

# Politics and Primordial Time

## Neil Hoffmann's Grand and Seamless Aesthetic

*Article by Pete Hay*

**P**ICTURE A COLD, COLD VILLAGE HALL IN A SMALL town in northern Tasmania. Those of us here in this wintry purgatory sit at trestle tables arranged in a horseshoe and the mood is tense, because this is the Appeal Hearing into a controversial granting of a Private Timber Reserve at Reedy Marsh, not far from Deloraine. ('Reserve' is a weasel word. This is not a 'reserve' in the accepted sense of the term but a concession to industrial forestry interests at the expense of community and natural values.)

It is not easy to launch an appeal against a decision to approve a Private Timber Reserve in Tasmania. The legal window opens just the merest smidgeon. A Municipal Council has appeal rights, but the only permissible ground of appeal here is a deliberately-kept vague criterion called 'the public interest'.

The Forest Practices Authority makes the call that any given PTR application is in accordance with the public interest, but how that determination has been made and against what criteria is never explained.

The Meander Valley Council has been inveigled into fronting an appeal on behalf of a group of Reedy Marsh residents, though the indications are that they now wish they hadn't. It so happens I know something about 'the public interest' and I'm here to give expert testimony on the appellants' behalf.

The residents run a brilliant case. They point out that the proponents have obfuscated the botanical character of the land in question, apparently to mute awareness of the presence and standing of threatened floral and faunal species. They demonstrate that the planning status of forestry operations has been

*Common Matter I (Moving Ground Series IV). 2005. Dolerite and clay, woodfired.  
36 cm/h x 50 cm/w x 40 cm/d.*



fudged to avoid the need to issue Permits. They demonstrate that the officer who drafted the PTR application subsequently had the job of assessing it. Those representing the proponents – Gunns Ltd. and a Government Business Enterprise, Private Forests Tasmania – are bored and tetchy. The man from Gunns asks me just two questions in cross examination. How much was I paid to give evidence for the appellants? (Answer: not one red cent.) And, entirely ignoring all matters of substance in my evidence, he names instead a months-old date and asks: 'Did you address a rally organised by the Wilderness Society on that day?' That's it. The politics of smear – but just about as inept and pathetic a smear as you can possibly get.

And of course they are bored. I understand that. They know we are just going through the motions. They know the way the judicial winds will eventually blow. And so, despite the forensic force of the appellants' case, and the resentful perfunctoriness of the proponents', the tribunal finds against the appellants – as it was bound to do, given the political shockwaves that would be set in motion by a finding for the appellants. Such is the implacable way of forest politics in this gouged and bleeding island.

Next to me in the horseshoe is a man of quietly impressive demeanour, his hair pulled back in a pony tail. The sense is of intelligence, integrity and physical strength. This is Neil Hoffmann, Reedy Marsh resident and ceramist *extraordinaire*. He is very well met.

Months pass, and I am driving through Reedy

Marsh in search of Neil Hoffmann's house and studio. Reedy Marsh is unlike the eucalypt forests I'm accustomed to down south. It is a distinctive sclerophyll forest on Aeolian dolerite in which *Eucalyptus ovata*, *pauciflora* and *viminalas* are featured. It enchants – but it is remnant; a *refugia* of a poorly reserved forest type that has been lost to land clearing across 95 per cent of its original range.

I pass an old bush hut and come to a clearing, all that is left of a potato-grubber's bush run, abandoned these 80 years past. Here are situated two of Neil's kilns. Just a little down the track and I come to a second clearing and there are Neil's house and outbuildings, one of which is his studio-workshop.

The house, designed and built by Neil himself, is large, spacious, welcoming and has a redolence of woodfire and good coffee. In the shrub that screens the large west window an eastern spinebill goes busily about its important work. Outside the house an old Fergie squats under the cover of an open shed. All is purposeful clutter.

The yard is enlivened with pieces, discreetly placed, from earlier phases of Neil's work. He talks me through these. His *Dulverton Brickworks* pieces from almost 20 years ago first, when he moved playfully away from the potter's wheel and into figurative work. But the real sea change came with the *Animate Earth* series that followed soon after with the construction of his first wood kiln. In this body of work the artist sought, through the medium of plastic

*Common Matter II (Moving Ground Series IV)*. 2005. Dolerite and clay, woodfired.  
28 cm/h x 77 cm/w x 46 cm/d.



clay, for earth-embodied suggestions of early life, and to extract this exploration from the intellect and its close collaboration with the hand, he engaged in 'unmediated, random acts of making', working more remotely while shaping the clay, stretching it, throwing it around or 'working it blind' into a giving bed of foam, 'not quite knowing what would transpire'. The aim was to let the earth itself speak its piece; make its intent known, and the artist recast his own role more modestly – from that of god-creator to a medium through which elemental forces might conspire in the making of a truly grounded art; an art of the very earth.

Neil still likes these pieces but came to the view that he remained too controlling in their making; "too much a part of the work". Seeking a working mode that still further privileged surprise and unplanned, organically-derived outcomes, he moved into larger, heavier pieces "conceived in part by earth's gravity as it pulled their wet mass deep into a bed of thick foam", before returning again to smaller works in which the play of opposing forces is the thing, seeking an artist's communion with the deep geophysical past, "to cut back in time to earlier and yet earlier notional life".

Outside again, we track back to the clearing up the road and the broader of Neil's Bourry kilns. "It's a good kiln," he tells me, "and it suits what I'm doing at the moment." But this is an artist of

ideas and a driving central vision, not a technocrat. He has no obsession with the detail of the kiln's chemistry; rather "the process is a catalyst for my thinking about larger issues". The firing is a time of portent, of possibility, of wonder: it involves "taking on elemental forces and from the play between them, reaching toward an older world and reflecting on our place in it now".

Readers of *Ceramics: Art and Perception* will know some of this, for Hoffmann has been featured here before. What has not previously been discussed, though, is the deeply political context to his work and the extraordinary cosmological range of his aesthetic. That is why I have dwelt at such length on the political threat that local forest operations pose to the place and ecosystemic integrity of the artist's home range. And it is why, in tracing the evolution of his art practice, I have sought to explicate its links to the broad-sweep ambition of his aesthetic. Let me expound upon this for a moment, for it will not be immediately obvious how the deep time reach of the artist's aesthetic links to a politics of the here and now.

Hoffmann partly entitles a sustained meditation upon his own creative project *Imagining Genesis*. It is a visual meditation with text and it is quite remarkable. There have been creative and philosophical sensibilities before Hoffmann's that have scoped their dreams and their speculations cosmologically, but Hoffmann

*Common Matter III (Moving Ground Series IV)*. 2005. Dolerite and clay, woodfired.  
31 cm/h x 64 cm/w x 47 cm/d.



is different. Whereas other cosmologists swirl away into astral infinity, Hoffmann remains on – or in – this earth. He, too, swirls away – but he spins down through the flux and stream of deep time, down to the earth’s first primal moments. He puts it better himself than I ever could: he seeks “expressions of earth’s first rumblings for life, of... a time before the substances within the earth found mobility, pre-separation [of life from its source], pre-independence.” There in the energies born of the primordial moment is to be found the essence – the truth – of all that the vast forces of time itself have bequeathed to us here, now. And that includes – especially includes – life on earth.

How does this grand-sweep aesthetic reach out and shape the man and the artist? It does so in three potent ways (possibly more – these are the three that I identify), and I will consider each in turn.

First and most obviously, there is the impact of this fierce attunement with the unfolding process of geophysical time upon Hoffmann’s art practice. In previous discussions of the latter much has been made of the meaning that Hoffmann derives from his medium/material – clay – and from the creative technologies of his woodfired kilns. I have myself followed suit and Hoffmann, too, has contributed to these ruminations. In an ultimately unused artist’s statement for the 2005 Australian Woodfire Survey Exhibition in Canberra, he wrote: “I’m pushing clay and fire to speak their secrets, their knowledge of a time long past when life was in its most elementary state. I’m seeking to discover something of the primal

energy, spirit and potency of the subterranean... I deliberately call in the power of the elements to take their effect on the materials I place in their path in order to imbue my work with manifestations of nature – the results of colliding forces and elemental friction. In this way I’m able to ride with nature for a while and feel something of its power.”

Similarly in the firing, Hoffmann sometimes seeks to “apply melt to the whole form, not just the surface, as is most common in ceramic practice”. In his mind, he says, is engagement with “the earth’s molten core”, and he seeks the volatility of process and effect that is there in the earth’s liquid heart; a “greater relinquishment of control”. To American ceramist, Jeff Oestreich, Hoffmann’s forms “seem as if they are born rather than made... untouched by human hand”. I agree. It has already been noted that the artist seems less a creator than an enabler – a medium through whom the very earth speaks.

More recently, though, following the relentless pull of his deep-time aesthetic, Neil has moved beyond clay to an even more primordial substance – the bones of the earth: rock. In his series of clay melts Neil used clay taken from his own property. “Giving the mother material life” was his evocative description of the project. But the primal vortex of deep time continued to beckon, and it was, he says, “a logical extension to take the local dolerite and melt that directly”. “If clay is mother,” he has written, “then rock is GRAND mother!,” with “some earlier stories to tell regarding a geo-primordial time which notionally gave rise to our being.”

*Common Matter IV (Moving Ground Series IV)*. 2005. Dolerite and clay, woodfired. 42 cm/h x 37 cm/w x 30 cm/d.



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Hoffmann is much taken with geologist David Leaman's description of the local dolerite as "The Rock Which Makes Tasmania". And so we come to the second important way in which his aesthetic constructs a lived unity of artist and man. The primordial processes of deep time emerge into the here of the artist's time and place, which happens to be the island Tasmania, and within that, the dolerite-birthered forests of Reedy Marsh.

The geophysical scapes and processes within which we move – along with our co-evolutionary travellers on life's grand adventure – embody the memory of all that has gone before and that has shaped our present. It links us to those evolutionary travellers who have stepped out of time, "creatures which now reside only in the memory of the earth". The artist describes this connection as 'umbilical', and it leads us to a 'heritage of connectivity' that joins us in space as well as time, so that a profound empathy for 'all tenants of this earth' ensues. This is rendered personal and immediate when it comes to the living forms (and the processes that sustain them) within the direct range of our own lived experience. It leads Hoffmann himself to a passionate concern – artistic and human – for "the architecture of our place, our home", and the project becomes, then, one of place – or home-making: "the establishment of an environment for birth, a place in which to dwell". From a cosmological aesthetic that carries the artist down to the very moment of the earth's genesis, there emerges a deep, seamlessly-derived commitment to localised place in the present.

You can see where this is going. You can see what this means for the artist's apparently non-political aesthetic. The third component of the artist's aesthetic trinity, then, is the political critique it engenders.

It is, he writes, "time to grow our imagination and energy for restorative action." Time "to change the collective consciousness for a new sort of doing." Time to "naturalise" human behaviour so that we can rejoin the "dance with our parent earth", "regrow our visceral consciousness". But on Neil Hoffmann's island home a venomous marriage has been enacted between the suits of politics and the suits bearing capital to invest in life – and place – contemptuous resource-extraction. This is a loveless marriage, one with no feeling for that wild dance that is the island's bequest from the grand processes of deep unfolding time. It is entirely appropriate that the artist should write: "the greatest strength in what I make is not of my making." It is entirely appropriate, too, that the artist should take his place behind the trestles at those sour proceedings in that grim and cold country town hall. Because the place, the man and the artist inhabit a single continuous plane – a unity that joins a primordial earth-aesthetic to local, place-defending activism.

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