Owen Rye: An Interview by Tony Martin

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T WAS WAR BETWEEN THE 16 YEAR OLD BOY AND HIS HIGH
school chemistry teacher. The teacher was deter-
mined and the boy confrontational and spirited. Classes descended into conflict and anarchy.

Eventually, in a bid to break the deadlock, the boy approached his teacher with a bizarre proposal. “I will sit in the back of your classroom; I will not do any class work and will not listen to anything you say. I will study the subject myself and I will get an A in the final exams. In return you will leave me the f*@k alone.”

The student was true to his word. Peace returned to the classroom. He studied hard, eager to prove a point and by the time he had achieved his ‘A’ he had developed a fascination with chemistry. By the age of 20 he completed a Bachelor of Science degree with first-class honours, falling in love with both the art and science of ceramics in the process. At 25 he completed a PhD, one of the youngest persons ever to have achieved such an award in Australia at that time. Within another two years he was a Post Doctoral Research Fellow with the Smithsonian Institution, Washington. Welcome to the brilliant, uncompromising and determined world of Owen Rye.

Rye’s studio is a wonderful setting for our inter-
view. The old, single-room, country schoolhouse had originally faced the main road, along which an ‘Avenue of Remembrance’ from the Great War had been planted – a grove of trees preserving the memories of marching bands, carefree country boys in search of adventure and the sons and fathers who never came home. The road has long since been rerouted to a more convenient location and the school closed. All that remains are the giant trees leaning watchfully over what is now Rye’s studio and kilns sheds.

I should not have expected the interview about his favourite pot to be easy. After all someone who has spent more than 50 years as an avid woodfirer probably does not consider ‘easy’ as important. Rye sat on a tall stool in front of an old workbench on which he had placed three uniquely different pieces of pottery, one of which, through a process of discussion and elimination, was going to be revealed as his favour-

ite. The first was large, dark and brooding – inspired by a pot recovered from a mysterious Japanese shipwreck discovered off the local coast. The next, tall, elegant, voluptuous – a form that Rye has returned to again and again. The final pot, smaller, rough-hewn, bearing the scars of four days in the hell fires of an anagama kiln.

Rye turns his attention to exhibit number one. “I

like the quality of it – it just kind of sits there, immo-
bile, a finished kind of object. I like the dark. There

is always... mystery in the darkness.”

His attention moves on to the second piece. It is tall and curva-
ceous, glazed in a soft, grey gloss, with the faintest

references to its woodfired origins. His fingers trace

its organic, familiar curves. “It is crisp, these lines are

nice and clear. I can only fit two in a firing and I only

do one firing per year so you can do the math – and

half of them don’t work.”

He chuckles.

He recalls fondly a similar piece he had made years before. It was exhibited in Melbourne and purchased by Ken Lawrence, a renowned collector of ceramics. “You have bought a lot of ceramics. . .
defiant presence, challenging the viewer, offering no easy understandings. This piece makes no pretence of functionality, demands your attention and challenges you to wrestle with its complexity and ambiguities.

Ask Rye, however, why he has chosen this particular piece out of the many thousands he has made and the answer will surprise. “I’m more interested in what comes next rather than... in the past. I enjoy it because of what it is and I value it because of what I can learn from it.”

This sense of enquiry and of curiosity is a driving force in Rye’s creative journey. “Looking at your work and not seeing it as a finished thing but seeing it as a guide to where to go next” is an underpinning philosophy. “I ask two simple questions. First, what complexity of emotions arises from my interaction with this object? The second question is: what do I learn from this object? What insight do I have that I did not have before... where does it lead me, what might I make after experiencing this one?”

These revealing reflections are a timely reminder of the complex, multilayered nature of this snowy haired, gravelly voiced, woodfire potter from country Victoria. For not only is Rye a respected ceramics artist, credited with many more than one hundred national and international solo and group exhibitions, he is also a scientist (with a PhD in ceramics chemistry), prolific author, archaeologist, researcher, long-time academic and widely-published anthropologist.

Yet, for all these achievements, he has chosen woodfiring – the most quixotic of ceramic processes – as his artistic voice, relishing its vagaries and uncertainties, embracing its unknown. “My woodfired pots are not designed, but imagined as a possibility; with the
knowledge that the eventual reality will be different. Perhaps better, perhaps worse but always different. The woodfired pot... with its distortions and flaws... reminds us of a different attitude, a different approach where logic is balanced by deviations in the plan, by accident along the way, by a sensory response rather than an intellectual one.”

There is another recurring theme throughout our interview: the friendships formed through a lifetime involvement in fire and clay. “I have made good friends by getting involved in this and if, for some reason, I had to stop making work tomorrow, it wouldn’t matter so as long as I have still got all the friends... that’s the most important thing.” Janet Mansfield once observed that Rye was particularly drawn to woodfiring because of the camaraderie it offered. Coincidentally the evening before our interview, Rye and his partner Barbara (to whom he credits much of his success) had discussed, with palpable excitement, the upcoming firing of the anagama kiln. It is a much-anticipated annual event bringing together a sizable team of friends and family. Four days of hot, exhausting work, good food and long evenings of memories and laughter culminate in that most magic of moments when the great fire-breathing monster reveals its treasures as well as its inevitable questions.

For this remarkable potter the circle is now complete. A lifetime on, the crackle of burning wood, the waft of smoke and the heat of the flames once again bring together everything that is truly valued in the life of Owen Rye.

ENDNOTES
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.

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All photos by Jared, Tyler and Anne Martin.