



FLAME *into* FAME

Honouring the work of two living treasures. **BY DOUGLAS LLOYD JENKINS**

The residents of Hastings seem particularly fortunate. Not in the frequency of blossom festivals or the abundance of Spanish mission architecture but in an art gallery (they call it an exhibition centre) that seems to serve them particularly well.

At the moment, Hastings is being exposed to a fairly typical combination of shows in the two-gallery building: a major touring show, Ans Westra's retrospective *Handboek*, and *Kamaka: The Ceramics of Bruce & Estelle Martin* – a locally generated exhibition that celebrates two of the region's (and New Zealand's) leading arts practitioners.

Any art gallery or museum has two audiences to please: the visitors who come through the door, most of whom will be locals, and the wider audience of artworld professionals around the country. A successful gallery or museum balances both. Satisfying the first delivers attendance figures, while impressing the second delivers the all-important national reputation.

Not all art galleries get the balance right. Some ignore local patronage in search of national or international reputation. Others focus so strongly on the local community that they fail to appear on the national radar, which is good neither for those who work in them nor the communities they purport to support.

The Hastings Exhibition Centre gets the balance just right – an achievement reflected in its attendance figures. Seventy percent of its visitors are drawn from the local community and the rest are a mixture of tourists and art professionals who feel the need to make the trip.

Well-designed exhibitions, supported by modest but well-

written catalogues, ensure not only that exhibitions at the Hastings Exhibition Centre are usually worth the trip but also that a permanent record remains of the scholarship brought together for such occasions. Because this is a relatively small organisation, it has become particularly good at looking around to find the right curator for the job, and often succeeds by convincing a candidate prepared to work outside their natural territory.

Kamaka was curated by Peter Shaw – well-known as an architectural writer and music and art critic but not an obvious choice as a curator of pottery exhibitions. Yet Shaw is something of an expert on the aesthetic connections between Japan and New Zealand, and the catalogue for this show contains some of his best writing – nicely nuanced, carefully contextualised and with a reference to the Czech composer Leos Janacek thrown in for good measure.

Where *Kamaka* does best, however, is in its careful handling of the first retrospective exhibition of two potters who found their personal *métier* relatively late in life. Bruce and Estelle Martin, of New Zealand and Scottish birth respectively, married in Hastings in 1950, and not long afterwards Estelle was introduced to Japanese aesthetics. As with many women of her generation, this happened through ikebana – the Japanese art of flower arranging – the austerity of which was just then beginning to find a place in the New Zealand imagination. In a way, the Martins' story is a familiar one: unable to buy suitable ikebana pots, they decided to make their own. They became skilled potters (fulltime from 1965 on) and rode the wave of demand for studio pottery that lasted till the end of the 1970s.

Left, Estelle Martin. Right from top, Hanaire bamboo vase "Hidden Treasure" by Estelle Martin, 1988. White glazed bottle by Bruce Martin, 1982. Cha-wan (tea bowls) by Bruce Martin, 1988.

Of the early pots in this exhibition it is the ikebana pieces that stand out most today. The architectural nature of their form makes them unusual. Unlike the more organic pottery of the period, these fascinating vessels come closer to the manufactured pottery of the period than to most of the studio pots then. This, ironically, makes them more likely to be admired in the 21st century than other works that might have got a better response in the 1960s.

Kamaka pottery was generally characterised by high-quality domestic works, which although then much admired seem a little difficult to distinguish from other works of similar quality produced by other potters in the same period. The Martins might have remained in this position, one of any number of excellent potting duos (Harry & May Davis, Peter & Dianne Stichbury), had it not been for a trip to Japan in 1978 that sparked their interest in an alternative method of firing – anagama.

New Zealanders' tolerance for the technical details of pottery making is generally not high but – as Shaw explains – anagama is a type of kiln, "a sloping, single-chambered, wood-fired kiln usually buried or partially buried in the ground". This new form of firing utterly transformed the Martins' work into something distinctive and immediately propelled them to the forefront of New Zealand potters. Their anagama works are flame-licked, the



heat of the kiln having worked directly against the clay without the assistance of a mediating glaze. These works have an exciting fluidity and a depth and complexity of colour that reward contemplation – particularly as it's quite possible that most New Zealanders missed seeing them the first time around.

The Martins' shift into high gear ironically corresponded with a decline of public interest in studio pottery in the 80s. Just as they began to produce their best works – subtle, fluid, original – the public turned away from ceramics. They continued to exhibit – as they did for the Fletcher Challenge Ceramic Award – but their audience was increasingly limited to those already in the know.

Estelle's death in 2001 came at a time when the Martins' reputation was once again growing. Since then, they have gone on being rediscovered by a younger generation of New Zealanders who are also beginning to re-explore local pottery. Some of those were drawn into the world of pottery through learning of the Martins' home – itself the major work by the iconic modernist architect John Scott – and now the Martins have become part of that select group of older modernists whom one local nesting magazine, which features them regularly, calls "living treasures".

Like anagama, the idea of living treasures is a Japanese concept. It is bestowed on the most respected of elder craftspeople, and in the case of Bruce and Estelle Martin nothing is lost in the translation.

Kamaka: The Ceramics of Bruce & Estelle Martin, Hastings Exhibition Centre, to November 6.