

# A licence to kiln

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In his role as director and curator of the Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at the University of British Columbia, Scott Watson has, over the years, come to play a number of significant roles in the cultural life of Vancouver.

First, he is an unrepentant champion of the subversive, and he always has been. (He was fired by the Vancouver Art Gallery back in 1987, for example, as a result of his advocacy for video artist Paul Wong.) Second, Watson is an unrelenting champion of the new. His 1985 landmark show *The Young Romantics* brought to light a whole generation of emerging West Coast painters, some of them fresh out of art school (artists such as Attila Richard Lukacs and Graham Gillmore).

Vancouver 6, 12 years later, canonized the next generation of Vancouver artists (Myfanwy MacLeod, Geoffrey Farmer, Steven Shearer, Kelly Wood, Ron Terada and Damian Moppett). More recently, Watson launched the Belkin Satellite, providing a brand new downtown platform for emerging artists.

If all this wasn't enough, Watson is also increasingly a keeper of the historical flame. With his two books on the painter Jack Shadbolt, written in the nineties, he expressed his devotion to the history of West Coast art, and the legacies of its most senior practitioners.

Watson occupies this role again with his current exhibition *Thrown*, currently at the Belkin Art Gallery at UBC, a show developed in collaboration with Lee Plested and the potter Charmian Johnson. The exhibition examines in careful detail the history of a generation of B.C. artisans who were trained at the famous Leach Pottery in St. Ives, Cornwall, a radical atelier lead by British ceramist Bernard Leach and Japanese master Shoji Hamada: Ian Steele, John Reeve, Mick Henry and Glenn Lewis. The show traces the influence of these apprentices on subsequent West Coast potters such as Tam Irving, Gathie Falk (who would later become a well-known painter and sculptor) and Johnson, who also spent some time in St. Ives, documenting the Leach Pottery collection in the late 1970s.

If this is sounding like a snooze, it's not. This is, in every way, a beautiful exhibition -- beautiful in its conceptual clarity, beautiful in its installation (elegant in a Spartan sort of way, like the pottery studios themselves), beautiful in its diligence (the show draws from more than 60 lenders, and includes a wealth of archival material), beautiful in the aesthetic objects it presents, and beautiful, finally, as an expression of B.C.'s distinct cultural identity. The show tells us a lot about pottery,

but it speaks as well of a deep sense of place and its past. Leach's accomplishment was to foster a unique blending together of British and Asian culture, reinventing the practise of the ancient peasant potters of Asia in the context of the British Arts and Crafts movement.

It's small wonder, then, that Leach and Hamada resonated so strongly for these B.C. artisans, working in a British colonial outpost with its snow-capped mountains, cherry-blossom trees and Eastward-leaning ethos. The very specific flavour of Vancouver resides precisely in this blending of East and West, and this show is animated by that hybrid spirit.

Leach's ideas also accorded with hippie culture. "A potter is one of the few people left who uses his natural faculties of heart, head and hand in balance -- the whole man," Leach wrote. "His is a way of life. Good pots require an ardour of vocation and the devotion of a lifetime."

The anonymity of the machine age was rejected by Leach, as it was by the later back-to-the-land types camping out in the B.C. rain forest. As Watson puts it: "The pot had to be hand thrown -- that was the ethical imperative. Leach's legacy was to imagine pottery as a life vocation that involves a transformation of the self." Art and life were to fuse, and the values of self sufficiency and humility were highly prized.

The best of the 850 objects in this show express those values completely, whether it's a shelf of humble little white porcelain cups, jars and vases by Reeve; or Johnson's drinking bowls, which express great clarity and spiritual presence, like the forms of her other great influence, Lucy Rie; a stack of Henry's dinner dishes, wonderfully earthy brown slabs of earth forged to a utilitarian end (his Slug Pottery in Roberts Creek used only local clays, ashes and other materials for its glazes); or a funky little cup by Lewis, from the collection of Vancouver curator Hank Bull, all the more endearing for the fact that it collapsed a bit from its own weight before firing and was placed in the kiln all the same. These objects embody their makers' love of the coarse, the accidental, the felicitous.

The curators allow us to place these objects in a centuries-old context. In one vitrine, they have set a 1960 white decorative stoneware bowl by Reeve atop an open book showing a nearly identical stoneware bowl by Leach. Propped behind it, Leach's 1975 publication *The Potter's Challenge* is opened to a page cataloging an early Chinese bowl of the same type. As Watson describes it, "Leach and Hamada created a canon of ceramics, the same way Berenson created a canon of the Renaissance and Alfred Barr created a canon of modernism. They decided, for example, that 16th century Korean pottery was important, and that Chinese Sung Dynasty pottery was important. And then they inserted themselves into that history."

Watson and his team have also included a CBC documentary about the studio of Wayne Ngan made by the late Doris Shadbolt, and it's a perfect period piece. Ngan appears dressed in the garb of a peasant potter, catching crabs on the beach, harvesting seaweed for winter snacks and gathering driftwood for the kiln. We

meet his barefoot wife and their two children, who roam wild about the landscape foraging for food.

Later, Ngan appears as the alchemist at work in his handmade kiln, sparks flying against the night sky as he performs his magical acts of transformation through fire. The unpacking of the kiln at the end feels like a home birth video, as Ngan, his daughter and Shadbolt exult over the treasures emerging one by one into view.

The show also lets us see how the work of these potters intersected with the work of Vancouver artists in other fields. A Henry teapot turns up in a video work by Fluxus artist Robert Filliou, a series of Henry's little lidded boxes appears in a still-life video study by the late Kate Craig, and a handful of his fired clay peanuts are glazed and set in a custom made bowl in honour of Vincent Trasov's mayoralty bid as Mr. Peanut. Watson has also included a tea set used by Bryan Mulvihill in his ongoing performance work, *The World Tea Party*. The set includes a plate by Lewis, a bowl by Johnson and a tea bowl by Reeve.

There's a holiness to these objects; beautiful things, conceived with such sincerity, so lovingly made, and so humbly offered to the world. Through this intelligent and well organized show, Watson leads us to a deeper appreciation, helping us to understand why they are important, how they fit in the bigger picture and why they have the power move us still.