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DOWN TO THE WIRE … AND WHY EXHIBITION FLOOR TALKS ARE IMMEASURABLY VALUABLE

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Grant Banbury

Down to the Wire: **Cheryl Lucas / Richard Stratton / Chris Weaver, The National, Ōtautahi Christchurch, 10 March – 4 April 2026.**

"COFFEE WITH CHERYL LUCAS & RICHARD STRATTON," 18 MARCH AT 11AM

The catch-phrase exhibition title – *Down to the Wire* – carries a feeling of urgency, an acknowledgement time is limited, and precious. In reality, such sentiment may not be far from the truth as looming deadlines often add to existing pressures for many exhibiting artists. Chris Weaver, one of the three exhibitors, explains that "The [exhibition] title perfectly encapsulates the way I work and make," and goes on to highlight a fascinating material connection: "I use twisted wires to cut and form the body and attachments of each piece. I've also been using electrical wire to form the handles of my teapots."[1] All Weaver's ceramic works, including cups, dishes, bowls, teapots and pourers, are intentionally functional. But his meticulously constructed teapots in particular – unique, inventive and ever-evolving – have become his signature, justifiably earning him a national reputation.



Advertising image for floor talk Richard Stratton and Cheryl Lucas at the 2017, Portage Ceramic Awards, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery. Photograph: Peter Rough.

Let's begin, though, with a snap, taken almost a decade ago, used to advertise the floor talk "Coffee with Cheryl Lucas & Richard Stratton." With its quirky casualness and cropping, it offers a light-hearted image of the artists and generates an immediate smile, quickly followed by the thought "what's going on here?" Mobile phones have become ubiquitous tools for instant visual communication globally, capturing 'the moment' and sharing it at the touch of a finger. Fun and playful, the image underscores friendship and a shared passion for ceramics, but there is a hint of mischief in their facial expressions, particularly Lucas': has something funny just happened or been verbalised? The photograph was taken at the 2017 Portage Ceramic Awards in Titirangi, Auckland, the year Stratton won the Premier Award and Lucas a Merit.[2]

All three exhibitors, Cheryl Lucas, Richard Stratton and Chris Weaver, are friends, although Stratton is from a younger generation while Lucas and Weaver have known each other for over fifty years.

Cheryl Lucas (b. 1954) graduated from the Dunedin School of Art (DSA) in 1975 with a Diploma in Fine Arts and Applied Arts (Distinction). After gaining a Postgraduate Diploma in Advanced Printing (Lithography) from Wimbledon School of Art in 1979, she taught drawing at Ara Institute of Canterbury from 1987 to 2005, and since then has been a full-time ceramicist residing in Lyttelton. In 2020, Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū presented a major survey, *Cheryl Lucas: Shaped by Schist and Scoria*, curated by Felicity Milburn, the gallery's Lead Curator.

Chris Weaver (b. 1956) graduated from the DSA with a Diploma in Fine and Applied Arts in 1975 and a Certificate in Ceramics the following year. He lives near Hokitika in the South Island and exhibits regularly both nationally and internationally. A survey exhibition, *Teapot Meditations: The Practical Poetry of Chris Weaver*, curated by Richard Fahey, was held at Auckland's Objectspace in 2024; a limited selection toured to Christchurch the same year.

Richard Stratton (b. 1970) gained an Honours degree in Ceramic Arts from the Dunedin School of Art in 1993. He later worked as a production thrower at a commercial pottery in Scotland before moving to Wellington, where he is now based. His works have been exhibited widely in New Zealand and overseas, and are included in private and public collections, notably the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa, The Dowse Art Museum and Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū.

Each of these artists has established a notable ceramics practice in Aotearoa; exhibiting regularly, giving workshops and illustrated talks and attending international workshops. Sustaining a ceramics studio practice also takes commitment. The transformation of a once soft malleable material involves expertise in clay technology, the ongoing challenges of firing and glazes, combined with ideas, concepts and ambition. Trial and error is a constant. The fact that all three are recipients of institution support and awards attests to the strength of their individual voices.

So why are these three artists exhibiting together, and what are we to make of this group show? Although they have a shared connection to the same DSA training ground, The National's director, Caroline Billing, provides further insight into how the exhibition took shape: "it came about from a conversation. Chris and Cheryl were invited to show … and somehow the idea of Richard joining in manifested. I think Cheryl had seen Richard and told him she was showing with Chris, and the idea was sparked."[3]

Lucas' interests in her work link back over three decades to her upbringing in a rural environment, touching on issues around farm and animal practices, exploring the role certain plants play in our ecosystems and addressing the often thorny issue of sustainability. Such conceptual threads give her practice currency in a rapidly changing world threatened by global warming and wars. Her current working environment is a studio high on a hill above Lyttelton Harbour where aspects of the port's lifeblood – cranes and the constant movement of cargo and produce – have manifested in abstract sculptures with titles that indicate rather than define. Exploring the relationship of 'form' to 'surface' is a constant driver too.

In this exhibition, Lucas' works are monochromatic, quieter, more restrained, and more domestic in scale than her expansive 2022 *Subterfuge* series. For me, the title of the current series, *Space*



Figure 1. Floor talk,
Richard Stratton foreground.
Photograph: Caroline Billing,
courtesy of The National.



Figure 2. Floor talk,
Richard Stratton and Cheryl Lucas.
Photograph: Caroline Billing,
courtesy of The National.

Gym, reads as an exercise in containment and release, volume and space, yet allowing for discovery too. Flat plains are formed into open box-like vessels, which gently lean and sway. Architecture is apparent and during the floor talk Lucas mentioned metaphors in relation to her practice. Exterior surfaces are marked by defined areas of black, in striking contrast to the cream-white glaze. Billing observes, through photographing Lucas' pieces, how different each looks from different angles. In the floor talk, Lucas spoke of "finding space, making space," and at a time of reduced energy levels she reiterated the work had to be "simple and achievable."[4] Here is part of a discussion between Lucas and Stratton about the former's techniques:

> Cheryl Lucas: … when I'm working on these [*Space Gym* works] on a turntable, I've got a mirror in front of me, so when I'm working on this side, I'm very aware of what's actually on the other side … [I have used] a really lovely Abbots sculptural clay; it has a fine groggy texture and it's got enough iron in it; where the glaze breaks on the edges it goes really rusty.
>
> Richard Stratton: You have to know about the clay body.
>
> Lucas: [When] I got electric kilns … that changed my whole thinking … I realised it's up to me what I put on the pot … [the kiln] didn't have a flame to do these lovely little scorchings … although it still surprises …



Figure 3. Installation of works by Cheryl Lucas. Photograph: John Collie.





Figures 4 and 5. Installation or works by Chris Weaver, 2026. Photographs: John Collie.

The glistening salt-glazed surfaces of Chris Weaver's pots are a joy to the eye; it is a glaze he has mastered and takes pleasure in returning to again and again. The pots are initially wheel-thrown; he then alters and shapes each form. Each stage of the process – from wheel throwing through various construction methods to the technical understanding of glazing and particularly firing – opens up a heap of possibilities. These possibilities coincide, stand alongside, bounce off or even question the rich history of object-making in clay that stretches back centuries and across cultures.

The wooden handles of Weaver's pots are a striking contrast to the fired vessel. Projecting skyward from teapots and pourers, they offer additional drama to his adherence to functionality. Acknowledging that inspiration can come from something as simple as a household item, Weaver informed us: "I made the handles after seeing a modern desk lamp."[5] The parameters of his practice – functional objects – suggest limitations, but this is far from the reality. It is a hallmark of Weaver's practice that he is always experimenting to find new directions. Richard Fahey, a well-informed and insightful commentator on ceramics in Aotearoa, hit on the word 'poetry', which I feel perfectly summarises Weaver's practice.[6]

At the talk, I sat with other guests, including Nichola Shanley. Shanley is herself an accomplished ceramicist, and I feel I must mention the elegant long steel trestle tables which she loaned for show.[7] Standing on fine beaten legs, around 120 cm tall, they appear to float. From a seated vantage point, the trestle tops were at eye level, and the nearest housed eleven of Weaver's pieces. What struck a chord with me was the way his teapots and pourers could be clearly viewed as silhouette forms, but the clever raised edges at the base of each one achieved a degree of animation and added an overall lightness to the work.

Previously, I have seen only a limited number of Stratton's works, although I remember a solo show in Titirangi, Auckland in 2016.[8] The intricacy and complexity of his pieces intrigues me. In some ways they appear from a former time, and certainly unlike any other contemporary ceramics in this country. Describing his historical interests and processes for pieces in the current show, Stratton states:

> … all this work here is basically based on Japanese, Chinese, English [ceramics] … all the clay bodies are … layered, sandwiches … a lot of it is socially politicised work … I use lead glazes, [a] technique dated right back to Egyptian [times] … so quite amazing still being able to build upon it. Me and my family went to Japan recently ... and I was really inspired by the simplicity of Japanese pottery, and also the woodwork, so I built these smaller works [*Polyphonic bottles*].[9]

In discussing *The Disco of death in an Old Men's War* (2025) with Lucas, Stratton clarifies:

> Richard Stratton: I've used Wedgewood moulds made by John Flaxman, circa 1780 … This is not an original mould … I was lucky enough to buy a whole palette of these … they were imported into New Zealand circa 1930s by Te Rona Pottery in Temuka … This piece is about the colonialisation of Israel, so what we have here is the dance party that Hamas moved into … these are the dancing hours … A lot of my pieces are made against war and stuff.
>
> Cheryl Lucas: You pack a lot into these …
>
> Richard: Yeah, but I only make twelve pieces a year …
>
> Cheryl: I know, I know …
>
> Richard: [They are] made with Winstone McPhersons Stoneware XXX.



Figures 6-8. Wedgewood Cameo moulds
designed John Flaxman ex Te Rona Ceramics Works, Temuka.
Collection Richard Stratton, Courtesy of Richard Stratton and The National.

The floor talk, attended by an enthusiastic group of around twenty, was friendly and stimulating, as such talks should be. Histories were shared, concepts discussed and technical information about processes gave audiences valuable insights. Questions were asked and by the end constant chatter filled the gallery. *Down to the Wire* highlights three distinctly different approaches, but ones in which the vessel, both in a contemporary and historical sense, still carries currency.

As Chris Weaver was not present at the floor talk, I leave the last word to him: "After seeing the show set up, I'm impressed at how our individual works sit well and relate to each other and I'm very proud to be showing in such great company. Thank you, Caroline, for bringing us together as fellow graduates of the Dunedin School of Art."[10]



Figure 9. Installation view, Chris Weaver (foreground) and Richard Stratton.
Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 10. (Top) Cheryl Lucas, *Space Gym I*, 2026, stoneware, 147x156x118mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 11. Cheryl Lucas, *Space Gym Facet*, 2026, stoneware, 132x105x95mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 12. Chris Weaver,
Jug, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
120x145x80mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 13. Chris Weaver,
Teapot with Wooden Handle, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
175x180x110mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 14. Chris Weaver,
Pourer with Wooden Handle, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
195x170x100mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 15. Chris Weaver,
Pourer, 2026,
stoneware salf-fired,
155x155x80mm. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 16. Richard Stratton's test pieces.
Photograph Courtesy of Richard Stratton and The National.



Figure 17. Installation of works, Richard Stratton (foreground) and Cheryl Lucas. Photograph: John Collie.



Figure 18. Richard Stratton, *Polyphonic Zoo Bottle*, 2025,
glazed ceramic inlaid agate veneers, 175x70mm. Photograph: John Collie.

Grant Banbury is an Ōtautahi Christchurch-based art consultant and art writer. After graduating in painting from the University of Canterbury School of Fine Arts in 1979, he exhibited throughout the country for twelve years and is represented in several public gallery collections. Following Post Grad studies in Art Curation at Melbourne University in the mid-1990s, he returned to Christchurch and established Campbell Grant Galleries (1997-2008). Passionate about New Zealand studio ceramics, he has published articles in *Ceramics Art & Perception, eyecontact*, and is a regular contributor to *Art New Zealand*.

1 As Chris Weaver was unavailable to take part in the floor talk, Caroline Billing, The National's director, emailed him a series of questions and read out his replies. This quote is from Weaver's email, 21 March 2026.

2 A detail of Lucas' *Milkstock* (2017), visible in the background and comprising 12 individual pieces, was purchased by Christchurch Art Gallery Te Puna o Waiwhetū, accession 2018/035: a-l.

3 Caroline Billing text to author, 26 May 2026.

4 Cheryl Lucas, audio recording of floor talk, 22 March 2026, collection of The National. All subsequent unidentified quotes are from this source.

5 Chris Weaver, email to Caroline Billing, 21 March 2026.

6 In 2024 Richard Fahey curated *Teapot Meditations: The practical poetry of Chris Weaver*, Objectspace, Tamaki Makaurau Auckland, 15 June - 18 August.

7 Nichola Shanley had these tables made for her solo exhibition, *The Agnes Dei Collection*, Two Rooms, Auckland, 19 July – 17 August 2024.

8 *Richard Stratton: Old Zealand New*, Te Uru Waitakere Contemporary Gallery, 13 November – 14 February 2016.

9 Polyphonic literally means 'many voices or sounds,' and typically refers to a style of music where two or more independent melodic lines are played or sung at the same time, weaving together in harmony. The term is also used more broadly across literature, electronics and phonetics.

10 Weaver, email to Billing, 21 March 2026.