

JAN IRVINE-NEALIE

Cloth Covers Clay Series



*Clay holds water
Water soaks cloth
Cloth covers clay
Inter-relatedness and consequence*

Above:
Cloth Covers Clay #1 2009 1330mm x 755mm
Acrylic pigment on hemp, wool filled, hand stitched.
Mounted and framed. Photo: Geoff Ambler
Held by the artist

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'JIN'.

Opposite page:
Cloth Covers Clay #3 2009 400mm x 400mm
Acrylic pigment on hemp, wool filled, hand stitched.
Mounted and framed. Photo: Geoff Ambler
Private collection, Australia



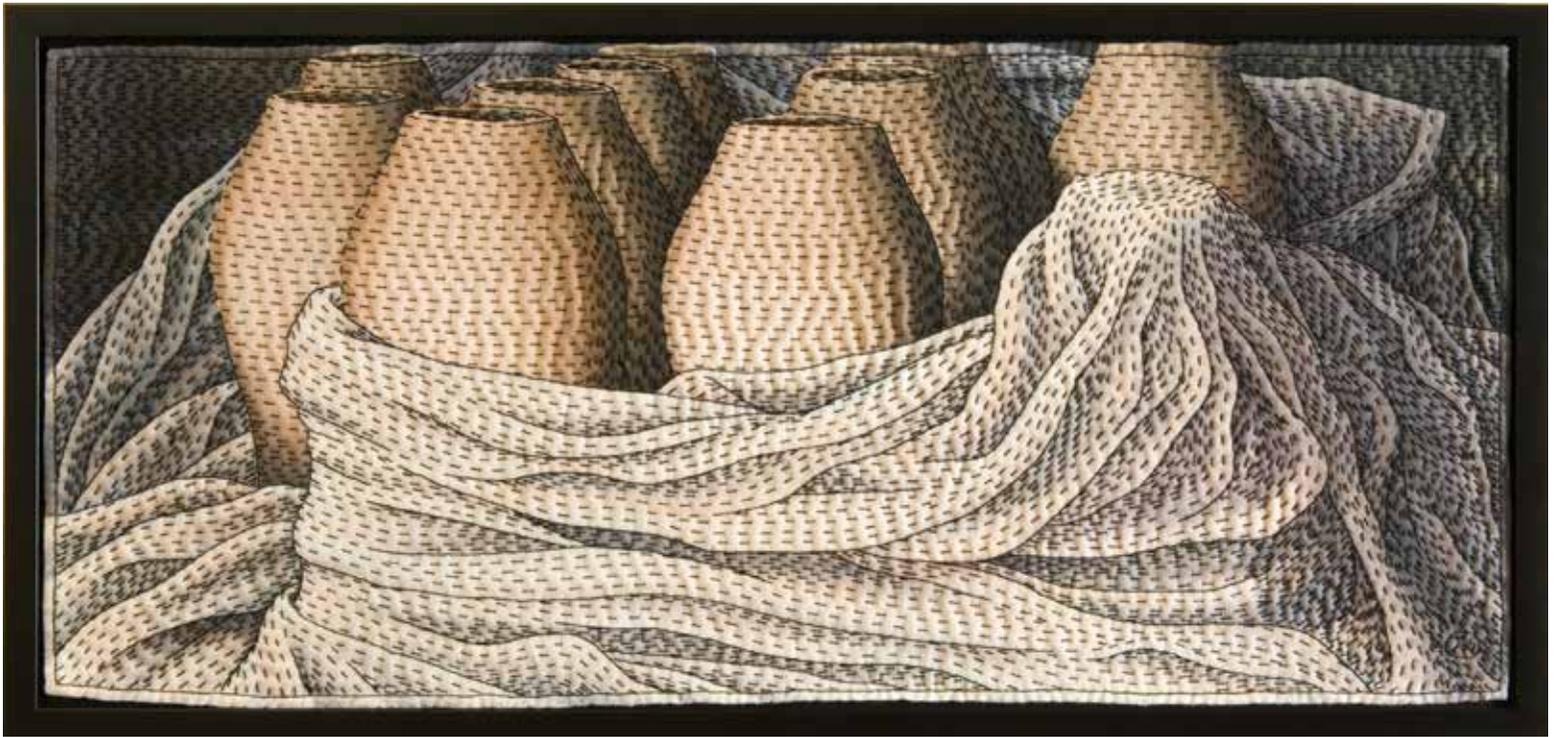
We fly into Xi'an and bus north to Fuping. We're in Shaanxi Province, China – Terracotta Warrior country. It's 2007 and potters from Australia and New Zealand have come as artists in residence at the Fuping Pottery Art Village, their work to be the inaugural exhibition in the Australasian museum, most recent of the FuLe International Ceramic Art Museums there.

Our host is generous and there's a lively cross-Tasman rivalry between studios. My husband, Chester

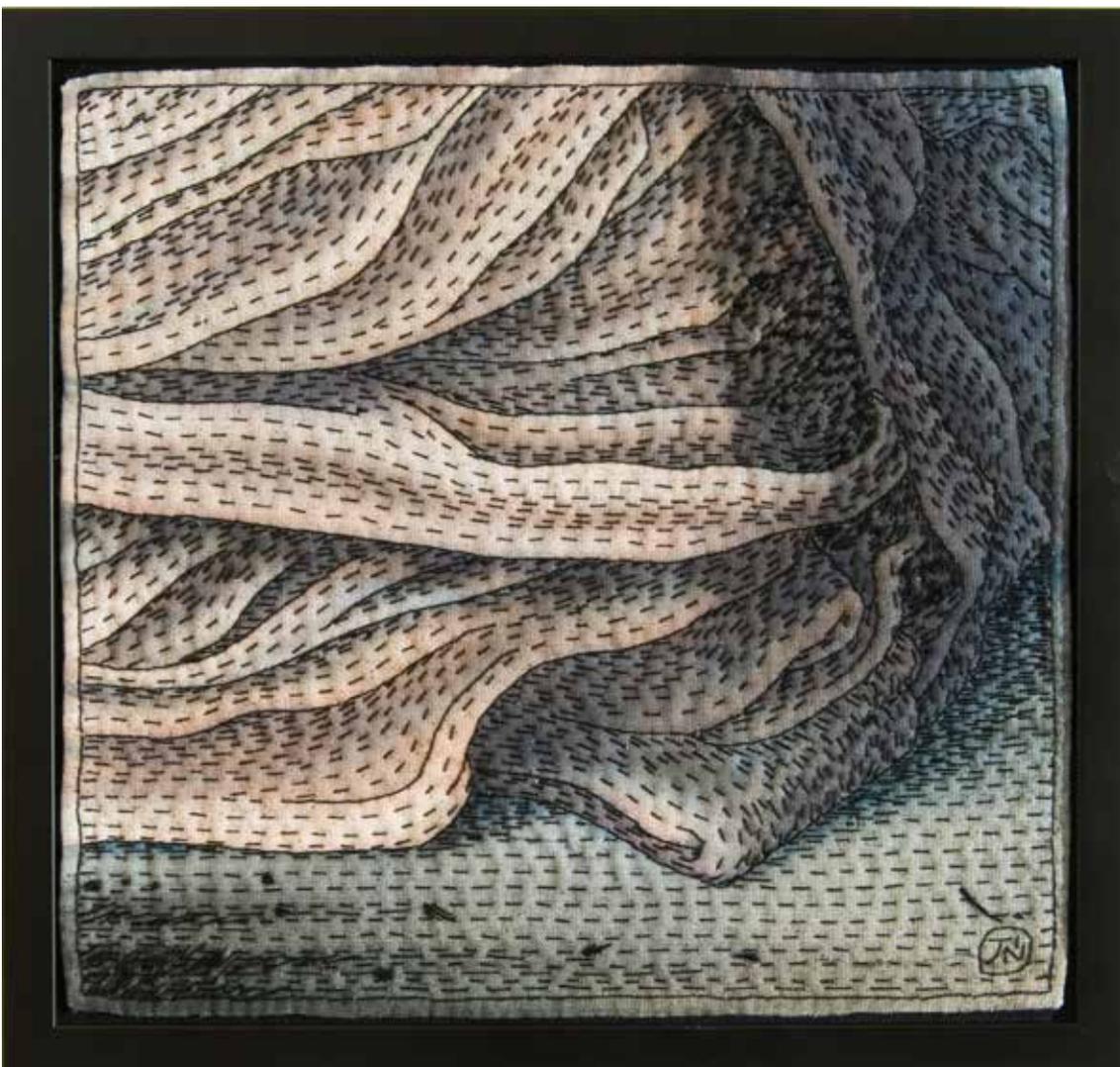
Nealie, has a foot in both camps – a New Zealand potter living in Australia.

I'm a 'not-potter' in the group. Excursions are arranged from time to time and early one morning we set off in the bus and head further north.

We leave in the fog/smog of Fuping and speed through countryside and towns, enjoying the (limited) scenery and stopping off at a regional museum along the way.



Above:
Cloth Covers Clay #2 2009
420mm x 1000mm
Acrylic pigment on hemp,
wool filled, hand stitched.
Mounted and framed.
Photo: Geoff Ambler
Private collection, Australia



Left:
Cloth Covers Clay #4 2009
350mm x 350mm
Acrylic pigment on hemp,
wool filled, hand stitched.
Mounted and framed.
Photo: Geoff Ambler
Private collection, Australia



Leaving the plain we head into mountains, more slowly now, winding our way along country roads, through villages and hamlets. We pull up in the pottery village of Chen Lu and step out into mountain mist.

I'm struck by a sense of time worn human endeavour in the structures and pathways around us. There's unknown and tantalizing detail everywhere. We're briefed on general directions and left to wander in groups. I'm reminded that a 'village' is more populous here – thousands of people occupy the slopes and gullies around the village centre.

I follow potters keen to explore, to find how these potteries operate, curious to know how they fire, what fuel, techniques, glazes and so on. Our group visits a compound at the beginning of our wandering. We're shown pots formed in one workroom then glazed and decorated in the next. They're accustomed to visitors like us – Fuping residents are often brought here. The potter and assistant are

friendly and joking, the decorator next door is shy. My camera records details but in the dull indoor light I'm not hopeful of good results.

We walk along a lane with large Chinese characters in the embankment formed by overlapping broken blue-and-white plates (wonder what that says). We visit the ceramics museum, noting bullet holes in the reinforced glass windows, and then down ancient steps to another compound and so on.

Eventually the group disperses to meander back to our bus. Chester had noticed the first compound was beginning a firing – he's curious to see the kiln,

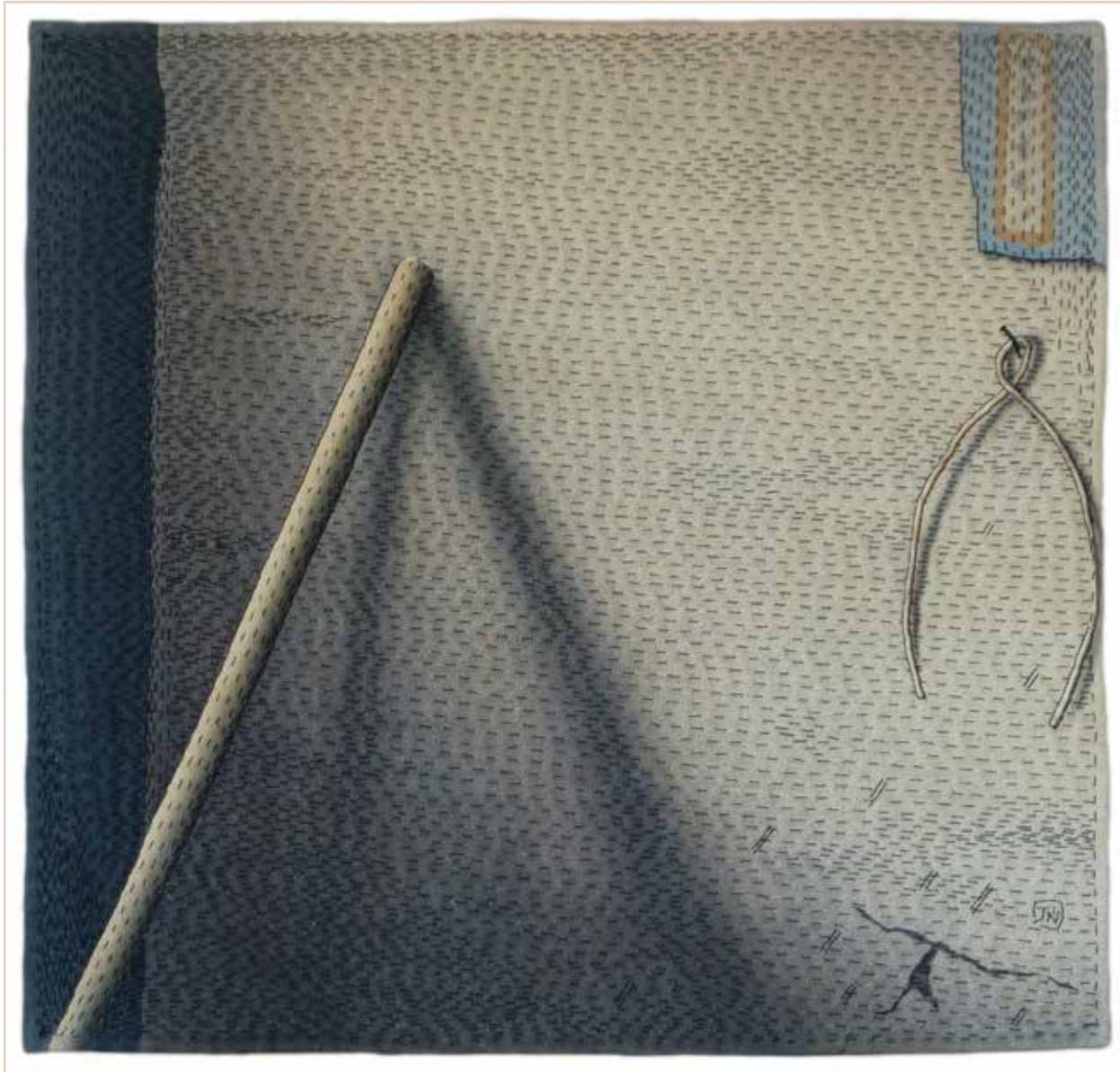
Above:
Assessing Cloth Covers Clay #1 in the last stages of painting. Acrylic pigment has been airbrushed onto plain hemp using stencils and freehand brushing to work up the composition and these stencils litter the studio during the intensity of completion.

Opposite page:
Potter's Wall, Chen Lu – Simple Needs 2011
1070mm x 600mm
Acrylic pigment on hemp, wool filled, hand stitched
Photo: Geoff Ambler
Private collection, Australia
Pegs in the wall for a shelf and string to hold coat
and towel – simple solutions to simple needs in this
Chinese potter's workroom.

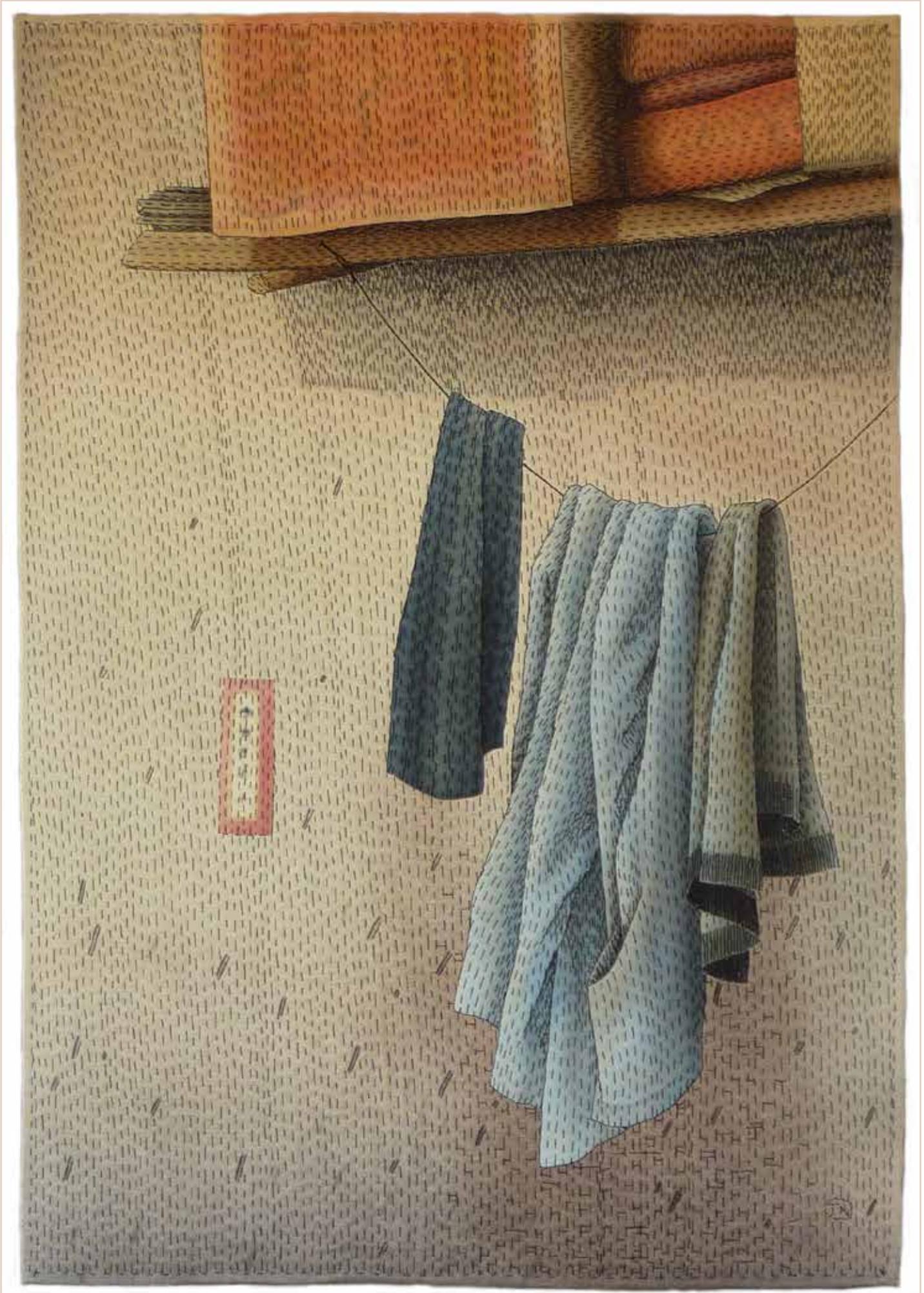
This page:
Potter's Wall, Chen Lu – Calipers 2011
520mm x 540mm
Acrylic pigment on hemp, wool filled, hand stitched
Photo: Artist
Private collection, Australia
A twitch of wire serves as calipers for this Chinese
potter but the drama in the composition comes
from the leaning broom handle and its cast shadows.

keen to talk to the firers. Pottery is the common
language – not English or Chinese. They talk and
laugh, peer into the kiln and roll lumps of coal in
their hands. As we leave I record the compound;
workrooms at the end, pile of coal contrasting
with a fired vase (tall as me) and a 'fence' of
exotically decorated but damaged vases around
the perimeter.

Noisy excitement subsides into quiet
contemplation on our return trip. I check the
shots on my camera and delete a few of the
dark ones before I'm interrupted. It's late by the
time we get back.



Chen Lu





We were in Fuping for three weeks and Sanbao, near Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, for the fourth. Back home it was difficult to 'settle' after such an immersive experience. I reviewed my photo essays. Among potters working, visits to Xi'an, warrior sites, Jingdezhen and others I found Chen Lu. Looking closely I saw vague forms in those last dark images and by adjusting tonal qualities I found, behind the mask of gloom, some great content.

My camera gave an image of the great slab of raw clay in the Chen Lu potters workroom. The wet canvas sacking that covered and maintained moisture was pushed back and nearby stood partly formed pots, their drying also modified by wet cloth. Cloth covers clay. Then, adapting the old rock/paper/scissors ... 'Clay holds water, Water soaks cloth, Cloth covers clay'.

There in that 'uncovered' image was a central and satellite compositions. I was excited by the chiaroscuro effect of ambient light and adjusted the composition to compliment. This central work tipped the focus of my practice from textile into painting. As I spent time 'painting' (acrylic pigment airbrushed on plain hemp) and stitching/'drawing' into these

compositions I sank deeper into the elements at play. I added – 'inter-relatedness and consequence'.

The 'Cloth Covers Clay' series was made in 2009 and exhibited at Kerrie Lowe Gallery in Newtown, Sydney. Three sold but I was glad to have the central work returned – things to learn here, good to have had it 'hang around'. It has shown at various times, most recently in Peter Rushforth – A Legacy, Blue Mountains Cultural Centre, Katoomba.

I revisited the Chen Lu photographs in 2011 for a further series 'Potters Wall'. Again, the cast of light and simple elements of the potter's workspace sparked compositions – a twitch of wire and splattered wall in one; peg-and-board shelf with simple string line in another provided focal elements. 'Potters Wall – Calipers' and 'Potters Wall – Simple Needs' showed in a number of venues and are now in private collections.

The contemplative reflection and aesthetic study involved in these works extended my practice and the process of making resolved the challenge of my travels in China.

Jan Irvine-Nealie

Opposite top:

Pottery compound in mountain pottery village of Chen Lu in Shaanxi Province, China. In one of the workshops at the end a potter throws the forms and in the next workshop glazes are applied. A finished vase stands tall in the compound in startling contrast to raw coal – fuel for the kiln.

Opposite below:

After wedging the right amount of clay for the potter to throw on the wheel, his assistant rests before cutting and wedging for the next throw. Simple tools and raw elements begin a transformation.

Right:

Peter Rushforth – A Legacy exhibition in the Blue Mountains Cultural Centre paid respect to Peter's broad and enduring influence on friends and fellow artists. Cloth Covers Clay #1 hung in a distinguished company of artworks to honour him.

