

A Highly Conscious Unconscious



The Well-Travelled Towers of Helen Dunkerley

Article by Helen Hopcroft

SINKING HER HANDS INTO THE MUD OF THE ISLAND OF ST Thomas, Australian ceramist Helen Dunkerley discovered clay so rich and red it looked like the earth was on fire. St Thomas is part of the US territory in the Caribbean (one of glorious Virgin Islands) and Dunkerley's studio there looks out over an intense blaze of azure sea and lush tropical foliage. Each year, like some avian species borne aloft by a powerful urge for discovery, she begins a fresh cycle of migration that sees her travelling between a part time teaching job in Newcastle, Australia; an artist's residency and teaching in upstate New York; and a part time gallery assistant job in the Caribbean. It seems that each place leaves a fresh imprint on her work.

Dunkerley has been visiting and creating work on St Thomas for a few years. The practicalities of freighting work back to Australia and the US partially dictates the small scale of some of her exhibition pieces. Look closely at their embossed surfaces and you can see designs that echo the flora of the Virgin Islands, patterns that reference tropical plants and coral are arranged in a soft grid across the clay's skin. The stamps used to create this effect were made by the artist during a previous visit to the island; she explains that the geometric grid arrangement is a device used to 'hold together' and visually contrast the rough, sensual surface of the terracotta. Part of their charm is their lack of perfection: curved sides split into eye-corner creases, impurities in the clay create tactile interest, the dark red clay has fired to a hue closer to the glow of a cooling furnace. About the size of a large human hand, holding the pieces is like touching skin.

Inevitably the place of an artwork's creation leaves an indelible mark on its genesis, execution and aesthetic. Sometimes a sense of place resonates in the formal elements of an artwork: its form, colour, composition or texture. In Dunkerley's practice, place is a crucial locus for her creative imagination, inspiring and affecting process and imagery. Not simply the physical terrain in which she makes something, place also represents the instinctive internal space where she dream-thinks her way through forms, ideas and memories. In Dunkerley's practice, travel fuses with and inspires internal journeys, thus each ceramic piece functions as a visual marker of both inner experience and geographical location.

Spending winter in her suburban studio in Newcastle, a port city where grey sky hammers down on a steel grey sea and large tankers line the ocean horizon,

Dunkerley's work references the delicate curls of the spiral ferns that crowd her open air working space. Building up grainy textures with layers of coloured slip, then scraping them back when leather hard, she describes the surfaces as being "thin and old looking. I want people to see my work and experience a sense of the fragility of thing, growing old and fragile and wearing away." Delicate tensions flicker back and forth

*Facing page: **Fungoid 2 (Detail).***

*Below: **Fungoid 2.** 55 x 17 cm. Photos by Dean Beletich.*



in Dunkerley's practice. There is irony in the choice of material as long lasting and rich in history as clay being used to describe ephemera, constant processes of change, growth and decay, concepts as mutable and subjective as place.

Work emerging from her Caribbean studio, made from robust clay dug from her host's garden, however, resonates with the intense colours of a sun-drenched island.

***Tower of Love, Gone Wrong*, 2006.**

Earthenware paperclay, multilayered with slips and a lithium glaze. 87 x 21 x 18 cm. Photo by Dean Beletich. Collection of Newcastle Regional Art Gallery.

The hole where she has dug the clay has left a red scar against the vivid green of the garden and the artist says, only half joking, that eventually it will be turned into a pond. "Everyone else on the island was buying their clay at great expense from the mainland, because everything has to be transported by boat but I saw it sticking out of the ground. I dig it up and dry it out, drop it in a bucket of water for a few days, then stir it up until it is like a thin creamy slurry. Leaf matter floats to the top and stones drop to the bottom".

It is not the first time that place has literally fused with process in her work. During a holiday in Western Australia, Dunkerley and her family walked along the King River to visit the traditional aboriginal fish traps which arch across the mouth of the tidal waterway. It was an extremely hot day, they had walked for miles, clouds of flies stuck to their backs and hovered close against their

sweating faces, when Dunkerley spotted some white clay protruding from the riverbank. It was the grey-white of old bones, sticky and crystalline with salt. She gouged up a large handful, put some in a plastic bag and, after taking an exhausted glance at the fish traps, staggered back to their hotel. Flying home with her excess baggage proved a novel experience: "I went through security and they snapped 'what's that in your bag?' And I said 'it's a lump of wet clay'".

Most of the time it is the finished ceramic pieces or Dunkerley herself, not the raw material, that travel from one place to another. Sometimes the nature of travel blurs the line between experience and memory, transporting one place's visual references to another space, emerging as new imagery in a fresh location. After a sleepless night on her friend Kate's sofa in New York, Dunkerley recalls finding a beautifully illustrated Art Nouveau book in her collection. She sketched some of the intricate, curling, leaf-like patterns without any clear idea of how she would eventually use them, or even whether they would be adaptable to ceramic use. A year later the same patterns re-appeared, fused with forms reminiscent of tropical plants, on work created in her St Thomas studio. In Dunkerley's practice, such chance finds and discoveries act as a kind of navigational marker (to borrow Deleuze and Guattari's phrase) in the "smooth space" of her creative unconscious.

On another occasion, back in her nominal hometown of Newcastle, Dunkerley received an urgent phone call from staff at a local art gallery. The gallery had organized a public drawing workshop with a famous painter, not many participants had turned up, it looked like the event would be a sad disappointment to all concerned. Urgently requested to help make up numbers, Dunkerley and a friend quickly drove to the gallery, joined the workshop, and had a great day exploring Newcastle's busy docks and harbour, reveling in the city's industrial heartland. Away from nature and organic forms, she found herself relishing the unfamiliar subject matter of giant steel girders, scaffolding, barges, boats, cranes and giant hoppers.

Like its counterpart in the United Kingdom, Newcastle is a city built on the hunched back of the coal mining industry. One of the world's busiest coal ports, the harbour features a perpetual fleet of sturdy tugs waiting to shunt huge tankers alongside ironwood docks. It is a city of black, white and gray, with the occasional dark red of rusted iron, a post-industrial city looking into a future where few things are made locally and struggling to forget the boom era of the past. It is a place in transition, experimenting with new identities. Down on Steel Street, cheap brothels crouch next to sleek new high-rise developments; international cuisine lives alongside football, burnt meat barbeques and cold fizzy beer; every year the local university graduates thousands of bright young students who need to go elsewhere to find work. If you travel a lot, you might find some of the roughest, friendliest people you have ever met living here.

Like many artists working in their hometowns,



Dunkerley was so familiar with the city that she had almost stopped seeing it. The day she spent drawing its industrial heart would have a profound influence on her practice. She began building tall towers, the rich colour stripped back to Dickensian black and white, long tooth-like pieces of clean, pale porcelain attached to their rims like scaffolding. A new geometric rigidity found its way on to the clay's surface. Textured with hard grids and marked with the sooty blacks and red raw rusts of the coal and steel era, the towers resemble much of the city's industrial apparatus. Dunkerley remembers the simple, pure pleasure she discovered in building a tall structure. "There is something satisfying about starting wider and building up. I wanted to start with solid bases, feeling like the tower of Babel, building it and seeing how high I could go." Over the next few years, the tower would appear repeatedly in her work. With their undulating rims and seemingly casual planes, these forms have something of the human figure about them. Eventually she began building a series of two towers, sometimes slouching like teenagers, sometimes leaning towards each other like lovers. Ironically the appearance of the tower, that potent symbol of heavenly aspiration, coincided with the end of Dunkerley's marriage. "I called the first one *The tower of love gone wrong*" sounding a little sad, she notes "I usually try to keep myself out of the work: it was a therapeutic tower."

When asked about her imagery, Dunkerley describes a cyclic process of becoming intrigued, overwhelmingly intrigued with certain shapes and forms and making them again and again in an attempt to marry the perfect form in her mind with the necessary imperfection of the real. A form that she has often returned to, almost the antithesis of the tower, is a series she refers to as *peg pots*: essentially large inverted triangles that start from a narrow base and dramatically flare outwards, terminating in her characteristic undulating lip. Named after the old fashioned wooden pegs she uses to mark the surface of the clay, the *peg pots* celebrate Dunkerley's instinctive, deceptively casual approach to form. "I roll the slab out and imprint with a peg. Then I use a newspaper template, change the width to height proportions a fair bit and cut the sides out. I throw the slabs across the table, a bit like a pizza: this gives them the flare across the top and distorts the peg marks." Again, references to the human form are to be found in the petal-like curl of the lip, a tactile unselfconscious curve.

Her imagery is assembled via a largely unconscious process, familiar to many artists, of accumulating impressions and ideas over a long period of time. At something of a loss to explain the workings of her imaginative mind, Dunkerley observes: "I always do a lot of looking and dreaming . . ." Her eclectic reference material, collected during her annual migration and without a definite use in mind, is instructive. On her laptop are stored photographs of old Dutch architecture in the Caribbean; tropical marine plants (rather erotic long tubes with swollen bulb bases); her lovely daughter emerging from the cradling fronds of a tree fern like a copper coloured, bikini-clad version of

Botticelli's Venus; ancient wooden doors, their once bright paint faded and scarred; verdant tropical plants throwing themselves skyward out of black dirt; plates of delicious food prepared by and for family and friends. It represents an accumulation of impressions, a memory patchwork, that somehow comes together to imbue her work with a specific sense of place, sometimes so precise that it is akin to a type of regionalism, embodied by her use of local clay and imagery. It seems that every time Dunkerley arrives in a new place, she experiences a plant-like need to quickly establish roots, embrace her new surroundings and, in the case of the tropical island of St Thomas, literally sink her fingers into its red earth. By referring to her own forms as "always in a state of flux: growing", Dunkerley is effectively describing her own kinetic existence and instinctive creativity.

Tower of Grace. 52 x 13 cm.
Photo by Dean Beletich.

Helen Hopcroft completed a Masters degree in painting at London's Royal College of Art in 1994. Prior to this she studied Fine Art at the University of Tasmania and used a Nescafe Big Break to travel to the UK in order to commence her postgraduate study. She lectures in Fine Arts at Newcastle University and works as a freelance writer for a number of new media and print publications; her publication list includes *The Australian*, *Sydney Morning Herald*, *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, *Music Forum Magazine*, *unsweetened* (UNSW literary review) and *ArtsHub.com*. She has exhibited her paintings internationally and is currently working on her first novel and on paintings for a solo exhibition at Despard Gallery. Unless noted, all pieces shown are handformed with some wheelformed components. Made from paperclay fired to Orton cone 02. Surface is multi-layered slips with a thin coating of dry high magnesia glaze.

