



Belinda Fox and Neville French, *Limnonari Vessels*; porcelain, wheelthrown, altered, inlaid, incised limestone and feldspathic glazes; photo: Pixart

The Narrative of Place

Altair Roelants discusses a collaborative journey
with Belinda Fox and Neville French

Victoria based artist Belinda Fox and ceramicist Neville French's recent joint body of work exhibited in *Slip*, 4–18 June 2011¹ at Sydney's Arthouse Gallery, marked the end of a fruitful collaborative journey that was initiated by Fox's chance foray into ceramics in Skopelos, Greece – the natural beauty and marine wild life of the area giving the artists much of the inspiration for the show. The successful exhibition, that included couplings of evocative paintings and luminous porcelain vessels, captured the fragility of life and the marine environment within an interrelated painted and ceramic aesthetic. *Slip* also marked the strong unity Fox and French had achieved and demonstrated the power that such cross-disciplined dialogues can have in expressing those narratives inherent in place, colour, glaze and form.

Artist Belinda Fox is well known for her haunting mixed-media paintings and prints that combine wonderful moments of intimacy with flowing washes, to imagine man's charged relationship with the environment. This first time ceramics project was inspired by Fox's print-making residency at the Skopelos Art Foundation in June 2010², during which time she also had the opportunity to learn from a well respected local traditional potter³. Working in clay had come naturally to Fox and this experience compelled her to explore ceramics potential for expressing the rich ecological fabric of the area and her broader environmental concerns. Similarly as an artist who often incorporates experimental components within her practice and creates stories "in multiple parts"⁴, fusing 2d and 3d elements appealed to Fox and she believed that this multi-disciplined approach would really bring the essence of Greece to life. After returning to Australia, Fox initiated an on-line search for a ceramicist whose aesthetic would complement her ideas, which brought her to ceramicist Neville French. Well respected for his

rich expressive approach to glazes and graceful forms, French takes his inspiration from rural Victoria to “distill an essence of place, evoke quietude and transcendence”.⁵ It is not surprising then, that Fox was drawn to “the natural, beautiful and elegant forms”⁶ of his ceramics and felt there was an affinity between their two aesthetics. After an email of introduction, the two artists first met in August 2010 to discuss the joint project that would take them on a journey of investigation and learning over the following months.⁷

Drawing on Fox’s images of Greece – particularly white sea urchins (or ‘hairy flowers’ as they translate in Greek), jelly fish, the ocean and the physical delicacy of that environment – the duo commenced work in September 2010 beginning with the collaborative porcelain vessels.⁸ As French explains, “The development of the ceramic techniques and method we used was very systematic and started with a clear aim to express a feeling of fragility.”⁹ French began by creating test tiles and experimenting with blends created from four clay slips of white, brown, blue and black that he felt would be suitable as under glazes and “would have an affinity with Belinda’s printmaking skills and techniques”.¹⁰ After demonstrating a range of ceramic techniques to Fox¹¹, he then supplied the artist with clay tiles and buckets of the slips to experiment with independently in her Melbourne studio. Fox found this process both exciting and challenging due to shifts in colour post firing and obtaining precision in the malleable clay. As she discusses she had to “let go” of her own artistic impulses in order to engage and ‘build confidence’ in what is more of an ‘organic process’¹². The emotive surface designs Fox developed incorporated incising, sgraffito and inlay, and brushed, poured and splashed slip effects, such as solvents and salts sprayed and splashed onto wet slips to create brilliant marine effects that depict the mood, movement, textures and wildlife of the sea and which would later be echoed in the imagery and colours of the paintings. These test tiles were then returned to French for bisque and glaze firing.

Belinda Fox and **Neville French**, *Limnori Vessel 3*, porcelain, wheelthrown, altered, inlaid, incised limestone and feldspathic glazes; h.30cm, w.24cm; photo: Pixart





Above: **Belinda Fox** and **Neville French**, *Limnonari Vessels*, porcelain, wheel formed, altered, inlaid incised limestone and feldspathic glazes.

Below: Belinda Fox incising a *Limnonari Vessel*

Photos: courtesy artists



While Fox developed the surface designs, French worked on the base glazes in his studio in Buninyong, creating ten in total that would strengthen the thematic thread by mimicking the reflective qualities and hues of the sea. These included a fluid glossy glaze with suspended bubbles in the surface, a translucent papery matt glaze, a crystalline semi matt glaze and a felspathic crazed glaze¹³ in pale blues, greens and ambers. French then trialed variations of these glazes over Fox's designs on the test tiles. As he explains, he applied "thick and thin applications, layered, juxtaposed, brushed, sprayed and poured to discover the ways to effectively integrate the drawing and washes with the glazed surface"¹⁴ and to play with the effects of light and transparency. This process was new for French whose own porcelain forms are normally free of motifs, and enabled him to apply glaze in a more "painterly way" and to "shift the behavior of the glazed surface".¹⁵ French's expertise and understanding of the expressive and imaginative capacity of glazes positioned them as integral elements of both the vessels and overall body of work. The glazes evoke contemplation and forge a connection by reflecting natural light, which extends the narrative reach of the vessels to the paintings, the surrounding space and the viewer, drawing these elements back into the porcelain form – very much like the flow of the tide.



Progress on *Limnonari Vessel 7*; photo: courtesy artists

For the forms of the vessels themselves, French developed a set of eight large test pots in the shape of jellyfish that would mirror Fox's imagery. French then bubble wrapped these un-fired samples and drove them to Fox in Melbourne where the two artists considered the designs and applied the most successful onto the test vessels. This stage required them both to work in their area of expertise but intuitively and in new ways – Fox was drawing directly onto a large, curved clay object and the designs had to meld the exterior with the interior of the vessel. French had to apply glazes that would merge Fox's designs with the porcelain form and achieve the desired aesthetic outcome after firing. As Fox explains, it was both "terrifying and liberating doing something you didn't know" by "starting from something beautiful...responding to its shape and form".¹⁶

French then produced the final vessels¹⁷, before returning them to Fox. During the finishing stages, Fox suggested Facebook as a practical way for them to upload images and comments from their respective studios and it became a vital tool for the remainder of the process, particularly when discussing final glaze choices. Fox also kept a notebook about the collaboration, including records of the slip blends, colour paint samples and sketches. The porcelain vessels were finished by French in April, during which time Fox worked on the paintings in response to particular ceramic pieces; these were completed in May.

The resulting exhibition, *Slip* (2011), included thirteen mixed media paintings on board and fourteen thrown and altered porcelain vessels. Tying in the beginning of this journey, three of the painted works¹⁸ came from Fox's residency in Greece and were pivotal pieces within the show. The exhibition layout also illustrated the wonderful fusion between these two artist's practices, as the vessels and paintings were displayed as pairs. These groupings were selected during the making process by Fox¹⁹ to express the direct relationship between the 2d and 3d forms – the most explicit being three small vessels positioned



Belinda Fox in studio; Neville French in studio; photos: courtesy artists

beneath the painting *Tide* (2011). As Fox explains, “I made the painting so it felt like a torrent of water and energy was falling into the vessels below.”²⁰ Similarly, Fox positioned the works within the space to create a “narrative journey through the exhibition”²¹ itself. Such an approach was particularly successful in *Slip* as one instantly had a sense of the place and story Fox and French were describing – as the ocean flowed from the walls to the vessels in energetic but delicate waves, and the occasional lone figure in the paintings reminded us, the audience, of our position within this cycle. Even more striking was the feeling one got of the seamless nature of this collaboration and harmony demonstrated in the work – both elements could have been created by one artist, and the pride in this partnership is expressed in their joint signature, ‘ff’. When asked about this experience, both artists speak of thorough enjoyment and pay tribute to the other’s expertise, expressing what they gained from the collaboration and how it influenced their own practice. As French states, “The final results were a great fusion of our skills and, I believe, more than either of us could have achieved individually.”²²

So successful was the collaboration, Fox and French have another exhibition coming up at Canberra’s Beaver Gallery *Give & Take*, 22 March – 10 April 2012²³, which will again incorporate ceramics but this time with works on paper and print-making. In this sense, *Slip* becomes a space of narration not only about place, but also about the journey these two artists have been on and will continue on.

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View of the exhibition, *Slip*, Arthouse Gallery, Sydney, June 2011; photo: courtesy gallery

- 1 Full exhibition title *Belinda Fox Slip*, 4–18 June 2011; www.arthousegallery.com.au
- 2 Belinda Fox was invited by master printer Basil Hall to create prints along with ten other artists.
- 3 The Greek potter was Basily Rodio who creates the traditional black ceramic ware of Greece at the studio opened by his great grandfather in 1900.
- 4 Quote taken from Belinda Fox August 2011
- 5 Quote taken from Neville French's website www.nevillefrench.com
- 6 Quote taken from interview with Belinda Fox in August 2011
- 7 This was a first time collaboration for French, and while Fox had worked collaboratively before this was the first time she had done so with a ceramicist.
- 8 The porcelain vessels came to inform Fox's paintings.
- 9 Quote taken from a text supplied by Neville French August 2011
- 10 Quote taken from a text supplied by Neville French August 2011
- 11 These included inlay, incising, sgraffito and screen printing
- 12 Discussed during an interview with Belinda Fox August 2011
- 13 Quote taken from a text supplied by Neville French August 2011
- 14 Quote taken from a text supplied by Neville French August 2011
- 15 Quote taken from a text supplied by Neville French August 2011
- 16 Quote taken from interview with Belinda Fox August 2011
- 17 The vessels ranged in height from 10 to 40 cm
- 18 These are *Your Journey May Be Long* (2010), *Full of Adventures* (2010), *With Much to Learn* (2010).
- 19 Fox consulted with French during the exhibition planning and layout
- 20 Quote taken from Belinda Fox September 2011
- 21 Quote taken from interview with Belinda Fox August 2011
- 22 Quote taken from Neville French August 2011
- 23 For more information about the artists and their exhibition at Beaver Gallery, please visit www.belindafox.com.au and www.nevillefrench.com