



THE POTTER & THE CLAY

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SHANNON GARSON LIKES GETTING HER HANDS DIRTY. AS A POTTER, IT'S PRACTICALLY A PREREQUISITE. NOW SHE'S ALSO ROLLING UP HER SLEEVES AS THE NEWLY APPOINTED PRESIDENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN CERAMICS ASSOCIATION. TONIA ZEMEK MEETS THE WOMAN WHO'S CARVED A CAREER FROM HER PASSION.



Pottery is a tough business. Maleny potter Shannon Garson says it's an art form that really gives your arms a workout. "You need physical strength to do this job," Shannon explains. "Potters are usually pretty strong in their forearms, especially the men who build their muscles more easily. They have arms like Popeye," she laughs. All jokes aside, over the course of one day throwing pots in her Maleny studio, Shannon could find herself lifting up to 40 kilograms of clay.

She is certainly a heavyweight in her industry. Late last year Shannon was appointed President of the Australian Ceramics Association, a role she is relishing. "It's a wonderful organisation that works to help ceramists all over the country." Shannon says she's keen to embrace social media platforms to help engage with regional members. "It's really exciting because so much is happening out there and I'm keen to promote and use those wonderful resources."

Her new appointment is not the first time Shannon has been recognised for her artistic acumen. In 2005 she was awarded a coveted Churchill Fellowship that led to stints studying in France and Italy, as well as a residency with Dartington Pottery in the UK. Her impressive 20-year career includes a string of further grants, exhibitions and prestigious awards. However, Shannon admits it wasn't easy turning her artistic ambitions into a full-time profession.

After graduating from high school, she studied painting but found herself disenchanted by her university education. "There was a lot of conceptual art involved. For example, I'd draw something on a piece of paper and my teachers would suggest doing it directly on the floor! I don't think really young kids can get their heads around conceptual art. We were still learning about life and how to live and we didn't have any concepts yet. We barely had a grasp on the real world," she laughs.

Fortunately fate stepped in, in the form of a local potter who was setting up a new gallery and needed students to help decorate her creations. That potter was Clare Laurence and Shannon credits her as being a creative inspiration. "She let us have free reign. We could do anything. We could paint flowers, angels – anything! I was so lucky to have found such an inspiring, non-judgemental person. She didn't take on a mentoring role, she was more like a friend who let us use her gallery."

That experience led to a life-long love of pottery, especially domestic ware (more commonly known as tableware). "Even today, way down the track from those early days, I still like domestic ware. I feel as though the shape of a domestic pot, like a bowl, provides a little doorway for people. It's saying 'welcome, here's something you understand' and then the drawing or whatever's going on can be something that's really quite conceptual or intellectual but the shape of it makes people feel comfortable and happy."

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Shannon seems enamored by the entire pottery process, from "throwing" the clay to shape it on a spinning wheel, right through to designing and executing the decoration. "The drawing and the form have to work together. They have to speak to each other. The drawing can't just be like a separate thing floating on top; it has to work really closely with the form."

Those drawings are often inspired by Shannon's natural surroundings. "Making something by hand makes people aware that they have to look closely at it and that's what I like about nature too. I like to look really closely at things we see everyday, like gum leaves, and draw people's attention to how amazing they are by saying, through my work, 'stop and look at this'."



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Shannon also admits that her familiarity with Maleny's landscape gives her a unique perspective, having first observed the flora and fauna as a young child and now seeing it through the eyes of her own offspring as they grow and mature.

So what about the growth of the next generation of creatives; can Shannon offer some advice? "One of the best things I've learnt about being a professional artist is to be professional. Selling artwork is a different job from making artwork but to be a professional artist you have to learn to do both of those jobs."

A visit to her website www.shannongarsonporcelain.com reveals that Shannon has indeed managed to marry her creative mastery with marketing. Though perhaps more importantly, she's created a happy life where the work of her hands embodies the thoughts in her head and the passion in her heart.

"I am so lucky to love my job. Most people don't feel like this about the work they do everyday." ○