



Open Cut. Ceramic 32 x 54 cm.

Jenny Mulcahy
Sensing the Silence

Article by Stephen Naylor



SOMETIMES ART IS ABOUT BEAUTY, ON OTHER occasions it reflects artistic skill, but rarely is it about the notion of silence. The exhibition by Jenny Mulcahy is about many things; silence is purely a vehicle to explore a series of significant issues in her practice that can only be understood through research based in artistic processes.

The deserted mining town of Mary Kathleen in north west Queensland has been the inspiration that has driven her practice over the past five years. Jenny Mulcahy has researched the mine's history and the chequered saga of uranium itself. What is revealed in this exhibition is a poignant statement about Australian space, how we see, feel, hear and experience the real phenomena of the land and its history.

Sensing the Silence: Mary Kathleen presents a series of sculptural works that combine ceramics, glass and found objects with the emphasis on the inclusion of kiln cast glass and pâte de verre. The work aims to bring together craft skills based on Mulcahy's ceramic background but also to create totemic and iconic sculptural forms that act as sentinels to the land. The empathy with indigenous art practice is clearly evident in the work, as she limits recognisable forms in favour of abstract shapes, colours and textures that go beyond simplistic representation. The exhibition is a component of her PhD which she is undertaking at James Cook University; she endeavours in this study to create an awareness of the primal energy that is unique to a particular place in time.

Her project has focused on the site of the now defunct uranium mine and small township of Mary Kathleen, located east of Mt Isa in Queensland. The open-cut uranium mine was established in 1963 and operated spasmodically until 1984. Using the inspiration and the associations of the industry, Mulcahy creates a suite of works with exquisite glazed surfaces that conjure visions of fission and the turgid power of the nuclear industry. We are also challenged by possible disasters, yet there is a beauty associated with this humble mineral and the potential of its beguiling energy source.

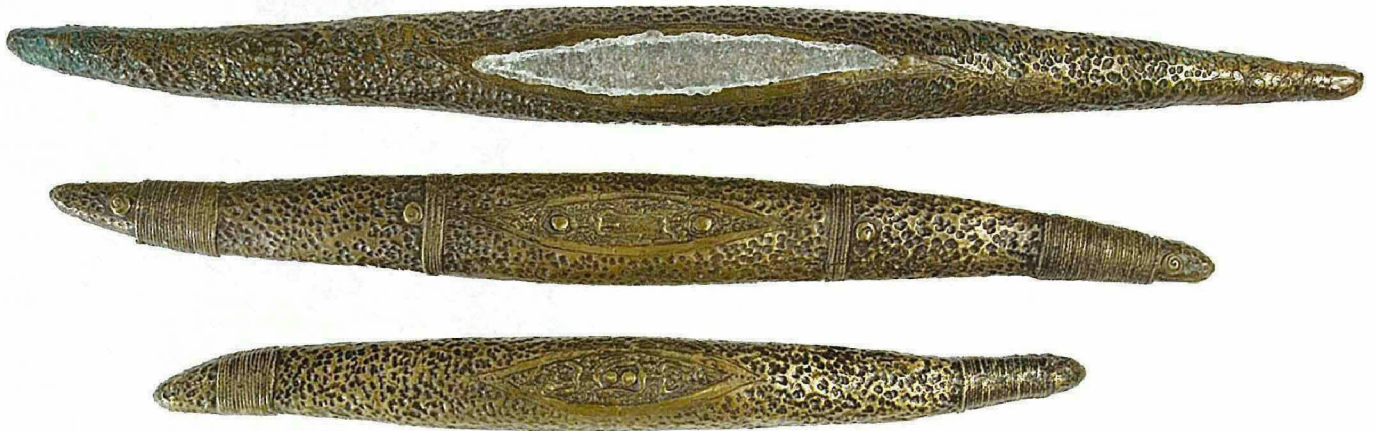
In this exhibition Mulcahy explores the visual phenomena and the essences of silence endemic to the now abandoned Mary Kathleen mine site, township, and immediate surrounds. By examining the energy near the sacred aboriginal sites, the eerie/waiting silence of the deserted township, the aggressive, dominating silence of the mine site, and the peaceful energy of the surrounding bush, she hoped to convey through the artwork, a sense of the silence unique to these sites. (Mulcahy 2006). This show represents some fine examples of contemporary sculptural



Ruins 1. Ceramic. 56 x 17 x 18 cm.



Green Arch. Ceramic and cast glass. 28 x 67 x 33 cm.



Message Sticks 4, 5 and 6. Bronze. Longest 7 x 8 x 88 cm.

practice utilising the ceramic medium and a depth of artistic research; yet it also appeals to many who do not have a strong interest in the arts but have experienced the authentic nature of the Australian bush. Haunting and enigmatic are words that resonate when we view the work. Here years of ceramic practice are condensed into her forms that stand as sentinels to a little known chapter of Australian history.

In Australia we are becoming more cognisant of place. More than 40,000 years of stewardship have yielded a land rich in history and stories. There is an intersection emerging where White Australia is embracing the notion of story, metaphor and even the metaphysical; we are beginning to recognise that words and pictures alone cannot speak with authority about land and country. Mulcahy is suggesting that it is 'what is not said' (hearing the silence) that conveys the truth of place.

Sensing the Silence: Mary Kathleen approaches the landscape from a non-Western perspective. As artists have always attempted to attune their perspective of the landscape through immersion, Jenny Mulcahy

has spent time in this place. Mary Kathleen is an emblematic name conjuring a short but poignant history of the nuclear age in Australia and the mine acknowledges rich mineral deposits stored in the land.

The modern technological unlocking of the uranium power has adjusted our minds since Hiroshima, in 1945. Australia also shared in the quest to be part of the nuclear age through its collaboration with Britain at Maralinga, partly driving the need that made Mary Kathleen spring into existence.

Our comprehension in the age of terror, post 9-11, is one different from Hiroshima Day or the 1956 tests at Maralinga. We relate to the Chernobyl accident and the devastation caused in Russia in 1992. Mulcahy has worked up the surfaces of her forms to distil the essence of the 1945-1992 nuclear phenomena, the pock marked skins and facades are embattled by force and time. The largest work in the show is a seven-part wall mounted piece entitled *Ruins 6*. The vertical totemic pieces stand up to 3 m high and are fashioned out of steel and clay. The astute fabrication is unified by a



Inheritance. Mary Kathleen Series 2. 54 x 17 x 6 cm.

steel armature that could be seen as the last vestige of a building decimated by an explosive force. Embedded in the surfaces are fragments of rusty steel, brackets, rivets and bolts. The forms are cracked, crazed with a variety of shapes that reflect man-made and natural features. In Mulcahy's research, she has carried out extensive investigation into creating new clay bodies; some of these experiments have included sawdust, perlite and vermiculite. The firing too has been an arduous process; some works have been in and out of the kilns over a six month period always pushing the boundaries of possibilities.

Mulcahy's ability to patinate surfaces is noteworthy; the transitions of natural clay to steel sections are almost seamless. The glazed surfaces both absorb and repel the flow of light and colour revealing pure whites, greens and yellows through to resilient browns and burnt-out blacks.

The almost 30 works made in the past year demonstrate a consistency of technique and understanding of the forms. The exhibition pivots between pure abstraction into metaphoric figuration. There are a

series of altar works featuring primal figures representing male and female archetypes which are enriched with *pâte de verre* highlighting a sense of gender identification with specific places. The integration with glass is a perceptive inclusion as uranium was an integral part of the early glass industry, where it was used as a colouring pigment for yellow and green.

The Mary Kathleen reference is central to Mulcahy's work but never in an overt fashion. She identifies elements of buildings, towers, the open cut mine face and other remnant structures, but one of the most enigmatic forms she has utilised is the arch. *Green Arch I* and *Blue Arch* are large forms 28 x 67 x 33 cm with a surge of energy punctuated by a cast glass wedge. The striations unifying the form are integral to both mediums. *Green Arch I* seems to both emit and absorb light giving the work a haunting but troubling presence. The technical skill to integrate ceramic and cast glass seems simple enough but the dramatic variance in the shrinkage of both mediums was a significant obstacle in rendering the finished



Heads (detail), Ceramic. 3 x 2 cm each.

work. Many technical experts suggested that her tolerances were impractical and could not be achieved; this only made Mulcahy more determined to achieve her aim. The finished works are poignant in their simplicity; they take the medium far beyond the natural limits, pushing the audience beyond form and technique into the realm of the poetic.

Five large pod-like bronze 'message sticks' utilise glass but surprisingly avoid the use of traditional patina (except in one small section), instead they highlight the intricate surfaces of polished and bound sections.

The title and theme of *Sensing the Silence* is expanded through two wall hung installations incorporating hundreds of small faces. The open mouths cry in a chorus of silence. These mute works expand on the recognition of the unheard voices, which we sense but cannot hear. The rows of gaunt faces establish a wave of silence, the repetition of the forms emphasising continuity over thousands of years not discriminating between colour, class or creed. Jenny Mulcahy's technical proficiency in creating a work linking ceramic, acrylic and printed medium is consistent with her ceramic assemblages. There is a seamless integration of media, all bound in a strong conceptual frame.

The poetic response to an ancient place, exploited for its resources and now dormant, mute and empty, generates a healing silence; one only some can hear. The screaming faces, message sticks and enriched surfaces are voices for those who are receptive enough to hear the tales of this town and its memories. To hear the silence is to understand.



Ruins 6. Steel and clay. 3 m/h.

Stephen Naylor is a Lecturer in Art Theory and Visual Arts at James Cook University, Townsville, Australia. *Sensing the Silence: Mary Kathleen* was shown at the Perc Tucker Regional Gallery in Townsville from 30 June – 27 August 2006. Some works from the exhibition will be shown in other venues during 2007. The thesis component accompanying the exhibition will be completed in 2007 and assessable through James Cook University.