

CATHY KEYS REMNANT



AN EXHIBITION EXPLORING IDEAS ABOUT 'PLACE' WITH CERAMIC SCULPTURES
INSPIRED BY QUEENSLAND BOTTLE TREES AND THEIR HABITAT.



AS A MAKER — IT IS INCREASINGLY IMPORTANT TO PRODUCE CRAFTED OBJECTS THAT CONVEY OR 'HOLD' MEMORIES OF A SPECIFIC PHYSICAL AND CULTURAL ENVIRONMENT.



FOREWORD

Stephanie Outridge Field

Remnant is a body of work that has occupied Cathy Keys' making, thinking, researching and consideration for some time and it culminates in a landscape of works that create their own commentary. Concepts examining and exploring the handmade; landscape; place; site specificity; the role of the artist in the process of making; culture and its containment in the most elemental; the object; the vessel have all been part of the conversation.

Coiling is often a technique one is introduced to early in one's relationship with clay often a compulsory element that is not valued for itself but as a quick slam bam intro to thousands of years of making. Raced over as if treasure lies further along the path. cursory introduction to the coil is usually always followed by the desire to cover up and remove this evidence of the making. Cathy Keys uses this very technique of making to consolidate and elicit the process of the landscape she filters through a plethora of interconnected concepts—amongst them the sense of before and continuing, time, age, growth, layering, difference, landscape.

The works grow coil by coil to become forms that grow into themselves with her hand as guide. The very particular focus of Cathy's work has been the Bottle Trees (*Brachychiton* spp.) found in South East Queensland and inland along the central Queensland coast. This work relates to Cathy's area of interest, commitment and place. They are and have been an integral part of her identity and relationship to her surroundings.

I don't know if Cathy talks to her pots as she makes them or thinks to them as she works and develops her relationship to the object but I do know they are part of a continuing dialogue between herself as an artist and her material and method of choice.

In Gwyn Hanssen Pigott: A survey 1955 – 2005 Jason Smith writes "Hanssen Pigott talks of her pots having to 'stand as they are, as real as my hand; and it seems I have so little time to know them before they are gone'. It is this quality of knowing her objects, of feeling their particular individualities and their potency as ensembles or families that seem to animate the still life. Hanssen Pigott considers that in the alchemy of making, the pot becomes subtly humanised."

Cathy Keys creates communities of clay forms that contribute to dialogue in regard to the specific landscape and the key knowledges of the places that resonate with her work: the scarring on the particular face of the bottle tree that tells of time and geographical location; the swelling and narrowing of the forms that reflect the abundance or lack of water and the anchoring to the landscape of the individual tree in a community. All these facets are layered within the coils—some distressed, some smooth and thin; visible inside and out. Unadorned, except for a rubbing of oxides to accentuate the crevices and other textures and stain the clay.

Cathy comments in her statement on the specifics of the importance and physicality of the Queensland Bottle Tree and its cultural and physical significance and context.

Cathy Keys' work is significant as it creates a new landscape to consider.



BACKGROUND

When I began preparing for this exhibition I was drawn to the (craft) literature concerned with rationalising the apparent resurgence in the material object. The main thrust of the argument went something like this—in the context of a global, industrial, capitalist ‘digital age’ where contemporary life and work is increasingly ‘placeless’ there is a growing realisation of the human need to be surrounded by ‘hand crafted objects’. The question coming out of this reading for me as a ‘hand-building’ ceramic artist was—if our material culture is considered the physical environment in which people interact with, and from which they make things, then do we still have a cultural need to assign place specific meaning to the objects we make or is it enough that they are hand-made?

Theoretically, places can be considered as specific, unique spaces that we allow to accrue history and symbolic meaning. A premise of existing place theory is that the people/environment relations constitute an important basis for human existence. (Relph 1976:1, Malpas 1999:16.) Some place theorists are arguing that with the scale of ‘international displacement’ being experienced by human societies it can no longer be assumed that culture is fixed to particular places (Casey 1993:31; Lavie & Swedenburg 1996:2-3). I am interested in this contemporary notion of ‘displacement’ because there is much historic evidence to suggest that the cultural relationships between memory, self identity and place are strong¹ and inter dependant² (Long 2005:52).³

If we broadly define culture as the characteristics of a group of people consisting of both patterns for behaviour and patterns of behaviour—is it possible to consider culturally specific behaviour not grounded to a specific place? Do we still need to have some aspect of our identities linked to a physical place? Does a shared experience of place, climate and history still have culturally specific meaning? Do we still need objects that remind us of these places and events? I’m not sure if it’s the case for ‘others’ or the dominant cultural paradigm I live in, but for me as a maker—it is increasingly important to produce crafted objects that convey or ‘hold’ memories of a specific physical and cultural environment. I currently understand my process as an act of literally weaving layers of cultural knowledge into ceramic objects so they are *meaning-full* about place. This exhibition comes out of this thinking about place and culture and about reaching some understanding about my motivation and intent as an artist. To explore these ideas I have focused my attention on the cultural knowledge and significance assigned to Bottle Trees found in Queensland.

¹ Hayden (1995:16) argues that ‘places assist on all ways of knowing (sight sound smell touch taste) that [is what] makes it a powerful source of memory.

² Jeff Malpas (1999:178) argues self identity is maintained through ‘active engagement with places and that due to ‘separation from place and possessions may be almost literally a separation from parts of oneself’.

³ Others are not so sure. Geographer Relph (1993) argues for a notion of ‘placelessness’ saying ‘unfortunately the skills and social context for making places no longer exists. Architectural theorist Norberg-Schultz (1980:180) writes of ‘alienation’ and belief that developments in communication systems have reduced the specific notion of place.



Left: Bottle Tree — western Bunya Mountain foothills
Middle: Bell Series (stoneware 63cm high)
Right: Brigalow Series (stoneware 57cm high)

BOTTLE TREES

Bottle Trees (*Brachychiton* spp.)⁴ are found in South-east Queensland and inland along the Central Queensland Coast. The trees are generally stunted⁵ with a swollen trunk. They naturally exist in a type of dry rainforest with vine thickets occurring on undulating hills, lowlands and plains on a range of soil types. I am attracted to their anthropomorphic forms; their ability to hold water and survive droughts; their history of use by Aboriginal people and early settlers and the multiple meanings assigned to them in our physical and cultural landscape. I am interested in making ceramic sculptures that record and pass on some of these characteristics at a time of widespread drought and when the Queensland Bottle Tree habitat has been almost completely cleared. The species is nationally recognised as threatened.⁶

PLACE SIGNIFIER

In their natural habitat Bottle Trees act as sign posts, compasses and markers. The Bell Series in this exhibition is inspired by a stand of narrow leaved Bottle Trees (*Brachychiton rupestris*) growing on the western foothills of the Bunya Mountains on the Darling Downs. Despite long term farming and change to their natural habitat these trees have been retained thus creating a very strong sculptural element in the rural landscape. In their natural habitat several 'bottle types' have evolved in different micro-environments. Specific places with Bottle Trees at the Bunya Mountains have significant personal meaning to me.

LIVING TRIBUTES

Some Bottle Trees found in urban or town landscapes in Queensland have been assigned an ongoing role as 'living tributes'. Bottle Trees have been formally planted in culturally significant sites to 'hold' symbolic meaning associated with memory and loss—most commonly places assigned for the purpose of retaining the memory of those killed in times of war. Bottle Trees are found in Anzac Square, in the centre of Brisbane city, a site where the "Eternal Flame" is kept alight and where the annual Anzac Day dawn ceremony is performed to honour the memory of lives lost to war. At Roma, a town in Western Queensland, 'Heroes Avenue' was planted with a Bottle Tree for each of the 93 local young men who did not return from World War I.⁷ The installations concerned with the idea of Bottle Tree as 'living tribute' are the Anzac (Roma) Series and the Anzac Square Series.

WATER STORAGE

Bottle Trees have another more contemporary symbolic significance as water storage vessels during a period of unprecedented drought. Historically, Bottle Trees provided Indigenous⁸ and non-Indigenous Queenslanders with water and food sources in dry times. Low rainfall and water restrictions have brought the consciousness of drought into urban lives and urban backyards. Bottle Trees remind us of the preciousness of water contained in their swollen form and perhaps inspire us with the way the natural vegetation has adapted to a dry climate. Pieces in the Brigalow Series are concerned with the idea of Bottle Tree as 'water storage' and were made with individual coils distressed to create a cracked and textured surface. The surface was rubbed in oxides and fired to reflect the colours of a parching earth. The Reservoir Series speaks about a 'dry place'— ceramic vessel as recorder of a specific time and place in our memories.



⁴ *Brachychiton* spp. are not related to the baobab trees found in Western Australia and South Africa.

⁵ Although in natural bush where they are competing for light they can grow to be quite tall.

⁶ Changes in tree clearing legislation has resulted in 75% of their habitat being removed (reduced from an estimated pre-clearing extent of 77,485 hectares to 19,360 hectares in 1999) and they are now considered a threatened species with only 8.2% of the threatened ecological community conserved in National Parks (Commonwealth of Australia 2007:2,3).

⁷ See www.anzacday.org.au/ed.

⁸ Australian National Botanical Gardens, Aboriginal Trail, 2007.

Top: Reservoir Series (porcelain 31cm high)
Left: Roma — Heroes Avenue
Middle: Anzac (Roma) Series (stoneware 70cm high)
Right: Anzac Square Series (stoneware 45cm high)

CATHY KEYS

I am a Brisbane based ceramicist, with a background in architecture and anthropology. I create hand built sculptural forms. The coiling process and the forms and textures it creates are inspired by observing the interaction of climatic and environmental phenomenon in the Australian landscape and have resulted in work that is unique and original. I am interested as a ceramicist in investigating and documenting a human connection with place, environment and cultural knowledge.

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