



**Project
Space**

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Danica Drago

Reclaim: A Ceramic Site Intervention

September 12 – October 4, 2014

Reclaim: A Ceramic Site Intervention is a multidisciplinary sculptural installation of recent ceramic work produced by Danica Drago. Rather than focus on the final product, Drago's project explores the detailed and self-directed process of conceptualizing, molding, firing, and displaying a body of ceramic sculptures. Drago, who is a skilled ceramicist in her own right, is deeply interested in how process affects the conceptualization and production of artwork, and uses the *Reclaim* project as a means to explore this creative sentiment.

Drago's practice as a sculptor is a manifestation of her interest in the multiple stages of ceramic sculpting. For Drago, each step within her creative process, beginning with the initial concept and strategy for creation, to the collection or purchase of materials, down to the firing and glazing of each object, is an integral element in the process of creation. Drago defines her practice as an ongoing exploration of the relationship between materials, and their ability to build dialogue through the materials they are constructed with. Drago is respectful of the history of ceramic sculpture, and finds great enjoyment in the technical aspects clay sculpture lends itself to, which is somewhat ironic given Drago's practice as one of relatively open-ended cause, effect and chance. Drago's previous work built on these ideas by exploring the intersections between hand and machine-made ceramic sculptures, and the tensions that exist around the very notion of an object being "hand-made."

Drago approaches *Reclaim* as an artist avidly interested in the materiality of process-based creation, seeking new ways to expand on this practice. Drago accepts that, while working with a general concept of what her aims for the project will be, that a certain degree of error, improvisation, and experimentation is inherently unavoidable. Watching the project unfold is to accept a certain degree of variables outside of the artist's control that are a product of both the natural and constructed environments *Reclaim* took shape in.

The entirety of *Reclaim* is a product of Drago's residency at Artscape's facilities on Toronto Island's Gibraltar Point. But, that is not to say the project as a whole has been contained within the expanses of the Island itself. Through the artist's commitment to process-based creation, *Reclaim* took on unexpected twists and turns that were the result of the numerous and often-unpredictable variables associated with each stage of the project. Over a two-week period Drago commuted, by bicycle with a large two-wheeled trailer attached, to harvest natural, unprocessed clay from several sites along the Toronto waterfront. The sites included the Scarborough Bluffs along the city's eastern waterfront,

to a condominium construction site along Queen's Quay just south of the Toronto Island Ferry Docks. The endeavor proved difficult in the sheer weight and quantity of the clay when one considers that not only was the raw material dug up by hand, but brought back to Drago's island studio by bicycle.

Each harvest yielded clay most emerging ceramic sculptors would be unfamiliar with. The clay ranged in colour from a light, sandy brown to an almost black, dense sludge that emitted an equally powerful odor. Drago feels that for many working within the medium, sculpting is a very clean, safe, and regimented means of production that stands in stark contrast to the messy, labour-intensive process of creation ceramic sculpting is derived from. Drago states:

For so many people working with clay, it becomes something that is totally clean and commodified, with no connection to the land of place it came from. It's very clean, neat and processed with all the convenience of a material you can buy pre-packaged in an art supply shop. With *Reclaim*, I wanted to move as far away as possible from that concept and mode of production, and reconnect the act of sculpting with some of the processes it originated from, and the land that it came from.¹

The laborious process of straining and purifying the harvested clay exposes the basic realities of Drago's connection to her chosen medium. It is a messy and often-imperfect method of process that illustrates Drago's immersion in her work. The intimate connection Drago shares with her work extends well beyond the rendering of sculptural forms, infusing every step of the artist's process.

In *Reclaim*, Drago's commitment to process-based production extends beyond the creation of a gallery-ready object. Drago sculpted and fired—with the exception of two firing vessels—all of *Reclaim's* objects without the use of a conventional ceramics facility. Instead, Drago's sculptures were fired in two hand-built kilns on the beaches of Gibraltar Point. The construction of each kiln is further evidence of Drago's commitment to process-oriented production. Each kiln—one, a large pit dug into the sand of Gibraltar Point with a fire then built over top of the firing vessel, the other a more traditional kiln constructed from reclaimed bricks from the Leslie Street Spit—were susceptible to the changing elements in a day, and resulted in several delays in the firing process. Cold temperatures, rain, and high winds (along with summer crowds that occupy the numerous beaches of the Toronto Islands), presented a series of challenges that while anticipated, were unpreventable in Drago's process. However, the kilns were not simply a means to an end in the creation of each sculpture. Instead, they were a vital means of process and production, with each kiln and its unique firing process becoming an extension of the final sculptural product.

Through every step of *Reclaim's* production—from conceptualization, to the harvesting of clay and kiln materials, to the final rendering of each sculpture—one sees Danica Drago's commitment to the entirety of process-based sculpting. It is a unique connection between landscape, space, technology, and aesthetic exploration that gives life not only to the project, but also to Drago's broader artistic practice.

-Jonathan Lockyer

¹ The author in conversation with Danica Drago, Artscape Gibraltar Point, August 12, 2014.