

## HOME &amp; DESIGN

## The inner circle

A landmark city clayworkers' co-operative is celebrating 20 years of creativity and solidarity, writes **Bronwyn Watson**.

Two decades ago a group of young, inexperienced art graduates, all with a passion for clay, came together to form a rather radical group. They wanted to discuss ideas and share information but their main aim was to open their own gallery, one that would exhibit their work, much of which was not being easily accepted by the establishment.

Twenty years on, the Inner City Clayworkers Gallery (ICCG) has become a Sydney institution. Such is the importance of the ICCG that Sheila Myers, one of its

longest-serving members, says the "minutes from the [group's] meetings are a rollcall of the movers and shakers of the ceramic world".

This week the gallery celebrates its anniversary with a retrospective, *The Vase Show*, "a look at 20 years of contemporary ceramics". Curated by Petra Svoboda and Ellen Westcott, it includes 32 artists, 20 past members and 12 current members. There are works by such names as Patsy Hely, Toni Warburton, Susan Ostling, Bruce McWhinney, Rod Bamford, Karen Jennings and Carol Valk, who now lives in the United States.

Svoboda says the exhibition is indicative of the changes in ceramics over the past 20 years and so there is a vast range of work, from the wood-fired pots of Ian Jones to Hely's fine porcelain, from Warburton's dark terracotta clay vases to Ivan Gluch's carved, thrown porcelain.

Hely, one of the founding members of the group, remembers the formation of the ICCG as a very exciting time.

"I think we were all a bit disgruntled because we felt a bit out of the mainstream," she says. "It seemed like there was nowhere to show our work. It also seemed that if you were a potter you had to be a certain sort of person, you had to live in the country and dig your own clay and make brown pots, all that '70s ethos. But a lot of us were

interested in using colour in our work and we lived in the city.

"The group gave us a feeling of solidarity. It certainly enabled me to be a bit bolder than if I'd been working on my own. It also gave me a sense of belonging to a professional group.

"Twenty years ago there was a feeling that people just did [ceramics] as a hobby and that if you sold your work you were a bit of a cop-out. But I think we all wanted to work on a professional footing. We wanted to be like any other artist. We wanted something a bit different and opening a gallery seemed a good way of doing it."

Hely says another important benefit of forming a co-operative group was the range of skills that could be called upon when needed. "There was a woman called Jan Shaw whose husband was an accountant," says Hely. "One day, three of us went to open up the bank account for the gallery but the bank manager wasn't at all interested in talking to us. But Jan wangled her way into his office because she talked the lingo and so the manager opened up the bank account."

Trisha Dean, a former member and now editor of *Pottery In Australia* magazine (which this year celebrated 40 years of publication with an exhibition at the Powerhouse



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Museum), says the early '80s was a "great time for the arts in Australia and anything seemed possible".

"It was a time of experimentation and forging new ground for studio ceramics," says Dean. "The Clayworkers Gallery had a radical edge. There was a sense of excitement about what was happening and it was a time of expansion.

"But the unusual thing about the Clayworkers as a group is its democracy, the way the members themselves have control over all aspects

of the management, including finance, promotion, exhibition programs and staffing the gallery. To me it is a venue to experiment with new ideas and you can always buy something unique at the gallery."

Helen Stephens, a writer, curator, gallery owner and potter who has been involved in ceramics for the past 16 years, believes the Clayworkers group helped to lead the way to a "greater recognition for the professionalism of craft and a greater public awareness of the quality, vision and variety of ceramic practice within the visual arts".

"The past 20 years have been quite a revolution in ceramics," says Stephens, "and the Inner City Clayworkers Gallery has been there all along and there has always been an open

acceptance of all styles which is, I guess, what makes it such an unusual gallery."

*The Vase Show* is on at the Inner City Clayworkers Gallery, corner St Johns Road and Darghan Street, Glebe until June 2; phone 9692 9717 or visit [www.clayworkers.com.au](http://www.clayworkers.com.au)

Glaze of glory: Bruce McWhinney vases, far left; a collection by Susan Ostling, top; vase by Karen Jennings, left; Ivan Gluch carved porcelain bowl, below.

