

Women Potters, Part 3.

'May Ling has shown a natural flair for pottery. She has a good imagination'

by Joan Witham



Impressed initials stamped on the bottom edge of all pieces.

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This school report on May Ling Beadsmoore, then aged twelve, held no significance for either her or her family. It was however, to prove prophetic, for now, some nineteen years later, she is an established potter with her own studio and gallery.

In 1986, on leaving school, she joined the staff in a Derby bank, was happy there and studied in her own time for her banking certificate. Eager to continue learning, she started a number of evening classes each September, only to drop out after a few weeks. However, the pottery class was different; there she found a medium she loved and spent her time experimenting with hand-building.

The defining moment for her was the occasion when, in her lunch break, she wandered into Derby Museum and Art Gallery and found Kyra Cane, a potter now working at Welbeck, North Nottinghamshire, throwing clay on a wheel. May Ling was captivated. Never had she seen a ball of clay take on such fluidity and she realised that throwing could be creative rather than merely mechanical. In the hands of a skilled and experienced potter there emerged an exquisite bowl, seemingly, at one point, ready to collapse, but controlled and finally brought to perfection. She could not hide her excitement and declared her intention to become a potter. Kyra, somewhat surprised but nevertheless delighted by her enthusiasm, suggested starting with a full time course. Some evidence of artistic ability was required

before May Ling could hope to be accepted but a portfolio of still life drawings, portrait photography of friends and evening school work in clay secured her a place on the Higher National Diploma in Studio Ceramics at the University of Derby.

So it was, in 1992, May Ling, acting on impulse with her heart ruling her head, gave up her promising career, against all advice from friends and colleagues and joined the university. For the next two years she learnt the practicalities not only of pottery construction and decoration but also of kiln building and various methods of firing. The second year was a time of individual experimentation with students working towards a final exhibition. At the end of the course, Josie Walter, who had been her art history tutor employed her, as did John Wheeldon, both experienced potters, as workshop assistant. In their studios she learnt a great deal about all aspects of running a professional workshop including the realisation of the sheer volume of work to be done. Returning to Derby University in 1995, May Ling was able to study on the final year of the B. A. Hons. Applied Art which she gained in 1996, having spent the year concentrating in the use of colour.

Studies completed, she was able to devote all her energies to setting up her pottery. With the help of a bricklayer she built her own kiln which has been immensely successful. She won a Craft Council 'setting up' grant for a year, without which she would have had to find part time work. It was obvious to the Crafts Council committee that she had serious intentions and special promise. The grant



May Ling Beadsmoore, maker of soda-glazed stoneware.

included the cost of publishing photographs once the pottery was operational and these were sent out to galleries throughout the country to promote sales.

May Ling's work is all hand made by throwing, slab building or modelling. Shells, feathers and homemade tools are pressed into the soft white stoneware clay, building up layers of texture which are highlighted by the soda glaze firing. She makes her own slips - mixtures of clay and naturally occurring oxides of metals, such as copper, iron and cobalt which provide a range of colours: turquoise, orange and blue. Pieces are fired to 1210°C. At this intense heat a sodium bicarbonate solution is sprayed into the kiln. Immediately the soda vapourises and is carried along by flames dancing around the pots, glazing at random. The individual nature of the making methods combined with the unpredictable glazing carried out during the firing ensures that no two pieces are the same. Much of her work bears the influence of the nearby river, soft curves, ripples and watery-looking surfaces. The pots are made to be functional as well as aesthetically pleasing. Certain pieces are designed with the presentation of seafood, cheese or fruit in mind.



'Boat', 14in long £90 to £110. Long wavy lines made with a cake icing tool.



Cheese platter 11in to 13in diameter, £65 to £120. Ripples made with twisted cheese wire.



Oval fruit platter 17in, formed from a slab of clay, cut rather than rolled. Ripples made with a stretched out spring coil. £130 to £150.

Outlets for the range of soda glazed stoneware include the showroom at the pottery, specialist craft galleries around the UK, one gallery in the USA and one in Japan. May Ling also exhibits at art festivals and potters markets and was selected for the prestigious Chelsea Crafts Fair 2000, billed as the finest in Europe. A farther step towards recognition of the high quality of her ceramics came with her membership of the *Craft Potters Association of Great Britain* in 1999. This is extremely commendable for a potter who only started up in 1996.

May Ling is very mindful of the help and support given to her by other potters. Kyra Cane was of course the catalyst which took her from bank clerk to potter and Josie Walter has been her mentor throughout. Penny Simpson from Devon shared the results of her experiments with soda glaze and John Leach in

Somerset, after some persuasion, agreed to provide a student work placement. In addition to improving and handle-making skills, there May Ling had the opportunity to experience displaying work in the showroom, talking to and selling to visitors. In 1993 she spent a week with Peter Reynolds in Norfolk further honing the skills of throwing. All these potters were kind, generous and patient. Last but not least May Ling attributes a measure of her success to Andrew Mason, a visiting lecturer at the University. The two are now partners living and working together at the pottery in the beautiful village of Darley Abbey near Derby. She benefits from his experience of the technical aspects of potting and finds his wry humour helps keep things in perspective, making the long working hours enjoyable.

Asked about frustrations in her career she speaks of the erratic income which peaks prior

to Christmas, slumps in February and trickles through the summer. The other disappointment comes when 'the kiln gods' provide an unusually beautiful colour combination impossible to reproduce, but she cannot afford to keep it for herself. A week's groceries have to take precedence.

Contemplating the future, May Ling declares herself open to new ideas but for the time being she is content to consolidate her success and to enjoy the satisfaction of producing affordable ceramics which are both good to look at and good to use.

May Ling will be exhibiting a full range of work at 'Art in Clay', the National Pottery and Ceramics Festival, Hatfield House, Hatfield, 3rd, 4th, and 5th August 2001. For details of current stockists please phone May Ling on (01332) 343070.

Acknowledgments to May Ling Beadsmoore.



Kiln designed and constructed by May Ling for soda-glaze.



Jugs, 4in to 6in, £34 to £40.



Cheese or butter dome, £56 to £66 impressed shell design.



River vase, 5.5in to 8in, £24 to £40.



Mugs, 3.5in, £16 to £19.



Spoons, 8in and spoon rests, £22 to £26 impressed with home made and found objects.