

Soft Feelings: Exploring the potential of material expression in ceramic objects

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Image 1. My AUT studio, Oct 2022. Image taken by Emily Parr.

Abstract

This practice-led PhD explores the potential of earth and body, material and gesture, in ceramic objects. The methodology, *a soft approach*, supports the material expression of clay; impressible, changeable, and unruly. Positioning the relationship between artist and material as the focus of its inquiry, *Soft Feelings* speculatively asks how the artist can befriend clay, sustaining its waywardness rather than working it into submission. Drawing upon Céline Condorelli's thoughts on support and friendship, as well as the principles of process philosophy (as defined by Erin Manning and Brian Massumi), the project reflexively develops a methodology that aids the artist to work in feeling with materials. Developing a material intimacy that accumulates through the doing, I aim to become susceptible enough that the clay invites responsivity conducted by its materiality. Objects form irregularly, in ways my subjective perception may not anticipate. They embody familiar structures, such as squares, coils, rolls and slabs, but do so loosely; slouching, cracking, flopping, leaning, and sagging. The thesis asks questions about the potentiality of the material object. Following Henri Bergson's idea of the open whole, *Soft Feelings* aims to expand the capacity with which interiorities (subjective) can commune with their exterior (objective), tending towards closeness without closure. Enfolded artists that work with a variety of materials, including Peter Hawkesby, Philip Guston, Kate Newby, Gabriel Orozco, Ryder Jones, and Lucy Meyle, the thesis considers the value of those methodologically working otherwise, to realise new possibilities for object expression. Using the formal conventions of sculpture and painting, as well as ordering principles and basic logics of installation, the ceramic objects attempt to muddy up systems of aesthetic classification and soften objecthood by exceeding objective reason. Clay readily embodies the marks of its relational processes. Emphasising material entanglements in the ways described by Karen Barad, clay is already sympathetic towards the closing of objective distance. *Soft Feelings* questions the capacity of ceramic artworks to evoke both the specificity and generality of the present, feeling what it is to be here now; as impressions and expressions of earth and body.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Signed:

29/11/2022

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Soft Feelings is a tribute to this community of support. I dedicate it to clay, which holds my heart.



Image 2. Andrew helping me prepare for an exhibition in 2021.



Image 3. Harriet's kiln-packing talents.



Image 4. Clyde at work on the sawdust firing, 2021.



Image 5. Mum unloading work from the sawdust firing, 2021.



Image 6. Dad helping me to build a table for an exhibition in 2021.



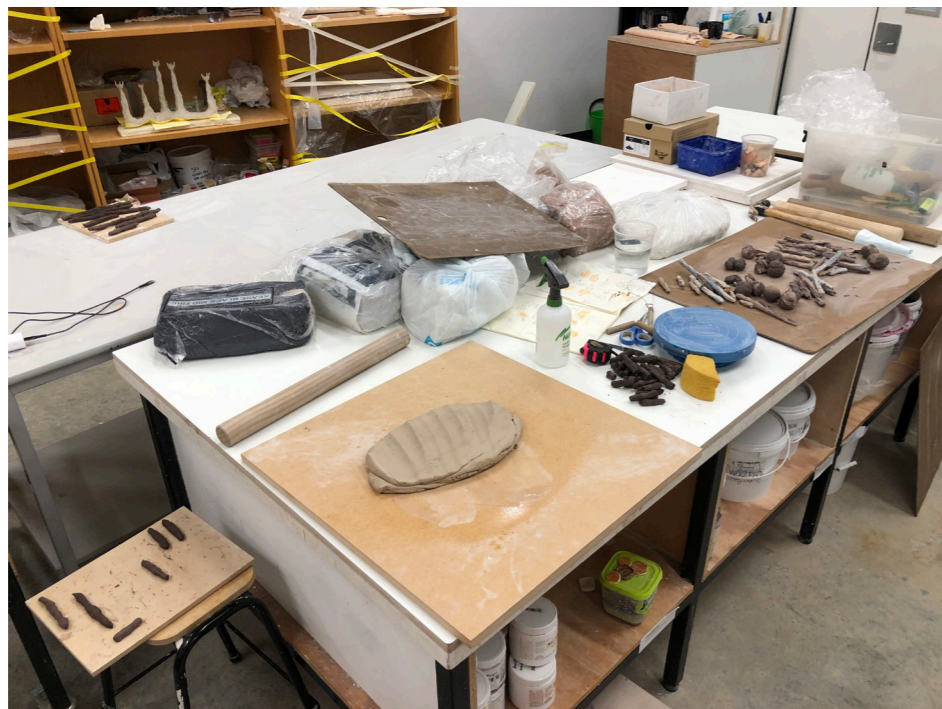
Images 7–12. Emelia French, greenware (unfired) clay objects drying in the AUT Wet Lab, Nov 2022. Their greenware colour changes to black, white, and terracotta variations in the firing process.

Introduction

This research project explores the affective capacity of artworks to foreground the feeling of what it is to be a material expression and body. Reorientating my habitual subjectivity outwards to the unruly activities of the material world, *Soft Feelings* is curious about artist-material relations. Beginning with a transdisciplinary practice, the project has developed a focus on my relationship with clay. Making ceramic artworks that inhabit between object and image, sculpture and painting, *Soft Feelings* is motivated by a quest to muddy the borders of objective knowability. In the artworks, clay's materiality is emphasised so that image associations drift in and out of perceptibility.

Soft Feelings questions subjectivity by affirming the object's potential. A significant focus for this research is what awaits beyond the bounds of objective reason, as it is performed by the subject's gaze. Getting up close and involved with the material, I proposition the clay asking, 'Hello clay, what can we do today?' Sprawled across my worktable might be clays of varying conditions, including leftover remnants of broken works, sticky lumps fresh from the bag, crumbs and dust, and bisque-fired components. They are all possibilities to be explored gesture by gesture. Practising in reply to what is offered by these materials, my hands impulsively get a feel for when to follow, resist and stop. Slapping, massaging, rolling, gripping, hurling, twisting, curling, and folding, the clay welcomes my touch upon its body and responds in kind with an expressed shiver, sag, flop, or slump. Communing, our bodily language enfolds into a ceramic artwork. My intent is that these objects work to close the distance between earth and body, expressing the relations and joy of our making together. *Soft Feelings* considers the possibility of the artist befriending the material(s) with which they work, collectively becoming more.

This beginning content positions the three key questions for the project, and introduces the practice, methodology, and the exegesis. It explains the rationale of the research, and the structure of the document. It proposes the significance of *Soft Feelings* for contemporary ceramic practice in Aotearoa New Zealand and questions around artist-material relations.



Images 13–14. My worktable in the Wet Lab, Nov 2022.

Research questions

How can the artist befriend a material, working in support of its expression?

How might my prioritising material experience in the process foreground potential in the artwork so that it may be affectually felt?

How can ceramic objects promote connectivity in transcending the categorical differences of objective reason?

Introducing the practice and methodology

Soft Feelings positions the relationship between artist and material as the focus of its research. Responsive to discoveries made in the studio, it builds a methodology, a *soft approach*, that supports material expression so that artworks may accumulate as collaborations of our working together. Clay, as the primary material, is productive for exploring the potential of mutual responsiveness because it is very receptive to relations with my hand, other tools and the environment, accumulating marks and gestures that contribute its aesthetic quality. *Soft Feelings* learns from and with its materiality. It questions how the artist may become more susceptible to the potential of material relations.

As Karen Barad proposes, objectivity offers an opportunity to rethink our “accountability to marks on bodies” and our “responsibility to the entanglements of which we are a part.”¹ Atop and below the surface of the object, clay readily enfold the memory of my working it, informing its bodily language. Accumulating tensions that it expresses physically, it is *already* materially sympathetic towards the closing of objective distance, for the capacity to which it expresses gesture is contingent on the manner of my touch. Its activity may allow me to observe the ethics of our relation.

A focus for this research, is my sensitivity toward how the artist may inadvertently perpetuate habits of subject-driven agency in making processes. It details my efforts to follow the lead of the material. In New Materialism, the notion of ‘following’ is a common methodological approach as it presumes expanded movement for materiality focused practices irrespective of categorical distinction.² Following also positions movement in anticipation of the embodied or expressed, similar to process philosophy. Moreover, for the artist to follow the material, they must be willing to be moved; they cannot stay fixed in position and orientation. In practice, I attempt to follow a material’s unruliness

1. Karen Barad, ““Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers” Interview with Karen Barad” in *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (Michigan: Open Humanities Press, 2012), 52.

2. Katve-Kaisa Kontturi, “Following,” *New Materialism*, 30 March 2018, <https://newmaterialism.eu/almanac/f/following.html>.



Image 15. Emelia French, artwork, 2021. My hand impressed as a trace upon the clay.

and waywardness so that it leads ‘our’ making, opening towards contingency in support of clay.

In accordance with the process philosophies of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, *Soft Feelings* is concerned with the ‘how’ of the practising. Relationally and processually motivated, it explores how potential builds through the physicality of my working with clay, emphasising the importance of relational openness. With a light touch, I aim to loosen the grip of my subjective hand, softening my tendency to mould the clay into shapes predetermined. Supporting the changeability of raw clay, my hope is that the clay body might inform my action. Endeavouring to work ‘in feeling’ with clay’s materiality through a *soft approach*, building affectual proximity.³ The way clay moves is a proposition for which the artist may reply; conversing haptically with its bodily language. Implicated and entangled in the physicality of the practice, the trajectory of the artwork is unknown, and the clay may form into objects that my human perception may not anticipate.⁴

Developing material intimacies specific to the relations of the practice in working with them, I befriend *this kiln, this environment, and these clays*. ‘Working in friendship’ has been a key turn of phrase for describing the methodological approach. *Soft Feelings* speculatively explores the possibility of our friendship, positioning it alongside Céline Condorelli’s writings on support and friendship (2009, 2014), and Simon O’Sullivan’s defining of friendship (2004), as a moment of shared affirmation that catalyses becoming. ‘Getting to know’ the behavioural temperaments of the nine clays with which I have worked, through practice, haptic familiarities developed that offered relational closeness, which *Soft Feelings* positions as different to objective ‘knowledge.’ The project considers how a *soft approach* methodology tends towards the potential of working otherwise.

‘Working otherwise’ is another key phrase for *Soft Feelings*. Adopted from Manning, the phrase describes the ‘minor gesture’ as leading “the field of experience to make felt the fissures and openings otherwise too imperceptible

3. Early on, I positioned empathy as a methodological framing and quality for artworks. As the research developed, affect became more appropriate, because it offered more scope for embodied responsiveness (empathy is associated with cognitive emotion). However the etymological origin of empathy, meaning ‘in feeling’ retained relevance for *Soft Feelings*, becoming a key phrase. Now, my efforts to work in feeling are best contextualised in relation to Alfred Whitehead’s theory of feeling. This is discussed in Chapter 4, *A soft approach: part one*.

4. Throughout the exegesis, ‘perception’ is used to describe the way in which something is visually regarded or understood, with an emphasis on the habitual/typical patterns of perception. The dictionary definition is “recognition of things using your senses, especially sight” and the interpretation of “information from the external world.” In general, I understand perception as entangled with the body; perception is an awareness that arrives through the senses. Etymologically, perception means “seize, understand” and “take.” When I describe my attempts to form objects that unsettle, evade, or draw attention to the limits of habitual/standard/subjective perception, I mean that they cannot be fully seized or understood by their image. Their affectual excess (porosity, softness, lightness) is more than can be contained. See: “Perception,” Collins English Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/perception>; “Perception,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/perception>.

or backgrounded to obtain.”⁵ Attentive for material gestures that open the practising to an “environmental relationality that was otherwise imperceptible,”⁶ my ‘working otherwise’ might support my feeling of the connectivity of working with/beside another. This attentiveness foregrounds the inherent kinship of clay and hand (earth and body) so that our relational *entanglement* leads and shapes the form of the ceramic artworks. The artists discussed throughout the exegesis share this commonality in approach, working to realise new possibilities for object expression, which is also the aim of *Soft Feelings*.⁷

A *soft approach* is methodologically sympathetic to the inherent entanglement of the material world.⁸ Defined by Barad, entanglement is *more than* intertwined.⁹ In a similar vein to Massumi’s description of the subject within an event (2002), and Alfred Whitehead’s theory of feeling (1929), Barad writes “Individuals do not preexist their interactions; rather, individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled intra-relating.”¹⁰ *Soft Feelings* considers how every singularity relates as a part to its others, through varying frames, inclusive of togetherness and apartness (Barad), manyness and oneness (Massumi), and feeling and felt (Whitehead).¹¹ Tending towards process philosophy, this research develops its understandings in accordance with the writings of Manning and Massumi. In addition, specific to the context of Aotearoa New Zealand in which I practise, in Te Ao Māori the earth is positioned as the entity that hosts our collective becoming, Papatūānuku.¹² Uku/clay is a material from which to explore such processes because, sourced

5. Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 65.

6. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 81.

7. The object is “something material that may be perceived by the senses.” Etymologically, the object is defined as that which is in “place against,” for perceiving. It “receives the action of a verb or completes the meaning of a preposition” that the subject performs. See: “Object,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/object>.

8. Henri Bergson’s concept of sympathy is aligned with this research. However, I have focused on Manning’s minor gesture (Manning allies to Bergson’s sympathy). Conceptually developing on the standard definition of sympathy as “together with” and “in feeling,” for Bergson, sympathy holds difference together so that the “ineffable becomes expressive,” as Manning describes it, so that the potential of the “more-than” can be expressed. Sympathy is not the expression, but is the “way of its articulation.” It precedes the “constellatory potential” of the event, or, in the phrasing, my following a lead. Throughout the exegesis, ‘sympathy’ (and ‘sympathetically’), are used with an awareness of this complementary connection, comprising the vocabulary with which I articulate my working in feeling with the relational potential of the practice. See: Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 56–58.

9. Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), ix.

10. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, ix.

11. Although not included in this exegesis, Gilbert Simondon’s theory of vital individuation is another similar framing. See: Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 53–55.

12. Te Ao Māori refers to the Māori world. As described by Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, Te Ao Mārama/the natural world “forms a cosmic family, in the traditional Māori view. The weather, birds, fish and trees, sun and moon are related to each other, and to the people of the land.” Within this unity, whenua/land is a knowing entity. See: Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, “Te Ao Mārama – the Natural World - The Importance of the Land,” Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand (Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, 24 September 2007), <https://teara.govt.nz/en/te-ao-marama-the-natural-world>.



Image 16. Emelia French, greenware, 2021. Marks from my pinching and slapping the clay.

from earth, it reminds me of the togetherness of which we are all a part.¹³

Following Henri Bergson’s notion of the open whole, the practice explores how every inside opens to its outside. This includes how the clay meets my hand/tool/other clays, how a greenware (unfired) object meets the atmosphere and kiln, how the ceramic object meets others that are like it, and how those artworks meet the world.¹⁴ Sara Ahmed states that “attachment takes place through movement, through being moved by the proximity of others.”¹⁵ *Soft Feelings* explores this notion in two ways, endeavouring to become close enough to the clay to be moved by its materiality, and making fired ceramic objects that aim to circumvent the efforts of the subject to objectively place them. Potentially evading existing image or representation (which the thesis positions in relation to Massumi’s semblance, and his term “life motif”), they

13. Throughout the exegesis, I primarily use the word, ‘clay’ rather than ‘uku/clay’. When writing about Māori concepts, I write ‘uku/clay’ and ‘uku’ when referring to a Māori practitioners’ artwork such as Maia McDonald, as this is the word she uses. From my understanding, uku is more than a translation to clay. It infers a tradition of material treatment that is culturally specific. As Pākehā, my intention is to respectfully acknowledge ngā iwi Māori as the Tangata Whenua of Te Ika-a-Maui and Te Wai Pounamu. See: “Uku,” Te Aka Māori Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.maoridictionary.co.nz/>.

14. In this instance, the world is used to refer to the largest “celestial body” (whole unit) or the most expanded ‘outside’ that the practice opens out towards (albeit, that the world opens to its outside universe as well). See: “World,” Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/world>.

15. Sara Ahmed, “Collective Feelings: Or, The Impressions Left by Others,” *Theory, Culture and Society* 21, no. 2 (2004): 27.



Images 17–18. Emelia French, artworks, 2022.
 Top: the circular additions are an important gesture for the practice. Bottom: the sticks jutting through the stacked slabs are also significant for the practice. They are called 'grip rings' and 'grip sticks' throughout the exegesis.

are unable to be summarised completely by their likeness.¹⁶ Physically stationary but affectually active, they invite the subject to be moved by their excess feeling (opening out, in the way Bergson describes).

With repetitions of motif and series, and a consistency of colour and texture that comes from using the same nine clays, the practice explores spectrums of sameness and difference. Accumulating distinctive types, such variations are amplified when the ceramic artworks are installed en masse. They belong to each other as a collective 'whole' (Bergson) because of what they share; familial in their resemblance to one another. I work with the bodily language that the clays and I have developed, whilst opening towards contingency in an effort to bring about new contributions to expand the practice. Oscillating between familiarity (association, representation) and strangeness (difference, divergence), practising unfolds new variations and series that expand the body of works outwards from within. Like Bergson's whole, the practice is its own system (an entirety) that is distinctive in character but open to becoming differently with each new artwork addition. Following Massumi's notion of the life motif to describe how form unfolds in a pattern of variations, it builds and diverges from patterns of its own making through differences of degree.

Throughout the exegesis, words such as 'arrive' (and the corresponding action of 'welcoming in') are employed to emphasise my feeling of being faced by a new object that seems cognitively unfamiliar but familiar to my touch, having formed in hand. Whilst the artwork does not materialise from elsewhere and builds relationally through the doing, it often appears quite suddenly as a beguiling and perplexing surprise at the periphery of my habitual perception, and it crests the outer edge of the practice as well. In most instances where the exegesis uses 'arrive', it does so to locate this moment when I step back and pause, ahead of encountering the clay anew as an object.

The ceramic artworks of *Soft Feelings* are unruly and loose in structure in a joyful and jovial way. They exuberantly slouch, crack, flop, lean, and sag. Unglazed, the works are coloured black, brown, terracotta, beige, and white, embodying the tones and textures of their clay material. The hard and rough tactility of the fired ceramic emphasises the indeterminacy of their resemblance and porosity as to their meaning. Impulsively handled and lightly formed, they have an immediacy and economy of gesture. They interrupt hierarchies of causality and objective reason because every mark of their making is afforded an aura of intentionality, a presence formed by my hand (a finger print) or that of the clay (a crack or flop). Using the formalities and ordering principles and logics of sculptural and painterly disciplines, they muddy up systems

16. Throughout the document, 'motif' is used to denote a dominant pattern/shape/gesture in the practice. Similar to how Massumi defines semblance, for this project, a motif is a repeated pattern that varies and tessellates across different objects. The 'grip rings', 'grip sticks', 'window', 'frame' and 'eye' are some of the motifs. Massumi develops the term "life motif" to explain how form unfolds in a pattern of varied repetitions. See: Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event: Activist Philosophy and the Occurrent Arts*, 3rd ed. (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2013), 50.



Images 19–20. Emelia French, 'wall tile'
artwork with custom bronze hooks, 2022,
400 x 510 x 8mm. Images taken by Emily Parr.

of aesthetic classification.¹⁷ In the practising, clay stirs and stratifies with associations that traverse what they look like. Stilled through the process of firing into physical stasis, the ceramic artworks eclectically embrace seemingly disparate likenesses, softening the weight of with which meaning can be ascribed. Closing objective distance, they wear the marks of their relation. Connectivities charge affect in excess of objective reading.

Soft Feelings is motivated by the disruptive potential of the object, exploring what O'Sullivan positions as "objects of encounter."¹⁸ Interested in the value of representational indeterminacy, *Soft Feelings* hopes to create artworks that exceed our capacity to place them objectively. Developing Massumi's notion of the semblance (2013), *Soft Feelings* positions representation (recognisable image) as internal projections that inform experience. Instead of confirming what Barad describes as, the "undistorted mirror image of the world,"¹⁹ *Soft Feelings* aims to distort this reflection, composting images and partial resemblances into new forms that do not affirm the same. Cracking open the hierarchies and habits of objective reason, their meaning sits potentially outside of the jurisdiction of the subjects' gaze, offering a directness of connection that resists mediation by subject. They enfold objectivity and subjectivity, and with them, perceptions of external (objective) and internal (subjective) start to *blur*. Permeating the internal, they wear away at the distance cast by the subject, inviting connection.

In the exegesis, the concept 'internal/external' (and the associative inside/outside and interior/exterior) are used to denote a difference in relational orientation which is not inherently different. Relation enfolds interiorly (inside), and expands exteriorly (outside). With clay, *Soft Feelings* explores how every inside opens to an outside. It considers how a body (form) becomes knowable by its outside, which I understand as a perceptive projection

17. The formalities and ordering principles and logics refer to the conventions of sculpture and painting (formal and conceptual). These include conventions such as composition, colour, mass, volume, form, shape, line, texture, weight, gravity and balance. Usually, the way an artwork adheres to these established conventions informs its categorical title, whether painting or sculpture. My practice exploits these conventions to confuse aesthetic classification. For example, the ceramic artworks tend to be painterly in their surface marks, colour, line, and texture. However, these marks are not applied to the surface (as glaze would be); instead they emerge from within the mass of the clay body as impressions and expressions. In this way, the mark making is more similar to sculpture. Others may adopt the frame and uniform rectangular shape of a painting, but warp and buckle emphasising a three dimensionality that is sculptural, offsetting the illusory depth of the painterly image.

18. Simon O'Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari: Thought Beyond Representation* (United Kingdom: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 1–2.

19. Barad, "Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers" Interview with Karen Barad," 51–52.



Image 21. Holding a 'body bowl' I made by cupping the clay between my hand and elbow or knee. Exploring gestural impressions and expressions, the 'body bowls' are some of the earliest ceramic works made for *Soft Feelings*.

in response to felt difference (affect).²⁰ Building upon Arto Haapala's notions of familiarity and strangeness (2005), and Ahmed's writings on queer orientations, *a soft approach* works to reorientate outwards, beyond the habitual domain of the subject, opening towards difference.

For *Soft Feelings*, my hand is a threshold for unravelling dualisms of subject and object, mind and body. Within clay practices it is typical for clay to be referred to as a 'body' (the clay body). The body denotes the fired unglazed clay to distinguish it from a glazed object. The phrase 'clay body' is productive for the project because it emphasises the dynamism of the clay and positions it in relational equivalence to my material body. Affording the clay, the same movement and autonomy I habitually view myself, whilst also foregrounding my inherent materiality (embodied; thinking with my whole body). Throughout the exegesis, my hand/body is emphasised as the haptic centre for my physical communication with clay, comprising our bodily language, which forms the sculptural aesthetic of the ceramic objects.²¹

In accordance with New Materialist theory, through practice, *Soft Feelings* explores the affectual potentials of both my body and that of the clay through our movement together, mixing the distinction with which the subject acts and the material/object is acted upon. Inside and outside may be temporarily unorientable, and in the activity of the practising, the artist is subsumed within the material relations of body and clay. Open towards one another, enfolding into object forms that confuse my perceptive tendency to separate the world into independent compartmentalised parts, I am interested in how the ceramic artworks might retain a memory of our processual entanglement, foregrounding our shared feeling. *Soft Feelings* lingers with our inherent connectedness.

The exegesis

Structured in ways authentic to the processes of the project, the methodology, literature review, and associated contexts are organically interwoven throughout the document. Just as the methodology, *a soft approach* has been reflexively customised to support the interests of the practice, it also hosts the contextual and conceptual considerations of the exegesis. Enfolded into the two chapters (4 and 5) that detail the methodology are horizontal digressions into relevant

20. This thesis indirectly explores Deleuzian concepts, as they inform the thinking of some theorists discussed in this exegesis, including O'Sullivan, Manning, and Massumi. For example, Massumi's semblance complements Gilles Deleuze's difference, exploring the potential within every measure of difference to catalyse change/newness. Similarly, Barad's notion of entanglement overlaps with Deleuze's concept of multiplicity, whereby connection hosts the convergence of potentials and expression of difference. In addition, Deleuze's virtual is comparable to the excess that Manning describes within her minor gesture. My point is not to tease these nuances, but rather acknowledge the lineage of the ideas informing this document, and its use of the word 'difference.' *Soft Feelings* tries to soften orders and representations to affirm a collective capacity for difference, which it explores materially with clay. Though Deleuze is quoted within the exegesis, in general, the document tends towards the more recent interpretations of his theories (Manning, Massumi, O'Sullivan).

21. I do not perpetuate the Cartesian split; my mind feels and my body thinks, they are not dual but one.

artists and philosophies (inclusive of New Materialism, Process Philosophy, Tao, Wabi-sabi, and Te Ao Māori), drawing out the nuances of *a soft approach* by positioning the practice relationally. Similarly, the writing intentionally varies its pace, slowing down for a more involved recounting where appropriate. This ‘move-by-move’ detailing parallels the processual emphasis of the making. Meandering and discursive, the writing leans into digressive moments to tease out the relations at play in the making. It lingers with the ‘how’ of the practising, conceptually and through the tone of the writing.

The conceptual interests of *Soft Feelings* are immeasurable. As such, the writing of this document is intentionally speculative in style. Throughout the exegesis, names are given to individual and groups of ceramic artworks for the practical necessity of distinguishing between particularities. For example, the ‘grip rings’ are circular hand-clenched rings of clay. Other series include ‘standing paintings’, ‘wall tiles’, or the ‘abacuses’. These are descriptions I also use in the studio; they comprise my personal vocabulary. In the context of an exhibition, the artworks are not titled. Leaving the individual pieces/series untitled emphasises their value within installation, for what they are to each other, and so they may be experienced through relation, not name.

Although the exegesis focuses on discoveries made with clay, its methodological and conceptual foundations developed through my explorations with other materials including rock, fabric, timber, tapes, and magnets. Chapter 1: *Chronology of Soft Feelings*, explores material continuities and overlaps and practically traces the terrain of the project, detailing how it has unfolded over the three years of the PhD. It locates the practice by looking at the work of artists Kate Newby, Veronica Ryan, and Briony Fer, and emphasises the value of wabi-sabi for developing the *Soft Feelings* aesthetic.

Chapter 2: *Material contexts*, briefly lists the circumstances under which clay entered the project. Woven throughout the material histories are references to Aotearoa New Zealand ceramicists Jaime Jenkins, Peter Lange, Barry Brickell, and the ceramic community that has developed through an association with Brickell’s Driving Creek Railways & Pottery. Considering the spatial situatedness of the materials situates me as a Pākehā artist practising with uku/clay in Aotearoa New Zealand, and the ethical implications of my doing so, with sensitivity for the implicit association of uku/clay to whenua/land. In addition, it takes the spatial ambiguity of commercially manufactured clays as a prompt for exploring Arto Haapala’s notions of familiarity and strangeness.

Chapter 3: *Cracking open*, positions potentiality in the midst, located between ‘what is’ already. For the practice, it is the intangible affectual excess within what is tangible (clay and my body); it is our frictional capacity to become more. The chapter begins a vocabulary of terms such as softness, openness, and porosity for considering ‘affect’. With Henri Bergson’s open whole, artist Paul Chan’s writings on what art is (2009), and Hans-Georg Gadamer’s concept of the horizon, it explores how interiorities (subjective) might increase their

permeability to more readily connect to their outside (object), in the interests of empowering collective potential. It considers the affectual porosity of Zac Langdon-Pole’s artworks. With the support of Simon O’Sullivan’s object of encounter (2006), the chapter contemplates the metaphorical potential of the crack as a break in habitual subjectivity that invites ambiguity and compares the crack to the cauldrons in Maria Olsen’s paintings. It also covers poet Lisa Samuels’ soft text (2018) and Roland Barthes’ third meaning (1977) to explore the affectual power of poetry, questioning how the artworks of *Soft Feelings* might operate poetically.

Both Chapters 4 and 5, respectively titled, *A soft approach: part one* and *A soft approach: part two*, unfold the nuances of the project methodology in close detail. Structurally, these chapters are complemented with sections about artists working similarly to expand the possibilities for object expression, including the practices of Philip Guston, Gabriel Orozco, Peter Hawkesby, Xin Cheng, Ryder Jones, and Lucy Meyle.

Chapter 4: *A soft approach: part one*, speculatively discusses how *a soft approach* might outmanoeuvre subject-driven agency. It explores how this desire cannot be measured, and that the value of *a soft approach* resides with its *attempts* to do so. It contemplates the necessity of working otherwise, to bring about new possibilities; positioned in relation to Erin Manning’s minor gesture and Jan Verwoert’s musings on possibility (2010). In addition, it covers Brian Massumi’s affect, Gilles Deleuze’s stutter (1997), artist Heidi Salaverría’s doubt (2017), Alfred Whitehead’s feeling, Karen Barad’s agential realism, and William James’ pure experience (1912). And, considers the relationship of uku/clay to whenua/land within Te Ao Māori/Te Ao Mārama. It ponders how a singularity or an individual relates as a part to its others.

Chapter 5: *A soft approach: part two*, responds directly to the research question of how the artist may befriend clay by working in support of its material expression. It contemplates Céline Condorelli’s notions of friendship and support and Simon O’Sullivan’s positioning of friendship as the joy of working in synchronicity with another. In addition, it details how I work receptively through haptic touch, developing a bodily correspondence with clay. Chapter 4 introduces the theoretical grounds for practice-based discussion in Chapter 5; its emphasis is on my attempts to commune with clay, following its lead, working to support an artwork’s conceptual porosity and openness. It defines what a light touch is to *Soft Feelings*, contextualising it in relation to Italo Calvino’s lightness (1988) and Brian Massumi’s semblance. The chapter concludes with a brief discussion of what an ‘affirmative aesthetic’ contributes to the practice.



Image 22. My AUT studio, Oct 2022. Image taken by Emily Parr.

The significance of the project

Soft Feelings adds to contemporary ceramic practices in Aotearoa New Zealand, through its methodological contribution of a *soft approach* to the materiality of clay. Aesthetically, the artworks expand ceramic sculptural languages by developing an alternative set of values and principles to the established conventions of studio ceramics.²² In complement to other Aotearoa New Zealand ceramists already working in this way, such as Peter Hawkesby, and those with a similar ethos to the late Barry Brickell, this project celebrates the unruly potential of clay. Foregrounding material character, the works in *Soft Feelings* encourage an inventiveness of approach, asking me, the artist to accept and work with its inclinations and tendencies to shape irregularity and crack. More broadly, this project engages questions around artist-material relations and the speculative ethics involved in trying to befriend the material with which one works. It advocates for the capacity of art objects to transform relational engagements, potentially reorientating the human subject towards its entanglements and to become more attentive to how we connect.

22. For the purposes of this exegesis, studio ceramics are positioned as orthodoxically typical approaches to clay, the 'learned ways.' They comprise all the 'correct' processes for material treatments; how to join the clays properly, reduce cracking and warping, and work the clay into submission to master its materiality (regulating, rather than supporting, its tendencies towards unruliness).



Image 23. Emelia French, studio explorations, 2019. A neodymium magnet rolled in magnetic iron.



Image 24. An observed trace in my Dad's backyard, 2019.



Image 25. Emelia French, studio explorations, 2019. Made with low-stick tape, this work peeled off the wall in a couple of days.



Image 26. Emelia French, studio explorations, 2019. Gravel collected on my walk home arranged on a folded painting.

Chapter 1: Chronology of *Soft Feelings*

This chapter chronologically consolidates the discoveries of *Soft Feelings*, providing a scaffold for the chapters that follow. It explores how the first two years (2019–2021) expanded my way of relating to the material world and led me to work primarily with clay. This chronology performs as a slow unfolding that wanders the terrain of the project. Emphasising practice, it details the research trajectory as I experienced it.

Soft Feelings began with an interest in empathy as an aesthetic within abstract painting. The first research question was: *How might I use painting to explore why and how we position the 'other' in the processes of defining ourselves, to consider more empathetic ways of being in relation?* Although the question has shifted materially, my original intent to practise empathetic approaches, remains relevant throughout the research. The etymological origin of 'empathy' is from Greek *empathia*, meaning *em-* 'in' and *pathos* 'feeling.'²³ 'In feeling' has become a key phrase, and is developed in relation to Whitehead's theory of feeling in Chapter 4, *A soft approach: part one*. The word 'empathy' is not a core term; instead, 'affect' has offered more scope for considering the potential of direct and embodied connection as yet unmediated by cognition.

This chapter explores the project's early focus on working in feeling with materials and their influence in developing the methodology, *a soft approach*. It recounts my attempts at working with the natural tendencies, inclinations, and perceived needs of materials, including paint, fabric, tape, rock, bronze, clay, timber, magnets, sand, steel, and paper, considering how the practice grew its affective capacity.

23. "Empathy," Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/empathy>.



Image 27. Collecting gravel after a beach swim with my sister, Niamh, in Ngāmotu New Plymouth, Dec 2019. Image taken by Niamh Younger.

May 2019 – October 2020

Reorientating outwards

In the studio, I sought to become more sensitive toward relational activities already at play, inclusive of (but not limited to) gravity, materials, my body, and weathering processes. While walking and collecting material, I reorientated with greater sensitivity to what I understood as my relational ecology. In this respect, the project began with what New Materialist Kathleen Stewart describes as “a barely audible whispering that something’s up in the neighbourhood.”²⁴ Situating myself in outdoor environments, I endeavoured to develop my relational awareness. Early investigations involved a stockpiling of elements collected whilst walking, including driftwood, rocks, gravel, sand, jars of seawater, and other studio materials that drew my attention, such as tapes, fabrics, and neodymium magnets. Materials were chosen because they seemed to call out to me, resonating differently. I felt their affectual responsivity as a prompt for exploring their aesthetic possibilities closely.

Motivated by Sara Ahmed’s writings on queer orientations, I started orienting towards objects marking the periphery of my dominant experience. Ahmed likens our orientation with objects and others to a subjective lens or perceptive filter;²⁵ the way or direction we look determines what and how we notice.²⁶ She wonders whether we might orientate towards different or more proximate objects, our bodies turning towards those that are “not supposed to be there.”²⁷ Positioning the straight line as the dominant direction, Ahmed advocates for “queer moments of deviation.”²⁸ For example, she asks, “If the objects slip away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, or out of place, what will we do?”²⁹ For *Soft Feelings*, her thoughts on orientation are beneficial for reframing my automatic response to disorientation; as this is still bound to happen with clay. Rather than pushing a strange or unsettling object away in the interests of regaining solid ground or a firm grip of self, Ahmed proposes that it is an opportunity to lead our bodies to different objects, beginning new possibilities for relation.³⁰ Leaning into contingency, I became more attentive to the

24. Kathleen Stewart, “Afterword: Worlding Refrains,” in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 345.

25. ‘Other’ means “additional or different to people or things that have been mentioned or are known about.” A *soft approach* works otherwise, leaning into excess, difference, and the unknown, to bridge the distance with which ‘self’ and ‘other’ are typically defined, which it explores through subject/object, human body/clay body, and self/world. All of these examples are ways I explore how a singularity relates as a part to its others. See: “Other,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed October 23, 2022, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/other_1.

26. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.

27. Dai Kojima, “A Review of Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*,” *Phenomenology & Practice* 2, no. 1 (2008): 89.

28. Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 179.

29. Ahmed, 179.

30. Kojima, “A Review of Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*,” 91.



Image 28. Emelia French, inside-out 'wall object' artwork, 2019.

ways materials detour.³¹ I started to enjoy my disorientation and confusion as the pleasure of experiencing differently.

At the time, I was mainly practising in a pattern of relation that, in retrospect, was convoluted by my efforts to exercise agency over the outcome. I tried to emphasise materiality but unintentionally worked materials into submission. In painting abstract images that affirmed what I already knew about painting, the paint's materiality was backgrounded by a predetermined image. Even when I thought I wasn't working with a 'plan', I tended to follow familiar aesthetic conventions rather than follow the lead of the material. On reflection, I made works that looked *like* abstract paintings, but lacked affectual potential. I did not yet realise that the creative momentum of the practice (or, capacity to generate new possibilities from within) was contingent upon my susceptibility for the process to unfold differently (diverging otherwise, allowing for new expressions of paintings/objects).

One day, feeling frustrated by this lack of momentum, I followed an impulse. I cut an old painting out of its stretcher frame and turned it inside out, the underside becoming its face. The canvas was rigid and unyielding to being stretched anew, hardened by paint. By gently folding the canvas enough to staple it over a smaller frame, the painting relaxed into the textured surface of a 'wall object'. I could not have anticipated the awkward shape and form as it was determined by material tendency; how the material settled around the frame. This loosening of my subjective control transformed a painting depiction into a productive artwork. In outdoing itself as a 'painting', it unsettled previous conceptions and expectations I brought to the material and contributed new possibilities. This critical moment sparked a hunch that inventiveness might arise *within* the practice beyond conditions set out.

This phase of exploration developed my confidence to make work without knowing a reason for doing so in advance. It preempted what became the central material investigation. Introspectively wrestling with my personal need to feel in control of what was unfolding predeterminedly whilst also desiring material activity, I slowly realised that my attempts at control made the material submissive, quiet to my hand. However, encouraged to follow impulse, and work with hunches, as had happened with the inside-out painting/object, I began to find ways of subverting my heavy-handed seriousness. I tended toward material engagements that made me laugh, not because of a pithy visual joke but for how they disrupted my sense of authority about 'our' practising (myself and material).

31. Etymologically, detour means 'change of direction' and to 'turn away.' An important term for the project, in detouring, I orientate away from the mirror image view of the world as it interiorly confirms myself (see Introduction, in relation to Barad). I reorientate outwards *towards* materials that deviate, seeking to affirm difference as I encounter it materially. See: "Detour," Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, accessed November 4, 2022, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/detour_1.



Images 29–30. My AUT studio, March 2020.





Images 31–33. Emelia French, studio explorations, 2020.



Image 34. Emelia French, kinesiology tape and sand 'wall object', 2020.



Image 35. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork with sediment, 2021.

Wandering: a provisional methodology

Wandering was the first way I described the processually-led and relationally responsive methodology of this project, partly due to my early walking and collecting methods. I sought to emphasise the importance of detours, enacted physically, away from orthodox rationalism and subject-driven activity. In the context of Ahmed's queer orientations, I hoped to undercut my subjective tendency to orientate as the major 'I' within every encounter by leaning into opportunities arising through making processes.

Continuing Ahmed's consideration of the straight line, I adopted a similar approach for thinking about potentiality analogised through walking. Rather than practise a linear A to B trajectory, I sought to wander. Even now, with clay, I follow its waywardness. In my Confirmation of Candidature Research Proposal (PGR9) in July 2020, I likened affect to a bodily openness and contextualised it, according to Stewart's description, as a "...sharpening of attention to the expressivity of something coming into existence."³² I began to work responsively, regularly propositioning materials in ways I thought might provoke play. As I did this, I was attentive to potential opportunities arising through the process, aiming to practise in feeling with materials to bring about new expressions.

Wandering eventually became a restrictive framing as it seemingly reinforced that I was an autonomous and contained body moving through a relatively stable environment. It did not do enough to unsettle the habitual subject-object relation. Reframing the methodology as *a soft approach*, does more to dismantle the illusion of an individual subject. It seeks to build haptic closeness. To be developed in Chapter 4, softening the performative positions of knowing subject and known object, *a soft approach* is implicated, attentive to the entangled relations presupposing their formation.

Emerging aesthetic curiosities

Reflecting back on an early studio photograph from March 2020 (images 29–30), I see works arranged in sympathetic groupings on the table and walls. Most still conform to the stretcher frame, but in evidence are my attempts to leave this structure behind. When present, it seems caught between hosting and regulating the practice as it starts to exceed its use. The works are mainly comprised of found patterned and coloured fabrics, and a few are painted. Some have rocks arranged atop them or stuffed into loosely stretched fabric so that the internal stretcher frame is activated as a makeshift shelf or cavity. In other works, the fabric is stretched traditionally three sides out of four, or it is looped so loosely around the frame it drapes far enough to (almost) touch the floor. Leaning against the wall, kinesiology tape wraps around a stretcher frame as

32. Stewart, "Afterword: Worlding Refrains," 340.



Image 36. Emelia French, *Saggy swirl*, 2020.



Images 37–38. My holiday photos of Takayama, 2018.



Image 39. Emelia French, *Bathmat visits Japan*, 2020.

if strapping a human injury; sticky-side up, black sand clings to the tape. On the table, a canvas painting has been cut from its frame and folded into four. Out of view and on the floor, a painting has been cut out the same way but is instead unfolded like a picnic blanket, with four pebbles holding down each of its corners. Although my choice of materials is different, these gestures are not entirely dissimilar to how I approach relationality now. For example, the sticky tape painting coated with black sand (Image 34) explores similar relations to a ceramic ‘standing painting’ (Image 35), in which I pushed a sloppy clay slab into a bed of dried and crushed clay, caking its front with sediment.

Additionally, in *Saggy swirl* (2020), I observe a likeness in my treatment of its materiality to that of clay. The paint is embedded into the fabric as a dye, its colour activating similarly to that of the clay objects (interior and fundamental rather than exteriorly applied to surface). An abstract painting morphing into sculpture, it teases between object and image, which is a quality of the ceramic ‘wall tiles’ and ‘standing paintings’. In making these fabric works, I encouraged the fabric to relax into shape in a way most comfortable; alternative in determination to the tightly stretched canvases I typically made. I wanted the material to be free “to perform its materiality,” as described in my PGR9. Slouchiness is still an aesthetic interest for the clay practice; when I slam the clay onto the table, it is a proposition for it to slouch how it wants. How the clay sags or slumps, expressing its material weight, is considered for its aesthetic potential, similar to the canvas in *Saggy swirl*.

Introducing the notion of material friendship

Leading up to the PGR9 (Confirmation of Candidature), I understood the practising as seeking ‘material friendships’. At this stage, I was searching for affinities between materials and objects; it was only later that I realised I was working to befriend them. I tested out different combinations between materials/forms and assembled complementary aesthetic moments together.

Bathmat visits Japan (2020) is an example of a material friendship observed and made into an artwork. It comprises a green rock sitting atop a painting frame of a stretched bathmat. The ‘painting’ structure physically supports the rock object, but aesthetically they work in mutual support, enhancing and emphasising particular qualities of the other. The stone is placed between textured lines of the green terrycloth fabric. The title, *Bathmat visits Japan*, references water drains I saw in Takayama, Japan, in 2018. Pebbles arranged in patterns along the bottom of water drains caused a rippling effect on the surface of the stormwater, making them aesthetic features within an urban streetscape. Although the notion of material friendships has conceptually developed with the clay, this early work explores relations that later become central to the project, including interior/exterior, material sympathies, and the difference between association and resemblance/representation.

Engaging similar interests, artist Veronica Ryan makes sculptural installations usually comprising mixtures of found and made components, which she arranges in sympathetic relation. Employing a series of processes, including tying, wrapping, stacking, gathering, and hosting, she explores systems of meaning materially.³³ In her recent exhibition, *Veronica Ryan* at Alison Jacques Gallery,³⁴ Ryan teases the “midpoint between oppositional principles: interior and exterior, absence and presence, material and object memory.”³⁵ She names her key conceptual concerns as “residues, traces, memory, deposits” for considering how “everything is connected.”³⁶ Like Ryan, I was (and still am) interested in residues of entangled relationality and am attentive to the way parts connect, as aesthetic opportunities for work; impressions/expressions, inclusions/protrusions, and joins/edges. These are ongoing preoccupations that *Soft Feelings* materially develops with clay.

Ryan’s sculptural gestures are reminiscent of how I was practising in 2019–2020. Her work, *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams* (1985), is a large pillow-like plaster object built with concave grooves within which smaller bronze objects are nestled and embedded.³⁷ It’s like an artwork I made in 2020, where I tucked collected rocks along the inside edge of a heavy-duty (extra wide) stretcher frame, utilising its interior structure like a cubbyhole for storage or keeping objects safe. Before doing this action, I had attached a piece of blue hand-dyed calico fabric to the stretcher frame in a loose draping manner, similarly to *Saggy swirl*. Placing the rocks, their relationship of mass to gravity pulled the calico into a cave-like interior bed (within which the rocks sat), settling the surrounding excess fabric into a pillowy frame. Importantly, the painting and stretcher were *responsively activated* in aesthetic support of the rocks they hosted. As with Ryan’s work, the supporting structure is an equally integral component as that which it supports, their relationship comprising its form and content.

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Jake Walker approaches the frame/support similarly to Ryan. He tends to combine ceramic and painterly materials within an artwork, usually as a minimal abstract painting or dada-esque assemblage surrounded by an earthenware glazed clay frame. On his intent to subvert the viewer’s expectation of what pottery and painting should be, Walker explains that it is important that the “familiar is presented in an unfamiliar way.”³⁸ For him, the loose organic quality of the clay frame transforms the interior of the painting, softening the composition enough that starts to conceptually

33. Alison Jacques Gallery, “Veronica Ryan Exhibition,” accessed October 3, 2022, <https://alisonjacques.com/exhibitions/veronica-ryan>.

34. *Veronica Ryan* was exhibited at Alison Jacques Gallery in London, Sep–Nov 2022.

35. Alison Jacques Gallery, “Veronica Ryan Artist Page,” accessed October 3, 2022, <https://alisonjacques.com/artists/veronica-ryan>.

36. Alison Jacques Gallery, “Veronica Ryan Artist Page.”

37. Imelda Barnard, “The Allusive Sculptural Work of Veronica Ryan,” *Art UK*, 22 June 2021, <https://artuk.org/discover/stories/the-allusive-sculptural-work-of-veronica-ryan>.

38. “FROM HERE ON OUT 01.08.19 - 20.08.19” (The Engine Room, Massey University Whiti o Rehua, 2019).



Image 40. Emelia French, tucked rocks artwork, 2020.

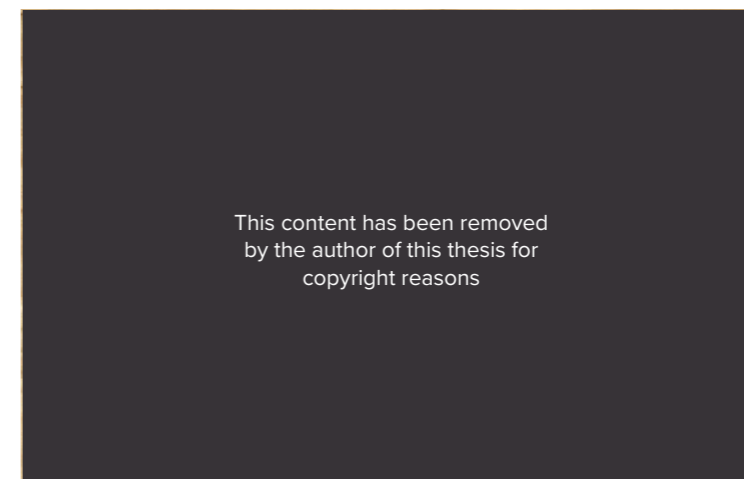


Image 41. Veronica Ryan, *Relics in the Pillow of Dreams*, 1985, plaster and bronze, 300 x 1540 x 1540mm. Image from Tate Gallery, London, UK.

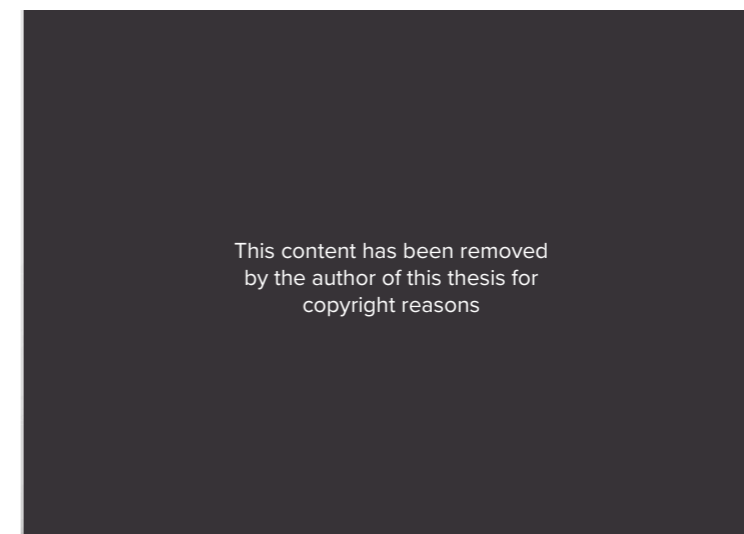


Image 42. Veronica Ryan, *Veronica Ryan* exhibition, Alison Jacques Gallery, 2022. Image from Alison Jacques Gallery. Installation view.

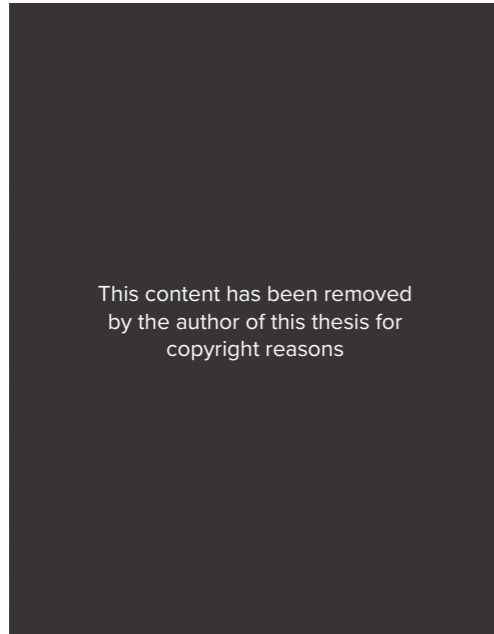


Image 43. Jake Walker, *152*, 2021, acrylic, linen, glazed earthenware, 430 x 330mm. Image from Station Gallery.

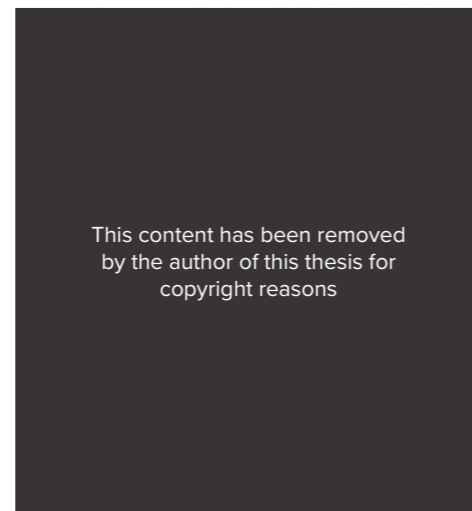


Image 44. Jake Walker, *Untitled*, 2016, oil on jute mounted on board, stoneware frame, 460 x 410mm. Image from Station Gallery.

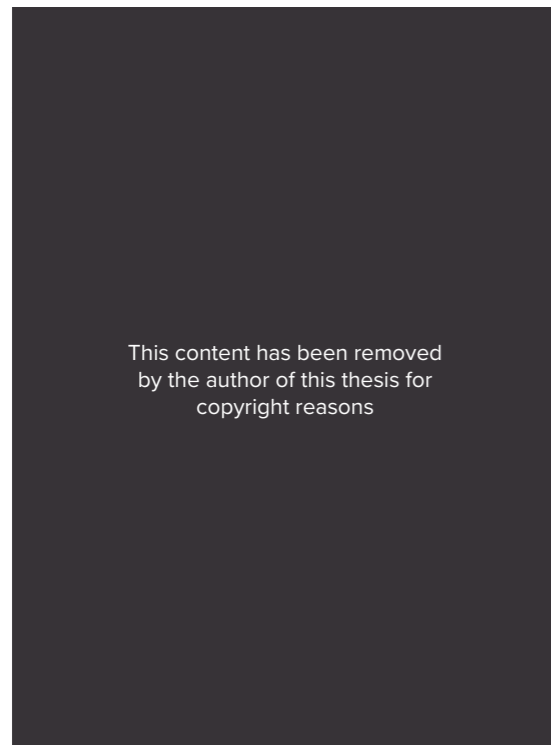


Image 45. Jake Walker, *#0165*, 2021, oil on linen, glazed stoneware, 530 x 340mm. Image from Gallery 9.

“move around,” emphasising its potential to “morph into something else.”³⁹ On this, he explains, “When my painting became more and more reductive and minimal and went more towards pure abstract, then that poetic element... got pushed more towards the edge of the painting and became the frame.”⁴⁰ In Walker’s work, clay is relegated to the edge, but rather than being conceptually sidelined, it confuses the typical reading of the frame as support, collapsing the distinction of hosted/hosting, whereby the painting canvas may as easily be hosting the gesture of the clay frame. Exploring relational co-dependencies interiorly within the painting/object, Walker complicates oppositional principles of inside/outside, similarly to Ryan, so that the support is foregrounded as fundamental (rather than supplemental) to the conceptual content of a work. For *Soft Feelings*, the notion of material friendship is productive because it has a similar intent, working across material relations to redraw the bounds of inside/outside, enfolding the outside in.

Returning to the photograph of the studio installation, rearranging works frequently was how I practised my ability to feel affectual resonances in the first year of the project. Building relations between different framings and groupings, I started to consider the systems of reference for determining parts. In addition, I became more attentive to the difference between the physical edge of a form (its frame) and its affectual perimeter, wondering if it could even be knowable or definable in this way.⁴¹

Rock: a provisional material for the practice

In the first year of the research, rock was an important studio material. I explored rock as an affective material of mediation within existing categorical frameworks, similar to how I do with clay.⁴² Karen Barad’s notion of unsettling of rock from its given role as a placeholder for radical difference was productive. In Barad’s words, it is “always being shoved to the side, as if it is too far removed from the human to matter.”⁴³ In questioning, “Who gets to count as one who has the ability to die? A rock, a river, a cloud, the atmosphere, the earth?” Barad brings attention to systems of binary difference as anthropomorphic constructions that strain our capacity to feel close, inherently connected as earth and body.⁴⁴

39. Michelle Duff, “Architectural Intent,” *ArtZone*, 21 July 2020, <https://www.artzone.co.nz/post/architectural-intent>.

40. Duff, “Architectural Intent.”

41. To frame is to place, surround, form, make, and construct. See: “Frame,” Collins English Dictionary, accessed October 3, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/frame>.

42. Categorical frameworks in this context refer to classification systems for distinguishing difference. They are knowledge patterns that I apply based on existing logics. In this instance, rock carried the baggage of what I thought I ‘knew’ about its properties, as an inanimate, solid material. I was drawn to it because I experienced it affectually differently to what I conventionally knew of it.

43. Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, 21.

44. Barad, 21.



Image 46. Emelia French, *Sunbathing rocks*, 2020.



Image 47. Emelia French, *Sunbathing rocks*, 2020.



Image 48. Emelia French, *Sunbathing rocks*, 2020. Pictured installed at ST PAUL St Gallery Three.

A pivotal work for *Soft Feelings*' development is *Sunbathing rocks* (2020). Made on the back lawn of my dad's house in Ngāmotu New Plymouth whilst I was home visiting for the summer, it began as an arrangement of twelve rocks sitting atop a length of brown linen fabric. Left outside for weeks, the sun bleached the brown pigment where it touched, leaving stone shadows behind. Rain stained the fabric, embedding soil residues that settled as they dried, like dusty tidal lines. The work involves rocks holding place and leaving place, expressed as traces. Like Ryan, I sculpturally consider absence and presence, whereby the residues of relation are foregrounded emphasising material entanglements. Now, with clay, I explore this through bodily expressions and impressions; in both instances, a material withholds the touch of another (the clay holds the residue of my hand and the fabric holds the residue of the rocks).

By the end of this project phase, I was more consciously exploring aesthetic dynamics that disrupted what previously felt familiar, seeking encounters that would generatively collapse the primacy of the individual/singular. I was attentive for material moments that potentially dissolved the categorical distinction between subject and object, blurring the processes of enacting and being enacted upon.

November 2020 – September 2021

During this period, clay was introduced as one component within a multi-material practice. This section emphasises the shift from assembling found materials in which my intervention was mostly limited to an arrangement (or physical shifts in location), to working with traditional sculptural 'raw' materials (such as bronze, steel, timber and clay). At this stage, I became more directly implicated in the shaping of forms.⁴⁵ In addition, two important solo exhibitions for the project will be discussed, *Sun Room* at RM Gallery & Project Space⁴⁶ and *Soft Feelings* at ST PAUL St Gallery Three.⁴⁷

The AUT A&D Wet Lab and 3D Lab

The practice markedly accelerated between November 2020–January 2021 as I prepared for *Sun Room* at RM Gallery & Project Space. For the exhibition, I made paper, booklets, paintings, steel sheet 'drawings', bronze twigs and oyster shells, a table with the help of my dad (using leftover timbers stored in his

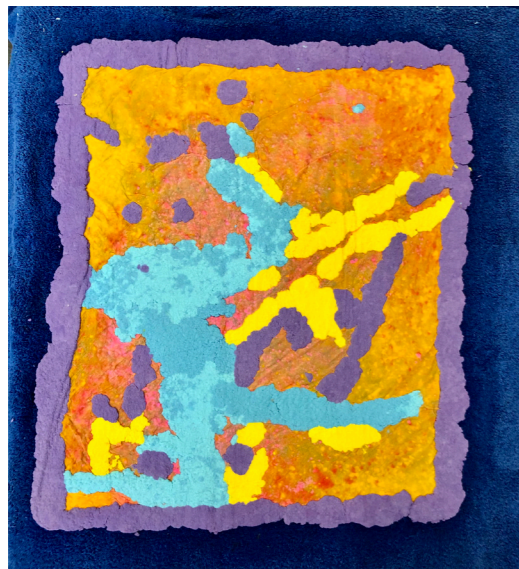
45. I am tempted to describe my shift 'raw' materials to 'working from scratch,' however, this would wrongly affirm that materials are neutral and I am interested in their affectual inheritance.

46. *Sun Room* was exhibited at RM Gallery & Project Space in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland Jan–Feb 2021.

47. *Soft Feelings* was exhibited at ST PAUL St Gallery Three in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, July 2021.



Images 49–51. Explorations in paper making, AUT Bindery and Printmaking Lab, 2020.



Images 52–53. Emelia French, paper artworks, 2020. Left: for this work, I ‘repaired’ the rips arising in the main paper body as I worked it with different coloured paper pulp.

garage),⁴⁸ and seed bombs (an adaptation of Japanese microbiologist farmer Masanobu Fukuoka’s Tsuchi Dango/‘Earth Dumplings’).⁴⁹ Undertaking this series of making, I was feeling the limitations of how I had previously sourced materials by walking and collecting, and out of convenience (fabrics, tape, paint, and stretcher bars were all close to hand in the studio). A shift away from studio arrangements towards other technical and material-process focused environments (including the AUT’s Wet Lab, 3D Lab and Bindery, and my dad’s backyard and garage) would allow me to encounter new material relations, and afforded me more scope to work closely with material processes.

The Wet Lab and 3D Lab workshop have been my workspaces for the majority of *Soft Feelings*.⁵⁰ The Wet Lab is a shared facility at AUT, comprising three kilns, worktables, and drying racks. It is used for clay, plaster, glass, plastic and resin. Wet Lab Senior technician, Harriet Stockman, has supported the development of a *soft approach* methodology. In November 2020, in the first weeks of using the Wet Lab, I remember asking if there were any ‘rules’ I needed to know about the clay. She replied with, “not really, just get into it and have a play.” The environment of the Wet Lab, inclusive of this relationship, has hosted the experimental play of the practice, providing the space (physically and conceptually) for me to follow the lead of the materials.⁵¹ The 3D Lab workshop, also a shared facility, comprises metal and wood-working equipment. Presently, I use the 3D Lab to manufacture the timber and bronze supports for my ceramic artworks. It also has a sandblaster, which I have used to eat away the outer surfaces of bisque-fired clay.

48. My dad, David Younger, has been a reoccurring participant within the *Soft Feelings* project. We have occasionally collaborated on works, but mainly he contributes materials from his garage collection of useful leftovers. I have also shared my provisional writings with him, and over the duration of the project recommended readings I thought he would enjoy. Since Dad is familiar with my practice approach, he is able to make contributions sympathetic to the tone of the works.

49. Seed Bomb Ireland: Brighten Your World, “The History Of The Seed Bomb,” accessed November 20, 2022, <https://www.seedbomb.ie/2015/02/history-seed-bombs/>.

50. My two main working environments are the Wet Lab/3D Lab workshop, and the studio that my mum, Deborah French, has at her house in Ngāmotu New Plymouth. My mum is a potter and used to be involved in the New Plymouth Pottery Club (of which I am now a member). Her at-home studio facilities include drying shelves (for greenware work), making tools and benches, and a Nidec-Shimpo kiln. For part of the Covid-19 lockdown in 2021 I worked remotely from her studio. I continue to do so every summer.

51. I sometimes refer to the making process as a form of play. It stems from this original interaction with Harriet. I do so to emphasise the back-and-forth receptivity required for a *soft approach*. In addition, it helps to disrupt my sense of authority about ‘our’ practising (myself and material). In this instance, play is best defined as “light” and “easy movement” that is “active” and associated with pleasure or “joy.” It accentuates the fun I have working with clay. See: “Play,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed November 4, 2022, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/play_2.



Images 54–55. Making the moulds for the oyster shells, AUT Wet Lab, 2020.



Images 56–58. Pouring the bronze with AUT technicians Angus Roberts and Harriet Stockman, AUT Wet Lab, 2020. Bottom right: detail of bronze overspill.



Bronze casting: an opportunity to go with the material

Developing my interest in interior/external, absence/presence, and material residues, I wanted to try casting processes. Appreciable in retrospect, this was also the beginnings of my thinking more consciously about replication and difference, and degrees of likeness from object to object. In November 2020, I visited the AUT Wet Lab for the first time with the intent of learning bronze casting, taking with me some twigs and oyster shells I had already collected. Making the casts of these found materials, I enjoyed how my unfamiliarity with the process allowed for more material responsiveness because I was new to it. Losing details and gaining new ones, the moulds already started to diverge from the shell's original shape.

In the pouring of the molten bronze into the moulds, I was given (by the material itself) an opening to follow its lead. Being inexperienced with mould-making, I made their funnel hole too small for the molten bronze to enter and fill the cavity. This, along with the viscosity of the material, caused it to respond differently to what I had anticipated, diverging towards the sand. In the casting process, the sand is a support prop holding the casts steady. In spilling over, the bronze pooled into the sandy surrounds, casting the hollows and grooves of its support (similar to how clay does). It settled into amorphous blobby shapes. I decided to keep these residues, reframing them as objects that became otherwise.

Exploring representation: the origin of a light touch

Around the same time, I started to work with my first bag of Barry's Coromandel Gold clay. The earliest ceramic forms made in *Soft Feelings* were a herd of crudely shaped clay animals (Image 64). I named them 'critters' as I was reading Donna Haraway's book *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* around the same time.⁵² Although this project developed in a different direction, it was through Haraway that I was introduced to the phrase "making-with;" which is her translation of "sympoiesis," a keyword for her research.⁵³ Rejecting the term 'Anthropocene' and its association with human primacy, she explores how the human and nonhuman are entangled. Like Barad, she looks to unsettle (or trouble) the mirror image of the world, as it is mediated for and by the human subject. She positions making-with in this context, as a challenge to "self-making."⁵⁴ A *soft approach* methodology speculatively considers how to collaborate with material in friendship, going along with its activities in support of its expression.

52. Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016).

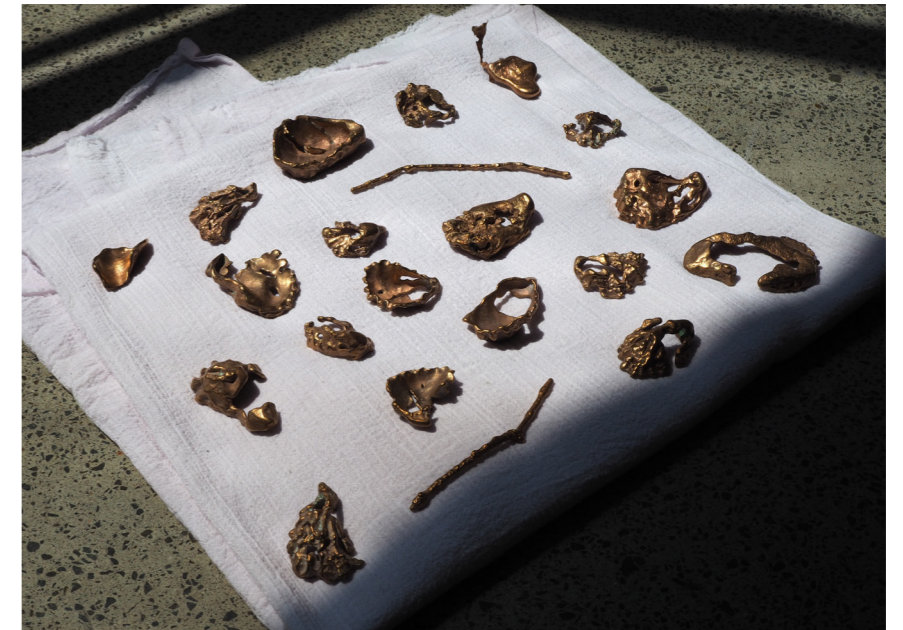
53. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 58.

54. Haraway, 40.



Images 59–61. Emelia French, bronze artworks, 2020–2021. Top left: a bronze twig (one of two) made alongside the oyster shells. Top right: detail of the bronze blobs. Bottom: bronze blobs arranged into custom-made sandboxes for *Sun Room* at RM Gallery & Project Space, 2021.

Images 62–63. Emelia French, bronze artworks, 2020–2021. Top: a bronze blob. I enjoy that this partially resembles a form I recognise, maybe an animal. Bottom: bronze oyster shells, twigs, and blobs installed on a hand-dyed muslin for *Sun Room*.



Returning to the ‘critters’, I wanted them to be animal-like but indiscernible in terms of a specific species. It was an early effort at representational ambiguity. I made them quickly with an intentional looseness, ascribing myself a rule of limiting my gestures to the minimum required to get the gist of an animal, avoiding representational detail that would mark cat from cow, etc. In this respect, it is the beginnings of my working with a light touch. I was starting to think about measures of likeness, and the potential of indeterminacy and ambiguity. Using a processual pattern (the same four gestures, repeated slightly differently), I explored how form unfolds as varied repetitions, and the value of an economy of gesture for keeping work light, not in terms of weight, but meaning.

Wabi-sabi and my hand

Wabi-sabi offered an aesthetic framework for thinking about a light touch differently (as it has come to be defined for my project), playing up my hand as a processual tool.⁵⁵ Texts about Zen Buddhism and Taoism such as Alan Watts’ *The Way of Zen*, Lao Tzu’s *Tao Te Ching* and Leonard Koren’s *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* assisted in researching the Mono-ha art movement, active in Japan from 1968–1975, and wabi-sabi aesthetics, also distinctive of Japan.⁵⁶ These movements highlight minimising touch as a ‘mark’ and how a dominant hand might be called into question. As described by Koren, the wabi-sabi object is, materially,

...visibly vulnerable to the effects of weathering and human treatment. They record the sun, wind, rain, heat and cold in a language of discoloration, rust, tarnish, stain, warping, shrinking, shrivelling, and cracking. Their nicks, chips, bruises, scars, dents, peeling, and other forms of attrition are a testament to histories of use and misuse.⁵⁷

In my reading about the wabi-sabi aesthetic, I started to reframe my touch as a contributor towards the resonance of a material through my working with it, accumulating relational residues that aid its affectual power (as an artwork). My approach to handling materials changed to thinking about how I could retain its openness (connectedness) as I worked it. I made an intentional decision to no longer ‘tidy’ or ‘tuck away’ the marks of making processes.

55. A light touch is a method of a *soft approach*. Materially, it determines the aesthetics of the ceramic artworks as raw (unglazed), transparent (showing the processes of their construction), and truthful to the material (the clay is structure and surface; its variegated mark, colour, and texture). It is discussed in Chapter 5, *A soft approach: part two*.

56. Alan Watts, *The Way of Zen* (United States: Vintage Books, 2019); Leonard Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers* (Point Reyes: Imperfect Publishing, 2008); Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Ancient Classic* (United Kingdom: Capstone Publishing Ltd., 2012).

57. Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, 62.



Image 64. Emelia French, greenware ‘critters’, 2020.



Image 65. Emelia French, ‘critter’ object, 2021.



Image 66. Emelia French, 'grip rings', 2021. The first set of 'grip rings' made for the project, installed on hand-dyed calico for *Sun Room*.



Image 67. Emelia French, 'body bowls', 2021. They are installed on hand-dyed raw silk for *Sun Room*.

In addition, wabi-sabi offered an alternative aesthetic value system to my learned Western ideals of monumental, permanent, preserved, and individualistic beauty.⁵⁸ According to Koren, “things wabi-sabi often appear odd, misshapen, awkward, or what many people would consider ugly.”⁵⁹ Before encountering wabi-sabi, I was preoccupied with my own preconceptions about aesthetic value. Through wabi-sabi, I have come to understand cracking, weathering, rusting, scraps and accidental fingerprints as accumulations (not degradations). And, am more concerned with processual sincerity and care, endeavouring to handle material in ways supportive of its character.

In the *Tao Te Ching*, I encountered the term “wu-wei,” which translates uneasily into English as “not doing.”⁶⁰ However, it is more complex than this and closer to “not forcing.”⁶¹ As I understand it, wu-wei is moving with the grain of life, letting it flow as it needs to. The activity of an ecology, or movement of a system of relations, is more than individual agency. Wu-wei is going with the current of what is already unfolding, participating in ways that add to the feeling of the experience. In reading about wu-wei, I started to get a sense of the difference between forced action and non-forced action. I realised that non-forced action can be physical, strong, assertive, and confident too (different to minimisation), so long as it is going with (following the lead of) a relation, receptively affirming entangled activity rather than individual autonomy or dominance over practice/material. Now, I understand it as my working with clay in friendship.

Clay body casts: the arrival of the ‘grip ring’ motif

Along with the ‘critters’, I made a group of objects loosely resembling pinch-pot bowls, referred to as ‘body bowls’. They are casts of parts of my body. At the same time, I made the first group of ‘grip rings’ by taking a strip of clay and twirling it around my thumb or index finger and with my other hand, giving the clay a light grip to seal it closed.⁶² The ‘grip ring’ gesture has since

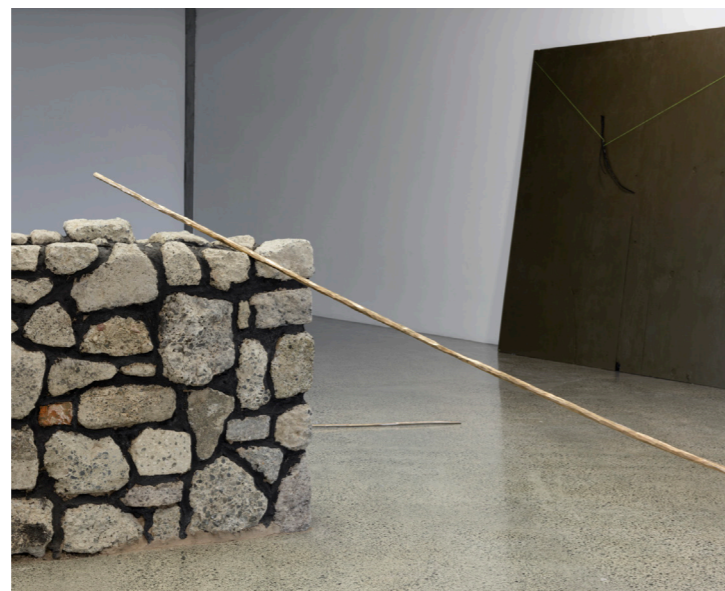
58. Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, 50.

59. Koren, 62.

60. Tzu, *Tao Te Ching: The Ancient Classic*, xii.

61. Tzu, xii.

62. The ‘grip rings’ are informally named for practical identification purposes. I enjoyed the colour and texture of Barry’s Coromandel Gold terracotta. In conversation with Harriet, we discussed the ways I might fire the works to emphasise its red colour (due to iron in the clay) but also reference terracotta’s material history, as used as earthenware sculpture and pottery. I decided to fire the clay without glaze (a tendency that has carried throughout the project). I opted towards sawdust and paper firings because they offered further opportunities to accumulate relational residues. I detail the event of the firings as part of my introduction to Barry’s Coromandel Gold clay, in Chapter 2, *Material contexts*. Even now, I continue to fire the ‘grip rings’ differently to the rest of the ceramic artworks (which are fired in electric kilns). Heated with a gas flame, the clay matures differently in this style of firing; it is more organic and variegated in look because the temperature is less even and regulated (compared with electric). Crucially, the ceramic objects are too fragile to withstand the intensity of raku (their uneven density, combining of clays, and solidity make them incredibly delicate to fire, requiring the consistency of the electric kiln). I enjoy the difference between the styles of firing, and often combine them in a single work, to emphasise the soft neutrality of the electric kiln versus the wild temperament of gas fired clay.



Images 68–70. Bianca Hester, *The walk* (event) and *movements materializing momentarily* (exhibition), ST PAUL St Gallery, 2015. Images courtesy of Bianca Hester and ST PAUL St Gallery.

become a motif for the practice; they are components in many of the ceramic artworks. Comprising moments where the clay has impressed my hand as a trace, their shape is informed by the outline of my finger; the clay sculpturally holds the memory of my body.

Australian artist Bianca Hester's project *movements materialising momentarily* at ST PAUL St Gallery in 2015⁶³ contributes to this understanding of the sculpture as a relational enfolding. As stated by curator Abby Cunnane, Hester explores material transformation by positioning the sculpture "as a movement itself," that it is "a sequence of actions within a dynamic system."⁶⁴ In my making the 'critters', I was already starting to think about the sculpture as a sequence of gestures. Cunnane describes Hester's material objects as embodying "the energy of the various processes it moves through."⁶⁵ Exploring the "un-still" static object, Hester emphasises the activity of hardened materials.⁶⁶ She often uses materials that have undergone a transformation from soft/liquid to hard, such as plaster, concrete, bronze and steel. Hester activates them in movement, either by emphasising their geological deep-time activity, or through human participation.

For *The walk*, an 11km walking event held as part of *movements materialising momentarily*, Hester produced three 5.6 metre long bronze poles (weighing 20kg each) shaped by the artist's clenched grip, which participants then held in hand as they walked. In this instance, the indentations of the artist's grip become a suggestion for where/how to carry the pole. The maker and participant are connected haptically through their shared encountering with the bronze, whereby the bronze pole becomes a conduit connecting past and future relations (as yet unknown) that enfold time and space. They offer a feeling of closeness to process, and to the hand of another (Hester's hand).

Carrying the bronze poles in twos and threes, participants followed the lava flow from Te Kōpuke Mt St John to Te Tōkaroa Meola Reef across the volcanic terrain of Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland.⁶⁷ Accompanied by a video projection drawing the line walked, the bronze poles charged potential in the gallery installation, affectually evoking their "potential for movement," as Cunnane describes it.⁶⁸ The residue of their prior bodily relational activities evokes the memory of their being touched and moved, which they now carry as an affectual potential. Connecting these interpretations to the 'grip rings' and 'grip sticks' of

63. *movements materialising momentarily* was exhibited at ST PAUL ST Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, July–Sep 2015.

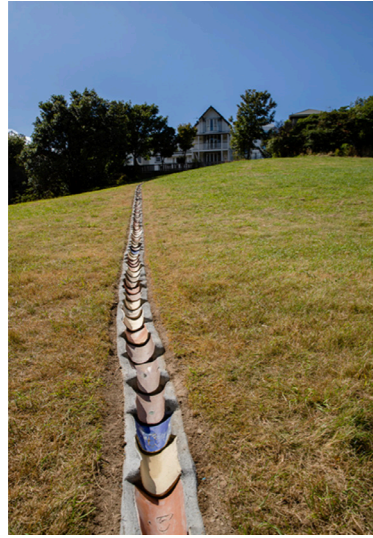
64. ST PAUL St Gallery – AUT, "Past Exhibitions: Bianca Hester: Movements Materialising Momentarily," accessed November 4, 2022, <https://stpaulst.aut.ac.nz/exhibitions/past-exhibitions/2015/past-2>.

65. Abby Cunnane, "Movements Materialising Momentarily: Bianca Hester" (ST PAUL St Galleries, AUT, 31 July 2015).

66. Cunnane, "Movements Materialising Momentarily: Bianca Hester."

67. Bianca Hester, *Groundwork* (Melbourne: Perimeter Editions, 2021).

68. Cunnane, "Movements Materialising Momentarily: Bianca Hester."



Images 71–73. Kate Newby, *Rob Duncan Megan Daniel Margaret Lynn Samuel Deb Nico Marilyn Sarah Henry Mieko Kate Ruth Mike Briana Justine Grace Romesh Josefina Madison Nerissa David Nina Gabrielle Dayle Isabelle Ana Lilith Christian Ruby Sophie Millie Michaela Loretta Laura Christina Alison Olly Miriam Fred Lise Hazel Simon Mia Anita Caroline Anna Prak Nadya Alba Xander Flavia Emma Stef Areez Bella Rachel Kirsty Kate Nicola Emerita Tim Megan Ruby Fina Felixe Ella Eva Ben Julian Bena Huhana Max Lily Tina Rose Bill and Teresa*, 2021, assorted clay, glaze, mortar. Images courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

my practice, they also hold the memory of my touch.⁶⁹ As motifs, they carry the relational history of my ceramic practice (its sculptural unfolding), present as a poetic and physical trace structure.

Exploring the processual gesture in Kate Newby's practice

Aotearoa New Zealand born artist Kate Newby's practice was an early reference for *Soft Feelings*, particularly when I was working with rocks. Newby also makes rocks, sometimes out of clay. As Newby states in her doctoral exegesis (2015), her works collapse and confuse the boundary between "process and product, doing and documentation."⁷⁰ Prioritising processual relational action, she asks how she might, in her making processes, "express a dialogue with a rock or a puddle?"⁷¹ Similar in intent to my efforts to befriend materials, Newby explores the expressive potential of the materials she works with, hoping to "keep the element active in the actual structure of the work."⁷² Lingering with the process so that the material might 'speak', Newby stays with the potential of connection, foregrounding it in the artwork so it may be affectually felt.

More recently, for her exhibition *Yes Tomorrow* at Adam Art Gallery,⁷³ Newby engaged in body casting with clay (as I had with the 'body bowls'), manufacturing terracotta 'thigh tiles.'⁷⁴ Collaboratively produced with friends and family and later with volunteers from her 'Touch Clay' workshops, the tiles are rectangles of clay formed around human legs.⁷⁵ They were woodfired in a hand-built kiln, made by well-known Aotearoa New Zealand ceramicist and educator Duncan Shearer, on his property in Paeroa.⁷⁶ In their fired state, they are relational gestures materialised. The clay holds the impression of human contact, as it does in my ceramic artworks; a captured moment of intimate togetherness. Repeating variations of these basic tile forms en masse (200 total) she arranged the tiles in a line marking the landscape.

The tiles were installed on a lawn outside the gallery as a grooved line cutting into the bank. In this instance, the demarcation becomes a site of relational overlap between interior and exterior. As a fixture of the landscape, the thigh

69. The 'grip sticks' are another motif for the practice, like the 'grip rings.' They are short rods of clay made by gripping a length of clay to make a variegated textural form. The clay holds the creases of my enclosed grip as protrusions, a little like knots of a tree twig. The first 'grip sticks' varied between 5-8cm in length. Now, I make them up to 40cm long. Any longer, and the clay breaks under the weight of itself. They predominantly form the sticks of the 'abacus' artworks.

70. Kate Newby, "Casualness: It's Not about What It Looks like It's about What It Does" (Doctorate of Fine Arts, Auckland, University of Auckland, 2015), iii.

71. Newby, "Casualness: It's Not about What It Looks like It's about What It Does," 10.

72. Newby, 10.

73. *Yes Tomorrow* was exhibited at Adam Art Gallery in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Feb–May 2021.

74. Christina Barton, "Kate Newby YES TOMORROW Exhibition Guide" (Adam Art Gallery, Victoria University of Wellington, 2021).

75. Barton, "Kate Newby YES TOMORROW Exhibition Guide."

76. Barton.



Image 74. Kate Newby, *Always humming*, 2021, glass. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

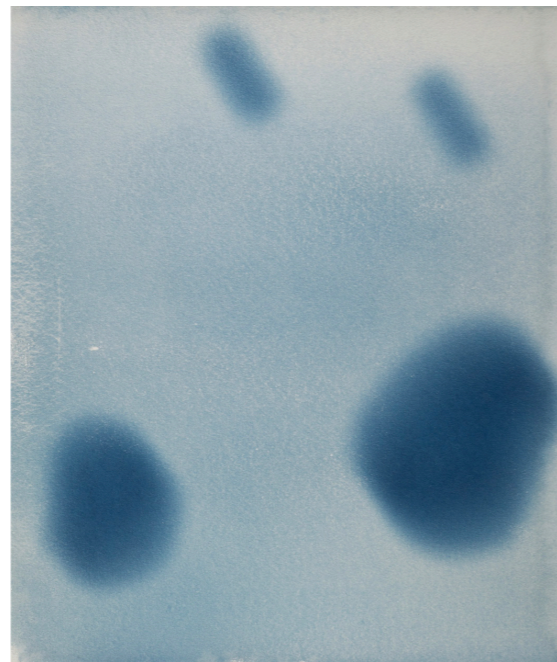


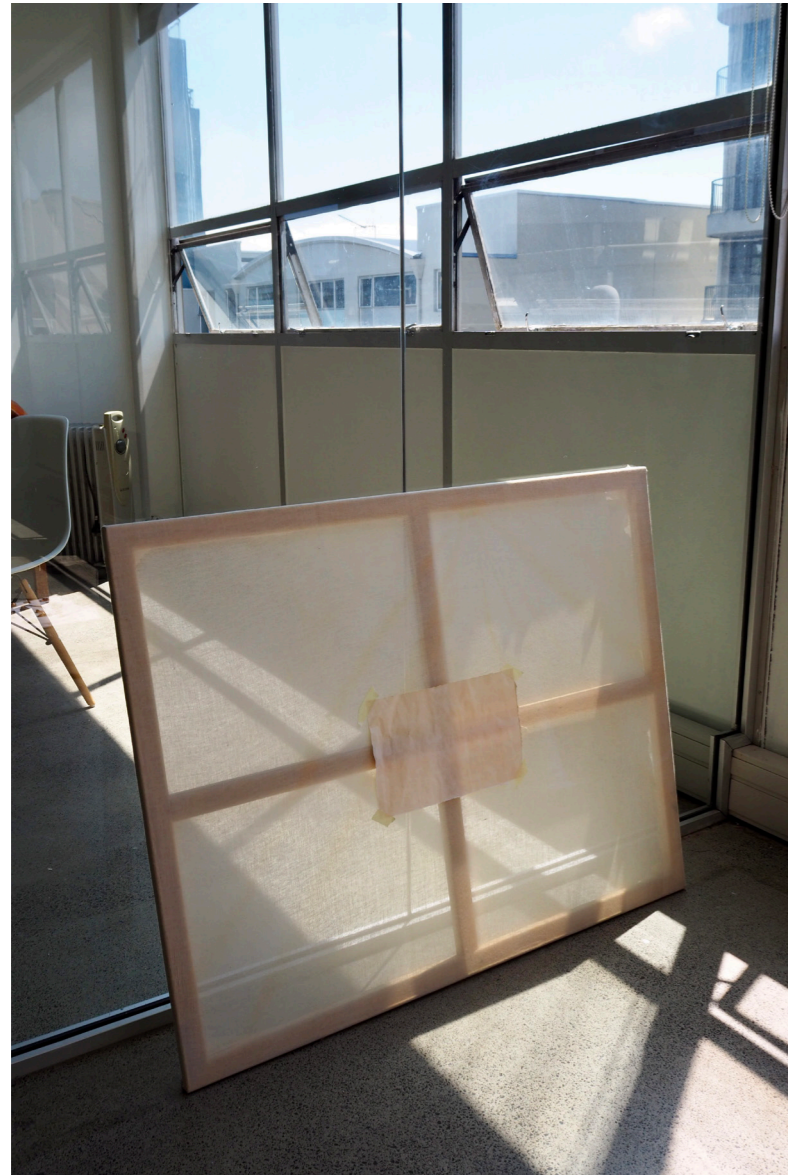
Image 75. Kate Newby, *incredible. Always.*, 2021, cyanotype on Arches watercolour paper, 450 x 375mm. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery. In conjunction with her exhibition *Yes Tomorrow*, Newby made ten cyanotypes recording the sunlight shining through the holes in the glass window panes of *Always humming*. They remind me of the markings made by the rocks and the sun in my work, *Sunbathing rocks* (2020).

tiles invite movement, similar to how Hester's bronze poles do. The thigh tiles promote participation, requiring it for their creation as bodily traces; Hester's poles were also fashioned through the gripping action of her hands. As a site-specific installation, the viewer must walk along its length to experience it (for Hester, they walk with the pole). In my practice, the ceramic artworks may invite touch in their tactility, but mostly, the subject is implored to perceptively reorientate.

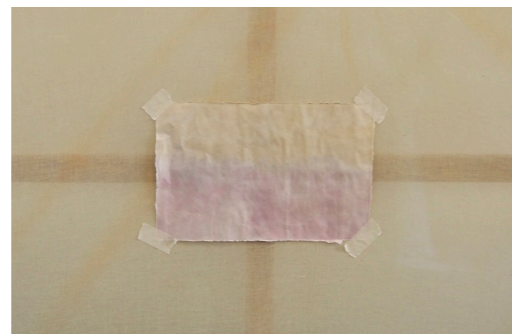
Described by Adam Art Gallery Director Christina Barton, *Yes Tomorrow* comprised seven installations that "stage moments when world and work, and the container that delimits them, are in suspense, to such effect that the building is breached and something human, animate, processual and shared is allowed to enter."⁷⁷ Reading this for the first time, I initially misread 'animate' as 'intimate,' as for me, this is what Newby's work offers. In her use of liminal opportunities within architectural space, such as windows and walkways, she works relational boundaries and borders, exploring the edge as a threshold for potential. For the work *Always Humming* (2021) inside the gallery, Newby replaced a standard window with a frosted equivalent bearing two holes, slightly smaller than the size of a human hand, allowing the outside to whistle through and permeate the inside.⁷⁸ Interior and exterior air intermingling, Newby's window become an intermediary passage softening the habitual structure of the gallery building and subverting its temperature-controlled environment. Exploring fragility and mobility (making the glass materially fragile, for the mobility of air), the sound of air moving through the window invites meditation upon forces felt but unseen.

⁷⁷ Barton, "Kate Newby YES TOMORROW Exhibition Guide."

⁷⁸ Barton.



Images 76–77. Emelia French, 'code for a landscape painting' artwork, 2021. Pictured installed in *Sun Room* at RM Gallery & Project Space.



***Sun Room* at RM Gallery & Project Space**

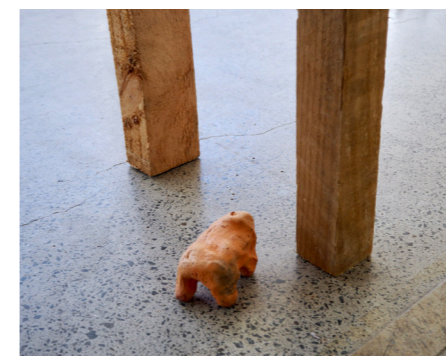
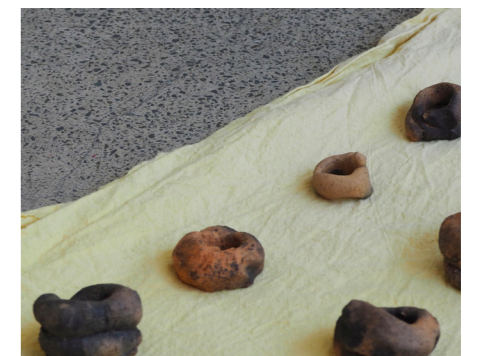
Through the early practice phase of *Soft Feelings*, I positioned the window as a motif for perception. Like Newby, I saw its potential as a boundary threshold for exploring relational orientations. For *Sun Room* at RM Gallery, I made an untitled artwork comprising a 1.5m length of yellow fabric activated as a canvas atop a large stretcher frame.⁷⁹ As the fabric was sheer, the crossbands of the stretcher frame cast shadows through the fabric in the shape of a classic four-pane window. I had an A4 paper drawing leftover in studio that I stuck to the centre of the canvas with masking tape.⁸⁰ Comprising two halves of faded colour, the composition was reminiscent of a horizon, which I emphasised by aligning the line to the stretcher beam shadow. At the time, I thought of this work as the code for landscape painting, utilising conventions without becoming an image. In that respect, this work was significant to my developing a light touch. I began to explore Brian Massumi's semblance, contemplating the measures of likeness required to form an image.

Included in the exhibition were three booklets and four paintings comprising representational drawings of the clay critters (which were also scattered across the gallery floor). One booklet contained images of 'critters' in various relations, face-to-face or walking in line. Another titled *Subject Matters*, comprised an illustrated alphabet of associative forms using the same process; 'A' for 'Apple', 'B' for 'Bear,' and so on. In the installation, the booklets rested on a table I had made collaboratively with my dad. We collected old timbers from his garage (all leftover pieces from our house in Ngāmotu New Plymouth), and decided to make provisionally and economically, with the minimum number of cuts possible, and mostly without measuring. The table was a mishmash of timbers joined together by an eclectic variety of screws (whatever we could find lying around) and had wonky legs.

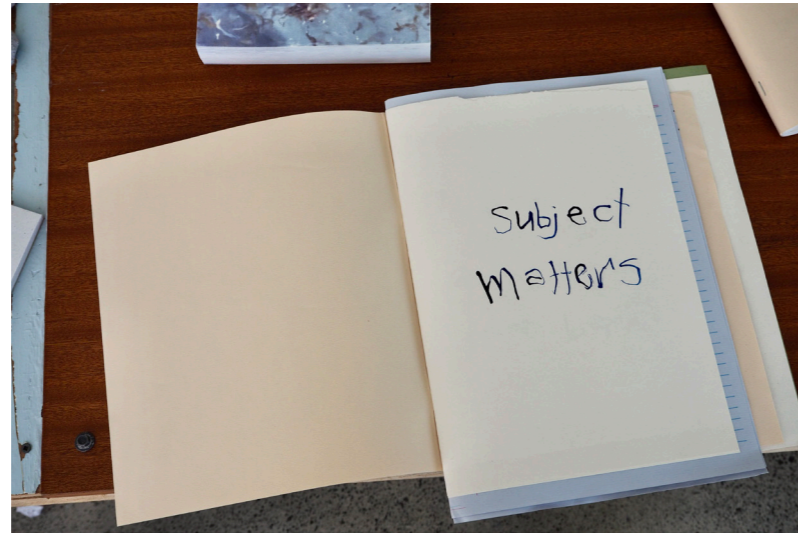
Of the works shown in *Sun Room*, only the 'grip rings' have ongoing place in the practice. The 'body bowls' and 'critters' are present as the smashed-up shards and sandblasted bits I insert into raw clay works, marking their edges, or loosely resembling ears and grips. The breaking of old work and enfolding it into new ceramic artworks is intentional, it has become another way I explore presence and absence.

79. Dyeing the fabric with sunflowers from my mum's garden, I left it to dry over the painting easel in the studio so the dye settled into the creases in lines of concentrated colour.

80. During the lockdown of 2020, I went through a phase of painting on rice paper using herbal tea and coffee. My decision to paint with herbal tea and coffee was part of an exploration into pigments that fade. I was also dyeing fabrics with plant matter. They are some of my early efforts towards working in wabi-sabi ways, whereby the material would change (either develop/devolve) after my intervention. Now, this interest is satisfied through the drying and firing processes of clay; the clay becoming outside of my control, so that the fired object is changed (in weight, texture, colour and size) from when I last touched it.



Images 78–81. Emelia French, *Sun Room* exhibition, RM Gallery & Project Space, 2021. Installation view.



Images 82–83. Emelia French, *Sun Room* exhibition, RM Gallery, 2021. Exhibition details. Top: *Subject Matters* booklet made with recycled papers from the AUT Bindery (collected whilst making paper in 2020). Bottom: steel drawing.

Images 84–86. Details of *Sun Room*. Top: close-up of the painting series (4) made to illustrate the ceramic 'critters'. Middle: exhibition ephemera. Bottom: seed bombs resting on the table I made with my dad. The jotter-pad has instructions for how to plant the seed bombs and was printed on the Risograph printer in the AUT Bindery.





Images 87–89. Smashing bisque-fired faces with a hammer, 2021.
Bottom left: arranging the parts into possible compositions.

Becoming a ceramic practice

Shortly after *Sun Room*, I made a series of small faces that were too illustrative and representational and thus not helpful for the project. I decided to smash them with a hammer for reuse in new works. My impulse to do so came about because I had encountered a work (Image 90) by Aotearoa New Zealand ceramist Maia McDonald (Te Āti Awa) in her exhibition *Clay, Naughty, Clay*, at ParrotDog Gallery⁸¹ in which one uku/clay holds another within a ceramic object. An elongated rectangular strip of white uku supports a line of four cracked inclusions tucked into place. Like Ryan and Walker, in this object, McDonald closes the difference between hosting/hosted, exploring material interdependencies as an aesthetic.

What I enjoy most about McDonald's approach to uku is how she allows the raw roughness of the material to remain even in its fired state. For this untitled work, she has casually cut a slab of white uku. Within its form, four shards of brown-black speckled uku are held in place with 'tabs' made by her fingers. The work teases questions of intentionality. Some marks appear accidental but were made purposeful because of the presence of her hand as a trace upon the uku. In this way, her hand gives a feeling of purpose and authority about *all* gestures comprising the work, whether they are made by the uku, wooden tool, or the artist. Aesthetic decisions in this piece combine uku for colour and textural difference (instead of using glaze for colour).

I began to think about how clay shards might find their way into new works, and that raw clay might host these leftovers. With a sandblasting machine, I softened their edges, eating away the clay to expose its grog (river sand and other inclusions). I inserted the fragments into a slab of white Macs Mud clay, arranging them into a 'wall object' (Image 91). During firing, the Macs Mud cracked dramatically, only just holding the bisque-fired pieces within its body. Incidentally, it was my first electric firing, and because of this, I packed the work into the kiln far too wet. A black greenware work exploded in the kiln, completely disintegrating into dust and coating the white clay in black ash, imprinting it into the clay and giving it a speckle.

81. *Clay, Naughty, Clay*, was exhibited at ParrotDog Gallery in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, March–June 2019.



Image 90. Maia McDonald, untitled work in *Clay, Naughty, Clay*, ParrotDog Gallery, 2019. Image courtesy of Maia McDonald.



Image 91. Emelia French, 'wall object' artwork, 2021. It comprises leftover bisque-fired face fragments inserted into raw Macs Mud Classic White clay.



Image 92. Emelia French, greenware objects drying in the AUT Wet Lab, April 2021. Pictured are the first expansive group of clay objects made for the *Soft Feelings* project.

Soft Feelings at ST PAUL St Gallery Three

Soft Feelings at ST PAUL St Gallery Three could be described as the first draft of the body of work that comprises the final PhD exhibition. This section briefly details key discoveries and their influence on work and installation tactics thereafter. For clarity, this installation will be referred to as *Soft Feelings (1)*, and the overarching PhD will continue to be referred to as *Soft Feelings*. The term was first used within the project as a title on the gallery door, hand-created with thin strips of masking tape.

Soft Feelings (1) consisted of predominantly ceramics and paintings with a few bronze pieces. In the ceramic works, the motif of the ‘critter’ was still present, but was utilised as a leftover base structure for clay material experimentation. Of significance, was the series of nonrepresentative clay work and the sculptural language beginnings of the clay practice; fleshy folds of clay, ‘slobby slabs’, broken-up bits, piles of ‘grip sticks’, and the ‘grip rings’. On the windowsill, a lump of white clay sagged into a half-circle shape. Around the outer edge of its form, I had pushed in bisque-fired shards of sandblasted ‘leftover faces’ so that, as the clay dried, it cracked where it joined. Below on a plinth built into the gallery’s architecture, a ‘body block’ of black and white clays mixed and thrown into a chunky brick, compacted inwards, creating an orifice. On another shelf, an ‘abacus’ artwork seemingly smiled wonkily back at the viewer, flopping forwards, sagging under the weight of its material.

Thinking about the role of the support within the installation, I decided to position most of the ceramics on makeshift shelves. Fashioned from pieces of wood borrowed from the 3D Lab workshop, I strung them up with two loops of undyed cotton rope that hung off two nails.⁸² The suspension arrangement worked well with these artworks, activating their material fragility. Playing up a light association as swing sets, the shelves made them physically vulnerable, holding them questionably in place. Instead of being a source of worry for me, they added to the joy of the installation; their being framed and suspended by another material relation (the held tension between the planks of wood and rope).

As well as ceramics, the exhibition also included three small bronze sculptures that I made by rolling wax into a ball and biting it with my teeth. I installed them on the edge of one of the shelves. I also included a painting series that were activating more like objects. Comprising a group of four carved MDF boards, coloured with oil pastel and watercolour, each had four bronze knobs/appendages stuck to the board edge; two top and two bottom. I formed the small knobs with jewellery wax that, whilst holding my grip and inferring grip through their shape, were intentionally too small to be functional holds

82. The rope was lightweight, flexible, and capable of stretching without snapping to accommodate the weight of the ceramic artworks. It emphasised the provisional quality of the exhibition.

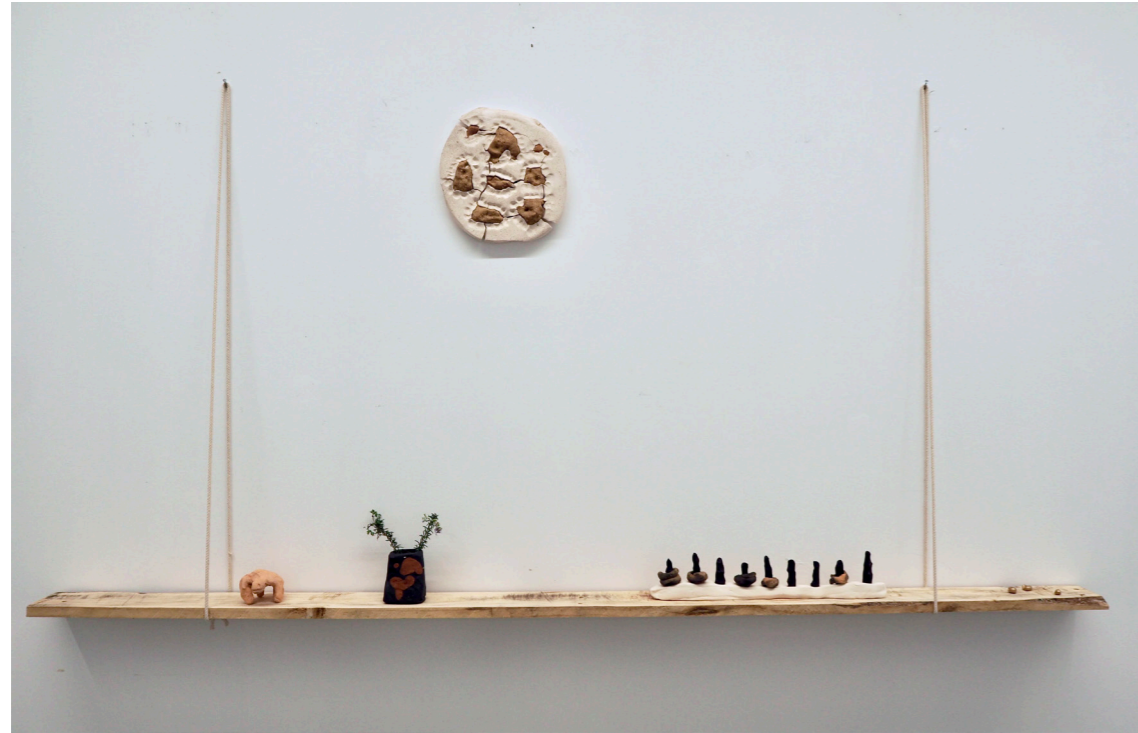
for the paintings. And so, when cast in bronze, they activated as accessories belonging to the body of the paintings. Propping them on the floor and leaning them against the gallery wall, I titled them *Standing Paintings (2021)*. I now use the same name to describe a series of clay works that emanate a similar formal tension, enfolding the distinction between image painting and sculptural object.

October 2021 – Ongoing

Since October 2021, I have exclusively focused on working with clay material for the artworks, and timber, bricks, and bronze as the supports. The remainder of the exegesis develops this phase of making in-depth, as I have worked to resolve a large body of ceramic works for exhibition. Emphasised throughout this chapter, *Soft Feelings* has evolved in response to a prolific material practice whereby discoveries unfold and catalyse the next phase of making. In *Sun Room* and *Soft Feelings (1)*, relations operate across different material modalities (inter-materially). For the final exhibition work, the practising happens in the same way, but differences percolate intra-materially through the clay, across disciplines of sculpture, painting and installation.



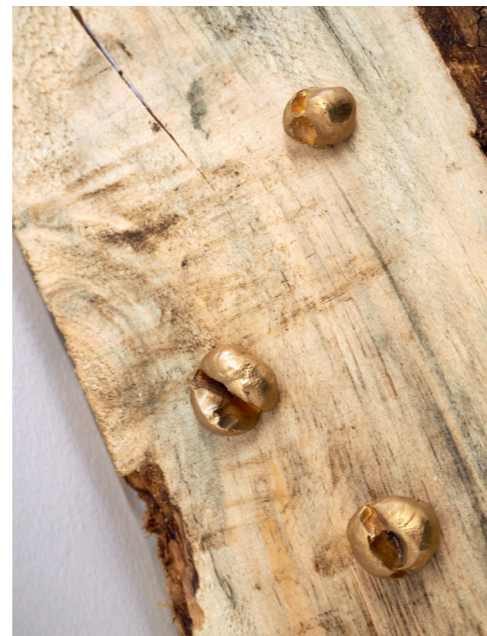
Image 93. Emelia French, ‘abacus’ artwork, 2021. Pictured installed for *Soft Feelings (1)* at ST PAUL St Gallery, it was the first ‘abacus’ of the series. Its form includes bisque-fired face fragments, ‘grip sticks’, and ‘grip rings’.



Images 94–95. Emelia French, *Soft Feelings (1)* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery Three, 2021. Installation view.



Images 96–99. Emelia French, *Soft Feelings (1)* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery Three, 2021. Exhibition Details.
Top left: an example of the painting series that did not continue in the project after this exhibition.
Top right: title taped to the door. Bottom right: *Standing Painting*, 2021.



Images 100–107. Emelia French, *Soft Feelings (1)* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery Three, 2021. Exhibition Details. Moments that became important to the aesthetic of the ceramic practice. Visible are 'grip rings' and 'grip sticks'. Bronze, timber, and clay became core practice materials. At this stage, I had only worked with three clays; Barry's Coromandel Gold, Macs Mud white, and Bot Pot black.



Images 108–109. Preparing the 'critters' for the sawdust firing, Dec 2020. The 'critters' are wrapped in dry horse poo, corn husk, and seaweed. Their material is Barry's Coromandel Gold clay.

Chapter 2: Material contexts

The ethics of using clay as the primary material has become particularly important due to the closeness of commercially manufactured clay to its origin as ground and earth. With this comes the colonial history that I have inherited through my cultural identity as a Pākehā artist practising within Aotearoa and the implicit association of uku/clay to whenua/land. I recognise ngā iwi Māori as the Tangata Whenua of Te Ika-a-Maui and Te Wai Pounamu, and acknowledge the unique cultural and spiritual significance of the environment from which these practice materials are sourced. Particularly, the uku found locally in Kapanga Coromandel, the three Macs Mud uku manufactured from materials sourced throughout Aotearoa, and the totara comprising the shelving structures for the exhibition that came from Waihi. Through the way I relate to material in the making process, I seek to lessen the authority of my hand and the tradition of material mastery.⁸³ Some examples of this include not wedging the clay or joining with typical methods, combining clays of different firing temperatures, developing a custom firing schedule, and enjoying moments of material expression that are typically downgraded, inclusive of cracks, warping, and burnt (overcooked) clay. Not laying claim over material, or working for its subservience, I develop a methodology, *a soft approach*, to explore the inherent kinship between mud and skin; earth and body.

This chapter considers the fundamental materials at play in *Soft Feelings*. It explains the context in which they were found/encountered/collected/included in the practice. All of the clays utilised have been purchased through commercial sale; some have more accessible geographical locations to track than others. This is a curiosity, as I think clay infers a spatial situatedness perhaps more readily than other materials, such as paint or plaster. For me, clay is materially close to its environment. Intertwined with geological and social history, it belongs to the earth. However, commercially produced clays tend to be sold without providing available manufacturing information. Only one clay of the nine used in this project has a single and identifiable origin location; Barry's Coromandel Gold from Kapanga Coromandel. Where possible, I have sought out and named the origin site in the description of the clay. All others are composites of raw materials (clays, powders, water, minerals) with unknown geological locations, their bodies forming as tangled intermingled masses of globalised manufacturing processes.

83. In this context, I understand the 'tradition of material mastery' as the established orthodoxy for studio ceramics. It is the habitual approach to material. Because of clay's temperament and fragility, and its history of human use as domestic ware, established techniques for its treatment pervade every aspect of its processes (from raw to fired state).

Therefore, the clay is of the earth but cannot be found in a specific place. Similarly, the ceramic artworks made in this project are material bodies that infer situatedness, but their vernacular speaks of an elsewhere that cannot be placed precisely and nor is it designed to be.⁸⁴ This quality of the artworks is developed in Chapter 3, *Cracking open*, under the theme of potentiality.

Familiarity and strangeness

The practice plays within spectrums of strangeness and familiarity. Complementing Ahmed's notion of queer orientations, writing on everyday aesthetics and the meaning of place, philosopher Arto Haapala suggests that strangeness and familiarity is the fundamental process for making sense of the world; in degrees of closeness.⁸⁵ He explains that in encountering the unfamiliar for the first time, we get acquainted through observing, categorising, searching for use, and aesthetic potentiality.⁸⁶ For this project, the ceramic artworks cannot be easily *placed* using the first three approaches (observing, categorising, use). The works oscillate between accessible and ambiguous; they are direct but without staking a claim to meaning. Instead, their aesthetic potentiality becomes that with which to interface, their conceptual content thus challenging a tendency to relegate strangeness to the outside by holding it close.

For Haapala, his conceptualisation of familiarity is most clearly expressed in regard to home, about which he writes, "most matters are under control.... things are in their places; they are there where they should be, where I am used to seeing them."⁸⁷ In practice, notions of home and familiarity have circled the making without becoming a central focus. Materials from home have been repeatedly used as makeshift support structures within the studio and in exhibition. Ceramic artworks rest on terracotta chimney bricks and kauri floorboards that I found stored in my dad's garage; off-cuts and remnants from our family home in Ngāmotu New Plymouth, dating back to its original construction in 1910. In addition, clay materially carries an anthropomorphic history of domestic function. Haapala defines the process of placing as the building of familiarity in the act of "home building."⁸⁸ In my use of support structures and clay, familiarity starts to unravel. Clay is explored for its potential for strangeness (difference) in sculptural practice; and 'home building' blocks (timbers and bricks) are repurposed in support of disorderly

84. 'Vernacular' is a productive framing for describing the collective feeling of the ceramic artworks, because it infers a dialect that is particular to a group, not learned or imposed as a second language. Throughout the exegesis, when referring to the 'vernacular' of the ceramic artworks, I mean their sculptural character and affectual resonance as a group of objects aesthetically sympathetic to one another. See: "Vernacular," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed October 23, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/vernacular>.

85. Arto Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place," in *The Aesthetics of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 43.

86. Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place," 43–45.

87–88. Haapala, 46.



Image 110. Emelia French, artwork installation, ST PAUL St Gallery, 2022. Testing installation possibilities for AUT Visual Arts Talk Week.

material expressions (the ceramic artworks).⁸⁹ The works make themselves comfortable, their earthly materiality signalling that they belong here, and at the same begin to disrupt processes of placement. As stated by Haapala, a prior familiarity is now "broken by something new."⁹⁰ They crack open habitual interiorities and offer a new way of relating to the outside, which operates in multiple ways, as literal exteriority of space, but also in how they relate to others, inclusive of the other ceramics and support structures within an installation.

Sculptural materials commonly associated with the outside (clay, timber, metals), considered 'hard materials' within an educational setting, are intentionally worked with in their found state.⁹¹ These familiar making materials wear a tradition of craftspersonship that the practice deliberately emphasises. Clay, timber, and bronze all have a material history of being worked by hand and a relationship to human use that is fundamental in the history of human civilisation. These materials are not inherently strange or novel to our gaze but

89. Not using glaze is another way the practice unravels familiar expectations of use. Traditionally, glaze makes clay watertight, so it is suitable for use as domestic ware (cups, bowls, plates).

90. Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place," 45.

91. *Outside In* is the title of a group exhibition that my ceramic artworks were included in alongside that of artists Alana Wilson, Conor Jeory and Daegan Wells. Curated by Laree Payne for Laree Payne Gallery in Kirikiriroa Hamilton, *Outside In*, May–June 2022, it considered the similarities in our approach to materials. See: Laree Payne, "Outside In | 18 May - 11 Jun 2022," Laree Payne Gallery, accessed October 12, 2022, <https://lareepaynegallery.com/exhibitions/29-outside-in/>.



Images 111–112. Emelia French, greenware object (top) and ceramic artwork (bottom), 2022.

become so through a difference in treatment. Haapala writes that strangeness is our response to that which cannot be placed in “existentially significant categories.”⁹² Thus, we search for connections between what is encountered as a way of orientating the self. In their oddness, the ceramic artworks draw attention to the expected perimeters that they do not fit within. They activate differently materials traditionally weighed down by expectations of functional use within a human-material relation.

For this practice, materials explore notions of body and place. The term ‘place’ functions as both adjective and verb. In general, place can mean a position either occupied (‘in place’) or offered (‘to hold place’) physically but also categorically in sequence or hierarchy. Additionally, ‘to place’ is to be able to “identify... someone or something,” to “put a name to,” or “find a home for.”⁹³ Place usefully blurs the categorical distinction between subject and object as it muddies the processes of enacting and being enacted upon. Etymologically, place derives from the Latin *platea* “open space” and Greek *plateia* “broad (way).”⁹⁴ This is a productive curiosity for *Soft Feelings*, given its interest in opening paradigms and endeavouring to realise new possibilities for object expression (and relation).

I draw upon existing vernaculars for the body and placement to explore how such concepts are commonly understood sculpturally as a body occupying position and marking space with mass, volume, weight, form and scale. The ceramic artworks playfully emphasise a physicality of presence and, by going further in form and texture, becoming closer to our human bodies. I do not intentionally shape it this way, for clay is already materially similar to the human body, folding and slumping like my bodily skin. Responding to the research question of how the artworks, in transcending the categorical differences of objective reason, promote connectivity, the materiality of clay aesthetically emphasises the way our bodies (clay and mine) are alike.

In addition, the practice generally employs a visual language of placing without staking a claim to place. Plinths, stands, frames (interior windows and exterior edges), and stakes are all reoccurring motifs with which the works beckon ‘over here!’ and ‘this way!’ In this respect, the works act as wayfinding coordinates that draw in only to point outward, back to the world from which they came, just as every singularity (body) does. Following the waywardness of the material, I explore how through encountering others, a body positions and is positioned, placing interiorly and exteriorly in a single move. Redrawing the bounds of familiar and unfamiliar, the ceramic artworks tend towards the edge of experience, softening the domain of the subject and leading otherwise;

92. Haapala, “On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place,” 43.

93. “Place (Noun),” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/place_1.

94. “Place (Verb),” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed October 1, 2022, https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/place_2.



Image 113. Jaime Jenkins, *Stone Age* exhibition, 2020. Image courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery.



Images 114–117. Jaime Jenkins, *Stone Age* ceramic objects, all stoneware, 2020. Top left: *Woven Shelf*, 310 x 230 x 110mm. Top right: *Stone Shelf with Vase*, 450 x 350 x 240mm. Bottom left: *Red Table*, 750 x 550 x 440mm. Bottom right: *Whittled Table*, 400 x 400 x 240mm. Images courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery.

orientating outward in the way Ahmed describes. In doing so, they emphasise space as relationally produced phenomena calculated in response to our placing of bodies (in the broadest definition of any material form, physical structure, or framing); we mark our coordinates through encountering others. Enfolding processual relations interiorly, the artworks embody a place *for* themselves (that is not for the subject to name). They offer new relational coordinates to explore.

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Jaime Jenkins makes ceramics that engage domestic placement. Her sculptural objects investigate the possibilities of what clay can do, particularly in terms of strength and scale, teasing fragility and weight.⁹⁵ However, they also situate at home in a domestic context, and are to be lived with; as chairs, shelves, bowls, wall ornaments, slab stools, and tables. They are “architectural,” as gallerist Jhana Millers describes, constructing an interior environment that enfolds the outside in.⁹⁶ In her exhibition *Stone Age* at Jhana Millers Gallery,⁹⁷ Jenkins’ ceramics host home as an aesthetic quality. Works are titled accordingly, such as *Woven Shelf*, *Whittled Table*, *Stone Shelf with Vase*, and *Red Table*.⁹⁸ In these instances, the clay is shaped into ceramic artworks that embody support structures; the shelves support, the bowls and vases hold, and the tables and stools host the body of the viewer (should they want to engage the works functionally). Like my works, the mark of her hand is present on the clay, building a feeling of intimacy about the objects. Her works feel close-to-hand in their everyday function, but open new possibilities for objecthood in relation to the spaces and bodies they activate. In this exhibition the clay hosts an interior atmosphere and setting that is sympathetic to the exterior (earth) from which it is sourced.

Like Jenkins’ work, in my ceramic artworks, and that of the supports, material is revealed for what it is, prosaically and poetically, as contents belonging to this earth’s surface – clay as dug-up mud, timber as a tree cut out of the soil, and bronze, a mixture of metals mined from its crust. For this project, in conjunction with its definition in the Introduction as a celestial body, world also means “the earth, together with all.”⁹⁹ When referencing clay, I tend toward using ‘earth’ as a way of positioning it close to its source; relating to dirt, soil, and mud, and the conceptually interesting associations that accompany such materials, inclusive of the notions of unsettling solid ground. The ceramic artworks invite us to reconsider how a body relates to a surrounding ecology, drawing attention to how a body meets its outside. As part of this process of being encouraged to think about placement, we question where the clay is from and its context in an attempt to locate the ceramic artworks in the world.

95. Jhana Millers, “Jaime Jenkins, *Stone Age* | 8 - 13 October 2020,” Jhana Millers Gallery, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://jhanamillers.com/exhibitions/46-jaime-jenkins-stone-age/>.

96. Jhana Millers, “Jaime Jenkins,” Jhana Millers Gallery, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://jhanamillers.com/artists/jaimejenkins/>.

97. *Stone Age* was exhibited at Jhana Millers Gallery in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Oct 2020.

98. Millers, “Jaime Jenkins, *Stone Age* | 8 - 13 October 2020.”

99. “World,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/world>.



Image 118. Clay manufacturing facilities for Barry's Coromandel Gold clay, Driving Creek Railway & Potteries, 2021.



Images 119–122. Emelia French, artwork details, 2022. Showing the colour variation of Barry's Coromandel Gold clay.

What follows is a listing of the project materials as I first encountered them. They are listed in order of arrival in the practice.

Material #1: Barry's Coromandel Gold (wild terracotta clay)

I acknowledge the Tangata Whenua of this uku, Te Patukirikiri.

Driving Creek Railways & Pottery is the ongoing legacy of nationally recognised potter Barry Brickell. Born in Ngāmotu New Plymouth in 1935, Brickell relocated to the Kapanga Coromandel and purchased the land for Driving Creek in 1973, positioned just north of Coromandel township. He lived and worked on-site until he died in 2016.¹⁰⁰ The complex comprises a railway that goes to the top of *EyeFull Tower*, named as such by Brickell for its views over the Tīkapa Moana Hauraki Gulf (its name also reveals his comedic and eccentric character).¹⁰¹ The railway was initially built to bring clay and wood down to the kilns. The complex is now operational as a tourist attraction, as well as a working pottery facility.¹⁰²

Barry's Coromandel Gold is manufactured locally on-site in small quantities by the visiting and resident potters. It combines terracotta clay dug from a clay bank on the property and local river sands.¹⁰³ It is the most variable of all the clay bodies I work with. Its colour, texture, and water content change markedly from bag-to-bag. Raw, it varies from an ochre yellow to paprika red. Fired, it has come up eggplant purple, chilli red, flesh pink, and caramel brown. As the only clay not commercially produced within the project, it is texturally distinctive; its body is gnarled, cracking and rough like scoria with basalt protrusions bursting through the surface of its skin. Consequently, because of its unpredictability, this clay rarely holds up as a structural base in the artworks. Still, I try to get it into almost every piece, whether as a cracked ear, fiery flash across a slumping black body, or as speckled grit pressed into a 'wall tile'. I like the idea of continuity as the first clay used in practice, hosting all that follows.

Initially, I chose Barry's Coromandel Gold because, at the time, I was searching for clay as unprocessed as possible for texture and nuance. I tried digging clay from the earth myself, as my mum has a clay bank on her property. Due to her knowledge of clay, she was able to identify by eye a clay seam. However, manufacturing clay from a clay bank is a time-intensive skilled process, and I could not get the clay to a workable state myself. Barry's Coromandel Gold offered a processual likeness and aesthetic whilst also being practicably workable within the confines of this project.

100. Driving Creek, "Our Story," accessed September 20, 2022, <https://drivingcreek.nz/our-story/>.

101. Driving Creek, "Homepage," accessed October 1, 2022, <https://drivingcreek.nz/>.

102. Following Brickell's passing in 2016, Driving Creek has continued as an important location for the Aotearoa New Zealand pottery community, offering a popular residency programme in which I will participate, Sept 2023.

103. Driving Creek, "Barry's Coromandel Gold," accessed September 20, 2022, <https://drivingcreek.store/store/p/barrys-coromandel-gold>.

The first time I worked with this clay, I fired it in a paddock at my Uncle Dean's farm in Taranaki. I researched low-fire techniques online and then hand-built two transportable kilns; one made out of twisted newspaper plaited into rope and then woven into a cocoon-like shape (Image 129), and the other, an old metal bin borrowed from the local pottery club that I drilled holes into for ventilation. I collected seaweed from the coastline, horse poo, banana peels, and other materials I expected might colour the clay. I bought a bag of mānuka shavings which I used to amplify the smoke. My partner Andrew, my step-dad Clyde, my mum and I, drove out to Dean's at dawn to set up, our car boot full of these firing ingredients, the kilns, and my clay pieces. We wrapped each piece in a tinfoil package encased with the collected organic material. The kilns burned for almost 24 hours while we sat together with a packed lunch and dinner, stoking the flames and checking that the ventilation was good enough to smoke out the clay. Fired that day were the 'critters' and the first collection of 'grip rings'.



Images 123–126. The sawdust firing, Taranaki, Dec 2020.



Images 127–128. The sawdust firing.



Images 129–134. The paper firing, Taranaki, Dec 2020. Right: Mum and I holding the 'grip rings' in our hands.



Images 135–136. *Brickell-brac*, Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Images taken by Monique Redmond while visiting *Brickell-brac*.

Barry's Coromandel Gold is a distinct favourite clay amongst Aotearoa New Zealand potters and seemingly gathers a community of practices around it; in recent years, this use has been intentionally emphasised through the Driving Creek residency programme. *Brickell-brac* exhibition at Whangārei Art Museum¹⁰⁴ is a celebration of this clay's character and that of founder Barry Brickell.¹⁰⁵ The exhibition is a group collaboration by artists connected with Driving Creek, including Laurie Steer (residency founder) and Karl Fritsch with North Madison, Kalou Kofoed, Frederick Church,¹⁰⁶ Josh Taylor, Simon Cumming, Paul Maseyk, and Sam Ireland.¹⁰⁷ Advertised as a "play space," the exhibition is a process-orientated installation of greenware (raw and unfired) clay work made in the gallery over 5 days, combining "elements of studio visit, installation and presentation."¹⁰⁸ A tonne of Barry's Coromandel Gold with "extra brickells" (groggy river additions and small rocks) was shipped to Whangārei Art Museum in preparation.¹⁰⁹

In terms of aesthetic, the studio-like installation and forms of *Brickell-brac* are rough, collapsed, warped, and leaning, and it is hard to distinguish scrap from work. In the diary of making accompanying the exhibition, it becomes clear this muddying of intentionality is the group's ethos: an entry reads "4.58pm One shelf falls down and the mugs on it are flattened. It is put back up, as is."¹¹⁰ Germinating seeds have been sprinkled into some areas, which sprout. On the wall, written by Kalou is a quote from a book about convicts trapped on an island, which reads "SEEMS TO ME IT'S IN THE DEING THAT BOING COMES."¹¹¹ Absurd and practical in equal measure, the support shelves are constructed in a make-shift manner, using recycled materials from the gallery's storage warehouse installed functionally but precariously; something I often do within my studio too.¹¹² In a way, I wonder if it is the unruly character of this clay body that brings out the playfulness in those who make with it. As professed by Fritsch, "If Brickell-Brac has a sound, it is a gecko's burp."¹¹³ The installation is aesthetically very different to my objects, but the approach employs the same sincere abandonment that comes with exploring clay's potential. Its waywardness not only invites, but *demand*s, a playfulness because it cannot be controlled; only worked with.

104. *Brickell-brac* was exhibited at Whangārei Art Museum in Whangārei, Sep 2022–Jan 2023.

105. Whangārei Art Museum, "BRICKELL-BRAC Exhibition Description," accessed October 1, 2022, <https://whangareiamuseum.co.nz/exhibition/brickell-brac/>.

106. Frederick Church mostly manufactures Barry's Coromandel Gold and is my key correspondent for purchasing the clay.

107–113. "BRICKELL-BRAC Exhibition Description."



Images 137–140. Raku firing at Harriet Stockman's house, Nov 2022. Top: Barry's Coromandel Gold 'grip rings' drying in the AUT Wet Lab and my studio. Middle: 'grip rings' threaded through old kiln wire to make them easier to remove from the kiln at temperatures above 1000 degrees Celsius. Bottom: bins loaded with paper, sawdust, and dried leaves for smoking the 'grip rings'. These materials amplify the smoke, which embeds in the clay.

Images 141–143. Raku firing continued. Top: the inside of the raku kiln. Middle: bricks weighting down the lids so they are airtight (and so the clay gets smoked). Bottom: the resulting 'grip rings'.





Image 144. The *Brickell-brac* balls.



Image 145. My bronze ingot.

In October 2022, my supervisor, Monique Redmond, travelled north to visit *Brickell-brac* and returned with three small balls of Barry's Coromandel Gold in a ziplock plastic bag that she had purchased from Whangārei Art Museum as a gift for me (and several others, including Harriet). Presumably hand-rolled by one of the artists who made *Brickell-brac*, I decided to keep these found forms of slightly squished spheres pressed together in transit, and fire them as is to emphasise their difference from the 10kg bags of Barry's Coromandel Gold regularly used in my practice. I included them in a raku at Harriet's house in November 2022, along with several hundred 'grip rings' (Images 137–143).

Material #2: Bronze

The bronze used for this project is cast from a 6kg ingot purchased from Glucina Alloys in Avondale, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. The bronze is a composite of more than 18 metals, predominately copper and tin, locally sourced from recycled, remelted and refined metal scraps. Like some of the clay bodies, particularly those made by Keane Ceramics, bronze cannot be found in the earth but is produced from within it, composing a singular mixture of many material parts.

Bronze is an alloy metal of human invention. It inherits a human-centric vernacular of invention, industry, and use (tool/weapon). Generally, the Bronze Age signifies the beginning of metalwork. It follows the Neolithic period (or New Stone Age) and the settling of human lifestyle and domestication. In a contemporary context, brass has replaced bronze in most industry settings. Bronze is now predominately associated with art and sculpture, evoking a romanticised history of craftspersonship. This historical baggage is helpful as bronze, like timber and clay, pulls into the project a narrative of human entanglement with material and a priori association of human development with material mastery. These themes are playfully explored in practice; I am always searching for other ways of relating, trying to support rather than command material (in keeping with the directive of Barry's Coromandel Gold).

The animated sitcom, *The Flintstones* (1960-1966) repeatedly surfaces as a familiar context for audiences when viewing the ceramic artworks.¹¹⁴ Although not intentionally evoked, this association has been productive for material decisions made in the project. Although loosely set in the Stone Age era, history wobbles out of order in the show, both factually (the wheel already being invented, for example) and thematically (dealing with contemporary issues of the sixties). The artworks made in the practice with their rounded edges, flat colour, and simple forms do evoke a cartoonish quality, and the domestic size/scale (through the material tradition of domestic ware) might infer a

114. "The Flintstones," Animated sitcom (United States: ABC, 1960).



Images 146–147. Emelia French, greenware objects and artwork, 2021. Images show the colour change of Bot Pots Pot Black clay (raw to fired).

residential setting. The retrospective association of bronze and the way it is shaped (roughly beaten manually by hand), supports their association with a pre-historical temporality. In general, bronze emphasises the age of the clay comprising the artworks, increasing our confusion in placing them categorically because they are both contemporary and out of place (in the way Haapala defines it), simultaneously strange and familiar.

Material #3: Bot Pots Pot Black clay

This clay is manufactured in South Korea.¹¹⁵ I purchase it from Bot Pots Botany Pottery Studio in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland. I used it for most of my early ceramic artworks as it fires into a smooth texture that is both soft and bodily, but incredibly dense. It is visible in the works for its jet-black colour with a silver sheen in the light. Although this is a favoured clay, I have gradually phased it out of the practice in favour of Keane Ceramics Mid-fire Black, as I suspect it is manganese that gives it these qualities, which makes it toxic for me to use.

It is physically the hardest clay I worked with, firing to stoneware at a lower temperature than the other clays. Stoneware is the name for clay fired high enough to be vitrified (glasslike, nonporous and therefore resistant to liquids); this functionality is distinctive of domestic ware. Not all clays can become stoneware, though some of the clays I work with could. I mostly work at a midfire temperature of 1180 degrees, between the two states of earthenware (1000-1200 degrees) and stoneware (1100-1300 degrees). At this temperature, some of my clays transition into stoneware and others remain earthenware depending on their chemical composition. Earthenware is porous and brittle.

Materials #4, #5, #6: Macs Mud clays (Classic White, Southern Red, Northern Red)

The Macs Mud clays are manufactured in Waikato. Given the inference in their titling to location, I have been particularly interested in finding out where Southern Red and Northern Red are from. In email correspondence with Macs Mud customer service, they wrote, “most of our clays are a blend. With the exception of some materials in classic white, all our clays are sourced in New Zealand. We only use natural materials and rain water.”¹¹⁶ Additional details could not be provided on account of commercial sensitivity.

Macs Mud Classic White is the main white clay used in the practice. At 1180 degrees it remains porous, retaining a soft and puffy lightness that is often

¹¹⁵ I have been unable to acquire further information about its manufacturing ingredients and origins.

¹¹⁶ Macs Mud Customer Support, “Re: Submission from Enquiry Form on 17th Sep 2022, 12:37pm,” September 23, 2022.



Image 148. Emelia French, greenware object detail, 2021. Raw Macs Mud White clay.



Image 149. Emelia French, artwork detail, 2022. Macs Mud White and Primo-Pro black clays combined in an artwork, hairline cracking visible.

described by others as ‘marshmallowy.’ Because it does not have grog in its body and is smooth and refined in texture, it is not typically used for hand-building as it is structurally flimsy. Used for the foundations of my artworks, it cracks readily, which I enjoy.

Macs Mud Southern Red came into the practice as I was searching for a terracotta that would fire differently to Barry’s Coromandel Gold; smoother in texture and darker in colour. I overfired it the first time, up to 1220 degrees, so it coloured a mocha brown rather than a typical terracotta brick red, vitrifying. I still enjoy how this terracotta can be fired up to stoneware temperatures without melting, as would happen with some other terracotta clays. At the end of 2021, the seam from which Macs Mud were sourcing Southern Red (somewhere unspecified, presumably ‘south’ of Waikato) ran out. The clay can no longer be manufactured. I bought up the last of the bags available in Aotearoa New Zealand from Gordon Harris art supplies store, stockpiling 200 kilos of the clay in my studio so I could continue to work with it. As emphasised in the Introduction, the material intimacies that I develop are specific to these nine clays. In substituting this clay, I would lose a longstanding relationship with this material.

Macs Mud Northern Red is the newest clay mix offered by Macs Mud in replacement of Southern Red. For me, it is not equivalent; it is a new relation. It fires very differently, retaining a light orange colour even at temperatures over 1220 degrees.

Material #7: Primo-Pro European Blends Nigra 2002 clay

This clay was supplied to the AUT Wet Lab and was initially used as it was close to hand. I enjoyed its dusty and muted surface colour and its structural weakness that tended towards prolific hairline cracking in the firing and thermal shock cracks when unloaded from the kiln prematurely (when taken out of a 50-degree kiln into a 21-degree room environment). Since then, I have purchased it locally from Bot Pots or CCG Pottery Suppliers in Rosedale, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, though it is manufactured in Europe from imported raw ingredients.¹¹⁷ This clay is visible in the works comprising the final exhibition; it is charcoal black, softer than the deep black tone of Bot Pots Pot Black and Keane Mid-fire Black.

117. CCG, “Primo Pro Nigra2002 Black Stoneware Clay,” accessed September 20, 2022, <https://www.ccg.co.nz/craft/product/5722/primo-pro-nigra2002-black-stoneware-clay>.



Image 150. Dad's brick pile, 2022.



Image 151. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork, 2021. Image taken by Emily Parr. The clay object requires the brick to stand.

Material #8: Bricks from home

At the end of 2021, I worked at home in Ngāmotu New Plymouth for a couple of months. My mum owns a small top-loading Nidec-Shimpo kiln that I use in combination with the AUT front-loading Potclay kiln. I have developed custom firing schedules for each kiln, ranging between 36-48 hours (a typical firing length might be 8-12 hours). All kilns fire slightly differently, and because of the precariousness of the ceramic works (combining clays of different temperaments and treatment), even small temperature variations of 5-10 degrees at top firing levels of 1180 degrees can significantly impact the work. Likewise, the holding phases within the firing schedule need to occur at the appropriate times to match the chemical reactions induced by heat. The first time I fired in Mum's kiln, I think I accidentally took the clays too high by about 20 degrees Celsius, enough for the cone 5 Bot Pots Pot Black clay to start bubbling and melting.¹¹⁸ A 'standing painting' had this clay as its structural body, and as a result of the inaccurate heat work, warped so much that it could no longer stand independently.

To remedy this warping, I tried to sand the bottom of the object enough for it to sit by itself. Unsuccessful in my attempts, I explained the problem to my dad, and he suggested propping up the work with a brick as support. He gathered a few bricks from the back of our section. Previously part of the original 1910 house chimney structure, their bodies still wear the soot of past use. They were manufactured by hand and are therefore not perfectly rectangular. We tried a few out until we found one with a top surface sloping upward at the right angle to complement the 'standing painting', offsetting its top-heavy lean.

This ceramic artwork signals when the support structure became an integral component of the work. Aesthetically and functionally, it exists as a relation of interior codependency, comprising two parts; the 'standing painting' only stands *because* of the brick, complementary not only in shape but also in colour and texture. Like Walker's paintings, in this instance the brick support became internally integrated. It affirmed my changing approach, from trying to make the artwork meet my intentions by sanding it back flat, to instead responding to the opportunity it offered for new relations.

The inclusion of a weathered brick also introduced a vernacular of placing. The brick pulls in questions around function and utility, human habitation, and

¹¹⁸ Cones are tools for measuring the heatwork of a kiln. Usually, ceramics are fired to a cone rather than a temperature, because it is more reliable. Whilst the pyrometer inside the kiln measures the general temperature, the internal heatwork of the kiln is usually different (subject to the density of the packing and the density of the objects). To ensure reliable results from firing, cones are inserted at different locations in the kiln. They melt at a certain temperature, revealing the hot-spots within the kiln as well as the true temperature. I do not use cones unless there is a problem I am trying to understand. I enjoy the unreliability and variations from firing to firing. For example, my dense ceramic objects retain heat differently to the 'wall tile' series, so despite firing at 1180 degrees Celsius (between cone 5 and 6), the objects themselves likely go higher, which I discern from their material differences.



Images 152–153. Peter Lange, *Brick* exhibition, Oddly Gallery, 2022. Images courtesy of Peter Lange.



Image 154. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork (double-stacked), 2022.

a priori tradition of clay-human relations. For me, the brick is like an ancestral signifier for a history of clay as a building block for human habitation, literally stuck in place. However, in the 'standing painting', the brick loosens from its "existential" place (Haapala).¹¹⁹ Its aesthetic potentiality is appreciated ahead of its intended use, which is still active but altered so that it now supports a variation of itself.

Although the brick carries colonial association to home-building, I am interested in its form for similar reasons to Aotearoa New Zealand ceramicist Peter Lange. Interviewed for *Standing Room Only* (RNZ) about his exhibition *Brick* at Oddly Gallery,¹²⁰ Lange described bricks as "the most basic unit of clay that there is."¹²¹ He tends to activate the brick as a regulatory small unit from which to build sculptures. Lange has worked with bricks in an expanded way since 2002, when he constructed the two tonne six metre long *Brick Boat* out of building blocks and set it afloat in the Waitematā Harbour.¹²² In 2006, he won the Portage Ceramic Awards with his work *Lilo* (2006), a sculpture of a plastic lilo constructed with 400 homemade bricks.¹²³ In these examples, the aesthetic of the uniform brick wall is adopted as the construction material for representational form. However, for his more recent exhibition *Brick*, Lange bought black bricks from China that unexpectedly sagged when heated.¹²⁴ He then intentionally melted them, comprising sculptural pieces of glazed and sagging components of broken-up bricks.¹²⁵ This approach is similar to something I might do in my practice, the brick exceeding its intended functionality and materially morphing irregularly out of its standard form.

Materials #9, #10, #11: Keane Ceramics clays (Mid-fire Black, Mid-fire 33, Mid-fire Speckled No.6)

Established by potters Roger and Margaret Keane in 1977, Keane Ceramics operates out of West Gosford in New South Wales, Australia. Using local and imported raw powders, Keane Ceramics produce "new variations of bodies" not belonging to a single seam (as noted on their company website).¹²⁶ In correspondence with their customer service team, the clay manufacturing process was described as "closer to making a cake than it is being dug from

119. Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place," 43.

120. *Brick* was exhibited at Oddly Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Feb 2022.

121. Peter Lange, "Peter Lange - Brick by Brick," for *Standing Room Only*, RNZ, 30 January 2022, <https://www.rnz.co.nz/national/programmes/standing-room-only/audio/2018828618/peter-lange-brick-by-brick>.

122. Artis Gallery, "Peter Lange," accessed October 1, 2022, <https://artisgallery.co.nz/artist/the-letter-b/>.

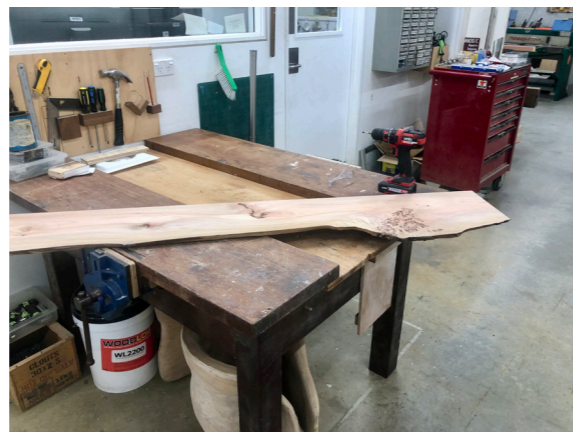
123. Helen Laurent, "Brick Lilo Floats off with Top Ceramic Award," National Library Records, accessed October 1 2022, <https://natlib.govt.nz/records/30767381>.

124. "Peter Lange - Brick by Brick."

125. "Peter Lange - Brick by Brick."

126. Keane Ceramics "About Us," accessed September 20, 2022, <https://keaneceramics.com.au/about-us/>.

Image 155. Emelia French, artwork installation, ST PAUL St Gallery, 2022. Ceramic objects were installed on kauri floorboards and bricks from our family home.



Images 156–158. Exhibition preparations. Top left: Dad returning from collecting the totara in Waihi, Aug 2022. Bottom right: the totara shelves mid-process in the 3D Lab, Oct 2022.

the ground.”¹²⁷ These clays are good examples of what I understand as materials from the earth without place. The clay body comprises components from the earth, and their muddy materiality infers a closeness to the ground, yet they cannot be found where one might expect them.

Material #12: Totara

In the early phases of the project, I used MDF and plywood scraps as makeshift plinths and shelves for the work (as stated in Chapter 1). Despite enjoying the happenstance way in which they came into the practice, as off-cuts left by other students, and their similarity to other material composites already being used (clay and bronze), aesthetically, neither timber suited the clay due to the extent of their refinement and processing. They came into my hands already too manipulated and regulated, lacking the ruggedness I searched for.

Next, I tried out native timber scraps (mostly floor and skirting boards) found in my dad’s garage; I sanded back the paint to recover the original timber (kauri, totara and rimu). Similar in origin to the bricks from home, they were leftovers from our house. Given the age of our home (1910) and its location within the Wakefield settlement of New Plymouth (managed by the New Zealand Company), these materials strongly suggest their colonial history of habitation.¹²⁸ Installed en masse, the floorboards inferred an unintended tone within the work, jarring inappropriately with the affirming and jovial qualities of the ceramic artworks.

The totara shelves were introduced as a response to the problems raised by these prior supports. Like previous explorations, it was important to me that this timber had a history as leftover or scrap, already implicated within a human-material relation. The totara was cut from a section of privately owned land in Waihi at the Southern end of the Te Tara-O-Te-Ika-A-Māui Coromandel Peninsula, by arborist Brett Soutar and his colleagues at Short Back ‘n’ Sides Ltd. In conversation with Brett, he mentioned that he had protested the planned removal of this tree to the local council, and, when unsuccessful, asked to be the one to remove it. He donated half of the tree to the local iwi, Ngāti Ranginui, and the remainder was made available for sale through his business, of which I bought the remaining lengths. Describing the ethos of his operation to my dad, Nana Joye and myself when we visited, he explained that he collects and recycles timber scraps that would typically be relegated to firewood or landfill, whether freshly removed from the soil or reclaimed in the deconstructing of houses. Brett directed my attention to the totara, and explained its anthropomorphic history, but also gave a reading of its grain and markings, tracing its history of activity. It was because of the care and detail with which

127. Customer Service at Keane Ceramics, “Customer Service Inquiry,” September 14, 2022.

128. Told to me during my childhood, my dad confirmed this information in a personal conversation in Aug 2022.



Image 159. Totara shelves in my AUT studio, Nov 2022.



Image 160. Mellons Bay bricks in my AUT studio, Nov 2022.

he talked about this totara that I decided it was right for *Soft Feelings*; his approach mirroring my feelings towards clay.

In the 3D Lab workshop, I made shelves from this single tree trunk, split into cross-section slabs so that the grain is mirrored across each support structure hosting the ceramic works. It was important I do this myself, bringing a *soft approach* to the timber with the same attentiveness I apply to the bronze and clay. Responding to what it offered materially, I incorporated its natural tendencies and inclinations, as I do with clay.

Material #13: Bricks from Mellons Bay

Midway through 2022, my friend and studio colleague Ena Kosovac invited our supervisors, Monique Redmond and Christopher Braddock and myself on a trip to Mellons Bay, Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, on a walking event for her PhD project. Mellons Bay has a sense of industry about its shoreline. Exposed and corroding pipes protrude from clay banks that sustain what feels like precariously positioned homes above the cliff. Half-submerged in the sand is material evidence of human habitation; shards of metal structures, concrete slabs and other remnants of construction that are composting into the sea. Whilst walking along the beach, one of us (I can't remember who) pointed to some fallen bricks marking the shoreline, their rectangular shapes and edges softened by the ocean, and suggested they aesthetically had a place within *Soft Feelings*. In agreement, I gathered up as many as we could collectively carry, salty residues marking my jumper as I walked them back to Ena's car.

The found Mellons Bay bricks have distinctive rounded edges like sea glass. It is an ongoing curiosity to me that the practice has developed its own vernacular to offer place for 'alike' materials found outside of *Soft Feelings*, inviting them in. More so, the bricks announced place so readily, that it stood out to myself and others even when not actively looking for them, and from an unexpected environment. They belong to the project because they are wriggling out of place where we expect to find them (Haapala). In the process of shapeshifting out of a rectangular construction brick, making wonky their regulated shape (as did Lange's bricks), the Mellons Bay bricks signify place but cannot be placed in the way we expect them to for they have potentially exceeded their intended use.



Image 161. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork detail, 2021.

Chapter 3: Cracking open

Developing upon Haapala's notions of placing, this chapter explores how the objects of *Soft Feelings* might potentially open up paradigms of relations and their corresponding dominant positions. It positions the crack as a metaphor for rupturing habitual subjectivities. As framed previously, the ceramic artworks may not easily fit within existentially familiar categories, and for this, their representational indeterminacy inhabits the distance cast by the subject; activating the space between resemblances. Outside objective reason, they are potentially charged with affectual excess that may not always be cognitively realisable.

Contextualising potential

As conventionally defined, potential does not reside with "an individual body or particle," but rather is characteristic of a system; located *between*.¹²⁹ Arising as a frictional charge within what is, potential is the changeability of experience and its capacity to become differently. I understand potential as the measure of openness within every relation and porosity of the ceramic artworks (their aesthetic excess).

Throughout the exegesis, the terms 'potential' and 'possibility' are used for slightly different emphasis.¹³⁰ Both fit within the project methodology and my interest in opening habitual experience to becoming otherwise so it might contribute new possibilities for relation in the ceramic artworks. The distinction between the two terms is that 'potential' is as yet unrealised, whereas a 'possibility' is an option. Possibilities are the current options within a field of relation, and potentials are those that await outside it. Potential is the unfolding of experience and possibility as the enfolding of experience, of which the practice does both. I attempt to access potential and in doing so, hope to bring about artworks that contribute new possibilities for object experience.

Returning to Haapala's notion of placing in Chapter 2, I wrote that the artworks are both 'body and place'. Expanding this notion, they are without an existential place as they potentially arrive as new place (*possibility*). Materially enfolding different geological contexts into a new clay composite, and by becoming

129. "Potential Energy," Britannica, accessed September 22, 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/science/potential-energy>.

130. However, when referencing other theorists such as Jan Verwoert in Chapter 4, *A soft approach: part one*, I have opted to continue their choice of words.



Image 162. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork with custom bronze hooks, 2022, 280 x 260 x 25mm.
Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery.

outside existing frames of reference, they produce new coordinates within an already existing relation-scape. In addition, they consolidate the potential of the relations comprising the practising; embodying and expressing a new possibility for object form.

The open whole

In this regard, each artwork might behave a bit like philosopher Henri Bergson's analogy of the open whole (an interiority), which opens into another whole (exteriority), both of which are open and unfinished.¹³¹ First encountered in *Deleuze's Bergsonism* by Craig Lundy, the notion of the open whole offered a way of rethinking relationality in the early phases of *Soft Feelings*.¹³² Lundy proposes that what makes something whole "is not the extent to which it is hermetic but on the contrary the manner in which it opens into an outside - other wholes and the Whole of the universe, which is itself open and unfinished."¹³³ By this definition, completeness and entirety is not contingent upon closure, but rather the degree of openness, the capacity for which a singularity can connect out to that which exceeds it.

Artist Paul Chan, writing on *What Art Is and Where it Belongs*, proposes that "In art, the parts do not make a whole" and because of this, art might be "freedom."¹³⁴ He considers the difference between an everyday object and art, deciding that art "incompletes itself" so that it "reaches beyond its own composition, touching but never embracing the family of things that art ought to belong to, but does not."¹³⁵ For Chan, an everyday object becomes definable because it is containable. Its parts "bear the weight" of its objecthood, different to an art object.¹³⁶ For *Soft Feelings*, the ceramic artwork materially is a singular object comprised of parts but this is irreconcilable with what it affectually suggests it might be, which is many things and what "make its presence felt."¹³⁷ On this, Chan writes that "a work of art expresses both process and instant at once, and illuminates their interdependence precisely in their irreconcilability."¹³⁸ For *Soft Feelings*, the tension between an artwork's processual immediacy and lingering indeterminacy is its conceptual freedom. It catalyses potential *because* of its categorical resistance.

131. Craig Lundy, *Deleuze's Bergsonism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018), 13.

132. Lundy, *Deleuze's Bergsonism*, 13

133. Lundy, 13.

134. Paul Chan, "What Art Is and Where It Belongs," *E-Flux*, November 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/10/61356/what-art-is-and-where-it-belongs/>.

135–138. Chan, "What Art Is and Where It Belongs."

Returning briefly to Haapala's notion of placing, the ceramic artworks of *Soft Feelings* draw attention to familiarity and strangeness as measures based on subjective proximity. Whilst their feeling may not be fully contained or grasped, their material bodies can be – my fingerprints on the skin of the clay remind us so. In addition, the objects muddy the distinction between giver/given by embodying both, extending the feeling of that which exceeds it and cannot yet be known, established or specified. They subvert singular understandings of wholeness by emphasising how every whole is *both* an inside and its outside; a temporary holding within a wider ecology. As Chan describes, they do not prescribe fully to existing frames of reference, but their materiality emphasises that they belong to the earth. Therefore, the objects don't belong to the *subjective gaze* but do to the relations of the world (inclusive of my hand), emphasising the difference between our perception of an experience and the directness of that experience.

On horizontality

Concerned with the subject and object relation, and curious about the seemingly vertical gaze the subject uses to look down upon the object, I have wondered what working horizontally can offer differently, opening new modes for relation. On horizontality, Hans-Georg Gadamer's concept of the "horizon" marks the limits of our subjective understanding, backgrounding our experience and contextualising based on our lived history.¹³⁹ His notion of the horizon is helpful because in my understanding, it expands the edge of the body to include its ecology. The subject is seemingly imbued with a gravitational orbit, pulling in what already (or mostly) has a categorical place and is regulated to what already fits. Contextualised through the project, our capacity for new experience is largely limited by how well the ceramic artwork adheres to what we already know.

Writing on Gadamer's horizon, Haapala explains that "We pick up from the environment things that are in accordance with our existence, or at least that are not in clear contradiction with it, and in this way make the milieu accessible."¹⁴⁰ Gadamer's notion of the horizon raises questions around potentiality and its relationship to the periphery. A subject's horizon is constantly recalibrating, changing through their moving, and thus capacity adapts to what passes through. Loosely likening the horizon to a nuclear

139. Jeff Malpas, "Hans-Georg Gadamer," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta and Uri Nodelman (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2022), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2022/entries/gadamer/>.

140. Haapala, "On the Aesthetics of the Everyday: Familiarity, Strangeness and the Meaning of Place," 47.

membrane,¹⁴¹ I wonder how an artwork might soften the habitual bounds of perception so more experience gets through.

Erin Manning's notion of chunking is helpful here. She writes,

It is no doubt easier to habitually cross into a room that itself habitually chunks into chairs and tables, than to begin with the whole-field pattern as yet unresolved into objects. Rather than chunking, what occurs on the autistic spectrum of neurodiversity is an immediate entertainment of modalities of relation. Pattern, an interplay of contrasts, comes before familiar use and describable chunking... [but what if we could instead first experience] modalities of relation?¹⁴²

Manning proposes that chunking (interpretation) is an act of subtraction, whereby we only see what we know and/or is immediately suited to its use.¹⁴³ In every instance of this perceptive sorting, that happens in a split-second secondary to the moment, there will always have been much more that was not seen. The question for *Soft Feelings* therefore is, how can we see more of this "field of experience", which Manning describes as the "... neither subjective nor objective yet – ready to be both or either, more and less, multipliciously?"¹⁴⁴ And moreover how can a singularity undo its own signification as a 'chunk' by evoking forth that which has been backgrounded in the process of its bodying?

Soft Feelings explores how artworks might perplex chunking patterns by producing novel affects that open to the potentials that await in the phase of pre chunking, encouraging the feeling of its relational field. Although often chunky (solid and thick) in form, they make incomplete their own resolution as objects, in the ways stated by Chan. I am curious about this tension, whereby an artwork outreaches its material composition and affectually pulls the outside closer. Like Chan, I wonder how they might offer freedom. If the edge of a subject's relational landscape limits and regulates their capacity for experience, how might artworks open the subjective experience to what Manning describes as the "whole-field pattern" (relational interplay)? It is these kinds of questions that lead the methodology of *a soft approach*. Inviting a closer look, the ceramic artworks might coax the subject out of a habitual way of looking, through feeling, connecting with more than can be presently perceived, introducing new vistas and openings for experience.

141. The 'cell membrane' is also described as the 'nuclear envelope' for how it encloses the cell. My general understanding of the membrane is that it is a permeable barrier comprising pores that manage what materials can enter and exit. Significantly for this project, the nucleus disassembles and reforms with every cell division (every production of difference). Interpreted for the purposes of the project, the horizon might be like a cell membrane, enclosing the subject but constantly reassembling in response to potential difference. See: Gabe Buckley, "Nuclear Membrane (Nuclear Envelope)," *Biology Dictionary*, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://biologydictionary.net/nuclear-membrane/>.

142. Brian Massumi and Erin Manning, *Thought in the Act: Passages in the Ecology of Experience* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 18.

143. Erin Manning, *Always More Than One: Individuation's Dance*, Durham (Duke University Press, 2013), xxii.

144. Massumi and Manning, *Thought in the Act*, 19.



Image 163. Zac Langdon-Pole, *Traslaio Studio (Revisited)*, bowl fragments, brass staples, 127 x 253 x 253mm, 2022. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.



Image 164. Emelia French, greenware 'standing painting', 2022.



Image 165. Zac Langdon-Pole, *The Same River Twice*, 2020–2022, borer ridden wooden shelf trolley, gold, painted wooden shape-sorter blocks (two sets laid out identically on separate shelves); painted wooden shape-sorter blocks, hand carved Campo del Cielo meteorite, 460 x 750 x 713mm. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Ways of seeing in Zac Langdon-Pole's practice

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Zac Langdon-Pole explores “ways of seeing.”¹⁴⁵ For his exhibition at Michael Lett Gallery, titled *Porous World*,¹⁴⁶ he treats sculptural artworks as “poetry” for “looking” and questioning the function of the image.¹⁴⁷ For the object, *Traslaio Studio (Revisited)* (2022), Langdon-Pole has joined disparate shards of broken pottery with brass ‘staples’ to resemble a bowl form that is incomplete in its resolution as an object. Its identification as a bowl is questionable because the pieces are only half-fitting together. My eye travels to their edges and how they hold across because logically they do not belong to one another in the same way a repaired bowl would. The gold of the brass reminds me of Kintsugi, but Langdon-Pole’s work is not a broken bowl fixed to be how it *was*; rather, it is a collage of leftover remnants of multiple bowls assembled into a new form.¹⁴⁸ Like Chan’s description of art as freedom, its incompleteness is affectually productive.

In another work, *The Same River Twice* (2020–2022), a wooden shelf trolley hosts a casual arrangement of wooden shape-sorter blocks. Presented in this way, they might look at home in a domestic setting as discarded leftovers of child’s play. With my ceramic objects, the cut-out shapes in the clay lightly reference the shape sorter cube drawing attention to the limits of perceiving in such a way. Sometimes I stuff the holes with blobs of clay that don’t quite fit. In the context of *Porous World*, the shape-sorter blocks activate as building blocks of object code and for thinking about chunking processes (Manning). Significantly, missing the box to which they belong (only offering a part of the equation, shape=hole in box), the shape-sorter blocks are freed from their expectation to fit within a predetermined mould. Thus we start to consider them anew, distanced from their associated context.

Porous World invites contemplation about place and order. Like *The Same River Twice*, Langdon-Pole’s jigsaw paintings encourage the view that if only a place could be found for every piece, then the entirety of the image would make sense (and the world’s wholeness may settle into view). However, in these works, such as *The Dog God Cycle* (2022), two images from disparate periods in human history are combined to form a glitchy and corroded image that infers *and* undermines discernible pattern. The puzzle is solved, and every piece belongs, but it does not make the image more familiar (or satisfying in terms of representational meaning). Enfolding Albert Bierstadt’s *Rocky Mountain Landscape* (1870) and NASA’s *Pillars of Creation* (1995/2014), *The Dog God Cycle* collides two perspectives of space to tease questions about how data is

145. Michael Lett Gallery, “Porous World,” accessed November 20, 2022, <https://michaellett.com/exhibition/zac-langdon-pole-3/>.

146. *Porous World* was exhibited at Michael Lett Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Oct–Dec 2022.

147. “Porous World.”

148. Kintsugi is the process of filling pottery cracks with gold to make a feature of the crack (associated with wabi-sabi aesthetics).



Image 166. Zac Langdon-Pole, *The Dog God Cycle*, 2022, recombined jigsaw puzzles of: *Rocky Mountain Landscape* (1870), Albert Bierstadt; *Pillars of Creation* (1995/2014), NASA, ESA, CSA, and STScI, 3010 × 3930 × 40mm. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

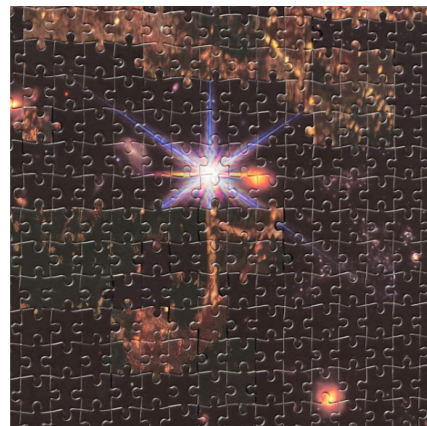


Image 167. Detail of Zac Landon-Pole, *The Dog God Cycle*, 2022. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 168. Zac Langdon-Pole, *Untitled (X)*, 2022, four metric set-square rulers, pins, 900 × 900mm. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 169. Emelia French, greenware object detail, 2022. An experiment in adding 'X' as my 'potter's mark' (signature).



subjectively composed into a perspective image. In addition, by comparing *Pillars of Creation* to the history of sublime landscape painting (represented by *Rocky Mountain Landscape*), Langdon-Pole explores the relational overlap of these different approaches to image making, factual and poetic combined.

On the wall, *Untitled (X)* (2022) comprised four metric set-square rulers arranged to form an 'x' marking the spot. Like the shape sorter blocks, the rulers are not functional as measuring devices in this instance. They signify precision and a way of seeing that is based on measurement and exactitude. Instead of revealing information about something (as a tool for perspective), they are arranged as the conceptual content of the artwork, encouraging poetic contemplation about the units and data with which we make sense of the world, similar to how *The Dog God Cycle* does.

Like Langdon-Pole's works, the objects made in *Soft Feelings* may affectually evoke the feeling of 'whole-field pattern' (Manning) whilst subverting it perceptively. Playing with processes of perceptive sorting, they transparently and logically evidence how they hold together as parts. Within my artworks, the different clays are visually apparent in ways similar to the shards of *Traslaio Studio (Revisited)* and the puzzle pieces of *The Dog God Cycle*, so the material structure is encountered ahead of its representational image. The ceramic objects invite contemplation on shape-sorting processes (chunking), foregrounding the potential of relational interplay to outdo established patterns.

Becoming more

Manning proposes that "artfulness" is "how a set of conditions coalesce to favor the opening of a process to its inherent collectivity, to the more-than of its potential."¹⁴⁹ She likens it to an "aesthetic yield" for how it gives direction both ways, consolidating potentials within a process already underway and directing them through to expression.¹⁵⁰ Carrying a porosity that allows the body of the artwork to operate a bit like an open field, artfulness is how the artworks host the feeling of what is still yet to come, similar to how Chan describes the freedom of art. In this regard, the 'art' comes as a moment of boundedness into a broader ecology (a system of relations), like other bodies. It is a sympathetic expression that is reflexive about its own situatedness and actively works to germinate new ecologies, which Manning describes as "new openings, new vistas, new complexions for experience in the making."¹⁵¹ For *Soft Feelings*, its ceramic artworks are artful as they are moments of boundedness (a consolidated system holding together) yet seemingly invite their own unravelling; they make possible some potentials, and begin new ones.

149. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 58.

150. Manning, 58.

151. Manning, 58.



Image 170. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork detail, 2022. Cracks draw a constellation through the body of the clay object, breaking it open.

Developing this idea further, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari affirm the capacity of art to produce new “universes,” which they call “possibles, the possible as aesthetic category.”¹⁵² They write that the best artworks “construct their own limits, their distances and proximities, their constellations... that they put into motion.”¹⁵³ For my project, the ceramic works mark new bodily orientations with correlational gravitational orbits. In the previous chapter, I described this similarly as new relational coordinates in the context of Haapala’s familiarity and strangeness. Networking, they potentially pull the outside closer. Holding the friction of both inside and outside, the artworks spark new possibilities as they expand the boundary of an inside so it might start to enfold its outside; through its proximity, becoming affectually palpable.

When an object connects to more than what is given by producing new systems of relation, it starts to undo my previously held subjective illusion that matters are under control (Haapala). Extending Manning’s notion of artfulness and Chan’s writings on what art is, Simon O’Sullivan’s distinguishing of an “object of encounter” from an “object of recognition” is helpful here.¹⁵⁴ With an object of recognition, the world we inhabit is reconfirmed as what we already understand or know; it is a re-presentation of something already in place and a clarification of habitual knowledge, beliefs and values (inclusive of the passive material object/active subject relation).¹⁵⁵ By contrast, an object of encounter is a challenge, a proposition that disrupts, and in O’Sullivan’s words, “We are forced to thought.”¹⁵⁶ Through the ceramic artworks, a crack forms in our habitual subjectivities (habitual perceptions), opening new ways of encountering the material world and ourselves.

Contextualising the potential of the crack

Cracks are a sculptural interest, evidence of clay’s responsivity and an expression of the material’s activity. A crack is an internal tension released as a physical gesture as friction builds between its natural inclination to shrink and the shape it is moulded into. A conventional approach would see cracks minimised by slowing the drying of the clay, wedging it before use, and working with a single-type clay body (or at least only combining those with compatible technical specifications). However, for me, cracks are aesthetic opportunities that emphasise a break in habitual subjectivity (like O’Sullivan’s object of encounter).

152. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* trans. Hugh Tomlinson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 177.

153. Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* 177.

154. O’Sullivan, *Art Encounters Deleuze and Guattari*, 1–2.

155. O’Sullivan, 1–2.

156. O’Sullivan, 1–2.



Image 171. Emelia French, greenware 'wall tile', 2022. Evidence of clay retraction on the plaster support.



Images 172–175. Process of making a 'wall tile' artwork. Top left: a crack in a greenware tile. Top right: my custom-built plaster slabs allow the tiles to be made. Bottom left: retraction lines evidence how much the tile pulls inward as it shrinks. Bottom right: my toolbox.

As a raw material, clay needs to move; drying it retracts by up to fourteen percent in greenware state, and more again when fired. Greenware is the term used for clay that has been shaped but not yet fired, before it transitions through heat-induced chemical processes into ceramic. The process of greenware consists of a subset of process phases including wet, leather hard and bone dry. It is an active state in the process of the ceramic artworks. Due to the way I hand-build, the wet clay form is a proposition for relational activity yet to occur in their transition to bone dry.¹⁵⁷ As the practice has matured, I have developed an understanding of the cracking process enough to provoke it within the ceramic artworks. Combining different clays, not wedging, inserting fired clay shards into unfired clay, and using solid thick slabs of clay, are ways the greenware works welcome cracks as expressions of relation. Compacted and enfolded clay forms physically crack open, breaking out of the position I left them when I last handled the clay.

However, just as interesting is when the clay should theoretically crack apart but does not, sticking together despite enormous tension on the join. The 'wall tile' series are experiments in this kind of material-to-material holding. They are the most materially sensitive of all the ceramic artworks, and have been informally described by another technically experienced potter as "experiments with impossibility."¹⁵⁸ The size and proportions of the tiles is determined by the maximum dimensions of the AUT kiln, and so they typically measure 8mm depth, 430mm height and 570mm width. As the clay dries, water leaves its body, and it becomes extremely fragile. To fire the tiles, I must lift off the custom-built support they are made upon and walk them to the kiln, my hands balancing a sheet of compacted dust.¹⁵⁹ Most tiles do not reach this stage, having already crumbled from tensions in the drying.

In traditional pottery methods, to minimise tension and thus the appearance of cracks in the clay body, clay is subject to a treatment that increases its compatibility. As listed earlier, wedging is one technique whereby the clay is worked by hand (similar to kneading bread dough) to compact its platelets, so they go in the same direction. For wedged clay, when it contracts, it moves together as one, pulling closer. Contrarily, I do not wedge the clay, and rather than working with a singular body, nine or more clay bodies are combined to create discordance between characteristics (including different shrinkage rates).

157. 'Hand-building' is a common term within ceramic practice, to distinguish forms made without a pottery wheel.

158. This quote comes from a personal conversation with my PhD colleague Toby Twiss in June 2022, after having 28 'wall tiles' consecutively break in the greenware stage. He runs the Diploma of Studio Ceramics at Auckland Studio Potters, of which I am also a member.

159. I have built custom tools and support structures to host the making of the tiles. I have made large rolling-pin tools, and their length measures the maximum width of the tile. In addition, I have realised the tiles are only possible if made on very smooth plaster slabs. Even the texture of plywood causes the clay to crack, for every protrusion on the surface becomes a point of friction as it retracts inwards. Plaster also absorbs the water uniformly out of the clay. I dry the tiles slowly between a sandwich structure of custom-made plaster slabs.



Image 176. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork with custom bronze hooks, 2022, 390 x 440 x 10mm.

To briefly explain this distinction of composition and behaviour, platelets are the molecular structure of the clay, randomly dispersed throughout its body. I have realised unwedged clay moves best for this practice, shivering, sagging, and flopping, as it is not yet pacified and still has pushback. After so many actions the clay becomes so overmanipulated that it only echoes with the material memory of our recent play. At this stage, mixing the overworked clay with other clay bodies or introducing inclusions of bisque-fired grit or 'grip rings' seems to reinvigorate it, contributing new resistance for me to work/haptically converse with. Rolled together like pizza dough, the varying colours and textures accumulate into a 'wall tile'.

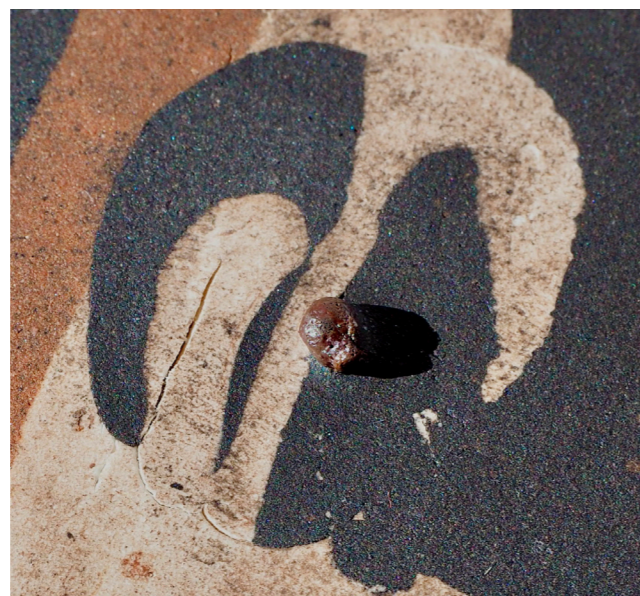
It is this disorder of material that makes each tile highly unpredictable, dramatically increasing the tensions they are under in a greenware state. Enough external variables have to be regulated for the clay to hold together across three phases cohesively; the hand-building, the drying of the greenware, and the firing event. The artworks culminate through these material processes, assembling their aesthetic language. It is also why they break. I am always balancing this literal and processual tension of bringing something into the world, wondering how to best support the arrival of something new (like the tiles), which require a regulated environment because of their internal irregularity, and about the difference between facilitating (hosting) and controlling their image/form.

The poetic as an aesthetic

Although the 'wall tiles' activate inter-material relationality more than the other ceramic works, their painterly representation makes them easier to place categorically. In this respect, they explore perception differently from the sculptural artworks. Morphing between abstraction and representational imagery, illusion and material transparency, even when stilled through the firing processes, they continually stir; stratifying through the process, the clays assemble soft images. Playing upon the same impulse that causes me to see loose resemblances in clouds, as I work with the clay, I look out for these emergent shapes and forms. As with all of the ceramic artworks, I do not decide in advance what that image might be. Instead, while rolling out the clay patterns I start to find forms. For example, a whale with a pointy nose smattered with white-clay snow that reminds me of my home horizon of Taranaki Maunga (Image 176). On seeing this, I cut around the whale, laying it atop a fresh slab of clay, loosely collaging this shape with other 'collected' and 'found' moments, accumulating a composition through contingency.



Images 177–178. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork and custom bronze hooks, 2022, 260 x 330 x 25mm. Images courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery. Detail of a basalt protrusion that pushed through the flat surface of the tile mid-firing, caused by the grog in Barry's Coromandel Gold clay.



Considering the poetic potential of the 'wall tile' in Images 177–178, I write,

Scanning the surface, I see worlds building, earthly forms rising, mountains twisting into shape. A hill cries four black tears. In the top right corner, black clay forms the outline of what could be two birds in flight. Geometric shapes cut through the composition, causing me to dip in and out, getting drawn in by perspective, only to get pushed back out again by the flatness of the colour or line beside. In the bottom right, black and white clays bleed together, reminding me of the yin and yang duality, except in this instance it has the shape of an upside-down anchor; a double-hook.

Despite this improvised reading of the emergent image, I never forget that the artwork is fired clay. It has a shape-shifting quality in how it seemingly 'tries on' different registers of representation but never becomes what it resembles. It retains material transparency (truthfulness to the material). In the face of all the suggestive associations, I never lose sight of the clay body; its materiality is foregrounded, and associations are backgrounded, secondary to material expression but complementary to its affect.

As mentioned in Chapter 1, early on in *Soft Feelings*, before clay directed the practice, I was interested in the Japanese aesthetic of wabi-sabi. Influenced by Leonard Koren's notion of visual poetics, developed in his writings on wabi-sabi, he offered a poetic approach to materiality that was not contingent upon representation or symbolism.¹⁶⁰ He writes that wabi-sabi objects are unpretentious, simple, and earthy in quality, but host "strong, reverberating images" larger than the "frame that holds them (thus evoking the larger universe)."¹⁶¹ In all the ceramic artworks, inclusive of the 'wall tiles', the earth is brought into play as literal material (clay, bronze, and timber are of the earth), and the world is explored as metaphor. Hosting a collective experience, the ceramic artworks begin a productive breaking down of demarcations that segregate the earth from its world of relational activities. Starting with the subject/object relation, it unsettles established order, generating potential through its provocation to play with image association.

160. Koren, *Wabi-Sabi for Artists, Designers, Poets & Philosophers*, 54.

161. Koren, 54.

Soft experiential textures

Developing this notion of visual poetics, Aotearoa New Zealand writer and poet Lisa Samuels' *Soft Text and the Open Line*, uses the terms 'soft' and 'hard' to denote different intensities within experience, not a difference in tactile texture but an expression of feeling.¹⁶² Writing in the context of conceptual poetry and poetic prose, Samuels uses the term, 'hard' for spoken or written language, which this research positions in equivalence with what is materially and/or physically present in a given moment.¹⁶³ By contrast, she says 'soft' is taken as the "invisible textuality of potential language" that "never quite materialises."¹⁶⁴ For *Soft Feelings*, softness is affectual texture and hard text its material host. Returning to Bergson's notion of the open whole, I understand softness as that to which every whole opens out into; I hope to grow the porosity of the practice enough that it might host this softness moving through.¹⁶⁵

The title of this research, *Soft Feelings*, emphasises an affectual capacity of the artworks and an aesthetic potential with which we interface. Samuels explains that because the potential of soft text intrinsically exceeds whatever is written, "there is always more soft text than hard text anywhere and anytime."¹⁶⁶ As happens with soft text, our subjectivity seeps into our reading of the ceramic artworks, the physical materiality of the work hosting connections that we project onto its form. The poetry is in their porosity, reverberating a multiplicity of possible meanings.

Samuels' *Soft Text* unfolds the seemingly closed relationship between action (word) and how it is received by drawing attention to the production of meaning as a subjective response. She explores affect generation through her practice of conceptual poetry and poetic prose. Soft text is the minor of hard text yet exceeds it. Not yet realised in hard text form, it is future in its orientation. In reading Samuels' poetry, affect builds but it doesn't attach to an existing schema of meaning easily. For example, in her autobiographical prose *Anti M*, published in 2013, a passage reads "Her colour is/ Florida country/ in a large car hitting the front rider."¹⁶⁷ It partially conforms to sentence convention but the words are not oriented in a usual or prosaic way. The structure confuses the expectations of standard perception enough that its supposed meaning loses its grasp just a little, softening. It is this quality that I hope to mirror and evoke in the artworks, promoting a bodily receptivity for what might yet happen, opening in excess of what is presently apparent. Again, this is not about physical porosity, but rather, the affectual capacity of a work.

162. Lisa Samuels, "Soft Text and the Open Line," *Axon: Creative Explorations* 8, no. 1: Materiality, Creativity, Material Poetics (May 2018).

163. Samuels, "Soft Text and the Open Line."

164. Samuels.

165. The title of the research, *Soft Feelings*, and the title of its methodology, *a soft approach*, reference the softness that Samuels describes. In this instance, softness is a synonym for affectual potential, openness, and lightness (all important terms for the project).

166. Samuels, "Soft Text and the Open Line."

167. Samuels.



Image 179. Emelia French, artwork shaped like a cave, 2021.

The third meaning

Early on in my experimentations with clay (Sept 2021), I made a work shaped like a small cave, hand-holdable in size. Its texture and colour that of the clay material. Likewise, its processes are visible, evidenced by the indents left by my fingers as I curved the clay into a hollowed concave shape, making a wave-like pattern of oscillating texture on its surface. In addition to this, in the process of drying (prefiring), the raw clay started to crack along the cave's floor. This crack is a reminder of material processes. But this fragile quality offered me more; the clay cave is cracking itself open, breaking open the habitual, which is what the practice has attempted to do by potentially becoming a threshold outside of objective reason.

Roland Barthes describes the affectual capacity of an artwork as its "third meaning."¹⁶⁸ In his essay of the same name, he explains that the 'first' level of meaning is 'concrete' information that arises following what can be physically seen within a work, which I understand similarly to Samuels' hard text, Chan's notions on art as freedom, and Manning's artfulness.¹⁶⁹ It is the material transparency of the ceramic artworks; the apparent fingerprints, the crack in the clay, and all other 'evidence' of what it is as a material invention. The 'second' level of meaning is what it represents; its degree of signification to what

168. Roland Barthes, "The Third Meaning," in *Image Music Text* (United Kingdom: Fontana Press, 1977), 52–68.

169. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 52.



Image 180. Emelia French, 'sloppy slab/abacus' artwork, 2021.

already exists (similar to O'Sullivan's object of recognition).¹⁷⁰ In the practice artworks, this is what they associate to as a list of 'likenesses', which may read as disparately as 'abacus, floral, dinosaur skin, stakes, pancakes, candlesticks, the game of quoits'. This tendency is developed in Chapter 5, *A soft approach: part two*, in relation to Brian Massumi's semblance. The 'third' level of meaning, which has been the focus of this chapter, is what remains indiscernible about a work, beyond the reach of the other two levels of meaning; unable to be named or signified but experienceable as affect. It is the feeling that the artwork is more than a sum of its parts as a list of associations; alike to many things without becoming like them.

Barthes states that the third is what keeps him held by the receiving image.¹⁷¹ It is the measure of difference between what is literally discernible and visually readable within the artwork and what is happening in excess of that. Whereas the former affirms and bolsters the ability of the intellect to find clarity (make sense of) the image, the third meaning is a bemusing complication to our 'solving the puzzle' of the work through reductionist critical analysis. For Barthes, "It does not leave me fully satisfied, [because] my intellection cannot succeed in absorbing, at once persistent and fleeting, smooth and elusive" beyond receiving "a 'poetical' grasp."¹⁷² This is the poetics of forced syntagms. It is what makes the artworks theoretically locatable but not describable. Toying with "representation which cannot be represented," the artworks are difficult to 'pin down' with exactitude, and so I rely instead upon the use of figurative language, such as poetic simile and metaphor, to get closer to the unknown possibilities that they are offering.¹⁷³ This is a source of aesthetic pleasure. As my intellect (continuing Barthes' choice of word) cannot regulate its affect, I linger with their novel feeling.

For example, considering the aesthetic potentiality of the 'sloppy slab/abacus', I write,

A sloppy slab, dense and hard and heavy with thick cracks fracturing its form. I never lose sight of this, but I still catch onto the fleshy and circular chunk of fired terracotta jutting out from the main ceramic body, a freckled ear? The clay congregates visual metaphors: archetypical storybook characters: a jester, clown, pirate, a criminal in black-and-white stripes perhaps, breaking free.

Similarly to the previous poetic interpretation of the 'wall tile', my ability to read the work conventionally in terms of its image meaning is suspended. The artwork simultaneously emphasises a literalness of material expression whilst

170. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 52.

171. Barthes, 53.

172. Barthes, 53.

173. Barthes, 64.



Image 181. Emelia French, 'abacus' artwork, 2022.

poetically inferring likeness to other things; an ear, flesh, jester, clown, pirate. Such associations do not settle into clarity of meaning, but what is 'clear' is the materiality of the clay. Like the 'wall tile', the object's material gives off a resistance that keeps associations shallow.

Because the third meaning is indifferent to the dualities governing dominant perception, as Barthes says, "it is on the side of the carnival." It has "something to do with disguise" by "saying the opposite without giving up the contrary."¹⁷⁴ As noted throughout this chapter, it is the quality of 'both, *and*' about the artworks, whereby they produce new meanings by combining established opposites within their bodies. They hoodwink established meaning, cracking open the existing field by slipping out of the knowing gaze of standard frames of reference. For example, a ceramic artwork that is abacus-like may also remind us of rolled pancakes and ring-wearing fingers. Having only a single 'grip ring' within the ceramic artwork makes redundant its possible function as a counting mechanism within the 'abacus'. Instead, the 'grip ring' becomes a poetic weighting for contemplation, offering pause. The 'grip ring' (as a cast) infers that the clay object has positive definition, but yet it is not knowable in the way I expect it to be. I can get close to its definition through other forms (abacus, rolled pancakes, and ring-wearing fingers) but such associations do not make its meaning any more solid or containable.

Like Bergson's open whole, as fired hard ceramic artworks, they assert a physical sense of wholeness or completeness whilst conceptually opening out. Playing with aesthetic 'almosts', they reach out and enfold an invisible textuality of softness (Samuels), reminding us of that which never quite materialises by holding close what could have been and might still be. Beguilingly, they potentially absorb the viewer in a game of associations, stringing along the feeling that one is getting closer to the 'essence' of what they are but outmanoeuvring habitual understanding. The third "...subverts not the content but the whole practice of meaning."¹⁷⁵ It is a "new – rare – practice affirmed against a majority practice (that of signification)...[that] does not yet belong to today's politics but nevertheless already to tomorrow's."¹⁷⁶ Like Manning's conceptualisation of artfulness, the third makes porous the majority so that its 'more-than' (outside) vibrationally oscillates through; as a charged potential that does not settle.

174. Barthes, "The Third Meaning," 54–55.

175. Barthes, 62.

176. Barthes, 62–63.



Image 182. Maria Olsen, *Cauldrons*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 3480mm. Image courtesy of Chartwell Project.



Images 183–184. Emelia French, 'wall object' artwork and 'grip rings', 2022. Examples of thresholds in my practice.

Exploring thresholds in Maria Olsen's Cauldrons

During the first two years of this project, I worked part-time as a Gallery Assistant at Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, where I spent many slow hours leaning against the gallery wall, alone in the room with Aotearoa New Zealand artist Maria Olsen's painting *Cauldrons* (1986). The artwork is a large-scale diptych depicting a primordial landscape of bubbling pools. When standing directly in front of its surface, my body is engulfed by its scale. The pools remind me of the geothermal activity of Rotorua, and evoke the feeling of something brewing and concocting out of the belly of the earth, breathing a sense of anticipation into the room. Olsen has been generally associated with other feminist painters working in Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1980s.¹⁷⁷ Perhaps the cauldron is a 'birthing space' or threshold for beginnings. The cauldron could be an open whole (Bergson); a leaky vessel and open container that hosts what is inside to overspill to its outside. The painting is both an emergent field for futurities that are yet to arrive and a retrograde portal to the dawn of all that is. The work has a quality of atemporal situatedness, offering spatial context in the form of a landscape image, but enfolding and complicating my sense of linear time.

In my practice, I tend towards motifs that also operate as thresholds; the clay loosely associates with gateways, arches, windows, eyes, and painterly frames. The hollow circle form of the 'grip ring' is another threshold, though it resides with material more than an image; a hand cast. In their affectual quality, the ceramic objects are primordial stirrings, embodying the earth from which they came, breathing its deep-time residue into the foreground of experience. For me, Olsen's *Cauldrons* has a similar quality to my artworks because it conditions a feeling of fertile laziness. The cauldrons are leaky vessels bubbling over, depicting a welling up of material potential, a brewing soup. The painting is both finished and provisional, not fundamentally but in what it potentially evokes. It calls forward possibilities within the present, pulling the future forth from cauldrons set in an imaginary otherworldly landscape or perhaps our deep-time geological past. Embodying the artfulness that Manning describes, Olsen's *Cauldrons* brews for what is yet to come. Like the cracks in the ceramic objects, the cauldron is a motif for the threshold that overflows and is openly formed.

177. "Cauldrons by Maria Olsen," The Chartwell Project, accessed June 4, 2022, <https://chartwell.org.nz/seeing/collection/cauldrons/>.

Interlude: Thoughts from home

In Taranaki, the starlings migrate at dusk, swooping low and ducking and twisting, flying in scattered groups, congregating in the sky for moving down the coast to their nesting spot on Motuotamatea Island. Sometimes in summer, we drive out there to watch their murmuration, when thousands of birds dance together in one singular swarm, a vast moving rhythmic cloud. The illusion is so spectacular that it is hard to see an individual bird in their collective fluidity of motion comprising one synchronised event. Unique about this formation is that there is no individual agency (no singular leader); instead, the movements are relationally calculated as a network of neighbourly affects, whereby each bird practises highly attuned sensitivity for their edges only insofar as they provide affectual information about the collective moving body. These whispering affects give the murmuration an agency that arises relationally rather than one bird (cause) leading the others (effect). In this context, the individual could be seen as simply an affectual instrument contributing to the event's movement, a bird participating in the event but never observing its collective effect.

The summer following the end of secondary school, I got sick for a while. I am still not sure what happened, but my parents think I caught a virus, which developed into a prolonged episode of severe anxiety. During this time, my perception of reality didn't feel right, the room felt too big somehow, and everything was warped. When it was really bad, our family GP told Dad to urgently take me to the hospital for a CT scan; it was only a few minutes from home in Ngāmotu New Plymouth. On the drive, I had this constant paranoia playing in my head "is this my last thought, is this my last thought, is this my last thought?" I was wholly associated with my 'self', this virus triggered much fear in me around death. I felt like I could just be walking along and then seemingly evaporate off the earth. It terrified me, mostly because I couldn't cognitively conceive how I would know what had happened; how can my 'death' exist if I cannot register it so? I remember having this fixation on the idea that I would need to know what was happening, and then I could be okay with it; even if it was outside my control, I could rationally understand. Even now, I struggle to sleep sometimes, to let go of my grasp on reality and let my perception slide into the unknowingness of sleep.

Around this same time, I was at home lying on the grass, and our family dog (a Border Collie Huntaway cross we named Jess) was bounding around chasing a monarch butterfly nearby. It was sunny out, and the garden was vibrant in its colour. Our house bordered the edge of the national park marking the boundary of Taranaki Maunga, and the previous owners grew rhododendrons for a living (so there was room for these enormous flowering trees). In a way, the garden was a bit like an extension of the park; my Mum spent many long hours tending to it and it showed; it had this feeling of lively abundance. Lying there in that space, I remember this fleeting moment of absolute clarity that I've been in some way or another, chasing ever since. For a window of time, it felt like I was observing pure colour and texture and light and movement. Jess was there, but she wasn't in a way either. I was seeing her as a black and white blur of expressing energy; I marvelled at this incredibly cohesive empowered motion, the beauty of her bodying, utterly irrespective of my emotional attachment to her as my pet. I lifted my hand and looked at it in wonder, appreciating it in a way I never had before and never have since. Everything seemed to be flickering, more alive than ever before in the sun, but in a way that felt unfamiliar to how I had known it, just a moment before. It was pure energy, buzzing. I think I was still aware of the names of things, a tree or a flower, for example, but it felt irrelevant, equivalent to the difference between the thought of an apple and the experience it offers. I was more connected than knowing could ever bring me, attentive but not yet interpreting. As soon as this feeling arrived, this gap in my habitual perception clouded back over, and my hand was just my hand again. But for a moment, I realised I was not 'Emelia' any more than that complex event was Jess, just as the affectual network of birds comprising the effect of a starling murmuration was not its illusion as a dancing cloud.

Perhaps my body is a starling murmuration, a negotiated system of relational affects holding a pattern long enough for me to get attached to the dazzling illusion comprising myself, like a ripple seemingly running across a rising and falling body of water. What is the difference between these bodies, the clay body and mine? Are we all domino waves of translating affects? Is this the openness, this bodily porosity, that this practice is growing?



Images 185–188. Emelia French, greenware objects drying in the AUT Wet Lab, Nov 2022.

Chapter 4: A soft approach: part one

This chapter details the methodology of *Soft Feelings*, positioning it as *a soft approach*. Building upon key discoveries made whilst the project was still working under the methodological premise of *wandering*, *a soft approach* tends to the elasticity of the practice so that it can accommodate new opportunities for making as they processually arise. I am interested in creating soft systems that are porous enough to host unsystematic moments without downgrading their value, by exploring how these expressions might start to open from within. This chapter considers how *a soft approach* aids my making objects of encounter (O’Sullivan), and my processual efforts to outmanoeuvre the subject. It leads into the following chapter, *A soft approach: part two*, which contemplates how the methodology grows sympathetic receptivity and practises a light touch.

The ceramic artworks loosen regular shapes, ordering structures, and patterns. As discovered in practice, the ceramic artworks crack open their appearance as independent and closed singularities when they toy with representation just enough to provoke some semblance without settling into a subtractive depiction.¹⁷⁸ They linger with experimental complexity, remaining undone enough that the clay leans into representation, but not enough to find fixed categorical place. One way the practice explores this impulse is through ordering aesthetics. The works include reference to geometric shapes such as squares and cylinders, and lines, counting and framing devices, albeit lightly. They evoke a vernacular of order by exploring ordering conventions, but they do not necessarily function in the way we expect an order might. Inconsistently activated within the ceramic artworks, patterns begin to emerge but are only carried so far that they subvert expectations about the establishing order. The artworks start to play with formula by unravelling and interfering with the aesthetic vocabularies of simple logics of line, shape, pattern.¹⁷⁹

In addition, they aesthetically exploit methodological principles to emphasise the aesthetic potential and pleasure of material unruliness. *A soft approach* comprises impulsive, idiosyncratic, wonky, and leaning aesthetics that dislodge the habitual and cast it off-kilter. *A soft approach* supports this wayward bodily language of clay, so that the works develop their own logic internal to the relations of the practice. As already stated, I endeavour to override habitual logic and methods to cocreate with the clay new expressions of making, in the form of object artworks.

178. The term ‘semblance’ is contextualised in Chapter 5, *A soft approach: part two*, in relation to Brian Massumi.

179. The etymological origin of formula is “fixed sense of words” and “shape, mould.” See: “Formula,” Oxford Learner’s Dictionaries, accessed October 1, 2022, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/definition/english/formula>.



	Timer min.	Temperature 1 °C	Time 1 min.	Temperature 2 °C	Time 2 min.	Hold 1 min.	Temperature 3 °C	Time 3 min.
B-1								
Bisque B-2	1000	560	420	700	90	10	1000	180
B-3								
Glaze Underglaze B-4	1180	560	210	900	120	10	1180	210
B-5								
B-6								
Alkaline B-7	BISQUE from A2 taken up to 900							
03 1086 B-8	BISQUE from Richards taken to							
B-9								
Coordinating B-10	GLAZE (A4) to 1180 with 20 min							
B-11								
Decal firing B-13								
B-14								
miles drying B-15	100	600	100	0	0	0	1000	100
slow fire B-16	400	300	600	120	30		1180	390
B-17								

Images 189–190. Firing logistics. Bottom: Mum's kiln log book, with my first custom firing schedule included.

Minor orientations

In *The Minor Gesture*, Erin Manning asks, “What else can artistic practice become when the object is not the goal, but the activator, the conduit towards new modes of existence?”¹⁸⁰ Manning proposes that artistic inquiry needs to work “against method” to *create* research.¹⁸¹ She introduces her concept of the “minor gesture” as working “the major from within.”¹⁸² The ‘major’ is the methodological and systematic approaches from which the already knowable or already thinkable is affirmed; it brings about more of the same as it works within knowledge paradigms already tied to “an account of subject-driven agency.”¹⁸³ In comparison, her ‘minor’ runs counter to the major. By disrupting its uniform homogeneity and looking to potential for “variation,” it activates “a difference in quality” and brings about new contributions which, for my project, are the ceramic artworks.¹⁸⁴ With *a soft approach*, I turn towards the activity of clay, orientating in relation to its changeability, in an effort to outwork the bounds of what is objectively known.

A soft approach charges potential by building frictions between irregularity and regularity. From within already existing methodological approaches to the material, I work in orderly ways (at first) to find opportunities to deviate, in support of the waywardness of the clay's activity. Developing upon the notion of the detour, and Ahmed's notion of queer orientations, unsystematic moments working with clay orientate differently; they interrupt patterns of material subordination by revealing its unruliness. In this respect, material tradition and the accompanying association of artistry to mastery in craftpersonship is one major that *Soft Feelings* expands by working otherwise, tending toward a relational equivalence instead of working the clay into submission.

Through the making, I have realised that *a soft approach* is most productive when the material carries with it a tradition of a systematic process but also requires it. The structure of an established process allows me to notice divergences from the major (or straight line, as Ahmed calls it), following such leads as they arise. Clay requires a partly analytical approach in order to support its activity. Its sensitivity and responsiveness demand a meticulous consideration of the material's physical and chemical conditions, and how it responds to different atmospheric conditions (the Wet Lab and Mum's studio). Developing an intuitive understanding of the material through my practising, I am attuned to what has relationally occurred and adapt accordingly, building or reducing tensions to enable to work to exist. Mediating the changing forces at play in the processes of making the work is particularly important because of my deliberately adventurous approach to the material. Doing so increases the capacity for the clay to host disorder *within* an artwork.

180. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 46.

181. Manning, 26.

182. Manning, 1.

183. Manning, x.

184. Manning, 1.



Images 191–192. Emelia French, ‘wall tile’ artwork and custom bronze hooks, 2022, 260 x 370 x 25mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery. This ‘wall tile’ cracked in two during the firing. Recognising an opportunity to detour, I leaned into the cracking, making more, tapping the tile against the edge of a brick until it broke. I sanded the edges of each fragment, exposing the inner layers of the tile’s surface. Its image is not seamless because the tile foregrounds the join as Zac Langdon-Pole did with his repaired bowl artwork, *Traslaio Studio (Revisited)* (2022).



On possibility

Jan Verwoert’s thoughts on art as ‘possibility’ help to consider why a methodology that supports new aesthetic potentials might need to ‘irregulate’ as its main activity.¹⁸⁵ Verwoert proposes that an artwork should “evoke possibility” and that its capacity to do so is contingent on the creative process generating the potential for the artwork before it starts to emerge.¹⁸⁶ He speculates that for an artwork to stimulate possibility, it must first attach itself, from its beginning to a “a reality that does not yet exist,” so that it can become a shifter, a link or a prompt for new emergent realities.¹⁸⁷ The process must therefore work in “intuitive defiance” against specific logics of “social regulation” and “rational synchronisation” to welcome into the present different modes of experience, similar to how Manning describes the minor gesture.¹⁸⁸

A soft approach works in intuitive defiance of habitual logic in the way that Verwoert states, and for this, the ceramic artworks have the potential to contribute new possibilities for relational engagement with the material world. Deviating from an established system or process, this methodology orientates otherwise, in support of the material. With *a soft approach*, I try to commune with the clay, so that the artworks may build as expressed traces of my becoming beside myself.¹⁸⁹ As such, the practice starts to potentially move apart from my subjective agency and, through the making, I find myself in different circumstances from what my perception is used to.

Even in my early attempts to work in feeling with material, I recognised that getting relationally closer to the material would first require my preparedness to leave *something else* first. Although I did not yet know what that was, my writing in the PGR9 (Confirmation of Candidature Research Proposal) reveals my intent to disassociate somehow, using phrases such as ‘to reposition’ or work ‘astray’. As the project developed, it became clearer to me that I was hoping to leave the habitual patterns of the knowing subject behind to experience an embodied closeness less mediated by my standard perception. Exploring Verwoert’s earlier proposition about art needing to “evoke possibility,” he adds that for it to do so, it needs to exist as “an invention of its own beginning.”¹⁹⁰ In practice, I try to limit my preconceptions about the work so as to mitigate expectations of what the clay ‘should’ become. Doing so requires more dexterity than rejecting all established habits.

185. Jan Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea” (36th Association of Art Historians Society Conference, The Glasgow School of Art, 2010), <https://vimeo.com/60549110>.

186. Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea.”

187. Verwoert.

188. Verwoert.

189. Most interesting for this exegesis is not whether or not I achieved it (for how can this be measurable), but rather the hope and optimism that it might be *possible*, encouraging efforts at connecting with the potential that exceeds us.

190. Verwoert, “Why Are Conceptual Artists Painting Again? Because They Think It’s a Good Idea.”

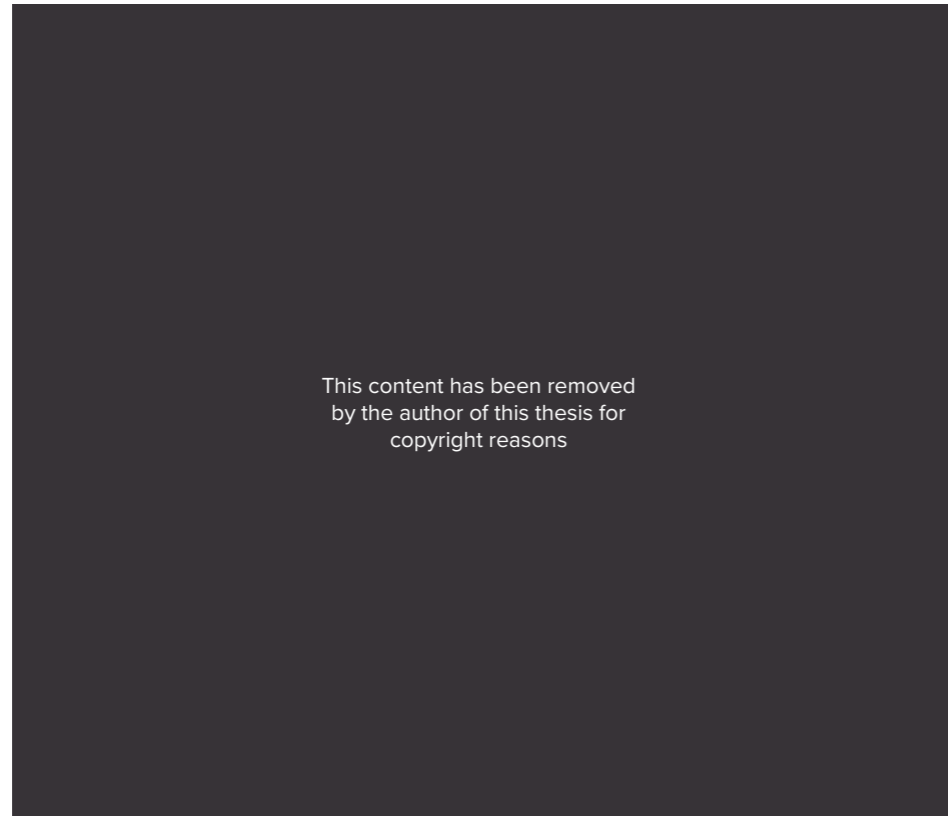


Image 193. Philip Guston, *Painter's Table*, 1973, oil on canvas, 1962 x 2286mm. Image from the National Gallery of Art, USA.



Images 194–195. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork, 2021. Detail of its 'eye'.



A kindred practice: Philip Guston

The practice of painter Philip Guston offers a helpful comparison for *Soft Feelings*, aesthetically and methodologically. He also works to negate habitual tendencies in his painting processes. Aesthetically, his paintings arrange mostly domestic objects into a composition. Flatly coloured and cartoon in style, the forms depicted in Guston's paintings lightly attempt an illusion of three-dimensionality but intentionally avoid the precise rendering required for the viewer to fully *believe* their semblance. They play with the perspective of the pictorial plane by inferring perspective through shadow, basic shading and three-dimensional line, but never attaining 'real' perspective enough that we fall into such illusory techniques; instead, the surface stays shallow. Guston explains that he builds tension between surface forms and their depth because he wants the material to give off a certain resistance so the viewer cannot go straight to the idea. He says he does not want "either meaning or clarity [for] who wants to vanish into clarity or meaning?"¹⁹¹

Explored through one of his paintings, *Painter's Table* (1973) visually offers enough information to identify a pair of shoes, a book, a painting with an eye, a paint palette, and an ashtray of used cigarettes. However, naming such objects does not make their meaning (in this context) more digestible or their placing familiar, as Haapala might describe it. Instead, they appear awkwardly collaged together, as if being approached from multiple differing perspectives. The three-dimensional lines and shadow suggest different spatial relations for every object, emphasising the position with which they face or are viewed. Crucially, the painting might make the subjective gaze *its* subject. Surface forms (rendered objects) subvert habitual relations by looking back, sometimes literally, for Guston uses the eye motif in his work (which I do, too). Given his interest in perspective, perception, and undermining clarity of meaning, perhaps the eye is used subversively, drawing attention to the limits of such approaches.

Guston wants the work to look "like something he knows, but not quite."¹⁹² For him, it is important that the "work is strange, and will never become familiar," as this means it can "live by itself."¹⁹³ I interpret this similarly to Verweort's proposition that an artwork should mark its own beginning. Guston is not asserting absolute independence (challenging relationality) when he hopes the work can 'live by itself,' but rather, that it might exist within the world beyond his subjective hand, becoming its own part-subject part-object. This is similar to how Deleuze and Guattari describe the possibility of an artwork to operate as a mini-universe with a gravitational orbit, networking relations. Like Guston, I work for the moment whereby the artwork exceeds what can subjectively be determined through objective reason, confusing the distinction between the

191. Philip Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See* (United Kingdom: Penguin, 2022), 4.

192. Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See*, 224.

193. Guston, 224.



Images 196–197. Emelia French, greenware object explorations, 2022.

observed and observing. Returning to his eye motif, it might be the mark of a painting that has its own laws, as Guston hopes for. “Having its own laws” (as autonomous is etymologically defined) outside of direct human control, it cannot be governed by the power of the major system, minorly orientated in the way Manning defines.¹⁹⁴

Turning to Guston’s methodological approach, he seems to work against method (Manning). He reframes mistakes of his hand as opportunities to follow that lead him to making different paintings; his wanting to do so suggests that he too hopes to work around his perception of subject-driven agency (following not leading). In a conversation with critic Harold Rosenberg, Guston says,

Sometimes in painting I keep making ‘mistakes’, then I realize that what’s happening is that I keep scraping out the mistake because it’s not meeting certain expectations that I have developed from the last painting, and then I reach a point where I follow the mistake. I mean, the hand wants to go left instead of to the right. So at a certain point I become willing to follow and see where going to the left leads, and it leads to all sorts of detours, fascinating detours.¹⁹⁵

As previously emphasised, detouring is how I understood my ‘working otherwise’, being wayward from the established path or anticipated trajectory for a work (as it existed in my mind). Like Guston, I am constantly practising my ability to notice moments in process that do not meet my expectations as opportunities for inventiveness.

For example, one day, in the process of making an artwork, struggling to match my gestures with that of the clay, it became tough and dry from my overhandling. Reverting to a familiar gesture, I picked up three ‘grip sticks’ and pushed them into the top of the clay, relegating it to an already existing series of ‘abacus’ forms (Image 196). Straight away, I recognised it as a convenient habit and my doing so became an opportunity to respond differently. I removed the sticks and played with the clay a while longer until the artwork emerged out of the practising; a half-circular form resting atop two squished stone-henge-like rocky lumps with ‘grip rings’ framing its edge (Image 197). The difference between the first and second attempts was palpable to me as the latter felt productive. Whereas the ‘grip sticks’ closed the process down, cycling it back into habitual tendency, the artwork introduced new aesthetic interests for the *Soft Feelings* practice to explore. Although the ‘grip ring’ framing device is not new, in this instance it felt fitting in a way the ‘grip sticks’ did not because they relationally activated other aspects of the work, emphasising its rotundness of form and thick edge.

194. “Autonomous,” Collins English Dictionary, accessed October 11, 2022, <https://www.collinsdictionary.com/dictionary/english/autonomous>.

195. Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See*, 224.

Returning to the earlier quote, Guston emphasises the difference between his subjective autonomy and something *else* that he follows. This chapter explores a similar phenomenon I experience through the practising, whereby *the practice partially outdoes me*, so that I start to work in accordance with by its feeling. Like Guston, I have the “sense that I am [practising] in reverse,” whereby continuing the mistake is like unravelling a loose end, until what appears is “the image [object] I have been waiting to see.”¹⁹⁶ For *Soft Feelings*, this image/object does not predeterminedly exist in my mind to be realised; rather, the object might realise a potential feeling to which the practice has been tending, arriving as a new possibility for experience.

Continuing to chronicle his painting process, Guston says,

When I complete a painting that feels real – I think afterwards that I have found a way – a road. And my mind races on – painting pictures in my head. Infinite possibilities. What a delusion this is. All the possibilities – oh, at last I know. These are mere notions – proven to be so when you start painting again. They all tumble down when paint is put on. And again you must learn that there is no road – no way – and all you possess is the luck to learn to see each time – freshly. Newly.¹⁹⁷

My earlier contextualising of the difference between possibility and potential complements Guston’s analogy. For me, a new artwork is a possibility *realised*, and establishes a path retrospectively of how it came to be. The next time I practise, these possible paths are all available as starting points, and in this sense, they are productive insofar as they offer the opportunity for new deviations. However, the capacity for an artwork to mark its own beginning (Verwoert) is contingent upon its divergence; it *must* deviate off and chart a path anew, opening to potential so it might mark a new coordinate in space. A new body/object/ceramic artwork from which to relationally orientate. Closely following the trajectory of an existing orientation closes down potential. Considered earlier as part of my differentiating habitual tendency from authentic responsivity (in the context of the ‘grip stick’ gesture), *Soft Feelings* builds its own systematic patterns, which every new artwork must then break open, growing the practice from the inside.¹⁹⁸

196. Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See*, 266.

197. Guston, 260.

198. Some works do this slightly (continuing a series, varying upon a pattern) and others seem way-out at first, but gather alike works around them thereafter. I am not concerned by the extent to which they break patterns open, as I am always searching to expand the practice.

Guston suggests that he can lean into the divergence most easily when he is “not watching himself.”¹⁹⁹ Likewise, I try to build a lag between what is happening relationally and any regulatory judgements so that I might become a part of the play, entangled in a relationship that exceeds my habitual perception of subjective agency. On this, Brian Massumi writes that “Self-consciousness is a negative condition” of creative play, because “Subjects don’t make decisions – events make decisions. What we call the subject is an outcome of decision,” which we retrospectively own.²⁰⁰ This notion is developed throughout the next section, which speculatively explores how through practice the artist might outmanoeuvre the subject and the potential of such attempts to do so.

199. Guston, *I Paint What I Want to See*, 266.

200. Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 74; Brian Massumi et al., “Affect and Immediation: An Interview with Brian Massumi,” *DisClosure: A Journal of Social Theory* 28, no. Article 13 (2019): 115.

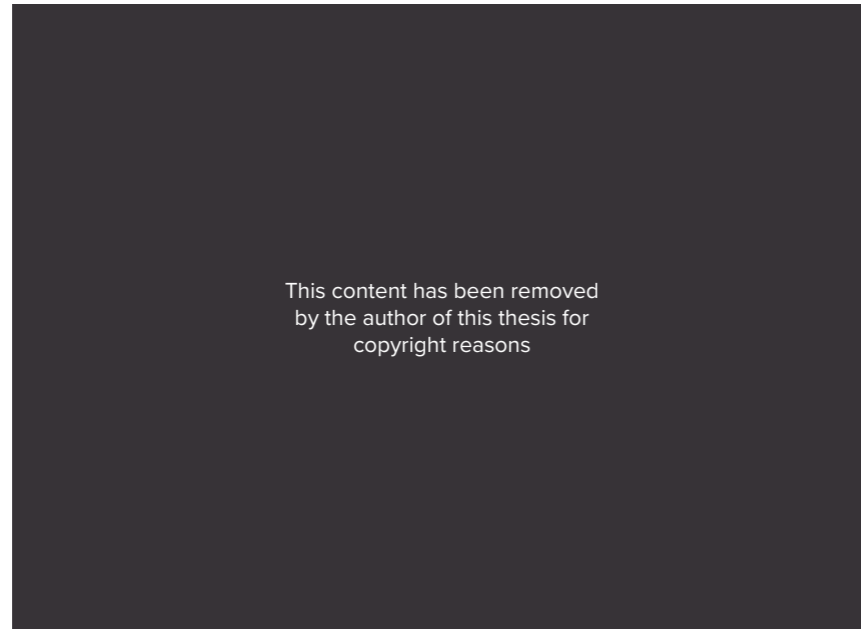


Image 198. Philip Guston, *Back View*, 1977, oil on canvas, 1752 x 2387mm. Image from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.



Image 199. *Brickell-brac*, Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Installation view. Image taken by Monique Redmond while visiting *Brickell-brac*.



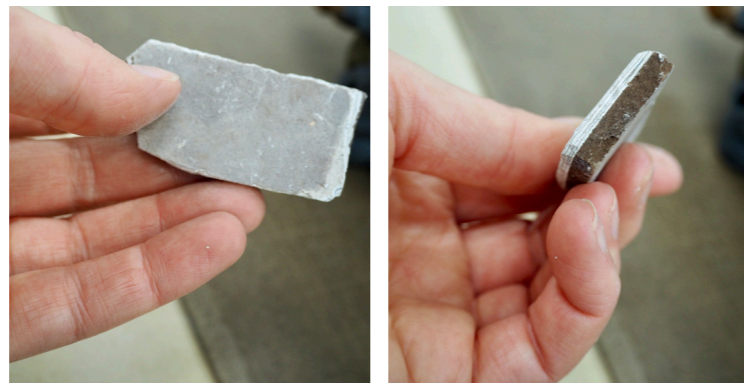
Image 200. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022. Front view.



Image 201. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022. Back view.



Image 202. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022.



Images 203–204. A tile piece used as a tool. The indentations on the object (Image 202) are made with this greenware fragment from a broken 'wall tile'.

Speculative explorations in outmanoeuvring the subject

Beyond the habits of subjective perception

The *Soft Feelings* practice does not have the means to measure whether it has outmanoeuvred subjective perception, even though that is its desire. The value lies in its *efforts* to negotiate subjectivity, opening towards the contingency of 'our' relational entanglement (Barad), following the lead of the material. Developing upon Massumi's notion of fracturing the subject from its perceived agency, this section asks how the artist might be implicated with materials and evoke relational momentum; haptically communing with an as yet unperceivable feeling. On this, Massumi proposes that "Participation precedes recognition... Being precedes cognition," and that, we can only become "cognizant" of what "set us dashing" after we have "stopped running."²⁰¹ Applied to *Soft Feelings*, the ceramic artworks build *behind* the doing; their aesthetic potential (or affectual capacity) is contingent upon the methods of the practising. Here, I explore how a *soft approach* might tease out (or tend to) a distancing of making processes from my sense of self, so that unknown potentials can enter the ceramic artworks, arriving, as Massumi describes like "an exclamation point of joint experience."²⁰²

Massumi proposes that self-consciousness stops play because the subject is self-aware as it *leaves* an event; a subject cannot know its event in anticipation.²⁰³ I understand this not as two distinct phases, but rather, that the subject is constantly mediating experience in real time, recognising what is happening as it clarifies its bodily edges (or what Gadamer would liken to its horizon). A *soft approach* follows this premise of process philosophy: experience is a dynamic process and motion is the primary condition, and subjective perception constructs correspondingly in the wake of shared experience. As soon as I am cognitively aware of my body moving, I am retrospectively informing (making sense of what is happening), and am no longer in feeling with the clay but cast outside it. The notion of following the lead of the material, common to New Materialist theory, is to acknowledge that accessing a realm of connected participation prior to cognition is outside of the realm of the subject to know, but nonetheless, the following orientates towards the connection rather than turning away from it.

Whilst I cannot know that I have left subjective perception, in some instances, I suspect I may have because, at times, I feel myself returning to the processual pause, catching myself analysing the emergent work to see how easily visible it is to my habitual perception. This is a part of the process I cannot outmanoeuvre.

201. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 231.

202. Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 31.

203. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 74.



Images 205–206. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022. Leftovers from prior works are balled up and become the structural base for an object. Fingernail and wire-cutter marks are visible in this detail.

It is also productive, supporting my explorations into the disruptive affect of the clay-becoming-object, for, in these instances, my borders of my standard perception are potentially being confused by the object. Attempting to occupy the threshold between my perceptive awareness and haptic feeling, I build bodily momentum about the practising, which is punctuated by my stepping away to reflect cognitively upon what has occurred.

Using my perception as a tool for when to stop making, in these moments I perceptively assess whether the work is stuttering my habitual perception (yet). Stuttering is a term adopted from Deleuze's essay, *He Stuttered*, in which he writes, "Creative stuttering is what makes language grow from the middle," by stretching it to its limit so that it overflows.²⁰⁴ For Deleuze, the stutter carries the capacity to "minorize" language; Manning develops the term in regard to the minor gesture, working for a togetherness of gesture that precedes articulation, tending to that which exceeds what can be said on its behalf.²⁰⁵ Deleuze contextualises the stutter as a metaphor for that which ruptures existing systems of meaning, by pushing "language as a whole to its limit, to its outside, to its silence."²⁰⁶ It might be an "inkstain or unreadable handwriting" that foregrounds a strange materiality about the words that were always present but backgrounded before, exposing an "underside" that interrupts the smoothness of the words and their meaning.²⁰⁷ I think of Deleuze's stuttering, similar to the cracks in the clay, as an irregularity that is productive, causing habitual perception to falter in its patterns of objective reason, similar to O'Sullivan's notion of the object of encounter, Barthes' third meaning, and Samuels' soft text.

In the context of *a soft approach*, the work stutters my perception patterns when its affectual capacity exceeds my capacity to place it (Haapala), by evoking existing systems of meaning enough to interrupt them. In my gazing upon the work, a network of associations accumulate but don't hold. A list of likenesses that explore the periphery of the artwork but are different to its content, this network fosters a feeling that cannot be placed. In this making stage, I determine the work complete or 'independent' enough (as Guston might say) to remove my hand. However, this raw greenware goes through the firing processes as well. The clays' latter gestures (through drying and firing) remain largely outside of my control. These are additional chances for me to be cast outside of the process, changing the clay into an object that is different in weight, hardness, colour, texture and marks from when I last held it.

204. Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 111.

205. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 109.

206. Charles J. Stivale, *Gilles Deleuze: Key Concepts* (United Kingdom: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011).

207. Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, 107–14.



Image 207. Emelia French, artwork, 2022.



Image 208. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork, 2022.

Exploring the relationship between knowing, doubting, and subjectivity

Philosopher and artist Heidi Salaverría's philosophy on *The Beauty of Doubting* complements Deleuze's notion of the stutter.²⁰⁸ For Salaverría, doubt is "the tentative moment of the mind stretching itself," more flexible to what happens.²⁰⁹ She writes that doubt unsettles a subject's "whole frame of meaning", enough that it becomes temporarily questionable; the self has to "feel itself" differently again, "its status as a self with a firm identity...temporarily held in suspense."²¹⁰ Doubt pulls thought into contact with its limit, so that we might start to consider 'what else' in every encounter outside of what is "allegedly known."²¹¹ In this respect, not knowing is alike to following, in both instances, the subject/artist becomes susceptible to relation.

Similar to Salaverría's positioning of doubting as a positive feeling in creative research (or research creation, to continue Manning's term), Steven Shaviro suggests that not knowing might allow an experience that is (as yet) outside systems of subjectification.²¹² He writes that because "feeling is irreducible to cognition" and "isn't anything that we already know," it only has "half the picture," retrospectively colouring the past and projecting it as a map onto the future.²¹³ In this respect, to work in ways already knowing what one is doing is to bring about more of the same as cognition recursively self-creates what has been; it remembers forward. For Shaviro, not knowing interrupts this predetermined relationship and invites potential and immediacy. When I come to clay, I always start 'our' making by reminding myself that the artwork is not for me to know. By leaning into immediacy and giving myself permission to respond to a feeling, I hope to be affectually carried enough to detour otherwise with the material, bringing a new ceramic artwork, that may be unknown to me cognitively, but that knows my hand.

On affect and feeling

A soft approach tends to affect, which has been referred to throughout this exegesis in relation to potential, and is understood as the measure of openness about a body. Massumi describes affect as the "co-presence of potentials," whereby what 'is' bumps into what is 'not yet' and that affect catalyses the

208. Heidi Salaverría, "The Beauty of Doubting (Political Reflections on a Rebellious Feeling)," in *Between the Ticks of the Watch* (Chicago: The Renaissance Society at the University of Chicago, 2017), 153–83.

209. Salaverría, "The Beauty of Doubting (Political Reflections on a Rebellious Feeling)," 171.

210. Salaverría, 180.

211. Salaverría, 169.

212. Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2012), 62–63.

213. Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics*, 62.



Image 209. Working in Mum's studio, Ngāmotu New Plymouth, Nov 2021.



Image 210. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021. The trace of my hand is visible on the surface of the clay.

present into becoming more.²¹⁴ He writes, “In affect, we are never alone” for we ‘body’ where we connect; my hands support the clay as it leads our play.²¹⁵ Affect is the dividing impulse and connecting spark between every relation that fields the new. Whilst a *soft approach* could be seen to chase affect, it would be like chasing one’s tail; you can never catch it because it is already in every relation building its next move. In this respect, although the methodology cannot claim to know affect, it can grow a capacity to feel its potential tessellating through the activities of the practising; implicated, it feels the entangled connection that backgrounds every expression of difference as they happen.

It does so by working the periphery, where I think potential is found. It goes to the site where bodies are sustained, and repeatedly contacting – clay-to-clay, clay-to-hand, clay-to-tool – it quickens the affectual pulse of the practising enough that it may outgrow what is known and welcome in the new. I throw, slam, hit, twist and roll dense slabs of clay, usually 5-10kg at a time, and in doing so, become physically implicated in the labour and force required by the process. With every gesture, my hands enfold into the clay, and I start to lose my sense of self amid the action. In turn, the clay accumulates and impresses my hands as its expression. It remembers my touch above and below its surface; my fingers mark the skin of the clay and my bodily impact (through force) changes the internal platelets of the clay (how the clay orientates at a molecular level and which shape the way it moves). In these respects, my physical body, muscles and skin are the way into feeling; cognition rules the realm of the known, and through my hands, I attempt to unfold new regions for experience.

Alfred Whitehead’s theory of feeling helps me to understand how the ceramic works may arise as haptic negotiations of feeling.²¹⁶ I first encountered his theory through Manning, who writes that feeling is the doing of unsplit experience, “the force of the event as it expresses itself.”²¹⁷ By this definition, the subject forms as the articulation of feeling; it is both felt (product) and feeling (producing) different expressions into existence. Feeling is not that which is possessed by the subject, i.e., ‘I have a feeling’, but rather the felt subject is a contribution to feeling; it “is not the activator of the act but what emerges in the act.”²¹⁸ I understand Whitehead’s theory similarly to Massumi’s statement mentioned earlier, that “Subjects don’t make decisions – events make decisions;” ‘feeling’ is the action of bodying, and what is ‘felt’ is the body retrospectively.²¹⁹

214. Massumi positions his embodied understanding of affect in accordance with Benedict (Baruch) de Spinoza’s philosophy, defined in *Ethics*, later developed by philosophers such as Bergson, Deleuze, and Guattari. See: Mary Zournazi and Brian Massumi, “Navigating Movements - with Brian Massumi,” in *Hope: New Philosophies for Change* (Annandale: Pluto Press Australia, 2002), 213.

215. Zournazi and Massumi, “Navigating Movements - with Brian Massumi,” 214.

216. It also has relevance for the title of the exegesis, *Soft Feelings*. Alfred North Whitehead, *Process and Reality* (New York: The Free Press, 1985).

217. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 61.

218. Manning, 133.

219. Massumi et al., “Affect and Immediation,” 115.

On this, Massumi contributes that space is what builds behind (as a constructed outside of) experience. He writes,

A path is not composed of positions. It is nondecomposable: a dynamic unity. That continuity of movement is an order of reality other than the measurable, divisible space it can be confirmed as having crossed...It is only after the arrow hits its mark that its real trajectory may be plotted. The points or positions really appear retrospectively, working backward from the movement's end. It is as if, in our thinking, we put targets all along the path. The in-between positions are logical targets: possible endpoints. The flight of the arrow is not immobilized...We stop it in thought when we construe its movement to be divisible into positions.²²⁰

Phrased differently, events do not happen in space; they produce their own space (interior and exterior), just as the moving arrow marks its background as it cuts through. Space consolidates an open field of positions (subjects and objects), marking the trajectory of an experience that has already moved on. Thus, the subject's position does not belong to a body but is a situational occurrence within a relational ecology; it is the gesture that breaks open and casts a body and world apart.

Returning to the theory of feeling, Manning (writing on Whitehead) describes the feeling of the situation we find ourselves in as its "affective tonality."²²¹ If agency were searched for in the 'theory of feeling,' it would be found in the surrounding atmosphere that drives the event. For example, when a raindrop falls (subject), cast out from the mood of the sky (feeling), it is but a singular expression within a broader atmospheric performance. When we say we can feel rain in the air, what we are feeling is the building potential of rain, not yet arrived but about to spill out. This quality is what Manning defines as "the event's agency."²²² Taking a simple example, even our wondering 'do I have time to run home?' reveals that the affect of rain arrives before its first drop. When the first drop of rain does appear, we do not suppose that it has wriggled itself free from the sky out of its own free will. Instead, we perceive the raindrop as a telling expression of that from which it comes, and so we look up. In this respect, a raindrop is the felt expression of a sky in the process of feeling itself into a different weather pattern, "overspilling as it gathers itself up to move on," to borrow Massumi's analogy.²²³

220. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 6.

221. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 61.

222. Manning, 134.

223. Zournazi and Massumi, "Navigating Movements - with Brian Massumi," 215.

Such discoveries for the *Soft Feelings* practice can be summarised by Manning's description of a body as "what emerges at the intersection where what is inside the skin reaches out to meet its environmental return."²²⁴ Massumi writes that a body "moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving."²²⁵ Through the physicality of working with clay, and its capacity to hold and thereby record my trace, it is as if I can partially observe the processes of my bodying, compounded into the artwork externally facing back at me. In such instances, I am aware that I am a body the clay has known; outdoing myself and becoming more.

On this, Massumi writes, "there is a punctuated oneness within a manyness ongoing."²²⁶ Just as the artist is a moment of oneness within a world ongoing, the ceramic artwork is too. However, in my working with clay, it is as if I experience the oneness and manyness in equivalence. In following its materiality, sympathetic to connection, practising processes start to diverge from the anticipated trajectory afforded by my presumption of subject-driven agency, towards contingency. Reorientating towards the connections hosting my bodying with clay, the usually backgrounded feeling of the open whole of experience (Bergson) might be palpable for the artworks as their affect.

224. Manning, "Housing the Body (2007)," Erin Manning Movement, accessed October 12, 2022, <http://erinmovement.com/housing-the-body>.

225. Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1.

226. Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 31.



Image 211. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork, 2022.

Becoming bodies

As positioned in the Introduction, my hands are a threshold for unravelling dualisms of subject and object, mind and body, and for building a bodily language with clay. For me, clay allows an exploration of processes of bodying more readily than other materials. Materially, it muddies the distinction between impression/expression; it impresses my touch externally and internally, so that the way I handle its materiality informs how it expresses (slumps, cracks, and warps). It can be rigid, crumbling, sticky, or slouchy. The opportunities for composing form are seemingly inexhaustible. Additionally, working with different kinds of clay extends my understandings of what constitutes a body. Mixing the clays only partially, the parts comprising the body of the artwork remain visually perceptible through colour and textural differences. The ceramic artwork as a singular form reveals through its surface aesthetics how it exists as a composite of material relations holding together.²²⁷

Significant in the development of *Soft Feelings* was my understanding that any singularity (body) is always two. For this, Karen Barad's theory of agential realism was helpful. They propose that the typical way of thinking about our world, where two predetermined and independent (essentialised) subjects meet and have a relation, is false. Replacing interaction with "intra-action," Barad disrupts the "familiar sense of causality where one or more causal agents precede and produce an effect."²²⁸ They unsettle the metaphysics of individualism by proposing that individuals (or differences) are not predetermined (as I used to believe) but materialise relationally, through and as relation. In doing so, Barad positions relation that carries the force that cuts two from one; an inside and outside form together.

Barad defines their "agential cut" as a momentary doing that produces individuals/'beings'.²²⁹ Like Whitehead's theory of feeling, for Barad, agency does not reside with the individual, but emerges relationally; relation is the capacity to act (changeability) that informs becoming, which arises collectively. In this respect, the artist and material impress upon one another the capacity to express and the perception of difference is a response to such a relation.

227. Material composites are an ongoing preoccupation for the *Soft Feelings* project; even when using bronze for the first time in 2020, it was conceptually significant that it was an alloy composite of 18 different metals.

228. Karen Barad and Adam Kleinman, "Intra-actions," *Mousse* 34, (2012): 77.

229. Karen Barad, "Nature's Queer Performativity," *Kvinder Køn Og Forskning* 1, no. 2 (2012): 46.



Images 212–213. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork and custom bronze hooks, 2022, 400 x 480 x 8mm.

Barad describes matter as permanently unsettled and radically open as “Closure cannot be secured when the conditions of im/possibilities and lived indeterminacies are integral, not supplementary, to what matter is.”²³⁰ They unravel the illusion of a predetermined body, rewriting the body as a boundary that does not hold. Applied to my practice, the bodies of myself and clay are “not state[s] of being with insides and outsides, but in/determinate and dynamic.” The outside is only the outside for the reason that I perceive it so. Still, my body is “... ‘materially haunted by’ and ‘infused with’ what is excluded”.²³¹ In this respect, all bodies are entangled networks of affectual relations that do not hold as tight as we perceive; rather, “times, places, beings bleed through one another,” porously formed.²³²

Developing on this, Manning writes that we cannot know the edge of a body because a body is a field of relation that is “worldwide, even otherworldly.”²³³ If bodies are leaky boundaries that don’t hold, as Barad explains them, then perhaps their edge cannot be contained. Searching for such an edge might therefore be a bit like drawing a line in space around a spoken ‘Hello’ without being able to perceive the body that spoke it. Where does it start, and where does its affect stop? Such questions about affectual porosity are interesting for a *soft approach* methodology, and for considering how the clay material might realise past potentials and catalyse new possibilities through my handling.

Barad’s theories support how I have come to understand the material composition of the clay bodies I work with, as well as my feeling when holding them. Irrespective of whether the clay is commercially manufactured (Keane’s and Macs Mud varieties) or dug from the ground (Barry’s Coromandel Gold), they all combine material histories that date back to stardust. Even when presented as a uniform commercial ‘product,’ a bag of clay is an unsettled deep-time compost mass of resonant affectual potential.²³⁴ A mixture of powdered minerals, water, soils and grog inclusions (river sand, for example), disparate places and stratified histories congregate to physically inform clay’s molecular structure and material temperament. They surface as tendencies to explore.

230. Karen Barad, “On Touching – The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,” *A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 23, no. 3 (2012): 214-215.

231. Karin Murriss and Vivienne Bozalek, “Diffraction and response-able reading of texts: the relational ontologies of Barad and Deleuze,” *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 32, no. 7 (2019): 876.

232. Barad, “Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together-Apart,” 179.

233. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 191.

234. Clay is highly variable in terms of its mineral substance. Each clay has its own unique composition, which takes millions of years to develop. It forms like a deep-time compost; the youngest type of clay (not used in this practice, and found in volcanic rainforest terrain) still requires 1000 years to form. See: Barry Brickell, *A New Zealand Potter’s Dictionary: Techniques and Materials for the South Pacific* (Auckland: Reed Methuen Publishers, 1985).



Image 214. Emelia French, 'single pronged abacus' artwork, 2022, 150 x 180 x 8mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery.

Revisiting material contexts: uku as whenua

With uku/clay, I feel viscerally connected to the material earth for I hold in my hands its primal substance. It breathes proximity and intimacy into the studio, connecting me to the whenua/land. Uku fosters in me a feeling of togetherness in all forms, irrespective of anthropomorphic classification. In this respect, the Māori principle of whakapapa,²³⁵ whereby humans are situated within a broader ecology in which the *land* is the knowing entity, is closest to how I understand my relationship with uku.²³⁶ Māori academic and musician Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal explains that whenua means both land and placenta, reflective of the core worldview that, “All life takes place within the womb of the world.”²³⁷ Similarly, Māori writer Emilie Rākete translates “tangata whenua” to “land-people,” explaining that people are “a function of the land, of the whenua;” and “the land itself in the act of being.”²³⁸ Concerning *a soft approach*, framing the uku as knowing (rather than the human subject) offsets the conventional hierarchy for which objecthood is often addressed. Emphasising the inherent relation of humans to environment, it returns agency (the collective capacity towards activity) to the activities of the land; I also hope to do this with the clay by working with its material changeability.

For *Soft Feelings*, uku is a material metaphor for the world that both begins and exceeds me as a subject. I am reminded of the inherent connectivity of everything, that any perceivable differences are entangled together through a deep-time history of material expressions predating my arrival as a human body. In this respect, uku is a material that softens the distinction between beginnings and endings; they compost into and are composed from the same fundamental source. Following my understanding of Te Ao Māori, the earth is the source that hosts us. It mediates Te Ao Mārama (what is already) and Te Kore (void beyond, unlimited potential).²³⁹ As Royal writes, “everything in the world is believed to

235. Māori academic Dr Rāwiri Taonui explains whakapapa as a “taxonomic framework that links all animate and inanimate, known and unknown phenomena in the terrestrial and spiritual worlds.” Loosely translated as genealogy, it “binds all things.” In my project, this worldview is helpful for how I understand the vital connection between myself and clay. When I work with clay, I feel connected to the earth, as an expression of its wholeness (collective material expression). See: Rāwiri Taonui, “Whakapapa – Genealogy - Whakapapa of Creation,” Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, 5 May 2011, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/whakapapa-genealogy/page-2>.

236. Interestingly, in Māori mythology, Hineahuone (the first woman) was formed from clay. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal describes her as “the female element who comes from the soil.” Her name means earth-formed woman, birthed from the earth. See: Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, “First Peoples in Māori Tradition - Tāne, Hineahuone and Hine,” Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, 8 February 2005, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/first-peoples-in-maori-tradition/page-2>.

237. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, “Papatūānuku – the Land - Whenua – the Placenta,” Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, 2007, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/papatuanuku-the-land/page-4>.

238. Emily Rākete, “In Human: Parasites, Posthumanism, and Papatūānuku,” Artspace Aotearoa, 2017, <https://artspace-aotearoa.nz>.

239. Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, “Te Ao Mārama – the Natural World - The World of Light and Darkness,” Te Ara - the Encyclopedia of New Zealand, Ministry for Culture and Heritage Te Manatu Taonga, 24 September 2007, <https://teara.govt.nz/en/te-ao-marama-the-natural-world/page-3>.



Images 215–216. Emelia French, artwork details, 2022. Gestural explorations of interior/exterior relations.

be related...all members of a cosmic family.”²⁴⁰ We are already in “kinship with the world.”²⁴¹ With the uku, my hands host the material as it hosts me (messing with the distinction of acted/acted upon, in the ways Barad describes).²⁴²

The theory of pure experience

Developing the notion of a root source or “one primal stuff,” William James’ theory of “pure experience” complements the explorations of this chapter, of uku, Barad’s cuts, Whitehead’s feeling, and Manning’s bodying.²⁴³ James’ pure experience positions the subject, not as a fundamental stranger to the world, but as estranged through the processes of the world becoming, whereby perceptive processes construct a surrounding outside and, at the same, affirm a self as its new orientating position. Whereas perceived experience is synonymous with normative experience, as it is colloquially defined and entangled with the notion of the acting subject, James’ pure experience invites the possibility of a collective experience that predates the subject’s arrival. In this respect, James’ theory supports the hope of outmanoeuvring the subject through connection, potentially accessing a directness of experience that is the moment of the cut (Barad).

James characterises ‘pure experience’ as “*that* which is not yet any definite *what*, tho’ ready to be all sorts of whats; full both of oneness and of manything”, and that it is “...plain, unqualified actuality, or existence, a simple *that*.”²⁴⁴ It is the quantity of mass of which “everything is composed” but “only virtually or potentially either object or subject as yet.”²⁴⁵ Therefore, it has no positive definition; it ‘is’ but cannot be described yet as ‘what’ exactly, which is its character. For *Soft Feelings*, this is significant because it brings about speculative questioning of how a body is knowable if it does not have a positive definition. We come to know other bodies and, through them, ourselves.

240. Royal, “Te Ao Mārama – the Natural World - An Interconnected World.”

241. Royal.

242. Here, I want to acknowledge the context within which I work in Aotearoa New Zealand and express the excitement and awe I felt at realising that Te Ao Māori already embodied and expressed the principles I was learning by hand through my working with clay. At the same, I have been concerned that I do not want to presume my access and ability to speak to and for cultural methodologies and ontologies that are not my own nor slip into a comparative reading that would posit subaltern Māori knowledge as the same as or interchangeable with, New Materialist theory. Following Te Kawehau Hoskins and Alison Jones’ articulation of the synergy between New Materialism and Kaupapa Māori research, my inclusion of uku within *Soft Feelings* acknowledges that for Māori, “the material things of the world” can already “speak” to human beings” because in this worldview, “we are always already in relation with certain material objects.” Hoskins and Jones encourage greater acknowledgement of this overlap but emphasise that one should also “forestall interpretation.” With regards to uku specifically, my working with clay (as Pākehā) is different to the cultural specificities that accompany the traditions of uku. From my informal conversations with Māori practitioners, I determined that, in general, a respectful distance approach was the most appropriate for this project. See: Te Kawehau Hoskins and Alison Jones, *Critical Conversations in Kaupapa Māori* (London: Huia Publishers, 2017), 48–59.

243. Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 139.

244. William James, *Radical Empiricism* (United States: Longman Green and Co, 1912), 93–94.

245. James, *Radical Empiricism*, 23–24.

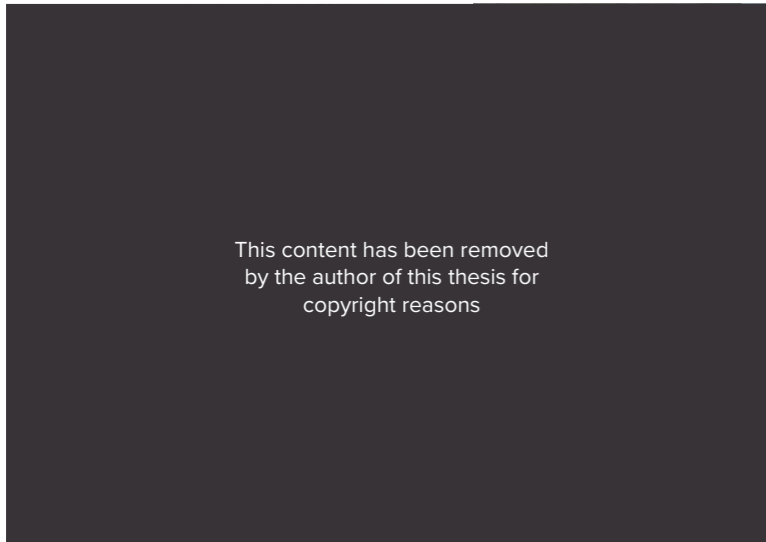


Image 217. Gabriel Orozco, *Working Tables*, 2000-2005, unfired clay, straw, egg container, bottle caps, wire mesh screen, string, stones, shells, plaster, bark, polystyrene foam, painted wood elements, pizza dough, and other materials, dimensions variable. Image from The Museum of Modern Art, USA.



Image 218. My worktable, Mum's studio, 2021. I tend to group components in a visual brainstorm for material play.



Image 219. Emelia French, artworks, 2022. Testing exhibition possibilities in my AUT studio.

Connecting with clay (as a metaphor for my environmental return, as Manning describes it), I explore the power of our relation to collectively empower our individual expression (our responsivity). In the practising, we become apart/together/apart; difference is not essentialised as it is hosted by connection, in the doing and in the artworks too. As Barad states, agential cuts are the “holding together” of the “disparate itself.”²⁴⁶ The clays combine, cracking and expressing material differences as they hold together, revealing the body to be a live mediation marking an inside from outside.

Handling the clay becomes an occasion to *either* assert or soften my subjecthood and its frames of meaning; to minorly orientate (detouring outwards towards material), as Manning advocates for, or majorly affirm (inwards, confirming a mirror image of the world). Through contact with this material, I might metaphorically thicken my skin *or* grow its porosity, and with that, my affectual porosity for receiving/perceiving felt difference. In this respect, *a soft approach* becomes an ethical framing supporting a closing of objective distance and an opening towards experience. Aiming to notice relational connectivities already inherent, akin to the Māori principle of whakapapa, *a soft approach* practically and conceptually encourages a more entangled worldview; with clay, muddying objective clarity and meaning.

Embodying explorations in Gabriel Orozco's practice

Artist Gabriel Orozco also explores relationality in his practice, focussing on the spaces between where things connect. Art historian Briony Fer writes that for Orozco, “The intervals between things are as important as the things themselves;” which is reminiscent of the ideas also discussed in the context of Samuels’ *Soft Text*.²⁴⁷ As Fer emphasises, in Orozco’s work the intervals between are not empty; they are pregnant with opportunity as charged moments within which two things/elements/materials/surfaces are in a process of contact, recalibrating and drawing the bounds of known/unknown (cutting apart and feeling themselves differently), similar to my work.

Describing Orozco’s practice, Fer writes that “parts do not add up to a whole so much as circulate in perpetual motion...part-circuiting-part.”²⁴⁸ Returning to Chan’s description of art in Chapter 3, such incompleteness foregrounds part-to-part relations ahead of the image (wholeness) of the work. As noted previously, I am most excited when the clays do not mix and connect seamlessly, when their holding together is visible. The ways the nine different clays join and their differences of hardness, whether raw or bisque-fired, become material metaphors exploring relations of sameness and difference, and how a body might hold together, even if somewhat loosely. With cracks, I

246. Barad, “Nature’s Queer Performativity,” 46.

247. Briony Fer, “The Scatter: Sculpture as Leftover,” in *Part Object Part Sculpture* (Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2005), 223.

248. Fer, “The Scatter: Sculpture as Leftover,” 223.



Images 220–224. My worktable in the AUT Wet Lab, Nov 2022.

experiment seeking out these material frictions, whereby disorders internal to the clays charge potential and express as fractures (what Barad would call cuts) in the artwork.

In Orozco's *Working Tables* (2000-2005), the table structure frames or hosts a group of part-to-part components that circuit in a "series of temporal rhythms," generating and degenerating relations, as Fer positions them.²⁴⁹ Arranging and rearranging parts, Orozco's tables invite mental play of likenesses and differences across a horizontal nonhierarchical plane. To me, the table operates as a metaphor for pure experience, propositioning the viewer to do the organisational work of determining connectivities and differences between forms. For my installations, works activate similarly, tessellating in varying degrees of aesthetic closeness, percolating social groups and friendships, while arranged horizontally on shelves and low-lying plinths (Image 219). For *Fer*, Orozco charges the space between parts, building frictional potentials to "trigger an extreme mobility," teasing tensions between the system and its capacity for change.²⁵⁰ In this respect, I understand Orozco's *Working Tables* as a sculptural installation equivalent to the still-life arrangements in Philip Guston's paintings. In both instances, the objects are activated like leftovers or fertile composts for thinking about what Fer describes as "not for what once has been but what will be. They suggest forever-fluctuating possibilities."²⁵¹ The objects break through their associated meanings and invite relationally determined meanings to bubble, whereby parts are valued for what they are to each other. Logics form idiosyncratically; loose and shifting, open and variable.

Orozco's *Working Tables* reminds me of how I work in the Wet Lab, with ingredients for making spread out over my worktable. Leftovers from old work, filled with unfired shards of broken 'wall tiles', chunks of smashed-up bisque-fired work, powdered specks of dust, scraps and other components ('grip rings' and 'grip sticks') are arranged into groupings based on like-minded colours, textures and shapes. As I work, the table of possibilities grows; yesterday's dusty remnants are scooped up and smudged onto the skin of today's work. If a piece breaks away from an artwork whilst drying in the greenware phase, it is added to the worktable, where it remains until the right opportunity arrives to reinsert it into another work. The table is a visual brainstorm of parts at play that the slabs of fresh clay (cut from the bag) then host. In this respect, scraps, leftovers, and components are foregrounded in the ceramic artworks, forming their 'flavour' where composing and composting happen together, generating and degenerating bodies of relations like Orozco's *Working Tables*.

In Orozco's practice, I observe an interest in how a body assembles. In *Mis Manos son Mi Corazón* (*My Hands Are My Heart*), (1991) (Image 225), the

249. Fer, 228.

250. Fer, "The Scatter: Sculpture as Leftover," 223.

251. Fer, 228.

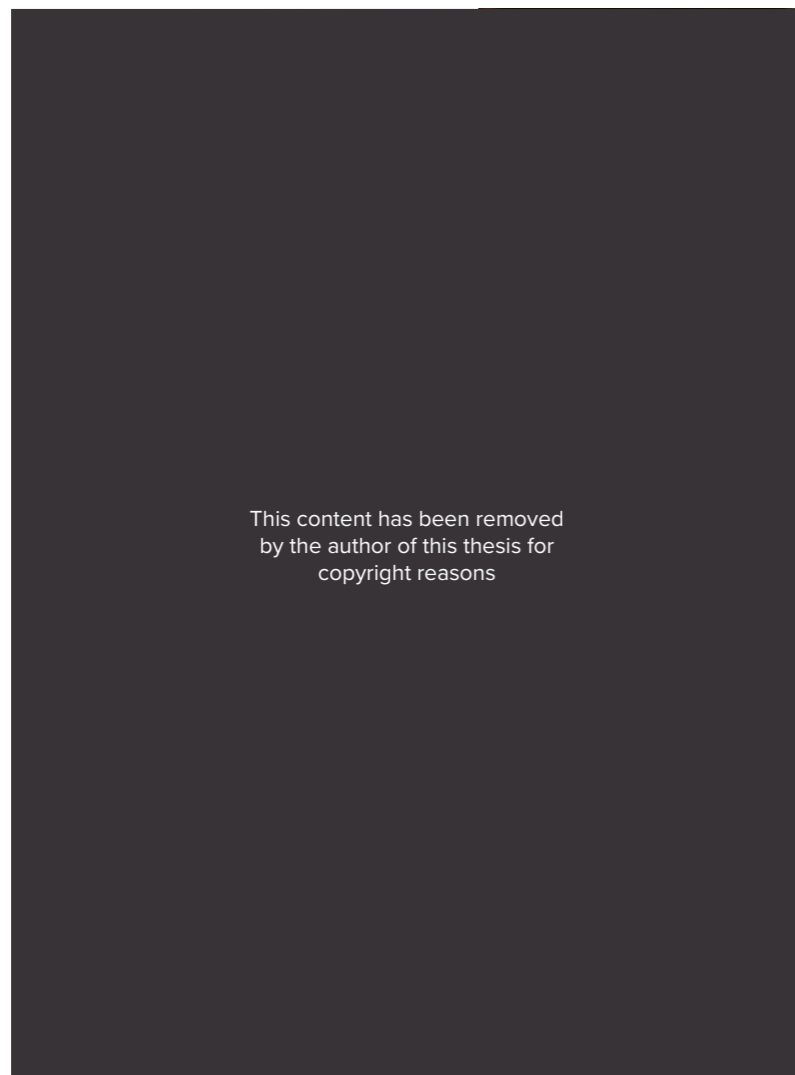


Image 225. Gabriel Orozco, *Mis Manos son Mi Corazón (My Hands Are My Heart)*, 1991, two silver dye bleach prints, 232 x 318mm. Image from The Museum of Modern Art, USA.

clay records the trace of the space inside/between Orozco's hands as its form. He holds its body in his open hands. The clay becomes a cast of negative space, expressing the space between his hands (my ceramic artworks may also be described this way). Presented as two sequential photographs, Orozco's hands are closed in front of his heart, and then, in the second image, he opens them out, revealing a clay form. In one respect, this pairing could be simplified as cause and effect; the artist squeezes the clay, and it shapes accordingly. However, this would only be part of the story. It might be better explored as a bodying process that complicates form by revealing how the positive space, which is the sculpture, is in fact another body's negative space (which is also true of the works of *Soft Feelings*).

As stated, *Soft Feelings* understands bodies as only knowable by their outsides (form and edges). Similarly, for Orozco, his hands feel what they are not. Orozco's hands shape together/apart, making the expression of a shared feeling (between hands and clay). Through the title of *My Hands Are My Heart*, Orozco positions the clay as a residual trace of their relation; his gesture cuts difference but it is not definitive. His perspective of the relation foregrounds the togetherness of himself and the clay (uku as whenua). In my practice, I seek to do the same, whereby the differences of the newly formed artwork are celebrated as a shared creative expression.

In another work, *Yielding Stone* (1992) (Image 227), Orozco rolled a large plasticine sphere the weight of his own body through the streets of New York. Due to the materiality of plasticine, its surface and outer body received everything it made contact with, accumulating sediments and marks as it rolled. While wet, the clay also has similar materiality. Orozco explains that, unlike clay, "Plasticine never hardens. It's always changing, always dirty, absorbing all the dust and imprints" and, in this regard, has an "organic presence."²⁵² Like his body, *Yielding Stone* is a "vulnerable mass" that continuously is imprinted as it moves.²⁵³ This artwork expresses Orozco's bodying, as it happens beside himself. In my practice, sometimes I cut fresh slabs of clay and intentionally work them on a dirty surface with the leftovers from previous making. The clay receives this sediment, as well as the marks of my hands as I work it. Whilst Orozco walks, I work; both connecting with the material through our moving/movements. More recently, developing the nature of the gesture, I have crumbled entire greenware works into thick beds of grit, then taken a ball or slab of raw white clay and rolled it through (Image 226). Thickly coated, the sediment functions a bit like glaze.

Like my work with clay, Orozco explores the joy of observing one's becoming externalised in a related form, in step with one another, side by side. Simon

252. Briony Fer, "Gabriel Orozco: Interviewed by Briony Fer: Crazy about Saturn," in *Gabriel Orozco* (Thames & Hudson, 2006), 57.

253. Fer, "Gabriel Orozco: Interviewed by Briony Fer: Crazy about Saturn," 57



Image 226. Emelia French, greenware 'standing painting' detail, 2022. I rolled the white clay through a bed of black clay sediment, accumulating this texture.

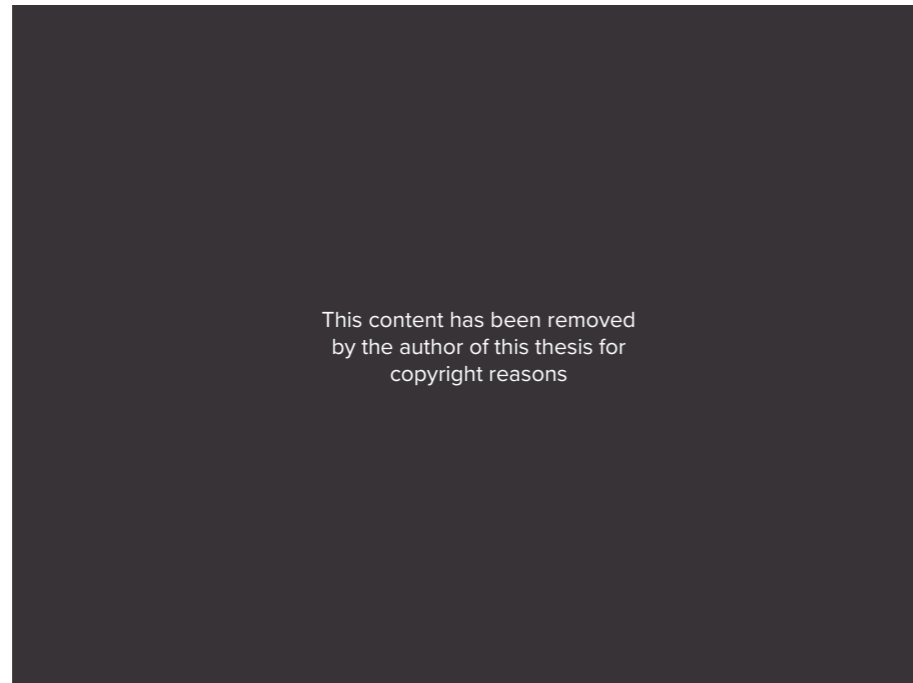


Image 227. Gabriel Orozco, *Yielding Stone*, 1992, plasticine, 368 x 394 x 406mm. Image from The Museum of Modern Art, USA.

O'Sullivan, writing on Spinoza's concept of the joyful encounter and the potential of friendship, proposes that joy arises at the moment when two or more bodies meet and "agree with one another," and through this moment of affirmation are empowered to become more.²⁵⁴ Encounters produce us, as we comprise a network of bodily affects (prosaically considered in the section, Interlude, *Thoughts from home*). O'Sullivan writes that affect informs our "power to act in the world."²⁵⁵ He says this is because affects begin processes of "resingularisation," which is how our subjectivity recombines reflexively as we move, decomposing and recomposing with every relation.²⁵⁶

O'Sullivan positions joy as the affect that arises in our experiencing synchronicity across difference that exceeds subjective knowledge, describing it as "a sense of cosmic communion" that the subject does not experience as it exceeds the subject (possibly pre-cut, in the way described by Barad).²⁵⁷ In this respect, joy is the moment of mutual "affirmation that takes us beyond ourselves," where we might start to become beside ourselves, building commonalities across differences, and recomposing closer in feeling with others; as Orozco does, by walking in step with *Yielding Stone*.²⁵⁸ By supporting the plasticine ball to move, rolling it in accompaniment with his own movement, he positions his body in sympathy with that of the ball. Matching weight and walking speed, he frames both his body and that of the plasticine in equivalence, forming a material friendship. The material becomes 'more' through his walking and the accumulating dust and imprints; it inhabits the street and is inhabited by it. Similarly, in my practice with clay, the artworks embody the feeling of our relation affectually and physically. They promote a difference of expression hosted by a relation of togetherness; the clay responds to my haptic touch, embodying our relation as an artwork.

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Chapter 5, *A soft approach: part two*, continues to explore my attempts to befriend clay. Like Orozco does with his practice, Chapter 4 has questioned the notion of subject-driven agency (attempting to outmanoeuvre the subject), demonstrating how *Soft Feelings* works otherwise and is, therefore, minor in its orientation (Manning). In accordance with Barad's agential cut and Massumi's affect, this chapter has repositioned agency (the capacity to act) as responsivity (the capacity to be acted upon). In the context of Te Ao Māori/Te Ao Mārama (and Aotearoa New Zealand), uku/clay has a spiritual significance that complements the project's exploration of its material activity. This chapter has emphasised how we are *already* in kinship with the earth, inherently connected as it is the earth that hosts our activity. Chapter 5 develops my aim to work in feeling with clay so that the background of pure experience may be affectually palpable in the ceramic objects.

254. Simon O'Sullivan, "Friendship as Community: From Ethics to Politics," in *Takkekortet: The Written Acknowledgement* (Denmark: Rum46, 2004), 20–21.

255-258. O'Sullivan, "Friendship as Community: From Ethics to Politics," 20–21.



Image 228. Emelia French, artworks (pair), 2022.

Chapter 5: A soft approach: part two

This chapter considers how *a soft approach* methodology grows receptivity and practises a light touch. Continuing the theoretical framings introduced in *A soft approach: part one*, it explores the ways the artist might hear a material's call to work with it. Although similar in conceptual interests, Chapter 4 prioritised the unravelling of the subject and Chapter 5 expands upon the ethics of our relation. With an emphasis on practice, it provides examples of what I understand as my communing with clay, explaining how I haptically feel the clay's activity and respond to it as we work. In addition, it develops O'Sullivan's positioning of friendship as a moment of shared affirmation that catalyses becoming. Responding to the research questions of *Soft Feelings*, this chapter details my attempts to *befriend* material, working in support of clay and prioritising its expression. Speculating an affirmative aesthetic, it ponders how the objects might foreground a typically backgrounded connectivity through their difference, collectively empowering potential (the capacity for change).

Building upon the discoveries of Chapter 4, I am interested in how the practice might potentially exceed my subjective agency through its becoming an interior system of relations, whereby the artist is implicated as a part of *its* play. *Soft Feelings* catalyses its unfolding, culminating in constellations of series, whereby one work arrives and pulls forth the next. Different groupings percolate, expanding subsets and giving rise to new variations. As mentioned throughout the document, artwork categories include 'wall tiles', 'abacuses', and 'standing paintings,' but there are casual sortings too, such as the 'grip rings'. Within these categories, further opportunities arise for organisation; the 'abacuses' are distinguishable by rolled, smiling, and sloppy square forms and the number of 'grip sticks' (single, four, five, seven). Inventing and self-organising an open system of material relations, new forms grow responsive to internal principles rather than what I choose to create. As a group, their complementary aesthetic relations amplify their affect, individually and collectively. As discussed in Chapter 1, this is one of the ways the practice explores friendship, enjoying how aesthetic differences come together en masse, their frictional charge palpable as an affectual potential.



Image 229. Emelia French, greenware 'sloppy slab' object detail, 2021. Stained with Bot Pots Pot Black clay dust, my hands marked the surface of the Macs Mud Classic White clay as I worked it.

On friendship

I am interested in friendship as a relational framework for thinking through how material and artist work together and considering the speculative ethics *Soft Feelings* might offer. Oppositional tendencies and conflicting forces are played up to emphasise the potential harmony of difference. In addition, frictions are held together in balance, between and within the artworks (between clays).

Céline Condorelli's writings on friendship support my discoveries. She describes friendship as a form of "agreement between bodies" whereby "the collective sum" of the relation "proposes something that each part alone could not."²⁵⁹ Synonymous words for agreement include sympathy, communion (correspondence), likeness, and resemblance. However, it also infers uniformity and similitude, whereas the antonyms of difference, deviance, variability and divergence are more in line with the project intent. *Soft Feelings* is interested in friendship as an agreement that *begins* variability and divergence, leading to a collective sum (artwork) that has a degree of difference to what exists already within the practice.

Through *a soft approach*, I work to build closeness with the material without closing its potential. The word 'close' holds conflicting meaning, inferring proximity and the reduction of an opening. Generally defined, "close" means "to bar passage through," "to stop," "to bring to an end," and "to leave no opening."²⁶⁰ But close can also be "to draw near" or to be "intimate, familiar."²⁶¹ *A soft approach* builds closeness with clay that *opens, begins,* and makes *possible*. It works for a reduction in distance and expansion of difference. As stated by Barad, "Distance is the condition of objectivity." I get close to the clay, so that the potential afforded by our relation is suspended as an affectual charge in the artworks, closing the distance through their call to feeling.²⁶²

I develop material intimacies that are specific to the kilns, environments, and clays, 'getting to know' their behavioural temperaments whilst retaining an openness for unknown potentials that may arise through the process. On this, Condorelli writes, "It is essential to behold an unknown dimension in and for our friends."²⁶³ Extending this notion, it is essential to allow for unknowability within every relation so that it is open to becoming otherwise rather than affirming what is already known. This means I appreciate the bubbled surface of overcooked clay, the warp of a rectangular 'wall tile' flexing out of shape, and the accidental marks that arrive. In friendship, my intentionality is secondary to how material relations develop the work.

259. Céline Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps* (London: Book Works, 2014), 8.

260. "Close," Merriam-Webster Dictionary, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/close>.

261. "Close."

262. Barad, "Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers," 56.

263. Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps*, 22.



Image 230. *Soft Feelings* artworks in my AUT studio, Nov 2022.

In conversation with Condorelli, Johan Frederik Hartle wonders whether friendship might be “about enabling each to be oneself.”²⁶⁴ An affinity across difference, he describes it as “an affectionate relationship in and through which humans mutually increase their *potentia agendi*, their vital capacities.”²⁶⁵ In this respect, friendship might be the productive relation of coming together and becoming apart, similar to Barad’s description of the agential cut. Speculatively, I wonder whether the world *already* exists in friendship, whereby every relational difference is backgrounded by inherent kinship. This might be the (as yet) uncut connection that I feel in my working in synchronicity with clay.

On ‘Care’, feminist theorist María Puig de la Bellacasa writes that we might “think from the perspective of how cuts foster relationships rather than how they disconnect worlds.”²⁶⁶ She proposes that Barad’s cuts are opportunities for reframing “partial connections” whereby new patterns might be more sympathetic to the “web of relationalities” they inherit “to make them possible.”²⁶⁷ In practising, I feel connected and apart with every skin-to-clay contacting; I feel what separates us at the same instance we connect. Working to support its bodily language, susceptible to being moved by its touch, is to work *for* the togetherness of our difference, distinct from the essentialism of categorical difference. I hope to empower collective expression (realising potential as possibility), which is how O’Sullivan positions the joy of friendship.

Complementary to Manning’s notion of the minor, Condorelli speculates that minor friendships (different to homosocial friendships of power) might be able to resist “individual authorial voice,” together speaking through a “multiplicity of voices.”²⁶⁸ In my practice, the affectual resonance of an artwork (or its individual voice) is comprised of many frictional forces that all have a say in the aesthetic shaping of the work, each discernible as a part comprising the whole. Working in a sympathetic agreement, they constitute the ceramic artwork, together becoming more than can be perceived. In addition, as a group of objects, their affectual resonance is amplified by their collectivity of differences, as parts comprising an installation that speak a multiplicity of material expressions.

264. Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps*, 21.

265. Condorelli, 16.

266. María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 78.

267. Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 78.

268. Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps*, 8.



Images 231–232. Peter Hawkesby, *Tender Brick: The Material Epiphanies of Peter Hawkesby* exhibition, Objectspace, 2020. Images courtesy of Objectspace, taken by Samuel Harnett.

Joyful material expressions in Peter Hawkesby's practice

Aotearoa New Zealand ceramicist Peter Hawkesby's approach to clay's materiality has informed my working methods. He, too, has a learned sensitivity for what the material wants to do, following its unruliness to build loose structures that slouch exuberantly. Within his sculptural assemblages, clay embodies its materiality comfortably and assumes form easily. In his hands, clay seems free to breathe, slump, crack, bubble, and move – arranging into lopsided and saggy object-scapes. It is as if, with his support, clay is becoming whatever it wants to.

My first encounter with Hawkesby's practice was visiting *Tender Brick: The Material Epiphanies of Peter Hawkesby* at Objectspace.²⁶⁹ Hawkesby's characteristic tick motif was built into most of the sculptures in varying colours, forms and textures. They seem to jubilantly speak a multiplicity of expressions, together affirming YES! In this respect, I felt like I had arrived at a party; clays “primping, puckering and gussying,” mixing and mingling, and living it up.²⁷⁰

Curator of *Tender Brick*, Richard Fahey states, Hawkesby's sculptures have a “livedness” not unlike a human body.²⁷¹ They present a “double identity” being “...suggestive of a range of human postures and accessories...while also emphatically retaining the real meaning of their origins” as clay.²⁷² Hawkesby works with a sensitivity for the inherent kinship between his body and that of the clay. He plays up how the clay is already materially alike to the materiality of the human body. By drawing such likenesses, Hawkesby's works affectually amplify the sensory pleasure of touch. The exhibition title, *Tender Brick*, references artist Gertrude Stein's 1914 publication, *Tender Buttons*.²⁷³ Fahey writes that Hawkesby explores the “incomparability of ‘touch’” in the same way that Stein works with text “unencumbered by the preconceptions of language.”²⁷⁴ On this, Fahey proposes that the works are to be “visually felt,” and that “the eye is the organ delivering that haptic experience.”²⁷⁵ Visually hosting the anticipation of connection, they present with an intimate directness and a logic internal to relation.

269. *Tender Brick: The Material Epiphanies of Peter Hawkesby* was exhibited at Objectspace in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Nov 2020–Feb 2021.

270. Richard Fahey, “Tender Brick: The Material Epiphanies of Peter Hawkesby,” Objectspace, 25 November 2020, <https://www.objectspace.org.nz/journal/tender-brick-the-material-epiphanies-of-peter-1/>.

271. Fahey, “Tender Brick.”

272. Fahey.

273. Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons* (New York: Claire Marie, 1914).

274. Fahey, “Tender Brick.”

275. Fahey.



Image 233. Peter Hawkesby, *Impaled Tick with Blushing Cheek*, 2018. Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.



Image 234. Peter Hawkesby, *White Demolition; Demolition Tick*, 2018. Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.

Fahey proposes that the ceramic artworks comprising *Tender Brick* spark “a recognition within our nervous system that these objects, at their most profound, talk to our corporeal reality as sentient beings”, because of how they are “indistinguishable from manipulation.”²⁷⁶ The works harbour material evidences of Hawkesby’s human touch. Holding “every physical compression, slightest indentation, crevice or fracture,” they embody haptic relation (between Hawkesby’s hands and the clay) as an aesthetic potential, similar to my intent.²⁷⁷ They “exhibit the wear and tear of their making,” adorned with glaze dressings, splits, bubbles and other attributions that speak about the memory of their process.²⁷⁸

Hawkesby practises truthfulness to clay as contemplations of the poetic potential of the slab, lump, knob, wedge and coil with careful consideration and serendipity combined.²⁷⁹ Perhaps the clay slumped that way, relaxing into shape. Fahey likens it to “an ability to simultaneously court the ritual and the casual,” teetering between formalism and informality, the works enfold the supports that carry their play.²⁸⁰ These concerns are important in my practice too. Supports are built interior to artworks in multiple ways; my hand is visible as prior support, and the base structures holding a shape vertically or allowing it to balance are made part of the work – they are fundamental (not supplemental).

Hawkesby teases ordering vernaculars, gluing compositions together out of parts for play so the artworks *look* like systems, yet somehow appear unsystematic in terms of a recognisable logic. Old and new, electric and wood-fired, glazed and unglazed, cracked and clean, enfold an eclectic interior system of ‘this and that’ which becomes the artwork. Fahey calls them post-kiln assemblages.²⁸¹ He likens this quality to an “aura of intentionality” that permeates the works, even when “no obvious interpretation is readily available.”²⁸² Like my practice, Hawkesby draws upon the orderly to dismantle its meaning from the inside, interested in social space and conversations that exceed what can already be said. Sense and nonsense in equal measure, his sculptures resist words and invite touch, building a language of bodily expression that is their own.

More recently, at his exhibition *Bone Thrones* at Anna Miles Gallery,²⁸³ Hawkesby explained that because he works with different clays of varying shrinkage rates as I do, bits ‘drop out of place’ in the firing process.²⁸⁴ He cannot always remember ‘what went where’ nor is he worried about it, preferring to insert bits back where they don’t quite belong. Viewing the new works, it is evident that they cross-pollinate, swapping parts so that colours and marks oscillate. Each ‘Bonethrone’ plays with notions of parts and wholes. Similar to how Fer described Orozco’s *Working Tables*, in Hawkesby’s work, part-to-part

276-282. Fahey, “Tender Brick.”

283. *Bone Thrones* was exhibited at Anna Miles Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Nov 2022.

284. Statements made in this paragraph and the following reference my memory of a personal conversation I had with Hawkesby at the opening of *Bone Thrones*, Nov 2022.

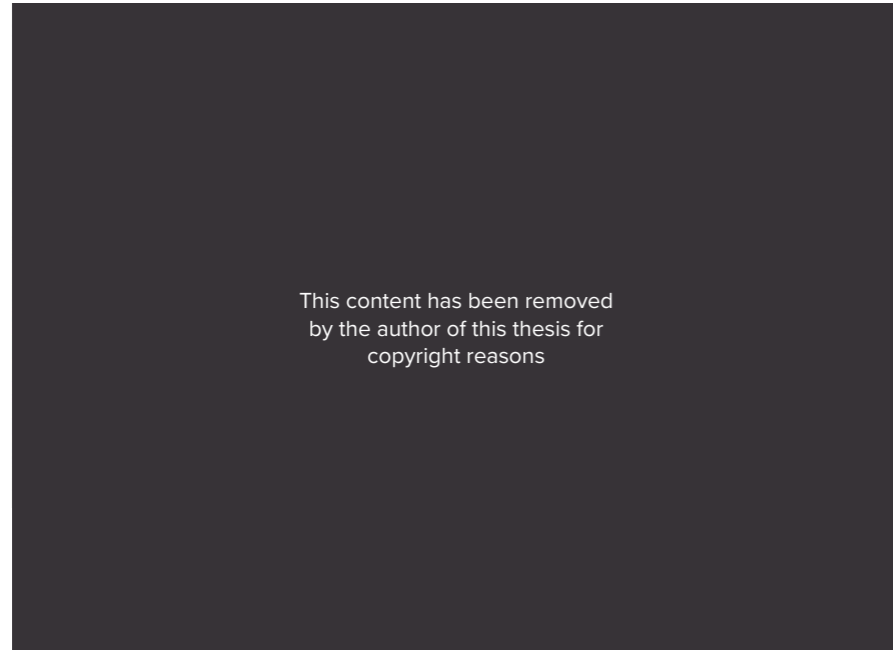


Image 235. Philip Guston, *Monument*, 1976, oil paint on canvas, 2032 x 2794mm. Image from Tate Gallery, London, UK.



Image 236. Peter Hawkesby, *Bonethrone gate*, 2002, ceramic, 300mm (h). Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.



Image 237. Peter Hawkesby, *Bonethrone Fan Hamper*, 2022, ceramic, 360mm (h). Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.

relations do not seamlessly add up to a singularity. Not containable in their physical materiality, his sculpture's horizontality connects interchanging parts and compiles leftovers into new forms. The inspiration for *Bone Thrones* came from an old tile Hawkesby made in 1999, rediscovered when moving house and incorporated into the exhibition assemblages. In my asking Hawkesby about it, he said he always works in this way, combining old and new, similar to how I recycle old work (smashed tiles, critters, and leftover greenware).

Fahey (also the curator for *Bone Thrones*) writes that they are “monuments to the texture of memory,” which I translate as embodied, muscular and fleshy, haptic and non-verbal.²⁸⁵ Their meaning is vague, but their structure's physical components are transparent and on show. In some, I am reminded of Guston's works, such as *Monument* (1976), which are machinic and limb-like in equal measure like an entangled system of intestines or pipes. As with Guston's paintings, Hawkesby's sculptures evoke a liveliness that affectually pulses. He describes the ceramic sculptures as imparting a knowing ‘wink’. Returning to Guston's eye motif, I am interested in how Hawkesby also builds a palpable tension between the impulsive and the systematic, and reason and nonsense, so that the clay seems to run circles around our mind's recognition of its seemingly static materiality. Encountering them, it is as though my perception is the punchline. Like a wink, the ‘Bonethrones’ are friendly and affectionate in their teasing with meaning, offering the feeling of being playfully led into a setup that blurs the distinction between order and disorder. In this way, Hawkesby works with a light touch.

Hawkesby's material dexterity is different from the longstanding tradition of studio ceramics. Fahey emphasises the significance of Hawkesby's arrival to the Aotearoa ceramic scene for how his approach defied the prevailing orthodoxy.²⁸⁶ Making reference to *Five by Five*, a group exhibition at Denis Cohn Gallery,²⁸⁷ with Hawkesby, Bronwynne Cornish, John Parker, Warren Tippet, and Denis O'Connor, Fahey positions it as a counter-culture moment and the first local and substantial instance of post-modern ceramic practice.²⁸⁸ Reflecting upon the exhibition, O'Connor (one of the exhibiting artists) wrote that for each of them, “a new way of handling clay opened,” whereby works contributed “expressive vocabularies” that celebrated clay at its “most primal, alchemical and essential condition, speaking in its purest tones.”²⁸⁹ Rupturing dominant ways of working by attempting to listen to the material, receptively shaping and responding to the clay, the exhibition explored the inherent potentialities of the material. Hawkesby's knack for inventiveness is evident in his capacity for play, for

285. Richard Fahey, “PETER HAWKESBY: Bone Thrones,” Anna Miles Gallery, accessed November 20, 2022, <https://annamilesgallery.com/exhibitions/peter-hawkesby-4/>.

286. Fahey, “PETER HAWKESBY: Bone Thrones.”

287. *Five by Five* was exhibited at Denis Cohn Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, 1980.

288. Fahey, “PETER HAWKESBY: Bone Thrones.”

289. Denis O'Connor, “Mud Company: The “Five by Five” Exhibition,” Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, September 2015.



Image 238. Dad lying in sympathy with *Sunbathing rocks*, 2020.

exploring what Fahey describes as the “eccentricities of touch.”²⁹⁰ Rather than aspiring to material mastery, Hawkesby fosters friendships with and between clay bodies so that his skill arises through a learned haptic sensitivity for what clay seemingly wants to do or say. Hawkesby says if the clay didn’t ‘talk back’ he wouldn’t keep working with it – and because of this, his ceramic sculptures become otherwise, casually indifferent about the a priori expectations of objecthood. Throughout *Bone Thrones* are gestures that emphasise the space Hawkesby affords clay in his making processes so that its materiality is foregrounded. For example, in *Bonethrone Fan Hamper* (2022) (Image 237), Hawkesby has made vertical cuts into a slab of clay. As the clay heats and warps in the firing, the splits open and slump, pulling apart. This slight and simple moment is one of the most exciting discoveries in the exhibition and case study for Hawkesby’s receptivity to potential material expressions.

Receptivity

Receptivity became a key method for a *soft approach* as a response to an unexpected moment in the backyard of my dad’s house in Ngāmotu New Plymouth in the early stages of *Soft Feelings* (March 2020). As stated in Chapter 1, *Chronology of Soft Feelings*, I arranged collected rocks on lengths of coloured linen and left them outside for two weeks to record a trace of their presence. One day, elsewhere in the garden, Dad called out to me. I found him lying on the lawn, grinning, his body decorated with rocks ‘in sympathy’ with fabric. I took a photograph, laughing at this ‘classic Dad’ gesture.

On reflection, Dad practised answerability, responding to the arrangement on the lawn as a proposition to play. His intervention extended the work’s duration because he participated in a friendly way to what was already happening. Dad cocreated the work, his body enfolding into the composition, becoming relationally implicated. I later asked him why he did this, and he said, “Material talks by your intervening with it. Intervention is a social work term. Communication is always an intervention that changes both; as soon as we communicate, we intervene with the trajectory of another, and via reflexivity, ours.”²⁹¹

I began to understand that my capacity to respond receptively to support the material was catalysed by my intervening with it. Interrupting the trajectories of subject and object, my subjecthood is softened by the clay at the moment I affirm its material expression. Hand and clay correspond through bodily movement comprising our body language, and the memory of our relationship is enfolded into the clay body as an aesthetic.

290. Fahey, “Tender Brick.”

291. Personal conversation with Dad at home, Aug 2022.

Listening as a metaphor for haptic receptivity

With receptivity, I practise listening to the material so that I might feel what *else* is potentially available through our relation. Karen Barad describes listening as a decision to be responsible to the other; it is the ethical call of entanglement.²⁹² They write that listening is “the ability to respond,” and “an obligation to be responsive” to what one hears, from the other “not entirely separate from what we call the self.”²⁹³ Importantly, in the context of *Soft Feelings*, listening embodies more than sound and ear; it is how the artist becomes sensitive enough to receive the bodily language of the material and the emergent tone of the event, foregrounding it as the aesthetic of the artwork.

Beginning as a question enacted physically, receptivity is my asking the clay what we can do together and my answerability to what is offered, similarly to how Hawkesby treats his clay. Anthropologist Tim Ingold’s writings on material intimacies in the practices of art and craft are helpful framings for my understanding of receptivity. He writes that in our touching material, we “bring the movements of our own being (or rather, becoming) into correspondence with the movements of the materials.”²⁹⁴ For *Soft Feelings*, communication and exchange happen as relational bodily movements, similar to Orozco’s *Yielding Stone* and his falling into step with the material, or Dad lying, in keeping with the fabric and rocks. In a reorientation of position, order, and relationship, the artist is affected by the potential of the physicality of the process, connecting haptically with the material.

Ingold writes, “materials think in us, and we think through them.”²⁹⁵ Like Donna Haraway, he proposes that making with material is a more authentic type of inquiry because “the conduct of thought goes along with, and continually answers to, the fluxes and flows of the materials with which we work.”²⁹⁶ Making with is not an imposition upon a material but instead aims to listen to what the material might want to do. He explains, “Suddenly something is flashing up in front of you as if it’s telling you something.”²⁹⁷ With clay I am haptically susceptible, responding impulsively to its material dialectics so the art-object might arrive as a received form.

292. Barad, “Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers,” 69.

293. Barad, 69.

294. Tim Ingold, “An Ecology of Materials,” in *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality* (Zürich-Berlin: diaphanes, 2014), 65.

295. Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2013), 6–7.

296. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 40; Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 6–7.

297. Karianne Fogelberg, Tim Ingold, and Max Lamb, “Materials Are Constantly Astonishing: In Conversation with Max Lamb and Tim Ingold,” in *Power of Material/Politics of Materiality* (Zürich-Berlin: diaphanes, 2014), 79.



Image 239. Emelia French, unfinished greenware ‘wall tile’ (process), 2022.



Image 240. Emelia French, greenware, 2022. The greenware ‘wall tile’ above (Image 239) was repurposed into this object instead.

Practising receptively

The material is already potentially charged when I first open a bag of clay, its potential possibilities overspilling. At first, I work with habitual gestures (rolling, slapping, squishing) as a way of catalysing the making, a warm-up that loosens and prepares my body to respond. Through the physicality of the process, I work to become pliable and flexible myself, matching the malleability of the clay. Perhaps the leftovers from the ‘wall tiles’ instigated a new subset of artworks. How does my practising receptively allow me to notice the value of what might otherwise be overlooked or discarded? As indicated in the previous chapter concerning Orozco’s *Working Tables*, the notion of the leftover as a *potential excess* continues to be productive for bringing about new forms.

For example, a large pile of leftovers builds as I work on a tile. These are the strips of rolled and mixed clays (cut away from the main body of the slab), which I ball into lumps for later use, comprising up to nine different clays enfolded into a streaky mixture (raw terracotta, white, and black clays, as well as dried sediments). As a mix, it behaves unpredictably. The platelets are so different between clays that they cannot orientate and move in the same way, similar to unwedged clay fresh from the bag.



Images 241–242. Emelia French, greenware 'standing painting' and 'wall tile', 2022. Although the clay started as a tile (bottom), through the process, it became a 'standing painting' object (top).

The leftover 'wall tile' clay amalgamation has the most internal tensions (resistance) of all the combinations I work with. Because of its rigidity, to work with it, my body must respond with equal toughness to that of the clay, slamming it hard on the floor over and over or whacking it hard with the edge of the rolling pin (used like a wooden bat). It requires this treatment for it to join to withstand the firing. This feels more appropriate than adding water to the clay body to 'reclaim' it back to a conventionally workable texture – the typical approach and corresponding term for that action. For me, hitting the raw clay hard is more sympathetically responsive to its ever-changing materiality as it presents in this dehydrated and crumbling state.

I try to accept the clay as it is and respond to its changes. The materiality of the clay is subject to extreme variation under environmental conditions. In the Wet Lab, the air-conditioning is so intense that within 30 minutes of exposure, it can go from sticky and floppy to crumbly and rigid. If the artwork is not completed when the clay is malleable, we keep going, and the rigidity of the clay thereafter becomes a sculptural component to explore. In this respect, receptivity is how the artist works in feeling with the tone of the material's expression and responds in kind. Going with the clay, in these instances, is about contributing an equivalent and befitting gesture that amplifies its material expression, welcoming its potential changeability.

Working in support

Céline Condorelli describes support as "the feeling of an intimacy" that blurs and softens "great divisions" through "proximity."²⁹⁸ She explains,

No support can take place outside a close encounter, getting entangled in a situation and becoming implicated in it. A desire emerges, an offer opens; they are expressed in different ways, emitted or projected without or before being fully formed. It is not a word but a call, a longing; it cannot rely on intellectual awareness or abstract formation, but requires a proximity and intimacy (one needs to recognise that it is a call and not just noise). This unarticulated moment is one of an intimate, un-named knowledge; someone is listening, someone hears something.²⁹⁹

Condorelli uses listening as a metaphor for responsive action that is supportive. She emphasises the closeness required to be able to hear the call for support; one has to be in hearing range. For my practice, physical touch between clay and skin offers a proximity with which to build an intimacy, enough so that I might begin to work responsively to what the clay 'needs' through haptics. Such understandings remain speculative, and it would be problematic to the research questions of this project for me to presume to always know clay's needs. Instead, through our contact, we activate together.

298. Céline Condorelli, "Directions for Use," in *Support Structures* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), 10–11.

299. Condorelli, "Directions for Use," 15.

Condorelli contextualises supportive structures and systems with the power to “undo simple binary oppositions and work on the inherent relational level between forces.”³⁰⁰ In positioning my hands as an opposing force to the clay, I provoke our relationship as frictional material forces, which is different to the categorical opposition between subject and object. In this instance, our bodies are not inherently opposed; moving against the clay, my hands offer resistance that supplements its material expression. The artist works in support of its difference rather than seeking to homogenise it by returning it to its regular consistency straight out of the bag or throwing it out (determining it unusable).

When practising, I constantly recalibrate my position, moving my body *around* the clay, angling and moderating my physical force to match the clay’s potential character. In touch with the material, I may become “too close to see” objectively as stated by Condorelli.³⁰¹ Working away at the established borders within my perception, practising expands what Hans-Georg Gadamer describes as my subjective horizon. I do so in the hope of feeling what Conderelli lists as the “unspoken, the unsatisfied, the late and the latent, the in-process, the pre-thought, the not-yet manifest, the undeveloped, the unrecognised, the delayed, the unanswered, the unavailable, the not-deliverable... the unseen [and] the dormant;” which *Soft Feelings* positions as softness.³⁰² Touch is a means to lead the artist to different objects, not by encountering them as I did in the first year of the project as they are already within the world, but by becoming vulnerable to the process that makes them.

Condorelli writes that methods which work in support need to “work, on the periphery, on a permeable edge working within from without: the site of production of the work is the border.”³⁰³ She locates support as working beside, next to, and at the edge. In practice, my skin is the permeable edge connecting interior/exterior, wearing away at the borders of my perception through haptically contacting clay. On this, Sara Ahmed brings attention to the overlap of contingency and contact. She writes, contingency is “linked to proximity, to getting close enough to touch another and be moved by another.”³⁰⁴ She proposes that touch is “attachment” in movement,” whereby we are “moved by the proximity of others.”³⁰⁵ We feel the surface of another; it impresses upon us as an “intensification of feeling” (affect).³⁰⁶ In this respect, touch closes objective distance through proximity. Returning to Barad’s notion of the cut, through touch, I feel (haptically) what separates us at the same instance that we connect.

300. Condorelli, “Directions for Use,” 12.

301. Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps*, 11.

302. Condorelli, “Directions for Use,” 13.

303. Condorelli, 17.

304. Ahmed, “Collective Feelings: Or, The Impressions Left by Others,” 27.

305. Ahmed, 27.

306. Ahmed, 27.

Receptive action in Xin Cheng’s practice

Jan Verwoert positions support as “a mode of exposed potentiality... dedicated to the future arrival of a different spirit.”³⁰⁷ For him, support is a gesture of care that “comes to us from someone else...something that one is empowered to do by someone else whose needs one responds.”³⁰⁸ Like Verwoert, Aotearoa New Zealand artist Xin Cheng positions listening as the care of hearing ‘something’ else’s needs, anticipating the arrival of a ‘different spirit’ and simultaneously growing room in a practice to accommodate it. Her practice was an early reference for *Soft Feelings*. I encountered the art publication, *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness*, around the same time I was exploring wabi-sabi aesthetics (which Cheng is also interested in), and consequently started thinking about listening as a framing for *a soft approach*.³⁰⁹

Exploring the relationship between receptive action and hosting in Cheng’s practice, in *Walking from Maori Bay to Muriwai 20160807* (2017), produced with Aotearoa New Zealand artist Ziggy Lever, they describe listening as a bodily “porousness” that “allows things to bubble.”³¹⁰ Porosity has been explored throughout this exegesis through concepts such as Bergson’s open whole and Barad’s notion of bodies as containers that don’t hold. Their concept of listening adds to these considerations because listening is expanded as embodied action. They write listening is “enabling” and “providing” space, “just following what is there... not even making the drawing but letting the drawing appear,” similar to Ingold’s description of making with material.³¹¹

Cheng activates found materials differently from their common use to facilitate conversations around fixed meaning, supporting new possibilities for object expression. Aotearoa New Zealand writer Allan Smith proposes that her practice wears away “the edges of other things, including the other people looking at it.”³¹² In her solo exhibition *Mixtures* at Split/fountain,³¹³ (Images 243–246) Cheng arranged communities of found objects on makeshift shelves and plinths. She undresses them from their prior associations and frames of meaning. Making them bare, she allows new meanings to appear.³¹⁴

307. Jan Verwoert, “Personal Support: How to Care?” in *Support Structures* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2002), 177.

308. Verwoert, “Personal Support: How to Care?” 165.

309. It is through *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* that I first came across artist Heidi Salaverría’s philosophy on doubting (discussed in Chapter 4), because they collaborated on a conversation for the publication. Xin Cheng, *A Seedbag for Resourcefulness* (Germany: Materialverlag der HFBK, 2019).

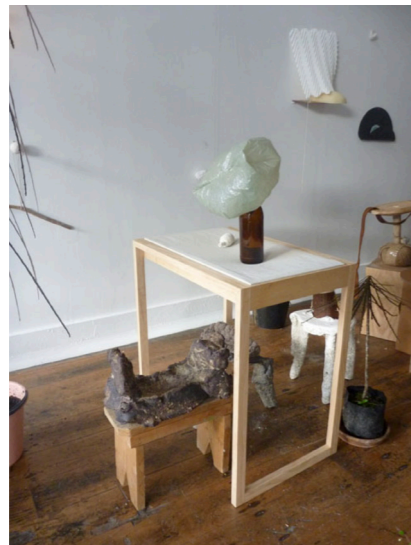
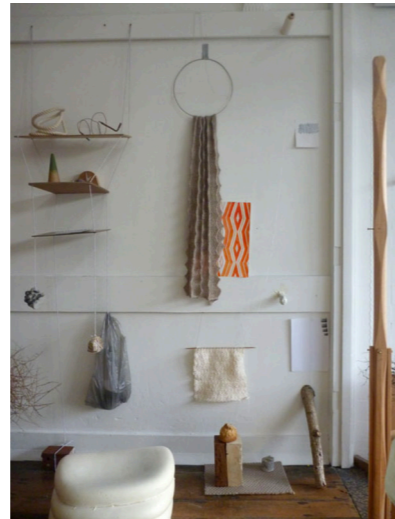
310. Xin Cheng and Ziggy Lever, “Walking from Maori Bay to Muriwai 20160807,” *Exercises in Listening*, no. 3 (May 2017): 28.

311. Cheng and Lever, “Walking from Maori Bay to Muriwai 20160807,” 29.

312. Allan Smith, “Xin Cheng: Addressing the “parliament of Things” and Helping in the Kitchen,” in *Distracted-Reader #1 Mixtures* (Auckland: split/fountain, 2013), 104.

313. *Mixtures* was exhibited at Split/fountain in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, May–June 2011.

314. Bare, in this context, is meant in the way described by Massumi, whereby bareness is the activity of experience “at the cusp,” at the “threshold” of “just coming into itself.” See: Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 3.



Images 243–246. Xin Cheng, *Mixtures* exhibition, Split/fountain, 2011. Installation view. Images courtesy of Eye Contact Magazine, taken by Asumi Mizuo.

Pulling disparate objects close and arranging them in installation, Cheng disrupts them from their everyday use, so they hover between being intimately familiar and strange. Enacting Simon O’Sullivan’s objects of encounter, Cheng installs “objects of recognition” differently. Doing so does not render them fully unrecognisable, but it interrupts processes of recognition enough to provoke an encounter, so other possibilities start to bubble. Even though most of the objects remain identifiable by name, their feeling has changed so they “swim away through the nets of what is said on [their] behalf.”³¹⁵ The relations between them seem to take precedence over the human viewer’s relationship and they start to shake off the weight of meanings ascribed by objective perception.

Working with a sensitivity for the spaces between objects as opportunities for conceptual mobility, like Orozco’s *Working Tables*, Cheng listens for lateral correspondences that connect the distance that separates. Smith writes that her practice moves between “metonymy and metaphor.”³¹⁶ She works with sensitivity for “spacing and displacement; part-to-part accents and sideways shifts of direction” to foreground lateral relations that cannot be individually summarised.³¹⁷ *Mixtures* reads like compost of a collapsed object-scape, of which the leftovers oscillate with speculative inventiveness.

Cheng’s practice has informed my approach to installation. As mentioned at the outset of this chapter, the ceramic artworks are installed in social arrangements. Meaning is emphasised as a relational production that is interior to the community of objects, whereby the meaning of a singularity is what it is to its others. Stuttering objective meaning (Deleuze), the ceramic artworks invite a lateral experience that exceeds what can be said on their behalf.

315. Smith, “Xin Cheng: Addressing the “parliament of Things” and Helping in the Kitchen,” 111.

316. Allan Smith, “DOCument Of MOMO: Continuities/ Differentiations/ Collaged Intensities,” in *Distracted-Reader #1 Mixtures* (Auckland: split/fountain, 2013), 96–102.

317. Smith, “DOCument Of MOMO: Continuities/ Differentiations/ Collaged Intensities,” 96–102.



Image 247. Emelia French, custom bronze hook, 2022. This one snapped in the wall because the bronze was too malleable.



Images 248–249. Martino Gamper, *Hookaloti* exhibition, Michael Lett Gallery, 2022. Images courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

The role of the support structure in installation

In my practice, the support structures of an installation afford the chance for expanding border vernaculars already at play within singular and across multiple ceramic artworks. The support structures are an extension of my hosting the aesthetic potential of clay material. If aesthetically sympathetic enough, they soften the border or edge denoting where the ‘work’ begins and ends. Internally, within the works, support structures are built in. Plinth-like bases are attached to the bases of some ‘standing paintings’. In others, additions are strapped on, in place, and the strap is activated as a formal interest. Just as supports (joins, holds) are integral to the internal structures of the artworks, the external supports amplify their aesthetic potential also.

In addition, throughout the project, I have made efforts to match the support structures to the character of the artworks. The uniformity of commercially manufactured standardised supports risked their affectual intensity. I hand-build support structures with equal care and material treatment to how I approach clay; they need to be bare, raw, treated with an economy of gesture, so that every mark of their making is afforded an aura of intentionality, whether formed by my hands, that of the material, or in relational activities preceding their entry into the practice. Every solid bronze hook holding a ‘wall tile’ is custom-made by hand in the 3D Lab workshop. The warm auburn colour of bronze aesthetically links with the terracotta clays, and its material associations (histories of use) add to the ceramic artworks. The totara shelves are also handmade from a single slab of wood, left to dry in the workshop, warping and splitting as it wants. I do not add any varnish or finish to the bronze or the totara; to me this would be the equivalence of glazing the clay. Foregrounding material expression, I leave surfaces bare.

Considered through another practice, designer Martino Gamper’s online exhibition *Hookaloti* at Michael Lett Gallery,³¹⁸ explores the aesthetic potential of the hook beyond its supplementary role as support, by inviting a fundamental reconsideration of its aesthetic possibilities.³¹⁹ Gamper reached out to various workshops throughout Aotearoa New Zealand, asking them to host his construction of the hook. The character of each hook (chunky clay, slick metal, smoothed rock) was informed by the speciality and limitations of the workshop within which he was collaborating.³²⁰ He plays with the hook as an object of support by forming relationships and connections to spaces that support the work (the hook) to be made. Installed empty, the hooks are artworks for contemplating what they offer in excess of their use. For *Soft Feelings*, supports still need to function but equally as important is what they aesthetically

318. *Hookaloti* was exhibited at Michael Lett Gallery in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, Oct–Nov 2022.

319. Michael Lett Gallery, “Hookaloti,” accessed November 4, 2022, <https://michaelllett.com/rooms/hookaloti/>.

320. As listed on Michael Lett’s website, workshops hosts include: Karl Fritsch, Rob Upritchard, Monmouth Glass as well as Shoal Bay pottery in Great Barrier, Rahu Road Pottery in Paeroa, Mount Pottery in Mount Maunganui, Nicholas Brandon in Kaimata and Barry Brickell’s Driving Creek Pottery in Coromandel. See: “Hookaloti.”



Image 250. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021.



Image 251. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021.

contribute (sculpturally) in support of the possibilities offered by the ceramic artworks.³²¹ In addition, by treating their materiality with care equivalent to how I treat clay, I emphasise the value of support as an ethic of the practising, as Gamper does with *Hookaloti*.

A light touch

Throughout the Covid-19 lockdown in 2021, I worked on my clay practice from my mum's studio in Ngāmotu New Plymouth. To keep my supervisor, Monique (Mon), up to date, I regularly sent PDF documents of photographs of drying greenware and ceramic artworks fired in my mum's kiln. Viewing them on Adobe Acrobat, Mon noticed that whenever she hovered her mouse over a photograph of the artworks, an automated text box would appear. Adobe generates text interpretations of photographs to increase reader accessibility. It scans the image for things it can recognise, offering them up as accompanying text; this is what Mon saw in the pop-up box. In its attempt to compute what was discernible within the image, the computer application externalised the stuttering of habitual perception (Deleuze) into list form. For a work comprising white clay speckled with black fragments (Image 250), flopped into a stretched half-circle with its edge adorned with small bisque fragments, the app produced: *A picture containing indoor, echinoderm, sliced*. I started thinking about the list I might make for the same work: *A sculpture containing a half-sun, wrinkled belly button, skin, broken crockery, crowned*. Later, listing associations in my head (similar to Adobe) became a way for me to check the representational ambiguity of the clay as I processually worked with it.

As I practise, I 'read' the clay to see what 'image' it is generating, attentive to gestural expressions that contribute to an expansive and unusual list, enfolding categorically disparate associations close without settling into a form that can be singularly described. As emphasised throughout the exegesis, I want to feel my inability to secure the artwork tightly with words, to realise they cannot be fully quantified through measuring likeness. I hope that their doing so draws attention to the excess within experience that cannot be realised, nor be reconciled by my seeking to know it, which the practice continues to play with as a source for aesthetic pleasure.

³²¹ Functionality is utmost for the supports to withstand the heavy weight of the ceramic artworks (sometimes up to 8 kilograms). I tested four varieties of bronze (of different metal compositions) before finding one with the tensile strength required.

Aotearoa New Zealand curator Abby Cunnane sometimes begins her essays about artworks by acknowledging the limitations of writing about such a thing. Emphasising the difficulty of translating the affectual feeling of artwork with words, she explains,

I'm exhausted by saying things are like other things, when, mostly they are not. They are near you, it is now, and then they are not and there is not another thing like them... Saying things are like other things is exhausting, but it can be the only way to say how they are.³²²

In confronting her feelings of frustration with relying on relational likenesses, Cunnane wonders whether a sculpture is unique in its proximity.³²³ She writes that it offers us the experience of becoming “right-now with the ‘near-to-hand’, in a way that is specific,” because its solidness is a way of “keeping something close, of holding the present... for now.”³²⁴ Reading this from Cunnane, I am interested in how the responsive immediacy with which the clay and I work might carry into the hardened ceramic artwork, so that it offers a directness of experience. Offering a closeness that does not settle into something measurable, the ceramic artworks are alike to many things, associating readily, without turning into them, similar to the experience I think Cunnane is describing.

Practising a light touch

As a method for *a soft approach*, a light touch brings lightness to the works, not physically but in meaning.³²⁵ In part, this happens because I attempt to distance myself from cognitive impulses and be responsive to material relations. A light touch may allow me to negate my (sometimes necessary) heavy-handedness in the making process, not as a bodily force but in my shaping of the clay. As mentioned in Chapter 1, *Chronology of Soft Feelings*, the non-forced action of wu-wei (*Tao Te Ching*) is important to my understandings of a light touch. Moving with the activity of a relation, wu-wei is the responsive action that follows receptivity, and that works in sympathy with the tone of the relation. In this respect, as previously discussed in context of my responding to clay with equivalent gestural weight, a light touch can be physical, strong, and assertive, for it is not about a lightness of force. Instead, it is the way an artist works in keeping with the material's expression, supporting its activity in the creating of the artworks, so that it continues to ‘speak’ rather than being worked into submission.

322. Abby Cunnane, “I Too Walk in the Mornings: Electrons, Molecules, Brittlestars, Jellyfish, Coral Reefs, Dogs, Rocks, Icebergs, Plants, Asteroids All Stray from Calculable Paths” in *David Clegg: Loca Projects/Correction* (New Plymouth: Govett-Brewster Art Gallery, 2018).

323. Cunnane, “I Too Walk in the Mornings.”

324. Cunnane.

325. Lightness has been indirectly addressed elsewhere in the exegesis through similar terms, such as softness and porosity, and phrasings like practising ‘a light grip’.

In addition, a light touch intentionally leaves the ceramic artworks open enough to avoid representational exactitude. In doing so, they might make felt what Massumi describes as the generality of feeling “of the world's more-than activity going on” whilst carrying the “singular feeling of that activity specifically coming to this” as a processual residue.³²⁶ Their processual coming-togetherness is aesthetically visible. Like the bareness in Cheng's objects, a light touch *potentially* makes *felt* the “bare activity of coming experience finding itself in the midst,” at the “threshold” of “just coming into itself” but stilled through the processes of firing, holding place on the cusp.³²⁷ As outlined by Massumi, their ambiguity of meaning and transparency of process emphasises the immediate “enjoyment of the specialness of its holding itself together in just the way it comes to do,” as yet unweighted by the gravity of definition.³²⁸

In complement to these ideas, Italo Calvino explores lightness as a quality within language. Developing upon the notion of the unmeasurable, Calvino positions language as weighted (and weighable). Through his writing, he hopes to “remove weight” so that language might take on a “weightless gravity.”³²⁹ Considered through my practice, with a light touch, I attempt to lessen the burden of the object as a category, dissolving its solidity so it might become more mobile.³³⁰ Lightening my perspective allows the practice to build new minor logics (Manning) and methods of affirmation that are internal to the community of ceramic artworks. Doing so may afford them a weightlessness within dominant systems of meaning. In their lightness, they might potentially start to dissolve the “solidity of the world,” in the ways Calvino proposes.³³¹

Exploring lightness in Ryder Jones' practice

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Ryder Jones works with a lightness of touch that I think is comparable to mine with clay. His artworks contain a casualness of gesture and their materiality takes on the weightless gravity that Calvino seeks with his writing. Methodologically, in his Masters thesis, Jones describes his making process as being receptive to a “resounding atmosphere”, which he names “Z.”³³² Likening it to chasing a shadow, he characterises his methods as “idiosyncratic and unlikely” because he is waiting for a call to arrive that draws him “into the grips of a presence, as familiar as it is unexplained.”³³³ While he waits, he engages in active non-doing, meandering along the beach or tinkering

326. Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 3.

327. Massumi, 3.

328. Massumi, 3.

329. Italo Calvino, *SIX MEMOS for the NEXT MILLENNIUM* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 1; Calvino, 9.

330. Calvino, *SIX MEMOS for the NEXT MILLENNIUM*, 8.

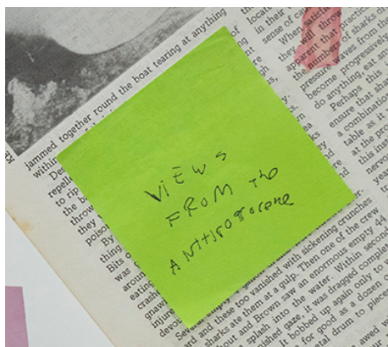
331. Calvino, 8.

332. Ryder Jones, “The Mystery of Z” (Master of Art and Design, Auckland, Auckland University of Technology, 2015), 3–4.

333. Jones, “The Mystery of Z,” 10; 3.



Images 252–256. Ryder Jones, *Shapes for future suns* exhibition, RM Gallery & Project Space, 2020. Images courtesy of Ryder Jones.



around with materials.³³⁴ Returning to the notion of wu-wei (*Tao Te Ching*), it seems significant to note that Jones' cites the Tao as an influence upon his ethics of practising too.³³⁵ I suspect that Jones' open receptivity might be the factor which allows him to bring lightness to materials so they physically evidence being shaped by his hand (or at least, carried). Yet affectually, they perhaps feel as though they have shaped and carried themselves autonomously – as if Jones was the instrument through which they were able to express their feeling.

In Jones' solo exhibition titled *Shapes for future suns*, at RM Gallery & Project Space,³³⁶ the installation reads like a congregation of aesthetic attractions; a magpie's nest of enjoyments, as specific as they are hard to pin down. For example, arranged in the dirt of a pot plant that belongs to RM Gallery is a school of soy sauce fish-shaped containers, a fresh orange, safety pins, a sage green rubber band, and a collection of goggles. This is not rubbish, and it is not nonsense. However, it is hard to figure out how they could categorically belong aside from Jones' impulse (being called upon) to collect them. At the foot of the pot plant are four sedimentary rocks, smooth-faced, with two eyes carved into their bodies as if gazing knowingly back. Nearby, on a post-it note stuck to a loose book page, Jones has hand-scrawled the phrase "Views from the Anthropocene". As I do in my work, and Guston did in his paintings, I wonder if Jones activates the eye as a clue, expanding the subjective perspective of the one looking, so we might notice the unseen offering within every situation.

On the wall are necklaces Jones makes for his wife as he walks along the beach. Unlike footprints, they are traces that accumulate in hand. A faded bottle top, a stick, a purple straw, tinfoil and rusted wire wrap are turned into a necklace. There is a quality of everyday romance to the gesture and a cool casualness that makes their materiality slight; even the Coca-Cola symbol on the bottle-top lid starts to shake off the weight of its label. Everyday objects and well-marked representations (such as the soy sauce fish container from St Pierre's Sushi) swim away from their associated meanings. On the gallery wall, seaweed bleeds dry, pouring its pink guts onto white paper, its body stamping 'I was *here*' even if just for a short time. Jones' artworks exhibit a quality of immediacy – treated with an economy of gesture, they develop *just enough* to be affectually resonant without any superfluous extras. In this respect, their aesthetics are raw and fundamental rather than decorative, so their excess is felt as a potential left unillustrated.

Jones writes that his practice is "about leaving an open space for what struggles to become words," for that which is "beyond immediate comprehension...that negates language."³³⁷ *Shapes for future suns* is a collection of material leavings from experiences that together build an atmosphere, hosting an intangible residue that cannot be comprehended (what Samuels' might describe as

334. Early on in the project, I also practised in these ways, walking the beach and tinkering with components.

335. Jones, "The Mystery of Z," 10.

336. *Shapes for future suns* was exhibited at RM Gallery & Project Space in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, May–June 2020.

337. Jones, "The Mystery of Z," 18.



Images 257–258. Ryder Jones, *Shapes for future suns* exhibition, RM Gallery & Project Space, 2020. Images courtesy of Ryder Jones. Installation view.



softness). In his words, he tends to the “not yet articulated” and the “unknown or unspecified,” so it can be felt in the grip of the present; similar in intent to Conderelli’s notion of support and what it stands for.³³⁸

Shapes for future suns might foreground what Brian Massumi describes as the “background feeling of what it’s “like” to be alive, here and now, but having been many elsewheres and with times to come.”³³⁹ My ceramic artworks also foreground this background feeling. In one respect, the physical presence of the fired clay, dense and hard, affords the same near-to-hand quality as Jones’ use of everyday materials; in both instances, emphasising material practicality that is of this world. Returning to Calvino’s writings on weightlessness, he emphasises that a balance is required; it is not just lightness but a value of weight as well.³⁴⁰ Since Jones’ materials and objects are tangible and locatable in a world we *know*, it supplements their intangible feeling of difference (their weightlessness) that we cannot place with the gravity of their meaning. Similarly, in my practice, the ceramic works are realised to the fullness of their process (where clay is physically stilled into shape through firing), yet they continually stir and stratify with associations.

Measures of likeness

Massumi’s notion of semblance offers a useful reflection on how the ceramic artworks toy with representation without becoming representational, lingering indeterminately between associations and thereby affording them a lightness. Massumi proposes that “a simple object is doubled by its own “likeness”” and so we experience at once the object *and* its variations, which he describes as the registration that there have been “other appearings “like” this one.”³⁴¹ I understand Massumi’s semblance as the degree to which the ceramic artworks continue, host and perform “life motif(s)” we are already familiar with, whereby they widely associate with recognisable forms without fitting something recognisable.³⁴² In addition, they explore their own likenesses, varying their forms, so that in encountering them en masse, they relationally tessellate in degrees of sameness and difference.

The ceramic artworks invite likenesses by playing up variation *and* repetition so that they become one and many. “Both itself and a placeholder in life’s processes for others like it,” the ceramic artwork expands the “perceived margin of changeability” and enfolds into the present the potential for future variations, because it cannot be placed (Haapala), and might instead hold new place for future others like it yet to arrive.³⁴³

338. Jones, “The Mystery of Z,” Introduction.

339. Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 44–45.

340. Calvino, *SIX MEMOS for the NEXT MILLENNIUM*, 15.

341. Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 49.

342. Massumi, 50.

343. Massumi, 50.



Image 259. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021.

Practising a light touch is to work with sensitivity to the moment whereby the clay-becoming-object is developed *just enough* to expose the “thinking-feeling” that happens in our processing of an encounter.³⁴⁴ This is when the object brims with disparate associations (how Adobe Acrobat generates) without resolving into one recognisable form. I understand this listing similarly to Erin Manning’s chunking, whereby a relational experience is compartmentalised into digestible parts, breaking down experience so it can be absorbed. Inverting this pattern of subjective perception, the ceramic artworks transparently show their physical structure as parts held together as one.

In this respect, they foreground what Massumi describes as the “uncanniness” of experience, because they “perch in objecthood” in “uncanny excess of actual objectivity.”³⁴⁵ In doing so, they bring perception processes to the fore and make them stutter (Deleuze) to find their reason. Massumi explains that, in our “so-called natural perception,” “the self-reflexivity of the experience is backgrounded”, and our “sense of relational aliveness disappears” in chains of autonomous action, whereby the object is simplified to its instrumental application (its use).³⁴⁶ For Massumi, likeness “betokens a moreness to life” as “It stands in the perception for perception’s passing.”³⁴⁷ I interpret this to mean that we grab for likenesses and differences in the process of placing ourselves. Indeterminate likenesses might bring attention to the underside of habitual perception and to the excess within collective experience (inclusive of self/other) that is always changeable; always, *already*, slipping out of place, on the cusp of what has been and what is yet to be, expanding the margin of experience.

Furthering this, Massumi writes that likeness blurs “strictly logical categories” by “mixing, matching and alloying”; *Soft Feelings* also explores such modalities materially with an interest in clay mixtures and alloyed metals.³⁴⁸ In addition, through association, the ceramic artworks play with approximations that “overlap and contaminate each other,” muddling and uprooting familiar life motifs and contributing new ones.³⁴⁹ The works are approximations of each other, in their shared character, building a vernacular that is specific to the practice. They associate out, enfolding disparate image patterns that are glitchy (or stuttering, Deleuze), allowing an unconvincing ‘half-reading’ at best (a list of likenesses). The clay, in exploring its potential and striking new postures, “invents new ways of affording itself of the world, in collaboration with the world, with what the world throws before it.”³⁵⁰ The material enjoys itself in an “immediate way”; following through on its capacity to vary and be changeable,

344. Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 49.

345. Massumi, 56.

346. Massumi, 44.

347. Massumi, 44–45.

348. Massumi, 50.

349. Massumi, 50.

350. Massumi, 50.



Image 260. Emelia French, artworks (group), 2021. These objects were exhibited as a single work for the *Portage Ceramic Awards 2021* exhibition at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, Nov 2021–Feb 2022.

it participates in a “self-creative” activity of bringing its “experiential potentials” through to expression.³⁵¹ In my working with it, it supports me to do the same, our potentials building the affectual charge of the ceramic artwork.

In doing so, the ceramic artworks are *affirmative gestures*. They suspend potentials and make them “all the more apparent by holding them to visual form.”³⁵² Their indeterminacy is their affectual charge. Even as fired clay, they build a feeling of changeability that exceeds the physical bounds of the ceramic artwork by emphasising the material changeability of clay as a group. In their image, they direct out towards the ecology of relations to which they belong, evoking likenesses to a world outside. Enfolding in, loosening existing frameworks and charging new experiential affects through the friction of holding disparate likenesses, they potentially empower expression (internally within the practice, as new contributions, but also outside of the practice, in how they are received experientially by the viewer).

Finding likeness in Lucy Meyle’s practice

Aotearoa New Zealand artist Lucy Meyle’s material explorations in likeness are an important reference for *Soft Feelings*. In addition, her methodological framework overlaps with *a soft approach*, enfolding ethics of support and care. Situating Meyle’s practice in line with my understanding of a light touch, I am interested in how her comic objects seem to play with semblances to make loose the existing structures of meaning with the interruption of a visual joke (fracturing the habitual). Through humour she brings a lightness that undercuts the weight of objective reason. Like my ceramic artworks, and the found objects in Cheng’s practice, Meyle’s sculptural works make porous existing frames of reference to allow new modes of existence to activate from within, playing with shifting ideas to bring about new possibilities for object expression.

For example, for her PhD exhibition, *Does a flower rehearse for spring?* at ST PAUL St Gallery Three,³⁵³ she custom-built a table titled *Shell inlay table and chair set (with peanuts #1-586)* (2018), (Image 262), designed to house 586 peanuts in shells, routing fit-for-purpose grooves for each peanut’s size and shape. The table exists for, in support of, the materiality of the peanuts. Although the scale of the table suits human functionality and is surrounded by chairs that Meyle built to affirm this, its practicality is subverted by the peanuts; it is still useable to a degree, but the peanuts bring it into question. In addition, whilst the materiality of the peanuts is not changed, for they are still ordinary peanuts, her emphasising them in this way invites a reconsideration of them

351. Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 4.

352. Massumi, 43–44.

353. *Does a flower rehearse for spring?* was exhibited at ST PAUL St Gallery Three at AUT University in Tāmaki Makaurau Auckland, April 2018.



Image 261. Lucy Meyle, *Does a flower rehearse for spring?* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery, 2018. Image courtesy of Lucy Meyle. Installation view.



Image 262. Lucy Meyle, *Shell inlay table and chair set (with peanuts #1-586)*, 2018, plywood, peanuts, scrap melamine, pencil. Image courtesy of Lucy Meyle.

outside of the bounds of how we know them. As stated by Meyle, the installation proposes situations that “re-orientate our relationships to the familiar.”³⁵⁴ The peanuts are technically where we might usually expect to find them at a (dining) table, but they belong to the table (not for us). They invite touch (I want to pick one out to eat) but I’m dissuaded from doing so, as to not disrupt the pattern of the table in which every peanut has its place. Relations of hosting/hosted and absence/presence are humorously activated in the work as a continuation of her methodological approach.

Utilising her methodology of *wiggle room*, Meyle explores ethics of care and responsivity, as have been considered in relation to Barad, Condorelli, and Puig de la Bellacasa earlier in this chapter. Meyle writes that she works with “an ongoing attention to the liveliness of others,” searching for opportunities to foreground this intent in the making of sculptural objects.³⁵⁵ She is interested in what she calls “baggy concepts,” so that she might loosen up “more space, for bodies, neglected ideas, or ways of being, within codes and structures that already exist.”³⁵⁶ In wiggling to make room, Meyle draws attention to how objects are different in excess of their pattern (or the image/resemblance/life motif).

Writing on Meyle’s *Soft Spot* at Enjoy Gallery,³⁵⁷ Cunnane describes how, in encountering her work, she is “waiting for some kind of translation act, for something that meets me halfway with the words to validate the feeling of these images against my skin.”³⁵⁸ I specifically enjoy how Meyle uses titling in this exhibition as an opportunity to evoke what Cunnane calls “non-verbal images” that don’t quite match the material presence of the artwork, provoking a likeness that reveals the underside of standard perception (Massumi).³⁵⁹

Meyle has a knack for naming, whereby titles operate in linguistic support, breathing fictional possibilities into materially readable works and amplifying their affect. For example, *Snake’s dress (like a fruit and its skin)* (2020), (Images 263–264), is not a snake’s dress; it is a hand-crafted silver-plated fine chain mail holding a mixture of natural and fake foods. However, because of the title, I am drawn to the qualities of their arrangement that are sympathetic to ‘snake-ness’, such as how the silver-plated chain closes around the fruit, similarly to how a snake expands its stomach to make room for food. And how, like a chain-mail dress, the chain ‘glams-up’ the fruit. Through titling,

354. “Exhibitions: PhD Exhibition: Lucy Meyle: Does a Flower Rehearse for Spring?” ST PAUL St Gallery - AUT, accessed November 4, 2022, <https://stpaulst.aut.ac.nz/all-exhibitions/lucy-meyle-does-a-flower-rehearse-for-spring>.

355. Lucy Meyle, “Does a Flower Rehearse for Spring? Movements, Comic Objects, and Anti-Smooth” (Doctor of Philosophy, Auckland, Auckland University of Technology, 2018), 19.

356. Meyle, “Does a Flower Rehearse for Spring?” 5.

357. *Soft Spot* was exhibited at Enjoy Gallery in Te Whanganui-a-Tara Wellington, Jan–March 2020.

358. Abby Cunnane, “Whose Clothes Are Falling in a Pigeon Rain?” Abby Cunnane, 2020, <https://abbycunnane.com/Whose-clothes-are-falling-in-a-pigeon-rain>.

359. Cunnane, “Whose Clothes Are Falling in a Pigeon Rain?”



Images 263–264. Lucy Meyle, *Snake's dress (like a fruit and its skin)*, 2020, silver-plated chain, jump rings, real and fake foods. Images courtesy of Enjoy Gallery, taken by Cheska Brown.

Meyle treats familiar materials and objects differently to emphasise the distance between the fullness of experience and our ability to comprehend it. On first look, the works half make sense, but quickly any habitual logic being applied to discern the meaning behind the work becomes fuzzy. As my ceramic artworks do, Meyle's practice plays with Massumi's semblance to loosen up and make shifty existing images so that they are *kind of* familiar, like a game of 'telephone', whereby the translation is lost in a tessellation of words and object code.³⁶⁰

On *Soft Spot*, Cunnane writes that she can "recognise" the artworks physically in her body, but they do not settle in the horizon of her vision (as Gadamer defines it), and so she struggles to "validate" their physical feeling with words.³⁶¹ In doing so, Meyle's objects wobble what Massumi describes as thinking-feeling processes, seemingly pushing thinking out of kilter from feeling. Cunnane writes,

Where do images like this sit, if not just in my head? And if not just an experience of my body—or especially close, like wearing clothes? Maybe it's somewhere between: like the last part of the body, not yet finished when you arrive, the last gap to close hard and solid. Maybe that's where they sit, steadfast, in the soft spot.³⁶²

Returning to Samuels' notion of softness, developed in Chapter 3, *Cracking open*, *Soft Spot* seems to foreground softness as its conceptual focus (in title and content), intentionally working with the slipperiness of materiality so that it slides out of the cognitive place where I expected it to stay. Doing so, Meyle accommodates the as yet unknown as well as the inherently unknowable within experience. Meyle explains it as her "drawing and re-drawing of the bounds of the known and unknown" so that the "untended borders of objective reason open."³⁶³

360. Also called 'game of rumours', 'telephone' is the game whereby a whisper is passed ear to ear, the original translation shifting and varying as it travels from person to person.

361. Cunnane, "Whose Clothes Are Falling in a Pigeon Rain?"

362. Cunnane.

363. Meyle, "Does a Flower Rehearse for Spring?" 5.

Contemplating affirmative aesthetics

In the way Meyle redraws the bounds of what is known, *Soft Feelings* leans into contingency and the unknown to open the borders of experience with objects that participate in image identification, but only partly. As mentioned in the Introduction, they distort the “mirror image of the world” (Barad), as it affirms the subject, to soften identification with an image.

Artist Hito Steyerl, in her essay titled *A Thing Like You and Me*, speculates on the potential of affirming the object. She wonders what an object without a subject might be, writing that it is “A thing that feels.”³⁶⁴ Exploring the notion of identification, she writes that “identification is always with an image” and that “things are not being represented [by the image] but participate in it.” I understand this to mean that internal projections (perceptions comprising recognition: representation/ familiarity/ the image) inform experience; they colour and cut and render experience as it is processed, but they also inform its future possibilities.³⁶⁵

Considered in relation to the ceramic artworks of *Soft Feelings*, when I encounter them fresh from the kiln, their materiality has changed from when I last held them, but as happened in the practising – *the excess in them communes with the excess in me*. While I once attempted to build closeness with the raw clay (in my working with it), it is as if the ceramic artworks now want to befriend me. Additionally, in viewing them, I am more aware of myself materially and cognitively because they distort the mirror image of the world as it used to reflect back at me; they connect our difference.

Physically traceable are my fingerprints, and aesthetically the texture and folds of the fired clay are similar to that of my bodily skin. They are alike to me, holding the mark of my hand, and their aesthetic character is a style specific to our relation. I can also sense my cognition working to know their image and, through them, being reminded of other things. In their absence of perceptible meaning, they offer what Hartle describes as “the reflection of a lost authenticity”, which is another way he defines friendship.³⁶⁶ Through the ceramic artworks, I am made aware of that which is collectively more than can be individually ascribed, and the discovery is empowering.³⁶⁷

364. Hito Steyerl, “The Language of Things,” *E-Flux*, April 2010, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/15/61298/a-thing-like-you-and-me/>.

365. Steyerl, “The Language of Things.”

366. Condorelli, *The Company She Keeps*, 21.

367. Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture*, 6–7.

The ceramic artworks expand the notion of self-expression to include more than the human subject. Muddying the categorical and agential distance distinguishing my body from that of the object, they affirm a collectivity of individual expression. Embodying the vitality of our practising, they animatedly enjoy the specificity and generality of feeling what it is to be here and now. As one amongst many and potentially in their affect, they invite others to experience the same.



Image 265. Emelia French, ‘wall tile’ artwork with custom bronze hooks, 2021, 210 x 320 x 25mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery.



Image 266. Emelia French, 'abacus' artwork, 2022.

Conclusion

Soft Feelings develops thinking about the possibilities of collaborating with feeling (Whitehead) by tending to the potential charge within every relation, which it explores by befriending clay. Like Peter Hawkesby's practice, *Soft Feelings* affirms the unruliness of this material and foregrounds its waywardness in ceramic artworks. Curious about objects that may not sit passively in the domain of the subject (subjectable to the habits of objective reason), *Soft Feelings* is motivated by a quest to empower objects that affectually outdo their image (degree of representation).

With clay, the research has explored the inherent connectivity of earth and body, material and gesture. I have attempted to work against perpetuation of my subject-driven agency. Considered in relation to Philip Guston's painterly practice, *a soft approach* diverges towards contingency, following the activity of the material. In doing so, my capacity to engage materially with the world aims to expand beyond the bounds of what is quantifiable, attending to an entanglement (Barad) that is unmeasurable. *Soft Feelings* makes ceramics that occupy the distance between subject and object. Pulling closer, they undercut subjective power, catalysing other possibilities for object relations by emphasising the material kinship of the subject and object. Developing a relationship with uku/clay allied to Te Ao Māori/Te Ao Mārama, shaped by impressions and expressions of our haptic relation, the ceramic artworks aesthetically foreground an environmental relationality.

In practice, the ceramic artworks have adhered to an internal system of relations and logics, similar to how the found objects in Xin Cheng's *Mixtures* perform. They invite reconsideration of what they are and how they belong, as a part to their others, and this quality expands outwards to connections in the world outside of the practice. Adapting Bergson's open whole, *Soft Feelings* has explored interiors that open to their outside, within the objects (material mixtures), their groups (subsets and friendships), and in how they associate to the world (networking associative likenesses). Like Lucy Meyle's comic objects, the ceramic artworks of *Soft Feelings* draw attention to the entangled excess within experience that cannot be compartmentalised, or 'read' objectively, but may be affectually felt (Massumi). Evoking a softness (Samuels) that cannot be translated, their openness is the consolidation of my and the clays' processual engagements (our friendship).

As described by Manning, the final exhibition is the "aesthetic yield" of *Soft Feelings*.³⁶⁸ It concentrates potentials within the process of this project whilst carrying a porosity (or lightness) that is inconclusive. The PhD exhibition

³⁶⁸ Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 58.

explores clay's bodily language, its changeability, and the aesthetic we have formed working together. In this respect, my hope is that the ceramic artworks might open new regions and complexions for experience that are sympathetic to the inherent variability of the material world inclusive of ourselves as material bodies. Clay, and the ceramic artworks, soften my subjecthood. They open my habitual perception (as a subject), lightening the weight with which I read the world, promoting, in me, the joy that arises in my moving in relational synchronicity with the movements of the material world (O'Sullivan). The ceramic artworks emphasise the oneness and manyness (Massumi) that is myself and clay, because they are the consolidation of our potentials into the expression of an object.

Repositioning agency as the production of an ecology not tied to a subject that empowers new expressions from within, this exegesis has contemplated the distinction between difference and distance (closeness without closure). In accordance with Barad's cuts and Puig de la Bellacasa's writings on care, *Soft Feelings* has developed a *soft approach* methodology for exploring how "cuts foster relationships rather than how they disconnect worlds."³⁶⁹ By building receptivity and seeking to sustain connection across difference, a *soft approach* has attempted a relation of equivalence with clay rather than working for its submission in a perpetuation of subject-driven agency and associated histories of material mastery.

Returning to the first research question of the project: *How can the artist befriend a material, working in support of its expression?* this document has detailed the ways an artist might work to hear the material's call. It has explained how I tend to clay's activity, making efforts to reinvigorate its liveliness. Valuing cracks, warps, slumps, and other material expressions, the ceramic artworks not only incorporate but are aesthetically determined by the bodily language of the material as it communes with me. Working in support of the raw clay's material changeability (crumbling, sticky, rigid, malleable, hard, and soft), I have tried to work with its variability and divergence so that the clay might lead to different objects (Ahmed) that blur boundaries of acted/acted upon (active subject and passive material object).

With a *soft approach*, I have worked to befriend clay so it might become in the ways it wants to. Speculative in inquiry, a *soft approach* supports a mutual increase of potential within artist-material relations, whereby the material is empowered to move through my movement and I am empowered to move by its movement. Unfolding relationally, the ceramic artworks materially enfold our relational contact, withholding, as an affectual capacity, the potential afforded by our friendship. The specificities of *our* relation become their shared resonance and aesthetic character; they embody the character of our working together, expressed differently from artwork to artwork.

369. Bellacasa, *Matters of Care*, 78.

As emphasised by Steyerl and Barad, objectivity offers an opportunity to rethink our accountability around how we subjectively mark bodies, categorically and physically. Throughout this project, I have developed a learned sensitivity for how clay and I materially contact, impressing and expressing through touch. The environmental susceptibility of clay to the bodies it contacts (mine and tools), the atmosphere, and the kiln, has aided the inquiries of *Soft Feelings* as it materially transforms with every relation.

The exuberance of the ceramic artworks (the degree of their material expression) is an indication of my support. For me, they are aesthetically a measure of my sensitivity to their activity (my acting in friendship), and their affect is contingent on the degree to which I have empowered the clay, affirming its capacity to become more. Returning to the second question of this research: *How might my prioritising material experience in the process foreground potential in the artwork so that it may be affectually felt?* I prioritise material experience and soften my expectations. Using the material's expressivity as a guide, I hope to empower the clay so its material excess is palpable as affect in the ceramic artworks. Foregrounding clay, its image may be backgrounded by its material quality. The degree to which the material affectually activates in the artwork is conditional to the care (or lightness) of my touch.

In addition, by combining nine types of clays (different raw compositions, as well as fired and unfired), I have explored how things hold together, but only just so that internal/external boundaries might stay porous to receiving what is intangibly felt. Retaining aesthetic evidence of their processual coming-togetherness, the ceramics do not close hard and solid in their representational exactitude; even fired, they are soft in form. Similar to Ryder Jones' practice, the ceramic artworks aim to make felt the generality of worldly activities, coalescing and consolidating some potentials into the specificity of the material object (Massumi) by foregrounding a shared feeling coming into itself as an expression of difference that can be tangibly felt (touched, held, weighable), but is affectually weightless. Dissolving objective solidity, the ceramic artwork's immeasurable lightness (Calvino) may have no calculable meaning within the dominant/major system of the subject (Manning). Through our working in friendship, the clay and I *together* compose artworks that open the habitual subject-object relation to becoming otherwise, in sympathy and mutual support of our differences of expression, distinct from the essentialism of categorical difference.

In these ways, the ceramic artworks promote connectivity. Responding to the third research question of this project: *How can ceramic objects promote connectivity in transcending the categorical differences of objective reason?* they transcend categorical differences by emphasising difference as a production of togetherness. Clays with different tendencies combine, and sometimes their inner tensions crack the work apart. In other instances, they hold together, though not fully amalgamate, so the 'origin' clays remain aesthetically visible as the textural and tonal variations within a work.



Image 267. Me with the ceramic artworks in my AUT studio, Oct 2022. Image taken by Emily Parr.

Soft Feelings contributes to ceramics practice in Aotearoa New Zealand by engaging questions around artist-material relations. *Soft Feelings* proposes the value of working with the material as a processual encounter that offers so much more than can be captured by the objective grasp of a subjective hand. Advocating a celebration of material expression, rather than working for its passivity, this project brings attention to clay's unruliness as an excess capacity within all of experience. Tending towards the margin of variation and difference in excess of homogeneity and representational exactitude, *Soft Feelings* cultivates a speculative inventiveness about how an object might feel (affect/be affected); curious about what an artist and material can do together. Joyful and jovial in quality, the ceramic objects work away at the seriousness of the subject, inviting playful engagements. As Gabriel Orozco infers with *Mis Manos son Mi Corazón (My Hands Are My Heart)* (1991), my artworks also explore the heart of who I am to them, together as one and many. Working a deep affection and haptic intimacy for clay, *Soft Feelings* holds this material at the centre of its subjective undoing. Offering a directness of experience that closes distance, the ceramic artworks embody the feeling of what it is to become beside another.



Images 268–269.
Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition,
ST PAUL ST Gallery,
March 2023.
Installation details.
Images taken by
Emily Parr.



PhD exhibition

***Soft feelings* (exhibition text from accompanying room sheet)**
ST PAUL St Gallery Two, AUT University
6 - 18 March 2023

Soft feelings is the concluding exhibition of a practice-led PhD that explores the potential of material expression in ceramic objects. Foregrounding the inherent kinship between earth and body, material and gesture, the artworks sustain the waywardness of clay; impressible, changeable, and unruly. They embody familiar structures, such as squares, coils, rolls and slabs, but do so loosely; slouching, cracking, flopping, leaning, and sagging. Using the formal conventions of sculpture and painting, as well as ordering principles and basic logics of installation, the ceramic objects attempt to muddy up systems of aesthetic classification and soften objecthood, tending towards closeness without closure. *Soft feelings* explores the capacity of ceramic artworks to evoke both the specificity and generality of the present, feeling what it is to be here now; as impressions and expressions of earth and body.

Objects

7 wall tiles
5 abacuses
11 standing paintings on bricks
6 self-supporting standing paintings
4 wall objects
16 (other) objects

Components

Grip rings
Grip sticks
Remnants of broken work (bisque-fired pieces, wall tile shards)
Leftover clay balls

Clays

Barry's Coromandel Gold (wild terracotta clay)
Bot Pots Pot Black clay
Macs Mud clays (Classic White, Southern Red, Northern Red, Brick Red)
Primo-Pro European Blends Nigra 2022 clay
Keane Ceramics clays (Mid-fire Black, Mid-fire 33, Mid-fire Warm 33, Mid-fire Speckled No.6)

Support structures

7 custom-made totara shelves
28 custom-made bronze hooks
19 terracotta bricks borrowed from home
1 brick found while walking at Mellons Bay



Image 270. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation view. Image taken by Emily Parr.



Images 271–272. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation view. Images taken by Emily Parr.



Images 273–274. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation view. Images taken by Emily Parr.



Images 275–278. Emelia French,
Soft feelings exhibition, ST PAUL
 ST Gallery, March 2023.
 Installation details. Images
 taken by Emily Parr.

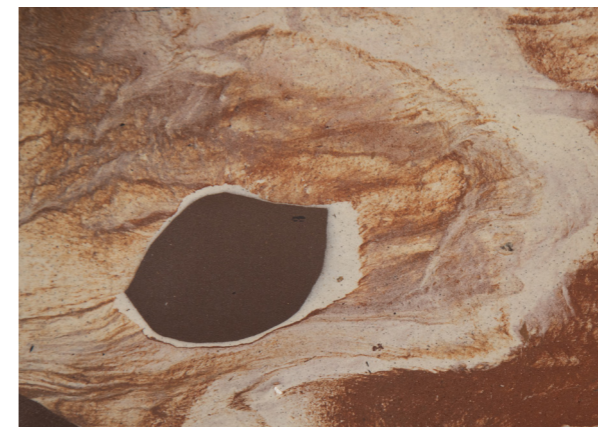




Images 279–280. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.



Images 281–283. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.



Images 284–288. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.



Image 289. Me with the ceramic artworks comprising the *Soft feelings* exhibition, March 2023. Image taken by Emily Parr.

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Image 90. Maia McDonald, untitled work in *Clay, Naughty, Clay*, ParrotDog Gallery, 2019. Image courtesy of Maia McDonald.

Image 91. Emelia French, ‘wall object’ artwork, 2021. It comprises leftover bisque-fired face fragments inserted into raw Macs Mud Classic White clay.

Image 92. Emelia French, greenware objects drying in the AUT Wet Lab, April 2021. Pictured are the first expansive group of clay objects made for the *Soft Feelings* project.

Image 93. Emelia French, ‘abacus’ artwork, 2021. Pictured installed for *Soft Feelings (1)* at ST PAUL St Gallery, it was the first ‘abacus’ of the series. Its form includes bisque-fired face fragments, ‘grip sticks’, and ‘grip rings’.

Images 94–95. Emelia French, *Soft Feelings (1)* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery Three, 2021. Installation view.

Images 96–99. Emelia French, *Soft Feelings (1)* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery Three, 2021. Exhibition Details. Top left: an example of the painting series that did not continue in the project after this exhibition. Top right: exhibition title taped to the door. Bottom right: *Standing Painting*, 2021.

Images 100–107. Emelia French, *Soft Feelings (1)* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery Three, 2021. Exhibition Details. Moments that became important to the aesthetic of the ceramic practice. Visible are ‘grip rings’ and ‘grip sticks’. Bronze, timber, and clay became core practice materials. At this stage, I had only worked with three clays; Barry’s Coromandel Gold, Macs Mud white, and Bot Pot black.

Images 108–109. Preparing the ‘critters’ for the sawdust firing, Dec 2020. The ‘critters’ are wrapped in dry horse poo, corn husk, and seaweed. Their material is Barry’s Coromandel Gold clay.

Image 110. Emelia French, artwork installation, ST PAUL St Gallery, 2022. Testing installation possibilities for AUT Visual Arts Talk Week.

Images 111–112. Emelia French, greenware object (top) and artwork (bottom), 2022.

Image 113. Jaime Jenkins, *Stone Age* exhibition, 2020. Image courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery.

Images 114–117. Jaime Jenkins, *Stone Age* ceramic objects, all stoneware, 2020. Top left: *Woven Shelf*, 310 x 230 x 110mm. Top right: *Stone Shelf with Vase*, 450 x 350 x 240mm. Bottom left: *Red Table*, 750 x 550 x 440mm. Bottom right: *Whittled Table*, 400 x 400 x 240mm. Images courtesy of Jhana Millers Gallery.

Image 118. Clay manufacturing facilities for Barry’s Coromandel Gold clay, Driving Creek Railway & Potteries, 2021.

Images 119–122. Emelia French, artwork details, 2022. Showing the colour variation of Barry’s Coromandel Gold clay.

Images 123–126. The sawdust firing, Taranaki, Dec 2020.

Images 127–128. The sawdust firing.

Images 129–134. The paper firing, Taranaki, Dec 2020. Right: Mum and I holding the ‘grip rings’ in our hands.

Images 135–136. *Brickell-brac*, Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Images taken by Monique Redmond while visiting *Brickell-brac*.

Images 137–140. Raku firing at Harriet Stockman’s house, Nov 2022. Top: Barry’s Coromandel Gold ‘grip rings’ drying in the AUT Wet Lab and my studio. Middle: ‘grip rings’ threaded through old kiln wire to make them easier to remove from the kiln at temperatures above 1000 degrees Celsius. Bottom: bins loaded with paper, sawdust, and dried leaves for smoking the ‘grip rings’. These materials amplify the smoke, which embeds in the clay.

Images 141–143. Raku firing continued. Top: the inside of the raku kiln. Middle: bricks weighting down the lids, so they are airtight (and so the clay gets smoked). Bottom: the resulting ‘grip rings’.

Image 144. The *Brickell-brac* balls.

Image 145. My bronze ingot.

Images 146–147. Emelia French, greenware objects and artwork, 2021. Images show the colour change of Bot Pots Pot Black clay (raw to fired).

Image 148. Emelia French, greenware object detail, 2021. Raw Macs Mud White clay.

Image 149. Emelia French, artwork detail, 2022. Macs Mud White and Primo-Pro black clays combined in an artwork, hairline crackling visible.

Image 150. Dad’s brick pile, 2022

Image 151. Emelia French, ‘standing painting’ artwork, 2021. Image taken by Emily Parr. The clay object requires the brick to stand.

Images 152–153. Peter Lange, *Brick* exhibition, Oddly Gallery, 2022. Images courtesy of Peter Lange.

Image 154. Emelia French, ‘standing painting’ artwork (double-stacked), 2022.

Image 155. Emelia French, artwork installation, ST PAUL St Gallery, 2022. Ceramic objects were installed on kauri floorboards and bricks from our family home.

Images 156–158. Exhibition preparations. Top left: Dad returning from collecting the totara in Waihi, Aug 2022. Bottom right: the totara shelves mid-process in the 3D Lab, Oct 2022.

Image 159. Totara shelves in my AUT studio, Nov 2022.

Image 160. Mellon’s Bay bricks in my AUT studio, Nov 2022.

Image 161. Emelia French, ‘standing painting’ artwork detail, 2021.

Image 162. Emelia French, ‘wall tile’ artwork with custom bronze hooks, 2022, 280 x 260 x 25mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery.

Image 163. Zac Langdon-Pole, *Traslaio Studio (Revisited)*, bowl fragments, brass staples, 127 x 253 x 253mm, 2022. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 164. Emelia French, greenware ‘standing painting’, 2022.

Image 165. Zac Langdon-Pole, *The Same River Twice*, 2020–2022, borer ridden wooden shelf trolley, gold, painted wooden shape-sorter blocks (two sets laid out identically on separate shelves); painted wooden shape-sorter blocks, hand carved Campo del Cielo meteorite, 460 x 750 x 713mm. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 166. Zac Langdon-Pole, *The Dog God Cycle*, 2022, recombined jigsaw puzzles of: *Rocky Mountain Landscape* (1870), Albert Bierstadt; *Pillars of Creation* (1995/2014), NASA, ESA, CSA, and STScl, 3010 × 3930 × 40mm. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 167. Detail of Zac Landon-Pole, *The Dog God Cycle*, 2022. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 168. Zac Langdon-Pole, *Untitled (X)*, 2022, four metric set-square rulers, pins, 900 × 900mm. Image courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 169. Emelia French, greenware object detail, 2022. An experiment in adding 'X' as my 'potter's mark' (signature).

Image 170. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork detail, 2022. Cracks draw a constellation through the body of the clay object, breaking it open.

Image 171. Emelia French, greenware 'wall tile', 2022. Evidence of clay retraction on the plaster support.

Images 172–175. Process of making a 'wall tile' artwork. Top left: a crack in a greenware tile. Top right: my custom-built plaster slabs allow the tiles to be made. Bottom left: retraction lines evidence how much the tile pulls inward as it shrinks. Bottom right: my toolbox.

Image 176. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork with custom bronze hooks, 2022, 390 x 440 x 10mm.

Images 177–178. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork and custom bronze hooks, 2022, 260 x 330 x 25mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery. Detail of a basalt protrusion that pushed through the flat surface of the tile mid-firing, caused by the grog in Barry's Coromandel Gold clay.

Image 179. Emelia French, artwork shaped like a cave, 2021.

Image 180. Emelia French, 'sloppy slab/abacus' artwork, 2021.

Image 181. Emelia French, 'abacus' artwork, 2022.

Image 182. Maria Olsen, *Cauldrons*, 1986, acrylic on canvas, 1200 x 3480mm. Image courtesy of Chartwell Project.

Images 183–184. Emelia French, 'wall object' artwork and 'grip rings', 2022. Examples of thresholds in my practice.

Images 185–188. Emelia French, greenware objects drying in the AUT Wet Lab, Nov 2022.

Images 189–190. Firing logistics for the project. Bottom: Mum's kiln log book, with my first custom firing schedule included.

Images 191–192. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork and custom bronze hooks, 2022, 260 x 370 x 25mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery. This 'wall tile' cracked in two during the firing. Recognising an opportunity to detour, I leaned into the cracking, making more, tapping the tile against the edge of a brick until it broke. I sanded the edges of each fragment, exposing the inner layers of the tile's surface. Its image is not seamless because the tile foregrounds the join as Zac Langdon-Pole did with his repaired bowl artwork, *Traslaio Studio (Revisited)* (2022).

Image 193. Philip Guston, *Painter's Table*, 1973, oil on canvas, 1962 x 2286mm. Image from the National Gallery of Art (USA).

Images 194–195. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork, 2021. Detail of its 'eye'.

Images 196–197. Emelia French, greenware object explorations, 2022.

Image 198. Philip Guston, *Back View*, 1977, oil on canvas, 1752 x 2387mm. Image from San Francisco Museum of Modern Art.

Image 199. *Brickell-brac*, Whangārei Art Museum, 2022. Installation view. Image taken by Monique Redmond while visiting *Brickell-brac*.

Image 200. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022. Front view.

Image 201. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022. Back view.

Image 202. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022.

Images 203–204. A tile piece used as a tool. The indentations on the object (Image 202) are made with this greenware fragment from a broken 'wall tile'.

Images 205–206. Emelia French, greenware object, 2022. Leftovers from prior work are balled up to become the structural base for an object. Fingernail and wire-cutter marks are visible in this detail.

Image 207. Emelia French, artwork, 2022.

Image 208. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork, 2022.

Image 209. Working in Mum's studio, Ngāmotu New Plymouth, Nov 2021.

Image 210. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021. The trace of my hand is visible on the surface of the clay.

Image 211. Emelia French, 'standing painting' artwork, 2022.

Images 212–213. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork and custom bronze hooks, 2022, 400 x 480 x 8mm.

Image 214. Emelia French, 'single pronged abacus' artwork, 2022, 150 x 180 x 8mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery.

Images 215–216. Emelia French, artwork details, 2022. Gestural explorations of interior/exterior relations.

Image 217. Gabriel Orozco, *Working Tables*, 2000-2005, Unfired clay, straw, egg container, bottle caps, wire mesh screen, string, stones, shells, plaster, bark, polystyrene foam, painted wood elements, pizza dough, and other materials, dimensions variable. Image from The Museum of Modern Art (USA).

Image 218. My worktable, Mum's studio, 2021. I tend to group components in a visual brainstorm for material play.

Image 219. Emelia French, artworks, 2022. Testing exhibition possibilities in my AUT studio.

Images 220–224. My worktable in the AUT Wet Lab, Nov 2022.

Image 225. Gabriel Orozco, *Mis Manos son Mi Corazón (My Hands Are My Heart)*, 1991, two silver dye bleach prints, 232 x 318mm. Image from The Museum of Modern Art (USA).

Image 226. Emelia French, greenware 'standing painting' detail, 2022. I rolled the white clay through a bed of black clay sediment, accumulating this texture.

Image 227. Gabriel Orozco, *Yielding Stone*, 1992, plasticine, 368 x 394 x 406mm. Image from The Museum of Modern Art (USA).

Image 228. Emelia French, artworks (pair), 2022.

Image 229. Emelia French, greenware 'sloppy slab' object detail, 2021. Stained with Bot Pots Pot Black clay dust, my hands marked the surface of the Macs Mud Classic White clay as I worked it.

Image 230. Soft Feelings artworks in my AUT studio, Nov 2022.

Images 231–232. Peter Hawkesby, *Tender Brick* exhibition, Objectspace, 2020. Images courtesy of Objectspace, taken by Samuel Harnett.

Image 233. Peter Hawkesby, *Impaled Tick with Blushing Cheek*, 2018. Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.

Image 234. Peter Hawkesby, *White Demolition Tick; Demolition Tick*, 2018. Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.

Image 235. Philip Guston, *Monument*, 1976, oil paint on canvas, 2032 x 2794mm. Image from Tate Gallery, London, UK.

Image 236. Peter Hawkesby, *Bonethrone gate*, 2002, ceramic, 300mm (h). Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.

Image 237. Peter Hawkesby, *Bonethrone Fan Hamper*, 2022, ceramic, 360mm (h). Image courtesy of Anna Miles Gallery, taken by Samuel Harnett.

Image 238. Dad lying in sympathy with Sunbathing rocks, 2020.

Image 239. Emelia French, unfinished greenware 'wall tile' (process), 2022.

Image 240. Emelia French, greenware, 2022. The greenware 'wall tile' above (Image 239) was repurposed into this object instead.

Images 241–242. Emelia French, greenware 'standing painting' and 'wall tile', 2022. Although the clay started as a tile (bottom), through the process, it became a 'standing painting' object (top).

Images 243–246. Xin Cheng, *Mixtures* exhibition, Split/fountain, 2011. Installation view. Images courtesy of Eye Contact Magazine, taken by Asumi Mizuo.

Image 247. Emelia French, custom bronze hook, 2022. This one snapped in the wall because the bronze was too malleable.

Images 248–249. Martino Gamper, *Hookaloti* exhibition, Michael Lett Gallery, 2022. Images courtesy of Michael Lett Gallery.

Image 250. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021.

Image 251. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021.

Images 252–256. Ryder Jones, *Shapes for future suns* exhibition, RM Gallery & Project Space, 2020. Images courtesy of Ryder Jones. Details.

Images 257–258. Ryder Jones, *Shapes for future suns* exhibition, RM Gallery & Project Space, 2020. Images courtesy of Ryder Jones. Installation view.

Image 259. Emelia French, greenware object, 2021.

Image 260. Emelia French, artworks (group), 2021. These objects were exhibited as a single work for the Portage Ceramic Awards 2021 exhibition at Te Uru Waitākere Contemporary Gallery, Nov 2021–Feb 2022.

Image 261. Lucy Meyle, *Does a flower rehearse for spring?* exhibition, ST PAUL St Gallery, 2018. Image courtesy of Lucy Meyle. Installation view.

Image 262. Lucy Meyle, *Shell inlay table and chair set (with peanuts #1-586)*, 2018, plywood, peanuts, scrap melamine, pencil. Image courtesy of Lucy Meyle.

Images 263–264. Lucy Meyle, *Snake's dress (like a fruit and its skin)*, 2020, silver-plated chain, jump rings, real and fake foods. Images courtesy of Enjoy Gallery, taken by Cheska Brown.

Image 265. Emelia French, 'wall tile' artwork with custom bronze hooks, 2021, 210 x 320 x 25mm. Image courtesy of Laree Payne Gallery.

Image 266. Emelia French, 'abacus' artwork, 2022.

Image 267. Me with the ceramic artworks in my AUT studio, Oct 2022. Image taken by Emily Parr.

Images 268–269. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.

Image 270. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation view. Image taken by Emily Parr.

Images 271–272. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation view. Images taken by Emily Parr.

Images 273–274. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation view. Images taken by Emily Parr.

Images 275–278. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.

Images 279–280. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.

Images 281–283. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.

Images 284–288. Emelia French, *Soft feelings* exhibition, ST PAUL ST Gallery, March 2023. Installation details. Images taken by Emily Parr.

Image 289. Me with the ceramic artworks comprising the *Soft feelings* exhibition, March 2023. Image taken by Emily Parr.