OBITUARY

Tanya Harrod remembers
Gwyn Hanssen Pigott
1935-2013
A maker of still lives

On 10 July a group of friends gathered at the London gallery Erskine, Hall & Coe to celebrate and mourn the fine and remarkable life of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, one of the world’s greatest contemporary potters. Matthew Hall spoke first, movingly recalling her solo show – which had ended on 8 July, three days after her untimely death – and the pleasure Gwyn took in setting it up. Jennifer Lee read out telegrams from all over the world. Alan Caiger-Smith spoke with eloquent humour, recalling Gwyn when he first met her in the late 50s. Finally her sister Beverley Larwill recalled Gwyn as a child in Australia. To stand together, raise a glass and remember Gwyn was the best that we could do in sad circumstances.

She was born Gwynion Lawrie John in 1935 in the former Australian mining town of Ballarat, south of Melbourne. She was to take the names of both her husbands – the late Louis Hanssen (who committed suicide in 1968), and John Pigott, from whom she separated in 1980. To do that as an ardent feminist may seem paradoxical but it was part of Gwyn’s graciousness, loyalty and modesty that in turn was born of an absolute integrity.

Her upbringing was both strict and privileged. Her father was the director of a large engineering firm while her mother, who had trained as an arts and crafts teacher, worked in an eclectic range of media, from watercolours to earthenware pottery. At the University of Melbourne she majored in art history and paid regular visits to the National Gallery of Victoria, going down a long corridor that housed the Kent collection of Chinese ceramics. It was ‘these seductive objects’ that increasingly fascinated her.

When she met Ivan McMeekin, an artist and potter who had served as a first mate on the Yangtze River, she realised (to her father’s dismay) that she wanted to devote her life to ceramics. McMeekin and his young apprentice embarked on an exploration of local materials as they sought to create the dense, almost porcellaneous qualities of Sung wares through raw glazing and wood firing. In 1958 Gwyn arrived in England and rode a push bike to all the major ceramic workshops, working at Winchcombe Pottery with Ray Finch, discussing oriental ceramics with Sir Alan Barlow, working at the Leach Pottery at St Ives, where she met her future husband and assisting Michael Cardew with his historic summer course Fundamental Pottery with an emphasis on geology and raw materials. By 1960 she set up a pottery in West London, working for Alan Caiger-Smith and attending classes given by Lucie Rie at Camberwell School of Art.

Four years later she bought a house in Achères, near Bourges, inspired by the traditional stoneware of the Haut-Berry area. She had worked at Cardew’s Wenford Bridge Pottery during 1964-65 and was now committed to wood-firing and digging her own clay. In France she went on to make some of the finest functional stoneware and porcelain of all time. But in 1973, she walked away from her rural idyll and a varied teaching career.

She briefly worked with the Bread and Puppet Theater in Vermont, returning to Australia in 1974, setting up a pottery in Tasmania and marrying her assistant John Pigott in 1976. By 1980 she was working in the Jam Factory Workshop in Adelaide (a difficult period when she considered abandoning ceramics) and 12 months later she moved to Brisbane as potter-in-residence at Queensland University of Technology. In 1989 she moved to Netherdale, a sub-tropical sugarcane region west of MacKay in northern Queensland, and in 2000 set up her final pottery near Ipswich in south east Queensland.

By the early 1990s she was exhibiting world-wide and her work had taken a decisive turn away from production pottery. In 1971 she had been profoundly affected by a large retrospective exhibition of paintings by Giorgio Morandi at the Palais de Tokyo in Paris. In the early 80s she was using the Japanese-Korean potter Heja Chong’s noborigama kiln, a method of firing where glaze is redundant. New shapes seemed required, memories of Morandi floated up, and she began making bottle forms that were to develop into the still life groups for which she became renowned. These groups were given a further beauty by her subtle glazes, which made her arrangements both painterly and sculptural. It was a move in the direction of fine art, seen at its most ambitious in her 17 metre installation Caravan shown at Tate St Ives in 2004.

In 2002 she was awarded the Order of Australia Medal, and in 2006 the National Gallery of Victoria staged a major retrospective of her work. At the time of her death she had plans to work in Japan and Spain and to show her work at Chatsworth House, Derbyshire.

Once she explained of her pots: “They are about themselves, and about the years of needing them that are behind them. Sometimes they are beautiful and worth all the trouble. They sustain me. I have to make them; they are about what sustains me.’ Her pots were what she called her ‘daily pleasure mines’ that brought, out of the chaos of life, silence and calm. Gwynion Lawrie Hanssen Pigott, née John, born 1 January 1935, Ballarat, Victoria, died 5 July 2013, London.

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