

Flow and Chance

This: a 2.5 metre paperclay object-animal suspended mid-air from the high vaulted ceiling of the Cell Block Theatre. It had been tested in a tree outside the windows of the Ceramics Department before it joined this staff-student ceramics exhibition in 1995. Such fun. I was aided and abetted in this tricky manoeuvre by Diogenes Farri, an artist-teacher from a multigenerational family of Chilean potters, who drew less on the Anglo-Japanese Leach-Hamada-Cardew school of influence on Australian studio ceramics and more from the centuries of rich expressive clay traditions of his South American heritage. He in turn understood that the continent beneath our feet and the former colonial jail site of our local surrounds also carried millennia of Indigenous cultural heritage at work, ever-humming, in the present day.

My three years from 1994 to 1996 as a student in the lauded ceramics course at East Sydney Tech/ the National Art School were exhilarating, exhausting and energizing in rotational flow. Days were long, often extending into the evening in the kiln shed getting up to 'cone temperature' with a gas kiln that required its human drivers. It was a period of total immersion in studio-based learning, a physical and intellectual immersion facilitated by a pool of practicing teachers – potters, ceramics artists, philosophical educators - fluent in the materiality of touch and movement and crystallized stillings that clay and ceramics have come to mean to me. In hindsight, this time was also located in the wash of the mid-nineties ebb and flow and push and pull between a waning of traditions and guiding certainties that 'form follows function' and 'truth to materials', themselves once 'revolutions' in thought-practice in western ceramics, and a postmodern(ish) turn to 'the object', with influences from multiple sources. But, also, an emergence of contemporary craft theory that revalorized hapticity – touch - the 'somatic object' – and questioned the lingering supremacy afforded ocularcentrism in the expanded field of the arts.

Accompanying these currents were quietly passionate practitioner-teachers who advocated variously for more traditional ceramic ideas and means, or enjoined fearless exploration as part of a contemporary studio-based education. As a student, I was able to tap into both: learn how take a ball of wet plastic clay and shape it quickly into a desired shape on a turning wheel, do that scores of times in a day,

convert it to a long-lived ceramic fabric by controlled heatwork in a kiln that we students may have collaboratively learnt to build at East Sydney, or take that same clay and innovate with paperclay slurries applied to armatures of wire mesh which when fired could be hoisted into the lightness of air. When a small cohort of like-minded fellow students began making 'white' ceramics for the table influenced by *blanc de Chine*, collections of bleached animal bones and a chime of snowy Scandinavian minimalism – rather than popular coloured majolica terracottas or stoneware greens and browns, for instance - we ignored appraisals that 'white was cold'. Likewise, opinions that ceramics should not be perforated with holes, should not be hung on walls, that a vessel should stand firmly with its feet on the ground, were all part of the wash of challenge and change. All of these examples have since become more commonplace for contemporary studio makers in the spectrum of ceramics of course, and in turn, have morphed, evolved, or been rejected by new hands and eyes. When I returned to the NAS Ceramics Department in 2000, briefly as a degree-conversion student, and then in a teaching capacity, I remembered the privilege of being part of that energetic hotbed of ceramics creativity, competing ideas and potential embodied by generous teachers and passionate, sometimes irreverent, students.

In an emerging Anthropocene, I am reminded that the turning wheel is in conversation with a turning planet. In my own ceramics practice set vigorously into motion two decades ago, new ecological injunctions as an artist-maker are also at play. But fluid clay and the processes of ceramics-making also teach much about the wonder of flow and the potential of chance. It is a pleasure to participate in the fifty-year strong abundance of this exhibition gathering, and it will be exciting to watch new creative turns and re-turns as the generational flow continues through the NAS Ceramics studios and imagining spaces.

Louise Boscacci, 7 May 2015

Words for 'TURN, TURN, TURN: The Studio Ceramics Tradition at the National Art School', National Art School Gallery Sydney, 4 June - 8 August 2015. Glenn Barkley, Curator.