

NEW EMPIRICISM

Cherish old knowledge so that one can acquire new.

This Analect of Confucius silently occupies a small wall plaque in the newly re-opened Ashmolean Museum of Art And Archaeology in Oxford, England.

I was there in November last year as part of a studio residency and research trip, based in the Australia Council London Studio. I was away for three and half months, mostly in England, but also with some research time in northern Italy (Bologna, Faenza, and the Valtellina in Lombardy).

I went to visit and study collections of ceramics and other cultural objects held in mainly British museums and institutions of interest; I had a 'wish list'—I wanted to see them in the round and up close which is a radically different experience to 2d photographs in books or digitally online. The British museums have a long tradition of collecting and making collections of cultural artefacts; this has indeed been controversial for other cultures, including Indigenous Australians. But with ceramics, in particular, one can access that long timeline of making to human antiquity, to the Neolithic. I was also there to visit contemporary art exhibitions and galleries in London, and this was to encompass ceramics and the spectrum of contemporary visual arts more generally.

To quote a proposal from two years ago, the project

Object, Place, Time continues interest in a conversation between the contemporary ceramic object and the continuous presence of the past. Over the past nine years, I have explored inlaid, marked porcelains as carriers of place and time—the austral and the intensely local. Exhibited have been objects, vessels, porcelain + metal assemblages, and site installations. Away from home ground, the twenty-first century metropolis of London, holds major collections of ceramics and symbolic objects from both hemispheres, and from the ancient Neolithic to the present day.

And, I wanted to do this with:

... one ear to the question: what objects might an emerging Greenhouse Age elicit?

This was a dedicated time of looking, learning and pondering. In a way, making my own collection of perceptions, encounters and information.

I plan to speak about this recent research for about thirty minutes, then wing my way back to this ancient island to say something about recent studio work of mine. Two years ago, for the *Australian Ceramic Stories* Forum in Dubbo, not far from here, I contextualized my practice in some detail; I don't wish to repeat that here, but the text of this passage of making and thinking titled *Hold, Trace, Listen* is online for anyone to read.

I speak here in the first person, as a full time practising artist—this is not an academic paper—but I hope to slip in some ideas that form part of the synthetic act that making ceramics is for me. By that I mean that fluid call and response between materials, kiln, ideas, encounters, 'feelings', and the reaching for 'the right fit'. The 'right fit'. The 'right fit' is the inner imperative and guide that the works have to *feel* right, to be authentic to what moved one to make in the first place. And, perhaps even to give something unexpected back—something enlivening, another little movement to me the maker, when all is done. It is a two-way conversation always. I have referred to this previously as "synthetic movement".

So, let me take you on a version of a *dérive*, literally a 'drift' as first proposed by thinker and writer Guy Debord in 1958. Debord is credited as the founder of Psychogeography, which I will return to further down the track in relation to some recent work of mine. In a *derive*:

[O]ne or more persons during a certain period drop their usual motives for movement and action, their relations, their work and leisure activities, and let themselves be drawn by the attractions of the terrain and the encounters they find there ... But the *dérive* includes both this letting go

and its necessary contradiction

[and I leave the quote here to paraphrase]—choosing what to do with the possibilities offered in the process.

Let me begin this passage of movement and composition in Oxford at the Ashmolean in the cool of English autumn last year.



contd.

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