Janet Mansfield

An Interview by Tony Martin

She agreed immediately to my rather strange request. "Could I come to your home and interview you about your favourite pot? You know the one – the pot that you loved so much you kept it for yourself?" There came no questions, no request for clarification. Janet knew immediately the piece that I was asking about.

Getting there was a drive through a quintessential Australian landscape. Dusty bone-coloured dirt roads twisting through the stunted, grey/green eucalyptus bush and paddocks of bleached dry grasses. The rains of the past few years had not returned and the landscape was already parched. Over a culvert and then a cattle grid, to the century-old homestead sitting on a ridge overlooking the dusty hills.

The welcome is quiet, friendly. The front door opens to reveal an Aladdin's cave of ceramic treasures. Shelves are lined with beautiful

pots from some of the greatest ceramics artists of our time. Bookcases and cabinets piled high with the fabulous, the quirky, the experimental and the useful. Janet seems eager to continue the tour and a rocky path winds past an outdoor eating area echoing with the stories of family, friends, grandchildren, good food, wine and laughter – leading to a beautiful gallery filled with a lifetime of passionate collecting. There I see spectacular exhibition pieces collected from around the world now lining the shelves.

"There used to be a lot more", Janet says with a shrug, "but they told me I only had three months to live – so I started to give them all away. But I'm still here."[1] She laughs, quietly.

Next stop is a hexagonal library of rammed earth, stacked floor-to-ceiling with literally thousands of ceramics journals, books, catalogues, reviews and photographs representing an avid curiosity, expressed in writing, publishing and a seemingly never ending thirst for learning.

"I read the pictures,"[2] she explains.

Another short walk brings us to a cozy, light-filled building exhibiting her own work: Pots of every shape and size line the room, beautiful exhibition pieces, teacups, platters, clay tests and failures, each with a story. Janet settles comfortably into a lounge, cradling the object of our interview. It is a tall, elegant, beautifully formed piece, salt glazed and wood fired. Yet it is quiet and unpretentious. Made in 1989 it was part of an exhibition held in Canberra curated by Peter Haynes.

She lights up at the memory of having her pot selected for the exhibition. Her sense of pride even after so much time has passed, says much about Janet: by 1989 she had been the editor of *Pottery in Australia* for 14 years; had numerous national and international exhibitions to her name; had been awarded the Order of Australia and had been the president of the Ceramic Study Group, the Crafts Council of New South Wales and the Potters Society and was a

member of the International Academy of Ceramics.[3] Yet there seemed to be no sense of self-entitlement, no foregone expectation of being selected for the exhibition. "It was an important show. . . I was just thrilled to be in it"[4] she says, still excited. She places the pot on the edge of an old oak table.

"I have always kept it because it did add up to the things I was looking for. One was this elevation" she explained, tracing the outline of the piece with her fingers. "One was the sense of volume, the way the salt really worked. . . the contrast of the iron coming down off the edges. . . I always put handles on things because I like making handles and because it does give the salt somewhere to work and the ash somewhere to land. . . it alters the flow, the entire aspect of the pot. I like the traditional paddling technique; it does bring up all the same qualities of texture where the salt separates out. The salting isn't too much or too little."[5] Her fingers continue tracing the form, a remembering, intimate touch.

"It is hard to make a good pot," she muses, "especially a useful pot. You can make some wacky type of thing but how do you judge it? If you make a teapot or a pot to hold branches – now you can judge it because you have some tradition to judge it by." She reflects for a moment, "We live on a farm – it's productive, we have sheep and cows, you can survive off the land and you can make your environment something special, it reflects the way you are. I like to be useful, I have always been useful."[6]

Janet is suddenly passionate and intense. "When I left school I went into physiotherapy to be useful. . . people were getting poliomyelitis. . . it was a difficult time, I had friends in iron lungs. I thought if I could be a physiotherapist I could be useful. I like the idea of serving, of being useful".[7]

Janet became involved in pottery during her fourth pregnancy. The reason was typical pragmatic Janet – she was unable to find certain pots that she wanted so she decided to make them herself. Before long she was caught up in the euphoric swirl of the 1970s craft revival – craft societies, organisations, associations and councils. "I got involved in all of them" she chuckles. "It was my social life as much as my professional life."[8]

A hobby had become a profession and a profession had become a consuming passion. "They were exciting times – we had a job to do – we had to promote crafts, we had to show people the beauty of handmade things compared to mechanically made things. It was something worthwhile to do."[9] The rest, as they say, is history.

Janet's CV reveals an astonishing career as a maker, exhibitor, author, publisher, editor, teacher, innovator and leader.[10] She was driven by a "passionate desire to share a love of the medium with others."[11] wrote

her namesake and contemporary, Janet De Boos. Her contribution to the world of ceramics is unparalleled, yet she is best known for her generosity and kindness with, as her good friend Owen Rye describes "a temperament lacking in sharp edges".[12]

Janet reminiscences with delight about conducting workshops and speaking engagements at conferences across the globe. A nail in the wall of her workshop is laden with dozens of meetings and conference name tags that she has collected over the years: each one a reminder of good friends and shared experiences.

She reflects briefly upon her ongoing battle with cancer. "It's been a bad year. . . I have had to say 'no' to a lot of invitations. I never say no, I always say yes."[13] Her voice trails into silence, disappointed.

Again her favourite piece returns to the conversation. She turns it slowly, pointing out its strengths – the line, how it stands proud, its Korean form – and its defects. "You come to appreciate the good parts of something even though they are flawed, like we as people, we are all flawed. There is always something wrong with us. She would be nice if only she was. . . (much laughter). I think ultimately you accept them for what they are."[14]

Later we returned to the marvellously eclectic collection in her home. Janet moves from piece to piece, almost excitedly, recalling potters, firings,

exhibitions and stories, with a sense of constant wonder. She pauses for a moment, her finger tracing the rim of a striking platter.

"I get such pleasure out of them,"[15] she reflects with startling intensity. Maybe this is the secret of Janet Mansfield – a passionate, life-long love affair with all things clay. "I am happiest sitting at the wheel making pots. I love clay, it is so accepting, so responsive, you are so intimately in touch."[16]

Or maybe it's her palpable enjoyment of the complex, physical ceramics process. "It's physical work, it's mental work, you have to bring passion to it, it's heavy work. There you are at 10 o'clock on a cold night and you are sieving a glaze and you think why didn't I take up embroidery and sit by the fire, but it's work I want to do."[17]

Yet the pots still had more to say about what has driven and inspired this remarkable, enthusiastic and generous woman. Janet seems briefly lost in her memories as she gazes around her collection. "It's the people, I think it's the people," she says quietly. "It's being a part of family, you talk a common language somehow. Even if I don't speak French and they don't speak English it doesn't seem to matter. The language is clay."[18]

Endnotes

1. Janet Mansfield. Interview. 26 October 2012.
2. Ibid.
3. Janet Mansfield, "Profile", Viewed 16 December 2012. http://www.janetmansfield.com/about.htm.
4. Janet Mansfield. Recorded Interview. 26 October 2012.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Janet Mansfield, "Profile", Viewed 16 December 2012. http://www.janetmansfield.com/about.htm.
11. Janet DeBoos, "Janet Mansfield". *Craft Arts International*, Issue 69, 2007, pp. 102.
12. Owen Rye, "Janet Mansfield: Ceramic Artist". *Craft Arts International*, Issue 40, 1977, pp 102.
13. Janet Mansfield. Recorded Interview. 26 October 2012.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.

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