



MELANIE TOMLINSON

EXPERIMENTS WITH CERAMICS FINAL REPORT

The Feeney Trust Grant enabled me to experiment with ceramics - a new material for me. I am a narrative artist working in illustration and metal. I had wanted to experiment with bringing ceramics into my work for years and the grant enabled me to have the time to do this. The ceramicists Jitka Palmer and Phillip Hardaker were my mentors. Jitka and Phil both work in quite different ways as ceramic artists, with Jitka hand coiling and sculpting vessels and objects and Phil casting found objects and also sculpting too.



Jitka Palmer in her studio in Bristol 2015

I was initially attracted to porcelain for its fine qualities and the way the surface appears when fired and glazed. Both Jitka and Phil informed me porcelain was one of the most difficult clays to use!! When Jitka gave me a lump of porcelain to play with, this fact quickly became evident. The Porcelain was very slippery and difficult to mould when wet and also dried very quickly being equally difficult to work with in this state.



Jitka's beautiful painted vessels and smaller objects in her studio. Bristol January 2015

During my first two visits to Jitka's studio I was really concerned with getting used to porcelain as a material. I wanted to be able to play around and get a feel for its qualities. I was also very interested in casting and taking moulds from objects as well as creating hand built items. Casting was the technique that I thought would suit my work well and in particular when combined with my pieces in steel. Initial experiments included some small hand built simple pod shapes and flower shapes as well as using the metal moulds. However getting to grips with porcelain even at this first attempt was much harder than I thought. White stoneware which Jitka suggested I experiment with, felt much easier to control and it was interesting to observe the different qualities.



Left: Me at Jitka's studio experimenting with porcelain and stoneware for the first time, making some very simple shapes. Above right: My metal jelly moulds. Below right: Later in February - the bisque fired objects.

My simple experiments using jelly moulds resulted in a collection of interesting shapes that were bisque fired and ready for glazing. During my subsequent visits Jitka introduced me to glazing and some very important and basic rules of firing and temperature control for different stages of applying oxides and glazes - all very interesting and complex at the same time. I felt as if I gained a very comprehensive overview of the processes during these visits and could see the possibilities for my own work.



Left: At Jitka's studio mixing some glazes. Top right: my simple porcelain shapes drying out. Below right: Dipping my objects into clear glaze.

Phillip Hardaker is a master at casting objects and I visited his studio in Stoke-on-Trent to gain experience using this process. Phil is famous for his use of recycled ceramics and also his beautiful

and narrative castings of objects and hand moulded items. He has amassed an interesting collection of mainly plastic objects, toys and ephemera over the years which is housed in his studio. Some of these intriguing items are cast and incorporated into works of art. Phil also hand builds and sculpts narrative objects too, that are also cast and added to the artworks. He very kindly agreed to mentor me in this process.



An example of Phillip's beautiful ceramic work.2015



Left: Phil and me in his studio in Stoke-on-Trent. Right: Phil's collection of plastic toys and other interesting and bizarre ephemera!

I arrived at Phil's studio with some very impractical objects to cast! Things like Thistle's I soon learnt could not be cast and would need to be made by hand! But objects such as tree bark, shells (which I wanted to try as the shape of a clam is so beautiful), twigs and simple ornaments if possible. All objects were cast in plaster but not without a coating of soap solution applied first, to make removing the objects from the casts possible!



Left and right: an odd assortment of ornaments, twigs and shells for casting!

The process of making a plaster mould is quite complex, but once made the mould can be used several times to make repeatable objects. We used older clay to make the moulds and each object was placed inside.



Above – the casting process, making the moulds, pouring in the plaster and a two part mould when dry and separated. 2015

Once my objects were placed on a base of clay with a clay surround, I was able to pour the plaster into the mould. Certain objects I wanted to cast were difficult if they had protrusions e.g. a twig with thorns. As well as single moulds we also made two part moulds meaning a 3D cast could be made of an object as well as half a cast. So rather than having half a cast of a twig that would need to be mounted flat against a background, we made a mould that meant I could make a completely 3D replica of the twig. I envisaged that any ceramic work I produced would be made in this way and although quite complicated I could see the possibilities for future pieces. When set the plaster came away very easily from the objects and clay due to the soap stone – much easier than I envisaged. I could see the precision this way of working offers - giving a clear cast, retaining fine details and line and keeping shape well.



Two part mould of a twig. 2015



Moulds finished and ready for clay impressions.2015

Organic items such as shells I discovered were very suitable for casting as they were strong, well patterned and didn't have any difficult protruding parts – unlike my thistle head!



A shell, a shell mould and a shell made from a porcelain impression.2015



An example of a cast found object – in this case a round plastic coaster that had a raised patterned surface.

The actual moulds are beautiful - objects in their own right and can be used repeatedly as long as kept in good condition. These first experiments of mould making and casting used porcelain, but I have also discovered that white earthenware is a good option too. White earthenware is slightly easier to use – is not as slippy and does not dry as easily. It gives a lovely white colour when fired – but in my opinion not as white as the whiteness of porcelain. I also feel that porcelain whilst strong has fragility about it that white earthenware does not.



Hand sculpted porcelain deer and white earthenware horses made on a visit to Jitka's studio 2016.

It has been my intention to use casting as a way of bringing found objects into my work using another material as well as metal. This was an area I felt suited my work. But it was interesting to work with Jitka who encouraged me to loosen up and try hand moulding. The white horses above are very rough in shape. But it is this roughness that has given me ideas for future experiments. Whilst metal is a precise material and the processes used are reasonably controlled – clay allows a more malleable approach. Jitka and I discussed the idea of casting found objects versus a freer approach. Rather than aiming for an exact replication of a deer or a horse – why not consider a very loose approach where the shapes 'suggest' the animal in question and finger marks can be seen on the surface of the clay rather than smoothed away. We felt this way of working was very suitable to the more controlled way I work with metal.



A herd of porcelain bisque fired deer.2016

I also am interested in movement within my work and the mass of running deer above in their rough state suggest this idea. You can tell they are deer – but the shapes are a suggestion of this rather than trying to be an exact representation. Cave paintings served as inspiration for these experiments where the suggestion of animals was the main focus of the artist.



Herd of deer with oxides and glazed in porcelain. 2016

It was interesting to experiment with oxides and glazes with Jitka. Not all the objects I made survived the first firing – porcelain is difficult to work with and also objects with very delicate parts are prone to breaking before a very final high temperature firing. Also I wanted the oxides to be very organic in appearance and not precise. So dripping oxides over the individual pieces gave me the effect I wanted. I feel that the animals have a lot of character and are waiting to come alive.



Porcelain deer with oxides and glazed on left and white un-painted porcelain glazed deer on right.2016

The larger bear and horse pieces made below use a more painterly effect. As well as dripping oxides over bisque fired work, painting symbols and marks into the clay gave the pieces a narrative feel when fired and glazed. Some of the items were glazed after firing and other were not. The combination of unglazed and glazed pieces was something I was very interested in from the start of my research. The effects of a matt and shiny surface add to the movement of the animals – particularly when the animals e.g. deer were repeated. I also left some of the objects without oxides and with just a glazed coating as I felt an un-coloured finish was effective too.



Bear in progress. Porcelain. 2016



Painted and glazed porcelain Bear. 2016



Painted and glazed Horse.2016

To summarise – the award has given me the opportunity to take some first steps into the world of ceramics. I have gained valuable experience from both Jitka and Phillip on the different possibilities available to me and how I might make ceramics work with my existing practice in the future. Certainly I am interested in a much freer approach to ceramics and at the start of my research I didn't think this would be the case.

I will be continuing my research with Jitka over the coming months and will continue to update my blog as I go along. Working with Porcelain is challenging – yet exciting and something that takes time to master. I intend to exhibit some of my new work in an exhibition next year which is currently in development. The prestigious Flow Gallery in London is putting together an exhibition based around the theme of nature and gardens of which I will be an exhibitor, and it is my intention to make some work in ceramic for this.

Without the Feeney Award it would not have been possible to find the time and fund the materials for my research to have taken place. I do feel the award has helped me to develop exciting possibilities for future work.

WORK WITH THE PUBLIC AND SCHOOLS AROUND CONSERVATION THEMES AND CLAY!

Part of my Feeney Award involved working with school groups and the public to explore environmental based themes in local areas. I teamed up with Jan Tomlinson who is the Birmingham Park Ranger for Birmingham City Council responsible for outreach work to offer clay workshops combined with learning about creatures we share our environment with. We worked mainly in Holders Lane Woods and Cannon Hill Park. Two events were delivered with the public during half term holidays and two were delivered to Solihull School who had come to Cannon Hill Park to work with the Rangers team. All community work was carried out between March and July 2015. As well as working with Jan to explore themes around conservation, the activities I offered consisted of using air drying clay to explore things we found. Air drying clay offered the possibility for pupils to explore the qualities that clay offered without the need for a kiln

HOLDERS Lane Woods in Kings Heath was the location of the public events and the aim was to explore the woods, pond and see what insects we could find. By 10am there was an eager queue of parents and children ready to look for bugs, grubs and slugs and to have a go at making them out of clay!



Above photos taken in Holders Lane Woods - a mixture of trees, wild flowers and rich habitats for all living things.



Children and parents get involved in the making process.

Holder Lane Woods is a mix of semi-ancient and new forest. There are a variety of trees and plants in the wood that offer a stunning habitat to a variety of animals, birds and insects. Fallen trees are secure homes for insects which can be viewed by turning over a log or two as demonstrated in the photos below! We found slugs, woodlice, miniature snails, spiders, millipedes and lots of tiny bugs all living together in the rotting wood.



Workshop participants and myself exploring upturned logs.2015

Jan the Park Ranger provided us with clear containers which we used to collect as many bugs as we could find. A magnifying glass in the top of the container meant we could see the details and textures of each bug close up. This was important as the children needed to observe such details for making their clay bug later on.



Top left: We found woodlice! Top right: a beautiful snail.

Bottom photo: the containers we used to collect bugs, grubs and slugs.



We spent the first part of the morning collecting interesting things to use as inspiration including small creatures, but also leaves, berries and fir cones. The children used the high quality air drying clay to make their art pieces. This clay was very easy to use and dries naturally over a few days, changing from a light grey colour to a bright white. The pieces can either be left white or painted and varnished. I preferred the white finish as I think you can see details more clearly.



***A selection of our finishes pieces - Top left: A Woodlouse. Top right: A Wolf Spider of course!
Bottom left: an Earthworm. Bottom right: a Millipede.***

The workshops were repeated for Schools from Solihull in Cannon Hill Park. This time we were able to explore the nearby river Rea too. Despite it being a very hot day – the children spent the afternoon making clay forms of things they had seen and found in the park. Pictures below describe

the afternoon!



Pupils from Solihull School making clay models of creatures they had found in the park. 2015



Pupil from Solihull school studiously making an accurate model of a woodlouse! 2015



Pupils from Solihull School carefully pack up their clay artworks into an old pizza box for the journey back to school! 2015



Left: Jan the park ranger explaining about the ecology of the park to pupils. Right: me and Jan in Holders Wood. 2015