

scope

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 30

August 2025

Residency Report

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1030025>

RESIDENTIAL DRIVE

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Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

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RESIDENTIAL DRIVE

Locke Unhold

This time last year I was preparing myself for my first artist residency. Chief among my preparations was to have little to no expectations; I knew that the more open I was the better the experience would be. I'm glad for this because I was correct. I had a truly enriching time at Driving Creek. I made new close friends, tried new techniques, explored a part of the country I hadn't been to before and took on new inspiration for my MFA work.

Driving Creek Pottery and Railway was established in 1974 by Barry Brickell (1935–2016). Brickell was a prolific and unique individual who is now considered a cornerstone of the ceramics and pottery history of Aotearoa New Zealand. Driving Creek is a large plot of land in the Coromandel that Brickell bought and where he set up his own pottery studio. But he also had a deep love of engineering and trains; he built a railway on the property so that he could go deeper into the hills to dig clay for his work. He also loved the native Aotearoa environment and began planting kauri by the thousands. As he became a popular figure, people came to ride the railway, which he eventually opened to the public. Now, almost ten years after his passing, it is a thriving tourist spot, artist hub and conservation achievement.



Figure 1. My first view of DCR as the sun was setting.



Figure 2. "The Sump" studio space as I was using it.

I learned from New Zealand ceramicist Neil Grant, who told stories about Brickell and his eccentricities, particularly about his proclivity for wearing little to no clothing. But other than that, I didn't know much about the man – not beyond the surface information about Driving Creek that I have laid out above. Everyone I knew who had spent time there raved about their experience, so that was my driving force to go.

After applying in 2023 and being accepted, I packed up my car and journeyed north in July 2024. It was a three-day trip from Dunedin to the Coromandel, with ferry rides and many stops along the way. I arrived as the sun was setting, exhausted after an eight-hour drive from Ōtaki. I got a quick tour around the property in the waning winter light by one of the conservation workers, knowing I would not remember any of it the following morning.

I spent the first few days getting my bearings and scrubbing down the studio space I was going to use. I wandered somewhat aimlessly around the property, trying to etch the narrow paths between ramshackle buildings and stacks of smashed pots into my brain. New Zealand is known for its DIY culture, and Driving Creek is a shining gem of an example. Adobe fills gaps around windows with stained glass embedded within. Crushed brick and ceramics make up the gravel pathways. Seen from above, the studio compound is a patchwork of corrugated iron roofs at disparate angles, put in place as needed. There is something small and creative and weird in every nook, cranny and corner.

Once settled in, most days during the first few weeks were fairly similar. I would wake up as late as I liked, have a small breakfast in the communal kitchen and then take my coffee up to the studio space. I listened to audio books as I made, sometimes throwing on the wheel and sometimes hand-building sculptural pieces. For dinner, one of the other residents would come up to my studio space and remind me of the time and we'd all head down to the kitchen. We took turns making meals for our group, sharing our favourite recipes and cooking tips, discussing our pottery plans. I became close with my fellow potters on residence – Charade Honey (Ngai Te Rangi), Fiona Gates (Te Rarawa, Rangitāne), Rona Ngahuia Osborne (Kai Tahu) and Janeen Page. We spent the evenings chatting about life, food, pottery and of course Barry Brickell. We still have a group chat together and I can't wait to see them all again.

In retrospect, I was deeply inspired by the works of Brickell that are scattered around the yard, though at the time I was not very conscious of it. Since my experience there, my sculptural work has become more abstract with figurative elements – twisting, bulging, and reconnecting parts of forms feeding into themselves. Just prior to my residency, I had been



Figure 3. A sculpture sitting outside the door of the Sump studio space. Opposite the path is Barry's studio left in situ.

making a lot of phallic forms and I was concerned going into the residency that my work would be too weird and too queer for the place. But as I spent time there and learned more about Brickell and his work, I found that I fitted right in. He had built a small kiln close to his studio to fire his 'naughty sculptures' out of view of the public. Getting to use the adjacent space, I felt a kinship with the man I never met. I left a small phallic sculpture in that kiln as an homage.



Figure 4. Work in progress, new direction.

A year later I look back and can see the residency was a turning point in my own work. I went in with no expectations and came away with a changed practice. I see it as a testimony to how your environment as an artist can affect your work in ways you don't think it will. And the environment isn't just the physical place, but also the people and histories you are working within. We frequently talk about "community of practice" and how our work fits into it, how we are feeding into it and how it affects our work. It can be a difficult concept to fully appreciate. My time at Driving Creek has manifested this concept in a much more tangible way for me.

Now I look forward to whatever my next residency might be. How will it change me? How will another place and set of people progress my work?

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Figure 5. Untitled new work.