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.

**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

*Peter 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 Gulung ceramics festivals held since 1989 at Morning View, but also founding two internationally-recognised journals. Over the past three decades, the Gulung 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 Gulung in 1994. Through Nealie’s commitment to woodfired ceramics, many of his contemporaries participate in firings at his Gulung 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 Wulf, Bill Samuels and Merran van Rossum. Many other students benefited from Rushforth's instruction, such as Thanaquith artist Gloria Fletcher Thanakupi, who travelled from her home in Napranum (Walia) 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 country retreat Le Var, on Shipley Plateau south of Blackheath. Working in his studio overlooking the Kanimbula 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 stroke 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. Erwin 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 c.1968-1969, 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 Hall • 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.

Many thanks to the Art Gallery of New South Wales, Bathurst Regional Art Gallery, Manly Art Gallery & Museum and the National Art School for lending works from their collections. A special thank you goes to Natalie Wilson, Curator Australian & Pacific Art, Art Gallery of NSW for her invaluable guidance and expertise, as well as her heartfelt catalogue text. We would also like to thank Bobbie Rushforth and Susan Rushforth for their willingness to share their stories and knowledge of Peter and his many friends and colleagues.

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A Blue Mountains City Art Gallery exhibition curated by Rikka Oakley

IMAGES


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

A Blue Mountains City Art Gallery exhibition curated by Rika Oakley
On exhibition from 1 December 2018 – 20 January 2019

Peter Rushforth: A Legacy is a celebration of the artist’s career, spanning more than six decades, and the significant influence he had on generations of artists, many of whom currently reside in or near to the Greater Blue Mountains. Artists included in the exhibition are: Les Blakobrough, Mollie Douglas, Ivan England, Patricia England, Merran Esson, Maree Gazzard, Malcolm Greenwood, Clara Hall, Steve Harrison, Jan Irvine-Neall, Janine King, Col Levy, Janet Mansfield, Ivan MeMeekin, Susie McMeekin, Chester Neale, Simon Reece, Peter Rushforth, Bernard Sahm, Bill Samuels, Shiga Shigeo, Ian Smith, Thanakupi, Peter Travis, Maureen Williams-Levy, Peter Wilson and Roswitha Wulff.

Exhibition Opening
Friday 30 Nov 6.30 – 8.00pm
Free event. Cash bar.
5.30 – 6.00pm Ikebana demo
6.00 – 8.00pm Exhibition Opening
Join us at 5.30pm for an Ikebana demonstration by Patricia Walters, Master of Chiko School of Ikebana, using select ceramic vessels from the exhibition.
From 6.00pm, guest speaker and artist Bill Samuels will open Peter Rushforth: A Legacy.

Public Programs
Saturday 8 Dec 10.30am – 2.00pm
Ceramics Open Studio Trail
Enter the creative microcosm of local ceramic artists in this inspiring open studio trail.
Simon Reece, Ian Smith & Susie McMeekin will share their spaces & arts practice in this behind the scenes experience. Price includes afternoon tea & entry into the gallery.
Tickets $20 / $15 InSight Members. Bookings essential at Reception or 4780 5410.

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Photo: Felicity Jenkins courtesy B. N. Erwin Gallery.