

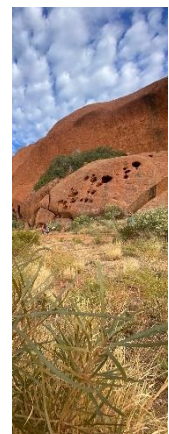
## CENTERING, COMMUNITY, CONNECTIONS and CERAMICS FOR CHANGE



I have recently returned from the Australian Ceramics Triennale, the 16<sup>th</sup> national celebration of contemporary ceramics, held every three years and for the first time in the Northern Territory in Mparntwe (Alice Springs) on Arrente Country. Still lingering with me are the colours of the landscape of red earth and rock, soft yellow grasses and green shrubs, and laughter – the sound of happy ceramic artists gathering to enjoy a shared love of clay.

This journey to the centre was epic, the distance and organisational complexities of the trip made it special but also only possible through the financial support of the Helen Dangar Memorial Art Bursary, which helped me pay for the conference ticket, flights and accommodation.

Community is central to my practice and I shared the experience with my good friends and ceramicists Ky Curran and Nicole Johnson – my “clay wives” with whom I first started pottery on Wyaliba Community over 20 years ago. Like many other conference delegates we took the extraordinary opportunity to explore the Central Desert whilst “nearby” (a 1000km roundtrip!). We approached Kata Tjuta and Uluru through the desert — the otherworldly and yet strangely familiar shapes beckoned from afar — our conversations able to loop and swirl, we had time to reconnect and investigate deep ideas. We talked a lot about the Uluru Statement from the Heart and read it whilst circling the rocks. Truth Telling was a key idea that kept circling throughout the conference.





## Helen Dangar Memorial Art Bursary Report Abigail "Abi" Sparks 2022



The desert and its giant rocks were mind-blowing...the sweet and sacred folds of Uluru and Kata Tjuta spoke of long geological time, spiritual connection and endurance. Our potters' eyes widened at seeing the red iron oxide, lit up at sunset in the famous "glow up" and used by ancient artists on ceremonial caverns in the rocks' flowing skirt. Kata Tjuta's fertile valleys provided inspiration for sculptural shapes as we enjoyed the cool sanctuary and quiet spectacle of her caverns. Beginning our journey in this way was wonderful, it centred us and gave us perspective for our conference which delivered big ideas, problems, and of course dirty hands.





## Helen Dangar Memorial Art Bursary Report Abigail “Abi” Sparks 2022



The conference was held at Araluen Cultural Precinct and produced by Central Craft, in collaboration with The Australian Ceramics Association. There was a packed schedule of speakers, activities, exhibitions and demonstrations. A strong sense of contribution and connection with/by community was evident throughout, with exhibitions around town and shows such as “Clay on Country” “Terra” and “Earth: Country”.

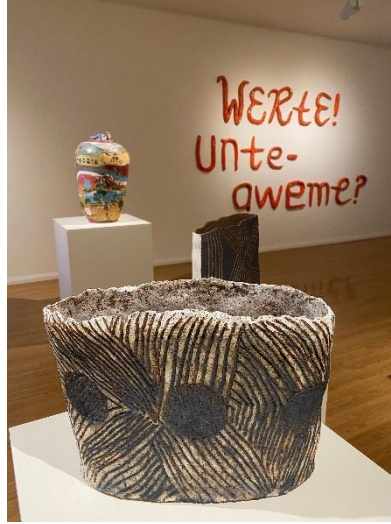
We were welcomed to Country by Doris Stuart Kngwarraye who told us the ancestral stories of yeperenye caterpillar and the akngwelye thylacine. She told us that “when you connect to Country, the country talks to you”, that “we are part of earth and made of earth”. She asked us to be open, to listen and let Country talk to us. She spoke of stories written in the land and in the sky.



We heard about the way that local First Nations people have continued to endure the occupation on their sacred lands and the deep sorrow felt at this. We met artists who were remaining on community and artists who were working from afar. All spoke of deep connection to country.

Presenters included local artists Alison Milyika Carroll from Ernabella, Judith Inkamala and Rona Rabuntja from Hermannsburg, and the Tangentyere Artists. We were taken on journeys about what these artists were exploring in their work and the ways that ceramics and pottery expressed culture

## Helen Dangar Memorial Art Bursary Report Abigail "Abi" Sparks 2022



Visiting first-nations artists Penny Evans, Maree Clarke, Billy Bain, Uncle Kevin 'Sooty' Welsh and Bernie Singleton, all shared their stories and the message that we ceramicists had a part to play in truth telling, connecting to country, healing and positive change.

A most astonishing project was presented by Yorta Yorta / Wamba Wamba / Mutti Mutti / Boonwurrung artist Maree Clarke. One of her works that explores the tradition of the Kopi mourning caps. These were clay and stick headpieces donned by people who have lost someone close to them, sometimes worn for up to 6 months and weighing up to 16kg. Clarke has used her research on this tradition, to run workshops for grieving participants who make their own Kopi mourning caps to process grief from loss of family and loved ones; this was a beautiful project focusing on healing.





## Helen Dangar Memorial Art Bursary Report Abigail "Abi" Sparks 2022

The theme of healing through practice was a strong thread at the conference. Keynote presenter Virginia Leonard from New Zealand uses her ceramics and art practice to explore the pain suffered in an accident in which she was badly injured. She makes extraordinary pots dripping with resinous paint (added after firing) which describe her risky processes and her drive to explore the darkest shame of her broken body. She urged us to explore the transformative qualities of clay and not to be afraid to express pain and truth. She said "trust your process, trust your practice, and be truthful".



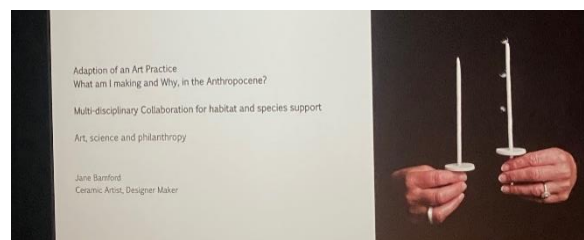
The healing properties of clay were explored in a lecture on medicinal clay and also in the practice of a range of artists.

## Helen Dargar Memorial Art Bursary Report Abigail "Abi" Sparks 2022



There was a great session exploring humour in ceramics and the fabulous Rona Rubuntja, Pru Morrison and Billy Bain spoke about their work. Rona is deaf so she used sign language and an interpreter.

The lectures raised some problematic ethics for ceramicists around our main materials and how they are sourced. Using earth/clay bodies and glaze materials can be environmentally and culturally invasive. Extractivism is under close scrutiny in the ceramics world.



Potters were asked to think about ways they can make their practice more ethical and sustainable. We learnt about ways to ask for permission to use wild clay, about pursuing change in practice from suppliers and the mining industry, and about making our practice more circular. We heard of artists practicing in entirely sustainable ways, closing the loop and making clay for environmental activism. Projects included repopulating animal species by making ceramic sculpture, using ceramics to produce 3D printed houses for homeless people, and creating ceramics from waste materials from building sites.



## Helen Dangar Memorial Art Bursary Report Abigail "Abi" Sparks 2022

These positive and productive artists were inspiring and we all went away questioning how we could improve the sustainability of our practice and make sure that we were doing net good in the world.



The workshops were busy and full. There, hands on activities were facilitated by some top ceramic artists from around Australia. There were demonstrations in throwing large pots, lustre-application, making homes for bees, decorating, using clay as a dance medium, and many more. The practical advice and tutorials were fantastic. We also had a number of gallery openings and exhibitions around the town of Alice Springs, highlighting the local projects.

One of the highlight events was the "Mugs on Mugs" evening where over 300 cups had been donated by ceramicists nationwide to a local organisation supporting grandmothers who raise their grandchildren. The sale raised over \$10 000 which really bought home the power of art and ceramics to be a force for practical positive change.

To finish off the week there was a creators' market day which was supported by the town; most stalls sold out on the day and made the trip back on planes and cars much lighter. All along the way the sleeping hills and cliffs (the dog and caterpillar) stared at us and quietly filled our hearts with the beautiful warmth of the red centre. The best fun was having those incredible memories to share, to take the inspiration and build on it through practice at home. Thankyou to the Dangar family and NERAM for this wonderful opportunity.





Helen Dangar Memorial Art Bursary Report Abigail "Abi" Sparks 2022

