



Merran Esson



Sculptor, Merran Esson, creates vessels from clay that investigate the nature of the Australian landscape, and was the only non-painter joining the tour to Fowlers Gap. By using clay, she is engaging with the place in a physical and tactile manner. She spent a great deal of time exploring dry riverbeds and dam surrounds during the trip, investigating the quality of dirt and potential clay. Upon returning to her studio, she created vessels that reflect the natural qualities of the areas she visited, helped by gathering physical, negative imprints of local objects.

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MOST OF THE artists on the expedition work primarily as painters and drawers in a 2-dimensional form. You work as a sculptor and potter, often creating 3D vessel forms. How was the experience of being surrounded by painters?

It was exciting. Working in ceramics means that we are often pigeonholed into craft and design, so it was exhilarating to be part of a much broader exchange of ideas where material and process were not the focus.

For some time now, your work has engaged with the Australian landscape in terms of the human presence. Did this change at all while on tour and since returning to the studio?

No not really, I was still searching for the human presence. Idris Murphy delights in showing all sorts of evidence underfoot, including small shards of rocks chipped away by the indigenous population. Peter Sharp drew my attention to a grinding stone, which will definitely feature in my work. I found evidence in the dry creek bed of an old water tank that was washed down the river and distorted as it was flung against a tree trunk. This is finding its way into this new work.

How was the landscape of Fowlers Gap fed into your work? What challenges did the landscape and the tour present?

The landscape is earthy, colours that are part of a ceramic palette, so that part is easy. The challenges for me are that I am interested in the small detail of stuff, particularly rural stuff. I am always drawn to rusty farm machinery, and rolls of barbed wire. These are the tools of my influences from my native Tumbarumba area, so Fowlers Gap was a bit too familiar.

The main challenge for me is that the landscape is so vast, so huge. How to capture that in a piece of 3D work remains the challenge. Because I work with the materials of the earth, I was trying to just feel the place and to interpret that feeling. Ah... oh so elusive.



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How was the experience of working *en plein air* for you? Is working in the landscape common to your practice?

That was a challenge for me. I use the landscape to gather imagery, mostly on film, sometimes drawing but not often. Because of the length of this trip, I was able to work with the landscape as I foraged around the place.

I spent a lot of time collecting textures, using slabs of soft clay to create impressions of tree trunks and rocks. I also collected bits of clay that I found in creek beds. The clay out there is not good; it's too sandy, but it is a rich iron colour so I have sieved it and am using it as a slip for painting on the surface of some of the work. That seems like a good way to use the 'stuff' from site.

While in the landscape, what was it that caught your attention most strongly?

Definitely the rocks – what a place for any farmer to decide to farm! The ground is littered with rocks, so I spent most of my time looking down. I discovered a soft area of secondary clay below the spillway of dam wall. There I found kangaroo and sheep paw prints and I made plaster moulds of them. Although they appear in the work, they are so far out of context that I doubt they will hold much power.

What work have you produced upon returning from the tour?

Developing work has been slow. As Head of Ceramics at the National Art School, it's been the uninterrupted holiday time that has given me time to create some larger pieces. I have completed a number of smaller pieces, which explore the textures of rocks. For me, ideas need to sit and rust away for a while. Usually it takes about a year for the real work to emerge, so I am very much in the middle of making my major works.

How was it working alongside a large group of artists? What comforts or anxieties did the group present?

Hugely exhilarating! Initially I was quite envious of the speed in which painters and drawers can create images of their subject matter. This was my first experience of working with a group in this way. The artists who had done similar trips were so organised and started on the first day, so I did have some anxiety that my results after two weeks were a couple of small boxes of test vessels and lots of texture slabs. The group was amazing to be around.

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What were the main highlights of the tour for you?

Having two weeks to totally immerse myself in MY work – it was probably the best two weeks of 2011 for creative development. Two-thirds sky at night, I have always loved the night sky. Listening to Elisabeth Cummings and Guy Warren reminisce over a tumbler of whisky at the end of each day. I completely forgot the advantages of technology or I would have recorded them on my iPhone!

Merran Esson is represented by Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney, and Gaffer Ltd, Hong Kong.
www.stelladownerfineart.com.au
www.gaffer.com.hk
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01 Regolith (detail), 2011, ceramic with copper glaze, 14 x 21 x 11cm

02 Chenopod, 2011, ceramic with copper glaze, 9 x 11 x 15cm

03 Regolith, 2011, ceramic with copper glaze, 14 x 21 x 11cm

Images courtesy the artist and Stella Downer Fine Art, Sydney. Photography: Greg Piper.

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