

# **News from the frontline: collaborative relationships between design and conventional and emerging fields**

## Individual development leading to collaborative projects

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#### **The building of collaborative thinking**

My sense of the word collaboration has always been that it refers to the building of understanding, connections, and of thinking and working together as equals.

In exploring now, the meaning of collaboration to me, I realise that, for much of my life, experientially I have been gradually, continuously and unconsciously gathering a perception and ownership of something very practical, positive, and enriching that now enables me to welcome opportunities for collaboration as they appear.

At Primary school, music entered my life, initially through recorder classes, then later via piano lessons. I still recall my teacher, Mr Savage—tall and lanky, with his ruddy battle scarred complexion reflective of his own puberty and growth. I know now that, at home, he was but one lesson ahead of his noisy recorder class, learning alongside and yet still a leader, able to tame that cacophony of sound. There was honesty to his teaching, an acceptance of error, an enormous ability to encourage and a great openness to exploration. It was as if we all investigated together, discovering how to read those scattered black dots hanging enticingly on the page, then delving into the blending and mixing of sound and rhythm as we happily performed together in groups. Later, as a secondary student, I studied the flute and experienced the wonder of orchestral playing. Once more, my experience was coloured by inspirational teaching as the exploration of colour, rhythm, tone and emotion was ignited and encouraged in tandem with a search to listen, to wait, to merge, to understand and then to combine. A sense of very positive collaboration was beginning for me.

Tertiary studies in Zoology immersed me in a work environment where the search for strong investigative questioning and the sharing of information and discovery was paramount. The two major streams within the department—ecology and physiology (otherwise known as the 'froggies' and the 'twitchies') eyed each other with slightly amused suspicion but within each section lay great clarity of exploration, academic excellence, trust and respect. For two years after graduation, I worked across both of these areas and experienced remarkable and exciting learning. All members of the Zoology department were expected to speak about the details of their work, their methodology and thinking. Here in these talks, I absorbed and gathered another level of understanding and a sense of looking and exploring across diverse areas for similarities and undercurrents of approach. We were encouraged to read widely and to think laterally about all aspects of science. This was remarkable, open and collaborative learning at its best. Listening was again at the heart of this process.

Ceramics came later, stumbled upon almost by accident while searching for something unknown but hopefully more satisfying and challenging than my laboratory job. I knew immediately and with immense excitement, that making objects with clay was to be my future.

My training at the Harrow School of Art in London projected me into an intense and demanding environment. We concentrated on the making of high quality, inventive functional objects. Learning

was focused and structured, committed and energetic; accompanied by thoroughly researched study of contemporary and historical references.

Expectations were high. This was both familiar and attractive to me. I was used to such a way of working as both science and music require this high level of dedication and accomplishment. Here for me also occurred an exciting union of hand, eye and mind as described so wonderfully by Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa in his book 'The Eyes of the Skin'... 'several realms of sensory experience now interacted and fused into each other'. Surprisingly to me then, the integration of materials other than clay into our work was discouraged, even forbidden, but I see now that this would have been a distraction from the main aim—that of in-depth learning in a singular and complex field.

Once more, the development of an inventive, open, questioning, experimental approach resulting in the gradual evolution of ideas was seen as essential for creative and expressive thinking. The recognition of such links across ceramics, science and music was, for me, very exciting. Emerging quietly within me was something so positive and optimistic, expectant even. I believe that these experiences have formed the building blocks of my work and the foundations of my current interest in collaborative projects.

Over the past decade, a series of exciting opportunities have arisen for me to step by step venture outside of my solo practice as a maker. Some of these I will now describe.

### **1. Design and development in Japan of tableware designs for hotel use and to be made from recycled porcelain.**

In response to Japanese government initiatives advocating environmental conservation and recycling, in 1997, the Gifu Prefectural Ceramics Research Institute (Tajimi City) initiated the Green Life 21 Project. This exercise involved local companies and research institutes, working together voluntarily to promote the more sustainable use of natural resources and a reduction in discarded fired ceramic waste. Used and broken ceramics were collected and crushed then carefully reformulated with a proportion of fresh materials into usable recycled clay bodies. New product designs were to focus on ease of use, longevity, and functionality. Forms were to incorporate thickened edges for strength and durability, while still maintaining lightness plus comfort at the mouth during use. Altogether, an exciting new approach to the making of ceramics.

Based at the Oribe design Centre in Gifu city, Gifu Prefecture, one of the largest ceramic producing regions in Japan, my brief was to design pieces for 'cross over dining' ie western style eating in Japan. I thought that I understood what this meant and, on hearing my brief, I immediately began to envisage possible solutions. I had previously visited Japan, eaten and enjoyed Japanese food and had already made western style dinner ware—surely I already had the knowledge to do this. However, this was not so. As the Oribe Design Centre staff further introduced me to the project, moment by moment, my assumptions quickly unravelled. I realised that here I was at the threshold of a new and exciting voyage of discovery. Cultural expectations and differences came suddenly and strongly into focus. A previously produced Japanese dinner set that had been exported to Canada, and then immediately returned with knife scratches in the soft glaze, alerted me to contrasting surface and cultural requirements. The light caressing stroke of chopsticks permits soft and low temperature glaze coverings, while the aggression of knives, forks and metal spoons carries much more robust requirements. The dainty and elegant display of individual tiny portions in Japan made my image of large white plates at home, loaded with mountains of mixed foods seem almost obscene in comparison.

An opportunity to experience 'crossover dining' where Western and Japanese foods and presentation had merged, was particularly helpful. Tiny, appetising morsels sat like jewels atop a large white porcelain plate, each separated by space, taste and colour and delicately coaxed upwards with fine wooden chopsticks. Pasta was presented on a small dish, twirled into a tight

volcano topped with a ruffled toupe of thinly shredded seaweed. The flavour was gorgeous, intense and delicious, and a metal knife and spoon were the tools this time. Dessert followed with miniature slices of cake, pickled apple, a dot of cream and accompanied by a soft lacquered wooden spoon. Cups and glasses were hand made and very delicate ... perhaps too delicate for this restaurant role as they showed signs of chipping and wear.

Here it was essential for me to listen and observe very carefully and openly if I was to be able to fully collaborate within this different culture and achieve an acceptable result. The Oribe Design Centre was an extraordinary organization, devised to support and revitalize local Gifu industries through the introduction of new designs. The generosity and forward thinking that underlay its international designer residency program were truly fantastic. Assigned to me were mentors who patiently interpreted, explained, demonstrated, supported and informed me. I was advised and assisted through all stages of the project cycle, from the design and making of my samples, complex glaze development, and then through to possible methods of manufacture, distribution and sales. Language skills and understanding were so impressive, and in each of many detailed discussions, the depth of visual perception was astounding. Proportion, surface quality, handle size, rim thickness, weight, volume - every detail was minutely examined, challenged and considered. Numerous times, I felt transported back to my student past, where tutorials required justification and attention to every detail and my awareness was ever stretched and awakened. Most impressive of all was the delicacy with which each of my hand made and unfired prototypes were handled, turned, examined and reviewed. At first I gulped and expected disaster as so many hands touched and critiqued my thin, dry bowls and cups with their ever so fragile edges and handles. This feeling quickly passed as I realized that here there was no danger, as all of these hands embodied great respect, delicacy and an intuitive sensitivity, a touch born of fine dishes, chopsticks and dainty morsels.

After four weeks of intense discussions, and the making and revising of prototypes, 13 designs were complete—4 plates, 4 bowls, 2 cups, 2 saucers, a small spoon - and a contract signed for their production under the title 'Oliva—Dinnerware for simple elegance, fine food and good company'. This project has now led directly to further collaborations and cultural connections between Australia and Japan. The visits by Hasegawa-san to Sydney are a good indication of these positive new links.

## **2. Collaborative projects with Melbourne based designer Simon Lloyd**

Regular casual discussions between Simon and myself have, over time, led to the imagining, drawing and discarding of many and various plans.

The first actual completed product was a porcelain hand mirror contained in a felt carrying case and recently purchased by the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas. This was followed by a porcelain rosary supported within a red felt display. In each situation, two separate objects sit together, relating and belonging together but not yet fully combined as one—similar also to an earlier piece of my own.

A more integrated project with a single 'object' outcome was a tile design for Melbourne architect John Wardle. Large terracotta tiles were developed to line the walls and ceiling of the foyer of a multistory building in the Melbourne CBD. The tiles were designed to clip onto a highly sophisticated Italian metal wall hanging system. Development involved careful discussions between a team of architects, Simon Lloyd and myself, plus a ceramics manufacturer. At all stages of development, we were faced with new and interesting problems and issues. Machinery had to be adapted and enlarged extrusion plates made. Ceramic firing supports had to be integrated into the manufacturing process to prevent slumping in the kiln. Firing space and time requirements had to be planned in order for production estimates to be calculated. This project was developed up to the point of production but was then unfortunately abandoned by the client. Disappointingly, possible

difficulties associated with the dusting and cleaning of the tile panels was the reason cited. We are currently returning again to the planning of the production of these tiles.

These ventures, plus the discussions and learning associated with them, have led to a new level of experimentation in my own solo work. Each situation has opened up my awareness and presented me with fresh issues and possibilities. I am now continuing to work on a group of pieces that involve the firing (at 1400 Degrees Centigrade) of fully glazed objects that remain free floating and mobile inside each other. Slumping and sticking are major obstacles at these temperatures and solving these problems has been difficult. These objects are fired using supports made from highly refined industrial alumina materials discovered during developmental work with Simon Lloyd. Here, a material designed for complex and precision industrial, medical and scientific purposes has been transposed to provide a solution to my own tentative and exploratory questions. A second group of pieces, also resulting from these experiences, will incorporate metal lids and attachments plus textile components.

### **3. 'Collector' series developed with SA furniture designer Khai Liew**

Here, Julie Blyfield, Kirsten Coelho, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, Bruce Nuske, Jessical Loughlin and myself all worked independently with Khai Liew to produce a series of pieces for SALA 2010 in Adelaide. These pieces are all currently on display in the Design Museum in London. The 'Prue' cupboard has four pierced porcelain 'sieves' integrated into its doors. Initially the sieves were held in the doors by a ring located behind—a visible and removable attachment. The final version involved the making of a double walled door—the sieves held enclosed and entirely integrated—no longer placed together but seamlessly combined.

### **4. Proposed development of a silver, porcelain and wood object in collaboration with Julie Blyfield and Khai Liew**

This project will explore the combination of silver, wooden and porcelain components into a floating table centrepiece. We will be working with a concept that makes reference to natural twig formations that remained behind after the receding of waters from the flooded creek beds in the Flinders Ranges. We will be working on the matching of movements, surface textures and coloration across the three materials.

### **5. Indigenous projects**

A recent visit to two isolated Indigenous communities has resulted in discussions regarding the future development of ceramic forms for decoration by the artists there. This is a complex situation and requires sensitivity towards the formal and material qualities of objects that would be suitable for this work. Previously, western style dinner plates have been produced as blanks but relationships between these and their painted surfaces seem thin. This is a new and challenging situation for me and will take time to consider and develop appropriately.

### **Finally:**

In stepping towards collaboration, I have found that talking, listening, writing, drawing and planning form an essential starting point on every occasion. The development of an understanding of the nature and possibilities of other materials and an empathy with the processes, skills and expertise of the other practitioners involved is also vital. In situations where different cultures meet, this listening and consideration leads invariably to both the discovery of similarities as well as the investigation of divergence, and thereby to new and more perceptive connections across previous obstacles of difference. These are wonderful and positive links.

There are pitfalls and hurdles involved with collaborative work. A high level of listening, respect, equality, plus excellent communication is mandatory. A determination to work collectively with

clarity and precision is also important to me. Aside from the making of the work itself, I have had to learn to imagine and predict many new issues each time that I have entered into a project. Aside from important design questions, these include more practical things such as the development of contracts, discussions regarding ownership, costs, marketing and the usual exhibition issues of photography, publicity and gallery commissions. Much time commitment is involved in research, ideas development, making—all stages of these projects—and the appropriate valuation of this can be tricky. Arrangements must be clear from the beginning.

Overall, my experiences have been extremely positive and rewarding. The collaborative learning that has occurred has stimulated many new threads in my work and a desire to continue in this way whenever possible and appropriate.

My current part time position as Creative Director of the Ceramics Studio at the Jam Factory in Adelaide is timely also. There, I am surrounded by great expertise, experience, opportunities for new learning and working with other materials. Some combined projects have occurred previously but there is a strong expectation that in the future, new and stronger collaborations will develop. What could be better??

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