

Tessa Laird

Lord Smoking Squirrel's Cacao Cup: Tessa Laird's Pocket-sized Utopias

It was the absurdity of the title of the small clay book that drew me to it, despite the competing claims for my attention from the lavishly decorated objects in Tessa Laird's installation, Chupacabra Candelabra, earlier this year.¹

The book was propped against a turquoise wall and shared a pink cloud shelf with a menorah-like candelabra festooned with flowers and leaves, with a handsome green snake winding its way up the central candlestick. These objects were joined with other brightly coloured ceramic candelabra adorned with bats, or springing from pyramid-shaped stacks of clay books. One even had a doughy looking Adam and Eve standing beneath a candelabra, doubling as a fruit-laden apple tree with a comical-looking serpent slithering towards them. There were just a few single clay books placed among the candelabra, pyramids and sprouting book-stacks, and it was one of these books that caught my attention.

Lord Smoking Squirrel's Cacao Cup:

The Buena Vista Jauncey Vase, by Jennifer Taschek, featured a cover image of a man holding a bowl, presumably filled with cacao, which he was about to place in the outstretched hands of a carved deity. The design seemed plausible enough, and it was certainly in keeping with Laird's method in recent years of making clay copies of the books she had been reading, but the name Lord Smoking Squirrel threw me, and made me question the accuracy of the facsimile.

people who might be interested in seeking out the real book; as a record of a key idea contained in the text that resonated with Laird; and as a means of isolating a redolent passage and allowing it to simmer in the viewer's mind.

This is what the back of Lord Smoking Squirrel's Cacao Cup has to say for itself:

I have done all in my power to call the attention of American scientists, of the men of leisure & money, to the fact that in New York perfect facsimiles of the palaces and temples of the Mayas could be erected in Central Park, both as ornament to the place, and object of study for the lovers of American archaeology, who may not have the means, nor the time, nor the desire, to run the risk of submitting to the privations & hardships that those who wish to visit the ruined cities, must inevitably encounter.

It is difficult to know whether the combined effect of the altered text on the cover of the book and the carefully selected quotation on the back is designed by Laird to highlight the *vulgarity* of the idea of plopping a perfect copy of a Mayan Temple in the centre of New York for the benefit of those too broke, lazy or busy to seek out the remnants of the real thing, or whether she is actually *charmed* by the idea of such a facsimile, whether or not people may be able to learn more about an ancient culture from it. Is the idea really so spurious, or is it a step towards the kind of multicultural Utopia that Laird created on a small scale in a gallery window in the heart of Hapa Bay, and (on a larger scale)

In her written account of the project, Laird was quick to point out that it was not a 'retro' project, in the sense that it wasn't 'about the slavish revivalism of a single era', but, rather, about 'resurrecting pockets of charm'.²

A parallel can certainly be drawn between the act of creating a little Babylon in the heart of Auckland City and the idea of erecting a Mayan temple in Central Park, which might provide some indication about where Laird positions herself on the subject of the culturally syncretic. As she herself explained it to me recently:

I see the stacks of books as being like the poutama tukutuku at the back of the wharenui, also known as 'stairway to heaven' or 'stairway of knowledge'. Books become like temple steps, Babylonian ziggurats, which lead to great heights. For me ... the sprouting books come down to the revolutionary power of the word, and [the fact] that the cover, title, and mere image of a book, is a kind of mnemonic device for all the information therein.

Certainly, what the Lord Smoking Squirrel book demonstrates is that Tessa Laird's clay books are not all that they seem at first sight, but she is careful to let the viewer make up their own mind about where they stand in relation to the ideas represented.

It is clear, though, that each of Laird's clay books, book-stacks and candelabras has its own visual and textual codex to be deciphered, and this process is part of the acquisition of knowledge, which is the

elicits from viewers is a large part of their appeal. The vibrancy and charm of her installations draws people to them as if they've encountered a miniature Wonderland, or a pint-sized Utopia, but the outward appearance of her clay objects; brightly painted and roughly made to give them a deliberately amateur look, is part of their artifice. Laird's installations certainly have an element of frivolity and humour about them, but that isn't the whole story. If you look closely, the political context of the work begins to assert itself.

The manipulation of visual and textual details on the book covers is one method Laird employs to distort her copies and alter their meaning. In the case of the 'Lord Squirrel' book, for instance, she has omitted a substantial part of the subtitle from the cover. It should read, The Archaeological Context and Socio-Historical Significance of the Buena Vista Jauncey Vase, but Laird has retained only the quirky sounding part of the subtitle, which might lead viewers to assume (as I did), that she had produced a clay facsimile of a work of fiction. In fact, the book is the third volume in a series seeking to decipher the complex codex of visual images on ancient Mayan ceramics. Laird's alteration of the text changes both the genre and the cultural context of the book, but you need to turn her clay book over in order to reveal the reasons for this device.

Many of Laird's books have an extract from the text inscribed on the back of them. These textual fragments appear to function in a number of ways: as proof that the artist has read the book; as a taster for

in her latest installation The Politics of Ecstasy in the exhibition Freedom Farmers at Auckland Art Gallery?

Setting aside my suspicion that the text copied onto the back of this clay book mightn't come from Taschek's book at all, the extract itself, which looked at first glance like some kind of joke, seems less so if one thinks back to an initiative that Tessa Laird and a group of friends undertook in 2005 to rejuvenate a neglected roof garden on top of the former Mount Street studio used by Elam students. The group named the rooftop haven Little Babylon, and this project might be thought of as the first of Laird's miniature Utopias.

ideal that underpins all of the artist's work: a kind of knowledge consumption that she herself has referred to as 'a dialogue between consenting parties across space and time'.

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1
Chupacabra Candelabra, Melanie Roger Gallery, 13 February - 9 March 2013.

2
Tessa Laird, 'Convivial Reconstruction: The Diary of Little Babylon,' in Z/X (2), Manukau School of Visual Arts, Manukau, 2005, p60.



Tessa Laird, The Politics of Ecstasy 2013 (installation detail).
Courtesy of the artist and Melanie Roger Gallery.