



Unearthed

Two artists combine clay with found materials to make ceramics that break a few rules, writes **Bronwyn Watson**.



It may seem strange that one of Australia's hottest young ceramic artists should regularly visit her local charcoal chicken shop to go through its rubbish bins, but for Petra Svoboda, the scrounging is all done in the name of art. Svoboda, who recently exhibited at Talente, the highly regarded international forum for young talent in Munich, is searching for the ash left over from the cooking of the chickens.

"They look at me really weird," she says of the proprietors, "and I know they are wondering 'what is this girl doing?'"

Svoboda has also been known to ferret through

fireplaces and barbecues in her search for ash. She uses it to make the glazes that adorn her hand-built and wood-fired ceramics. A model of self-reliance, she also finds and digs her own clay, which she once discovered while driving on a freeway in the Southern Highlands, between Sydney and Mittagong.

"I went down to Mittagong, just fossicking around," she says. "I was really looking for a dark, earthy clay, one that can withstand high temperatures. Initially, I came across it on the side of the road, on the freeway. Then I found a big deposit of this clay but it was on somebody's property, a real estate agent's property, so I rang him up and he said, 'Yeah, sure, go for it.'"

"They were clearing the land so they had moved all this clay, just a heap of dirt to them, into one corner. So there is a big mound of clay down there waiting for me."

"It is wonderful to have this natural resource. I really like using the clay that I find because it has certain individual characteristics that just can't be reproduced with manufactured or processed clays. It is pretty special."

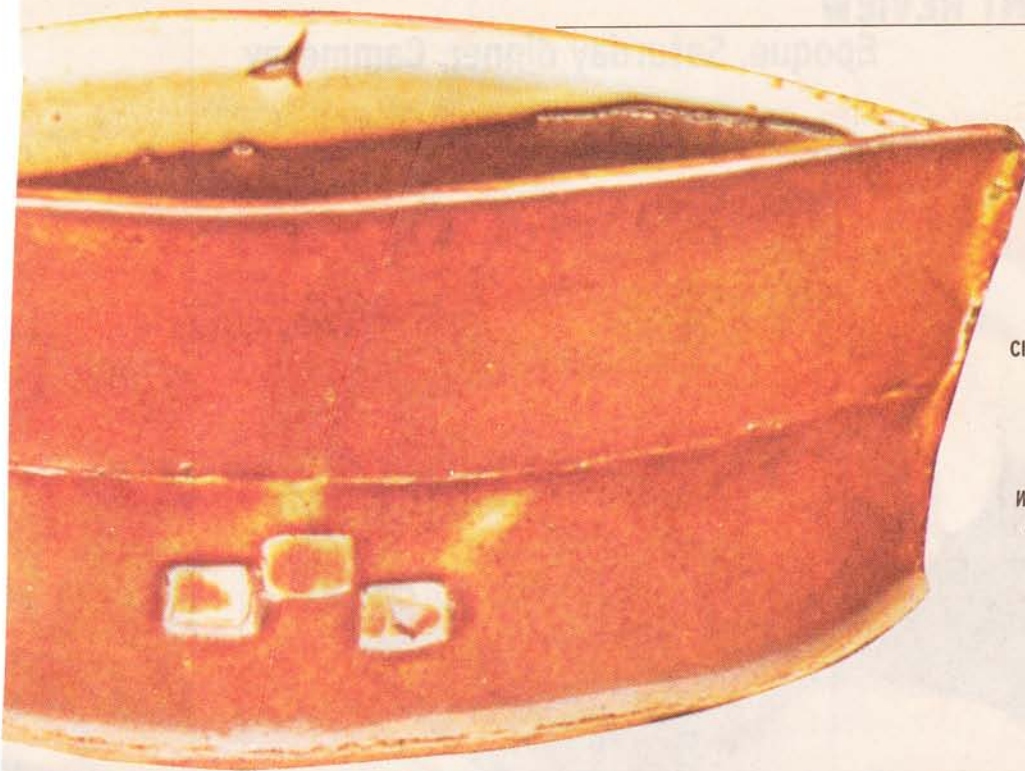
Svoboda cuts slabs and rolls coils of clay to make her bowls, cups, mugs and vases. In her work, which will be exhibited at the Inner City Clayworkers Gallery from Wednesday, she leaves joins and seams visible. There are finger marks, lines



and impressions on the surface of the clay. She notes it obvious that this is not produced ware.

The individualism of her work also owes something to her use of wood firing. Using wood in the kiln means that certain effects come from the flame and from the ash, which sometimes settles on the surface and then melts to give different colours and tones. However, as Svoboda points





Clockwise from top:
Weathered Eyes,
Osmosis and
Seaworthy by
Petra Svoboda.
Flocking Florals,
Wrapping Cloth and
Frugal Comfort by
Nicole Lister.
Photos: Ian Hobbs

out, wood firing can be unpredictable and unreliable.

"The percentage of good work that comes out of a wood firing is very low," she says. "Most of it you end up throwing away, but the things that do work are very, very special and unrepeatable. It is so hard to get the same effect in every firing and I love that aspect of it. I have no idea what will happen. It is just potluck. Opening your kiln is just like Christmas. It is so addictive, you really fall in love."

Like Svoboda, ceramist Nicole Lister also spends her time looking through discarded rubbish for the basic materials for her work. If something catches her attention while she's walking down the street, she picks it up and brings it home.

She manages to transform these mundane objects – cereal boxes, paper cups and plates, corrugated cardboard – into sophisticated objects by using them with porcelain, often considered the most precious of clays and the most difficult to manipulate because of its fragile physical structure.

First, Lister pulls the cereal boxes apart, looks at them as flat objects, as patterns. Then

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she cuts bits off and stitches them together with other bits of packaging. After that, she coats layers and layers of porcelain into the paper construction, slowly building up the right thickness. Once that is dry, the work goes into the kiln and all the cardboard and sewing thread burns away to reveal the porcelain piece. With this new technique and work (now showing at Object – Australian Centre for Craft & Design), she is able to achieve unusual surfaces and forms that would be impossible to create without those cardboard scraps.

Lister is probably best known for her porcelain reproductions of paper coffee cups, which have become collectables since she made her last one in February this year. Deciding to stop was no doubt a difficult decision, but Lister likes to challenge herself, as well as her

audience. She likes to push the boundaries of ceramics, as well as change conceptions about handcrafted objects.

"I think the handcrafted item is undervalued and a lot of merchandise is about being sleek and slick," she says. "Because of the way many products are designed, there is no sort of aesthetic standard. There is a place for cheap and serviceable mass production, but I think there is also a place for valuing the handcrafted item, as something that is not used, consumed and discarded, but that will live on and be passed from generation to generation."

Petra Svoboda is at the Inner City Clayworkers Gallery, corner St Johns Road and Darghan Street, Glebe, 9692 9717, July 4 to July 29. Nicole Lister's *Material Deceptions* is at Object galleries, Customs House, Circular Quay, 9247 9126, until July 29.