

Getting Started Ruth King



Connecting Threads

Ruth King CPA Fellow tells of her several starts, personally and as a potter.

I have started out in different ways several times, each new beginning informed by what has gone before yet distinct in its own right. Looking back these are punctuated by moments that stand out; as a six year old, walking home with my mother through woods and passing a heap of yellow London clay spoil she innocently remarked, 'I wonder if you could make a pot from that clay...'

Childhood was drawing, reading or making things from mud pies and concoctions of flour and water to paper cut-outs, knitting, sewing, you name it we did it. Later, when I wasn't roaming round





Opposite page Top: Ruth with David Lloyd-Jones, Fellow and past Chairman of CPA Below: Ruth King This page Top left: Early salt glazed pot with sgraffito design 1987 Below: Incised pot, early salt glaze 1986 Below left: Pot with flamboyant form 1985



the countryside I played the piano, read novels and continued to enjoy making things.

Age eleven, my first pot, bought from a pottery in St. Ives while on holiday. Beautiful curves, rich deep blue with darker streaks.

Living in rural Hertfordshire but with easy access to London we had the best of both worlds. My sister was at University College London (UCL). I often accompanied her to the British Museum, browsed second-hand bookshops, wandered the Portobello Road and the next day would be exploring swallow holes, rambling across fields or in local woods.

We made pottery at school but as I studied maths and science at A level I was only grudgingly allowed to slot in art around the edges.

I thought of studying music, as had my mother, but felt that I wasn't really good enough and looked to science and following in my father's footsteps. However, the way the subjects were taught at school was far from the thrilling and all-absorbing manner in which he described and explained things; there seemed an unbridgeable gap between the two.

I also daydreamed of being a potter. I would give it a try and after a foundation year went to Camberwell. I floundered at first trying

to make sense of an unfamiliar world that bore little relation to my previous experience. Used to working with empirical data and dealing with facts this subjective world of art school unnerved me. Nothing I made seemed to come up to my expectations or near to resembling what was in my head.

The final year got off to a rocky start. The prospect of outside exposure had the benefit of making all the false starts and flirtations with ideas coalesce into a reasonable degree show, though not one backed up with sketch-books or visible documentation elucidating the how and why. This is still how I work, just the odd note pinned to the wall or on the shelf in my studio.

Throughout, my partner Simon, himself a textile student gave me his support. Simon knew something about ceramics as his father, David Lloyd-Jones, was a well-respected potter. Together we shared a passion for fabric and colour and made and still make quite a good pair.

While a student I worked part-time at the CPA and became full-time after graduating. The safe world of the CPA potters was generous and all-inclusive, one of shared information and mutual support. With a foot in both camps, the 'new ceramics' on the one hand and the

Top left: Tall vessel with incised lines 1998

Top right: A placed kiln before firing

Below: The magic of the glazes revealed after firing

Opposite page: Ruth's workshop

grounded functional ware on the other, I could appreciate that each had merits though both also suffered from dogma. There seemed no good reason for the vying that went on between them.

A legacy of my time spent at the CPA is the pleasure of using functional wares in daily life. They are personal friends. I never had any desire to make them myself but in the same way I value the ability of others to work loosely without over-finishing. This approach is not in my nature either. Maybe because I'd had so much pleasure in drawing those 'perfect' graph curves that swooshed off toward infinity or some other destination. That clean controlled but energetic quality was what I aimed for. Thrown pots with their inevitably round cross-section held no appeal, I was more interested in exploring the dynamics of other symmetries.

Then I had an invitation to visit a family in Japan, providing the impetus I needed. My Japanese hosts were wonderful, kind and hospitable. They took me round Japan introducing me to their culture and landscapes. They arranged visits to well-known ceramic centres covering every style and aesthetic. This had a profound affect on my attitude to ceramics. As I believed that the work I made should reflect myself here and now, I didn't wish to outwardly imitate these styles. Yet, I discovered a new found respect for the quietude and subtlety within the Japanese works I saw. It was later that this impacted on me again, when walking through the door of the CPA I felt as if I were being assaulted by all the pots jostling with each other and shouting 'look at me, no look at me, me, me...'

Returning to London I took over a low rent studio in Brixton from Karen Bunting, who moved to Hackney. I settled in with toolbox, chair, table and paraffin stove. A mouse kept me company but the reality of not having the support of a college department sank in. I made some dreadful pots and for a while felt overwhelmed.

Simon graduated and we moved. Two years after leaving college life felt better, the pots had begun to sell, I acquired a kiln and spray gun with the aid of a Setting-up Grant from the Crafts Council. Things were on the up.

One hot and smelly traffic jam too many we suddenly felt a desperate need to leave the city for good and moved to York to live in part of Simon's parent's house. There was so much space, so few people...very different.

I got used to sharing David's studio, to begin with, not entirely comfortable for either of us. My kiln wouldn't work properly, there were lots of failures but I kept going. That winter was unbelievably cold. The dishcloth froze to the taps in the kitchen...the clay in the workshop froze. We were broke, a recurrent theme for years. I missed London, missed the activity, the anonymity of urban life.

I needed a job. Spelman's Second-hand and Antiquarian Bookshop provided one. It was a perfect arrangement, one week making pots, the next week spent with books, a great balance of occupations that continued for five years. It was here I found *On Growth and Form* by D'Arcy Wentworth Thompson, a biology textbook from 1917 and still



a standard text today due partly to the way it is written. Its particular combination of observation and interpretation perfectly articulated my own interests.

Needing a faster method to build forms and add definition I began slab building and made larger, more complex pieces. I was happy in the workshop and David was good company, I think he enjoyed my being there too.

Electric firing no longer satisfied me. I'd lost interest and wanted new surfaces but didn't know quite what. I needed to be surprised. David had built a small (for him) 25cu.ft. wood kiln and suggested we try a salt firing. I was hooked. Central to its appeal was the



Below: Incised pot on legs 1991 Bottom: The wood-fired kiln at Fulford, York Opposite page Left: *Soft teardrop* Top right: *Transformation*, a soft vessel 2003 Middle right: Vessel with bronze glaze 2005 Bottom right: Black Combe by Jane Blackman



formation of the final surface from within the structure itself and I relished that the responsibility for the ceramic surface lay with this unfamiliar outside agency. Salt glazing in the wood kiln seemed the answer. It was of course yet another beginning.

We had to move as the big house was to be sold. We found a dilapidated terraced cottage with two workshops, one large enough for Simon's 5metre print-table but nowhere for a salt kiln. I would continue to fire kilns at Fulford. I missed David's company but came to enjoy the freedom of working alone where I could succeed (and fail) in private.

Pregnancy needed a slab roller! Until then everything had been done with a rolling pin, cloth and batons. Past a certain point it is impossible! It was the first piece of equipment I had acquired in years. This time Simon got the part-time job, two days as assistant gardener at Shandy Hall for the Laurence Sterne Trust. Gardening is another passion we share.

Francis arrived, wonderful but exhausting. Adjusting to motherhood was hard. This was a period to introduce simplicity to the work. Forms were pared down and assembled in two hours maximum. No fiddling. The kiln was maturing and there were losses but the best pieces made up for that. I still miss the qualities that wood can give and to console myself will add spills of wood during reduction in the vain hope that they might have some effect.

Short of money and the second child pending we couldn't continue sharing work and child care, so when Simon was offered full-time employment at the Trust we made the most difficult adjustment yet. We'd always valued each other's company and input both artistically and domestically. It wasn't easy to adapt.

Thea arrived in late August. David died in January. This was not entirely un-expected but it left an enormous gap. For a time it felt too difficult to carry on working.

Three years later I took over Simon's workshop, a difficult decision with major implications. I started making pots despite having no kiln, beginning small but basic and familiar. Peter Dick leant me past issues of *Ceramic Review* for propane kiln designs and I decided to risk building one at home despite being in the middle of a village. Yorkshire Arts funded new arch bricks and two burners and I reused bricks from the now dismantled wood kiln. Thea started school and I started work.

Then I had an exhibition in York booked in for December and a workshop full of pots waiting to be fired. To cap it all I broke my wrist and had to beg for help to finish the chimney and to fire my first ever propane kiln. Karen heroically came up from London and saw me through the firing. All the pieces came out very dark or just brown tones. The second firing was better. At Jane Hamlyn's suggestion I tried a mix of salt and soda oxidising throughout, to ensure some colour and variation. Brown is all very well, but... Worries like would the kiln work? How long would it take? (23 hours first time round) Would the results be OK? What about the neighbours? Fire engines turning up? Still leave me with a deep anxiety associated with firing.

The pot buying public of York, having been starved for four years, came up trumps and all bar two of forty pots sold.

I made friends with my new kiln. The loss rate had gone from 25% to almost nil and it was more even-tempered than the wood kiln. The children grew as did work time and the pots became more complex.



Further Details...

Contact Details

Ruth King, Rose Cottage, Main Street,
Shipton-by-Beningbrough, York YO30 1AB
T: 01904 470196
E: ruthkingceramics@tiscali.co.uk
W: www.ruthkingceramics.com
Visitors welcome but please telephone first

Forthcoming event

Open Studio Weekend – Ruth King and Jane Blackman
Friday 27 March 18.00-21.00
Saturday 28 March 10.00-18.00
Sunday 28 March 11.00-17.00
For details of York Open Studios visit
W: www.yorkopenstudios.co.uk

Suddenly I couldn't draw another incised line on a slab, I'd had enough. Constructing the forms without damaging the incisions was too limiting. Time to return to paying attention to the unadorned form. Start again. I played with old paper templates and with the clay. Offered an exhibition with a friend who painted large abstract canvasses, I thought I had better take a risk or the pots would be overwhelmed by the paintings. Exploring nearly closed forms, soft yet carefully constructed, asymmetric and based in geometry I was surprised anew by what can emerge during transformations and transitions from one fixed plane to another.

I'm still working on this one, how sheets of soft clay behave when wrapped or teased round fixed points or planes, how to keep and emphasise the natural tendencies toward fullness, where points of balance reside, the best way to have them float above the surface, be dynamic yet poised.

Each start is another way of trying to pin down the same thing, searching for some description in material form of who I am and what it is that affects me. I find I cannot separate myself as potter from my life, as it is integral to who I am and is where for me, all the threads connect.