

SAMSTAG / AUTUMN SEASON



Helen Fuller

HELEN FULLER: OFF ROAD / ROSS WOLFE

There is something magical about Helen Fuller's unusual ceramics, and something compelling as well in the way they manifest such strange forms and visual effects. It is as if the artist has drawn upon a store of secret knowledge from the liminal zone – or paid the devil – releasing a power by which the work is imbued with mysterious meaning.

The 'pots', as she calls them, are all over the shop, defying easy categorisation. Their impulse is essentially sculptural more so than decorative, although colour plays a role. Random, surprising things, they are individuals from an uncommon tribe, their personalities both light and dark. This elegant one here, for example – a study in pure, simple happiness – clearly has the sun in it. And the one there, with the dark spirit, surely suggests archaeological and ancestral matter – ghosts, past lives of kin, or urns for the beloved dead. Then again, look more deeply, and perhaps it cries for the unknowability of ancient Indigenous minds.

Certainly, they are very beautiful, albeit in an unconventional way. That is their gift.

The poet Les Murray once described his preparation for creative work as sitting quietly at a table with his materials – the pencil and paper – ready. He said the verse came largely unbidden from the back of his head, rather than the conscious, reasoning mind – a creation almost of its own that he knowingly facilitated. His poetry, he said, was produced in 'a trance.'ⁱ All that he contributed or needed, he implied, was intent.

Fuller's pots begin similarly in the most elementary manner. She lays down a looping coil of moist terracotta clay on her studio banding wheel, and then another, and more, and so on, gradually working it all up. It's a meditation.

There might be a thought as a starting point, to provide intention – most often the patterns and textures of organic things, such as seed pods and plants that she's found when out doggie-walking Sootie, her constant companion. As her hands touch the clay, though, it could as likely be her late father's ever-remembered shed, or her grandmother Nana Maude speaking to her of damask and gingham fabrics.

Always, there is memory.

After a while something is formed, comes to life on the wheel. She might then draw into the object, scribing or physically impressing a pattern – shaping. Later, after the bisque firing, she will consider her options. Typically – though not exclusively – her choice is a commercial oxide underglaze applied by brush. She'll work the surface some more. A favourite treatment is the bleed-through – a ghostly semi-transparent stain that reveals an alluring hint of the terracotta base – achieved with a slip she's made using porcelain tailings from the studio of her generous and helpful friend Kirsten Coelho.

By this stage she's sometimes tired, and hurriedly 'gets them into the kiln to be rid of them and done.'ⁱⁱ However, she says, invariably, once out of the kiln and transformed, 'she loves them!'

When something goes wrong or she becomes bored – and if the pot is still damp – it can lead to play and experiment: 'fiddling around,' she calls it. Something new then starts to happen, and another journey begins.

i From an interview with Les Murray for the BBC Desert Island Disks program, 1998

ii Helen Fuller, in conversation with the writer, August 2021

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Journeying and ‘hanging about’ have been hallmarks of Fuller’s adult life, her inherent restlessness driven perhaps by gnawing discontents and a wilful, independent nature. An Adelaide girl, she was lured to Brisbane by professional opportunity soon after art school in 1979, when her collages caught the attention of legendary gallerist Ray Hughes, renowned for his ‘good eye’. Before long, liberated from the old yoke, she was spending time on the road adventuring, searching, travelling to Cornwall, UK, and Europe, even managing a stint at an Israeli *moshav* – a cooperative agricultural community.

Soon enough, Brisbane drew her back, and on and off she stayed for a decade, teaching painting at Queensland University of Technology with the likes of Bill Robinson – now an old friend – where she was able to closely observe an intriguing colleague, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, at her craft.

‘She was so scatty in life’, Fuller recalls of Pigott, ‘but to watch her at work – calm, centred and controlled – was impressive’. It was an influence she acknowledges.

Fuller’s wanderlust has never gone away. Over the years it’s taken her to Thailand, working as a documentary illustrator for the Ceramic Archaeological Project in Sri Satchanalai, and to the Zhejiang Academy of Fine Arts in Hangzhou, China, on an Asialink-sponsored residency. She’s also provided fieldwork photography for her researcher friend Dr Keryn Walshe on a South Australian Museum archaeological project at the remote Koonalda Cave on the Nullabor Plain, once home to Aboriginal people 20,000 years ago.ⁱⁱⁱ

Most recently she’s been travelling regularly to Beltana in South Australia’s arid north, fulfilling her commitment as executor for the estate of artist Antony Hamilton, following his untimely death in 2020. It enriches her.

It was her collage works that caught Ray Hughes’s attention in 1979. By the time Bernice Murphy invited her into the distinguished second *Australian Perspecta* at the Art Gallery of New South Wales in 1983, it had become assemblages. By 1998, in Juliana Engberg and Ewan McDonald’s Adelaide Biennial – *All this and Heaven too* – at the Art Gallery of South Australia, it was installation.

That radical shift had begun its inspired journey three years before when she recreated the contents of her father’s shed as an absurdist installation for her 1995 exhibition *BCF* at the University of South Australia Art Museum, then in Adelaide’s Underdale.

Over subsequent years, wise from experience, she has continued her artistic journey down ever-new artistic pathways. Fuller says that, with art, her instinct unfailingly is ‘off-road’, and that ‘unplanned chaos begets outcomes.’

Wherever she has found herself, she works – open to the forces of the day, responsive to the impulse to make. She is inventive and productive, unafraid to explore or to experience change, even though – like a monk – she fervently eschews the public arena.

In 2009, Helen Fuller needed a change – something to help shake off the black dog that from a young age had periodically wrapped itself around her. She wandered into a pottery hobby class in the Adelaide suburbs.

She was captured.

Ross Wolfe
October 2021

iii See ‘Koonalda Cave’, *Encyclopedia Britannica*



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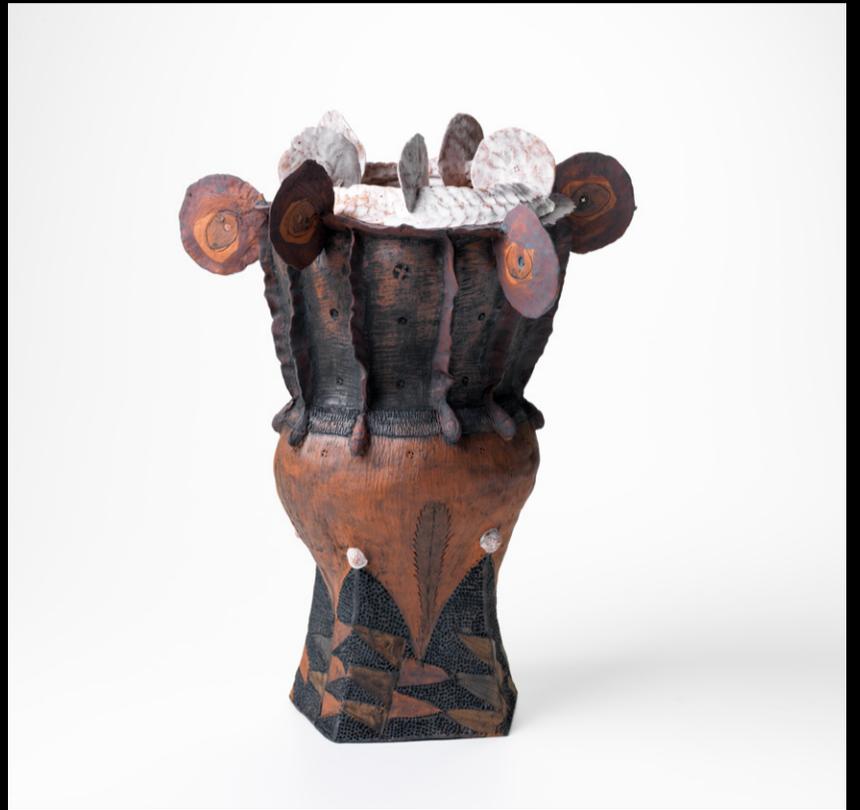


Image: Helen Fuller, Pots, 2021.
Photo by Grant Hancock. Courtesy Samstag Museum of Art.

HELEN FULLER WITH KHAI LIEW /



Image: Installation view, Helen Fuller, Pots, 2021.
Samstag Museum of Art for the 2022 Adelaide Festival. Photograph by Grant Hancock.

HELEN FULLER WITH KHAI LIEW /

Friday 4 March — Friday 27 May
Samstag Museum of Art, Gallery 3

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Published by the Anne & Gordon Samstag Museum of Art University of South Australia GPO Box 2471,
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ISBN-13: 978-0-6452560-2-4

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Helen Fuller would like to personally thank Khai Liew, Kirsten Coelho, Julie Blyfield, Ross Wolfe, Erica Green and Gillian Brown for their continued support in the realisation of this exhibition. She would also like to acknowledge and thank family, friends, Sootie, all the dedicated staff at Samstag Museum, Khai Liew's team, and everyone who contributed to this project.

Samstag wishes to thank Helen Fuller, Khai Liew, Kirsten Coelho, Julie Blyfield and Tobias Staheli for their realisation of the ambitious exhibition installation.

