

Janet DeBoos



I WAS GLAD TO ARRIVE.

With only 54 kms to travel from Canberra, the capital city of Australia, to the home and studio of Janet DeBoos it seemed a little unusual that the travel time was to be almost two hours. Twenty minutes into the trip, as the country road deteriorated to a rough dirt track the reasons became a little clearer. A series of battered farm gates lead to close encounters with several cows, four kangaroos and two rocky creek crossings while traversing the rutted and boulder-strewn track through the Brindabella National Park.

It was worth the drive. The home/studio of stone and timber curved long and low around a small lake, its back tucked into the base of a rocky hill. Completely private, its only views were to water, eucalypts and grey / green hills. An engaging evening was spent with DeBoos and her partner, Michael, replete with stories of studying science, discovering a passion for making, being nurtured by some of the truly great Australian potters, an enthusiastic

An Interview by Tony Martin

flirtation with the 1960s, falling madly in love, sailing the world with a new baby peacefully sleeping in a seat strapped to the mast, a stellar career combining teaching, writing and making, a deep sense of social justice and an ongoing fascination and connection with China. It was, by her own admission, the tale of “a privileged and fortunate life – I only had to do the things that I liked and wanted to do – it was extraordinary – I would

like that for everybody.”¹

Next morning we set up for the interview in a white painted room filled with pieces for a forthcoming exhibition showcasing a lifetime of making. The morning sun, combined with reflections off the water, filled the room with a rippling light. Well spoken and articulate, DeBoos was relaxed, engaged, generous and gracious. Most of the artists I have interviewed for this series have chosen for their favourite piece something that has encapsulated that goose bump, serendipitous experience when the gods of fire and earth conspire to create magic



beyond repetition. Not so DeBoos. Her favourite piece, the one that she had kept for herself, was a thoughtfully conceived installation consisting of deeply textured dry glazed clay boxes stacked in a pyramid form, each containing a porcelaineous cup and saucer.

"Why this piece" she muses. "I like it, not for any specific cup but for the entire piece. I made it at a time (when) I was making functional pottery . . . and I wanted to say this is as important as sculptural teapots and sculptural cups – ones that actually work are just as important and can say just as much."²

"It is talking about how every step of the way when you reduce the function of something some thing is lost, there may be a gain but something is lost. So . . . the bottom layer are our production cups, same clay but with a clear glaze and the pink interior. The next layer up – these teacups are not quite functional. They have small bases, your fingers stick to the ridges."³ "They are uncomfortable to use and because of all this extra clay the balance is wrong."⁴

Her attention turns to the third tier. "With these ones I was using stretched clay and torn surfaces. You can still drink out of them but it gets increasingly uncomfortable because the edges are rough and, again, they are not comfortable to hold. Then the

next ones up – I was thinking about the theatre of use and the theatre of making, the act of use and the act of making and the cup existing in that space between them and so it was natural to use flats like you would use in stage props. It is the moving into the 'theatre of' rather than the 'real'. And then" she said, indicating the clay box at the pinnacle where the cup had now become an empty void, "when you lose the illusion that is created in the theatre all you are left with is the memory of the thing you started with – it is just the idea of the teacup and saucer."⁵

During a subsequent talk that DeBoos gave exploring this "idea of a teacup and saucer"⁶ she realised most of her audience were sitting around drinking out of polystyrene cups and "it just suddenly hit me that a work of art can extend beyond the physical work of art."⁷ Art's ability to combine the conceptual with the "commonplace, the act of drinking"⁸ was exciting. "It seemed to me that this piece perfectly summed up the intersection of those two worlds."⁹

The realisation that she could "use what you do to talk about other things"¹⁰ was a moment of epiphany. DeBoos' works began to more fully embrace the potential of her functional pottery to form an effective and accessible language for



exploring concepts far beyond the concerns of daily use. This re-contextualising of familiar, everyday items gave them new meaning and relevancy, enabling them to become “agents of commentary on other aspects of things that concerned me.”¹² The resultant ground breaking series of exhibitions addressed a range of issues from social justice to environmental sustainability.

I asked which part of the installation she enjoys most. Without hesitation she picks up one of the production cup and saucers. Her pride in their soft beauty is palpable. “I think we devalue ourselves and our lives when we don’t value the things we use as much as the things we look at.”¹³ Our conversation continued, ranging far and wide – from establishing a business to a fascination with boredom, from working with indigenous artists in remote, difficult communities to a blossoming fascination and involvement with Chinese ceramics, from her ‘set theory’ to her quest for the perfect cup.

Yet no matter which intriguing sidetrack our conversation followed it always, in its own time, returned to the recurring theme of DeBoos’ life – her love of the act of making. She is a maker of things. She is a lover of things – beautiful things. “I like the



material world, I like the stuff that things are made of and I particularly like . . . clay because it can be so many things.”¹⁴ Edmund De Waal said of her work “Aiming to nurture simple daily pleasures, she makes domestic ware for use in everyday life, as gorgeous and as sensuous as possible.”¹⁵

DeBoos’ delicious “softly wavering cups”¹⁶ are almost an obsession. For her the act of cup making has been the start of a lifetime of conversations. “When I go to new places I always make cups. It is a kind of grounding for me. I’ve always seen the cups as the link between the act of making that I engage in and the act of use that the other person does – it is a social transaction.”¹⁷

Her passion and her love for making, however, create a complex, multifaceted relationship with the sensuousness of the material world. The Leachian construct of the naïve peasant craftsman has little in common with DeBoos’ intrigue with the production process. For even though she and Michael ran the remarkably successful Brindabella production pottery for many years, it seems from our conversation that the finished product was not the only reward she sought from the repetitive act. Rather it is that



moment that exists alongside the act of making, parallel but distinct.

It is through the sense of touch that the skilled potter understands his material most intimately. Knowing fingers sense clay's weaknesses and faults well before they are apparent, even to the experienced eye. It is in those moments when one is immersed in repetition, when the making is given over to the instinctive knowing of skilled hands that DeBoos finds the greatest magic. It is, she believes, the moment for our minds to wander freely, to dream unfettered. "What production throwing does is to induce a state of meditative rest or quiet. It has real value . . . that space you go into, that space of 'flow'¹⁷ when you are doing something that is repetitive and skilled, within your skill set but just stretching the boundary enough."¹⁸ It is in these times that DeBoos maintains that "we open ourselves up to the possibility of a radical change in our way of living, from inauthenticity to authenticity and closer to the heart of what it means to be human."¹⁹

I am reminded that Janet Mansfield once said, "I am happiest sitting at the wheel making pots."²⁰ Janet DeBoos is quiet for a moment before replying. "I don't think I would use the word happy because I am not quite sure what happy is. Complete is how I would describe it . . . I don't feel complete until I am making."²¹

ENDNOTES

- 1–14. Janet DeBoos. Recorded interview. 23 May 2014.
15. De Waal, Edmund and Claudia Clare. 2011. *The Pot Book*. New York, NY: Phaidon, pp 76.
16. Sanders, Christopher. "Janet DeBoos:



Ceramics: Entropy and Other Considerations". *Ceramics: Art & Perception*, 78, 2008.

17. Janet DeBoos. Recorded interview. 23 May 2014.

18. Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. 1990.

Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience. New York: Harper & Row.

19. Janet DeBoos, "On the Edge: Boredom, Repetition and the Creative Act". Presentation at NCECA 2012 Conference, Seattle, Washington, US. March 2012.

20. Janet DeBoos. Recorded interview. 23 May 2014.

21. Martin, Tony. "Janet Mansfield". *Ceramics: Art and Perception*. 92, 2013. pp 41.

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