



What is the Matter?

Bridget Nicholson ponders the material: clay

"Clay beckons, it implores touch: fiddling with clay, rolling it around in my hands, pressing into it, and pressing it into things, making marks, forming and reforming, is mesmerising. Despite all the things I have done to clay, and all the time I have spent playing with it; I have always thought of what I have done to it, not what it has done to me."

AS A CONCEPTUAL INSTALLATION ARTIST I HAVE BEEN DRAWN TO CLAY FOR its ability to act as a medium. I should preface this, however, by saying that this is what has been revealed to me over time through the process of working with clay. I have worked with clay in projects in which I seek to engage with people in intimate ways about their relationships to land. The idea initially appeared through an object of Aboriginal cultural heritage, a *kopi*, or mourning cap that I first saw at the Cumbo Gunnerah Gallery and Keeping Place in Gunnedah, NSW, Australia. The story passed on to me at the time was that objects such as this were made by women putting gypsum from the river banks on their heads when their husbands died. Intrigued by the idea of using a natural material in connection with the body to mitigate emotions, I experimented at home with clay. I found the process powerfully grounding and reassuring. Thinking rationally it seemed that heat transfer and weight could be responsible for these feelings, but it also felt that there was something else going on. A project evolved from this experiment, working with the local indigenous community and others in the production of contemporary mourning caps; where the making of the objects from individuals' heads initiated conversations around the mourning of place, family and cultural heritage. In looking back at this project, clay as material deserves more thought and recognition in the role it played in unlocking and bringing forth intimate, emotional, responses and conversations.



Unintentionally I found myself calling on clay again to initiate emotional response, this second time through feet rather than heads. A dairy was due to be drowned as part of a valley destined to provide water storage for future generations (Tillegra Dam, NSW, Australia). As I spent time watching cows traipse in for milking; it was the mud and the marking of the land wrought through this process that stayed with me. While pondering this place, tagged for environmental change, and witnessing the anxiety and confrontational behaviour this provoked in the community. I decided to initiate conversations with people around relationship to land by wrapping their feet in clay – touch this earth lightly. Although there are other factors that contribute to encouraging people to speak freely of deep internal thoughts, it has become obvious to me from the experience of both projects that clay is an active collaborator in these projects, affecting the process and the outcomes on many levels.

Material culture, materiality, materialism and new materialism are philosophical discussions that appear in anthropology and cultural studies; the questioning of artefacts, materials, how we relate to them and why. These are important questions when I look at my own work which revolves around the creation of 'non' functional objects. Is it valid today to be making more objects in a world that could be described as overfull? Although my interest is in the role that clay is playing in eliciting and connecting to an emotional dialogue, I am also dealing with the creation of objects (artefacts) that live on to tell stories/communicate ideas and values to a future populace, and I find myself trying to weigh up or determine the value in the making of contemporary 'artefacts'.

In an attempt to understand and perhaps to justify my practice I have turned to theorists focusing on materials, materiality and new materialism. At this point it is quite easy to become unstuck. The language and loops of referencing that bind the world of theoretical research confound me and yet I am drawn to it by an idea that it



Facing page: What is the Matter? (Detail).

Photo by Bridget Nicholson.

Top left: 2010 NAIDOC Day Festival.

Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia. Photo by Raelene Beale.

Top right: Kopi. Cumbo Gunmerah Gallery and Keeping Place (Red Chief Local Aboriginal Land Council), Australian Museum Collection.

Photo by Bridget Nicholson.

Above: Hold. 2008. Coal fired clay objects (200), steel fame (3.4 x 4.8 m), copper wire, back steel sludge (floor) gauze with red stitching

(1.8 x 4.8 m). Installation at

Muswellbrook Arts Centre, NSW Australia. Photo by Bridget Nicholson.



Top left: **Hard to Hold**. 2011. Coal fired clay objects (200), steel frame (3.4 x 4.8 m), copper wire, gas fired clay shoes (c 350 pairs) painted wall. Installation at Cessnock Regional Art Gallery, NSW Australia. Photo by Bridget Nicholson.

Centre left: **Pink Palace**. 2010. Tennant Creek, Northern Territory Australia. Photo by Dianne Drake.

Above: **Single feet**. 2010. Bisque fired. Australian National University kiln room. Photo Bridget Nicholson.

Right: **Bridget Nicholson**. Photo by Suzanne Bartos.

provides the key to understanding what is happening in this interaction between clay and the human body. It is tied up with the idea of matter, that the divide between the human and the non-human is semi permeable, a slide into science. The other attraction of considering materiality and new materialism is the fact that these terms cross boundaries of enquiry. The anthropologist Tim Ingold raises questions about materials and materiality¹. He comments on the anthropological tendency to render the material itself invisible, while considering the environmental factors, using the example of a wood worker whose work is recounted in terms of the tools used, their social position, the design of workshops and so on. Ingold's own enquiry is directed more by artists and craftsmen; people working directly with the material, the matter. He leads us towards questions of stuff, what are we made of, and places this within the natural environment, placing humans within air and light: the human and the non human.

My experience with clay is far from unique. It is at the core of an artist's or craftsman's inspiration. Michelangelo and his relationship to marble comes to mind. Michelangelo talked about the figures he carved as being held within the block of marble, his role being to let them out. Another way of seeing this might be to suggest that his works derived from a dialogue between him and the material and through this the forms

evolved. What is apparent is the physical nature of these relationships. Touch, the senses, connecting without attempting to rationalise or predict, the learning that occurs as we attempt to do things with a material. Not finding an explanation or requiring reasoning is the experience of losing yourself in the material, allowing yourself to be led by the material but also and possibly most importantly to be able to acknowledge and validate the effect that this interaction is having. This is art not science. A recurring theme in ceramics



literature is the alchemy of ceramics, however this focuses on the firing process and changes in the transformation of the clay from soft to hard, malleable to permanent, rather than changes rendered in the person, through their involvement with the clay. I am interested in the exploration of the material as active matter and how this might influence the manner in which artists and others might use and look at the process as well as the products of clay, particularly relevant in the current interest in forms of dialogical² or participatory art. What is the clay doing to us?

Considering clay as material, within the framework of new materialism, offers up a range of ways of seeing and working with the material. It also provides a means by which to look more closely at the work that I have been doing and what has come out of this work. It provides me with a rationale for continuing to work with clay that goes beyond the value of the objects created, by allowing for discussion and thoughts to emerge that deal with the conceptual through something solid and tangible.

ENDNOTES

1. Tim Ingold, *Being Alive Essays in Movement, Knowledge and Description* (United Kingdom: Routledge, 2011).
2. Discussion that started with Nicholas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (France: Les presses du reel, 2002) and continues today. See Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London Verso, 2002).

Bridget Nicholson is a conceptual installation artist, whose practice is based on an understanding of humans as part of a whole, the individual within the collective and the human amongst the non human. Nicholson is interested in using organic materials and craft based processes to create a space of exchange, where the senses are enlisted in a layered experience to uncover stories that relate emotional and visceral experiences of land and place. The process is centred on engaging with people and place and finding ways of collecting and then transforming material into content for installations that are comprised of a mix of audio, visual and three-dimensional objects.

Hard to Hold. 2011. Coal fired clay objects (200), steel frame (3.4 x 4.8 m), copper wire, gas fired clay shoes (c 350 pairs) painted wall. Installation at Cessnock Regional Art Gallery, NSW Australia. Photo by Bridget Nicholson.

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