



Tactile interaction



Rachel Wood's textured vessels are inspired by landscapes and purposefully display her maker's touch. *Isabel Andrews* uncovers the background to her practice



LEFT: *Green Earth*
RIGHT, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: *Dark Peak; Chaotic Wild; Dark Peak; Inside and Out; Chaotic Wild*

Peter Callas; the pierced forms of Lawson Oyekan. She recalls, too, a film about Alan Peascod throwing large jars in Africa from the neck upward, with the sealed base at the top to keep out the drying heat. Seeing all this work collapsed the boundaries in Wood's mind: 'I realised all the work was about the clay. It didn't have to be functional. I could just play. So that was when I started stacking forms and developing rims, incorporating fingerprints and waistlines.' She found her palette quickly, choosing greens and neutral colours in matte or opaque glazes that leave the surface of the clay tactile.

After her degree, Wood emptied out a front bedroom and put in a wheel and little test kiln with the aim of making one small show. She ended up working there for 10 years before moving to her current space, among the Harley Foundation Studios on the Welbeck estate. She credits nearby Rufford Craft Centre, where a job kept her in touch with the ceramic world, as playing 'a large part in keeping me going in my early career.'

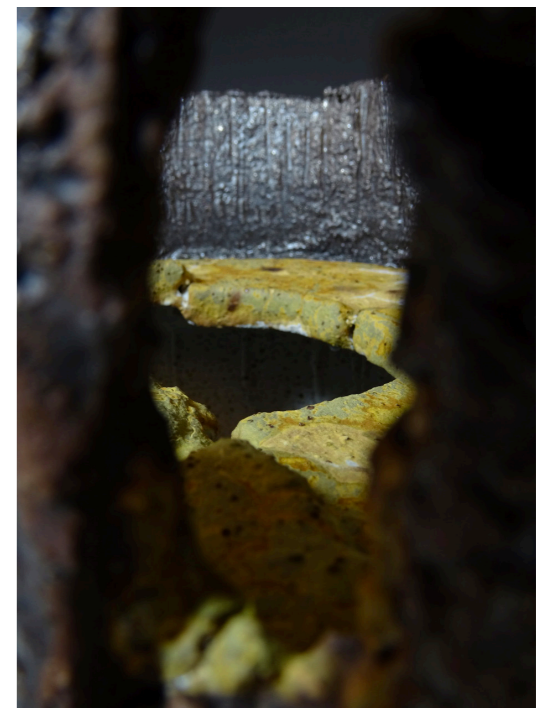
It was at Rufford's *Earth & Fire Ceramic Fair* that she first met her mentor and lifelong friend, the late Robin Welch, a potter revered for his organic, sculptural pots and textured, painterly surfaces. Welch cut an intimidating figure, standing aloof behind his stall, flat cap on, hands in pockets, and habitually chewing tobacco. In awe of his work, she ventured a compliment on one piece. 'Bloody good pot,' came the taciturn reply.

LEARNING CURVE

Their friendship blossomed a few years later, in part from a shared love of the Australian landscape, which Wood had recently visited and which she could see in Welch's work. She dropped a hint about youth training schemes and, in 2007, Welch invited her to work as his assistant on a commission for a sculpture park. His idea was to create two eight-foot structures evoking the Australian boab tree; these were to be built directly on kiln shelves, in separate parts to fit the kiln itself.

Construction involved coiling in large, 6cm-deep strips from the base of each section, having mixed specially prepared clay with vermiculite to achieve a pockmarked, textural surface. It required Wood to 'work very freely and with much more vigour, due to the weight of the clay,' and to rough up surface areas using an assortment of tools, even throwing scraps of clay.

Working away in Welch's studio – a time 'more about what wasn't said than what was' – Wood closely observed his approach to surface treatment: 'Each day he would walk in; something else would be added, or a line put on, or he had tried something and decided to take it off,' she recalls. 'He would often say, "I can't remember how



Part of the joy of encountering any pot is to intuit a sense of its maker. Rachel Wood's stoneware vessels – pleasingly organic shapes swathed with layers of slip and glaze that evoke the landscape with texture and colour – exude an expressive freedom that has garnered her international awards and acclaim. Part thrown and handbuilt, their dry, tactile surfaces may include dents and cracks in the clay, a residue of her fingerprints in the glaze, or a split that beckons the viewer to consider the internal space. Often considered weaknesses or flaws in construction, these elements are intentionally deployed.

Wood is an assured maker, so it comes as a surprise to discover she had no eureka moment with clay in childhood, but rather took a circuitous route into ceramics during her mid-30s – and even then, she says, 'I never thought I would become a potter.'

Born and bred in Nottinghamshire to parents with a strong work ethic and some handicraft ability (her mother taught creative embroidery), she showed obvious artistic talent as a child, but there was never any question of her pursuing it as a vocation. Instead, she took a degree in languages, followed by a decade working in London. Eventually she returned home to Mansfield, where a life-drawing class led to an art foundation course and then a ceramics degree at Loughborough College of Art and Design. There her affinity with clay became apparent – 'I lived and breathed it' – along with a clear sense for Wood that 'I had to get it right; I wouldn't get this chance again.'

STRONG INFLUENCES

As a student, Wood thought a lot about making. She was naturally drawn to artists best described as maverick: the loosely thrown cylinders, piled one on another, of Ryoji Koie; the abstract expressionism of Peter Voulkos and

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I did that.” Or I would see him looking uncertain whether he liked something or not. That experience was invaluable, as it showed me the human side, the trial and error that continues throughout your working life. What feels uncomfortable actually becomes part of the job.’

Thus was fuelled a desire to develop both glaze and form in her own work, enabled by a second residency in 2007 at Rufford (the first had been in 2005). Walks on Derbyshire’s shivering moors inspired a wider palette: ‘You’ve got the green, the bracken, the dark peat, the heather in August – I could link those together.’

Wood returned to playing with the stacked forms of her degree years, exploring joins to create ‘an adventure or event’ on a vessel, and to pinching and coiling to create a lift in her bowls akin to a seed pod. ‘I think of the pieces as a drawing that I’ve done with my left hand – and I am right-handed. I don’t want it to be totally regular, but it will still have that sense of form.’ Finger marks and scrapes from grouting tools remain on the surfaces, unretouched. These are an integral part of the pots, adding character and, crucially, imparting her maker’s touch, for Wood has no official maker’s mark of her own, ‘I just want some connection of me to the piece,’ she explains.

DEVELOPING STYLE

Wood often pushes herself out of her comfort zone by taking international residencies, which, as for any maker, entail the upheaval of travel and working in a new environment with different people. Her first, in 2013, was at Sturt Craft Centre in New South Wales, Australia, where working under the spotlight as the resident international artist – quite literally in the centre of a communal pottery, observed by students – as well as the speed the clay dried in the heat, forced mistakes.


Some of these, such as gaping splits down the clay, proved good accidents that excited Wood through their capacity to evoke curiosity about a pot’s volume and mystery. The result is a body of work called *Bark Vessels*, inspired by the raw power of the Australian bush and the textures of its gum trees. ‘Australia keeps you in your place,’ she says. ‘I like that sort of wildness.’

Wood returned to Australia in 2019, having accepted an invitation to make a solo show in just nine weeks. Feeling lost without the reassurance of her familiar studio pieces – ‘they are your territory’ – she recalls the pressure to produce good work: ‘Something’s got to come out of you, it really has!’ And something did, inspired once more by the uncompromising Australian bush. Wood describes the ensuing show, *Sentient*, as ‘the most complete experience I have had in terms of the work.’



While most of her pieces were acquired in Australia, for both public and private collections, Wood kept a few back, ‘just to remind me that it actually did happen.’ Among them was a stoneware vessel with a sunken internal rim and black surface evoking the scorched earth of Australian bushfires. The glazing had been a risk – a thickly daubed manganese wash and a vanadium slip on the interior – but one that paid off, synergising with the vessel’s form to create a pivotal piece that suggested a new direction for Wood. She has since sold it, resigning herself to the difficulty of parting with pieces as essential to a maker’s practice: ‘It is an exchange, the job isn’t complete until someone else can have it.’

Finishing a residency often brings with it a sense of displacement, compounded further in Wood’s case by returning to the UK just three days before the country entered lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic. She found her creative momentum stymied. ‘I haven’t properly found my feet,’ she says, ‘but it will come.’

This year she has three European residencies to look forward to, not to mention running workshops from her studio. And she has, as ever, been thinking hard about how to push her work, such as by becoming more sculptural, playing with scale and composition, and working with different clays. No doubt there will soon be many new pieces, some bold and adventurous, others quiet, but all of them pleasingly anarchic. Just like their maker. 

For more details visit rachelwoodceramics.co.uk

Images: courtesy of the artist; David Binch; Ben Boswell



WOOD’S HIGHLIGHTS

- **1996–99:** BA Hons in 3D Design (Ceramics), Loughborough College of Art and Design
- **2000:** first visit to Australia as a tourist
- **2001:** begins running ceramic workshops
- **2004:** PGCE Adult & FE Teacher’s Certificate
- **2005:** residency at Rufford Craft Centre, Nottinghamshire
- **2007:** assistant to Robin Welch, Suffolk; second residency at Rufford Craft Centre
- **2013:** residency at Sturt Craft Centre, Mittagong, NSW, Australia
- **2016:** *Die Neue Keramik Prize* winner, Oldenburg, Germany
- **2017:** residency at Guldagergaard International Ceramic Research Centre, Denmark
- **2017:** *Diessen Ceramic Prize* winner, Diessen Ammersee, Germany
- **2019:** second residency at Sturt Craft Centre, resulting in a solo exhibition, *Sentient*

LEFT AND BELOW: *Bark Vessels* series

