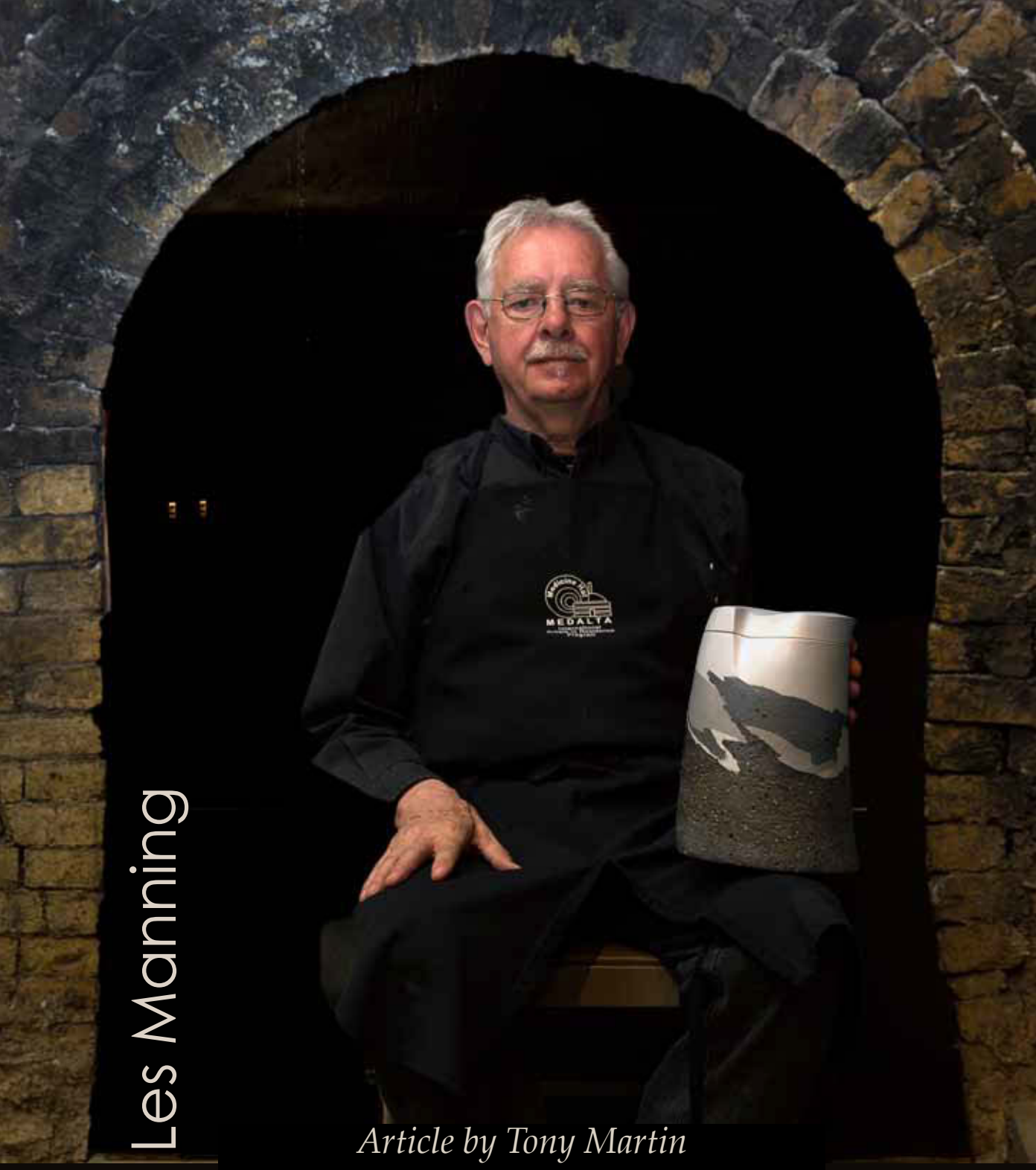


Les Manning

Article by Tony Martin

LES MANNING WAS ENTHUSIASTIC WHEN ASKED whether he would mind being interviewed in his studio about his favourite piece. He warned, however, that where he lived was a little remote. He was not exaggerating. Medicine Hat, Alberta, Canada, is a long way from anywhere.

The plains of central Canada seem to be endless, punctuated only on rare occasions by small farming and mining communities. Hour after hour the prairies stretch flat and unchanging in every direction, the only signs of life being clusters of oil pump jacks like giant rusted insects methodically sucking the land of its oily blood. The preferred form of local transport seems to be giant 'trucks' from which the locals look down with polite amusement at obvious visitors in their inadequately sized hire car.



Medicine Hat, however, is a surprise. Benefiting from the recent mining boom it is clean, modern and affluent. Manning's welcome is gracious. His small, neat home is filled with a wonderfully eclectic mixture of beautiful ceramics and quintessential Western memorabilia – right down to the polished cowboy boots and mounted horns. A delightful, noisy evening is spent with a welcoming group of local ceramics enthusiasts. Obviously proud to have the world famous elder statesman of Canadian ceramics as a part of their community they are quietly protective. It feels like family.

The next day Manning sits, a little tentatively, at the workbench in his studio at the Medalta Arts Centre – home to the prestigious Medalta International Artist in Residency Program. His studio sits high on a mezzanine floor overlooking the constant swirl of activity of the other ceramics artists. In front of him sits his favourite piece – a large handsome sculptural vessel. Superbly crafted, it is an amalgam of disparate materials – silky white porcelain, vibrantly coloured clays and extremely coarse grogged high iron stoneware. The technical virtuosity to successfully combine such different clays is breathtaking – let





alone overcome the challenges of drying and firing such a beautifully crafted piece made from such incompatible materials.

"I am a lucky person"[1] is a great way to start a conversation. It will be a recurring theme throughout our interview. Manning grew up on a ranch on the prairies, hard working and serious. In high school a perceptive art teacher approached his parents, suggesting that he would be much happier attending art school rather than persisting with a somewhat unspectacular academic pathway.[2] The first time Manning walked into the ceramics studio "just changed the world for me".[3] His future was decided. Art school was followed by the Alberta College of Art, work in production potteries, teaching, exhibitions and workshops. He approached his work with a focused determination, analysing and striving to improve every aspect of his craft. Not for Manning were the freewheeling excesses of the 1960s. The spirit of the prairies – long days in the fields stacking bundles of wheat, repairing machinery and the inventive problem solving of farming life – had developed a practical, capable and resolute approach which carried over into every aspect of his life. Soon opportunities to teach and conduct workshops began coming his way. The pivotal moment came when he was asked to conduct a short workshop at the Banff Arts Centre. Within a couple of years he was head of the ceramics program at the Centre – a position that he would hold for 25 years. It was a fortuitous and exciting time. The oil boom had brought a flood of money into the province and, simultaneously, the arts and crafts movement was going from strength to strength. Under Manning's guidance the ceramics workshop became renowned internationally for its "sophisticated programme of studio practice, conceptual development and lively artist interaction. The residency program literally put Canadian







ceramics on the world map."[4] Suddenly a ceramics residency at the Banff Arts Centre became one of the most coveted positions for ceramics artists around the world. It was a heady time for the boy from the prairies of Alberta.

The euphoric possibilities of this period were not the only thing influencing Manning's artistic work. For a young man whose entire life had been spent on the vast, flat plains of the Canadian prairies the Rocky Mountains were confronting and challenging. From being able to see an unending, distant horizon in every direction he was now hemmed in by the breathtaking snow-covered mountains.

For his first few years in Banff Manning felt uncomfortably claustrophobic, with his customary lines of sight obstructed in every direction. "When you take a prairie boy and put him in the mountains – that is scary. I took a long time to be comfortable." The beauty of the mountains, however, was to prove irresistible. "Where we lived in Canmore I could look out our living room window at the Three Sisters. Every morning I would have a cup of tea looking out at those mountains and watch the sun moving over them and they were absolutely gorgeous. Then I would drive to work in Banff, continually surrounded by the mountains."[5] Over time the spectacular, jagged beauty of the Canadian Rockies totally seduced him. "The mountains are my spiritual home," he says, "regardless of where I live."[6]

The Canadian Rocky Mountains were to change Manning's art irrevocably. But there was to be one more vital step in the transformation – and it was to begin half a world away in the traditional pottery villages of Japan. Manning was mesmerised by the Japanese potters and their rich and complex ceramics history. "I wanted to be a Japanese potter. I spent a lot of time there and I travelled widely and I loved it – I loved the attitude, I loved the people, I loved everything about the place. When I got on the aeroplane to come home I wrote down on a piece of paper 'I want to be a Japanese potter'. It took a long time to get over that. I would just sit there with the drawings of the patterns they put on their pieces and dream. Then one day, going down to the studio, I just thought 'what am I thinking? I have to get realistic – talk about where I have been, who I am, why I am.'"[7] Manning is silent for a long moment, then he pushes his favourite piece towards me a fraction. "This is why I am,"[8] he says, quietly.

His favourite piece is strong and graceful, a product of Manning's intoxication with the mountains. He traces the striated layers with his fingers, explaining his process of making. Dark iron bearing clay, coarse and indented with crushed granite, forms the ice scarred bedrock, inlays of vibrant pinks and blue/green reveal the sensuous, early morning light on





distant snowdrifts and glacial flower tinted alpine lakes, all crowned by the silky smooth, snowy curves of porcelain.

More than just a ceramic representation of the Rocky Mountains, it is the encapsulation in clay of a period in Manning's life (and career) of discovery, exhilaration and the sensory wonder of the spectacular landscape that surrounded him. He recalls, nostalgically, lengthy cross-country ski trips with close friends. "We skied a little apart and I was just cocooned in silence. All around me everything was just white and black, white and grey. It totally enveloped me."[9] He is momentarily lost in the memories and then smiles when I tell him I will be driving to Banff the next day. "When you have been through my territory," he says, then, gesturing towards his favourite piece, "You will see that this is absolutely from the heart."[10] Manning and the Canadian Rocky Mountains are inseparable.

Nothing, however, lasts forever. As with similar institutions around the world the Banff Centre Ceramic Studio was not immune to a growing tide of economic rationalisation. Manning departed his beloved mountains after 25 years as the head of ceramics at the Banff Art Centre. It left a wound which, I suspect, has never quite healed.

Manning's career, however, continued to flourish. As we sit in his Medicine Hat studio he reflects on a spectacular lifetime contribution to ceramics. He was one of the founders of the Alberta Craft Council, a vice president of the International Academy of Ceramics, instrumental in establishing ceramics residency programs around the world, lectured and conducted workshops in 46 different countries and has held countless exhibitions both in Canada and internationally. In 2012 he fittingly received the Order of Canada for his contribution to the arts.

Our conversation returns to his favourite piece. He turns it slowly, sharing and enjoying its many complexities. His fingers indicate different areas: "This is the mountains at sunset, this a riverbed where I used to ski, this colour is from the alpine lakes and this is a wind blown cornice, which form high above the snow line."[11] It was a reflection, a poem, of vividly recalled moments of transcendent awe and beauty. They were the best of times.

But, Manning reveals, this piece is so much more. It is to be his epitaph; for what he holds in his hands will be his final place of rest – his funerary urn. He had created his own soliloquy from fire and clay. For whatever the remaining years may hold for this grand old master of Canadian ceramics he has ensured that, in time, he will forever be cradled by the memories of his beloved Rocky Mountains.

Endnotes

1–3. Les Manning. Recorded interview. 26 June 2015.
4. http://www.harbourfrontcentre.com/whatson/visualarts/yqc08_4/handout-Les-Manning-Rev.pdf, February 18, 2016.
5. Les Manning. Recorded interview. 26 June 2015.
6. Les Manning – Homage, Galleries West, 18 February, 2016.
7–11. Les Manning. Recorded interview. 26 June 2015.

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Photos by Anne Martin.