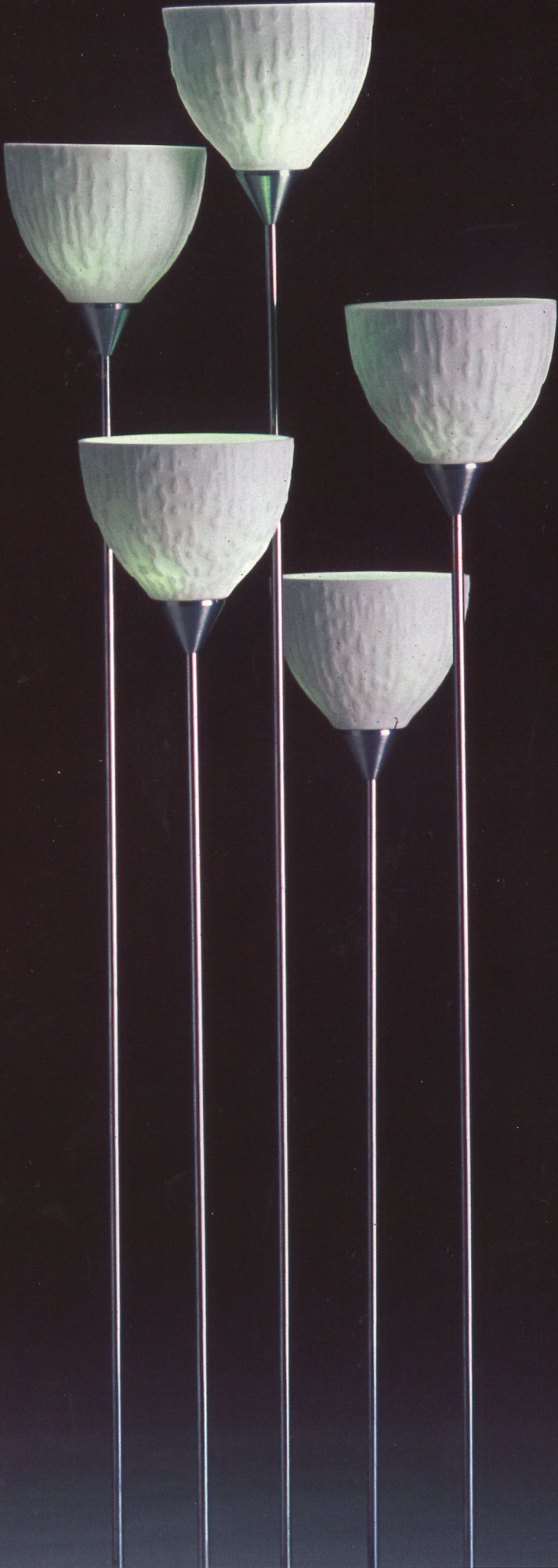
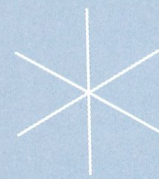


Ceramicist **Janet DeBoos** investigates the global passion for whiteness in ceramics and the path that led Les Blakeborough to 'Southern Ice'

WHITER THAN WHITE

A MARRIAGE OF MATERIALS AND DESIRE





For almost the entire history of high-fired ceramics there has been a desire for the perfect white surface. Approximately 1,000 years ago in Jingdezhen, China, the perfection of a clay body made

of *petunze* (china stone) and *gao-lin* (china clay) set the worlds of collecting and connoisseurship afire. It wasn't a sudden 'Eureka' style invention – translucent or clear-glazed white porcelain was already being developed in several centres in China and was often sold as artificial jade. But, previously, most Chinese high-fired pottery had been celadon-glazed (the stoneware and proto-porcelain from which it was made was greyish, rather than white after firing); and now, finally, in the Song dynasty, true porcelain was being made – pure white perfection that light would pass through, and in which light seemed to gather. This sublime material would also come to provide a superb canvas for the development of under- and overglaze colour of a clarity and liveliness never before seen.

The earliest brush-decoration technique was the underglaze cobalt of blue-and-white ware, but underglaze red was introduced very quickly, and then subsequently polychrome overglaze decorations that were formed in a third, lower-

temperature firing. It is reasonable to assume that without a clay body of the fineness and whiteness of porcelain, the highly elaborate decorations of polychrome ware might not have evolved in the way they did – and that the subsequent development of industrial techniques such as transfer printing (developed in England) may not have occurred.

The story of how this ware – the earliest porcelain – was exported to Europe via the Silk Roads is well known, as is the excitement that it caused in countries where ceramic traditions were all centred around low-fired earthenware. (In Europe the excitement was so great, and the demand so strong, that many attempts were made to copy it, leading to the Low Countries' development of Delft ware, amongst other stylistic borrowings.)

What was it that thrilled the European connoisseurs? It was the very fineness and whiteness of the stuff. This was new, and it was to make porcelain the single fashionable luxury item in the homes of the aristocracy by the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries.

We don't seem to have lost that desire for whiteness in ceramics – indeed one of the attempts to replicate Chinese porcelain was the perfection of bone china (a soft-paste porcelain fluxed not by

petunze but by animal bones) in England during the eighteenth century. It had a whiteness and translucency that surpassed even that of hard paste or 'true' porcelain, and it is still the industry norm for porcelain-type bodies there. As such, it has been the material of choice for many British ceramic artists, including Angela Verdun, Glenys Barton and Jacqui Poncelet.

So what do we want from white? With what do we associate whiteness in ceramics, and perhaps in life generally? There seems to be a dichotomy of desires when we seek whiteness in clay bodies. One version springs from more painterly needs rather than true desire – the availability of a neutral (but reflective) canvas for colour, glaze clarity and reliability. If the clay is white, then we have reduced the myriad variables that affect firing outcomes; in conjunction with coloured decoration, white provides freshness; and glazes such as celadon become more jade-like when applied over white bodies. The traditional use of white slips over terracotta clays has also been a response to this need. Although ultra-fine porcelain tableware became a sign of great wealth and gentility (no need for robust tableware in these families!), the new consumers were not really interested in the underlying whiteness of this type of ceramic, but rather the current fashion in glaze and decoration.

There is another branch of that desire for white, which is really a desire for a kind of transcendence, a desire to deny the heavy materiality of clay, and a desire to dissolve into light. It is not just the fact that porcelain and bone china transmit light, but that they also seem to capture light, and glow with its energy and warmth. So whiteness was and continues to be the point for many ceramic artists.

Since the Song dynasty, when the northern white Ding Shao ware reached a pinnacle of perfection that led it to be compared to silver and to snow, there have always been clay artists who have sought to capture light in clay vessels. Perhaps the best known is Rudolf Staffel (United States), who has been making his 'light gatherers' since the 1960s, but there were many others who sought an almost mystical relationship with white and light. In the early 1970s Jacqui Poncelet and Glenys Barton (United Kingdom) were variously manipulating light in elegant bone china sculptures and small pierced porcelain vessels, as was Angela Verdon by the early 1980s. At the same time, Curtis Benzle (United States) 'wanted a clay that embodied a purity that would transcend white. I wanted whiteness to blend into light itself'. Both Staffel and Benzle experimented widely and developed their own white, vitrified 'clays'.²

Previous page:

Angela Mellor, *Coral Cluster*, bone china, metal rods and base. Lighting by Urs Roth

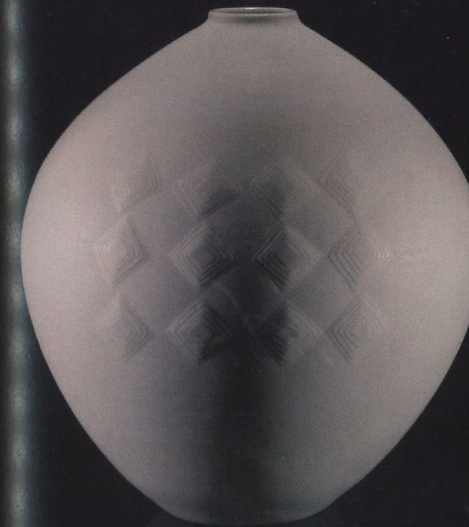
Left to right:

Les Blakebrough, *Large Bowl* (Derwent), 2002, unglazed Southern Ice porcelain. Photo: Uffe Schulze

Janet DeBoos, *solitary pleasures*, 2003, Southern Ice porcelain

Les Blakebrough, *Sphere* (Diamonds), 2002, unglazed Southern Ice porcelain. Photo: Uffe Schulze

Arman, made by Manufacture Raynaud, *As in the Sink II*, 1990, Limoges porcelain. Photo: Sotha Bourn. Courtesy Powerhouse Museum



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At about the same time in Australia, there were also a number of artists seeking sublime white. Owen Rye wrote perhaps the earliest published Australian work on white, highly vitrified bodies (although Joy Warren had written briefly about early experiments into 'low temperature porcelain'³ and Ivan McMeekin had supervised Rye's work, writing himself about Australian raw materials in his landmark work *Notes for Potters in Australia*⁴). Rye completed his PhD thesis⁵ at the University of New South Wales in 1970 and also wrote on bone china in *Pottery in Australia* in 1983⁶. His research was instrumental in the development of Sandra Black's bone china work, and a collaboration with an Australian pottery supplier⁷ saw the development and marketing of a vitrified china body, as well as the trialling of a very low temperature fritted body in the early 1990s. Andrea Hylands was working in bone china by the early 1980s, initially with introduced colour, and subsequently all white. More recently, in the late 1990s, other Australian makers such as Angela Mellor have exploited the 'light-gathering' potential of bone china, as well as its use in design for lighting. This interest in lighting design was also an aspect of Margaret O'Rourke's (United Kingdom) Sydney exhibition in the early 1990s using porcelain. The difference in the whiteness of light transmitted by most porcelains and that transmitted by bone china is marked. The porcelain light generally has a creamy warmth, whereas that of bone china is whiter than white.

But it is not only local technical developments in materials that influence studio work in ceramics – from time to time the publication of a new book or article opens new doors for expression. Norwegian Arne Ase's *Water Colour on Porcelain*⁸ was one such book. It made possible the introduction of transparent colour onto porcelain, breaking the existing nexus between colour and opacity. Ase was also a seeker of white but, interestingly, a different kind of transcendent white. He made a substantial

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body of work without any colour, and utilised the transmission of light through pure white porcelain of varying thicknesses, the walls of his vessels having been resist-eroded. In an interview with Tania De Bruyker⁹, Ase said that he 'wanted a clay that did not have such a strong identity'; that is, he did not want to work in the brown and groggy clays that were fashionable at the time. He was 'trying to create complex visual expressions and experiences out of nothing', he was 'painting with light'. This desire for a kind of 'nothingness' was still seriously engaged with the clay body, and Ase thought that for the clay artefact 'the way of being seen is to become a whisper'.

Les Blakebrough had researched porcelainous clays since his days at Sturt Workshop at Mittagong, New South Wales, and produced a new body of work stimulated by his meetings with Ase in Norway in 1990 and 1993. However, the various Australian commercial porcelains that Blakebrough tried (Valentine's, Limoges¹⁰ and JB1) were 'all lacking, there was always something wrong'¹¹. To resolve this, Blakebrough began extensive research into the development of a clay body that would ultimately combine the plasticity of porcelain with the translucent character and whiteness of bone china. In 1999, he christened this clay 'Southern Ice', an appropriate moniker for a material that started life in Tasmania and that (when reduction-fired) had many of the cool, almost blue qualities of glacial light¹². Blakebrough's work continued to develop from his earlier 'watercolour on porcelain' pieces to a practice entirely in white and light, in which he utilised the erosion technique to an extraordinary level of expression. His recent work has maximised the qualities of his clay body, capturing space and time through the layering of imagery reflecting the Tasmanian landscape and flora.

If Blakebrough was to take porcelain white to new heights of purity and plasticity, then it was not without cost. The new offspring, Southern Ice, was a contrary child that could be wheel-thrown and turned easily, but was difficult to manage in joining and handling. This has led to an almost total lack of joined or handled works made in this material. In fact, the standard Southern Ice vessel has become either a simple, small-footed, open-mouthed bowl, or a cylinder, both without additions.

With the popularity of Southern Ice, other clay suppliers responded to the increasing demand for fine, white translucent porcelains¹³, but many of these had a softness in colour and behaviour that was more akin to traditional Chinese porcelains, rather than to the new hybrid style of Southern Ice.

Other makers also actively sought a softer, creamier experience. In the early 1990s,

Takeshi Yasuda (United Kingdom) turned to English industrial history and revived 'creamware', reworking it in his readily identifiable throwing style, and this author (Australia), using a variety of white porcelain clays, developed domestic ware so finely and apparently casually made, that it challenged the usual stillness and symmetrical perfection of more conventional porcelain. Yasuda's latest work of the 1990s has also been in porcelain; Yasuda actively engages with porcelain behaviour, using its tendency to collapse when thinly thrown to establish a dialogue with material.

But will there always be a desire for that sublime white experience? Probably yes. Even if fashion has created an unprecedented move to white, as humans we still yearn for purity, and yearn to lose ourselves. Irrespective of how secular our outlook may be, the idea of a transcendent experience is seductive. We feel that we can melt into light when we look at a spot-lit vessel showing layer after layer of gum leaves that get brighter as we draw closer to what seems to be some ultimate truth; or, we feel we can actually hold light when we cradle a translucent porcelain cup in sunlight. Sandy Simon (United States) sums it up well (in an extension of her earlier article, 'I like porcelain because blood shows up on it'¹⁴):

White is light, purity, cleanliness and all the things that go hand in hand in making the best of introspections.¹⁵ ■■■■

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Angela Mellor, *Cretaceous*, bone china paperslip. Photo: Victor France

LIVING TREASURES: MASTERS OF AUSTRALIAN CRAFT
LES BLAKEBROUGH: CERAMICS
DEBUTS AT OBJECT GALLERY, SYDNEY,
19 NOVEMBER 2005 – 15 JANUARY 2006,
BEFORE TOURING ACROSS AUSTRALIA IN 2006-07.
PLEASE CHECK WWW.OBJECT.COM.AU FOR DETAILS.

1. Curtis Benzle, 'Some thoughts on translucent whiteware', *Studio Potter*, vol. 26, no. 2, June 1998.
2. I use the term 'clays' in quotes because, as Benzle states, 'finally I had it – a clay in name, but containing 25% kaolin. Fundamentally silica and feldspars stuck together with artificial binders. Not a potter's cup of tea by any means. Virtually unworkable by traditional forming methods; prone to cracking, and foolishly fragile when green, but what went into the kiln an ugly duckling came out a swan.' Ibid.
3. Joy Warren, *Pottery in Australia*, vol. 14, no. 2, 1975, pp. 21-3.
4. Ivan McMeekin, *Notes for Potters in Australia*, University of New South Wales Press, Sydney 1985.
5. Owen S. Rye, 'An Investigation into the Use of Australian Raw Materials in the Development of Porcelain Bodies and Glazes', Thesis submitted for PhD, University of New South Wales, 1970.
6. Owen S. Rye, 'Bone china', *Pottery in Australia*, 1983, vol. 22, no. 2, pp. 14-15.
7. CLAYWORKS, a clay manufacturer and supplier, was started by Will Mulder in the 1980s, and has continued since then to have a policy of working with ceramic artists (such as Owen Rye and Les Blakebrough) in the commercial development of clay bodies and other products. Similarly, other ceramic suppliers such as Walker Ceramics (Greg Daly, Jeff Mincham) and Puggoon (later Australian China Clays) have, from time to time, developed commercial clay bodies from meeting the needs of these various artists.
8. Arne Ase, *Water Colour on Porcelain, A Guide to the Use of Watersoluble Colourants*, Scandinavian University Press, Oslo, 1989.
9. Tania De Bruyker, 'Painting with light, an interview with Arne Ase', see www.ceramicart.com.au/articles/ase.htm
10. This French porcelain, tried by the author in France in 1988, was soon to become available in Australia, after being imported by Walker Ceramics in the early 1990s.
11. Les Blakebrough, in conversation with the author, October 2005.
12. In fact, the interest in a sublimely white experience was being seen everywhere by the time Southern Ice was launched in 1999 at the National Ceramics Conference ('Edge, Identity and Change') in Perth, and frequently the naming of works invoked polar experiences e.g. Angelor Mellor's 1998 work, *Glacial Light*.
13. Walker Ceramics produced an unashamedly Chinese-style porcelain in 2003 called 'Imperial Porcelain'. Like most of the other offerings, it sought to increase plasticity while maintaining maximum whiteness and translucency.
14. Sandy Simon, 'I like porcelain because blood shows up on it', *Studio Potter*, vol. 6, no. 2, June 1978.
15. Sandra Simon, 'The expectations of white: Revisited', *Studio Potter*, vol. 26, no. 2, June 1998.