Hard it is to begin an article on one of Australia’s leading ceramic artists without some trepidation. For what praise remains having already been described as “admired”, “brilliant”, “highly acclaimed” and “the most gifted artist in porcelain”, and her works as “majestic”, “evocative”, “sophisticated” and “with an understated power”? Not an artist or reviewer of the visual form, I resort, when pressed, to “her works move me”.

Better perhaps to quote others on the subject of Gwyn Hanssen Pigott. Best still to refer to Garth Clark, godfather of American ceramics and founder of Manhattan Garth Clark Gallery in New York who, when seeing her ceramics for the first time in the 80s was “struck instantly by the artist’s remarkable depth of knowledge and feelings for the materials and forms”. No surprise then that Gwyn Hanssen Pigott is now an international figure with works in museum collections on four continents. This year she had her third exhibition at the Garth Clark Gallery, another in an impressive list of exhibitions that span a 50-year career.

Gwyn fell in love with ceramics while studying art history at the University of Melbourne in the 1950s and after graduation moved to Mittagong in NSW to study with potter, Ivan McMeekin, who had a deep interest in Chinese ceramics. She moved to England and established a studio in Notting Hill in 1960. Over the next decade, Gwyn worked as a commercial potter and among other achievements became Elected Fellow for the Society of Designer Craftsmen in the United Kingdom and established pottery at Archeres, near Bourges, France.

In 1975, she set up a studio in Tasmania and worked there until moving to the Jam Factory in Adelaide at the end of the 70s. After 18 months Gwyn took the position of potter-in-residence at what is now known as the Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane. It was here she began to experiment with making seamless bottles, cups and bowls from wood-fired porcelain and arranging them into elegant clusters in the manner of ‘painterly still life’.

Gwyn’s first solo exhibition was at the Primavera Gallery in London in 1983. Other exhibitions have taken place in Munich, Vancouver, St Louis, Paris, Italy, Japan, Korea, New Zealand, Denmark, Dresden, Switzerland, Chicago and Hamburg. Her work is included in select private and public Australian and international collections, including the Victoria and Albert Museum in London, Henry Rothschild Collection, Cambridge, and Fina Gomez Collection, Paris, as well as the National Gallery of Australia and the new Parliament House, to name but a few.

It appears Gwyn’s ability was obvious early in her school days. Not only was she Prefect, Head of Form, Captain of Walker House, editor of The Touchstone, recipient of the Alliance Francaise Prize in 1950 and 1952 and Alliance Francaise Honorary Mention in Poetry and Dictation in 1950; she was also Dux of School in 1951.

One of the first to recognise Gwyn’s work in ceramics was art dealer, Garry Anderson who invited her to exhibit in the mid 80s and showed her work annually until the gallery closed in 1991, when Anderson died. Since then her work is regularly shown at Christine Abrahams Gallery in Melbourne, Rex Irwin Art Dealer in Sydney, and Phillip Bacon Galleries in Brisbane.

Up to the present day, Gwyn rarely gives interviews preferring instead a reclusive life in Queensland, happily engaged in her craft and enjoying the tender company and use of the many pots in her home that she has collected over the years.

“They have become my companions; and at each meal or coffee break I make a choice, inviting pot, like a friend, and seeing perhaps something about it I had forgotten in the rush of things.”

Busily focused on meeting the deadline for this article on Old Collegian and world-renowned ceramic artist, Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, my eyes come to rest awhile on the catalogues of her work beside my keyboard, my hands arrested by her gentle words. In this simple moment, I am reminded of beauty, serenity and possibility, and am greatly moved. The trepidation is gone.

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