

MY FIRST KILN

Richard Stratton

THE HOW AND THE WHERE

In 2018, I received an invitation from the Otago Potters Group to hold a workshop in Dunedin about my current ceramic practise of reusing surface techniques deployed in the decoration of British slipware dating from the late seventeenth century. At the time, I was being hosted by the Dunedin School of Art. I had recently arrived back in my home town of Dunedin and the School of Art's ceramics department, where I had not set foot for 25 years.



Figure 1. Raku Kiln, Dunedin School of Art, 2018. My first kiln, which got me hooked into ceramics, the raku kiln has been rebuilt several times and is still standing in the same position in the ceramics department.

THE WHY

My research is based on industrialised ceramic practises during the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries, including the development of British slipware from the early artisanal work of the late seventeenth century (Figure 2) to the mass-produced mochware of the eighteenth century (Figure 3). The mainstay of my research in this area is *The Manual of Practical Potting* by Charles F Binns (1897)¹, which I originally picked up in a second-hand book store. Essentially, it is a recipe book of glazes and ephemera relating to the industrialised ceramics of the late nineteenth century.

This work was to prove its importance on my return from an artist's residency at Guldagergaard in Denmark in mid-2015, following a five-month period of leave. This residency, and the work and research that evolved from it, was the starting point of my shift to a more sculptural-based approach to making works. My leave entailed a two-month ceramic research tour of England, Belgium, France and Germany, followed by a three-month residency at Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Centre in Denmark. After I started creating new works based on my research and work overseas, it soon became apparent that slipware was going to be the main surface decoration technique employed.



Figure 2. Cup, probably Staffordshire, 1690-1700, slipware, combed or feathered, 4 in (h). The potter has added an unusual "S" pattern to the decoration. Image courtesy of the artist.



Figure 3. Early mochware bowl, ca 1780. It is decorated with mottled and combed slip on a rust-coloured band. The rim has been engine-turned in a checker pattern. Source: www.hanauerandseidmanantiques.com/Mocha.html



Figure 4. Sixteenth-century slipware sherds found on the banks of the River Thames, London, 2015. Image courtesy of the artist.

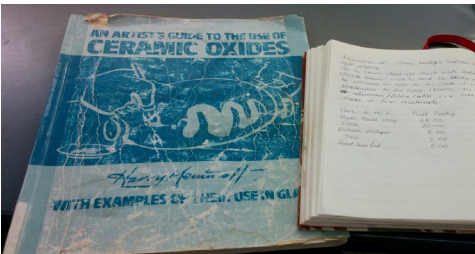


Figure 5. Harry Memmott's book on ceramic oxides, now out of print but still on the shelf at the Robertson Library, Otago Polytechnic. Image courtesy of the artist

My use of slipware decoration started with the chance finding of ceramic slipware sherds (Figure 4) on the banks of the Thames while 'mudlarking' there in early 2015. This activity was a planned part of my research tour of England in 2015. I was surprised by the sheer variety of ceramics I found there. While I set out looking for Westerwald sherds (German salt-glaze wares from ca 1560), I came upon some slip-trailed sherds; initially, I didn't think much of these toffee-coloured, haphazardly decorated fragments, but they grew on me. It wasn't until my return home that I came to fully understand the relevance of these slip-trailed sherds and how I could incorporate them into my work. The idea of reversing the process of building and decoration emerged – a new and challenging approach for me, because usually I would first make the pottery form, then decorate it, fire, glaze and refire.

Binns's 1897 book *The manual of Practical Pottery* was the starting point for much of the testing of clay bodies, glaze and slip recipes that were used for this new work from this point the process developed rapidly (Figure 6)



Figure 6. Slip-decorated slabware vases from Richard Stratton's "Old Zealand New" exhibition, Te Uru Gallery, Auckland, 2016.

THE PROCESS

The results of the past three years of research and making were offered at a double weekend workshop on historical slipware and the techniques involved during my three-week residency in the ceramics department in May 2018. It was hard to believe that after 25 years so little had changed in the ceramics department. With the help of Kylie the studio technician and Rob, we soon had everything sorted for the upcoming workshops.

To kickstart the workshops, I took some of the department's staff and students to the library to help them with their research. There I located some titles that were central to my own research when I was a student (Figure 7), and the students were happy to find that they were as relevant today as they were 25 years ago.

The course I was to deliver was entirely based on historical techniques dating from the late seventeenth century, piecing together the jigsaw made up of the processes, tools and technical applications used.

The first weekend of the workshop was all about preparing and decorating the platforms – in this case, clay slabs – after a demonstration of the process of slip-trailing, feathering and joggling. Chaos reigned for the rest of the weekend, as the slabs were decorated, discarded and redecorated, patterns trailed, ideas figured out, eureka moments. Then came the homework – designing a form to fit the prepared decorated slabs.

After a week of drying the slabs before the building process began, during which I noticed that freshly decorated slabs were turning up in the studio, I worked with the students on their various projects as well as continuing to work on my own slab-built vessel. This was a very slow process – I would usually build only around four square inches a day.

The second workshop weekend soon rolled around. After demonstrating how to join the pieces to build forms, I worked alongside the students. It was so quiet in the studios that you could hear a pin drop – the students' concentration levels were intense.

The works that the students produced were well thought out and covered all the techniques that I had demonstrated. I said to them: "I am here only to teach the techniques and provide inspiration – it's up to you to run with it now." And they did.



Figure 7. Richard demonstrating feathering technique.
Photograph: Erin Jones

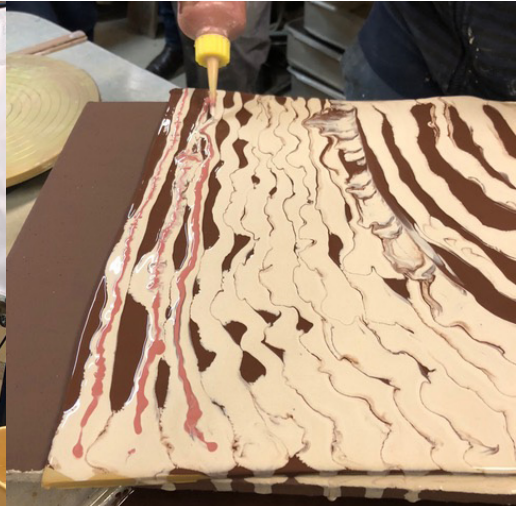


Figure 8. Joggled tri-colour slip decoration. Photograph: Lindsay Doeblner



Figure 10. One of the students hard at work at the 2018 workshop. Photograph: Erin Jones.

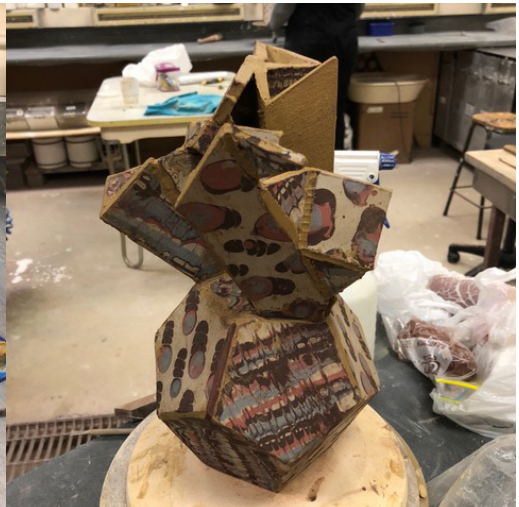


Figure 11. Richard's unfinished decorated slab vase. Photograph: courtesy of the artist.

Richard Stratton was an artist-in-residence in the Ceramics Studio, Dunedin School of Art, May 2018.

1 Charles F Binns, *The Manual of Practical Potting*, 2nd ed. (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1897)..