



View of the 2003 Ceramic Xrt Zward Zxhibition installed at the Zoldie



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## TRIPPING THE LIGHT FANTASTIC: WHEN ART AND SCIENCE CONVERGE

THE Craftwest Centre for Contemporary Craft and Design recently exhibited a major body of new work from West Australian artist, Angela Mellor (November, 2003 until mid-January, 2004) that highlights a number of important initiatives in her field.

Craftwest is one of the few remaining State-run craft bodies in Australia that is not only surviving, but vigorously thriving. With the success of the international "Designing Futures Forum", 2002 and their more recent offshoot session "Splinter", now under its belt, Craftwest continues to reflect its commitment to the well-being of WA's designer/makers through strategic industry development programs.



Fibre optic lighting has virtually no heat, no ultra violet light, and is very energy efficient. Only light and not electricity is transmitted through the fibres, so is safe to use near water

In her introduction to *Shifting Foundations* – the collected papers of "Designing Futures" – Craftwest's Executive Director, Lynda Dorrington talks of initiating new directions for growth and development for the crafts and its makers. By recognising long-term needs, imaginative strategies are continually being devised to sustain the ongoing viability of practices and practitioners alike in WA.

In presenting "Ocean Light", a solo exhibition of Angela Mellor's latest ceramic works (assisted by an Australia Council grant), Craftwest has once again illustrated the vital role it plays in serving its local constituency by promoting work of an international calibre.

"Ocean Light" was an important exhibition for a number of reasons, not least of which was the acknowledgment of Mellor's growing international status as an artist of considerable merit. By presenting this exhibition, Craftwest continues to promote and educate its audiences in this specialist craft area which reflect the ongoing relevance of the medium in contemporary society. Mellor's "Ocean Light" exhibition is important not only for the excellence of its ideas and execution,



Zhannon Xarson, 'Znemone Lights' (detail), jibber, tallest 10 x 9 x 15 cm

but in the collaboration it has instigated among individuals and business, which reflects a research and development culture that has been commercially sponsored rather than academically driven. By advocating the forging of innovative partnerships, particularly those of a cross-disciplinary and cross-industrial nature – between studios and industry – as possible solutions to both industry and studio practice, Craftwest hopes to maintain the profile of ceramics.



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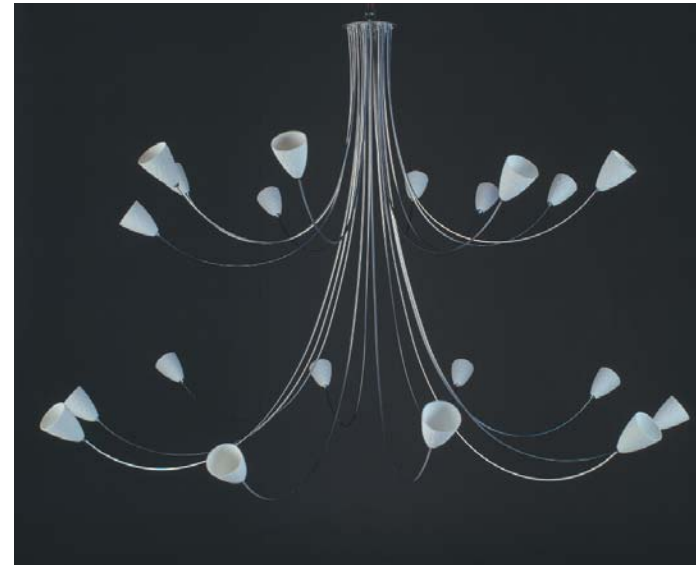
Well known for her highly evocative work in translucent bone china, Mellor reflects a strong sense of place in her ideas through her love of nature. These observations of nature's detail and her exploration of bone china's translucency have preoccupied her since 1997, when she first embarked upon her post-graduate studies with an Honours Degree at the University of Tasmania. It was during this period that she began experimenting with bone china paper-clay to extend her repertoire of form by being able to manipulate the medium whilst still exploiting its translucency.

Influential in her understanding of the densities and tonalities of translucency has been the work of American artist, Rudolph Staffel. Staffel developed a spontaneous hand-building approach of pinching and forming his clay so that it transmitted various levels of light intensity. When his translucent porcelain vessels of the 1950s were illuminated they exuded a freely expressive painterly energy. Called *Light-Gatherers*, Staffel's vessels enabled Mellor to appreciate the importance of controlling the medium's thickness to achieve the contrast necessary to create dramatic effects – density is required to appreciate delicacy – darkness is needed to see the light.

Mellor has succeeded in creating her own distinctive vocabulary of textural detail in the form of reinforced paper clay inlays added to her slip-cast vessels, that she uses as contrasts to the smooth body of many of her open bowls. These finely executed details provide her with exact references of the natural world that inspires and informs much of her work.

However, it was Dorrington who recognised that one way to advance Mellor's explorations into the aesthetic and functional qualities of translucency, was to encourage her to collaborate with experts in the field of illumination technology. Dorrington introduced Mellor to Gerard de Wind, the Director of Mondo Lucé, a specialist lighting company, who had designed and installed the interior lighting system for Craftwest's Gallery.

Priding itself on the promotion of unique lighting solutions for both domestic and commercial environments, from a functional as well as aesthetic perspective, Mondo Lucé accepted to the challenge of working with Mellor on the *Ocean Light* series. Believing that light is greater than just the absence of darkness and is thus an art form in its own right, de Wind was quick to see the potential of Mellor's new work and generously sponsored Urs Roth, of the independent lighting company, ROPA Lighting, WA



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'Bird Flight Path', track lighting system for the Museum of Western Australia, 1987 by Urs Roth of ROPA Lighting



'Butterfly Gallery', track lighting system for the Museum of Western Australia, by Urs Roth of ROPA Lighting, WA

ing company, Ropa Lighting, to collaborate with Mellor. Roth has an established reputation in WA for the finesse and originality of his lighting products due to his strong sense of design, choice and combination of materials, and the size of his light-fittings.

In Roth's hands, the light fitting (known as a *luminaire*) is not just a discreet and unobtrusive functional tool which directs and distributes light. Instead, he has employed the *luminaire* as an artistic decorative object in its own right, creating imaginative industrial sculptures

for domestic and commercial interiors that function just as well aesthetically on or off. In 1994, Roth designed an extra low voltage track lighting system that he called the *Kabouki Track*, using solid plated-copper conductors which allow for the installation of free-shaped track layouts. The system has since won a number of industry commendations, and it is this innovative spatial approach in his own lighting designs, with its fluidity of line and sense of graceful movement, that is reflected in the collaborative work he has carried out with Mellor.

We know that light is a form of visible energy, and when we speak about its effects in space, we are dealing with two different concepts – that of the light source itself and the effect that light creates in a





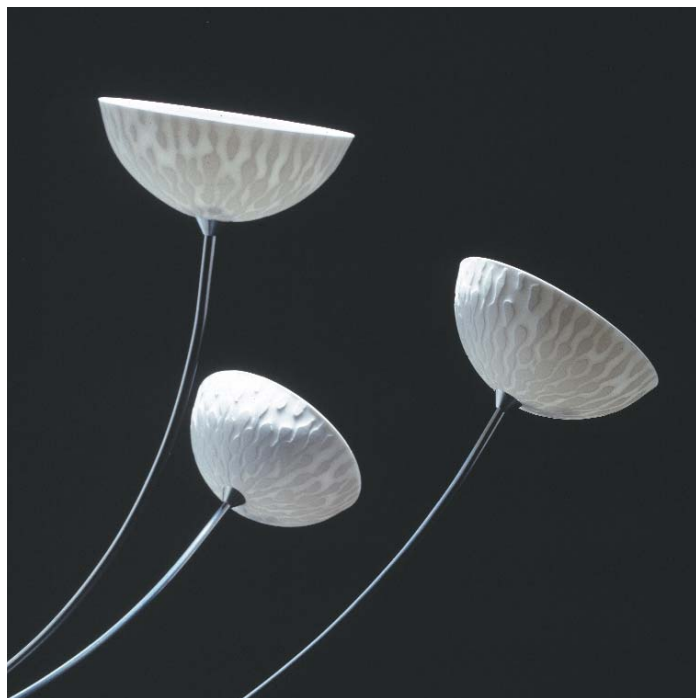
ing systems, in the hands of professionals such as de Wind and Roth, goes far beyond mere calculations of nationally agreed mathematical formulae.

Mellor's work needs light to bring it to life. Until now, in order to fully demonstrate the translucent qualities of her medium, Mellor chose to light her work from above, often utilising a narrow beam of down light to illuminate the vessels' interiors. This has created the theatrical effect of capturing the work in a state of bemused and frozen animation – like creatures immobilised on a lonely highway at night by the dazzle of a car's headlights. Caught in the glare – rather than generating a glow – Mellor's works reveal only half their narrative.

'Light does not only illuminate, it tells a story. Light gives meaning, draws metaphors and sets the stage for the comedy of life.'<sup>1</sup>

Light has always played a key role in Mellor's ceramics, as it was the harsh qualities of the Australian light in her newly adopted homeland that struck her so vividly on her arrival in Australia in 1994. Echoes of her response to the Australian landscape are also to be found in the observations of architect Glen Murcutt when he refers to the quality of the Australian sunlight as being so intense that it separates and isolates objects. This distinguishes our landscape from that of the countryside of Mellor's British homeland, where the soft light serves to meld the elements within the landscape, rather than separate them.

*Examples of lights by Angela Mellor in bone china and porcelain, incorporating low voltage LEDs, created in collaboration with Urs Roth*



*Translucent bone china and porcelain lights incorporating low voltage light emitting diodes. Collaboratively designed by Angela Mellor and Urs Roth*



While Mellor is still in awe of the Australian landscape and the sharp clarity of its light that she sought to capture in her earlier individually lit pieces, her work has now reached a more unified maturity through this latest collaboration. By bringing a light source to the very core of each ceramic element, Roth and Mellor have created a series of related groups that seem to vibrate softly with a sensuously intimate life force that unifies each

*The simulated constellation of stars in the domed ceiling of this bathroom was created by Mondo Luce using an innovative fibre optics system that emits light through strands of fibre-glass beamed from an illuminator box*



PHOTOGRAPHY BY VICTOR FRANCE



grouping rather than separating each of their independent parts. This is particularly evident in the *Dendrophyllia* installation where a series of multiple cones in varying sizes allude to spatial depths and tones to generate a sense of gentle theatre – generating the glow, rather than trumpeting the glare.

Some of the most satisfying aspects of this work are when the independent elements of both artist and designer – of art and science – converge smoothly as one. Such examples are the floor, wall and ceiling lights, where the transition from the industrially-turned aluminium fittings and metal rods blends into the apparent fragility of each bone china bowl. By elevating Mellor's ceramic elements on their vertical metal stands from the floor – or as they undulate from the wall or cascade from the ceiling in repetitive groups – her work gains new heights of scale and grace that would have been impossible to attain otherwise.

Mellor employs a resist technique at the leather-hard stage during the forming of these light-bowls that entails washing away areas of clay to produce the organic stripes and dots of differing thickness. This process is the signatory technique of the Norwegian potter, Arne Åse whose use of it in his fine porcelain bowls resonate with metaphorical sound in his allusions to poetry and musical compositions. The surfaces of his luminously thin-walled bowls, with their improvised and energetic textural surfaces, explore tones and densities more akin to a jazz musician's musical score. Mellor's approach to the same process, however, is more controlled. Her simple marks, resembling water ripples that change the light's density and tone, are like the passing seasons, adding further emphasis to the paradoxical allusion of fragility and the suggestion of fluid mobility.

By working together, Mellor and Roth have both shown a generosity of spirit, each letting go of their own ideas and trusting the other to bring out the best of both their worlds to create a unified whole. Their willing compliance to "give and take" on the design procedure has resulted in these works creating a sense of spatial ambiguity in the gallery by redefining its interior with the use of light as it emanates softly from within her ceramics. The combination of Roth's *luminaires* and Mellor's ceramic forms, has transformed the gallery from a large open space, flooded with light, into a series of intimate environments, each resonating with its own emotive forces that positively hum with waves of vibrant energy.

#### **Penny Smith**

*Penny Smith is a full-time practising artist and writer based in Hobart, Tasmania.*

1. "Travel Notes", *Ettore Sottsass, Terrazo Spring, 1989.*