

Panels: The Value of Ceramic Exhibitions: Commercial and Didactic

Janet Mansfield

We are ceramic artists, so what else matters? This is an altered version of a sign at a national exhibit at a recent Venice Biennale and it could equally apply to the question of the value of holding ceramic exhibitions today. As ceramic artists we need to exhibit our work in order for the public to understand it in contemporary terms. Considering the concept of an exhibition it is possible to include, on the commercial side, galleries, websites, publications including books, catalogues and magazines, retail shops, auction houses, open days in the studio, markets and fairs.

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On the educational side we have museum and private collections, public, state and regional galleries, travelling shows and exhibitions for captive audiences at conferences, such as the Australian Ceramic Triennale. There are videos and films, competitions and surveys, all providing a view of ceramic art through a range of levels of expertise and themes. Over the 40 years that I have been a potter I have taken part in all these forms of exhibitions, participating as artist, curator, juror, writer and more, and I have enjoyed the continuing discipline that is entailed in these activities.

"The art market is booming," writes Sarah Thornton in her 2008 book, *Seven Days in the Art World*. "Museum attendance is surging. More people than ever call themselves artists. Contemporary art has become mass entertainment, a luxury good, a job description and a kind of alternative religion for atheists. But the art world is still opaque to outsiders." Such a statement does beg several questions. Certainly, there seems to be a plethora of ceramic exhibitions. At the 2009 National Council for Education in the Ceramic Arts (NCECA) conference in Phoenix Arizona, there were 40 or more exhibitions, more than most of the 4000 attendees could possibly see. Magazines advertise and review a continuing stream of major exhibitions of ceramics, while smaller exhibitions show the works of ceramic artists throughout most regions of most countries. But Thornton's comment about outsiders is even more relevant when it comes to ceramic art.

Ceramics do not feature in too many reviews in the general press, a comment that has been made at many a forum, but the situation never seems to change.

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What is needed, perhaps, is to look at ceramic exhibitions in a different way. We will always need the prestige gallery, the well presented, didactic museum display, the local social gatherings of like-minded potters who bolster each other up and buy each other's work. Who is not guilty of this and who could deny the pleasure of owning and using pots that

give joy in the daily round, but maybe we should be looking for more public venues. One such example comes to mind. At the Botanical Desert Gardens in Phoenix, for several months during 2009, a massive installation by glass artist Dale Chihuly attracted a large crowd, and not only the conferees of NCECA. At nearly every turn in the gardens we were presented with a part of the installation, his first to be placed entirely within the desert environment. As he wrote about it himself, it "looks as if it comes from nature". Effective as art and as inspiration, comments heard included, "How can I learn to make art like this?" from 17 and 18 year olds. Juxtaposing the forms with those of the exotic cactus and desert flowers, Chihuly established a direct and immediate dialogue between art and nature.

It is in Asia, possibly, that the ceramic movement is gaining the most respect and promotion. In Mino (Japan), in The World Ceramic Centre Icheon, (Korea) and at Yingge (Taiwan), competitions for contemporary ceramics attract thousands of entrants, all vying for the substantial prizes offered. Each of these venues has a history of ceramic activity and industrial and individual artists, and the prizes are awarded for both useful and expressionist works. At each of these venues too, accompanying exhibitions are mounted, conferences and workshops with invited participants offered and the public responds by attending by the busload. Supported by local governments and private donors, the budgets are immense. The publicity is equally huge and it is not unexpected to see a prime minister or even royalty try their hands at throwing a pot. Good publicity indeed.

The value of ceramic exhibitions is one of reinforcing our stand in the art world. I believe ceramics is an art form, not necessarily fine art, nor indeed craft, but an entity in its own right. It is the material that makes us stand apart and it is the material that draws us together as artists. Presenting an exhibition of one's work requires much from an artist: discipline in regard to deadlines; a sense of display and presentation; attracting writers and photography if one is to produce an article or a catalogue; money for advertising or, ideally, a patron; and a degree of confidence. An exhibition is a form of communication, a telling of a story about one's life and values. One is exposed through the work, whether it be an installation, on the web, a video, a book or a magazine article, and from venues as varied as the local show to the finest museum in the country.

The Value of Ceramic Exhibitions – Commercial and Didactic will be one of the topics up for discussion at the 2009 Australian Ceramics Triennale. Invited panellists include Peter Haynes (Director, ACT Museums and Galleries), Helen Stephens, (director of All Hand Made and Helen Stephens Gallery, Sydney), Rowley Drysdale (artist and writer of Cooroy, Queensland), with Janet Mansfield in the chair.

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