

I Don't Get Out Much

I'd like to first thank Owen Rye for giving me the chance to come along this week to sit on the panel, '*Notes from the Departure Lounge*.' I've brought with me a few notes from the lounge at home. I don't get out much, so I am enjoying this – and the flight here. By the way, when I'm out shopping, that's what I might say to cashiers, though only half jokingly.... 'I don't get out much.' I like to justify the very large number of goods I can sometimes end up with.

Just let me tell you, when I do find myself out gathering these necessities of living, I can often feel rather uneasy and vulnerable, despite the mild enjoyment to be had pushing the cart. Sometimes, I can have a feeling of fragility come over me – possibly agoraphobia – but it's not wide-open space that gets to me. I think my feelings betray a long-held distaste and mistrust of consumer culture. And while I'm at it, I also have serious concerns with the digital market place, the weird, wild web. If that's culture, then I'm afraid I'm dropping out – again. I can be satisfied just playing at being a land, water and clean-air baron, warm at my personal fire. I'm lucky, but I still do aspire, as many of us might well, to the air-conditioned garage and castle.

As a boy growing up in Canberra and raised a nominal Catholic, I would sometimes find myself sitting inside a confessional box, with a priest in darkness just the other side of the flywire. I was never quite sure what I should be fessing up to, so I made up tales I thought to be suitably innocent. And now that I find myself here before you all in this grand auditorium, I'm again not sure what I should tell, but feel I must confess. OK, I'm subversive. But this is just mud, and we all know how that can stick.

As a youngster, I was often told I had a good imagination. At high school when most of my peers chose commerce, I chose art. I could not imagine what this serious word might mean, and just thought commerce was what aspiring public servants did. I was a stamp collector, so when a ceramics supply store arrived in town, I understood I must now begin to collect all of these novel materials I'd previously been unaware of. They will be called for in a recipe soon enough, I thought. And the recipes were often to two decimal places, and I marvelled at the precision necessary to achieve a good, ceramic melt. I was fourteen and of course, blissfully ignorant of the way of the world, and after two further years of something resembling horseplay, I had filled out a school careers questionnaire, and declared the wish to be a potter. I have not looked back.

Since then, I have sought the personal freedom to eke out a positive and imaginative existence in life, to work my way creatively through it, brushing over commerce. And now I can think of no other material than clay, that can so expansively allow one to explore the outer reaches of the imagination, and hands-on – for many a lifetime. If we were to look down a telescope and follow a stream of light back in time, to around 300,000 years of the big bang, where hydrogen and helium swirl around in abundance, we would see our ceramics materials first transforming from these elements, deep inside

massive nuclear reactions at the centre of stars. And here now, we have them all freely around us, and within us, and of course, bagged on the shelf, labelled and priced. Progress, mining and commerce have gifted us the lot.

So this thing has been with me a long time now. We all do go on and continue to unearth for ourselves what it can mean to walk this path in clay. My feet are quite sturdy, but still I don't understand where commerce might intersect art sufficiently in life, but remain curious.

I guess what I am trying to say, in a round about way, is that I've reached out for what might be possible in terms of firing up materials, without much of a view to exchanging results for remuneration – money. I like to believe this is pure resistance. The results though, do represent ongoing trials; they do continue to hold my personal interest, and I prefer them to remain in harbour to serve me further. They can reveal themselves and over time inform. But I feel I have been reckless enough. I have made sufficient mistakes now to willingly accept discipline. I have simply thought of my work practice as being about gathering up mistakes for later advantage, but I am beginning to see how ageing also requires a more mature approach.

My dilemma for now is how best to split other conflicting purposes – on the one hand vessels and utilitarian objects, and more strongly of late, my growing interest in sculpture, both inside the kiln and that other great testing ground, out in the public realm. I have been developing methodologies through what might be termed kiln sculptures – structures fired in-situ – and not always attempting strong heat. The spectacle alone is often enough to agitate onlookers into a frenzied state of heated excitement. Some of these new ideas are now beginning to be transferred inside, passing through my wood kilns with questionable results, but for now I persevere with pack arrangements involving two very different ways of thinking and firing.

If I were to ever arrive at a place of bliss, it would be the moment I felt I had gathered up enough experience and confidence to pull-off the dream.... kind of what Bernard Palissy attempted in the sixteenth century. I have the estate and the hermitage, and would furnish for the garden a life work – the grotto – a free-form sculpture-kiln, complete with payload. I would locate and reveal a great lode from the cave – naturally, fire-conditioned. Demand would likely remain low, but then, I have always feared life's treadmill.

I would like to acknowledge ongoing support from the NSW Office of Environment and Heritage, who do occasionally get me out with a dedicated team into thousands of hectares of forests, surveying flora and fauna. We try to understand how the koala might just survive the struggle of 21st century commerce. This experience feeds my own very fortunate life and art.

Yuri Wiedenhofer

Tanja

