

# Angela Mellor's Ocean Light



*Article by Peter Lane*



*Artic Fold (detail). Bone china, metal. 63 cm/h.*

I FIRST MET ANGELA MELLOR IN 1984 WHEN SHE ENROLLED on one of the courses I was teaching at the University of East Anglia in Norwich. This was a unit of the MA program designed for established art teachers for which she was awarded the Advanced Certificate in Education. I was impressed by her dedication and determination that enabled her to cope with the demands of this intensive course as a single parent with two teenage boys, and helped her to embark on the aesthetic adventure she enjoys today.

Her interest in the somewhat demanding material of porcelain had been aroused a decade or so earlier when she became aware of the delicate pinched bowls by Mary Rogers in England. It was evident that she felt an immediate affinity with those pieces as their clear organic references echoed elements within her own work. Initially, the attraction of porcelain for Mellor appeared to be its whiteness that could be explored for its own sake or as a 'canvas' for colour. Certainly, much of the broad appeal to potters of porcelain as a material owes a good deal to its special quality of clean brightness uncontaminated by impurities. This valuable property allows the artist freedom to explore a comprehensive and unblemished colour spectrum. Much of Mellor's practical work in ceramics at that stage was handbuilt from rolled out slabs or sheets of plastic porcelain which she decorated with air-brushed colours mixed from ceramic stains. These chosen materials and methods presented her with particular problems that had to be solved through a sustained period of trial and error. Sections had to be joined together with great care and dried extremely slowly to avoid the risk of separation as the piece shrank.

The majority of ceramists are more intimately occupied with and, to a certain extent conditioned by the nature of the materials, techniques and processes of their discipline than any other artist-craftsmen. The practical physics and chemistry must be understood if they are to avoid frequent frustrations and failures. Even so, the most experienced suffer disappointments from time to time when results are not quite what had been intended. In this respect, Mellor's search for personal ideals has been continuous and her search for technical perfection remains insatiable.

By 1991, she had begun searching for an extreme clarity of whiteness and translucency that she felt could not be obtained through handbuilding in the porcelain bodies that were commercially available at that time. She was now convinced that exploiting the interplay of light on and through a finely made piece would be ideally suited to her work and thus, allow her to develop a series of enriching visual and tactile experiences. Her objectives required a reassessment of her working methods and choice of materials because the two properties of whiteness and translucency can be incompatible.

Often, porcelain material is either exceptionally white and opaque or translucent and not white. If almost all the light is reflected back, then there is little left to pass through, and on the other hand if much of the light passes through, less is reflected back. By this time, Mellor's thoughts had turned to slipcasting and to bone china in particular. Although both porcelain and bone china seemed to offer her similar opportunities to explore delicate and varying degrees of translucency, it is the latter which has become the supreme attraction and ultimate goal for her. Bone china is renowned above all for its superlative whiteness as well as translucency. This material differs from so-called 'true' porcelain both in its composition, which includes approximately 50 per cent bone ash (calcium phosphate produced from calcined cattle bones), and in its relationship with glaze. Whereas, normally, the porcelain body and glaze fuse together as one at high temperatures, bone china is fired to maturity in the bisque firing around 1250°C and, if required, a 'skin' of glaze is then fired on at a much lower temperature. But glaze is not essential and Mellor decided to dispense with it altogether.

Studying the techniques of mould-making and slip-casting took her to work with Sasha Wardell in France. Wardell has established an international reputation for her subtle bone china slipcast forms. Models for casting moulds can be made in clay but plaster is the best material to make original models. Mellor learnt how solid lumps of plaster could be turned on a horizontal lathe to give a perfectly smooth surface and how to cast rectangular shapes between sheets of glass. Facets, twists and other details could be introduced by hand carving and re-shaping the plaster model. She pays careful attention to the profile when modelling a one-piece plaster mould to ensure that it safely releases the final slipcast form. The great advantage of slipcasting allows her to exercise precise control over the thickness of each piece. This is of utmost importance when optimising translucency. In addition, she is able to make a number of basic shapes that can be repeated, grouped together or manipulated, and to which further elements can be attached.

In her earlier work with asymmetric forms Mellor dispensed with the use of 'setters' to support her pieces in the kiln because she wanted to encourage the forms to 'move', to become more fluid during the firing and thus closer in character to the organic forms of nature that inspire much of her work. She came to understand and use the way that bone china shrinks and to control its tendency to warp extravagantly. The resultant pieces related well to diverse forms in the natural world that motivate much of her thinking.

She began by experimenting with slipcast forms based on similar shapes to those that she had previously produced by slab-building in porcelain, finding the tactile quality of bone china particularly attractive.



*Dendrophyll1a. Table light. Bone china. 30 x 7.5 cm.*



*Coral Cluster (detail). Bone china, etched. 58 x 20 cm.*

She values what she describes as “its marble-like surface displaying a warm sensuality”. Most importantly, she discovered that, only by slip casting bone china, could she make ultra thin shapes with the translucency she required. The results are seductively pure and so exceedingly white that ordinary porcelain seems almost grey in comparison.

However, no technique is without its problems. Mellor soon found the idiosyncratic nature of bone china to be both inspiring and, at times, quite frustrating. It is a rather seductive material with which to work but, while possessing those enviable qualities of intense whiteness, translucency and strength, it is notorious, also, for its ‘memory’ where the slightest knock can rarely be disguised and any unequal thickness leads to distortion. It is, to some extent, a peculiar body that forces the maker to work with clarity and precision. Its technical inflexibility and unusual making and firing characteristics can easily deter prolonged investigation but Mellor has learnt to use any restrictions and limitations as a stimulating challenge to her creative thought and personal techniques.

Although slipcasting is the method of production mostly associated with industry for multiple repetition pieces, the primary concern of artists like Mellor is not normally mass production. But it does offer her the opportunity to prepare basic forms for further treatment, individually or in combination, by carving, piercing, decorating, altering, constructing or joining elements together in different ways. Mellor has used it with great success to cast an exacting bone china body that lacks sufficient plasticity for normal hand building methods. She has made ingenious use of this technique to cast several series in the same simple shape placing them together in a various arrangements to construct evocative imagery. Her work achieved international recognition when her boxed sake cups received an honourable mention in Mino, Japan, and another set, consisting of a jug and five cups on a black, porcelain tray, gained a comparable award at the World Ceramic Biennial in Korea.

Undoubtedly, the greatest incentive to her work came when, having re-married in 1995, she came to live in Western Australia. It was the invigorating experience of finding such brilliant sunlight, vivid colours and sharply focused imagery that was to have a profound influence on all her future artistic expressions. This stimulated an enormous burst of creativity that prompted her to further her aesthetic and practical studies with a BFA Honours degree at the University of Tasmania in Hobart (1997) followed by an MA at Monash University in Melbourne (1999). Living, working and travelling widely in Indonesia as well as Australia brought her into fruitful contact with other cultures. She is interested, also, in the environment and it gave her the opportunity to observe skies and landscapes, to study exotic plants, marine life,



seashells and the textures of rocks, corals, seaweed and driftwood. Elements of these are incorporated now in many of her bone china forms.

In her current work, she has dispensed with colour almost completely and now relies mainly on the purity of the white bone china itself to convey her ideas. She describes her work as an investigation into the translucency of the material and its potential for the transmission and reflection of light. Photography has enabled her to captivate not only aspects of line and colour but also, some of those uniquely mysterious qualities of light that appeal to her. These observations have been translated into her ceramics.

Using pulp made from a soft white tissue paper mixed into a bone china slip, Mellor has produced a series of unique pieces. The paper-slip is converted into a plastic condition so that she can attach sections of it to the rims of slip cast vessel forms or within their walls without any loss of translucency. Her studies of natural forms and textures have led to many ideas for design. Patterns taken from these organic elements have been recreated in plaster moulds and cast using the bone china paper clay. Fragments of these have enabled her to introduce a delicate tracery of translucent patterns into the work reminiscent of organic forms found in nature. With only ambient light falling on them, these forms are attractive enough but combined with appropriately placed direct lighting they are transformed into displays of serene and dramatic beauty. The quality of the light source itself plays a significant part in the presentation of the work.

These developments have led to an industrial project between Mellor and the Western Australian lighting design specialists Mondo Luce. There have been the inevitable technical problems in controlling the shrinkage of bone china pieces that must marry with their electrical fittings, but initial results are promising. Mellor is working with Urs Roth from Ropa Lighting to fully explore and adapt the obvious potential of her supremely translucent bone china as sculptural objects incorporating special tungsten-halogen lights. She has produced a series of cup forms etched with a linear design based on coral formations to create table lights containing tiny light emitting diodes (LEDs) as the light source. They have been found to produce a pure, white light that is ideal to display the delicate detail of her pieces.

In an impressive installation called *Dendrophyllia*, Mellor has mounted multiple bone china cones inverted on a polished, black granite slab, again lit in to create a translucent sculpture. These brilliant white objects taper to fine points tinged with brown. In another, *Coral Cluster*, five translucent bowl forms are grouped together at different heights on top of slender, silver-grey stems to become a table light. Pleuracis corals inspired some pendant lights. Even more adventurous is another table lamp, *Cretaceous Light*, that is a column of bone china richly textured with



*Pleuracis. Wall light. Bone china, etched. 36 x 10 cm.*

shells and remnants of other marine life. The light within is transmitted through the thin walls illuminating these subtle images. Other multiple slipcast bone-china-paperclay objects that are light in weight and visually translucent have been used in different installations. Both natural and artificial lighting are essential ingredients to fully appreciate these combinations.

It is with considerable invention and a series of well-designed forms that Mellor has conjured up a visual feast for her solo exhibition, *Ocean Light*, at Craftwest in Perth from November 28, 2003, to 14 January, 2004. This show represents the culmination of an intense period of sensitive contemplation and exploration.

Peter Lane is a ceramic artist and author of a number of books on ceramic art. Caption title page: *Cretaceous Light. Bone china paperclay. 15 x 8 cm.* This article has been adapted from the catalogue essay written for Angela Mellor's exhibiton at Craftwest. Photos by Victor France. Lights by Urs Roth, Ropa Lighting.