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High on a green grassy knoll overlooking the city of Wellington stands a close grouping of three interconnected ceramic pillars. From whose hand did these come? What do they represent? People sit beside them. Some may even use them as a back-rest whilst soaking up the sun's rays and daydreaming between classes at the university which houses them. Perhaps they were commissioned to illustrate the buildings which surrounded them in their previous position in the quad. Their appearance is reminiscent of the work of the pioneering studio potters working in this country in the mid twentieth century; Mirek Smisek, Roy Cowan, Barry Brickell, Len Castle, Doreen Blumhardt. Their glazes reflect the sky and the earth, and their smooth surfaces ask to be touched. These glazed ceramic forms hold close together for support and comfort, a small family of three.

The work was indeed commissioned, to mark the opening of four new university buildings, and was unveiled in 1979 in the Rankine Brown courtyard. The maker was George Kojis. Not a native New Zealander but an American, who studied ceramics at Temple University in Phoenix, Arizona. In 1976 he became a lecturer in art at Wellington Teacher's College, and also taught pottery, design and ceramics at Wellington Polytechnic School of Design, and at Victoria University. He later relocated to Whanganui where he taught ceramics at Wanganui Polytech for 25 years before retiring to Turangi to indulge his love of fishing.

So, not a mid-century local potter, but a later import. Why, then, does this sculpture speak to me of Roy Cowan and his New Zealand contemporaries? Are there only a finite number of ways to create a ceramic sculptural form? Is there to be a universality to the work because of the constraints of method of creation, of what can be done with a potter's wheel and some clay, a hot fire and slip? We need to dig deeper.

In 1970s New Zealand concerns included falling trade with our major traditional market of Britain due to its inclusion in the EEC, the ongoing energy and oil supply crisis, the Vietnam War, and the stirrings of the Think Big policy. Reassurance could be found via a return to the slow paced craft traditions, in much the same way that the followers of the Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris had found reassurance in the hand-made in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution. Artists have an inclination to return

to the primitive forms of art-making in times of social and emotional stress. Comfort was to be found in the intimate contact with clay and water. The trend toward studio pottery and ceramics was widespread during the 1970s and developed from domestic-ware to encompass the sculptural as the decade progressed.

In 1978 an estimated 2000 potters were working full-time at their craft in Zealand with another 3000 earning at least a part of their income from potting. Douglas Lloyd Jenkins puts it that studio pottery in New Zealand was reaching a frenzied peak of popularity.¹ The sculptural possibilities of clay in large format was being explored by local potter Barry Brickell who was basing works on trains and the female form. This heralded an opening up of the manner in which fired clay could be regarded. Developments in the American Abstract Expressionist ceramic movement were disseminated here amongst the pottery community and collectors. Peter Voulkos, leader of the Californian Otis Art group in the 1960s, made sculptures famous for their visual weight, their freely-formed construction, and their aggressive and energetic decoration. Works with gouged surfaces, finished with painted brushstrokes.² His work was included in the 1966 exhibition *Abstract Expressionist Ceramics*. George Kojis' must have been aware of such freely composed ceramic pieces and his arrival here in the mid 1970s would have assisted in the sharing of information and techniques. Certainly his work contains elements commensurate with the ceramics of his homeland at this time.

If we look at this un-named work from the university collection we can see differences from his New Zealand counterparts. His glazes are more colourful. Gone is the reliance upon muted earth-tones. We have the blue of the sky, the green of the hills surrounding Wellington, and the ochrey yellows and browns which underlie them. The painterly strokes of deep carmine red further enliven the colour palette. The surfaces are not all smooth. They are lively with incisions, grooves, grids. Circular patterns emerge, and vaguely floral forms. There is a feeling of movement as lines curve about the pieces and intersect. Their image alters with the play of light during daylight hours, and their shadows fall to spread out along the base which echoes their forms.

¹ Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, *At Home: A Century of New Zealand Design*, Auckland: Random House New Zealand, 2004, p.243-244.

² 'Otis and its influences' by Garth Clark, www.karaartservers.ch/collections/fred.marer/clark-gb.html; and http://Wikipedia.org/wiki/Peter_Voulkos, accessed 4 November 2011.

In the best tradition of abstract art we are free to make our own personal associations. The viewer may look to the ancient headstones below and imagine a correlation, or to the movement of our notorious wind in the flaxes beyond as clouds scud across the sky above creating shadow play. In their original site they were within sight of Fred Grahams commissioned kauri and totara carving *Tane and Tupai*, 1975(Wellington,VUW Collection) sited in the library foyer. Tane is holding up the sky to let the light in while holding the three baskets of knowledge in the form of a diploma-like scroll.³ Considered together these works give us both the buildings which house the learning process and the end result.

Prior to the arrival of the European in New Zealand there had been no Maori work in clay. The new settlers quickly discovered the abundance of clay deposits which they utilised initially to make bricks and drainpipes, later expanding to an abundance of domestic ware. Export tariffs in later years encouraged continuation of this industry. By 1978 some New Zealand potters had been working to break free of the constraints of their Anglo-Oriental influences to make work with a local flavour and identity personified within it. Barry Brickells *Untitled*,n.d.(Manchester Collection) is very similar in construction to piece just inside the doors to the William J. Scott Education library at the Teachers' College where Kojis worked.⁴ Roy Cowan and Juliet Peter are photographed by Marti Freidlander for the New Vision potters calendar of 1967 with one of Roy's large lantern pots (Wellington, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa). Whilst these works are in pot format still they are not on a domestic scale, or able to be used in any manner apart from the decorative.

George Kojis has described his work as a search for the indigenous vessel-one that incorporates both cultural and traditional influences.⁵ He has created forms particular to the place of their making. The substance of their being is the soil upon which they stand. Kojis' three 1.5 metre tall forms are purely sculptural, exemplifying the progression of this genre. The use of more organic forms, and of local minerals to glaze allowed a 'signature of place' to be translated into strongly textured stoneware with muted tones,

³ William McAloon, (ed), *victoria's art: a university collection*,Wellington: Adam Art Gallery, 2005, p58.

⁴ This piece is not referenced in the Collection p.d.f.

⁵<http://www.digitalnzgeoparse.tripodtravel.co.nz>. OpenCalais-person-George Kojis, accessed 21 October 2011.

with renderings of landscape as form or surface.⁶ The wandering lines of Kojis' obelisks may evoke the fault lines beneath. Kojis blends his American influences with those of his new home, and the potters with whom he would have been in proximity via his teaching roles.

These roles must have led to his choice as commissioned artist. The university now wished to add elements other than the painted canvas to its collection. The purchase committee decreed that funds be set aside from the building budget to commission substantial works of art. This was the only work resulting from that policy.⁷ Christina Barton writes that Victoria's art collection fulfils the ambitions of the university to add a visual dimension to the cultural life of the campus, and that works such as these were chosen not only in terms of their artistic merit, but also with an eye to withstanding the testing conditions of a student environment.⁸ The chip on one corner and the residue of a sticker on this ceramic suggest close encounters with the student body. Although it has not proven to be from the hand of one of our well known studio potters it is a valued collection item, familiar to many because of its outdoor locales. Originally it stood quietly in a corner of the quad by a stair, and blended into its surroundings. It now stands as sentinel, providing a visual link between the towers of learning beyond and those of commerce below.

⁶ Moyra Elliott and Damien Skinner (eds), *conetendown. Studio pottery in New Zealand, 1945-1980*, Auckland:David Bateman Ltd, 2009, p.133

⁷ McAloon, 2005, p.21.

⁸ McAloon, 2005, p.93.

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