Peter Rushforth: A Legacy

Blue Mountains City Art Gallery
My aim is to create forms that have life and vitality, colours and textures that are unique to earth materials fired to high temperatures. The inner value of such work strangely reveals not only qualities of beauty inherent in the material and the processes, but also reveals much of the maker.¹

PETER RUSHFORTH: A LEGACY

It is impossible to measure the ways in which the life and art of Peter Rushforth touched and inspired so many people. In a career spanning seven decades, the words most commonly cited to express the nature of Rushforth’s influence include generosity, tolerance, patience and, in no small measure, mischief. Mr Rushforth, Peter, Petey, Pete, … he was a teacher, mentor, family man, friend and above all, an artist of the highest calibre. In all of these capacities, throughout his life and career, he excelled.

From his early childhood in Manly to the horrific years as a soldier and prisoner of war during World War Two; from the happiness Rushforth found through his love for his family to the discovery of the medium through which he would instil his unwavering belief in beauty and humanity: clay; and from his dedication to the teaching profession to the myriad friendships he formed in Australia and around the world through his art. At every turn of Rushforth’s life, particularly after discovering his calling as an artist, the people with whom he worked, those he taught and the myriad individuals who entered his life, would be forever changed.

Returning to Australia after completing five years of military service, Rushforth settled in Melbourne and enrolled in an arts course at Melbourne Technical College under the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme, where he studied ceramics under Allan Lowe and first encountered Chinese pottery of the Song dynasty. The aesthetic sophistication and incredible inventiveness of Song forms and glazes were the cornerstone of his ceramic output for the following seventy years. Back in Sydney, in 1949 he began teaching pottery to returned servicemen at the Repatriation General Hospital, Concord, where he met Jean ‘Bobbie’ Roberts whom he later married. He then began his long association with East Sydney Technical College (ESTC), now the National Art School. In 1950, he took sculpture classes under Lyndon Dadswell and in 1951 became the first full-time teacher of ceramics at the College, joining Mollie Douglas, who had been teaching part-time since 1944.

Over the next decade, the list of students who studied under Rushforth is a veritable who's-¹

¹Peter Rushforth quoted in the S. H. Ervin Gallery e-catalogue Peter Rushforth: All Fired Up (2013)

Above image: Courtesy Rushforth family archive.
who of the Australian ceramic world, some of
whom would later join the ranks of teaching staff,
including Les Blakebrough, Col Levy, Bernard Sahm
and Marea Gazzard. During this embryonic state
of studio pottery in Australia, students learned
the fundamentals of clay body preparation and
glaze technology using locally-sourced materials,
as commercial stoneware and porcelain clays were
not yet available in the country. New gas-fired kilns,
required for firing at high temperatures, were
incorporated into the College workshop, together
with new wheels and clay machinery. When Ivan
McMeekin returned to Australia in 1953 – after four
years training under the English potter Michael
Cardew – he brought with him pots made by the
father of British studio pottery, Bernard Leach,
whose 1940 publication *A Potter's Book* became
required reading for all potters and had a profound
effect on Australian ceramics during this period.
Douglas, McMeekin, Rushforth and ESTC graduate
Ivan Englund would meet at Rushforth's Beecroft
home to discuss their work and offer encouragement
to one another.

Realising the need for a formalised society through
which studio potters could exchange ideas and
disseminate information, Rushforth, Douglas,
McMeekin and Englund formed the Potters' Society
of NSW in 1956. The first exhibition of the society,
held at Macquarie Galleries in Sydney in November
1958, featured work by the four founding members,
Patricia Englund, Les Blakebrough and Wanda
Garnsey, among others. In May 1962, the Society first
published *Pottery in Australia*, edited by Garnsey,
and, in November, the second exhibition of the Society
was shown at Macquarie Galleries. The 1960s also saw
numerous Australian potters – Rushforth, Englund
and Blakebrough among them – travel to Japan to
experience first-hand what had been gleaned through
Leach's teaching. Likewise, many Japanese potters,
including Tatsuzō Shimaoka and Shōji Hamada
visited Australia. Some stayed, like Shiga Shigeo, who
first arrived in Australia in 1966 at the invitation of
McMeekin. Shiga's experimentation with the unknown
clays of Australia was an interest he shared not only
with McMeekin, but also with Levy, Sahm, Blakebrough
and, of course, Rushforth. He also taught at ESTC,
and Shiga and Rushforth became lifelong friends,
sharing glaze recipes and a disciplined approach to
their practice.

By the mid-1960s, the demand for a full-time
certificate course led to the inception of the two-
year Certificate Course in Ceramics in 1963. Peter
Travis was the first graduate in 1964, followed by
Alan Peascod, Roswitha Wulff and Janet Mansfield in
1965. Mansfield would go on to become a key figure
in Australian ceramics, travelling widely to promote
international exchange, and establishing not only the
Gulgong ceramics festivals held since 1989 at Morning
View, but also founding two internationally-recognised
journals. Over the past three decades, the Gulgong
event has become synonymous for fostering the
tradition of woodfired ceramics. New Zealand-born
Chester Nealie and artist Jan Irvine-Nealie became
integral members of the vibrant community of
artists when they moved to Gulgong in 1994. Through
Nealie's commitment to woodfired ceramics, many
of his contemporaries participate in firings at his
Gulgong property, embracing the collaborative and
social nature of the long hours required to stoke the
Anagama kiln. Katoomba potter, Susie McMeekin,
regularly fires her work with Nealie and her aesthetic
sensibility is, in some part, informed by her training in
the workshop of her father Ivan.

In 1963, Rushforth was appointed Head Teacher of
Ceramics and, in 1972, made Senior Head Teacher, a
post he held until his retirement in 1978. Those
who followed in his footsteps as Head of Ceramics at ESTC, include Roswitha Wulff, Bill Samuels and Merran Esson. Many other students benefited from Rushforth’s instruction, such as Thanaquith artist Gloria Fletcher Thanakupi, who travelled from her home in Napranum (Weipa) in Queensland to study at ESTC and became Australia’s foremost Aboriginal ceramicist. Steve Harrison and Janine King both studied under Rushforth in the early 1970s and became part of the extensive group of Australian ceramic artists known for their woodfired work.

Following retirement from ESTC in 1978, Rushforth began a new era of his life at his and Bobbie’s idyllic mountain retreat Le Var, on Shipley Plateau south of Blackheath. Working in his studio overlooking the Kanimbla Valley, decades of accumulated knowledge, experience and creative vision were given unfettered freedom. This enabled him to develop some of his favoured glazing techniques, in particular the heavy ash deposits achieved with long firing in his wood-fired kilns. His signature opalescent Jun glaze evokes the brilliant azure Blue Mountain skies, with its myriad shades from pale pastel cerulean tints through to the deepest of indigos.

Over the ensuing decades, the Blue Mountains creative community embraced and was likewise nurtured by Peter and Bobbie Rushforth, their generosity of spirit and inclusivity knowing no bounds. Local potters such as Ian Smith and Peter Wilson received Rushforth’s encouragement and, in Wilson’s case, one of Rushforth’s treasured glaze recipes. Bowen Mountain potters Maureen Williams-Levy and Col Levy were close friends and regular visitors to the Rushforth home. Firings at Le Var became events involving a group of dedicated volunteers, friends and family, who assisted in stoking the kiln, with Rushforth paying close attention from the first stoke of wood to the last. Le Var also provided, on occasion, a studio space for Susan Rushforth, a fine printmaker who studied traditional woodblock prints, papermaking and Sumi brushwork in Kyoto, Japan, where she was based 1990–1994. Father and daughter not only shared a love of Japanese art, they also held exhibitions showcasing ceramics and printmaking in unison.

In June 2013 at Le Var, a few months before the opening of Rushforth’s comprehensive retrospective, curated by Natalie Wilson and held at S.H. Ervin Gallery in Sydney, many of his closest colleagues and friends were on hand to fire the kiln one last time: Blackheath artist and former ESTC student Simon Reece; former ESTC Head of Ceramics and Hartley resident Bill Samuels; Blackheath-based sculptor Clara Hali; potter Malcolm Greenwood, and a support crew of family, friends and neighbours all pitching in. The atmosphere was convivial, with chess battles between potters in Rushforth’s studio and a constant stream of nourishment emanating from Le Var’s kitchen.

With Peter Rushforth’s passing on 22 July 2015, sixty years of creative output as a studio potter had come to an end. As testament to the sincerity with which the Blue Mountains community embraced its most treasured resident artist, a memorial gathering was held at Blackheath Community Centre on 16 August 2015, to honour the man whose life and art had indelibly left its mark on so many. This exhibition acknowledges just a few of the countless studio potters and artists who were touched by the integrity and dignity of the man and his work, many of whom, like Peter Rushforth, call the Blue Mountains home.

Natalie Wilson
Curator Australian & Pacific Art
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Above image: PETER RUSHFORTH Blossom jar c1968-1969, stoneware, Tenmoku and Jun glazes, copper red flashes, wax resist decoration, 24 x 14.5 cm diam. Sylvia Longfoot Collection.
EXHIBITING ARTISTS

Les Blakebrough • Mollie Douglas • Ivan Englund • Patricia Englund • Merran Esson • Marea Gazzard • Malcolm Greenwood • Clara Hali • Steve Harrison • Jan Irvine-Nealie • Janine King • Col Levy • Janet Mansfield • Ivan McMeekin • Susie McMeekin • Chester Nealie • Simon Reece • Peter Rushforth • Susan Rushforth • Bernard Sahm • Bill Samuels • Shiga Shigeo • Ian Smith • Thanakupi • Peter Travis • Maureen Williams-Levy • Peter Wilson • Roswitha Wulff

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Blue Mountains Cultural Centre acknowledges that the City of the Blue Mountains is located on the traditional lands of the Darug and Gundungurra peoples.

Blue Mountains City Art Gallery would like to thank all the passionate artists for their contribution to this exhibition as well as the private lenders who have willingly shared their precious works. Without their wealth of knowledge, generous loans of artwork, and delightful anecdotes about Peter, this exhibition would not have been possible.

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IMAGES


Inside fold: PETER RUSHFORTH Vase c2005, stoneware, Anagama kiln, firebox effects, heavy ash deposits, 23.1 x 18 cm diam. Private Collection.