



Foreword

I had the pleasure of meeting Margaret Lawrence only once before she passed away in January 2004. It was at the Victorian College of the Arts and in the gallery that now bears her name. I was introduced to Margaret, a benefactor and friend of the School of Art, by Professor Su Baker and I thanked her generally for the contribution she made. I had not yet been appointed director of the gallery and it was certainly not evident to me at that time just how critical her support would be in determining the gallery's future. I've often wished, since, that I could thank her appropriately.

May 2014 marks the centenary of Margaret's birth, and it is a very great pleasure to be involved in the celebrations – *Give it up for Margaret: A month of philanthropic inspiration* – that have been designed both to commemorate the legacy of her giving and to speculate on the future of philanthropy in Australia. For this occasion, I invited Melbourne-based artist Kay Abude to curate an exhibition that would highlight the ceramic discipline in some way. In addition to the fact that ceramics was an enduring passion of Margaret, I thought it timely to consider the relationship between ceramic technique or process and contemporary practice, more generally – something Kay herself engages in her own work. The resulting exhibition *Assembly: contemporary ceramics* is a joy: a wonderfully textured project that has developed out of Kay's research, through her conversations with the artists (indeed, some of these conversations are presented within this catalogue), in and out of studios and workshops, and finally here into the gallery.

There are, of course, many people to thank: Kay Abude, for embracing the project with utmost dedication and rigour; the artists Sarah crowEST, Richard Grigg, Katie Lee, Andrew McQualter, Sanné Mestrom, Stephen Ralph and Jake Walker for their remarkable, inspiring work; Kevin Murray for his insightful essay; Stephen Banham for the beautiful catalogue design; Tristan Meecham, Bec Reid and Phip Murray for discerning development and management of *Give it up for Margaret*; Scott Miles for his constant, and often unrecognized, commitment to the Margaret Lawrence Gallery. There are two people I would especially like to acknowledge, only one of whom I can thank in person: Jan Cochrane-Harry was a friend of Margaret and remains a trustee of the Margaret Lawrence Bequest; she has been instrumental in ensuring that Margaret's legacy has a wide-ranging and significant impact. And, although I could never thank Margaret Lawrence adequately during her lifetime, I am confident she would take delight in this exhibition and, I like to think, a quiet pride in what she has helped to achieve.

Vikki McInnes

Director, Margaret Lawrence Gallery

APRIL 2014

In conversation with

SARAH CROWEST

KAY ABUDE *Mound Activity* is an ongoing long-term project spanning several decades. It's an activity about your fanatic urge to keep making series of mounds over and over again in compulsive repetition. Producing these often humorous sculptural objects is an unequivocal, absurd undertaking, yet the project is fascinating in its own sense of lunacy. Can you describe how the project began and what fuels the making of these mounds?

SARAH CROWEST I can't quite pinpoint exactly how *Mound Activity* began and as I reflect on the possible triggers and inclinations for such a project to emerge, they continue to multiply. Here are seven possible versions:

1. I always gathered and agglomerated residual matter and paint from larger, sculptural projects together into massed forms. It's a cleaning up procedure and an aspect of a no-waste art practice.
2. Failed figurative sculptures were often squished into lumps or built up and over to obliterate features. Somehow these mute, material mounds seemed preferable in their quietness and indeterminate states.
3. I was once deeply intrigued by the mounded humps under Mike Kelley's blankets. A mysterious, lurking presence that is visible and hidden all at once.

4. I enjoy the recognized slapstick technique of flogging a joke to death. I find there is a dark humour in such dogged commitment to maintaining an art practice predicated upon such persistent repetition.
5. I have long-harboured a desire for order and repetition in my art practice and life (a counter-state to my habitual intellectual and process-driven roving and tumbling).
6. Following on from this aspiration, *Mound Activity* might be described as a defiant attempt, against my natural inclinations, to develop a trademark style. I think here of a mural and poster by Vuk Vidor, an artist working in Paris. His work called *Art History* is a list; on each line he links an artist to her/his cultural impact in three words. So, for example Pollock owns Drippings, Orlan owns Plastic surgery, Ryman owns White, Sherman owns Herself, and Arman owns Accumulation. In observing the mass of forms I produce, might one speculate that – were I part of such a list – it would read ‘crowEST owns Mounds’?
7. I had my mind ‘blown’ during a trip to India several years ago when I discovered the wayside shrines that often grew around existing rock forms in the landscape. These freely contrived deities were embellished variously with foil, enamel eyes and simple materials at hand. The strangest and most compelling had an abstract quality and were created over smooth, mounded protrusions from the earth. I am moved by them to this day and their presence continues to haunt my practice like a back beat.

KA Materials such as coffee grounds, scraps of plaster, clay, cardboard and polystyrene have been recycled and reused to articulate different mound forms in scale, weight, tactility and colour. Can you describe the ideas behind the new series of mounds that you have made for the exhibition?

SC A chance occurrence led to the mounded forms mutating into something approximating ceramic vessels. I was attempting to squeeze a too large, semi-spherical nugget through my new studio door and was thwarted. After deciding to tamp it down into a more tractable donut shape I jumped up and down on the top and was astonished to break through and fall into the centre! I had forgotten the nugget was built up around an empty cardboard box. After hauling out my giggling carcass I was faced with the semblance of a giant pinch pot. How opportune! With a ceramics show on the horizon and without a kiln in the vicinity, an idea glimmered. I had inadvertently found a way to link my agglomerative processes with found residue to a very rudimentary, yet undeniably charming, ceramic activity involving the idea of a simple, handmade pot.

KA Two of the three mounds have taken the form of pinch pots. How have the traditions of ceramics informed this series of work?

SC It's hard not to love a pinch pot. Forming clay into a vessel shape with nothing but the hands would have been the earliest and most direct construction method. Everyone who has ever worked with a lump of clay has probably made a pinch pot first before advancing to coiling. Children make them as they explore the responsiveness of clay. Of course, mine are not made of clay and I see that it would be impossible to make such large ones with the thumbs alone! The pinch pots, informed by both an archaic and contemporary form of pottery appear, here in this exhibition, as a snapshot moment of arrested development. This might be described as a ‘phase transition’ of matter caught in a stage of intensification in an ongoing cycle of mutation and clustering.



RIGHT
Sarah crowEST
terracotta mound,
2012
fired terracotta clay
approx. 55 x 46 x 30cm
Courtesy the artist

LEFT
Sarah crowEST
Large pinch pot,
2014,
Little pinch pot,
2014 and
Terracotta mound,
2012
(studio shot)
acrylic polymer paint, gyprock, cloth,
carboard, styrofoam, plastic, paper,
cellulose paste, coffee grouts, fired
terracotta clay
approx. 98 x 77 x 77cm,
70 x 35 x 35cm, 55 x 46 x 30cm
Courtesy the artist

In conversation with
RICHARD
GRIGG

KAY ABUDE In 2010 you were diagnosed with a neurological condition called *task specific primary focal dystonia* (PFD). This brain anomaly has affected your fine motor skills and over the years, you have had to re-train your hand to perform basic movements such as re-learning how to write and draw. Your artwork narrates the processes of adapting to this disability within a new set of circumstances. Can you describe the impact of PFD on your arts practice and how it continues to inform the work that you make?

RICHARD GRIGG Basically, I always thought of myself as a drawer. I worked through drawings to refine ideas for sculptures and other installations. At the time of my diagnosis I was having a lot of trouble touching the page with a pencil and controlling my movements when I was sketching, and I was finding I was holding my right hand with my left to keep it on the page. Despite the frustration, I was aware that the sensation of the touch of objects in my palms was greatly increased, so I began collecting stones, seedpods and wood chips to carry them in my pockets. The idea of severed parts and the gathering of them together became a metonym for the broken representation of my hand on my motor cortex, which I in turn was touching through the touch of the stones. Further to this, I began to amass a small group of symbols such as apples and staffs and leopards, which represented anti-gravity, desire and adaption to the parameters of my disability. I was forced through the appearance of this condition to change my entire practice and begin to learn new techniques of production such as casting, slip pours, resin production, fibreglassing, rubber moulds, terrazzo and other associated disciplines. Perhaps the greatest thing that this condition has given me is a strong bodily association with the objects I make as they explain my experience through their production and their distorted function.

KA The absence of drawing is now replaced with cruder markings that demonstrate the physical erasure of manual dexterity as you express drawing through tactile collage. Can you describe the importance of tactility in your sculptural works in relation to the materials that you use?

RG I seem to have a heightened response to the touch of surfaces but added to this is the desire to read the interiority of a fractured and singular stone – to understand the language of a stone helps with the placement of them in their intended, original position. The same can be said for the awareness of the nature in particular sections of individual muscles that have lost their placement within the act of drawing. I read stones and group stones in my works to develop, through their touch, a method of reintegration of muscular function.

The portraits of leopard heads that I have made are drawn from within a latex mould, so for me I am drawing inside the stones and working with the interior trying to understand the evolved mechanism. Slowly and happily, I am regaining my vision of drawing which had been erased by the tension which had come to replace it.

KA What are some of the ideas behind your *Rock leopard* series and your sculptural piece *Reflection*?

RG The rock leopard heads actually emerged from a dream I had of a drawing of a leopard that was made out of collaged material. I realized I could draw through the heightened sense I had of the surface of these broken collaged parts, if not through the tip of the pencil. I spent a lot of time collecting and cleaning rocks from beaches, riverbanks, gardens and other places to sort them into a tight arrangement that I could make into these leopards. The leopard I came to realize was an animal that had a sound fusion to its environment but which I considered always at a remove operating at the horizon. This elusiveness of ordered function is reflected in my improving, although still disabled fine motor skills.

The upstanding handgrip work is an enlarged copy of the negative grip of the palm. The sculpture draws its structure from several sources. Firstly it is a literal reading of the function aspects of the negative spacing of vessels that are found in the 11th verse of the *Tao The Ching*. There is a persistent restating of the functional role of the hub of the wheel and opening of the doorway, which I interpreted as the palm of the closing hand to distance myself mentally from the role of the fingers in order to allow a common action to occur.

Another reference of this work is the iron-age site in Norfolk that was revealed during a freak storm in 2003. A ring of logs that encircled an upturned stump was unveiled by the rush of water and was interpreted as a device of transition. The central, upturned log was seen as a vehicle to transport the deceased spirits from this realm into the next and coincidentally the structure resembles a wheel with the log acting as the functioning point similar to a hub. The idea of a reflection of two states that the upturned log represents is described through the sheen of the black resin that separates the grip into two hemispheres but with three parts – the solid ones and the reflected one. This once again relates to a condition within, but also to my body that can be seen in the worn, lying down plaster on the supporting finger logs.



LEFT
Richard Grigg
Rock leopard #1, #2 & #3
(installation shot), 2013
tinted polymer plaster
32.7 x 38.2cm each
Courtesy the artist
Photo: Kay Abude



RIGHT
Richard Grigg
Reflection, 2014
earthenware, lime wash
plywood, cast concrete,
resin/fiberglass tint, plaster
93.5 x 44 x 119cm
Courtesy the artist
Photo: Kay Abude

In conversation with

KATIE LEE

KAY ABUDE *Dreaming of a technological future* suggests an industry looking at its past to inform its future. Can you elaborate on the title of your work?

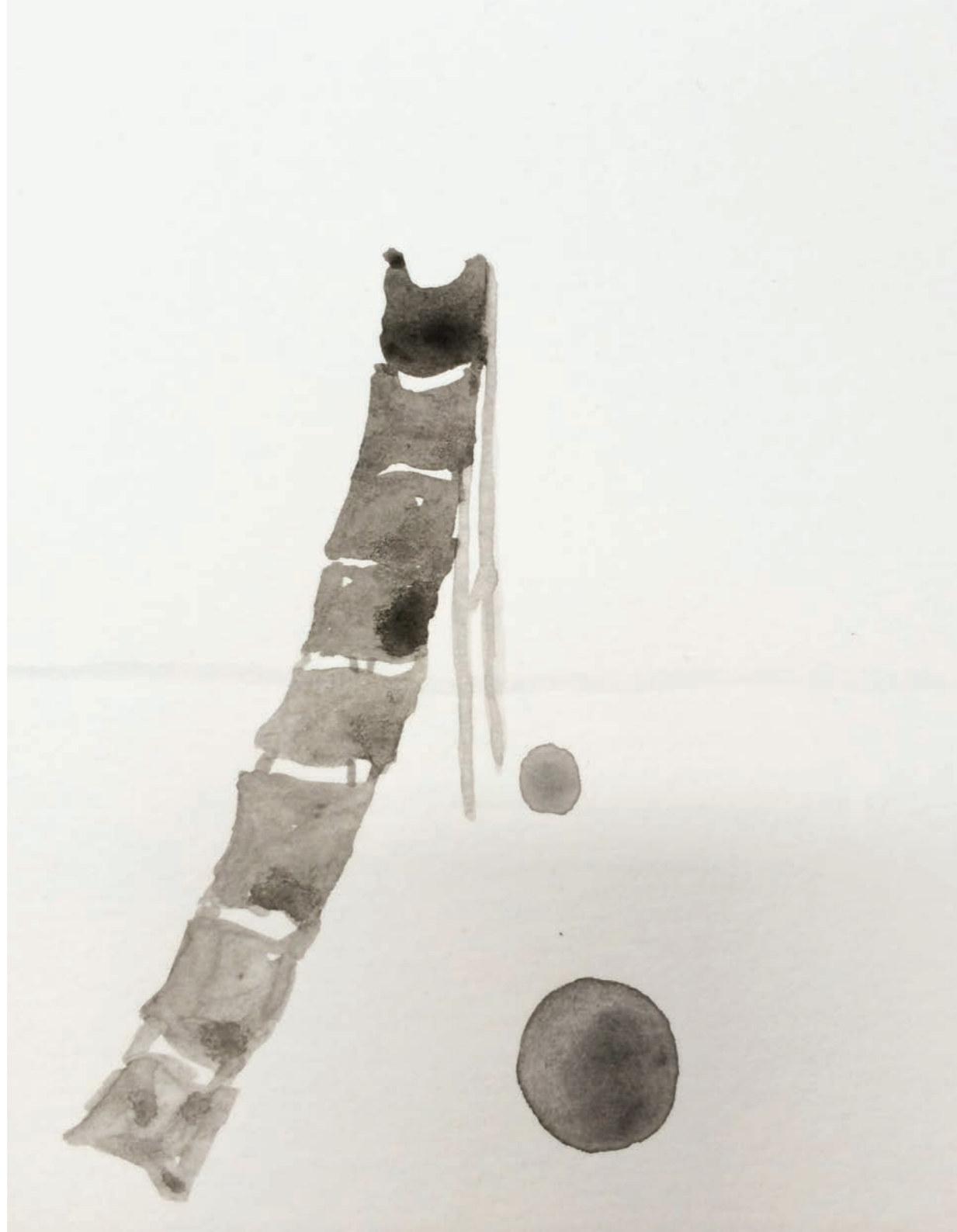
KATIE LEE For me, ceramics reference a kind of luddite's technology. Although it was once part of major industry it has been replaced with materials like plastics and rubber. Although the new technologies are incredibly seductive materials that I like to use in my work, they are industrial processes that are somewhat inaccessible to me as an artist. It is difficult to manufacture small scale, one-off works in plastics and cast rubber. Therefore ceramic has become a stand in industrial material for me. It harks back to its industrial uses, yet stands-in for materials that are more technologically advanced.

KA Your installation uses the Margaret Lawrence Ceramics Collection as a starting point for the exploration of materiality within your practice. Specific ceramic works have been selected from the collection that use glazes, or attempt in formwork, to mimic other materials, especially those of industrial surfaces such as timber, metal and stone. Can you explain the relationship between the works in the collection and the sculptures that you have made for the exhibition?

KL I've selected works from the collection that describe my thoughts about ceramics through a broad and discordant range of techniques. Some of the works I have selected look like they are mimicking pre-industrial ceramics. They seem reminiscent of the pottery found in ancient civilisations, craggy, rough and earthy. These works intrigue me because they seem to mimic the antithesis of technology, but no doubt use complex and sophisticated ceramic processes. I enjoy the diversity of these works, and how they masquerade as vessels, however they are actually artworks that have a highly attuned sense of materiality that ceramics is allowing them to create through the various treatments.

KA There has been a continual experimentation with clay in some of your most recent projects. Ancient ceramic techniques such as hand building, the use of decorative glazes and methods of firing have informed your making process. What ignited your interest in clay?

KL Although I say I am interested in ceramic as a stand-in, my interest in using it is beyond mimicry. I am actually interested in the integrity of ceramic as a 'real' material (rather than a material that is illusory). What I mean is that I am not using it to pretend to be concrete, rubber or timber. It is ceramic. Within my practice I tend to use industrial or robust materials, rather than using materials that are trying to look like something else. That is why ceramic is one of the only materials that I really like using as an alternative to the industrial version. I also enjoy using colour with ceramics, because I am not painting it to hide its materiality. The glazing process actually forms a glass-like surface, as it is alchemical and transformative. I like the process of firing soft malleable material into a permanent stone-like form, much like bronze casting. I like the record of the maker's hands, the imprint of the individual – but that it reverts to something more robust.



LEFT
Katie Lee
Flag sign, 2014
water colour and
ink on paper
14,8 x 21cm
Courtesy the artist



RIGHT
Katie Lee
River rocks by the beach
(Clifton beach, Tasmania),
2014
digital photo
Courtesy the artist

In conversation with

ANDREW MCQUALTER

KAY ABUDE A key theme running through your practice is the idea of creating visual analogues for relationships, where many of your projects are collaborative and process oriented. *A form made by constructing a coiled pot in the space between Craig and me* (2014) is the fourth reiteration of a coiled pot work from a series of works created as part of the same project. Can you describe how the project began?

ANDREW MCQUALTER I was thinking about ways I could extend a way of working that began with another project titled *Studies for the shape of government* (2004–06) which is a series of twenty-six collaborative drawings. For that project I invited people [mostly artists, but also a political economist, a film maker and a writer) to meet with me for a conversation. The conversation revolved around our knowledge of the structure of government; as we talked, we made a drawing together.

The drawings were shown as a series, laid flat on tables, accompanied with a description of the process and photographic documentation of each meeting. Each photograph was composed in the same way, showing the participant and myself seated across from each other at the table talking and/or drawing. The photographic images became significant for me as a metaphor for my process in general and also as emblematic of a particular idea we have of government in our culture.

I wanted to continue this activity of working opposite someone, talking and creating an object together. I wanted to recreate what I found intriguing or exciting in those images, and explore the agonistic process of working with another person. I thought a way forward would be to make an object that recorded the space between me and my collaborator, that would invite the viewer to enter the same area of thinking and association as myself; I wanted the viewer to actively speculate on what occurred during the making of the object.

There are many other thought trails and associations leading into the work — ideas about aesthetics and representation; and a reference to a *gestalt*- or *Rubin's Vase* created in 1977 to commemorate the Silver Jubilee of Elizabeth II.

KA You employ the ancient technique of pottery coiling as a symbolic representation of time, as the time spent with the other person is made tangible through the act of making. Can you elaborate on the making process and the reasons for using clay as a medium?

AM Both the material and technique used to make the work were chosen for pragmatic reasons. Clay was cheaper than, say, a commercially produced modeling material & more structurally sound than something like Play-Doh. Clay is also a fairly friendly, non-toxic material that most people are familiar with from their very first art lessons at primary school. The coiling technique is also 'friendly', it is easy to explain and work with, it's not difficult. The material's familiarity and ease of use was something that allowed us to not think too much about technique or outcome and simply concentrate on the experience of being together and making an object together.

The idea that the coiled pot is an analogue of time spent together is an idea that emerged during the process of making the work. I enjoy working with basic materials and simple ideas as it allows complexity to grow out of the process of producing the work.

The work was never conceived as being an enduring object, the photographic documentation was produced as a lasting record. The impermanence of the object, knowing that it will shatter when it is moved, is very much a part of the work.

At one stage, it was suggested that the form could be cast in bronze; I would be open to that idea if it was a proposal to create a work for a patron, or as a public monument, and if sufficient funds were available. If a large enough kiln was available, I would be open to firing the work. I have experimented with making a cast of the form with flexible polyurethane, but the labour involved in that process diminishes the poetry of the work in my opinion.

KA All the people you have chosen as collaborators are visual artists. How have the experiences, working processes, forms of exchange and negotiation differed from artist to artist?

AM Yes, I often work with other artists as collaborators, interlocutors and models. They are the people who I feel will be open to the ideas I come to the work with, and they understand process.

Each of the people I've worked with — Geoff Robinson, Utako Shindo and Matthew Griffin are people that I felt I could learn something from— something about art, or about worldviews different from my own, or about how that person approaches intimacy and relationships. Geoff Robinson was my partner at the time we made the work so it was very much about our relationship, it was also an occasion for me to learn more about Geoff's amazing interpersonal skills and ability to stay calm and solve problems. When I approached Utako, I was looking to have a conversation about the background of her practice, her approach to performance and the place of the body in her work; I was intrigued by works by Utako that referred to the presence of a person or a body but didn't represent or image that body or personality¹.

I'd seen a work of Matt's at ACCA, a really great video work that was an interview with Peter Singer about animal ethics and art². I was interested in how Matt worked with the conventions in contemporary art (video as document, representation, performance, approaches to the political) and turned them completely on their head!... So I thought that there would be an opportunity to learn more about his practice too. Each person I invite to make the work with me comes with an agenda of their own, too, so I am curious to see how those play out against my own.

Each iteration of the work is different. When I ask people to work with me I let them know the process, how the process will be documented and what I will and won't make public. To a very minor extent, the photographs that record the process are 'staged' — I use a self-timer and let the other person know when a photograph is being taken. When images are reproduced, I ask the other person if it's O.K. on the first occasion and consider that permission to reproduce the same images in the future. I've consciously avoided recording collaborative processes with audio or video equipment as I'm not interested in seeing or hearing people acting; as much as possible, the experience of making the pot with me is 'authentic'. Part of the authenticity of the work is that once the experience of making the form has passed, it can't be replayed and is available only to the audience through the form itself, the documentation and an audience member's imagination or active interpretation of those things.

1. In particular, the exhibition Utako Shindo *Miru Milieu/ See Site*, Sutton Gallery Project Space, Melbourne 18 June–11 July 2009 (http://ushindo.blogspot.com.au/2009_06_01_archive.html accessed 28/3/2014)

2. Matthew Griffin *Common Sense* (2009), three channel video; shown in *New09* curated by Charlotte Day, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Melbourne.



LEFT
 Andrew McQualter
*A form made by
 constructing a coiled
 pot in the space between
 Utako & me*
 (process documentation),
 2010
 unfired clay, wood, casters
 dimensions variable
 Courtesy the artist and
 Daine Singer, Melbourne

RIGHT
 Andrew McQualter
*A form made by
 constructing a coiled
 pot in the space
 between Matthew & me*
 (process documentation),
 2010–2011
 unfired clay, wood, casters
 dimensions variable
 Courtesy the artist and
 Daine Singer, Melbourne

In conversation with

SANNÉ MESTROM

KAY ABUDE Throughout the different projects within your practice, you have shown a sustained fascination with the traditions of ceramics. Your ceramic objects embody a materiality that is distinctively crude and primitive in their making and execution, combined with a very minimal and raw aesthetic. Can you describe when and how you first began working with clay?

SANNÉ MESTROM I first became interested in the medium via the ceramic folk art I encountered throughout Mexico a few years ago. I loved the way the artisans handled the clay in a way that seemed innate – they embodied a casual confidence in their process of ‘making’ that I’d not seen anywhere before. It was very inspiring. The trip was a real eye-opener in many ways and marked an important shift in my practice.

KA *Pork Barrel* takes the familiar form of a children’s piggy bank and invites active engagement from viewers to participate in the work by inserting and donating coins or bank notes into the sculpture. Over the period of the exhibition, as visitors keep adding to the piggy bank, its value increases. It raises questions about the value of the art object and the value of art itself; how can an artwork’s value and worth be generated or measured within a capitalist market? In this work, the piggy bank is without a plug. The only way to find out the value that has been collected over time within the vessel is to smash, destroy and sacrifice the artwork. Can you elaborate on the themes that you are exploring in this piece?

SM I think you’ve pretty much covered the answer in your question... But to extend your point, art is only worth what someone is prepared to pay for it. Ummm. Or is its value something more elusive, more ephemeral?

I’ve long been interested in the notion of ‘value’, which is itself an abstract concept around which the artworld orbits. Arguably, there is no meaning or value inherent in any of the objects we make, we inscribe meaning and value into them.

I like the idea that if someone were to buy my *Pork Barrel*, they’d get the artwork at whatever market value it’s worth – largely based on a mysterious kind of cultural caché that I don’t fully understand – plus ‘interest’. But, as you mentioned, said ‘collector’ must sacrifice one for the other. If they get tired of looking at the artwork on their shelf, they can smash it open and buy another (better) artwork. Though I’m not sure what you can buy for 3 bucks these days... and who knows what other treats they might find inside?

Materials: ceramic and coins (by donation) and other miscellanea.

KA The classical optical illusion known as *Rubin’s Vase* is often illustrated pictorially, an ambiguous figure is seen both as a vase and two human heads in the same image. However perceptually, only one figure can be maintained at any given moment, whether it is the vase shaped by two heads or its opposite, the two human heads taking form by a separation in space. In your work *Pot Piece* you have absorbed this two dimensional concept to create and reimagine this visual data as a three dimensional artwork. Transforming two dimensional source material into three dimensional sculpture is characteristic of the art that you make. Can you describe this process of translation and the ideas represented in *Pot Piece*?

SM In many ways, my sculptural practice is grounded in the language of painting.

Over the last four years my studio practice has been concerned with the life of art-historical images. My sculptural works – which explore the formal tropes of painting through sculptural practice – meditate on the way an art image or object traverses realms, such as from two to three-dimensionality; mercurial memory to fixed form; singular masterpiece to generalised style.

Pot Piece, is a slightly deadpan debunking of the perceptual trickery proposed by *Rubin’s Vase* in 1915. My intention with the work has been to take something very familiar and – by subverting *Rubin’s* intended strategy – the *Vase* only ‘works’ if it’s flat, pictorial – playing with our assumptions or recollections of what the original looked like and how it actually operated as a visual phenomenon. We may only see the vase if we know what we are looking for – though of course, it isn’t really there at all.



LEFT
Sanné Mestrom
Temple (detail), 2011
ceramic, acrylic,
plywood, found image
approx. 160 x 20 x 20cm
Courtesy the artist
and Utopian Slumps,
Melbourne

RIGHT
Sanné Mestrom
Temple (1-5), 2011
ceramic, acrylic,
plywood, found image
approx. 160 x 20 x 20cm
each
Courtesy the artist
and Utopian Slumps,
Melbourne

In conversation with

STEPHEN RALPH

KAY ABUDE Many of your sculptures forge an unlikely union of oppositional materials. You have combined cast concrete, turned wood, terracotta and gold leaf to create highly textured and detailed surfaces. How did the merging of these materials come about in your practice?

STEPHEN RALPH The merging of these materials came about in a similar way they might if you were building a house. In some ways I see these sculptures as architectural projects with their concrete foundations, timber floor, golden walls and terracotta roof.

KA How are your sculptures made?

SR When I made this group of sculptures, I started by modelling a section in clay. I might come across something that interests me, like a pinecone, a decorative detail on a building. Or it might be a particular section of a sculpture, like a log that has been carved in marble. I like those crossovers of materials; it reminds me of a game of Chinese Whispers and how the original message gets changed. I then make a mould and cast it in concrete or other times I pour the concrete directly into a clay object to get an impression of its internal space. Usually I build the next sections directly on top or below this first piece but there are also times when I might use an object I've made previously. The first time I took a box full of terracotta objects to the local pottery club to be fired in their kiln they were concerned that my objects might explode but at the same time cheerfully congratulated me on having such enthusiastic children.

KA The six works on display for *Assembly* have a unique trophy-esque aesthetic while also mimicking the proportions of the classical bust. They are, however, portraits of a different kind. They resemble mutated plant forms, awkwardly organic, yet solid and permanent in materiality. They also evoke a strong resonance with architecture. Greek mythology is also referenced in the titles of *Lotus Eater*, *Eileithya* and *Ambrosia*. Can you elaborate on your influences and the themes represented in your work?

SR About ten years ago I picked up a book on Gaudi that a friend found at the op shop. I couldn't read the Spanish text but was amazed by the images of Gaudi's work and the way he took iconography, styles, technique, materials and technology from everywhere, from the far east to ancient Greece and created these beautiful buildings that resonate with life yet also have a timeless quality. I try to work in a similarly intuitive way.

A friend who is an archaeologist at the Athens Institute at Sydney University saw these sculptures, and recognised in the motifs that I had used, symbols that represented personifications of ancient Greek gods. I worked out the titles for these works with her in conversation over a bottle of red wine.



LEFT
Stephen Ralph
Sicilian Venus
2011
concrete,
wood, gold leaf
100 x 47 x 42cm
Private Collection, Sydney
Courtesy the artist and
The Commercial, Sydney
Photo: Jessica Maurer



RIGHT
Stephen Ralph
Eileithya
2013
concrete, terracotta,
24 carat gold leaf,
hardwood
97 x 29.8 x 30 cm
Courtesy the artist and
The Commercial, Sydney
Photo: Jessica Maurer

In conversation with

JAKE WALKER

KAY ABUDE Your interest in ceramics began when you and your partner took ceramic lessons at Northcote Pottery in Melbourne a couple of years ago. Of all the different mediums, why did you choose to take ceramic lessons, in particular, and did you have any idea that clay would find an important place in your painting practice as a material?

JAKE WALKER I was finding the intellectual side of painting stressful, and really wanted to learn a craft that was more focused on the hands than the head.

We had actually started making pinch pots several months before we started the lessons, I found squeezing little balls of mud a relaxing break from the trials of painting. After a while we both decided it might be nice to learn some new techniques and to make some larger more useful forms.

At the time I had absolutely no intention of incorporating ceramic practice into my art making. I really just wanted to be able to make a decent pasta bowl.

The course was specifically focused on wheel throwing; we were being introduced to the best technique for producing functional objects. Throwing pots turned out to be a lot harder than it looks and in an attempt to make pieces larger than a teacup I took up hand building with coil between lessons.

KA How and why do the traditions of ceramics appeal to you as an artist?

JW I like the anachronistic qualities of ceramic, the action of firing can quickly make clay look very old and it's O.K. in this tradition to make ancient looking things. I enjoy the logic of the process within ceramic practice, there are clear steps to be taken, and once it's fired there is no were else to go. This finality never occurs in painting, you can just keep going (- I occasionally continue to work on paintings after they have been framed and exhibited).

KA Your practice explores a system of bringing two surfaces together, that of clay and paint are built into sculptural relief works that emphasise the hand made. You have described your works as becoming more and more about surface texture and in some of your most recent pieces, paint has been used sparingly on the stretched surfaces of canvas and linen, or has completely vanished. Can you describe your making process and elaborate on your influences and the themes represented in your work?

JW The work I have been making over the last few years is in essence a slow surrender to the strength of modernist principles. A conversation about the strengths and weaknesses of personality verses minimalism in painting, of gut instinct verses rigour. The black paintings are a final crossing out of countless hours of experimental painting played out on a single surface rather than a planned end point.

The first blank linen ceramic framed work I showed a couple of years back at Utopian Slumps was the result of time constraints; the ceramic process can be a lengthy one so by the time the frame was ready there was very little time to make the painting, so after a couple of days of consideration, I decided to leave it blank. All painters appreciate the power of the blank canvas, the fear of the starting point is in essence an acknowledgment of the strength and simplicity of materials you may be about to destroy.

The works I'm showing in this exhibition are a continued investigation of these concerns and an acknowledgement of the collaboration between the work of my hand and the workers who wove the canvas. They are also continuing to reference the home of architects Ian and Claire Athfield that loomed in my subconscious in Melbourne and now looms over the motorway on which I drive from my home in a small country town to my pottery studio in the New Zealand capital. The rigour of material choices in that house (white painted plaster walls and red brick floors) acts as a daily reminder that less is more, more or less.



LEFT
Jake Walker
Untitled, 2013
acrylic gesso on
linen, earthenware
32 x 37.3cm
Courtesy the artist
and Utopian Slumps,
Melbourne and
Gallery 9, Sydney

RIGHT
Jake Walker
Athfield house, 2013
digital photo
Courtesy the artist

