



## Under Pressure

Raewyn Atkinson's *Deep Time #26*

FELICITY MILBURN

In an old car kiln in the Ceramics department of the University of California, Berkley, a 1.9 metre-high ceramic disc, perforated by a honeycomb of circular holes, stands poised like a piece of immensely magnified ocean coral or an unearthly white wheel. Previously bisque-fired at over 1000 degrees to drive off the water content, it will soon be fired again at temperatures so hot that the porcelain from which it is made will begin to flux and melt, becoming one with the ice-blue glaze. The long channels that have been bored through the work will threaten its collapse. Months of testing, construction and meticulous logistical planning will boil down to a moment of truth in the kiln. Will it hold? This monumental, intrinsically fragile work-in-progress is *Deep Time #26*, a ground-breaking ceramic sculpture by New Zealand artist Raewyn Atkinson, who presents its epic scale and deliberately compromised structure as an elegant metaphor for personal and global fragility.<sup>1</sup>

For Atkinson, who began working with ceramics in 1975, and learned the basics—including how to build and fire in wood kilns—through night- and summer-school courses, this latest sculpture is the culmination of a career that has consistently challenged the limitations of the medium. Her early pieces responded directly to the New Zealand environment, transforming indigenous motifs such as the nikau palm and kina into dramatic, strongly textured vessels and tableware forms. After studying glazes with

the renowned Canadian potter, teacher and author Robin Hopper at the Metchosin International Summer School of the Arts in Victoria, British Columbia, Atkinson began working with large-scale hand-built forms in 1993, following a major development grant from the QE II Arts Council. Though ceramics has been her primary medium, Atkinson's approach is increasingly—and uncompromisingly—sculptural. The forms she creates interact powerfully with the space around them and often incorporate other materials such as cast glass, wood, fluorescent and LED light, aluminium and stainless steel. Highly regarded for work that is as adventurous as it is poetic, she is a sought-after teacher of ceramics practice both in New Zealand and internationally.

When she secured a workspace off the Berkeley campus on 3<sup>rd</sup> Street through her acquaintance with Richard Shaw, Professor in Ceramics at the University, Atkinson had no idea that she would be occupying the former studio of one of her artistic heroes, the legendary American ceramic artist Peter Voulkos (1924-2002). Described by Roberta Smith as an 'influential thinker, teacher and fearless innovator who followed a constantly changing course',<sup>2</sup> Voulkos regarded ceramics as a meeting ground for painting and sculpture and was renowned for his large-scale, Abstract Expressionist works. He founded the ceramics department at Berkeley, working and teaching there between 1959 and 1985—a time now

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(above) Raewyn Atkinson with *Deep Time #26* (work in progress), 2010



defined as the Contemporary American Ceramics Movement. Both the School of Arts Practice at Berkeley and 1306 3<sup>rd</sup> Street (known as ‘the Voulkos building’) reverberate with stories about the larger-than-life artist: legend has it that a crocodile his partner kept as a pet used to bask in the heat under the kiln when Voulkos was firing. For Atkinson, the almost palpable legacy of Voulkos was a touchstone: ‘I would not say his style has consciously influenced me but certainly his energy and courage was and is inspirational.’<sup>3</sup> After learning that the enormous car kiln that Voulkos built and fired his works in had fallen into disrepair, having remaining unused for decades, Atkinson and her husband Shaun Cornelius set about restoring it to working order. Following Voulkos’ own maxim of ‘the bigger, the better’, she began to plan the construction of a form so large and delicate it would need to be built inside the kiln and then lifted up for firing using a block and tackle system designed by Cornelius. The project she chose to undertake was the spectacularly enlarged culmination of a series that had its origins in a continent characterised by extremes: Antarctica.

Atkinson spent eight days on the ice in 2000 as an Artists to Antarctica Fellow, later producing two distinct bodies of work. One, *Homelight*, featured a stack of 61 porcelain boxes that responded to the human history of polar exploration, channelling

the ordinary domestic objects left behind by Robert Falcon Scott’s ill-fated expedition. In contrast, the *Deep Time* series focused on Antarctica as a place where unearthly beauty was juxtaposed with modern scientific research. Her stoneware and terracotta ‘core samples’ reflected the scientific culture that currently dominates the human relationship with the southernmost continent, and took their name and inspiration from the international Deep Time drilling project at Cape Roberts, headed by New Zealander Professor Peter Barrett. Obtaining core samples from as deep as 1500 metres into the sea bed, scientists are able to measure sedimentary deposits eroded over millions of years. Air bubbles have trapped chemicals and gasses at different levels throughout time and these enable glaciologists and climatologists to study previous climatic changes and, potentially, apply these findings to the world’s current environmental issues.

The cleanly sectioned edges and portable scale of Atkinson’s *Deep Time* works suggested that they, too, might have been extracted from the landscape and transported back to the laboratory for analysis. Their twisted profiles and dramatically textured surfaces provided a tangible reminder that in addition to being the coldest continent on Earth, Antarctica is also the windiest. The rocks Atkinson saw on the ground during her visits to Cape Royds and the Dry Valleys, and from the air during a helicopter flight over the landscape, were pock-marked and sculpted by the forces of nature, creating an unexpectedly diverse landscape characterised by wind-blasted horizontals,



(above) Three views of Raewyn Atkinson’s *Deep Time* #26 (work in progress) 2010

Porcelain & paper, 1900 x 1900 x 300 mm. (unfired)—from left to right: *Deep Time* #26 in hoist; with Raewyn working on it; entering kiln.

(left) RAEWYN ATKINSON *Neuschwabenland*—detail 2005

Porcelain, glaze, laser transfers, wood, fluorescent lights, 575 x 195 x 300 mm.

(opposite above) RAEWYN ATKINSON *Deep Time* #23—detail 2009

Porcelain with chun glaze, 300 x 380 x 220 mm.

(Photograph: Stephen A’Court)

(opposite below) RAEWYN ATKINSON *Deep Time* #7 2001

Red clay, stain & porcelain slip, 3100 x 4300 x 1800 mm.

knife-edge angles and rich, chiaroscuro patterns of weathering.

As the *Deep Time* works evolved, Atkinson began to combine these allusions to physical stress and deterioration with the delicate, precariously stacked porcelain forms that evolved out of the *Homelight* series to suggest a sense of environmental and individual vulnerability. In the 2009 *Fragile* exhibition at Bowen Galleries in Wellington, she presented two circular porcelain *Deep Time* forms, each perforated by a mass of internal voids. A lucent celadon glaze gleamed from within these cavernous channels, echoing the distinctive Antarctic light Atkinson had glimpsed through blocks of ice in a snow cave, while the holes themselves represented the negative spaces from which core samples might have been removed. *Deep Time* #22, the larger of the two works, was the more complete, but its fractured and cracked-open edges powerfully conveyed a sense of the external forces Atkinson had, quite deliberately, brought to bear. It had already begun to collapse before reaching the desired firing temperature, but Atkinson was fascinated by its torn and buckled form, and the enthusiastic response it received from audiences encouraged her to develop the work on a more ambitious scale. She subsequently applied for, and received, a Creative New Zealand Art Investment Grant for this purpose.

For an artist who claims she is not drawn to the ceramic medium because of its technical challenges, Atkinson does admit that she often finds herself involved in overcoming them. Her works not only test the physical limitations of her chosen materials; they constantly challenge her own knowledge and ability and sometimes seem to defy the laws of



gravity. In accordance with the words of Japanese ceramic artist Jun Kaneko, who studied with Peter Voulkos at Berkeley and said that one needs to be something of an adventurer in order to progress, Atkinson's is a practice fuelled by speculation, experimentation and leaps of faith. She casts her net with a fearlessness that belies the staid reputation for technical accomplishment ceramic artists are often backhandedly credited with. 'I do think a sense of risk and discovery is a significant aspect of art making for me,' she has said. 'I do not want to make what I know.'<sup>4</sup>

The choices Atkinson has made regarding the scale, medium and structure of *Deep Time* #26 reflect her determination to back her artistic vision as far as she can. Porcelain is a notoriously difficult and unpredictable medium, especially when taken to extremes of thinness and thickness. It requires a meticulous technical approach, but offers no guarantees. In operating beyond the boundaries of known performance, Atkinson has had to accept





high losses. 'Here was an opportunity to take an even greater risk, to push the material further and to see what visual/physical effect this would have. I was keen to see if the scale I imagined the work at was within the limits of possibility. With this current project I feel I may have reached them.'<sup>5</sup>

Atkinson has embraced the challenge of creating large works at several points in her career, when the subject matter demanded or when circumstances allowed her to work with a larger kiln. A striking early example was *Paper Mountain*, a two by three metre work she hand-built from used office paper and the fine white local clay during a 1998 three-month residency at Japan's Shigaraki Ceramic Cultural Park. A response to the intensive cultivation of the surrounding landscape and Atkinson's impressions of the quality and volume of packaging produced in Japan, *Paper Mountain* employed a catenary arch system to help it withstand the pressures of firing. Atkinson's motivation for enlarging the *Deep Time* works was to intensify the visual and physical experience for both viewers and for herself as maker. By taking the work to a size where it would physically dominate any conventional gallery space, Atkinson hoped to strengthen the impact of the work's main theme: the inseparability of environmental and personal fragility.

Since Atkinson's Antarctic residency in 2000, global warming has gone from a highly contested hypothesis in scientific circles to a widely (though by no means unanimously) accepted theory that is increasingly entrenched in the global political consciousness. Antarctica remains an important element in this debate, not only because so much research on climate change continues to be done on the continent, but because of its role as the planet's barometer; a symbol of purity and wilderness, but also of potential threat (melting ice in the Antarctic is predicted to contribute to the world's sea levels rising 1.4 metres by 2100). Atkinson's works no longer directly manifest the imprint of her Antarctic experiences, but are instead more generalised reflections on the vulnerability of the world's current environmental challenges; and an 'attempt to express the anxiety caused by this predicament and the enormity of the situation.'<sup>6</sup>

Atkinson likens the outward shape of *Deep Time* #26, and the pattern of the voids within it, to a mandala. A circular motif with spiritual and ritual significance in Buddhism and Hinduism, the mandala has come to represent a microcosm of the universe from a human perspective, and in Jungian psychology, it represents the dreamer's search for completeness and self-unity. By placing the work under such extreme stress during the firing process, Atkinson deliberately disrupts any sense of order, seeing the destabilisation of the form as a metaphor for personal and environmental frailty in the face of overwhelming adversity. Encouragingly, the porcelain transforms under pressure, creating unexpectedly beautiful new forms.

Atkinson is currently creating a body of related works to accompany *Deep Time* #26, which suggest that the very discipline that has sounded the warning bells for the global climate crisis may in fact be the source of its salvation. Extending the themes explored in *I Never Promised You a Rose Garden* (2009), in which ceramic discs shaped to resemble anti-depressant pills were strung in an oversized pharmaceutical rosary, Atkinson's new works respond to the recently popularised aphorism that 'green is the new religion' by suggesting that, correspondingly, science may be the new saviour. The scale and arrangement of the 'pills' have been calculated to echo the pattern of the voids in *Deep Time* #26, but their regular configuration will contrast with the disorder wreaked on the larger work by the stresses of the kiln. In a second rosary, the beads will be replaced by a form most representative of the current Zeitgeist: the ubiquitous eco light bulb. For Atkinson, the eco bulb—like the *Deep Time* drilling project—is a symbol of faith that the global situation is ultimately controllable. 'Like the taking of anti-depressants, it is a human intervention, undertaken with hope and faith in science to provide solutions to desperate situations.'<sup>7</sup> Ravaged and collapsing, *Deep Time* #26 is ultimately a hopeful monument—a small testament to courage, perseverance and faith in the process. It is undeniably fragile, but it is also a survivor.

1. As this article went to print, *Deep Time* #26 emerged safely and successfully—though certainly not unscathed—from the final firing process.
2. Roberta Smith, 'Peter Voulkos, 78, A Master of Expressive Ceramics, Dies', *New York Times*, Feb. 21, 2002, p. B9.
3. Raewyn Atkinson, email conversation with the author, September 2010.
4. *ibid.*
5. *ibid.*
6. *ibid.*
7. *ibid.*

(above) RAEWYN ATKINSON *Deep Time* #1, 4, 5 2001  
Red clay, slip, stain, variable dimensions

(opposite) RAEWYN ATKINSON *Deep Time* #22—detail 2009  
Porcelain with chun glaze  
(Photograph: Stephen A'Court)

