

# Ancient Medium, Contemporary Forms

*Bricolage, collage, the human form, primitivism and archaeological aesthetics are some of the notions explored in Figure and Ground, a new exhibition examining the use of ceramics and earthenware by contemporary artists. By Rosemary Forde.*



Taking the use of earthenware as an artistic starting point, *Figure and Ground* expands on a number of ideas that seem to hold currency in contemporary art practice. Curated by Jane O'Neill and director Melissa Loughnan, the exhibition is one of many curated projects that alternate with Utopian Slumps' program of shows by artists the gallery represents.

The curatorial collaboration developed from a conversation between Loughnan and O'Neill, a freelance curator who runs a gallery tour business showing tourists and enthusiasts through the upstairs and back-alley galleries of Melbourne's inner city. After bringing tour groups through the shows at Utopian Slumps for 18 months, O'Neill says she was "inspired by Melissa's emphasis on the handmade".

Above: Sarah CrowEST, *Top Dog*, studio shot, mutable arrangement (dimensions variable), 2012. Belgium linen, ceramic, bronze, wood, pseudo-ceramic (air-hardening modelling clay), acrylic medium, papier-mâché, acrylic paint, found ceramic. Photograph: Sarah CrowEST.

## Linden Innovators 1

31 March - 6 May 2012

- Sharon Billinge
- Mark Wingrave
- Betra Fraval
- Julie Shields
- Marc Freeman and Phil Edwards
- Michael Bullock

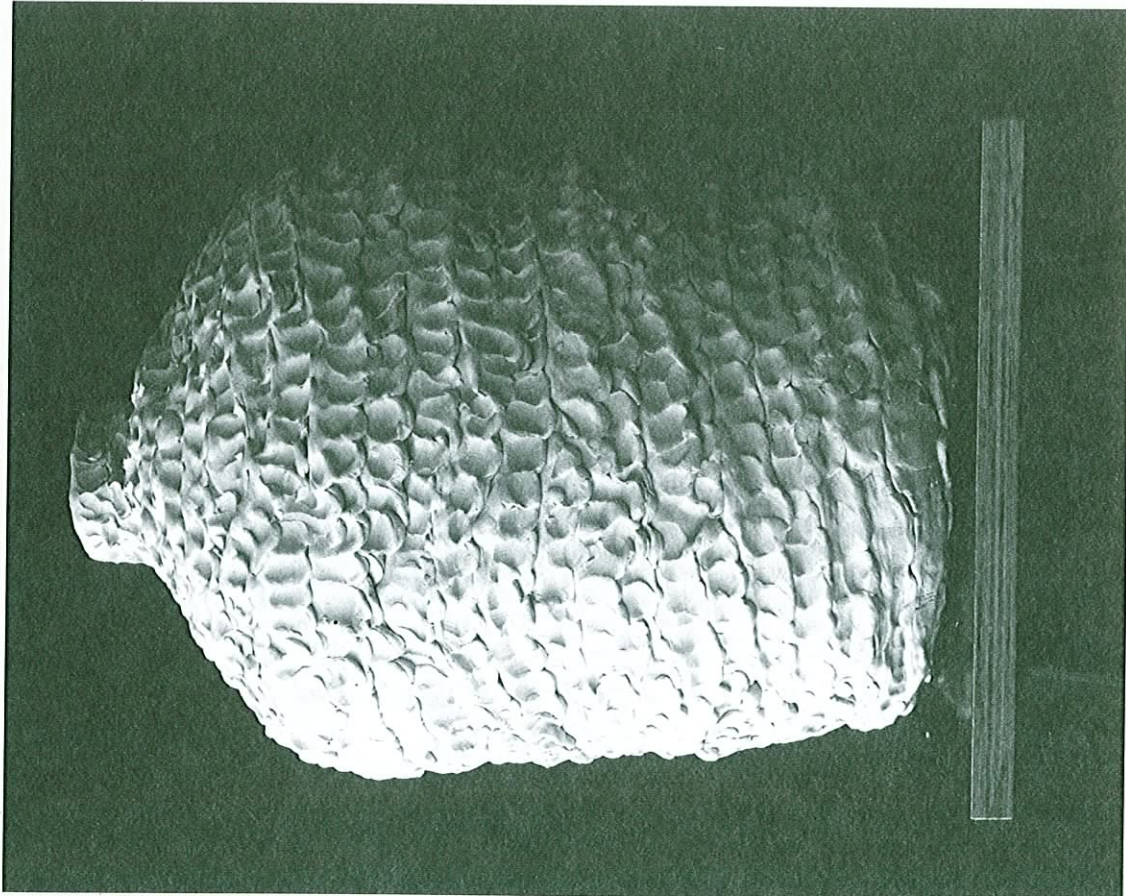
**Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts**

26 Acland Street St Kilda 3182 Australia T 03 9534 0099 info@lindenarts.org www.lindenarts.org

Sharon Billinge  
Sunrise and Sunset (detail)  
2011

Linden Centre for Contemporary Arts





Sanne Mestrom, *Untitled*, 2010, 45cm x 30cm x 30cm, ceramic.



Above: Misha Hollenbach, *Kluster I, II & III*, 2011, stoneware and glaze. Courtesy the artist and Utopian Slumps.

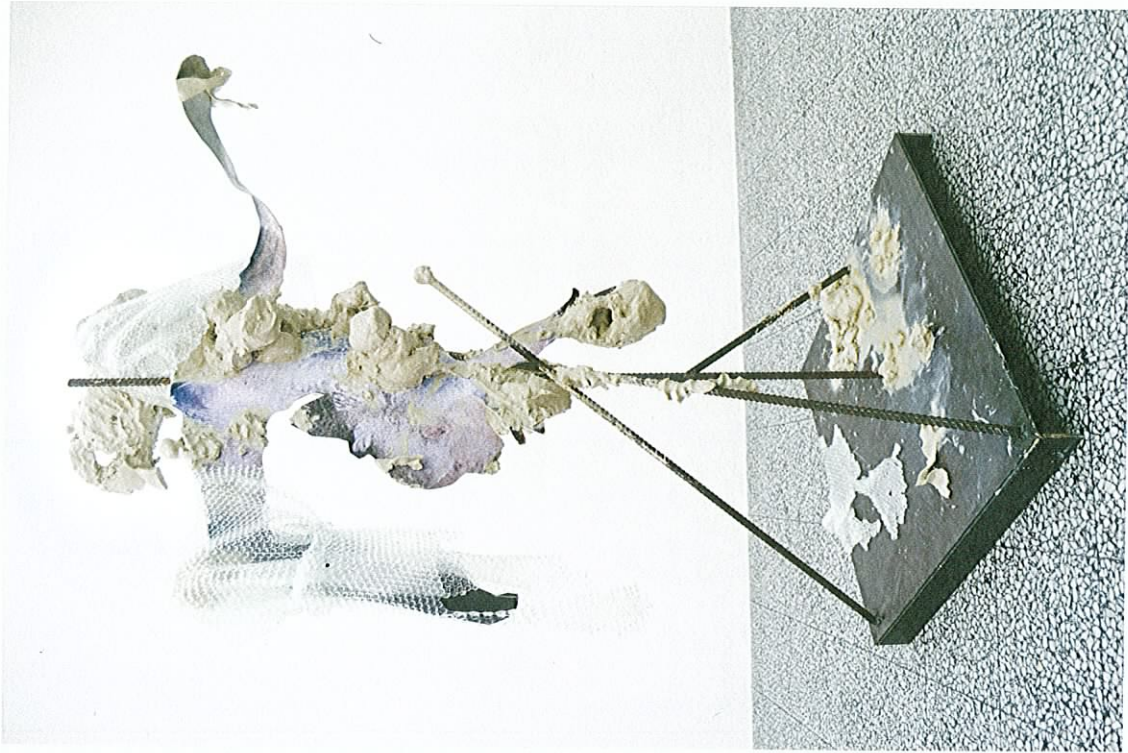
Through ongoing discussion O'Neill and Loughnan developed their shared interest in artists working with clay and other forms of earthenware – either as a generative process or as an element in finished works – into the nexus for *Figure and Ground*.

While the ancient medium of clay is a unifying factor across the exhibition, O'Neill and Loughnan have brought together a group of eight artists working in an expanded field of materials and processes. Aiming to investigate “intersections between ceramics and collage”, the exhibition includes artists who take a kind of bricolage approach to sculpture – incorporating found objects, recreated artworks, synthetic materials, and recycled waste. This combination of natural and found materials is described by Loughnan as a “recycled aesthetic” that she suggests fits the lifestyle of many contemporary artists – “like a bowerbird using what’s at hand and collecting things from their environment.” Such openness to materials and process, first seen in the work of the Italian Arte Povera artists, is an approach that continues among prominent

artists internationally. While superstar Gabriel Orozco has the wherewithal to cut a Citroen in half and stick it back together again (*La D.S.*, 1993), he also exhibits the lumpen leftovers, experiments and small curiosities of his practice in his *Working Tables*, 2000–2005.

## The traditional divide between craft and art has ebbed and flowed since the 1950s.

Of the artists in *Figure and Ground* perhaps Sarah CrowEST’s absurdist take on sculpture utilises this “bowerbird” approach most directly, creating objects with the hand-me-down material leftovers from other artists’ studios, her own morning coffee grounds or whatever else comes her way. Similarly, Rebecca Delange uses plasticine and clay along with sticks, moss and found materials to create works that become the material for later works in an endless process of remaking. Projecting an anti-waste politic of recycling and environmental consciousness onto this



Rob McLeish, *Gravity Stole My Eyelid*, 2011, steel, UV digital print on aluminum, epoxy clay, air drying clay, enamel, cast epoxy resin. Courtesy the artist and Neon Parc.



artistic process is tempting but doesn't stretch to fit the breadth of the exhibition; synthetic materials contrast with natural textures creating, as O'Neill puts it, "some quite unexpected moments of glamour, glitter or gold leaf".

There is, however, a preponderance of allusions to waste – whether it's bodily waste in the case of Misha Hollenbach, or material excess and the slippage between construction and destruction for Rob McLeish. The body, too, is a common reference throughout the exhibition, as the curators have identified the relationship between figure and abstraction as another area of investigation. Noting the way in which Claire Lambe's work isolates and represents body parts, or Marco Chiandetti references the body through performance and interaction with his materials, O'Neill suggests there's a "fairly consistent emphasis on the figurative" – even Stephen Ralph's abstracted forms of wood and terracotta "often look like a figure" or relate to the shape of a torso.

Taking pleasure in the aesthetic and curiosity of archaeology, the curators of *Figure and Ground* plan to reference the process of dig and discovery in the installation of the exhibition, which will be largely

floor-based. The primacy within the show of materials that come from the ground is part of the motivation to place artworks in a low hang – directly on the ground or with a makeshift form of display rather than a gallery plinth or pedestal: "we're trying to de-museumify in a way... [to] remove those museological inferences that you have with earthenware and stoneware," says Loughnan. Describing the installation O'Neill continues, "I like that the physical experience is quite closely linked to discovery – you bend over to discover something. It will be interesting to see how people experience this very textured, earthy material, crouching down or bending over rather than from a distance on a plinth."

Reflecting on the mechanisms of display is common ground for many artists working with sculpture – it's currently seen in works by Hany Armanious, who cast a used and scuffed plinth in his *Birth of Venus*, 2010, and stretches back to Constantin Brancusi and Alberto Giacometti – each who integrated the functionality of the pedestal into their sculptural works. *Figure and Ground* artist Sanná Mestrom has accentuated the plinth in her recent works, elongating them to emphasise their verticality while cutting sections in

Above: Sarah Crowest, *Offerings*, studio shot, mutable arrangement (dimensions variable), 2012, Belgium linen, ceramic, tarmacadam, pseudo-ceramic (air-hardening modelling clay). Photograph: Sarah Crowest

## Alcaston Gallery

11 Brunswick Street, Fitzroy VIC 3065  
 t: 03 9418 6444 e: art@alcastongallery.com.au  
 www.alcastongallery.com.au  
 Tues to Fri 10am–6pm, Sat 11am–5pm, or by appt.  
**6 March to 30 March**

Gary Lee

Galuma Maymuru

In conjunction with Buku-Larrnggay Mulka, NT

**3 April to 4 May**

Barrupu Yunupingu

Artists from Pormpuraaw, Queensland

In conjunction with Pormpuraaw, QLD.

## Alliance Française Eildon Gallery

51 Grey Street, St Kilda VIC 3182  
 t: 03 9525 3463 www.afmelbourne.com.au  
 Mon to Thu 9am–8.30pm,  
 Fri and Sat 9am–6pm, Sun 1pm–6pm.

## Anita Traverso Gallery

7 Albert Street, Richmond VIC 3121  
 t: 03 9428 7557 e: art@anitatraversogallery.com.au  
 www.anitatraversogallery.com.au  
 Wed to Sat 11am–5pm and by appointment.

**Until 24 March**

Launching *AT\_SALON* program for unrepresented artists. Featuring Kane Alexander, Sally Cleary, Kirstin Finlayson, Stefan Gevers, Robyn Hosking, Ted Lincoln (NYC), Kevin-Jo Smith, James Tapscott and Peter Whyte. See website for full details and 2012 submission information.

**28 March to 28 April**

Gallery 1: 12 years since her last solo show in Australia, Munich resident Anne Pincus exhibits new paintings which contrast a subjective experience of place against an objective mapping of landscape.

Gallery 2: *AT\_SALON*

## Anna Pappas Gallery

2–4 Carlton Street, Prahran VIC 3181  
 t: 03 8598 9915 www.annapappasgallery.com  
 Tues to Fri 10am–6pm, Sat noon–6pm  
**15 March to 14 April**

*Extended Foot*

David Palliser

*New Wave*

Billy Gruner and Sarah Keighery.

**19 April to 26 May**

*Don't Just Tell Them, Show Them (Part 3)*

Jesse Marlow

*Pantia Rei*

Paul Yorke

## Anna Schwartz Gallery

185 Flinders Lane, Melbourne VIC 3000  
 t: 03 9654 6131 e: mail@annaschwartzgallery.com  
 www.annaschwartzgallery.com  
 Tues to Fri noon–6pm, Sat 1pm–5pm

**Until 17 March**

*Transfer*

Angela De La Cruz

**22 March to 28 April**

*Layerings*

Jenny Watson

## Ararat Regional Art Gallery

Town Hall, Vincent Street, Ararat VIC 3377  
 t: 03 5352 2836 e: gallery@ararat.vic.gov.au  
 Mon, Wed to Fri 10am–4.30pm, Tues by appointment,  
 Sat, Sun and public holidays noon–4pm

**Until 1 April**

*Floating Forest*

Douglas Fuchs

The 30th-anniversary presentation of *Floating Forest*, a monumental basketry-based installation by American artist, Douglas Fuchs (1947–1986). Exhibition partner: Powerhouse Museum.



Wendy Golden, *Filled pair*, (2010), monofilament, 20 x 12cm, and 20 x 16cm.

**Until 19 March**

*Paired: Woven Forms*

Wendy Golden

Exploring the spatial relationship between woven forms created from both natural and manufactured materials.

**5 April to 12 May**

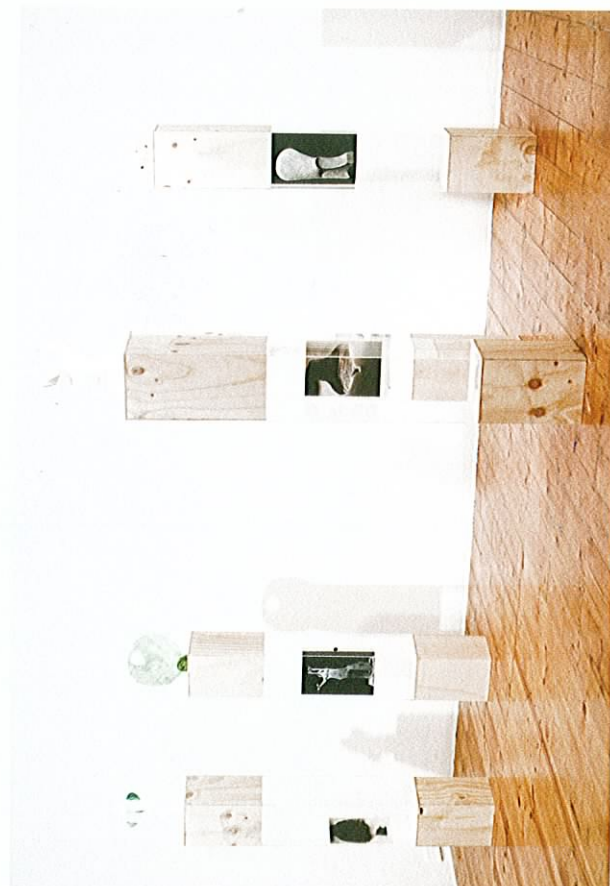
*Ceramics by David Ray.*

**21 March to 7 May**

*Mapless*

Lucy Irvine

Expansive organic woven forms made using industrially produced utilitarian materials, primarily nylon cord, irrigation piping and cable ties.



Perspex to house found images that reference art-historical and museum objects and the conventions of display. In other ceramic works designed for the wall Mestrom has incorporated the functionality of hanging to such a degree that the entire piece is arguably a mechanism of display as much as it is an object of display.

While ceramics and other craft-based art forms have risen in prominence in recent art practice – so much that it feels like we're entering the peak and fade-out phase of a fashion – the traditional divide between craft and art has ebbed and flowed since the 1950s. Curator and writer Robert Cook has described this shifting relationship between art and craft in sitcom terms as like Dharmia and Greg, where “craft is Dharmia to art's Greg; craft is the cool but outright kooky wild young thing ready and wired and care-free enough to take the more buttoned-up

of us down a highway of new thrills and pleasures.”<sup>1</sup> Cook's hypothesis is that in this configuration “craft is the primitivism to art's modernism”.<sup>2</sup> Yet for contemporary artists, the experience of “primitivism” comes already filtered through the appropriations of modernism.

Considering the proliferation of earthenware in recent artistic practice, O'Neill wonders if a return to tribal and primitive references is “born from a kind of apocalyptic fear”, but she notes the contradictory responses: “there is a divide between an altruistic earth-conscious mentality [and] a nihilistic one that's imagining what the earth's going to look like when there's nothing left.”

*Figure and Ground*, curated by

Melissa Loughnan and Jane O'Neill,

runs from 9 March to 31 March at Utopian

Slumps, Melbourne. utopianslumps.com

<sup>1</sup> Robert Cook, *Object Magazine*, August–November 2007, p. 21.  
<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* p.22.

Above: Sanna Mestrom, *Temple* (1–5), 2011, each approx. 160cm x 20cm, ceramic, acrylic, ply, collage.