THINKING OUTSIDE THE BOX – employing inventive and independent thinking in order to achieve a unique and original outcome – is grist to the mill to most individual artists. As a result of this, recognition and acclaim (preferably with vast amounts of money attached) thus become highly sought after ambitions by those of us who practice within any creative medium and, being imaginative, inventive and technically skilled are the key to achieving this.

So getting a group of such independent individuals (artists), who in their own right are all well recognised in their respective fields, to work with another artist in a collaborative venture, would seem a pretty daunting prospect. Not so to the members of the Alcorso Foundation who commissioned the Lesley Alcorso Edition in ceramics in 2009. This was a project that successfully achieved a harmonious outcome by challenging the working ideas of a group of independent makers in order to raise much needed cash in the continuing battle for arts support. Orchestrated through the philanthropic ideals of the Hobart-based Alcorso Foundation and with generous private sponsorship, the Foundation commissioned five Tasmanian ceramic artists and a furniture designer/maker to work on a series of limited edition, boxed ceramic sets. These were auctioned last October at the annual fund-raising dinner held at the Moorilla estate: a much-anticipated event by gourmands, art lovers and serious collectors.

The notion of working collaboratively with professional artists in an industrial setting is a European ideal, born of a history of traditional craft production that melded smoothly with industrial manufacture during the 1930s. Claudio Alcorso (1913–2000) was an industrialist, as well as a winemaker and an art entrepreneur who, along with his wife Lesley, left a remarkable artistic legacy to Tasmania.

Born in Rome, Alcorso fled his Fascist dominated homeland to Sydney in 1938 where he was to establish his fabric-printing factory a year later. Alcorso was keen to commission Australian artists from the onset to design his textiles for a market dominated by imports. By 1946, Silk and Textiles Printers had, at his instigation, produced the Modernage Fabric range that employed some of Australia’s best known artists of the time. Happily for Tasmania, Alcorso transferred his factory to Derwent Park in southern Tasmania in 1947 where it continued production until 1969.

Not only did Alcorso enthusiastically embrace collaborations between art and industry, he was also a pioneer of the Tasmanian winemaking industry, establishing one of the earliest wineries in Tasmania at Moorilla. He further championed the arts through his involvement with the Australian Ballet, the Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust, the Tasmanian Arts Advisory Council and was chairman of Opera Australia. He was also a

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**Boxing Clever**

**The Lesley Alcorso Editions**

Article by Penny Smith

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The Lesley Alcorso Editions

Top and centre: Lisa Boyter. *Ice Cool When Snow Melts Spring Comes*. 2009. Clayworks Cool Ice Porcelain, slipcast, manipulated, glazed. 9.5 x 8.5 x 4 cm. Box by Linda Fredheim. Huon pine, blackwood, hoop pine and brass. 203 x 203 x 117 mm.


All photos by Peter Whyte
crusader for the environment and took an active stance in 1982 during the Franklin River protest.

Alcorso’s mission in life was to make the name ‘Tasmania’ synonymous with quality. A year after his death, the Claudio Alcorso Foundation was established in 2001 to honour him and the principles by which he stood. The Foundation fosters international exchanges with Italy in the areas of the visual and performing arts and sponsors a number of programs and awards towards environment and social justice issues.

The Lesley Alcorso Edition boxed sets were a limited edition set of five different ceramic designs produced by Lisa Boyter, Ben Richardson, Penny Smith, Belinda Winkler and Sara Wright. Each artist worked with designer maker, Linda Fredhiem, who responded to the individual ceramic sets resulting in five distinct products with a limited edition run.

Linda Fredhiem graduated with a BFA (Design in Wood) from the University of Tasmania in 1992 and continues to run her own studio practice. Her primary interest is in the design and production of functional furniture using fine Tasmanian timbers, often with details in different materials, such as printed silk or finely engraved copper. One of the hallmarks of Fredhiem’s particular style of furniture is her combination of well-honed traditional furniture making skills with the contemporary technology of CNC routing used to create engraved-like feature details. Each box in the editions series was custom made to fit the five different artist’s work and were constructed from Huon pine, blackwood, hoop pine and brass with the use of the router to engrave each artist’s text into the lids.

In Winkler’s set, Their Lips Met, the pieces reflect the central focus behind much of her ceramic work: a sensual abstraction of the curvaceous. Winkler is intrigued with the geometry of the body, its curves, nooks and crannies. Often using her own body from which to create the initial forms in plaster, Winkler proceeds to dissect the curve and flesh it out to create seductively tactile elements designed to nestle together in related family groups. In the instance of Their Lips Met, the hand-polished surfaces of her slip-cast porcelain cups, once released from their Huon pine box, sit so closely together as if magnetically attracted but not quite touching – the space that hovers between the two as powerful as the forms that created it.

Winkler, Smith and Boyter all slipcast their pieces, but in different porcelains. Boyter, using Cool Ice (a mid range slip casting porcelain from Clayworks), appears to make a gentle pun on the product name within her title: Ice Cool When Snow Melts Spring Comes. Each of Boyter’s beakers, while cast from the same mould, are gently manipulated when still green, leaving the artist’s indelible imprint on each as a unique detail. A copper oxide wash has been deftly brushed on the outside of each vessel and overlain with a clear glaze. Due to the translucency of the porcelain, the oxidized copper appears to have penetrated the body, imbuing each with an icy coldness that only thaws with prolonged contact and intimate use.

The theme of intimacy is also reflected in Smith’s Caress – A Touch of Intimacy. Like Winkler, Smith also cuts and dissects from the curvaceous (only the geometry of Smith’s pieces is more austere). Here the hemisphere is cut and reassembled and subjected to tectonic shifts that create crisp directional planes that reveal the intimacy of hidden recesses. These secrets are only revealed when the piece is picked up from its rubber and

Top: Ben Richardson. Sense–Hold–Feel–Pour (Detail).

timber base (plumber’s cistern reducers and stained wooden curtain rings) and held. Each piece is clear glazed inside with a polished and buffed exterior to create a soft sheen and a sense of tactile warmth.

Wright, herself the recipient of the Foundation’s largesse, was awarded the annual Moorilla Scholarship for an emerging artist in 2009. Her series (From My Hands to Your Fingers and Lips – My Love to You) are thrown, carved and embossed porcelain beaker forms with subtly patterned white exteriors and soft celadon-like interiors. To reflect a ‘sense of place’ relative to the Moorilla Estate, home of the Alcorso Foundation and site of the much awaited Museum of Old and New Art on Hobart’s Derwent River, Wright explored the image of the river’s most notable inhabitant, the Black Swan. Wright noted that when the wind is still on the Derwent, the graceful mirrored images of the foraging creatures created an eerie and somewhat sinister presence.

Her creation of a Moorilla Swan Theory is a playful pun on Nassim Taleb’s Black Swan Theory that (in part) explains unexpected events of such magnitude, the consequences of which determine a dominant role in history. In her mirrored swan image, Wright not only alludes to Taleb’s theory by paying tribute to the vision of MONA’s founder, David Walsh, but also inadvertently reflects the enormity of the tragedies within her own recent history – a two headed creature depicting both a sense of place and time.

A ‘sense of place’ is the driving factor behind Richardson’s practice where he focuses on woodfiring and the use of indigenous raw materials for the creation of functional ware. Like Wright, Richardson wanted to reflect his relationship to Moorilla’s site on the edge of the Derwent by using the materials from the area. In his series (Sense – Hold – Feel – Pour) Richardson’s pouring vessels are thrown from the local clays he mines and prepares but, more specifically, it is his use of a local felspathic sandstone from the Derwent valley, a unique and crucial ingredient in his Derwent glaze series, that situates his pieces in space. The rich lush depths of this iron glaze, with its oily metallic skin and suspended spangles resonate with a sense of liquid timelessness best described by Richardson himself from a section of his poem “Sandstone: Derwent Valley, Autumn ‘04”:

I come for the stone that waits drilled and pinned, curvaceous in slow erosion
Crushed, milled and fired it yields, iron-rich viscous melts.
Mixed with dolerite it flows, two stones in endothermic coupling.

Richardson’s poetic description of the alchemical changes rendered by extreme heat is also reflected in the title of the most recent initiative of the Alcorso Foundation. Vitrify: Ceramic Art Award presented by the Alcorso Foundation is an annual $10,000 AUD award open to Australian artists, from which four selected artists will be invited to submit a small body of work each, to be exhibited at Colville Gallery in Hobart, Tasmania. The inaugural exhibition and award will take place in April 2011.

Tasmanian potter, Patrick Collins best describes the story of Claudio Alcorso as one of inspirational struggle over adversity, of reinvention and success attained at the highest level. Alcorso’s story is about displacement and a yearning for past traditions and the need to recreate a new world from the old.

Alcorso was passionate about the arts, issues of social justice and the preservation of the environment. This latter is of particular significance to many of the artists who live and work in Tasmania, who find within its wild places and unspoilt beauty, a sense of invigorating freedom worth fighting for.

Penny Smith works from her Mount Nelson studio in Tasmania.