

## The Domus: Constructing Histories and Identities in Clay.

Ronnie Watt, Ceramics researcher-writer, 2014.

In South Africa's Zulu culture which has a rich tradition of pot making, there are no different words for clay used for pottery and for clay used for constructing houses. Clay as material is uniformly named *ubumba* in the Zulu language.<sup>1</sup> Not so in the English language where brick is the clay-derived material for house building, and clay in the forms of earthenware, stoneware and porcelain is the material with which we shape functional and decorative utilities and objects for the house. Clay-as-brick contains, protects, facilitates and embellishes. Ditto for clay-as-utility/object. Yet despite their common functional and aesthetics qualities, we view and consider them as distinctly separate. However, when clay is endowed with deeper meanings such as associations with social, cultural, religious, economic, political and environmental histories, it assumes a significance beyond its mere materiality and functionality.



Studio Qiao (Rock Wang & Tong Ho), *Brick Plan - Vases*, 2009.  
Bricks, cutting, polishing, burnishing. Ø 15 x 45 cm, Ø 20 x 35 cm  
Photo by courtesy of Rock Wang.



Studio Qiao (Rock Wang & Tong Ho), *Brick Plan -- Oval Bowl*, 2009.  
Bricks, cutting, polishing, burnishing. 60 x 25 x 25cm.  
Photo by courtesy of Rock Wang.

A common thread of clay as the building material of house and home, in various forms and guises, and with various meanings, was incidentally featured at the 2014 Taiwan Ceramics Biennale curated by Wendy Gers of France, and hosted by the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum. Within the biennale themes of Glocal Identities, Shattered & Upcycled & Recycled Ceramics, and 3D Printed & CNC Ceramics, participating ceramists raised awareness of vanishing and altered built landscapes and how those translate as universal losses and gains.

Red brick has been the building material of choice in Taiwan and red brick houses and buildings permeate the Taiwanese landscape. In recent years, concrete and other building materials which allow for faster, cheaper and more innovative building, have come to replace the red brick. While historical red brick buildings are being preserved, red brick structures which served the Taiwanese people as houses and public facilities are eroding away and a way of life – a “red brick culture” - in which the masses shared, is progressively being erased. There’s no stopping the tide of progress and the Taiwan designers Rock Wang and Tong Ho of Studio Qiao know that full well... but believe that “the end of one thing could be the beginning of another”.<sup>2</sup> From cubes of assembled and cemented red bricks, functional and decorative objects are carved and polished using stone carving skills and technology. These bricks are newly moulded and fired rather than recovered from older, abandoned red brick structures which to some degree diminish their value as reference in their transformation into, as Wang describes them, “modernistic and abstract totems”.



Studio Tromarama, *Ons Aller Belang*, 2012.

Mixed media: 30 decalced porcelain plates, video projection, and looped animation. 256 cm x 255 cm.  
Photo by courtesy of Tromarama and Ark Galerie.

Red brick was introduced in Taiwan during the era of Dutch colonisation of the island and Dutch colonists also stamped their architectural style on occupied Indonesia. The Indonesian city of Bandung east of Jakarta, in particular became a melting pot of Dutch and traditional building styles. The Dutch progressively moved from building in a European style to adopting the more sensible local structural lay-out which was embellished with Dutch trimmings, to a harmonious blending of European and traditional building styles.<sup>3</sup> As in Taiwan, Bandung's older everyday structures are making way for new construction development and in the process the cityscape is being wiped clean of its distinctive architectural heritage and some of its socio-cultural features. The loss is lamented in *Ons aller belang*, a montage of decal-print porcelain plates with video projection by the collective Studio Tromarama (Febie Babyrose, Ruddy Hatumena, and Herbert Hans Marulia). A series of images derived from a locked camera view, positions the *Ons aller belang* building which was originally a community centre and then converted with a totally new look to a bank, in a landscape undergoing industrial transformation. The stop motion image of the building and the flow of activity past it, is trapped within a floral border design which refers to Bandung's epithet of "City of Flowers" which is progressively being nullified because of commercial and industrial development. The visual elements and the means of the imaging are incongruous but become reconciled within the whole understanding of loss whether flowing from indifference or complacency.



Kim Ju-ree, *Hwigyeong*, 2014.  
White clay, water, slip-casting and construction.  
Installation 75 x 75 x 130 cm.  
Photos courtesy of (top) Huang Yun-chung  
and (bottom) the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum.

Kim Ju-ree of South Korea's *Hwigyeong* is a visually dramatic statement about how ephemeral our world has become. The ceramist constructs in reduced-scale the domestic buildings in an old residential district in her country. The district is representative of urban South Korean architecture dating to the 1970s and 1980s which now has to make way for modern urban development. Ju-ree's clay structures are not fired but are exposed to contact with water which results in a slow decay and collapse of the material: the artwork destructs into non-art, the process of destruction become the process of constructing memory. From Ju-ree's structures we can extract analogies of loss of history, culture, tradition, individuality, communality, survival, and more.

The Chilean ceramist Ximena Ducci Budge did not exhibit her works of house structures at the biennale but in her conference presentation added to the theme of the house as symbol and container of universal values and needs: shelter, protection, privacy, rest, consolation and where our biological and spiritual lives unfold.<sup>4</sup> The house is the place in which we can isolate ourselves from the world, but it can not escape being part of the world. It is a sanctuary and a place of celebration. It can also be a place of secrets of abuse. She presents her houses as simplified structures but through their structural elements (or absence thereof) as analogies of living private lives, all is revealed in what they conceal.



(Top) Ximena Ducci Budge, *Casa Tramada* ("Woven House"), 2012.  
Reduction-fired stoneware, 16 x 42 x 39 cm.  
Collection of Patricio Cummins D.

(Bottom) Ximena Ducci Budge, *Casa Amarrada* ("Tied House"), 2012.  
Reduction-fired stoneware with copper wire, 20 x 25 x 26 cm.  
Collection of Mario Mora L.  
Photos by courtesy of Hildegardo Igor A.

Alongside the works at the biennale that address the house as symbol of cultural and social structure, are the installations by Francesco Ardini of Italy in which he explores and exposes the functional and decorative ceramics within the house as markers of negative culture via excessive consumption. Ardini's studio is in Nove in the province of Vicenza. The ceramic workshops and factories of Nove have traditionally produced decorative ceramic and table pottery, such as the familiar pyramid-stacked ceramic fruits as a symbol of wealth and prosperity. In *Circe: Convivio* (Banquet), an assemblage of ceramic plates and items of food, Ardini delivers commentary on "common [consumer] items consumed with bulimic obsession"<sup>5</sup> in which "bulimic" equates with a "pathologically insatiable hunger".<sup>6</sup> It is the relic of a banquet of surpluses and excesses from which organic and inorganic decay ooze.



Francesco Ardini, *Circe: Convivio* (Banquet), 2013.  
Clay, augmented reality on tablet. Installation 150 x 100 x 80 cm.  
Photo by courtesy of the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum and Huang Yun-chung.

In contrast to Ardini's theme of over-indulgence and waste, stands the biennale installation by Malin Lundmark of Sweden in which she appropriates and recycles functional objects within the home. Using uninhibited play, she alters and morphs objects and they gain new aesthetics of form and thought. Through playing behaviour, Lundmark subconsciously designs outcomes which

break all rules of how things should look and what their functions should be. In the next step, Lundmark takes control of the new objects and arranges them in a stylized room where they coalesce in a new world midway between fantasy and reality.



Malin Lundmark, *As if... fantasy was reality – Part II*, 2013.  
Recycled ceramics. Installation 640 x 310 x 305 cm.  
Photos by courtesy of the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum.

Translating into form the concepts of “house” and “home” via the very materials that constitute the house and home, could easily lapse into “domesticated” thinking about the domus. The challenge for the ceramic artist is to excite those materials via new and revisited forms, and how to incite critical thinking about the materials through which histories and identities are formed and in which they can flourish or decay or become erased.

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