Greg Daly Greg Daly Greg Daly Greg Daly Greg Daly

I ARRIVED THE EVENING BEFORE MY APPOINTMENT. AFTER all, one does not want to be late when interviewing, arguably, one of Australia's most celebrated potters. On an impulse I decided to follow the directions to his property, just to make sure I was not going to get lost the next morning. Eight kilometres out of the small country town of Cowra, in central NSW, is the battered cattle grid guarding the entrance to a long, dusty track that I assume will lead eventually to Greg Daly's studio.

Satisfied, I was about to turn back when I was greeted with a rare treasure of the Australian bush. As the sun dipped to the horizon it transformed, for a few moments, the dusty grey/green landscape into a glittering wonderland. What a moment before had been a flock of dirty grey sheep suddenly became black silhouettes haloed by dazzling gold. A drifting cloud of dust was transformed into a glowing mist of burnished copper, with the shadows of the ancient eucalyptus trees casting deep valleys of burnt umber. In the fading light the sky provided a rich, velvety backdrop of orange and aqua blue. A moment later the wonderland fades back to drab reality. Unaware of the significance of the moment I turn back to town.

An Interview by Tony Martin

Daly, as always, is friendly and gracious. Sitting relaxed and assured on a clay-covered stool, he is back-dropped by a table covered with vivid, glittering pieces destined for a major show at the Sabbia gallery in Sydney. When approached a few weeks previously about the possibility of an interview about his favourite piece that he had kept for himself the request was cut short by a rush of excitement. "I know exactly the piece you are talking about – but I have a story I have to tell you. Early in my career I made two beautiful pots that I was proud of. I put them in an exhibition and named a price that was many times what I thought they were worth because I wanted to keep them for myself. They sold immediately. The gentleman who had purchased them just laughed at my disappointment. 'It is your fault – an artist should always keep their best work for themselves.'[1] The gentleman giving the advice was Kenneth Hood, curator of Decorative Arts at the National Gallery of Victoria. 'I never forgot his words. I now have a collection of more than 300 of my best pieces – that may be a good place to start our conversation.'"[2]

Daly's studio is typical: bags of clay stacked haphazardly with glaze buckets, kiln shelves, bags of chemicals and throwing bats, all covered in a ubiquitous layer of dust. Even the battered table, presently home to the glittering exhibition pieces sits somewhat precariously on columns of concrete blocks. Yet the walls and shelves of the studio are covered with beautiful pieces of pottery – an intriguing visual history of an extraordinary career, starting 45 years previously when a 13 year old boy had to choose between Latin and pottery at school.

Daly launches enthusiastically into an account of a disastrous firing almost 30 years previously. The lustre firing was well short of completion when the gas started to splutter. Greg went outside to turn on the next gas bottle only to find it also empty – a process he repeated four more times with increasing frustration. None of the bottles had been refuelled as

arranged and the firing died well short of completion. Annoyed and more than a little irritated Daly abandoned the faltering kiln and over the days that followed completely forgot it. Two and a half weeks later he returned to the abandoned kiln. Even today, 30 years on, Daly's face replays the moment. The kiln opens to reveal a magical jewel – flecks of vivid copper reds on a ground of glittering metallic silver fading to soft lemons and striking gold.

Daly turns the his favourite pot slowly in his hands, tracing the beautifully formed, elegant curves with his fingers – reliving his Phoenix moment – the emergence of a spectacular, glittering creation from the flames of failure and frustration. He seems momentarily lost in his memories. "You put it in different lights and it is a different piece. . . as you turn it around you get the ever changing nature of the glaze. . . it shows you its history, here metallic, silver and bismuth, here oxidised. I have never, ever been able to do it again."[3]

After Daly had abandoned the failing kiln in disgust the final dregs from the almost empty gas bottles had formed a soft, lazy flame that had washed over one side of the pot until the gas had finally spluttered out. The effect was beautiful, iridescent copper reds, magentas and metallic silvers gradually giving way to oxidised greens, yellows and clears.

The piece achieves its dramatic colouring from copper, bismuth and silver salts in an earthenware lustre glaze – a combination that Daly only used for a short period. Ironically the spectacular exhibition pieces that form the backdrop to our conversation are the product of a return to that identical glaze, 30 years on. He likens it to "coming back to an old friend".[4]

This cyclic nature of Daly's creative process provides an important insight into his ability to "constantly surprise and reinvigorate his audience".[5] His career could be best characterised as a process of creative evolution. He surrounds himself with past work because of a propensity to re-analyse and re-evaluate his creative journey – a process he laughingly refers to as "mining the past".[6] "I keep reworking it, little things such as the size of the foot, where the belly sits, if it has a high shoulder or is a sphere, playing within that seemingly tight area of one form, endless varieties from where you put the emphasis, take from this here, pull from there, remining and revisiting."[7]

He gestures broadly at the pieces that envelop his work space. It is obvious that they are not displayed out of some form of professional vanity for a liberal layer of dust and the odd cobweb covers most. In essence they are Daly's diary, the recordings and

reminders of a career of experimentation, exploration and discovery. The processes behind every one of the pieces that surround his studio are recalled with extraordinary clarity. "I have them embedded in me – sort of like a film,"[8] he smiles. "I could tell you stories about each of them."

Getting to know a pot comes in stages, he explains: "first there is the 'wow' – the first glimpse that takes your breath away. But that moment is usually fleeting and is followed by the 'aaahh'[9] – the growing awareness and understanding of the deeper, more complex qualities. Being a three dimensional object, a piece of pottery demands that, "Whoever comes in contact with it has to dance, they have to move around it. . . so that they can see it and when you do that you create a narrative because you are looking at something in time."[10]

Over the years Daly has often attributed this narrative of his work to the colours and forms of his environment. As I sit in his studio surrounded by the glittering iridescence of his forthcoming exhibition, however, I find it difficult to reconcile Daly's claims that his work is, at its essence, a reflection of place, of the Australian landscape. I wonder how there can be any but the most tenuous connection between the vibrant, almost extravagant, colours of the pieces that surround us with quintessential Australia – the 'wide brown land', landscapes of ochre and iron reds overarched by endless skies of hard blue.

Before I can frame the question, however, Daly tells of a personal ritual that has inspired his practice for almost 20 years. Every morning and evening as he walks between home and studio, he photographs the sweeping views over the 1500 acre property he calls home. Through the years he has amassed a collection of many thousands of photographs – a record of the ever changing seasons, light and moods of his 'place'. "There is a vast horizon to observe sunrise and sunset, light through mist, rain, clouds, dust and heat and the moment as the sun goes down, that after glow that, for just a moment, changes the land and sky."[11] It is then that I recall the evening before – dusty paddocks momentarily revealed as fields of shimmering gold against a backdrop of sumptuous copper, blues and velvety blacks. Now I begin to understand.

Frank Boyden once said that "an artist's work should be a tribute to the world they live in."[12] Greg Daly has never viewed his world as ordinary and everyday. Through his art he pays tribute to those moments of fleeting magic when, for those few precious minutes, the mundane becomes ethereal and the everyday sublime. Through passion, unflinching focus and a sheer exuberance of spirit he has chosen to live in the 'wow'.

Endnotes

1. Greg Daly. Telephone Interview. 9 March 2013.
2. Ibid.
3. Greg Daly. Recorded Interview. 14 April 2013.
4. Ibid.
5. Sabbia Gallery Invitation. *Greg Daly: Luminous*. April 2013.
6. Greg Daly. Recorded Interview. 14 April 2013.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Greg Daly, Sabbia Gallery Invitation. *Greg Daly: Luminous*. April 2013.
12. Frank Boyden. Keynote Address 'Clay Push' Gulgong. 29 April 2013.

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All photos by Jared, Tyler and Anne Martin.