

Workshop-aholic

Robyn Phelan reflects on ceramics-specific workshops and their outcome, in particular a recent workshop with artist and conservator Penny Byrne



Workshops are immensely enjoyable and I would be completely addicted if I could afford the time and money to attend every one that came my way. I am still bitter with envy at not being able to participate in Akio Takamori's workshop, part of the Subversive Clay conference in 2012.

If I were to be more discerning and reflective, I should ask myself what exactly I have received from the many workshops and demonstrations I have attended over the years. Here, I concentrate on two particular experiences.

Participants of the Penny Byrne 3D Collage Workshop were asked to bring along a treasured but broken ceramic object from home. This was going to be difficult. To stop me pining over its loss, any ceramic piece that is broken due to the chaos of my family life is immediately thrown away.

In the lead up to the session I pondered on how I might use the skills of three-dimensional assemblage, restoration and conservation within my own practice. I wasn't interested in restoring broken objects (that I never keep), however the ability to connect found objects to my sculptural work in a skilled and professional manner was tantalising.

The workshop was a six-hour Saturday session at Slow Clay Centre, Melbourne, in February 2013. We were a full house of potters, ceramicists and Penny Byrne Facebook fans from both Melbourne-town and NSW.

After a stimulating slideshow of her eight-year art practice and astounding conservation prowess, Byrne put on her conservator's hat. We were each given a small majolica tile, which we smashed into fragments and then had to make the tough decision on whether to restore or to

Right: Penny Byrne, left, with Jane Sawyer, Vipoo Srivilasa and Robyn Phelan



conserve. Penny explained about her conservation work where damaged objects are brought to her for treatment. A conservator will often allow the repair to remain visually obvious and completely reversible. This approach helps museums make conservation decisions on the historical objects in their care.

A subtle contrast to conservation is restoration. This is where the repair of the object is unrecognisable from its perfect state and uses materials and techniques that are not easily reversible. It is this skill of concealment that Byrne uses in her art practice, allowing her to seamlessly assemble found ceramic objects into remarkable sculptures.

For the sake of drying time and avoidance of hazardous fumes, we used PVA glue to practise the process of reassembling, gluing, filling and painting. This process falls in clear stages: 1st, dry run; 2nd, sticking run; 3rd, paring back, sanding the overrun glue and filling cracks; and 4th, overpainting. As simple as that! Not likely. Byrne demonstrated every stage, clearly stating which glue, paint or solvent must go with its matching material.



Byrne brought a cornucopia of tools, materials and products into the class and was completely unprotective about the stuff of her trade. Each material and product was discussed and its pros and cons revealed; my notebook quickly filled. We watched her deceptively dexterous hand skills and absorbed her many practical tips.

The 3D collage workshop experience provided me with an excellent opportunity to make a comparison with another series of pottery classes. In 2003 I was an uncertain potter-wannabee who made her way to Jane Sawyer's home/studio in Fitzroy. At this time, having become a mother I was tossing around the idea of quitting the juggle of the gallery and museum industry. I felt the desire to make ceramics for myself, and Jane's weekly evening workshop became the sturdy bridge I crossed into a full tertiary degree in ceramics at RMIT the following year.

In those days, Jane's studio was snug for six students where she used her palette of materials: rich brown earthenware, creamy white slip and a few select coloured glazes. We learnt a Japanese technique of throwing off the hump. Jane's method is a synthesis of East and West styles using one's core body strength. I concentrated on technique and produced squat, chunky versions of Jane's eloquent fluid vessels. This brief experience quelled any doubts I had about committing to tertiary study and whet my appetite for the search for my own touch on clay.

Slow Clay Centre, where I attended the Penny Byrne workshop, opened in 2012 and is the impressive culmination of Jane Sawyer's 25 years of teaching the ceramics process to hundreds of students in her home studio. The Centre is an impressive, specialist ceramics education studio offering a range of weekly classes and intensives by Sawyer and other ceramic professionals. Byrne's workshop was part of an annual series by guest artists. These two experiences – Sawyer's pottery class and Byrne's 3D collage workshop, both initiatives of Sawyer's – gave me cause to reflect on how I digest creative input and what I desire in a workshop.

The way I absorbed the knowledge shared by Byrne in her workshop is different from the experiential development under Sawyer's tutelage. Byrne's empirical facts were not to be messed with; when she says "this glue product becomes brittle, use this one instead" or "only use acetone with this glue", one



doesn't question why. Neither am I itching to experiment with other combinations. Byrne's knowledge comes from years of training and experience. Her instructions were quite clear and confident; she knows what works best.

After Byrne's workshop I have golden nuggets of information tucked away that I know will solve sculptural problems that I would otherwise not have imagined or undertaken. Knowledge of the bare minimum of conservation techniques (yet to be honed) is empowering. In comparison, Jane Sawyer's years of personal development and teaching throwing came at a time when I needed the inspiration to pursue ceramics further. Sawyer's shared knowledge expanded my skill set and made me consciously want to find my own style and touch with the throwing process. It was an encouraging segue into a broader approach to ceramics that I pursue today.

Towards the end of the 3D collage session, Penny put on her artist's hat and keenly showed us the process and thinking that directs her artworks. Her conservation skills are the backbone of her work and from this virtually any outcome is possible. She explained how her interest in current political, social and environmental issues direct the concept of each work. It was amusing to see how Byrne hacks off parts of ceramic figures, and the tools necessary to safely perform the act.

Early in her practice, Byrne found antique or opportunity shop figurines were the impetus to collage together 3-D objects. I remain very much enamored of her first assemblage, *It's Murder on the Dance Floor*, where the joyous face of a pirouetting porcelain girl is contradicted by the bloodied head of a rival dancer held aloft in her hand. Currently, Byrne shops on the Internet to realise a conceptual idea. The computer search engine often finds the most suitable figurines and toys for her. *Keeping Young and Beautiful, 2011* is an example of this approach. The pre-surgery lass on the left shows Byrne's skill at bulking up parts of the figurine (the figurine's thighs) using epoxy putty. Barbie doll sunglasses have been sourced online for the post-operative Grace.

In this workshop, Byrne explicitly laid out her artistic practice for our consumption. As with Sawyer's workshop we were shown her technique right down to the materials she uses. While I was a gluttonous consumer of Byrne's conservation technique and Sawyer's throwing knowledge is still embedded in my



Penny Byrne, *Keep Young and Beautiful*, 2011

Photo: courtesy artist



own throwing style, I have no desire to copy or adopt these artist's styles. Being privy to their working practice creates a desire to expand my own practice and be reinvigorated with the act of making.

As a final note I must add that I have found some ceramic items to conserve. The permanent glues were awkward and assembling was tricky but the outcome was excellent. I used a simple wood fill for the cracks, leaving a lovely white tracery of lines reminding me of the history of the object's damage; just like an ancient pot in a museum. And as for my own work, I have been eyeing off the many small, plastic objects that I have kept as inspiration for my sculptural forms. One day they may appear, beautifully attached one hopes, to my ceramic work.

Slow Clay Centre will offer a Penny Byrne workshop again in September 2013. Further guest artist workshops planned for 2013 include Petra Svoboda, Irianna Kanellopoulou, Shannon Garson and Andrew Halford.

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