

The Scholar's Rock I by Stephen Ralph forages through similar terrain, in that his earthenware ceramic form could not be mistaken for anything but clay. For Ralph, clay is something to be kneaded and plied, bashed and pulled, until it resembles... a lump of clay. Ralph is no illusionist, and he makes no unreasonable demands of his material. Instead, he allows it to exist in its purest, most elemental, and most uninhibited form.

While abstraction in other art disciplines (such as painting and sculpture) is commonplace and not, in itself, noteworthy, pure abstraction in ceramics is still uncommon. And while many other artists we have seen reference decorative or functional ceramics, they still exist within an accepted tradition—they may not resemble any real form but they operate within a long standing and recognisable code. Not so Ralph; his loosely modelled abstractions exist as formalist expressions in ceramic, more like the sculptural works produced by Willem de Kooning. Indeed, Harold Rosenberg, the champion of Abstract Expressionism who coined the term 'action painting', might refer to Ralph's work as an 'action ceramic'.

Serving to heighten the loose, gestural quality of the clay, *The Scholar's Rock I* is set on a finely carved Australian hardwood base, whose highly refined and polished nature contrasts starkly with the roughly hewn ceramic. It is these kinds of exchanges—between cultures, form, and materiality—that underpin Ralph's work.

While the longevity of ceramic's current flirtation with 'weirdness' and eccentricity remains to be tested, what cannot be doubted is the enduring fascination with clay. While many of the artists explored here have come to the material only recently, several among them—such as Jenny Orchard and Donna Green—have been working in the field for many years. Their persistence (and newfound fashionableness) points to a rosy future for ceramics, in which pure imagination and wilful fantasies will long have a part to play. The word 'ceramicitis' doesn't yet exist but perhaps it doesn't need to—to act on the compulsion to make things is a virtue not a folly, with the Australian art scene undergoing profound rejuvenation as a consequence of this. ■

NOTES

- 1 Philjames, cited in an interview with Dana Tomic Hughes, *Yellow Trace*: <http://www.yellowtrace.com.au/sydney-artist-philjames/>, accessed 14 September 2016
- 2 Vipoo Srivilasa, cited in John McPhee, 'Vipoo Srivilasa', *Artist Profile*, No.26, 2014, p.96
- 3 Stephen Bird, cited in Prue Gibson, 'Stephen Bird', *Art Collector*, Issue 63, Jan-Mar 2013, p.125
- 4 Stephen Bird, cited in Steve Dow, 'Stephen Bird is not your average Wedgewood', *Art Guide Australia*: <http://artguide.com.au/stephen-bird-is-not-your-average-wedgewood>, accessed 23 May 2016
- 5 Emily Hunt, cited in Glenn Barkley, 'OVERUNDERSIDEWAYS DOWN: The Australian Ceramics Association Biennial Exhibition 2016', *The Journal of Australian Ceramics*, Vol.55, No.1, April 2016, unpaginated
- 6 Emily Hunt, cited in Sammy Preston, 'Forecast: Emily Hunt', *Vault*, May 2016, p.125
- 7 Lynda Draper, cited in Glenn Barkley, op.cit., unpaginated
- 8 Glenn Barkley, 'I can hardly wait till morning: Glenn Barkley on studio life', *Artlink*, Issue 36:1, March 2016, pp.40-41
- 9 Glenn Barkley, cited in Kon Gouriotis, 'Glenn Barkley', *Artist Profile*: <http://www.artistprofile.com.au/glenn-barkley/>, accessed 14 September 2016
- 10 Ashley Crawford, 'Chris Dolman: Bong Nose Long Socks Goes to Town', (exhibition catalogue), Galerie Pom Pom, Sydney, 2015
- 11 Jenny Orchard, cited in Glenn Barkley, 'OVERUNDERSIDEWAYS DOWN: The Australian Ceramics Association Biennial Exhibition 2016', op.cit., unpaginated
- 12 Ibid
- 13 Donna Green, cited in 'Donna Green and Steven Lee Exhibition', *Greenwich House*: <http://www.greenwichhouse.org/announcements/steven-lee>, accessed 15 September 2016
- 14 Lisa Slade, 'Critical Conversations', in Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, *Unearthed: Encroachment of the Commons*, (exhibition catalogue), Wollongong City Gallery, 2011
- 15 Sarah Smuts-Kennedy, cited in Daniel Mudie Cunningham, 'Working it all out', *Art Collector*, Issue 60, April 2012, p.127
- 16 Daniel Mudie Cunningham in ibid, p.128

