

a M i c s c e r a M
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M i c s c e r d M i c
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e r d M i c s c e r d



FLETCHER CHALLENGE
CERAMICS AWARD 1994



Waiclay National Exhibition 2011



Selector's Statement Bruce Dehnert New Jersey, USA

As our jet approached New Zealand, I saw a crystalline swath of islands through breaks in the clouds below. Just as expected, a deep well of emotion started to rise from somewhere in my chest. This was my first trip back to the country since living in Dunedin during the 1990's when ceramics education was just beginning its own descent into the netherworld of "how much salary you gonna be able to make on that degree?" Ceramics programs that had once fed a wild marketplace were just beginning to close down; shut their doors. As the Qantas pilot put the stop to the beast I wasn't too sure of what I would find in the way of clay in the cupboards, on the walls, in the galleries, or even gardens.

Having the rare opportunity, and honour, to be the selector for this year's WaiClay Exhibition, I have been able to derive for myself some answer to that question. At first, I experienced these works through images sent half way around the world via the internet. Since arriving, I've been able to spend quiet time with these special 'guests' before their coming-out party amidst

the noise, booze and glare. On the web, they were flat sorts of things, more iconographic than physical. In the dark basement of the museum we rubbed shoulders, getting to know one another. With some, I was surprised by their scale. After all, I had assumed they were going to be taller than my 21 year old son! One centimetre here, a millimetre there, it's all metrics to me. But what I found dazzled me and made my eyes tear-up (it's that way with me). Art and the things people make are usually just too good to be true. And thus is the horrific job of getting down to selecting what gets in, what doesn't, and then which ones get the special lustre of a prize.

See, being an artist doesn't prepare you for adjudicating. It does prepare you for having a value system in which the ephemera of animal making, a world to which humans belong, enjoy great importance. For example, I marvel at the wasps' nests that hang precariously over our dragon kiln back in Jersey. Thus the problem. Just as I regret having to remove one of those nests before a firing, when selecting these works

for WaiClay I was hyper-aware of the fact that each of us invest a great many things in the work we make. It's under our skin and there when we exhale. How do you choose between one breath and another?

Depending on the story needing told, clay is amazing in its ability to carry metaphor, message, and artist intent. As a medium, clay travels the longest distance in its possibilities; from taking a shovelful of the stuff from the paddock and firing it as-is, all the way to high-tech filtration and sterility. One might discuss the enduring earth while the other our bodies, vulnerable and alone at life's end. Most importantly, I wanted to select an exhibition of works that embody, in vicarious kinds of ways, each maker's take on the 'wreck' that is life.

Conversations, Coincidences and Motivations:
The Alfred Experience



Right:
Detail, *Hades' Revisited*, 2009

Page 42:
Hades' Revisited, 2009
earthenware
23 x 13 x 12 inches

Page 43:
Detail, *Hades' Revisited*, 2009

My studio work involves "utilitarian" and "sculptural" focuses. Each does what the other cannot.

I can reduce my recent sculptural work to the bare threads of writing. Starting with the premise that biblical stories are 'constructs' in need of characters developed through the usual means of narrative, I've chosen various cathedral floorplans and motifs as armatures. Direct references to these architectural devices might fall away as the process of construction proceeds. Ultimately, in my sculpture I want to present a reflection on the human condition that provides a conflict between Enlightenment and Reason.

While the utilitarian work might share architectural motif with the sculptures, there is a swift departure towards the 'organic' and random occurrence. I want to reference my local environment, i.e. the waterfall in our backyard or sun-ripened black raspberries in August. However, to depart from this reverie I am compelled to invite various associations with darkness. They may include a leopard shark, A-bombs or jet fighters.

"XFR STN": The New Museum's Stone Tape

By Walter Forsberg

Introduction

"Magnetic tape is compact, responsive—all the sales chatter says it is. Also: delicate, and prone to lose its memory." In the plot of Nigel Kneale's seminal 1972 BBC TV special, *The Stone Tape*, this visionary declaration spurs the teleplay's research into new methods of video preservation. Given that "tape's finished...its day is done," protagonist Peter Brock and his coterie of Ryan Electronics technicians embark on developing a groundbreaking new media format—one that will defeat the Japanese electronics industry, replace the need for magnetic tape, and make all of them filthy rich. To house their mass of requisite machinery (oscilloscopes, microphones, data recorders, and computing esoterica), Brock's team relocates to a sprawling countryside castle. However, once there, the engineers soon encounter eerie apparitions of the building's deceased, former inhabitants. Appropriately enough for the classic era of British science-fiction television, Brock decides to use his team's instruments and "go after it with electronics," quickly discovering that the ghosts aren't ghosts, per se. Rather, the aged Gothic edifice itself is revealed as a powerful and enduring new recording medium capable of preserving moving images—a "stone tape": free from delicate physical supports prone to decomposition, replaying video inside the minds of humans.

When I first heard the rough conceptual parameters of the New Museum's "XFR STN" project, the premise of Kneale's imagined institutional memory bank immediately came to mind. The "XFR STN" undertaking proposed installing elaborate electronics workstations, seeking a unique context to preserving information held on magnetic tape, and trying to make it last for millennia. Trained technician graduates from New York University's Moving Image Archiving and Preservation program would operate thousands of dollars' worth of old video and digital equipment (reconditioned with the generous technical support of DuArt Film and Video's restoration department), adhere to reformatting best practices, and store all resultant material through a partnership with the Internet Archive, where it would be made publicly accessible. In this, "XFR STN" seemed just as wonderfully ambitious, peculiar, and geeky as the objectives of Ryan Electronics.

In the last half-decade, several of New York's major art museums have recognized the imperative of Ryan Electronics's quest for a media preservation super-strategy. At the Guggenheim, Joanna Phillips's strong record of media collections and exhibition-driven conservation, and Peter Oleksik's immense achievement-in-progress of digitizing MoMA's mammoth video art canon, are two efforts that immediately come to mind. But as an institution without a comparable collection or retention policy, the New Museum's proposal to offer a publicly displayed free media transfer service, open to all, is radical in practice and distinct within contemporary modes of video and data preservation. In lieu of mere celebration, this essay attempts to articulate some of the stakes "XFR STN" addresses given videotape transfer's clandestine, expensive, and politically charged history.

Archiving "Traces"
XFR STN Project
The New Museum

Sometimes solutions to those scratch-your-head quandaries, like how to archive an artwork that was produced on a fragile medium like video, are serendipitous. Ever since I made the film titled, "Traces," I've often wondered if it would ever make that trip from its insecure existence as a tape hidden away in a cool, dry bank vault in Wyoming to some kind of more permanent 'safe house.' The construction of The Net...that non-existent place we visit practically every day...was heartening to say the least. If it doesn't exist, it can't be destroyed. Or can it? But how to get there on a big purple tape with some pretty interesting ideas recorded in Beta? That was always a nagging one.

Several months ago my wife, Kulvinder Kaur Dhew, who helped with the production of the film, came across an article describing The New Museum's *XFR STN* project. An elegant idea if there ever was one, we grabbed onto it like the gunwale of a lifeboat. *XFR STN* offered the opportunity to archive the film and by doing so, give it a second life after the initial rounds of film festivals and viewings that happened so long ago.

But here's the really interesting thing; there was a nice juxtaposition, coincidental of course, between the ideas expressed in the film, and the nature or concept of the *XFR STN* project. The film, "Traces," was shot in New Zealand, Borneo, and the United States during the late 1990's when tons of Art Schools around the globe were downsizing their programs by disappearing their "craft" departments. After barely surviving the Modernist era during which mediums like clay/ceramics were often viewed with jaundice and given the axe, unbeknownst to many of these schools clay would make a big comeback in Postmodernism as just one of many mediums an artist could (and would) choose from. An example here would be Ai Weiwei's 2011 installation "*Sunflower Seeds*" at the Tate in London. The historian and artists, who were interviewed in my film, argue from their very different perspectives for the importance of "the handmade" in culture. Each of them warn viewers about how changing technologies can leave behind makers who hold specialized knowledge. It's interesting that *XFR STN* seems, in part, an attempt to counter the loss of the same, using the very technologies that the narrators of the film, "Traces," caution us about.

While ceramics have a shelf life of tens of thousands of years, some new mediums and technologies are brief or transient at best. The expressions and ideas proffered by artists working in these various media are clearly what are important. Linden Cowell, the art historian in "Traces," questions the advent of what Rene' Descartes described as being the mind/body separation increasingly experienced by humans in the modern age. Cowell suggests that plastic mediums like clay are perhaps best put to use in order to stave-off the artificiality of that which exists "inside" the Internet and the various mediums that more easily serve its purposes like photography and film. His concerns

seem to have to do in part with the loss of 'the physical' as part of the artistic experience.

In "Traces," the potter Madam Sudan, of Borneo's Iban people, makes reference to the importance of smell when judging the qualities of pottery. She states that "if a pot doesn't smell like it was fired in the traditional way, it isn't a good pot." As information, this can be very interesting from the perspectives of culture, aesthetics, and the trajectory of human history. Through the *XFR STN* project, these snippets of erudition are saved for future generations to ponder in order to decide for themselves what is important in the artistic realm. What to keep in, what to leave out. There's an interesting co-dependency between these new technologies and those that have been with us since Neolithic times.

Goh Teck Yuong, a Chinese immigrant potter from Kuching, Malaysia addresses the transfer of ceramic technology from China to Borneo in the 9th century vis-a-vie the pusaka jar. While the Chinese potters enthusiastically incorporated indigenous motifs and forms, their Iban counterparts stayed well away from Chinese designs fearing retaliation from various spiritual forces. The *XFR STN* project makes possible the expression and examination of these sorts of conflicts between cultures. Like Marshall McLuhan's book "The Medium Is The Message" argued many years ago, both the digital and handcraft realms meet head-on in that area of mimicry. While the digital makes it easier and therefore more fraught with the possibility of conflict, it also makes possible the preservation of how things were done and the conceptual arguments for why.

As we exited the elevator onto the fifth floor of The New Museum and entered the *XFR STN* project room, we were hyper-aware of the opportunity to have the film recorded in a new format and one that would make the film part of a concept having to do with sharing in order to be preserved. It's interesting to me that "Traces" was a film having partly to do with shared perspectives on a specific medium, from European to Asian to American, and by being part of this project at the New Museum, conceptually the film survives another day as a shared, weightless gathering of ideas.

Bruce Dehnert
16 September 2013