



# clay on country

ceramics from  
the central desert

## EDUCATION RESOURCE



Artback NT

# INTRODUCTION

This education material has been produced by Artback NT to coincide with the exhibition *Clay on Country, ceramics from the central desert*. It has been designed to engage students with the key artistic concerns and practices of the artists in the exhibition through suggested activities for both the gallery and the classroom and in reference to the National Visual Arts Curricula. We recommend using this resource in conjunction with the *Clay on Country* exhibition catalogue which includes statements from all the exhibiting artists, full colour pictures and introductory essays.

## NATIONAL CURRICULUM VISUAL ARTS

### RESPONDING

- Considering viewpoints of artists and audiences
- Identifying visual conventions
- Investigating societal, historical and cultural contexts for the production of artworks
- Analysing and interpreting artworks

### MAKING

- Using and experimenting with different materials, techniques and technologies
- Exploring different ideas, experiences, observations and imagination
- Engaging with critical and creative thinking to produce artworks that communicate ideas

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# BACKGROUND INFORMATION

# ABOUT THE EXHIBITION

The exhibition *Clay on Country* celebrates the enthusiasm for ceramic practice in the central desert region. It includes the work of twenty-three individual artists and nine collectives, the majority of whom made new work for the exhibition. Some are established ceramic artists, some are reconnecting with the medium after a break, others are incorporating clay as a medium in their practice for the first time. All have produced accomplished, insightful and contemporary works that reflect the culturally and historically rich and complex region where they live.

*Clay on Country* is a survey exhibition meaning that it is an overview of artistic practice rather than a collection of works curated to explore a specific theme or idea. As such, the works included are diverse in their approach and style. However, there are many connections that can be drawn between the different works and practices, and certain themes emerge.

A strong theme is **connection to place**. A number of artists incorporate mapping in their work - whether representing Ancestral journeys, culturally significant places, pastoral land holdings or geological substrata - to tell stories of human interaction with and relationship to place. These works encourage us to think about the impact of settler histories, pressing environmental issues and obligations and responsibilities for caring for Country.

Others respond to the desert environment drawing inspiration from the various plants and animals that inhabit it, the aesthetic qualities of the landforms and the cycles of the seasons. These works have observation at their core and celebrate the diversity and beauty of the desert ecology.

Still others respond to the built environment taking historical and contemporary homes and structures as a starting point to create their work.

A number of artists reference the **symbolic nature of vessels**. Some utilise crockery in their work as found objects or as inspiration for newly created forms. These works reference the domestic sphere and the storytelling potential of cultural patterns and designs. Others draw on archetypal utilitarian forms such as jugs or coolamons to underscore the importance of food and water to a sustainable and resilient life.



A number of artists explore **the human condition**, considering psychological spaces, evoking emotional and visceral responses and drawing on cultural narratives to explain our place in the world. Others communicate a sense of community and connection.

Some artists' work is driven by process - responding intuitively to the quality of the materials they work with. Others work conceptually - driven by research, harnessing process to give form to ideas. The exhibition includes sculptures, vessels, wall pieces and even animations.

Cover image: Claire Freer,  
*Broken Ground* (detail), 2021  
pit-fired wild clay, 690 x 290mm dia

*Clay on Country* installed at Araluen  
Art Centre, Mparntwe, 2022.  
Photo Neridah Stockley.  
Courtesy Artback NT.

# ABOUT CERAMICS

Using clay to make ceramic forms is one of the oldest human inventions. Pottery shards have been recorded in the archaeological record from ancient times providing crucial insight into human activity over thousands of years. Functional ceramic objects have been essential to domesticated life and sculptural and decorative arts have provided an avenue for cultural expression. In contemporary life, ceramics are used extensively for a whole raft of utilitarian, industrial and non-functional purposes, everything from tea cups and toilets to space ships and microchips, as well as artworks.

Historically, due to its strong connection with producing functional ware, working with clay was seen as an artisan practice rather than an artistic practice. Skilled craftspeople produced volumes of ceramic objects in factories, often referred to as potteries, and individual makers were seldomly attributed. More recently boundaries between art and craft have blurred and clay has become increasingly central to contemporary art. Contemporary artists may utilise ceramic practice to make functional and non-functional ware, to create multiples as well as one-off-pieces, sometimes combining both these streams in their work.

Many ceramicists express an attraction to the tactility of clay and describe the process of working with this material as meditative and grounding. Many are also attracted to the endless expressive possibilities of forming, firing and decorating and the technical problem-solving challenges this entails. Some invite chance into the process, and relish accidents and experiments, others engage in meticulously long-winded processes of trial and error to achieve a particular desired outcome.

For all ceramic artists the relationship between form and surface is crucial and a connection to materiality is central to their practice. Ceramicists tend to be passionate and committed to their chosen medium and can often form strong communities around studios, sharing processes and facilities.

## CLAY BODIES - MATERIALITY

Clay is a fine-grained, earthy material that forms as a result of the weathering and erosion of rocks containing the mineral group feldspar (known as the 'mother of clay') over vast spans of time. It occurs naturally in the ground and is extracted and mixed with other substances to make it suitable and reliable for use in ceramic practices and then sold commercially. It is also possible to use 'wild clay' dug directly from the earth without any additives, but the production outcomes can be less predictable than commercially processed clay.

Raw clay is soft and malleable and can be shaped into many different forms. The malleable quality of clay and its ability to retain a shape when moulded is often referred to as its plasticity. Clay is generally prepared for use through kneading, to even out the structural nature of the clay and to eradicate any air bubbles. At this stage it is referred to as the clay body. It is then shaped either by hand, on a pottery wheel or in a mould.

It is important to allow clay forms to dry slowly to avoid cracking or splitting. The stages of drying proceed from wet plasticity through leather hard to bone dry as the water in the clay evaporates. Once the clay form is bone dry it is referred to as greenware. At this stage it is very vulnerable, can crack and break easily, and if exposed to water, will return to its raw form.

To turn greenware into ceramics it needs to be fired. This means exposing it to extreme heat over a period of time, generally in a purpose-built oven known as a kiln fueled by electricity, gas or less frequently wood, but it can also be fired simply using pits dug into the earth or a metal drum filled with woodchips or straw. The firing process leads to permanent structural changes, as the particles melt and flow together to create a single mass, increasing the strength and rigidity of the clay and creating a hard ceramic form. Fired forms will shrink a bit during this process.

The three basic types of clay are earthenware, stoneware and porcelain. Different clay bodies fire at different temperatures and have different qualities.

**Earthenware** fires at a lower temperature (1000-1160°C) and is porous once fired. Terracotta is a popular earthenware clay and is orangish in colour due to its high iron oxide content. Earthenware clays are easy to work with due to their high plasticity but are less dense and therefore more fragile after firing.

**Stoneware** fires at a higher temperature than earthenware (1200-1300°C) and is non-porous when fired. It is more durable than earthenware and is often grey or brown in colour. Stoneware clays may have grog added to them and can seem rough or speckled. Grog is a grit (often pre-fired clay which has been crushed up) added into the clay body to make it easier to work with and less likely to crack as it dries. These clays are sometimes referred to as being groggy.

**Porcelain** fires at the highest temperature (1300°C) and is revered for its fineness, paleness, toughness, strength and translucency. It is possible to get very delicate and strong forms with porcelain but its plasticity is lower than earthenware or stoneware which can make it collapse easily when working with it.

It is important to get the firing temperatures correct. If earthenware clay is fired at porcelain temperatures it will melt. If porcelain is fired at earthenware temperatures it will not vitrify, that is, harden into its ceramic form. Vitrification means that the clay particles have been bonded with glass-like crystals as a result of the extreme heat they have been exposed to. Earthenware is only semi-vitreous when fired so although it becomes hard it remains porous which means it needs to be glazed to make it waterproof.

Clay must be fired at least once to become ceramic but may be fired numerous times to achieve experimental or desired aesthetic outcomes. The first firing is called the bisque firing and once fired the ceramic works are referred to as bisque ware.



Alison Milyika Carroll next to the kiln packed with her works. Photo courtesy Ernabella Artists.





## CERAMIC TECHNIQUES - FORM AND SURFACE

There are many ways to create forms with clay. Clay can be kneaded, prodded, poked, stretched, pinched, perforated, folded, coiled and rolled, cut, joined, stamped, slumped, thrown and manipulated in endless ways to create forms. Central to ceramic practice is using hands as a primary tool to shape and form the work. Many artists speak of the appeal of this tactility, the physical satisfaction and the sensuality of working with the material.

Artists can hand build unique one-off pieces or use wheel throwing or slip casting processes to create multiple similar forms. They may focus on a particular technique or clay body or works across many. They may adhere religiously to age-old techniques and aesthetic perceptions of good practice or throw technical concerns to the winds and test the boundaries of what was once considered 'quality' work.

Broadly speaking the relationship between form and surface is fundamental to ceramic practice.

Some artists prefer to leave the clay surface in its raw fired state, others employ any number of decorative techniques to add designs, colours and finishes to the surface. There are endless possibilities. Some techniques used in *Clay on Country* are described below and in the **Making with Clay** section.

Rolling a coil. Photo Tobias Titz. Courtesy NGV and Hermannsburg Potters.

Making a pinch pot. Photo Tobias Titz. Courtesy NGV and Hermannsburg Potters.

## FORM

Basic techniques to create form include hand building, wheel throwing and slip casting. Ceramicists may prefer one technique over another or work across many. They may even combine all three techniques in a single work.

### HAND BUILDING

- **Pinch pots** – starting with a palm sized ball of clay, creating a central well with your thumb and pinching and stretching the clay out to form a small vessel.
- **Coiling** – using the flat spread of your hands to roll long even coils of clay. These can be wound around in a circular form and joined one on top of the other to make vessel shapes. Coils are also used as a general joining technique.
- **Slab building** – rolling the clay into flat sheets of an even thickness which can then be cut into shapes and joined together (often using a coil) or slumped across convex shaped models or pressed into concaved moulds to create forms.
- **Sculpting** – using a combination of techniques to create forms. Large sculptural forms need to be hollowed out so that the clay is not too thick. Closed hollow forms will need a small hole somewhere to allow hot air to escape in the firing process.



## WHEEL THROWING

Wheel throwing is the process of shaping clay on a pottery wheel. Pottery wheels have a large flat circular surface, often referred to as the wheel head, that spins when activated by a foot pedal. Generally, they are powered electrically but they can also be pumped manually, a little bit like driving a car as opposed to riding a bike.

The ceramicist will make a sizable ball of clay and slap it down hard on the centre of the wheel head and then seated at the wheel use the foot pedal to control the speed at which it spins. Throwing usually involves a few steps from the beginning to the end to make a vessel. These are centring the clay in the middle of the wheel, creating a well in the clay to open it out, stretching the clay vertically to pull up the walls, and collaring to give it a finished rim or lip. The ceramicist shapes the vessel using their hands on the inside and outside of the pot simultaneously.

Throwing a pot is faster than coiling a pot and enables volumes of work to be produced. A production potter will be very skilled at producing lots of close to identical pots.

**Watch Marissa Thompson throwing a pot in the studio at Ernabella.**

## SLIP CASTING

Slip is made by adding water to clay to create a thick liquid with a consistency a bit like cream.

To make slip cast work the artist first creates a mould, most often from plaster, and then pours the slip into the mould filling it to the brim. The slip starts to set from the plaster edge first and once the desired thickness of wall is achieved the rest of the slip is poured out. Then the slip form is left to dry thoroughly before removing it from the mould.

Slip casting is especially useful when wanting to make multiples of the same object or wanting to replicate a favoured vessel or found object.



Tjimpuna Williams using the sgraffito technique on a wheel thrown vessel.  
Photo courtesy Ernabella Artists.



## SURFACE

**Underglazes** are commercially produced liquid paints developed specifically for painting onto ceramics. They come in a range of colours and can be mixed with water to create different consistencies much like watercolours, gouaches or acrylics can be, and may also be mixed together to create different colours. Underglaze colours stay pretty much the same before and after firing. They can be left raw or covered in a clear gloss glaze to make them shiny.

**Oxides** are powdered mineral compounds that come in a small range of colours, similar to naturally occurring ochres. They can be mixed into clay bodies to colour the clay or rubbed or painted onto the surface of leather hard forms. Sometimes they are referred to as stains. Oxides will change colour once fired.

**Glazes** are used to protect and seal the surface of ceramic works. Glazing involves painting, dipping, or spraying raw glaze onto bisque fired pottery and then firing at a high temperature. During the glaze fire, the glaze melts and then hardens forming a glassy layer over the pottery. Glazes are produced commercially in a range of colours and finishes from matt to glossy, opaque and translucent or with special textured effects like crackling. Some ceramicists like to make their own glazes. Glaze recipes can be hugely technical, involve a lot of trial and error and can become highly guarded secrets.

Glazes can look very different before and after firing and react differently when used with different clay bodies. There are also clear glazes that can be added as a transparent matt or glossy coat over raw clay or oxides or underglazes to create a desired finish. The glazing possibilities are endless.

**Slip** that is used for casting can also be used to decorate works. The slip can be painted onto the surface of a work or the whole work can be dipped into a bucket of slip. The thin layer of clay slip acts like a veneer, or a skin, over the original form. Slips can be coloured by adding powdered stains or oxides to the mix and can be applied to leather hard greenware or bisque ware.

**Sgraffito**, derived from the Italian word to scratch, refers to a technique where a slip or glaze is applied to the surface of a ceramic work and then scratched through to reveal the clay surface beneath. The artist can incorporate fine line work like this but also scratch off larger areas. The sgraffito technique is best utilised on leather hard greenware.

**Mishima**, also known as **Inlay**, likewise involves scratching into the clay to create a design. Once the line work is drawn a layer of coloured slip is painted over the drawn area which is then carefully sponged or scraped back so that the coloured slip is removed from the flat surface but remains in the incised linework. This requires the clay to be at a leather hard stage.

**Decals** refer to a transfer system that is used to apply pre-printed images or designs to ceramic surfaces using a water slide and heat release paper. Any hand drawn or printed image can be processed as a transfer and used in this way. Designs can also be handcut from sheets of flat colour transfer paper. Once transferred to the surface the ceramic object needs to be fired to affix the decal permanently.

**Ceramic pencils** are specially produced pencils that enable artists to draw onto the surface of their works.

Painting glaze onto hand built letter form.  
Photo Jo Foster.  
Courtesy Artback NT.





**Firing** can also contribute to surface decoration. Electric kilns are a popular choice for their 'set and forget' nature and fairly predictable results but gas kilns, which use a flame as opposed to an electrical element, allow the possibility to manipulate the firing experience. A reduction firing (meaning a reduced oxygen firing) is possible in a gas kiln and can effect the colour and texture of glazes and oxides.

Even more random or unpredictable results can be obtained through pit firing which is possibly one of the oldest methods of firing clay. Pit firing does not involve a kiln. Instead, a hole is dug in the ground that is deep enough to contain some combustible materials like wood, sawdust, and leaves. The ceramic pieces are nestled in the pit surrounded by flammable material which is then set alight and left to burn. Once the fire has burnt itself out and cooled the pieces can be removed. Charred markings often occur across the surfaces due to close proximity of the flame from the burning materials and the reduction in oxygen and fuel. Accepting the chaos and unpredictability of this approach is part of the appeal.

I am drawn to pit-firing.  
There is something  
elemental and intuitive to  
it that becomes part of an  
artistic dialogue where you  
are not always the boss.

- Bronwyn Field



Pit fire blazing in  
Irryuntju Community.  
Photo Claire Freer.

Pit fired works in the ashes,  
Irryuntju Community.  
Photo Claire Freer.

# MAKING WITH CLAY

When making a work artists make decisions about what sort of clay body and what sort of techniques are best used to create the form, and how to treat the surface - whether to decorate it or whether to leave it raw. All these small decisions have a big impact on the aesthetic and conceptual qualities of the final works, the message conveyed and the viewers' experience of the work.

Artists can strive to control particular outcomes or invite accident. Opening the kiln is a highly anticipated 'moment of truth' which can bring welcome surprise or equally deflating disappointment. Most ceramicists acknowledge that being comfortable with disappointment is part of ceramic practice. Some say this is the challenge that keeps them intrigued to keep making and keep learning.

The artists in *Clay on Country* may utilise some similar basic techniques yet the outcomes are diverse stylistically.

It's beautiful to work with clay. It's a lovely feeling in your hands.

- Mrs Kunmutjayi Inkamala

I like the rhythm of making and joining the coils and letting it grow. It is very meditative and relaxing.

- Angela Abbott

I like that ceramics forces me to become comfortable with, and even expect, failure.

- Em Frank

The techniques I use are thousands of years old — coil building with terracotta.

- Anne Mosey



## TO SHINE OR NOT TO SHINE

### MUTITJULU ARTISTS

The artists at Mutitjulu made a series of owls.

They rolled out slabs of stoneware clay and wrapped them around a central core of newspaper to create the basic hollow form. Then they moulded and shaped the form, adding extra bits of clay where needed, to sculpt the finished pieces.

To add colour to the surface of the sculptures they painted them with oxides. The oxides create a raw, rustic, chalky surface which makes the objects feel like they are very old and weathered. A bit old and wise like the owls.

Janice Carroll, *Owl*, 2021  
230 x 130mm dia

Samantha Brumby, *Kuur-kuur/Boobook Owl*, 2021  
220 x 155mm dia



### ENGAWALA ARTISTS

The artists at Engawala also made birds.

Smaller in scale they were fashioned from a ball of clay manipulated and hollowed out to make the body shape. Then tails and beaks and feet were added to the main form. Two of the birds are sitting on upside down pinch pots. The other is sitting on a branch made from a coil.

To add colour to the surface they painted them with underglazes and oxides and then covered them with a clear gloss glaze. The clear glaze deepens the colour and creates a shiny, glistening surface. It animates the birds and makes them seem chirpy.

Leanne Dodd, *Yellow Throated Minor*, 2021  
150 x 170 x 170mm

Lisa Kunoth, *Splendid Fairy Wren*, 2021  
160 x 140 x 115mm

Moesha Lee Tilmouth (Glenn), *House Sparrow*, 2021  
180 x 160 x 125mm





## FLAT SLABS

### NERIDAH STOCKLEY

Neridah made a series of vessels inspired by the historic buildings at Hermannsburg Cultural precinct.

She rolled out flat sheets of clay, cut them into shapes and joined the edges together with coils to make her final 3D forms. They are called slab constructions.

She used black underglaze and experimented with different qualities of washes to paint on the surface. She also used a ceramic pencil to make drawn marks. The imagery reflects the shapes shadows, details and angles of the built environment.

Neridah chose to use a porcelain clay for its pale even quality.

The surface is a bit like paper or card and also a bit like the white washed walls of the buildings that inspired them.

*Hermannsburg Corners, 2021*  
approx. 120 x 400 x 150mm

### ILTJA NTJARRA ARTISTS

These works were made by rolling slabs of terracotta clay into organic shapes which were then coated with white underglaze and fired to create ceramic plaques ready for painting.

The artists at Iltja Ntjarra used coloured underglazes to paint onto the plaques. They painted images of places that are meaningful to them. The rounded shapes of the plaques are like thoughts bubbles representing memories of places.

The artists used soft colours and didn't cover the plaques with a shiny glaze so they had a gentle, dreamy feel and resembled the matt surface of their watercolour paintings.

*We hold our country in our hearts and minds, 2022*  
Installation approx. 1110 x 1900mm



## COIL UPON COIL

### ANGELA ABBOTT

Angela made a large pot using a coiling technique. Rolling long thick coils with the flat of her hands and then coiling them around in a circular fashion starting from the base. She joined each new coil to the one below, slowly and carefully building the form up, smoothing the surface out along the way.

She made the lizard separately and joined it on using a clay slurry. Slurry is made by mixing clay with water to form a thick paste and is used a bit like glue. Afterwards she used a black underglaze to paint designs onto the surface of the lizard and the pot inspired by the patterns she sees around her in the desert.

Angela used a clay called BRT which is a very rough, groggy clay. The clay has flecks of trachyte in it which sparkle when fired and is reminiscent of the stoney quality of the rocky ranges where these lizards like to live.

*Goanna Vessel, 2015*  
470 x 300mm dia



### BRONWYN FIELD

Bronwyn created this figurative sculpture by making a number of separate pinched and coiled pots which she joined together with yet more coils to build up a tall bulbous form. After that she pierced holes through the work with rusty found wire to create a dynamic effect.

She painted the work with oxides and underglazes and then put it in a pit firing. Unlike firing clay works in a kiln, where the temperatures can be pre-set and controlled, a pit fire uses wood as the fuel to create the heat and can be unpredictable and uneven. Where there is an excess of oxygen dark burnt areas appear on the surface. Bronwyn's choice to pit fire her work has created a dark, smoky, moody feel.

*Carer, 2021*  
480 x 340 x 410mm

# SLIPPING AND SCRATCHING

## ANNE MOSEY

It looks like Anne may have made this work from slabs but actually it is hand built using coils. Anne has covered the terracotta form with a white slip and then used the sgraffito technique to create the design.

Slip is made by adding water to clay to create a thick liquid with a consistency a bit like cream. The slip can be painted onto the surface of a work or the whole work can be dipped into a bucket of slip. The thin layer of clay slip acts like a veneer, or a skin, of colour over the original form.

Using sharp tools Anne has drawn through the slip, carefully scratching and scraping it away to reveal the clay beneath creating a strong contrasting two-tone graphic.

*Shed I*, 1986  
500 x 300 x 60mm



## RUPERT JACK

Rupert has also used the sgraffito method.

Whereas Anne has kept the surface of her work relatively flat, Rupert has dug into the surface creating a highly textured appearance which sits well with the organic nature of the hand built form.

The winding, undulating ruts carved into the surface evoke the furrowed textures of tracks in country and relate to the cultural practice of milpatjunanyi, drawing in the sand with fingers or sticks to tell stories. Rupert has drawn a different design on either side of the vessel but they relate to the same story.

*Kaltu Kaltu/Seeds*, 2018  
280 x 40 x 175mm





## CRAZY GLAZING



### MIKAILA RODGERS

Mikaila has made a series of small coiled vessels but in many ways she is more interested in the surface than the form.

She covers her vessels with layers and layers of thickly applied, differently coloured glazes and fires them multiple times. Her approach is very experimental and relies to a large degree on chance. The bubbling and cracking and pitting of the glaze which may make another ceramicist despair is what delights Mikaila.

These highly textured, encrusted little forms are all about excess. They are alluring but also somehow alarming. Mikaila wants to evoke an emotional response.

*Untitled, 2022*  
vessels approx. 205 x 90 x 90mm



### GRETEL BULL

Gretel has made a vessel that is not a vessel, that is, it is a container that can't hold anything. It is useless in a utilitarian sense but potent in a symbolic sense.

To create the form she placed a lump of clay on her palm and then closed her fingers around it into a fist shape, squeezing tightly. When she unfurled her hand she was left with an impression of her clenched palm. She made a number of these elongated squeezed forms and then joined them together to create this lace-like vessel shape. There is a sense of fragility to this delicate form but also a strength evoked by the silent solidarity of all the clenched fists.

Gretel is interested in Greek mythology and how these cultural stories encode human relationships with nature. She has dipped her work in a highly lustrous glaze which seems to evoke the gilded world of the gods but also the materialistic greed that threatens the natural world.

*The Space Inside a Clenched Fist, 2022*  
425 x 220 x 190mm



# FOUND AROUND

## TARA LECKEY

Tara hasn't created a ceramic artwork from clay she has created an artwork using found ceramic pieces.

She collected fragments of broken crockery from the ruins of an old abandoned homestead and mosaiced them onto found camel and cow bones. She is interested in the symbolism of the broken crockery, the cultural stories embedded in the surface decorations as well as the historical story connected to where they were found.

By combining these found objects together she creates new stories that encourage us to reflect on old stories.

*Remains I-III, 2021*  
320 x 115 x 90mm, 140 x 530 x 120mm, 130 x 355 x 115mm

## YARRENTY ARLTERE ARTISTS

Artists working at Yarrenyty Arltere have also incorporated found crockery in their work. They have overlaid the patterned surfaces of plates collected from op shops and flea markets with their own designs.

The quirky, black silhouettes are hand-cut decals transferred to the plates and fixed permanently to the surface through heating in the kiln. Many of the original designs on these plates would also have been affixed using this transfer process. Layering the designs together encourages the viewer to look again at these cultural patterns.

*Merne (Food) plates art plates now, 2021*  
collection of 32 plates, installation approx. 1900 x 175mm



# WORKING TOGETHER

## HERMANNSBURG POTTERS

The artists at Hermannsburg Potters have collaborated on a large pot that they made specially for the exhibition. It's the first time they have worked together like this and it's the biggest pot they have ever made. They used terracotta clay and the coiling process to hand build the form.

When the pot was complete and the clay leather hard they rubbed the surface with the back of a spoon. This process of burnishing makes the surface nice and smooth for painting on and also gives it a mild glossy sheen.

Thirteen artists worked together to paint a story about the cycle of the seasons on the curved surface with underglazes. They used the graphic of the river winding around the pot to connect the story visually. A small sculptural element was added on top of the lid.

*Antala-iperra/weather*, 2022  
550 x 390mm dia



## ERNABELLA ARTISTS

Artists at Ernabella also collaborated but this time each artist worked on a separate piece that they displayed together as an installation. The collection of works reference the forms of wooden vessels made and used for collecting and carrying food and water. Arranged together they tell a story about surviving and thriving in the bush.

The artists chose a dark stoneware clay which gives the forms a bold, silhouette quality and is also reminiscent of the charred wood of camp fires.

*Wankaru/Surviving*, 2019  
installation approx. 150 x 500 x 400mm





## MAKING IMPRESSIONS

### SUZI LYON

Suzi has created a work inspired by community. Over a series of weeks she pressed a small piece of clay into the palms of people she encountered, both friends and strangers. In effect she was using the cupped palms of these people as a press mould. She made hundreds of these palm print portraits.

Suzi chose to use porcelain, which is a very malleable and fine grained clay, so that it would pick up the subtle markings and folds of skin. Porcelain is also very strong and translucent when fired.

Once fired Suzi placed these small cupped palm portraits upside down on the surface of a lightbox and backlit them to expose all the fine detail. Suzi wants us to contemplate both our commonality and our uniqueness.

*My Town, 2014*  
140 x 1085 x 700mm

### SALLY MUMFORD

Sally also used clay to make an impression. She mixed terracotta clay with water to make a slurry and then used this as a clay paint.

Watering the clay paint down she added washes of terracotta colour to the surface of a number of sheets of Whenzhou paper. This paper is made from mulberry tree fibres and is very strong but very fine.

Then using a cut potato and a thicker slurry paint she stamped circular shapes in a regular pattern over the top of the washes.

Later she took this pre-prepared Whenzhou paper out bush and layed it on top of a putu – a hard, flat, circular, clay pavement made by termites – and made an impression of the surface by rubbing it using sticks of soft graphite. This process of rubbing is called frottage.

*Putu Frottage, 2021*  
2400 x 1200mm

The key is to integrate form and surface somehow conceptually.



*Territory (1)*  
wheel thrown porcelain, decals  
105 x 125mm dia

*Australian Pastoral (1-3), 2023*  
wheel thrown porcelain, stoneware and terracotta  
90 x 120mm dia, 160 x 130mm dia, 120 x 115mm dia



*Fenced (1-3)*  
wheel thrown stoneware, bronze glaze, decals  
180 x 150 x 12mm, 130 x 160 x 120mm, 180 x 170 x 130mm

cartography  
history  
decal  
conceptual



# MEL ROBSON

Mel has used the pottery wheel to throw a number of vessels that are similar in shape and size, creating a collection of objects that work in relationship to each other. They form a body of work.

She has used decals to transfer imagery onto the surface of the objects to tell a particular story of place. The decal imagery is sourced from maps that depict the property boundaries and subdivisions of pastoral holdings in Central Australia. The cartographic graphics lay flat across the smooth surface of the cylindrical forms.

Words such as 'territory', 'pastoral', 'unoccupied', 'vacant land', 'waste lands' taken directly from the maps signal a colonial perception of the land. She has also made small repetitive perforations in some vessels, using a sharply pointed tool, mimicking the stippling techniques used on maps to represent different areas or qualities of land.

Mel has chosen clay that responds to the colours of the desert landscape - the terracotta of the ranges and red soils, the paleness of the sands and ghost gums in the river beds and the charcoal of burnt trees and campfires. There is also a connection to the parchment of old hand drawn maps that she viewed in archival holdings.

Her archival research led her to understand that once the technology for creating metal posts was refined fences went up very quickly across the country and the boundaries on the paper maps took on a physical presence in a way they hadn't previously.

Through a long process of trial and error she developed a glaze specifically to evoke the quality of rusted metal to reference the impact that this new building material had on the landscape and on delineating ownership and control.

*Initially I loved the idea of making things that were useful and functional. I still love doing that but it is not necessarily the main focus of my practice now. Over the years it has shifted to thinking about what utilitarian objects can speak to beyond simply utility.*

*My ceramic practice centres around ideas of place and identity and the ways in which histories, stories and associations can become embedded in everyday objects. There is always an historical element to what I make. Creating connections between the past and the present is something I am drawn to as a way of understanding.*

*My creative process usually begins with a strong research component. Often it will be a story I hear, or an idea that takes root, and then I will be on the net, delving into archives, speaking to people, learning more about what has peaked my interest and amassing a whole lot of research material including text and imagery.*

*Living in Mparntwe has made me look at the history of this country in an entirely different way. When I first moved here and was trying to understand where I was living it lead me to explore mapping.*

*Maps represent place but they also represent power. They tend to serve the purpose of the maker and although they become an accepted and embedded part of how we look at land and place, and can be very alluring visually, they inevitably hide, ignore, or misrepresent. We would do well to continually question these representations of place. Beyond the surface markings, there are other stories, other interpretations and other histories.*

*I generally start with a bit of a vision of what I want something to look like and what I want it to say and then there is a very long process of actually figuring out how to get to that point. A lot of testing, a lot of disasters, which can be incredibly frustrating, but through that trial and error process you learn so much.*

*The key is to integrate form and surface somehow conceptually. I lean towards simplicity. I don't want the form to overwhelm the surface decoration and vice versa. It is important to find the right balance. Alongside making all the forms I am also glaze testing and experimenting with the surface of the works. The research I have done continues to filter through in that process. The research and the making inform each other. It's a bit of a dance.*

*The metallic glaze I used on these works was a real challenge to achieve. There are so many variables even when you follow a tried and true recipe. It can be a massively time consuming process to get what you want. For that particular glaze it was the firing process that was crucial. I learnt along the way the key was to fire them twice - high and then low. The thickness of application also made a huge difference - too thick and the result is gaudy and gold, too thin it comes out flat and too dark.*

Ngayuku warka, ngayuku culture / My work is my culture.



*Seven Sisters I, 2021*  
hand built stoneware, underglaze, sgraffito  
615 x 300 x 250mm



*Seven Sisters, 2021*  
hand built stoneware, underglaze, sgraffito  
430 x 345 x 200mm

**Tjukurpa  
Country  
Kungarangkalpa  
sgraffito**

# TJUNKAYA TAPAYA

Tjunkaya's works are hand built using the coiling method which gives the surface an organic and irregular feeling reflecting the qualities and textures of the natural environment.

She has employed the sgraffito technique, using a sharp tool to inscribe cultural iconography and written text in Pitjantjatjara language into the surface of the vessel.

Kungkarangkalpa means the Seven Sisters. This is an extensive cultural story that traverses Australia. Tjunkaya and her female relatives are privy to the part of the story which takes place in the country near Pukatja/Ernabella where the man called Nyiru is chasing the sisters. He tries to catch them by using magic to turn himself into the most tempting bush foods and shade trees. Eventually, to escape Wati Nyiru, the sisters fly into the sky where they turn into stars and form the Kungkarangkalpa/Pleiades constellation.

On her vessel Tjunkaya describes the bush foods and trees of her Country. This is the same food that the Ancestral sisters would have enjoyed on their journeys.

Punu nyangatja ini wanari, kala punu nyanga palula tjala tjawara uralpai.

*The name of this mulga tree is wanari, and it is from beneath this tree that we dig for tjala honey ants.*

Punu nyangatja mai kampurarpa nganana mantjira ngalkula paltja nyinapai mai nyangatja putitja.

*From this plant we gather kampurarpa desert raisins to eat and get a good meal.*

Kuwarina punu nyanga palunya wangkanyi. Itara nyangangka maku kutjara, palkapiti munu unganangu, ka nyalpingka ngapari kala nyanga tjananya mantjira ngalkupai.

*I am now referring to this tree. This itara river red gum has two kinds of edible maku grubs inside it, palkapiti and unganangu, and from its leaves we can gather sweet ngapari scales to eat.*

Ka punu nyanga palula nyalpingka ngapari. Tjuta ngarapai kala mantjira ngalkupai.

*On this tree is more ngapari on the leaves. It is very abundant and we collect lots of it to eat.*

Ka maku palkapiti punu katu ngaripai.

*Maku palkapiti grubs are found high inside the trunk of the tree.*

Punu ngangatja ini itara, ka punu nyanga palula maku iwiringka tjawara mantjilpai munula paura ngalkupai.

*The name of this tree is itara, the river red gum, and it is from its roots that we dig out maku grubs to cook and eat.*

*My work is my culture. My Tjukurpa (Ancestral Stories) features in most of my works. I could never depict someone else's Country, and I could never present someone else's Tjukurpa. But I can depict my own Kungkarangkalpa (Seven Sisters) Tjukurpa, which goes from Atila, close to my birthplace, to Cave Hill.*

*I have an affinity with clay from the earth, especially sometimes clays (terra sigillata) that have come from places like claypans [Tapaya's Country includes significant claypan sites]. Using this material from the earth I create works of art, objects of culture and beauty. It is enduring and robust, and it can be used on beautiful bowls and vessels. We have learned how to create many kinds of forms, some reference our traditional vessels and cultural sites.*

*I often inscribe this story onto my ceramics [in language] and also mark into the surface of the clay designs that represent these stories. I also tell these stories with paint on canvas.*

NESS SIM

FOCUS WORK

Working with clay is a cathartic practice that allows me to begin untangling what living climate change looks like.



*Groundwaters - Water is a Connected System (Beetaloo), 2022*  
hand built midfire clay, ceramic stain, underglazes  
365 x 250mm dia

*Groundwaters - Velkerri Formation, 2022*  
hand built terracotta, ceramic stain, underglazes  
240 x 230mm dia

archetype  
allegory  
solastalgia  
inlay



# NESS SIM

Ness has drawn on the forms of some age-old vessels – the ola and the chorrera – to tell a story about the significance of water and the threat posed to pristine ancient aquifers through fracking.

These water carrying and storage vessels, central to domestic and agricultural life for millennia, occur extensively in the archaeological record and are widespread geographically. Ness utilises the symbolic and fragile nature of these vessels to encourage us to think about how water flows and connects across vast areas, and how it is distributed and contained in naturally occurring catchment and river systems. She draws our attention to the interdependence and fragility of these systems.

To make the vessels she rolled out a slab of clay and pressed it into a concave mould to form the rounded bases and then built up the form from there using coils. Once the vessels were leather hard she decorated the surfaces with maps and diagrams of a specific water system in the Northern Territory that is under threat from gas extraction.

She used a sharp tool to inscribe the linework of the diagrams into the clay surface and overpainted this design with different coloured underglazes. Then she carefully scraped back the excess underglaze from the surface leaving the colour in the incised lines. This technique is called inlay and allows for very fine linework.

An earlier title for this pair of works was solastalgia, meaning an emotional distress caused by environmental change.

*There is an extremely long history of ceramics in human life and as a ceramicist I feel connected to the continuum of this craft and this practice. I find myself drawn to quite simple archetypal forms and am fascinated by the different functions of ceramics over time.*

*Thinking about the groundwater out here turned me to thinking about fracking. The more that I found out about the pristine aquifers in the Territory the more outrageous it seemed that these valuable water resources would be at the epicentre of hydraulic gas extraction.*

*I researched a lot of different forms connected to water carrying and then sketched out the shapes that I wanted to make. The jug distributes water widely from above. The olla, when dug into the ground and filled, releases water slowly to the soil, sustaining life in arid places.*

*I previously study geography and am interested in (and skeptical of) mapping as a language of place. I decided to map out the extensive groundwater system connected to Beetaloo Basin catchment on the jug and the geological substrata of the Velkerri Formation and the Cambrian Limestone Aquifer on the olla. The vessels work as a pair to tell this water story.*

*Practicing as a ceramicist is a cathartic process that allows me to begin untangling what living climate change looks like. The elemental connections of earth, water, and fire that are central to ceramic practice turn my mind to considering environmental themes.*

*Working with clay you are conscious that it is actually the ground underneath you. It is the earth, but it is also somebody's Country. I think being here in the central desert has made that connection a lot more palpable. It has definitely influenced my practice.*

JAYANNA ANDY

FOCUS WORK

These are the rock holes where the wanampi lives.



*Tjukula/waterhole*, 2022  
wheel thrown stoneware, underglazes, sgraffito  
152 x 225 x 185mm

**Tjukula  
wanampi  
milpatjunanyi**

# JAYANNA ANDY

Jyanna Andy has carved a design using the sgraffito technique into the surface of a wheel thrown vessel. The cultural iconography represents the significance of the waterholes in her mother's Country.

For Pitjantjatjara people living in the desert, knowledge of water sources was critical to their survival. Deep familiarity with the topography of their Country and the way rain would interact with the land ensured constant sources of water could be found. Knowledge of tjukula (rock-holes) were particularly important during the dry season when most of the water holes and creeks dried up.

Jayanna painted the surface of the stoneware vessel with black and blue underglazes in a bold design which she has then scratched through to create a striking graphic effect.

The process of sgraffito resonates with milpatjunanyi the widespread cultural practice of storytelling by drawing in the sand with sticks or fingers. It also connects to puṇu work – carving objects from wood and burning linework designs into their surface using a hot wire technique.

*My grandmother Atipalku paints her father's Tjukurpa on canvas. It is Mulayangu Tjukurpa.*

*A few years ago, I went to that country with Atipalku and my mother and we camped there. Atipalku told us the story of the wanampi (water snake) that lives there.*

*I am also telling my great grandfather's story on ceramics. It's the same story that Atipalku is painting, but I'm making the waterholes. These are the rock holes where the wanampi lives.*



SUZI LYON

FOCUS WORK

Artmaking allows a kind of navigation through existence.



*Covid Cups*, 2020,  
slip cast porcelain, cobalt oxide, glaze  
dimensions variable, cups 100 x 190mm dia each

**crockery**  
**porcelain**  
**globalisation**  
**symbolism**

# SUZI LYON

Suzi has made a set of cups and saucers. These forms are very familiar and immediately we think of tea drinking and the conversations that might be had over a 'cuppa'. She has used porcelain clay and painted designs on her tea set with cobalt blue oxide under a clear glaze.

This blue and white aesthetic has a long history. It initially appeared in 7<sup>th</sup> century Tang Dynasty China using cobalt pigment from Persia, known as 'muslim blue'. Once porcelain clay and its firing techniques were developed and refined, it became highly desirable and widespread.

During the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, through potteries in the 'porcelain town' of Jingdezhen, the craftsmanship improved significantly and production increased substantially. Blue and white wares were traded back and forth along the silk route taking on different cultural patterning at different places. Influences from Mongolian, Islamic, Ottoman and Persian civilizations in Central Asia and the Middle East were absorbed and blue and white china was also produced in Japan, Vietnam and Korea.

Later in the 16<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese, Dutch and English traders brought blue and white china to Europe where its exoticism and refinement held great appeal. At this time, China and Japan began producing blue and white porcelain in great quantities specifically for export to European markets and for European tastes. From the 17<sup>th</sup> century European potteries mastered the techniques and began producing and marketing blue and white china locally. Blue and white pottery is still produced today and cross-cultural designs such as the Willow Pattern are as popular as ever.

Suzi has drawn on the symbolism of this rich history of global trade and exchange to reflect on a contemporary issue. In the way this ubiquitous style of pottery has been encoded with cultural storytelling for centuries, she has decorated her teacups with stylised versions of the corona virus and the markers of the human activity she identifies as key players in its spread. This unassuming work incorporates many layers of meaning speaking to the viral nature of covid, its possible origins and the vulnerability of global societies it exposed.

By choosing to do this on a set of cup and saucers she brings this global crisis into the domestic realm and uses it to draw attention to our complicity as individuals, engaging in unbridled consumerism and complacent chatter at the expense of a healthy world ecology.

*I find that the artmaking allows a kind of navigation through existence - from the quiet every day to the pressing issues of our times. They are all part of being here.*

*The COVID story, according to me.*

*Our desire to eat meat and factory farm animals.*

*The reduction of wilderness and the loss of habitat of wild creatures.*

*Consumption, and therefore direct contact of animals from the wild.*

*Our travel in huge numbers all over the world by jet plane.*

*Cruise ships, carrying average 3000 passengers per ship and off-loading to ports all over the world.*

*I have to add one more thing, and it doesn't have a cup and saucer.*

*Us! How we deal with it all. What behaviour we bring forth.*

CLAIRE FREER

Wild clay is a living medium.

FOCUS WORK



*Mud and Mulga V, VI, VII, 2021*  
hand built and pit-fired using clay and *Acacia aneura*  
collected from the Ngaanyatjarra Lands with permission  
445 x 310mm dia, 410 x 360mm dia, 380 x 330mm dia

**process**  
**materiality**  
**elemental**  
**pit fire**



# CLAIRE FREER

Claire Freer's series of large vessels, made from very fine coils, seem to teeter on their tiny bases. It is almost as if they are billowing and could float away but their imposing scale also gives them an anchored presence.

Claire built these large vessels by carefully laying each fine coil on top of the one below and smearing a thin veneer of clay on the inside to join them together. This slow layering process seems to mimic the way forms might be built over time by insects or geological processes.

The forms are also somehow reminiscent of vessels from times past. It's as though they have been discovered in an archaeological dig. We wonder who may have used them and what they may have been used for. In some ways these associations arise from the processes and materials that Claire uses. She employs the oldest of ceramic techniques, coiling and pit-firing, and collects 'wild clay' rather than purchasing commercially refined clay.

These works are integrally connected to the place of their making. That place is the Ngaanyatjarra Lands of the Central Desert and specifically the locale of Irryuntju community where Claire was living at the time. She dug the clay from the ground there to make the works and then dug a pit into the ground to fire them, collecting leaves and splinters of mulga wood to fuel the firing.

Mulga trees are common in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands and favoured for campfires, as the dense nature of the wood burns hot and slow. Anangu also use mulga for punu work (wood carving) and historically their hardness and toxicity made them ideal for spear heads.

The high iron content of the local clay accounts for the strong orange colour and the random markings on the surface are a result of the pit firing.

Claire works in an intuitive and responsive manner and her practice is essentially an encounter between maker, material and process.

*I like the quality of clay as a material that can be stretched and shaped. I like the sense of moulding it with my hands, the immediacy and the tactility, and I don't always know where it will lead me. I am definitely a hand builder. I rarely work on the wheel.*

*I lived in England for many years and when I returned to Australia, I used clay to reconnect to the place of my birth. I was making artworks that responded to the natural environment, to seed pods and banksias and the like, reacquainting myself with the textures and forms and qualities of this place. Working with clay became a tool for exploring my immediate environment.*

*Whilst living and working in the Ngaanyatjarra Lands I began to explore that environment. I first noticed little curls of clay on the surface of dried-up pools and claypans. I collected this earthen material in a little yellow beach bucket and took it home to experiment with. I added water, sieving it and processing it to make useable clay. Later I found some very finely grained, velvety clay, deep in the earth, at the bottom of an old excavation site.*

*I made these three works with that velvety clay. I was very conscious that I was working with a living material and I felt this synergy between the clay, myself and what I was making. I wanted to build big works and see how fine I could make the walls of the vessels, honouring the quality of the material and allowing it to guide me. The clay and I sort of had a nice relationship with each other.*

*I made the walls very thin using very fine coils and built them out from a narrow base, so the forms are quite fragile and precarious. I coaxed and cradled the coils as I worked and was sensitive to the physical limitations of the clay, working carefully to make sure the walls didn't collapse.*

*As there was no kiln available, I researched pit firing techniques on the internet. I dug a pit in the ground and lined it with bits of corrugated iron that were lying about. I used a bed of leaves and splinters of mulga wood as the fuel source. I like inviting the force of nature and the element of chance into the firing process.*

*When I start a new work, I let the process dictate what I make in an intuitive and instinctual way. It is only afterwards that I can sense what I have been doing, what I have been responding to and expressing. I can then step back and look with a different eye.*

*These works are informed by the process of their making but somewhere in my subconscious the forms of the landscape, the rock holes, the claypans, the mud nests that birds and insects make, are also present.*

I follow my intuition in the moment and respond freely to the emerging form.



*Random Thoughts*, 2022  
hand built earthenware  
280 x 380 x 240mm

**intuition**  
**ambiguity**  
**biomorphic**  
**vulnerability**

# MARIA VANHEES

Maria Vanhees makes exceptionally refined enclosed forms using a coiling technique and white earthenware clay.

While previously drawing on the forms of what she describes as ‘animal architecture’, creating a small marquette faithful to a collected natural object and then translating this to a larger form, increasingly these days Maria begins to work without a specific physical reference and lets her many years of practice lead the way the work evolves.

She designs her ambiguous abstract forms to unfold seamlessly from any viewpoint so although they are static objects they are also very dynamic. As a viewer you are encouraged to walk around them and look at them from different angles. As a maker she constantly shifts and turns them to keep growing them.

Her abstract forms encourage many associations, a bit like seeing familiar shapes in the clouds. They can also evoke emotional states and feelings. Their interpretation is not fixed and some of the forms can be displayed in numerous ways. There is no single way to orient them or experience them.

Maria makes sure the surfaces are flawlessly smooth and that there is no hint of the making process when they are finished. Their pale flowing forms become a playground for gentle shadows but their unglazed surfaces are also fragile and vulnerable.

Maria has studied clinical psychology and works as a social worker as well as making ceramics. Her works are a way of giving form to the intangible and often times inarticulable space of thoughts and emotions.

*My practice is quite intuitive and I am inspired by nature. I am not always consciously fixed on the final form I am just concerned with creating the flow.*

*Initially I was very much inspired by shells, particularly broken shells and the insides of shells. I find them very intriguing forms. I used to copy small broken shell pieces and then enlarge them and try to get the curves right.*

*I notice that particular forms and shapes seem to reoccur when I am working. Forms that I have got to know through observing them closely or working to replicate them.*

*There is something in the original form I was drawn to or picked up that inspires and resonates with me even though I may not be able to consciously articulate it. Somehow my psyche is curled up inside these forms. They have become part of a visual language that is quite internalised and it manifests as I am working.*

*Generally, I start with a flat base and build up the form with coils. Once firm enough I turn it on its side, cushioned on a piece of foam, and then cut the flat base off and continue building from that opening and it all sort of grows in an organic and intuitive way.*

*The freedom of hand building, the repetitive and slowness of the process, the touching and the shaping can be a bit meditative but at some point it is hard work and you have to be very focused on the technical demands of finessing the surface and eliminating any sense of the joining process. It has to flow visually from every angle and this can be quite difficult to achieve.*

*I leave the surface in its raw unglazed state which makes the forms ‘naked’ and vulnerable. As a ceramicist I have to sit with this discomfort.*



# STUDENT ACTIVITIES

# PREPARE

## PRE-VISIT ACTIVITIES

Prepare students for a visit to the exhibition by alerting them to the plethora of ceramic objects in their daily lives, exploring the materiality of clay, researching some basic ceramic techniques and familiarising themselves with the central desert region.

### EVERY DAY CLAY

What does the term ceramic refer to?  
What sorts of objects are made from ceramic?

As a class brainstorm the variety of ceramic objects encountered in daily life.

List as many as possible, starting with the school environment, then the domestic and then the broader world of industry. Describe the purpose of these different objects.

Draw a picture of a ceramic object you encounter in daily life and write a brief story to accompany it.

Describe its aesthetic qualities. What do you like about the form or surface of the object. Is it plain or decorated? How do you think it was made? Is its purpose functional or decorative or both?

Create a class mural of drawings and stories.

### CLAY PLAY

What is clay? Where does it come from?

Make a series of small pots by starting with a pinch pot and adding a few coils.

Use a variety of clays including earthenware, stoneware and porcelain.

Describe the different qualities of clay. How does it feel in your hands? What is it like to work with?

Take note of the different drying stages from wet to leather hard and bone dry.

Experiment with ways to arrange the collection of pots as a collaborative class project.

[if possible bisque fire the pots in a kiln, otherwise pit-fire them in a drum or have fun smashing them up and placing the fragments in buckets of water to be reconstituted]

### WAYS WITH CLAY

Find out about the different skills and techniques used by artists working with clay.

There are many demonstrations and tutorials on YouTube and elsewhere.

Break into groups to research on-line and share your findings with the class.

Create a class glossary of clay terms and processes.

### GROUNDING IN PLACE

*Clay on Country* showcases the work of artists living and working in the Central Desert.

Where is the Central Desert? What is it like there? Has anyone visited? Share stories.

Refer to the list of place names in this resource and locate them on a map or using Google Earth.

Refer to AIATSIS map to identify the First Nations language groups in the region.

### Map of Indigenous Australia | AIATSIS

Break into groups to find out more about some of these places, including the history and geography of the region, and share your findings with the class.

# IMMERSE

## LOOKING AND DISCUSSING IN THE EXHIBITION

### IN THE EXHIBITION

Visit one or two works as a group.

Engage the students in looking closely at the work through guided questioning.

[Refer to information about the ideas and techniques in **Making with Clay** and **Focus Works** section to support questioning or analyse the artworks using the **Object Analysis** question prompts]

Ask students to work in pairs to explore a number of other works using the **Object Analysis Sheet** supplied.

Students will be required to share their thoughts and observations back in the classroom.

### EXHIBITION ACTIVITY CONTEMPORARY ARCHAEOLOGISTS

Ceramic pots and sculptures have survived through the ages as a record of human activity.

They are often used by archaeologists to piece together a story of people and place.

What stories do the objects in *Clay on Country* tell us?

Work in pairs as an 'archaeological team' to survey the exhibition and find

- 2 works that incorporate mapping
- 2 works that reference the natural world
- 2 works that reference crockery or functional forms
- 2 works that tell a human story

Choose one work from each category to analyse in depth.

Share your immediate impressions and associations with each other, then look closely to assess how the work has been made.

Take it in turns posing and answering questions.

Record your thoughts and findings on the **Object Analysis Sheet**.

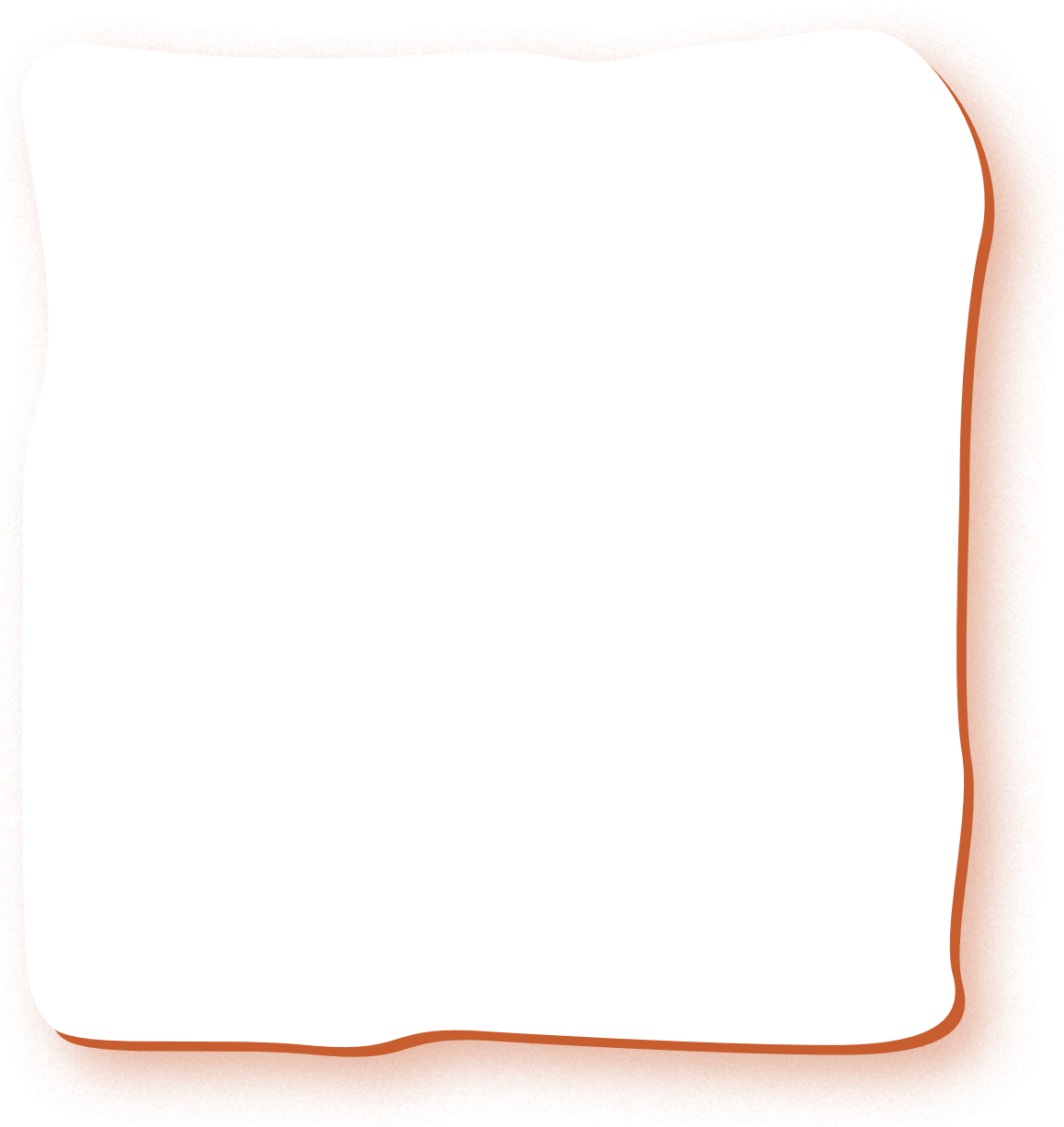
Begin with recording the caption information. This should be located somewhere near the object.

Make a quick labelled sketch of the object.

Add descriptive notes, observations and reflections.



# OBJECT ANALYSIS SHEET



DESCRIPTION

HOW WAS IT MADE?

WHAT STORY DOES IT TELL?

CAPTION INFORMATION

# LOOKING AND RESPONDING USING THE OBJECT ANALYSIS SHEET

## DESCRIPTION

### Immediate Impressions and Visual Qualities

Create a list of descriptive words to record your immediate impressions of the work.

What does it remind you of?

What associations come to mind?

How does it make you feel?

What mood does it evoke?

What are the visual qualities of the form and the surface?

What is the visual impact of the work?

## HOW WAS IT MADE

### Materials, Techniques and Artistic Language

Imagine being the artist and unpack the making process.

What processes and techniques have been used?

How has the form been made?

How has the surface been decorated?

What tools have been used?

How have they been used?

How does the making process contribute to the look and feel of the finished work?

What decisions and choices has the artist made along the way?

Consider the visual language.

Does the artwork reference any stylistic conventions in its form or decoration?

How do the form and the surface decoration relate to each other?

Does the work incorporate signs or symbols or draw on known or familiar visual languages or forms?

## WHAT STORY DOES IT TELL

### Inspirations, Influences and Intentions

Consider the motivation and intent of the artist.

What are the ideas and experiences that inform the work?

What has the artist referenced or been inspired by to make the work?

What does the artist wish to communicate or draw attention to?

Does the artist comment on social, political, historical or environmental issues?

Does the artist communicate a personal experience or perception?

# REFLECT

## RESEARCHING AND RESPONDING IN THE CLASSROOM

Encourage students to share their thoughts and impressions of the works they encountered in *Clay on Country* with reference to the responses gathered on the Object Analysis Sheets.

Use this discussion as a springboard to engage in research, writing and making activities that further explore the themes of the exhibition and the significance of the artists' practices.

The classroom activities focus on three key themes:

### **GROUNDING IN PLACE**

- mapping
- materiality

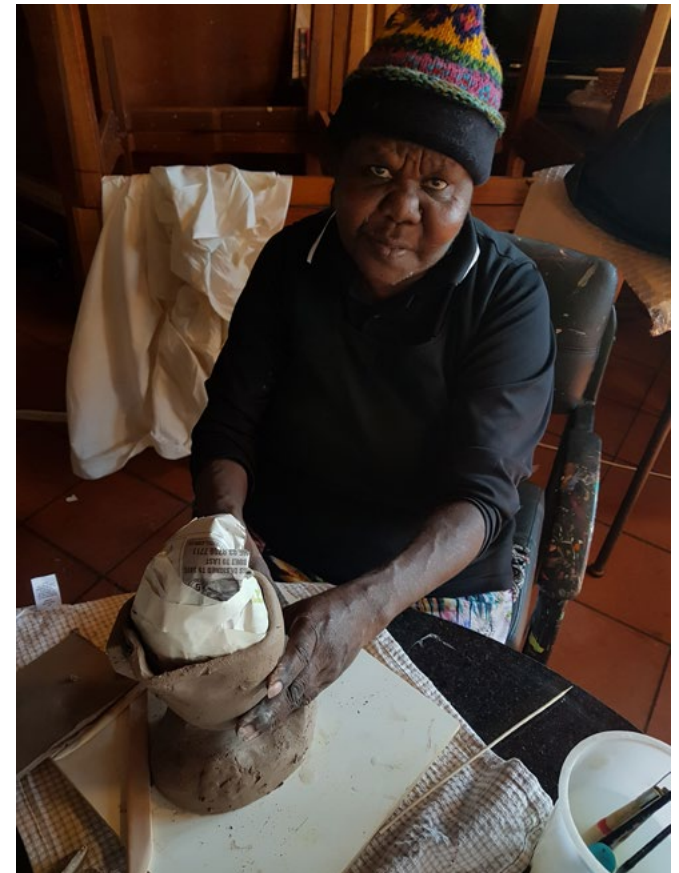
### **INSPIRED BY FORM**

- enduring forms
- global aesthetics

### **HUMAN BEING**

- living in the Anthropocene

If it is not possible to access ceramics equipment and materials, making activities can be adapted to use alternate modelling materials or whatever sculptural techniques are accessible or familiar such as papier maché or assemblage.



Angela Malbungka hand building a ceramic owl in the studio at Walkatjara Arts, 2021.  
Photo Jo Foster. Courtesy Artback NT.

# MAPPING – STORIES OF PLACE

I am interested in the language of mapping.

– Ness Sim

Maps represent place but they also represent power.

– Mel Robson

I mark into the surface of the clay designs that represent my Tjukurpa.

– Tjunkaya Tapaya

These are the rock holes where the wanampi lives.

– Jayanna Andy

## DISCUSSING

A number of artists in *Clay on Country* use the language of mapping in their works.

- Mel Robson references cadastral and pastoral maps
- Artists from Ernabella use cultural iconography to map Ancestral journeys and knowledge
- Ness Sim includes geological diagrams
- Sally Mumford made a rubbing of the surface of a termite pavement
- Suzi Lyon mapped her community using palm prints

Referring to the Object Analysis Sheets completed in the exhibition, share memories and impressions of these works. How have these artists incorporated mapping in their work? What stories of place do they tell?

Brainstorm a list of different ways we map the physical world, for example, street maps, weather maps, topographical maps, geographical maps, political maps and others.

Consider also blueprints, floor plans, x-rays, fingerprints, mind maps, mud maps and diagrams.

Create a list on the board.

# GROUNDED IN PLACE

## RESEARCHING

Break into groups to research different examples of maps on the internet and then compare and contrast them as a class.

What are the varied visual languages contained in these maps?

How do they inform a perception of and relationship to place?

What is the connection between mapping and storytelling?

## MAKING

Make an artwork based on a map or that incorporates the language of mapping.

Choose a familiar place as a starting point and contemplate what experience, perception, memory or history of this place to communicate, evoke or question.

Decide what sort of information to include and how to visually depict that information.

Consider conventions of representation, signs and symbols, and patterning.



# MATERIALITY – THE STUFF OF PLACE

Clay comes from the land. When we paint on clay it's like we are painting Country on country.

– Selma Coulthard

I like the immediacy and the robust quality of working with clay and the textured forms that can evolve through physical engagement with the push and pull of material. I try to emulate the raw and ancient landscapes I see around me.

– Bronwyn Field

I am inspired by the country around where I live and the animals that I see.

– Angela Abbott

Termite mounds have always fascinated me.

– Alfred Lowe

## DISCUSSING

Clay comes from the earth and is fundamentally connected to place.

Many artists in *Clay on Country* are attracted to this materiality and use it to respond to the aesthetic qualities and experiences of the desert environment where they live.

Suggest why working with clay might lend itself to creating work that responds to the natural environment.

## WRITING

Choose an artist from the list below and consider how their work evokes or expresses a connection to the natural environment.

Create a list of descriptive words inspired by the qualities of the material, the form and the treatment of the surface, including the textures and colours.

Use this word list as the starting point to write a short piece of prose as a response to this work.

- Alfred Lowe
- Angela Abbott
- Bronwyn Field
- Christine Godden
- Claire Freer
- Davina Edwards
- Mr Carroll
- Rupert Jack
- Sally Mumford

# GROUNDED IN PLACE

## MAKING

Go on a walk to collect natural forms from the local environment and bring them to class.

Make a series of detailed line drawings of the forms and textures, including some close-ups.

Consider what marks to make to represent the surface qualities of these natural objects.

Use these drawings as inspiration for a collaborative class ceramic tile project where each student contributes at least one tile.

Roll out small slabs of clay and use a cardboard template to cut them into a regular shape.

Create textured surfaces by making marks or imprinting into the surface of the clay.

Experiment with a range of tools and materials such as crumpled paper, string, twigs, pipe cleaners, wire, steel wool, kitchen implements as well as more standard ceramic tools. How many different textures can you create?

Choose your favourite tiles to fire and display the works together.

# ARCHETYPAL VESSELS – ENDURING FORMS

There is an extremely long history of ceramics in human life and as a ceramicist I feel connected to the continuum of this craft and this practice. I find myself drawn to quite simple archetypal forms and am fascinated by the different functions of ceramics over time.

– Ness Sim

## DISCUSSING

Historically ceramic vessels were part of everyday life used to store and transport liquids and foods, to cook with, to eat and drink from. These functional forms developed into standardised vessels over time, often reflecting regional or cultural styles.

A number of works in *Clay on Country* draw on utilitarian forms

- Ness Sim references archetypal water carrying vessels
- Suzi Lyon utilises ubiquitous tea cups and saucers
- Ernabella artists recreate wooden food carrying and collecting dishes

Others artists such as Angela Abbott, Claire Freer, Em Frank, Gretel Bull, Hermannsburg Potters, Kunmanara Tjilya and Mel Robson create works that echo familiar or evocative vessel forms.

Brainstorm a long list of functional vessel forms used in daily life. Consider both the needs of the domestic and the industrial sphere. For instance plate, platter, dish, bowl, jar, jug, cup, mug, tureen, vase, beaker, flask, vial, urn... What shapes, characteristics and functions do you associate with these forms? What are their defining features?

Discuss what is meant by the term utilitarian or functional ware and come up with a definition.

How may vessels evoke associations beyond their obvious function? How have artists in *Clay on Country* utilised the expressive or symbolic potential of recognisable forms?

# INSPIRED BY FORM

## RESEARCHING

Work in groups to research vessel forms from different times and places in books and on the internet. What are some popular vessel forms from history? Are these vessel forms still in use today? Have everyday vessels changed much? Collect as much imagery as you can and make a note of particular names and uses.

Make simple sketches that depict the outline or 'profile' of these forms to contribute to a class chart of vessel profiles. Are there vessel forms that are specific to different eras or cultures?

Choose a couple of favourites from the chart to research further independently. What were these vessels used for? Who used them? How is the form connected to the function? What other stylistic traits are evident? Record your research in your visual diary.

## MAKING

Fashion your own vessel for a specific purpose. It may draw on an historical or a contemporary form or perhaps combine features of both. What is the purpose of your vessel? What might it speak to beyond pure function?

Start with sketching the shape you want to make and then roll out a slab of clay to slump into or over a mould to create the base from which to build. Plastic, metal or ceramic objects from home can be useful as press moulds. Scrunched up newspaper or old towels can be shaped and taped to create a form to slump over.

Create a class installation of vessels.

# GLOBAL AESTHETICS

Originally invented in China, blue-and-white ceramics were widely circulated, copied and re-created by makers worldwide. Both the forms and the surface decorations exhibit the influence of cross-cultural exchange over centuries. It is an enduring aesthetic and blue and white china is still produced today.

Tea drinking is central to so many cultures across the world, deeply connected to ceremony and social ritual.

– Em Frank

## CHINESE WHISPERS

Break into small research groups to find out more about the influence, spread and different stylistic interpretations of this popular and influential aesthetic. Some well-known styles include Turkish Iznik ware, Japanese Sometsuke ware, Dutch Delftware, Kraak ware and Medici porcelain amongst many others.

Find specific examples and choose one that resonates with you to analyse in depth.

Research the cultural significance of the form and the symbolism of the design motifs.

Unpack the web of influences to reveal the cross-cultural story of production.

Set up an Antiques Roadshow game using cardboard cutouts of the chosen works.

Break the class into teams to attempt to arrange them in chronological order.

Create a class timeline of cutout forms and label with date and the country of origin.

Use this research to develop your own blue and white pattern to tell a contemporary story. What motifs and symbols will you include? What story will you tell?

## CROCKERY CONNECTIONS

Suzi Lyon has referenced both a well-known form of domestic ware and the aesthetic tradition of blue and white china to tell a particular story. She has considered both the symbolism of the form and the surface decoration to communicate her story.

# INSPIRED BY FORM

A number of other artists in *Clay on Country* have also referenced crockery or domestic ware in their work. Use the Making Connections diagram to hold a class discussion about each of these works, the different stories they tell and how they connect thematically to each other.

Investigate the work of other artists who harness ceramic traditions to serve contemporary storytelling purposes. Choose one of the following areas of enquiry to explore.

- incorporating the aesthetic of blue-and-white china
- quoting functional ware
- repurposing found ceramics

Consider artists such as Dani Mellor, Sarah Goffman, Ah Xian, Gerry Wedd, Sassy Park, Kristen Coehlo, Tony Albert, Yeesoonyung, Penny Byrne.

Use the Making Connections format to map out a mini exhibition based on your research.

Include one work from *Clay on Country* and add another four from elsewhere.

Consider how the artworks come together to create a narrative. How are interpretations and responses enhanced or highlighted by being grouped together?

Write a short label for each artwork plus an introductory label that explains the connections between the different works. Think of a title for your exhibition.

Present your mini exhibition as a powerpoint to the class.

# MAKING CONNECTIONS

What ideas, techniques and stories connect the objects on this page?

Brainstorm as a class and then record your thoughts in a short piece of writing.

Include descriptions of the works and outline the key themes and concepts.





# LIVING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

How much longer can we live  
in defiance of nature?

– Gretel Bull

It makes me proud to see those  
letters loud on the wall. It's a  
good question we asked.

– Amelia Turner

We always think of our Country.  
It is always on our minds whether  
we are living there or not.

– Selma Coulthard

## CLASS DISCUSSION

Many artists in *Clay on Country* use their ceramic practice to reflect on issues, concerns and experiences of contemporary society.

- Ness Sim and Gretel Bull comment on environmental issues
- Mel Robson and Tara Leckey reflect on the impact of settler histories
- Suzi Lyon comments on community responsibility for global issues
- Artists from Akeyulerre Healing Centre draw attention to the importance of language and the need for deep listening
- Bronwyn Field, Maria Vanhees, Pip McManus and Mikaila Rodgers explore human experiences, visceral responses and emotional landscapes
- Pitjantjatjara and Arrernte artists emphasise the importance of connecting to and caring for country

Contemporary times are increasingly referred to as the age of the Anthropocene. What is meant by this term? Formulate a class definition.

Discuss as a class how artists in *Clay on Country* have responded to or commented on living in the Anthropocene. What are some of the issues they raise?

Create a list on the board.

# HUMAN BEING

## ROLE PLAY

Hold a class panel discussion where students role play being artists and interviewers.

Divide the class into two teams and then divide the teams into smaller working groups to focus on separate collections of three works each.

Spend some time in the working groups formulating questions and discussing answers. Consider how the works were made as well as what they communicate or evoke.

Stage at least two panel sessions where teams take it in turns to role play being the artists or the interviewers, one team posing questions and the other team answering. Then swap over.

# LIVING IN THE ANTHROPOCENE

In this technology obsessed world the natural rhythms of organic systems continue to be pushed to the verge of collapse.

– Pip McManus

We need to hold on tight to Tjukurpa, to keep it safe.

– Rupert Jack

What do we mean by the term to be civilised?

– Tara Leckey

I wanted to evoke the chaos of our layered lives and also the need to somehow stay centred amongst the turmoil of those things outside our control.

– Bronwyn Field

## WRITING

Imagine you are a writer for an arts e-journal and write up an article that reports on one of the panel discussions.

Begin with a definition of the Anthropocene and then outline how the artists have responded to the contemporary world in their work.

Consider the use of allegory and symbolism.

Think of a title for your article and include images.

[It would be possible to get students to write about each others work, produced through the following making activity, as part of this writing activity]

## MAKING

What are some contemporary issues of concern to you? Do you share some of the same concerns as the artists in the exhibition?

Make a 3D artwork as a response to a contemporary issue of concern or interest to you.

You may wish to explore an environmental, social, historical or political issue or you may wish to express an emotional response to contemporary living.

Consider what materials to use and how the surface decoration relates to the form. You may decide to incorporate found objects, or build or assemble a form from raw materials. You may incorporate text or imagery. Where will this be sourced from?

Think carefully about what you wish to communicate and how best to do this.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

# KEY WORDS

## CERAMIC TERMS

ceramics  
pottery  
greenware  
bisque ware  
china  
crockery  
vessel  
bone dry  
leather hard

## TYPES OF CLAY

earthenware  
stoneware  
porcelain  
paperclay  
BRT (buff raku trachyte)  
terracotta  
wild clay  
clay body  
groggy

## FORMING TECHNIQUES

coiling  
hand built  
wheel thrown  
slip cast  
pit fired  
slab building  
joining  
plasticity  
slurry  
moulding  
kneading  
slumping  
press mould

## DECORATING TECHNIQUES

glaze  
underglaze  
oxides  
slip  
sgraffito  
decal  
inlay  
frottage  
burnish

## FIRST NATIONS TERMS

Anangu/Yapa  
Ancestral Being  
Country  
language groups  
(Pitjantjatjara, Ngaanyatjarra,  
Arrernte, Luritja, Walpiri)  
kunmanara  
Tjukurpa

## OTHER TERMINOLOGY

anthropocene  
cartography  
solastalgia  
iconography  
cadastral  
settler  
archetype  
quotidian  
utilitarian



# KEY PLACES

## NORTHERN TERRITORY

Anmatjeree Country

Alcoota Station

Angatjanya

Betaloo Basin (Pamayu NT)

Daly River

Engawala

Ikuntji/Haasts Bluff

Jay Creek

Kaltukatjara

Kintore

Kiwirrkurra

Mparntwe

Mutitjulu

Musgrave Ranges

Mataranka

Newhaven

Ntaria/Hermannsburg

Toritja/Macdonnell Ranges

Uluru

Wallace Rockhole

Walungurru/Kintore

Watanuma

Snake Well

Utju/Areyonga

Yalpiraniku/Yuelamu

## SOUTH AUSTRALIA

APY Lands (Anangu Pitjantjatjara  
Yankunytjatjara Lands)

Amata

Kalka

Mimili

Pukatja/Ernabella

## WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Irryuntju/Wingellina

Ngaanyatjarra Lands

# RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

## PUBLICATIONS

- Artback NT, *Clay on Country ceramics from the central desert*, Artback NT, 2023
- de Waal, Edmund, *The Pot Book*, Phaidon, 2011
- de Waal, Edmund, *Design Sourcebook - Ceramics*, New Holland, 1999
- Greenhalgh, Paul, *Ceramics Art & Civilization*, Bloomsbury Publishing, 2022
- Hamer, Frank and Janet Hamer, *The Potter's Dictionary of Materials and Techniques*, University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004
- Paterson S and Petersen J, *The Craft and Art of Clay. A Complete Potter's Handbook*, Lawrence King Publishing, UK, 2012 (5th edition)
- Taylor, Louisa, *The Ceramics Bible – The Complete Guide to Materials and Techniques*, Chronicle Books, 2022
- Levy M, Shibata T and Shibata H, *Wild Clay, Creating ceramics and glazes from natural and found resources*, Herbert Press, UK, 2022
- Barkley, G, *Ceramics, An Atlas of Forms*, Thames and Hudson, 2023

## JOURNALS

- Journal of Australian Ceramics*,  
The Australian Ceramics Association  
published three times per annum
- Ceramics: Art and Perception*,  
Mansfield Ceramics  
published quarterly

## WEBSITES

- Artback NT  
ABC Interview with co-curator Jo Foster  
**clay on country - Artback NT**
- A-Z of Ceramics, Victoria and Albert Museum, London  
**[www.vam.ac.uk/articles/a-z-of-ceramics](http://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/a-z-of-ceramics)**
- The Pottery Wheel  
A small site all about pottery, clay and ceramics  
hosted by enthusiastic ceramicist Lesley MacKinnon  
Includes lots of user friendly 'how to' tutorials and demonstration videos  
**<https://thepotterywheel.com/>**
- The Spruce Pottery Crafts Pottery Projects  
Includes lots of user friendly 'how to' tutorials and demonstration videos  
**[www.thesprucecrafts.com/pottery-basics](http://www.thesprucecrafts.com/pottery-basics)**
- Marissa Thompson a young artist at Ernabella Arts  
demonstrating how to throw a pot  
**How to Throw a Pot**
- Claire Freer – pit firing at Irryuntju Community, Western Australia  
**pit firing Claire Freer - YouTube**
- Jeff Mincham – coil building process demonstrated  
**<http://youtu.be/xr7GcekvJek>**

## ART CENTRES

**Akeyulerre Healing Centre**

[www.akeyulerre.org.au](http://www.akeyulerre.org.au)

@akeyulerre

**Bindi Mwerre Athurre Artists**

[www.bindiart.com](http://www.bindiart.com)

@bindi\_enterprises

@bindi.mwerre.anthurre.artists

**Engawala Arts**

[www.engawalaarts.com.au](http://www.engawalaarts.com.au)

**Ernabella Artists**

[www.ernabellaarts.com.au](http://www.ernabellaarts.com.au)

@ernabella\_arts

**Hermannsburg Potters**

[www.hermannsburgptters.com.au](http://www.hermannsburgptters.com.au)

@hermannsburgpotters

**Iltja Ntjarra Many Hands Art Centre**

[www.manyhandsart.com.au](http://www.manyhandsart.com.au)

@manyhandsart

**Walkatjara Arts**

[www.mutitjulu.com.au/walkatjara-art-centre](http://www.mutitjulu.com.au/walkatjara-art-centre)

@walkatjara

**Yarrenyty Arltere Arts**

[www.yarrenytyarltereartists.com.au](http://www.yarrenytyarltereartists.com.au)

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## RELATED RESEARCH

**Climate Analytics claims CSIRO underestimated Beetaloo greenhouse gas emissions - ABC News**

**The Beetaloo gas field is a climate bomb. How did CSIRO modelling make it look otherwise? (theconversation.com)**

**Indigenous people's knowledge, science research and an Academy grant help unlock the mystery of 'fairy circles' | Australian Academy of Science**

**[www.dcceew.gov.au/parks-heritage/national-parks/uluru-kata-tjuta-national-park/culture-and-history/anangu-language](http://www.dcceew.gov.au/parks-heritage/national-parks/uluru-kata-tjuta-national-park/culture-and-history/anangu-language)**

**Map of Indigenous Australia | AIATSIS**

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