



# Rainbow serpents and other awakenings

*Tessa Laird's new book and her rainbow-hued ceramic sculptures celebrate colour as a powerful, palpable force. Virginia Were reads between the lines.*

Encountering the art and writing of Auckland-based artist Tessa Laird is best described as a mind-altering experience. Like the hallucinogenic brew, *ayahuasca*, which is widely consumed by indigenous Amazonian people seeking spiritual enlightenment, Laird's art and her new book celebrating colour are likely to cause visual and auditory stimulation. They mix sensory modalities and cause psychological introspection, which can lead to intense states of elation. For those wanting to consume the psychoactive brew it's recommended they find a reputable shaman to supervise the experience.

Laird's series of ceramic 'book' sculptures and a new publication titled *A Rainbow Reader*, which was recently released by Clouds Publishing, are infused with a joyous, psychedelic sensibility harking back to the idealism of the 1960s and 70s. Evident in both her book and her art is the passionate desire for a better world in the present.

For her Doctor of Fine Arts, which she completed at Elam last year, Laird undertook to recreate her entire

bibliography in clay. This long, slow labour of love culminated in more than 100 sculptures, which nodded towards the history of clay tablets and playfully mocked collectors who fetishise the book as object at the expense of its contents. Because you couldn't open them, Laird's books literally became their covers. The other two components of her doctorate were a series of screenprinted posters and a thesis that culminated in *A Rainbow Reader*. Each of the six slim volumes in this book is devoted to one colour of the rainbow and is bound in that colour; all six are stitched together to form one volume. Inherent in the title is an intriguing ambiguity between the book itself, with its intensely visual kaleidoscopic text, and the reader, who brings to the text their own multi-hued background, experiences and belief systems. One of the most notable things about *A Rainbow Reader* is its freeform almost stream-of-consciousness style, its sudden acrobatic leaps from one subject to another and the sheer diversity of Laird's associations with each colour. Although the

Opposite page: Tessa Laird and Peter Lange, *Reading Room* at Objectspace, 2012 (detail). Ceramic books by Laird, brick table by Lange

Right (from top): Tessa Laird, *Chupacabra Candelabra* at Melanie Roger Gallery, 2013 (detail), ceramic books and candelabras, wooden shelves; *Poutama-Tandava*, from *Sheshnag's Coloured Canopy*, Doctoral Exhibition at George Fraser Gallery, 2012 (detail) ceramic sculptures, dimensions variable; *Chupacabra Candelabra* at Melanie Roger Gallery, 2013 (detail), ceramic books and candelabras, wooden shelves

book threatens to fly apart at any moment, its celebration of colour as a palpable, powerful agent is what holds its rainbow skeins together.

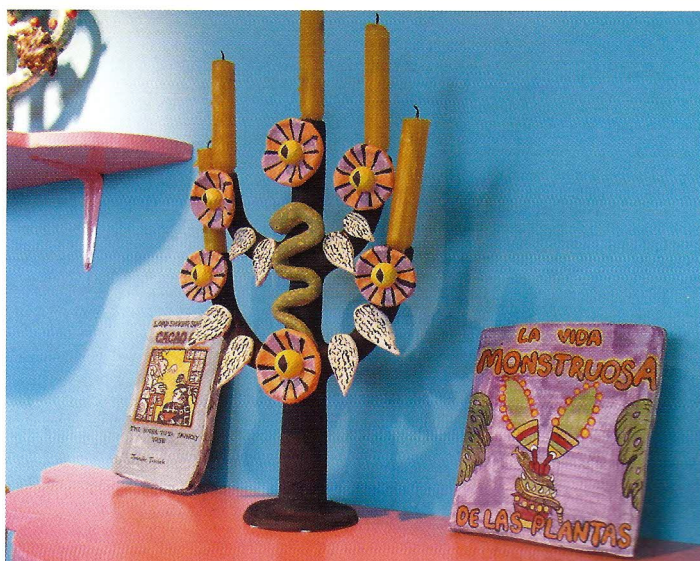
Although there are seven colours in Newton's version of the spectrum, Laird opted to run with six colours in accordance with contemporary science. Hence indigo is included in the blue chapter.

Laird admires the writing of anthropologist Michael Taussig, and in her book she has echoed his free-ranging style, in which he skips seamlessly between anthropology, art, politics, philosophy and personal anecdote. In the first of the six volumes – the one devoted to red – she starts out with Kundalini – the coiled serpent that lies dormant at the base of the spine in Hindu mythology. Red is the first colour on the spectrum and also the base chakra, the ancient Hindu “subtle system” of points on the spine. Once awakened, the serpent Kundalini travels through the seven centres, and human potential is fully released.

To signal her intentions Laird writes: “Starting in red and slowly uncoiling ideas like the rainbow serpent that is Kundalini, I hope to achieve, if not enlightenment, then some sense of awakened attention and purpose. Following the rainbow template, which also corresponds to the trajectory of the chakras, I will explore the colours one at a time. Perhaps this sequential dance in six chapters will become the literary equivalent of that Orientalist cliché, the dance of the seven veils. I know this much already, that the East, its tropes, and the West's use and abuse of those tropes, will weave in and out of these texts like the reedy sound of the nay flute, to which hips and cobras alike have swayed for millennia.”

Then in the next segment she makes a dazzling leap to an entirely different subject, describing a visit to her father's organic orchard outside Dargaville when she was a girl. There she saw a cow that had just given birth and she was “absolutely transfixed by the afterbirth” and its rainbow swirls. She likens the afterbirth to looking into the eye of a nebula. Later in this volume she discusses the ubiquitous practice, which began in the late 19th century, of painting Maori whakairo with Museum Red – the flat housepaint “somewhere in the spectrum between bricks and fake blood”. She concludes the ‘red’ volume with Dorothy clicking her ruby slippers at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*.

The ceramic version of Laird's bibliography, which represents three years of reading, is quirky and fascinating, not least because of the dizzying diversity of titles, ranging from serious, spiritual and intellectual to shonky and possibly silly. Because you can't open them, these books are contrary and unconventional – they can only be judged by their covers. Charmingly hand-painted and





Tessa Laird's work, *Demonological* (collaged screenprinted posters) was the Second Runner-Up Award Winner in the Annual Wallace Art Awards in 2012

folksy they suggest the dedicated enterprise of a cottage industry, which both book publishing and ceramics used to be before the juggernaut of mass production rolled out.

The public first saw Laird's books in the exhibition, *Reading Room*, her collaboration with ceramicist Peter Lange at Objectspace in Auckland. It was a clay library for which she made the books and he made the furniture. There were shelves, a table, a chair and a pouffe – all made from bricks. In her review of *Reading Room* ("Direct from the Kiln: Laird and Lange's Clay Library", published in the online journal *EyeContact*) Megan Dunn wrote: "In the age of the smartphone and the iPad, Laird reminds us of the clay tablet, the humble homespun origins of the written word. Books like clay birds are a target. The paperback is threatened with extinction yet again."

Interestingly, Laird is probably better known as an arts writer and academic than she is as an artist. Though that is sure to change when a suite of her sculptures is included in the exhibition, *Freedom Farmers*, which opened in October at Auckland Art Gallery. Curated by Natasha Conland, it includes artists engaging with notions of utopia.

Laird was Senior Lecturer in Contextual Studies at the School of Creative Arts, Manukau Institute of Technology, from 1992 until 2012. In 1996 she was Managing Editor of *Monica Reviews Art*, and from 1997 to 1998 she directed the Physics Room Gallery in Christchurch and was Editor of *Log Illustrated*. This background could lead to an art practice that is highly conceptual, theoretical and even a bit dry. In fact, there's nothing dry or humourless about Laird's art. Rather than seeking to flaunt her impressive and slightly wacky reading list, Laird argues for books as transformative agents. She proposes that knowledge is not only the path to spiritual and intellectual enlightenment, but also a way to laugh, wonder, let your imagination run wild, and most importantly, to have fun.

Her fascination with non-western cultures – Chinese, Indian and South American especially – pervades both her texts and her artworks. In acknowledging that she does, however, recognise the problematical politics of identifying as an Orientalist.

After labouring to re-create her bibliography in clay for three years, she felt a desperate need to escape the horizontal plane. The book form proved the perfect plinth or pedestal for a new series of sculptures that look like devotional objects – rainbow hued, unashamedly figurative and the perfect size to be placed on a book shelf, a mantelpiece, a shine or an altar.

In her exhibition *Chupacabra Candelabra*, in the window of Melanie Roger Gallery earlier this year, the book had 'sprouted' candelabra forms embellished with flora, fauna and – sometimes – human figures. One of these works features two Adam and Eve figures – their genitals concealed behind oversized leaves – crouching on a copy of *Finnegan's Wake*. Above them the branches of the candelabra are decorated with ripe pomegranates splitting apart and spilling their black seeds. Down the trunk of the candelabra slithers a benign looking green serpent. Another 'book' featured in this exhibition was *The Cosmic Serpent – DNA and the origins of Knowledge*, by Jeremy Narby who investigates connections between molecular biology and shamanism. Narby hypothesises that shamans may be able to access information at the molecular level through the ingestion of psychoactive substances such as *ayahuasca*. In this work the candelabra is embellished with serpents and round white orbs that look like boggling eyes.

Snakes and bats make frequent appearances in Laird's art – evidence of her absolute love of and commitment to nature and the natural world, as well as her love of colour and figuration. All these obsessions bring to mind the art of Peter Madden and Francis Upritchard, whose rainbow-



Tessa Laird in her studio. Photo: Xin Cheng

hued, counter-cultural figures first made an appearance in New Zealand in 2008 when they were shown in *Rainwob 1* at the Govett-Brewster Art Gallery.

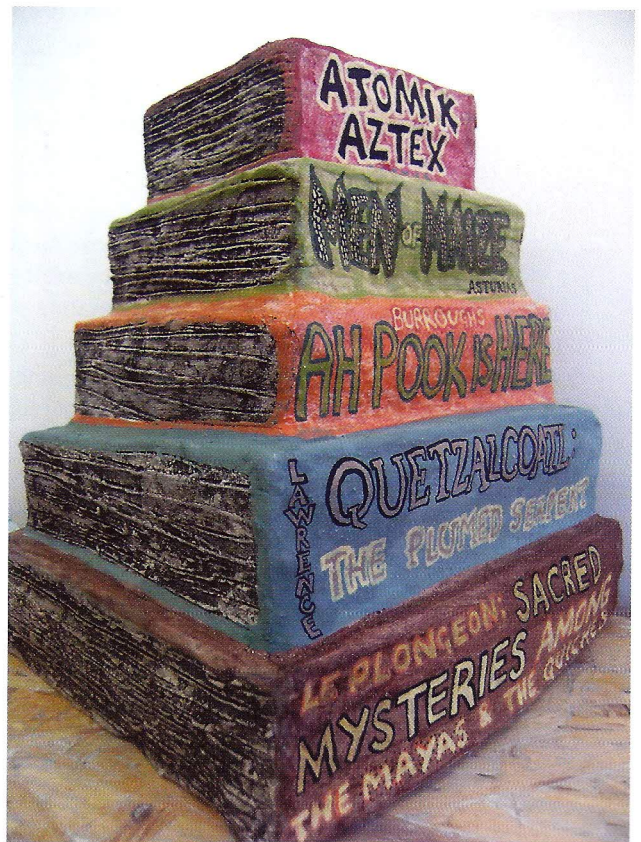
Laird's fascination with bats, which flit frequently through her work, stems from their status as outsiders. Bats consistently enjoy bad press and in many cultures are demonised, hunted and misunderstood. They're New Zealand's only native mammal and are struggling to survive due to the loss of their habitat. Laird sees them as indicators of the way we misunderstand and mistreat nature and the natural world.

The candelabras in *Chupacabra Candelabra* look a lot like Jewish *menorahs* and are similar in form to the universal Tree of Life shape that also finds its way into Laird's art. The Tree of Life is a symbolic form (and in some cultures an actual botanical species) and a concept used in science, religion, philosophy and mythology. Because the Tree of Life alludes to the interconnectedness of all life on our planet and serves as a metaphor for common descent in the evolutionary sense, it makes perfect sense in the utopian context of Laird's art.

In case you're wondering, a *Chupacabra* is a legendary creature rumoured to inhabit parts of the Americas and its name comes from its habit of attacking and drinking the blood of livestock, especially goats. It's the size of a small bear and has a row of spines reaching from its neck to the base of its tail.

Like any reputable shaman, Laird will take you to well-loved, familiar places *and* to those you've never been – perhaps even to some you've never dreamed existed.

*Tessa Laird's work is included in Freedom Farmers: New Zealand Artists Growing Ideas, at Auckland Art Gallery until 23 February 2014. Her book, A Rainbow Reader, is available from Clouds Publishing (clouds.co.nz).*



From top: Tessa Laird: *Ceiba-Wufu*, ceramic, 2013; *Aztexs*, ceramic, 2013