When I proposed this paper over a year ago, I had no idea I would be presenting alongside three well-known artists who have each made works featuring little birds. Whether that's a happy accident or a fiendish plan is for the organisers to say but at the very least, I hope you will find it entertaining!

I began this paper as a call to arms, a desperate plea to artists to stop populating the world with little birds. I'd seen enough! Everywhere I turned I encountered one little bird after another. It was like the plague. I began compiling my argument as to why they should die (figuratively speaking), spurred on in my convictions by the seemingly endless uses to which they could be put without actually saying anything, as demonstrated by Portlandia's humorous video "Put a bird on it". What is it with little birds? Why do we return to them again and again and what, if anything, do they tell us?

Like a lot of Australians, I grew up dodging nesting magpies. Living on the suburban fringe near bushland, my ears were full of the calls of rosellas, galahs, cockatoos and kookaburras. Our lounge room walls were adorned with images from John Gould's book, *Birds of Australia* and an early family holiday to Queensland featured a memorable visit to the Currumbin bird sanctuary. Growing up though, I can't say I ever really thought much about the symbolism of birds until perhaps when I was 14 and I bought my Mum a Willow pattern teacup for Christmas. The image of the ill-fated lovers turned into doves appealed to my romantic teenage imagination, as did Thomas Hardy's *The Darkling Thrush* a few years later. Hardy's poem depicting a tiny bird as a harbinger of hope in an otherwise desolate landscape still moves me.

There is a beauty and fragility that attracts us to the image of the little bird (qualities we also associate with ceramics). It reminds us of small things that need caring for and explains why they feature on so many items for babies. There are other obvious associations too such as birds as symbols of freedom and flight, as well as omens of danger. Indeed, the canary in the coalmine, as Gerry has pointed out, seems like an apt image for our times, given the ongoing debate in the media about climate change, species extinction, and the role of human agency in events described as 'natural disasters'.

Nevertheless, when I started probing deeper into the thoughts that brought me to writing this paper, it struck me that the little bird offers something quite interesting to think about in terms of our relationship to nature and to cultural production. My goal in writing became two fold: firstly, to tease out how we see our relationship to nature, focussing on the image of the little bird, and secondly to consider whether ceramic practice is contributing something different to that discussion. Are we contesting the ground and offering something subversive? Can clay do that in ways that other mediums can't? Happily, I think it can, but it is not without its contentions.

As a material, clay has a strong connection to nature, being literally 'of the earth.' There is a language associated with the 'naturalness' of clay, and ways of working with it that emphasises this connection. Yet for most of us, the clay we use is a highly processed material capable of almost limitless industrial and domestic applications. The incredible range of material properties and qualities associated with clay is what draws many of us to it as a medium and something that lends itself, materially and conceptually, to thinking about our relationships to each other and to the world around us in interesting and complex ways. This layering of meaning and ideas through material choices and processes is, I believe, what gives ceramics the potential to engage audiences with critical issues about our being in the world in a way that other forms of contemporary art can not.

Yet, while I have a strong affinity with the idea of clay as a subversive material, it's not something I encounter very often. As a community, I think we struggle with the idea of a critical discourse, never mind a subversive one. I agree with the Ceramics Research Centre in the UK that our practice is 'poorly understood',[1] and that conventional criticism within ceramics is, as the CRC states, 'largely celebratory in tone and exhortatory in intent,'[2] while outside it is largely ignored. That there is virtually no critical forum for robust debate of our medium and practice is something I was frustratingly reminded of while researching this paper.

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[1] Ceramics Research Centre, *Behind the Scenes in the Museum: Ceramics in the Expanded Field*. http://www.westminster.ac.uk/research/a-z/cream/ceramics-research-centre/ceramics-in-the-expanded-field

[2] Ibid.

In the foreword to his book, *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting,* David Revere McFadden writes that to be subversive is "*…to overthrow the status quo from the inside out*." In the book McFadden considers how artists working in areas traditionally identified as craft are radically altering our expectations about the materials they use and subverting conventional ideas about practices associated with their material choices. For McFadden, the resulting artworks reflect *"…more generous and fluid definitions*" of materials and techniques "*…within a much broader and more inclusive definition of art, no longer concerned with the hierarchies and value systems that separate art from craft and design*."[3] McFadden views the hand-made itself as a subversive act, offering an antidote to the "*impersonal nature of digital technologies*" and restoring "*our connection to community, to history*" and to the value of manual labour.[4]

As object-based practitioners, we know this. We understand the power of objects to speak to us about bodies, other objects, and environments. As Peter Schwenger explores in his book, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects*, [5] objects constitute our sense of self and the world around us – they shape and define us, just as we shape and define them. We carry this knowledge of the material world, and our reciprocal relationship to it, in our bodies; it is a lived experience. It is this knowledge that I believe, as artists, gives us the capacity to subvert conventional representations of nature and to engage audiences in more productive ways of thinking about our relationship to the world. Yet my concern is that too often we get carried away with the clay, becoming so seduced by its materiality that this becomes an end in itself. As a compulsive collector of objects, and someone who loves just about anything made of clay, this raises difficult questions for me about sustainability, not only in terms of the environment but also in terms of art practice.

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[3] Ibid, p.9.

[4] McFadden, David Revere (ed.), *Radical Lace and Subversive Knitting* (New York: Museum of Art and Design), 2007, p.8.

[5] Schwenger, Peter, *The Tears of Things: Melancholy and Physical Objects* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press), 2006.

As a society we still labour under a legacy of Enlightenment thought that views nature as something outside of culture, set apart and distinct. Yet our experiences of the world increasingly tell us otherwise. The fear and awe we experience witnessing waves crashing over sea walls and sweeping buildings, cars, boats, and people away in an instant, is palpable. We view these events with shock and horror yet we quickly consign them to the aberrant in nature as a way of dealing with their unpredictability and enormity. In doing so, we seek to regain control over nature, relegating it safely beyond the containment of our garden walls.

In her book *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*,[6] Susan Stewart describes how the picturesque and sublime, represented by the miniature and the gigantic, illustrates this split in Enlightenment thinking between nature and culture. Stewart explains that small things, dwarfed by the landscape of our bodies, draw us in to their intricacies and beauty. Nature framed in this way is undeniably comforting because it allows us to believe we can easily contain it. In contrast, the sublime engulfs us with a terrifying intensity; against this kind of landscape, our bodies are transformed into small entities at the mercy of a force outside our control.

There is no doubt that we live in an age, and at a time, when we need to rethink our relationship to nature beyond these narrative constructs. Watching a documentary about the child survivors of the tsunami that hit Japan in 2011, I was impressed by the insights of an 8-year-old boy interviewed for the program. After experiencing the awful devastation of the tsunami, he thoughtfully remarked that, while many of his friends now think of nature as inherently violent and threatening, he thinks about all the fish that live in the sea that provide him with food and help him to survive. For a young boy who has seen his friends, family and community swept away, it struck me as a far more productive way of understanding our relationship to nature.[7]

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[6] Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press) 1984.

[7] *Children of the Tsunami*, Directed by Dan Reed. Produced by Renegade Pictures, UK for the BBC. Aired March 2012.

Three artists whose work offers audiences something more thoughtful and engaging in this regard are Clare Twomey, Jan Guy, and Gerry Wedd. I became interested in Clare Twomey's practice after visiting the UK on an exchange program to Cardiff School of Art and Design in 2010. My research included visiting museum collections and investigating installation practice so naturally I found myself reading about *Trophy*, Clare's installation held at the Victoria & Albert Museum in London in 2006. Using the blue jasper clay body of one of Wedgwood's famous production lines, Clare made thousands of tiny blue birds (reminiscent of another famous little bird mentioned earlier)[8] and installed them in the Cast Courts of the V&A. Whether visitors to the museum were actually invited to take the birds, or took their cue from others and stole them (perhaps Clare can finally settle this for me!), by the end of the evening the birds were gone, much as a flock might disappear in nature, taken as souvenirs by visitors to the museum. There is a dynamic to the loss of the birds that I find interesting on a number of levels, not the least of which being that many of our museum collections were constituted from stolen artefacts. That aside, the absent birds touch on the loss of species due to extinction and an extinction of a different kind: the decline in ceramic industries and traditions that has occurred in the UK over successive decades. There is also a performative aspect to the installation, enacted by the audience that touches on notions of value as well as loss while quietly subverting the idea of our relationship to museum collections.

A similarly thought provoking work is the installation by Jan Guy and Adam Geczy, titled *An Unnatural History of Nature*, held at the Hazlehurst Regional Gallery and Arts Centre in New South Wales in 2011. The result of this collaboration is a conceptually and materially rich representation of the complex relationships that exist between ideas of nature and culture. The exhibition combined objects, video and photographic images of birds, native and non-native, alive and dead, provoking a dialogue about notions of migration, memory, preservation, colonisation and extinction. Made from the crushed bones of domestic birds (leftover from the Christmas dinners of family and friends), there is literally embodied in the material of these objects a conversation about our relationship to the natural world expressed through both domesticated and 'wild' birds and a parallel and connected conversation about the ceramic

[8] Clare Twomey, 'On the Cusp', *Ceramic Review* 229 (2008): 46-49.

tradition of bone china that is not necessarily extinct, but like the birds it is used to represent, potentially endangered.

Interestingly, Guy and Geczy chose not to represent extinct or endangered species but rather those that are under threat from non-native miner birds common across Australia. In the work native birds are placed in glass bell jars, alongside a jar containing replica toys and a seed bell commonly found in the cages of domestic birds. A nearby table contains fragments of wings and legs piled on top of each other, hinting at the consumption of nature (either as leftovers of a kill, or as with the bones used for the production of the china, a meal). A video, angled across a corner of the installation space, projects a flock of birds wheeling and calling to each other across the sky over Norway. The noisy presence of these wild European birds overlays the quiet stillness of the native Australian birds, cast in skeletal white clay and encased in miniature glass mausoleums.

Gerry Wedd's *Silent Spring,* 2010 offers a sombre and similarly thought-provoking representation of our relationship to nature in a row of delicate porcelain bodies lined up along a gallery floor. There is something truly pathetic and moving about the tiny figures of the birds with their up-turned legs and curling toes, marked off by tape like victims of a crime scene. These are not accidental deaths: the suggestion of human agency in the birds' demise is underlined by the title of the work, which is taken from a book published in the 60s warning against the dangers of pesticides and pollution.[9]

In each of these examples (there are others I would have liked to discuss but have run out of time – such as Mel Robinson's work, *You are My Sunshine* from 2008) there is an intrinsic understanding of the importance of material processes and concepts that is inseparable from the meaning of the work. The all too familiar images of picturesque nature that so often turns the representation of little birds into conceptually vacant tropes are absent. And while it is not hard to find good examples of insightful ceramic practice like the ones discussed above, it is not necessarily easy either. While beauty can be a subversive strategy in it's own right,[10] too often

[9] Gerry Wedd, *Silent Spring* artist statement, Hobart Art Prize, 2010.

[10] Jacqueline Millner, *Conceptual Beauty: Perspectives on Australian Contemporary Art*. Sydney: Artspace, 2010.

our seduction with the materiality of clay overrides a work's content or, worse still, is simply a convenient vehicle for an idea that is applied without much consideration or thought. In a world rife with over-consumption on one hand and extreme poverty on the other, we have a responsibility to be thoughtful and critical about the works we make, especially considering the energy embodied in our practice. It doesn't matter whether it is more or less than other art practices, what matters is that we consider it, and with it our audiences.

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List of images

1. Todd R. Forsgren, *White-crowned Sparrow*, 2012. From the series 'Ornithology'. Archival pigment print.
2. Portlandia*, Put a bird on it*, television series. Directed by Jonathan Krisel. Written by Fred Armisen, Carrie Brownstein, Jonathan Krisel & Allison Silverman. January 28, 2011.
3. J. Gould & H.C. Richter, *Beautiful Wren–Malurus Pulcherrimus*, 1840-1848. Hand coloured lithograph.
4. *Currumbin Bird Sanctuary*, Queensland, 1974. Family photograph.
5. Blue Willow Tea Cup, Johnson Brothers.
6. Thomas Hardy, *The Darkling Thrush* [here entitled 'By the Century's Deathbed'], 1899-90. Autographed manuscript. Pierpoint Morgan Library Department of Literary and Historical Manuscripts.
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8. Clare Twomey, *Trophy*, Cast Courts, Victoria & Albert Museum, September 2006. Photography by Dan Prince. 4000 Blue Jasper Wedgewood clay birds.
9. Jan Guy and Adam Geczy, *An Unnatural History of Nature*, 2011:

   Fired Chicken Bones, 2010. Inkjet print on fine art paper. 90 x 60cm.

   Bird Paraphernalia, 2011. Bone china, found ceramic,decals,wood, acrylic, brass and glass. 46 x 43 x 54 cm

   Scaly-breasted Lorikeet (Trichoglossus chlorolepidotus) (chicken), 2010. Bone china, found ceramic, decals, wood, acrylic, brass and glass. 43 x 43 x 54 cm.
10. Gerry Wedd, *Silent Spring* 2010. Installation view and detail. Porcelain paperclay, cool ice, slips. Dimensions variable.