writing is as important to me as my work with ceramics and I am constantly trying to improve it. If I could no longer work with clay for some reason, I'd be quite happy to be a full-time writer.

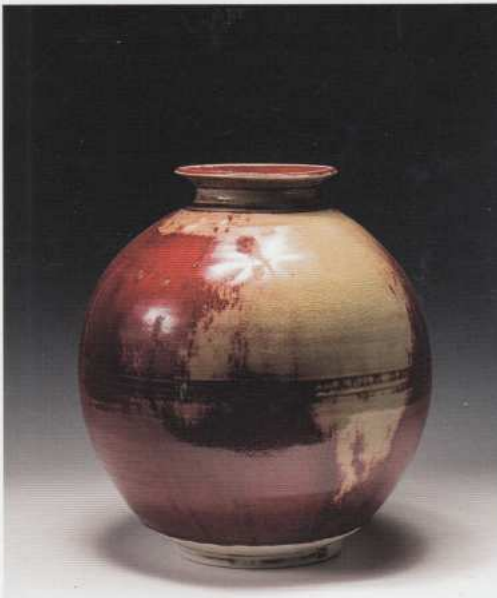
What is clear from these points of view is that there is an individual basis for each person's arts practice. Ongoing pursuit of that practice, even after many years, is still a personal response and there is no one-size-fits-all solution to the challenges of a long period of time in the ceramic arts. Individuals may draw inspiration from these journeys of a group of stayers still creating and making new pathways for themselves.

Geoff Crispin reaches 50 years as a woodfiring potter in 2019. He lives and works at Whiteman Creek in the Northern Rivers of NSW, Australia.



1 **Sandra Taylor**
Glorious home, fabulous pool, 1996, terracotta
h.40cm, w.36.5cm
Photo: Simon Hughes

2 **Geoff Crispin**
2017, woodfired
Whiteman Creek
porcelain, mix of
local and commercial
materials, based on
Eckalite 1 clay, copper
red glaze, fired on open
shelves in 2nd chamber
Bourry firebox kiln
h.40cm, d.34cm
Photo: Tony Webdale



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