

A Storage Problem



Martin
Poppelwell

“almost exactlyⁱ”

A rabbit, a skull, a swan, a plate, a vase, a mug, an eyeball. Is that a shark fin Martin? Gestural smudges, gridded lines, smooth blobs of clean black paint, scrawling screaming text. I visited your studio on Monday and on Wednesday I had a dream about a glass eye rolling off a long thin table. Work is everywhere, ceramic objects that shift in scale, unravelling still lifes of domestic dinnerware and vessels among a menagerie of other things, animals feature but so do strange hand sized nuggets of clay coated in a shiny glaze. It would be easy to imagine disorder but these works, they are orchestral in nature, making more noise, more harmoniously, the larger the assemblage grows. You told me that a sense of humour goes a long way and I remember the words you gave us for Doris De Pont's Empire of Dirtⁱⁱ. A long list of thoughts which read a bit like a manifesto for thinking and making, disguised as a stream of consciousness (or is it the other way around?). You sent it to us from Napier with a plastic container filled with dirt and an insurance value of \$1.50. That text – it got laughs, real laughs in the gallery. Visitors standing in the arched window reading your sort-of poem omitted unexpected laughter through their noses on more than one occasion that I can count. The dirt is still with us (stored out the back carefully on shelves alongside a Sheehan, Robinson and Strattonⁱⁱⁱ) soon to make another appearance on the gallery floor.

“i think that the humour i use has an emotive quality in order for people to see that it is not only a joke.”

We have been talking about the life expectancy of an artwork, made in the confines of a studio, a conversation had privately and then out into the world it goes, to a dealer or a public gallery, cleaned up and on show. That's where A Storage Problem picks up the story, the return journey that is not often thought about. What happens to the unsold and the de-installed, what's the lifespan of the *thing* that has been made for public consumption but finds its way back to you Martin, to your lovely studio and you the caretaker? Reassembled even if unintentionally into new configurations, joining old fragments of other works on storage shelves and table tops?

“if i haven't been through what i make things about then the pieces aren't really worth anything.”

It may seem a bit off the topic but it's got me thinking about *that* conversation about ceramics. The *either/or* conversation that pits craft and visual art against one another^{iv}. It comes up at Objectspace a lot, applied arts education in New Zealand is being obliterated and the kilns are being reclaimed in fine arts departments all around the country. When these conversations get too irksome or silly I think about your work. You told me that you're a terrible potter, of course you're not but without thinking I was going to say that you're not a potter in the applied art sense of the word, but what's that doing for the conversation other than reinforcing old clichés? You came to clay as a means for making objects but it seems to me you've placed a value on tracing a line right back to its age old fundamental value, the thing that has intuitively prompted humans to mould dirt in our hands for eons now. Just look at Derek's photographs, a study of a studio with an artist making notes. Your work, in ceramics at least, charts a kind of paranoid map of what you've learnt along the way, fine arts at Elam, a potter's studio in Whanganui. A keenness and dedication to understanding the origin of that which you'd like to steal, borrow and render new, that's the job of a good and thoughtful artist (be it craft or design or fine art) and that puts an end to the *either/or* debate for me. And it's all there, this trajectory as a maker and an artist, in and on your work, one thing leads to another in a Poppelwell compilation. Repeating motifs, forms and words, and along that signature black line we find ourselves plotting a course which takes us from pop culture to Caravaggio, from comic books to dining room arrangements to the truly prehistoric properties of dirt we might find under foot.



i
Describes a sentence that isn't made to be finished/completed. Quote and subsequent quotes taken from Martin Poppelwell's notebooks.

“don't buy these why not make your own worthless copies.”

ii
Empire of Dirt: Writing about Ceramics. Curator Doris De Pont. Objectspace, Auckland New Zealand. 14 November–19 December, 2015.

iii
Joe Sheehan, Ann Robinson, Richard Stratton

iv
An arguably out of date mode of delineating between the two, would be to say the former serves the material, the latter insists the material serves the expression of an idea.

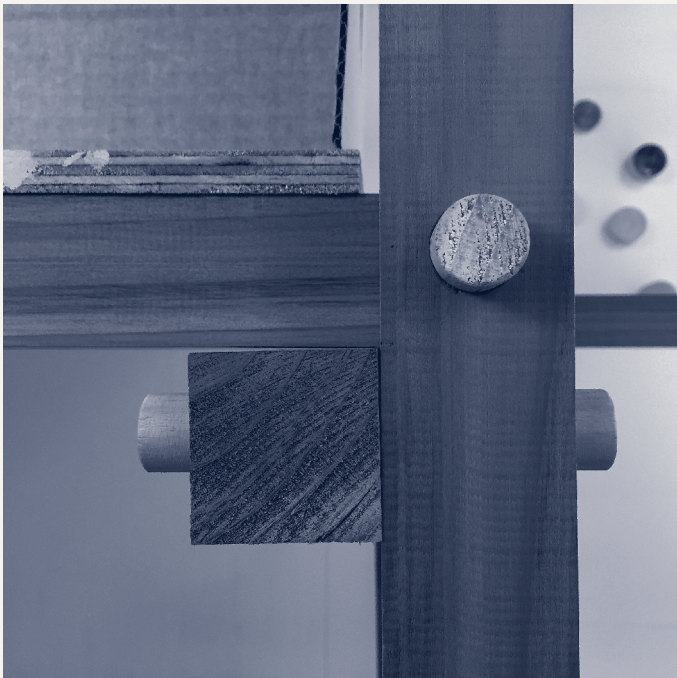
The solution, this structure you and Ben have made is perfectly revealing. A housing for over a decade's worth of work. A survey show that instead of editing work out in pursuit of tidying up the story of the artist's practice, you're inviting it all back in and then us too. Outcasts, miss-casts, broken sequences and broken pieces all given a second chance. A funny and fitting tribute to an artist who has always embraced the blur between the test, the trial, the sketchy working drawing, the spectacular fail and the finished work.

IMAGES:
P.1/4/5: Courtesy of the Artist, SPA_CE and Melanie Roger Gallery.

“how does stuff become art and art become stuff?”

Kim Paton is the Director of Objectspace

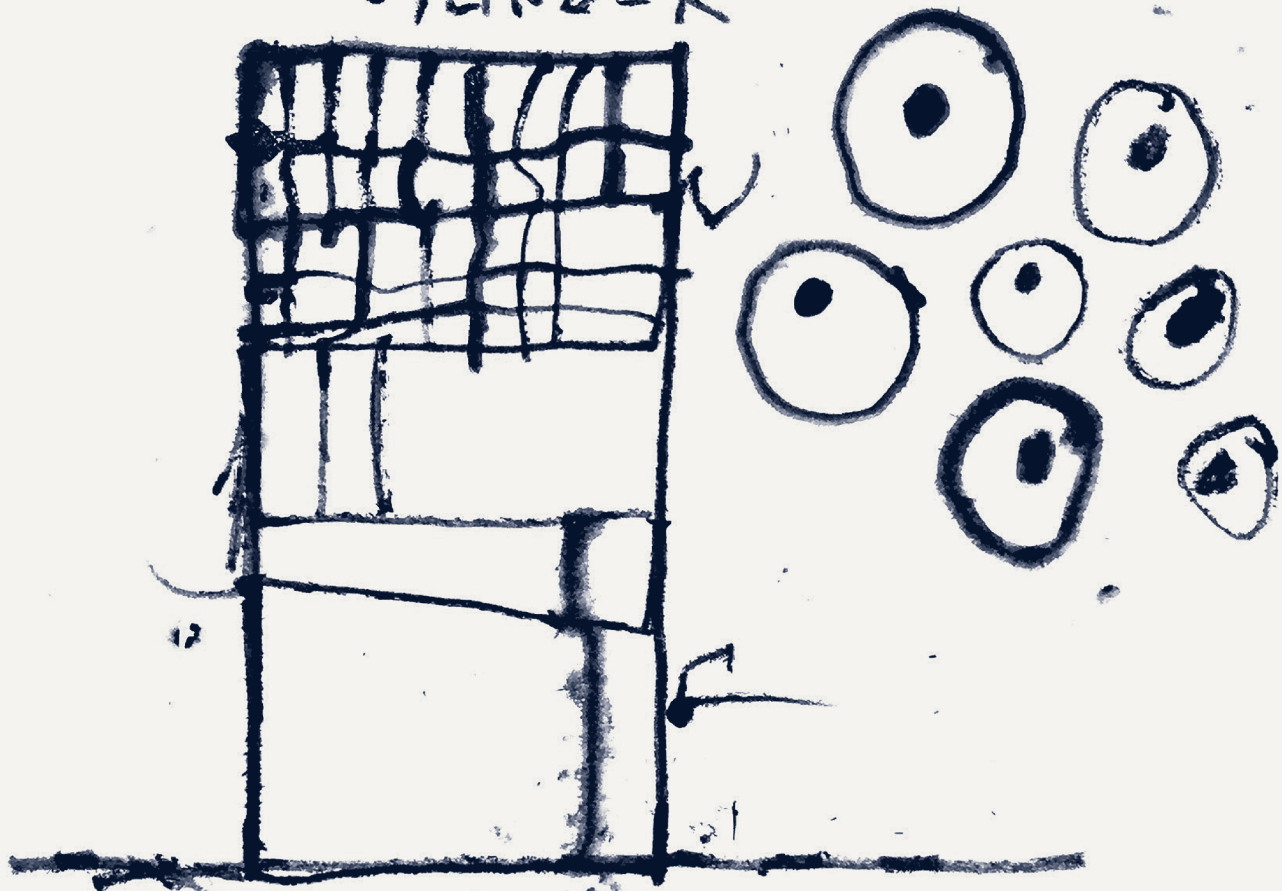
P.3: Derek Henderson. Courtesy of the Artist, SPA_CE, McNamara Gallery and Melanie Roger Gallery.



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Diagram
CYLINDER



Pottery has
the means to
behave like a
stream of consciousness,
referencing ones immediate
environment,
flights of thought,
current veering and pangs
of despair.