



CLAY GULGONG

A Visit to the Mansfield Estate to Meet Renata Cassiano

Embers of the Pyroteque

Words and Pictures Elizabeth Walton

TO WORK IN CLAY is to truly inhabit the space between form and function. The history of the world's finest ceramics tells a story that traces the history of humanity.

This is a story of vessels and vases, of the plates we ate from, the cups we drank from, and the capsules that carried secret ingredients that made us well again when we were ill. Yet that is a story of clay as the functional. Works of clay are largely worked by hand, wet down, watered, dried, fired and glazed in a process that explores the form on an intensely human and personal level.

For artist Renata Cassiano, the world of functional ceramics is left behind with the rows of cups and glazed bowls that

line the shelves of the firing rooms. For it is dancing with the fire itself that inflames her deepest creations, and her love of the form itself.

Recently in Australia as guest artist for the world renowned Clay Gulgong festival, Cassiano and her partner Craig Hartenberger were commissioned to create a fire sculpture at Morning View, Janet Mansfield's iconic clay retreat in the dry red plains of the Central West of New South Wales.

Creating clay installations is a tradition that has held steady at the conference-styled festival throughout its various incarnations, from Clay Push, Clay Sculpt, Clay Modern, and more recently, Clay Gulgong, the event arose out of an exploration of the clay revolution that sprang up in the

A stylized, handwritten signature in black ink, likely belonging to Elizabeth Walton.

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1960s and 70s. Created by renowned Australian ceramicist Janet Mansfield, the event has thrown, pushed and sculpted itself into the heritage of the global ceramicist movement. The almost-outback town of Gulgong itself has a strong identity as an integral place in the world of fine art ceramics and skillfully rendered craft works.

The work 'Light Not Lost' was developed by Cassiano and Hartenberger throughout their week-long residency, with the final firing and reveal at sundown on Morning View, Mansfield's home in the heartland of Australian 'white

gold', or world class clay. As the sun went down on the final day of the festival in April, festival delegates lined the sundrenched rolling hills with picnic baskets and glasses of wine and watched the pinking sky come down to kiss the hallowed earth that surrounds this artistic colony.

The estate is a peaceful seclusion from the rest of the world, dotted with huts and red roofed outhouses, relics, remnants and everything handmade and hand crafted that the clay minded could dream of. There are huts and kilns, treehouses, hand cut hobbit doors and windows, and an octagon shaped library crammed with every tome of importance to the earthen arts.

Cassiano and Hartenberger travelled from their home in Dartmouth, southeastern Massachusetts to build the

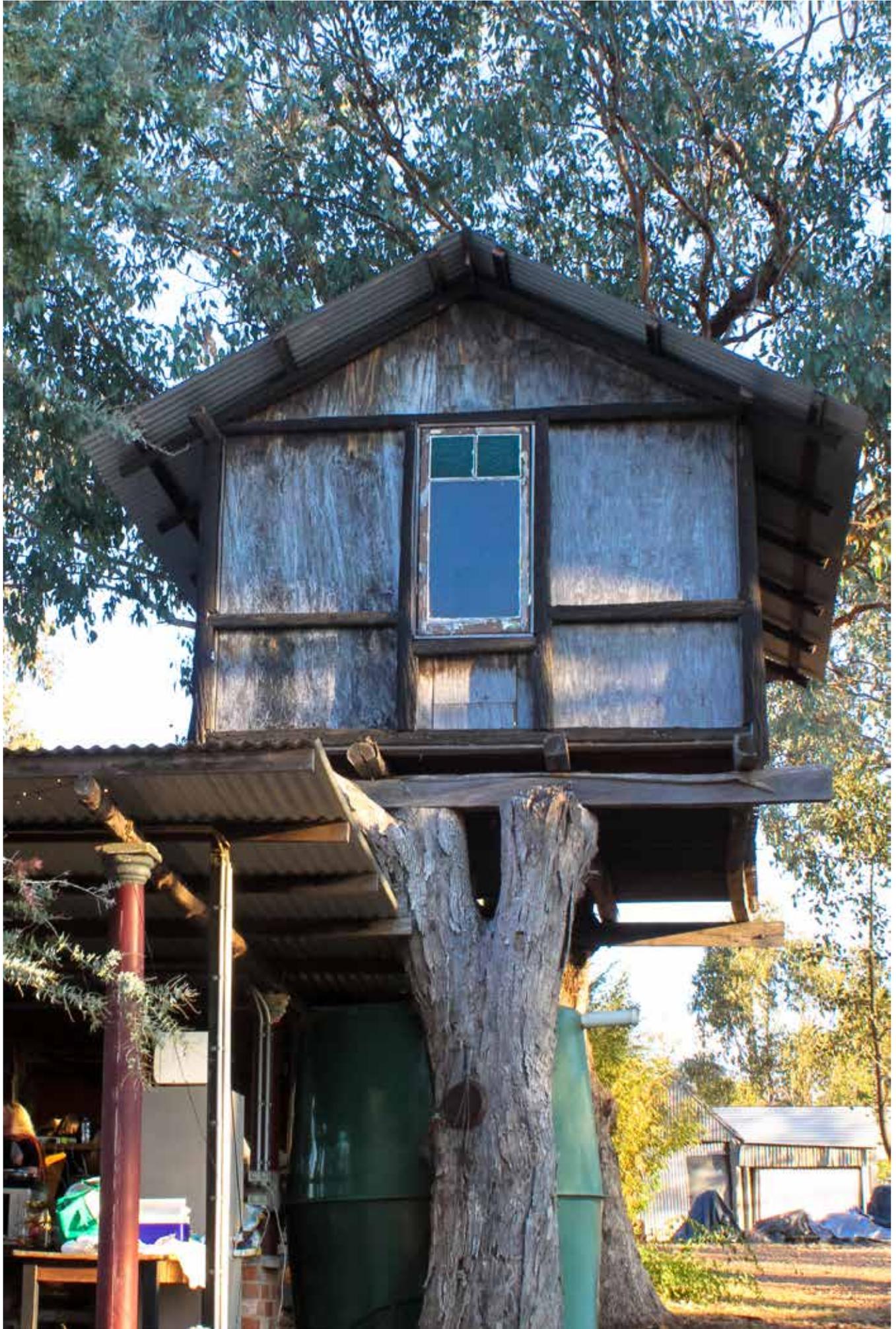




Renata Cassiano and Craig Hartenberger, were guest artists at this year's Clay Gulgong. Above, Renata Cassiano at work on the final firing of 'Light Not Lost'

installation, before flying out to Mexico to spend a season with Renata's family enroute to settling more permanently in Ohio. "The work came about largely from our experience of the sunrise and sunset at Morning View," Cassiano says.

The work was under wraps when Oz Arts attended to see the firing underway, tended by Cassiano and Hartenberger in back-breaking shifts. It is intense physical work, stoking the coals and tending the wood for the freestanding smokehouse with core temperatures that



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rise up to 1,000 degrees Celcius over a three-day firing. It takes a full day and a half just to dry and heat up the 2 tonne mass of clay. "We wanted to show our appreciation of the exquisite light we saw so we faced the sculpture - a head - to take the sunrise on one face and the sunset on the other."

The work pays homage to their teacher Nina Hole, who also built a fire sculpture at Morning View during a residency in the earlier years of the festival.

"The idea was to come and make a sculpture for the festival 25 years after Nina Hole built the first fire sculpture there. With this in mind we placed the piece with a direct line to Nina's sculpture on the hill."

The path of the fire pilgrim is no fast highway. Cassiano began working with her master, in 2007 and was joined by her partner Hartenberger in 2012. The pair continued working with her and completed a fire sculpture work in progress after Nina Hole passed on in recent years.

To work in fire sculpture is to work with the elements of now. It is to blend the art of function with all its purpose and pragmatism with the experience of something alive for a moment in the form of a living flame.

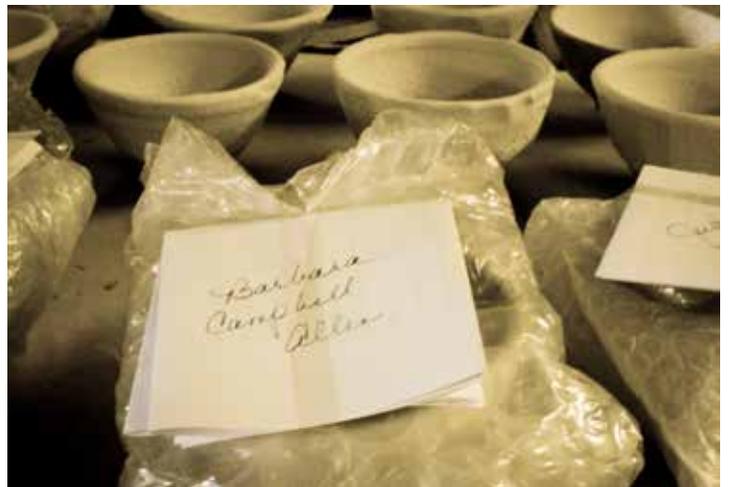
It is part a journey towards an installation that lives on after the fire sculpture, but even more of a moment of pure zen in the experience of witnessing the fire burning through the archways of its housing. In contrast to the





flash of experience in burning the work is the intense planning and engineering that goes into the construction.

"Our relationship is one of partnership in every way," Cassiano says, "and we divide the work as it plays to our individual strengths. I am a faster builder and he is very



Opposite page from top:
 There are many old kilns to see at Morning View Farm; Exploring the artworks such as this life size sculpture in clay; Ceramic packaged up for Barbara Campbell Allen to fire



This page:
 Top: Delegates from a wide age group enjoying their time at Morning View
 Below: Elaine O'Henry sent 37 pieces to be fired by different artists around the country

good at planning. We bounce ideas off each other and look out for what the other missed. We will talk generally about a form we want to make and then each do our own drawings or maquettes, then resolve the final form and concept from there. We also share a studio in Mexico where we make our own work independently, however in close proximity.'

"In many ways we view making as cumulative - you learn from the last work to make the next - so there is no one specific root for this work. Certainly knowing and working with Nina for a number of years showed us a way to make these types of works. For each project we work through a series of maquettes to find the form that will guide us as we build but we have to translate into the larger scale and make adjustments as we go."

The work is created using a double walled construction technique based on a "j" shaped slab, which allows the artists to quickly build a fast and strong structure that permits heat to rise fluidly throughout the pieces during the firing. The entire structure is wrapped in a ceramic fibre which holds the heat in during the firing. The wrapping is removed just after sundown to show the sculpture to the world for the first time, in a burning pyre of scorching hot flames. Once cooled, the structure lives on in perpetuity as an earthen installation, and a permanent monument to the space that exists between the artist, the form and the function.

Elizabeth Walton





Mollie Bosworth displayed her works at the delegate market in Mudgee
Opposite: Time to go home...