

**A GATHERING OF HOOPS AND LA:  
AN EXHIBITION OF CLAY AND FIBRE FORMS BY ROB  
CLOUGHLEY AND PRUDENCE EDGE IN THE VOGEL STREET  
CELLARS OF WINE FREEDOM, DUNEDIN, 10 OCTOBER 2015**

Peter Stupples



Photo by Alan Dove Photography.

Among the listed attractions at the Vogel Street Party in Dunedin on 10 October 2015 was a “Neolithic production line” that made it sound like an elves’ kitchen, but as you made your way with care down the steps into the low-ceilinged cellars – the brick walls covered in buff plaster; the kauri beams brushing your hair; the light sepulchral through a few windows half-below ground, the two spotlights dimmed to throw shadows in the shadows – you realised that, by chance as it were, you had intruded upon a silent gathering of forms, inhuman, unnamed, reminding you only of things that cause those bumps in the night, or of the crags of Elsinore long after Hamlet had left the stage, leaving only shards of palaces, street theatres and the images of now placated ghosts remaining in silent concourse.

That conversation without words was most inaudibly clamorous in the largest of the three cellars where black ceramic forms and black cheesecloth tubes and hoops swung from wall to wall, from ceiling to floor, as if dancing without motion, intent on intimacy but withholding any approach that might hint at tactility. No need for a notice telling you “not to touch;” the very monumentality of the total installation forced you to your tiptoes and your remarks to falter and your mind too to cry out for something to catch hold of and offer some clue as to what was going on so manifestly – but below any threshold of consciousness. This was decidedly a liminal space, where you left the actuality of the world outside to enter the as-yet unknown.



Photo by Alan Dove Photography.

The clay forms are made from local red clay. They are handbuilt from gobbets of clay, pinched, prodded, poked into flat, irregular shapes, pressed together at their piecrust-edges, sometimes with holes showing through at places where they don't quite meet, or where a hole seemed urgently necessary, building up and up to form honeycomb towers. Other pieces are made of solid coils of clay, pushed into rough rectangles to form the base for thick stanchions rugged enough to bear heavy, cumbrous edifices, sometimes incorporating grids of wavy clay, like some ancient, collapsing car radiator.

Rob shatters glass bottles and mixes fragments with the heavy clay before moulding the work and covering each piece with a mix of four oxides to create a matt, black surface. In the kiln, at temperatures of 1120-1140° C, the glass within the clay begins to be extruded as small beads on the surface, as if the resultant rock was sweating with the effort. (Rob fires these pieces on a bed of alumina.) This glass perspiration, these dewdrops, catch every shaft of light to reflect their winking presence, ever changing as you move around the piece, bringing the solid immobility of the clay to eerie life. In some pieces, the glass has been left a little larger and the temperature taken up a notch, between 1160 and 1180° C. Now the glass is forced out into larger tears and smears of light, like the trail of some giant slug foraging the surface of a to-us-alien planet. When over-fired, some of the clear glass becomes solid white, appearing in fragments like bone on the surface of a Cro-Magnon's hoop.

At times these rough, organic-seeming structures are reminiscent of the rocky coast off Island Bay in Wellington – molten lava, battered by the sea, uplifted, broken into unforgiving points and wedges, containing bits of shell and brick, stone and weed, a surface treated harshly by time. There is even a barbaric rock pool hovered over by hoops of declining circumference drawing up black cloth from the widest to the smallest, like the pointed hat of an out-of-body witch. One large form is made in two pieces, one resting on the other; the line of their juncture lined with fur. Elsewhere lumps of grog come to the surface and tufts of fur are poked into the clay, as if the coat of some swiftly passing creature had caught on the rough surface, leaving evidence of its passage to nowhere.



Photo by Alan Dove Photography.

Into this landscape of ceramic forms these black-fibre, porous skeins are pulled and stretched until they are see-through over circles of electric conduit pipes and ceramic hoops, creating giant wheels, from which the mourning black is shaped into cones, sometimes in the shape of a pinch-waisted hourglass. In one case, the fibre is formed into a series of linked balls that rise from the top edge of a ceramic form and loop in a gentle arc upwards, like the neck of some listening prehistoric creature perfectly at home in this antediluvian landscape.

A second smaller, rectangular room, like the side chapel of a cathedral, had been beautifully restored and fitted with modern glass doors, cutting it off from the galactic primitivism of the main gallery. The only furniture was an altar-like table made of heavy wood on which had been placed a series of hooped architectural skeletons of unfinished, or abandoned, basilicas made of oxide-black clay with minute glints of glass, or, in one case, with a matt finish that contrasted so definitively with the rest. Here were arches, rose windows, Romanesque doorframes. Only the walls were missing or were never there. The whole room speaks of a peace, a calm, an elevated state of deep restfulness; so, still on tiptoe, you felt the need not to raise your voice, not because of the watchful frisson of fearfulness that pervades the larger gallery, but here out of respect for the mood of ruminant meditation invoked by the room with its single table of multiple hooped temples.



Photo by Alan Dove Photography.

In the third room, intermediate in size between the other two, it was as if the space was almost uncurated, with only four white (white glaze on a white clay body) ceramic pieces lying about the polished concrete floor. These are cellular thigh-high towers, but are either unfinished or ruined remains, one lying on its side pierced from one side to another by a white pipe, and another standing against a wall holding an inverted tube with a conical bore, the wide aperture near the floor ready to disgorge some overflow from intergalactic scuppers to pool on the gallery floor. (Indeed, there was seepage from a connecting building drifting around the base of the work, leaving behind a white, salty efflorescence quite in keeping with the wasteland of the room.) Yet another standing piece had a twist to it, as if frozen at the point of collapse. Running up the curving walls were the ridged scales of a miniature albino stegosaurus spine. Another, the largest, seemed to have its top cut off diagonally, leaving the honeycomb interior exposed. Unlike the black universe in the largest room, these works did not talk to each other, but stood isolated, abandoned, uninhabited, even by ghosts.

Rob (ceramicist) and Prue (multimedia artist) work as a team. Both do preparatory drawings, white board doodles. Rob may make a maquette or two, plan the scaling up of the final pieces. These first steps are set aside, but not out of mind, as the creative process has its own momentum, a momentum sustained by the constant flow backwards and forwards of ideas, suggestions, compromises, try-outs, and new configurations of the installations in new spaces.

These works have no names, no ancestry, no precedent in art's history. They make a network of complex forms and shadows, inhabiting the space, claiming it for their own, speaking to each other; they render the viewer wordless, reaching for new-minted fables, fables without meanings, morals, or strings of causation. These pieces simply are, mutating as you move amongst them, with the change of light. La. The viewer was free to read these novel runes of a language no one has spoken for the first time, and then to read them again and again, before making towards the light and the stairs to the street where the all-too-familiar was waiting once more to disappoint.





Photo by Alan Dove Photography.

**Peter Stupples** is currently Senior Lecturer in Art History and Theory at the Dunedin School of Art at Otago Polytechnic. He was formerly Associate Professor and Head of the Department of Art History and Theory at the University of Otago. Among eight books published is *Pavel Kuznetsov: His Life and Art*, Cambridge University Press, 1989 and *The Social Life of Art*, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, November 2014. He has edited *Art and Food*, 2014, and *Art and Money*, 2015, both published by Cambridge Scholars.

**Prudence Edge** works in a wide range of media, most commonly employing photography, projection and installation. In 1999 she graduated from RMIT University (Melbourne) with an MFA in Painting. She has exhibited 39 times throughout New Zealand and in Australia and the United States where she completed a three-month Residency in 2001. In 2013 she was the Artist-in-Residence for the West Harbor Arts Charitable Trust in Port Chalmers. She has been three times awarded International Arts Foundation assistance. As a production or set designer she has been involved in many performing arts projects and facilitated workshops in theatre arts, sculpture and printmaking. Prudence is currently living and working in Dunedin.

**Rob Cloughley** graduated in 2004 from Dunedin School of Art with an MFA in Ceramics. He has exhibited 16 times in New Zealand and The United States and has completed residencies in the United States in 2001 and more recently at Driving Creek Potteries in the Coromandel. His ceramic work has included installation and performance, and Rob has also long performed as a musician in numerous bands. As Lecturer in ceramics he also coordinates the Diploma of Ceramic Arts programme at the Dunedin School of Art.