

28 June —
26 July 2008

/Familiar:



Strange

Ceramics by
Nicholas Mullany

1. Group A (1 piece)

2. Group B (2 pieces)

3. Group C (8 pieces)

4. Group D (10 pieces)

5. Group E (20 pieces)

6. Group F (25 pieces)

7. Group G (30 pieces)

Works 1-7 made of Rag, Egyptian paste, paperclay, paper, plaster, glaze.

8. Untitled (Group of 3)

Rag, Egyptian paste, paperclay, glaze

9. Untitled (Group of 2)
- Rag, paperclay, slipcast components, glaze

Untitled (Toilet rolls)

Paperclay, iron wash, glaze

Untitled (Toilet rolls)

Paperclay, iron wash, glaze

Untitled (Toilet rolls)

Paperclay, iron wash, glaze

Untitled (Wad) 2007

Paperclay, glaze,

Untitled (Chips & Dip) 2007

Paperclay, glaze,

Untitled (Small Stack)
- Paperclay, glaze

Untitled (Tall Stack)

Paperclay, glaze

Untitled (Side Stack)

Paperclay, glaze

Untitled (Side Stack)

Paperclay, glaze

Untitled (Ended Stack)

Paperclay, glaze

Untitled (Ended Cylinder)

Paperclay, slipcast components, glaze

All works produced in 2008 unless otherwise stated

All works courtesy of the artist

List of Works





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/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.¹ 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.

Freud developed the concept of *repetition-compulsion* to account for the random and uncontrolled effects that occur through repetitive actions or experiences.² Mullany's mistaken encounter with the figure at the bus-stop occurred repeatedly, supporting 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 which draws upon entrenched skills in 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 was later applied by Theodor W. Adorno to reflect the symbiotic relationship between art and society and the reciprocal influence one has upon the other. In his posthumously 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 responses direct the process of making.

Processes governed by the artist's technical ability and conscious choices operate in conjunction with subconscious intuition and the often unpredictable and unrepeatable results achieved in glazing and firing. Although trained in wheel-thrown vessel-making, Mullany enjoys making non-functional objects free from the constraints imposed by conventional 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 applies when you ask yourself to make 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

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.

1. Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", in *Collected Papers*, trans. Joan Riviere (London, 1949), 368-407
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

Nick Mullany

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Photography by Kate Mahoney

