



## PATTIE BEERENS

I am at my desk and reflecting:  
“Why clay and why sculpture?”

It all began during the summer of 2008 when my younger daughter and I enjoyed a few weeks in the former studio of ceramic sculptor Karl Duldig (1902–1986). The Glen Iris studio was engraved with the patina of the former artist and we were surrounded by tranquil gardens and Duldig’s sculptures. The clay was soft and groggy, it didn’t come in blocks or in bags and it was decades old. It was the clay used by Duldig, sourced from a Sommerville pottery that made terracotta pipes and quarry tiles. For four years I would go to the studio on a Sunday to meditate and connect with the clay. I spent weeks on a piece, and it was regularly suggested, supportively, that my sculpture would collapse. At times it did, but I persisted. I reflect that it was sort of like my own *Eat Pray Love*, but through clay.

One day I was offered a block of clay in a bag and I called it quits. My sculptures collected dust and become monuments to a past love until a good friend asked me why I wasn’t doing what I loved. She had perfect timing. I opened my eyes to the breadth of ceramics expression and embarked on a process of trying to learn everything I could in my ‘spare time’. Last year I retired from a secure career to progress what I refer to as my next career.



**Pattie Beerens**, *Camouflage*, 2019, handbuilt porcelain, chrome glaze  
1220°C, h.40cm, w.37cm, d.31cm; photo: artist

Along the way, I discovered why other ceramic artists connect with clay. After a few weeks with Victor Greenaway – the ‘master of my mentors’ – in Orvieto, Italy, he plucked an Etruscan bucchero vessel from the shelf and gave it to me to hold. It was so fine and so delicate, and I was mesmerised by the dimensions of time between now and then. Still captivated, last year I focused my ceramics studies at Federation University on the ceramics of the Minoan civilisation in Crete. Unlike the Etruscans, the Minoans articulated a strong connection with the female and with nature through their ceramics.

I am continuing this year with a Master of Fine Art at RMIT. So far it has been intense and challenging: to look beyond ceramics as a medium and to get feedback on my ceramics practice through the lens of contemporary art.

I work from studios in Melbourne and Anglesea on the Great Ocean Road. For those who think that the cost of setting up a studio is prohibitive, both of my kilns are electric, old, second-hand and cost under \$1000 each. One has an electronic controller but the other one has a kiln sitter and uses mini cones so I’m gentle with them and limit firing temperatures to 1220C.

I now buy my clay in buckets and bags and tend to use Lumina Porcelain in my structural sculptures. I make the ‘struts’ first by dipping absorbent organic and non-organic materials into casting porcelain and then I hang them and let gravity do the work. These are then cut or broken and connected with porcelain paper clay slip to create the forms. I can add texture or strength to the struts by adding more layers of clay. As the structures are fragile to move and build on as they get bigger, I have experimented with bisque firing in stages which has been working. Once the sculpture is completed in form, I then fully fire the piece to 1220°C. If I don’t like some of the cracks and breaks – which are inevitable – I have discovered I can add more clay and refire to 1220°C. Once I am happy with the form I glaze and fire to 1100°C.





**Pattie Beerens**  
*Matrix*, 2019, handbuilt  
porcelain, terracotta  
barium glazes, 1220°C  
h.45cm, w.45cm,  
d.43cm; photo: artist



**Pattie Beerens**, *Ultima Thule*, 2019, handbuilt porcelain, barium glaze, 1220°C, h.30cm w.40cm, d.30cm  
Photo: artist  
Below:

**Pattie Beerens**  
*Camouflage*, 2019  
handbuilt porcelain  
chrome glaze, 1220°C  
h.40cm, w.37cm  
d.31cm; photo: artist





I have been experimenting with struts for a few years now and it is meditative in the same way that the terracotta clay was at the outset. I don't follow any geometric rules as I construct, but look for lightness and space in the forms. The decision-making process to determine the connection points reminds me of how I make decisions in the real world and how branches grow from trees – responding to the wind, the sun and the balance of the form.

A drawback in my process is that some materials are toxic, so I keep the kiln room well ventilated and the doors open during the first firing. I also prefer to use organic materials like sponge from the beach, grasses, papers and natural fabrics.

Because my sculptures don't have a top or a bottom, glazing can be precarious. I don't scrimp on calcined alumina on the shelf and continue to invent wire structures to lift the piece up from the shelf. The best suggestion given to me was to make beds of wire spikes from nichrome wire and fire bricks on which to rest the sculpture.

I tend to pursue an idea or inspiration in my practice and the sculptures here were inspired by my trip to Tonga last year. I was on an island with no power and I had a dream one stormy night about our vulnerability to 'mother earth'. When I awoke, I thought I could feel the earth breathing, and in the morning I discovered we had experienced an earthquake. In response, these sculptures explore 'breathing' in the context of social, natural and geological structures. I couldn't believe how they came alive and took on other meanings when I photographed them in the landscape and their scale was transformed.

This year I have been sourcing clay from building sites, including the Metro Tunnel site in Melbourne, and using it to create sculptures inspired by casts of Melbourne's industrial landscape. I seem to be on a journey to discover hidden histories – like my own – that get absorbed as I look forward.

**[www.instagram.com/pattiebeerens](https://www.instagram.com/pattiebeerens)**

Above: Pattie Beerens, Anglesea studio, 2019; photo: Bodil Bergstrom