coal clay water wood

In 18th-century Europe, a village with supplies of coal, clay, water and wood was a perfect place for pottery production. Ceramic practices today continue both to depend upon and to disrupt relationships between these 'resources'. As anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss has noted: the art of pottery narrows the most radical way a culture can imagine and live. Its results are uncertain and subject to many risks, and this does not fail to effect the minds of those who practice it.1

By dint of their experience of the irreversible changes wrought by ceramic processes on fired clay and minerals, ceramists can be acutely attuned to the irreversibility of interventions into the natural order. Many feel charged with a duty to make the very best of what they use from the earth and to take exception to circumstances in which they perceive precious materials being squandered. The ethical and sustainable uses of so-called 'natural resources' are daily considerations.

coal
What do Captain Cook, Count Dracula and Queen Victoria have in common? At the coastal Yorkshire town of Whitby, Cook launched the Endeavour, Dracula was shipwrecked in the Demeter and miners dug the Whitby jet that was made into the black jewelry and tiara that Queen Victoria wore, dressed in black, to mourn the death of Prince Albert. Jet, also known as gage, is fossilised coal formed in the Jurassic period from the petrified wood of monkey puzzle trees that grew in abundance when England was closer to the equator over 150 million years ago. The Queen's grief habit sparked a Victorian craze for ornamental mourning that led to over-mining and depletion of the rare Whitby jet seams. As supplies could not keep up with demand, jet was imitated in materials such as glass, rubber, and coal dust with glue. It now seems worthwhile to use imitation materials to create new mourning apparel to adorn and protest our grief for the damage and death to towns, communities and natural environments wrecked by contemporary coal-mining scourg...
mixing with water and particulate matter, it carries other materials, responds to gestures, can be imprinted and poured into moulds. Clay mediates the melt of glazes. By firing a mixture of clay and grass fibres, porous water filters can be made. Lévi-Strauss tells us that in the myths of South American Indians, clay is the child of the rainbow snake. It lies under and over coal seams. South American Indians, clay is the child of the rainbow snake. It lies under and over coal seams. Eastern Australian Indigenous knowledge tells us that the Rainbow Serpent goes underground in the season of July, August.4

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John Cole puts a long handled shovel and a rake into the back of my station wagon with my plastic bags and hardened plastic trowel. Water flows through living creatures, is excreted by living creatures, is mutable and can change state from solid to liquid to gas.

Water is a vehicle for solids, impurities and contaminants. It can wash and purify and remove contaminants, it can be purified from contaminates. Water can be poisoned. Water can generate and conduct electricity. Water is a force of nature, a spring, a river, a lake, a rock hole, a soil, a dam, a flood, a habitat, and a biosphere, essential to life and to the potter's craft.

For travelling lightly, a traditional Aboriginal woman's kit contains a hand-sized wooden water scoop used to dig and draw water (once a recurrent resource) from the sandy ground of soaks. An elliptical shape, hand carved from a hardwood boll, its convex surface is engraved with a scatter of emu's tracks. A visual analogue, it resonates with conceptual and practical ingenuity. Implicit gestures of access and restraint tell us that water is sourced from ground laced with subterranean aquifers that connect to creeks, rivers, springs, clay pans, rock holes, lakes: all of which imbrite into song lines.

The runnels that erode the sides. The clay I dug was from the sides of the clay pit pond.

The hydrological cycle constitutes the flows of water between underground, land surface, ocean and sky through coal, peat, porous stone, soil and plants consumed by living creatures. Water flows through living creatures, is excreted by living creatures, is mutable and can change state from solid to liquid to gas.

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irreparable harm, not only to Australia, but to the entire planet: In truth we will not be dealing with climate change as a nation until we deal with the carbon liabilities we export to the world.7

Australian academic Glenn Albrecht created the word solastalgia8 to describe the profound sense of loss of connection that can occur for any of our connections to a total ecology of place. With respect to the notion of the jealous potter, Lévi-Strauss interprets ‘jealousy’ as the desire for something that you own that will be taken away or the desire for something that you don't have. These desires underpin our solastalgia for wrecked and ruined country and places, and our determination to protect threatened eco-systems, habitats and communities, and sustain authentic ways of being within the world.

provenance

In my own work, the theme of potable water reflects and signifies psychosocial, aesthetic and biological continuities between people, place and country. My work seeks to create perturbations of emotional responsiveness around human interventions into natural systems.

There are now many places where inhabitants can no longer trust their knowledge of the local ecology to obtain potable water. What happens up stream matters.9 What happens in the ground affects other ground. Knowing provenance may be one of the most effective activism left, a form of ethical reassurance about actions of consumption. Knowing the sources may ensure survival: of authenticity, knowledge, narrative, pattern and relationship.

A test has been called beside a stream. Beakers are filled with water and handed around for the walkers to share. The water they drink is not from the stream. They collect water from the stream to test. In the secular sense, a ritual has been called. Sustenance still has a connection to the sacred in the redemptive sense of working on what has been spoiled. Water from the stream is not tasted, but tested: a sacred function.

A shaft of sunlight beams a replica of the drip face. A visual analogue, it resonates with conceptual and practical ingenuity. Implicit gestures of access and restraint tell us that water is sourced from ground laced with subterranean aquifers that connect to creeks, rivers, springs, clay pans, rock holes, lakes: all of which imbrite into song lines.

John Cole puts a long handled shovel and a rake into the back of my station wagon with my buckets plastic bags and hardened plastic trowel. In the Gulgong district, not far from Uluru and the gigantic Moolarben open-cut coal mines, the way to the Cudgegong clay mine is a mirage of two tire tracks bruised into the soft wire grass that quivers in the breeze. Kangaroos travel across the paddock. It is a little after four in the afternoon, Sunday summertime. John opens various gates and closes them behind us. The track winds through paddocks and we cross a watercourse, not running fast but rather seeping across a low area of the field. I see the white mounds of China clay glisten like Sydney Opera House sails in the distance.

Sheep take off in a flock; they eat the same native grasses as the roos.

Sheep take off in a flock; they eat the same native grasses as the roos.

Cloven hooves of colonising herds of driven cattle, feral camels and pigs and the tracks of four-wheel-drive vehicles continue to damage, pollute and leave soakage places uncovered.

Toni Warburton, Wingecarribee Swamp, clay, peat mass and perforated masonite, 1999

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This clay is weathered granite, formed from the volcanic steam heating it through fissures, so the soil around here is acid. The good clay fires to a glaze on ceramics. As a renewable energy, wood is a structural material, a habitat. Harvested wood is a structural material, a renewable resource, a fuel. Melted wood ash forms a glaze on ceramics. As a renewable energy, wood is the fuel of choice for the kilns of many potters who have done their carbon sums.

Trees and plants are the elements of the terrestrial carbon cycle. Gravity of the planetary system causes pressure on the earth’s crust and this breathing of the planet causes a sort of peristalsis that makes the dead plant matter into mulch, then peat, then coal.

In Green Imperialism, British environmental historian Richard Grove reveals that for centuries, Europe, and Britain in particular, undertook massive clear felling of land for agrarian use and to obtain timber for urban and military demands. Subsequent European colonial expansionism deployed slave labour to slash, burn and deforest the invaded land to produce commodities such as sugar and tobacco. This caused massive erosion and loss of natural water catchments. In Australia as early as 1860: the colonial environmentalists felt a growing danger in which they argued the whole earth might be threatened by deforestation, famine, extinction and climate change.5

In the light of his recent research into the resources boom in Australia, Guy Pearce reminds us that, hedging the precautionary principle, we would do well to err on the side of caution rather than risk

8 to describe the profound


9 Artist Suvan Geer says ‘to treasure a river and work to preserve it is an act of global kinship when it values the culture of the land through which it flows’. Suvan Geer, ‘Keepers of the Waters’, Artweek, April 1997, p. 19.


2 Work by artists Stephen Harrison, Catherine Rogers, Julie Gough, John von Sturmer, Deborah Vaughan and activist curator Jo Holder influenced my thinking for this text. Thanks to Chris Ward for editing assistance.


4 Francis Bodkin, indigenous botanist at Mt Annan Botanical Gardens.

5. Knowing the sources may ensure survival: of authenticity, knowledge, narrative, pattern and relationship.


8 For an informed and insightful exposition about solastalgia with respect to the proposed slamming of the Williams River at Tillega, see Juliet Fowler Smith, ‘A place called the farm’ in The Stuttering Frog, October 2010, p. 4.

9 Artist Suvan Geer says ‘to treasure a river and work to preserve it is an act of global kinship when it values the culture of the land through which it flows’. Suvan Geer, ‘Keepers of the Waters’, Artweek, April 1997, p. 19.

1 Claude Lévi-Strauss, The Jealous Potter (Chicago and