







Character jugs and the (happy) provincial grotesque

Though Barry Brickell in the early 1950s had engaged deeply with the ideas of Bernard Leach as laid out in his *Potter's Book* – and respected him as an ambassador between Eastern and Western traditions – he didn't rate Leach as a potter. He never felt inclined to mimic what he saw as Leach's real skill, his brushwork decoration. Leach's languid domestic forms did not offer the kind of scope and expressiveness that Brickell's energies needed. The Anglo tradition that *did* attract Brickell had a more democratic, visceral source: plates of medieval English vessels from Bernard Rackham's 1948 book, *Medieval English Pottery* (page 19). Almost all of these vessels were reassembled from shards found in dump ditches around medieval markets, town gates and walls, and taverns.

The pots were there precisely because they weren't high art: they had been domestically or more often commercially used until smashed, and then discarded. They had, therefore, a public identity, and a character to match. Many had emphatic faces: characters literally protruding, grotesque, gawky. The jugs worked their way from wantonly spreading, swollen bases, with pie-crust 'thumbing' decoration around the foot rim, up to great wobbly heights topped by curly lips and spouts, and with thick rounded handles that followed the form. The rough and readiness of their making, the asymmetries and obvious evidence of throwing weren't added for decoration. The art in them was a matter of rough craft and expressive character, displaying the idiosyncratic, even naïve, marks of the village craftsman making pots for local consumption and appeal. That character, sometimes literally expressed in comic eyes and faces, provided Brickell with the inspiration for his famous 'fatso' and 'thinso' jugs (left, overleaf, and following pages).

Every community, Brickell reasoned, could benefit from the kind of grounded, vernacular craft they embodied: a craft traceable to local clays, local glaze materials and the hand of a

local artisan and. If a potter's work had that kind of ready quality, it was more than just craft: it was an art form that New Zealanders could easily access. And it could develop its own character, free of 'disabling' international 'fashion'. Often the result in Brickell's work was deceptively simple, deceptively primitive: bowls, mugs, jugs with basic glazes.

Making this kind of pottery was emphatically a counter-colonial move and, again, 'Learned Beech' became the other to talk and write back to. In embracing a grotesque wedded to anti-establishment aesthetics, Brickell also made a connection to more familiar regionalist territory: the provincial grotesque. This style comes out of a kind of twisted relationship with authority, where the local is given pride of place but also ridiculed. Grotesque figures are a core trope of this place- and politics-based art. In many cases, the figures and their faces also reflect the local landscape and its character: lined, pocked and marked with age. They stand in a unique, often territorial relation to place, and to places or positions in society others might not think worth defending. But they are also basic human fun, belonging to an ancestry that stretches from Rembrandt and Goya – with their near caricatures of local petty and grand authority – through to the regional characters of Grant Wood, Thomas Hart Benton, Walker Evans and the Australian grotesque painters (Drysdale, Dobell, Boyd, Nolan), down to late twentieth-century artists such as Diane Arbus and Mike Kelley.

In New Zealand, the grotesque has involved breaks with Victorian traditions and nationalist modernism alike, and produced a variety of work from the primitive cartoons of early McCahon to a variety of variously sympathetic, organic or sombre renderings of people, birds and faces in the work of Tony Fomison, Philip Clairmont or Peter Stichbury. There are both happy and dark grotesques (the latter including New Zealand gothic), but Barry Brickell sits firmly on the happy side of that divide. He is not alone: in New Zealand ceramics, there are strong elements of its innocent, transgressive joy in the work of Jim Cooper and, though with more sense of latent threat, Paul Maseyk.



As curator Robert Storr's landmark 2004 exhibition and book *Disparities and Deformities: Our Grotesque* makes clear, the grotesque has always operated on and around the edges of a more classicist and authoritarian practice. It is a way of hitting back at the people in power, those interested in 'purifying the language of the tribe'.¹ Grotesque practice seeks to defend the vernacular against high-handed opprobrium: or, on occasions, to deliberately provoke this kind of rejection, as a means to subvert it. 'The grotesque,' Storr argues, 'results . . . from an eruption of things systematically denied', and this eruption 'is the reinvention of the world in the spirit of play'.² Modern art at its most playful has spawned multiple versions of the grotesque, as author Thomas Mann noted, 'No other mode of art is so frankly and subversively artificial. The sometimes confrontational but frequently seductive manner in which the grotesque calls received aesthetic wisdom into doubt is precisely what has recommended it to artists from so many different periods and of such dissimilar styles and intentions.'³

For Brickell, the twistings, distortions, abjections, eruptions and voluptuousness of the grotesque have in various ways become a familiar, comfortable set of parameters and formal departure points. The line between art and simple caricature is a fine one, which grotesque artists are keen to push against; but Brickell's pompous, argumentative fatsos and thinsos and bowls with heavy jowls – not to mention the jugs with not just faces, but genitalia as well – charge over it, almost ridiculous in their insistence on striking an attitude. They crack Brickell up.











Salt glazing

Barry Brickell's distinctive salt-glazed vessels, storage jars and bowls have long been collector favourites. Salt glazing – 'peculiar in its austerity, richness and sympathetic natural quality'¹ – is a technique for producing mottled surfaces by introducing salt (or, nowadays as often, less corrosive soda) into the kiln during firing. It was a central (albeit grubby and toxic) part of commercial pipe production at large brickworks; and Brickell, like many of his contemporaries, first fell in love with salt glazing in this 'nitty gritty' context. Potters such as Len Castle literally smuggled their early salt-glazed efforts into the last, high spaces in commercial kilns with the help of 'cooperative workmen'.²

Brickell's use of heavy salted, often green, 'antique' glaze texture is especially distinctive and referenced to an indigenous palette. 'At salting time,' Brickell wrote in 1967, a 'high pitch is maintained while the acid vapour swirls about, antiquing iron ware and lungs, while the alkaline vapour antiquates the surfaces of pots'.³ A series of major firings in a round kiln at the old Driving Creek Pottery site in the mid- to late 1960s produced a series of generous, heavily salted large vessels brought to Auckland by boat and Wellington by rail (see pages 153 and 165) and shown at, among other places, the New Vision Gallery in Auckland. This work, as much as any other, is one of Barry Brickell's defining contributions to New Zealand ceramics.







I like twisting things for people. Sometimes you have to see things crooked before you can set them straight. And sometimes you have to make things crooked before you can see them straight! As Picasso said, art is a lie that tells the truth . . . - BARRY BRICKELL, 2010