

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

art & design 24:

August 2023

Artist's Page

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1024007>

NAKED CLAY AND THE AGEING OF LITTLE RED

Bronwyn Gayle

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.
Otago Polytechnic Ltd is a subsidiary of Te Pūkenga,
New Zealand Institute of Skills and Technology.

CC-BY the authors;

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.

NAKED CLAY AND THE AGEING OF LITTLE RED

Bronwyn Gayle

ONCE UPON A TIME

In my MFA exhibition "The Ageing of Little Red," I used toy-like objects and fairytale narrative as a means of subconsciously and intuitively exploring personal realities. Both toys and fairytales are ubiquitous in human historical and contemporary experience, and are observed across many cultures. Embracing this commonality of experience allowed me to transition from personal contemplation towards a relevant discourse with a contemporary audience. This process centred on interspecies relationships with emphasis on ageing, loss and grief.

The romanticised rocking horse (Figures 1 and 2) and the reality of caring for an ageing horse, Pepper (Figure 3) provided the anchor for the organic development of ideas developed in this body of work. My connection with the rocking horse as a nostalgic childhood toy inspired me to review my lifelong relationships with equines, from childhood toy to adult paddock companion. The ceramic and glass pieces created for this project were inspired by toys and what toys represent, with continuous reference to toy horses.

A girl in a red hooded dress and red shoes stands alongside a rocking horse (Figure 1). The clothing is inextricably bound to the Red Riding Hood fairytale, as well as the many other fairytales which focus on red shoes. This coincidence meant that I was compelled to investigate the fairytale phenomenon. When exploring the realm of fairytale, another essential character emerged, the 'Big Bad' or 'Evil Old.' This ominous character figuring in so many fairytales embodies fear and adversity. Three recurring characters, the Equine Companion, the Big Bad/Evil Old and Little



Figure 1 & 2. Childhood photograph.

Red, became vehicles for examining the nature of fear and its evolution, from childhood monsters through the changing face of fear in maturity, adulthood and old age. The surreal nature of fairytales, with their iconic but one-dimensional characters, combined with toys and the access toys provide to the liminal space of play and memory, created a fertile structure through which to explore my subconscious.

This project focused on human/equine interactions and dependencies which arose directly from personal experience and contemplation. These encounters provided a small window into larger human/non-human relationships. The representation of equines developed from the infant's need to feel warmth and security, through childish fantasies born of escapism, toward the understanding of equines as individuals and all the complexities this embraces. Because this growth in understanding revealed the extent humanity has played in the mistreatment of equines, my developing Little Red character is forced to question whether it is she who is the Big Bad/Evil Old. Along with this new perception came the recognition of the Big Bad/Evil Old shared by both Little Red and her Equine Companion – mortality, the most ancient of Evil Olds. The threads of this project's story, beginning with a photo and utilising toy and fairytale narratives, are concretised in clay expressions of the unconscious fever dream and the consideration of mortality.

THE EQUINE AND THE MONSTER EMERGING

Over the course of the project, Little Red's steadfast companion morphs like an equine Pinocchio from a generic child's toy into an individual creature. The equine in toy and fairytale became a vehicle with which to explore historical perceptions and experiences of human/equine relationships. These perceived realities are coloured by historical precedents and individual experiences. Alexander Nevzorov states: "By any stretch of the imagination, it is very difficult to find a subject more steeped in deception than the relationship of man and horse."¹



Figure 3. Pepper and the author. Photograph: Denise Cone, 2021.



Figure 4. Bronwyn Gayle, *Infant Red and the Call of the Cloak*, 2020-22, saggar-fired clay, wood, cast glass and re-imagined metal additions on bespoke bookshelf plinth. Ceramic pony approx. 400mm height.



Figure 5. Bronwyn Gayle, *The Entanglement Before the Fall*, triptych, 2021-22, saggard-fired clay, cast glass and found objects on bespoke bookshelf plinths.

Australian artist and writer Madeleine Boyd uses Karen Barad's term 'intra-action' to describe multispecies entanglements as "mutual emergence and transformation."² A horse who is humanised and an equestrian, on the one hand, are different from an undomesticated horse and an 'un-equined' human, on the other. Both must adapt their nature/culture and adjust their ways of being to communicate successfully with each other. With a 6,000-year history between us, the equine is instrumental in who we have become, not only through human/equine collision, but through thousands of individual intimacies.

My relationship with equines may have started with a toy rocker; but it became centred around my horses, the most influential being Pepper, a Standardbred who died while I was finishing my Master's exhibition. Whether intentional or not, all my depictions of equines are influenced by my relationship with Pepper, and all my interactions with and responses to equine art are influenced by what I have learned and continue to learn from her.

Humanity has a history of hiding behind the cultural normalisation of brutality towards non-humans. From the equine perspective, human individuals, or humans who are complicit in the agencies which create fear and anxiety, provide the obvious starting point for depictions of the equine equivalent of the Big Bad. My creative journey has revealed inconvenient truths not only about my personal relationship to horses, but also about the greater human/non-human divide. The focus of this project is not a broad multispecies overview, but instead a personal reconsideration with wide-ranging implications. My developing Little Red character is forced to challenge her accepted human/non-human relationships and so begins to question whether it is she who is the Big Bad/Evil Old. As this reality settles within their relationship, another mutual Big Bad/Evil Old asserts itself, as both human and equine are dealing with the signs of ageing and mortality. As an artist who is primarily a potter, all these considerations culminated in not only re-examining my memories and understanding of perceived truth, but re-examining my relationship with clay.

BURNT EARTH

Why would a potter shift away from the process of glazing, a process which is so significant to the history of the medium? On initial assessment, denying glaze appears to halve the creativity and practice of pottery. However, naked clay,³ fired but unglazed, offers a distinct visual and tactile sensation. Fired clay without the covering of glaze evokes a different response to that of traditional glazed ceramic. It speaks directly about the clay medium and the firing process, and there is an immediacy between the hand-builder as maker and the clay. There is also a sense of vulnerability created for the viewer by the object, which lacks the barrier of a glaze. To lower my environmental impact as a potter, I began experimenting with alternative colouring and patination methods, as well as lowering firing temperatures, while still achieving the desired clay strength. These decisions led me towards the realm of saggar firing. And then saggar firing took me on its own journey.

The saggar firing technique developed in this project is an amalgam of historical and contemporary experimental techniques. Traditionally, this firing process involved placing a clay item in a saggar (clay container), which provided an internal atmosphere protected from the flame in the kiln. In contrast, contemporary saggars often contain combustibles which are intended to create colour on the item inside. My saggar containers are formed by layers of slip, cardboard and paper. They are finished with layers of fairytale book pages. The process of forming the saggar boxes and wrapping the sculptures in combustibles has become as important as creating the sculptures they contain.

The combustibles chosen for my firing include horse dung, horse hair and waste hay. These items speak directly of the practicalities of caring for horses – not the aesthetics of the horse lover's calendar, but instead the result of caring for real rather than imagined horses, placing value on the mundane and the discarded. Other combustibles include seaweed and seashells from beaches on which Pepper and I both escaped our mental and physical confinements and grew to know and trust each other. Some contributions to the saggar-firing process, notably dung and seaweed, reliably left their mark through the interaction between clay and fuming combustibles. However, other flammables, such



Figure 6. Bronwyn Gayle, *Trike*, 2022, saggar-fired clay, wood, string and re-imagined metal additions, approx. 550mm height.



Figure 7. Bronwyn Gayle, 2022, pre-fired and wrapped ceramic pony from *Infant Red*, with drawings.

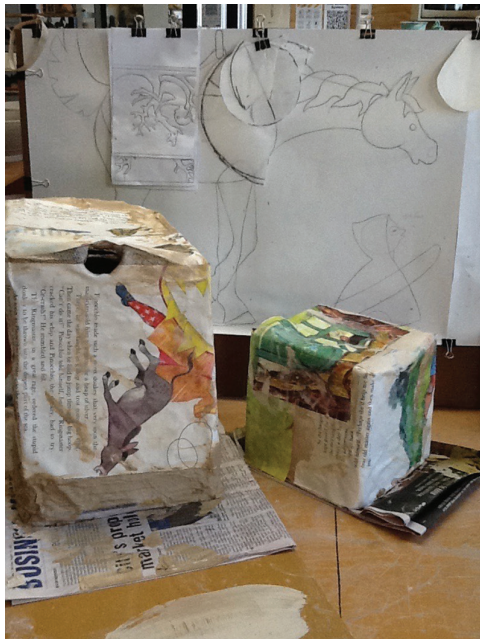


Figure 8. Bronwyn Gayle, pre-fired saggars with drawings, 2021.



Figure 9. Bronwyn Gayle, post-fired saggars and *Equine Friend*, 2021.

as hair collected from grooming, provided soft, secure nests within which the fragile clay piece inside could be transported safely to the kiln, but left no long-term visual presence on the fired piece. These non-marking combustibles remained essential, albeit in a more personal and esoteric sense.

My saggars process has developed from a physical method of firing clay into a significant and lengthy contemplative ritual: individually wrapping each ceramic piece in carefully considered combustibles, placing them in boxes made specifically for them and, finally, wrapping each box in layers of clay, paper and pages from fairytale stories. The result carries the potential to act as a kind of "sympathetic magic."⁴ James George Frazer's theory of sympathetic magic includes the "law of similarity," whereby an image created in the deliberate and considered likeness of another creates a connection between the two, and the "law of contagion," involving the use of a physical substance which was once part of the individual to which a connection is desired. In this project, the equine forms follow the law of similarity and the horse hair; waste hay and dung follow the law of contagion. The saggars containers themselves are wrapped in pages of fairytale storybooks, not just to acknowledge their inspiration, but in an alchemical attempt to bind the creations they contain to the realm of fairytale and perhaps to the realm of 'ever after'.

Susan Stewart also refers to sympathetic magic, but in relation to the miniature object: "When the miniature exists simply as a representation, it functions as sympathetic magic; when it is enclosed with a lock of hair; a piece of ribbon, or some other object that is 'part' of the other, it functions as contagious magic."⁵ Representations or objects need not, however, be miniatures to influence or become bound to what they represent. My hollow fairytale characters, fired within pages of a storybook, wrapped in horse hair and partially buried in horse dung, not only chronicle their firing history through their surface, but encapsulate the law of similarity and the law of contagion, which are the essence of sympathetic magic.

Modern vestiges of sympathetic magic include photos in wallets, the retention of locks of hair and the wearing of clothes of a missing or deceased loved one to keep them close.⁶ People more often turn to sympathetic magic in times when they feel anxiety, believing they



Figure 10. Bronwyn Gayle, *The Conflicted Chronicles of Grown Red*, 2021-22, saggur-fired clay, wood, string, cast glass and re-imagined found additions on bespoke bookshelf plinths.



have little or no control over aspects of their life or the life of a loved one.⁷ My fairytale saggur containers bind personal equine tales of an increasingly distant past and an uncertain future together with historical fairytales, giving personal experiences a shared history and a mode of expression.

The wrapped saggur firing technique celebrates uncontrolled marks left by smoke and flame, as well as colours that emerge through the process rather than being carefully applied as a glaze mask. In seeing these contingent surfaces, the audience is drawn into the making process; the finished piece is not clean and distant, but immediate and apparent; colour has been added to the pieces through the process itself, rather than being carefully applied as a glaze mask.

Figure 11. Bronwyn Gayle, *The Conflicted Chronicles of Grown Red* (detail), 2020, saggur-fired clay, wood, string, cast glass and re-imagined metal additions.

ENDINGS

"The Ageing of Little Red" explores the nature of anxiety through the guise of toy-like objects and fairytale narrative. Toy-like objects are placed in scenarios intended to evoke a questioning unease. These creations are not pristine, nor will they wash clean. They have been through fire and bear the scars of their making. They are haunted by ill-defined fears which remain featureless and can never be truly subjugated. Some are deliberately posed, while others lie seemingly discarded and forgotten. Or perhaps they have sprung to life, playing their own games, only to be frozen in play the moment they are looked at, like a game of 'freeze-tag,' or the primal fear that inanimate things move in the dark but become motionless and safe in the light.

I started this project with childhood photos and let them take me on a journey into memory and dream. I knew this voyage would utilise the imagery of that girl in her red hooded dress and her equine friend, but I did not know what else they would reveal. The fairytale and the toy bring their own meaning, their ubiquitous nature imbued with emotional resonance. I adopted them also as vehicles with which to explore ageing, at a time when life has become more reflection than future. The objects access a liminal realm, revealing layers of fear, anxiety and ultimately grief.

My Ageing Red, her memories questioned or failing, is being devoured by internal shadow and is lost in the darkness cast by the fairytale forest – a future she must learn to embrace. By wandering in the Deep Dark Woods of fairytale, home comfort vanishes, familiarity and continuity are replaced by the dark and the unknown. In this place of contemplation and transition, we begin to haunt ourselves. In the creative process also, there is sometimes reason not to project or interpret, but instead to embrace the ambiguous. This response invites mute conversation, offers only questions and opens closed boxes. As Rebecca Solnit says: "We know less when we erroneously think we know than when we recognize that we don't."⁸



Figure 12. Bronwyn Gayle, IV *Hobby Horse*, approx. 540mm height. Part of the triptych, *The Entanglement Before the Fall*, 2021-22, saggar-fired clay, cast glass and found objects.



Figure 13. Bronwyn Gayle, *Swing*, 2022, saggar-fired clay, wood, rope.

Bronwyn Gayle lives in Dunedin, Aotearoa. After many years working as a full time clay sculptor she returned to Dunedin School of Art to complete a masters of fine Arts in 2022. She has recently concentrated on saggar fired clay techniques in combination with cast glass and found objects. Her focus is on human/non-human entanglement and loss, and she is fascinated by toys, personal, contemporary, historic and ancient.

- 1 Alexander Nevzorov, *The Horse Crucified and Risen* (Charleston, NC: Nevzorov Haute École, 2011), 8.
- 2 Madeleine Boyd, "Towards a Performative Multispecies Aesthetic," *Antennae: Multispecies Intra-action*, 31 (Spring 2015), 9-28.
- 3 A term I have gleaned from Jane Perryman, notably her book *Naked Clay: Ceramics without Glaze* (London: A&C Black, 2004).
- 4 James George Frazer, *The Golden Bough: A Study in Magic and Religion*, 3rd ed. (London: Macmillan & Co., 1906).
- 5 Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 126.
- 6 Eugene Subbotky, "The Belief in Magic in the Age of Science," *SAGE Open*, 4:1 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244014521433>.
- 7 Colin Dickey, "Very Superstitious: The science of sympathetic magic, and why it persists," *Lapham's Quarterly*, Vol. 5, 3 Summer 2012 <https://www.laphamsquarterly.org/magic-shows/very-superstitious>
- 8 Rebecca Solnit, "Woolf's Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable," *New Yorker*, 24 April 2014, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/woolfs-darkness-embracing-the-inexplicable>.



Figure 14. Bronwyn Gayle, *The Entanglement Before the Fall*, detail, 2021-22, saggar-fired clay, cast glass and found objects on bespoke bookshelf plinths.