

## A GRAIN OF SAND

Ever since Europeans arrived in Australia artists have sought to identify and depict the nature of the Australian landscape. The antiquity of the continent with its flat worn-down plains and occasional outcrop of rock or remnant of volcanic activity has fascinated artists. The peculiarities of colour and light in the landscape, and the delicacy of the bush vegetation, with its unique flora, have all inspired painters. In the decorative arts, including ceramics, a nationalist school of design, led by visionaries, such as Lucien Henri, in the late nineteenth century, and Eirene Mort, a practitioner and teacher, early in the twentieth century, sought inspiration from the flora and fauna. The fervor of nationalist sentiment which surrounded the celebration of the bicentennial of European settlement in 1988, encouraged, for a moment, a rebirth of interest in specifically Australian motifs in the decorative arts. But few potters, silversmiths, or cabinetmakers, have been inspired by the landscape. Fewer still have been able to capture the qualities of the landscape in their work.

The majority of Australians live on the coastal fringes of the large dry continent. Nearly all the major population centres, and state capitals, are on harbours and rivers. Most people are less than a few hours drive from the sea and many live just a few minutes walk away. Nearly everyone spends their summer holidays at the beach. For many the exploration of the coastal shore, the scrubby ti-tree and boobialla strips beyond the dunes, the shell-strewn sands, and the mysteries of rockpools are part of childhood memories. This seaside landscape, like the landscape of the bush, is subtle, delicate and infinitely varied. Both are under constant threat of environmental damage or of being spoilt by thoughtless development.

Many Australian artists wish to interpret and depict the landscape. To be able to show how the landscape and its forms have inspired them and their concern for the preservation of the environment is their greatest challenge.

The potters Toni Warburton and Anders Ousback have both sought inspiration in the landscape. Although their experience of the landscape is individual and their work inspired by it unique, they have much in common, most importantly a realization that contemplation of the landscape can be enormously rewarding.

Since her childhood Toni Warburton has spent holidays with her family on the southern New South Wales coast. Her time exploring rockpools, with their trapped fish, slippery seaweeds, brilliantly coloured sea-anemones, spiny sea-urchins, black snail shells and barnacles, oysters and limpets stuck fast to the rock, and her understanding of the fragility of this ecosystem, has constantly inspired her art.

Some of Toni's earliest ceramics, teapots and cups, made in the early 1980s, were shaped like sea-urchins, or the leathery cungeoi or sea-squirts, that she

had observed in rockpools. Made in terracotta and painted with black and white slips, or a range of naturalistic colours, the results were reminiscent of the work of the sixteenth century French potter, Bernard Palissy. Later work showed her concern for both the fragility of the rockpool's ecosystem and the larger issues of the disposal of radio-active waste at sea and the preservation of the Pacific.

This interest in the environment continued while working at the MS University of Baroda in India in 1987 and 1988. The beauty of the form of women's saris and men's turbans, inspired Toni to make a series of works focussing on both the shape and protocol of the wearing of traditional Indian dress. The conical spirals of the sari forms she made also evoked the sacred mountain of Pavagadh, which rises from the plains of Gujarat. Her experience of the Buddhist caves at Bhimbetka in Tamil Nadu where she saw painted ceilings, one with a naturalistic decoration of a lotus pond and the other with a complex abstract pattern, had a profound impact on her work.

This inspiration continues. More recently Toni Warburton has explored the idea of mountains and their imagined interiors, as well as caves and the idea of being inside and looking out into the light. In many cultures mountains are where the gods live, a place beyond human experience. On the ancient continent of Australia, real mountains don't exist. The highest peak, Mt Kosciusko, is a mere 2,228 metres. Because of this the few tall hills assume remarkable importance, in both Aboriginal mythology and more recent European history. Features such as Uluru, the rock at the centre of the continent, have significance for both Aboriginal and European occupants. They remind us of the antiquity of the Aboriginal Dreamings and the need Europeans felt to establish a mythology in a land seemingly untouched by history.

Caves matter in the human imagination. On one level they are entrances into the inside of the earth and the hidden spaces within mountains. Caves and grottos, natural, or man-made, have been seen as places of mystery and fear. Sometimes they offered shelter. Sometimes they concealed danger. Hermits, sibyls and wise men retreated to caves to escape from the world.

Toni Warburton brings together her fascination with mountain forms and caves, in a series of works in which she explores the contrasts between naturalistic and abstract decoration, the world of experience and the imagination and darkness and light. The exteriors of these mountains are richly decorated with her memories of Pavagadh and of walking up Pigeon House Mountain on the New South Wales south coast. The interiors are decorated with abstract patterns. The patterns invite contemplation and meditation. The interiors of her mountains are places of the imagination and offer a sanctuary from a world gone mad.

Anders Ousback began to make pottery after a revelatory encounter in 1981 with the work of the English potter Lucie Rie. Inspired by the simplicity of her forms, the softness of glazes, the subtlety of colour and texture, he decided to become a

potter. He began making utilitarian objects, cups and bowls. With a range of palely coloured, but mostly white glazes, the objects he made were created to be used, held, drunk from and sensually enjoyed in daily life. They bring to life William Morris's maxim of having nothing in your life that is neither beautiful nor useful.

At the same time his desire to simplify his life, to cast aside the possessions of a traditional European lifestyle, and to go about making pottery, with an almost monastic devotion, brought him to leave the city and live in a small coastal town south of Sydney. There he works close to the native bushland, looking out over the ocean. It is a lifestyle that allows time for the appreciation and enjoyment of nature, which he pursues alongside and through his work as a potter.

In 2001 Anders Ousback began to make ceramic objects that had no functional purpose. So completely different from his more familiar work, these objects are a result of a long-standing interest in Asian culture, specifically scholars' rocks, known in Japan as *suiseki*.

The collection and presentation of rocks as works of art to inspire contemplation dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD) when connoisseurs recognized the aesthetic and spiritual qualities of certain rocks. There are ancient Chinese catalogues and accounts of these rocks. Individual rocks were highly valued and handed down as heirlooms. Some were large, even as tall as two metres, but most were meant for display on a scholar's desk or in a household niche, where they would evoke the natural world - mountains, hillsides, rocky seaside outcrops, and inspire contemplation. Some were valued for their unusual shape, colour, or even the sound they made when struck, others for their resemblance to humans or animals, or their purely fantastic nature. There is no equivalent in western civilization to the Chinese and Japanese reverence for nature in which a natural object can become a work of art and Nature is seen as the greatest artist.

Anders Ousback has long been fascinated by scholars' rocks. His carefully arranged garden features a small, but impressive example. A greyish-black rock streaked with white, it suggests an aged mountainside smoothed by the rain down which water has run for centuries. It brings an ambiguity of scale and some mystery to the banksias which surround it. In his studio he has a single rock, found on the nearby rockshelf, the only one he has found worthy of elevation as a contemplative object.

The 'rocks' he has made are mostly small. They belong on a desk top. There are some larger ones. Wheel thrown they have been manipulated to form enclosed spaces. Some have openings, which suggest an interior world, caves or volcanic fissures that allow insight into the mystery their interiors and a hidden world. Others have no opening and insist on the quietest of contemplation. They invite the viewer to visually caress them; to enjoy the pleasure of their stoney surfaces, streaked and flecked with subtle colour that conjures up stones washed smooth

by water; and then to pick them up and hold them and experience the texture, smooth or rough with your hands.

Both Toni Warburton and Anders Ousback explore the natural and creative world through their ceramics. The landscapes of Asia inspire them to create works that offer insight into the Australian landscape. Their mountains are mountains for contemplation. The objects they are making have no functional purpose but succeed as sculptures. They are complex and carefully considered and are meant to be seen 'in the round'. They are objects to contemplate and inspire not just decorate. These are works which stimulate the imagination. Like the best works of art they have something to say which can only be said in a work of art.

Toni Warburton and Anders Ousback's mountains are not grains of sand. They are worlds in themselves.

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January 2002