

# Empire of Dirt

WRITING ABOUT CERAMICS

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# Empire of Dirt: Writing about ceramics

Welcome to the Empire of Dirt, a rather grand nomenclature for an exhibition with such earthy origins. As with all empires those assembled here are an eclectic group, gathered not by military domination but rather by a simple invitation. Friends, friends of friends and others whose writing came highly recommended were invited to select a ceramic work that captured their imagination and to craft a personal response in words. Expanding the conversation about ceramics through lively, varied, challenging, dynamic and surprising writing is at the heart of this exhibition. In a rather neat reversal of the more usual exhibition format, Empire of Dirt, like its predecessor, Talking About (Objectspace 2004), places the writing centre stage while the works are present to illustrate the words. As the audience you are invited to be entertained and enlightened by the creative diversity of approaches, to appreciate how the writers capture the personality, poignancy, the art and beauty of their chosen works, offering us new lenses through which to see ceramics.

While there is cohesion of intent, Empire of Dirt is also full of paradoxes and contrasts. An exhibition makes a spectacle of an object. Objects that in everyday real life sits unobtrusively in a quiet corner have been singled out for attention, inviting consideration of their strength of form and purpose. The Bathroom Sink usually resides unremarked in a domestic location, Brickell's Big Wonky Pot also lives in a bathroom unostentatiously providing storage for spare toilet paper rolls. The translucent radiance of the Dental Prosthetics belies that they are most successful when they do not draw attention to themselves and the Bagwall is invisible until it fails in its function. Our writers have made these private pieces public. They have lifted them from their usual environment and drawn our attention to them, elevating them on a plinth they are exposed to our gaze; their words ask us to consider them in a new light.

The framing of an object is important for the reading of its cultural and economic value. By bringing together these ceramic objects in a gallery setting we are messing with their status. The Orange Glaze tea jar, the Palestinian Arts and Crafts bowl and the Vieux Paris vase, all originally commercial consumer products, rise above utilitarian domesticity by being singled out for inclusion in the exhibition where the writers solicit our appreciation of their history and ebullience. Giving attention and consideration to an object can change the perception of its value; so it is that The Rubble, Relics and Wasters, all pieces which reference the discarded detritus of making, are transformed first by their makers and then through written praise and visual honouring.

In this exhibition the personal is made public. Objects that have beguiled their owners and appreciators are doing their darndest to solicit our affections too. Through words we are drawn into the fate of Fomison's Head of a Cat, always rubbing up against your leg and we are invited to share the Enjoyment of Freedom embodied in a refined teapot. We meet Mexican diablitos, little devils, who tempted the tourist to take them home and have bound them to their maker. Radiant sulphuric yellow glaze rims a rich dark pool in a bowl with a deep footing that can be read as emblematic of an enduring creative relationship. In another corner The Poet, a tall enigmatic gentleman of many parts enchants us, compelling us to don a metaphorical "costume to invite undiluted pleasure" and requests we join him on a journey to savour the delights of fired earth here in this Empire of Dirt.

Objectspace would like to acknowledge and thank all the contributors to this project. The writers and lenders of works to Empire of Dirt and also the private collectors and galleries for generously allowing their pieces to be included: Raewyn Atkinson and Bowen Gallery, Wellington, Douglas Lloyd Jenkins, Sheridan Keith and Blikfang Gallery, Richard Fahey and Anna Miles at Anna Miles Gallery, David and Caroline de Wet at Oralart Dental Ceramics, all in Auckland.

# On Absence, And New Presence

Moyra Elliott

“My work speaks for itself”, is a mantra oft repeated and for much of our history of studio ceramics, this was largely true. Works consisted of functional vessels and only visual formal values applied as potential for utility was easily perceptible to a practiced eye and the maker seen as part of that large cast of anonymous craftsmen — unself-conscious yet authentic. Training was based upon traditional empirical lines and viewing was something close to essentialism — a belief that there existed necessary properties to works and the maker simply channelled those through submersion into repetition and process.

“My work speaks for itself” is today a sort of shut-down, inviting no further discourse.

It perhaps infers the maker wants their silence to be interpreted as some marker of authenticity. But failure to engage signals reluctance to put that authenticity at risk and avoid the knotty task of indicating what was in consideration toward making the work. It’s something of an art in itself giving clues to what were those thoughts, yet at the same time offering sufficient scope for the viewer or the collector to decode in their own way and allowing a critical interpretive space into which the critic or the curator can step. This, without falling into those ever-helpful shorthand phrases from the standard list of unthinking banalities; what Garth Clark has pungently labelled the “treacly, sentimental, overly subjective, belly-button gazing, warm and fuzzy, mud as spiritualism school of personal poetry.”<sup>1</sup>

Viewers will bring what they can to a work but when this mantra is upheld, missing is the artist’s input which can add significantly to the mix. Not that artists own all meaning of their work. Theirs is a contribution. The work may not do what the artist thinks it does. It was, I believe, Jasper Johns who said, “You may think you are making chewing gum, but society is using it for glue; You are making glue”.<sup>2</sup> In this post-modern art world, that has been gleefully labelled, “a giant game of 52 card pickup”<sup>3</sup>,

we learn that there are no absolutes and that all is subjective and relative so no single voice can be the last word. Meaning becomes a conglomeration of associations seen through a distorting personal lens.

Ceramic texts have almost exclusively been in ceramic-centric magazines which assumed a supportive role for, by and to the sector and were generally ignored in the wider art world. Technical articles on how-I-do-it and treatises on glaze formulations formed a goodly portion of content. Then there were personally written explanations of motivations, explicating the artist’s past, influences, and self-declared preoccupations and finally there were those third person, adjectivally heavy profiles on an artist that could read as written by the artist’s best friend, and often were. What has been largely missing has been the critical article which concerns primarily the object rather than the maker, and considers it in the context of other art and of objects and ideas that permeate the modern world. Artists from the wider context expect, and accept, the critical article and its more rigorous scrutiny of their work or event. Ceramists must also if they wish to be viewed in the interplay of actions and ideas that characterises the current state of flux around clay practices.

Ceramics currently mutative status derives from both established artists through to students,<sup>4</sup> and writing in ceramics has, and must further transform, as the field transforms. Now, sites for texts carry subtitles such as, “...broader and more interdisciplinary research into all those categories of human activity which are indicated by the term ceramics”. Leach and Yanagi, with their astringent, and mutually beneficial stances on ceramics’ frontiers, must be spinning in their graves.

Ceramics metamorphosis from untouchable to significant attention by fine arts has been signalled for some time and in the fashion of such art-world transactions, already there is some writing about how that even more shudder-inducing practice, textiles, is the new, new black.

The attention is curious compared with ceramics' threatened extinction in tertiary education in some parts of the world. Its adaptability in many spheres helps account for its growing appeal but makes ceramics difficult to categorise and so clay ends up in some institutions under headings like 3D design — where only a bit, fits. On the other hand, ceramics' allure makes for student (read client) demand and therefore provision, under their present mandate, by fine art schools. However, often ignoring its versatility, many conventional art schools want clay courses taught only under the rubric of fine arts. This lack means ceramics is understood only partially and its full potential and flourish unappreciated.

Similarly, writing on ceramics, when viewed only through a fine arts lens summons this comment from Edmund de Waal, "the mere addition of 'neo' 'post' 'anti' or 'meta' does not qualify as intelligent rethinking of agendas. The scattering of a little post-modern bird seed is not going to change the status of theory within our discipline... we have to regroup ceramics within the material cultures from which they come"<sup>5</sup>. However some ceramic artists gravitate to an academic reading on their work, perhaps it seems to help accrete a seriousness to their efforts that has, in their view, hitherto been unrecognised. Conversely, Clare Twomey, writing on the contemporary diversity in craft practice that includes "potters, object-makers, hybrid craft makers, sculptural artists, installation clay artists and temporary time-based works. These titles and terms have been borrowed and stolen from other art disciplines to give an identity and relevance to the activities undertaken. This embracing of terminology is vital..."<sup>6</sup>.

My own leanings incline toward De Waal's stance in not seeking theoretical borrowings from literature. The fit is generally ill. We don't need more jargon but accurate language evidencing thinking about, and a concentrated focus on, the work; on what is actually there, followed by an assured response with what the informed viewer feels about the work. From writers based within ceramics in

some way we might expect some scrutiny of means where it's consequential to outcome. There is significance in the process of making, and in particular the idea of making — not simply as some troublesome intermediary between intent and end result as though craft knowledge can be taken down from a supermarket shelf and used. We undertake contextualisation by ceramic history and culture; some comparisons and instances that offer relevance. Our discipline has been around too long for these not to figure, at least in potential, for they are grounding. From writers originating in other fields we welcome their various dispositions which can disentangle our codes from familiar conventions. Fiction, poetry, science, sociology, anthropology, ethnology and commerce all initiate a variety of perspectives which can add immeasurably to a reader's appreciation of a text and widen understandings of ceramics. And the field is enriched.

Virginia Woolf: "The thing that really matters, that makes a writer a true writer and his work permanent is that he should really see."

1. Garth Clark, "How Envy Killed the Crafts", 2008, p.5
2. Kirk Varnedoe, Ed. "Jasper Johns: Writings, sketchbook Notes, Interviews". MOMA, New York, 1996. P86
3. Claire Finin, "On Being Young, or Criticality and 21st Century Academia". AJF, August 2014.
4. Elam School of Fine Arts, University of Auckland, has this year seen maximum capacity, at 18 each semester, of students taking an introductory course in ceramics.
5. E. De Waal, "No Ideas but in Things", paper given at the Ceramic Millennium Conference, Amsterdam, July, 1999.
6. Clare Twomey, "Contemporary Clay", in *Breaking the Mould: New Approaches to Ceramics*. London, Black Dog Publishing, 2007. P26.

# my rubble

Martin Poppelwell

*Discarded worked clay*

Courtesy of Martin Poppelwell



the curator has allowed me 5 more days to finish the text for this show. after a conversation with her in person i explained that i didn't collect pottery any longer and nor did i regard what i made as a useful form for the 'empire' project. i was however very interested in the notion of the language that orbits objects and in this case objects made from clay. so this led me to a significant part of my workshop where all the discarded pieces of unfired work are biffed, launched, flicked and splattered..in time drying and becoming a healthy pile of dirt.

this rubble is like a dusty dull beacon for me. it reminds one of all the practical attributes that the 'clay' material has. this lump

of fragments are neither pottery or art, they are something else. this is pretty much exactly where i want my thinking to be, a loose scribble of uncertainty.

above this pile is a wall totally covered in drawings and notes, lists, musings, cross outs, scribbles, poetry and colour tests. these are the things that one has draped and wrapped over, around, through and under pottery. it is this combination of dirt and diagram which i continue to build — kind of like ongoing wonderings of the what if and why not. so why not list a small list of these musings to find what the effect would be, each piled one upon the other, clay destined sound bites.

this lump of fragments are neither pottery or art, they are something else. this is pretty much exactly where i want my thinking to be, a loose scribble of uncertainty.

- national grid
- the idiots are back
- this show isn't about laughter
- uphilldecline
- you tested positive for being negative
- fontana
- il sesso era buono i vicini era una sigaretta
- mad bad sad glad
- knocking off my own knock offs
- gave up punk for flower arranging
- exploits of the ante christ
- elias...elias..who is going to feed you
- lack of funding
- am i the only scoundrel and bunglar alive
- everyones doing everyone else
- thoughts that don't tremble are frozen
- nothing of the month club
- peanut flavoured cashews
- there's plenty more fish in the ocean, but my bait ain't what it used to be
- subliterate manifesto
- good idea..you're fired
- this one
- that one
- i used to be into jesus but moses had better tablets
- the last christian i knew of died on the cross
- now what
- my cheap lines aren't that cheap anymore
- vice this, assistant that, deputy other thing
- if this is art i'm leaving
- creativity means not copying
- a must for any serious collection
- the 2 most common elements are hydrogen and stupidity
- leaving would be a good idea
- ...

# An interview between craft historian Dr Softbod and the reclusive ceramic wall- sculpture, Dr Longbod

Transcribed by Bronwyn Lloyd

*The Poet, ceramic Longbod*

June Black

Courtesy of Sheridan Keith

**DR SOFTBOD** (Enters the room. She is slightly out of breath and carrying a case, which she places on the table and unzips) Thank you for agreeing to meet with me Dr Longbod. I appreciate your time.

**DR LONGBOD** (From the wall he fingers the bronze clock dangling from the collar of his 'Costume in which to withstand the flight of time and see one's way through its pitfalls') (speaking quietly) Time, Dr Softbod, as a friend once said, is simply value bestowed upon each moment by the close proximity of death.

(aside) I only hope that this interview doesn't waste too many of the valuable moments remaining to me.

**DR SB** (distracted) What's that? I couldn't quite hear you. (pulling the components of a contraption from the case and untangling the various cords, which she attempts to attach to her laptop) If you can just bear with me for a moment Dr Longbod while I set up the Apparatus for Extracting Secrets from Fired Earth.

**DR LB** (laughing) My dear Dr Softbod, you won't need that.

**DR SB** (confused) Why not?

**DR LB** Because I don't have any secrets.

**DR SB** (disconcerted) Oh, I see ... But I use this for all my interviews with ceramics. I should probably power it up anyway ... just in case.

**DR LB** (firmly) I'm afraid your 21st century contraptions will not work on me, Dr Softbod. Instruments such as that are not forged for the purposes of increasing understanding. Your generation want devices that do all the thinking for you, and while I'm loath to point out the obvious - that is why you have all grown soft.

**DR SB** (puts down the cords, slightly on the defensive) Well, what do you suggest instead?

**DR LB** Allow me to propose an alternative. I'd like you to close your eyes.

**DR SB** (with some apprehension she closes her eyes)

**DR LB** You find yourself inside the warehouse of the great Costumier Henri Folli. What do you see?

**DR SB** How extraordinary. The space is very large and so quiet. There are mannequins everywhere draped in all manner of



elaborate costumes and there's a huge row of shelves against the back wall filled with accessories.

**DR LB** Good. I'd like you to approach the shelves and locate the fifth row up from the floor and the seventh cubbyhole from the left.

**DR SB** I'm making my way along the shelves. One, two, three, four, five, and seven along. Yes ... here it is.

**DR LB** Excellent. Now, tell me what the label says.

**DR SB** It says 'Costume to liberate the imagination from collar and tie thinking'.

**DR LB** That will do nicely. Now, I'd like you to take out the costume and describe it to me.

**DR SB** (carefully extracting the costume) Let's see. It's a headdress of some kind, with what appear to be multiple paper ribbons tightly curled across the crown and falling in looser ringlets down the sides and back — something like a judge's wig.

**DR LB** That's it. Now, gently unwind one of the curls on the crown and tell me what you see.

**DR SB** (places her index finger inside a curl and draws it out. She gasps) I can't believe it ... It's a story I wrote when I was a child about a lonely boy who...

**DR LB** (interrupts) I don't need to hear the story Dr Softbod. That is your own. I just needed to verify that your imagination was still intact and therefore able to be liberated.

**DR SB** I See. How remarkable.

**DR LB** Indeed it is. Now, I would like you to place the article on your head and our interview can begin.

**DR SB** (puts on the headdress. The text-laden curls unfurl like streamers and fly loose around her head. She opens her eyes) I'm ready.

**DR LB** And so am I.

**DR SB** Firstly, let's talk about your identity.

**DR LB** As you wish.

**DR SB** As I understand it, you were a member of the expedition party led by Dr Endedus in the middle of last century to reach the summit of Mt. Eyedull Chatta.

**DR LB** That is correct.

**DR SB** Are you able to confirm which member of the party you were? Are you in fact Dr Endedus himself?

**DR LB** Your question is a complex one. I am Dr Endedus, and I am not, by which I mean that all Longbods are in a sense avatars of Dr Endedus. We are, or were, a collective, united by a single purpose.

**DR SB** That purpose being to save the 20th century?

**DR LB** That is correct.

**DR SB** I have a quote here from the Public Relations Officer to the expedition: 'Perceived as an image assimilated as an emotion we hope to arrive at the soul of the universe, then to light up personal existence, broaden living horizons, deepen the depth of consciousness and forge new instruments of understanding'.

Can you comment on whether the expedition succeeded in its aims?

**DR LB** You know very well that it did not. Your softness, Dr Softbod, is a consequence of that failure, as I have already pointed out.

**DR SB** (ignoring the insult) But Dr Endedus did reach the summit.

**DR LB** He reached the summit of Eyedull Chatta, but he failed in his quest.

**DR SB** To assimilate image and emotion?

**DR LB** Yes.

**DR SB** But what does that mean?

**DR LB** Come now Dr Softbod. You tell me. Let your costume set your imagination free.

**DR SB** (hesitantly touching the text streamers billowing about her head) I assume ... it's the linking of what we see to what we feel.

**DR LB** Precisely!

**DR SB** (confidence growing) So Dr Endedus regarded his exhibition as a failure because he couldn't achieve the link between image and emotion?

**DR LB** That's an interesting slip of the tongue.

**DR SB** What? Oh, I'm sorry. I meant expedition, not exhibition.

**DR LB** What you said is what you meant.

**DR SB** (perplexed) Pardon? Oh yes ... I see what you're getting at. In a way an expedition is like an exhibition where an artist's ideas are brought together in a body of work, each one playing a part, just like assembling an expedition party. And they are mounted on the gallery walls as the pinnacle of the artist's achievement at that moment in time.

**DR LB** Yes, surely the desire to scale the mountain of Eyedull Chatta is the objective of any artist.

**DR SB** A somewhat risky business as Dr Endedus discovered, and perhaps the reason why he claimed 'that all success is just failure delayed.'

**DR LB** But is the failure on the part of the one who tried to show people something, or on the part of those people who failed to see?

**DR SB** Perhaps the failure was the result of there being nothing to see. In fact, wasn't that the very point Dr Endedus made in his summit speech when he described his expedition as a fiasco — a dumb show to sustain consciousness trapped in a no-word void between the observer and the observed?

**DR LB** But that begs the question — who is the observer and who is being observed?

**DR SB** Surely, the object is the thing observed?

**DR LB** And yet, Dr Softbod, I am looking at you now.

**DR SB** (self-consciously) Yes, I suppose you are. And I am looking at you.

**DR LB** Good. And now that we have established that we are both seeing, and being seen, we are a step closer to fulfilling Dr Endedus's dream of filling the no-word void.

**DR SB** (realisation dawning) As we are doing today.

**DR LB** Yes, Dr Softbod, as we are doing today. Fill the void. Tell me what you see.

**DR SB** (as Dr Softbod begins to speak, a single purple streamer sprouts from the headdress and slowly extends across the space between them)

I see a long ceramic figure of many parts, each one connected to the next in a purposeful composite of shapes and textures that make up the whole.

I see various time-pieces adorning your costume, all showing different hours — they are no time, and all time, in one.

I see medallions, with shiny pâte de verre inserts that tell of your triumphs and your defeats.

I see the broken fingers on your right hand, a sacrifice borne with dignity, and the way that your left hand is positioned with the palm facing out in a gesture of collegiality.

And I see your face — your wise, dark eyes, full of longing, and your head bent to one side as if you are listening — to anyone and everyone.

**DR LB** I am listening Dr Softbod — and so are you. (At that moment the clocks on Dr Longbod's costume begin to chime in unison) Alas, Dr Softbod, our time together is at an end.

**DR SB** So soon? It feels as if we were just getting started. Thank you Dr Longbod, (reaching up to remove the headdress) you've taught me a great deal. I suppose I should close my eyes again and return the costume to Henri Folli's warehouse.

**DR LB** (warmly) Keep it, Dr Softbod. It suits you. Wear it and remember me. And then perhaps, just perhaps, Dr Endedus's expedition might not have been a failure after all.

#### **A note on the text:**

The form and content of this dialogue was inspired by 'The Purple Umbrella', an unpublished script of an experimental 'Play in Intentionalism for four walls' written in the 1960s by artist June Black (1910–2009). The play, which is about Dr Endedus's valiant but ill-fated expedition, was never performed. The character parts were designed for Black's cast of fantastical ceramic 'Bods' — each one clad in a metaphorical costume designed to fit that particular character's role in the expedition party.

Although the identity of this particular Bod is not known, it is thought to be one of Black's earliest ceramic wall-sculptures, and is likely to have been exhibited in her first solo exhibition, *The Search for the Fabulous* idea at the Architectural Centre Gallery in Wellington (1958).

# A paragraph and a poem after Tony Fomison's 'Head of a cat'

Gregory O'Brien

*Head of a Cat*

Tony Fomison

Courtesy of Gregory O'Brien

Photo Bruce Foster



## **Fate of a cat**

What became of the cat that was always rubbing up against your leg? Whenever I came around, it was always the same. Always rubbing. Always your leg. The same leg. But one day the cat was gone. and when I mentioned this you cited the first law of thermodynamics then added, matter-of-factly, that it was only a matter of time, with that amount of friction — with that loss

and gain of heat — the cat had rubbed itself out... Now I find the missing cat's face in the most unlikely places. It has become a footprint left in clay, the sole of an old shoe, a leaf that has blown from a garden fire or that comes to us from some outer province of autumn. I see the cat's face in mud-pool and mirror, puddle and milk bowl. Through its eyes I can see forever.

**Whangarei head, 1981**

After the face of a cat, made by Tony Fomison at the studio of Yvonne Rust, Parua Bay, around the time of the Springbok Tour.

Ancient  
as I am,  
fired and forged  
moon-faced  
or freshly

formed—  
a lost cat  
lingers, her head  
an outcrop or  
island

a brick  
almost or  
paving stone. Once  
I had a cat  
the shape

of Northland—  
rough-cast, thrown,  
a reminder the outer edge  
of anything is all  
we ever see.

Face adrift  
above its mineral  
body, or supping from  
an earthen bowl  
in kiln-light

its sideways  
glance became  
a scarred, inconsolable  
face, and its face  
an imprint

of foot  
or paw. Together  
we sought the company  
of smoke-like things,  
of rust

and rustling,  
Yvonne of the well-  
calibrated furnace, her  
fired-up world  
from which

arose this  
circus of  
hollowed eyes, music  
of fingerprinted ears—  
this allotment

of earth  
and the one  
perfect afternoon of a  
lamentable year  
given us.

# Beach Artware: A bittersweet success story

Valerie Ringer Monk

*Orange Glaze tea jar*  
Daniel Steenstra for  
Beach Artware  
Courtesy of Valerie Ringer Monk



In the early 1970s glaze chemist Peter Beach was regretfully asked to leave his job at Crown Lynn because severe arthritis prevented him from wearing safety shoes.

Undeterred, Peter and his wife Eva set up business in the family garage, recruiting Daniel Steenstra from Crown Lynn as their potter and designer.

They soon filled their first order for 1500 slipcast lamp bases for a New Zealand chain store, and began making hand-thrown kitchen containers.

Within weeks they were so busy Eva left her supermarket job to help out, then their daughter Sharon left school at not quite 15 to join the new enterprise.

Very early on Peter developed a very popular orange glaze and soon they had to move to a factory at 2A Rabone St in Henderson to make room for increased production.

At its peak Beach Artware operated from three adjoining factory buildings with up to 13 staff. They made 600 hand-thrown pieces a day, plus a range of slipcast ware.

In the early 1970s, Peter told the local newspaper that Eva was the business brain behind the enterprise. 'She's co-director of the company, company secretary, sales director, kiln loader, packer, delivery girl.' Peter was the technical expert with overall management of the factory. Importantly, he was able to create new glazes. His first matt orange was made with uranium oxide, then he changed to a glossy orange when uranium imports were banned.

Sharon threw pots as well as casting, glazing, finishing, and loading the kiln. Her script is seen on Beach Artware kitchen containers. One day she carefully inscribed 'CORNFLOWER' on a range of orange jars — her dad was not impressed.

Daniel Steenstra was the star thrower. He was 'like a machine' says Eva, able to quickly turn out hundreds of pieces all exactly the same, with perfectly fitting lids. According to the Beach family, Steenstra learned his skills at home in Holland during the war. Kept inside hidden from the Germans, he spent his days throwing pots, over and over again, from the same clay.

Other specialist throwers included Reg Matthews, Steve Fullmer and Peter Lenker. Terry Williams was the glazer for many years.

Eva would rush down to the factory in the early mornings to empty the kilns and sometimes the pots were still so hot they burned the boxes as her mum was packing them.

Less skilled jobs were often filled by travellers — among them Hare Krishna devotees who took time off during the day for their religious obligations.

Peter and Eva sold to about 90 outlets throughout New Zealand and exported to Australia. An initial order from Melbourne was for 1000 pots. They also had a small shop at the factory — sometimes buyers were lined up waiting when the kilns were opened.

The orange was hugely popular and it was a constant struggle to keep up with demand.

Eva would rush down to the factory in the early mornings to empty the kilns and sometimes the pots were still so hot they burned the boxes as her mum was packing them, says Sharon.

‘The boxes would burst into flames, and then Dad would be growling — you can’t open the kiln this early. The pots will all crack. But Mum had orders to fill — it was so funny.’

As well as orange ware, Beach made various shades of brown and green, and a deep midnight blue with gold sparkles. There were kitchen jars, spice jars, jugs, vases, salt pigs, salt and peppers, mugs, coffee pots, tankards, bird feeders and incense burners. Most Beach ware is unmarked, though some slipcast pieces have Traditional NZ or Beach Artware on the base. Occasionally the maker’s initials are impressed on hand-thrown ware — e.g ‘DS’ for Daniel Steenstra.

Before long, Peter and Eva could afford brand-new matching automatic Mustang cars, and they built a stylish Spanish-style

house complete with a swimming pool on ten acres in Kaukapakapa.

Sadly the family’s success was short-lived.

Peter’s arthritis left him severely crippled. He made a track for his seat to run along at his workbench, and had his painfully gnarled fingers surgically shortened so that he could continue to work.

In June 1977 Peter died from complications related to his arthritis. He was only 42. Despite his illness, he remained cheerful, positive and energetic to the last. After his death, Peter Lenker, who had potted at the factory for some time, wrote to Eva:

Peter was ‘such a fine man and so well in control of his life. It’s a shame that he was made to suffer so long. It still impresses me the way he carried on with life as though he had no disability at all... I consider it my good fortune to have come in contact with him and to be able to work for the two of you in your close-knit family business.’

After Peter’s death, Eva sold Beach Artware to pay death duties — which were abolished very soon after. The new owner Don McKenzie renamed the business Kiln Craft then Clay Craft.

I found this kitchen jar in a charity shop in Te Aroha about two years ago. It is one of thousands made by Beach Artware in the mid-1970s. It is hand thrown by Daniel Steenstra and glazed in glossy orange, with a glaze known as grey star around the top. There is no maker’s mark.<sup>1</sup>

1. Interview with Eva Beach and Sharon Beach Codlin, June 2015. (unpublished).

Newspaper article provided by the Beach family, circa 1973.

New Zealand Pottery website <http://www.newzealandpottery.net/>

# More ground, and in my own way

David Craig

*Big Wonky Pot*

Barry Brickell

Courtesy of Richard Fahey



“I could not find anyone with whom to share the excitement I had.... But because of this I found I could cover more ground, and in my own way”.<sup>1</sup>

Meeting Barry in 1949, Barry just 14, a young but already prominent Len Castle was perplexed.

“From the very first meeting with Barry, I knew I had met an unusual person, to say the least. We talked about pots and fire, and Barry told me about a deposit of clay on a Takapuna racecourse”<sup>2</sup>. It was, Castle recalled, “very good clay”: fine, cream coloured, and plastic and it became the clay Castle used to make his first stoneware pots, as he, with the rest of his craft generation, realised the possibilities stoneware and the Anglo-Oriental movement offered for producing a distinctive, ceramic art based on local materials.

Castle was one of many contemporaries drawn to the extraordinary young man obsessed with fire, clay, steam, engineering, trains, indigeneity, art. Each contemporary had their own engagement, magnetised and then often repelled by his remarkable unshakable energy and the discoveries and resources it perpetually generated. Barry would visit, pester, seek mentorship and correspond voluminously with the older potter, becoming someone Castle would variously admire, go prospecting and then teaching with and get clay from. But Barry was also someone the polite, restrained Castle would admonish “more than once” for his endless demands.<sup>3</sup> “Barry was a very keen correspondent”, Castle recalled, of a time in the mid-50s when Castle was working at the Leach pottery in Devon and Barry sent him numerous annotated drawings of kilns he had designed; “I was less so”, and when Castle returned home, Barry was on Queen’s wharf, waiting loyally. In later years, he would be kept at something of a wary distance, while Castle himself charted a smooth and relatively unchallenged path to the top of the erupting New Zealand ceramics movement.

Nor was Castle alone in thinking Barry unusual “to say the least”, and a little thrown by the realisation. Barry’s neighbours, his teachers, his peers in potting and much of the wider art world, in the end, anyone who came close quickly realised that this was

someone determinedly making his own way, and under his own abundant steam. It was a way that would evoke wonder and generate stories, with many (of the ones that can be told) focussed on physical energy and eccentricity. The station wagon full of nuns, or was it the Country Women’s Institute ladies, arriving to witness Barry potting naked, or nearly naked, his balls hanging out of his skimpy shorts. The hippies, the hangers on, coming to Driving Creek expecting countercultural Jerusalem but finding something closer to a bush work-camp. The women (were there really that many?) who tried to get Barry into bed or to father their children, but found him determinedly celibate; and sleepy. The young potters, including some of the very best, turning up looking for a teacher, leaving resentful about how much time and sweat they would spend on the railway or getting clay from creek banks, and how little tutelage or other recognition they got. The people who in the early days just wanted to ride the train, or meet the ‘pseudo-guru’ personally, but found him elusive, preoccupied with projects, hard at work.

By no means everyone was disappointed. Many and varied observers found Barry singularly marvellous, and developed a regard for him as among the most significant artists and cultural figures New Zealand has produced. As a potter and an artist, Barry’s position was reflected from the late 50s through the 80s in its seminal influence on the forms, attitudes and materials that gave our national ceramics movement much of its distinction and power. For at least 30 years, Barry held a central place in the cosmos of every potter (and many artists) in the country. With repeat cover boy status in *NZ Potter* and column length in the wider art press, national and international exhibitions, guest

contributions to edited collections of critical or agenda setting writing, Arts Council development and travelling grants (and even council membership), cultural ambassador gigs in Canada and New York, shows in the best and most innovative public and dealer galleries (Auckland Art Gallery, the Govett Brewster, the Dowse, New Vision, Peter McLeavey's at its peak), large scale corporate and public commissions (murals, foyer pots and sculptures including for Parliament and the National Library); Barry even enjoyed unique admiration from Shoji Hamada himself. Significant admirers would inventory his achievements: "potter, kiln builder, practical visionary, engineer, railway enthusiast, workaholic, amateur botanist, steam buff and helper of hundreds" was poet Kevin Ireland's list.<sup>4</sup> To which others would add: sculptor, painter and drawer, conservationist, ecotourism pioneer, railway general manager, civic and public intellectual. Barry's OBE, "for services to pottery", came in 1987.

But equally, many who tried to make a connection with Barry on their own, or on cultural or countercultural suppositions would often be left bewildered, headshaking. Barry, to many, operated perilously close to simple, self-defeating oddity. Increasingly shut out of the art mainstream, the canon, more so as he stuck to his guns, didn't go with fashion, and kept producing sculptures few understood, and domestic pots that still looked like the 1970s. The last big international show, for which he produced his most spectacular large work, was Seville Expo in 1992, where curator James Mack had the inspiration to give NZ ceramics scope and scale, and where Barry in particular responded magnificently.<sup>5</sup> In the two decades since, even as the railway boomed, it seemed to many and to Barry himself that the naysayers had the upper hand: that he wasn't being included, awarded or even recognised, and that he operated further and further out on an aesthetic limb. As the tide went out on the pottery and wider aesthetic movement he pioneered, he would see the influence of his and his peers' ideas diminish (although still stretching as far as ceramic artists with the voltage and outsider instincts of Paul Maseyk). He professed himself, as he had in the past, "prepared to be labelled an eccentric if necessary"<sup>6</sup>. But he felt incredibly isolated; speaking, writing, making, but with almost no-one reacting. "Where are all my friends", he would ask.<sup>7</sup> "Barry Boy: silly old man. Nobody knows you"<sup>8</sup>. It was a return, it seemed, to a kind of aloneness, an aloneness that maybe was there all along, deep and unmitigated by celebrity and early popularity. Popularity, now avidly dismissed as vulgar, in a retreat to "places I could be alone"<sup>9</sup>.

The evidence of difference, its perils and loneliness accumulated early: "born left handed and arty"<sup>10</sup>, a young child "spending as much time as possible alone. Running round the mudflats, naked..." The boy who shared his interests with no-one: "no-one at all", and who "had to run away from the other children all the

time"<sup>11</sup>. The local children, who a neighbour recalls laughing at early teenaged Barry coming home from the Devonport tip, his bike "so loaded up with junk you couldn't see him, but you could hear him, making locomotive noises, steam chuffing and whistle sounds as he pedalled home towards Tui St"<sup>12</sup>. "The stinks" of making tar and distilling coal "accompanied me beyond the bathroom and into the dining room and school room, and I was again given a hard time"<sup>13</sup>. Teachers remembered him as pleasantly obsessed: the third former in 1949 asking his science teacher "Sir, what can you tell me about salt glazes?", skipping sports in favour of chemistry lab duties<sup>14</sup>, ridiculed and fleeing Thursday afternoon sports after kicking the rugby ball in the wrong direction.

And above all, he was "a disappointment to my father, who had expectations of me being a leader within my generation of cousins and siblings"<sup>15</sup>. "Why are you so darn one track minded?" his father would demand, urging him down career paths that would have led to a secure place in an "Office with a large square of carpet". This, while his mother kept her fears about Barry taking a long time to talk to herself: "I was told", she revealed to the world and to Barry in the 1996 Christine Leov-Lealand biography 'A Head of Steam', "that he was mentally retarded. I knew damn well he was not"<sup>16</sup>. Nonetheless, Barry's angular, animated body and his rare, intense energies and obsessions, his primal disinterest in most of schooling and all of bureaucracy, meant that his father's hopes for the oldest child of that family generation would be permanently on hold.

Perhaps the hopes were displaced in the first place; Maurice Brickell, said a family friend, was even more eccentric than his son. And the arts were by no means absent from their Devonport home; they helped establish the Devonport Arts Festival. But crucially, Barry from the outset came to know himself odd; a child for whom "any form of contact with like-minded individuals was almost impossible"<sup>17</sup>. But too, a being and a body possessed by a rare internal energy, intense and ultimately aesthetic, whose "currents flow in odd directions"<sup>18</sup>. It set him apart socially, psychologically, economically, aesthetically. His intensities, he would write, "estranged me from my contemporaries but provided an internal world of the imagination and the immense satisfaction of being a loner in control of my own life"<sup>19</sup>. But it was an energy he had to surrender himself to; and come to think of himself and the things he did in terms of; intrinsically and extensively. It was an energy which he himself focussed, fused, diffused. He, his body, his work curling and bulging, organic, becoming, reforging the forms it urged. It was a unique, productive, catalytic energy, endlessly so. It still is, more than sixty years later.

1. Craig, D, ed., Barry Brickell's Doggerels 2012  
2. Leov-Lealand (1996:18-19)  
3. Brickell 2012 The Art Side, np  
4. Leov-Lealand (1996:11)  
5. Brett McDowell Gallery in Dunedin, where Barry has always

had profound admiration, held shows and published essays about Barry through to 2012.  
6. Leov-Lealand (1996:72)  
7. Author interviews, 2010.  
8. Doggerels ref.  
9. Brickell, (2012) Potters' Raw

Materials reflections, mimeo.  
10. Brickell (2012) The Art Side, 1.  
11. Leov-Lealand, (1996:14)  
12. Nancy Beck, quoted in Leov-Lealand (1996:16)  
13. Leov Leland (1996: 17)  
14. Leov Leland (1996: 21)

15. The Art Side, 1.  
16. Quoted in Brickell, 2012, The Art Side, p 1.  
17. Brickell 2012, 1. (the Art side)  
18. Craig doggerels \*\*  
19. Brickell 2012, The Art Side, p1

# Enjoyment of Freedom

Anna Miles

*Enjoyment of  
Freedom Teapot*  
Richard Stratton  
Courtesy of Anna Miles



One day in 2005 I was taken to an address in Karori, where I encountered a teapot that set me on a journey I had not anticipated or asked for. This was my first meeting with the pot's maker, Richard Stratton. I had not sought him out, instead I arrived at his house with someone who having seen this teapot three years earlier, had begun to hanker after it, and was now on a quest to obtain it. This was his business and I was just along for the ride, or so I kept telling myself as we spent some time in the house of Stratton.

Stratton's teapot was riveting, taste-challenging. I remember it was accorded considerable status in his house. It occupied a scone of its own in the living room, high above the detritus of Lego and the other accoutrements of a household inhabited by under-fives. The scone or mini-plinth was minute, the feet of the pot seemed precipitously close to its edges, however perhaps it was in the nature of the pot to appear uncontainable.

When I think of taste-challenging objects, I think of things that dizzyingly reorganise the mental world by failing to correspond with everything that is well absorbed and familiar. However in

the case of the Stratton teapot, a first glance at its superabundant gilding made me instinctively propel it into this category.

The teapot is liberally studded with golden devices that look to have been recast many times over. Uneven pairs of golden Tudor roses are appended to either side of its bulging middle, like badges of honour. A golden dragonish appurtenance emerges in the place of a spout. Blobby gold petals latch the handle onto the main part of the pot. The pot travels on gilded feet that look to have migrated from a neoclassical bathtub, (later I discover they are casts from a Spelter inkwell). The topknot is a gilded tower, a pointy inverted screw shape rising from a four-headed golden baby.

Stratton's concoction is ruled by ornamental exuberance of an unfettered Nineteenth Century kind. Most unsettling is its fusion of the clashing and unrelated. The group of wobbly stripes tripping around the edge of the lid and the worm of lugubrious pink at the base remind me of childhood coil pots. The top part of the vessel consists of an expanse of variegated oxblood glazing possibly related to refined examples of Chinese porcelain. Beneath is an elegant band of transfer printed vegetation,

What I was left in no doubt of was Stratton's devotion to ceramic genealogy. He pursues the history that encumbers the ceramics we use everyday as he sifts through the contents of tip shops and opp shops. He sees the teapot on a suburban kitchen table as the culmination of a long history of East-West conflict and trade.

presumably snipped from English blue and white china. The rainbow licorice handle is a homage to the Bassett's Licorice wheels Stratton consumed as a child.

I found myself in a Karori living room swinging through a jungle of incomprehensible references. As I contemplated Stratton's conflagration of ceramic traditions that I had barely noticed before, but which were suddenly of utmost interest, negotiations over the teapot continued. I thought about imitations and replicas, techno-mania and fluency, myths of origin and mysteries of cultural perseverance, weird interceptions of the luridly organic and coolly composed. The discombobulating teapot was a prized trophy, and as the afternoon progressed its top shelf status was on the ascent. We left without the pot. A number of other pots would be transacted before Stratton eventually agreed to surrender this one.

What I was left in no doubt of was Stratton's devotion to ceramic genealogy. He pursues the history that encumbers the ceramics we use everyday as he sifts through the contents of tip shops and op shops. He sees the teapot on a suburban kitchen table as the culmination of a long history of East-West conflict and trade. The local shapes his attachment to a global cultural history. The story of how Chinese ceramic influence made its convoluted way, via Staffordshire and Dresden, to utilitarian objects manufactured in the early industrial potteries of the South Island, is of particular interest to him.

For the immediate moment however, what puzzled me was why Stratton's ceramics were not better known? He had made his way to the attention of the clay cognoscenti via Heralds and Harbingers, Moyra Elliott's prescient 2002 exhibition of work by emergent ceramic artists at Lopdell House Gallery in Titirangi. This was the occasion when the teapot in question had first

exercised the eye of the collector I had come to call with, but even he, not someone known for being slow to accumulate objects made of clay, had taken three years to come to the realisation that he desperately needed this teapot.

Was it Stratton's interest in industrial ceramic tradition that meant his work was slow to gain a foothold? He clearly did not share the local pottery fraternity's orientation towards the studio rather than the factory. The teapot we had come to visit was non-functional (the dragon spout solely a decorative appendage), but it was somewhat of an exception to his usual production. Stratton was not interested in sculptural ceramics so much as the domestic vessel. Perhaps unsurprisingly his work did not have a following in the contemporary art world at the time.

I kept my thoughts to myself, went home and wrote Stratton an uncustomarily long and raving letter. Soon after that visit I began to represent his work. Like others in thrall to it, I have been subject to a continually expanding education in ceramic tradition. Stratton is an ornamentalist, wired to ornament as a language of culture, and a language often imbibed at an age when our experiences are circumscribed by the domestic world. Stratton taps into convention, how mystifying it is, how little we know about the conventions that surround us, and how we are for the most part ignorant of what it is we carry.

Many things challenge taste for a short time, the allure of new season clothes for example, but the pleasures of the uncustomary seldom last long. Having lived with Stratton's *Enjoyment of Freedom Teapot*, for most of a decade, I now recognise clues it offers to the way his work has developed. The teapot is no longer entirely foreign, but it retains something of the thrilling unrecognisability that drew me to it in the first place.

# The melting pot

Emma Jameson

*Palestinian Arts  
and Crafts bowl*

Maker unknown

Courtesy of Emma Jameson



Mixing, melding, moulding and seeping: all processes that have shaped the ceramic object before you. Although technically a static, lifeless 'object', a ceramic bowl is teeming with layers of human tactility and interaction with the elements. Deft, dexterous fingers mould the clay; caressing, kneading and pinching the malleable substance into its desired shape. Protective, nurturing hands guide the clay as it spins on the wheel, transmuting the abstract blob into a discernible shape. The process is transformative, mesmerising, and intimately personal in its mingling of physical touch and cognitive responses. To think of ceramics as being 'inanimate', then, seems to be a fallacy and a disservice. They are actively shaped by human hands, and the movement of these hands too is directed by emotive sensibility, personal experience and/or cultural contexts. Although passive in that they are acted upon, ceramic objects are also active agents that connote, reflect, and at times reinforce the specific environment from which they evolve. They each have a particularised narrative that is constituted by their origin, circumstances of production, sale, collection, and the eventual purpose that they serve.

The narrative of this bowl starts in British Mandate Palestine. Its lyrical floral arabesques intertwine rich blue and green petals and interweave the cultural aesthetics of Armenia, the British Arts and Crafts Movement, and Imperial expectations of 'the Orient'. After the British Government assumed governance over Palestine in 1917, Jerusalem became the locus of imperial cultural re-fashioning and re-visualisation. Valued for its romantic evocations of the Crusades and the birthplace of early Christianity, the Old City was a space in which the British imagination could be enacted and realised.

The British Arts and Crafts Movement had emerged in the nineteenth century as a reaction to the threatening encroachment of modernisation, industrialisation and the 'tasteless' churning out of identical, manufactured objects that these developments enabled and prompted. In response, artists and design theorists such as Gabriel Rossetti, Pugin and John Ruskin urged for a return to the simple elegance of the Arthurian epoch. Clarity of line and colour and purity of design were an antidote to the vulgar extravagance of falsified materials and eclecticism favoured by the new middle class and it was hoped that design revisions could in turn inspire a socio-cultural reformation. This was not the case. Factories continued to develop, cities continued to expand, and newfound wealth continued to influence the market and its aesthetic directions.

Jerusalem, as an area of fresh Imperial conquest, presented the British Government with a new arena in which their hopes for socio-morality and culture could be reinvigorated with new impetus, unimpeded by the pace of modernisation. Under the direction of the Civic Advisor Charles Robert Ashbee, Jerusalem became the vanguard for a revitalised Arts and Crafts Movement. Perceived as a place that had suffered deplorable deprivation under the Ottoman Empire, Jerusalem's governance under British rule was justified in paternalistic terms. The full glory of the Old City could only be restored under British guidance and guardianship. A project of cultural revitalisation was embarked upon, in which architectural and decorative schemes satisfied the patriarchal motivations of the British government and imprinted its authoritative presence within the cultural fabric of the city. The principles of the Arts and Crafts Movement mollified the paradoxical concerns of Mandate governance: to preserve Jerusalem's world-renowned history yet simultaneously foster 'progression', albeit in a model that strictly adhered to British sensibility.

Hand crafted by Armenian ceramicists, this bowl is testament to Ashbee's cultural legacy. Upon the commencement of his post, Ashbee implemented policies that reflected his involvement within the Arts and Crafts Movement. Handcrafted goods were of prime importance in his cultural schema. In 1918 he founded the Pro-Jerusalem Society, a direct emulation of the Guild and School of Handicraft that he had established in Britain in 1888. In addition, he established a weaving industry, organised for Syrian mother of pearl in-layers to travel to Jerusalem, and planned for a revival of the pottery industries through the importation of techniques from the British De Morgan Workshop.

The production of a 'local' style was riddled with hypocrisy, complications and contradictions. Ashbee's vision of a 'local' style was in fact an amalgamation of different cultural facets fused together to meet the British expectations of a particular Jerusalem visual culture. The word 'local' ironically became synonymous with stereotypical Imperial fantasies regarding the Orient, the East, and the qualities of timelessness and exoticism that such terms evoked.

Jerusalem's cultural programme was thus one of adoption and adaptation, forged through Ashbee's selective appropriation of historical and cultural elements to cement his own romanticised view of the Old City. Tiles featuring generalised Islamic styles were celebrated for their geometrical logic, functional purpose

and clarity of design, and were incorporated into British homes due to their evocations of another world seemingly fundamentally different from Britain in both visual display and cultural narrative. Perceived to be emblematic of an ancient, 'Eastern' society, such tiles were a prominent feature in the visual landscape of British Jerusalem. The fact that there was no prior tradition of tile glazing in Jerusalem did not deter Ashbee; rather, he decided to construct and implement this particular craft custom by enlisting David Ohanessian, an Armenian tiler who had previously designed the tiles for the Turkish Room at Mark Sykes' Sledmere House. After completing restorative work for the Dome of the Rock, Ohanessian and his team of Armenian workers were commissioned to decorate houses and important buildings in Jerusalem, incorporating Armenian and Islamic design features with British techniques and materials sourced from British Arts and Crafts ceramicist William de Morgan. Arts and Crafts ideals were fused with cultural expectation and assimilation to create an impression of local design selected for the public facade of the new Jerusalem of British Mandate Palestine.

This bowl symbolises Ashbee's legacy in design, its mode of acquisition and its multi-faceted implications. The simple lines and passages of colour are unpretentious and do not hide their artificiality against the stark white of the bowl. The more complex, intricate arrangement of floral motifs in the bowl's interior recall the rhythmic, geometric patterns of Islamic designs promulgated in Britain through Owen Jones's 1856 publication *The Grammar of Ornament*. These aesthetic features together with its hand-crafted mode of creation encapsulate the aims of the Arts and Crafts Movement: simplicity, purity and integrity of design, producing an object that is not only functional, but also free of the shackling chains of superfluous decoration and superficial materials.

On a deeper, more intrinsic level, it lays claim to the ongoing presence and proliferation of Armenian ceramicists within the multi-cultural, multi-sensory fabric of Jerusalem life. Armenian ceramic workshops are to this day an integral, enriching component of the visual patterns of creativity interwoven throughout the city. The Balian, the Darian and the Sandrouni workshops are thriving creative centres, and can be seen as a continuation of Ashbee's desires for guild workshops focussed on a specific type of craft. This particular bowl was bought at the Jerusalem Shuk; a criss-crossing maze of food, jewellery, clothes, and ceramics stores that act as a dizzying thoroughfare between the four cultural quarters of Jerusalem: Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Armenian. The intermingling of different cultural practices, foods, clothes, and speech surrounds and inflect the perusal and purchase of ceramic objects such as the one before you. The bowl, in its visual appearance and mode of acquisition, can be seen as a realisation of Ashbee's aims (albeit superficial, naïve and contrived) of multi-cultural assimilation,

integration and collaboration in the arts. It serves a parallel metaphoric function to another vessel: the melting pot.

The bowl for me, is synonymous with Jerusalem. I am not alone in the cognitive synthesis of this specific locale with this particular aesthetic. Countless tourists peruse the various Armenian ceramic workshops around Jerusalem to acquire visual validation of their memories and experiences. Perhaps then, Ashbee was successful in defining a 'local' Jerusalem, even if at the very least it is merely an imprint in the visual memory of the fresh-faced, eager-to-see-and-experience tourist, which in itself is an extension of the British Mandate's interpretation of the local aesthetic through detached (and it would be fair to say, naïve) eyes. It is at this point that the bowl's status as a relic of Ashbee's policies becomes ironic. Hand-made, Armenian ceramic bowls are bought in the masses by foreign visitors, producing an interesting *mélange* of hand-craft, mass production, local identity and its commercialisation for consumption. This complicates the purity of the anti-capitalist ideals espoused by the British Arts and Crafts movement yet paradoxically seems a natural extension of the mode of cultural curating enacted by the British Mandate.

I bought this bowl as a tourist; an excited wide-eyed visitor eager to absorb all of the new smells, sounds and sights I encountered. Purchasing it was a way in which I could gain some permanency over these transitory states. The handing over of the Shekels, the packaging of the dish into its protective wrapping, and finally its unpacking from my suitcase and positioning in my house was a process in which I could convince myself that I had gained control over temporality and geography. Jerusalem and my memories of it are, to a certain extent, contained and fossilised in the layers of glazed clay.

The uses that I have found for this bowl too fulfil a role in perpetuating these memories for posterity. Within its concave shape my mother and I prepare the recipes that awakened our taste buds whilst in Israel: pearlescent pomegranate salads; mountains of luscious labneh cheese enlivened with peaks of sprinkled green zaatar; thin slices of radishes, cucumber and tomato; hummus; dates. The translucent pink beads of the pomegranate seeds, the cream of the labneh, the green of the cucumber – all of these colours react against and reinforce the vibrant colours of the floral design, investing it with new optical effects, new visual sensations, new life. I am reminded of the colours of Israel, the tastes of Jerusalem, and the sheer excitement of being somewhere new, somewhere different.

The bowl then, is not simply a decorative, inanimate object. Rather, it is imbued with a rich narrative that is, like its floral pattern, circular and intertwined. Interwoven amongst the petals are the oscillations of cultural activity that have taken place within the parameters of maker, buyer, and their collective and personal heritage.

1. This concept of material culture having a personal and organic narrative is very much inspired by Samuel J.M. Alberti's compelling article "Objects and the Museum", *Isis* 96, no. 4 (December 2005): 559-571. Alberti considers 'object biographies' and how these how they can act as starting points from which we can consider human relationships and cultural interactions.  
2. Ron Fuchs and Gilbert Herbert, "Representing Mandatory Palestine: Austen St. Barbe and the

Representational Buildings of the British Mandate in Palestine," *Architectural History* 43 (2000): 281.  
3. Inbal Ben-Asher Gitler, "C.R Ashbee's Jerusalem Years: Arts and Crafts, Orientalism and British Regionalism," *Assaph: Studies in Art History* 5 (2000): 33.  
4. *Ibid.*  
5. Fuchs and Herbert, "Representing Mandatory Palestine," 281.  
6. Alan Crawford, *C.R Ashbee: Architect, Designer, and Romantic Socialist* (New Haven: Yale

University Press, 1985), 174; Renton, "Changing Languages of Empire and the Orient," 652.  
7. Fuchs and Herbert, "Representing Mandatory Palestine," 284.  
8. *Ibid.*  
9. *Ibid.*  
10. Yad Izhak Ben-Zvi, *The Armenian Ceramics of Jerusalem: Three Generations 1919-2003* (Tel Aviv: Eretz-Israel Museum, 2003), 25.  
11. John Sweetman, *The Oriental Obsession: Islamic Inspiration in*

*British and American Art and Architecture, 1500-1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 169.  
12. *Ibid.*, 29, 30  
13. Gitler, "C.R Ashbee's Jerusalem Years," 36.  
14. It is beyond the scope of this essay to investigate the self-identification of Jerusalem's inhabitants with the Armenian ceramics, although this undoubtedly would reveal some interesting intra and inter-cultural relations and understandings.

# The Wasters

Jenny Bornholdt

*Wasters II and  
Western Traveller VII*  
Raewyn Atkinson  
Courtesy of the artist  
and Bowen Galleries  
Photos Stephen A'Court

Made from loss and hits and misses,  
odds and ends, discarded dishes,

defunct pieces, rejects, seconds,  
worn out, marred, abandoned, slippage.

Breakage, unsecured and sullied,  
mark-downs, mis-mades, unloved slurry,

blurred and marred and somewhat fractured,  
odds and sods not manufactured.

Nearly-theres and almost-made-its,  
shards beside the flawed and chipped,

ill-kept, ill-worn, ill-defined,  
marked and clattered, patterns slipped.

The wasters built from shattered music,  
monuments to salvage, use it.





**From Field Notes, by Raewyn Atkinson**

From October 2009 until July 2012 I lived in Berkeley, California and rented a studio at 1306 3rd Street. It was busy and noisy. 3rd Street was not actually a street but train tracks. It was not uncommon for people to throw themselves under a train there, so even though there were barriers and bells, when the Amtrak or freight trains came through the driver would sound the horn very loudly.

The studio was close to the recycling station. All day people would be crossing the tracks, pulling or pushing whatever they

had collected to earn some money. Some, maybe most, lived on the streets, their belongings in a shopping cart.

I regularly rode my bicycle to Point Isobel which was near my studio and across from Battery Point where people made their 'homes' from discarded material. I was drawn to the beach composed almost entirely of ceramic shards, wasters, from the now-demolished Tepco factory nearby.

These experiences and collected shards were combined and shown at Bowen Galleries Wellington, in October 2013.

# Dear Adelaida

Tessa Laird

*Diablita and  
diablito figurine*

Adelaida Pascual

Courtesy of Tessa Laird

Dear Adelaida,

Four years ago, I purchased one of your figurines in San Antonio, Texas, from a Mexican folk art store packed woven-plastic Frida shopping bags, wrestling masks, ceramic jugs, embossed tin picture frames... Most things seemed cheap and sketchy, although there were some beautiful examples of *arbol de la vida*, polychrome ceramic trees of life, festooned with tiny birds and flowers on wires, so their leafy canopies seemed to shimmer. These were expensive, though, and hard to carry. I still had to get back to New Zealand.

I ventured into the basement, scanning the shelves of dusty trinkets, when I saw your work. Finding an object you adore is like meeting the gaze of a potential love interest. There is a moment of shyness. Could this be the one? You don't want to look too hard, as though there is an impropriety in staring too long or too longingly. You sidle closer, attempting nonchalance. I gingerly picked up your piece and turned it upside down. I saw your name, Adelaida Pascual, written confidently across the bottom. A good sign, I thought.

Dear Adelaida,

Here is why I loved your sculpture: you depicted *diablitos*, little devils, as if they were people like you and me. They were hanging out on a crazy pink park bench, the black *diablita* eating an icecream, the yellow *diablito* trying to woo her. I saw this scene play out at Xochimilco, the aquatic park in Mexico City, many years ago. I remember dusty trees, canoodling couples, kids, and men carrying sticks festooned with bags of candyfloss, balloons and toys piled so high you can barely see their faces and they look like they might float away. The coloured boats on the water and the food vendors were superimposed in my mind's eye over an earlier view of the city. That uncivilised fellow Cortés sent a letter to the King of Spain in 1520, remarking on the neatly arranged islands of the aquatic city of Tenochtitlan, later to become Mexico City. Canoes navigated canals and there were public squares where "more than sixty thousand souls" were daily engaged in selling their wares: fruits and vegetables, honey, agave nectar, fish and eggs. There was gold, silver, lead, brass, copper, tin. There was bone, stone and shell. There were iridescent quetzal feathers and precious stones. Every kind of wild bird was for sale, and all kinds of animals (including *chihuahua*) were raised for meat. There were barbers and restaurants, and a street full of medicinal herbs and apothecaries' shops. There was cotton in all colours, and coloured paints, and here's where you come in, Adelaida — there were pots and painted clay figurines!



Cortés was full of praise for the city he would change forever. Although, gazing out over the lake at Xochimilco, I thought it hasn't changed that much, after all. The vendors still pile high coloured goods, the boats still float, the pottery still charms...

According to Cortés, it was because Moctezuma's people had come down to Mexico from Aztlán in the North, that they accepted the imposition of his ways. They were concerned that, having lived away from their ancestral home for some time, their habits might have become warped. They stood by while Cortés smashed their idols.

Dear Adelaida,

Although I only spent six days in Mexico, I lived in Aztlán for three years. According to a Nahuatl chronicler of the seventeenth century, the word Aztlán derives from an enormous tree with white flowers called an *azcahuatl* in the centre of an island. This suggests that the Aztec empire's island capital of Tenochtitlan purposely recalled the original island of Aztlán, and that a tree stands literally at the core of the Aztec name (which is Nahuatl for the people of Aztlán).<sup>2</sup>

So Mexico City recalls Aztlán, and Aztlán recalls Mexico City. Echo Park where I lived had a lake that was like Xochimilco in miniature, with candyfloss men and corn guys, dusty trees and lovers. The sacred signs of Mexico City were there too: images of the eagle (and those gringos thought it was their symbol!); plenty of nopales, those cacti the gringos call 'beaver-tail'; and signs warning about rattlesnakes, although I never saw one. Only 150 years earlier, this was 'officially' Mexico, but unofficially, it still is, despite the gringo propaganda machine called Hollywood, that grandiose monument to human sacrifice, greater even than Huey Teocalli, the magnificent Aztec temple upon whose ruins Mexico City now stands.

Dear Adelaida,

I went to San Antonio to see my tejana friend Celia. I had visited her once before, many years ago, when we watched Sergei Eisenstein's ¡Que viva México!, ate huevos rancheros and danced to cumbia. By the time I made my second visit, Celia had completed her training as an architect, and she was working on the restoration of the Alamo. She hated all that Davy Crockett, John Wayne mythology.

"In the 1800s, Anglos migrated illegally into Texas, which was then part of Mexico, in greater and greater numbers and gradually drove the tejanos (native Texans of Mexican descent) from their lands... Their illegal invasion forced Mexico to fight a war to keep its Texas territory. The Battle of the Alamo, in which the Mexican forces vanquished the whites, became, for the whites, the symbol of the cowardly and villainous character of the Mexicans... In 1846, the U.S. incited Mexico to war. U.S. troops invaded and occupied Mexico, forcing her to give up almost half of her nation, what is now Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, Colorado and California."<sup>3</sup>

Celia cooked me borracho or 'drunk' beans with beer, and took me to see the world's largest bat population streaming out of Bracken Cave. When we went to a local craft gallery, I wondered aloud why the tejano artists making arboles hadn't included any bats, and Celia said, "That's your job!" I went home with a head full of ideas, like a cave filled with bats.

Dear Adelaida,

According to Lenore Mulryan, no one knows exactly when or why the Mexican ceramic candelabra tradition known as tree of life began, but one of its original sources of inspiration may have been the metal candelabras used by Catholic friars at the time of the Conquest. The Spanish clergy fostered syncretic parallels between local traditions and Catholicism as a means of promoting Christianity. "Franciscan friars are also believed to have commissioned Indian potters in Metepec to create rudimentary Trees of Life incorporating Adam and Eve."<sup>4</sup> Well, I guess you knew that already, and Metepec isn't that far from you in Michoacán. I looked you up on the Internet. Adelaida Pascual González, prize-winning artist.

I hear there is a lot of natural clay in Michoacán. And that diablito figurines were made popular by a potter called Marcelino Vicente

from Ocumicho, Michoacán, in the 1960s. Pottery was women's work, but Marcelino was a renegade in women's clothing. Maybe that's where Grayson Perry got the idea? But this story doesn't have a happy ending. Marcelino was beaten to death, a victim of hate crime, in 1968 at the age of 35.<sup>5</sup> His style has left a grand legacy among the women potters of the town.

Michael Taussig studied the diablito figure further South, in Colombia, and found that it was used by miners as a symbol of power against oppression. And so it was in early modern Europe, where the devil emerged from popular paganism, and was seen as an ally of the poor in their struggles against landowners and the Church.<sup>6</sup>

Dear Adelaida,

It wasn't until 2013 that I started making something resembling the Mexican arboles, encrusted with flowers, snails, eyeballs, fruits, frogs, and of course, bats. Then one day, Adelaida, I made a piece featuring a ti kouka, or 'cabbage tree' from my country, and standing next to the tree were two diablitos. The yellow male was copied exactly from yours, but the female in a turquoise dress had turned from black to white, and had a wrinkled-up bat face.

I was worried about such a direct appropriation. So I scratched into the trunk of the ti kouka TL + AP – like those lovers initials you see carved into the bark of trees. Only in this case, it was to acknowledge a 'collaboration.' I hope you don't see it as theft. I wrote to Delia Cosentino, who is an expert on Mexican polychrome art, to ask her about the political implications of my arboles. She said, "As I see it, the Mexican trees themselves represent a series of mixtures, appropriations, and transformations — most recently by the transnational tourist and collector trade, so at its very core there is nothing 'pure' about the form. I can see that your artworks are truly rooted in who you are, with a nod to those who have helped to shape your vision."<sup>7</sup>

In the end, no one mentioned cultural appropriation in regards to my exhibition, although one reviewer called my work 'derivative' but didn't say of what. Another one said my ceramics were 'daggy' and quite a few people called them juvenile. But my friend Xavier, who is Mexican, came with his partner Carolyn all the way from Raglan, and they loved it. They were the critics I was hoping to impress. Them and you, Adelaida.<sup>1</sup>

1 i Hernan Cortés "Second Letter to Charles V," 1520, in Oliver J. Thatcher, (ed.), *The Library of Original Sources* (Milwaukee: University Research Extension Co., 1907), Vol. V: 9th to 16th Centuries, pp. 317-326. Modernised text by Prof. Jerome S. Arkenberg, Cal. State Fullerton, Internet Modern History Sourcebook, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/>.

2 Delia A. Cosentino, "The Tallest, the Fullest, The Most Beautiful" in *Ceramic trees of life: popular art from Mexico* by Lenore Hoag Mulryan and Delia A Cosentino, Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 2003, pp. 36-37.

3 Gloria Anzaldúa, "The New Mestiza," in Charles Lemert (ed.), *Social Theory: The Multicultural and*

*Classic Readings*, Fourth Edition, Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 2010, pp. 555-6.

4 Lenore Hoag Mulryan, "Beyond the Botanical, The Storytelling 'Trees' of Mexico," in *Ceramic trees of life*, pp. 24-25.

5 Hunter Oatman-Stanford, "Diablitos in the Details: The Curious Tale of Mexico's most

*Peculiar Pottery*, [www.collectorsweekly.com](http://www.collectorsweekly.com), April 5th, 2013.

6 Michael Taussig, *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism in South America*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980, p. 174.

7 Personal correspondence with the author, 21st March, 2014.

# Invisible Reign

Janet McAllister

*Dental prosthetics*

Oralart Dental Ceramics

Courtesy of David de Wet

Photo David de Wet



Farah Fawcett — the star with the sun-bright smile — once said something like “either you have brown teeth and no holes, or white teeth full of holes”. I like to think she’s right, but then I would; I have terribly holey teeth. I had teeth full of metal, and now they are full of plastic. This is called “progress” by the dental profession, perhaps because composite resin fillings don’t last as long as amalgam ones, so our purses have to open wide more often.

This year I received my first crown — a grand name for a tooth cap and a momentous occasion for any mouth of decay. And, in spite of progress, my crown is made of neither metal nor plastic but of a material first used for dental prosthetics two years before the French Revolution: porcelain. My crown is my very own piece of luxury custom-made pottery (albeit one that wasn’t coveted).

Why porcelain? “It’s a warm, beautiful material with life,” enthuses David de Wet, owner/operator of Oralart, the Mairangi Bay dental laboratory that made my crown. In contrast, he describes metals as “cold and functional”. A jeweller might beg to differ, I laugh. Yes, David replies, but porcelain’s optical properties mimic teeth. There is a new ceramic-resin hybrid material available, a porcelain matrix infiltrated with resin, but apparently

even that should only be used for back teeth. It’s not translucent and pretty enough for front teeth — unlike porcelain on its own.

My lovely dentist, Jenny — an old schoolmate of mine who now lives next door to my mother — put me in touch with David, because I was intrigued about the crown manufacturing process and, let’s face it, curious about where a lot of my money was going. Dentistry tends to feel like a secretive ritual when you’re in the chair: you hear, feel, smell and taste what your dentist is doing, but you can’t see very much. Deprivation of that one sense amounts to torture in this age of visual stimulation; I would swap the other four senses for sight, at the dentist’s at least.

Crowns are particularly mysterious: two visits are required and off-site witchcraft happens in the fortnight in-between. In the first visit — in what seems a crazy counter-intuitive move to the patient who is trying to keep their teeth — the dentist files down the tooth to make room for the crown. They then take a mould of the prepared tooth and much of the mouth, out of what feels like silly putty. The crown is fitted in the second visit.

In between, the fabrication process at the dental lab is labour-intensive and involved. The machines at Oralart are cool: a

It's a lesson in how invisibility does not mean absence. A missing front tooth can be as obvious as neon; here, invisibility means camouflage, it means letting people see what they expect to see (a lesson also taught by the cleverest culprits in Agatha Christie novels).

vibrating surface to get air bubbles out of the gypsum moulds, a red-hot “burn out” oven, a little transparent vacuum box attached to one big red glove, for sand-blasting away the mould (“investment”), after casting. But what stood out for me on my whirlwind tour of the lab was the human skill involved. A dental technician painstakingly builds a wax model of your crown onto a model of your prepared tooth, drop by drop with a hot wax knife, by memory. That is, they do not need to consult their Platonic Ideal reference model of what each tooth should look like while they're creating yours. It's an impressive technical feat that takes 15 minutes after three years of training — and, in the industry in general, it is gradually being replaced by CAD/CAM restorations.

At the other end of the process, after casting, the crown is painstakingly hand-layered with porcelain powders — yellowish, pinkish and bluish — mixed with water, to give colour, add details and finesse the shape. Three to four layers of this enamel are painted on, with the crown going back into a furnace between each layer, to fuse the porcelain. The enamellers add depth to the middle of molars with a brownish colour, and they use similar “deep” colours to mimic wear on the tooth.

One of the three example crowns made for the Empire of Dirt exhibition shows a front tooth crown before enamelling: textured and jagged. The other two are also “single centrals” (one front tooth each) but are what David calls “full contour”: enamelled, ready and waiting to be received into a grateful mouth. The middle example is made of “Suprinity” — a new-generation glass ceramic material which is enriched with zirconia (which, in another form, is used by jewellers to mimic diamond). The other two examples are moulded from “Empress” ceramic, a slightly older material which is prized for its good looks and range of colours but which is not quite as strong. To a small extent, it's a choice between function and beauty — how much do you wild things want to gnash your terrible teeth?

My ten-year-old flatmate, drying the dishes, is sceptical when I reassure her that porcelain teeth can't shatter like porcelain plates. “Be careful when your jaw drops!” she warns.

It's in the enamelling that the aesthetic aim of the whole field of ceramic prosthetics becomes apparent: invisibility. Like Cold War spies or Pericles' women of Greece, porcelain crowns in situ aim to attract no attention whatsoever, neither criticism nor praise. They are doing their best work when nobody can detect their presence.

It's a lesson in how invisibility does not mean absence. A missing front tooth can be as obvious as neon; here, invisibility means camouflage, it means letting people see what they expect to see (a lesson also taught by the cleverest culprits in Agatha Christie novels). So while you don't want a gap, you don't want a perfect, dazzling tooth either. Instead, context is everything — hence your dentist takes a putty mould not just of the tooth to be crowned but of a large part of your mouth. “If it's a worn mouth, we make the crown age-appropriate,” the technicians told me. “We don't make many fresh teeth.” (Cue me looking embarrassed at needing a crown at the relatively spring-chicken age of 36, wondering if my teeth would be considered “fresh” or not.) The enamellers also use the model of the corresponding tooth on the other side of your mouth as a shape guide because they're aiming for mouth symmetry.

Video editors come to intimately know the (onscreen) features and mannerisms of people they've never met. It must be similar for tooth enamellers, who not only study our maws in some detail but also change elements within them to maintain the appearance of the whole. I wonder if they recognise the mouths they've worked on, when they meet them in the street. I wonder if they can recognise artificial teeth in other smiles — or if they too are in the dark when it comes to the provenance of discreet pearly whites.

# In Conversation

**Nina van Lier with  
Dylan van Lier**

*Bathroom Sink*

McSkimming Industries

Courtesy of Nina van Lier



Dylan and I are twins, seventeen years old, in our last year of high school, and we have opposite interests. I'm art, he's science. We hold great conversations about the strangest of things. When I was invited to be part of the Empire of Dirt exhibition, my first reaction was to invite myself to his room and ask him for ideas. He was giving me 'get out of my room' glares, when I looked out of his doorway, across the hallway, and into the bathroom at the sink. 'Dylan, that sink is ceramic right?' His answer was yes, and we started talking. I could have written an essay, or researched the historical background, but that would just be like writing an assignment for school. So here we are, Nina and Dylan, The Twins, and here is our conversation about a ceramic sink.

**Nina van Lier:** Dylan, what is the first thought that comes to mind when you look at this object?

**Dylan van Lier:** Well, it reminds me of that urinal that got put in an art gallery...

**N:** Marcel Duchamp. Yea, same here. That's what made me think that exhibiting a sink in Objectspace would be a good idea.

**D:** I mean, why did he put a urinal in a gallery?

**N:** It was like a big upturn of the fine art hierarchy...

**D:** So basically Marcel Duchamp was being a bitch.

**N:** Woah, big accusations there Dylan...

**D:** (laughs) I suppose with a sink, with anything like that, which is used for something not of intrinsic artistic 'value'... Think of a painting. If you put a painting up on the wall it's good at being a painting and looking lovely, but it's not necessarily good for anything else. You can't use it as a weapon, you can't use it to solve world hunger...

**N:** But then you could say that about anything, everything just has one purpose. Art's purpose is to be art, and a chair's purpose is to be sat on.

**D:** The trick about a lot of things, though, is that they do have multiple purposes, that they could have, when you put them in different contexts. Books are MEANT to be read, but if you get one that's thick enough it makes a fairly decent club.

**N:** (laughs) Yes, and I have been on the receiving end of your book 'clubs'.

**D:** With a urinal or a sink or something, and ceramics...

**N:** This sink once had a purpose, but right now it does not have any purpose.

**D:** Right now, its purpose is for us to talk about it. I think that is kind of the interesting thing about ceramic as art, and about the whole idea of the Empire of Dirt — what this thing is named...

**N:** What is your meaning of the Empire of Dirt?

**D:** That even if we think we are above certain things, they still rule us.

**N:** What do you mean...

**D:** Well, it's like the magic of the everyday, the art of the everyday. I mean, I think it was Socrates that suggested beauty was appropriateness, with something fitting into its context and being fit for its purpose

**N:** Hmm... That's a good one, Socrates.

**D:** It was only one of his hypotheses, but it is quite attractive.

I suppose that's the thing about ceramics in art, that they bridge that gap between art purely for its own sake, and practicality. Form and function. You generally come across ceramics that are a bit of both.

**N:** When I thought about the name Empire of Dirt, what came to mind was that Modest Mouse song. That one, 'Parting of the Sensory', which is all about how we are all just made up of carbon atoms and part of the whole carbon lifecycle. And I kind of thought, 'Empire of Dirt' — this whole 'empire' of the world, and everything that it is made up of was once just dirt, or clay, or minerals or stuff like that. A sink is just a ceramic object, is just a piece of processed dirt.

**D:** Yeah, if you think about that it's kind of ... I mean a lot of earlier art is very... natural. It's very tied to reality. I mean, in the time before photography, some of the art you see can get very photorealistic, some of the Dutch masters...

**N:** And then when the camera was introduced — Suddenly that style of art becomes totally redundant.

**D:** That's right. Which is when you get that whole branching out into, or a return to, things like expressionism, abstract art...

**N:** ...splattering paints Jackson Pollock Style...

**D:** and it's still naturalistic. You've got a transition from a naturalistic portrayal of something, to a portrayal of naturalistic emotions and abstracts, but not necessarily in a natural WAY

**N:** ...impressionist, expressionist...

**D:** But ceramics as art, and ceramics just as a sink or a urinal, is something very human. We've created the tools and the medium. Actually that's an interesting point. I mean what are you depicting with ceramics? I guess you can have mosaic sort of things, geometric stuff...

**N:** I think most ceramics seem to be practical.. It's been quite a foundation medium for mankind.

**D:** It's like the figure Prometheus in Greek mythology. The guy who created humanity out of clay...

**N:** What was he the god of?

**D:** He technically wasn't a god, he was a titan. Titan of forethought I think. And he was also responsible for bringing us fire, which is, you know, what you need to do anything related to pottery or ceramics. Pottery is as old as civilisation. Without ceramics we really wouldn't have civilisation as we know it, because if you have a ceramic container you can do a lot of things with that. You can store food, you can store seeds and grains and water in a way that you couldn't if you didn't have pottery — which allows you to plan for the future. That is quite interesting because Prometheus was in charge of forethought... circles within circles. Huh.

**N:** Very interesting. I love how you know all this stuff... on another note, what is the weirdest thing you've seen go down a sink?

**D:** Hmm... Probably blood? I don't know.

**N:** That's not weird, but a bit vampire-like...

**D:** It was for a media studies horror film that someone at school was making.

**N:** Remember that New Zealand short film, 'The Kitchen Sink'?

**D:** Oh god, yeah.

**N:** When the woman pulls that hair from the kitchen sink which starts off a single strand, and she keeps pulling it and it becomes this disgusting hair rope as she pulls more and more of it from the sink — and suddenly this...

**D:** ...person comes out...

**N:** Yes! But it's not a person, it's a freaky, tiny, human thing!

**D:** Sort of like a mandrake root, yeah

**N:** Um... yeah? You know, like those two dollar shop rubber animals which grow over three days. The whole film is a bit like that!

**D:** And then she ends up trimming all the hair off it and it turns out to be her dead husband or something.

**N:** No, I never got that it was her dead husband. But they had this very weird relationship which develops over a very short space of time.

**D:** Oh yeah... we watched it years ago.

**N:** But then she pulls a hair which she thought she missed on the nape of his neck. And as if that hair was the plug of his soul, he shrinks back into this foetal state that he started off in when he was pulled from the sink.

**D:** Yeah. And I guess that's the thing about sinks, you don't quite know what might come out...

**N:** That's what makes it so freaky! Ah horror films... Did you know Uncle Grant did the music for that one?

**D:** Ah, neat! That reminds me... you know that if you put the lyrics to Miley Cyrus' song 'Wrecking Ball' through multiple layers of Google translate, then back into English, in just the right way, then "I came in like a wrecking ball" comes out as (sings) "I like the ball in the sink"?

**N:** Really!

**D:** Just another useless titbit.

**N:** Ha ha, I never thought that a conversation about a ceramic sink would end up with reference to Miley Cyrus... But hey there you go, our sink off Trademe has served us well — brought us from horror films to Prometheus, clay men to artistic relativism, bits of history to Duchamp.

**D:** I suppose it's rather ironic that we've got something so similar to Duchamp's piece physically, but we've made it quite meaningful... which is kind of the opposite to the point he was trying to make.

**N:** I don't know if we have necessarily made the sink more meaningful — but we've certainly had a great conversation. Which is exactly why I wanted to share our conversations with Objectspace, because two heads are better than one...

**D:** and great minds think... not alike, differently? Complementarily?

**N:** Either way, that's the ceramic sink.

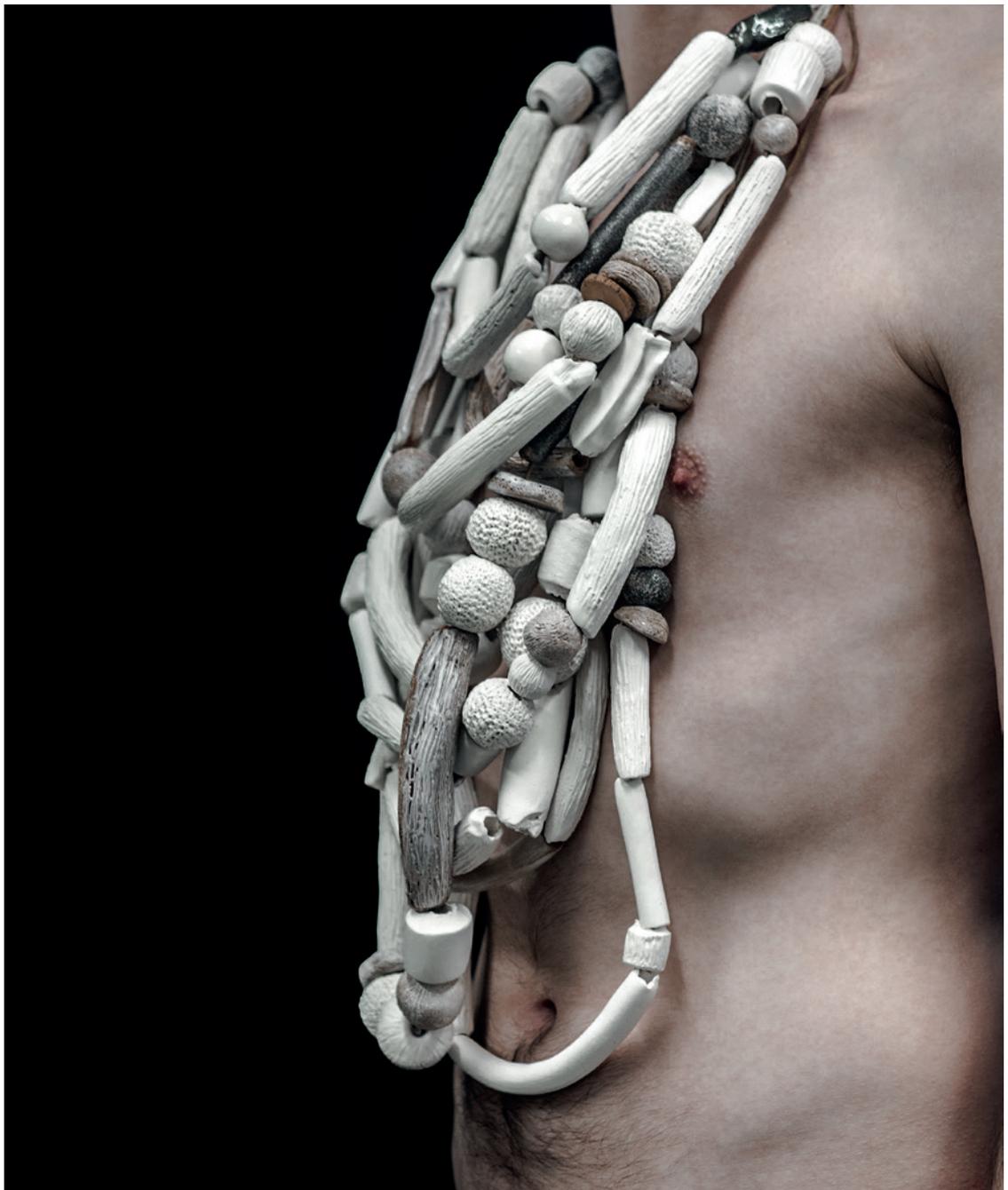
# A Sequence of Spherules

Meighan Ellis

*Relic*

Meighan Ellis

Courtesy of Meighan Ellis



Hold my weight

my smallness, boldness  
my strength and fragility.

Encounter the continuity  
and incongruous.

Mediate our network of rigid fired forms  
with fingers  
with eyes.

A repetitive Palaeolithic rhythm

we stem:  
from an initiation to sculpt  
the impulse for assemblage  
a desire to be transformed and embellished.

A petrologic lineage lies beneath our slip and glaze:

a grandfathers predilection for carving  
a grandmothers penchant for collecting.

Bound with silicus, air and water

excavated from:  
stones, rock  
iron, silt and sand

Malleable due to the transmutations of clay  
and our alchemic particles.

Exposing latent taxonomical myth  
from archaeological origins

We have witnessed

erosion, drought, flood, pillage and war.

I have been baked, bashed, bent, burnt

cut, coaxed  
filed, folded  
drilled  
inscribed  
pressed, pulled, pinched, pierced, pushed, poked,  
pricked, punched  
rolled  
scratched, shaped, sliced, stabbed, stretched  
teared, twisted.

I am your relic

hewn from sediment and soil

To lay rested on breast and bone  
- to be adorned.

# Yellow Glaze Bowl

Linda Tyler

*Thrown and glazed  
stoneware bowl, c.1953*

Dame Lucie Rie, DBE, CBE

Courtesy of Douglas

Lloyd-Jenkins

Photo Sam Hartnett



It was a warm afternoon in May 1984 when I first visited Ernst Plischke in his sun-filled apartment at Josefstädterstrasse 7 in Vienna. Half of the living room was taken up with an extensive indoor garden, with a tangle of plants swaying gently in a long low trough about knee height in front of the large open south-facing French windows. When I complimented him on the luxuriance of plants, he replied, “Anna was a very gifted gardener. I have my office now in her bedroom so I can look through here and sense her tending to them still. Here are Anna’s potted plants, and there are Lucie’s pots,” he said, gesturing to the ceramics dotted around the periphery of the room.

A maid offered us green tea from a deep black teapot with a tiny spout like a snub nose. Its hoop of cane handle seemed impossibly frail for the stout cylinder it had to carry, but it was a very neat shape, and handsomely proportioned. It creaked ominously as she poured, and she kept one restraining hand on the flat disk of a lid. After our cups were filled, the teapot was banged down rather unceremoniously on the table, with the handle falling to rest on the body of the pot. As she left the room, Plischke lifted the handle erect again very gently, and used it to turn the teapot so that he could admire its profile, and direct my attention to it. “See how the cane coils in rings around the handle echo the pronounced throwing lines below? Where there is heaviness, it is balanced with delicacy. It is an intriguing contrast of form and materials.” I sipped my scalding tea cautiously and admired the

pot. “Japanese?” I asked. “Viennese,” he answered firmly, “it is an early piece by Lucie Rie. Almost a work of eclecticism, but somehow saved by the singularity of the spout.” As he was pronouncing the name of the potter emphatically as “Lootsee Ree”, I finally understood. This was the work of the woman whose Viennese apartment he had designed between 1926 and 1928. “How old is this teapot?” I asked. “As old as the relationship,” he replied, “and it’s still going strong.”

Following Anna’s death, Lucie had been to stay with Ernst in Vienna, he revealed. “She came for my 80th birthday exhibition at the Akademie in 1983. She is a year older than me, but she has the same energy she had when she was in her twenties and I first met her. Next month I will go to London to stay with her in Albion Mews and I will come back exhausted. She still lives in the same apartment I designed for her all those years ago. She paid to have it shipped over from Vienna to London before the war. Even the kiln and the kick wheels she took from here to there. Anna and I had been accepted as refugees by New Zealand, so she asked Ernst Freud, Sigmund’s son, who happens to be an architect, to cut it down to size. The irony was that I had the chairs and couch made to fit the height of her husband Hans Rie’s legs, and as soon as she got it installed in London in 1939, she separated from him! For years she shared the space with the very important Herr Hans Coper, but he died in 1981, so now it is safe for me to go and visit again.”

That this simple stoneware bowl with its deep footing looks so remarkably contemporary despite being sixty years old is testament to its excellent design. Its surfaces are rich with story of its facture.

Plischke went to visit Lucie Rie in London that year, and again in 1987. Following her death, her studio was moved to the Victoria and Albert Museum, but the apartment, with all its furniture and fittings, was returned to Vienna. Dialled back to its original 1928 state, it is now the placeholder for Plischke's early career in a permanent exhibition at the Imperial Furniture Museum in Vienna. Despite the concern for period authenticity, Anna Plischke's copy of the Yates Gardening Guide for 1957 can be seen amongst the other books rescued from the auction of Plischke's library after his death in 1992. Its cracked spine tells its own little story of a New Zealand connection, only partially stifled by the restored splendour of the mahogany bookshelves.

Looking around the cabinetry in the apartment that Plischke had shared with his wife since his return to Vienna in 1963 on that day in May thirty years ago, I could see that not just the coffee tables, but each shelf and cupboard was accented with a piece of Lucie Rie. Above the hinged flap of the built-in writing desk glowed three blush pink and bronze porcelain bowls. Squared-off white porcelain bottles with narrow necks (thrown cleverly in two pieces) were lined up like milk bottles along the centre of a niche. Next to a strategically placed bookend which bolstered a cluster of poetry books, gleamed one of her "potatoes", a rounded vase with its rim turned resolutely inwards. There was a little McCahon painting of trees somewhere, I remember, but it couldn't compete with the splendour of the ceramics on display.

Plischke's teapot is one of just a few pieces that survive of Lucie Rie's pre-war work. As a Jewish woman who was also an avowed modernist and socialist, she was lucky to have escaped the Holocaust. Never interned as an enemy alien, she was permitted to reopen her ceramics workshop in London after the war in 1945. It is for her work in Britain in the second half of the twentieth century that she is best known, and for her independence and determination that she should be celebrated.

Making ceramic buttons for the clothing industry directly after the war, Lucie Rie saved up enough money to buy a high temperature kiln. Modifying Bernard Leach's glazes so that they would vitrify at 1260°C, she fired her first porcelain in 1949. Visiting the museum in Avebury in Wiltshire, she was inspired by dark bronze age pottery patterned with incised lines. Scratching through her manganese oxide glazes with a steel needle, she created her characteristic sgraffito pattern for the exterior surfaces of her porcelain ware. Lucie Rie tea and coffee sets, their chocolate brown cups set off perfectly by milky white tin glazed interiors, became the preferred wedding gift for stylish couples with a taste for modernism.

Fortunately for her, a neighbour in Albion Mews was Sir Gerald Barry, the Director General of the Festival of Britain in 1951 and after her success there, she and Hans Coper were chosen for the Milan Triennale as the only potters worthy of the honour of representing British ceramics. Ironically, both were German-speaking. By the 1950s, Lucie Rie's ceramics had become renowned for their good manners and elegance, just like the woman who made them.

Meanwhile, in another hemisphere, Plischke was leveraging off the success of his book *Design and Living* to engineer an exit from his public service position in the Housing Department in Wellington. He used the popularity of its message about the necessity for modernism to catapult him into a successful private practice in domestic architecture. Commissioning fellow emigres such as Irene Koppel and John Ashton to photograph his completed houses for architectural magazines, he ensured that each room was furnished with bowls and vases by Lucie Rie. Her modernist ceramics also lent a necessary glamour to the office of the Chairman of the Meat Marketing Board in newspaper images of Massey House, Plischke's breathtaking "crystal block" which was opened on Lambton Quay in October 1957.

Plischke's most unique New Zealand house was designed in schist quarried from a site high above the Clutha at Alexandra in Central Otago in 1948. Once it was completed in 1951, the owners, Barbara and Russell Henderson travelled to London, visiting Lucie Rie in her workshop in Albion Mews. They arranged a licence to import her pottery and sell it in Alexandra alongside the Hurricane lamps and other rural necessities in Russell Henderson's shop. This is one of the pieces that they kept for themselves in their Plischke house at 12 Earnsclough Road.

That this simple stoneware bowl with its deep footing looks so remarkably contemporary despite being sixty years old is testament to its excellent design. Its surfaces are rich with story of its facture. Dark streaks of manganese dribble through the acid yellow glaze. Her technique was to mix her glazes with gum arabic and paint them on the dried thrown ceramic. Wielding a flat house painter's brush, she laid on the mix in bands, thick as yoghurt, first outside, then inside the bowl, light following dark.

In one of the many letters Ernst Plischke wrote from Wellington to Lucie Rie in London, he described his life as an architect here as being "a fight against vulgarity and ugliness". Before he gave up and returned to Vienna in 1963, his crusade included introducing many New Zealanders to the modernist miracle that is Lucie Rie's ceramics.

# Punk Rococo

Louise Rive

*Vieux Paris vase*

Unknown

Courtesy of Louise Rive



I have known this Vieux Paris, Rococo-Revival vase for many years and from before I started working in clay. The form is slip cast, painted, glazed and gilded. When I first saw it filled with flowers, holding them like a fan, I was struck by its glamorous beauty. The extravagant form and decoration screams wealth and privilege. There is nothing subtle about what it represents. If the painted figure is a shepherd, there is nothing real or workmanlike about him, and if the character is simply resting after wandering the countryside, wearing his ribbons and his bows, he is an affluent man. Function is not the reason for this vase to exist, however as an intelligently designed vessel with a subtly curved back, it is a perfect balance of decorative form and utility. It is obvious to me from my work practice in clay that skilled workers have made this piece, and it is also evident to me as a painter that difficult techniques of glaze decoration and lustre are mastered with ease.

In my garage workplace in Mangere Bridge, amongst the spider webs and clay dust, my time is spent with hands dirty, shaping cold clay, carefully drying it, mixing the glaze, painting stains on to the glazed forms, and then worrying whether the work will survive multiple firings in the kiln. Out of the window I can see cows and people wandering on the Maunga of Mangere

Mountain, and the same ceramic alchemy that was possible in 19th century Paris is happening in Mangere Bridge. My response when I saw the vessel was to want to know why it was made and painted as it was, and what stories were associated with it. There is a joyousness in the opulence. This vessel has both challenged and influenced me in my work practice. I call my response, my nod to Rococo-Revival: Punk Rococo.

Made in Paris in the late 19th century, this Rococo-Revival vase illustrates 18th century Rococo characteristics of elaborate forms, embellished with sinuous gilded decoration, and with an element of asymmetry in the design in that the leaf wreathes do not mirror each other. Possibly it is one of a pair of vases; shepherds and shepherdesses were a popular pairing motif at this time. The 19th century Rococo-Revival style in art and decoration was a nod to the past, making a romantic and maybe commercially and politically cynical, feel-good connection by presenting a utopian view of, and association with, a period pre-revolution and pre-regicide when royalty had not yet been challenged by the masses. Gilded opulence had been the fashion of the day. One can easily argue these porcelain pieces were used as a canvas for a political narrative and presented an attractive historic ideal that had no basis in fact, except for a privileged few.

I make my Punk Rococo vessels knowing, as those who have gone before me knew, that connections can be provoked by an object as common as a clay vessel.

The historic and social context of this work is that it comes from a century of immense political upheaval and change. Mass migration to the city, an emerging bourgeoisie and a growth in specialist skilled workers in Paris, characterised the transition from an agrarian feudal society to an industrial society.

There is no maker's mark on this vase and the whiteness of the body indicates that it is hard-paste Paris porcelain or "Vieux Paris". Because the vase has no mark it is not from the Sevres factory — which had been owned by the kings Louis XV, and then Louis XVI until his death at the guillotine — or from one of the other factories which were owned by nobles and whose wares would have been marked. Vieux Paris factories often appropriated and worked with fired but unglazed "bisque" from the larger factories and the quality of decoration on the same form could vary greatly. Porcelain production had always been a seriously competitive, secretive and costly endeavour. In the 19th century it was no longer the domain of the wealthy ruling class as it had been, and there were more than 30 potteries and decorating workshops in the city of Paris in the 1800s.<sup>1</sup>

Technical innovation and experimentation in porcelain production became a significant part of the Industrial Revolution in late 19th century France, and techniques of mass production were developing to satisfy the new reality of the marketplace. The commercial imperative for the Vieux Paris factories was that the porcelain objects for sale had now to have wide variety, both in quality and price, to appeal the wealthy, the middle class and the poor. Factory owners and designers had to be enterprising to, "They (the factories) had to get the most fashionable wares out there before the public or they would go under".<sup>2</sup> Paris porcelain became a very successful industry, and though vast quantities were exported around the world, I cannot tell you when or how the vase arrived in New Zealand.

My handmade Punk Rococo work in clay is crude in a way that the factory-made Vieux Paris vase is not, but the glamour and glitz of the gold lustre and detailed painting is used to appeal

in exactly the same way as it did to an audience in the 19th century. I make my Punk Rococo vessels knowing, as those who have gone before me knew, that connections can be provoked by an object as common as a clay vessel.

While I admire the makers of Vieux Paris, in my ceramic practice and attitude I am philosophically closer to those of the next ceramic movement that developed in Paris; artist-potters like Ernest Chaplet, a ceramic master having begun his working life apprenticed to the Sevres factory at the age of 12, and in whose studio Paul Gauguin produced many vessels and sculptures. They shunned the Rococo-Revival style, questioning the sincerity of Old Paris, and rejecting all that had made it so widely successful i.e. the mass production of ornate porcelain objects with lush gold embellishment. Instead Chaplet and others with him adopted the values and age old techniques and traditional craftsmanship of artisans, valuing simplicity and handcraft and regarding their unique works as true artistic expression, disputing any distinction between fine art and their work in clay.<sup>3</sup>

Art builds on what has gone before. Familiar and classical form and decoration can elevate a quiet message of social connection as on my work Punk Rococo: A woman and an apple and a woman with a flower. Difficult and awkward thoughts can also be articulated, and unpalatable ideas can be disguised in a golden frame. I am in good company in this belief. Turner Prize winning artist Grayson Perry is a master of this practice. He presents an apparently attractive and colourfully decorated classical ceramic urn which entices the viewer in to a closer examination only to view unexpectedly shocking images of destruction and violence; ceramic morality tales not fairy tales. Perry speaks of his work having "a stealth tactic" and his desire is that "a polemic or ideology will come out of it",<sup>4</sup> his ceramic is not an attractive tool of propaganda to pacify the bourgeoisie with aspirational thoughts and associations. Dirt can be pretty and dangerous.

1. Artes Magazine August 2010. Rebecca Tilles, Curatorial research associate in decorative arts and sculpture in the Art of Europe Department, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

2. Ceramics Collector: "Old Paris Porcelain - 'Gilty' Pleasures" [www.liveauctioneers.com](http://www.liveauctioneers.com) Nov.2011

3. Sullivan, Elizabeth. "French Art Pottery". In Heilbrunn Timeline of

Art History. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000-. [www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/fapot/hd\\_fapot.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/fapot/hd_fapot.htm) (December 2014

4. Grayson Perry. Ceramics today.

[ceramicstoday.com/potw/grayson\\_perry.htm](http://ceramicstoday.com/potw/grayson_perry.htm) Press release Tate Britain, May 2003. Text and images used by permission of the artist.

# Bagwall

Denis O'Connor

*Bagwall bricks*

Courtesy of Denis O'Connor



Plans for kilns were roughly sketched on bits of paper. You pestered a more experienced potter for these and then the obsessive search for firebricks began. Derelict potteries in West Auckland were fertile territories and covert operations to retrieve firebricks became carefully orchestrated raids. Acquaintances with a flat-bed truck were a major coup as were wheelbarrows and a lot of hands-on-deck for the poozle.

My kilns were ramshackle structures requiring constant maintenance. Bagwall bricks melted randomly at white-hot temperatures as salt-fumes choked the atmosphere. You risked everything at this extreme heat. Often I would have small pieces balanced on the bagwall — anything could and would happen to these items. Finely modelled cameos, like porcelain operettas could be enhanced by unexplained garnitures that bestowed

mystery onto a narrative relief. Melting and fluxing was not only confined to glazes.

I think of these brick lava-oozings as not dissimilar to scholar stones from the Asian tradition. Scholar Stones are 'found stones' with grotesque, sometimes fantastical forms and are venerated. They represent a sublime intimation of an internal realm. They are usually mounted on carved ebony stands and take pride of place on poets' desks as guardians of the imagination.

'Scholar bricks' litter the undergrowth around my derelict kilns. These glassy burls or lava knots carry the primal knowledge of flame and melt. They are both archaeology and apparition, stone and transparency — many deserve a stand carved from my library of heritage pear or plum wood.

## UNMUDD | a glossary

- Brick on brick, word on word
- Salt-glazing, hair-singe, damper management
- The symbolism of smoke, bag walls, communion rails
- Poems that are recited to brick walls
- How to see through a brick wall at night
- A short history of Tangler ware
- What would Brickell say about this wine?
- Dirt, dirty, dirtier
- Landscape with chimneys and figures licking each other
- Why do bricks levitate?
- Mud Company: translating potters' slang for artists
- Bricks, garnitures and burns
- Paradox and flame narratives
- Lustres or sinking?
- Cameo depicting a foot with brick attached
- Animals that are attracted to cooling kilns
- When bagwalls collapse. A guide towards past-lives therapy
- Translucent brick work and confessional boxes
- Vase decorated with hob-carrier comedy
- Night-lamp with bad handles
- The bay lay glassy and weeps
- From Huntly
- Sack of tannery salt with horse's hoof
- The volunteer fire brigade will arrive at 3am while salting
- Two half bricks, one glass slipper
- Secondary air guitars
- A firing cake with porcelain spout
- Seto noir again
- Kiln debitage with pastoral subjects
- The bagwall became a waterfall
- My white dog covered in soot
- The post firing ice-cream was stolen
- Where glowing bricks were wrapped in moss for export to places needing fire

August 2015

The word UNMUDD comes from a poem in the book *Wonky Optics* by Geoff Cochrane, VUP 2015

# Empire of Dirt: Writers Bios

**Denis O'Connor** is a sculptor and writer represented by Two Rooms Gallery, Auckland.

**Emma Jameson** is studying for her Masters in Art History, specialising in synagogue visual culture and architecture. She first became enamoured with ceramics during her internship with EyeContact in 2014. She is currently away conducting research in Israel, where she is accumulating more ceramics.

**Linda Tyler** wrote her MA thesis on Ernst Plischke and in 1984 travelled to Vienna to interview him. Currently Director of the Centre for Art Studies at The University of Auckland she also administers its Art Collection.

**Martin Poppelwell** is a practicing artist based on the East Coast of the North Island in Napier. The artist's work has consistently messed with the hierarchy of sensibility, medium and the possibility of meaning. His work is represented in Auckland by Melanie Roger Gallery.

**Meighan Ellis**, a multi-disciplinary artist, writer and researcher, she lectures in design, fine art and contextual studies. Her practice focuses on photography, moving image, writing and recently a re-acquaintance with clay after a hiatus of twenty years.

**Valerie Ringer Monk** has written two books on Crown Lynn, *Crown Lynn a New Zealand Icon* (2006) and *Crown Lynn collector's handbook* (2013), both published by Penguin. She is currently researching other New Zealand commercial potteries.

**Nina van Lier** and Dylan van Lier are twins, seventeen years old, in their last year of high school, and have opposite interests. Nina is art, and Dylan science. Next year the two plan to go to university to study graphic design (Nina) and biomedical science (Dylan). [www.ninavanlier.com](http://www.ninavanlier.com)

**Tessa Laird** is an artist, writer, and lecturer currently living in Melbourne. Her ceramics have featured in *Freedom Farmers*, *Slip Cast*, and *Five by Five*. She is the author of *A Rainbow Reader*, an exploration of colour, and is currently writing a book on bats.

**Bronwyn Lloyd** teaches in the writing programme at the School of English and Media Studies at Massey University (Albany) and has worked as a curator publishing articles and catalogue essays about New Zealand art and craft since 1998.

**Gregory O'Brien** is a poet, painter and art-writer and the 2015 Stout Memorial Fellow at Victoria University, Wellington. His recent publications include a collection of poems, *Whale Years*, and *See What I Can See: New Zealand Photography for the Young and Curious* (both published by AUP).

**Janet McAllister** is an arts and cultural commentator, and proudly semi-retired without any assets.

**Jenny Bornholdt** is a poet who enjoys working with visual artists. Raewyn Atkinson used her poem, 'Pitcher with Women', on her series *Praising Girls*, made a few years ago.

**David Craig** is a sociologist with a long term weakness for pots, especially those reflecting the avidly regional, fairly primitive aesthetic sensibility that emerged here in the late 1960s and early 70s. Barry Brickell's work, he thinks, is central in this.

**Anna Miles** established Anna Miles Gallery in 2003 and is a senior lecturer in visual arts at AUT University.

**Louise Rive** is the winner of the 2014 Portage Ceramic Award.

**Moyra Elliott** is a writer, reviewer, curator and 'odd jobs person in the arts'. Recent activities include writing for *The Listener* and international ceramics journals and negotiating for the Portage ceramic residencies in Denmark and New Jersey.

**Doris de Pont** loves bowls, the look and feel of them and the usefulness of them. She also loves words and sharing stories and has curated this exhibition to share the love.

## Objectspace

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