

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN AUSTRALIAN CERAMICS?

PART 1: COMING TO AUSTRALIA

by Anne Sherman

After more than five years of teaching and making ceramic work in Australia, I'm only just starting to feel like I understand the context of ceramics in this country. In my experience, ceramics is an extremely welcoming field. So when I arrived 2019, I was excited to re-engage my practice while becoming acquainted with my new home in Melbourne. I researched studios, attended markets, and visited studios locally – and people were generally friendly and gracious – but the culture here seemed different to the United States. I sensed information was less freely shared and that practitioners operated more independently of one another.

Last year, while researching organisations offering ceramics residencies along the East Coast of the US, I interviewed staff at over a dozen ceramics studios. People regularly asked me to comment on the state of ceramics in Australia and make comparisons to the United States. I often tried to deflect the question or downplay my responses, concerned my perceptions were inadequate or biased by my early encounters. I assumed there was something specific to me that resulted in my perceptions but I kept wondering, *is it just me?*

To help me assess whether my experience was unique, I have gathered a small group of ceramic artists who have also relocated from North America and are now living and working in Australia: Amelia Black, Caine Stednitz, Dawn Vachon, and Kelsey Weber. Although our time in Australia varies, each artist currently operates in Naarm (Melbourne), initially established their artistic practice while living in North America, and relies on ceramics for some part of their income.

Our conversations covered the differences between expectations and reality, challenges and opportunities faced, and avenues for developing ceramics practice in Australia. I hoped their perspectives could provide fresh insights. I know our experiences are not definitive; our similar backgrounds and shared home base in Naarm limit our perspectives. However, reflecting on the experience of adjusting to Australia with others from a similar background provided a consistent and relatable point of comparison to begin exploring the question of *what's happening in Australian ceramics?*

Not surprisingly, we shared the perception that the ceramics community is full of welcoming and generous people. We all have stories of practitioners who have supported us and provided opportunities in our transition to Australia.

1 Anne Sherman, *Relic of Time II*
2 Anne Sherman in the Home. Clay Studio
Photos: courtesy artist



1



2

"It was a revelation when [I realised] I could talk to anyone in the world about [ceramics]; it's a truly international conversation."

- Amelia Black

Dawn, who arrived in 2008, reflected on how much the field has grown since she arrived, and Caine "found it pretty astounding ... that there were seven to ten ceramics studios [in Naarm (Melbourne)]." The growing popularity of shows like The Great Pottery Throwdown and a recent zeitgeist for tactile hobbies have driven ceramic interest internationally within the last few years. We've all benefited from the widespread Australian interest in ceramics.

One of the first challenges for us on arrival was accessing facilities. Teaching opportunities in local studios were a vital entry point for most of us, providing both studio access and employment. And though we all acknowledge how beneficial teaching is to our personal satisfaction and professional development, it seems confusing that ceramics' popularity does not translate into diverse opportunities to exhibit and sell work.

"There are fewer formal opportunities to ... support yourself as a ceramicist besides [teaching] and markets."

- Amelia Black

In our experience, 'market stall' sales are the most prevalent opportunity. This typically involves making and selling large volumes of functional work priced for affordability and broad appeal. We found comparatively fewer ceramic collectors and galleries representing ceramic artists –both institutional and private. So why doesn't the popular appeal of ceramics translate into a more supportive culture?

"I was making more involved and detailed functional pieces back in Canada, but I quickly found Australia wasn't interested in that style, so I have simplified."

- Dawn Vachon

It's relevant to note that formal learning institutions in Australia are being squeezed, with professional ceramics programs in TAFEs nearly extinct and the few universities that offer ceramics often placing the subject within a broader degree. All of us noted our challenges in accessing technical and creative development opportunities here.

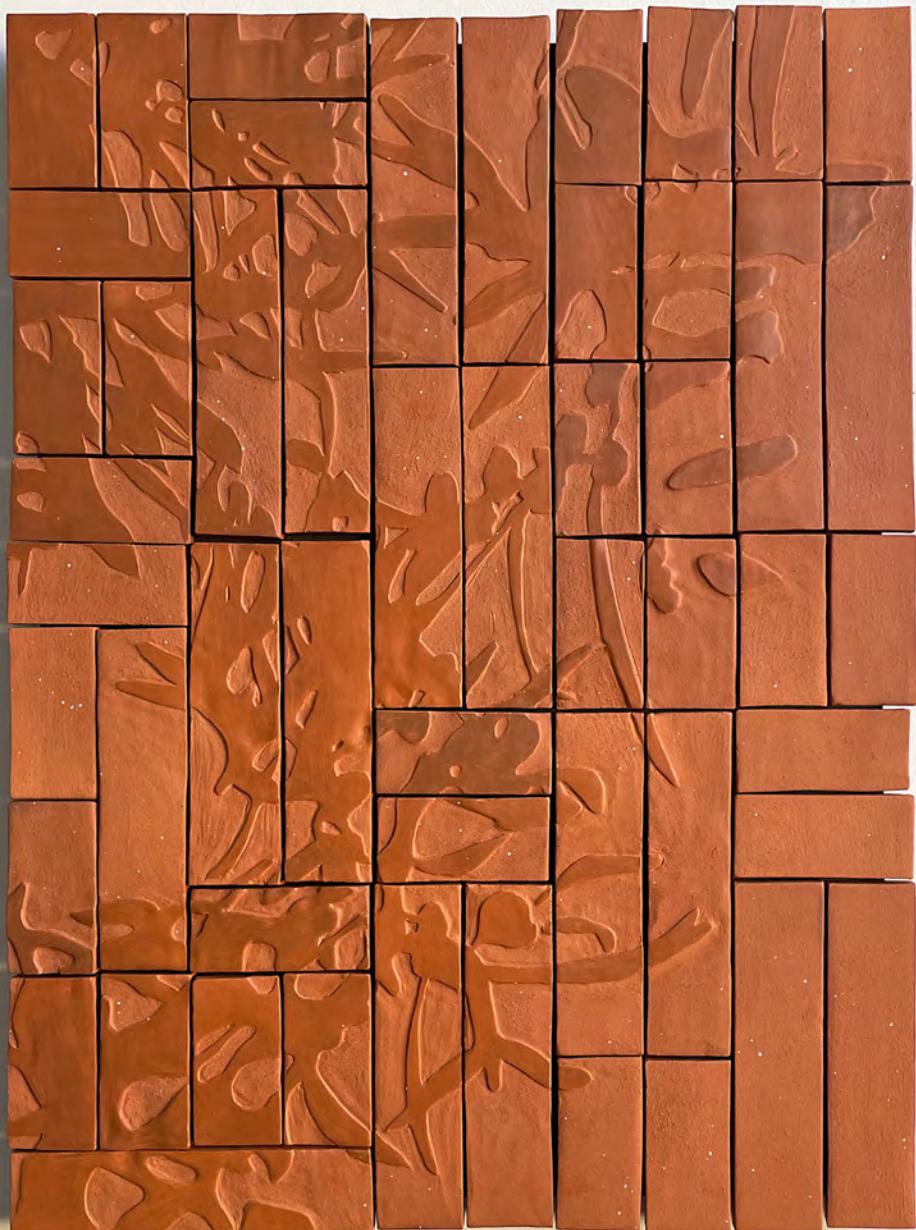
"Australia doesn't seem to have the proportionate number of institutions to facilitate growth as a ceramic artist."

- Kelsey Weber

We also observed fewer opportunities for residencies designed to support ceramic artists, and a high incidence of international travel for development. Amelia observed: "I think there's a culture here where people look abroad for inspiration or expertise." It's easy to imagine that proximity and cultural ties to highly valued ceramics centres like Jingdezhen, China, contribute to a culture of travel for learning. I can't say I would have seriously considered international opportunities before moving to Australia, but based on observations of my peers, it almost seems like a rite of passage amongst this community.

Though comparatively more scarce than in North America, avenues for creative development do still exist here. Amelia and I met through Amy Kennedy's mentorship programs, which helped connect us with other artists and strengthen our creative and professional practices. Amelia highlighted that

Amelia Black, *We Came With Visions but Not With Sight*, 2024; photo: courtesy artist



"being part of collaborative groups has given me access to opportunities" – particularly to exhibit work. I'm curious to explore other ways the Australian ceramics community may be establishing learning pathways beyond institutions, and how these new pathways fit within the social, political, and economic landscape.

As teachers, we shared similar observations that students' skill levels appear concentrated closer to the beginners' end of the spectrum. Though there are plenty of incredible contemporary (and historical!) ceramics practitioners in Australia, those operating at an advanced level are comparatively not as visible; they may have a more private practice or are less accessible because they are located further outside the urban centres. We also noticed that sharing knowledge through teaching in community studios isn't as common as in the United States where visiting artists and workshops are commonplace.

"I find there's a good mix of skill levels in Australia, but there's not as wide of a gap [in skill levels within the same studio]."

- Caine Stednitz

Meanwhile, 'wine and wheel' nights and 'taster classes' have become some of the most popular studio offerings, as Kelsey notes – "a totally different thing (to a committed practice)." I can't help but wonder how fewer formal learning programs, combined with the influence of popular media and social media algorithms, might influence the kinds of work new students are exposed to, and to what extent this may influence the type of work that is created and purchased.

My conversations with Amelia, Caine, Dawn, and Kelsey have made me feel more confident in knowing that my experience is not an anomaly. Adapting to a new place has brought its trials and tribulations, but it also encourages growth and requires exploring different pathways to clarify how we want to develop as artists, and as a community, and where we fit in the mix. We are all discovering our places.

"I'm at the point where I found the community that I want to be surrounded by, learn and grow with."

- Caine Stednitz

For myself, I'm so grateful to have found a small enclave of amazing artists and humans to call friends and peers in Australia. I even opened my own teaching studio – Home. Clay Studio. However, I still don't feel much closer to understanding what's happening in Australian ceramics. The apparent disconnect between interest in craft and broader investment irks me. Perhaps the popularity of craft and waning support for the arts generally demonstrates a shift towards viewing ceramics purely as a recreational or therapeutic experience, rather than a dedicated creative practice. And, if so, how might these circumstances influence the current and future iterations of the craft?

This process has ignited a desire to build a current and informed understanding of the Australian ceramics community, and, as a soon-to-be citizen, it's an investment in my new home. From these first conversations, I feel I have a stronger foundation on which to continue exploring these themes. In the next stage of this project, I'll gather more perspectives and insights directly

from the Australian ceramics community. I invite you to contribute your perspective through a community survey on my website. You can also learn more about my research in the United States and Australian ceramics communities.

annesherman.com

Anne Sherman is a functional and sculptural ceramic artist and educator committed to contributing to the ceramics community by incorporating her professional experiences in design, facilitation, and social and environmental evaluation. Her clay practice began in primary school and developed through secondary school programs and in production and community studios. In 2002, she received a scholarship to pursue a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Ceramics at the School for the American Craft at the Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), New York, where she also studied industrial design, architecture, and business management with a focus on sustainability. In 2019, Anne moved to Naarm (Melbourne), and in 2022, Anne founded Home. Clay Studio in Footscray, supporting students at all levels through classes, workshops, and studio access.



Amelia Black is an American-born, Melbourne-based clay artist, writer, teacher, and researcher. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Architecture & Design from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and a Master of Fine Arts in Design Criticism from the School of Visual Arts. In 2008, she co-founded Studio Ana, a community ceramics facility in Brooklyn, New York. In 2020, Amelia relocated to Naarm (Melbourne), where she now takes a practice-based approach to projects that bridge ceramics, sustainability, and material research. She currently teaches glaze chemistry and experimental surface design at Slow Clay Centre, Collingwood. Her writing has been published in *The Journal of Australian Ceramics* and she has presented research on sustainable material research at Craft Victoria and Melbourne Design Week. Her work is held in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria.
Photo: Aliza Simons



Dawn Vachon studied visual arts at Emily Carr University of Art and Design in Vancouver. Since relocating to Melbourne in 2008, she has continued her ceramic practice spanning functional, decorative, and sculptural avenues. Notably, she was included with a group of outsiders showing as part of The Australian Ceramics Association's *OVERUNDERSIDEWAYSDOWN* exhibition in 2016, and their following exhibition *Manifest* in 2019. The Gold Coast City Gallery acquired her piece *Beard and Tie* as part of their 2016 International Ceramic Art Award. Dawn can often be found throwing, handbuilding and concocting glazes at her home studio in Coburg.



Caine Stednitz was born and raised in Pennsylvania, USA. Caine honed his skills with an apprenticeship under potter Joel Hildebrand in Pennsylvania, where he developed an appreciation for traditional Turkish pottery forms and techniques. Residing in Australia since 2021, Caine quickly immersed himself in the local arts scene. His teaching philosophy is holistic and creative, guiding students on their artistic journeys. Caine operates out of the Brunswick area, working at Lygon Street Pottery and Sunroom Studio, and volunteering at Montsalvat in their current woodfired kiln rebuild.



Kelsey Weber is an American-born artist living and working in Naarm (Melbourne) since 2024. She has worked at studios in the United States, United Kingdom, Europe, and Australia. In 2015, she received a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Ceramics from Maine College of Art in Portland, Maine, and in 2022, she completed a Masters in Ceramics at Cardiff School of Art and Design in Cardiff, Wales. She is currently an instructor at The Wheelhouse Studios in South Melbourne. Teaching is an important part of her practice – she sees it as a way to add a sense of playfulness to her own work. Kelsey's work illustrates uncertainty while addressing themes of mortality, legacy, and potential, often alluding to the climate crisis. As a peripatetic ceramic artist, she values seeing the medium of clay from different international perspectives and is curious how Australia will influence her practice.