I first met Sue Scobie at the 2010 ICMEA conference in Fuping, China. She had entered the 3rd International Emerging Ceramic Artists’ Exhibition and I was so impressed by the sophistication and technical skill of her pots that I have kept an eye on her work ever since. When planning this issue’s focus on New Zealand ceramics, I thought it was time to catch up on her current practice.

Vicki Grima: Do you have a mentor? Who is/was it and how does/did he/she assist you?
Sue Scobie: I don’t currently have a mentor. During the last year of my ceramics diploma in 2009, Anneke Borren was great to talk with, providing lots of encouragement to keep going in the face of seemingly endless technical challenges. My current work has developed from that final year.

VG: What is your favourite tool?
SS: The only tools I use are my hands and metal scrapers (kidneys) – I can’t do without either. The best scrapers are some I picked up in China but they are wearing pretty thin.

VG: What do you listen to whilst working?
SS: Mostly I have the radio on in the background, usually Radio National or RadioActive. When I’m not covered in clay (and able to change CDs) I play a lot of New Zealand music. Nick Cave gets a good thrashing when I’m in the right mood.

VG: How is your work made?
SS: My current work starts with a pinched base and is built up with coils. I colour my own clay with a range of oxides. These give softer colours that work well with the land and seascapes I tend to work on. I sometimes include local materials in the mix, usually to add texture, but have also recently started including glaze chips in with the clay body which produces a different range of textures.

I use mid-fire porcelain together with a stoneware body which can cause no end of trouble with differential shrinkage, made worse by the additional fluxing of the oxides. At times I lose up to half...
(or more) of the pieces in any one firing due to cracking. Really careful joining and drying seems to be the answer.

The patterning that shows through on the finished piece is not always predictable. I combine different colours and/or clays in one coil, which is then often interspersed with a coil of a single colour or plain porcelain. The thickness of the coil before and after pinching affects the result. As the piece builds up, I leave it to dry for a while before scraping back and refining the shape and then adding more coils. The rim is a porcelain coil which can be quite tricky to work with as you only get one go at putting it on.

I fire once only to vitrify the porcelain and then finish off each piece with a wet sanding.

Left: Sue Scobie, *Around the Mountain* 2012, coiled porcelain and stoneware oxides, glaze inclusions, h.23.5cm w.11cm, d.11cm; photo: Rob Burns

Below: Sue Scobie, *Together Alone*, 2013 coiled porcelain and stoneware oxides, tallest h.7 cm, w.8cm, d.8cm Photo: artist
VG: What is your most treasured piece of ceramics?
SS: A smoke-fired fantail I was given a long time ago. It’s very low fired and fragile but really captures the spirit of these small birds.

VG: Describe your studio cycle – how you spend the days/weeks/months in your studio.
SS: I need at least four consecutive days to take a piece from the start to being able to leave it to dry.
completely. If I don’t have that time, it’s not worth starting – catching the right stage between being too
dry and too wet is critical for both joining and scraping back.

Things can get pretty intense with exhibition deadlines. I try to work steadily all year, though in
summer it’s easier to make larger pieces due to much shorter drying times, while in winter it makes
more sense to work on smaller pieces. My studio is unheated and not insulated, so I’m mostly working
in the ambient conditions. On really hot days, I’ve had the porcelain dry so fast it just falls off, whereas
in winter I can leave the same piece for days before I can finish it.

Sue Scobie is participating in a group show at Avid Gallery in Wellington from 2–16 April, 2013
with Chris Weaver, Janet Green and Hana Rakena; www.avidgallery.co.nz

www.suescobie.co.nz