



potted memories

ASHLEY FIONA'S ASHKEEPERS HELP BEREAVED PEOPLE HEAL.

WORDS KOREN HELBIG

Ashley Fiona was just 13 when she came home from school and found her mum lying on the couch, apparently sleeping. It was only later when Ashley's older sister got home that they realised something had gone terribly wrong. After a whirl of ambulances, helicopters and sterile hospital rooms, doctors delivered the awful news: "She'd suffered a massive brain haemorrhage, a clot that exploded in her brain. It was the size of a cricket ball, so there was really no chance. It was out of the blue, very sudden."

Years on, little details of her mother's death still live vividly in Ashley's memory, especially the plastic container that held her ashes for months. "It was ugly, unsightly, unrefined – everything far removed from who she was as such a vibrant human being. It was actually put away in a cupboard next to my dad's bed and we never looked at it," she says. "I'll never forget how we didn't really have anything to create a ritual with; some form of vessel for us all to remember Mum."

As she grew older, Ashley went off to pursue an art career, studying ceramics at UNSW's College of Fine Arts, before landing a job with the Australian Ceramics Association. Then, in 2012, her grandfather died. "When Nan was given the vessel containing his ashes, I could see the tears welling in her eyes and I just thought, 'You shouldn't have to live with this ugly vessel as the lasting memento of your darling husband of 63 years.' I thought, 'I can make you something,'" Ashley says.

That's how Ashley began crafting incredibly beautiful porcelain Ashkeepers, firstly as a gift for her nan, then as an expression of her own life's experience. It was only in April last year that she finally unveiled her creations publicly, hoping to help other bereaved people deal with their loss. "I wanted to create a vessel that could be incorporated into someone's everyday life, as opposed to boxing it up, putting it in a cupboard and not looking at it or being afraid of it," she says. "We share lots of tears and it's a highly emotional process, but I feel so elated after they take their Ashkeeper home with them. The feeling of having helped someone on their grieving journey – in even just the slightest way – is really something special."

From her studio on the New South Wales Central Coast, Ashley hand makes each Ashkeeper from porcelain clay, which she paints freehand with elegant indigo blue designs using cobalt carbonate. The painting alone can take up to 10 hours. "It's a hairy balance of trying to support my wrist, because you can't actually touch the vessel once the cobalt's on or it will smudge. My heart's in my throat, and then if I smudge it all the cursing comes out, because it's a bitch to try and get rid of all of that smudging," she says. "But working with clay is a meditative process and it does help me heal. Making these Ashkeepers really does help me deal with my own loss, incredibly."

Ashley deliberately made the receptacles sturdy enough to pick up and hold, with a lid that inverts into a candleholder. She reckons that's why they're so powerful: they invite family members to create little rituals to remember their lost loved ones, which allows for healthier mourning. "As much as death is real and everyone will face it, it's not something that people want to talk about all the time. So this aids the healing journey by acknowledging that the person existed," she says. "Having beautiful items and photographs that remind me of Mum inside the sphere of the Ashkeeper helps maintain that connection and those memories we shared together. Just because someone has died, it doesn't mean that your relationship with them has to die, too." ❀