

# 'I am a Rock - The Archipelago of Ramesh '

By Glenn Barkley

*I am a rock*

*I am an island*<sup>1</sup>

The emergence of ceramics in the contemporary art world is both surprising and expected in equal measure.

Surprising as in the turn towards the machine made, the emergence of global artist 'super brands' and the emphasis on manufacturing seems to run counter to ceramics' intuitive hands-on processes

At least in the way we consider it post modernism and the influence of quintessential Englishman and potter Bernard Leach on generations of Australian practitioners who valued authenticity and foregrounded the idea of the artist's craftsman – making your own clay, mixing your own glazes and working in concentrated solitude – above all others. Even when figures like Leach himself, who had created a proto-mechanised workshop structure, ran counter to the 'movement' this was ignored in the search for an arcane ideal that morphed in to 1970's to back to earth movements. So much brown, so much wood.

The influence of various Asian ceramic traditions most notably the Mingei folk movement in Japan seemed to exemplify what the 'potter' should be – not artist but humble practitioner caught in the endless loop of making.

But this is of course a myth unto itself. The belief that a true potter should be all things is unrealistic and running counter to this history is an alternate one which pushes against the orthodoxy. In simple terms it values the handmade over the thrown, the sculptural over the functional and is expansive enough to include design and factory made production

Practitioners such as Ken Price, Betty Woodman and Ron Nagle in the US, and Alison Britton, Grayson Perry and Richard Slee in the UK have taken clay and ceramic into the world of fine art and galleries, in distinction to the museum, and lessened the emphasis on function and production. All use the studio as a site to make *artwork* over the production of *pottery* – all they speak with that language and collectively they, and others, have primed the art community to accept ceramic as a valid 'contemporary' medium.

The next phase is the adaptation of the material as medium by artist as diverse as Ai Wei Wei to Urs Fischer. It is now a ubiquitous rather than specialised material. Coupled with this is the rapacious appetite of the art market and its horde of globe-trotting art collectors and its constant probing for the next big thing. This has seen the masters of previous generations 'rediscovered', reconsidered and with lots of stock still available to buy! It is debatable how much these collectors and the associated cohort of curators will persist with

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Simon, *I am Rock*, 1965, Columbia Records

the medium into the future but clays potential for the moment seems somewhat supercharged.

***"I am an island"***  
***Some sucker scrawled<sup>2</sup>***

This provides some context for the work of Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran. Ramesh is arguably the most influential, visible and successful artist working with clay in Australia and the pin-up boy of the revitalisation of ceramics in Australia.

*Archipelago of Ramesh* places the artist right in the centre of production and was created in the time immediate prior to the Kuandu Biennale. It's title gives some indication as to the works meaning.

Australia is a collection of islands perhaps not an archipelago in the traditional sense but its culture is shaped by its island status. Being an island implies, in the beginning of the twentieth century and witnessed by the recent Brexit, a preoccupation with ideas of sovereignty and all that entails – from 'Buy Australian' to 'Stop the Boats' slogans.

The moral, social and political panic of border control and successive governments heightened rhetoric around the issue, captured most brutally eloquently by former Australian Prime Minister John Howard as 'we will decide who comes to this country and circumstances in which they come'<sup>3</sup> has made border protection a key issue within successive electoral cycles. At the moment I write this, and concurrently while Ramesh's work is being conceptualised, another Australian Federal election campaign is taking place and border protection is again at its heart.

Australia's position as both a part of Asia and as colonial strong hold is both its strength and weakness. In Sydney, Australia's international city, the mixing of cultures is dynamic and has led to a strange melange of cultural styles within the context of of art world(s). The increasingly important role that western Sydney plays within this situation, a population that has been made by successive and ongoing waves of migration, will only strengthen its position as cultural engine and powerhouse of ideas.

Conversely many cultural institutions still look outwards towards the old colonial powerbases of Europe and the UK. The colonial mindset still exists and frighteningly Sydney is sometimes exposed as colonial cultural outpost and the cultural capital of Great Britain, another island culture, still holds sway - strangely enough. There is a sense of measuring against them when we should perhaps be measuring and collaborating with our closer partners.

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<sup>2</sup> Richard Clapton, *I am an Island*, Orient Pacific Music, 1982

<sup>3</sup> "Liberals accused of trying to rewrite history . Australian Broadcasting Corp". Australian Broadcasting Corporation. 21 November 2001. Retrieved 22 November 2012.

### ***When I was in my native place I was but a lump of clay***

The line above is one is often used on English slipware Harvest jugs. These jugs, part of an English folk tradition which extended into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, were also a big influence on the aforementioned Bernard Leach and his first and most notable student Michael Cardew. In the context of this essay they provide a common entry point into the practice of Ramesh and the studio/production pottery movement but where the 'folk' movement is centred around truth to materials – creating and sourcing them yourself or creating glaze and clay recipes from scratch - Ramesh is a believer in the use of ready-made ceramic materials such as contemporary manufactured clay and glaze, bought in a shop ready mixed and from raw materials rather than dug from the earth.

As Ramesh himself has written:

*As practitioners and consumers of creative product, we must realise what values are essential to embed within contemporary practice. Should we gravitate towards the safety and mediocrity of the orthodox, and thus continue to make cases for the relevance and necessity for things like wood fired bowls and mugs which are 'un-unique' in their form and treatment? Should we spend decades refining a glaze recipe when Cesco <sup>4</sup> has produced reliable and robust products that are both affordable and easily accessed? And should we marvel at the finesses and 'technical virtuosity' of white men who produce (copy) Asian ceramic forms?<sup>5</sup>*

Ceramic technology has in a sense brought forth a new kind of folk art. Generally speaking since the 1970s with the emergence of community art and specifically socially-engaged types of practices there has been a push towards community-based workshops using ceramics as a medium. This is coupled with a general simplification in kiln technology and readily available non-toxic glazes. In recent years this has been added to by a general push toward the 'handmade' over mass produced table wares. This has added a multitude of new diverse voices to the ceramic landscape – see for instance the work being produced by assisted studios in Australia - Arts Project in Melbourne being the primary example. There the work of artists such as Alan Constable, whose ceramic cameras have been shown in major public spaces such as the National Gallery of Victoria and in the US, has been brought into the so called 'mainstream' art world. Also witness the work of the Indigenous Ernabella potters creating work of powerful originality that is not overwhelmed by technical considerations – being instead direct raw and personal – 'an aesthetic of excess and an amplification of the handprint'.<sup>6</sup>

Ramesh's archipelago speaks of multiple fears and multiple meanings and I want to concentrate on one - the the sheer joyful audacity of it. Unfired and formless, spread across the gallery space it borrows from the process art of the late 60s and the scattered exhibition

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<sup>4</sup> An Australian ceramics supply company

<sup>5</sup> Ramesh Mario Nitheyendran *Fundamentalist Pottery vs Contemporary Art* The Journal of Australian Ceramics Vol 55 No 1 April 2016,

<sup>6</sup> *ibid*

methodology made famous in such exhibitions as Harald Szeemans *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form*.<sup>7</sup> An exhibition where you could thoughtfully consider the idea as object whilst trying to not trip over it. Ramesh draws out the inherent humour of the conceptual display – it's a matter of having to watch where you walk.

There is also some correlation between the densely packed arena of *Live in Your head: When Attitude Becomes Form* and the shop-style aesthetic of production and studio pottery. The dense collection of objects is, not perhaps acceptable to some, but the display orthodoxy of ceramics with objects piled on top of each other cheek by jowl is an acceptable practice in both the museum and the shop.<sup>8</sup>

As a touchstone of controversy within the insular ceramics world Ramesh work has been described as having 'slop stacking aesthetic'<sup>9</sup>. This term meant to be a derisory slur instead is an apt description and there is a bit of that but there is also refinement, when its needed, and a crafty swift intelligence that comes from a university training which now foregrounds ideas over materials – but here we have both ideas *and* materials.

The phenomena of Ramesh sitting on his island, his provocations to ceramics orthodoxy and his seemingly easy co-opting of the dialogue of contemporary art is what makes him and his work unique. It is an island rapidly being peopled by those who are turning their back on the cool, over intellectualised to the point of meaningless, contemporary art world and the very straight laced Fundamentalist ceramics community. All being interested in something that is singular and boisterous and challenging the status quo.

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<sup>7</sup> *Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form* (1969) Kunsthalle Bern is the prime example. It was remade in Venice in 2013 for the Fondazione Prada. In 2012 the survey of Australian process, minimal and post-minimal art *Less is More: Minimal and Post-Minimal Art in Australia* (curator Sue Cramer) at Heide Museum of Modern Art caused much discussion due to the dense, trip-worthy installation. It did though, correctly I thought, replicate the original conditions of display. It was only when people got famous and egos inflated that the singular, minimal display really started to take over.

<sup>8</sup> My exhibition *Turn Turn Turn* (2015) NAS Sydney also used this aesthetic as a way as bringing together a diversity of practice. In a review of the exhibition Craig Judd rightly points out the correlation between ceramics high profile in the 1960s and 70's and its links to current and conceptual practices: 'Many forget that it was the domestic craft revival of the 1960s and early 1970s that was the petri dish for what we now call Australian contemporary art. In technical schools (pre TAFE) around the country short courses in pottery, Ikebana, printmaking and woodworking brought a new understanding of the value of the handmade, and of the positive role that fostering creativity can play in the development of the individual and the community.'

<https://www.artlink.com.au/articles/4373/turn-turn-turn-the-studio-ceramics-tradition-at-th/> (accessed 24/6/2016)

<sup>9</sup> [https://m.facebook.com/groups/545862235577313?feed\\_uFI=comments](https://m.facebook.com/groups/545862235577313?feed_uFI=comments) - Bill Powell comments 10 May.

Like those before him, Ramesh foregrounds process in his work and the art is in the making – it is purposefully unrefined as if to show every second chance, failure and wrong step – and that’s where its magic lies. It makes a space where the good manners of the pottery studio meet Richard Serra scatologically chucking lead into a corner like a baby flinging food and where things are split, spilt, slumped and smeared.

Ramesh’s work is in turn: childlike, easy, quick, formless, reactive and flippant but it’s also the flipside of this: smart, technical (in a way that you only really need to know what you need to know), intuitive, instinctual, robust, traditional, delicate and refined. It’s these dichotomies that makes it interesting and he is smart enough to know that sitting somewhere between them is a line worth pursuing.

With its links back to Ramesh’s own cultures – his Sri Lankan background, Hinduism and Catholicism, mixed with a University rather than technical training - it forges its own dynamic, a conceptual folk art if you will.

### ***As Crook as Rookwood***

From Sydney’s central station we can catch a train to Lidcombe to the homeland studio of Ramesh. At Central we can think about the city as a huge complex built on the labour of brick workers who dug into the city’s core to make it. It rises up, the brick pits now obliterated but which ran from Central to Chinatown where some vestiges remain. In the endless march of capital as apartments rise and fall – we peer down in to cavernous holes to see the red clay of the Sydney basin embedded within the geographical strata before it becomes strata title.

Move through the city now heading west to Lidcombe – the home of Sydney’s great necropolis Rookwood and to be ‘as Crook as Rookwood’ in the Australian vernacular is to be very sick indeed. My grandfather is buried here probably his father too. All that time, all that rot. Once I laid turf in the cemetery as part of an assignment for a horticultural course. While the grave diggers leant on their shovels and flirted with the girls in my class they told us the soil was good here, for obvious reasons. They had divided the cemetery up into neat cultural divisions. Maybe we live under the rubric and fantasy of multiculturalism but in death we stand divided – God will sort us out.

Clay has a visceral, sensual and direct appeal that is often at the core of any discussion of it but it is always worth reiterating as it is part of what makes it so appealing. As Ramesh puts it *‘I would never describe myself as a ‘ceramicist’. I’m more an artist who uses clay... I’m in that ‘post-medium’ school of thinking. I believe contemporary art is fundamentally about the use of materials to present ideas.’*<sup>10</sup>

As an artist who thinks deeply about what he is doing Ramesh knows that working with clay brings you into a direct conversation with the makers of the past. It also opens up history and place in a way that very few art forms do and this is a fairly predictable way to discuss

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<sup>10</sup> Ramesh Mario Nithiyendran unpublished artist statement 2016.

it. But there is also the trap of taking directly to it rather than talking around it and its undeniable, never-ending source of potential.

Clay once made solid by fire and heat has the potential to last millennia but can be reduced back to its basic elements and used again, or discarded. Scattered, porous ephemeral. Look at the surface of his work –every part is active, every surface is worked as if to say ‘something has happened here - I needed to be made’.

Ramesh has told me that when the Biennale finishes he wants the work to be returned back to clay, recycled back to where it came – maybe remoulded and reshaped by students or just to nothing - ‘Dust/Dust/Dust of dust...’<sup>11</sup>

We are all just particles, dust to dust, like clay, like bone, like ideas. Raw materials turned back to the earth to possibly be remade again.

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<sup>11</sup> T.S. Eliot *Triumphal March* (1931)