

## The Resonance of Gabbroic Clay in Contemporary Ceramic Works

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*'Creative art practice also encompasses more than just cognitive, social and rational levels of human motivation. It acknowledges the more obscure, individual reasons for action, which do not leave physical traces in the archaeological record, such as intuitive and emotional motivations. It is based on the full spectrum of human experience and does not exclusively deal with one particular medium. If art practice is to be used as a means to bridge the current divide in archaeology between material culture and human experience, a direct engagement with the materiality of objects, environments and substances is necessary.'*

Hansen 2007: 10

### The clay itself

Gabbroic clay dug from the Lizard Peninsula has been used in the production of pottery in Cornwall from the Neolithic period and onwards for thousands of years. This wonderfully versatile material was utilised by many early makers across Cornwall and beyond. In this contribution, I explore how the uses of gabbroic clay, the history of its usage, and its material properties have influenced my own work as a ceramic artist. My interest in this clay began with my first ever visit to the Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro. I was a young tutor under the guidance of David Metcalf and during our visit to the museum we were able to see and touch several vessels, sherds, and funerary urns. I stood in the museum with one hand inside and one outside of the pot, with my eyes closed, feeling my way up the sides, feeling the thickness and traveling through time, engaging with the material and the journey of the maker.

For many years the Ceramics Bachelor of Arts degree at Falmouth University ran a reconstruction project with 1<sup>st</sup> year students. We dug clay, processed it, visited the museum in Truro to draw and handle Bronze Age vessels, and we built replicas and fired the pieces. We also processed clay to replicas of some of the drawings and photographs of prehistoric pottery held in the Royal Cornwall Museum. These replicas were made in bonfire/pit firings at the Cornish Celtic Village, a reconstructed Bronze Age settlement run by experimental archaeologist Jacqui Wood.

Almost 20 years later, I still go and dig small amounts of gabbroic clay from the Lizard Peninsula (Fig. 14.1). For quite some time, I have been using it to make bases and small fragments within my ceramic work, which will be discussed in more detail below. I can still find small deposits of gabbroic clay in already disturbed runoffs. The clay is dug from approximately a foot beneath the turf, and it contains natural inclusions.



*Fig. 14.1: Digging gabbroic clay. Lizard Peninsula, Cornwall.*

Within a minute or two, inclusions and all, it is possible to immediately shape the clay into a small round form. Miraculously, when it is dried this clay can withstand high temperature firing up to 1260°C. By removing as many large pieces of rock from the mix as I can, the process of reclamation begins. Placing the dry pieces into warm water, they fizz and dissolve quickly, reducing down to a thick slip. The clay is then poured onto small plaster bats in order for the water to be absorbed, and then it is wedged and ready for use. Gabbroic mixture tests show a variety of colour changes, due in part to the inclusion of ball clay by increased percentage. Ball clay acts as a binding agent and contributes to workability and strength in the ceramic body. There is a greater distinction between colour and shrinkage above 1200°C. The results are surprising and spectacular, since the clay body does not move or melt, it simply vitrifies, even at 1260°C and when it is 100 percent gabbro.

### **The significance of materials**

*Humans display the intriguing characteristic of making and using objects. The things with which people interact are not simply tools for survival, or for making survival easier and more comfortable. Things embody goals, make skills manifest, and*

*shape the identities of their users. Man is not only homo sapien or homo luden, he is also homo faber, the maker and user of objects, his self to a large extent a reflection of things with which he interacts.'*

Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981: 1

Highlighting the significance of crafted material possessions and signposting the ways in which people carve meaning from their domestic environment is perhaps significant in terms of identifying the clear distinction between objects valued for action and those valued for contemplation. If we are a reflection of the things with which we interact, then surely we are reflected in the things we make. In my own practice the use of specific materials brings additional context to my work. Throughout history the use and ownership of specific materials made into objects has indicated power, status, wealth, and gender. Frequently it is the foundation of economy. Each material resonates, speaks, and holds meaning and significance. Within the world of ceramics, porcelain is an excellent example. It has symbolised purity, special translucent sophistication, glamour, and high status. Difficulty in sourcing and working this material meant that it commanded a high price. Despite contemporary availability, porcelain figurines and decorated plates adorn the fireplaces and cabinets of countless homes. They remain, in the eyes of some, symbols of high status and finery. I would argue a cultural/historical and personal resonance and significance for most materials. In teaching, I encourage the careful choice and selection of material, urging consideration of the significance of this choice in manifesting ideas, reinforcing the notion that everything has a voice and resonance.

*'Another aspect of materiality as a theory is that art locates viewers within their corporeal selves by engaging the senses; such experiences are, naturally, unique and individual to each viewer. The aesthetic experience is evoked first through art's physical components, and then through an intellectual engagement with materiality in the broad sense, through time.'*

Mills 2009: 1

Joseph Beuys, one of the most significant and influential artists of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, produced works that embodied this notion. Beuys incorporated materials from the outside world into his multiples, installations, and performances. His selections were not random, however, and the materials were never neutral. Rather, Beuys viewed certain materials as having important associations with his past, and through repeated use they attained a personal symbolism. Other materials were viewed as having magical or therapeutic powers both for Beuys and for the audience or viewer. Material significance may

well alter from person to person and frequently these responses are culturally and historically denoted. It is of course important, not least in archaeological terms, to always try and consider the lens that we see things through.

### **The invisible backpack**

In speaking about the development of a personal visual language I employ the metaphor of an 'invisible backpack'. This can contain all that you know, everything you have read, much of what you might have learnt, and in particular all that you have seen and experienced. We carry around the invisible backpack, adding daily. When one needs to manifest and express an idea – the creative process is as though pieces of the contents are thrown out, sometimes violently, mixed up together, literally 'thrown up'. A visual response or reaction is not necessarily straightforward to interpret but it is as powerful a representation of the whole of that person, their culture and their place in history, as any verbal or written contribution. A variety of indicators have unconsciously entered the visual repository of my own invisible backpack; they sneak into my work whether I like it or not. Equally significant are the markers in time enmeshed through smell, touch and familiarity of material. These materials and objects might repel or attract, but for those of us that use these indicators as visual language, you are what you make and you make what you are.

The nature of the contemporary maker's journey may be illustrated through the marriage of concept, context and material resonance. This exploration also highlights the importance to the maker of material selection in conceptual expression. Function and necessity are often primary considerations in the production of craft. However, much creative practice transcends the practical and begins to communicate the desire to understand existential issues; the wonder of birth, the mysteries surrounding death, heavens, earth and environment. Throughout the human past, many creative works have been in some way suggestive of, or produced in honour of, a system of belief. We therefore cannot underestimate a cosmological impact in the translation of objects and their meaning rather than their function. It is possible to believe that objects have a language all of their own, a means of communication through form, colour, texture and function/use.

### **My own engagement with gabbroic clays**

My own practice moves beyond the material to explore concept and context. My choice of materials and their significance, resonance, and tone or frequency are central to the communication of my personal visual language. My work focuses particularly upon borrowing and abstracting meaning and significance from both domestic and ritual objects in order to create contemporary cultural indicators, future relics and signifiers.



Fig. 14.2: *Echoes Installation: 2001.*

Fig. 14.2 is of an installation piece called *Echoes*, and is the first of my works to be driven by investigations into our fundamental drives and needs. This work, a 7x7ft cube, housed 184 separate pieces of ceramic and mixed media work. Each of the pieces fell into one of three categories, Protection, Consumption and Reproduction, encompassing our basic human drives and needs. This was where I first began experimenting with the gabbroic clay in a resonant way. The pieces in this cube were originally for exchange rather than for sale, thereby encouraging a diverse and interesting range of responses. This approach was to become an interesting way to map preference and choice according to gender.

Fig. 14.3, entitled *Hold my soul in this place*, began autobiographically, as I produced a number of paintings depicting these entities in a variety of situations. Attractive and desirable, these little candy-coloured pieces actually reference our entrance and exit points; they observe the body as a machine and celebrate the functional truth. The presence of gabbroic clay bases reference the grounding nature of this Cornish material. Used in the past and dug locally, it is revisited here in order to express a connection to past as well as place.



*Fig. 14.3: Hold my Soul in this Place: Earthenware/gabbroic clay/slips and glazes.*

Fig. 14.4, *Inanimate Companion*, is part of a series of works juxtaposing the domestic and ritual. These are poignant works looking at the cycle and ritual of domestic work, confinement, commitment and ceremony. The use of the gabbroic clay seemed particularly relevant in expressing the domestic use of early finds. The central piece references a very early Chinese clay oven I saw in a museum in Taipei, beautiful in its compact simplicity. The shackles reference slavery, as in the American South slaves practiced the ritual of jumping the broomstick in order to marry; they were seldom released for Christian ceremony. This piece was made using gabbroic clay and ball clay fired to 1120°C and combining red glaze, cinnamon broom and gold lustre.



Fig. 14.4: Inanimate Companion: Cinnamon broom, gabbrioc clay, chain, glaze.

## Conclusion

*‘If we accept that mind and matter achieve co-dependency through the medium of bodily action, then it follows that ideas and attitudes, rather than occupying a separate domain from material, actually find themselves inscribed “in” the object.’*

Knappett 2005: 169

This contemplation of the making of things perhaps illustrates that differences between our distant ancestors and ourselves may be relatively few. Scientific and technological advances have enabled us to acquire rational answers to many of our previously unimaginable questions and yet the world still seeks answers and clings to a diverse range of belief systems. The powerful use of symbolism brings to mind Carl Jung’s ideas of the collective unconscious; I am frequently surprised when I find images from my sketchbook mirroring objects from a museum. Symbolic form is clearly a deep-rooted part of our shared cultural make up. There are many familiar forms, with shared meaning for everyone; it is after all the basis for semiotics and advertising.

In conclusion, there are many ways in which the use of this special clay might resonate in my work, some may be obvious, others less so. Certainly it expresses my location in time as well as the inherent historical and cultural significance the material embodies.

In art, as in archaeology, searching for clues does not necessarily guarantee certainty of meaning, particularly when the creator of that work is not here to explain. What seems to matter is what we leave behind, the impression that we make in the world, what we pass forwards, and the future archaeology of our multi-cultural hyper-mediated lives. For some of us this still includes objects, fragments of our existence that communicate now and into the future.

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