The Australian National University
College of Arts and Social Sciences

School of Art
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DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Clay Objects and the Articulation of Place

STUDIO REPORT

Presented in part fulfilment of the requirements of the
Doctor of Philosophy in Visual Arts

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ABSTRACT

CLAY OBJECTS AND THE ARTICULATION OF PLACE

The Thesis, Clay Objects and the Articulation of Place, is comprised of two parts: a Studio Practice component and accompanying Studio Report (66%), and a Dissertation (33%). Using two different sites as models, both examine the ability of objects to provide information about specific places.

With Canberra as its site the Studio Practice explores, through processes of making, ways in which ceramic objects can convey information about the place where they are made and viewed. The research is presented in the form of an exhibition of ceramics held at the ANU School of Art Gallery from 15 – 23 March 2007.

The Dissertation takes as its focus a site in Sydney Harbour, Dubbagullee/Bennelong Point, one of the places where European Australians first turned country into object. In this document I show how examination of two of the objects/structures that have occupied the site - Bennelong's small clay brick house and later the Sydney Opera House - can provide information about Bennelong Point and the processes by which it has been shaped.

DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

I, ... , hereby declare that the thesis here presented is the outcome of the research project I have undertaken during my candidacy, that I am the sole author unless otherwise indicated, and that I have fully documented the source of ideas, references, quotations or paraphrases attributable to other authors.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

With much appreciation to studio supervisor Janet DeBoos; thank you.

Thank you very much also to supervisors Anne Brennan and Nigel Lendon, and to Gordon Bull.

I've benefited enormously from discussion with colleagues and fellow students within the School of Art, and from the broader ANU community. My interest in this area of study had its genesis in casual but informative conversations around the corridors with colleagues, Jan Davis, John Smith, Gary Jolly and Leonie Lane and so my thanks go to them.

Very many thanks as well to David George who has kept everything going, and to Georgina Buckley and Helen Stephens for both practical and moral support. Making studio ceramics often requires the expertise of others and I am indebted to Bernd Weise for throwing large forms, Michael Sainsbury for stand building, Serafin & Co. for persistence in the area of water-jet cutting, Caren Florance for graphic design assistance and Brendan McGeachie for some of the photography. As well, I owe a debt to those who made the 'found' ceramic vases and figurines I have reworked in the course of this research project.
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INTRODUCTION

In this Studio Research Project, questions associated with the depiction of nature and place on contemporary ceramic objects are explored. Currently, our relationship to our environment, to nature and to place, is under intense scrutiny. As the natural world disappears under our weight, or changes under our will, the need to reassess our relationship with it becomes more pressing. How ‘place’ is thought about is changing as well. Where once connections to particular places seemed unproblematic, in today’s world, claims to particular places are contested daily. So this project seeks to investigate how ornament might play a role in maintaining the natural world as an imaginative and provocative presence in daily life and broaden and enliven an understanding of place in a way that is underpinned by a concern for all place.

Philip Rawson has observed that:

The roses to which a 1760 Sevres rosewater ewer may refer are probably in the first place the roses that bloom in Boucher’s pictures, not in the uncouth countryside of rural eighteenth-century France.

This statement became a catalyst for the investigation; had images of the natural world become so loaded with signification that they could never just represent themselves? Margaret Scott’s comment in her essay, Prospects from a Metal Garden, in which she compares the ‘outside’ garden of the orchard and native bush surrounding her Tasmanian home, with the ‘inside’ garden of carved wooden fireplace and Wunderlich pressed metal ceilings, suggested a different way such images might operate:

It was from all this that the metal and wooden flowers, leaves and trees derived their meaning, encoding in themselves messages that in turn illuminated the external landscape.

Can images of landscape & place endure as both relevant sources and subjects for contemporary ceramics in a similarly sustaining way? What does it mean to paint roses on cups when all around they are brown and desiccated from lack of rain? Or to portray a regent honeyeater sitting happily on a tree when there are so few left? Could a painted carp on a Chinese rice bowl ever be looked on with appreciative eyes again? Or a border of ivy considered when it was such a weed? What are the implications of depicting the natural world on ceramic objects?

CERAMICS AND NATURE

The natural world has historically been the most common referent on domestic ceramic objects; flower; leaf; insect; water; cloud; rock – all have been used over and over as decoration and ornament, each iteration inflected by prevailing socio-cultural attitudes and understandings. What might be said to be a constant throughout these iterations

though has been the depiction of nature in an idealised manner; repeat patterns around plate borders are evenly spaced and symmetrical, colour is constant, shape is 'just right' and conventional over a range of motifs... nature tamed, ordered and predictable.

Nature is pre-coded in ceramic objects because, in its natural state, clay is a natural material. Yet, in the 21st Century the clay we use to make tableware or expressive works is natural in much the same way that milk is natural; it's cleaned, it's filtered, it's augmented and/or corrected. It's purified or else, ironically, primed with additions of colour and texture to become what could only be described as either extra or hyper natural; the connections between the natural material clay and nature often involve artifice.

Ceramic domestic objects and nature share the paradoxical characteristics of change and constancy. Norman Bryson maintains that the basic forms of ceramic domestic objects have remained unchanged for centuries, yet they constantly respond stylistically to the changing cultural environment.² Bryson might be reiterating A. N. Whitehead's claim that 'Every scheme for the analysis of nature has to face these two facts, change and endurance.'³

A walk through the ceramic section of any Department Store will show just that; dinner sets replicating floral patterns that have endured since the 18th century can be seen alongside modern, minimalist works that reference the natural world as an abstraction of colour and texture. Neither necessarily speak at all directly to everyday life in this country though both might, in their own way, encourage an appreciation of the natural world, but it is a non-specific, generic ‘nature’ that is in play here.

Nature has, possibly since the very first pot was made, been a prime referent in ceramic shape, surface, colour and ornament. Although it is a very broad generalisation, it might be said that there are two 'schools' of objects that this is apparent in. These again very broadly might be constituted firstly by the earthy, iron bearing, primarily hand made objects historically produced in what is often termed 'the developing world'. That is, these are the red earthenware cooking and storage vessels historically made in countries such as New Guinea, Africa and so on. As interesting as these are, they are outside the ambit of this study.

The second category is the products of Asian, English and European ceramics that, from the 18th century, sent an explosion of nature-based ornament around the globe. These works have shaped ceramic domestic objects since that time; they continue to do so today. The messages these objects carried with them as they first spread around the world were not just about the joys and marvels of the natural world, but embodied within them were messages about the might of technology, the power of science, the pleasures of consumption, the wonders of man's imagination and, in their incredible quantities, the bountifulness of the earth.

Nature itself appeared on these ceramic objects in many guises, as botanical specimen, as groomed and tamed garden, as fanciful grotesque, as site of both romance and terror; as man’s friend and man’s enemy (for women, like nature, were seen to be under men’s domination), as backdrop and as subject – it would be impossible to canvas the myriad manifestations. It was technology, and improvements in administrative process and systems, that enabled these objects to be made and distributed. This was not just the technologies of the making process, though these were substantial, but the technologies of various forms of distribution. Boxes for packing, canals for barges, ships and later trains – and of accounting, marketing, hauling; all came together in the 18th century.

Sarah Richards has pointed out that as much as these objects met a demand, they created demand (and taste) as well. As the technology and skills in the ceramic factories of England and Europe increased and demands were met in one area, new objects were invented to ensure the profit flows were maintained. The white ground that pictorial representation of the natural world depended on had been used in the Middle East, Spain and elsewhere at least since the 9th Century either in the form of a pale clay or a white tin glaze. It was the arrival in Europe of Chinese porcelain in the late 1600s and the subsequent development of that material and its accompanying technologies in Germany and then elsewhere that made the botanical extravaganza possible.

The migration of Chinese motifs, themes and styles around the world since then has been well documented, as has the way these shaped ceramic design globally. In Australia, Chinese ceramics and English ceramics that borrowed heavily from them were most likely brought out by officers on the First Fleet but were anyway being imported into Australia, often via India or South Africa, in the early years of the colony. A consequence of the global distribution of the styles and idioms of various countries via ceramic objects (and fabrics and other material cultural objects were implicated as well) was that ornamental idioms lost local resonance. They picked up new ones to be sure, and, if a plum and cracked ice pattern on a ceramic object were only pretty to a householder in North Sydney, there were other meanings to be had from the ownership of such a thing.

But it is interesting to try and think about the ramifications now of the great globalisation of ceramic ornament and object that began in the 18th century. What effect has it had, this mass circulation of diverse idiomatic representations of the natural world? The diverse numbers of manufacturers in China, England and Europe (and elsewhere) meant that the variety of representations in circulation was huge; did that suggest a natural world of almost limitless diversity? And if that represented a rapacious commodification of the natural world, how might we think about the increasingly numerous, but similar objects that are the products of today’s manufactories? What might a container load of all white Maxwell Williams tableware signify about our attitudes to the natural world? In recent years the natural world, in representational form, has been disappearing from the table, in its place natural colours and textures; what might this absence of image signify?
BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

At various times in my studio career I have had periods of making work depicting local community or place. Early on, this often took a souvenir-like form in its representation of places around Sydney, where I lived. Subjects were the places I frequented, Bondi Beach, Wylie’s Baths at Coogee, the view of Centrepoint Tower from my studio window. I sought in these works to make pattern and image that held something recognisably local but which by observing some aspects of ceramic ornamental convention, could lay claim to growing out of, though making a slight departure from, ceramic tradition. I was making tableware at the time and concerned that the representations on objects I could buy – cups, bowls, plates – refracted back little that was meaningful in terms of cultural experience as it was all manufactured elsewhere, overseas.

Later, after moving from the city to a country property my reasons for wanting to respond to the place I lived changed. Now, I came to realise, I was painting or utilizing shape references of the local landscape in an attempt to both understand the particularities of the place, and as a way of knitting myself to it. More recently, after another move, this time to a different state, those reasons for wanting to explore the representation and articulation of place remain. But the questions I ask myself now, while still grounded in personal experience, relate more to the broader public sphere and the responsibility I might have in relation to representing place.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

‘Nature’ and ‘place’ are two terms always requiring definition, yet in attempting to define them, meaning often slips away – such is their contingency. Here I am referring to the natural world in the first instance and to a geographically specific area in the second and my presumption is that as human beings we are part of nature and that we construct places through experience. Place exists in and of the natural world but being geographically specific might have an ecosystem or environment specific to its conditions. Further, I take both terms to suggest dynamic entities that change over time and in response to actions. The geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has noted that ‘Place is a type of object. Places and objects define space, giving a geometric personality’ and ‘Objects and places are centers of value.’ At times in the following text, when making a choice between the two terms seems impossible, I specify them as nature/place.

THE STUDIO INVESTIGATIONS

My journey through the area of nature and place has been discursive and I have responded to ideas as they have arisen rather than following a pre-planned route. It has been rhizomatic in that forays made into some areas have not been pursued, though some ‘themes’, for instance that of carving, have been put down and picked up again periodically. I have carried out two forms of ‘fieldwork’ – though they don’t fit the usual conception of that term – but I have mapped a particular place repeatedly on foot and I have carried out a project of bird watching both around Canberra and on the worldwide web. The objects I have concentrated on exploring have been largely, though
not exclusively, functional. For the purposes of this Report, I have grouped the studio research into six sections: Handles and Garlands; Walking Backwards and Forwards; Nature Writing and Pastoralia, Birds, and a final section on the work of other artists, Artists Work.

**THIS DOCUMENT**

The Report that follows is essentially chronological but themes and concerns have had differing iterations over time. For instance the section describing my engagement with birds is gathered together but the studio investigation in this area was carried out at intervals.

I have spent much of the time in the studio with a book in my hand and the research documented here has developed out of my exposure to a diverse range of texts on nature and place. As well I have had the opportunity during my candidature of attending seminars and talks by visiting scholars, especially in the areas of the eco-humanities and environmental philosophy. At times it has seemed as if my project has been driven more by texts and talk than by in-depth exploration of the work of other artists, and this has been true to a degree; but new areas opened up that I felt compelled to follow. The work of many artists both historical and contemporary has however provided much inspiration and information. The final section of the document discusses a selection of these.

I have attempted to avoid using the studio research to illustrate what I have read or heard though and have approached the making of work as Terry Gifford notes a poet might approach a poem:

> A personal notion of nature will always be in dialectical relation to socially constructed notions of nature. The poem is a site where writer and reader negotiate that dialectic of personal and social meanings.®
My first impulse, on beginning this project, was to sit still and work slowly because straight away a conundrum presented itself. I had only just moved to Canberra and, as a place, it was very unfamiliar to me. The initial proposal stated that I was going to investigate how ceramic objects made primarily for use inside the home, can image the outside world yet, in a new place, I quickly realised I had little idea of the outside world I found myself in. I prevaricated for a while, what should I do? What was the outside world? Should I be outside gathering information about Canberra at first hand or in the library reading about it? On a previous arrival in a new town I'd tramped up and down streets, studied the map, sorted out the relationship of one area to another; visited the central and peripheral shopping precincts, toured the bits that flooded and the bits that didn't. The decision I made here though was to stay inside, to sit in my small studio, and to carve.

Suspended between two locations as I felt myself to be at this stage, the idea of place seemed too difficult to broach, and nature – I had defined it so hazily – where should I start? Although I was deliberating on one level, it seemed quite clear to me that my approach should be to work through initial ideas by making them as I thought them, and that I needed to go back to basics – what did I think about nature, what was it to me, what shape would I give to it? This last question resonated most and prompted me to take up my carving tools. Carving is a very particular activity because whether an object is being formed, or just a surface incised, shape is being given to something in a very tangible way. As well, there is something particularly mesmerising about it that encourages a meditative, reflective state of mind.

Although in past studio practice I had drawn on motifs derived from the natural world or utilised landscape imagery, it had been via painting, printing, or other two dimensional methods. Rawson's statement about Boucher's roses was still playing in my mind here and I hoped by moving away from flat pictorial representation and working quite directly with the material that a quite personal response might arise. Margaret Scott's words about the carved wooden fireplace that 'illuminated the external landscape' continued to resonate as well.

The studio I had been allocated was in a demountable outside the main Art School building and for some time I was the only student working there. The building is divided into individual spaces, small lockable rooms all running off a corridor edging the building, with at its centre a large studio used occasionally for life drawing. Each day I would go there and carve and at times I felt that I could be in a snow-covered hut in the mountains whittling wood; there was no-one else around, it was quiet and it was cold.

At this early stage I worked with two shapes that I thought of as constituting an individual table setting – a very simple asymmetrical bowl and a small cup without a handle that
were to sit on the table on separately carved plates or saucers. Working with such an ensemble I felt was a way of entering into a dialogue with a user. I made a series of these sets and each was carved differently.

THE CUP

On the cups I carved flowers from memory and I carved them quite deeply so they stood out in relief from the cup’s fabric. My aim was for the carved representations to have sufficient thickness that it could act in a number of ways. Firstly I wanted it to act as a visual and tactile aide memoire that would bring the natural world to mind with each use, and secondly, for it to act as a handle. Robert Nelson, in *A Typology of Small Objects* has written that the cup (and the spoon) are the most personal of objects because they enter the body of the user. Feeling the carved flowers with the hand on picking up the cup, and then again with the lip and interior of the mouth would theoretically then constitute a very personal encounter.

For reasons of hygiene, objects that go into the mouth are normally smooth and coated in impervious glaze; it is uncommon for cup rims to be carved or textured, or unglazed. I had only glazed the cup’s interior and the carved relief but I was attracted to the idea that even though the cups were reasonably pristine, an idea of the messiness and uncontrollability of nature — in the form of potential dirt and disease — might still lurk… My thinking here — discursive as it may have been — was influenced by a debate being carried out in the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* about the ecological implications of the imaging of unscenic nature. The argument was that valuing places or aspects of nature that were deemed ‘picturesque’ higher than places or aspects deemed ‘unscenic’ might lead to an undermining of our appreciation of natural systems.10

Examples of the ‘unscenic’ listed in the debate were swamps or boggy areas, a rotting elk being devoured by maggots (it was an American publication) or anything thought ‘slimy, dangerous or dirty’.11 One author argued that a scientific appreciation of nature’s systemic and relational properties alongside a more straightforward aesthetic appreciation could amplify or broaden aesthetic experience. Also that while some things in nature might appear on an individual level to be unaesthetic, the self-regulating and sustaining system of which they are a part was in itself aesthetic and thus lent value to what might be considered the unaesthetic:

Would we not be disappointed (aesthetically) knowing that the movements of the solar system were at every moment controlled by an omnipotent being? The solar system would lose a bit of its grandeur (itself and aesthetic property) and so not be as beautiful as it is. Ecosystems, including those that lack obvious scenic value, are similarly self-sustaining and self-regulating and science allows us to understand how each part of an eco-system helps maintain the system’s integrity. Thus, science helps reveal certain of nature’s aesthetically relevant properties, which in turn helps us appreciate the aesthetic properties that depend on them.12

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11 Ibid.: 276.
12 Ibid.: 278.
Fig. 1  Patsy Hely, Small Cup, 2002, porcelain with incised surface, partially glazed, 5.5 x 6.5cm.

Fig. 2  Patsy Hely, Small Cup, 2002, porcelain with carved surface, partially glazed, 5.5 x 6.5cm.

Fig. 3  Patsy Hely, Small Cup with flower saucer, 2002, porcelain with incised surface, partially glazed, 5.5 x 6.5cm.

Fig. 4  Patsy Hely, Small Cup with leaf saucer, 2002, porcelain with incised surface, partially glazed, 5.5 x 6.5cm and 6cm x 1.5cm.

Fig. 5  Patsy Hely, Small Cup with wattle saucer, 2002, porcelain with carved surface, partially glazed, 5.5 x 6.5cm and 6cm x 2cm.
Another argued that, morally, not everything should be valued equally; an earthquake might be a reflection of natural forces re-aligning mass, not a bad thing in itself, but to see any aesthetic value in the lives lost is of course unconscionable.  

While this debate might seem somewhat remote from considerations of the hygienic status of a small cup's rim, my interest in it had come about through questioning the implications of the ways that nature is so often depicted on ceramic objects. Mostly, it is clean, regulated, nicely coloured and, in its ability to be fashioned around this curve, that handle, that spout, as accommodating, I wondered what the implications of this could be. Without wanting, necessarily, to depict a rotting elk carcass, how could I articulate something about the natural world in my work that allowed both myself and a viewer/user, to engage meaningfully with it?

NATURE AS 'HANDLE'

The carved relief gave quite a thickness to the cup in parts and I saw the thickly carved shapes acting as a handle. The handle has many metaphoric possibilities and the idea of nature as a facilitating or collaborative force, an idea I thought embodied in a handle, I hoped was apparent.

The sociologist George Simmel has written about the role of handles in relation to domestic objects, using them as metaphors for relationships between what he sees as the centrifugal and centripetal actions between us, and our broader social world. Using a vase with a handle and a spout as an example, he describes firstly how such an object is incorporated in two worlds, one—a segment of reality, the other—the world of art, and secondly he suggests that handles and spouts perform opposing actions:

The principle of the handle – to mediate between the work of art and the world while it remains wholly incorporated in the art form – is finally confirmed by the fact that its counterpart, the opening or spout of the vessel, works according to an analogous principle. With the handle the world approaches the vessel; with the spout the vessel reaches out into the world.

I wondered then how I might think about my cups, with their built-in handles, in relation to this. The cup itself performed the spout’s function of reaching out, but it reached into the body, not out into the world.

Were they suggesting nature as something to be consumed, or, as I had hoped, something that helped sustain us—a conundrum that was hardly new or unusual. I had made the cups very small because I had imagined the table setting as being one used for lunch or dinner and the cup I envisioned as being used for short black coffee. This size went with an ecological consideration of moderation, I thought, and while the miniaturization might suggest nature commodified, it might also suggest it as something to be handled with a degree of care.
THE BOWL

I shaped the bowl to be round-bottomed and half-hemispherical and I envisioned it used in two different ways. In winter, used with hot food, it could sit on its accompanying stand and as the food gradually cooled, it could be picked up and held and so warm the hand. On a hot day in summer, if it was used to serve ice-cream, for instance, it could be held in the hand and so prove cooling. Though the bowl was made of porcelain and a lack of ornament and white glazed interior gave it a minimalist appearance, I hoped its half-hemisphere shape might be suggestive of the earth, or a gourd or melon, and thus, on some level, suggest the natural world. But such identification of ceramic form with the natural world, as Phillip Rawson points out, might only have resonance in cultures where nature is a focus of celebration or where life is lived in close companionship with it; equally, such a bowl might be associated with many things.

NATURE AS ‘STAND’

For both bowl and cup I carved small freestanding bases based on botanical forms. The bases for the cups could have been used independently as small dishes though those for the bowls could not, for they were triangular, round or square ‘ring’ forms. Unlike a traditional saucer or plate, they had to be used with a degree of concentration so that in placing the cup or bowl onto them some care was required to house them securely and to ensure neither bowl, cup nor stand was damaged. I saw the stands as representing nature as an entity on which all else rested but which must be treated with some mindfulness.

In the end I did not pursue the above investigations in the same form, they seemed too literal, but the process of making them did allow me to think through initial questions.

THE GARLAND

The next form I explored, which arose from my work with the ring-like bowl stands, was the garland – a circle of plant forms woven or knotted together into a ring. Traditionally these were composed either of flowers, of flowers and stems, or of leaves, as they are today. The garland carries with it many associations. Ring forms symbolise wholeness; the idea of weaving and knotting strands together has been used to symbolise creative activity and making meaning, in many cultures over a long period of time. Historically, garlands were worn on the head, though Rawson and others’ suggest diverse uses:

Woven garlands were, we know, customarily draped upon sacred trees, on the doorposts of temples or those many rustic sacred objects and images at springs, by roads or in the fields scattered over the ancient worlds.¹⁸

This practice also saw representations of garlands carved or painted onto architecture and objects. In all of these uses, the intention seems to have been to mark people, object or place with sanctity; or to mark as ‘special’. The idea of sanctity may have arisen because the garden historically – in Western culture at least – was seen as an analogue of paradise, and it follows that its products denoted the sacred. Originally gardens were

¹⁶ Rawson, Ceramics, I 12.
Fig. 6  Patsy Hely, Garland, 2002, work-in-progress, porcelain, unfired, 30 x 15cm.

Fig. 7  Patsy Hely, Garland, 2002, work-in-progress, porcelain, unfired, 28 x 10cm.

Fig. 8  Patsy Hely, Garland, 2002, work-in-progress, porcelain, unfired, 28 x 10cm.
places found in nature; places come upon where, because of a particular microclimate, collections of particular wildflowers flourished. The garden as we know it today grew from attempts to copy this natural phenomenon and the idea of flowers as a somehow wondrous or special, sanctifying even, continues.

Garlands I can remember seeing were those being worn by actors in a masque in a version of *The Tempest* and by Maori women at an exhibition opening at the Auckland Museum. These were spectacularly beautiful; a ring of fresh flowers is a wondrous thing. It is quite different from a bouquet or posy of flowers because the crafting of the ring form seems a special thing in itself. A funeral wreath is a particular form of garland yet it too seems unlike a true garland form because it is primarily flat, made to sit on a flat surface, a casket or the ground whereas a garland of flowers acquires a special character by being in direct contact with the body. A tiara or crown is perhaps the closest approximation.

The convention of representing garlands on ceramic borders spans the history of ceramic production though it may not be that it is garlands that are being represented, but that garlands are being constructed by the placement of vegetal ornament around a circular form. Both forms, the real and the representation, have connections with the body, one by being worn, the other by being used and both seem to represent nature’s ability to make the everyday significant. The anthropologist Jack Goody has given a detailed account of the history of the use of flowers for 'garlands, chaplets and bouquets' and he gives a good account of the changing uses of these forms. He documents changing patterns of use in ancient Greece, Rome and Egypt, through to later European, Chinese and Indian uses of them and discusses their various uses, from marking out sporting prowess, celebrating marriage and birth, commemorating death, and sanctifying sacrifice. He also documents that the broad use of them grew out of increasing luxury. With food plentiful, fields could be set aside for the growing of inessentials.

My interest lay in my perception that, overall, the garland was a form that marked a person, an occasion or a thing as having special significance, as standing out from the everyday. In the first clay garlands I made I drew on flowers borrowed from Chinese ornamental designs. I chose those because as I began to venture out around Canberra I was struck by the ubiquity in the local gardens of the flowers so familiar to me on Chinese porcelains – camellias, azaleas, and prunus in particular. Like many others I had always associated these with England but as I began now to canvas the literature on early plant collecting, it was sobering to see how many familiar species originated in Asia and the Middle East.

**NATURE OR PLACE?**

At this point I began questioning again the relationship between nature and place, why were they so magnetically connected, and could one be considered without the other? I’d been aware for some time that many of the plants I’d always thought ‘belonged’ to England in fact ‘belonged’ to other places. But I had grown up in a household – and at a time – when it seemed natural that everything right was English. Realising the scale of
the wholesale British appropriation of other culture's products, both made and natural, rankled.

At this time I was auditing an undergraduate course offered by the English Department on Representations of Nature and the ideological uses of the natural world, from the Greeks to Shakespeare, Rousseau, to the pastoral poets and the early American nature writers. Around this time I also came into contact with Helen Tiffen, a visiting academic with research interests in the literature of colonisation, especially with regard to the Jamaican experience. Hearing her speak, I began to see correspondences between the two colonised countries, Jamaica and Australia. In one of her presentations she discussed how the Jamaican landscape had become re-ordered by the introduction of a variety of foreign plants and how this reconfigured landscape formed a virtual map of countries dominated or pillaged by the British. She suggested, too, that the Botanic Gardens in the country's capital, Kingston, could be seen as a thumbnail image of the entire country, much like many of the Botanic Gardens in this country.20

As I sought to weave these ideas together, I began, at the same time, to carve 'garlands' from both native and foreign species, in some pieces the species were woven together, in some I used only flora indigenous to this country I scanned Chinese ornamental motifs into my computer, wondering if this constituted another form of colonisation, then wove them together with native species in Photoshop, printed them out and used them as templates for carving the clay forms.

These seemed not successful aesthetically for a number of reasons. Technically, to get them to hold together for the length of time it took to carve them, I had to make them quite solid and this gave them a heavy ponderous appearance I disliked. The clay needed to be kept at an optimum state to be carved: too wet and it collapsed, too dry and my tools left scrape marks and I lost many by having to use the tools too forcefully. As well, I had difficulty arriving at a representational form that I felt might lead me further and then, while making a garland comprised entirely of wattle, the Bali bombing took place and, while I deplored that, the use of wattle as a national symbol at the time left me with a feeling of unease as well.

20 Helen Tiffen, "'Replanted in This Arboreal Place': Gardens and Flowers in Contemporary Caribbean Writing," (Humanities Research Centre, 2002), Unpublished paper.
Fig. 9  Patsy Hely, saucer, 2002, porcelain, glazed, 6cm variable.

Fig. 10  Patsy Hely, saucer, 2002, porcelain, 6cm variable.

Fig. 11  Patsy Hely, saucer, 2002, porcelain, partially glazed, 6cm variable.

Fig. 12  Patsy Hely, saucer, 2002, porcelain, glazed, 6cm variable.

Fig. 13  Patsy Hely, saucer, 2002, porcelain, glazed, 6cm variable.

Fig. 14  Patsy Hely, Bowl with stand, 2002, porcelain, 14 x 8.5cm and 10 x 2.5cm variable.

Fig. 15  Patsy Hely, Bowl with stand, 2002, porcelain, 14 x 8.5cm and 10 x 2.5cm variable.

Fig. 16  Patsy Hely, Bowl and cup with stands, 2002, porcelain, dimensions as above.
Fig. 17  Patsy Hely, stand, porcelain, 2002, 10 x 2.5cm variable.

Fig. 18  Patsy Hely, stand, porcelain, 2002, 10 x 2.5cm variable.

Fig. 19  Patsy Hely, saucer, porcelain, 2002, 6cm variable.

Fig. 20  Patsy Hely, workbench with leaf moulds and casts, 2003.
Chatwin notes that most nomadic tribes claim ‘ownership’ not of the pastures they use but only of their ‘own’ migratory path (in Arabic, Il-Rah, meaning ‘The Way’). This enacts a spatio-temporal conflation insofar as the notion of ‘owning’ these spaces is not constituted independently of the particular times they are traversed. The physical traversing over and temporary (meaning here, ‘temporally limited’) use of these pastures is an owning without possessing.\(^{21}\)

While I had been spending time sequestered in the studio carving, to get there each day I had been walking from my home to the University. It is quite a long walk, around an hour and a half, and doing it a few times each week I came to feel as if I was walking myself into the place, that if I travelled enough ground this place might start to feel like home. The route I took began in my suburban street, then crossed over into one of the ‘Nature Parks’ that run through Canberra. Here I traversed the lower slopes of Mt Majura and Mt Ainslie along a route that runs parallel to one of the main north–south roadways, about ten blocks away, leading into the city centre. On the path through the park I would pass the occasional other walker and small groups of kangaroos, then I would descend through the suburb occupying the lowest slope of Mt Ainslie, into the city then across to the University.

Not only did this walk take me, in quick succession, across three iconic Australian topographic strata, bush, suburb, city but also, I reflected as I walked, it also took me through two typical settler landscapes. The Nature Park had been cleared in the late 1800s and used to graze cattle and traces of this can be seen in a few early stone culverts scattered here and there, as well as in the persistent weeds that local bush regenerators repeatedly cull. The homestead attached to the area was situated further down the slope so the Park possibly had no exotic plantings and only indigenous species grow there now, gums and wattles and hardenbergia most noticeably.

As if someone in the international embassies that dot Canberra had walked around distributing handfuls of seeds, the suburbs, by contrast, are full of exotic or foreign species of trees, bushes and flowers. Legions of settlers, of British and other nationalities, have planted their gardens with a mix of native and foreign species and the streets are lined with a government-planted tree mix, also of exotics and native species. Canberra suburbs have a reputation for being dull and largely featureless (though I don’t agree) but to walk through them in autumn can be quite transporting. And to move from grey green bush to yellow red streets in the space of a few minutes is a very particular experience and were it not for the weeds and stone culverts, and the predominance of a non-indigenous over an indigenous presence, it might seem to represent a move between pre and post colonial space.
In autumn, the streets become thickly papered with diverse types of leaves, and, although there are deciduous natives, it is as if everything that comes from another place surrenders its leaves, lowers its flag almost, in some unfathomable metaphoric act. In my walkings to and fro I began, fascinated by their shapes, to pick up leaves and used these as templates for making small dishes to amplify the idea that they were useful things. I wasn’t happy with these, in the transformation from two to three dimensions they lost their ‘leafness’, but the habit of picking things up stayed with me. Working still with the idea of nature as ‘handle’, I began collecting sticks, pods, leaves, anything natural that caught my eye as I walked and that might present the possibility of being used for a cup or jug handle.

MOVING HOME

My aim here was not to see nature in any basic instrumental sense, but to find ways of using something from where I lived as ornament, and through that ornament to suggest a reliance on the natural world. At this stage, finding my studio space at the School somewhat bleak, I moved home and began to make sprigs out of my collection of sticks, leaves and pods. A sprig, in ceramic parlance, is a moulded and cast addition that is added to the body of a ceramic vessel. Wedgwood was perhaps the master of sprigging and his basalt ware – where images derived from classical sources are made into white moulded sprigs and meticulously placed onto a coloured clay body – is a famous exemplar of the technique.

The process of making a sprig involves taking an impression of the object, the stick or the leaf, in the form of a hollow plaster mould and from this hollow or solid multiples can be made. I became very attached to this as a method of imaging nature more directly because I saw the moulded components as being like a photogram in that they retained a trace of the original thing. The original object plays a role then in determining the form its representation takes. I started a project of casting objects from nature; the leaves I collected in autumn were cast and attached to drinking vessels, and the thickness created acted as a handle. I cast twigs and seedpods from my garden and from the close-by mountain and attached them to cups and jugs.

I was aiming here for a greater sense of actuality, a sense of the real object being touched by the hand during use, and a resultant haptic as well as visual experience for the user. Although I thought of the sprigs as ornament, it was ornament that had more than decorative purpose; I hoped it had an ecological dimension. My walking pattern had been curtailed by the move to my home studio and, I realised that I had got to know and feel at home in the corridor between where I lived and worked, but I remained unfamiliar with either of those two places, so I set to explore the place where I lived.

When I first began this research I had begun by sitting still and carving as a reflective process, now I decided to work again with a similarly prescribed methodology. I determined to only paint or cast what I could see out of my studio window – what was in bloom in my own garden or what I could find there, and to only walk the streets and the bit of mountain immediately in my neighbourhood. I thought that
Fig. 21  Patsy Hely, Leaf Bowl, 2003, porcelain, 14 x 6cm.

Fig. 22  Patsy Hely, Leaves, porcelain, dimensions variable.

Fig. 23  Patsy Hely, Leaves, 2003, porcelain, dimensions variable.

Fig. 24  Patsy Hely, Leaf Beakers, 2003, porcelain, 7 x 8cm.

Fig. 25  Patsy Hely, Leaf Beaker, 2003, porcelain, 7 x 8cm.
by doing this, and incorporating what I observed into the studio work, that I could participate in the representation of the natural world on ceramic objects with a sense that, even though I might be drawing on tradition, the imagery was based in personal experience, that it was drawn from a particular source and it wasn’t just, for instance, a generalised leaf form.

CASTING STICKS

The application of moulded or modelled sticks and pods to ceramic vessels is a well-worn practice and at times I felt as if I was back in Ceramics I, but it was a process that allowed me to think through some of the questions I had about the ways ceramic objects represented nature. The making of moulds from small twigs, in particular, I found almost as mesmerising as carving. Sticks are never regular in shape and almost always have protrusions in a number of directions from the main stem. The moulds need to be made in a number of pieces therefore to ensure adequate draft if the stick and mould are to be separated without either being damaged. I was casting quite small twigs so their scale would be appropriate as ‘handles’ so concentration was required to get them to remain in one piece.

Once I had cast a number I would set them on my table to firm up before I could use them and seeing them sitting in piles kept reminding me of being in the dense dry forests that I would sometimes visit around Canberra. I began then turning these piles into wall and shelf vases where I sought to suggest an idea of ‘wilderness’, or at least of the natural world used as form without it being made too neat or regularised, so the vase might more directly reflect the unregulated world. The shape of each stick dictated where it could be joined to another and the joints were made minimal so they would not show – I hoped the sticks (trees) would be perceived as having grown in close proximity to each other together, a small slice of forest.

I gave no thought to flower arrangement in constructing these vases and once flowers were put into them the blooms jutted out at odd angles. I liked the idea that the act of making an arrangement might contain a small reminder that control over the natural world might need to be surrendered. Looking at the vases later I saw them in another light as well, they seemed akin to the still life genre of ‘nature morte’, but instead of piles of dead game, they were instead, reminiscent of images of the forest after logging. There seemed a suggestion in them of those terrible, heart wrenching photographs of trees uprooted and lain waste – a much less romantic evocation, though equally ‘real’.

WHERE I LIVE VASES

Carving was continued in a series of vases into which I carved maps of the area in which I live and the carving of them, as my walking did, seemed like a form of spatial, geographic investigation. With no reference marks or street names, the maps appeared as abstract pattern possibly not recognisable to any observer; though many who saw them did recognise them as maps, though without recognising the locality. Up until this stage all of the studio explorations had been focussed on natural forms
and these vases marked a point of departure where I more explicitly shifted my focus from 'nature' to 'place'.

The problem of the relationship between them was something I struggled with and my initial questions about the implications of the imaging of generic nature on ceramics kept recurring. I had been attempting to make objects with nature-based ornament that was specific to a particular place, and therefore could be said to be articulating something about that place, yet despite the strategies and rationales I was putting in place, it seemed necessary at this stage to attempt to bring the two concepts, 'nature' and 'place' into closer juxtaposition. The development of the work had so far been for me a profitable form of thinking, yet my interest I was realising, was much more engaged with ideas of a cultural 'place' than solely with the natural world. While the idea of 'nature' could accommodate 'place' in my conception, as an entity 'nature' was too abstract, it needed too much qualification.

My interest in place was being concurrently fuelled by research I was undertaking for the Dissertation. While this is described fully in that document, in summary, it involved me in a quite intensive investigation of events surrounding the colonisation of this country. To provide a broader framework for my understanding of the area, and fuelled by the intellectual stimulation of the English department course, I had been attending seminars around the University that coincided with the interests I was developing. In a number of these nature and place were discussed as interdependent entities, an approach that seemed useful, and there were two discussions very germane to the ideas I was struggling to develop; both centred around daffodils.

DAFFODILS (I)

Firstly, I found the ideas of visiting literary theorist Helen Tiffen (mentioned in the previous chapter) provocative in terms of the way she suggested that the colonised subject/body was made to participate in the re-construction of colonial place. Secondly, the Canberra-based environmental philosopher Val Plumwood’s account of her attempts to create an ecologically sustainable garden where she lived helped focus my ideas on what might constituted 'place'. Daffodils featured in both of these and I was particularly excited that a plant so debased as a visual motif might be made to resonate.

In one of the papers she gave, Tiffen discussed a novel by the Jamaican author and garden writer, Jamaica Kincaid. In the novel, which Tiffen suggested was 'autobiographical', the key character describes how being taught poetry at school influenced her attitude to the plants of her native land. Tiffen noted here that, as in Australia, education in Jamaica up until fairly recently, was based on a British model and inculcated British ideals and values.

Lucy, the character, spoke of being made to learn Wordsworth's 'Ode to a Daffodil' by the process, popular at the time, of rote-learning, a way of learning by repetition, without there necessarily being an understanding of either meaning or significance. She further spoke of the posture that she and her fellow students were made to adopt as
they recited the poem before an audience; a rigidly upright posture with hands clasped tightly in front of the waist, a posture which Tiffen describes as ‘... the reproduction of the English body in colonial subjects’. Together, the content of the poem, its rhythmic incantation and the foreign posture, together with the required English-inflected diction, subliminally acted to valorise the daffodil above the plants of Lucy’s native land; the daffodil came to represent to her all that was worthy and valuable in a flower; and the plants she walked past on a daily basis, plants which were the subject of no poem, were wanting, in comparison. And, by extension, the place too was constructed as wanting.

Tiffen also describes the role of memorizing and repeating before an audience as ‘... memorizing the English script, ie taking it into the body and re-producing before audiences of fellow colonials that which has been absorbed by heart/mind.’ The parallels I saw here with my own interests were firstly between rote-learning, the repetition of a script over and over without necessarily paying a lot of attention to its meaning, and the daily use, over and over, of domestic tableware. Nature is by far the predominant referent on ceramic domestic objects. The daily negotiation of form and image, when utility has primacy over the construction of meaning, could, I thought, have as a consequence the inculcation of attitudes to nature suggested by the object/image.

Objects – though perhaps not in such an overt way as poetry – have the capacity to signify and to affect. So, at a time when the natural world is under threat, representation of it on objects that are used countless times a day deserves consideration. Likewise, the roles that repetition, tacit knowledge and phenomenological experience might play in attitudinal inculcation. The repetition of traditional motifs and images over the centuries could be seen to valorize particular ways of representing nature and to make emblematic the attitudes to nature such imaging suggested.

The second chord that struck in Tiffen’s paper was with Lucy’s experience of being required to mimic the English body – it took me straight back to my own school days and a similar apprenticeship in English-ness. But in Australia for a person of my generation this was, paradoxically, overlain with forms of nationalism. This could be seen embodied in such things as Bird Day, Arbour Day and Wattle Day in the subject ‘Nature Study’, then taught in schools, and the lauding of Australian-ness epitomized by the works of Henry Lawson and Banjo Patterson et al. From this distance it seemed a strange mix.

DAFFODILS (2)

The daffodil took on a much different role in the constitution of place in the work of Val Plumwood for here it represented a way of reconciling a ‘here’ and ‘there’, national-colonial divide on both a personal and broader level. In a seminar paper Decolonizing Australian Gardens: gardening and the ethics of place Plumwood discussed attempts, in her own garden, to pursue the idea of what she termed an ‘adaptive’ garden. This type of garden she argued, could represent a collaboration with nature as opposed to the war on nature which both the ethics of purity (characterised by restricting plantings to only native species regardless of their suitability for contemporary conditions), and the
wholesale planting of species from the colonial inventory, regardless of their suitability, seemed to represent.

In attempting to live in an ecologically sustainable way she had conducted her own empirical experiments with plantings around her house in the bush outside Canberra. She wanted her garden to provide a visual link with the surrounding bush yet be relatively fireproof, she wanted a garden that could remain a habitat for native animals and spoke quite movingly about needing to appreciate animals as 'familiars' or neighbours rather than as companions, and she wanted flowers, colour, fragrance. The system she came up with that allowed all of this was one where less fire-prone 'exotics' were grown in combination with native grasses and with daffodils. The local wombats fed happily on a diet that includes native grasses, and they keep them in check – and therefore less fire-prone – yet they left the daffodils alone for Plumwood's enjoyment. As well, daffodils don't self-seed and so are in no danger of becoming feral like other introduced species.

So the daffodil in this case takes on emblematic form; it allows both history and present environmental requirements and understandings to be valued. As such, a daffodil could seem to have something to offer as an ornamental motif, and yet... a daffodil on a cup or a plate? The idea seemed weighted under decorative banality. As I deliberated over these ideas and the ways in which I might make objects that could be as articulate about place as I found Tiffen's and Plumwood's evocations to be, my focus on 'place' both sharpened and blurred; my interest in it as a concept quickened, but an understanding of my own relationship with it was becoming less clear. From many of the texts I was reading, the idea that 'place' had a temporal and experiential dimension was solidifying and I was particularly captured by Edward Casey's summing up, at the end of 'The Fate of Place', of one of the many philosophical positions he had canvassed:

It (place) certainly no longer appears as a mere container: hence Heidegger's immediate, unequivocal rejection of the container model early in Being and Time and his transformation of this model's closed-in, present-at-hand structure into that of the Open, a regionalized neighbourhood that is more an event than an entity.

While my experiences and foot-mapping in Canberra were sketching the place out for me, and I was still taking daily (and nightly) forays around the streets where I lived, I also found myself trying to conjure up 'place as event' in relation to my own past experience. This coincided with a period of introspection about the somewhat momentous move I had made, from one State to another, and a frequent weighing up of what had been lost and what had been gained. This period led to the development of two bodies of work made one straight after the other; the first a foray into the past and the second exploring ideas about what constituted 'local'. The first of these studio investigations was exhibited as 'Trace' at Craft Queensland, and the second, 'Nature Writing' at Object Gallery in Sydney.
The studio investigations for this body of work were carried out while I was acting as a mentor for a young Brisbane artist, Mel Robson, through a program funded by Craft Queensland. As the outcome of this we devised an exhibition that explored an area germane to us both – nostalgia. The exhibition was in two parts and mine concentrated an examination of ideas surrounding nostalgia for place and the natural world; I called my component of the exhibition ‘Miss’. In attempting to think about how objects might be able to embed a sense of valuing place/nature I was interested in examining the tension between nostalgia and a concern or care for place. Was it possible, for instance, to feel nostalgia for a place or to experience loss in relation to place, without being a nostalgic? I sought to work my way through these ideas by developing work in a very personal way about places I missed.

As happens sometimes when one is concentrated on a particular idea, I had come across in quick succession a number of statements about nostalgia that I was puzzling over: I had recently read, and felt irritated by, Susan Stewart’s statement that ‘Nostalgia is a sadness without an object, a sadness which creates a longing that of necessity is inauthentic because it does not take part in lived experience’. At the same time, revisiting notes I made during a paper given by Deborah Bird Rose on relationship to land in settler societies I found recorded a story she told about the Canadian environmental philosopher Freya Mathews. Mathews, having felt forced to leave the prairie town of her upbringing – a place whose landscape she felt a deep attachment to – in search of culture, found that her regard and concern for, in fact her love of the place remained undiminished and expressed the view that ‘living with absence is different from nostalgia’.

So if nostalgia (or a form of it characterised as living-with-absence) evoked a concern for place, then perhaps the seeds of an ecological consciousness were implicit there.

Finally amongst the thousand odd books lining the room of an English lecturer’s office my eyes lit upon a book on poetry, The Uses of Nostalgia. This text – though I have to admit it was drab – reinforced my ideas that nostalgia, the longing for people, place or thing, rather than being always associated just with entropy, might also have an instrumental component. This text also awakened my interest in the area of the pastoral, a literary genre always cited as emblematic of nature put to nostalgic use and I discuss this more fully in the next section ‘Pastoralia’.

In the studio I made what I thought of as small narrative compositions centred around diverse episodes where the idea of missing some place resonated with me. The imagery for each object was chosen either from photographs from my family archive or from particular memories; some were printed as ceramic decals. Each small narrative was comprised of a number of components because I wanted the ‘missed’ thing to not have the clarity of a singular object. In one vignette, missing badly the fierce storms and torrential downpours so common on the north coast of N.S.W., I used a photograph taken from our Lismore veranda as a storm approached. On another, a beach associated with a particular group of friends.
Fig. 26  Patsy Hely, Trace: Wildnature vases, 2004, porcelain, dimensions variable.
Fig. 27  Patsy Hely, Trace (detail), 2004, mixed media.
Fig. 28  Patsy Hely, Trace (detail), 2004, mixed media.
Fig. 29  Patsy Hely, Trace: Wildnature vase, 2004 porcelain, 16 x 12cm.

Fig. 30  Patsy Hely, Vase with Bird, 2005, porcelain, 26 x 7.5cm.

Fig. 31  Patsy Hely, Vase with Bird, 2005, porcelain, 26 x 7.5cm.
Fig. 32  Patsy Hely, Birds in Branches, 2005, porcelain, 16cm.
Fig. 33  Patsy Hely, Birds in Branches, 2005, detail, porcelain.
Fig. 34  Patsy Hely, Where I live vases, 2005, porcelain, 15.5 x 7 x 8cm.
One vignette was based on a family photograph of my father being shown, by his father, how to fire a rifle. The setting was a bushland one suggesting the target may have been a bird or small animal, though it could have been a tin can. Some years ago I had given a copy of this photograph to a colleague, who was developing an exhibition of photographs of his friend's fathers. He had pointed out, it had never registered with me, that only half of my grandmother had been caught in the photograph and, because of my family history, the photo has since taken on a particular charge for me. How could I miss noticing for all of those years that half of my grandmother was missing, why had no one in the family ever commented on it, what was my father shooting at, did he miss it?

At the time of making this work a newspaper article about a threat to a habitat of the Scarlet Robin in an area of Canberra drew my attention, and I added its image to a small group of objects I was making that referenced birds I remembered from my childhood but now rarely saw. Wanting to be didactic, I had the robin's outline water-jet cut from a number of plates, some plain porcelain dinner plates and a number of bone china plates decorated with blackberry bush. I used some of the cast and modelled flowers and leaves I had made previously and I thought of these as decorative fillers or links between the narrative components; a common usage of nature-based ornament. I tried to suggest an idea of time and narrative by gathering the work into episodes, or vignettes, all grouped within an overall pattern.

The work was attached minimally to the wall in a long horizontal band and I saw this format as representative of a panoramic photograph, photographs whose extensive span suggests that a complete viewpoint has been garnered; though of course something is always missed. On separate shelves on adjacent walls I exhibited two series of vases; one group comprised of 'wild nature', cast stick vases made previously, the other a group where half were carved to resemble the particular type of fake wood panelling that so extravagantly misses being what it hopes to be, and the other half to suggest the pattern seen on some Asian plastic soup bowls that seem to mimic woodcarving.

I felt in pursuing the line of investigation represented by this work that I had taken a detour in some ways. It seemed both too personal and too abstract all at the same time and yet it allowed me to work through ideas about nostalgia and I thought this was cogent to a questioning of how ceramic objects might articulate something about nature and place.
This forest was enclosed by a wall of rock, the South Ram's Head forming one wing of it. We rode through the centre of this amphitheatre till we rose up on to the grassy tops behind, and then out on to a ridge point overlooking the Leatherbarrel and Groggin. From there we turned towards Kosciusko and twisted in and out through a maze of rocky peaks. The white cumulus clouds in a brilliant blue sky framed these grotesque tors or hung suspended on the skyline of a pass.

The text mentioned previously, The Uses of Nostalgia, had led me to an interest in the literary genre of The Pastoral and to Terry Gifford's illuminating text on it, Pastoral. In Gifford's conception Pastoral accommodates a number of forms, one of which is Nature Writing. Nature Writing can constitute any writing where the natural world is a central subject. It has a long history in Australian literature and my introduction to it was via an old second hand version of the naturalist Alec Chisholm's Land of Wonder picked up at a sale; an example of the genre is above. I had been beginning to wonder if what I was trying to do in the studio might not be consistent with a form of Pastoral so I determined to explore the area more thoroughly.

Gifford suggests that there are three different ways in which the term Pastoral is used:

First, the pastoral is a historical form with a long tradition which began in poetry, developed into drama and more recently could be recognised in novels.

He goes on to describe the different forms this took in various eras but famously in Greek and Roman poetry, it involved a literary device of retreat and return, centred on the life of the shepherd moving seasonally between the country (retreat) and urban life (return). The return though could also be thought of as insights that the period of retreat 'returned' to the poem's urban audience.

The second use of the term he describes as referring to an area of content, which could be:

... literature that describes the country with an implicit or explicit contrast to the urban. ... a poem about trees in the city could also be called pastoral because it focuses upon nature in contrast to the urban context. A delight in the natural is assumed in describing these pastorals. Here a pastoral is usually associated with a celebratory attitude towards what I describe ...

This use of the term Pastoral most adequately accords with the area of Nature Writing. Although, as in the quote that opened the section, contrast with an urban environment might not always be explicit in particular passages, it is almost always there as an
Fig. 35  Patsy Hely, *Nature Writing I*, 2004 and 2005, bone china, 27.5cm. edition #2 of 5.

Fig. 36  Patsy Hely, *Nature Writing II*, 2004, porcelain, 28cm.

Fig. 37  Patsy Hely, *Nature Writing III*, 2004, Installation view, Object Gallery, Sydney.
underlying assumption. It occurred to me that on one level what I had been doing, observing what was going on in my backyard, describing twigs in another form, making work that sought to express aspects of place/nature I missed could almost be termed a form of nature writing. I reasoned also that even though the aim I had stated in my original proposal was to investigate ways in which the depiction of nature on ceramics might respond to a contemporary ecological context, I was addressing that only in an abstract way.

Gifford’s description of the third use of the term pastoral, where he describes it as being used in some quarters as a pejorative term, proved useful here in determining my next move:

A Greenpeace supporter might use the term as a criticism of the tree poem if it ignored the presence of pollution or the threat to urban trees from city developers. Here the difference between the literary representation of nature and the material reality would be judged to be intolerable by the criteria of ecological concern. A farm worker might say that a novel was a pastoral if it celebrated a landscape as though no one actually sweated to maintain it on a low income.

So I took from Gifford’s description that Pastoral could be a classical form with a central theme of retreat and return, a celebration of nature without cognisance of broader realities or lastly a more holistic critical appraisal of it – with this form coming under the contemporary rubric of ‘eco-criticism’.

SEARCHING FOR A MORE CRITICAL STANCE

I had begun incorporating found objects into my work some years before as a way of extending the life of what I thought were lovely yet discarded components of the functional objects I came across as an inveterate bric-a-brac hunter. These things, old lids and handles, stands and trays all bore the patina of use and I was searching, at the time, for ways in which I could foreground the haptic in the objects I was making. Later, I set myself a project of constructing sets – teaset, coffee set, sets of beakers and stands etc – out of a group of objects found in second hand shops in the space of one day. To make them cohere as a group the task I set was to make one object that caused a relationship to be set up between the disparate components I had managed to come across.

I saw both of these as having an ecological intent in that I was recycling still functional objects, and minimising the new objects I was sending out into the world. I developed this further in a project where, working with my archive of discarded objects I would make sets out of components that were disparate but in which I recognised something, a colour, a shape, a reference, which could make them coherent as a group and I saw this as a metaphor for a state of ecological equilibrium.

Throughout my candidature I had been collecting found vases that incorporated images of nature and I set about finding ways of using these in the studio. At a time when I was questioning how I could possibly represent anything that might correspond with the
Fig. 38  Patsy Hely, Nature Writing: Vase Construction, 2004, porcelain and found objects, 20 x 16cm.

Fig. 39  Patsy Hely, Nature Writing: Vase Construction, 2004, porcelain and found objects, 14 x 15cm.

Fig. 40  Patsy Hely, Nature Writing: Vase Construction, 2004, porcelain and found objects, 14 x 12cm.
idea of a local place when, for a start, the place I was in gained much of its environmental character from its likeness to a European or North American seasonal cycle, it seemed appropriate that the vases were the products of many countries.

Rather than use the vases in sets as I had before, I began to experiment with first making a vase myself and then fusing the made and the found together in the final glaze firing by applying small unnoticeable patches of glaze. When that worked I began to join casts of the sticks I had in the studio to the constructions, and later to incorporate bird figurines I had also been collecting. I began to think of these vase constructions as being fanciful descriptions of the streets I was walking around, with each component of a vase representing something I’d seen, the bamboo on a found vase representing the bamboo in the garden three streets away, for instance.

Constructing each vase took some time and involved a process of finding components that presented the right angles and surfaces for joining and which worked visually together. Each was made directly onto a kiln shelf so I didn’t have to pick it up and risk dislodging the glaze ‘glue’ that held each piece together. On a small number I added coloured glaze or a decal-ed image, but on the whole each was left as it was with representations of multiple places, but actually describing one place.

I thought of these ‘vase constructions’ as narratives that might suggest place as a mix of local and global but I hoped also that the juxtapositions of nature – cast sticks and two dimensional representations – and culture, might raise questions about the relationship between the two. Even though in developing them my intent was in essence eco-critical, I decided to call them, as an exhibited group, ‘Nature Writing’ because I wanted to establish the connection that the making of a vase and the writing about nature might be commensurate activities.

This group of works was exhibited in the Project Space at Object Gallery in Sydney and I decided to have another Scarlet Robin plate water-jet cut. In 2003, the last remnant of Yellow Box woodlands edging a Canberra suburb, home – amongst other things – to this robin, had been sold for the development of ‘luxury housing’. I wanted something didactic to counterpoint the vase constructions because I saw the vases as representing a constructed place, my neighbourhood. The ‘absent bird’ plate, sitting to the side of the gallery in the exhibition, might I thought be a reminder that choices of building in certain places, or the growing of particular species, constructed place as well.

PASTORALIA

Since moving to Canberra I, with my partner or friends, had been making excursions to the National Parks or country areas around the city to go walking. On a particularly rejuvenating excursion to Molonglo Gorge, I began to think about such trips as being modern versions of the Pastoral retreat and return cycle. Although there was no extended period of isolation, they did offer a period away from urban existence – the vicissitudes of normal life felt suspended – and often, one did return with a fresh perspective. There were no sheep to tend, though I reasoned that perhaps a concern

for the welfare of these 'natural' areas, and the very act of visiting them might constitute a form of the pastoral care that a shepherd might be charged with.

Finding myself totally engrossed in a nature documentary on television one night, I began to wonder if there might not also be some parallel in watching these and the idea of retreat and return? Certainly they represented encounters with a sublime and isolated nature, with huge icebergs shown crashing into the sea, vast tracts of majestic mountain ranges and terrible but beautiful encounters between giant sharks and their prey. In their own way, they seemed to me to represent, even if it was fanciful, a retreat from urban existence and there was always, at the end, a sense of something 'returned'; an insight gained from a concentration on the natural world or on the comparison between it and the world of one's normal existence.

Part of what is 'returned', after almost any going away, is a renewed sense of the place to which one has returned. I set out now to explore this idea in the studio. An opportunity to use the Craft ACT Gallery presented itself and so I began by visiting there a number of times to get a feel for how I might use it. Because I was wanting to suggest an experience, I thought I needed to work with a space in a way I never had before. The gallery is long and quite narrow and this suggested to me that if I concentrated the work at the furthest end then the act of getting to it might in some way mirror the process of retreat – away from the world (outside the Gallery) and into nature (the work), and return – back to the world.

I decided to have just two components to the work, one suggestive, in some way, of Molonglo Gorge and the other something that might suggest, in an abstract way, nature as a restorative 'place'. To do the former I had vases in mind and a teaset to suggest the latter. Working from photographs of the Gorge I made vases and painted them with representations of what I'd seen there, but I put this aside for a period because I couldn't seem to make the imagery specific enough. I worked on the teaset then and after some trial and effort settled on making a set with each component depicting a local bird. The methodology of walking and observing I'd been following had made me much more aware of the world of birds than I had ever been before, and I had become fascinated by them and become something of an amateur 'twitcher'. One of the pleasures of going to places such as Molonglo Gorge was to spot them. This teaset component then I thought both specifically documented the Gorge in a sense, through its bird life, and might signify, through its reference to tea, a specific place as restorative.

Going back to the vases then, I began to experiment with grouping the vases I had made and painted with found vases I had been accumulating. This wasn't seeming very productive and I was having trouble making sense of using both made and found vases together as a group. My interest was held most by the found vases and I began trying to insert my own imagery onto their existing surfaces. This was not successful and I wondered whether the compositions might work better if the decorative schemas on the found vases weren't so coherent and complete in themselves. They seemed such closed systems that it was difficult to impose any further coherence on them. I experimented then with masking and sandblasting parts of their surfaces and was
Fig. 41  Patsy Hely, *Pastoralia*, 2006, Installation view, mixed media, Craft ACT Gallery, Canberra.

Fig. 42  Patsy Hely, *Pastoralia*, 2006, Installation view, mixed media, Craft ACT Gallery, Canberra.

Fig. 43  Patsy Hely, *Pastoralia*, 2006, Installation view, mixed media, Craft ACT Gallery, Canberra.

Fig. 44  Patsy Hely, *Pastoralia*, 2006, Installation view, mixed media, Craft ACT Gallery, Canberra.
surprised by the effect this created for all of a sudden I saw that the remaining motifs took on the character of small isolated pockets of 'nature'. This seemed to perfectly describe, metaphorically, the geographical aspect of Molonglo Gorge – an isolated tract of bushland hemmed on each side as it is by the industrial areas of Canberra and Queanbeyan and so I decided then to leave them unmarked by my own imagery.

While working on the objects in the studio I had been deliberating about how to present them in the Gallery. I knew that I wanted visitors to have to walk up to the work over a distance and the other aspects that I wanted somehow to include or infer were television, and bird sounds. I wanted to allude to the television as a possible 'virtual' way of retreat and return. The birdcalls and song, if they only became apparent once one was in the vicinity of the work, would be a further suggestion that a separate place had been arrived at.

A way of introducing the idea of television was to have stands bearing a likeness to a television set made for each of the two groups. I mimicked the proportions and wood veneer of a television set but with its face to the ceiling so the screen provided the platform for the work. Each stand had a frosted glass top, akin to a TV screen and a blue-tinged cathode ray light to mimic the seductive other-worldly (or other-place) glow that such screens emit. This not only gave an electronic ambience to the work overall but it reflected onto the ceiling a fuzzy blue glow, such as can be glimpsed in lounge rooms of houses as night falls.

I canvassed various ideas for the bird sounds. Initially my plan was to attempt bird calls myself and record them, or to use publicly-available recordings of Canberra birds, but then I came across a reference on the Canberra Ornithologists email list – a list I had been eagerly tracking – of a device called an Audubon bird caller. Named after the famous American naturalist, bird lover and illustrator, this was a small wood and metal device consisting of a wooden pipe with a moveable metal key-like component which, when turned, emitted the sound of various species of bird, depending on the pressure and speed with which the key was turned. The description on the box of one purchased by an email list correspondent described it as:

The Audubon Bird Call. When twisted, this simple birch wood-pewter instrument will produce sounds that attract a variety of wild songbirds. Now the standard songbird call throughout the world. The capsule contains rosin. Use a little of it occasionally to renew the call's voice. Keep the call dry.

Made by Roger Eddy, Newington, Connecticut 06111

It is an ingenious device and birdwatchers use it sometimes to flush small birds out of the undergrowth so they can be seen. It seemed perfect for my purpose, it suggested both the veracity of nature – its sound was almost indistinguishable from true bird sounds, and the artificiality of the televisual world. Although it is a simple device it takes some practice to use and so I enlisted a colleague, Paul Maclay to digitally record a naturalist acquaintance, Steve Holliday operating it. The sound file was transferred to
an mp3 player attached to small speakers mounted on a high shelf on the Gallery wall in close proximity to the stands and the sound adjusted so it only gradually became apparent as one moved closer to the work.

As an exploratory body of work I felt many aspects of Pastoralia to be successful. In discussion with visitors to the exhibition, the darkness of the space and the difficulty this presented for adequately viewing the individual works was raised and these were justified; it was dark. Thinking about the comments after though was interesting. I had wanted a sense of being in both real and virtual 'nature' and also the sense that immersion in either might play a role in constructing a sense of place on return from them. I realised that much of the thinking I had been doing while plotting the work had been done not just in the studio but also during my local walks around the neighbourhood.

Many of these walks were in the late evening, as darkness fell, and I had come to associate them with two things, the blue glow of TV screens I saw through open blinds or seeping out around the curtains of most houses as people settled for the night, and the noise of small flocks of birds squabbling and noisily settling, as they do, for the night as well. Perhaps a sense of these twilight excursions had permeated the work. Later, again, I was reminded of the darkness I had set up when reading comments gathered together by Tom Griffiths, about experiencing the bush at night. He recounted a story told by the nature writer, Alec Chisholm, about how, despite feeling 'happy and free in the bush', another feeling could come over him at dusk:

> The ironbarks now had shed their friendliness. They were, perhaps, revengeful phantoms of the black men who had once frequented these forests. Especially was I uneasy when passing a spot on the ridge-top in which white pipeclay contrasted with the sombre colour of the trees...

Another story, this time from a visiting writer, William Howitt, who wrote of his travels at night on horseback:

> ... he imagined that blackened stumps or fallen trees bleached to whiteness were 'like dark images of the natives, who have been pushed from their hereditary seats by the white man'.

The fact of colonisation underlays any attempt at representing or articulating something about place in this country, whether with ecological purpose or not. Perhaps, though it was not my intent, the comparison between the teaset with its fairly muted colours and bush scenes, and the clean white porcelain vases, so clearly describing the nature of other countries, caused some subliminal disquiet, or perhaps just now suggests itself to me. I found the comments very useful in prompting this line of thought and the other aspect they brought up, for me, was how much of a convention it had become for the bush, or 'nature', or the natural world, to be thought of as primarily a daytime experience.

I found 'the pastoral' a useful form for guiding me in these imagemaking investigations and although it historically has been linked with a nostalgic longing for a long-gone
bucolic way of life I believe it has resonance in the contemporary world. In the final chapter of his book where he terms eco-critical intent 'post-pastoral', Terry Gifford discusses whether, in essence, it might represent a 'dialectical mode of perception' and he concludes:

If our lives now lack a separation between urban and rural existence, we need a post-pastoral literature that will help us understand that dialectical experience and how we can take responsibility for it. Against necessary notions of roots, neighbourhood and community there is another necessary impulse towards retreat, renewal and return. This is the circle of postmodern mobility. The paradox with which the post-pastoral engages is the fact that retreat informs our sense of community, and at a time when we are conscious of the need to improve our relationship with our neighbours on this planet, no literature could be more important to our imaging or our very survival.

My aim in this body of work was to make manifest a 'local' experience and I hoped viewers would understand it as such, although clues on locality were in fact few and abstract. Experiencing nature on television is a universal experience, the decorative motifs on the vases were international in derivation and the bird sounds generic. These – the international, the universal and the generic – all are brought into local experience in a globalised world. I hoped though that the images on the teaset of local birds, and a map I had drawn for the room brochure clearly indicating Molonglo Gorge as the locality, might effect an understanding that it was a work grounded in a local experience.

I was aware that this might not be easily evident, and that I had in fact made the work as a way of thinking through my own response to – and ideas about – the place I was living. The production of it though did act to clarify for me, and to take me back to, the central question of my research: how can ceramic objects, in this case ceramic domestic objects, articulate something about place? Weighted down as they are by centuries of decorative traditions, is it possible for such objects to inform an understanding of localised place?

A strategy that I thought I could finally test was to investigate ways of revealing something about a place by recording and documenting its birds. Although my interest in local bird life had been developing for some time (I had been experimenting with painting them on cups and vases, attempting to find them 'in the wild' and on the world wide web), my use of them in Nature Writing and then in Pastoralia provided a catalyst for a more intensive concentration on them as signifiers of place.

I also saw many possibilities in the sandblasted vases and thought I could pursue these to extend my already-developed practice of working with found objects. Although a small and, I realise, largely symbolic attempt at minimising my own personal resource use,
I propose that in this body of work my use of existing objects has metaphoric potential. For instance, I saw I could use the sandblasting and overpainting of found objects again to suggest ways in which local 'place' is constantly in flux and being re-made.
Tuesday. Sycamores in bloom. Oak puts out. Cherries in full bloom. All the country looks green.

Thursday 24th. Go to town. Figs have put out here, and white lilacs in flower. Swallows fly. Saxifrage blows.

Tuesday. Purple lilacs blew. Fruit trees in full bloom. Nightingale in full song, and cuckoo.


Thomas Gray, the English poet, whose diary entry this is, has sometimes been decried as a sentimentalist but he is also known to have been a keen observer, letter writer and diarist on the many travels he made both in England and in Europe. I came upon a pamphlet about him at the home of a relative and it contained many diary entries, like the one above. All together, these short records of the place where he lived gave a real sense of someone with a keen and experiential understanding of the environment in which he lived and I found it inspirational. I also found evidence that as a practice, observation and recording of the natural world had many modern equivalents and I felt sure Thomas Gray would have been a blogger or email list devotee had he had the opportunity.

Throughout this Doctoral project I had wanted to find ways of picturing nature/place on or with my work in a way that took cognisance of a local ecological context. I had a sense that rather than just cherry pick motifs from the vast ceramic botanical archive that a considered use of motif or image with some local, but not nationalistic, resonance was important because, as Peter Hughes has suggested:

Craft as a local practice attuned to the particulars of place and history might have some value in shifting our attention back to the material world.40

I found Hughes’ writing on craft, ornament and ecology especially useful at this point and in particular, a number of articles written between 1995 and 1998. These seemed not to stir much debate, possibly because he was attempting in them to turn around received knowledge about John Ruskin – a man whose written works can be difficult to negotiate, and whose views are often termed ‘archaic’. Hughes interpretation of Ruskin’s ideas I found illuminating though and his arguments for those ideas prescient; altogether I found his reading of aspects of Ruskin’s project edifying.

In addition to his discussion of Ruskin – and again discussing craft and ecology – Hughes mobilised an argument by Timothy Luke that posited the need for oppositional strategies
to counter the ‘global technoregions which are no longer grounded in one planetary place’.41

Hughes position was that an ‘ecologically sustainable world is a diverse one and it must have a home that is a genuine and material location on the earth’s surface.’42 Written with some passion in response to a conference talk given in Melbourne in 1995 by the British designer and theoretician John Thackara, Hughes was not taking a luddite stance or making a wholesale cri-de-coeur for a return to post-industrial practice, rather his concern was for thoughtful, ecologically-tuned practice that was considerate of place.43

In Ornament and Ecology he outlines the reasons behind John Ruskin’s championing of Gothic forms of ornament over Classical or Victorian. In Gothic ornament, especially as exemplified in the Gothic cathedral, the individual artisan has agency to affect the work because the method of construction involved was, Ruskin argued, ‘capable of infinite variety and infinitely adaptable’.44 In Classical ornament, with its adherence to rules of proportion and regularity, it is the architect who devises and the workers, slave-like, follow direction. Although Victorian ornament is famous for its forms and variety, Ruskin argued that in its industrial precision it was in actuality an inheritor of Classicism and that both were:

- systems that are closed off from the surrounding natural environment
- as well as the variability and contingency of local culture – and enfolded in their own logic.45

Summarising the beliefs underpinning Ruskin’s arguments and his opposition to the industrial Modernists, Hughes notes:

But while the Modernists were determined to embrace and control technical and industrial processes by submitting to their logic, Ruskin rejected this logic itself. He did not, as is often believed, do this out of a blind desire to return to an imaginary romanticised past. Rather he was concerned about the destructive and alienating potential of the new industrial world.46

This discussion by Hughes had been helpful in the formation of my early ideas for this project and had remained in the background for much of the study. My response to his ideas, especially in relation to the particularising of place – that shifting of attention back to the material world – has been most apparent in my later studio investigations in relation to birds.

SEARCHING FOR BIRDS

My awareness of the local Canberran bird population, and my search for visual material that drew upon the local developed concurrently. Birds are omnipresent in this city as they have been nowhere else I have lived. My garden is full of them, and except in the very centre of the city I saw and heard them wherever I walked. The sound of birds is the first thing to be heard on waking and the often the last to be heard at night. Virtually all activity is accompanied by their calls; as I sit writing this I can hear magpies, a

41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.: 34.
Fig. 45  Patsy Hely, *Bowl with Bird*, porcelain, 2006, 12 x 9.5cm.
Fig. 46  Patsy Hely, *Bowl with Bird*, porcelain, 2006, 14 x 8.5cm.
Fig. 47  Patsy Hely, *Cup with Bird*, porcelain, recycled timber (Peter Filmer), 2005, 7 x 8 cm and 15 x 3 cm.
Fig. 48  Patsy Hely, *Cup with Bird*, porcelain, 2005, 6 x 5 cm.
Fig. 49  Patsy Hely, *Cups and Saucers with Bird*, 2005, porcelain, recycled timber (Peter Filmer), 7 x 8 cm and 15 x 3 cm.
cockatoo, a small group of wrens in a grevillia next door and a parrot of some kind.

After completing the body of work for *Pastoralia* I realised that by focussing on local birdlife I could devise ceramic decoration that directly referenced place. For while many birds might be common to vast areas of this country, a collection of birds that had categorically been spotted in a specific place might usefully give a sense of that place.

At some time during my candidacy I had joined the Canberra Ornithologists Group (COG) email list; a list where amateur bird-lovers and professional ornithologists posted information about birds they had sighted locally, and this became central to the final investigations of the project. I became fascinated with this list; it reminded me of the construction of place and interest in the natural world implicit in Thomas Gray’s diary. While I’d always thought of myself as a ‘nature-lover’, this had been very non-specific and underpinned by virtually no knowledge of science or botany or anything else that might be useful in that respect. The wealth of information built up by the COG bird lovers over many years, of bird comings and goings, of habits and practices observed, of numbers, is inestimable. Especially when it is processed, as it is periodically, in the form of statistics and joined to the statistics of similar groups all over the country.

Such documentation constitutes a particular way of knowing place that is possibly unique; it represents a ‘database’ comprised of documented sightings, photographs, and sound recordings and detailed description. Within it is data that can possibly be used to track climate patterns and it’s conceivable that a map of land use in this country could be charted through the presence and absence of birds. Furthermore it is a resource that has been built up by everyone from top scientists to schoolchildren. Since the beginning of ornithologists groups in Australia, the bird lover’s movement has been comprised of amateurs and professionals, adults and children, men and women. There is a charming story told in a history of ornithology in Australia to illustrate the involvement of children. A 12 year old Melbourne boy who wrote into a Melbourne newspaper column ‘Nature Notes and Queries’ in the early 1930’s to report having seen European Starlings ‘picking up sugar-ants and putting them under their wings and then flying away’ gained renown all over the world when the information, spread by Alec Chisholm, made its way to Berlin and other parts. Reports of similar behaviour in different birds came in from ornithologists all over the world and the practice became known as ‘anting’.

On the Canberra Ornithologist Group email list the number of postings per day varies but in November 2006 for instance, a low to average month, there were three hundred and fifteen postings, around ten per day. It is startling to see the rapidity with which members respond to a posting alerting them to a particular bird. One day, at ANU (legions of bird lovers seem employed there), a particular bird was spotted around 10am near the Chemistry building, over the next few hours it was tracked all over the campus by at least five different people.

Bird lovers know how to find particular birds, they know their habitat, they know what they eat and when it’s available, they know which species is which and what the characteristics of it are. In short, there is a whole parallel universe of which they have

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Fig. 50  Patsy Hely, Cup with Bird, 2005, porcelain, chinapaint, 7 x 5.5cm.

Fig. 51  Patsy Hely, Teaset with Birds, 2005, porcelain, recycled timber (Peter Filmer). 7 x 8cm and 15 x 3cm.

Fig. 52  Patsy Hely, Teaset with Birds, 2005, porcelain, recycled timber (Peter Filmer). 7 x 8cm and 15 x 3cm.
an intimate understanding. Perhaps one of the final startling things about them is that they have the ability not just to mimic birds, but to catch and encourage small nervous ones to sit calmly in their hands, an inestimable skill in my book.

PAINTING BIRDS: THE FINAL RESEARCH OUTCOMES EXHIBITION

The final studio research involved the development of ways of painting locally spotted birds from photographs posted on the email list. I had been drawing birds I saw on my walks, and photographing them, but my responses are slow and too often I ended up with blurred photographs of empty branches or a beak described on a page with no other part attached. I had better luck in my own garden but I found I couldn’t look and draw or photograph as well, and I was more intent on looking.

Taking up from the teaset made for Pastoralia, the first paintings I did were on cups and teapots and were done primarily to re-acquaint myself with the processes of painting on ceramic objects. I tried various painting techniques; in the past I had been very familiar with the use of ceramic underglaze colours and so I spent some time working with these, at times combining them with ceramic pencils and crayons. A china-painting colleague gave me a crash course in that technique, again one I had used previously but not for some time. At the same time, in front of COG photographs on the computer, I painted watercolours, scanned them into Photoshop and reworked them, then had them made into ceramic decals that I applied and fired in successive firings.

For the final body of work I decided to return to the vase form and in this I include jugs as they are so often used as vases. Writing in 1984, Phillip Rawson rebukes potters for making so many works titled ‘vase’ because ‘vases are meant, generally speaking, only to be looked at, not used in the hands, perhaps not even to contain flowers’. The potters he was referring to here were those he termed ‘febrile aestheticists’ and he claimed that ‘aestheticism – tends to produce objects whose appearance diverges from any possible function they may have.’

But for my purposes I saw them as fitting because they dwell in the zone between nature and culture. A vase with nothing in it still speaks somehow of the idea of sanctity; the target of which might be the natural world or the place in which its contents, flowers, might be displayed. Speaking of architectural space, but I think it can stand true in relation to bringing the natural world into the home, Gerrit Rietveld noted that:

If, for a particular purpose, we separate, limit, and bring into a human scale a part of unlimited space [nature], it is (if all goes well) a piece of space [nature] brought into life as reality. In this way, a special segment of space [nature] has been absorbed into our human system."

Perhaps a vase, whether its intended function is fulfilled or not, can do something similar and it seemed to me that a form that might give an idea of the natural world as special would have some power.

The vases used are a combination of made and found ones. Of the made ones, some have been made shaped in moulds and then slipcast, some I have thrown on the wheel.
Fig. 53  Patsy Hely, diary page, 2006, COG bird sightings.

Fig. 54  Patsy Hely, diary page, 2007, COG bird sightings.
Fig. 55  Patsy Hely, *Teapot with Bird*, detail, porcelain, 17 x 13 x 14 cm.

Fig. 56  Patsy Hely, painting for decal, 2006, watercolour on arches, 19 x 13.5 cm.

Fig. 57  Patsy Hely, watercolour for decal, 2006, watercolour, 14.5 x 11 cm.
Fig. 58  Patsy Hely, watercolour and text decal sheet, watercolour, A3.
Fig. 59  Patsy Hely, Chinese Vase with Leaden Flycatcher, porcelain, decals, 2007, 35 x 22 cm.
The found vases and jugs were purchased from bric-a-brac or antique shops or markets and a number were bought from a short-lived local shop where imported vases from China were sold. These latter were mostly copies of traditional shapes, for instance a gourd-shaped vase, and featured both decal-ed and handpainted copies of traditional patterns and decorations.

These ‘found’ vases were treated in various ways, some sandblasted then china painted on the erased areas, and some just have decals of watercolour painted birds. I had used sandblasting previously to create ‘pockets’ of nature on the field represented by the vase form and I wanted to continue this so it was clear that the ‘nature’ being pictured was no utopian vision, but a representation of a more contemporary situation. I deliberated over whether it was a disrespectful act to erase parts of the surface of the found works and decided to only do so on the contemporary copies of traditional forms as these are mass-produced. Many birds sighted in the Canberra region are migratory and I thought these found vases and jugs – sitting in amongst the hand made ones – might be seen to constitute a migratory species as well.

I documented bird sightings over a twelve-month period in 2006 and then chose a sample for each of the seasons during that year to represent in the final exhibition. To further bring home the idea of documentation, as opposed to just image making solely for aesthetic purposes, I decided to name the birds and the date it was spotted on the works, so on each object the bird is named and its date of sighting recorded. Each object documents one bird sighting and no two objects are alike. This diversity I hoped would give the idea that, on seeing the bird, whatever was at hand was grabbed to record it – to suggest the idea that local experience was here at play.

The final body of work comprised 24 vases divided between four tables, each one representing a season. The tables were placed with the current season (autumn) placed closest to the point of entry to the gallery and were at chest-height so that the vases could be viewed frontally.

In developing this final body of studio research my aim was that the ornamented clay objects – vases and jugs – would articulate information about this specific Canberran locality, and play a role in maintaining the natural world as an imaginative and provocative presence in daily life. And, that they would usefully participate in:

The long-term reproduction of a neighbourhood that is simultaneously practical, valued and taken-for-granted [and which] depends on the seamless interaction of localized spaces and times with local subjects possessed of the knowledge to reproduce locality.56

Fig. 60 Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, 2006, installation view, found and made objects, porcelain and stoneware, decals, underglaze and china paint.

Fig. 61 Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) Autumn, 2006, found and made objects, porcelain and stoneware, decals, underglaze and china paint.

Fig. 62 Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) Winter, 2006, found and made objects, porcelain and stoneware, decals, underglaze and china paint.

Fig. 63 Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) Spring, 2006, found and made objects, porcelain and stoneware, decals, underglaze and china paint.

Fig. 64 Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) Summer, 2006, found and made objects, porcelain and stoneware, decals, underglaze and china paint.
Fig. 65  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) Yellow Headed Honeyeater, 2006, porcelain, underglaze colour, china paint, decals. 23.5 x 16cm.

Fig. 66  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) Speckled Warbler, 2006, found object, porcelain, china paint, decals. 36 x 15cm.

Fig. 67  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) Magpie Lark, 2006, found object, porcelain, china paint, decals. 34 x 17cm.

Fig. 68  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary*, (detail) White Fronted Chat, 2006, porcelain, underglaze colour. 20 x 11cm.
Fig. 69  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary, (detail) Blue Wren*, 2006, found object, stoneware, china paint, decals. 11.5 x 10.5cm.

Fig. 70  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary, (detail) Pink Robin*, 2006, found object, porcelain, decals. 32 x 11.5cm.

Fig. 71  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary, (detail) Red Wattlebird*, 2006, found object, stoneware, decals. 24.5 x 14cm.

Fig. 72  Patsy Hely, *Bird Diary, (detail) Jackie Winter*, 2006, found object, porcelain, china paint, decals. 35 x 21.5cm.
The themes of 'nature' and 'place' are common ones within contemporary visual areas, either as subjects of enquiry or sources of representation. In Australia they have particular weight because of fraught relationships with the environment and, for the non-indigenous population, a fraught relationship with a sense of belonging in/to this place as well.

During this project I have looked at a diverse range of artworks based around these areas. Research for the Dissertation involved investigation of First Fleet artworks and early colonial works amongst which were many natural history and topographic studies. Of these, the bird paintings of John Hunter were of particular interest although my encounter with them preceded the focus on birds that developed later in the Studio project. Since, I have also been drawn to the bird painting from John Gould's (1804–1881) Australian and English projects and the work of John Lewin (1770–1819), E. E. Gostelow (1867–1944) and Lilian Medlow (1880–1961). The modelled ceramic birds of Grace Seccombe (1880/1 – 1956) have also been of interest.

In the area of ceramics I have, over the period of the project, devoted much time to looking at and reflecting on 18th and early 19th Century British and European porcelains where nature is depicted. I have had a love of much of this work for as long as I can remember but my interest in it in relation to nature and place was stirred by the catalogue of an exhibition Along the Royal Road: Berlin and Potsdam in KPM Porcelain and Painting, 1815–1848 at the Bard Graduate Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts in New York in 1993. This exhibition looked at ways in which representations of place could be put to ideological intent. It does so by examining porcelain objects onto which paintings by the German artist Carl Daniel Freydanck were transferred, between 1838 and 1848 at the KPM Porcelain Manufactory in Berlin. This period covered the reigns of both King Friedrich Wilhelm I and King Friedrich Wilhelm IV. Under both of these, two royal residences were in use, one at Charlottenburg and one in Potsdam and the two men engineered major architectural and topographical transformations at each place and along the road that joined them.

As was often the case between porcelain manufactories and ruling families during this time, the royal father and son were the main patrons of the KPM manufactory, at that time one of the most prestigious ceramic producers in Europe. The express purpose of Freydanck's work for KPM was to provide patterns for the studio painters to copy and these documented the changes to the landscape wrought by his royal employers. The porcelain objects in this exhibition exemplified the type of ceramic objects I had a great fondness for; so how I could reconcile my aesthetic appreciation of them with the ideological project they describe became a question. This was a familiar
Fig. 73  Plate, KPM Berlin, Porcelain: enamel colours and polished gilding, 24.1 cm, 1827–32. From Derek E. Ostergard and Marlise Hoff, Along the Royal Road: Berlin and Potsdam in KPM Porcelain and Painting, 1815–1848, New York: The Bard Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 1993, 140.

Fig. 74  Vase, KPM Berlin, Porcelain in two parts: pedestal separate; enamel colors and gilding, 1844–32, 74 x 26 cm. From Derek E. Ostergard and Marlise Hoff, Along the Royal Road: Berlin and Potsdam in KPM Porcelain and Painting, 1815–1848, New York: The Bard Centre for Studies in the Decorative Arts, 1993, 206.

Fig. 75  Neil Douglas, Platter, earthenware, 28 x 14 cm. From Geoffrey Edwards, The Painter as Potter: decorated ceramics of the Murrumbeena Circle, Melbourne: National Gallery of Victoria, 1982, 18.
ideological project, of the powerful re-making the natural world and its human and animal inhabitants to their own purposes, yet the decorative arts – often described as a ‘gentle art’ – played a role in it.

There have been three artists whose work I have returned to many times for the duration of this project, Mark Dion, Rosemary Laing and Neil Douglas; all of them I describe, perhaps hyperbolically, as great artists of the natural world. Dion, an American artist, has been exhibiting work that explores human’s relationship with the natural world since the late 1980’s. The works, primarily installations, have been carried out both where he lives and in other places around the world, sometimes in museums and galleries, at other times in civic institutions. Rosemary Laing’s photographic work is site specific in that it comments on particular places while also being germane to place in general. Neil Douglas lived and worked for much of his life in bush areas around Melbourne, and was a partner, with John Percival and Arthur Boyd, at the pottery at Murrumbeena south east of Melbourne from 1950.

Similarities between the work of Dion and Laing can be found; both work for instance in a form that has the nature of a ‘project’ where themes are explored and have a specific exhibited outcome. Douglas worked similarly on a ‘project’ yet his was an ongoing one explored, I suspect, as much in the act of making as in the exhibiting. Like Dion and Laing, his work was fuelled by an interest in and concern for the environment; he was a keen conservationist and awarded an MBE in 1975 in part for his contribution in this area. He was both a watercolourist and a ceramic artist and his work in the latter medium fused both arts with lightness and fluidity. The white earthenware and clear glaze he used on his bowls, cups, plates, vases and lidded containers (a domestic compendium of objects), were ideally suited to his subject matter: his surroundings.

The clay gave him a clean ground on which to re-make what he saw and the glaze gave a sense of three-dimensional depth to his imagery. As happens in the alchemical fusion of clay and glaze though, the final representation achieved some of its expressive quality because it visually documented the processes to which it had been subjected. That is, in the firing, thicker areas of glaze acted to make some areas partially opaque, or a curve closer to a hot element or gas burner might cause part of a scene to blur in relation to a crisper whole. As well, the nature of painting on ceramics is such that thickness and intensity of colour cannot be entirely judged at the time of their application and so the final result can never be totally under control. All of these acted in his work to suggest place as a dynamic thing, something one suspects would have been Douglas’ view. These were no static landscapes he was depicting.

One of the most characteristic aspects of his oeuvre is the natural world as a place of profusion and wonder, his work teems with trees and bushes, birds and animals, and a sense of abundance can be seen in certain of Mark Dion’s work as well, though differently. Dion is a keen naturalist, ornithologist and biologist with a knowledge built up through formal study and personal enquiry. Of particular interest to me was a work he carried out in Antwerp in 1993, The project for the Antwerp Zoo where he was commissioned to make work for the newly renovated bird enclosure at the Zoo. Here

Fig. 77  Mark Dion, *The Project for the Antwerp Zoo* (detail), 1993, Majolica tiles with woodblock print. From Lisa Graziose, Miwon Kwon, Norman Bryson, Mark Dion, *Mark Dion*, London: Phaidon, 1997, 90.


he designed a series of majolica tiles depicting now-extinct birds based on images made from early colonising expeditions he found documented in Belgian archives.

If the British left a trail of porcelain – their own and Chinese products they transported – wherever they colonised around the world, it was Majolica, a white glaze opacified with tin, which might identify European excursions. Majolica is a glaze very commonly used historically in France, Belgium and Spain, all of whom have had foreign enclaves. The tiles then with their extinct birds and glaze-as-national-badge spoke of past environmental plunder, though as Norman Bryson has pointed out, this recognition of past wrongs hardly outweighed the fact that enclosure of the contemporary birds was no less a subject of contestation.51

The idea of profusion occurs here in the repetition of Dion’s tiles frieze-like around the top and bottom of the enclosure, much like the tile decoration one would find in an old butcher’s shop. In this arrangement it is a profusion of slaughter that is brought to mind, the profusion of animals plundered for the Museums of Europe, and the West in general, that great corpus of wildlife once alive, now dead.

The idea of profusion comes across in the concurrent work he did in Antwerp at the Museum of Contemporary Art, a work that more closely accords with his normal installation practice. Here a dead tree is installed, its branches intact but scarified and lopped to fit the contours of the room in places. A short circle of wall fences it and features the same majolica tiles. In the room are 18 African finches purchased from the Antwerp market flying freely around; again one feels for the birds. The tree itself is home to various texts – books on Audubon, Rachel Carson’s Silent Spring, innumerable bird books – together with images and objects crudely tied or otherwise attached.

A stuffed parrot alights on an empty birdcage, Audubon prints are nailed to a branch, there are bird traps and poison canisters – nothing at all subtle is happening here. The tree is a mess, and it is as if the roles have been reversed and we are living in it while the birds fly around, stopping (and shitting) where they will. This colonisation of the tree seems to represent the huge profusion of material on the natural world, huge amounts of information about how to care for it, and how to set about destroying it – an entropic system writ large and Bryson suggests that:

Dion’s work raises the possibility that in an era of managing resources now recognized to be limited, knowledge itself may be the resource whose historical limits we most urgently need to understand.52

Both of these works, while disturbing, have a visual elegance found in much of Dion’s work. It comes from an attention to detail, a precision of placement and juxtaposition which even when appearing casual, calls for attention to be paid.

Similarly, the crafting of Rosemary Laing’s work adds a keen intensity to her images. In groundspeed, floral carpet sends flowers flooding through the bush like some creeping river. Laing’s great control of depth of field, the high key colouration and controlled lighting, coupled with the crisp detail make it seem as if no fakery could find a place here. Perhaps some antipodean Andy Goldsworthy has had a hand, one might think at
first glance. These images seem to suggest how naturalised the artificial has become yet there is also a sense of how enticing the artificial can be. Groundspeed (Rose Petal) #16, with its shafts of sunlight on carefully tended carpet (lawn) shows the cleared forest space as emminently desirable, a comfortable zone, while on the other hand, groundspeed (Red Piazza) #5 could be the scene of some terrible carnage, a Myall Creek massacre or similar is evoked. Such contradictory images bring to mind problems thrown up about place not just here but in many places, though the familiar bush scenes have particular resonance here.

Laing’s groundspeed (Rose Petal) #16 with its thin shafts of light and delicate (here) colouration reminds me of a Neil Douglas plate. The two works, or projects, could not be more dissimilar in form but both invite a questioning of the way we perceive place, and of the relationships between nature and place. Mark Dion’s work may have more particular resonance in other countries but I think the questions his work asks about our relationship to the natural world could well be articulated anywhere.

Fig. 80 Rosemary Laing, groundspeed (Red Piazza) #5, Type C photograph, 70 x 114 cm. 2001. From Vivienne Webb (ed.), The Unquiet Landscapes of Rosemary Laing, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.

Fig. 81 Rosemary Laing, groundspeed (Rose Petal) #16, Type C photograph, 85 x 144 cm, 2001. From Vivienne Webb (ed.), The Unquiet Landscapes of Rosemary Laing, Sydney: Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005.
My Studio Research has profited by study of these artists. Neil Douglas’ work suggested to me that my own backyard – and observations close to home – could be a profitable source of subject matter and imagery for the ‘decoration’ of ceramic domestic objects. As well, studying his use of colour and control of relationships between image and form and between mark, curve, and edge has caused me to pay greater attention to them also. Mark Dion’s work is underpinned by a sound scientific knowledge of botany and ornithology and I have been encouraged by this to further my own understanding in relation to what became a central focus of this study, birds. I have been impressed also by Dion’s didacticism and by his, and by Rosemary Laing’s, ability to visually manifest contemporary environmental and cultural discourse about place with wit and subtlety.
CONCLUSION

The two components that comprise this study – the Studio Research and the Dissertation – have sought to investigate ways in which objects made of clay might be used, lens-like, to reveal information about place. My proposition that clay objects can be articulate about place has been tested through making processes and through analysis of historical and contemporary texts and artefacts.

In both components a strategy based on the traditional decorative motif of the meander of walking around and pausing to look was employed. This method of developing an understanding of the two study areas, Canberra and Sydney, was done in recognition of LeFebvre, Tuan and other theorist’s assertions of the role experience plays in the construction of place. In the Studio Practice research my meanders were aimed at experiencing place so I could make objects that reflected that place. In the Dissertation the meanders were undertaken to increase my understanding of the physical space where the objects being examined were situated.

In the Studio Practice I investigated ways of continuing the long ceramic tradition of drawing upon the natural world – so often a signifier of place – for subject matter; while looking for ways to avoid perpetuating the representation of generic, idealised place which over the centuries has become an entrenched convention. I did this by withdrawing at first to my own very local backyard in search of subject matter and then by moving further afield into my local neighbourhood. In doing this I realised that the local is increasingly inflected by the global and so I sought ways of incorporating objects made elsewhere into the studio works.

The integration of found vases of both European and Asian origin proved a useful device because through my studio interventions, I was able to make them convey ideas about local environments as constructed rather than idealised places. And, by drawing upon documented sightings of birds in the local area, birds seen by myself and by others, I have developed a body of work in which information about the place it was made is accessible. Ceramic decoration has the capacity to contribute to an understanding of specific localities and to an understanding of local ecological patterns. In this way, it participates in the articulation of local knowledge.

In the Dissertation I examined ways in which an object might, through analysis, reveal information about place. The place used as an example was Bennelong Point in Sydney and the two objects investigated were one of the first clay brick houses built in European Australia, Bennelong’s house, built there in 1790, and the building occupying the site now, the Sydney Opera House.

In wanting to understand how objects might reveal information about place I was mindful that the place I inhabit, this country, is a place my European cultural and hereditary
forbears were not the rightful inheritors of, though they claimed it as their own. Therefore, an investigation of the first place occupied by Europeans was relevant and in that way the Dissertation and the Studio Research Project connect. As the research developed other connections between the two components became clear as well and uncomfortable notions of erasure, of species and of cultures, can not be ignored.

I demonstrated in the Dissertation how Sydney Opera House publicity – and the broader public historical record – have shaped Bennelong’s house as a gift from Arthur Phillip in acquiescence of a somewhat capricious demand on Bennelong’s part. These reportings and recordings of the transactions surrounding the house have seen Governor Arthur Phillip, and through him, the British Government, cast in a generous light by calling attention to what was given, rather than what was taken.

I identified the house as having been categorised as what Elizabeth Weiner terms ‘inalienable objects’ – those where the object’s provenance is its defining characteristic. As part of the complex parcel of exchanges being carried out at the time though, I argued too, the building of the house acted to hide the colonist’s giving with one hand and taking with the other. Exploring Tuan’s contention that architectural space models behaviour I suggested that Phillip hoped the house would have a ‘civilising’ effect on Bennelong and his people and then argued further that the Opera House, in the present day, has been similarly tasked. And of the ‘place’ that emerged from the research: the Sydney Opera House has physically done to Bennelong’s Point what the small house could be said to have done metaphorically to the existing culture two centuries ago. Shaved down and engulfed, it is place no more; there is only the building.

Although I set out to investigate the ways in which objects can be articulate about place, one of the findings of the research has been the degree to which objects and texts are interdependent. LeFebvre’s somewhat rhetorical claim that objects are as useful for lying as for telling the truth alerted me to this possibility and it is supported by my research. In my final presentation of the Thesis, I sought to demonstrate that objects are not mute, they can be articulate, though an awareness of the ways in which they can be made to narrate a multiplicity of histories needs always to be considered. But they do speak.
REFERENCE LIST


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ADDENDA

I. ORIGINAL PROPOSAL: STUDIO

This project takes its cue from the vocabulary of ceramic ornament; it suggests a 'meander' between the inside world of the home and the outside world of nature. A 'meander' is a series of floral motifs, either individual blooms, small posies, or a mixture of both, spaced at intervals around the surface of a ceramic form. It articulates ceramic space less formally than its relatives the border, the garland, the lozenge etc. and carries with it the presumption of movement through space, rather than static display.

AIMS OF THE PROPOSAL

The aim of this research project is to investigate, via the production of ceramic and mixed media works, ways that ceramic objects made primarily for use inside the home, can image the outside world. Currently, our relationship to the environment, to nature and to place, is under scrutiny, yet the imaging of environment on or by ceramics tends to be either nostalgic representation in the case of mass-produced ware, or abstraction, in studio ceramics. Underlying the research are questions about how we can, in a contemporary world, image the outside, inside. Can ceramic objects portray nature only as anodyne, and place as primarily sentimental, or can they act as agents which inform our relationship with the outside world?

In the essay, Prospects from a Metal Garden, in which she compares the 'outside' garden of the orchard and native bush surrounding her Tasmanian home, with the 'inside' garden of carved wooden fireplace and Wunderlich pressed metal ceilings, Margaret Scott comments:

'It was from all this that the metal and wooden flowers, leaves and trees derived their meaning, encoding in themselves messages that in turn illuminated the external landscape.'

Can images of landscape & place endure as both relevant sources and subjects for contemporary ceramics in a similar way?

Images of the natural world, of flora in particular have traditionally been common on ceramics, both industrially made, and handmade. They have been used on domestic tableware, souvenirs and commemorative wares. Industrially made ceramics in particular used this source either as motif or pattern. This use of reference to the outside, on objects primarily for use inside, has endured even though in recent studio ceramic objects, and in domestic interiors in general, the outside is currently referenced primarily through colour and texture, rather than image or motif.
The disappearance from ceramic objects and domestic interiors of images of the outside world, specifically of the natural environment is quite fascinating. In an essay titled Where did Ornament Go? in the catalogue for the exhibition ‘Ornamentalism’ curated by Andrew McNamara at the IMA in Brisbane in 1997, Michael Carter suggested that:

‘the death of ornament in Modernism was not simply the terminal exhaustion of a set of traditional motifs but the throwing into crisis of the whole internal economy of the artefact upon which the register ornamental had rested.’

Elsewhere in his essay, Carter suggests that ‘Modernist Functionalist interiors, with their radical aspirations towards (a) self-sufficient purity’ replaced ornament with the lustre of the highly polished surface. Stainless steel, polished timber, glossy plastics, textured fabrics, ‘minimalist’ ceramics, all in low key naturalistic hues – all of these are hallmarks of the contemporary interior . . . nature imaged as abstraction and essence.

The distance between early European domestic interiors, fair bristling with nature’s products and a house at the end of this millennium is quite notable. It’s easy to see various rationales for the use of imagery derived from nature in English and European interiors. Spaces architecturally fortified against the cold, with thick brick walls and small windows might logically call for internal spaces figured with images celebrating the power of the sun.

Perhaps then in Australia it is the heritage of Modernist architecture that has conspired to keep images of nature in their rightful outside place. Theodore Van Doesburg, writing in 1923 on ‘the new architecture’ talked about the role of the window in modern buildings; he said ‘with its openness, the window now plays an active role in opposition to the closedness of the wall surface’. ‘. . . so the window no longer frames the view, but presents a space where inside and outside meet and possible merge.

By opening up the interior to the outside perhaps we don’t need to keep the mnemonic of the garland, the border or the meander close by to remind us of the natural world – maybe it speaks for itself. And yet, it is often through highly artificial means that we appreciate the natural.

In Virtual Reality and the Tea Ceremony Michael Heim, suggests that aspects of the tea ceremony, a technology for affirming nature, could provide a model for the way we inhabit the artificial space of cyberspace:

‘The paradoxical use of technology to transform perceptions distorted by technology are inherent to the traditional tea ceremony. Entering the tea room, we go indoors in order to better perceive the outdoors. We remove ourselves from the many things in the world in order to see more clearly the flowers, the scroll, and the colours of the tea bowl. We crawl silently through the entrance of the tea hut and pay attention to the sound of boiling water so we can later hear the waterfalls.’
And, James Trilling in ‘The Language of Ornament’ states that 'Most ornament, except the simplest, implies a challenge to reality.'

Central to the studio research then are questions about relationships between the ‘artificial’ of the ceramic object (paradoxically, made from a natural material) and the ‘nature/natural’ of the outside world, and as well about ways that ceramic objects might contribute to a contemporary understanding of our relationship with nature, with landscape and place.

My interest in this project has arisen through recent work exploring:
- ‘the set’ in ceramics as a format for reflecting on ecological relationships
- ways of imaging place through the use of particular materials
- ways of imaging place that utilize images of ‘unsenic nature’
- ceramic ornament

METHODS AND RESOURCES

My studio investigations will initially focus on two common ceramic items – ‘the set’ and the vase. The vase is immediately an inside/outside referent while ‘the set’ allows relationships between components to be considered, and gives the opportunity to introduce ideas of ecological diversity to ceramic objects – an escape from the matching border:

The set

In ceramic practice, ‘the set’ is a convention that encompasses the dinner set, the tea set, the breakfast set and a variety of other sets. As well, there are particularly fine examples, from 17th Century Germany, and 19th Century Japan, of boxed ceramic picnic sets which I may draw upon. ‘The Set’ is particularly apt for exploring issues germane to ecology and to interrelatedness as the relationship between each component of a set can be figured (or not) through type and function of object, shape, spatial placement, surface imagery, colour, material, juxtaposition etc.

Each object in a set is integral to the set, yet maintains distinctness.

The vase

The relationship of the vase to nature/landscape/place is obvious, but in a sense paradoxical. Writing in 1984, Phillip Rawson rebukes potters for making so many works titled ‘vase’ because ‘vases are meant, generally speaking, only to be looked at, not used in the hands, perhaps not even to contain flowers’.

His statement about vases points to their paradoxical nature; they are at once truly functional forms, and at the same time, capable of doing nothing. Many ceramic forms share this paradox, the jug especially, but also the teapot, and, in recent times the bowl. (In fact, perhaps the only common ceramic object not to perform both of these functions is the most recent – the mug.)

And yet, for the vase, this ‘doing nothing’ state represents a stage between possibility and
action. An empty vase speaks of a desire to bring the outside in. This impulse to keep the outside present is intriguing, and made more complex because ceramic objects (though not particularly the vase) are experienced haptically as well as visually.

Pertinent then to this project are questions about touch and movement – what role do they play in this imagining of the outside?

Although ceramic functional objects will be the core focus of this program, non-functional forms may also be produced. A problem of any research that combines functional and non-functional forms though is how to visually articulate a connection between the two; is the combination in fact possible and if so, what exhibition strategies does one employ?

Processes and materials

My aim will be to image the outside world through a combination of image and shape.

The processes used will be primarily those associated with the use of molds – slipcasting and pressmolding, though some work may be thrown. The material will initially be porcelain but broaden to include investigation of the use of iron-bearing stoneware clays (to be used in conjunction with porcelain). As well, clays will be sourced from particular localities around the ACT and NSW.

In ceramic industry and in the arcane world of china painting, images of the natural world – floral motifs, landscapes etc have been pictured using overglaze enamels, either painted or printed (or a combination) onto the glazed ceramic surface. While I am familiar with ways of using overglaze enamels I will need to further develop my expertise in this area, and to research non-traditional ways of using the material. My plan is to explore china painting techniques in combination with other common ceramic decorative methods – incising and piercing, underglaze colouring, printmaking processes and post-firing engraving and sandblasting techniques. I will look, in some instances, to the techniques often used in souvenir painting – the hand colouring of printed outlines.

I plan to work with other materials where appropriate, so access to glass firing and polishing facilities and to basic woodworking equipment may be needed if my own studio resources are insufficient. I may require limited access to screenprinting expertise and facilities and to a ventilated workbench on occasions when turps-based solvents used in china painting cannot be replaced with water-based materials. As well, I will need access to imaging software, Photoshop and Illustrator in particular, to manipulate photographic material and devise imagery for transfer to ceramic surfaces.

CONTEXT

Within the wider ceramic field there exist three 'micro-fields', each with its own traditions, conventions and histories, that this research hopes to traverse – china painting, studio ceramics, and industrial ceramics.

In the area of industry and china painting the work I see as relevant comes from both Germany and Australia. In Germany, the floral compositions from Meissen which
became popular around 1735 are of interest. In these, native German flora replaced the Asian-style flowers used on the earliest porcelain. The flora were copied from woodcuts and engravings of the day and their stylized appearance led them to be called ‘mannered flowers’. The name given to the most usual compositional strategy used with these flowers was ‘strewn flowers’; it referred to the way the composition looked as if a bunch of flowers had been cut and then strewn around the form. This combination of informal intent (strewn-natural) with stylised arrangement (artificial) seems relevant.

Also from Germany, the work carried out at the KPM Porcelain Manufactory in the 1800’s detailed in the text ‘Along the Royal Road: Berlin and Potsdam in KPM Porcelain and Painting 1815–1848’ is relevant. These porcelain objects take as their subject the topographical features of the twin towns which served as residences to the royal family of Prussia. The works were copies of paintings by Carl Daniel Freydanck, directed by them to record the growing urbanisation of the landscape surrounding Berlin, especially the major works being undertaken by the architect Schinkel. This body of work is commemorative in intent, made mostly for royal gifts, and I see it as relevant for my project because of the questions it poses about aesthetics, ceramic convention and power.

In Australian ceramic practice, I am interested in comparisons between work produced by studio artists around the 1930’s, during the heydey of the use of native flora and fauna as decorative motif and contemporary souvenir ware – the imaging of the scenic as banal.

I see sources of interest for my research in practices both inside and outside the ceramics area, in the work of Simryn Gill, Mark Dion, Toni Warburton, Fiona Murphy, Fiona Hall, Lucien Henri, Eileen Keys, Col Levy, Ivan Mc Meekin, Vince McGrath. As well fruitful insights into the figuring of relationships with nature may come from areas such as bonsai, ikebana and the Japanese tea ceremony (though I realise they could be seen as overused sources in ceramics).

To conclude, this research hopes to inhabit an area intersected by the four points of ceramics and experience, landscape and aesthetics. It hopes to investigate the ability of functional ceramic objects to image the outside world when the traditional language of their ornament – for instance, the border, the posy, the meander, is either debased or meaningless, or just too uncomfortably linked to notions of the ideal.
2. ORIGINAL PROPOSAL: DISSERTATION

AIM

The representation of ‘outside’ on domestic clay objects has been a longstanding means of bringing the outside environment and the private or shared experience of it, in. What does it mean when these ‘sample(s) of a now-distanced experience’ are scaled down and replicated for continuing consumption in the private space of the home?

In recent times there has been broad art theoretical scholarship in the area of representation by artists of nature and place yet this discourse has been concerned primarily with painting, and with printmaking, drawing and photography.

The dissertation aims to analyse past and present ceramic practice in Australia in the light of this discourse. The paper will investigate ways that the environment has been imaged in Australian functional ceramic objects and question where and how ceramic practice and contemporary understandings of ecology, of aesthetics and of post-colonial theory intersect.

Unlike the painting, the drawing, the print or the photograph, ceramic objects which depict or reference environment have, in some cases, a further function – they are used to eat and drink with, and are used in both private and social settings. They are handled. Could these small movements of picking up, of putting down, of passing, be seen as analogous, metaphorically, for the trace of our passage through outside space. Does the act of use have any impact on the way we read their imaging of the outside world?

METHODS AND RESOURCES

Research for the dissertation will involve the examination of both primary and secondary sources. Through an initial survey of museum collections, objects for study will be identified. Relevant collections will include those of the Shepparton Art Gallery, National Gallery of Victoria, Powerhouse Museum, National Gallery of Australia, Art Gallery of NSW and others. Existing written material on the area will be traced via literature searches. The most useful sources will possibly be exhibition catalogues and academic scholarship, rather than journal articles or published books.

Initially, some of the areas I see as relevant to the research include:

Theories of ornament (Riegl, Gombrich, Graber)
- Historical framework
- Relevance to Australian experience

Ceramic ornament (Rawson, Dormer, Richards, Timms)
- Why/when flora first used
• Relationship to culture
• Stylistic evolutions

Flora in art (Betteridge, Gooley)
• Decorative arts & Australian motifs – Australian china painters, Lucien Henri etc

The Souvenir (Susan Stewart)
• Analogy to be made between ideas of souvenir; and virtual experience – could the act of using a (for instance) dinner plate with a leafy border constitute a ‘virtual’ experience? (movement through both ‘spaces’ takes place only with the eyes and hand)
• Images of place always souvenirs?
• And cultural practices?
• The tenmoku/celedon bowl as souvenir?
• the referencing of landscape via glaze, texture, material as souvenir?

Landscape/place (Carter, Levitus)
• how could such texts inform an understanding of ceramic objects
• potential for contemporary post-colonial theoretical texts to provide insight into ceramics and nature/environment.

CONTEXT

Although there have been various texts (books and exhibition catalogues) which touch on the area of ceramics and landscape/environment/nature in Australia, few, if any, have this as their primary subject. Central to the dissertation then will be the survey, documentation, analysis and critique of existing literature in the field.

Representational images of the environment, common on earlier studio products and on mass-produced ceramics, are not common on contemporary studio ceramics, where nature is imaged mostly in abstract ways. An exception to this dearth of representational imagery is the work being produced by the Hermannsburg Potters in Central Australia, and at Australian Fine China in Western Australia over the last ten years. This perceived shift in representational mode will be investigated.

To summarise, the dissertation hopes to investigate ways in which contemporary art and craft theoretical debates inform our understanding of ceramics that image nature and/or place. Secondly, it considers whether haptic experience contributes to the way such objects might ‘illuminate(s) the external landscape.’

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Timms, Peter, Australian Pottery and China Painting, Melbourne: Oxford University Press,
3. CURRICULUM VITAE

EMPLOYMENT

2003– Honours Convenor, ANU, School of Art, Canberra ACT
2002– Website Coordinator, Distance Ceramics, ANU, School of Art, Canberra ACT
2002 Sessional Lecturer, ANU, School of Art, Canberra
1989–2001 Senior Lecturer, School of Contemporary Arts, Southern Cross University, Lismore NSW

EDUCATION

2002– PhD candidate, Graduate Studies in Visual Arts, School of Art, ANU.
1995 Master of Arts (Fine Arts) with distinction, Southern Cross University
1979 Post-Ceramics Certificate, East Sydney Technical College
1977–8 Ceramics Certificate, East Sydney Technical College

INDIVIDUAL EXHIBITIONS

2006 Pastoralia, Craft ACT, Canberra
2005 Vase, All Hand Made Gallery, Sydney
2004 Nature Writing, Project Space, Object Gallery, Sydney
2003 All Hand Made Gallery, Sydney
1999 Distelfink Gallery, Melbourne
1997 Savode Gallery, Brisbane

GROUP EXHIBITIONS

2006 Bowl, Khai Lew Gallery, Adelaide, South Australia
Impact, Watling Galleries, Newstead, Brisbane
Penelope’s Thread, Victoria and Albert Museum, London. (small tapestry design, woven by Victorian Tapestry Workshop)
2005 Prue Vennells, Patsy Hely, Neville French, Beaver Gallery, Canberra
Designed, C.S.A. Gallery, ANU, Canberra (with Oliver Smith)
D’immaténiels lendemains, Musée royal de Mariemont, Belgium
2004 Plane to Line and Point, Tin Sheds Art Gallery, Sydney
Trace, with Mel Robson, Craft Qld Gallery, Brisbane
2003 Union Street Ceramics, Fusions Gallery, Brisbane
Future Function, Manly Art Gallery
Satisfaction, Hazelhurst Regional Gallery, Craft ACT, Shepparton Art Gallery
2002 Satisfaction, Lake Macquarie City Art Gallery, New England Regional Art Museum, Gold Coast City Art Gallery, Cairns Regional Gallery,
Ritual of Tea, Jam Factory Gallery, Adelaide
2001 Foreign Soil, The Sybaris Gallery, Michigan, USA
Doubletake, travelling exhibition jointly curated by Craft Queensland and Craftwest. Craft Qld Gallery, Brisbane, Object Gallery, Sydney, and Craftwest Gallery, Perth
Mineral, Fusions Gallery, Brisbane
Mirror, Patsy Hely, Susan Ostling, Toni Warburton, Gallery 482, Brisbane
Patsy Hely and Janet De Boos, Ceramic Art Gallery, Sydney (2 person exhibition)

Ceramics: The Australian Context, Campbelltown Bicentennial Art Gallery, Campbelltown, NSW.

City of Hobart Art Prize, Hobart Art Gallery
White, Ceramic Art Gallery, Sydney

Collective Knowledge, Lismore Regional Art Gallery
The Artist's Book, Grahame Gallery, Brisbane
Teapots, Distelfink Gallery, Melbourne
Contemplating the Bowl, Distelfink Gallery, Melbourne.

Australian Ceramics for Tea, Japanese Embassy, Tokyo


In Context: work by artists featured in the Manly Art Gallery Collection, Manly Art Gallery, Sydney

Ceramic Survey, Savode Gallery, Brisbane
Homebrand, Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre
Townsville Invitation Ceramic Award, Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery

4 Australian Ceramic Artists, Galleri Narby, Copenhagen, Denmark
Lightly, Tin Sheds Gallery, University of Sydney
Stillness, Crafts Council of ACT, Canberra

Wedge, Beaver Gallery, Canberra

Ensemble, Craftspace, Centre for Contemporary Craft, Sydney (with Union Street Ceramic Studios)
The Souvenir, Craftspace, Centre for Contemporary Craft, Sydney

Being with Objects, Orange Regional Gallery, Craftspace Gallery, Sydney; Wollongong Regional Gallery, Wagga Regional Gallery, Perc Tucker Gallery, Townsville

CITATIONS

2006 Cousins, Kerry-Anne, review 'Pastoralia', Canberra Times, Times 2, p4–5
Weekend Australian, (editorial). Review section, 'Hotseat', p17
Vogue Living, March/April (editorial), p27, 'Australian Design Now', p109

2005 Cousins, Kerrie-Anne, review, Beaver Gallery exhibit. Canberra Times, 29 October, p22
Lister, Nicole, 'Nature Writing', Object, May/June 05, No 45, p79
Vogue Living (editorial), Jan/Feb 05, p82

2004 Gourmet Traveller (editorial), Style section, July, p. 69
Keens, Leeta, Patsy Hely, Belle Magazine, March

2003 Lane, Peter, 'Contemporary Studio Porcelain', Philadelphia Pa: Pennsylvania University Press, p125
Walters, Michael, Patsy Hely, Domain, Sydney Morning Herald, 21 August, p9

2001 Stephens, Helen. Ceramics as a reflective medium, Object, No. 1–01, p.86

2000 Stephens, Helen, Variations/transmutation, Pottery in Australia, Summer
Ruyak, J., An Event for Tea, Ceramics, Art and Perception, Issue 31, p.93, 94

1997  Stewart, O. Delicacy, intricacy in ceramic work, The Courier Mail, Tuesday 9 December, p 16
Rowley, S. Somatic Object, exhibition catalogue, Ivan Dougherty Gallery, Sydney
Ioannou, N. Masters of their Craft, Nth Ryde: Craftsman House

PUBLICATIONS

2006  Peter Rushforth, catalogue essay, Boutwell Draper Gallery, Sydney, October
Handled with Care, Exhibition review, Art Monthly Australia, March, No. 187, p12–15

2004  Objects, things, film, the past and the present, Contents, Craft ACT, Canberra, p.19–22

1997  Molina Monks: Situations and Influences, Ceramics, Art & Perception, No. 26, p.38
On Not Breaking the Mold, Artlink, Vol 17, No. 1, p 39

1994  Machined, catalogue essay, Southern Cross University Art Museum

1993  Switch, QCA + Southern Cross University exchange exhibition, Periphery, August, p25

COLLECTIONS

National Gallery of Australia
Victoria and Albert Museum, London (small tapestry)
Musée royal de Mariemont, Belgium
Powerhouse Museum
Parliament House Collection
Art Gallery of Western Australia
Art Gallery of South Australia,
Victorian State Craft Collection, National Gallery of Victoria
Shepparton Art Gallery
Manly Art Gallery
Gold Coast City Art Gallery
Perc Tucker Regional Art Gallery, Townsville
Rockhampton Regional Art Gallery
Bathurst Regional Art Gallery
Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre
Queensland University of Technology
Northern Territory Museum and Art Gallery