



“ There is something sublime in the experience of nature, between you and what you see, and that’s where the important art is. ”

Jeff Mincham

Education Kit

JEFF MINCHAM: CERAMICS

Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft

Jeff Mincham: Ceramics

Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft



Jeff Mincham: Ceramics is the fifth in Object's annual series Living Treasures: Masters of Australian Craft. This important series represents Object's commitment to celebrating the achievements of the most influential and iconic figures within the Australian crafts movement. Each year we present a solo exhibition of new work by an artist whose mastery of skill and contribution to the sector is truly worthy of broad national recognition.

Jeff Mincham: Ceramics exhibition will be toured by Object across five states. The museums and galleries included in this tour are Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery (NSW), Bathurst Regional Art Gallery (NSW), Manning Regional Art Gallery (NSW), NoosaArt Gallery (Qld), Tamworth Regional Art Gallery (NSW), Dubbo Regional Art Gallery (NSW), Cowra Art Gallery (NSW), JamFactory (SA), Craft Victoria (Vic), Geraldton Regional Gallery (WA), Bunbury Regional Art Galleries (WA) and Hawkesbury Regional Art Gallery (NSW).

Jeff Mincham has played a key role in the unfolding history of the professional crafts movement in Australia as an outstanding artist and as a tireless advocate for the arts within the community and at all levels of government.

Steven Pozel
Director
Object: Australian Centre for Craft and Design

Jeff Mincham making sgraffito design on a porcelain plate, 1982.
Photographer: Garry Benson

Jeff Mincham: Ceramics

Teachers Notes

The Jeff Mincham education kit explores the inspiration, influences, techniques and aesthetic concerns behind the work of one of Australia's leading ceramic artists. The information provided presents teachers and students with background knowledge that should assist them in building a greater understanding of Mincham's work and the expressive possibilities of ceramics. The questions, research and making activities will support students in developing their own projects and create an awareness of the methods artists use to develop a body of work. The kit also includes some technical information.

Throughout the kit you will find references to symbols, they refer to;



Enquire
Investigate/research
before you visit



Experience
The exhibition through
questions and activities



Extend
Your knowledge by further
research, making, creating
and designing.



Dry Lake detail, 2009, multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware 25x40cm (dia)
Photographer: Grant Hancock

Waiting for Rain 2009, multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware 26x52x12cm
Photographer: Grant Hancock

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Jeff Mincham: Ceramics

Jeff Mincham's career as a potter began in 1971 when he had his first contact with clay. Prior to this time he had worked on the family farm at Milang, South Australia, all the while building a passionate relationship with the surrounding countryside. Moving to Adelaide he studied to become a teacher and this is where he was first introduced to ceramics.

Mincham learnt his craft from the pioneering post-war generation of studio potters, principally Milton Moon, and Les Blakebrough and he was also inspired by English potter Michael Cardew.

He originally set out as a production potter, creating functional domestic ware and continued on this path when he went to the Jam Factory in 1979 as head of the ceramics workshop. By the mid 1980s Mincham began concentrating on creating one-of-a-kind works for exhibitions.

Mincham initially gained widespread critical acclaim for his impressive raku-fired masterpieces but since 1996 he has worked almost exclusively with mid-fired earthenware.

His monumental coil built vessels have become a canvas for his dramatic interpretations of the South Australian landscape- the patchwork fields of the Fleurieu Peninsula, the sand dune grasses of the Coorong and the leafy surrounds of the Adelaide Hills.



Jeff Mincham working in his Cherryville Studio
Photographer: Sandra Brown

Jeff Mincham's Studio, Cherryville Studio 2009
Photographer: Sandra Brown

Environmental influences

Growing up in the Coorong and working in the picturesque Hills district above Adelaide, near Mt Lofty, Mincham continues to be a passionate activist for the South Australian environment. The surfaces of his vessels reflect this ongoing passion with the patchwork fields of the Fleurieu Peninsula's northern wheat belt, the sand dune grasses of the Coorong and the leafy surrounds of the Adelaide Hills. Each of these locations is expressed through bold graphic interpretation of patterns, colours and textural effects.

Spirit of the Coorong

The Coorong and Murray Lakes region in South Australia; where the once mighty Murray River flowed into the Great Southern Ocean is an important eco system comprising fresh water lakes, wetlands, ocean beach and saltwater marshes. This is the landscape that inspired Mincham in his youth and one to which he continually returns. It is home to over 240 species of native birds many which migrate annually to this region from Siberia, Alaska and Japan. Upstream irrigation, stemming of the flow of the Murray River waters, and the long term sustainability of this fragile region are issues of immense concern to Mincham.

Cultivated countryside

The distinctive South Australian landscapes of the mid north wheat belt and the coastal Fleurieu Peninsula appear as grid-like collages of colour, texture and pattern – particularly when viewed from high above. Mincham was greatly influenced by these abstract configurations each time he flew over them: crops of golden wheat, bright yellow canola and fresh green shoots of new growth interspersed with the vivid purple of Salvation Jane (Patterson's Curse) and the warm brown of freshly turned earth.



Above Left: Coorong
Photographer: Jeff Mincham

Above Right: Cultivated Countryside of South Australia
Photographer: Jeff Mincham

Below Left: *Reedbeds* (detail) 2009
Multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware,
63 x 52 x 16cm,
Photographer: Grant Hancock

Below Right: *Fleurieu Fields* 2007
Multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware,
40 x 49 x 12cm
Photographer: Michal Kluvanek
Image courtesy: Sabbia Gallery

Environmental influences

Picturesque 'Hills'

The Adelaide Hills frame Adelaide's eastern border and stand as a barrier separating the coastal and desert regions of South Australia. Part of the Mount Lofty Ranges the 'Hills' retain a strong German influence from early Lutheran settlers. Often called the food bowl of South Australia, agriculture and viticulture are the main focus alongside national parkland. The picturesque surrounds of mighty grey gums and rural scenes have long been a magnet for artists, perhaps most notably the painter Hans Heysen. This is the environment in which Mincham works- continually inspired by the view out the window of his studio.



An elliptical vessel, provides a strikingly flat surface for Mincham's abstract interpretation of the Adelaide Hills landscape using painterly multi glaze effects.

Left: Adelaide Hills
Photographer: Sandra Brown

Right: *High Summer II* 2007 Multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware 20x36cm(dia)
Photographer: Michael Klivanek



Enquire

Find out more about the Coorong and the environmental issues surrounding this unique area of South Australia.

Look at the work of other ceramic artists who have been inspired by nature or their environment and compare their interpretations with Mincham's.



Experience

How do the forms of Mincham's vessels reflect the qualities of the landscape?

Write a short description of one vessel that is inspired by the landscape and then write a description of the actual landscape. Compare the descriptions..



Extend

Make a pot or tile and decorate it with a design based on a landscape familiar to you.

Ensure that the form of the vessel relates to the decoration.

Aesthetic Influences

“ I am trying to make something of enduring beauty. Behind the Japanese ethos is the idea of an object having an enduring presence-it’s just there. Life’s experience does help you to realise things you value, and things you can discard. Nature is always the indelible force ”

from a series of recorded conversations between Jeff Mincham and Margot Osborne, between July 2008 – March 2009.



The concept of Japanese aesthetics is based on ancient ideals that included Zen Buddhist influences as well as the principles of wabi (ephemeral beauty) and sabi (imperfect beauty). The wabi-sabi aesthetic arose out of a need to be mindful of everyday life and its experiences such as old age, poverty and the unattractive. It celebrates the marks of time and finds beauty in imperfection. The growing importance of the tea ceremony from the 16th century and the teachings of Sen no Rikyu (1522 – 1591) established wabi-sabi as an aesthetic concept.

Mincham’s forms and surfaces consistently and deliberately reference this Japanese aesthetic. Many of his vessels rise from refined bases that often seem to float above the surface they are standing on, much belying the weight and impressive aspect of their size. Mincham’s tea bowls are an unabashed homage to the Japanese tea ceremony aesthetic but they still retain the sense of place evident in his large scale works. They offer a very different experience as they rest easily in one hand and you can feel and observe the subtleties and nuances in each bowl.

Teabowl 2006, multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware, 10 x 11cm (dia),
Photographer: Michal Klivanek

Aesthetic Influences

Wabi Sabi Stories about Sen no Rikyu

A disciple swept the garden completely clear of leaves when Rikyu told him off saying he did not know sabi. Rikyu shook a branch scattering more leaves over the ground.

On another occasion Rikyu did not comment on a beautiful tea box that a teamaster had specially selected to serve tea to him. The teamaster smashed the box in anger however it was skilfully glued back together and used again to serve tea to Rikyu. This time recognising the tea box Rikyu commented that it had become a piece of wabi.



Tea Bowl: Survival 2019
Mid-Fired earthenware
Photographer: Annette Mauer
This work references the survival of the Coorong

Enquire

Further investigate the ideas of wabi and sabi.

<http://nobleharbor.com/tea/chado/WhatsWabi-Sabi.htm>

<http://brian.hoffert.faculty.noctrl.edu/TEACHING/TeaCeremony.html>

Research the Japanese tea ceremony and the teachings of Sen no Rikyu

http://www.absoluteastronomy.com/topics/Sen_no_Rikyu



Experience

Describe the qualities of the tea bowls in the exhibition. Consider how they are used. Compare them with the other works.



Extend

Find an object that has special meaning to you or your family. What signs of wear and tear can you see? Explain the significance of the object. Does it relate to a special event or a memory?

Make your own tea bowls that might reflect some of the following qualities that Sen no Rikyu claimed to be essential for the tea ceremony: Harmony, Purity, Respect and Tranquillity.

Write your own wabi sabi story.

Clay and Coil Building

The choice of clay is an important consideration in a ceramicist's repertoire. The style and shape of the vessel, decoration, function and firing will be influenced by the clay being used. Many of the low-fire clays are not waterproof unless sealed using a glaze or non-fired sealer.

The three main types of clay used in ceramics are:

Low-fire earthenware

terracotta, earthenware and raku
(fired to 900° – 1000°C)

Mid-fire earthenware

earthenware and stoneware clay
(fired to 1100° – 1200°C)

High-fire

stoneware and porcelain
(fired to 1220° – 1300°)

Mincham uses a mid-fire earthenware clay, Keanes Special K* because of its specific properties that enable him to build his large sculptural forms while allowing for refiring a number of times at the maturing temperature.

This clay contains a large amount of ground up pre fired clay or grog that enhances the building strength and ability of the clay to undergo multiple firings.



Some Practical Advice from Jeff Mincham

How to Build A Coil Pot

If, as would seem highly probable, the first pot ever made was a "pinch pot", the second would have almost certainly been "coil built". It would have been an easy transfer of forming techniques from basket making and remains to this day a fundamental clay methodology.

The process of coil building is quite appropriately introduced at the very beginning of the clay learning experience, however if it is badly taught, and it often is, the results mean it is quickly overlooked for more glamorous techniques such as the potter's wheel. This is a great pity, as sound coil building techniques are as important to ceramics as scales are to music, and the possibilities are almost limitless (one limit being the size of the kiln).

Mincham builds his large elliptical forms by deftly rolling out long coils by hand and then pinching them, row by row, to make the walls. The walls are finished by smoothing and scraping back excess clay.

Photographer: Grant Hancock

Clay and Coil Building

The fundamentals of coil building:

- It is a highly skilled technique.
- Some clays do it better than others and some do it brilliantly, especially where objects of a reasonable scale are involved.
- It is not as slow as it looks in terms of a final result.
- Done well, it produces an extremely strong, dense and resilient form. Done badly the exact opposite applies.
- Shortcuts don't work, extruded coils are weaker than hand-rolled and at the end of the day they take a lot longer, especially if you include the clean up.
- Finally, it's all about timing. As in life, get the timing right and anything is possible.

From a maker's perspective there are a few simple rules:

- Well-prepared clay of the right consistency makes easy work of it.
- Develop a simple, consistent hand action for the joining process. It's like knitting and keeping even tension.
- Always score the surface before the next coil goes on and very lightly dampen (grease) the surface with cloudy water, i.e. water with some clay in it.
- To produce a smooth surface, various fettling and smoothing tools are needed (you may find them in the kitchen drawer) and again consistency of touch is essential.
- Once the work is underway, timing the next layer is critical. It is usual to put down three or four coils in one session and it is possible to build very quickly in the right climate conditions once you know your clay.



Jeff in Cherryville Studio
Photographer: Sandra Brown



Enquire

What are the advantages and disadvantages of coil building? If you have made a coil pot what were some of the problems that you encountered?

The origins of coiling clay are ancient and some of the most beautiful examples are the Japon pots produced in Japan between 7000-300BC. Find out about Japon pots and the meaning of the word Japon.



Experience

Draw a selection of Mincham's vessels from the exhibition.

What impact does the size of his works have? How do the vessels make you feel?

How does the quality of hand building reveal itself in his work?



Extend

Make a coil pot that is based on one of Mincham's vessels .

Document your own processes to explain the techniques of coil building.

Surface Decoration

Mincham is attracted by the
“haphazard beauty that could result from the variable chemistry of firing conditions. The interplay between chance and control....”

Margot Osborne

Mincham’s textural imagery involves carving and gouging repetitiously with tools to reproduce effects such as the windblown grasses of the Coorong sand hills around the vessels, or the staccato patterns all over a surface, often found in rock formations and plant life. These textures are enhanced, exaggerated or subtly coloured with glazes that accentuate the details of these effects.



Above Left: *Sea of Grass* 2009 multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware 50x60x20cm
 Photographer: Grant Hancock

Above Right: *Pelargic Memoir*, 2009, multiglazed, mid fired earthenware, 40x48x13cm
 Photographer: Grant Hancock

Below Left: *Tree Stump*
 Photographer: Sandra Brown

Below Right: *Arboreal Vessel 1*, 2009 multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware, 79x46 cm (dia)
 Photographer: Grant Hancock

Surface Decoration



Mincham uses his glazes as a palette to paint the landscapes that inspire him.

In the early 2000s Mincham started to experiment with the complicated layering of glazes built up over multiple high temperature firings; a challenging contrast to the one fire tenet of mid-fired ceramics. The painterly treatment given to the glazes by numerous applications gives a moody glow and reflects the scenic colours of the South Australian countryside.



Above: *The Marshlands* 2008 multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware, 36x27x27
Photographer: Michal Klivanek

Below: *Edge of Day (Detail)* 2009 multi-glazed, mid-fired earthenware 47x64x19cm
Photographer: Grant Hancock



Enquire

Do Mincham's vessels have a practical function? What purpose do they have?



Experience

Draw some of the textural patterns on Mincham's vessels. How did he create these surfaces?

How successful is Mincham's integration of surface, form and colour?



Extend

Research the Native American Pueblo pottery or the rich tradition of African pottery. Consider the form, function and decoration.

Firing Techniques

Raku

Mincham made Raku ware early in his career. Raku ware is a type of Japanese pottery that is traditionally used in the tea ceremony often in the form of tea bowls. Pots which are handmade using low fired earthenware are taken from the kiln while they are still very hot. Typically, pieces removed from the hot kiln are placed in masses of combustible material (e.g., dry grass, or newspaper) to provide a reducing atmosphere for the glaze and to stain the exposed body surface with carbon.

Fuming

Fuming is also known as Sagger firing. A sagger is a sealed container however many potters use a kiln. Materials such as oxides, salts coffee grinds, and other reactive agents are placed inside the sagger or some enclosed environment such as a kiln with a combustible product such as wood shavings to create the smoke or fumes. These are trapped to create an atmospheric reaction that influences the surface of the pot. Some artists are so adept and knowledgeable about the effects of particular materials and the placement of the materials, pot and temperature that they have considerable control over the process.

Multiple Firing

The technique of multiple firing is traditionally used with high fired clay bodies such as porcelain and some stoneware. Most low and mid fired clays such as terracotta and other earthenware aren't strong enough for constant re firing.

Mincham uses Keanes Special K which is a heavily grogged (addition of crushed previously fired clay) clay that also has some stoneware properties and is fired at 1000- 1100 degrees.



Mincham working with students.
Placing works in a carbonising firing.
Cooling the works very quickly with water

Photographer: Unknown



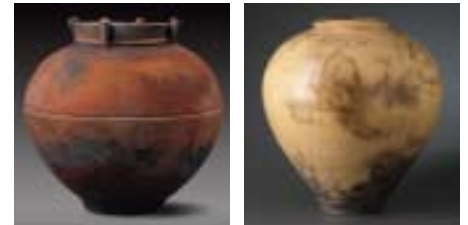
Some Firing terminology

Oxidation

Firing with ample oxygen.

Reduction

Firing with inadequate oxygen and large amounts of carbon (smoke, unburned fuel).



Above Left: *Large Jar*, 1985, raku-fired earthenware, 45 x 43cm (dia), winner of the 1985 Fletcher Brownbuilt Award, Photographer: Grant Hancock

Above Right: *Lidded Jar* 1978, salt-glazed stoneware, 46 x 43cm (dia), Photographer: Grant Hancock

Some interesting information on kilns, firing techniques and clay

- Clay consists of fine-grained particles that are relatively weak and porous. Part of the firing process includes the heating of the clay until the particles partially melt and flow together; creating a strong, single mass. Through firing, the pores are reduced in size, causing the material to shrink slightly. The fired clay is very hard and strong, although usually somewhat brittle.
- Kilns are insulated chambers or ovens required for the firing of clay at high temperatures. Kilns can be as simple as a metal drum filled with wood chips to large expensive electric or gas kilns with timers and temperature gauges.
- Some potters notably from African countries such as Nigeria place their pots in a shallow firing pit on a bed of dried cattle dung and then cover the pots with dried grass.
- The Anagama kiln is an ancient Japanese kiln that uses wood in a long, sloping, single chamber tunnel to fire the pots. At one end are the fire and the pots and at the other end is a flue. This type of kiln requires a constant supply of wood and someone to continually stoke the fire.
- Ceramic artist Nina Hole builds large clay architectural forms that she sets alight. The audience is asked to throw a packet of sawdust, salt or copper on the work to add colour. Thus the work is a sculpture, a kiln and performance all in one.



Mincham's techniques of surface using a combination of glazes and multiple firings are what make his work unique.

*Large fumed Raku Jar 1990, raku-fired earthenware, 47 x 49cm (dia),
Photographer: Grant Hancock*



Extend

Various types of kilns are used in different parts of the world.

Research a number of firing methods and kilns from Africa, Japan and North America.



Enquire

Find out more about the work of Nina Hole by visiting her website.

<http://www.ninahole.com/>



Experience

Which firing methods has Mincham used in the works exhibited in the exhibition?