



The search
for PERFECTION

WORDS BY MERCEDES SMITH

Steve Tanner



ABOVE
Hugh West



During his 50 year career, Hugh West has experienced every possible connotation of life as a potter, and has finally reached his paradise.

Potter Hugh West was, in his own words, “destined to be a farmer, but many things put me off that way of life, including being struck by lightning on our farm in the Brecon Beacons.” This curious act of God was the catalyst for the next half century of Hugh’s life, over which time he has risen from lowly art student to respected Master Craftsman. It has been a circuitous journey: talent, hard work, and an education from world class potters have all influenced Hugh’s incredibly productive career, and have brought him this September to a celebratory 50th Anniversary exhibition at Whitewater Contemporary in Polzeath, Cornwall.



“After my recovery from the lightning strike,” says Hugh “I took a foundation course at Hereford College of Art which included an industrial ceramics module.” Soon after, while on holiday in Cornwall, he visited St Ives Pottery and saw the great Trevor Corser throwing on the wheel. Instantly inspired, Hugh enrolled on the ceramics course at Redruth School of Art, where Mary Rich and Roger Veal were his tutors, and Bernard Leach, Janet Leach and Michael Cardew were visiting lecturers. “Their way of creating pots was the opposite of the industrial methods I had learned,” says Hugh. “Everything was handmade and so free.” As a student, Hugh was fortunate enough to meet potter Lucie



PREVIOUS
Hugh makes all of his own glazes

ABOVE
A hallmark of quality

ABOVE
The works of one of Cornwall’s leading fine art potters



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Rie in her studio, and her work made an early impression him. “And others have influenced me since,” says Hugh, “Richard Godfrey, for his innovation and use of colour; Seungho Yang, for his calm and unorthodox approach, Alfred Hering, for his tenacity and creativity, and David Leach for his friendship and support.” At the age of just 21 Hugh set up his first pottery in Newquay, but soon found that his skill would need to be backed up by serious business acumen. “I borrowed £1,000 – that’s the equivalent of £12,500 today! – and bought a wheel, clay and raw materials to set me up” he tells me. “Realisation came fast though – I had limited time to make glazes and get selling, and I remember thinking ‘what have I done?’. I actually stood in my new workshop and cried!” Things improved after Truro shop owner Pru Danby gave Hugh his very first order for £50, but the ceramics market around Newquay was limited and the pottery studio was too small to be viable. Looking to expand, Hugh found a barn on the Flete estate near Modbury in Devon and set up West Pottery, employing trainee potters including Chris Hawkins, who is now a successful raku potter. Hugh quickly found success creating tableware for Harrods, Heals, and Liberty of London, “and I supplied the original Cider Press Centre in Dartington,” adds Hugh. “Miss Jewel, the head buyer, insisted that all pots be inspected by her to check quality. I would tremble before an

appointment!” It was there that [potter] David Leach befriended Hugh. “I am ever grateful to him and to Pan Henry of the Casson Gallery,” says Hugh, “for introducing my work to the gallery scene”.

Hugh’s business success in Devon eventually lost its attraction, and he began to look for an opportunity to explore the wider world of ceramics. “I answered an advert in Ceramic Review for someone to go and live and work in the village of La Borne, in France [an internationally significant centre for ceramics],” explains Hugh. “It was part of a project to recreate the traditional wood-firing ways of former La Borne potters and it was an important chapter in my career: learning the old ways, collecting antique pots and visiting museums.” In France Hugh built an Anagama kiln [a traditional Japanese wood-burning kiln]. “By then I was fast at throwing and earned well. I sold at fairs, took part in exhibitions and won a gold medal at the Munich International Craft Fair.” Circumstance eventually brought him back to Cornwall, where he spent a brief time on the Killiow Estate near Truro before establishing a pottery at Carnon Downs, “this time building a Yakishime kiln,” says Hugh. “I had no time to spare for exhibitions – I was working non-stop to supply galleries.” In 2000 he returned to La Borne, where he made a significant change in focus from stoneware



to porcelain, thanks to advice from his long-time friend David Leach. “David once told me ‘You are a porcelain potter,’” says Hugh, “and what did I do? I went off and made stoneware! But by now I had decided to work exclusively in porcelain and to make individual pieces. After years of hard work I wanted porcelain’s simplicity and purity – I wanted to really explore its possibilities.” Porcelain, Hugh tells me, “has its own limits and boundaries. It requires respect. Everything on a throwing day must be right – my mood, the consistency of the clay, the music on the radio. I am inspired by the search for perfection, I still want to get it right, I want people to pick up one of my pots and really love it.” Hugh uses three types of porcelain – Southern Ice, Audrey Blackman and French porcelain – and makes all his own glazes. “I have never purchased a commercial glaze in my life,” he says. “Sometimes I test

other potters’ glaze recipes, and I enjoy honing the results to fit my type of glazing and firing, but two different potters can use the same glaze and it won’t come out the same way. Sometimes it takes a year to develop a glaze from testing to production.”

In 2014 Hugh returned permanently to the UK and now works from the Toll House Pottery at his home in west Cornwall. “The studio building dates from the early 19th century, when tolls were taken on a small road between Truro and Falmouth,” says Hugh. “I love not having to drive to work, I just walk through my beautiful garden with my beloved border terrier Budleigh beside me.” Now, Hugh has reached a point in his life where he is free to work as he pleases, when he pleases, and concentrate on “simplicity and function, knowing what the clay and I are

ABOVE
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capable of”. Of a typical day in the studio he tells me: “There is no typical day. It depends what mood I am in, but what I can tell you is that in the last 50 years I’ve never spent a day in the working week without throwing. In my student days I found throwing a challenge, but no matter how much time it took and how hard it was I wanted to master it, and I still look forward to working on the wheel. I was lucky to have had two high-production workshops in my career, enabling me to hone the process of throwing hundreds of thousands of times, but it was grinding – that’s the word for it. Working repetitively like that takes such a toll on your body. You don’t realise until later in life how taxing the process is to your joints, your back and your eyesight. We potters must be mad!” The beautiful porcelain work Hugh

makes now has earned him a reputation as one of Cornwall’s leading fine art potters, one who exhibits all over the world, and years of experience have brought him to his 50th year as a potter, an acknowledged master of his craft, utterly at ease with any clay, wheel or form. “In spite of the pain,” says Hugh, “this is where pleasure comes in: no thinking is required, it’s easy, even with porcelain. Potters who have mastered throwing with it will know exactly what I’m talking about.”

See Hugh West’s 50th Anniversary exhibition from 1st to 29th September at Whitewater Contemporary, The Parade, Polzeath, Cornwall PL27 6SR.

 whitewatercontemporary.co.uk

ABOVE
Functional simplicity