

Glenn Barkley conducting the floor talk in front of an installation by **Gwyn Hanssen Pigott**, *An Idea Needing to Be Made: Contemporary Ceramics*, Heide Museum of Modern Art, 2019

Opposite: RMIT students and Glenn Barkley in front of **Pippin Drysdale**, *Splendour at Black Rock, East Kimberley* 2018–19, porcelain, various dimensions

Photos: Robyn Phelan



Leslie Harding and Glenn Barkley co-curated *An Idea Needing to Be Made: Contemporary Ceramics* at the Heide Museum of Modern Art and it is a phenomenal representation of the current ceramics landscape.

On the day of the exhibition opening, my 3rd year ceramics class in Fine Arts at RMIT, along with our two mentors Kris Coad and Robyn Phelan, were lucky to attend a floor talk with the charismatic Barkley. I gained so much knowledge from this talk and at the conclusion asked myself: “What exactly is the idea that is trying to be made here?”

My understanding of this exhibition in relationship to ceramics practice is described as follows: Ceramics for the longest time has sat in the back seat of the contemporary art world because of its craft and functional history. Yet, when observed intently, its material has an elusive nature while being part of our everyday life. Clay is of the earth. It comes from mining industries. It's used for design purposes. It goes into mass production. It is a means of sculptural expression. It is respected as a craft by some, industrialised by many, and used in ancient ritual traditions still alive today.

Artists who have direct engagement with this material are pushing the boundaries of what we know about it and redefining the artform. That is what makes clay and ceramics so alluring to those who are familiar with it – ceramics keeps artists (myself included) drawn to the limitless possibilities, and of those who are unfamiliar with the material, many are curious to connect with it.

As I listened to Barkley, I considered that there is a thin line between the vessel, the still life and the sculptural. I observed that each of the artists in *An Idea Needing to Be Made*, found a way to subvert preconceived notions of how material should be used. Not only does the material have a rich connection to land and earth, its appeal also lays in its tactility, in its chemistry, in how it can be used to explore form, function, surface and narrative.

Is ceramics craft or is it art? It is both! Due to the boundary-dissolving nature of clay, it has defined itself as a leading material in contemporary art.

Nicole Cocis, @niicoleecee

A CONTEMPORARY CERAMICS EXHIBITION NEEDING TO BE REVIEWED

RMIT ceramic students respond to *An Idea Needing to Be Made* and floor talk by Glenn Barkley

On 7 August 2019, Glenn Barkley met with RMIT Bachelor of Fine Art (Ceramics) students in the exhibition *An Idea Needing to Be Made* at Heide Museum of Modern Art, just hours before the formal opening. Co-curator (with Lesley Harding) Barkley's floor talk included inspiring personal anecdotes that revealed the complexities of being an artist and curator. He also provided information and advice drawn from his extensive experience working within the world of contemporary art.

Upon returning to class, students were asked to reflect and write about Barkley's talk, the choice of artists represented, and the style of installation undertaken by a major gallery.

Robyn Phelan, @robynphelan

Installation view, *An Idea
Needing to Be Made:
Contemporary Ceramics*, 2019
Heide Museum of Modern Art
Melbourne, Victoria
Photo: Christian Capurro





Installation table with test samples, *An Idea Needing to Be Made: Contemporary Ceramics* 2019, Heide Museum of Modern Art Melbourne; photo: Christian Capurro

The exhibition is brilliant and beautifully curated with twelve unique and respected artists represented. A generous selection of work from each artist was arranged in a beautiful rhythm in the main gallery.

In a room opposite, the artists were asked to include some of their dearest objects and inspiration for their work. These were displayed in the *Wunderkammer*, like personal pigeon holes. Both these exhibition design features exposed each artist's personality and way of working.

I couldn't help but feel jealous as Barkley described working closely with these artists. As a ceramicist, our strongest urge is to be able to hold and feel work. Barkley even said that we are the worst kind of audience because it is so hard to resist caressing an intriguing artwork. Every artist had a piece that I wanted to feel, especially the smooth, satin glimmer of legend Gwyn Hanssen Pigott's glazes and the taunting spikes in works from both Laurie Steer and King Houndekpinkou. The attachments on the enormous vases by Kate Malone and Nicolette Johnson intrigued me, and I desperately wanted to pick up Alison Britton's vessels after Barkley said that they were remarkably lighter than he anticipated.

I am confident in saying that the concept of the show resonated with our class. Glenn introduced the work of Hanssen Pigott as a starting point for discussion about the ceramic vessel. The second room at Heide was entirely devoted to her work. I learned that Hanssen Pigott was significant as one of the first potters to blur the line between functional vessels and still-life installation. I read in the exhibition catalogue that Barkley and Harding imagined the artists selected as a counterpoint to Hanssen Pigott's work, in the way that an artwork can be understood as a collection of objects rather than a singular sculpture. Another statement talks of the inescapable history of ceramics that is present in objects made from clay. The curators asked, "Why is the past an eternal presence in ceramics practice?"



Ceramics by **Kathy Buttery**; photo: Robyn Phelan



Wunderkammer Room; photo: Robyn Phelan

Experiencing this show gave me the inspiration I was searching for. The artist who stood out to me most was Kathy Buttery. Her delicate works were protected by a Perspex box so my temptation to touch was thwarted! The works were quite small, however they had so much detail and character. Buttery's delicate and feminine motifs resonated with me and my current body of work.

I felt inspired and motivated to get back to the studio. I took away a reassuring confidence that one day I might have the opportunity to exhibit in a show as incredible as *An Idea Needing to Be Made*. With the end of my degree looming I feel nervous about being an artist, however my anxiousness was calmed by viewing some of my most admired ceramicists.

Anabelle Stonehouse @tinkceramics

I admire Barkley's ability to candidly speak to us for over two hours and would like to thank him for his upfront and playful manner. I appreciated his honesty when he revealed his process of selecting works – he admitted to being completely selfish and opportunistic. For him, this exhibition was a chance to meet some of his favourite artists, visit their studios and gain insight into their practices. He told us of the generosity of the artists giving their time to share some of their secrets with him. He seemed excited to see how this experience would impact his own practice as an artist.

When asked about the future of ceramics, Barkley likened it to photography, which has become a medium synonymous within contemporary galleries. Barkley believes ceramics has cemented its place in contemporary art, and it's not just another trend. This was definitely welcome news to a group of students who have spent the last three years studying ceramics!

Kelly Greenhalgh @kelly.greenhalgh

John Wardle Architects' exhibition design for *An Idea Needing to be Made* made a strong impression on me. I loved the idea of engaging a prominent architectural firm to work with the exhibition spaces and a large selection of ceramic objects. I hoped that the design of the exhibition would create a dialogue between the space and work. Despite these hopes, I must say these visual and spatial elements fell flat for me.

The exhibition design consisted of four main custom-designed components, though the design was, as a whole, cohesive. Using a grey colour palette, the architect's touch is apparent in every room. The design felt overly intrusive and slightly banal. Upon entering the space, I was immediately taken aback by the large massing of tables which completely commanded the viewers' attention. The sea of tables not only felt like an overly obvious and blatantly boring way to showcase ceramics, it was insulting to the contemporary art context and the values I believe Heide champions. The tables referenced the domestic context of ceramics and Hanssen Pigott's integral concept of the still-life, however I struggled to see it as anything but a cliché. In 2019, how is it that contemporary ceramics is still being so blatantly reduced to pots sitting on the kitchen or dining room table?

Other sections of the exhibition, though more subtle, continued to underwhelm. The gallery, exclusively reserved for Hanssen Piggott's works, was the most successful in my opinion. The two large plinths, subtle colouring of the walls and placement of mirrors gave Hanssen Pigott's groupings the space they needed and the grandeur they deserved. That said, the over-designed window vitrine was a letdown, leaving one of the most central works almost concealed in darkness by the stark back lighting from the window.

The *Wunderkammer* was a fascinating mess. The purpose of this room was to give insight into the artists', architects' and curators' personal practice and aesthetic, but it was poorly labelled and easily overlooked. Without Barkley's floor talk, the room would have remained a mystery. Opposite the *Wunderkammer* was a large, pool-like display, filled with the artists' test pieces and broken objects – a generous homage to the labour-intensive process and high failure rates that are intrinsic to the ceramics practice. Would this section also be confusing and unclear to the average viewer? This display was about 120 cm from the ground, essentially inaccessible to anyone viewing from below that height. Our class debated whether this installation was meant to be touched by visitors or not. This was unclear.

Ultimately, for me the exhibition design spoke loudly but said very little of any value.

Anni Hagberg@annihagberg

An Idea Needing To Be Made: Contemporary Ceramics is a tribute to the countless techniques employed by contemporary ceramic artists. I was intrigued by the pool-like installation. Peering over the walls of a large circular dish lay hints of what would result in finished pieces. Instead of providing the public with a drab wall label, Barkley and Harding provided tangible objects as evidence of the arduous journey that is the process of ceramics. Trying to match each test piece



Gwyn Hanssen Pigott, *Travellers*, 2000, 21 parts, porcelain, h.20.5cm, w.180cm, d.22cm (overall), private collection Sydney
An Idea Needing to Be Made: Contemporary Ceramics, 2019, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Melbourne
 Photo: Christian Capurro

to its maker was a unique and engaging challenge. Samples of sgraffito, eye-popping glaze, or a gritty clay texture gave us a true sense of how deliberate these artists are and the many choices required in making their work. This installation acts as a monument to celebrate the techniques that helped drive the finished pieces and situated the exhibition around the skill and knowledge of the artists.

If a concept is what is being said or communicated, then the techniques can be described as the vocabulary. With each one of these test tiles, a new texture, colour or form is added to the ceramicist's dictionary. As a viewer and a ceramics student, this room really helped to create a personal connection between me, the artists and their process.

The exhibition is a shrine to both the ideas achieved in contemporary ceramics and how they are made.

Rory Young @roryyoungceramics

27 July – 20 October 2019

An Idea Needing to be Made: Contemporary Ceramics

Alison Britton (UK), Kathy Butterly (US), Kirsten Coehlo (AUS), Pippin Drysdale (AUS), Ernabella Arts (AUS), Simone Fraser (AUS), Gwyn Hanssen Pigott (AUS), King Houndekpinkou (FRA), Nicolette Johnson (AUS), Kate Malone (UK), Kang Hyo Lee (KOR) & Wi Te Tau Pirika Taepa (NZ); curated by Glenn Barkley and Lesley Harding.

Heide Museum of Modern Art, 7 Templestowe Rd, Bulleen VIC 3105