

Rachel Grimshaw: **Ceramic Residency in Rome** at CRETA studios

9th March – 12th April 2017

'Genius Loci' – Spirit of Place

The aim of this residency was to create work which I could only have made in Rome. Inspired by the combination of brickwork and marble within the Roman ruins, I used locally dug clay, contrasted with Parian porcelain (posted from the UK to Rome by Valentine Clay Ltd in Stoke) to create two separate bodies of work which at the end of the residency were exhibited together in a final solo show.

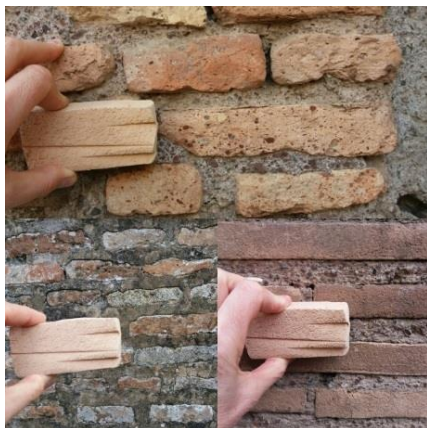
The plan to source clay locally was a risky venture, as I discovered on arrival in Rome. With the potter Paolo Porelli (who runs CRETA with his wife Lori-Ann Touchette), we went in search of clay in an area of Rome called the 'Valley of Hell', north of the Vatican. This evocatively named place is in fact a city suburb with a curiously rural feel to parts of it. It is where the most recent brickworks used to operate from. Abandoned brick factories and solitary chimneys poke up from new building developments or overgrown and derelict sites down quiet lanes called 'Brick Lane' and 'Tile Street'. Initially our hunt for clay seemed doomed as underfoot all was either tarmacked over or overgrown with rubble and weeds. The rising hillside ground was covered in plastic mesh to avoid subsidence. No clay in sight! We wandered around, asking friendly strangers – one an old man who had once worked in the brickworks. It was always "just up there" or "down there and turn right" you will find clay. No luck. Paolo remembered finding clay somewhere round there many years previously and wouldn't give up. Eventually we walked back to the building site of a new shopping mall. Poignantly, one remaining brick tower of the once thriving brickworks stood isolated in a traffic island of large scale construction work. Peering through a fence we could see where a new access road was being cut. Paolo spotted a perfect seam of brown clay - and so my plans for potting in Rome as planned could go ahead!





Back at the studio I began the lengthy (and yes, somewhat tedious!) process of refining the clay into a workable clay body. Breaking up, drying out, soaking, sieving and then drying out on plaster bats. The clay was very pure; hardly a handful of grit remained after sieving. Finally, I wedged in a 35% mix of silica sand and molochite to enable me to work in my usual way of creating solid, sculptural pieces.

A small test piece came out of an earthenware firing of 950°c an unexpected and fascinating salmon pink colour. I then took this out round Rome to see what it matched. It was not the colour (dark terracotta or sandy yellow ochre) of Roman brickwork but looked much closer to the brickwork of Renaissance (and later) buildings. Apparently, no bricks were made (or stone cut) for 1000 years following the end of the Roman Empire (no need – all materials were lying around for the taking). So, my clay was from a more recent source. The Renaissance palazzo I could see from my studio window had brickwork of an identical colour to my clay sample. The Romans obviously dug their clay elsewhere; possibly north of modern Rome. I felt my little sample was a key into the past, into the earth, into a way of knowing Rome.



I set to work to make a series of solid forms, impressing them with locally sourced objects which hinted at references to fluted classical columns and the worn and broken fragments in the Portico d'Ottavia (close to the studio – see image above). Spying a ribbed offcut of timber in a nearby furniture restorer's workshop I went in to ask if I could buy it; the owner looked mystified and just handed it to me, refusing to charge! Ultimately, my work in Rome as in the UK was about the clay; its pliable, immediate qualities. Like a photograph capturing a 'frozen moment' this material when fired fixes forever a gesture, an impression. In pushing the material to its limits my wish is always to explore three dimensions while retaining a real sense of the qualities of clay. This smooth terracotta earthenware was sticky to work with and did not feel familiar; I felt I was working with an intriguing stranger.

Once I had worked through all the dug clay (approximately 12kg), I began working with the Parian ware, posted from the UK. Working smaller scale, this series of forms took similar inspiration. When fired (to 1200°C) they had a white sheen, similar to the worn marble seen everywhere around Rome. The firing of the Rome dug clay was quite nerve-wracking as the forms were solid and this unfamiliar clay was being fired in an unfamiliar kiln. Paolo reassured me it would be "like a picnic." And he was right; the only crack was the one that had occurred prior to firing due to my surprise at the speed of the drying process. Being used to damp North West of England conditions, the degree of dryness in Rome came as a shock.



Showing both the Parian and Rome clay pieces together in my final show at the end of the residency conveyed what I had hoped to achieve; a sense of Rome, with its brickwork and marble sitting together. I named the show "Genius Loci" as a 'spirit of place' was what I had hoped to achieve all along. The greatest compliment I had at the preview was an Italian woman who had lived all her life in Rome and said, "this person must be a Roman; she understands Rome so well!" One visitor, who has lived in Rome for many years, said my work had made him "look at Rome in a different way".



I managed to bring home just a token few pieces. When unpacked I was again surprised by the Roman clay colour; it seemed to have sunshine locked within it.

From my time in Rome I learnt many things I would wish to hold onto: Italian-style patience with letting the unpredictable take its course, working in a freer, looser style (due to the coarse nature of the silica sand), how to use Instagram to record my progress (which, with its immediate feedback from around the globe was a good encourager when working solo) and most significantly, learning to respond in my work to a particular location. I have continued since my return to be fascinated with the idea of clay as a way into understanding a specific locality. Foraging in woods close to my studio in Wigan, I have already begun collecting more clay – this time from a stream embankment. Rural English clay, waiting to be worked.....

My month-long residency in Rome was generously supported financially (in part) by a donation from The Craft Pottery Charitable Trust, to which I am most grateful. I would also like to thank Paolo Porelli and Lori-Ann Touchette for their support, knowledge and technical advice, together with Valentine Clay Ltd for their heroic persistence in making sure the porcelain clay arrived in Rome from Stoke!

Rachel Grimshaw May 2017