

# An Accumulated History

Karl Chitham considers the work of Raewyn Atkinson

I have always been a big fan of collecting keepsakes to remind me of moments or experiences I have found significant in my life. This habit has somewhat dissipated over time as I have tried to rationalise my own role in the ever-increasing accumulation of 'stuff' in the world. I still have a few little mementos – a stone from a windswept New Zealand beach, a shiny brass button from a military uniform, and a ceramic shard with an 1814 maker's mark found on a rocky shore in the north of Scotland. This little collection sits in a bowl alongside other assembled and discarded bits and bobs. On top of the pile rests another ceramic shard, this one by ceramicist Raewyn Atkinson. It was acquired during a cheeky promotional push by the artist during the Volume Craft Symposium for her show *Praising Girls* (2008) at Judith Anderson Gallery, and became another link in a chain of moments I was to have with Atkinson's practice over the years.

I first encountered her work at the exhibition *Designs on Antarctica* (2005), initially presented at Objectspace, Auckland. This exhibition marked the completion of a significant body of work by Atkinson, inspired by multiple trips to Antarctica, both as an Antarctica New Zealand art fellow in 2000 and as a tourist in 2003. The content of the exhibition was drawn primarily from Atkinson's observations and experiences of the layers of human history she had discovered on the Southern continent. Subjects as diverse as Scott's disastrous South Pole expedition, the Nazi bid for domination of the continent during World War II, and a painting of the Virgin Mary in the Ukrainian Antarctic base, were brought together in a surprisingly succinct and harmonious series of works. As a somewhat curious component of the show, there was also a small carpet of porcelain shards that visitors had to walk across in

Below: **Raewyn Atkinson**, *Praising Girls*, 2008, slipcast porcelain, each, h.15cm, w.25cm

Opposite page: **Raewyn Atkinson**, *Wasters II*, 2013, (work in progress), found ceramic; photos: artist











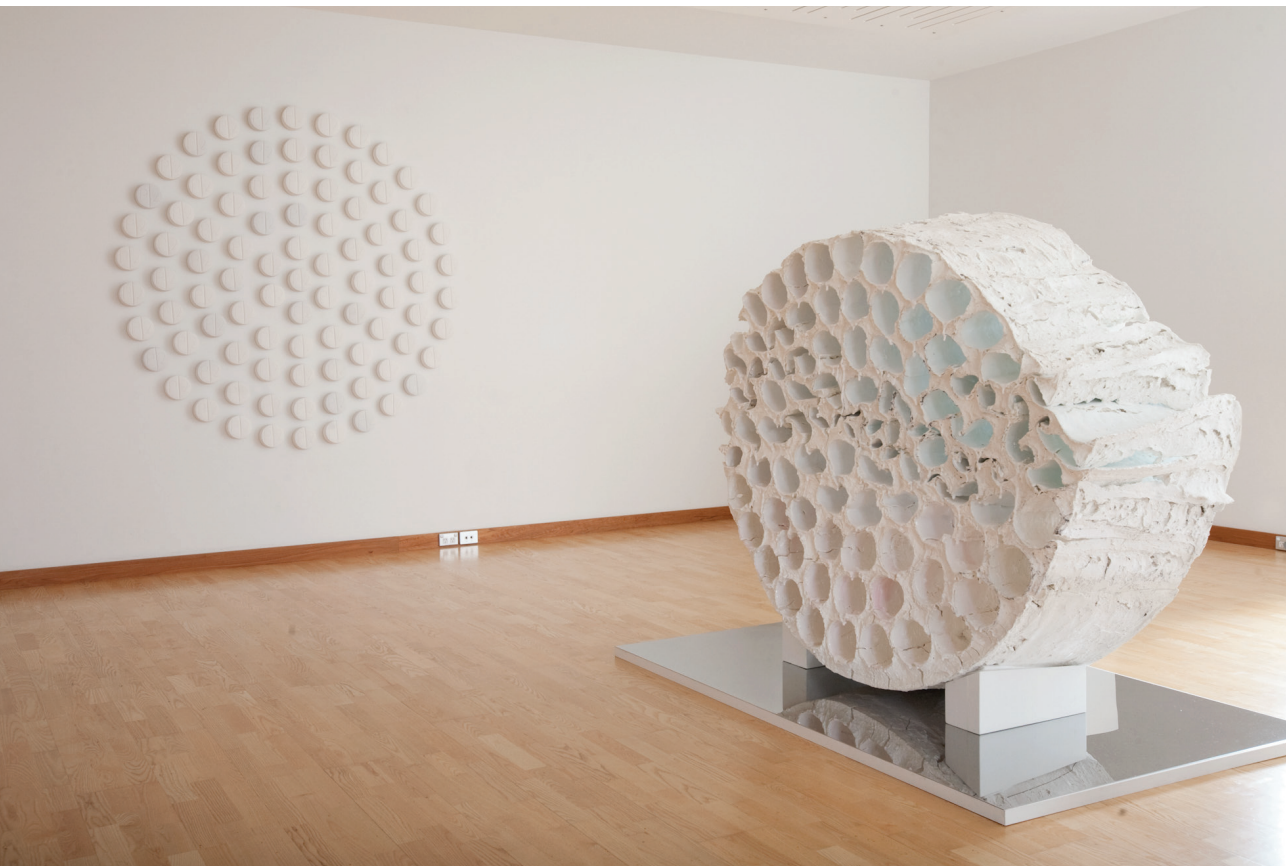
**Raewyn Atkinson** with *Deep Time #26*, 2010  
Work in progress; photo: artist

order to enter the gallery. The startling crunch as brave individuals made their way tentatively over the work was an unnerving experience for the participant and the observer. It heightened the senses and immediately shifted you from the passive gallery setting to another place – an ice field in sub zero temperatures, a beach with the compacting of shells underfoot, or the potters studio after some unforeseen kiln mishap.

This experiential approach is just one method Atkinson employs in order to provide access to the strata of human experience that make up our idea of history. In Atkinson's case, the goal is to bring these layers together - not necessarily to make sense of them, but more as a means of giving them a renewed prevalence.

In 2010, Atkinson took up a residency at the School of Art Practice at Berkeley, University of California. Working in the space once occupied by Peter Voulkos, a famous figure in world ceramics,

**Raewyn Atkinson**, *Deep Time #26*, 2010, porcelain, chun glaze, h.154cm, w.177cm, d.53cm: *Fiat Lux*, RH Gallery  
Photo: Elspeth Collier



Atkinson began to rebuild his immense kiln and expand on an earlier body of works called *Deep Time* (2001–2011). Based on the Deep Time drilling project at Cape Roberts, these works were a direct response to the activities of the project's scientists who collected core samples from below the Antarctic seabed to gauge the impact of climate change.

One particular work fired in Voulkos' reconditioned kiln was *Deep Time #26* (2010), described by curator and writer Felicity Milburn as "a 1.9 metre-high ceramic disk, perforated by a honeycomb of circular holes, ... poised like a piece of immensely magnified ocean coral or an unearthly white wheel".<sup>1</sup> This colossal porcelain artifact was, for Atkinson, the culmination of ongoing attempts to communicate her intense reactions to the current state of stress the environment was and is still under. *Deep Time #26* became a concise metaphor for the tensions of global change – the structure of the form undergoing enormous pressure as the clay softened, slumped, cracked and then solidified during the firing process. This work was a calculated risk, a visceral experiment in helplessness and vulnerability.

While still at Berkeley, Atkinson began another series of works using found 'blank' shards recovered from Tepco Beach on the eastern shore of San Francisco Bay. She first heard about the beach through one of the technicians who showed her a worn ceramic shard he had recovered during one of his visits. Over a period of 30 years, the Technical Porcelain and China Ware Company (TePCo), which closed its doors in 1968, dumped its flawed or 'unfit for sale' waste on a section of shoreline now known affectionately as Tepco Beach. Atkinson initially didn't expect to find much and was not disappointed when she arrived at a relatively barren stretch of rocky shore in an industrial area called Point Isabel. After further exploration she discovered the true Tepco Beach which has become a haven for amateur foragers, mosaicists and artists.

Like the remnants of human occupation scattered around Antarctica, Tepco is made up of layers of material that reference various periods of local industrial and social history. The process of collecting intrigued Atkinson. Trying to find all of the pieces in an effort to reconstruct a whole object became an all-consuming pastime. The rules around what to keep and what to discard were something akin to

Tepco Beach, 2012; photo: Raewyn Atkinson





**Raewyn Atkinson**  
*Wasters I*, 2013, detail  
found ceramic  
various dimensions  
Photo: artist



**Raewyn Atkinson**  
*Wasters I*, 2013  
found ceramic  
diam.170cm  
variable depth  
Photo: artist  
Courtesy RH Gallery





**Raewyn Atkinson *Wasters III*, 2013**  
work in progress, found ceramic and laser decals  
various dimensions; photo: artist

solving a complex puzzle. Atkinson suggests that “shards are enduring; they are what we use as a tool to construct our culture and history – we need them in order to make our understanding whole”.<sup>2</sup>

While considering what to do with these countless pieces of broken pottery, Atkinson was drawn to the accidental outcomes of the ceramic process. Of particular interest was an example of a Delft ‘waster’ – stacks of individual ceramic pieces that have become fused during the firing process. These (often beautiful) malfunctions of pottery production share elements of the intentions of Atkinson’s *Deep Time #26* – a tangible instance of the potential for failure and also representative of the physical evidence of history. Using the shards from Tepco Beach as a starting point, Atkinson has begun incorporating images and impressions collected while at Berkeley into her work. Obvious references to over-consumption, such as shopping trolleys used by the homeless or stacked with black plastic bags ready for the recycling station, become provocative statements in place of the decorative motifs commonly found on dinnerware. This is what Atkinson refers to as a “revisionist approach”<sup>3</sup> – her attempt at reconstructing history through a personal lens.

This predisposition towards combining historical references with the artist’s own impressions and experiences is what allows Atkinson’s practice to have currency. She is intent on commenting not only on how we have influence over the environment but also how we fictionalise history. For Atkinson, the shard has become a corporeal agent for a tendency towards what she considers the approximation of history. As with my own collecting fetish, shards have become mementos for Atkinson, visual markers of the ebb and flow of time. They are the substance and the conduits of human history in the same way that core samples are a historical record of the environment. Both are reliant on someone making sense of them, tying the pieces together into some semblance of truth. As Atkinson reminds us “history can be a fiction”.<sup>4</sup>

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1 Felicity Milburn, ‘Under Pressure, Raewyn Atkinson’s *Deep time #26*’, *Art New Zealand*, no.136/SUMMER 2010-2011, pp. 49-53.

2 Raewyn Atkinson, in conversation with the author, January 2013.

3 *ibid.*

4 *ibid.*