

# JOHN DERMER: POTTER

VIC report by Robyn Phelan

John Dermer has been making ceramics for more than fifty years and his extensive career has been celebrated with a survey exhibition at the the Ian Potter Centre: NGV Australia.

The National Gallery of Victoria (NGV) has been collecting Dermer's work since the 1970s. Their first acquisition, *Urn* in 1978, was included in the display and features a metallic-like surface that seems to radiate light underneath ashy, glaze drips. The exhibition was curated by David Hurlston who states that Dermer " ... is one of a very small number of ceramic artists who have made a continuous living from his craft as a studio potter over a remarkable 50-year career".<sup>1</sup> Dermer's reputation as a master craftsman has been made through hard work, talent and, by his own admission, the support of his wife Shirley. The trajectory of Dermer's life with clay could be read as a professional checklist for any aspirational potter. He studied at RMIT in 1969 and in the 1970s visited centres of traditional and contemporary ceramics culture – Japan, Britain, Europe and the USA.

Dermer settled in Devon in the UK momentarily when he was employed as a production thrower for Michael (son of Bernard) Leach. From there he moved to Wedgwood Pottery, Stoke on Trent. On show is a delightful piece from this time – a tiny, grubby little vessel; a keepsake, roughly inscribed with the words Staffordshire, Nov. 1971. Coal-fired in a Milo tin, its inclusion amongst more substantial and highly finished works epitomises Dermer's curiosity, passion and a deep understanding that he was participating in a place of ceramics history. Three years later he returned to Australia to set up home and studio in Yackandandah in north eastern Victoria.

I admire the NGV's decision to include three extended text captions to support the objects in this exhibition. The first explains the combination of skill and technique common to all who use the ceramic process. The second label talks specifically about salt glazing in language that evocatively describes the prosaic fact that salt glazing was " ... originally used as a cheap and effective way of glazing industrial wares such as sewer pipes". This statement is contrasted with words that capture Dermer's extraordinary dexterity with glazing " ... the finished form takes on a deep and rich iridescence, becoming a piece that is both visually and physically balanced and of jewel-like beauty".

The relevance of this retrospective is more than honouring one of Australia's important modernist potters. It is also about the responsibility of our cultural institutions to acknowledge and support the recent energy and frisson about clay and ceramics with an historical, engaging and information example of studio ceramics production.



Above: Installation views, *John Dermer: Potter* exhibition, 12 April – 6 October 2019, NGV Australia Melbourne  
Photos: Robyn Phelan

Left: **John Dermer**, *Urn*, 1978, stoneware, h.38.3cm, diam.39.4cm, NGV Australia, Melbourne; purchased with the assistance of the Crafts Board of the Australia Council, 1978 (D58-1978)  
Photo: courtesy NGV, Melbourne

***John Dermer: Potter*, NGV Australia, Federation Square, 12 April – 6 October 2019**  
[www.johndermer.com.au](http://www.johndermer.com.au)

**Robyn Phelan is a writer and educator and is currently completing a Masters by Research at RMIT. For more images of Dermer's NGV exhibition please go to [www.lookingwithsofeyes.blogspot.com.au](http://www.lookingwithsofeyes.blogspot.com.au).**

1 David Hurlston is Senior Curator of Australian Painting, Sculpture and Decorative Arts to 1980 at the National Gallery of Victoria; [www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-14/potter-john-dermer-exhibition-ngv/10998196](http://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-04-14/potter-john-dermer-exhibition-ngv/10998196)