We have a spectrum of what is currently practiced under the name of ceramics here in the show. Early influences in NZ have been mainly British and we have been a nation of vessel-makers. That is in evidence here although the functional vessel is little represented  while decorative vessels are abundant. That's often common to many competitions. What is surprising is there is an unusually high number of the figurative - be it animal or human and this has not been a NZ tradition and it's good to see this arena being traversed. Figuration is the oldest area of ceramics -  the votive piece made to marry with offerings and many early cultures have, on excavation, offered up the votive piece- usually referencing fertility in some way; a goddess figures symbolising safe childbirth as was made in Slovenia, or the early Japanese planted works at the corners of rice fields to ask help from the gods for a good harvest, and so on - the figurative connects us to the earliest uses of ceramics - links between clay and magic. These are the two principal divisions with sub-groups within them. Some make reference to commercial uses of clay - perhaps the narrative or written words with a message on the surface of a platter. Others utilise clay's mimetic qualities where it can imitate other materials or other things. There are many ways of referencing our long and rich histories, and we should celebrate them for ceramics is often self-referential in that way and its something I personally enjoy recognising. We need to celebrate our own! Ceramics can be powerful vehicles for meaning through their encounters with  so many contexts and points of reference.

What do I look for in a pot? First and foremost - good form whether a vessel or a figure - proportion must be 'right' which is hard to prescribe but easy to recognise when there, or not. I look for good confident clay handling and finishing - it's often the first ton through the fingers that is the worst. I seek not immaculate completion but prefer  just enough for excellent functionality - I don't much like to see clay 'fiddled with', it's a hand-made work, not factory produced. Just the same I ask for appropriate completion, particularly underneath. Don't just take a slice of clay, cut it into four and plonk the mini blocks on the base to form feet - make something that tells me you are using a malleable material to elevate your piece. Surface needs to be appropriate whether glazed or not. Weight also - and in keeping with the function.

So, what do I choose? The vase by Richard Parker is the piece I'd most like to take home and it receives the premier award. It's heavy - vases should be or the weight of the flowers can tip them over. It's not a teapot that should be light for its size because it will be filled with hot liquid and handled. It's a good height for many a bunch of flowers. It was wire cut from a solid clay block, and not fiddled with, left fresh, then later hollowed once the outside had firmed. The form is dynamic - its method of making is evident. It's different on every facet and the glaze sits perfectly while being a great colour for a vase - green - what could be more appropriate?. The glaze carries an interesting history - T'ang Chinese in style and colour it also has T'ang inserts - those ancient potters would scrape out small hollows in the surface and place medallions of the same glaze in different colours - which often ran during firing. It's happened here. T'ang is one of the most famous of Chinese wares. Those glazes were about 95% red lead but this was made with modern materials but is just as beautiful. But while the surface was redolent of a period over a thousand years old, the form it sits upon is very current. Then the clincher for me was underneath the pot - when still a little soft it was set down on a bed of ferns which have left their mark. Its a link to the place the piece was made. When the staff are not looking lift it (carefully) and look at the most beautiful base on this pot. Every surface has received consideration.

My second prize goes to Greg Barron’s ovoid form - a pot really designed to stand alone. It does not need flowers and there is much happening on this surface. We have wood ash effects upon the bare clay left on top at the opening gifting a vibrant orange, while most is this copper bearing glaze making this subtle matte surface stunningly beautiful and gorgeously modulated all around the pot, changing with every viewpoint....violet, grey, turquoise, blush pinks and wine reds in areas - truly a fantastic glaze finish for a well scaled pot - I have had my hands deep down into its depths - it's also very well made indeed.