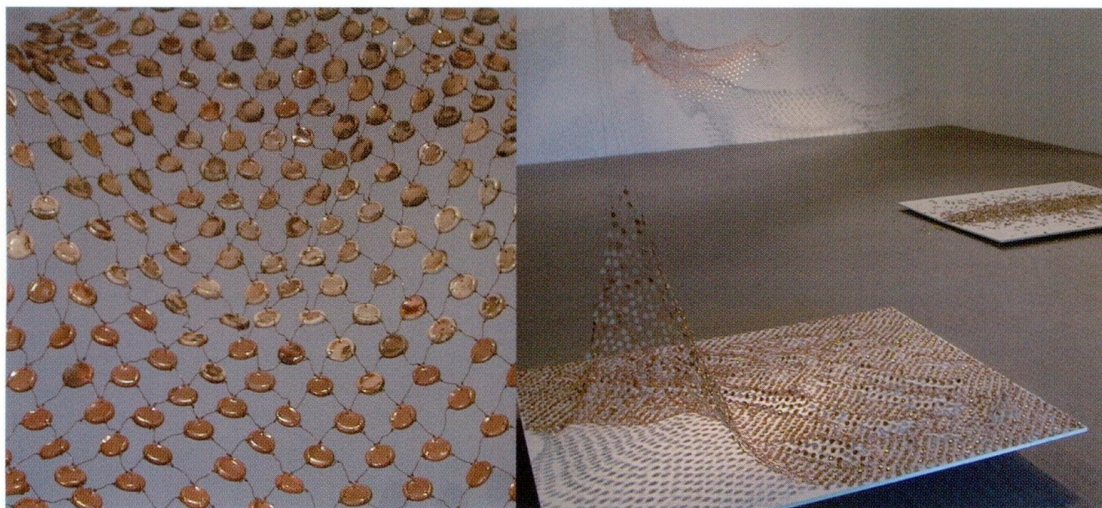


embodied surface

MORAIG MCKENNA



Left: 'Embodied Surface', detail, wood fired porcelain and threaded wire. Right: installation - front view 2m x 2m

A Masters exhibition at Southern Cross University

In the work 'Embodied Surface' I have visually explored the processes, forms and surfaces associated with long wood-fired ceramics and I have drawn conceptual and aesthetic connections between them and the human body, particularly with skin. When making this work I was particularly interested in fostering what I see as the 'skin like' qualities of wood-fired surfaces.

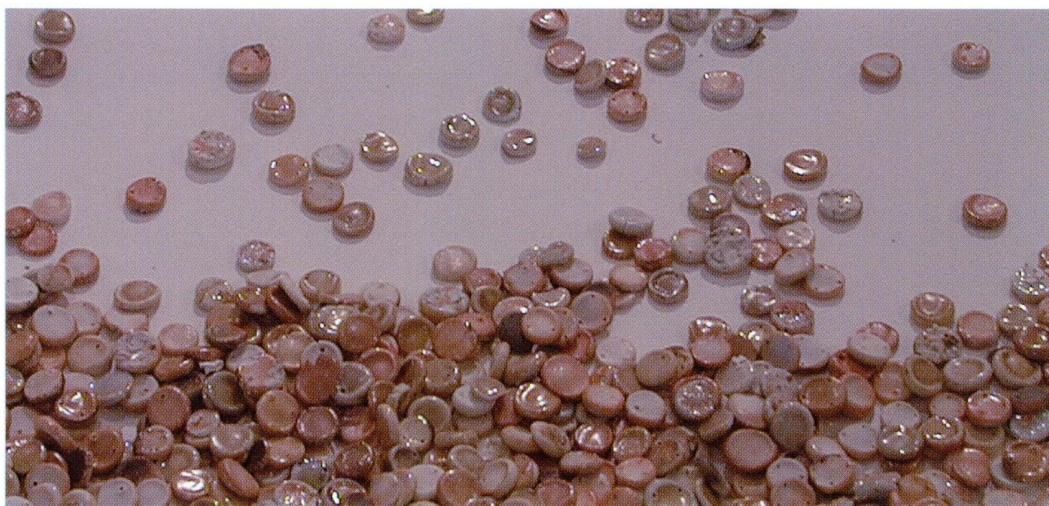
Throughout life our skin documents the experiences of our body on its surface. Wood-fired surfaces are formed in a similar manner. The colours, patterns and textures are a direct document of their creative process and are dependent on the composition of the clay body and the conditions of firing. These surfaces record the passage of flame as it licks around them, layers of ash accumulate, and the work collects the scars of movement and contact with other work during the firing. Similarly the life experiences of the body are shown on the skin through wrinkles, scars, and freckles.

The skin also mediates from the body to the outside world. It communicates by externally displaying the inner states of the body and mind on its surface through blemishes, rashes and blushes. In a similar manner, the constitution of clay, its Alumina/ Silica ratio, iron content, texture, and degree of vitrification all determine to some extent the resultant surface quality. For both clay bodies and human bodies what is in evidence on the surface is directly affected by what is happening on the inside.

The work as a whole comprises approximately 12000 individual, porcelain, wood-fired cells. These cells are each about 1cm in diameter and were formed by pressing a small ball of clay between my index finger and thumb. These cells are like pieces of my flesh; traces of my body, each impressed with my fingerprint.

'Embodied Surface' is installed as three layers or skins that occupy visually connected spaces within the gallery. Each skin occupies about 2.5 square metres. The first two skins are formed from cells that are meshed together with fine copper wire and are suspended within the gallery space; the remainder of the cells are scattered on the gallery floor like bodily detritus.

'Embodied Surface' is about the intertwining of inside and outside, and of surface and depth. It represents the body as skin that is marked by influences from within, the body/clay body and influences external to the body.



Embodied Surface detail wood fired porcelain discs d.1cm each

Every picture is a picture of the body. Every work of visual art is a representation of the body. The creation of a form is to some degree also the creation of a body. This is a beautiful and complicated subject, the way our eyes continue to look at the most diverse kinds of things and bring back echoes of bodies¹.

Looking at wood-fired ceramics for me brings back "echoes of bodies". The clay is like flesh and the forms are like figures, the making and firing processes are reminiscent of the processes and experiences of a human life span. However it is in the many connections between wood-fired surfaces and human skin that these echoes are at their most resonant. It is these connections between wood-firing and the body that are the aesthetic and conceptual basis of the work 'Embodied Surface'.

'Embodied Surface' was produced for the degree of Master of Arts by research that I recently completed at Southern Cross University, School of Contemporary Arts in Lismore. and was exhibited at the University Art Museum in April 2002.

¹ J. Elkins, Pictures of the body, Pain and Metamorphosis, Stanford University Press, 1999, p.1

Technical Information

The Clay Body

The Porcelain body was developed as part of my Honours project at Southern Cross University. It has a high alumina:silica ratio and is based on Eckalite 1 Kaolin with Nepheline Syenite as the flux.

The Surface

All work is unglazed. The surface qualities are enhanced by a reduced cooling to around 1100 c and then re-oxidation.

The Firing

The work was wood fired for three days using hard wood (Eucalyptus) in the 'sphinx' tunnel style kiln at Southern Cross University.