

# BEFRIENDING CLAY

## WHY DOES IT MATTER?

by Pattie Beerens

This article shines a spotlight on the oft-hidden relationships potters and artists share with clay.

When we look at Instagram or read the latest ceramics magazines, we learn about artists: their processes and their creations. My aim here is to explore the idea that there is something special – not new – about the relationships between clay and humans.

My interest stems from a belief that if we find words to talk about befriending clay – a material perceived to be inanimate – we may discover a new way of perceiving the natural world and our place in it.

I am encouraged by New Materialist thinking which is an 'on-trend' academic theory that emphasises the materiality of the world. The term is ascribed to a range of contemporary perspectives that resist anthropocentrism (the way in which we see humans as at the centre of the world). I wonder if New Materialism is putting words to an ethos already existent in the ceramics community. New Materialist writers refer to an understanding of agency that extends to all matter and to relations with inanimate materials such as clay. They recast the world as an ecology of humans and non-humans where neither is privileged. They offer an ethical framework that conflicts with the idea that materials are simply resources for human exploitation.<sup>1</sup> It may be a contemporary agenda for making human-clay relations the hero.





Sandy Lockwood working with clay; photo: courtesy artist

Primitive skills teacher **Nick Neddo** based in Montpelier, VT, USA (@nick.neddo.eartharts), adopts simpler language:

Through working with raw materials, we begin to learn to speak the language of that particular material. Through this level of interaction, a conversation begins. We learn to be receptive of the feedback the raw materials provide ... Ultimately this level of participation with the landscape is a path to help us remember that we are part of its natural history and ecology, not just a visitor like an astronaut to a foreign place."<sup>2</sup>

Exploring the question, why make with clay, is not new. UK sculptor **Antony Gormley** (antonygormley.com) shares in a published interview:

I am very keen on the ... redness of the clay being something to do with the iron in the earth, which is also the iron in our blood, which somehow makes a connection between flesh and planet.<sup>3</sup>

Based in New York, ceramic sculptor **Arlene Shechet** (@arleneshechet) says, "Clay [is] a living material, one capable of recording and externalising thoughts and feelings."<sup>4</sup> Also in New York, Studio Head of Ceramics at New York University **Linda Sormin** (@lindasormin) says, "I feel the clay meets me, that I don't control it, that it pushes back. It helps me make sense of the world around me – so it's a really good friend."<sup>5</sup>

1950s ceramicist and teacher at Philadelphia's Tyler School of Art, **Rudolf Staffel** @rudolf\_staffel\_archive, said:

... working with clay (as anyone who's ever touched clay knows), is a primordial experience that is very, very comfortable.<sup>6</sup>

**Perhaps we should ask a different question: what is your relationship with clay? I share here some generously offered reflections by artists (known and emerging) on their relationships with clay.**

**Neil Hoffmann** from Reedy Marsh, Tasmania (@neilhoffmannceramics), has worked in collaboration with the earth's materials and elemental forces for around 40 years. At Clay Gulgong 2018 (in his talk titled 'Earth and Us') he spoke about his hope that his work ...

... might link us in the everyday to our ancestry, and assist us to see the land, the earth, as something common to all tenants of this earth, indicating a heritage of connectivity ... a common point from which all life grew. I want work which might fire the imagination for a future when this commonality is more widely felt and understood, when our way in the world evolves with a greater respect for our ecology.

About Hoffmann's relationship with clay, he recalls:

I first encountered material earth in a processed form at age 13 when given a bag of clay for Christmas. This coincided with my family's move from country living to city life where a concrete and asphalt 'emptiness'





Pete Pilven in his Ballarat studio, 2021; photo: Pattie Beerens

dominated. The open spaces punctuated by muddy dams and raw earth enjoyed in childhood were absent. Clay became a touchstone for country and places less spoiled, connecting me to something important to my psyche. Something deep inside me, a remnant 'primal chip' giving me a particular link to the substance and conditions of my evolutionary birth was reawakened for an inner energy.

**Pete Pilven** from Ballarat, Victoria (@p.pilven), is a ceramicist, lecturer and long-time advocate for advanced regional ceramics education. Pilven has fostered many ceramics careers and, unlike most teachers, he invites students to respond to the clay. "Take it home and mix it up with something else," he suggests, saying:

Working with clay has been such an important part of my life and goes back a very long time to when I was building things as a kid off the mullock heap next to a disused gold mine. There hasn't been a period longer than about four months since I was sixteen that I haven't touched clay because I just need to. It's a connection with clay's materiality that's sort of spiritual. I love the evolutionary connectivity of clay. One of the most important things in my collection is a small shard from Damascus given to me by Dr Owen Rye. It is a human fingerprint and 5000 years old.

**Magdolene Dykstra** from Ontario, Canada (@magidykstra), creates raw clay sculptures and installations to meditate on the multiplicity of the human race.

My relationship with clay is one of the most persistent relationships in my life. I tend to let go of people, before they can let go of me. I can't let go of clay. Sometimes I wish I could. My relationship with clay is a

---

## MATERIALS & PROCESS

relationship between equals. I push clay, and it pushes back. Sometimes my will triumphs, and often the will of the material dominates. Clay forces me to confront all that I don't know. This is sometimes inspiring and stimulating, and sometimes daunting. Even when we are at odds with each other, our wills not coalescing in a clear direction, clay is the body I continually crave intimacy with. Its warm, wet flesh absorbs my warmth and moisture. We become intertwined, and I become connected to our earliest ancestors who pushed into this material to see its response.

**Monika Majer** in Baden-Wurttemberg, Germany (@monikamajersculpture), also a sculptor, responding to my callout on Instagram typed: "Working with clay makes me feel very connected – inside and outside ... and touching it immediately calms me down ...".

**Jeana Blackert** from Geelong, Australia (@jeana\_blackert), couldn't create her larger scale paper and wire sculptural installations during the lockdown and struggled with an absence of connection. Blackert began making pinch pots as she watched TV. "The clay took on my feelings, my memories and my thoughts. It became a soothing companion during a time I will remember as very challenging."



Mike Hall discovering clay  
Photo: courtesy artist





Magdolene Dykstra installing *Polyanthroponemia* at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, 2020  
Photo: courtesy artist

**Mandy Parslow** in Tipperary, Ireland (@mandy\_parslow), exhibits fired and unfired forms.

I have always been drawn to the softness of clay – how it responds to pressure from the hand and how the degree of softness sends signals back, setting up a dialogue between maker and made. This conversation is heightened if the clay has ‘body’. Stones and organic elements leave tracks and traces that signal the pressures the clay is undergoing. Like the materials used, the dialogue can be robust, my whole body becoming involved as I move around the piece, pushing, tapping, lifting and pinching, at all times responding to the clay and the suggestions it makes.

**Sandy Lockwood** in Balmoral NSW (@slockwood737), makes woodfired salt-glazed ceramics and her strong relationship with clay forms the central theme of her making.

By being in correspondence with, and having conversations with the clay, I forget the rest of the world and things happen – magic happens. It’s not about controlling, which we see a lot of in the world. I encourage the clay to speak.

It all started in the ‘70s when I went to a drop-in centre – Stanley Palmer’s Culture Palace [she laughs] – to learn how to make things with clay. I realise now, looking back, that I brought to clay who I was and how I was back then in my job as a social worker at that time. My role then was to respond, and that’s partly how I am with clay. I respond to what the clay is saying. I’m ‘listening’ and paying attention. I never thought about this historical connection before.

**Mike Hall** from Scotland Island, NSW (@mikefhall), responded to my Instagram call out with “Like any relationship, it’s complicated!”, so I followed up for an interview.

Clay is my teacher. It helps me explore and learn about life. It has taught me patience and humility and can be both generously forgiving and frustratingly incalcitrant, rather like people.

When I dig up and process my own local clay, I am very conscious that it is earth – I am literally taking from and using the Earth for creative expression. For me, collecting and processing local clay and making useful pots is a very practical and physical connection to place, like gathering food from the wild.

Even if I’m busy with other work, I feel compelled to go into my studio to touch clay in some way, stir a bucket of slip with my hand, pick up a leather-hard piece and feel its weight, or prepare some clay for the next throwing session.

**Fran Romano** from Canberra, Australia (@franromanoceramics), offers experiences of mindful making with clay.

Like an old friend or an old glove, clay is a comfortable, comforting fit. Over the years we’ve come to be in tune with each other. Teaching and guiding others has shown me that I know more than I realised ... but more than that, I have learned about myself, about life.

**Joon Hee Kim** in Canada (@junniekim18), won the 2020 Winifred Shantz Award for Ceramics and generously shared these thoughts:

I believe that clay is the most immediate, elemental, and sensuous art making we must return to. It has taught me more about myself because, as I create, I reveal hidden feelings I was completely unaware of. The way I see it, as I transfer my thoughts into my pieces while working with clay, there’s a story developed within each piece that evokes different emotions that reflects on the burden of human relationships and rebuilding of ruins of life; conveying the narrative of history, heritage, and our need to make things, giving us a profound challenge to delve into our lives intensely with the material characterised by the forces of life naturally contained in itself.

This project has given me the privilege of witnessing the warmth and closeness that each artist feels for clay, for the earth; and the smiles with which my questions were greeted. I too experience many of the connections expressed – from nurturing, to companionship, to learning, to something deeper in my DNA. By meeting with different clays, at different times, in different places and under different circumstances I sense I have many clay friendships. For me, the physical plasticity of clay seems to be mirrored in its ability to interconnect with humans.



Pattie Beerens with locally foraged clay, 2021; photo: Thomas Radtke

So, the question left to consider is: do these relations and connections matter? Do they cause us to see ourselves as part of an ecosystem of kin? As a community, should we share more about the human-clay relations we experience in the studio?

In my view we should have this conversation with clay in our *knowing hand* – “the hand that grasps the physicality of materiality and thought and turns it into a concrete image”.<sup>7</sup>

**Pattie Beerens, from Melbourne and Point Roadnight, Victoria, is a nature girl at heart who loves working with clay – both found and from a bag because all clay is of the earth. Pattie conceptualises her practice as completely entangled in a world of *matter*ing materials and invites readers to continue this discussion via #befriendingclayconversations**

### Instagram @pattiebeerens

#### References:

- 1 Nick J. Fox, *New Materialism*, Fox, N.J. and Allred, P. (in Press) *New Materialism*. In: Atkinson, P.A., Delamont, S., Hardy, M.A. and Williams, M. (Eds.) *SAGE Research Methods Foundations*. London: Sage., 2018. [academia.edu/34669365/New\\_Materialism](https://academia.edu/34669365/New_Materialism).
- 2 Nick Neddo, *Organic Artist – Make Your Own Paint, Paper, Pigments, Prints and More From.*, 2015, page 9.
- 3 Antony Gormley, “Antony Gormley,” 2004, [antonygormley.com/resources/interview-item/id/164](https://antonygormley.com/resources/interview-item/id/164).
- 4 Arlene Shechet, Jenelle Porter, and Arlene Shechet, *Arlene Shechet: All at Once* (Boston: Munich: Institute of Contemporary Art ; DelMonico Books, Prestel, 2015), page 31.
- 5 Brooklyn Clay, *BKLYN CLAY Online: A Conversation with Linda Sormin and Clare Twomey*, 2020, [youtube.com/watch?v=k4JbtrKYVvk](https://youtube.com/watch?v=k4JbtrKYVvk).
- 6 Ingrid Schaffner et al., eds., *Dirt on Delight: Impulses That Form Clay* (Philadelphia: Institute of Contemporary Art, University of Pennsylvania, 2009), pages 25–31.
- 7 Juhani Pallasmaa, *The Thinking Hand: Existential and Embodied Wisdom in Architecture*, AD Primers (Chichester, U.K: Wiley, 2009), 016.