

Ernabella in Jingdezhen

by Heidi McKenzie

From the isolated badlands of Australia to the densely populated streets of Jingdezhen, two Aboriginal artists discover the rewards of cultural exchange through an arts residency.



Derek Thompson and Tjimpuna Williams are two Aboriginal ceramic artists from the central badlands of Australia who found themselves in the midst of the porcelain capital of the world in Jingdezhen, China, for two weeks last June. The cross-cultural pollination that transpired over Thompson's and Williams' time at the Big Pot Factory in Jingdezhen combined the awe-inspiring sophistication of the two artists' own ancient and complex culture, and that of the equally sophisticated and long-lived ceramics traditions in Jingdezhen.

Thompson and Williams are from the isolated 500-person village of Ernabella where mail is flown in once a week, unemployment levels soar over 90%, and most people over the age of 40 have extremely limited English language skills. This one-school/one-store town is home to one of seven arts centers in the greater Central Australian APY [Anangu Pitjantjatjara Yangkunjatjara] region. The Ernabella Arts



1 Tjimpuna Williams working on one of the patterned bands on a large vessel. 2 Derek Thompson carving a pattern around an animal on a large vessel. 3 Traditional vase being painted at the Big Pot Factory in Jingdezhen. 4 Courtyard at the Big Pot Factory where the artists worked during their residency. 5 Williams and Ruth McMillan of the Ernabella Arts Centre working on a large vessel. *Photo: RedHouse Ceramics Design Studio.* 6 Williams working on a large vessel, with additional vessels in progress in the foreground and background. *All photos by Heidi McKenzie unless otherwise noted.*





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Centre is a non-profit cooperative managed by a six-person board, with two staff and over 70 members. It is the only regional center that boasts a ceramic studio. Though founded in 1948, the center's relationship with clay is relatively recent. In 1997, facilitated by Adelaide-based ceramic artist Robin Best, a number of Ernabella artists visited Adelaide's Jam Factory Studios. As a direct result, bisque wares created at Jam Factory were freighted thousands of miles into Australia's interior to be painted and decorated by Ernabella artists, then shipped back to the urban center for sale. Largely due to the success of this means of production, the state government stepped in with funding to build and establish a ceramic studio at Ernabella in 2003. This first Jingdezhen artist trip marks the ten-year milestone of ceramics at Ernabella Arts Centre.

Approximately 20–35 artists use the facilities at the center daily. In addition to ceramics,



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the center provides the tools and materials for weaving, batik, and silk screening. The artists access resources in exchange for funneling back 40% of the sales of their work into the materials and operations of the center. Despite the fact that the nearest gallery is five hours away by car, in addition to representation in Australia, the artists have international gallery representation in Singapore, Germany, and in New York in the US.

As there is limited or no wheel-throwing training available, this technique is only now just beginning to make its way into the creative lexicon of the Ernabella artists. Decorating a vessel that was created by someone else is the preferred way of working for most ceramic artists at the center. Traditional ways of making these vessels include coil, slab, and slip-casting techniques. Visiting artists occasionally train local artists in throwing, as well as work to create pots for

decoration at the center. A new generation of Anangu and Papunya artists are beginning to show interest in making their own pots; a handful are beginning to throw their own vessels on the wheel. The center's co-coordinator, Ruth McMillan explains, "In Ernabella we think of pots being made for the artists as being the same as when staff stretch canvases for painting." This ideology, though foreign to most Western studio artists' practices, is curiously akin to the "division of labor" way of making, practiced for generations in China. My observation of Jingdezhen, in which approximately one million of its 1.7 million inhabitants are employed in the ceramic industry, is that people generally become artisans in one particular skill or trade, as opposed to the start-to-finish hands-on way of making in Western studio traditions. For example, there is a glaze expert, a kiln expert, a plaster pattern maker, a plaster mold maker, a blue-and-white cobalt painter—that may specialize in flowers, mountains, or landscapes—a carver, a designer, a trimmer, and so on.

In terms of techniques at Ernabella, the artists carve using a sgraffito method either on earthenware covered with white slip, or on white stoneware painted with a layer of dark terra sigillata. Using clay that is collected from the rain-washed silt in their own community to make terra sigillata holds added meaning and symbolism for the artists, as does the way of making. Sgraffito, although rooted in Italy by nomenclature, emerges as a technique used by Ernabella artists out of the story-telling tradition of the Anangu and Papunya peoples. *Milpatjunanyi* is the term given to the practice of drawing out a story using a stick in the sand, usually sitting around a fire. The stick holder, or narrator, draws a part of the story, then wipes the story clean to begin again, akin to the turning of a page. This ancient way of story telling is still common practice across the APY Lands, and it is an everyday occurrence to see children telling each other stories using the *milpatjunanyi* tradition.

The imagery on all of the artwork created at the Ernabella Arts Centre was pattern-based until relatively recently. Patterned work is called *walka* and the designs often reflect nature either through abstracted landscape or weather elements. The other type of imagery that is now present is called *tjukurpa*, which can be translated loosely as "law and culture." *Tjukurpa* depicts narrative representation. The Anangu have traditionally guarded



Thompson and a volunteer assistant carving sgraffito decoration on a large vessel at the Big Pot Factory.

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8 Thompson carving imagery onto smaller vessels, using a combination of styles, merging traditional Anangu and Papunya motifs with Chinese designs and spatial compositions. *Photo: RedHouse Ceramics Design Studio.* **9** Derek Thompson's pair of small blue and white vases after firing. *Photo: Ernabella Arts Centre.*



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their family stories with much secrecy, even within their own communities, and when the Papunya started marking down their stories on clay there was much internal tension. However, once it was generally acknowledged that non-Aboriginal peoples cannot read or interpret the stories with any sense of accuracy or detail, beginning in the late 1990s the community deemed it possible to use tjukurpa as source material for art making on canvas, batik, weaving, and ceramics.

The artists use the canvas of the clay to tell their stories. Each story is passed down from generation to generation within a family unit, and the artists inherit the right to tell their own stories. In broad strokes, Williams' story is *Piltati*, and it tells the story of two women who are hunting two water snakes for food, but the snakes are two men in disguise who turn on the women and attempt to lure them away (see figure 6).

Thompson works with a variety of mark-making, incorporating both walka and tjukurpa; he is one of the first artists to begin to use landscape and realistic drawing of animals in his sgraffito clay work (see figure 8). Two of the pots he created in Jingdezhen are examples

of this type of work, and are influenced by other aspects of Chinese ceramics, including incorporating the use of borders, and the signature Chinese cobalt-blue style. The Chinese ceramic artists are known for their highly embellished border patterning. Williams and Thompson both chose to incorporate patterned bands at the top and bottom of their pots while working in Jingdezhen. They adapted their own non-narrative walka patterns into the border designs: the geometric forms are abstract depictions of the mountain ranges or running water that reflect the Aboriginal people's deep sense of communion with their natural environment. In this case, a cobalt wash is substituted for the terra sigillata, and applied as the base for Thompson's decoration of these pots. This aspect of cultural assimilation may well prove to be an ongoing and vital component of the artists' new work. Only time will tell if the ideas, concepts, and techniques experienced in Jingdezhen will survive the journey to the APY Lands.

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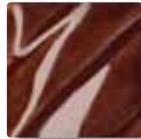
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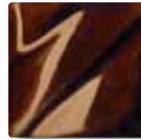
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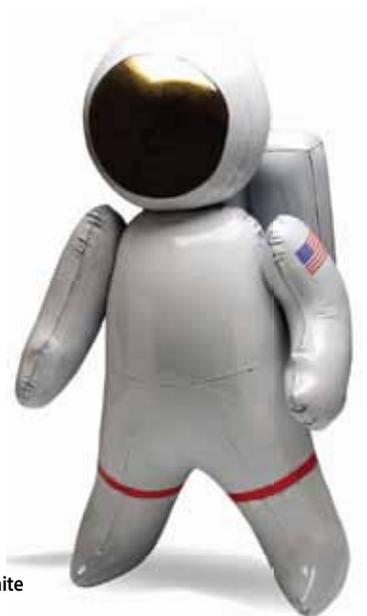
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