



Sonya Wilkins MA Fine Art Ceramics

Activation Vessels



Seeking Alliance with Nature

'How can ceramic vessels become activators for wellbeing'

Main Research Themes

A summary of my main subjects of enquiry



Earth Vessels: Creating vessels within a recess in the ground, to act as 'Beacons', linking back to Mother Nature and her healing energy (enhanced with Quantum Touch®)



Reclamation: Exploring my resistance to 'disintegration' and non-attachment. Do the 'Earth Vessels' belong outside or can they serve inside a space by acting as a type of echo, beacon or bridge?



Wild Clay: Foraging wild clay and using it to forge an alliance with commercial clay. Can the wild clay act as a catalyst to reunite the 'man-made' processed clay back to Mother Nature?



Hand Gestures: Witnessing my hand gestures in response to the making process within earth. Using freeze frame during my videos to capture moments in time representing healing energy and intention.



Excavation: Going back to my roots, where I first grew up and visiting Ibstock Brickworks. The reality of pillaging the earth and excavating self in the process - realising my MA is also about my own healing journey.



Visual Methodologies: Exploring how my vessels may be interpreted through curatorial display. Adjusting my approach and deciding between inside/outside or the dance between both.



Activation Vessels: Creating a visual bridge between the 'Beacon Earth Vessels' and converting their resonance into functional contemplation vessels or 'Activation Vessels' for wellbeing.



Collaborative Wellbeing: Guiding a fellow student to create their own 'Earth Vessel' and teaching them how to run Quantum Touch® energy - passing on well-being through the making process where both involved benefit.

Trimester 1 saw me exploring the relationship between ceramics and Quantum Touch® energy - I was interested to see if people could feel and sense the difference between a thrown cylinder made with a 'blank mind' and an identical cylinder thrown while running energy using the power of intention and entrainment.

This exploration soon became as much of a self realisation as a research method. I realised that I was in fact unravelling my need to 'prove' myself as well as the efficacy of Quantum Touch®.

It also helped me to see, that of course, people will interpret sensations differently (it's a subjective process) and therefore I'm unable to control the outcome.

Furthermore, it allowed me to relinquish my quest to 'prove' and turn my attention towards creating an energetic connection with Mother Nature. I would also be exploring how her marks, shapes, patterns and iconology could make a visual bridge with my ceramic vessels. After all, an icon is a symbol which has an unwavering and common meaning. It can bridge cultural differences and form common understanding. In the Western world,



'Prove' Experiment 1 ~ Art in Clay Farnham November 2022

Mother Nature holds a common meaning of healing and wellbeing. Innately, we all know as humans how beneficial it is to connect with nature.

Studies are proving that humans benefit mentally, emotionally and physiologically by spending time in nature. A movement called 'Forest Bathing' or 'Shinrin-Yoko' founded in Japan, has been born from these findings.

Trimester 2 sees me exploring how I tap into the healing power of Mother Nature to help create "Activator Vessels" for wellbeing.

I will be combining Quantum Touch® with the healing force of the ground, earth, organic matter and trees - forging an alliance between these vibrant materials and beings.

At the end of Trimester 1, I created my first 'Earth Vessel' in a patch of bare earth in my garden. This started a new way of working...a new making method and research practise; my aim to forge the first alliance of many, with clay, earth and Mother Nature.

As part of this growing intimacy with earth, I've become increasingly aware of my use of commercial clay and how Mother Nature might feel about me re-introducing a hybrid of 'soil' such as porcelain, back to it's source.

With this in mind, I witnessed this reunion while coiling layers of SSB8G clay and porcelain from my supplier (Bath Potters).

I can only try and interpret this with the words available to me. It felt much like a lost Son or Daughter being reunited with their Mother. After all we are all made of the same atoms, elements and molecules. So instead of becoming purest about only using foraged wild clays, I decided to embrace all forms of



Earth Vessel 1 ~ Mendip Croft (Stoneware & Porcelain Clay)

clays in the making of my 'Earth Vessel' collection.

Key Observations and Questions:

- Mother Nature embraces all.
- It felt disruptive digging a recess inside her, even though I would mindfully refill the recess afterwards.
- The coiling process takes on a life of its own in response to the earth, recess shape, my own energy and elements around me.
- Lifting the vessel out is impossible without some kind of aid.
- Leaving the vessel in situ felt awkward for me, but like a ceremonial offering to Mother Nature.

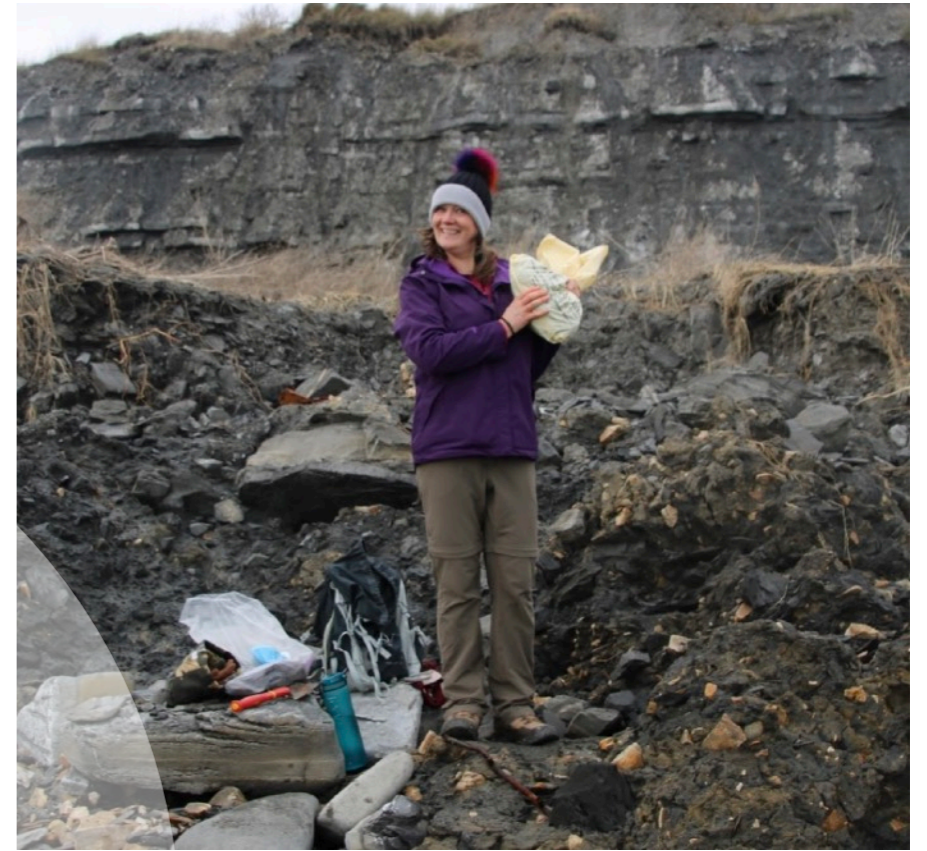


An Alliance Is Formed: Earth Vessel 1 ~ Mendip Croft (Stoneware & Porcelain Clay)

Reclamation

Within a few days Mother Earth had started to reclaim Earth Vessel 1 - rain had softened it's walls and it started to disintegrate. Initially I felt sad about this...I was clearly attached to the object I had created. But I also knew this would be an interesting process to witness over time. So I decide to document it's journey back into Mother Earth...there was more for me to learn, not just about the process of making, but about my own process of letting go...





Foraging wild clay from the Jurassic Coast, Lyme Regis, was one of the most satisfying things I have done in many years. It was like when you don't quite realise how hungry you are until you take a first bite of food and then you can't stop...only then do you realise how much you needed nourishment...I'm not sure what came over me, but it was something primal! Scooping this vibrant material from the earth felt like a calling had been answered...



I experienced a mixture of feelings as I looked for clay along the coast. A section of the cliff had fallen and taken with it part of an old building, exposing pipes, metal objects, plastic, rubbish of all sorts. The scene was almost apocalyptic.

This made me question what I'm doing by using clay - a resource from Mother Earth. What makes me different from anyone else who pillages from the earth? Perhaps it is intention and gratitude that makes some of the difference.

With that in mind, I decided to speak to her as I scooped from the depths of the earth spillage. I thought of what I might make from her 'earth flesh' and what good might hopefully come from my creations. I gave thanks and drank in the mineral aroma as I collected half a bag of foraged 'dinosaur clay' while imagining who in all the history of our planet, had touched the particles I was handling. I could hear Richard White in my head...reminding me of the deep history that lay within this vibrant matter. I was using my body as a somatic practice - and it felt good. For me this landscape of clay was nemonic - it had within it, things that are triggers



Jurassic Coast, Lyme Regis ~ Foraging Clay

for memory. I started to remember who I was...memories from childhood finding fossils with my Father...an innate connection to land. As Ingold said at Central St. Martins (2019, 96:21) "If you talk to indigenous people they talk about the land...we belong to the land...they believe the lands includes the sky and the sea...you can't be 'on the land' you can only be in it...and I think we can learn from that".

Furthermore, Chagué (2023) said, "the clay is something that changes us when we use it...pottery is much like gardening in this way too. Making with minerals brings us back to ourselves because it reminds us of our origin...we never have really left it..."

So I decided to write about my inner most feelings related to foraging wild clay...

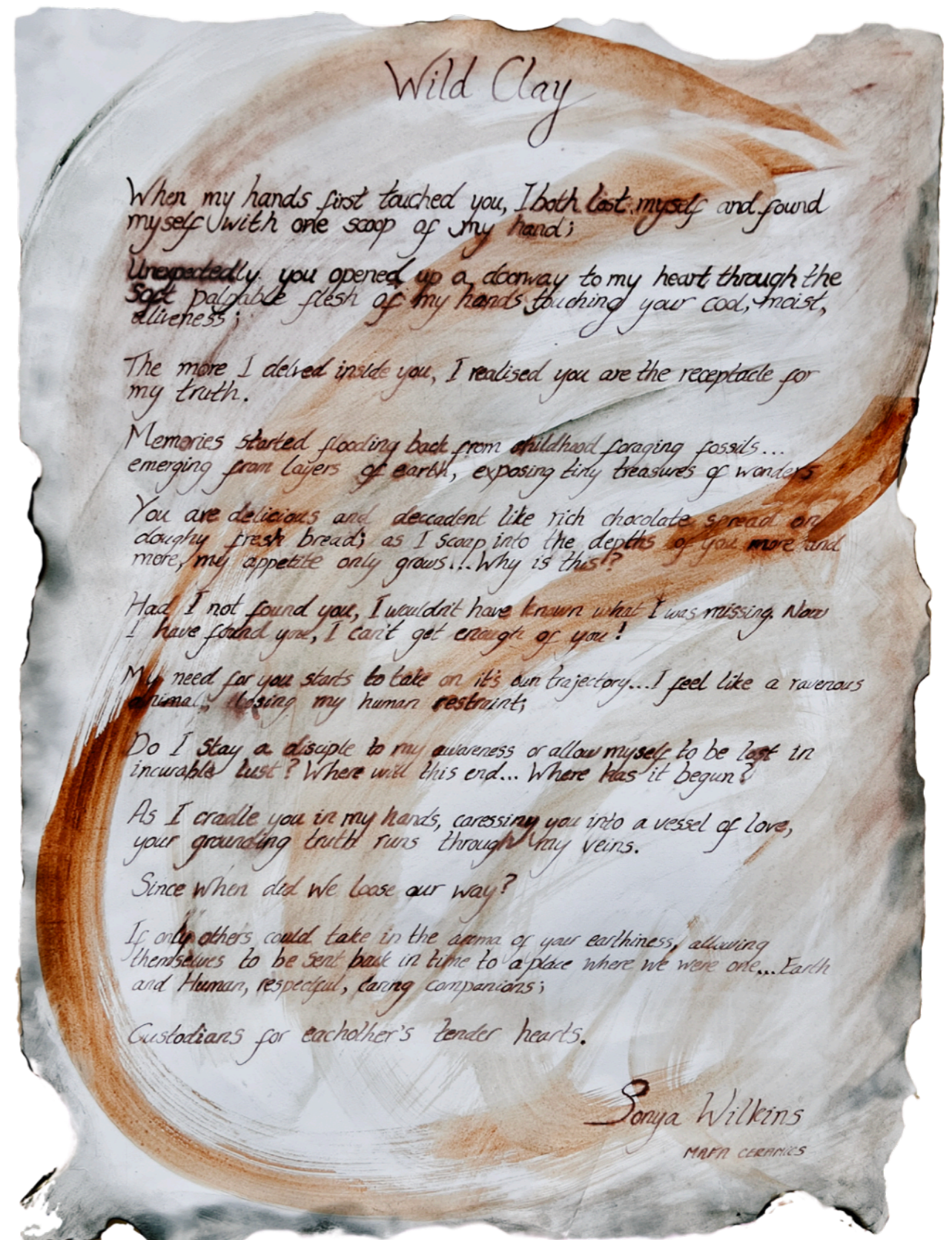
Wild Clay

When my hands first touched you I both lost myself and found myself in one scoop of my hand...unexpectedly, you opened up a doorway to my heart through the soft palpable flesh of my hands touching your cool, moist aliveness....the more I delved inside you, I realised you are the receptacle for my truth. Memories started flooding back from my childhood when I held the hand of my father while foraging for fossils...emerged in the layers of the earth, exposing tiny treasures in wonder.

You are delicious and decadent like rich chocolate spread on doughy fresh bread...as I scoop into the depths of you more and more, my appetite only grows....why is this? Had I not found you, I wouldn't have known what I was missing, now I have found you, I can't get enough of you! My need for you starts to take on it's own trajectory...I feel like a ravenous animal, loosing my human restraint....do I stay a disciple to my awareness or allow myself to be lost in incurable lust?

Where will this end....where has it begun?

As I cradle you in my hands, caressing you into a vessel of love, your grounding truth runs through my veins. Since when did we loose our way? If only others could take in the aroma of your earthliness; allowing themselves to be sent back in time to a place where we were one...earth and human, respectful, loving companions...custodians for each others tender hearts?



Earth Vessel 2 ~ West Mendip Way

My connection with foraged clay lead me to create more 'Earth Vessels' (EV's). The next one was along West Mendip Way, 10 minutes walk from my home.

This took me further into the connection between me as a 'vibrant material' responding to the earth as a 'vibrant material'.

I was keen to delve further into the process of making in the earth and document the process, critiquing it by recording a video of the making process in totality and then freeze framing at stages along the making process. This would reveal otherwise 'hidden' moments of connection.



Demetrios (2009) explained during a TED talk about Charles and Ray Eames' making process, "The object is just a pivot, its a pivot between the process and a system".

So for me, it's like my earth vessels are the objects that arise (literally) from the process of making in the earth, each one is in a system of making and I strive to improve/learn/adapt with each one...much like Charles and Ray Eames would not end at one style of chair, they would strive to get it better and better by adapting their process within a system of 'manufacture'. So I too would "take my pleasure seriously" and see what would evolve as a result.



Forging Alliance: Earth Vessel 2 ~ West Mendip Way (Jurassic Coast Wild Clay & Commercial Stoneware Clays)

Hand Gestures, Energy & Intent EV2



1. Digging: As I become increasingly aware of the agency of things and when I watch myself back, I realise forming a recess is a brutal action. I feel as if I'm digging into the skin and flesh of a living being. The salve in this is that the recess will be temporary...



2. Supports: Lining the recess with muslin fabric supports (so I could lift the vessel once complete), felt more like applying a bandage to the hole I had dug. Watching this back, how my hands tenderly applied the fabric, made me realise I'm empathically connected to this process - I almost don't recognise myself... something else has taken over...



3. Base: adding the base is an actual offering...I can see in the way I move and position the disc of clay...why do I feel emotional watching this back?



I wonder: If we are truly present with material, do we evoke an intuitive empathy, such that we become entwined and entangled in the integral emotions, energy and being of the thing? We become indelibly linked for that moment in time..and after the echoes still linger...

Earth, Water, Fire & Air



4. Pressing: When I look at my hand in this image - making a tender fist to press the base into position, I'm not sure it's my hand. I can see it is because it's connected to my arm and my body. Yet there is quality to it's pose that is beyond my normal conscious awareness. In life we move quickly, from one thing to another, one task to another without really taking in the 'aroma of action', yet here this 'aroma' seems to have been captured. I'm struggling to put it into words, but hopefully you can see a glimpse of what I'm trying to communicate. As Ingold (2013 p.1) explains "...the only way one can really know things - that is, from the very inside of one's being - is through a process of self discovery. To know things you have to grow into them, and let them grow in you, so that they become a part of who you are".



5. Angling: My Grandmother would often say to my Mother 'that child has beautiful hands'. I never understood what she saw in my hands, but I suppose there was something, seeing that I now use them to create and heal. I don't think she was speaking about the physicality of my hands, because they're not particularly beautiful, quite lined and wrinkly now. I think she was talking about something else, an energy. I think this 'something else-ness' is what I'm seeing in these freeze frame images...if we took time to really look, to press the pause button, everyone would see the same potential in their own hands. It's why we use hands to comfort, reassure and hold a wound when we are hurt. The window I have opened through these video frames has allowed me to reconnect to the essence of who I AM.

It's becoming increasingly apparent that this is more than making, it's a ritual. I'm seeking alliance and in doing so I am showing an intimate part of myself that has even become distant in my own consciousness.

My vulnerability watching the freeze frames from the video has brought this to light...I didn't realise how intimate this process was until now...it speaks not just to my Head, Heart and Hands, but also to my Higher Self



Making Video (9:31) Earth Vessel 2 ~ West Mendip Way (click the image to view video)

This video has been edited down from a 2hr making duration. It shows the whole process involved in making an Earth Vessel. This approach has been used for all 'Earth Vessels' to date. The accompanying sounds seem important, as do the involvement of all four elements of nature (earth, fire, water and air). I make in earth, with earth, I use water to blend and flute, I use air and fire to dry and transform. Towards the end, you will see I create a fire inside the vessel to help dry it out before I lift the vessel from the recess. This was driven by the practical need, but has ended up being an important shamanic ritual for every vessel I make on location.



Forging Alliance: Earth Vessel 3 ~ Newton Park (Jurassic Coast Wild Clay & Commercial Clays)

Reclamation: Living Matter & The Elements Of Nature

Meanwhile, 'Earth Vessel' 1 has been living outside in my garden and forging a relationship with the elements...these pictures were taken in early March, nearly 6 weeks after it's initial creation. We had a mixture of rain, frost and snow so it's intriguing to see how the porcelain has dispersed like silver snow over the ground...



In the image opposite, granules of earth matter have impregnated the porcelain, dispersing themselves around the platelets of white. It seems this alliance has given birth to a living entity; I learn and watch as the vessel breathes, evolves and transforms...



The anthropologist Gregory Bateson called this type of learning active following, or 'deutero-learning' (Bateson, p.141). This kind of learning aims not so much to provide us with facts about the world, as to enable us to be taught by it. For example the Geologist studies with rocks as well as professors... So I study with earth and minerals (clay) as well as professors...and I actively allow myself to be taught by Mother Nature.

Hand Gestures, Energy & Intent



1. Palms: We have chakras (energy centres) in the palms of our hands, this is why when we hurt ourselves the first thing we do is touch the area. Have you ever found yourself placing your hand in the centre of your chest when you share an emotional story? You are in fact healing your heart chakra...I've now come to see my hands as healing tools not only with clients but also with clay, earth and nature. Of course we all do this, but we're not always aware of the healing power we hold.

As McTaggart (2008) says "A thought isn't a thing, a thought is a thing that affects other things". So when we offer something up to the earth with gratitude and love, we set up a chain of events. That intention will be transmitted, absorbed and converted - there will be a response, a reply and maybe one that others can even benefit from. Those others being people, organisms, organic matter...life.



2. Gesture: Hands speak a language, a dance interplay between human, environment and object. Used together, this language dance is even more profound. I found that when my hands moved in unison while blending clay and coaxing it in response to the surrounding earth recess, they emanated an energy that magnified my inner intention. They were entraining to frequency and transferring it to the vessel.



I can feel a reaction in my heart as I watch myself move and tend to the earth vessel. I'm vulnerable because I'm showing you, what I really am. My level of perception about materials all around me is not 'normal'. I've known this since I was a child. It feels exposing to show this to you in these freeze frame images. It's something I normally keep well hidden...but it's time to excavate this intimate part of me...

Excavation

My excavation of self continued when I went back to my roots and returned to Almondsbury where I spent the first 24 years of my life. I was aware of Cattybrook when I lived there but never visited. I even dug clay from nearby to use on my BA course. So it was time to explore, but what I found was both disturbing and disruptive. How could I have lived next to a quarry where Mother Earth was pillaged and plundered so brutally? There was beauty amongst the destruction, yet it all felt so contrasting and uncomfortable. This visit left me wondering many things about humanity, what we are doing to our planet, what my role in life is as a creative and healer. Should I continue using clay? What justifies me foraging wild clay? What value will my creations add to the world when we already have too many 'things'. I left feeling fragmented and a little lost...





I was born in 1973, so 1 year after Cattybrook was taken over by Ibstock Brick Works - to date, the works has existed for 159 years. The images below show my exploration around the works on 22nd March 2023, 50 years and 16 days after I was born - it's taken that long for me to excavate myself...Afterwards I made EV4 in a field close to my old home, this helped to ease my discomfort from the visit and reconcile some of my thoughts, but they are still percolating...the mirror is still being held up in front of me...





Forging Alliance: Earth Vessel 4 ~ Almondsbury 'Back Home' (Various Wild Clays & Commercial Clay)



Forging Alliance: Earth Vessel 5 ~ Mawgan Porth, Cornwall (Various Wild Clays & Commercial Porcelain and Seaweeds)



Forging Alliance: Earth Vessel 6 ~ Blossom Tree, Mendip Croft Garden (Various Wild Clays & Commercial Porcelain)

Visual Methodologies

The 'Doing Together' exhibition provided an opportunity for me to display three of my EVs within an indoor space, together with the organic matter I collected on site at each location. This didn't include the tree stumps which I sourced separately from friends' gardens - each one had been felled because of wind damage to the tree or other natural processes.

Two pines and one eucalyptus provided a natural plinth to raise each EV from the ground. I was curious to see how they would be perceived by onlookers and how they would relate to each other and the space.

The guidance provided by Rose (2012 p.18) helped me to consider the site of production, site of the object/image and site of audience. Going forward I need to consider many things. For example, how can I create a link to the original site of production (woodland etc) and bring that across into the current site of the object (exhibition space). I also need to consider how my audience may perceive the EVs, after all humans continually seek meaning based on life and personal experience. This isn't something I can control, but something I need to consider if I want to try and portray a clear intention and consistent message.

Q: Do I bring nature inside 'to the cities' or invite people outside to create with me?



Visual Interpretation



Please click the image opposite to listen to my analysis of my display... How do you react when you see my Earth Vessels elevated on tree stumps versus being on the ground? How does each placement style make you feel, what does it conjure inside you? How do you interpret them differently?

Some people have said the Earth Vessels become more fungi like when elevated (because fungi live on trees). But others have said they look more mushroom like on the ground. Perhaps this distinction doesn't really matter as either way they are 'earthly' (from earth) and contain the intention of wellbeing energy (Quantum Touch®). For this reason, they have the potential to call in that source earth energy, acting as 'Beacons'. So my next focus will be to create hand held vessels who speak to these 'Beacons' and are decorated in such a way that they form a visual bridge for people to respond to. My hope is that these 'Activation Vessels are conduits for earth energy, even when people are unable to get outside in nature - a connector for every day use in our chaotic lives.

Activation Vessels: Translation of Visual Energy

With that in mind, I threw some porcelain vessels and held the intention of visually and energetically connecting with the Beacon EVs I had made. The nature of throwing on the potters wheel lends itself to spiralling energy, so I explored ways of letting go of the clay at the final pull. This created a gestural, free shape in the vessel and was demonstrative of a Quantum Touch® technique where you visualise a spiral of energy to magnify energy. As I gained in confidence, letting go of the clay...the forms grew in confident vitality.

I chose porcelain because as de Wall says, (2016 p.3-5) “If you make things in porcelain clay, you exist in the moment”....“It is a material that records every movement of thinking, every change of thought...what defines you”. So in my mind it’s perfect for transference.

Quantum Touch® Process:

1. Ignite the chakras (energy centres) in palms by rubbing hands together and conjure memories of joy, gratitude, hope, enthusiasm and love.
2. Build the memories and assign a colour to the associated feelings, then focus the colour inside both palms.
3. Body sweep both hands from feet to head and down over face, across chest 3 times. This is called ‘running energy’.
4. Repeat with breath work to magnify (inhale 4 counts, exhale 6 counts) at the same time as body sweeping.
5. Visualise a spiral of energy as you body sweep and then focus your intent on the object to receive the QT energy. Imagine the spiral reaching out to the object. As you focus, the object will entrain to your now increased frequency.





Creating 'Activation Vessels' in response to Beacon 'Earth Vessels' - Thrown Porcelain with Quantum Touch®

Palimpsest

During one of the 'Doing Together' workshops I learnt a new technique inspired by a type of manuscript page called 'Palimpsest'. A palimpsest is a piece of writing material on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing. We were shown how to use paper, slips, organic matter (leaves, twigs, grasses), oxides and sgraffito tools to create a layered image. This approach allows the layers to show a visible trace of earlier forms underneath.

I was enthralled by this process as it lent itself so beautifully to what I wanted to achieve with the decoration of my 'Activation Vessels'. I particularly loved how the final 'image' held an echo-like quality - you weren't too sure what lay beneath, but you had a sense of it - and that uncertainly created, if anything, a stronger message, because it captured one's curiosity and intrigue.

This is the effect I want to achieve with my 'Activation Vessels' - to echo the essence of the Earth Vessels, not necessarily explicitly, but energetically - creating a visual bridge between the two types of vessel, with the outcome that people would be curious enough to hold and explore the 'Activation Vessel' because of its markings and then hold it contemplatively.



Visual Bridge: Marks From Nature

After the workshop, I experimented with mark making by studying the gestures in the EVs. I was particularly inspired by the organic material hanging perilously from the vessel surfaces and the fractures, sweeping movement and fluting of the clay.

I also practised intuitive writing (inspired by Eleanor Duffin's workshop several weeks ago). In order to do this, I sat quietly, focused within and allowed my self expression to flow while holding the intent of nature inspired wellbeing...I then made up slips from the wild clay I had foraged and started to decorate spontaneously. The result was a layering of oxides, wild clay slips, sgraffito marks and 'language' that spoke to the process of making all the Earth Vessels so far...





'Activation Vessel 1' - Thrown Porcelain with Quantum Touch®, 'Palimpsest' Decoration, Fired to 1280°

Clay & Nature: A Psychodynamic Teacher

Meanwhile, 'Earth Vessel' 1 is continuing to transform with the help of rain water. These pictures were taken in April, now 10 weeks after it's initial creation in the ground. The rain allows the porcelain to expand - inhale. The sun allows it to contract - exhale. It's a continuous process outside...the vessel is truly allowed to 'breathe' and life grows within it too..can you spot the little plant?



But, having now made 5 EV's, I'm very aware of my attachment to each of them. They each feel like a piece of me. I wasn't able to lift this first one out of the ground, so I had no choice in the matter - the perfect outdoor experiment without conscious decision making. But can I choose to leave another one outside? Having lifted it from the earth and exhibited it in an exhibition, this feels different. I wonder why? Attachment is such an ingrained behaviour for humans (and me, it seems). I feel tugs at my heart when I think of firing one of my 'live' EVs, because it might melt. I feel anxious at the thought of taking one outside and leaving it to the 'perils' of the elements - would it feel abandoned? Perhaps I feel abandoned? This research practise is inviting me to excavate feelings, behaviours and belief patterns about myself. Art is so very psychodynamic! I wonder if this process could be offered to others as a way of exploring awareness more deeply? Is that where the real 'healing' lies?



'Mercury' The beauty of Nature's Transformative Power - Earth Vessel 1, 10 weeks after creation, exposed to the elements

Collaboration: Teaching Quantum Touch® & Guiding Earth Vessel Creation

Now it was time to see if the real healing was within a collaborative practise. I've made six EVs to date, the seventh a practise run for this collaboration. This would be the EV8. This new approach would not only allow me to guide a fellow student in Quantum Touch® technique and making, but also explore how it would feel to create a vessel within a natural crevice or rupture in the earth, in the hope it would be less disruptive to Mother Earth.



Firstly, I taught Mel how to 'run energy' using Quantum Touch® to raise her personal energy frequency so she could later transmit this high vibration into her Earth Vessel. The power of visualisation, breath work and intention magnified this energy so it could then be used in the making process and encourage entrainment. Sharing this process was so enjoyable; sun, connection, nature and creation within Mother Earth...





Surprisingly we did seem to disturb quite a few insects during the making and this felt intrusive; so going forward I'm not convinced the natural crevices are preferable as a recess. However the overriding by product from this collaboration was the intimate sharing and connection that grew between me and Mel - in many ways this is what signified a true alliance. Honest and vulnerable Human connection, nurtured in the arms of Mother Nature, and enhanced by all the elements around us - including of course, healing energy...

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