

Ceramics suits me, I am used to disappointment:
Making objects of contemplation

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Abstract

Ceramics is a practice full of hope and disappointments. It can be disheartening to open a kiln and see your expectations crushed. Making ceramics not only presents lessons in patience and skills but develops an ability to cope with persistent failures. Just like life, some things are beyond your control.

This paper investigates art making practices with a focus on making and painting ceramics. The research discusses making objects for contemplation, how we relate to objects, historical precedents and contemporary examples. The research project explores how ceramic objects can be utilised to present a personal and intimate worldview.

My work encompasses painted vases, pots, plates and figures inspired by historical examples including Greek Tanagra and English Staffordshire figures, and Georgian pots. Questioning the generally accepted uses of domestic ceramics, I play with meaning; the meaning of the object and the meaning of ceramics, and with wider themes of values and expectations within society. Ideas of vulnerability and fragility are investigated through concepts of scale, intimacy, and humour. Pots speak of their own fallibility and figurines represent marginalised characters inspired from personal, historical and contemporary life.

To explore these ideas and to place my work in a theoretical context, I have looked to schools of thought such as Object-Orientated Ontology and theories on the role of the souvenir. Adopting these ideas, I further examine Sigmund Freud's collection of artefacts and the power of the intimate object. I reference artists whose work appeals to me, including Linda Marrinon, Stephen Benwell, and Hylton Nel. I discuss their work in regard to humour, scale, colour and figurative forms which resonate with my work. Studio aspects of the project are discussed through ideas of painting and the display of ceramic objects as artwork.

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Fig.1. Sassy Park, *Constant sorrow* 2017, painted ceramic, 9 x 16 x 16 cm

Introduction

Ceramics is my form of social media. It is a means to communicate the present and offer commemoration for the future as a current and personal souvenir, a locus to make commentary and a surface on which to write, paint and scratch. I situate myself in a continuing practice of object making which connects me to clay's extensive sphere of cultural production. Clay and ceramic objects occupy a unique position in this continuum, having a constant and unbroken presence as cultural artefacts.¹ Vessel forms, from each different age and culture, enter our collective subconscious carrying 'a mute and poetic power'.² Along with these forms, figurines are one of the most fundamental to make and use to communicate ideas. The fascination we have in recognising ourselves in a rudimentary face or human-like form remains.

We are daily engaged with objects including a plate, eggcup, vase, vacuum cleaner, car, traffic light. We use them with automatic habit and often take them for granted. Perhaps the only attention they garner is when they break, and a decision has to be made whether to repair or replace. Other objects that are set aside for contemplation, art objects and artefacts, have a special place in the human psyche. Decorative objects and art works on a mantelpiece, in a cabinet, gallery or museum fulfil an important functional role; they communicate history and culture, inform us of status and aesthetics, make us think of concepts and relationships. Overall, they speak to us. Through them, we can meditate on our lives, the joys and disappointments, loss and love, or perhaps reflect on them as mementoes of life's experiences.

¹ Philip Rawson, "The Existential Base", in *The Ceramic Reader*, ed. Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 19.

² Gerry Wedd, *Words for a Room*, Liner notes for the exhibition, 28th July - 15th September 2018, (Adelaide: Ace Open, 2018).

In chapter one, I look at the relationship between objects in our lives with particular attention to ceramics. Ceramic artefacts and their continued use in human society makes ceramics a field especially suited to expressing ideas of relationships between people, and with people and things. A theory that supports my ideas is the relatively new school of thought, *Object-Orientated Ontology* (OOO), a philosophical way of thinking about objects in the world. The term was introduced by philosopher, Graham Harman, in his 1999 doctoral dissertation, *Tool-Being: Elements in a Theory of Objects*.³ OOO rejects the anthropocentrism of Humanism which privileges human existence over objects.⁴ It theorises that objects exist independently of human perception.⁵ This way of understanding objects and artefacts unbinds them from established histories and systems of categorisation. As an example, I refer to Sigmund Freud's personal collection of antiquities as a model for how objects can be interpreted beyond their physical presence by taking on new meaning. Freud's use and display of objects is also of interest when considering the installation of my own work. Mixing disparate objects together on a shelf, desk or mantelpiece can interrupt ordinary meanings and challenge preconceptions. Using notions of Object-Orientated Ontology can change our perception. Grouping figures with other figures and figures with objects changes their context and sets up new dialogues.

Personal souvenirs are objects that possess meaning, memory and nostalgia and are the focus of my discussion in chapter two. I consider how making objects of contemplation, these contemporary souvenirs, allow me to present my own history, biography and worldview. In creating ceramic objects I look to critique ideas of identity and value in our society through play and expressions of self. The history of humanity can be told through objects.⁶ Two different historical figurative traditions are of special interest to me through their lightness of approach and ability to still

³ The European Graduate School, faculty, Graham Harman, Biography, <http://egs.edu/faculty/graham-harman/bibliography>, (accessed 15 September 2018).

⁴ Graham Harman, *Object-Orientated Ontology: A New Theory of Everything* (London: Pelican Books, 2018), 257.

⁵ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002), 16. <https://books.google.com.au/books?id=FFmO9Nv9a4cC&printsec=frontcover&dq=9780812694444&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjmwanhq9zbAhUjEqYKHbPfDUcQ6AEIKTAA#v=onepage&q=present-at-hand&f=false> (accessed June 2, 2018)

⁶ Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, (London: Allen Lane/Penguin Books, 2011)

communicate to us across time. Greek terracotta figures found in graves at Tanagra, Boeotia, Greece, (later C4th BCE) and Staffordshire figures (England, 1760-1830) reference themes of the everyday. Both were mass-produced by hand by often unknown craftspeople. However, these figures reveal a vivid humanity and sense of their times, often missing in more elaborate or patrician works of art.

In chapter three, I discuss notions of the domestic and in extension, ideas of intimacy and scale. Domestic ceramic objects are intimate to our everyday lives. We touch cups, mugs and bowls to our lips and hands daily. I discuss how utilising traditional forms allows me to introduce reflective and responsive ideas into my work. I recognise similar themes in the work of Linda Marrinon (Australia, 1959-) whose intimate scale works establish a relationship between the object and the viewer. Her painted figurative sculptures express a vulnerability and empathy exemplified through her subject matter of poignant characters and her use of materials like plaster, fabric and clay. Marrinon's exhibition in 2018 of painted terracotta figurative sculptures is of particular interest to my project, as I experiment with terracotta as a modelling clay and a surface for my pots and figures.⁷

In chapter four, I discuss the unique qualities of clay, clay as a metaphor and the ability for humour and text to be used in conjunction with clay. Clay has unique qualities of malleability, fragility and resilience. The binaries which ceramics embodies between functional and non-functional, art and craft, lumpen and refined, allow me to explore ideas of expectations, values and hierarchies. Using humour with ceramics makes addressing these ideas accessible. Hylton Nel (South Africa, 1941-), a self-described artist-potter, makes work that has an unfailing sense of humour.⁸ His work, consisting of painted and glazed plates, vases and figures are made for both 'use and display', as a recent exhibition was titled.⁹ Using the surface of functional ceramic forms, he pairs personal observations, ponderings and commentary with

⁷ Linda Marrinon, *Architects! Terracotta!* Exhibition, (Sydney: Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, May 2018)

⁸ Michael Stevenson & Hylton Nel, *Hylton Nel: Conversations*. (Cape Town, South Africa : London: Michael Stevenson Contemporary; The Fine Arts Society, 2003), jacket

⁹ Hylton Nel, *For Use and Display*, exhibition, (London: The Fine Art Society, 23 May – 16 June 2017)

imagery and ornament that is both delightful and amusing. Hylton Nel gains a profound pleasure from looking at objects and artefacts which inform his practice.¹⁰ It is his intense interest in ceramic objects and the direct, unrefined way of making and applying his ideas that interests me.

Finally in chapter four, I discuss the use of text in my work. Text on ceramic pots and plates has been found throughout history. Georgian Creamware (1760-1830) was decorated with political images and slogans, such as propaganda calling for the defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte, as a way of influencing public sentiment¹¹ In my own work, vases are painted with jarring, self-reflective and self-reflexive messages that demand engagement; to say, look at me!

Chapter five discusses finding a surface through investigating painting techniques on ceramics. Working within principles of painting and sculpture, my research expands the ideas of combining painting's two dimensionality with sculpture's three dimensions. Plates, vases, cups and bowls provide a portable surface on which to paint personal opinions and observations, playing with ideas of hidden sides and the unfurling of narratives. Stephen Benwell (Australia, 1953-) combines studio based ceramic processes with sculptural traditions and painterly concerns. Over his career he has continued to make and paint ceramic vessels and figures, however for this project I have looked solely at his small, painted male nudes. The suggestive modelling and unexpected way Benwell paints his figures are outcomes I look for in my own work. Finding a surface on ceramic has allowed me to reapproach and expand ideas of painting and the painting process.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, 7.

¹¹ *Pots with Attitude: British Satire on Ceramics, 1760-1830*, press release, (British Museum, London, UK) https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Pots_with_Attitude_Final.pdf (accessed September 19, 2018)

Fig. 2. Sassy Park
Domestic Sculpture 2017
porcelain and terracotta
11 x 6 cm



Chapter 1. The relations between things

Souls are mixed with things; things with souls. Lives are mingled together, and this is how, among persons and things so intermingled, each emerges from their own sphere and mixes together.¹²

We carry subconscious relationships with objects through our lives. As a child, our first reference to the adult world of objects includes the plate and mug. They are the first tool-objects, albeit miniaturised, of the grown-up world that begin our bond with objects. Here a child might start an appreciation of the visual, with the ornament of

¹² This quote refers to French sociologist, Marcel Mauss, writing in the 1920s referring to the spirit of the donor that clings to objects in gift giving cultures. Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: Forms and Functions of Exchange in Archaic Societies*, trans. W.D. Halls (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 20.

pattern or illustration at the bottom of a bowl or side of a cup.¹³ That some things are for everyday use and others not to be touched is an early lesson. My fascination with objects can be traced to the china cabinet of my grandparents. A transformation of these ornaments from behind the glass occurred when the doors were opened and I was granted access to play with them. Tea cups and figurines became participants in tea parties, dialogues and stories. Their significance as precious objects was not diffused through handling. The potential for imagination and narrative play gave enchantment to these transformed objects. Archaeologist, Michael Schiffer argues that,

Social scientists have ignored what might be most distinctive and significant about our species...(that) human life consists of ceaseless and varied interaction among people and myriad kinds of things.¹⁴

Things have inherent qualities and capacity for meaning beyond their materiality and customary use, whether they are tables, art works or traffic lights. Our perceived knowledge, experience with and valuing of an object makes them reliable, familiar and trustworthy in their present roles and tasks. However, things continuously gain meaning by reference to other objects, people, histories and times. They remain open to be understood in a cross-referencing system.¹⁵

As Object-Orientated Ontology (OOO) philosopher, Graham Harman writes, “The world is not the world as manifest to humans; to think a reality beyond our thinking is not nonsense, but obligatory.”¹⁶ Accordingly, objects cannot be exhausted by their relations with humans or other objects in theory or practice, meaning that the reality of objects is always present-at-hand.¹⁷

¹³ Ian Wilson, “Appreciating Ceramics or so much more than just an Egg Cup or a Milk Jug”, in *The Ceramic Reader* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 22.

¹⁴ Michael Schiffer, with Andrea Miller, *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication* (London: Routledge, 1999), 2.

¹⁵ Philip Rawson, “Analogy and Metaphor in Ceramic Art” in *The Ceramic Reader* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 55.

¹⁶ Graham Harman, “On the undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno and Radical Philosophy”, in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. Levi Bryant, Nick Smicek and Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re.press. 2011), 26.

¹⁷ Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2002), 1.

Sigmund Freud's (1856–1939) pioneering development of psychoanalysis in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth century included theories that objects, especially cultural artefacts, possessed implicit symbolic significance for human beings.¹⁸ Both OOO and psychoanalysis view the better part of reality as lying below the visible or conscious surface, like the proverbial tip of the iceberg.¹⁹ Although much of Freud's work has been dismissed as unscientific, authoritarian, anti-women and didactic, Graham Harman defends him as a humble, accessible, and daring thinker, his prose and ideas still being highly influential in literature and the arts.²⁰ My interest in Freud stems from his passion as a collector of objects from the ancient world. These were displayed exclusively within in his consulting rooms, initially in Vienna and later in London.²¹ There he created an exotic sanctuary where patient's felt cocooned in a sanctum of secluded peace and quiet.

Freud's intense interest in archaeology gave him the model and metaphor for describing the mind and the methods of psychoanalysis itself, where the therapist dealt with the careful uncovering of the 'object', being the memories of the past, the fragments, interpretations or reconstructions of his patients.²² His passion for collecting archaeological artefacts and his commitment to the 'archaeology of the mind' provides insight to how he developed his theories of psychoanalysis and his profound ideas about the human psyche.²³ Dr Janine Burke writes,

His collection attracts multiple readings: as the embodiment of his theories, as an investigation and a celebration of past cultures, as an exercise in aesthetic

¹⁸ Stephen P. Thornton, "Sigmund Freud (1856-1939)", *Internet Encyclopaedia of Philosophy: A Peer-Reviewed Academic Resource*, <https://www.iep.utm.edu/freud/#SH8a> (accessed July 17, 2017)

¹⁹ Graham Harman, "Freud's Wolfman in an Object Orientated Light", extract from *The Neurotic Turn* (November 9, 2016) *Repeater Books*, <https://repeaterbooks.com/extract-graham-harman-in-the-neurotic-turn/> (accessed June 11, 2018).

²⁰ Graham Harman, "In Defense of Freud", *e-flux conversations*, (June 2016) <https://conversations.e-flux.com/t/graham-harman-in-defense-of-freud/3868> (accessed September 19, 2018)

²¹ Dr Janine Burke, "The Shrine of the Dream Collector" in *Sigmund Freud's Collection: An Archaeology of the Mind* (Monash, VIC.: University Museum of Art/MUMA, 2007), 9.

²² Burke, *ibid.*, 8.

²³ John Forrester, 'Freud and Collecting' in *The Cultures of Collecting: Critical Views*. ed. Elsner, John, and Cardinal, Roger (London: Reaktion Books, 1994), 226.

pleasure, as a quest for excellence, as a memento of real and imaginary journeys, as a catalogue of desires, and as a self- portrait.²⁴



Fig. 3. Freud's Desk, Courtesy of the Freud Museum London.

Prominently displayed these objects which included Greek terracotta figurines, exerted a powerful presence in the enclosed room and acted as ritual objects or talisman.²⁵ Freud began collecting antique objects when grieving for the death of his father and whilst writing the *Interpretation of Dreams*.²⁶ He would take the smaller objects as traveling companions when he went on holidays.²⁷ Later after Freud was exiled from Vienna under the Nazi occupation in 1938 his collection was moved to London.²⁸ The way Freud behaved with these prized objects included bringing newly purchased relics to the dinner table where they would serve as dinner companions.²⁹

²⁴ Burke, *ibid.*, 4.

²⁵ Diana Fuss, *Berggasse 19: Inside Freud's Office*, JSA News, Joel Sanders Architect, <http://joelsandersarchitect.com/berggasse-19-inside-freuds-office-with-diana-fuss/> (accessed 13 September, 2018)

²⁶ Burke, *ibid.*, 6.

²⁷ Burke, *ibid.*, 6.

²⁸ Burke, *ibid.*, 7.

²⁹ Burke, *ibid.*, 8.

They would assist him in weighing down his papers when working. On his deathbed in his London study he was surrounded by “his ancestors of choice, his most faithful colleagues, and the embodiments of his excavated truths of psychoanalysis.”³⁰ The personal meaning he attached to the figurines allowed him to explore the layers of his own psyche.³¹ Their beauty consoled him. Freud's reverence for these inanimate objects of attachment took them beyond their physical state to something much more significant and magical.³² Freud confessed to Jung, “I must always have an object to love.”³³ French philosopher, Jean Baudrillard, suggests that the emotional investment we project into things is what gives these objects their ‘soul’ and makes them ‘ours’.³⁴ These objects give life to thought and thinking. Recognising this potential for an object to be a touchstone or portal to other ways of thinking allows me to utilise objects as a vehicle for establishing empathy and opening dialogues of new narratives and ideas.

Freud's desk where he mixed his ritual objects with his ashtrays, pens and papers is replicated in a way in my studio. On a shelf, figures and pots, the high and the low, the weak and the strong, the fragment and the whole sit side by side. Nothing needs to be quite what it seems. Figures stand on pots transforming them into plinths. The objects placed along a shelf or mantelpiece read in a particular rhythm. The gaps and spaces creating a pattern like notes of music in a score or words in a sentence. By mixing these objects and ideas together, it expands both their receptivity and their meaning. The openness of reading the work through this style of presentation is to aim away from a reductive stance of how to look and understand the world.

³⁰ Lynn Gamwell, ‘The Origins of Freud’s Antiquities Collection’, in Lynn Gamwell and Richard Wells (ed.s), *Sigmund Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities*, (London :Thames and Hudson; in Association with State University of New York, Freud Museum, 1989), 29.

³¹ Burke, *ibid.*, 7.

³² Burke, *ibid.*,6.

³³ William McGuire, ed. *The Freud-Jung Letters: The correspondence between Sigmund Freud and C.J. Jung*, (Princeton; Princeton University Press,1974), 292.

³⁴ Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* (London; New York: Verso, 1996), 153.



Fig.4. Studio shelf, National Art School studio, 2018

Chapter 2. Making objects of contemplation

In our daily lives we encounter countless objects that surround us, but few attract our attention or demand our contemplation. These objects, often inconspicuous, remain unnoticed due to our habitual or trivial encounters with them. Yet when we attend to these objects and make them objects to contemplate, the 'sedimented history' locked within them can be realised.³⁵ Object symbolise values beyond their functional utility. So what happens when we decorate an object? It becomes something that asks to be looked at. Ornament is there for the eye to wander and delight. What if we not only decorate this object but the object has something to say through text and symbols? A dialogue is created between viewer and object when recognition and self-reflection occurs. Finding meaning in objects connects to German philosopher,

³⁵ Theodore Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* (UK.: Routledge, 2015),163.

Walter Benjamin's notion of the aura of things. He believed that, "to experience the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look back at us."³⁶

As in the example of Freud and his artefacts, objects can create a symbolic bond of meaning with people. The subject (person) reflects in the object their own meaning and memory. In this way the object can act as a souvenir. Bjørn Olsen writes in his book, *In Defense of Things*, that there is a further intimate related effect of things than what we initially perceive as their social and cultural significance, one where the past is not forgotten but "patiently gathers and folds into what we conveniently term the present."³⁷ This gathering or sedimentation, not only slows the flow of history but rescues the discarded, redundant and 'othered' of history."³⁸ The forgotten, untimely or displaced are resuscitated, "creating the potential for involuntary and possibly disturbing memories."³⁹ The invisible, overlooked and maligned aspects of life are a theme I recognise in my work.

In Susan Stewart's book of essays, *On Longing*, she describes how an object like the souvenir, is imbued with nostalgia, mythology and memory; projecting our longing to understand the world by constructing narratives, myths and memories. She proposes that the souvenir is more powerful than the original experience or event by being a potent resonance of the original. Stuart suggests that the souvenir collapses the various elements of the event/experience into the one object.⁴⁰

Souvenirs are small scale replicas, fragments or tokens of remembrance. Ceramic objects have commonly been made to commemorate events from birth plates to royal souvenirs, to tourist ashtrays and tableware. It is a medium especially suited to memorialising the small stages of life and the intimacies of the ordinary everyday. In

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, vol. 4: 1938-1940* (Cambridge, Mass: Belknap Press), 338.

³⁷ Bjørn Olsen, *In Defense of Things: Archaeology and the Ontology of Objects* (Maryland, USA & Plymouth, UK.: Altamira Press, 2010), 173.

³⁸ Olsen, *ibid.*, 173.

³⁹ Olsen, *ibid.*, 173.

⁴⁰ Susan Stewart, *On Longing, Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1993), 138.

my pots and figurative work, I seek to document the overlooked, and forgotten ideas and people, so they become memorials and remembrances. Understanding how the souvenir operates gives me insight into the power of the ceramic object that I am creating as 'markers' of the contemporary. In a way these contemporary objects act as mementoes of life and artefacts of the future. There is a permanence to ceramics that seems to suit the marking of time. Even when these pieces are reduced to broken shards, they have the potential to be unearthed one day by archaeologists who will perhaps ponder their significance, bereft of their original narrative.

Ceramic objects from history that carry these ideas of the souvenir include Greek Tanagra terracotta figures, produced from the later fourth century BCE, and Staffordshire figurines from England beginning around 1740.⁴¹ In both these examples we recognise humanity, activity and emotion portrayed in a direct and honest way. The small scale nature of these works draws the viewer in, to look more closely, to notice the detail, and engage with the object. The use of scale harnesses the intimacy and condensed power of the diminutive that makes us care so much for them. Small clay figurative work from Tanagra in ancient Greece and Staffordshire, England have particular relevance to my practice through their ability to make us comprehend their individual humanity from across time.

Tanagra figures were first excavated from the cemeteries around Tanagra, a city in the region of Boeotia, central Greece, in the late nineteenth century, which puts their discovery after the era of Staffordshire figures.⁴² The archaeological find set off a fashion for collecting these antique statues, a phenomenon of popularity that was more indicative of the desires of Europeans at the time to have a souvenir of what they believed was the commonplace life of ancient Greek people. The Tanagra figures, predominantly representing women and children engaged in daily activities, reflected the nineteenth century bourgeois collector's ideals of the ancient world.⁴³

⁴¹ Adele Kenny, "Industry, Inventiveness, and Ambition: The Art of the Staffordshire Figure", *adelekenny* (2005) <https://www.adelekenny.com/-staffordshire-figures.html> (accessed August 14, 2018)

⁴² R.A. Higgins, *Greek Terracottas* (London: Methuen & Co Ltd, 1967), 97.

⁴³ Néguine Mathieux, "Tanagras in Paris: a bourgeois dream" in *Tanagras: Figurines for Life and Eternity*. (Valencia, Spain: Fundacion Bancaja, 2010), 17.



Fig. 8a



Fig. 8b



Fig. 8c

Fig. 5. Tanagra figurines, terracotta, c. C3rd B.C.E., Beotia, Greece, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

As well as depicting small scale humanistic and captivating figures, the method of their production is also of interest to my practice. The Tanagras were the first figures to be pressed in two-part moulds, one for the front and another for the back.⁴⁴ Heads and arms could be moulded separately, which gave the maker a greater range of poses and expressions.⁴⁵ Details like hairstyles, drapery and accessories such as wreaths, hats and fans, gave a personalised intimacy which was amplified by their sentimental qualities and fragility.⁴⁶ They were covered in white slip, fired and hand coloured in mineral and vegetable-based paints.⁴⁷ I have adapted this technique by painting on white slip with watercolour underglazes. Contemporary water-colour underglazes that withstand firing ranges well over a thousand degrees Celsius allow

⁴⁴ "Tanagra", *The Fitzwilliam Museum*, www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/collections/greeceandrome/online_gallery/places/tanagra (accessed July 23, 2017).

⁴⁵ Arthur Muller, "The techniques of Tanagra coroplasts. From local craft to global industry" in *Tanagras: Figurines for Life and Eternity*. (Valencia, Spain: Fundacion Bancaja, 2010), 101.

⁴⁶ Sharon L. James and Sheila Dillon, ed., *A Companion to Women in the Ancient World* (Blackwell Publishing 2012), 231.

⁴⁷ "Tanagra", *The Fitzwilliam Museum*, *ibid.*

a more permanent colouring although I am more interested in the antiqued patina of the unearthed Tanagra figures than trying to replicate how they once originally looked. In making figures I have continued to hand model each figure as an individual piece. Press moulding has been used to make small parts of my figures but at present I prefer to hand build which allows the suggestiveness and softer finish of clay to remain. A mould can give the finished work a manufactured sharpness. However, mould making may be of consideration in the future.

All of the qualities of their manufacture point to their functional and symbolic role for personal dialogues, as souvenirs of the theatre, children's toys and votive objects or as tomb companions for the after-life.^{48 49} Little factual evidence is known of the social conditions of women and children at the time of the production of the figures.⁵⁰ Fundamentally, what attracts me to the Tanagra figures is the idea that they express 'interest in the individual and the human rather than the ideal and heroic.'⁵¹

The Staffordshire figures, especially in the nineteenth century, were made to commemorate stories, events and celebrated characters reflecting the issues of their times.⁵² Against the backdrop of a society in the throes of revolutionary industrial and social change, and a population divided between the dismal poverty of factory laborers and the extreme wealth of the upper classes, the Staffordshire potters captured "artistic, technological, moral, and social transformation in their product."⁵³ After 1800, Staffordshire pottery's market was the rising middle class who, striving for betterment, could now afford to own and display a vision of their own world on their mantelpieces.⁵⁴ The form and subject matter was unbound from the old conventions

⁴⁸ James & Dillon, *ibid.*, 233.

⁴⁹ Jeammet, Violaine, "The Origin of the Tanagras: Fourth century B.C. Athens" in *Tanagras: Figurines for Life and Eternity*. (Valencia, Spain: Fundacion Bancaja, 2010), 63.

⁵⁰ Lynn Gamwell and Richard Wells, *Sigmund Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities*, (London: Thames and Hudson; in Association with State University of New York, Freud Museum, 1989), 96.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁵² Adele Kenny, "Industry, Inventiveness, and Ambition: The Art of the Staffordshire Figure", *Adele Kenny* (2005) <https://www.adelekenny.com/-staffordshire-figures.html> (accessed August 14, 2018)

⁵³ *ibid.*, (accessed August 14, 2018)

⁵⁴ Frances Bryant, *Staffordshire Figures* (Buckinghamshire: Shire Publications, 2005), 8.



Fig. 6. Sailor's wife and child, c.1815, lead-glazed earthenware with enameled decoration Staffordshire, 23.5 cm high

based on the prevailing taste of the elite and polite society. 'Unskilled' workers such as women and children were often given the task of decorating the Staffordshire figurines which would be painted 'quickly and freely' adding to their naïve charm.⁵⁵ Glaze colours were limited but could be added in overglaze techniques including enamels and lustres making them colourful and popular items.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Dennis Gaffney, "Tips of the trade: Fanciful Figurines." *Antique Roadshow* (2004) <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/tips/staffordshirefigurines.html> (accessed October 12, 2017).

⁵⁶ "Staffordshire Portrait Figures." *Stoke Museums* (2013), http://www.stokemuseums.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/sm-info_staff-figures.pdf (accessed September 30, 2017).



Fig.7. *The Death of Munrow*, Lead-glazed earthenware with enamel-painted decoration Attributed to the "Sherratt" pot bank, Staffordshire, c. 1820

After 1810, illustrations were widely distributed through the new technology of print and there is perhaps a link between the spread of images and scandalous news with the subject matter chosen for these ceramic figures.⁵⁷ Perennially popular figures included Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, while the emancipation of slaves and the passing into law of the New Marriage Act in 1823 also became subject matter.⁵⁸ Personal stories, such as Lieutenant Munro, a young British army officer, who was taken by a tiger while picnicking during a hunt in the Indian state of Mysore in 1792,

⁵⁷ Hunter Oatman-Stanford, "Murder and Mayhem in Miniature: the Lurid Side of Staffordshire Figurines." *Collectors Weekly*, <https://www.collectorsweekly.com/articles/the-lurid-side-of-staffordshire-figurines/> (accessed July 16, 2017).

⁵⁸ Oatman-Stanford, *ibid.* (accessed October 15, 2018).

captured the English public's imagination.⁵⁹ The news reached England in the form of a letter and excerpts were reprinted in 1793 in the *Gentleman's Magazine*, *Sporting Magazine*, and *New Wonderful Magazine and Marvellous Chronicle*.⁶⁰ The earthenware group remained in production from 1810 to 1830. Staffordshire figures are an example of ceramics that are a visual record of their time, documenting a society that would have otherwise remained largely unknown.

In a similar fashion, my work, *Man with sore finger* 2017, memorialises the events of an accident of a loved one. Portraying the pathos in a ceramic statue of the aftermath of the accident, where his finger has been stitched and bandaged, makes a memento of personal emotion for me. Yet perhaps all that an audience sees is a light-hearted effigy of someone else's pain; a small episode in an ordinary life. Like the antique Tanagras, *Man with sore finger's* inscrutable expression echoes an archaic past. The delicate painted details of his bandage and the grass at his feet contrast with the rough glazed surface that has acquired a patina from the kiln firing process. He appears trapped under a haze of glaze, giving off a sense of otherworldly nostalgia whilst remaining playful and whimsical. Although my work, *Man with sore finger*, is intimate in scale, it carries presence in a room. The small scale succeeds when the viewer attends to the detail and expression of the work and engages to the exclusion of all else. It is not the uncanny feeling of the presence that you are not alone, but the engagement of unconscious dialogue that springs up between the subject and the object.

⁵⁹ "Search the Collections", V&A (2018) <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O297611/the-death-of-munrow-figure-unknown/> (accessed October 18, 2018)

⁶⁰ Myrna Schkolne, *OBSESSION: The Myrna & Benzion Schkolne Collection of Early English Pottery*, (2017) http://www.mystaffordshirefigures.com/uploads/1/0/8/9/1089253/ob-session-myrna_and_benzion_schkolne_collection.pdf Dallas, Texas: Schkolne, (accessed May 1, 2018), 554.



Fig. 8. Sassy Park, *Man with sore finger* 2017, glazed stoneware, 22 x 9 x 8 cm

Chapter 3. Ideas of the Domestic

We have an innate knowledge of ceramics objects gained through our daily experience through intimate touch. Traditional vessels and domestic forms share a universal language. Ceramics has archetypal forms that carry subconscious meaning for us. A cup is not just a vessel that holds liquid but has associations to the history of humanity, community, and sacred rites; ideas of identity and personal value. A plate is not just a surface for serving food but a signifier of social status or a message carrier.⁶¹ These qualities site the domestic as the traditional home of ceramics; the table setting, the afternoon tea ritual and the flower arrangement. The domestic is a space of unassuming potential due to the familiarity of these everyday objects. According to Walter Benjamin, it was only as far back as the early 1800s that “for the first time the living space became distinguished from the space of work.”⁶² This means the division of the home occurred contemporaneously with the industrial revolution where western societies saw the recently monied middle class create a market for buying objects and ceramics to furnish their new living spaces. The emergence of new technologies during the industrial revolutions brought about unique movements in art, design and culture. The twentieth century saw the evolution of the Avant-garde and Modernism, with its trajectory towards the city and the future, distancing itself from the domestic sphere and the values associated with domesticity.⁶³ Today, in light of Modernism's past repudiation and suppression of the domestic realm, it has become a prominent theme in cultural practice as a site for portraying ideas of power, gender, values and privacy.⁶⁴ That ceramics fits so seamlessly into the domestic realm gives it a new importance for talking about the contemporary.

⁶¹ Philip Rawson, “The Existential Base”, in *The Ceramic Reader*, ed. Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie (London, UK, New York, USA: Bloomsbury), 20.

⁶² Walter Benjamin, “Louis-Philippe or the Interior,” *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism*, trans. Harry Zohn. (London: Verson, 1973), 167.

⁶³ Christopher Reed, *Not at Home: The Suppression of Domesticity in Modern Art and Architecture*. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1996), 14.

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 17

Ceramics are commonly made on a domestic or intimate scale often in relation to the body. The plate, cup and saucer, over time and through personal use, engage with us on an emotional level. Small things are necessarily intimate, however they can be expansive in theme and concept and resonate from within to a wider audience. The intimate nature of small things and the meaning they hold is potent, like a talisman or treasure. When an object is small, we tend to view it more closely, seeking out details and understanding. If we pick it up, we turn it over in our hands, look underneath and inside. We are reminded of the ritual of the Japanese tea ceremony where the participant is encouraged to inspect all angles of their tea bowl, turning it over in their hands to gain appreciation of its beauty. In an increasingly digitalised and internet-based world, it is no coincidence that there has been a recent surge of interest in working with clay.⁶⁵ The idea of contact within our lives has lost its physical relationship. The tactile nature of a handmade ceramic object carries within it the idea of having been touched by the maker's hand as well as its quality of tangibility. In an age of mass-production, there is a new appreciation of the value and intimacy of the handmade object with its sense of manual labour.⁶⁶ Clay's earthy origin also has an honesty, which added to the close affinity between hand and clay are all hallmarks of intimacy.

A vase functions to hold flowers but when empty, its function also changes. Without flowers my work, *Loveless vase* 2018, becomes poignant. With loveless written across the body surface, the vase has anthropomorphised to say something heartbreakingly human. Although it is a small and quiet work physically, in the gallery context the work acquires a reverence. The vase's traditional form and blue and white colour brings to mind ideas of delftware.⁶⁷ It has presence without being didactic or heavy handed in sentiment. It asks for contemplation. Notions

⁶⁵ Glenn Barkely, "So Hot Right Now? Contemporary Ceramics and Contemporary Art", *Art and Australia*, Issue no. 51.4, 2014. 552

⁶⁶ Paul Matheiu, "Object Theory", in *The Ceramic Reader*, ed. Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie (London, UK, New York, USA: Bloomsbury, 2017), 275

⁶⁷ Delfware is tin-glazed earthenware made in the Netherlands and British Isles and commonly conjures up images of blue and white pottery. V&A, A-Z of Ceramics, www.vam.ac.uk/articles/a-z-of-ceramics (accessed October 17, 2018)

associated with and restricted to vessels, filling and emptying can be likened to our relationship with an emotion as great as love. We have capacity for love to ebb and flow and we humans are merely vessels in which to contain it.



Fig. 9. Sassy Park, *Loveless vase* 2018, majolica on terracotta, 19 × 10 cm

Sculpture has historically been seen as large scale, ego-driven and masculine, especially in terms of late twentieth century Modernism where we think of sculptors such as Henry Moore, Richard Serra and Peter Voulkos. Small scale works don't fit neatly within generalised notions of the trophy piece or hero-artist of the art world. Linda Marrinon (Australia, 1959-) addresses the marginalised and maligned genres within contemporary art through work that encompasses painting, watercolour and sculpture.⁶⁸ Craft materials, scale and sentiment are utilised by the artist to play with the deep-rooted hierarchies of the art world. However, her figures follow within the recognisable traditions of western representational form from an historical point of view. Scale is particularly important to how her figures interact with the viewer as it places the audience in a specific relationship to them. The small-scale makes us look down, endearing the work to us. The scale and fragile medium evoke an empathetic response.



Fig. 10. Linda Marrinon
Boulee cenotaph 2017
terracotta
33 × 25 × 13cm

⁶⁸ Julie Ewington, 'Intimacy and distance', in *Linda Marrinon: Figure Sculpture 2005–2015*, Charlotte Day, ed., (Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne); 17.

In *Sunburnt man wearing cut-offs* 2007, a plaster figure tinted to look like terracotta stands with an expectant air as if he were ready for a game of tennis on a hot summer's holiday. The figure has a sense of fashionable elegance whilst playing into ideas of comic caricature. Marrinon's 'man' undermines ideas of masculinity with his



Fig.11. Linda Marrinon
Sunburnt man wearing cut-offs 2007
tinted plaster
75 × 23 × 21cm

foppish hair, winsome attire and the joke of his 'sunburn' mimicking the antique terracotta traditions. Within her practice, the faces of her figures, often with abbreviated dots for eyes and button nose still emit a strong presence. Details such as clothing and accessories, rather than defining the subjects as personalities make them into archetypes which maintains their aloofness. The domestic world though is where they originate, and this is also a site for intimacy, the familiar, and the cosy. Her use of materials, which include plaster, fabric, clay, watercolour and acrylic paint, make the statues more vulnerable, requiring our care and attention to their humanity without giving anything of themselves away.⁶⁹ All these qualities engage us in the artist's vision. Her characters, from the contemporary world of arts and entertainment are made into timeless artefacts. The appeal to sentiment lingers on the threshold of ideas of craft, kitsch and collectibles.

Trumpeter 2018 is a work I have made that has much in common with the modelling and colouring of the excavated Tanagra figures of ancient Greece, and the humour of Linda Marrinon's figures. The hand-modelled man is painted with patches of pinks and blues, reminiscent of the remains of colours that decorated the historical Greek figurines. His persona comes from a family narrative centred on an uncle, who played the trumpet even after losing his arm in the 2nd World War. He lived out the rest of his days in the Soviet Union, a figure unknown and lost to his family. Based on this scant oral history, *Trumpeter* is an imagined figure, presented as an idealised type. He is more like the comic-strip character, *Tintin*, than a real man. Through the making process he is rethought and transformed. Even his golden trumpet has levitated in the heat of the kiln to hang magically on his chest. *Trumpeter's* romantic and magical allusions contrast with his cartoonish appeal and domestic scale, confusing ideas of value, humour and poignancy, museum artefact and mantelpiece knick-knack.

⁶⁹ Kate Alstergren, "Linda Marrinon 2016", *Roslyn Oxley 9* (July 7, 2016), <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/news/releases/2016/07/07/289/> (accessed July 25, 2017)

Fig. 12. Sassy Park
Trumpeter 2018
painted terracotta and gold leaf,
26.5 x 9 x 9 cm



Chapter 4. Metaphor, Humour and Text

Clay's ability to blur boundaries stems from its history of making not just functional ware but the creation of symbolic objects such as ritual vessels and figures.⁷⁰ These objects carry metaphor and layered meaning. The most fundamental idea surrounding the vessel form is its analogy to the body. The idea of the body as a container for the soul directly conjures up an image of a pot. Clay is also linked to creation myths across diverse cultures.⁷¹ From the ancient Sumerians to the Greeks, Laotians, Maori and Christian theologies have origin stories of humans being born out of clay.⁷² Clay's other characteristic qualities are its potent conceptual possibilities and inherent malleability evidenced in its wide application across industry, manufacturing and the arts. However, ceramics is a vulnerable practice full of failures. Pots collapse on wheels, greenware is fragile and what you give to the kiln is taken with mixed expectations. What comes out can be deeply disappointing. Pots crack and pieces slump. Glaze pin-holes and crawls and images burn out. Conversely, ceramics is a deeply compelling practice that delivers rich and complex surfaces, satisfying forms and beautiful, rewarding outcomes. These qualities of being malleable, fragile, resilient and joyous, and its scale and relationship to the body, make clay and ceramics specifically relevant for making artworks that convey meaning and significance relating to the human experience.

Ceramicist and potters also have a technical language for describing vessels further linking ceramics to the human analogy. They describe pots as having lips, necks, shoulders, bellies, hand (les), and feet. The anthropomorphic metaphor continues as the pot can be read as a head with handles on either side acting as ears and the lid becoming a hat. Ceramic figurines meanwhile are widely thought of as fragile and needing care. This embedded idea makes the portraying of my subject matter, such

⁷⁰ Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie, *The Ceramic Reader* (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2017), 11.

⁷¹ David Adams Leeming. *Creation myths of the world: an encyclopedia*. (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO. 2010) 312. https://maghon.weebly.com/uploads/2/0/0/3/20035969/small_creation-myths-of-the-world.pdf (accessed October 18,2018)

⁷² Leeming, *ibid.* 313

as forgotten women, hurt men and fallen cricket heroes in clay even more pertinent. Clay and ceramics stand in as metaphors for the human characteristics of fragility, vulnerability and resilience through adversity (fire). Clay itself contains its own memory, a physical memory that makes pots frustratingly warp in the firing process. In this age of forgetfulness and intangibility, where the increasing speed of technology and societal upheaval has brought about a fast-paced epidemic of communal amnesia, ceramic's material ability to be seen as a constant of human activity, and clay's physical memory that shapes its making, adds to its capacity for the symbolic.⁷³

A vase or figure can be picked up and turned about in the hand but it can never be seen all at once or in total, giving it the ability to carry a secret or a joke. Both my pots and my figures rely on humour to convey my ideas. The humour of the figures relies on caricature and characterisation. The pots painted with text function in an ironic, self-deprecating manner where puns are paired with the ceramic form. Using humour and the embedded ideas inherent in clay and ceramics, *I Object*, picks up on the anthropomorphic nature of vessels and pots. *I Object* is a full bellied pot that has a double meaning from reading the text consecutively and plays with the idea of who is speaking, the artist or the pot?

Part of the humour of my works is the irony of the text on the pot. Usually the text that appears on domestic pots is banally descriptive of its contents, like tea, rice or sugar. This pot is speaking out. First it reads 'I' and then when turned, it says 'object'. The joke being that it is stating an objection and is an object itself. The painting of leaves that surrounds the pot and text, emphasise the idea of a decorative object linking into assumed notions of ceramic's function. I subvert the viewer's expectations with small jokes.

⁷³ Christopher McHugh, "Ceramics as an archaeology of the contemporary past", in *The Ceramic Reader*, ed. Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie (London, New York: Bloomsbury), 536-537.



Fig. 13. Sassy Park, *I Object* 2018, terracotta , 22 x 17 cm

The use of humour is a long proven method employed for saying the otherwise unsayable and to introduce taboo topics and discussions. Women are often entreated to 'say something nice, or say nothing at all'. Where then can we say 'something' that brings with it a truthful intent, which might not be as 'nice' as dictated by social, gender and community standards? Commenting on taboo topics in public is fraught, yet when applied to the domestic ceramic vessel it carries with it the ideas of the private inside space where intimacies abound. There is an expectation to be heard. Humour opens a conversational space that invites rather than dictates. By using ideas of the traditional form and the domestic, and applying irony and humour, my work approaches truths, ideas and observations that crave exposure.

Sigmund Freud, in his book, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, develops ideas of humour as part of human psychology.⁷⁴ He states that 'a joke is a judgement which produces a comic contrast'.⁷⁵ For a joke to be successful it needs a punch line, a surprise. The hidden surface of ceramics, the bottom and backside or inside of a ceramic object, offers such an opportunity for carrying jokes. On a pot, the juxtaposition of image and/or text within the context act as a visual pun. Puns allow us to hold two opposing ideas in our mind at the same time making unexpected connections between things and ideas.⁷⁶

Humour pervades the work of South African artist-potter, Hylton Nel (South African, 1941-), through a direct and spontaneous approach as he documents the world around him. Hylton Nel's idiosyncratic ceramics include plates, vases, bowls, figurines, and small sculptures, many decorated with line drawings and script referencing decorative arts, literature, art history, erotica, social and political issues. His imagery ranges from cats to angels, presidents to the Madonna. This form of expression extends the functionality of the ceramics into the realm of art, as objects of contemplation. One work reads, *Three unforgettable weeks in Gaza*,⁷⁷ whilst another shows an image of a fleshy man dancing with overblown flowers.⁷⁸ His respect and irreverence to both ceramics, in referencing its history whilst working in a 'wonderfully crude'⁷⁹ style, and his subject matter, candidly stating his views, gives his work an effortless fluency and worldly depth. Nel is not bound by elaborate plans for his work, finding inspiration directly from what he is exposed to that is current and of importance.⁸⁰ The paradox and gap between his

⁷⁴ Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (1905) in 'The Artist's Joke. Documents of Contemporary Art Series'. Jennifer Higgie, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 25.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*, 25.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*, 27.

⁷⁷ *ibid.*, Nel *A Curious World*. 35.

⁷⁸ *ibid.*, Nel, *Conversations*. 96.

⁷⁹ Dinah Hall, 'Interiors: Where vases go to die'. *The Independent newspaper online* (1993) <http://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/interiors-where-vases-go-to-die-no-cowardly-monochrome-for-a-designer-brought-up-in-africa-who-loves-1489910.html> (accessed April 14, 2017).

⁸⁰ *ibid.* Nel, *A Curious World*. 12.

Fig. 14. Hylton Nel
Three unforgettable weeks in Gaza
2009
Glazed ceramic
26cm diameter



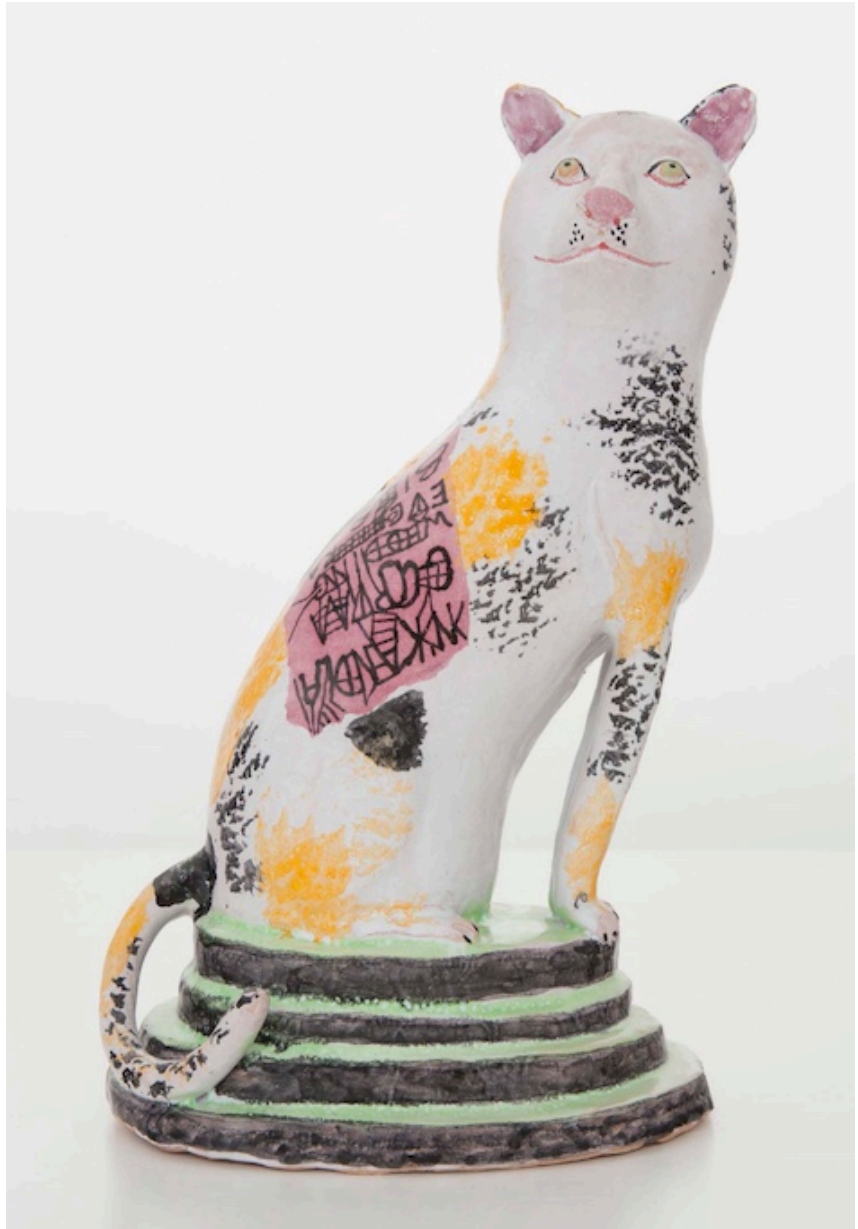
refined sensibility and his unrefined method is where Nel's humour lies. His ceramics work on a duality of being light-hearted and profound at the same time.

Nel's curiosity and everyday approach with regards to his subject matter might emerge from reading the news, or observing a flower. These small moments of life, that are meaningful and important to him, are coupled with recognisable forms of the ceramic tradition.⁸¹ His work is informed by a deep appreciation of ceramics and art history including Staffordshire figures and early English and Chinese plates and pots. For Nel, objects are an important and significant part of life, to be admired as much

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as they are to be handled.⁸² This is similar to the position my ceramics occupy for me, as go-betweens, narrowing the separation between art and life. Used and admired, to provoke thought and conversation, they approach a form of art and aesthetics that mirrors the values I see in living.

Fig. 15. Hylton Nel
Hidden Secrets Cat 3 2013
Glaze, ceramics
35.5 x 19 cm



⁸² Michael Stevenson, *Hylton Nel: for use and display*, introduction, exhibition catalogue, 23 May-16 June 2017 (London: The Fine Art Society, 2017)

The use of ceramics to deliver a powerful message with light-hearted humour is not new. The British Museum in London held an exhibition of ceramics in 2018 titled, *Pots with attitude: British Satire on Ceramics, 1760-1830*, which presented the history and purpose of communicating on vessel forms in the specific era of Georgian England.⁸³ Although these pieces were not made as art works but were about the dissemination of current affairs in a humorous and agenda-driven form, they convey a similar idea to some of my aims of writing on pots. That is, they take a stance on political or social conditions of their current time in a commemorative form. The vessels, which included ale jugs, pitchers and mugs, were used and viewed most likely by an unsuspecting audience in the public houses where they were deployed. It was to be assumed they would be conversation starters for the hard drinking, and ballad singing men.⁸⁴

The pastiches of characters, cartoon drawing and social commentary on this Georgian tableware, follows the English tradition of satirical prints from the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries by the likes of William Hogarth (1697-1764) and James Gillray (1757-1815). Hogarth's and Gillray's cartoons coincidentally would be used for the newly developed transfer-print technology which allowed mass production of printed ceramics.⁸⁵ These Georgian era artists used ribald and satirical slant of analogous subject matters, politics' foibles, great wars and the follies of London society and the art world, techniques still employed today.⁸⁶

Today, words and language surround us in the form of news headlines, toilet graffiti, bus conversations, song lyrics, thoughts and poems. I use words and text because they engage directly with the viewer. They surprise their audience and transform the

⁸³ *Pots with Attitude: British Satire on Ceramics, 1760-1830* 12 January-11 March 2018 (British Museum, London, UK) <https://tinyurl.com/y7dy28dr> (accessed May 9, 2018)

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* (accessed May 9, 2018)

⁸⁵ Patricia Ferguson, "Ceramics with an Agenda," *Ceramics Art + Perception*, no. 107 (January 2018): 50.

⁸⁶ Louisa Buck and Marjan Boot, "The Personal Political Pots of Grayson Perry" in *The Ceramic Reader*, ed. Andrew Livingstone and Kevin Petrie (London, New York: Bloomsbury), 375.

Fig. 16. *Bonaparte Dethron'd April 1st 1814*, 1814, Creamware jug, Cambrian Pottery, Swansea, Wales, Transfer-printed in black and painted enamels, 16.5 x 16 cm



ceramic object. Ceramics are rarely confessional or confrontational.⁸⁷ We think of them in convivial settings where we value their duality of function and aesthetics yet when painted with commentary with an agenda, they transform their position and power.

Deriving from my own personal experiences, *Ceramics suits me, I am used to disappointment* 2017, a simple terracotta vase becomes a confessional piece. In the work the text sums up a worldview and a specific issue with making ceramics, i.e. life is often disappointing, and the ceramic process is fraught with failure. Painted on a traditional vase form, the message is however unexpected, making it both truthful

⁸⁷ *Pots with Attitude*, ibid. (accessed May 9, 2018)

and humorous. The utilitarian nature of the pot is challenged by the confessional tone of the text. Here the pot becomes both an object of domesticity and an art object. Increasingly these text-based vase works have become a site for self-referencing the medium and practice of clay and ceramics, making in-jokes with the ceramic crowd. The patterning and raw terracotta finish add to the idea of an artefact but the jarring cobalt blue against red terracotta is not gentle on the eye. It is not conventional at all. Unglazed terracotta is more aligned with flowerpots or baked earth. In one way it draws you in with its humour, shared confidentiality and familiar form but then repels with its contrasting colour and pessimism.



Fig. 17. Sassy Park, *Ceramics suits me I am used to disappointment* 2017, terracotta, 16.5 x 12 x 12 cm

Chapter 5. Painting: Finding a surface

Within my practice, a plate or pot can be a surface for delivering a message or for painting a picture. With ceramics I find a way of reapproaching painting to present my ideas, therefore painting is an important element in this research project. As in ceramics, painting includes concepts of embracing failure, lack of proficiency and the unfinished, as well as the usual concerns with image, draftsmanship, illusion, texture and the frame.⁸⁸ Contemporary debate within the visual arts has challenged the adherence to a hierarchy of materials or approaches, in painting as well as ceramics. The prescribed technical methods of traditional ceramic craftsmanship are no longer a prerequisite to working with clay. As a result, researching and experimenting with all types of clay, techniques and surface applications available to ceramics has been part of my undertaking over the two year master's program. The variety of processes is one of the advantages of working with clay, however to find surfaces that can subtly hold passages of painting, decoration and text-based commentary, pares back the choices. To this purpose I have concentrated on painting with underglazes and oxides with fine brushes and sgraffito techniques and majolica glazes.⁸⁹

My figurative work are created by detailed sculpting and moulding techniques. Here the balance is to suggest by modelling and painting rather than providing all the visual information. The suggestiveness of clay is one of the qualities I wish to maintain in the finished figures. The vases, plates and cups are wheel-thrown, slump moulded or hand-built depending on what the concept is for the finished piece. I consider carefully the form and nature of each piece and how this is combined with the graphic elements to form the meaning and convey the idea. The challenge is to merge form, line, image, text and glaze to achieve something that holds attention. Sometimes when the detail is burnt out by the kiln, hidden under a glazed surface or altered by heat, the work is taken to a new serendipitous stage.

⁸⁸ Fayen d'Evie & Elizabeth Newman, ed. *Elizabeth Newman: More Than What There Is* (3-Ply Publishing, 2013), 10.

⁸⁹ Sgraffito is the incising with sharp tools on a soft clay body to reveal a contrasting colour. Majolica in the historic sense is a coloured clay body with a white, tin-opacified, viscous glaze, that is decorated by applying colorants (usually with a brush). The glaze is stable when fired, giving a glossy surface that maintains the line quality of the surface decoration.

Stephen Benwell (Australian, 1953-) sees himself firstly as a painter. However, he graduated from art school in the early 1970s with a sculpture diploma and went 'side-ways into ceramics from there'.⁹⁰ His approach to painting figures avoids conventional realist traditions, using patches and splatters of colours over a white glaze on the entire body. Changing to the lower firing range of earthenware during a residency at *Cité*, Paris in 1984 allowed him to create richer surfaces through multiple firings.⁹¹ Within this range he could paint, remove, smudge and repaint his surfaces. In 2008, he returned to Greece's National Archaeological Museum of Athens where he renewed his interest in miniature and classical sculpture and the groupings of objects to make a single work.⁹² Inspired by the patina of the stained,



Fig. 18. Stephen Benwell
Falling Backwards 2006
Earthenware
18 x 17 x 24 cm

⁹⁰ Stephen Benwell: *Beauty, Anarchy, Desire – A Retrospective*, Museum of Modern Art Heide. vimeo (2013) <https://www.heide.com.au/exhibitions/stephen-benwell-beauty-anarchy-desire%E2%80%94retrospective> (accessed September 14, 2017)

⁹¹ John McPhee, "Ceramic beefcake and other desires; The Art of Stephen Benwell." *Art and Australia*, Vol. 47 (Spring 2009): 47.

⁹² *Ibid*, 51.

weathered, and broken marble sculptures of the Greek classical period, his paint dribbles mimic the veins of the marble and marks of water drips over the surface of the figures.⁹³ Stephen Benwell's ceramic figures could also be seen as reminiscing for an idealised classical past although one with unsettling appendages and paint work. The small statues both reference and caricature classical forms. His standing figures are influenced by Greek *kouros* and porcelain figures of the seventeenth century, as in his work *Statue (red and yellow)* 2015, however their demurely classical pose are countered with heavy thighs and large feet. This duality of the classical and the uncouth, the bulky and evocative, instils a sense of tension

Fig. 19. Stephen Benwell
Statue (red and yellow) 2015
earthenware
27 × 10.5 × 9.5 cm



⁹³ Stephen Benwell: Beauty, Anarchy, Desire – A Retrospective, Museum of Modern Art Heide. vimeo (2013) <https://www.heide.com.au/exhibitions/stephen-benwell-beauty-anarchy-desire%E2%80%94retrospective>

and aloofness. Benwell is not averse to leaving his finger marks in the clay giving a lively His figures can be read as lost or pathetic characters although they remain earnest and endearing. Benwell's dedication to the small is a victory for minor work over the heroic. Paint brings depth and character to the figures and their small scale nature draws us in. Where the eyes and lips might be picked out in a representational manner, other areas are daubed and splattered in alluring pinks, yellows and blues.

Stephen Benwell offers a way of painting figures that avoids the kitsch or predictable. I also am looking for my own original approach to contemporary figure painting. *Men's group* is a collection of ceramic busts of male types: a scientist, fund manager, war hero, dandy boy, wounded man, jester and ghost. *Men's group* trialled a number



Fig. 20. Sassy Park
Men's group 2018
ceramic and paint glazes
20 x 32 x 25 cm approx.

of paint and glaze techniques on the collection of heads and busts on plinths. These included watercolour underglazes painted on porcelain, terracotta with painted white slip, raw terracotta with blue underglaze, ceramic pencil, bronze and other glazes. These different approaches bring a diversity of surface across the work and suited the subject matter of different characters. Particularly successful was using the matt white of the slip on to which were painted under-glaze colours and fine detail. The use of vibrant cobalt blue on unglazed terracotta was later used for the series of text vases.

Referencing the traditions of Staffordshire figures dictates a certain colour palette while the patina of the ancient Tanagra figures, with their remnants of pink and blue is far subtler. Using these ideas, painted elements on the clay surface can be altered and enhanced by techniques such as graffito, the use of overglazes, crayons and pencils. Repainting through multiple firings or obscuring painted elements under glazes helps create surfaces that are captivating, rich and unique. Establishing that painting and its concerns are central to my ceramic practice, enables an open-minded approach.

Conclusion

Objects have a ritual quality. One must be careful handling cups and plates because handling things is a ritual. Move without haste, consciously.

Hylton Nel, Journal, 6 September 1970, near midnight.⁹⁴

The Master of Fine Art project has involved making and painting ceramic objects for contemplation. Through this research I have come to a greater understanding that these objects commonly thought of as for display have a deeper, psychological use in our lives. Freud's collection provides me with the definitive example of this use of objects and continues to inspire my ideas, especially for display and installation of my work.

The objects in our lives, the ones we use every day, to eat, drink and wash, have a ritual quality that is generally unacknowledged. Drawing attention to them, by imbuing them with meaning, makes us reflect on them. These familiar objects can then act as potent messengers, leading us into broader discussions of value and awareness.

The things that affect and are meaningful to me are the subjects that find their way into my work. As in Hylton Nel's ceramics, it is the quotidian matters that need remembering and commemorating. Through the examples of the Tanagra and Staffordshire figures, and Georgian Creamware vessels, I have found historical traditions that have used ceramics as a compelling form of social media, communicating the views and values of their time. Similar to our own present day technological upheaval and social change, the Staffordshire potters in particular positioned themselves as social commentators on the brink of the modern industrialised world. Ceramics remains a powerful and adaptive medium to address

¹⁰⁷ *ibid.*, Nel, *A Curious World*, 9.

current themes in an age of digital revolution, where our voices are lost in the ether. The hard evidence of ceramics in an increasingly non-haptic world enhances the idea of the personal and intimate memorial. Through referencing historical and traditional forms my work carries a sense of the anthropological, making each piece an artefact of contemporary times.

Developing ideas for exhibiting work in the future, could include juxtaposing my work with other objects and contexts to create new interpretations. At present they sit on the kitchen table where they intermingle with other objects from our lives, both bric-a-brac and utensils. Their inclusion in art galleries or museums could be extended to other public locations, unusual sites like supermarket shelves or church niches. Here they could sit with other curated objects that draw connections and insights.

The domestic sphere, where affections are expressed and issues are put on the table is a unique place to communicate with ceramic art works. That I can say things with a plate or figure that are awkward to say in other art forms shows the intimate and influential nature of ceramics. This intimacy dictates scale, not for the heroic or grandiose. The small scale holds power and allows for the unobtrusive seeping out of ideas and thoughts.

I have established through writing and researching my paper that ceramics, through its universal use and appeal and its democratic nature, is a potent social media. That it is my social media has become clearer over the last two years. It has been exciting to find that my ceramic figures have presence and a power to evoke empathy and humour in an audience. Although making ceramics can be disappointing, it is also tempered with excitement, triumphs and joy. Ceramics suits me.

Sassy Park



Fig.21. *Strong Woman* 2018, painted terracotta, 20 x 9 x 7 cm

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