

when ceramic meets video



Ichor video installation with earthenware figure offering, h.42cm, w.13cm, d.23cm
photo: Kent Buchanan

Pip McManus explores a new direction

Ichor: the ethereal fluid flowing in the veins of the gods, but poisonous to mortals (Gk)

Pip McManus' *Ichor* video is mesmerising.

A golden unfired clay figure, enlarged on-screen, very slowly disintegrates in water. Every nuance and escaping air bubble draws the viewer's entranced attention.

The gently dissolving figure is suggestive. It embraces an acceptance of natural processes, of the inevitable organic cycle of change. It suggests mortality and fragility as well as meditative contemplation. Loss and enrichment, ancient and contemporary life are all inferred.

Video projects are an intriguing new preoccupation in Pip McManus' ceramic practice. The artist stumbled across the idea for the *Ichor* video, recently awarded the 2008 Alice Prize, while seeking to soften some overly rigid seated clay figures. Submerging them in water, she became captivated by their process of disintegration. The gradual process of dissolution brought a new dimension to the clay figure, and suggested a new direction for her ceramic work.

What happens when ceramics meets video art? It's an engaging combination: each brings its own distinctive visual language to the fusion. Ceramics' earthiness and ancient history of storytelling contrasts

[mixed media]

and synchronises with video's mediated quality and relative newness. There's a pleasing irony in *Ichor's* use of the enduring, long-standing medium of ceramics to express change. Yet there's also something very natural about this. Dissolving at a slow pace in water, clay returns to its original state.

Ichor encourages viewers to slow down. As Carl Honoré commented in *The Pursuit of Slow*: "In this media-drenched, data-rich, channel-surfing, computer-gaming age, we have lost the art of doing nothing, of shutting out the background noise and distractions, of slowing down and simply being alone with our thoughts." When humans reduce their speed, they can more thoughtfully contemplate emotional and temporal realities.

McManus' ceramic practice has had a long-standing preoccupation with making visible the emotional realities of our society. The experiences of refugees, such as displacement and a search for sanctuary, have been recurring themes and inform ceramic works that accompany the *Ichor* video. A figure clasping a small house speaks volumes. Petite human figures perch upon boat-like patterned vessels.

These small clay figures draw attention to various activities in contemporary life, such as using an iPod or digital camera. Others engage with the world in immediate, unmediated terms, looking outwards. They present choices in life regarding whether humans choose to become closely bound with a faster, technology-driven culture, or to stand outside it and question this way of life from a contemplative distance.

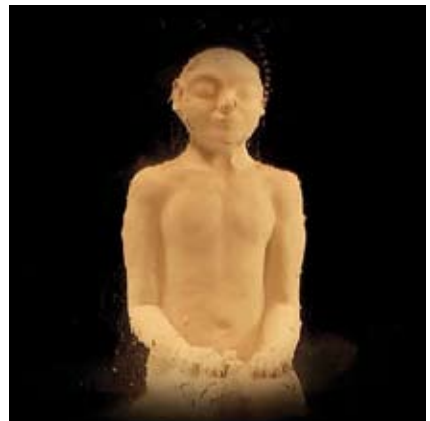
The contemporary screen culture that has become a ubiquitous part of everyday experience often generates a fast-paced, flexible way of viewing things, rather than a meditative sense of contemplation. Many people are addicted to the remote control and computer mouse. They choose when, where and for how long they view visual media.

Visitors had intriguing responses to the video when it was displayed at the 2008 *Australian Ceramic Stories* exhibition in Dubbo NSW. For some *Ichor* viewers who were more time-pressed, frequent visits to the projector room were a method of attempting to counter 'missing out' on the moments of greatest action. While this departed from the intended impact of the video, it created an amusing sight that was quite at home with the gently humorous element that underscores McManus' practice. *Ichor's* serenity and philosophical seriousness is laced with a subtle wry humour in the poses and gestures of some of the tiny ceramic figures.



above: *Listen* (detail), figurine, earthenware with terra sigillata, h.7cm, w.2.5cm, d.3cm
photo: artist

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Stills from *Ichor* video (duration 55 minutes)



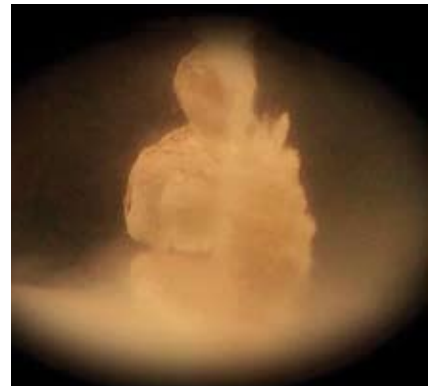
When viewing the *Ichor* video in *Australian Ceramic Stories*, the visitor was plunged into the inky blackness of an enclosed projector room: a quiet, secluded cave. As McManus asserts, it is a work that speaks very directly to the individual, experienced one-on-one and requiring close engagement. The video is a form of moving visual poetry. It brought to mind the embracing of visceral autumnal change in Keats' poem *Ode to Autumn*: 'Thou watchest the last ooziings hours by hours. / Where are the songs of Spring? / Ay, where are they? / Think not of them, thou hast thy music too.' As air bubbles drift upwards from the figure, resistance to its demise slowly falls away. Instead, it becomes a submerged focus of poetic intrigue, a changeling that draws attention to a different state of mind.

The use of water as a medium is a continuing focus in McManus' video art today. Water has a powerful capacity to communicate emotional and philosophical information, and to tell many different stories with its rich, fluid language. Other video projects, such as Bill Viola's *The Tristan Project*, exhibited at the Art Gallery of NSW, April – July 2008, also harness its communicative power. Viola uses its language to tell the story of two lovers in water ascending towards dissolution to escape their unbearable depth of feeling for one another in the material world. While *Ichor* presents dissolution as a source of meditative calm, for *Tristan* it's a retreat from agony. Both video works employ movement in water as a powerful symbol of change.

McManus is an enquiring practitioner. Her fusion of video and ceramics also involves the incorporation of music. *Ichor* is a collaborative work, produced in partnership with musician Nic Hempel and video producer David Nixon in Alice Springs, where the artist is based. Music can be powerfully mood-altering, and this is used to great effect in *Ichor*. Nic Hempel's cello sings while the clay dissolves. The richness, slowness and haunting depth of the cello establishes a mood of mellowness and contemplation.

Pip McManus is firmly set on a path to explore the expressive and idiosyncratic nuances of this mood. Just as *Ichor* embraces change head-on, so too does McManus tackle the fusion of video art and the music of clay. There are many stories waiting to be told, and McManus' combination of video, ceramics, water and music continues to create mesmerising ways to tell them.

A clip of the *Ichor* DVD can be viewed at Pip McManus' website: <http://members.ozemail.com.au/~pipmcmanus> ■



Dr Julia Jones is an arts writer and educator. She was the guest curator of the national ceramics exhibition *Australian Ceramic Stories*, held at the Western Plains Cultural Centre, Dubbo, NSW, 5 April – 18 May 2008.