

CATHY KEYS TIDEMARK



It is the process of erosion, staining and wear so honestly revealed at the edge of the sea—that inspires this current body of ceramic work. The interactions of people and environments and the cultural artifacts this produces have been the focus of my study for some time. It is not just the physical environments themselves that captures my imagination but the importance of place in people's behaviour and collective memory. To date, my art work has been drawn from landscapes where I have had strong personal experiences, reaching out from the heart of Central Australia through to central and southern Queensland. The ceramic sculptures in this exhibition are inspired by the coastal environments of the Sunshine Coast and have been informed by ideas about weathering, human behavior and environmental change.



## WEATHERING

I want to work with retelling the stories attached to weathered surfaces—one of them being evidence of the gradual passing of time. In creating a staining and textured finish I aim to re-engage with the environmental process of modification through erosion and the accumulation of dirt. To disintegrate or discolour a surface, through exposure to the elements is a slow process in nature. It is this layered quality of dirt and history that intrigues me. Working with this idea has resulted in stained hand made objects that are at odds with the design and craft industries current attachment to a sleek white finish.<sup>1</sup>

The desire for a perfect white surface has a long standing history in high-fired ceramics<sup>2</sup> but the current global 'fashion' for whiteness across a broad spectrum of ceramic products is paralleled in the neural tones and flat white finishes of contemporary architecture.<sup>3</sup> Common to all these cultural artifacts, be they a translucent porcelain bowl or a beach house, is the absence of colour<sup>4</sup> and marks indicating the passing of time. There are cultural implications when a society aspires to be 'dirt' free, wanting 'new' objects that look and stay white. In choosing to predominately work with earthenware and stoneware clays I am aware of their cultural value and material status and consciously positioning my work in opposition to this white aesthetic.

## BENCHMARK

This body of work was conceived and built in the context of a public concern with environmental stress and global warming. In all this debate I was taken with the way marks made on marine rocks by people many generations ago were now being used retrospectively to establish sea water bench marks across the globe. While forecasts and projections of changing water levels vary widely I was drawn to the coastlines of my childhood searching for evidence of this 'rising' sea. Arriving at the beach I found myself observing tides, trying to measure water marks against worn and stained rock shelves. The series *Tidal pool* is concerned with recording qualities of this threatened tidal zone.



Left: *Gastropod*, stoneware/oxides, largest 35cm high

Middle: *Pebble*, stoneware/oxides, 18x23cm

Right & opposite: *Tidal Pool*, stoneware/oxides, 20x45cm

## BEACHCOMBING

Humans have been fascinated with the pebbles and sea shells for a very long time. In fact, there is evidence in various parts of Europe to suggest that people were collecting shells for body ornamentation up to 40,000 years ago.<sup>5</sup> Peering into rock holes and turning over shell fragments and pebbles is something we continue to do. I am intrigued by this behavior and how it connects us with beachcombers across time. The *Gastropod* series and *Pebble* series are concerned with humanities ancient relationship with the beach and the objects found washed up on the sand. While I may be fascinated with recording behaviours like beachcombing that show very little evidence of change in thousands of years, in hungering for the 'new', my society is requiring people and environments to adapt rapidly with change. In response, I find myself wanting to create hand made objects that capture time and express its passing.

1. I see a great deal of similarity in the thinking underpinning ceramics and architecture and when preparing for a new body of ceramic work I supplement my reading in the craft/design literature with architectural texts and theoretical discourse.
2. See Janet DeBoos' paper 'Whiter than White' for a brief historic overview of 'whiteness' in ceramics (De Boos 2006).
3. The global 'ideal' of a white surface in architecture is relatively new, gathering momentum with Le Corbusier and the modern movement (Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow 1993:72). See Mostafavi and Leatherbarrow's book *On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time* (1993) for a critique of the role of weathering in contemporary architecture.
4. Colour in design is used to mark a fashion moment and can be seen to quickly 'out-date' a material object.
5. Archeologists have found that the use of marine shells as personal ornaments are much more common in certain inland areas where it is thought their 'exotic origins seem to have added to their desirability' (Rudgley 1998:190).



## 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.

cathy.keys@optusnet.com.au  
www.cathykeys.com



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This project has been assisted by the Australian Government through the Australia Council, its arts funding and advisory body.

Thank you to Coolooloolo Shire Public Gallery and Fusions for their support of this exhibition. Thanks to Jenny Keys, Sandy Keys, Sue Loveday and Leesa Hickey for advice and assistance with research, editing and graphics. I would like to acknowledge the support of Stephanie Outridge-Field, John Conroy, Desley Keys, and Lesley Stewart. To my partner Sean Flanagan and daughters Emily and Anika, love you and can't wait to make the next sand castle.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

De Boos, Janet, 2006, 'Whiter than White: A Marriage of Materials and Desire', in Object Magazine, Issue 48, pp34-39.

Mostafavi, Mohsen & Leatherbarrow, David, 1993, On Weathering: The Life of Buildings in Time, The MIT Press, London.

Rudgley, Richard, 1998, Lost Civilisations of the Stone Age, Arrow Books, London.