

Ceramics

Art and Perception

2007
ISSUE 68

INTERNATIONAL

AUS\$16 US\$16 UK£9 NZ\$20 CAN\$20 Euro15

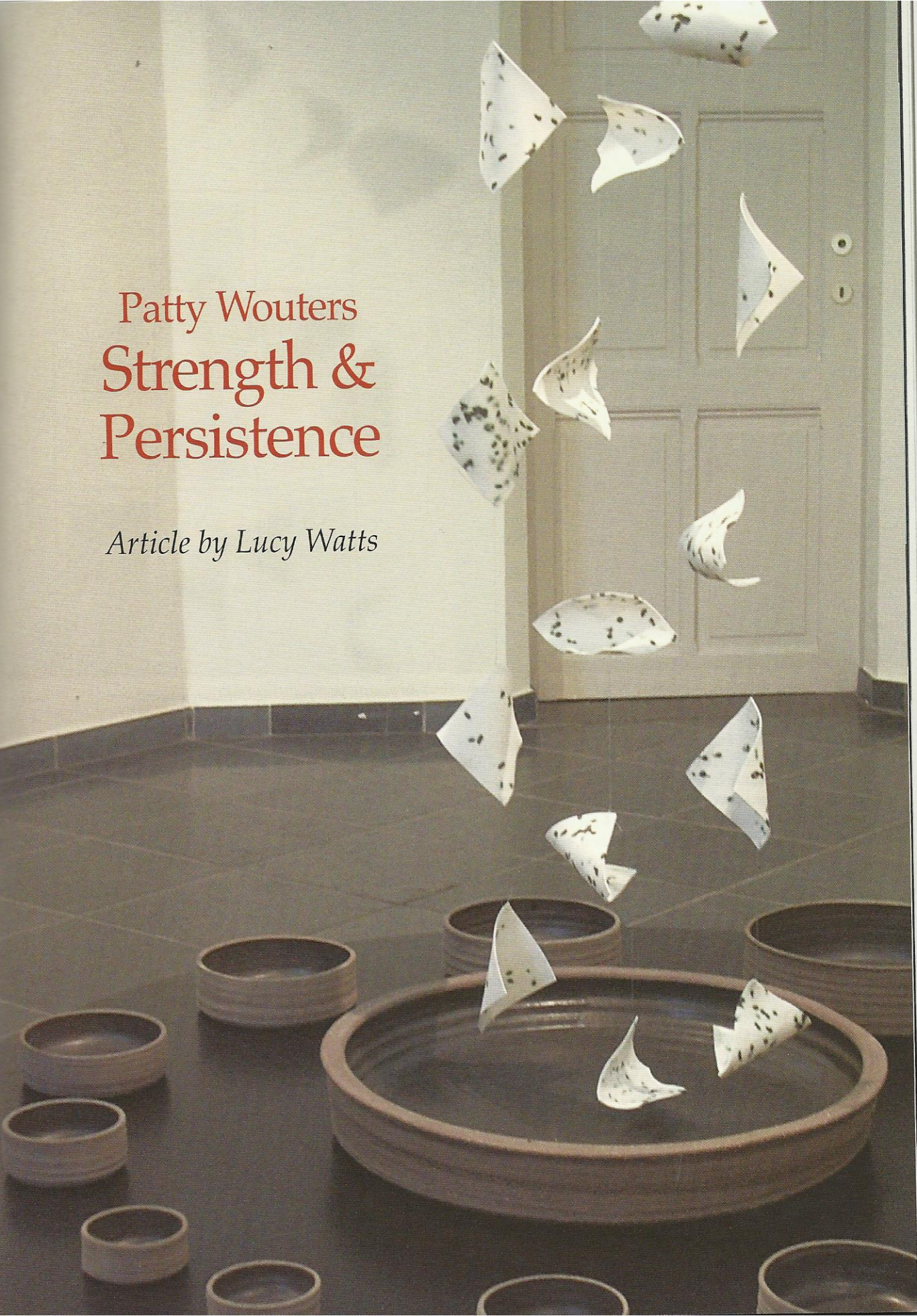


\$16.00US \$20.00CAN

68

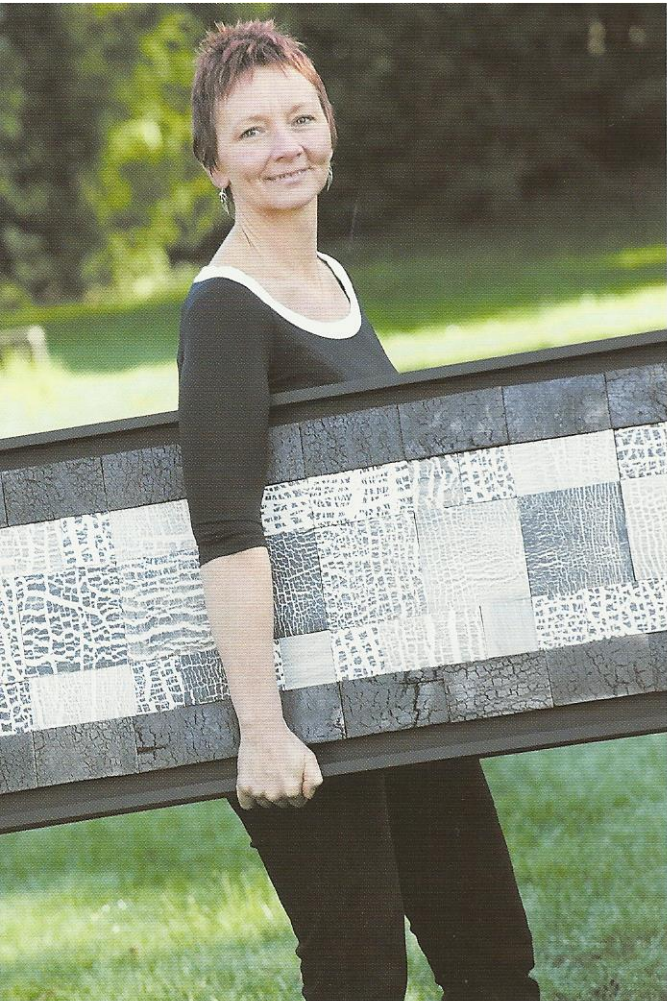


0 74820 64603 8



Patty Wouters
Strength &
Persistence

Article by Lucy Watts

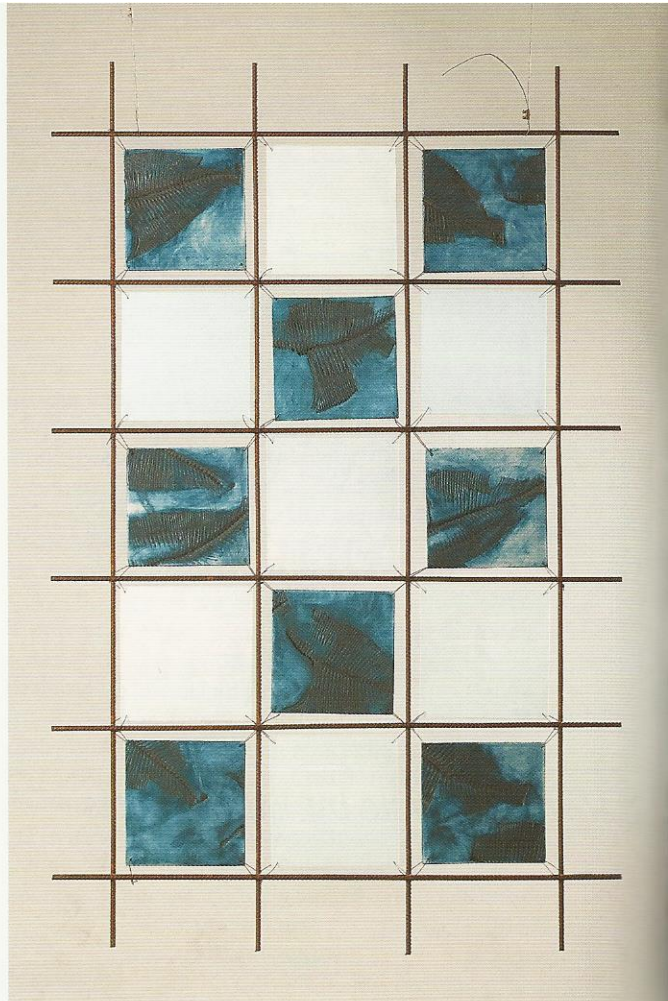


Patty Wouters.

IT IS HARD TO IMAGINE THAT SUCH A PROFICIENT ceramist as Belgian Patty Wouters could have ever considered another path. A little over three decades ago Wouters knew her career would be in the arts – exactly where within its enormous scope was less clear. As an exchange student, she headed from her hometown Antwerp to the US for one year. There she took every art elective available and chanced upon the rare experience of a truly inspirational teacher, Laura Kohler. She passed on her passion for ceramics as only a masterful teacher can. “She was a wonderful art teacher who introduced me to ceramics and pottery making. During that time we also visited a ceramic studio which appealed to me,” she recalls.

On her return Wouters completed a Fine Arts and Teaching Degree. After graduation she taught in several schools in Antwerp and gained further qualifications in social work. Spare time was filled with attending ceramic weekend workshops and week-night classes. “My first attempts at the wheel were frustrating but at the same time exhilarating and magical. It was great to feel the clay grow into a form under the pressure of my hands and fingers.”

By the mid ‘80s Wouters had dedicated one day a week to ceramics but felt it wasn’t enough. She said



Fish Fossils. Wall-piece. High fired porcelain and bone china. 50 x 85 cm.

goodbye to her other working commitments and became a full-time potter. “At first my ambition was mainly to make table ware and sell it through shops, markets, fairs and galleries. At the same time, whenever I could, I tried out all kinds of sculpture materials and techniques. I was fascinated by pit-firing and porcelain and made many experiments between 1987 and 1994. I started doing saggar firings in a gas kiln to reduce the risk of breakage.”

While her own creativity, skills and business sense were growing she reflected on the time she had spent at art school. Her entrée to the arts in the US had been a positive experience but this hadn’t continued. She found it curious that ‘education’ in the arts could actually work to stifle a student’s creativity and confidence. “I wasn’t pleased with the art education I’d received. It wasn’t structured and many of our teachers weren’t specialised in their subjects,” she recalls. “We, as students, asked the other students for advice. The feedback we were receiving from the teachers was often negative. I felt that instead of being encouraged and developing creatively, I was discouraged and cut down.”

From this reflection came an idea that would open the door to budding ceramists worldwide. In 1986



Fish Fossils. Objects. High fired porcelain and bone china. 25 x 20 x 8 cm.

with support for her idea, a building was offered to her through the municipality and she set to work.

"I started my own studio – Atelier Cirkel. I decided there must be a better way to teach people how to develop their creative and artistic potential. I created a school with an open and positive atmosphere where everybody could develop according to his or her own pace, their own potential and ambition."

At the Atelier Cirkel renowned artists impart their wisdom on a broad range of art disciplines through workshops in a nurturing environment. Students range from full time artists aiming to perfect their craft to corporate business people looking for a creative outlet. Not surprisingly, the ceramic department is the largest part of the studio and enjoys a healthy international reputation.

The current lease for Atelier Cirkel will wind up next summer but in typical Wouters fashion this too has been seized as an opportunity. "We are preparing to build new studios and, if everything goes well, we will move into the new building next September. After this we hope to enlarge our international program," she says.

The opportunity Wouters has brought to the international art community through her studio received

official recognition by the Ministry of Culture this year – a deserved accolade for an artist who has been driven to share her enthusiasm and skill and managed to maintain an ever-increasing momentum for more than 20 years.

Patty Wouters' international reputation stretches far beyond her creative attitude and success in education. She continues to make waves through her approach to creating ceramic artworks. On numerous occasions her creations have featured in the World Biennial for Ceramic Art and the Fletchers Challenge Award and she has a string of international awards from many countries – Korea, Argentina, Spain, Sweden, Belgium and Italy, to name a few.

Wouters concedes that the motivation behind her craft has changed over the years. "When I first became a potter, I was much more concerned about a well-designed and finished product. Exploring new techniques was also a priority." For the past 10 years her focus has centred on communicating through her work. Over this time she has moved away from pots to create a signature style in sophisticated sculptural wall pieces containing both hidden and clear messages.

"More and more I find the flat surface of clay offers me plenty of space to express my ideas. As my career



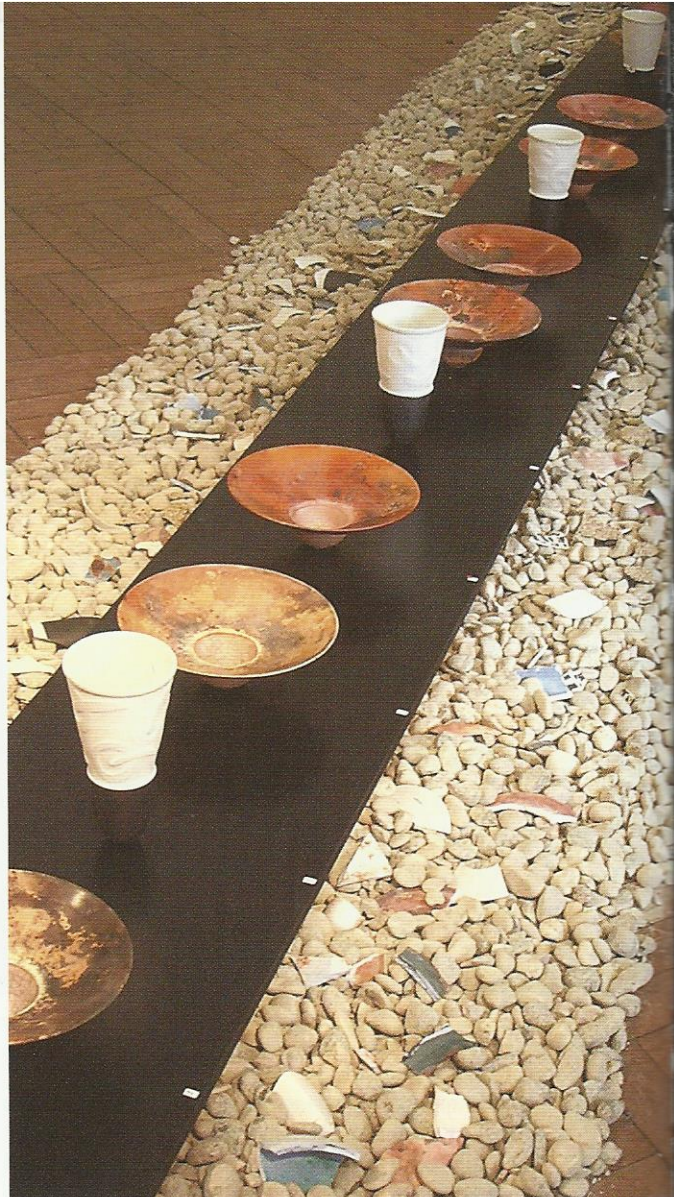
Vulnerable. High fired bone china. 30 x 30 x 10 cm.

progresses, the forms I choose become simpler. In many ways I have realised that 'less can mean more'. The simpler the design, the stronger the message."

Success in simplicity is evident in *Flakes of Porcelain* which expresses the fragility of relationships and people; falling; searching for destiny; finding protection. *Fish Fossils* directs this question to the ocean and all that it supports. *Fragile*, one of Wouters' more challenging works from a technical perspective, articulates her own concerns about nature. *Still Waters* examines a Dutch expression. Translated literally, 'still waters, deep lands' refers to reserved people who may have much more to offer than first thought.

"I don't have an ambition to bring a message to 'the world'. If I can make artworks that please people in one way or another, that is fine for me. For myself, there are hidden messages but my audience can feel free to look for these messages or use their own creativity and give their own meaning to what they see or feel. Subjects that fascinate me include communication on all levels, relationships, balance of the inner self and how one fits into nature, his/her society and the world."

This driving force behind Atelier Cirkel, mother of two and globe-trotting ceramist finds the perfect outlet in her studio: "For me, being in my studio with the liberty to do what I want, creates possibilities which are endless. My studio is my small island where I am left to myself. This emptiness is a wonderful invitation to start creating. Usually I start making sketches and making notes about what I want to make and



Installation: Cirkels and Lines. High Fired and low (saggard) fired porcelain vessels. 500 x 80 x 40 cm. Vases: 12 x 30 cm. Bowls: 30 x 12 cm.

express. Once I start producing this offers me more time to reflect upon my life, my environment, the people I share my life with, the society, the world. The more I work in my studio, the more inspired I am. Working in my studio also gives me time to balance myself. It is almost a way of meditation."

Lucy Watts is a freelance journalist based in NSW, Australia. Wouter's fascination with the relationship between nature, people, societies and the world will be under further examination in Australia at Cudgong Gallery in Gulgong, NSW, where Wouters' solo exhibition, *Strength & Persistence*, will run from August 10 – August 27, 2007. For more information contact Cudgong Gallery on 61 2 6374 1630 or visit www.cudgong-gallery.com.au. Caption title page: *Flakes of Porcelain.* High fired bone china flakes and black stoneware clay. Thrown vessels.