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The Book of Mick: A Collaboration Chapter 17

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CHAPTER 17

Tony Martin

I had wanted to interview Michael Shannon for quite some time. Now in his 60s he was a familiar figure in the (admittedly small) circle of Australian ceramics. Often seen at conferences and workshops around the country he appeared occasionally, albeit somewhat reluctantly, as either a presenter or panel member. His presentations were usually quiet, thoughtful affairs lacking the bombast and showmanship of the more popular performers. In the frenetic socialising and networking that is the real purpose of any such gathering, he often seemed a little apart. That is not to suggest that he was not a prominent figure in that envied swirl of artists, academics, international presenters with their entourage of eager young students and the obligatory supporting cast of amateurs, not quite so beautiful students, housewives and the general unknown. Even the way he dressed was a little different. Seemingly unaware of the dishevelled aesthetic that is the de rigueur uniform for such events he usually appeared, if not neat, at least recently acquainted with soap and water.

He didn't accept my request for an interview at once. Rather it took a few days before he called back. "Sure" he said "as long as you don't mind coming to Tassie. 'Fraid you'll have to stay overnight. The place is a bit of a haul from anywhere."

It was late afternoon when we (my wife and I) arrived, armed with cameras and recorders. Michael lived in a weatherboard 1940s farmhouse situated in a small, gently sided valley. Accessed by a dusty gravel road the house sat at the edge of a surprisingly green thirty acres that climbed one side of the valley until halted by the omnipresent grey green of the encircling eucalypt bush. The greeting was warm, if a bit reserved. Moments later we headed off for a look at the workshops and the kiln. Having started life as a dairy the property had a rather haphazard scattering of old buildings- a milking shed, hay barn and storage and

machinery sheds some of which had been repurposed to house a pottery workshop and kiln shed. All very functional, if rather spartan. The kiln itself, however, was a work of art – long and low, climbing up a gradual incline to the tall flue. The ground around it was swept meticulously clean and long, tall rows of precisely stacked wood lined each side, within easy reach. It was his pride and joy. He had built it about six years before, he explained, with a few of his wood firing friends and half a dozen enthusiastic students who had wanted some ‘real hands-on experience.’ It was a pretty good kiln and he thought that he had almost figured out how to fire it. Maybe. We headed back to the workshop.

We talked for a while of ‘stuff’ – mutual acquaintances, travels, upcoming exhibitions, clay bodies and firings. Looking for connections, passing time until the valley faded to black and we headed over to the house. We were greeted by a woman with a lively, intelligent face and softly greying hair. “Welcome to our place,” she said with a friendly outstretched hand, “I’m Alina.”

That evening, over coffee, she spoke of meeting, of almost two years of correspondence and much travel between Tasmania and New Zealand before she decided to “jump the ditch.” Michael contributed little – the occasional nod and somewhat more frequent smiles. The evening progressed pleasantly enough with good coffee, a wood fire (“what else would you expect” said Michael) and enough shared background to keep the conversation easy. Eventually Michael asked “So what questions do you have for me tomorrow?”

Having envisaged the interviews I was doing as a series I had a fairly standard set of questions. I flipped open my notebook and started reading. Mostly pretty predictable stuff – training, motivation, influences et cetera et cetera. Getting to the second last question on the list I read out without thinking: “Has trauma or violence played any part in shaping your work?” Realisation dawned too late and I almost choked on the last few words. I glanced up quickly. Michael was staring back at me, his eyes hard. Alina reached over to touch his arm, maybe for reassurance. Maybe for restraint.

The silence stretched to breaking point. Eventually he said, with hard-won control, “How much do you know?” “I was told about

your dad” I said simply. He stared at me for a long moment before gesturing towards the voice recorder that I had running so as to recall the conversation accurately. “Turn that thing off”. It was not a request.

Again, the long, excruciating silence. “You need to get some things clear” he said eventually, with low vehemence. “I never had a dad. I had a father who was a shit of a human being whom I somehow survived. Secondly if I choose to talk about my childhood, such as it was, it will be on my terms and in my way – not in response to any of your pseudo-bullshit questions.” He pushed his chair back abruptly from the table and stalked out of the room. Alina said “I’m sorry – it’s always pretty close to the surface. We all have things that we don’t like reliving. For Michael, it’s more than most. It will be better in the morning” then hurried after him.

She was right. After a rather sleepless night on my part the morning dawned cool and grey. Michael was already in the large farm kitchen, stoking the fire. He smiled easily, dropped the armful of firewood in its box and shook my hand. “Don’t worry” he said “I’m good. Kind of blindsided me. We’ll talk more later.”

The interview was going well. Michael Shannon was refreshingly open and frank. All too often in interviews the subject, particularly if they have been through this process multiple times, have a polished and well-rehearsed persona which is trotted out for the interviewer. Sometimes it is difficult to know whether they themselves can discern the difference between truth and long polished fiction. Michael’s answers, in contrast, were considered and thoughtful. There was no tension from the night before and the subject of his childhood was not raised again – until I asked why he had chosen wood firing as his preferred means of expression. He thought for a few minutes before he replied. “I’m not sure whether I chose wood firing or if it was a necessity – a kind of therapy if you will. I was enjoying art school. The drawing classes were fun – especially life drawing! But, and I’m sure you have often heard this from others, when I walked into the clay studio I was immediately seduced. There is something about the tactile qualities of the material, the way it responded to my touch, the whole demanding process and even the frequent failures and disasters. There seemed to be a natural rhythm, an honesty, that clay demanded of you. Wood

firing was different again. I loved the results – the flashing, the way the clay responded to flame and ash. In the end it was more than that, because I also loved porcelain and stoneware and terracotta and all the rest. But wood firing is a demanding mistress. The hours of planning, of gathering wood, sawing and splitting and stacking. Then there was the digging and preparation of the clay, months of throwing, the days of meticulous stacking and crawling around in that damn kiln let alone the total mind numbing fatigue of the firing. It was an exhausting, all consuming passion. And that is exactly what I needed. All artists, I believe, have their fair share of demons. But I had far more than my fair share. I could feel them stalking on the edge of my consciousness during the day but at night they invaded unchecked, chasing any chance of sleep. Night after night I could hear my father yelling, stuff breaking, the muffled thuds as he punched my mother to the floor, her screams fading to sobs, the waiting for him to become exhausted. Worst of all was the hoping he would not get distracted from his thuggery because that is when he came after us kids.” Michael paused, looking out the window at the valley beyond. “But the process of wood firing was so all consuming, so exhausting and at the same time so exhilarating. I would fall into bed at night totally spent but content. I started sleeping again, I guess the demons were losing out to exhaustion! It was the physicality of the process that I needed. It got me through some hard times.”

“What was the most difficult experience you have had to face as a ceramicist?” I asked a little later. The surprising answer came immediately. “Japan” he said. “No doubt about it at all– it was Japan.” I must have looked astounded because he laughed at me. “Don’t get me wrong” he said “I love Japan. Always have, always will. When I first went to Japan it was a pretty difficult time for me. Once again, I was running from my problems. I was on the cusp of becoming a professional vagabond and tramp – albeit with a PhD! But I was lucky – I was invited into Tanaka’s workshop. I worked incredibly hard but I became part of something important, at least to me. I was part of a team, a group of highly skilled artisans working towards a single goal. There was scant praise, not much money. But I belonged. I still remember the thrill of when Tanaka simply touched me on my shoulder after I had put in a huge effort. It was praise enough! When I look back I realise that it was the first family that I had – the first place that I truly felt needed, where I

belonged. But it was much more than that. If there was ever a country that is an addictive drug it is Japan. There is such a sense of history, of understated beauty, of tradition and the valuing of beauty, of stillness and of simplicity. From the perfectly swept streets, the respectful bow, the far-off temple bells – it is so completely seductive. And I was completely seduced! Let me illustrate. I was visiting Kyoto one day, just walking through the crowded downtown area. As in every major Japanese town or city there were tiny shrines on almost every street. I remember coming across one such shrine – probably only a few metres square, in between shops and next to a busy road. In one corner of the shrine was a small conifer tree, gnarled and bent – obviously many years old. Beneath it was a small ceramic statue of some kind, all surrounded by smooth white pebbles interspersed with a few larger rocks. Pretty unremarkable really except kneeling in front of this tiny garden was an old monk. First I thought it was some sort of worship ritual but as I watched it become apparent that he was tending the garden. He would kneel there for minutes on end before moving a pebble or adjusting a twig on the tree. I have no idea how long he had been there but he was so totally involved that he was completely unaware of my presence. Eventually he was satisfied, got to his feet, gave me a faint nod and went about his day. It occurred to me that he may have been tending that one tree for decades – a pebble here, a twig there. In all those years I may have been the first person who noticed the perfection of that tiny garden. But to the monk that was of no importance. In that place he was the custodian of a moment of such simple beauty as wonderful as anything in the Louvre. To me it was a privilege to feel part of a culture that valued beauty that much. It is a moment I will never forget.”

“That certainly doesn’t sound like it was too difficult” I suggest. “Ah” Michael said “that was not the difficult part. Not even the leaving – that was something I was good at. It was the months, even years afterwards that I found so confusing. Back in Australia I so wanted to still have that feeling that I had in Japan. Belonging, being a part of something special, ceramic traditions that went back millennia, the simplicity, respect, deference, the valuing of beautiful things. I was sure I knew how to hold on to that feeling, or at least how to recreate it. I threw myself into making the same kind of bowls, vases and tea bowls. And I succeeded. The pots I made were wonderful. They had the same kind of

quiet beauty that I had so admired in Japan. But it wasn't the same. So I made more – lots more. In the end they were better than anything I had ever made in Japan. It was still not enough. Don't get me wrong I utterly enjoyed making those pots – I still do. It took me years to realise that I could never replicate what I had in Japan. It wasn't the clay or the pots, the stunning beauty or even the culture. It was about the relationships, the people. It took me a very long time to understand that what I really wanted was not about being a Japanese potter. What I really wanted was to matter, to belong. That what I missed about Japan. It just took a long time to realise it." He looked embarrassed for a moment. Alina, sitting to one side, smiled.

That evening, as the electric humming of cicadas gave way to the softer accompaniment of crickets and frogs, Michael reminisced on a life of clay and fire. He spoke of steadfast friends, of faded heroes, of violence and blood and despair, of vivid rice fields and ancient streets. He spoke of hurting and being hurt, of needing to belong and the seduction of leaving. We ate off rough slab plates, drank coffee from handsome wood fired cups. 'Beautiful traces of us' Alina called them.