

Jennings Kerr

Julie Pennington
Keeping Time

There is a faint hissing that builds to a full and piercing whistle. One task paused to flick the kettle, water turning from clarity to a flavoured murk. Infusion. A moment to break from the studio grind. Checking the diary for daily tasks, plotting out a schedule while resting the hands and fingers against a warm cup. There is a preparation for more pressing, rolling, pinching and sculpting. These moments away from the work bench are eventually contained, they are infused into the vessel forms through the change of rhythm. A phone call, a studio visit, an appointment, or sun down, whatever the reason might be, the pausing gives a shift in the sequence and a variance in the pattern. It pronounces the hand. Life punctuates the making but the making also opens gaps through varying material qualities and workability. It steps Pennington away from the work. The rhythmic and repetitive gestures act like a meditation but they are also a way in which the process feels like a measure of time. The pieces might allow air and light to pass through their walls, permeable like a breezeway, but they hold time in their materials through the artist's hand.

Pennington's studio table is a silent symphony of rolling and pressing, laying and forming. The gestures conducted like an orchestra and brought together in harmony through careful hand, measured gesture. There are five different clay bodies in this show. Their material quality and workability varies, and the building with them often dictated to by this. Moisture level becomes critical in working the material into coils, laying and forming occurring across multiple pieces at a time, in order to factor this variable. I received some studio and work in progress photos from Pennington as she developed this series. What stayed with me from this was a small section of coil, laid loosely and dangling down the face or wall of the piece. Waiting for the appropriate moment to be settled as part of the wall. It spoke to the notion of down-time. The moments that Pennington has to use her patience in a different way, to wait for suitable weather, for humidity to shift and then ever so carefully apply some clay slip and lay the coil in place. I enjoy the skill and labour in how Pennington is able to apply repeat pattern and mimic surface texture, however I feel the success in these works is often found in where this slips or the pattern changes slightly. This is how the ceramic comes to life, and perhaps the difference between the hand and something from an additive layer manufacturing. The natural surface and organic come out of a material restraint, a willingness to allow the clay bodies to speak for themselves.

Ants and bees, termites, the workers of the hives and nests are all building in sequence and repetitive action. Termites mix dirt, saliva and dung to form their mounds. The wall structures are porous despite their solid appearance and the internal tunnel systems and the permeability allow for air to reach the underground nest and control internal climate. In some cases the mounds are built with open chimneys atop. The architectural form, material and colour palette are all consistencies with Pennington however the artist's hand here, is singular. Her forming is dynamic and varies as she builds. The forms are not always predetermined other than the base shape of oval or square. The laying of the coils will drive how the angle and walls develop, the undulation, the height and in cases the breezeways Pennington incorporates. Like the workers, Pennington finds purpose in her making, her hands on and in the material as a critical relationship in her life. Pennington finds inspiration in larger buildings, both contemporary and ancient, but in many cases the time worn is of appeal. Walls and their construction ideology find a way into the work. It might be the relationship of the brick to the coil, or in some cases I consider rammed earth, a primitive straw and mud hut or stone castle. Pennington's forms are elegant and minimal, allowing her interest in pattern and sequence to be fully expressed. The hand-built forms are about revealing, like an exposed brick, they let you understand their workings and as a result allow no place to hide. Pennington's work is intricate and controlled, interior and exterior resolved in equal measure

This series of work focusses on flat and wide walled forms in order to expose a greater surface area of pattern and open more of the surface texture in order to create light play. The shadow becomes an important element as the creases and folds fall into darkness, allowing for a contrast with the lightness of the Raku sand and paper clays. In 'Breathe', 2024 we find this affect heightened by the coil placement allowing for windows in the wall, and a peek into and through the form. These openings allowing the air and light to flow into and out of the work while also speaking to the aesthetics of woven basketry with its holes and knots. Pennington's ability to allow these various interests and inspirations into the work while achieving such a controlled handle of her material is what makes this work special. The formal qualities of her pieces combined with her ability to render her material in an illusion makes for such distinctive and successful sculpture. The pattern and sequence are important in mimicry of baskets however it is the ability to render a softness in the clay that is also so impressive. The time spent on the studio couch with the book on woven basketry infuses into the show as the tea calms the room and soothes the tired hand. A glance up from the book and out to the light play in the tangled branches of tress, patterns and textures at every turn.

This show has come about through a diffusion of interests into a natural material. Architecture, a worn away wall, a pattern on the bark of a tree or the fine work of Japanese bamboo basketry seep into the clay like the flavour infusing into the boiled water. These works continue Pennington's interest in exposing the construction ideology and treating its surface in order to express her various interests in pattern and sequence found in nature and more specifically woven basketry. The resulting coiled forms bring to mind ants nests, termite mounds, cocoons, and other architectural structures while also mimicking the detail and surface of rope, raffia, reeds, twigs, twine and grasses used in basket making. The incredible attention to detail is evident, the works sign Pennington's skill and touch, they whisper softly about the rhythms of daily life in their repeated gestures. They keep time.

James Kerr, 2024