

Ocean Light

PROFILE – DAVID BROMFIELD finds magic in *Ocean Light*, Angela Mellor's series of delicate bone china pieces.

PHOTOGRAPHY – VICTOR FRANCE



Light, as Turner might have said, is a rum business. The pre-eminent painter of light in, and on, the ocean has more in common with Angela Mellor and her work than might at first meet the eye. Both artists understand light in the traditional manner, not as a phenomenon or convention, but as the dense substance of creation from which all is formed. For Turner light becomes almost liquid, indistinguishable from his medium; waves, rocks, sand, shells appear as the light leaks, contracts, shifts, vanishes or bursts open like a fountain. Beyond the technical refinement of her thin bone china shapes or the fragile elegance of her vessels and paper slip sheaves, Mellor's recent work offers the same intense drama of creation to the astute viewer. It is as if the light that lives within and around them has fused with clay in the firing to become one substance.

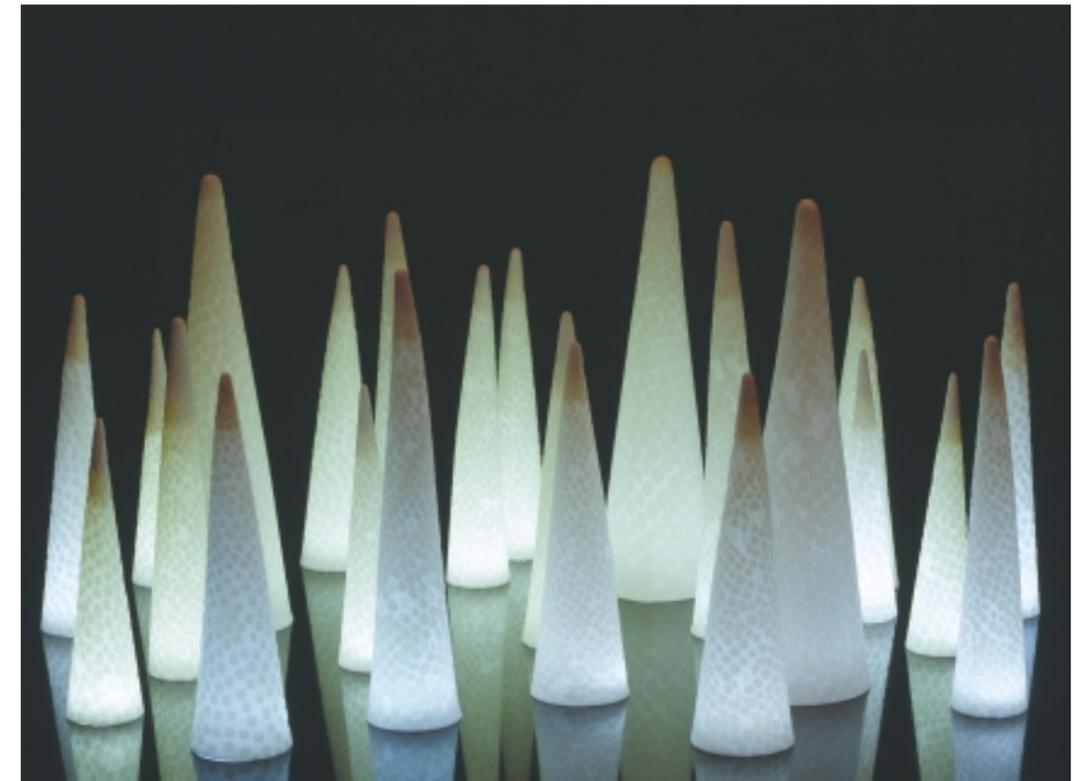
In *Cretaceous Bowl*, the form hangs in space as if it were entirely light, the world contained in the crest of a wave that might at any moment plunge into darkness. Light and time always depend on each other but Mellor has made the briefest moment and the most infinitely extended come together as one. How long have the shells and coral, the landscape caught in this wave-like lip, been slowly ground to particles small enough to reveal their true nature – light itself? They exist only as fossils, shadows within its sub-

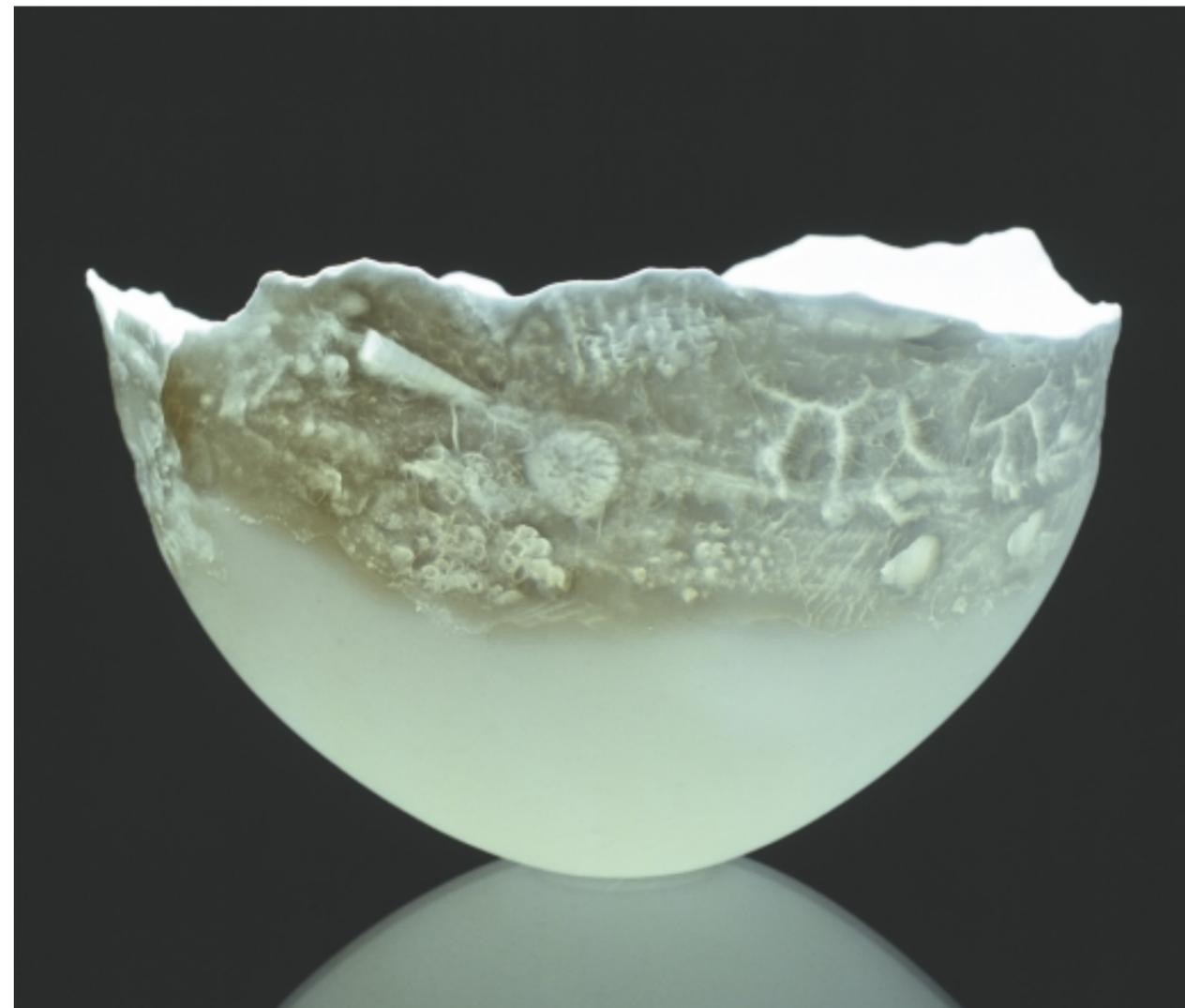
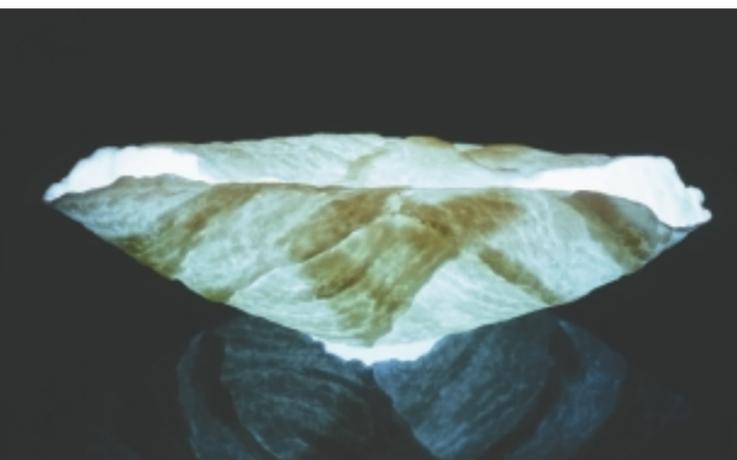
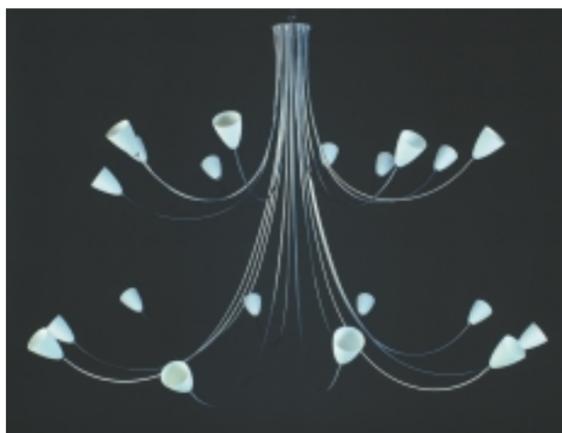
stance. So time now and time forever meet on the wave's crest, the bowl's brim.

SENSIBILITY AND SCIENCE

Through experiments with clay and paper slips, Mellor has achieved a marriage of sensibility and science. She knows how far light sinks into white bone china, and how to set and cut its pristine surface so that light from any source can flow in all directions – delicate, diffuse – or sharpen into bright white edges, spots, shapes and slowly rolling curves. Rhythm – the rhythm of the vessel in its making, the waves, the strata of rocks beneath the rolling hills – has always been important to Mellor. In these new pieces it is crucial. The large and small *Ocean Light Bowls* have paper-clay inserts deeply embedded round their rim, worked so as to ripple and bend the light, as wind does to the water or the waves to the sand. These landscape rhythms also inform the shape of every vessel.

THIS PAGE INSET: Angela Mellor ■ MAIN IMAGE: *Sea Bowls (Serenity)*, bone china, soluble colourants on sandstone base, 2003, W38cm ■ OPPOSITE PAGE TOP: *Dendrophyllia* installation, etched bone china, granite base, LED lights, 2003, H max. 29cm ■ BELOW: *Sea Bowls (Tranquility)*, bone china, soluble colourants on sandstone base, 2003, W24cm.





Given her commitment to nature and the romantic vision, Mellor's enthusiastic acceptance of artificial light as part of her work may seem unlikely. For, however it is placed, a bright white LED must surely have one of two possible effects. The work will become precious, like the crown jewels in a spotlight, or denatured, like those sliced and polished minerals that fluoresce under ultraviolet light. Through her collaboration with Urs Roth, Mellor has transcended these problems, precisely because both artists have understood light as the substance of the work. In *Cretaceous Light* the presence of a carefully modulated LED at the base of the interior of the 17cm cylinder of bone china and textured paper slip is just enough to suggest the light that seeps slowly across the ocean floor. The bright ascent of its interior again assumes the quality of a potent timeless liquid, a draught of immortal life. Of course this is theatrical, but Turner too loved theatre and illusion; he looked for drama in the landscape.

Light also helps with Mellor's interpretations of ocean flora. These tall cones of etched bone china, clustered across a sheet of polished black granite, represent dendrophyllia. They glow from within, each at a slightly different intensity, so that the texture and tone of each luminous surface varies, as if it were living tissue. One almost expects to see them swaying slowly in the current, dark shadows hovering over their granite base. Coral was the inspiration for a small bowl used as a shade for lights. Again mounted in clusters, but on long curved metal stems, this is the riskiest of her work because functional lighting, or even objects that

might simultaneously mimic function and natural growth as do these coral clusters, challenges the idea of light as a universal substance. Her coral clusters escape this fate by a hair's-breadth. Once again, the rhythms of their relationship save the day.

Small, smooth-surfaced bone china *Sea Bowls* also invoke the movement of light through quiet water. Their brilliant white surface is softened with turquoise blue, painted with copper nitrate salts. The three conical *Sea Bowls (Tranquility)* are stained with cobalt chloride, a powder blue with drifting ellipses of cotton wool white, like the circles left by raindrops falling through mist to the ocean, in a stillness that is almost Japanese.

EARLIER WORK

In earlier works Mellor showed a stronger interest in process. The overt manifestation of the way a work was made, in its ultimate form, was an essential part of its presence, its fascination for others. In *Arctic Light Bowl* and related works, the geometric semi-crystalline pattern of overlapped shadows of torn scraps of bone china paper slip reveals a slow, careful construction. The abandonment of this easy revelation is a move towards greater subtlety rather than a fundamental change of direction. The *Arctic Fold* series also uses

bone china paper slip, but its folded form is organic, rather than structural, a fertile seed-like shape, a rolling nut of windblown snow, capturing light in the crisp cleft at its foot. Sometimes, as in these pieces, an LED will emphasise the swirling texture of the clay surface, so that one has the sensation of an arctic landscape in motion. The *Ocean Light* series marks an exciting new departure for Mellor. Her next step will be difficult. Clay and landscape have many affinities but the challenge is to find the poetry which lock them ever closer together for the eye and the memory. QR

David Bromfield is an art critic and writer.

Forthcoming exhibitions: *Coloured Porcelain*, St Joseph Galerie, Leeuwarden, The Netherlands, until December 24. Website www.sjgalerie.nl

Mellor will be exhibiting with the Raglan Gallery at *Collect 2005*, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, January 12-17. Website www.craftscouncil.org.uk/collect

Angela Mellor: Website www.angelamellor.com.au

OPPOSITE PAGE TOP LEFT: *Coral Bud Chandelier*, etched bone china, steel, LED lights, 2003, H120cm ■ BELOW LEFT: *Arctic Fold*, textured bone china paper slip on granite, LED light, 2002, W33cm ■ TOP RIGHT: *Arctic Light Bowl*, textured bone china paper slip, 2002, Ø22.5cm ■ BELOW RIGHT: *Cretaceous Light* (detail), textured bone china paper slip, 2003, H17cm ■ THIS PAGE: *Cretaceous Bowl*, bone china with paper slip inlay, 2003, Ø14.5cm.

Technical Notes

CLAY BODY AND FIRING

All my work is slipcast using bone china casting slip from Walkers Ceramics, Melbourne, Australia. I make up my own paper slip for the textural areas of my work using one third paper pulp (white tissue paper) to two thirds casting slip.

The work is unglazed and fired to 1250°C in an electric kiln to show translucency. I find no soaking is required. Setters are used for round cups and bowl forms. No setters are used for more organic forms and sometimes I slightly distort the form when it comes out of the mould.

DECORATION

Acrylic resist where the design is painted on the dry unfired surface and then sponged back to create a relief design which accentuates the varying degrees of translucency of the object. **Paper slip inlay** here paper slip is poured on to a textured plaster slab and left for a minute or two. This is lifted off and torn to the desired shape and inserted into the mould before pouring in the casting slip.

Coloured work involves the use of soluble salts painted over acrylic resist. I use mainly copper, cobalt and chrome nitrates. Usually 10-20%.