



'Ting', 1992, stoneware, slips, matt glaze, ht 46 x 21 x 21 cm



'Happy Couple Well Jar', 1992, stoneware, ht 47 x 24 x 24 cm

EVOLVING LIFE FORMS

Ceramist Elizabeth Charles continues to develop her beautiful vessels while showing a new emotion through her box and figurative forms. Text by Judy Spitzer. Photography by Joseph Lafferty.

IN her second solo exhibition in Sydney, Elizabeth Charles showed a new confidence and maturing in her work. While there is still the love of the classic vessel form, Charles has expanded her box forms and begun to experiment with figures.

Born in Murwillumbah, NSW, Charles was fortunate to attend a high school that encouraged weekend workshops by Japanese-inspired ceramic artists. This involvement gave her an affinity for the feel and texture of clay. The tropical vegetation of her childhood surroundings engendered an interest in the complexity of organic form.

Her decision to attend the Canberra School of Art was based on a lifestyle decision embodied in the written works of the author Bernard Leach, who spoke of the Japanese ceramic tradition – the solitary existence of working in a studio and earning a living by making objects of beauty that were also functional. Even today Charles still enjoys being alone in her studio playing with the clay. She describes herself as a “mucky” worker who delights in the process of handling and carving out the clay. ‘I don’t like to be pristine, I like to attack the surface with carving and sanding tools ... so I elected to use a stoneware clay which is very tolerant of abuse.’

'Kate', 1993, stoneware, slips, matt glaze, ht 21.5 x 15 x 19 cm



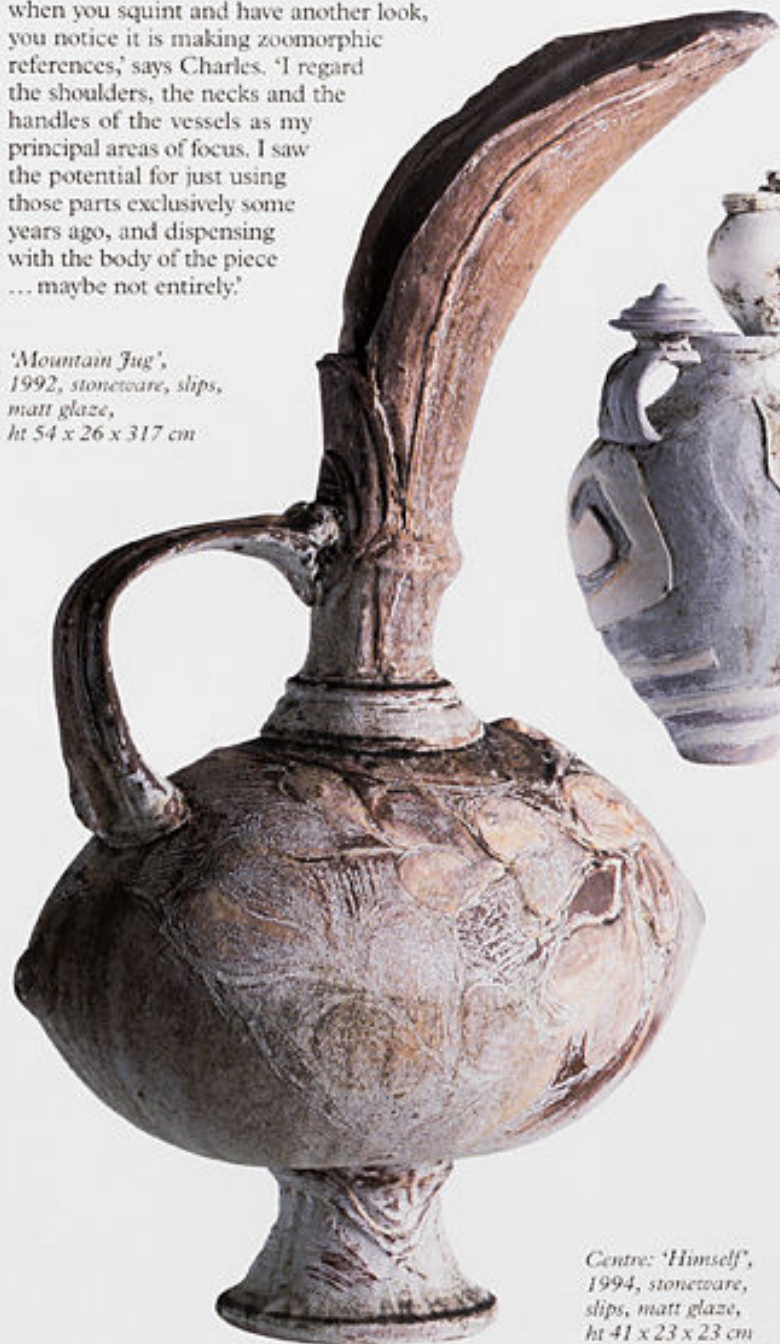
Charles sees her vessel forms as embodying a spirit ... one that she places there herself. 'I do see this idea of duality reflected in the idea of those amusing little traditions of clay talk being about body and necks, and vessels as being reflections of our own physical bodies. There is a certain proportion that I have used that I can see associated with the body form being female. I do imagine those jug forms as being representative of a human or another figure. So they contain the spirit of something,' she says.

The body of the vessels becomes a canvas for the painting or drawing on its surface. Shapes and forms in the surrounding environment may creep into the design but are secondary to the body form; the neck, spout and handle are given very different treatments. While the body has a softness enhanced by matt glazes, the other parts are carved and boldly coloured.

Charles continues: 'I hope that they appear initially as a delicate, very fine thing, but on closer scrutiny are seen to be quite strong – opposites again.'

The duality of the surface decoration is a feature of her work. 'You might look at it one way and see a simple geometric design, but then, when you squint and have another look, you notice it is making zoomorphic references,' says Charles. 'I regard the shoulders, the necks and the handles of the vessels as my principal areas of focus. I saw the potential for just using those parts exclusively some years ago, and dispensing with the body of the piece ... maybe not entirely.'

*'Mountain Jug',
1992, stoneware, slips,
matt glaze,
ht 54 x 26 x 317 cm*



*Centre: 'Himself',
1994, stoneware,
slips, matt glaze,
ht 41 x 23 x 23 cm*

*'Jug', 1994,
stoneware, slips,
matt glaze,
ht 52 x 30 x 21 cm*



From 1983–86 Charles taught at the Orange College of TAFE. During this period her work was experimental but consisted of the classical vessel form. When she was uncertain of her direction she returned to her strengths within the vessel format: the neck, the shoulders and the carving. It took many years to absorb the teachings of the Canberra School of Art and to create an individual style.

In Orange Charles took up the idea of the box form again. During her last year in Canberra, she recalls struggling with this form: 'I spent seven months in my final year working on these wretched things that would explode in the kiln; eventually I just gave up. They did not develop during this stage, as I was not mature enough.'



'Coconut Spirit Box', 1993, stoneware, slips, matt glaze, ht 31 x 23 x 20 cm

It was in Canberra that Charles came under the influence of Alan Peascod. He was a strong and inspiring teacher who instilled in her a sense of the history and tradition of ceramic work, but at the same time encouraged experi-



'Pilgrim Jug', 1992, stoneware, slips, matt glaze, ht 52 x 24 x 24 cm

'Cloud II', 1993, stoneware, slips, matt glaze, ht 35.5 x 26 x 22 cm



mentation. Limits were to be stretched ... new ways found. Glazes could be used in many different and unusual applications. Charles feels that Peascod gave her a freedom to explore as well as an appreciation of classical forms. It was during these years of study that she came to understand that ceramic works could be created for their beauty alone and did not have to function as well. Today, although her vessel forms are functional, they are not created with function in mind.

Since then, Charles has looked more closely at the ceramics of the ancient Near East, in particular Assyrian ceramics. It is the form of the jug that is referred to in her work, not directly but as a repertoire of ideas. It is the freedom and freshness of Cypriot and Macedonian pots that also attracts her. When Peter Haynes was Curator of Exhibitions at the Canberra School of Art, he described her work in the following words: 'Charles' work is both aesthetically pleasing and intellectually stimulating. In its boldly executed forms and subtleness of decoration she has created moving, contemplative work evocative of an historical past and representative of a contemporary expression.'



Elizabeth Charles

Since 1988, Charles has been involved with the Goulburn College of TAFE. She vividly recalls the first Easter when, having the studio at her disposal, she rolled out a huge slab of clay and once again began experimenting with the box form. This form is now made in many different ways and the legs attached to the box are starting to look like pelvic joints. Although they are not directly modelled from the human skeleton, Charles does relate 'to where connections are made'.

These box forms are changing as they become more real to her. They are created as a response to a strong emotion regarding a living entity in her immediate environment. 'Technically, they are very difficult to make and hold together, which is why they have been so slow to develop. On each occasion I make these objects I construct them differently. An event may inspire the form and surface treatment. Just simple things that happen around me: a death, a birth,' explains Charles. The carving on the forms reflect their purpose. The symbol of the eye and the circle, that is found in many ancient cultures, recurs frequently. The memorial box built after the premature death of her dog is decorated with the circle to signify a place for him in their landscape. Occasionally the boxes have writing on them, but at this stage she is not associating any particular

'Charlie's Spirit Box', 1993, stoneware, slips, matt glaze, ht 40 x 23 x 15 cm

'Bird Jug', 1993, stoneware, slips, matt glaze, ht 90 x 42 x 34 cm



colour with an emotion.

Travels in Europe, collecting research material, allowed Charles to view in the flesh all that had been seen in her art textbooks, but an exhibition in Paris of African and Oceanic art was her key to looking at pieces more figuratively. There is an interest in the way other cultures use figures to embody simple functional objects, but are beautiful in their own right, such as the African dollies used for weaving. For Charles now, her recent figurative pieces are portraits of people. This is a new exploration and reflects not the perfect physical likeness, but rather the feelings and location surrounding that person. Charles elaborates by referring to the works in her recent solo exhibition: 'I hope they illustrated my growing interest in more figurative pieces and what I feel is a progressive development in my work. I see myself concentrating more on assembling shapes or forms to create a unified piece. It's a step away from how I have been working with traditional classical forms. I'm still keen to show my box forms, previously titled *Ting*. These are derived from the Chinese bronze forms, as well as the funerary boxes used in Cypriot and Macedonian cultures, to hold ashes or bones.'

For Elizabeth Charles, ceramic sculpture represents an exploration and reflection of her feelings. The vessel forms appeal to her calm aesthetic side and embody the pursuit of beauty for its own sake. It links her with her ceramic ancestors, yet provides her with a contemporary canvas. As her technical ability has matured so has her confidence in expressing her cathartic emotions about life and death. These become the inspiration for her box forms. As the vessel forms house a spirit, the box forms provide a resting place for her emotions. What then of the figurative forms? These are still in the early stage of development, but may represent the synthesis of spirit and emotion.

Judy Spitzer

Judy Spitzer is a freelance writer living in Boveral, NSW.