

AMY KENNEDY *Study in* CONTRASTS

by Lilianne Milgrom

I first met Amy Kennedy in her modest, sun-drenched studio on the outskirts of Melbourne and was struck by her humble, gentle demeanor. It did not take long to recognize that her natural humility belies an artistic vision that crackles with originality, strength, and intellect. The same can be said of her work.

In preparation for my studio visit, Kennedy had placed several of her distinctive works on a tabletop beneath a bay window. Despite being thrown into high relief by the unforgiving Australian sun, her complex, textured forms seemed to shimmer like ice crystals on a frozen landscape. I discovered that the source of this illusion lies in the unique properties of the ceramic material that Kennedy has been developing since her days as a university student.

While pursuing her ceramic studies at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), Kennedy concentrated on the layered form and its potential for manipulating light and shadow. She began joining the strata by adhering the layers with glaze. This did not achieve the desired effect, so she began experimenting with combinations of glaze and clay properties, eventually arriving at a hybrid ceramic material that scintillates with tiny particles of glass frit and—to the artist's delight—is not immediately identified as clay.

As Kennedy built up a successful studio practice, she continued to modify her clay composite while honing a body of work that is energized by an internal struggle between fragility and resilience.





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1 Blue and indigo, 5 in. (13 cm) in length (each), artist blend clay/glaze material, fired to cone 8, 2015. *Photo: Christopher Sanders.* 2 Baer Art Center in Hofos, Iceland, June 2016. 3 Cliffs and fjord at Baer Art Center.

Her signature monochrome pieces project a meditative stillness as if time itself has been trapped within the folds of the multiple, feather-like elements. The forms gently undulate and ripple. But viewer beware—the brittle, perforated layers, contoured by jagged edges, discourage close tactile interaction. “The work is intriguing, curious, and tempting to touch,” says Anna Maas, Director of Skepsi Gallery. “The delicate fragments that come together to make the form puzzle and amaze people. They expect them to be soft and move, but when touched, they are hard and solid.”

Underlying the work’s deceptively organic appearance lies a structural architecture that is highly refined and controlled. Similar to the way that natural patterns found in flora and fauna and ancient rock formations have taken millennia to evolve, Kennedy’s thoughtful pieces emerge in their final manifestation after enduring multiple labor-intensive, carefully construed phases of production. Kennedy expands on her unique process on page 52.

Throughout her career, Kennedy has actively pursued new experiences in far flung areas of the world. After completing her studies, she attended international residencies that included the European Ceramic Work Centre in the Netherlands and the Anderson Ranch Arts Center in Colorado. During her time in Colorado, she traveled throughout the southwestern states, conducting research into natural formations. I caught up with Kennedy again shortly after she returned to Australia from her most recent residency in Iceland.

Since Australia is practically antipodal to Iceland, I was curious as to what attracted her to seek creative inspiration so far from home. Kennedy had reached a point in her artistic practice in which

she was seeking a less rigid, less prescribed manner of working. She was sorely in need of both adventure and isolation. Iceland, she explained, “seemed the perfect place to surprise myself.” The physical distance alone promised to provide the opportunity for detachment and objectivity.

Kennedy left for the remote Baer Art Center (the nearest town was an hour’s walk away) with a few hypothetical questions in mind. How far could she push the boundaries between robust/delicate and immediate/deliberate? How could she introduce greater strength as well as elements of ugliness and spontaneity into her work? The natural Icelandic landscape provided ample inspiration. She spent





4, 5 Amy Kennedy's research and work in progress, various dimensions, stoneware clays, natural objects, Baer Art Center, 2016. 6 Untitled, 5 in. (13 cm) in height, stoneware clays, fired to cone 8, Baer Art Center, 2016. 7 Untitled, 16 in. (40 cm) in length (installation), artist blend clay/glaze material, glass additions, fired to cone 8, 2014. *Photo: Jeremy Dillon.* 8 *Surge*, 8½ in. (22 cm) in length, artist blend clay/glaze material, glass additions, fired to cone 8, 2016. 9 Multi-toned, 11½ in. (29 cm) in length, artist blend clay/glaze material, glass additions, fired to cone 8, 2015. 8, 9 *Photos: Christopher Sanders.*

days seeking answers amidst the wonders of black beaches, majestic fjords, moss fields, and dramatic basalt cliffs.

During her residency, Kennedy allowed herself the freedom to embrace happy accidents and accept failed investigations without judgment. Some of her new forms teeter precariously, as if haphazardly rearranged, while others are adorned with spiky appendages. Into her usual muted palette of white and gray, she introduced a black clay that mimics the dark residue of lava eruptions, and here again she immersed herself in the challenge of joining disparate elements.

I asked Kennedy what it was about joining and fusing that continued to preoccupy her. After mulling the question over, she replied that joining “is an essential consideration, technically and aesthetically, in ceramics as it is in many other mediums. How does one link two elements together? Does one make the connection obvious, disguise it, labor over it, or just do it? Years ago in my studies, this was an area of questioning—how to connect, glue, or fix one part to another. This question is still in my practice and it was an area of focus and thought during my residency in Iceland; how to join two incongruent elements together—the very delicate with the strong, for example. During my

time in the northern Icelandic environment, a foreign natural environment to my Australian one, I recorded observations of forms joining other forms, connections between elements in the landscape, small and large. Connections are everywhere and can offer possible solutions.”

The works that emerged during her time in Iceland take their cue from the natural world and are imbued with a seriousness of purpose. They are edgier, self-contained, aloof, and otherworldly. They speak of a primordial time not much impacted by the turmoil of the modern world. One of her new works evokes an ancient sailing vessel ready to set out and test the waters of the unknown world, a brave and grandiose ambition that parallels Kennedy’s own artistic journey of exploration.

Amy Kennedy is represented by the Skepsi Gallery and will be showing some of her new works in her upcoming exhibitions, notably a two-person show with Tania Rollond at Skepsi at Malvern Artists’ Society Gallery, in Melbourne, Australia, scheduled for September 22–October 8, 2017.

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LAYER BY LAYER by Amy Kennedy

To make my layered sculptural forms, I start by mixing up a clay body made from 60% clay and 40% glaze materials that I have developed and get it to a plastic state (A).

Next, I build a bowl-shaped support for the layered form using a robust stoneware clay body. I coat the interior of the support with an alumina wash, so that the slabs in the layered form fuse to one another, but release from the support structure after firing (B).

Once this is complete, I create cardboard templates that reflect the curves of the interior of the support (B, C). I use a numbering system to match a particular area of the support to the matching template.

I begin construction of the form by preparing slabs of the clay/glaze material. I then roll each slab thinner, using a cement board, rolling pins, and hand rollers. Individual layers are cut out using the cardboard templates. I then roll these layers again to refine them further (D).

After building up many layers, I position them in the support (E, F), repeating the process to complete the form.

The work is once-fired in a mostly oxidation atmosphere in a gas kiln to cone 8. During the firing, the layers in the work fuse together. After the firing, the sculpture is carefully separated from the support. Excess alumina is removed from the work by brushing and sanding (G).

