



Make/ Me Everyday Stories

< Rebecca Dowling (left) and Anne Brennan sit down with the collection, May 2007.
Photo: Brenton McGeachie

The handmade ceramics of Rebecca Dowling are put to good use by collector Anne Brennan. Merryn Gates sits down with the artist and collector to talk about taking pleasure in the everyday.

We may buy that special piece of jewellery, one outfit every year from our favourite designer, even a feature piece of glass for that place in the lounge-room; but when it comes to casserole dishes and butter plates, handmade is not such a frequent choice.

But it can be. There are ceramic artists, potters some still like to call themselves – who practice the art of throwing multiples for use on the table: bowls, cups, plates and dishes. It is a discipline that goes back thousands of years. So far, in fact, it is strange to think we are now a bit suspicious of handmade functional ware. Is not the pottery recovered from ancient sites among the most durable evidence of domestic life? Are we afraid it is not tough enough? Are we so anxious that the set be absolutely identical?

In the case of Rebecca Dowling's work, jugs and baking dishes join plates and beakers in a range of ceramics designed for everyday use. Reflecting on the appeal of repetition, Dowling says: 'I work mostly with shades of celadon and I just like the forms changing as the tone of the glaze changes. Perhaps my work can be likened to sibling similarities and differences.'

'I immediately liked Rebecca's work,' says Anne Brennan, who has a small collection of Dowling's tableware. 'She was working on a body of archetypal vessels, developing a palette of celadon glazes to go with them. My first purchase was a serving dish, and I loved the sense of generosity that its form suggested – its rim is pulled outwards, so that it always seems to be offering you the food within. It also speaks very clearly of its handmade condition; the handles consist of two 'sprigs' of clay that are joined to the dish with a deft push of the thumb, which has left two lovely dimples on the inside of the dish.'

While the appeal of these pieces is very much about them being used, a quality both Brennan and Dowling emphasise, they have also been on exhibition. When they are shown in a gallery, Dowling prefers not to present them on plinths. Instead she shows them on wall-mounted shelves in a way she describes as 'suggesting domestic space'. The shelving most closely resembles the china cabinet or shadow box, furniture that might be found in kitchens or dining rooms. And in Brennan's home, when the plates are not on the table they can be seen on open shelves that divide the kitchen from the living area.

Brennan's interest in handmade domestic ceramics is linked to her interest in the rituals of everyday life, particularly those that revolve around food. She says that 'although I am not really interested in the "handmade" versus "factory made" debate, I do think that handmade objects have certain characteristics that make them very pleasurable to use'.

'People always notice and admire Rebecca's ceramics', Brennan adds. Each plate has a distinctive nick in the edge that suggests the way they are formed on the pottery wheel, and because they are not a standard size and colour, the food always looks different on each plate, '... almost as though it has been specially arranged for each diner,' concludes Brennan.

Dowling believes that 'most pots hold many stories deep within their walls'. It seems to be the time we spend around a table with friends and family eating and drinking that stories unfold, as they did even during this photo shoot, the first time maker and collector had shared a meal. ■■■■

Merryn Gates

1 Rebecca Dowling in correspondence with the author, May 2007.
2 Anne Brennan in correspondence with the author, May 2007.