



Back to the land

BY JOHN LUNA, OCTOBER 2012

An upcoming exhibition displays the resourcefulness and innovation of Vancouver Island-area potters of the 1970s and early '80s.

When she directed the Cartwright Street Gallery in Vancouver, Diane Carr used to find herself thinking that if she could take a box of Wayne Ngan tea bowls around to the heads of local corporations, extracting a promise from each to use the bowl every day for a month, the money would flow in. “I think ceramics are very contemplative,” she says. The day-to-day encounters with a humble tea bowl are part of a continuum that includes the artist’s movements, the behaviours of clay and fire, and the domestic impressions that form a rhythm over time; a texture carried in the hands, a contour brought to the lips. As Carr confirms, “you have to use more than just your visual sense.”

This October, the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria will present the work of 31 ceramic artists from Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands made during the 1970s and '80s. Guest-curated by Carr, Back to the Land is the first group exhibition to focus on this unique period in the island communities of the West Coast, who up until now have been unacknowledged by official histories of West Coast ceramics. Carr, who spent months rounding up key pieces from collections, notes in her catalogue essay, “The pots exhibited here represent a short period in which there was a remarkable explosion of ceramics activity on Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands. It was a brief era in which the modernist and Anglo-Asian influences that prevailed were beginning to give way to the contemporary post-modern influences that would revitalize ceramic practice in this region.”

Carr herself was a product of the moment. Though raised on Vancouver Island, she had come under the spell of modern art while studying in Portland, taking in a retrospective of Northwest Coast artist Mark Tobin. His seminal abstract painting, such as the “white writing” series, fused Asian-inspired calligraphic marks with a North American, “all-over” composition. These connections between Asian and Western art also inspired a love of ceramics, which Carr had collected from a tender age.

In Vancouver during the 1960s, Carr continued to study art, and also embraced activism, working with the feminist organization Voice of Women which was protesting the war in Vietnam. This included helping young men from the United States who had come over the border to escape compulsory military service seek refuge, often in remote rural areas. “We were...channelling these young ‘draft dodgers’ out of Vancouver and to [the Kootenays and the Gulf Islands] as fast as we could,” Carr recalls.

Often, the draft resisters were not only escaping a moral dilemma, but pursuing a dream—that of a different kind of life than the one offered by Nixon’s supply-side economics. Social movements rejecting urban, industrialized existence in favour of simplicity and self-sufficiency often resonate during crisis. As Salt Spring Island potter Gary Cherneff remarks, for his generation, “back to the land” represented the search for “an alternative way to live a life.”

Artists in particular were attracted by the promise of off-the-grid, inexpensive acreages on which to construct homes out of studios, communities out of counterculture.

Carr had been looking for her own alternative in the early 1970s when a friend asked her to take over a pottery studio in Victoria. Carr kept the studio's name—the Potter's Wheel—but reinvented the business as a serious commercial gallery, stocking the more practical wares on the storefront while using the upper floor as an exhibition space where ceramic pieces were arranged on plinths and presented as fine art. "It was a shock to me," Carr says, "that nobody thought it was art, because I never thought that it wasn't...To me they were sculpture."

More than either a shop or a gallery, the Potter's Wheel became part of a rich milieu, a meeting place for artists to exchange information and study one another's work. Some two dozen potters supported themselves primarily through sales of their work in the years represented by the exhibition, a remarkable statistic considering the materials, training and accumulated knowledge required to go from hobbyist to production potter.

It wasn't easy. As Carr notes in her essay, "equipment and materials from commercial sources were [often] lacking or too expensive." Many potters, like Wayne Ngan of Hornby Island, built their own kilns following traditional models; others like Denman Island's Gordon Hutchens, developed new formulations of glazes using local materials. Carr describes Ngan's first Hornby house, built by hand from the roughest of raw materials as, like his ceramic work, "both in and of nature."

But perhaps this tendency toward self-sufficiency is also part of the potter's temperament. Metchosin potter and ceramics writer Robin Hopper's first contact with clay came as a boy in the English countryside, scooping fresh earth from craters left in the wake of aerial bombardment; there is something elementally resourceful at the heart of the medium.

Synthesis, the drawing together of different materials and fusing them into a cohesive, transformed whole, is another feature of ceramics, and also of Carr's curatorial storytelling. As an art historian, she identifies varied influences—from the "form follows function" ethos of the Bauhaus technique inherited and perpetuated by German-born potters Jan and Helga Grove (members of the Limners), and other European émigrés, to the teachings of Bernard Leach and Shoji Hamada, themselves synthesizers of ancient traditions from across Asia and Western Europe. Leach's *A Potter's Book*, first published in 1940, popularized his technical methods, as well as his philosophy of a creative life. In doing so, he inspired flocks of disciples from around the world.

In the postwar world into which the new pottery was born, artists were often necessarily nomadic, their traditions fugitive; theirs was the quintessential twentieth-century leap from tradition to fragmentation to innovation. The spontaneous sensibility of North American Abstract Expressionist painting, an approach popularized by American Peter Voulkos and today practised by Metchosin's Walter Dexter, fused painting, sculpture and clay, complementing the rigour of the earlier schools with a heady dose of experimentalism.

Perhaps then *Back to the Land* is a show about many lands, or many islands, whose artists came from all over to find, quite literally, a piece of earth. Carr herself travelled the world after selling the shop in 1975, but returned to the cause of craft with Vancouver's Cartwright Street Gallery, later the Canadian Craft Museum. Carr describes these efforts as looking for a way in the "back door" of public galleries like the Vancouver Art Gallery and the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria; a way to get critics and scholars to pay attention. Despite a hiatus from curating, Carr's conviction continues with *Back to the Land*: "Every time they write the history of BC ceramics they don't mention anything about Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands...This is really important and it needs to be done."

Until relatively recently, it could be challenging for Canadian ceramic artists to see their efforts taken seriously as cultural capital in their own country. The daily experience of living with ceramics, experiencing them as an extension of domestic routines or hospitable rituals, fosters a different kind of appreciation than we usually

associate with objects in museums. If, as Carr suggests, we take time to contemplate these vessels, perhaps also, reciprocally, everyday life is contemplated more finely and thoroughly. Contemplated and venerated.

Back to the Land: Ceramics from Vancouver Island and the Gulf Islands 1970-1985 runs from October 5 through February 3 at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria. An opening reception with many of the artists in attendance will be held October 5, 8-10pm.