

Earth-dialogue
Maarit Mäkelä

ST PAUL St Gallery Two
27 November – 11 December



Maarit Mäkelä *Portrait of a Woman* 2015 (detail). Painting with Te Henga black sand, Tasman red stone, Long Bay white and yellow clay, Te Matuku clay and Cory Road clay on Matakana clay

Earth-dialogue has resulted from Professor Maarit Mäkelä's sabbatical year from Aalto University, Finland. Mäkelä, who has been hosted by the School of Art + Design, AUT University, has her roots in contemporary ceramics. The title of the exhibition refers to the profound relationship with earth and a woman who, via walking starts a tangible and visual dialogue with the material environment.

The core of Mäkelä's artistic practice is the local, natural environment. For *Earth-dialogue* Mäkelä collected earth samples she gathered during her walks in Aotearoa New Zealand, especially around Waiheke Island where she lived during the year. These materials were processed in her studio on Waiheke and then used as clay body for the works, and as coloured slips for the paintings she produced on clay. Mäkelä then fired the paintings, and at 1080°C they were transformed into ceramic.

Earth-dialogue consists of the serial clay paintings and documentation of the creative process underpinning her work. It includes documentary photographs of local places and materials she encountered during her walks to collect materials. *Earth-dialogue* also contains samples of sand, stone and clay – the materials Mäkelä gathered from different locations in Aotearoa New Zealand, that she then processed and fired as test pieces. Together the fired pieces, the documentation images of material gathering, and the test pieces present a view of the process and making practices that go into Mäkelä's final work.

In addition to the works displayed in Gallery Two, Mäkelä has been engaged in documenting her time in Aotearoa New Zealand to appear in her forthcoming publication titled *Earth-dialogue*. The following essays by Dr Welby Ings (AUT University) and Dr Katve-Kaisa Kontturi (University of Melbourne), will appear in that publication.

A woman walking: Thinking, materiality and form in the ceramics of Maarit Mäkelä

Dr Welby Ings

On the day I saw her walking there was wind in the sand. It ripped the foam from the waves and tumbled it in small frantic somersaults along the beach. Maarit Mäkelä cut a diminutive figure, dressed in layers of green and orange. Behind her the sky was the colour of obsidian. Picking her way between the rocks, she paused at fissures, collecting samples of soil that she wrapped in white handkerchiefs and placed carefully in her bag ... pausing ... watching ... breathing ... listening ... and walking again.

Circumambulatory knowing

Tim Ingold suggests that walking can be a form of “circumambulatory knowing” (2004: 331), and Tilley (1994) argues that the traversed landscape is woven into the walker’s life, and vice versa. Mäkelä says of this relationship, “My body likes the movement, it is aware of the undulations of surface and my mind is continually resting and active.”¹ She suggests that she is concurrently in a state of adaptation and sensory awareness. For her walking is not destination-oriented but an embodied experience of pedestrian movement that functions in opposition to detached and speculative contemplation (de Certeau, 1984: 121). She walks as a process of thinking. In this state she comprehends the worlds she traverses, not from a static vantage point but from a constant flow of changing physical and sensory positions.

Although the materials Mäkelä uses in her ceramic work are sourced from the land she crosses, her relationship with the dunes, shorelines and riverbeds is one of serendipitous discovery. The colour combinations, linear treatments, and rethinking of identity in her art are drawn from the environments that she inhabits.

Materials and dialogue

John Muir, the environmental philosopher, said, “I went out for a walk and finally concluded to stay out till sundown, for going out, I found, was really going in” (1979: 439). In this statement Muir referred to the walker’s distinctive state of interior knowing where a dialogue develops between the self and the world one inhabits. What is outside and what is inside the body no longer exist as a demarcation, and as Alfred Irving Hallowell has argued, “any inner-outer dichotomy, with the human skin as boundary, is psychologically irrelevant” (1955: 88). The significance of being ‘in’ and ‘with’ the physical world is not difficult to understand in relation to a ceramic artist. On a fundamental level, ceramicists work with the earth. They prepare it, mold it, and fire it. But for Mäkelä the relationship is more complex. Although the clay she digs from a local creek bed is supplemented by deposits further up the coast, it is the indentations made by shells and dried seed heads, the lines scribed by sticks, and the colours ground from rock, sand and shell that render her work so distinctive. These objects are also the gatherings of her journeys. They become part of an incrementally complex dialogue in a world where walking renders her studio permeable. Walls that once contained are ruptured. Ideas and resources flow inward and outward as material thinking develops along lines of perambulation.

The varying hues of kokowai (ochre) that Mäkelä collects when she walks are ground and tested. She houses the resulting powders in delicate tipa (native scallop) shells that line the windowsills of her studio. Their gradations of yellow, red and brown form part of a collection of other pigments that she has discovered on her walks, including ground shell, white clay and black titanomagnetite sand. On the opposite wall of her studio are small rectangular pieces of earthenware that have been tested through firing. They are laid out with the attentive care of a taxonomist. But these ‘test pieces’ are more than technical experiments. They glow with quiet conversation, expressive of the private, deliberating joy that permeates her research. What becomes evident when you enter Mäkelä’s studio is that research for her is a thing of beauty. Every idea made manifest is treated with a kind of reverence. Drawings are carefully layered between sheets of clean paper, experiments are arranged in harmonious groups, diaries are placed in careful piles and slabs of clay, checked daily are sandwiched between moist layers of newspaper. In her world the technical and the subjective are not binaries, they exist as a dialogue; material talks to material, and her experiments talk to an interior self. It is through her processes of making and reflection that this dialogue drives her thinking forward. There is something quiet and intimate in this relationship. When she describes it she says, “the materials I use, show me and I have to learn from them ... my inner world comes to the clay. I cannot lie. We listen to each other.”

This intimate dialogue is evident in the pieces she has selected for this exhibition. Here you can see the tile that Mäkelä has cradled against her body and tilted so the wet pigment runs in lines like water in the sand. It is also there in the impressions of seeds and shells, and the subtle warping of ceramic slabs shaped from hours of hand kneading and drying. All of these things testify to an intimate relationship where control is a negotiation. Within this we encounter an implicit understanding of the vital materiality of things (Bennett, 2010). Earth contains force and the ceramicist senses this and is in productive dialogue with it. This force forms relationships with other forces, emotions and bodies such that what we see in this exhibition may be understood as a collaboration between a woman, materials, energy and the world she traverses.

Identity as portrait

Building on a research trajectory that can be traced back to 1991, Mäkelä’s work develops concerns with the portraiture of women. However, where earlier work often used print as part of its process, the pieces in this exhibition are wholly painted. Her

¹This quote and others in the article are taken from an interview with the artist at her Waiheke Island studio on 10 October 2015.

inspiration is drawn from two distinct sources, both portraits of women. The first is Helene Schjerfbeck's 1915 self-portrait. Schjerfbeck, a Finnish artist, was widely known for her melancholic realist paintings in the first decades of last century. Mäkelä's *Portrait of a Woman* completed exactly one hundred years after this image was painted, references, but is separated from the iconography of the original. Her nine considerations of the woman are a form of mirror that reveals a newly considered, complex self. The iterations are revealed and erased, fixed and mutable and underpinned with strong emotional silences. A theme of harmonious contradiction also extends to the paradoxical structure of the work, where the portrait may be read concurrently as a composite or an arrangement of individual expressions.

In her *Earth-woman* series, Mäkelä draws inspiration from a photographic portrait of the Polish artist Käthe Kollwitz whose prints, drawings and sculptures contributed an agonising account of the impact of poverty, hunger and war in the first half of the 20th century. Here the works are rich in line that is more troubled. In this series, the kokowai, black sand and white clay pigments are frictional. Undercurrents of discord and stillness pull against each other. The result is inscribed, layered yet strangely incorporeal. The effect is achieved using only three tools, a Chinese watercolour brush, and old slip brush and a sharpened stick. While these instruments may be employed to incise lines and brush in fields of pigment, they work in an organic environment where colour washes over and through Mäkelä's identities. Pigments of the earth run, colour twists and stains and the portrait of a woman moves incrementally from calm knowing to an identity troubled by undercurrent.

The final body of work *Curtains*, is much quieter. It may be read as a form of revelatory portraiture where tiles are grouped so our attention is drawn to a central figure and concurrently away from her by the rhythmic transparency of curtaining. The woman in these portraits was also inspired by a photograph of Kollwitz. In this work, low sheen and matt surfaces interplay to subtle effect. Mäkelä does not disguise the materials with which she converses. This is earth. It talks like earth, it is coloured like earth and its grace and beauty lie in the confidence and respect she has for earth as a medium.

In this series rhythmic indentations on the edges of the curtaining (made by small shells pressed into the clay) act as delicate, glossed punctuations. This curtaining functions as a frame that emphasises the woman as "both looking and looked-at" (Chute, 2010: 2). The portraits do not address us directly yet they retain something of the knowing, contemplative pose of the photograph that was their origin. However, this woman is painted. Her lines and surfaces are visceral, they are textured with the marks of an inscribing hand and the flow and subtle brushing of pigment. She crosses boundaries, subverting the role of passive domesticity to become "unheimlich – unhomey, extimate to the realm of femininity-as-domesticity and unrelated to masculinity" (Lajer-Burchard, 2001: 37). Yet for all of this, the portrait is delicate. Her femininity is strong. It is integral. Mäkelä's elegant restraint creates a woman uncompromised by affectation. The artist's simplicity of form and the manner in which colours of the earth wash over and through her portraits, propose a deeply harmonious relationship with both thinking and the visceral world in which it occurs.

Materialising thought

In 1889 Nietzsche observed, "Only thoughts won by walking are valuable" (2004:7). In such a statement he touched upon the essence of Mäkelä's work. This woman does not create artefacts that are utilitarian and decorative; instead she works with ideas and she walks these ideas into being. Thinking is both tacit and explicit. Her ceramics are not designed from a series of sketches, refined and then applied to clay. She thinks, and this thinking is part of an embodied engagement with the earth as a medium and a force. Traversed or exhumed, contemplated or kneaded, coloured with thought or pigment, Maarit Mäkelä is a researcher. While she may navigate the unknown, drawing on deep material knowledge and intuitive knowing, there is an intensity in her approach that reminds us of the late 16th century etymology of the verb to research. The word comes from Old French: re- (to express with intensive force) and *cerchier* (to search).

The intensity of Maarit Mäkelä's research is quietly spoken, it touches the considered and the systematic, yet it also engages the sensitive and unknown. The portraits in this exhibition have been laboriously edited from numerous iterations and reflections. It takes the artist up to a month of living with her work after its second firing before she decides what will eventually be presented for public exhibition.

But, perhaps this is not a surprise. It is part of a process of living with and making sense of things.

... It is the behaviour one would expect of a scholar who materialises thought.

References

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Dr Welby Ings is a Professor in Design at Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand. He is an elected Fellow of the British Royal Society of Arts and has been a consultant to many international organisations on issues of creativity and learning. He is a designer and illustrator, whose short films have garnered numerous international awards. He has written and spoken extensively on design methodology, practice-led research and disobedient thought. In 2001 he was awarded the Prime Minister's inaugural, Supreme Award for Tertiary Teaching Excellence and in 2014 he was awarded the AUT University medal for his contributions to research and creativity.

Between and beyond ceramics and geology

Dr Katve-Kaisa Kontturi

Maarit Mäkelä's art grows from the ground – it is all about the earth. She digs and mixes her own clay and paint wherever she goes.¹ Whenever she sees and feels that colours of the land carry an extraordinary beauty and that there is something very special about the environment and its atmosphere, she digs her portable shovel into the ground and excavates some soil. She then makes notes about the landscape, locates her findings on the map and brings what she has collected from nature to her studio. At her studio, filled with natural light, overlooking the ocean and permeated by the sea breeze, she carefully prepares muddy-soily-earthly mixtures for her clay paintings.

Mäkelä has limited knowledge of chemistry and physics; her material experimentation is grounded in the ceramicist's tacit knowledge and tactile experience. It is an exciting and time-consuming task to mix clay, but also hard manual labour. The consistency of the clay has to have the right feel. She alters and refines proportions to produce soft, supple clay, adds some sand and paper-shred to achieve the correct texture, and then creates a set of samples to be burned in the kiln. The samples are aesthetically appealing pieces of art themselves; what they express is a collaboration of materiality of clay and the powers of the fire. The colours and textures that are often a surprise to the artist herself are the result of a delightfully risky business of burning clay. But Mäkelä is not satisfied yet: the clay 'canvases' for her paintings must be prepared and the paintings painted.

As an artist, Mäkelä is more of a geologist than a chemist. She works in layers, appreciating the folding beauty of the earth. But she is not a hero geologist, who drills the earth to find valuables to be harnessed to produce profit (Parikka, 2015: 32). Rather, she appreciates the ground, caresses it: her incentive is to make something beautiful and meaningful with it. There is something very feminine, if not motherly, about the way she tends the ground.

Mäkelä's clay paintings seem to consist of two layers: there is a clay slab and then a painting on it. In geology, as well as in the processes of meaning-making, layers always appear as doubles, where one is not without the other, like the blades of scissors or claws of a lobster (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987: 40). But in reality, there are always more than two layers folding into each other, presupposing each other – the layers are related in intricate, subtle ways.

What might look like a rather straightforward process of painting something on the clay – applying content to raw substance – is actually much more complex. For example, Mäkelä is not only painting with the pigment the earth provides, but also with the texture and porosity of the clay slab. The paint is its own material process: the liquid colours come to exist when variable combinations of water, ironstone, sand, silt and clay are ground in a mortar. After the first firing, she finishes the paintings by applying to their surface a mixture of chemical elements commonly known as baking soda or a blend of burnt seashells and water, which she discovered only recently. The clay slabs have their own lively materiality too: again, a mix of earthy ingredients. In the practice of painting, all these soily matters are brought together, and it is in the intermingling of these material processes that the images on clay slabs emerge. Drying, which can take weeks, and burning in high temperatures are transformative processes that make ceramic painting even more unpredictable. The humidity of air is an indispensable element here, as is how the materials in their mutual entanglements catch fire and peter out. It is for good reason that Mäkelä denies she has control over her images.

Artist and art theorist Barbara Bolt (2004: 159, 184–5) has described this sort of creative practice as 'working hot'. When working hot, flowing intensities of creative work confound signification and reasoning, and images emerge in the material movement beyond representation (Kontturi 2014: 43–4). You never know, for example, how the firing changes or even contorts the painted image and its meaning as pigments melt and clay might crack in extreme temperatures. In Mäkelä's ceramic painting, the fiery, transformative powers of the kiln make the conception of working hot all the more accurate.

Yet Mäkelä's works also bear recognisable visual references: the female portraits and curtains, both of which she has painted for years, are not devoid of cultural significance. For Mäkelä, however, the portraits and curtains are strongly imbued with embodied memories, rather than conveying conventional shared meanings abstracted from lived experience. Many portraits depict painter Helene Schjerfbeck, a Finnish national treasure of major cultural significance, but, for Mäkelä, they recall her childhood and the grandmother who greatly admired Schjerfbeck's art. The curtains are painted in flowing lines and have spots made with seashells, both of which are elements indebted to the techniques and materials of Australian Indigenous bark painting. During her previous visits to Australia, Mäkelä had seen modern acrylic paintings, but felt nothing. When she recently visited Australia again and finally encountered the older, more traditional paintings, the beauty of their earthy materials – ochre, chalk and bark – immediately appealed to her.

In Maarit Mäkelä's art, it all comes down to earth: to the time-consuming manual labour of digging and grinding as well as the pleasures of painting and burning clay. It is for the love of earth that she is working hot, tending the soil, recreating its beauty time and again.

¹ During her New Zealand residency, however, Mäkelä partly used commercial clay offered by a small local company based in Matakana, *Morris and James*. This was only because she knew exactly where the clay came from and thus could understand its environment.

References

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Dr Katve-Kaisa Kontturi is a McKenzie Postdoctoral Fellow at the University of Melbourne. She was trained in Art History at the University of Turku, Finland and has held visiting scholarships at SenseLab, Concordia University, Canada, UC Berkeley and the University of Sydney. Her research focuses on material-relational processes of art and the body and she has a special interest in fabrics, affectivity and collectivity. She is a founding member of the European New Materialist Network, and co-chairs its working group, New Materialism Embracing Creative Arts. Her essays have appeared, or are forthcoming, in *Carnal knowledge: Towards a 'new materialism' through the arts* (2013) and the new materialist special issues of *A+M Journal of Art and Media Studies* (2014), *Cultural Studies Review* (2015) and *Studies in Material Thinking* (2016).

Artist Bio

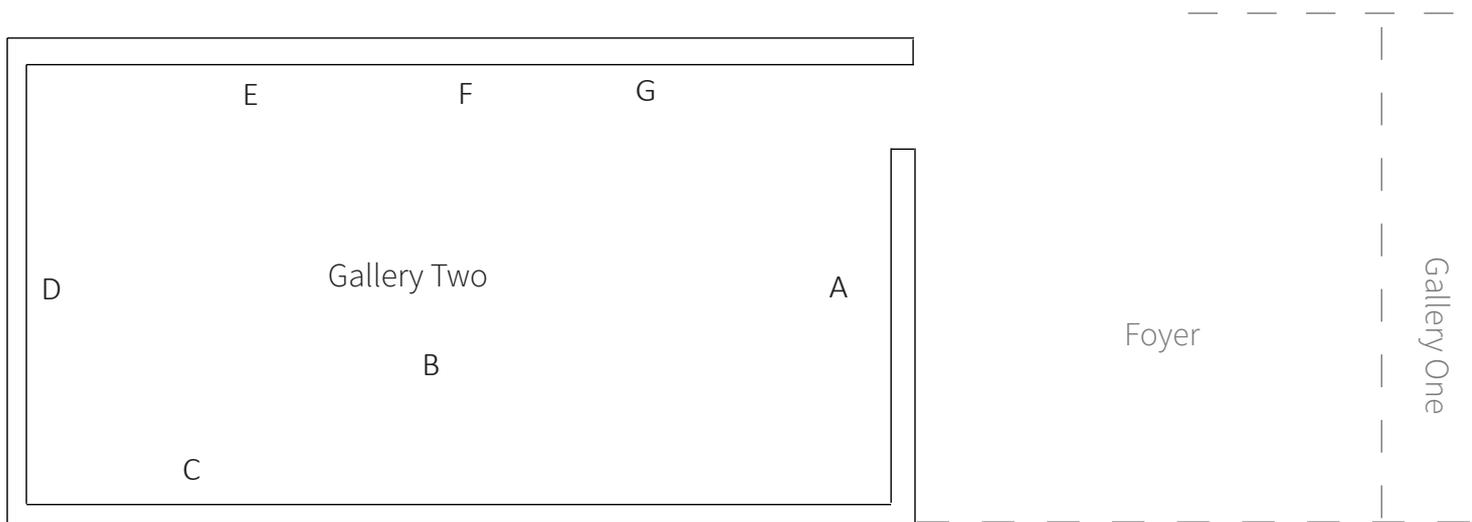
Maarit Mäkelä works as an artist in the junction of ceramics and fine art. She has had several solo exhibitions in Finland and has taken part in frequent joint exhibitions in Finland and abroad. Mäkelä's works deals with femininity. She has discussed this theme broader in her doctoral dissertation *Saveen piirtyviä muistoja. Subjektivisen luomisprosessin ja sukuopuolen representaatioita* [*Memories on clay: representations of subjective creation process and gender*], University of Art and Design Helsinki (2003). The study is a practice-led research, where visual representations of femininity are produced during the research process by artist-researcher herself. The works were shown in the series of three exhibitions *Mirrorplay I-III*, which formed a central part of her doctoral study.

Between 2004-2006 she worked as a postdoctoral researcher and during 2009-2011 as a coordinator in the Design Connections Doctoral Programme in the Department of Design at the University of Art and Design Helsinki. Since 2011 she has worked as an Associate Professor in the University, currently called Aalto University, School of Arts, Design and Architecture. Her research interests lie in practice-led research. She is initiator of *The Art of Research* conference and co-editor of *The Art of Research* and *Research Practices in Art and Design*, University of Art and Design Helsinki (2006) and *The Art of Research II. Process, Results and Contribution*, Aalto University, Helsinki (2012).

<http://designresearch.aalto.fi/blogs/anmakela/>

Maarit Mäkelä is a guest of the School of Art + Design, AUT University.

ST PAUL St Gallery Floor Plan



Work List

A. Materials, test pieces and tools (2015).

B. Photo documentation of the places visited and materials gathered. Images 1 – 10 (from left to right), Pertti Mäkelä (2015); image 11, *Archives of Morris and James* (2015); images 12 –21, Pertti Mäkelä (2015).

C. *Earth-woman V* (2015). Painting with Te Henga black sand, Tasman red stone, Long Bay white and yellow clay on Te Matuku clay.

D. *Portrait of a Woman* (2015). Painting with fired seashell, Te Henga black sand, Tasman red stone, Long Bay white and yellow clay, Te Matuku clay and Cory Road clay on Matakana clay.

E. *Portrait of a Woman II* (2015). Painting with Te Henga black sand, Tasman red stone, Long Bay white and yellow clay, Te Matuku clay and Cory Road clay on Matakana clay.

F. *Curtains* (2015). Painting with Te Henga black sand, Tasman red stone, Long Bay white and yellow clay, Te Matuku clay and Cory Road clay on Matakana clay.

G. *Earth-woman* (2015). Painting with Te Henga black sand, Tasman red stone, Long Bay white and yellow clay on clays from Matakana, Te Matuku and Wilma Road.

Special thanks to *Morris and James* in Matakana for providing clay for the clay works.

