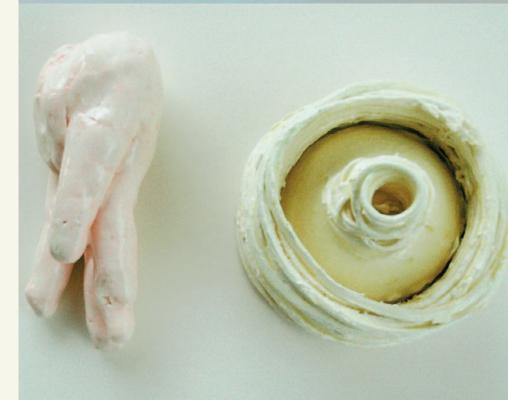
28 June —— 26 July 2008



List of Works









/Familiar:







Christine Whybrew

Screative nz

Christine Whybrew is a Christchurchbased writer currently completing a PhD through the University of Otago She has worked in art museums and galleries throughout Freud developed the concept of repetition-

compulsion to account for the random and

repetitive actions or experiences.² Mullany's

mistaken encounter with the figure at the

bus-stop occurred repeatedly, supporting

which draws upon entrenched skills in

Freud's assertion that the uncanny suppresses

rational thought. Repetition-compulsion draws

upon instinctual behaviour or learned responses

to guide actions. This pervades Mullany's work

base-level making developed at an early age.

Dozens of amorphic, blobular forms that cling

to the wall are created using a process born

from play; stacked towers assembled from

methodically-cut uniform clay components

recall constructive skills found in childhood

creations from Lego components or Meccano.

Freud's dichotomy of the strange and familiar

reflect the symbiotic relationship between art

was later applied by Theodor W. Adorno to

and society and the reciprocal influence one

published Aesthetic Theory Adorno developed

this concept and considered a place for art

independent of prevailing ideologies and

expectations. In the current body of work,

Mullany responds to Adorno's observation that

"estrangement from the world is a moment of

art." 3 For Mullany, the best results occur when

conscious thought is disengaged and intuitive

Processes governed by the artist's technical

conjunction with subconscious intuition and

results achieved in glazing and firing. Although

trained in wheel-thrown vessel-making, Mullany

enjoys making non-functional objects free from

utilitarian types and pre-defined form: "When

people ask you to make stuff it takes the focus

away from what you're doing. And the same

something."4 The development of technical

skills enables this creative freedom; however

he also relishes the limitations of his craft. He

is attracted to the inherent fragility and

applies when you ask yourself to make

the often unpredictable and unrepeatable

the constraints imposed by conventional

responses direct the process of making.

ability and conscious choices operate in

has upon the other. In his posthumously

uncontrolled effects that occur through

/Familiar

Nicholas Mullany tells a story of catching the bus home as a student in Dunedin. In the evening light he sees a silhouetted figure waiting at his regular stop. Presuming the next bus is due, he runs to the stop, yet as he arrives realises the figure is in fact a life-sized mannequin, positioned as a hawker at the door to an adjacent travel agency. So, Mullany stands with the mannequin as he waits for the bus. Although now knowing the object to be inanimate he feels its presence as though it were human; a conduit for the silent, anonymous company of a stranger.

He uses this anecdote to illustrate the subconscious and often irrational influence objects have on our experience of the world. Mullany relates this to Sigmund Freud's concept of the uncanny – the paradoxical sensation of something familiar appearing unexpected or strange. Citing the example of E. T. A. Hoffman's novel, The Sandman, Freud applied his theory to the illusion of an inanimate entity conveying characteristics of being alive. Mullany explores this concept in his art by making ceramic sculptures that alienate him, as although reliant on the intervention of their maker, these objects possess meaning and purpose that is unknown to him. Predictable, repeatable results are not always his goal and he accepts that although his art is the product of his own creation it possesses autonomy beyond his determination. vulnerability of ceramics and enjoys the potential for slow and involved processes to curtail spontaneity.

Methods developed by the artist challenge him as he encourages accidents, but also endeavours to replicate chance occurrences. Attempts to recreate results achieved through acts of pure inquisitive play are foiled by rational thought and structural properties of materials. Mullany's wall-mounted blobular pieces were initially developed through his efforts to replicate an earlier experiment whereby he successfully moulded clay within a balloon. The forms are moulded from rubber gloves that are contorted through both the artist's intervention and the behaviour of the materials. A concoction of plaster, Egyptian paste, paperclay and toilet paper is left to set in the glove and takes its own form as the mixture settles and the glove contracts. Further shifting in shape occurs as the set form is removed from the mould, applied with slip and fired in the kiln.

The inverse circumstance can also apply as methods which at first failed him are refined through perseverance. Pieces assembled from rags of ripped tee-shirts are saturated in slip scrunched or wrapped around found objects. As the piece is fired, the rag disintegrates in the kiln leaving the hardened slip form. This process began as an experiment and initially met with failure. Mullany revisited this identical process over a period of years and has met with success through gaining greater knowledge in the properties of the materials and enhanced skill in working them. Yet, despite his control over the process he leaves the final result to chance, allowing accidents to happen such as unexpected curling or collapsing of form.

These objects resonate with ambiguity. Individual pieces become sites of archaeological excavation as the story of its origins is deciphered through idiosyncrasies, markings or residues of the creation process. In this context the form is meaningless except as artefactual evidence of its making. Although coded with the artist's personal recollections, the form is not

expressive and is ultimately determined by the processes engaged in its creation.

Mullany acknowledges an affinity with sculptors of the mid-to late-twentieth century, particularly Lee Bontecou, Alberto Giacometti Cy Twombly and ceramic artists Lucia Fontana and Gillian Lowndes These artists share an emphasis on intuition and irrationality in the process of making, and a proclivity for assemblage or composite sculpture. As subjects for inspiration – studied mainly in reproduction – the works of these artists operates in a realm independent of the maker's intention or control. Meanings are drawn from and imposed upon objects by a surrounding discourse that empowers inanimate objects with the autonomous ability to communicate at the exclusion of its maker. Mullany welcomes the location of his own art in such a position and pleads a lack of concern for whether or not individual pieces aesthetically or conceptually appeal to him. Once an object leaves his studio he permits it the freedom to be displayed and interpreted by others, inviting the viewer to enter into an uncanny relationship with the object.

Nick Mullany





- 2. Ibid., 389-391 3. Theodor W. Adorno. Aesthetic Theory, trans C. Lenhardt
- (New York, 1984), 262 4. Conversation with
- Nicholas Mullany. 10 May 2008

Nicholas Mullany is a Christchurch based ceramist who trained at Otago Polytechnic E nlmo@lycos.com.

Photography by Kate Mahoney

