

MUD COMPANY

THE 'FIVE BY FIVE' EXHIBITION⁽¹⁾

Five by Five was an exhibition held at the Denis Cohn Gallery, Auckland, in June 1980, by five artists who at that time and throughout the 1970s were working with clay. They were Bronwynne Cornish, Peter Hawkesby, Denis O'Connor, John Parker and Warren Tippett.

What unified this exhibition was the singular focus on works that denied any reference to utilitarian traditions in preference to a commitment to ideas and methods plundered from other disciplines and sources. These were as diverse as architecture, industrial or product design, street fashion, contemporary painting and Arte Povera, carnival floats, psychological identikit, etc. The show took its title, and its iconoclastic stance, from the Rolling Stones' rock album of the same name released in 1974. The title declared its referential gaze to be outside of the Leachian⁽²⁾ ceramic traditions so influential in this country's pioneer pottery movement, and directed instead towards the popular cultural forms of the times.

Music, dance crazes, film, advertising and any low art source was the preferred focus of attention and appropriation, 'ideas' being the crucial component of these ceramic sculptures. Forget glaze fits, slumping, crazing and the worship of the transcendent glow of stoneware at 1300°C. Many of the pieces in *Five by Five* were low fired. Some were painted with Levene's⁽³⁾ house paint acrylics or gritty slips. Many were constructed with a nasty red clay from a mangrove creek and were fired until the clay could endure no more.

Consider these titles: Incinerators (Hollow Burnt Men)
Uvee
Boat Load of Stones
Fifth Penetration
Wings of the nation fly me south

These could have been the names of garage bands, modelled perhaps on examples from California or the UK, cultures featured as influences in the clay sculptures making up this exhibition. The Japanese-inspired achievements that obsessed this country's ceramic circles at that time just did not feature. No Tenmokus, Celedons, or Shinos. No Anagama

-- -- -- --

[The] Leachian perspective and Japanese inspired principles of Mingei Folkware came loaded with dos and don'ts, a codified language with rigidly defined dogmas. Potters here seemed bound and gagged by ceramic histories because of the pioneer nature of the movement that gathered momentum during the 1960s and 1970s. Pottery had suddenly assumed a central position in the culture. Painting and sculpture were almost runners up. This was reversed in the U.S.A. where the dominating images and personalities of Abstract Expressionism ensured the supremacy of painting. Clay artists such as Ron Nagle were able to absorb influences from Fine Art sources with Spanish painter Antonio Tapies and the Italian Giorgio Morandi cited as his major models. Nagle's early work mimicked the melting graphic profiles Morandi achieved in his luminous still life compositions of boxes, bottles, cans and jars (Morandi often painted and resurfaced the objects he collected; sometimes thickly crusted and crinkling, like clay).

European painters such as Lucio Fontana, Joan Miro and

-- -- -- --

The contemporary ceramics movement, Sodeisha (The Running Mud Company), [offers another] touchstone. Sodeisha was founded in 1948 by Kazuo Yagi and Osamu Suzuki in Kyoto. It reflected a rebellion against the social order of the existing craft world in Japan and an awareness of trends in art and design that were flowing into Japan from the West. When I met members of this group in the early 1980s, influences such as Marcel Duchamp, Robert Rauschenberg, Arte Povera sculptors from Italy, and Robert Smithson the land art pioneer, were discussed avidly. Performance rituals involving clay and sound were taking place. Large touring exhibitions of contemporary avant-garde art from Europe were doing the rounds of the Department Store Museums. Seibu Bookstores stocked all the current catalogues from around the world. After the devastation of World War II, the apprentice master/disciple system and national Living Treasure hierarchies were openly condemned. Many 'Sodeisha' artists were from university art schools. Some were hostile to the previous connoisseurship that had developed. The leader Yagi admired the internationally acclaimed work of sculptor Isamu Noguchi, back from the U.S.A. where he had designed for theatre and experimental dance companies. But it needs to be stressed that these diverse influences on members of Sodeisha existed within a masterly understanding of the tradition of making, glazing and firing utilitarian clay wares.

Like the sculptural work of Sodeisha artists, the American sculptors Joseph Cornell and H.C Westerman made assemblages that were tailored down to table scale, small enough to hold in the hands (like pottery). Their images, however, had a visionary dimension that undermined the determinedly-miniature delicacy of scale. The crafting of each piece was always subordinate to the idea and at times the vision subverted the craftsmanship. This approach seemed entirely absent from ceramic traditions (the exception being children's clay-work). The Funk experiment had freed ceramics to engage with major issues being addressed by artists in other media. But its obsession with irreverent humour, punning and mock self-parody only underlined its minor-league status. It was still threaded down a line that stretched from 'Masterpieces of the Tang Dynasty' to 'The World's Most Fascinating Hobby'. Clay needed to get tough, get dirty, and get down off its high horse. It needed some foreboding and plangency that only artists unshackled by the restraints of craft histories could provide. Art of the 20th Century does have a tradition of clay-work that embraces these freedoms, but it has been marginalised in favour of these artists' achievements as painters or sculptors — starting with the ceramics of Paul Gauguin to the mid-century experiments of the Australian visionary Arthur Boyd to contemporary artists such as Richard Long, Jannis Kounellis, Mario Merz, Marina Abramovic and Anthony Gormley, clayiness has figured prominently. Richard Long throws buckets of clay slip at gallery and museum walls and

or the random flame markings of Naborigama styles. This was replaced by switch it on, switch it off, electric firings or crude and trouble-fraught salt kilns.

China Cabinet Ceramics had haunted the traditions in the U.S.A. (New Zealand had examples of souvenir genre ceramics too⁽⁴⁾). A strain of biographical narrative evolved alongside the slashing, tearing and distorting techniques of the gestural expressionist. A fondness for the hot hues of swimming pools, surfboards, convertibles, trailer homes and neon-tinted Californian skies. Even clay from across the border in Mexico featured. Day of the Dead effigies, ritual masks, throw-away tortilla plates and suchlike imposed an influence on West Coast U.S.A. perceptions. Warren Tippett's cubes and carnival tableaux and Bronwynne Cornish's early alertness to aspects of the American Funk tradition registered these during the 1970s, with influences as diverse as Robert Arneson's self parody and mocking humour and Clayton Bailey's deadpan rendering of palaeontology and scientific methodology. (Bailey published 'texts' in a pseudo-scientific newspaper called The Unnatural Enquirer revealing startling uncoverings of the skeletal remains of unknown beasts, such as cyclops, in remote regions of California. Some of these porcellanous skeletal remains were monumental in scale and carefully photographed in situ attended to by Professor Bailey and his white-coated team of 'experts' - he was an avid collector of Studebaker automobiles, tattoos and robot toys. The scientific prankster and master craftsman had found a way of talking to one another in his art.)

What clay artists such as these and the likes of Ken Price, Ron Nagle, Michael Frimkess, Robert Brady, Peter Voukos, James Melchert, Robert Hudson and Richard Shaw provided at that time, particularly for Bronwynne Cornish, Peter Hawkesby and myself, were examples of an alternative way of handling clay that had paid its dues to the great ceramic traditions from the Orient and moved on! A way too that embraced developments in 20th century painting and sculpture, acknowledging the surrealists, Dadists, constructivists and the New York-dominated Abstract Expressionists.

Pablo Picasso started collaborating with master potters: Picasso in the village of Vallauris in the South of France where traditional peasant-ware was still made; Joan Miro with Luis Artigas whose kilns and workshops were located in the heartland of Catalonia, a place that had always invested Miro's art with a tense fecundity. Lucio Fontana had produced highly expressionist clay pieces from the early 1930s onwards. These evolved into elegant spaziale experiments with ruptured skins that mirrored his canvas and cement works. In the late 1950s, he collaborated with the renowned Sevres Porcelain China Factory in France to produce sculptural pieces unprecedented in 20th Century art for their inventiveness and technical mastery. In America in the late 50s, some of these experimental works in clay by this century's foremost painters were finally seen by potters such as Peter Voukos. A new way of handling clay opened before them, extending the expressive vocabularies of wheel-thrown pottery that had, like New Zealand, looked to Leach and the Orient for its guidance.

lets it drip, run and puddle. He stamps out huge circles and rings with muddied hands that resonate like mandalas. Often the location where the slip-thickened water originates will determine the title or text. Jannis Kounellis, the great povera sculptor, fills ancient terracotta amphorae with seawater and blood then stacks them in the holds of a cargo vessel to make narratives that track the migratory and trading traditions of once expansive European cultures. Mario Merz just flattens and 'pancakes' lumps of clay over igloo forms left to dry and crack. Sometimes he'll just leave it in the plastic bag and thread neon lighting through to create metaphors about nature, continuity and systems of proliferation. The British sculptor Antony Gormley fills museum rooms with thousands upon thousand of dumpy, shapeless, schematic clay figurines for a generic installation he calls Field. Armies of untrained volunteer workers drawn from local communities labour to a basic prescribed formula. Elongated standing tube shapes capped with two glaring eye-sockets in a rudimentary head. Each is unique. But any individuality is lost in a thronging mass of gaping forms that are only visible from doorways or peepholes. No nationality, no identity, just a harvest of human clay and human consciousness. The performance artist Marina Abramovic makes clay mirrors imprinted with facial features that summon both fragmentary actions in time and their conjunction with the transforming alchemy of the earth-body.

These examples from contemporary installation art represent clay at its wettest, slipperiest and thickest. Clay in its most primal, alchemical and essential condition, speaking in its purest tones. Formless, but teeming with symbolic content. The High Art end of the line. A line that is anchored by objects still invested with some residual phantom of containerhood. Vessels made by artists in clay like Ron Nagle, Ken Price, Peter Voukos, Liz Fritsch or Andrew Lord have advanced ceramics in the late 20th Century by broadening the terms of reference.

The strength of the *Five by Five* exhibition was to add significantly to the vocabulary of references while accepting the limitations of scale. Each piece was essentially kiln-shelf sized and not rehearsing statements that suggested clay could be made to perform monumental tasks like big brother bronze. The work celebrated clayiness and displayed a devotion to its expressive language and lineage. In fact, there were pieces that renewed the possibilities for domestic ceramics, which were foundering on overworked borrowings and slavish obsession with technical triumphs. The show did however direct its gaze towards another tradition. It was that tradition of using clay to which some of the most innovative painters and sculptors of the 20th Century contributed, but had remained unseen (especially in New Zealand) due to the conspiracy that developed between those who believe Craft will never be Art, and those who believe Art will never be Craft.

Denis O'Connor
September 1995

(1) This text is an abridged version of an essay that Denis O'Connor wrote in 1995 when he was writer-in-residence at Unitec department of architecture/design. To read the full text, which includes O'Connor's description and analysis of the workshop Five by Five works, please visit www.teuru.org.nz.

(2) Bernard Leach was an English potter whose publication 'A Potter's Book' became a workshop bible for the pioneer pottery movement in New Zealand.

(3) Levene is an Auckland-based retailer of commercial acrylic paints for exterior and interior use.

(4) Often revered classical Māori forms such as Hei Tiki were appropriated by our commercial souvenir ceramics producers, e.g. Titianware.