



## A Dogged Process

*Debra Sloan creates life-size dogs*

**Tom Dog.** 1998. Red clay, coloured slips, gersley borate, cone 35 cm tall, 792.5 cm long.

SHE WAS SEATED ON A VELVET CUSHION – my first attempt of making a life-sized dog in clay. She was 32.5 cm high and weighed in at about 13.5 kg, a veritable brick. There are stress cracks throughout the body where it had threatened to explode, and her little ankles were bending under the weight of her chest and head. It was 1976, and I was in the process of teaching myself how to work in clay. The *Pug on Pillow* was all about love, my love for the pug, and my new love of clay. I did not know how to make her, I only knew I wanted to make her in clay.

Clay is a difficult material to master and clay practice demands that we work with grace. For the purpose of this article, I wanted to walk through that ‘valley of the shadow...’ where virtuosity tempts us to stray. It is a dangerous but unavoidable walk for artists of the traditional media when their chosen material leads them through a maze of process. Philip Rawlins so neatly says, “Even though pottery must be based on technology of some kind, it is the good pottery that eludes the tyranny of its technology.”<sup>1</sup>



How often has one heard (usually during question period after a lecture) “Why do you work in clay, anyway?” Where the clay artist is obliged to defend their affinity for his or her medium. The question infers that they are technicians first, and artists second, that their attachment to the material takes precedence. That being said, being moved simply by the smell, or physical contact, or a fascination with glazes, or the fire – these attachments to all, or particular, ceramic processes, are integral as to why the artist has chosen clay. Nicholas Baurriaud says, making art is “elaborating a form on the basis of raw material.”

<sup>2</sup> Artists using traditional media have a commitment to their material, and a part of their process is emotionally interactive. There are many particulars of clay work, all accompanied by physical requirements – insistent subtexts that underpin the methods used to support the central notion. Process is immediately engaged, as in every manner the clay is touched there a significant effect on what is being communicated. There are physical, sensory, conceptual and historical implications on whether the work is thrown, coiled, slab built, cast or sculpted, electric fired, wood, raku, or gas, slipped, painted, or glazed – or not.

Clay artists have, arguably, the greatest historical resources of any medium. Most clay practices have an historic parallel, and therefore a potential reference. Historical reference also functions as a foil, like a Greek chorus, motivating – or goading – the artist with its running commentary. A ‘good piece of pottery’ should not rely on the viewer being privy to millennia of ceramic tradition, or even cognisant of the contemporary response, however, these allusions add a rich element of insight for those who know and love the ceramic practice. It is knowledge worth having as it illustrates, from the beginning, the human journey towards a civilised life.

Throughout what has now become a composite interactive process; the

**Grande Chihuahuas.** 2002  
Red clay, terra sigalatta,  
coloured slips, cone 1. Pair,  
50 cm tall.

*All artworks are realised through process, it is a matter of degree. The demanding ceramic process for clay artists should be understood to be a series of passionate and transformative opportunities, not a liability.*

*Along with historical references, every artist has an inner lexicon of images and notions. The dog's image is one of the cyclical references in mine. The dog image kick-starts an emotional interaction; it is a commonality, signifying many things to many people. We all know a dog, know myths about dogs, been bitten by a dog, and maybe even share our bed with a dog. Most of us are now removed from farm and forest, making the dog our most intimate connection with the animal domain. Our shared idea of the dog, and its transparent cipher-like nature, embraces anthropomorphosis, yielding sly sideways glances at ourselves. In aesthetic terms, the dog, as an image, is infinitely malleable, an unresisting canvas, with its palette of variable colours, proportions, surfaces and dynamics.*

conceptual development, the making and experiencing the effect of contact – the clay practice offers time and again choice and chance. Although this is common to all art practices, for the clay artist there are so many transformative stages in the process. The challenge, as we toil, is to not stray into the ‘valley of the shadow’ . . . and fall victim to convention, blind attachment or habit, but to remain alive to those transformative events as they appear out of the mud, or the brush or the kiln. The material and the processes are ever changing. The notion is the engine, and our empathetic process is the fuel that keeps the notion interactive.

Over the past 10 years I have made a number of dog sculptures, each a result of explorative and learning processes to support what I wanted to convey. Each solution suggests another method. Each method has its own effect. In itself this series of investigations has been a process of personal, technical and notional, evolution.

I started my clay practice as a potter, and after the *Pug on Pillow* lesson, my early sculptural pieces were disguised pots built around a space. Though my methods have evolved, the notion of the sculptures being containers is irresistible as a metaphorical connection to our own corporeal sentient state – the walking, thinking, emoting containers that we are.

Scale is another critical decision as it impacts not only on the dynamic effect the piece has on the viewer, and the amount of space it absorbs, but scale also has a profound impact on how the work will be made. The process of building large-scale involves acquiring strategies and skills to oppose clay's adversary – gravity. Moving the work to and fro the kilns in the fragile bone-dry stage, is another nightmare. These skills can become vanity potholes, a temptation to do something just because you can. However, there is also an exciting dynamic to life-scale where the dog image suggests the notion of shared space and companionship.

After the *Pug on Pillow*, I did not return to the dog image as my central notion for 20 years. Consequently, on the next go around, I was able to bring to the image more context, experience and skill. I had been making [human] figurative work for some time using thin slabs fluted edge to edge for height, and chose the same process to work the next life-size dogs. In *Tom Dog* [1998] the body, legs, head and tail were made as hollow tubes and assembled while still soft. The surface was carved with painted-on coloured slips, mimicking my own dog's colouring. It was a direct process, quick and immediate, focused on rapid gesture, and the effect of life-scale. There is no base or division of space between the sculpture, its environs, or the viewer.

One historic model I am attached to is that of the rough and ready 19th century Staffordshire figurine where, in order to speed up the making process, various contrivances were enlisted to prop up figures during construction. The result of those methods was that the central narrative of the work is enriched and invigorated by the props. They become little imaginative worlds.

Wanting to push the dynamics of the dog image further, I looked for ways to raise it up on to its legs. A tapered form made height easy to engineer, and after the shape of the legs was marked, they were bent into a pillar-shape. As they hardened, I started to cut away the supporting clay that was extraneous to the dog-parts. In *Hermes at Rest*, 2001. I have a leggy dog scratching its nose. Here I chickened out because of the extreme angle of the front legs, and made a ‘Staffordshire’ decision to not cut away all the clay, but left wing like shapes, which begged to be carved and, suddenly, a mythical Mercury or Hermes was suggested. Choice and opportunity, as a process, affected how the work

evolved and started a series of mythical dogs. I textured and applied coloured slips to *Hermes At Rest*, in homage, but a poor substitute, for the marvel of pattern and swirl in the brindled coat of my own rescue greyhound. Again without a base, the dog image has a fluid relationship with the space around it.

The pair of *Grande Chihuahuas*, 2002, started life as tapered slabs as well. When the supporting clay was cut away it left a dramatic space around the chests of the dogs. I decided to keep evidence of the process, so one can reach up to the body all the way to the nose. There was a serendipitous synchronicity to the simple construction and the directness of the dogs' wicked anthropomorphic miming, capitalised upon by doubling the dogs. There is no barrier, no fixed way to view or share space with these dogs, and they welcome the viewer's input.

In *Green Pastures*, 2004, a life-size dog is finally standing on all four legs. It was an arduous process of building and hardening hollow legs, then supporting the body structure and head, as they were jointed. During the process, I



***Hermes at Rest***. 2001.  
Red clay, terra sigalatta,  
red, white, brown. Gersley  
borate, cone 3. 67.5 x 60  
cm foot spread.





**Green Pasture.** 2004. Red clay, paint, wood, flocking, cone  
1. Base 60 x 30 cm.  
Dog 42.5 x 45 cm.

became anxious that the legs would be vulnerable and decided to make a base. The immediate effect was that of an imaginary domain around the dog. The spiral surface lines infer a different kind of distance, between the real and the implied. There is some play with the use of the word 'Pasture', the soft green-flocked base, and the bovine style of pattern and colour on the dog. From its own, now defined space and its gaze, the dog shifts from companion to observer.

*Dog Figurine Supersized*, 2007, was made in homage to a favourite small, Staffordshire figurine in my collection. In the process of sorting out how to make this dog, I decided to try a whole new approach. Like the real Staffordshire, I wanted it to be fluid and symbolic rather than realistic. Slabs were of no use, and I let go of the notion of working around a hollow space and, instead, by sculpting a solid mass of clay it was possible to have a flowing shape. The base, a future context, was incorporated into the structure. After I established the form, it was only a matter of hollowing it out thoroughly. It ended up feeling like a giant press-moulded figure, light and durable. I replicated, as best I could, the lovely orange on the Staffordshire figurine, and its sumptuous purple-blue base.

At first glance the Staffordshire figurine is just a little ornament, but it is much more. The figurine is imbued with a desire for the 'life-style of the rich and famous'. The dog is a greyhound, a treasured hunting companion reserved for the nobility, or kept illicitly by gypsies for hunting rabbits and betting ... a nod to the racetrack hounds of today. The Staffordshire dog is sitting on a bed of purple; the colour reserved for the rich, not the bed of a working collie. Along the base is an extravagant little band of gold, a material more commonly



applied to the best porcelain tableware. I love this Staffordshire figurine, and the generous scale of my facsimile reflects just how much. By giving the dog a knowing creatural pose, and stylising the form and the markings, I wanted to place the dog firmly in the imaginative realm, a place where the viewer can enter.

This new process has freed up making and shaping considerably. With attention to the engineering and extreme angles, it suits this exploration of narrative forms. In *Dog With Baby*, 2008, the scale is intimate. Much of the pleasure in making this was in interlocking the two forms. Though they are visually separated by colour and textures, the animal and human elements, clasped in their equivocal embrace, are one continuous mobile surface. I have drawn on the miniature realm of the netsuke to pull the viewer closely into this little drama. It is an interactive object, not just because of the hand-held scale, but also the two outward gazes, and begs the question whether size matters. This tiny piece, without a base, returns to the notion of interactive fluid space, where, as Philip Rawlins says, "... space-modality offers the imagination continuous glimpses of 'the unlimited' and the pure relativity of scale."<sup>3</sup>

Lately, revisiting my potter's origins, I have made dog pots, playing with form and function. I am enlisting the companionable dog image, and inviting it to dinner so to speak. *Daffodil Dog*, 2007, is both a useful and playful object, there for the benefit of the seated diners, to be viewed from all sides and contribute to the occasion. There are various sources for animal pots. The most affecting, for me, are the tobacco jars of the Martin Brothers. They are perfect examples of superlative attention to detail, using virtuosic glaze and kiln skills, with dynamic, even vitriolic effect. The technical demands and the obsessive

***Dog Figurine Supersized.***  
2007. White clay, terra sigalattas, colored slips, gersley borate, cone 3. 50 x 60 x 27.5 cm.



**Daffodil Dog.** 2007. Red clay, coloured slips, terra sigalatta, gersley borate, glaze, cone 3. 45 cm/h.

REFERENCES:

1. Philip Rawlins, *Ceramics*. Oxford University Press, 1971
2. Nicholas Baurriaud, *Postproduction*. Lukas and Sternberg, New York
3. Philip Rawlins, *Ceramics*. Oxford University Press, 1971
4. Nicolas Baurriaud, *Postproduction*. Lukas and Sternberg, New York. Baurriaud quoting Mike Kelly.



**Dog With Baby.** 2008. White clay, terra sigalatta, coloured slips, glaze, cone 12.5 x 12.5 x 10 cm.

detailing do not create a veneer, or diminish the impact, rather it is those processes that were executed with passion, and enlisted all of the composite ceramic requirements, that illuminate these pieces. The expressive characteristics of clay are exploited to the full; there is no subterfuge or ambiguity here. I think they wonderfully illustrate this quote of Mike Kelly: “Art must concern itself with the real, but it throws any notion of the real into question.”<sup>4</sup>

Mine is cyclical practice; energised by the process of moving between three or four themes. New information pertaining to those notions is introduced simply through the process of waiting, living observantly, and making. It is akin to the pleasure of re-reading a favourite book: each time you bring your new self to the book and discover previously over-looked nuances and allusions. The same can be said of process inside the clay practice. The material is ever changing, and the problems are never ending. Every time a process is enacted or revisited, the clay artist is given yet another opportunity to discover new expressive possibilities. Process need not be a hindrance or a liability, or tyrannous. What is wonderful about the clay practice is that process gives us so many chances.

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