



Stepping  
out of the  
mainstream  
to catch  
a vision  
led to a  
larger than  
life career  
in ceramics

## Playing with firing

**T**he outsider in modern mythology is a romantic character. In reality, it is a tricky role to play well. To revel in one's differences, one must believe in their intrinsic worth. Deborah Halpern, aged thirty-one, was, in a sense, born an outsider. Her parents, Melbourne potters Sylvia and Artur Halpern, were among those who started the Potters' Cottage in marginal Warrandyte in the fifties. Artur was Polish and a trained engineer. According to his daughter, he ran his commercial pottery studio as he would have run an engineering workshop. Sylvia, who has survived her husband, is a studio potter who broke free of secretarial chains.

They sent their daughter into town, to the Establishment's Methodist Ladies' College. Later, determined not to be a potter, she studied literature at university and journalism at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology. But her mind resented being trimmed. She abandoned the mainstream and during the shake-out months established that she would never again work for anybody, never go on the dole and never again pay rent.

The mud-brick culture was in its heyday. Halpern built a house with her boyfriend with borrowed money and agreed to become her father's apprentice to pay the bills. He

was working in the favoured earthy tones of the seventies, but in his cupboards he kept multi-coloured pottery from a previous era. She took a paintbox and began to play with his throwaways.

Halpern's father died and in 1978 she and her mother held a joint exhibition at the Potters' Cottage. "In all of our eyes I was a completely unknown quantity," she recalls. "What I was doing didn't fit into anybody's frame of reference." The response to her work was overwhelming.

But the next year she left Warrandyte to study painting and go into showbiz with Tony Edwards ("half of the Black Cat Cafe"). Their performing career culminated at the Last Laugh. Halpern learnt how to crack whips for that show, practising in a vacant lot behind her St Kilda apartment.

When showbiz ceased to be fun, she put forward an "outrageous and totally improbable" application to the Australia Council's Crafts Board for assistance with an exhibition of life-size ceramic furniture. That grant was probably responsible for Halpern now being considered one of Australia's liveliest and most ambitious exponents of ceramic sculpture.

Halpern is a rampantly fertile artist. Her shopfront studio in North Melbourne seeps into her living quarters above. There

are no undecorated spaces. The bathroom walls are lined with her unmatched tiles, the kitchen cupboards are sketch pads, the benches are laden with her painterly mugs and miniature ceramic furniture all functional, as a matter of principle for the potters' daughter. Paintings commissioned by her dentist ("he insisted there be no teeth showing") lean against chairs. Whimsical cushions, the fruit of a barren Christmas, are stacked on couches. China, her dog, finds floor space under her trestle desk.

We talk about Gaudi, the architectural artist who was given the run of Barcelona; of the maverick Hundertwasser; and the remarkable partnership of Niki de Saint-Phalle and Jean Tinguely, who did the water playground next to the Pompidou Centre in Paris. These unaffiliated artists are her inspiration.

Halpern's vision is not being starved of attention. Her work is sought after by private and public collectors, and, inevitably, it has broken out of the intimacy of home and gallery.

Her most recent creation, scheduled for unveiling this month, will stand in monumental festivity in St Kilda Road, its three ceramic-clad legs planted in the murky moat of the National Gallery of Victoria. This prestigious commission has been largely funded by the Australian Bicentennial Authority. The gallery's curator of sculpture, Geoffrey Edwards, says it exposes an art form which is among the freshest, most vigorous and most experimental in Australia.

After forebodings about tackling such a grandiose project, Halpern persuaded herself to "stop being such a coward, to pick it up, play with it, to make a commitment to it being the best thing you have ever done". Perhaps it is the defence reflex of a fringe dweller which prompts her to add: "A lot of people have trouble with my work because it is an outpouring of who I am. It is not a statement about the world . . . But there is something in my work which touches the kid in people, and even if they disapprove of it, they often laugh at it."

She reaches again for her book on Hundertwasser and, as if searching for an appropriate scripture, opens it at a photograph of his miraculously whimsical house in staid, imperial Vienna. The existence of such a house, in such an environment, feeds her resolve to let her playful imagination have its head. "For me, to see Hundertwasser is very strengthening, because I am always an outsider. I can't be more sophisticated. I make what I am."

Her monument has two heads. Some say that's better than one. **Diana Bagnall**