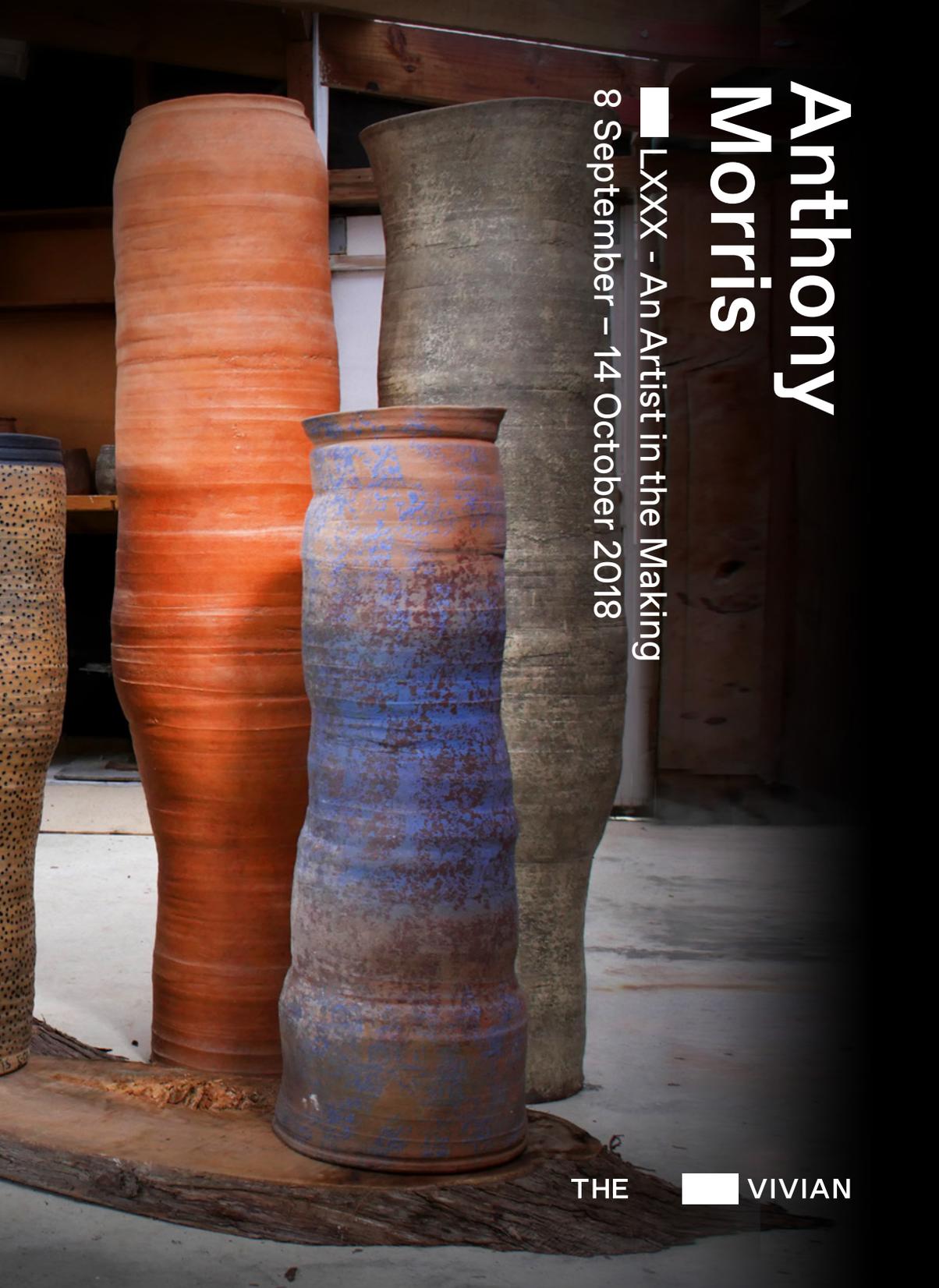


Anthony Morris

■ LXXX - An Artist in the Making
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THE



VIVIAN

Foreword

Scott Lawrie

This journey began with a 50-year survey exhibition curated by Elizabeth McClure held at Morris & James last year. Seeing the work for the very first time, we felt it was of such significance to the history of New Zealand arts and crafts, that it deserved a place in The Vivian exhibition calendar. The title reflects a recent birthday by Ant, who at 80-year's old, is still practicing his craft in his studio – and never seems to tire.

This exhibition offers a broad panoramic view of the creative work of one of the founders of Morris & James, and shows both the incredible depth, influential scope, and masterful technical ability of his artistry.

From his series of delightfully raw Primitive and Dinka pots inspired by his travels to Africa, to his majestically tall Cretan pots, and of course his hauntingly beautiful 'Shades' series, Ant has also created a new foyer installation of recent work.

A selection of Anthony's glass work will be on display at ArtForm in Matakana.

As a contemporary art gallery based in Matakana, we're both grateful, and proud, to show an artist who was among the first to put Matakana on the international arts map.

Scott Lawrie,
Director, The Vivian



The Alchemy of Making

Linda Tyler

Anthony (Ant) Morris is someone who teaches himself things by doing them. He is what is referred to in education as "a haptic learner". While a powerful amount of reading gets done, when it comes to producing things, it is trial and error that wins out. His is a hands-on approach. Back in England in 1968, when he centred his first mound on the wheel, opened it up, and felt the gritty scouring of wet clay as it slid through his palms, he got hooked. Not just seduced by the sensation of mastering material and machine with mind, hand and eye, but also captured by the magic of transforming dirt into gold; the alchemy of making. Taking something unformed from the earth, and fashioning it into a shape that has a purposeful life - as a bowl, or a crock or a tile - bringing joy with its beauty and its utility - before returning to rest in that earth again.

He is what the New Yorker's Malcolm Gladwell calls "an outlier", succeeding where many have failed. Back in 1977, when Crown Lynn was the titan of New Zealand's ceramics manufacturing industry, and reputed to be the Southern Hemisphere's largest producer of household pottery, employing 650 people and churning out 17 million pieces annually, Ant returned to New Zealand. After nearly two decades away, spent travelling in Europe, Asia and Africa, (including a stint studying for an undergraduate degree in Anthropology

at the University of Witwatersrand), Ant decided to offer an alternative to factory-produced tableware. With wife and business partner Sue James, he set up Morris & James Pottery in Tongue Farm Road, Matakana, in the heart of clay country, near where a brickworks had operated in the nineteenth-century.



Their brand was nostalgic, harking back to the Victorian era, when artisans practised their crafts in workshops, not production lines. Back then, life was lived at a slower pace. An image of a penny farthing bicycle being ridden in a stately manner by a gentleman in a top hat and high boots encapsulated the concept: this early form of locomotion requires skill and balance to ride, (as well as a ladder to mount), and exemplifies what Ant calls “intermediate” technology. It made it easier to get around, and like the potter’s wheel, gives the rider the time and freedom to use creatively – getting dressed up, or in the case of pottery, getting decorated. This motif is inside an oval ring, lettered with the company’s name in serif font, and the locality, Matakana.

There is no craft more situated in its place, its locus, than pottery. Each locality’s clay has its characteristic quality, and like fine wine that let’s you taste the terroir, the environment that produced the grapes, clay tells you where



it has come from. Matakana’s clay bristles with minerals and (inconveniently) likes to hold water, taking a long time to dry out, and shrinking in the process, and is prone to cracking in the kiln during firing. Ant patiently applied the 10,000 hour rule, repeatedly throwing, firing and glazing the clay until he knew what to expect. Muscles in his body learned the movements, and like his mind, became honed to produce item after item in the same way. He became a production potter, sustaining himself and his family with his wares. At a time when the studio pottery movement in New Zealand gave rise to artist-potters who produced handcrafted pieces to put on exhibition



and sell in craft shops, he was an artisan-potter. The volume of his output was prodigious. But after seven long years of building the business up, a fire completely destroyed the pottery in 1984, and he had to start again.

Meantime, Crown Lynn was stuttering to a stop in the face of deregulation of New Zealand’s manufacturing industries which had resulted in the market being flooded with ceramics produced offshore where labour costs were low. Ant had to recalibrate and relaunch in a tough commercial environment. He succeeded by doing it intuitively, and collaborating with others who wanted to work in the same way. His approach to the world is experiential, investigating the properties of materials and interacting with his environment through touch, and he reasoned that others would respond to the “Morris & James experience”. He rebuilt the pottery as a destination, where visitors could rest and refresh



in the countryside, and understand the uniqueness of the product through seeing how it was made, and meeting the makers. Gleaming platters and planters in rich ox blood, egg and spinach glazes flew out the door to come to rest and be treasured in homes around the globe. In 1991, Morris & James celebrated their 21st birthday with a commemorative tile, and flourished for another decade, with Ant’s restless creativity leading him to venture out into cast glass. While preparing an exhibition of his new crystal creations in 2004, another disaster struck: a cataclysmic stroke. By the next year, he had sold the business, and started again.

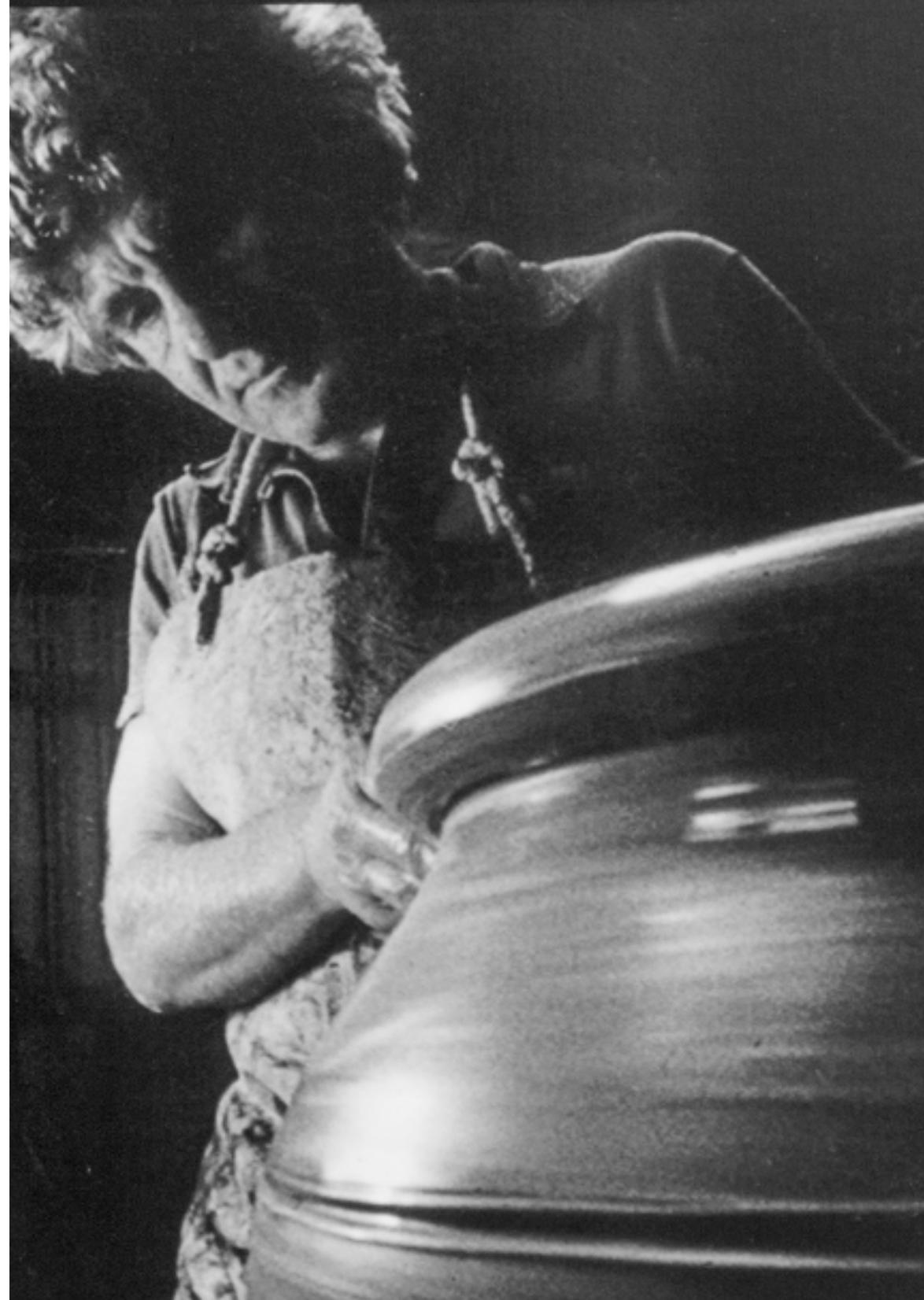
Although the stroke had rendered his dominant left hand useless, he knew he could re-programme his body, once again learning by doing. Teaching himself to write with his right hand, using a

stylus on clay tablets, led to the painting self-portraits on the clay, rendered with distinctively wonky flair. He felt like a shadow of his former self, and called this series Shades, referencing Greek mythology where the shades were the spirits of dead people who, bereft of their bodies, stand disconsolately on the banks of the River Styx awaiting carriage to Hell. That is, they can cross if they can pay the ferryman, but are condemned to an eternity of wandering around, if not. It took another decade – maybe another 10,000 hours – but Ant relaunched himself as a painter. Using quick-drying acrylics to depict people, places and politics – the plight of refugees – his images are defined by the quality of their engagement with the subject and their vibrantly-coloured, gestural style.



Again and again, he repeats the same motif, training himself in this new form of creative expression.

Now in his eighth decade, he is still intent on conquering new territory, setting himself challenges and keeping moving on, driven by the need to find out what happens next. Relentlessly curious, he is compelled to make things, to experiment with ideas, materials, and methods. He remains an alchemist, transfixed by transformation.



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Images

Inside back cover:

Anthony Morris Portrait -
Courtesy of Anthony Morris Studio.

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