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introduction

Gallery 1Co3 is pleased to produce Eruptions, a publication to accompany an exhibition of new and recent sculptural installations by established Winnipeg artist Grace Nickel, presented in the gallery from February 17 until March 25, 2022. In this body of work, Nickel collects, studies, transforms and memorializes felled trees and forest fragments in porcelain. Nickel applies an archaeobotanical lens to her investigations, referencing the past and present with regard to the life cycle of living organisms and to varied forms and functions of ceramics production. Nickel's work also considers how the micro struggle for survival reflects the macro crises in which we find ourselves today, with climate change and resulting environmental catastrophes in mind.

As guest writer Heidi McKenzie explains in her thorough and well-considered essay, Nickel's virtuosic incorporation of diverse ceramic techniques is displayed in Eruptions alongside forward-facing experiments which demonstrate the transformative potential of the medium. Through experimentation in photogrammetry by her collaborator, Michael Zajac, delicate porcelain plumes that burst forth from each *Eruption* sculpture are re-envisioned as other-worldly inkjet prints. Central to the exhibition are limblike pyres resembling tree trunks which support miniature forms that reference funerary rituals and provision for the afterlife. Root-like lifelines emerge and stretch skyward suggesting networks of support and the possibility of passage to a new life. An apt creative response to the present time, Eruptions evokes messages of fragility and grief but also hope and resilience.

Jennifer Gibson

Director/Curator
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Grace Nickel's *Eruptions*: Regrowth and Reimagining

By Heidi McKenzie

Trees, their growth, destruction and regrowth, and by extension their syncretic relationship to the human body, form a central thesis in Grace Nickel's Eruptions. Nickel began her life's journey with clay at the University of Manitoba. She moved to Halifax to undertake her MFA at NSCAD University in 2006. Having witnessed the scale of devastation wrought there by Hurricane Juan in 2003 (over 70,000 trees were destroyed in Point Pleasant Park), Nickel became deeply attuned to the metaphoric and sculptural potential of trees. On some unconscious level, Nickel believes she was compelled to create a body of work around these trees because of her childhood lived experience of the relative absence of trees. Nickel grew up in the flat plains of south-central Manitoba. The sparse planting of trees by settlers was deliberate and often specifically landscaped to demarcate property, serve as a physical barrier to protect against the harsh elements of the wide-open prairie, as well as signal the presence of human society. Nickel's MFA thesis exhibition Devastatus Rememorari, is a testament to a collective grief, a mourned sense of loss, what the artist herself senses as a visceral corporeal connection between trees and the human body. Her oeuvre over the last fifteen years is an evolution of thought, process, technique, concept and aesthetics vis-à-vis her relationship to the life cycle of trees, and their ability to regenerate, mourn and communicate. Nickel renders richly layered metaphors between trees and humanity in both the macro and micro spheres of inter-subjectivity.

Nickel's work leans into the act of memorialization. It is a celebration of that which lives on, and takes full advantage of the inherent polarities of the medium: clay is of the sediment of the earth; it transforms through water and fire into one of the most permanent substances created by humankind; all living beings ultimately return to the earth.

The three central ceramic installations of *Eruptions – Pyre* with Amphoras and Lifeline, Pyre with Tumble Stack and Lifeline and Pyre with Flower Brick and Lifeline – are themselves multi-layered allegories. The pyres are literally cast tree limbs ornately collared together: one part recumbent on two similarly cast wood fragments that serve as cradles, and the conjoining part elevated, raised as if one were reaching down to tend to the dying. These works are a testament to life, yet signify death. As ceramic artist and writer Paul Mathieu notes "Ceramics is the art of time...it can act as a memorial for the real life of real people, their desire, their struggles, their hopes, as it embodies the passage of time, the fragility of life and the reality of death." Mathieu goes on to draw process-driven parallels between death and the corporeal, "the form coming out of a mold is but a remnant of the original, a ghost form of sorts, ... a corpse, a lifeless form."² He notes that this is particularly evident when a cast is taken from a living subject, as is the case with Nickel's Pyre series. The forms seem bleak, "winterized" with their near monochromatic skins, each uniquely steeped in meaning, each "re-barked" by the artist's hand. The seemingly obvious connection to the Hindu faith's practice of burning their dead upon wood pyres is merely tangential to the artist, who notes that her own Eastern European Mennonite ancestors used to display the dead in open caskets, a familiar scene in her youth as her grandfather was a Minister. Nickel's reference to the burning of bodies is about rebirth, regeneration, a return to the earth, and acceptance of our inevitable mortality.

Nickel incorporates hope as the pyres simultaneously point to a celebration of life. Just as each pyre translates its own narrative, each pyre has a corollary lifeline that tells its own story with its own unique visual aesthetic. Each emanates from its pyre, extending upward and fanning outward casting shadows, whose negative space is integral to the whole. Each has hundreds of beads strung loosely onto five tentacle-like strings akin to a system of roots. Peter Wohlleben rather famously asserts that the roots form the tree's brain centre: "Roots absorb substances and bring them into the tree. In the other direction, they deliver the products of photosynthesis to the tree's fungal partners and even route warning signals to neighboring trees."3 Following Wohlleben's thesis that trees learn and communicate with one another in societal patterns, Nickel's exhibition adapts to its new pandemic environment. Its first iteration at the Art Gallery of Burlington in Ontario in 2019 showcased but one root system. Since that time, Nickel has completed lifelines for all three pyres.

Nickel also stresses the increasing importance of ceramic art history and the way it informs her work. Each pyre and lifeline have their own antecedent historical root. Pyre with Tumble Stack and Lifeline references the tradition of pit firing ceramics at low temperature, tumbled on top of each other. Each coiled vessel atop the pyre carries an image transfer of the negative image of organic matter drawn from Nickel's earlier work, and is embellished with bronze, "laid upon" a ceramic bronze cloth. Its lifeline is rich with dark iron oxide tones on vessel-like beads, 4 interspersed with pit fired and black fired beads, and white terra sigillata beads that carry individualized, reused stencils of organic matter on their facets. 5

Pyre with Amphoras and Lifeline, the central piece in the triad, is severed into a flat surface, reminiscent of a tomb bed. It carries a set of eight tiny amphoras, referencing ancient Egyptian and Greek ceramic traditions. From as early as the 6th century BC, pot-burials were common practice in Egypt. The dead were buried in large reused ceramic food jars, possibly a way of maintaining a connection between the family's everyday life and the dead. Ceramic vessels preserve their contents far better than wood, and thus serve to protect the body of a loved one.⁶ This lifeline, the first created, is a composite of non-uniform beads with the same range of colour as the pyres: the rare earth palette. Whereas many commercial ceramic colorants might "burn out" in the firing process, the soft pink, erbium, is one of the rare earth oxides derived from heavy metals that allow for subtle colour to survive the ceramic firing temperatures. Aside from black stain and bronze glaze, erbium is the most prominent colour accent in Eruptions.

Pyre with Flower Brick's lifeline uses the green rare earth oxide, praseodymium, to underscore the vitality of the symbolic vessel flowers on its pyre, and branches out in form with the beads, many of which resemble small twigs. A flower brick in the ceramic tradition is a brick-shaped vessel with multiple holes on the top to allow for individual stems of flowers to be displayed. It harkens to 17th century Europe. Nickel might well have been influenced during her time at NSCAD by professor Walter Ostrom, one of Canada's foremost ceramic artists, who is well-known for his groundbreaking work in this form. In this piece, Nickel integrates playfulness by using the negative print of a photograph of the brick wall from her artist residency room at Medalta7 where she was during the making of the work. The play is on words, and on the juxtaposition of historic versus contemporary references.

Nickel's practice of drawing on the historical, coupled with her exploration of life cycles and memorialization, is unto itself a reiterative process. She continues to circle back to earlier works and recycle patterns while at the same time pushing her research with new ideas and techniques. A prime example of this process began in 2012, when Nickel's partner and collaborator, Michael Zajac, photographer, digital media artist and designer, created a non-orthogonal panorama from sixteen individual shots in the round of one of Nickel's circular tree bark surfaces with a compact digital camera. In Jingdezhen, China, considered the porcelain capital of the world, Nickel and Zajac experimented with these flattened images and large-format ceramic decals. This led to a new series first shown in 2015.8 Back in Winnipeg, Nickel experimented with laser sintering, a form of additive ceramic printing.9

The continual evolution of Nickel's reiterative process is also salient in the three pairs of volcanic eruptions which comprise the exhibition's namesake. Each half has its genesis from a ceramic cast of the same found cut of a fallen tree. The external "mountain sides" are cloaked in sombre dark tones or metallic bronze - revisiting the commemorative. The interiors are separated as if in conversation with each other. Each chronicles its own complex root system or fossilized organic matter that seem embossed or grafted onto the severed planes that face inward. Yet another interior eruption is a microcosm of two-dimensional drawings by the artist. Nickel deftly reuses the abstract graphic slip written in her own hand from her MFA thesis work. She overlays the writing on a blush pink erbium canvas, amidst a collage of bark and plant imagery. Circling back, the original mould for the cast comes from that time and place, and is altered, regenerating new work, new narrative, newness of concept and ideation.

Nickel did not intentionally set out to bring attention to the increased threat to forests from flood, ice-storm, and fire that are on the rise as global warming inches forward. Yet as is so often the case, there is a symbiosis and reflexivity in life's imitation of art. The *Eruption* pieces, the kernels of inspiration for the exhibition, translate the simmering unrest of the moltenfilled mountains. At the same time, they seem to signify the artist's yearning to right a wrong, a call, conscious or not, to mobilize around climate change, the ominous cloud that hangs over the future of humanity.

Atop each section of each *Eruption* perch one, two or three totem-like outgrowths composed of round bumpy, spiky, or vessel-like digits. In marked contrast to their hosts, each hand coiled or pinched element in the short vertical stack bursts forth with colour accentuated with bronze. Nickel was inspired by photographs of fungal growth on fallen trees that her fellow Winnipeg-based ceramic artist Kathryne Koop had sent her. These images shifted Nickel's creative direction and spawned a fascination with fungi and the many real and symbolic layers it represents. Parallels may be drawn between fungi and our bodies' complex web of fascia or nerve synapses. Tim Flannery notes, "A tree's most important means of staying connected to other trees is a 'wood wide web' of soil fungi that connects vegetation in an intimate network that allows the sharing of an enormous amount of information and goods." ¹⁰

Nickel references the ashen post-eruption smoke plumes of a volcano with the fungi-inspired outgrowths. Regardless of the sobriety of their muse, the plumes emanate a cheerful energy through their colours and irregular forms. Nickel plays with the plumes' vitality and chose seven of them as the subject matter for the photographic series, *Plumes*. These nineteen-inch square photographs are meticulously digitally constructed by Zajac. Here, the plume forms morph from solid to translucent, and from three-dimensional to two-dimensional. The forms were 3D scanned using digital photogrammetry, a method that reconstructs a virtual surface using scores of photographs shot from multiple angles. This process was undertaken with the intention of realizing Nickel and Zajac's upcoming collaboration where the plumes will be 3D printed in bronze. The result is a two-dimensional projection, literally an imprint of the original, with X-ray like appearance. Nickel wanted to capture an airborne permutation of the plumes that float like ghostly foils as a counterpoint to the earthbound sculptural forms from which they erupted. Nickel unifies the visual aesthetic of the whole by drawing from the rare earth palette adding in the manganese of her bronze glaze, and kaolin, a primary white element of most clay bodies. This is another prime example of the type of reiterative exploration that leads to unanticipated results that continue to drive Nickel's practice forward. Nickel notes the ethereal quality of Zajac's work, in striking juxtaposition to the haptic nature of her own. At this stage in her career, she is taking more risks, "I'm not thinking about my work so finitely these days. I just want to keep reworking and reimagining it."

Endnotes

- Paul Mathieu, The Art of the Future: 14 essays on ceramics –
 Theory Book, Chapter 14 "Death: The Fragmentation of Time;
 The Past, the Present and the Future" p. 2.
 http://www.paulmathieu.ca/theartofthefuture/The%20
 Art%20of%20the%20Future.pdf (accessed December 23, 2021).
- 2. Mathieu, p. 3.
- 3. Peter Wohlleben, The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate: Discoveries from a Secret World, David Suzuki Institute, 2016, p. 82.
- 4. Black firing was achieved through the traditional process of using cow dung, sourced from the University of Manitoba's Agricultural Department.
- Nickel credits the work of University of Manitoba students PJ Anderson, Jacobi Heinrichs, and Julianna Zwierciadlowska-Rhymer in helping to create the hundreds of beads necessary for the lifelines.
- 6. Annelee Newitz, "Ancient Egyptian 'pot burials' are not what they seem A new interpretation of why people buried their dead in food jars 5,500 years ago" in ArsTechnica, 1/18/2017 https://arstechnica.com/science/2017/01/ancient-egyptian-pot-burials-are-not-what-they-seem/ (accessed February 13, 2022).

- Medalta, located in the Historic Clay District of Medicine Hat, Alberta, runs the Shaw International Centre for Contemporary Ceramics, where Nickel was an artist in residence working on the pyres in the winter of 2019.
- 8. This series of three tiles JDZ Tile No. 1, JDZ Tile No. 2, and JDZ Tile No. 3 were shown at the School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, in the School of Art Faculty Exhibition, March to June, 2015, and subsequently at Actual Gallery, Winnipeg, in a three-person exhibition titled, Heat, September 4 to October 31, 2015.
- 9. Five tiles were produced using this sintering technique. The Espalier No. 1 series was first shown at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo along with Nickel's Arbor Vitae installation in 2015 as part of Exquisite Woods, curated by Christian Bernard Singer. Both works were shown at Actual Gallery in Winnipeg in 2016, curated by Alex Keim. Espalier No. 1 tiles were shown at Blue Line Arts in Roseville, California for a concurrent NCECA 2022 exhibition called Constructed Landscapes: Brick, Tile and Pillar, curated by Eliza Au.
- 10. Tim Flannery "Introduction" of Peter Wollheben's *The Hidden Life of Trees*, p. viii.

About the artist

Grace Nickel is an artist and educator living in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Her studio practice focusses on sculptural ceramics and installation. She has won awards in international competitions including the Mino International Ceramics Competition in Japan and the Taiwan Ceramics Biennale, and has had numerous solo exhibitions in Canada including at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia, the Winnipeg Art Gallery in Manitoba, the Moose Jaw Museum & Art Gallery in Saskatchewan, and the Art Gallery of Burlington in Ontario. Her work has been widely collected and is included in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Ceramic Art in Gifu, Japan, the New Taipei City Yingge Ceramics Museum, Taiwan, and the Fule International Ceramic Art Museums project in Fuping, China. Her work has been selected for the Cheongju International Craft Biennale in Korea, and for several NCECA Annual Exhibitions (Philadelphia, Portland). Grace Nickel has completed numerous residencies including at the Pottery Workshop in Jingdezhen, China and the Banff Centre for the Arts in Alberta. She held the position of Adjunct Research Fellow at the Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia and has travelled abroad extensively to present lectures, including recent invitations from the Clayarch Gimhae Museum and AK Ceramics Centre in South Korea. and the Australian Ceramics Triennale in Hobart, Tasmania. Nickel received her BFA from the University of Manitoba and MFA from NSCAD University. She is a member of the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts and currently teaches as Associate Professor at the University of Manitoba School of Art.

About the writer

Heidi McKenzie is a Toronto-based ceramic artist. She completed her Diploma in Crafts & Design at Sheridan College, Canada, in 2012 and an MFA in Curatorial Practice and Art Criticism at the Ontario College of Art & Design University in 2014. Heidi McKenzie has exhibited and been collected nationally and internationally. She is the recipient of Craft Ontario Awards, Best in Show Ontario Artists Association Biennial Award, Best in Show, Toronto Potters Biennial and the inaugural 2020 NCECA Helene Seeman Zucker Curatorial Research and Critical Writing for Women. This award resulted in her chapter "Liminality: the work of Monica Mercedes Martinez, PJ Anderson and Habiba El-Sayed" in Craft is Political, Bloomsbury Press, 2021. She is an active arts journalist and ceramic arts reviewer, and regular contributor to Ceramics: Art & Perception and Ceramics Monthly. Heidi has taught critical arts writing to emerging BIPOC writers for SAVAC (South Asian Visual Artists Collective). She recently published her first piece of creative non-fiction with U of T Press in Topia, entitled "The Colour of our Skin." Heidi's studio work engages issues of race, identity, and belonging, as well as body and healing. Heidi is on the Board of NCECA (National Council for the Education of the Ceramic Arts).

Acknowledgments

The University of Winnipeg and Gallery 1Co3 are located on Treaty One and the land on which we gather is the traditional territory of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples, and the heartland of the Métis. Our water is sourced from Shoal Lake 40 First Nation.

As the campus art gallery of The University of Winnipeg, Gallery 1Co3 is grateful to the University for its ongoing operational support. The gallery also acknowledges the financial support of the Manitoba Arts Council for Eruptions as well as partnership with the Manitoba Craft Council to host Grace Nickel's artist talk affiliated with the exhibition and with MCC's "Year of Eco-Craft". We extend our sincere gratitude to Grace Nickel for the opportunity to present her impeccable work in the gallery and through this publication and her artist talk, and for all of her labour toward these endeavours. In particular, we appreciate her patience as the project was delayed several times due to the COVID 19 pandemic, a factor which has made the underlying messages in her art even more relevant. *Eruptions* would not be possible without the vital contributions of Grace Nickel's collaborator Michael Zajac, whose inkjet interpretations of Nickel's Plumes grace the gallery walls and pages in this book. Michael also installed and photographed the exhibition, attending to these critically important tasks with the utmost of care and detail. We thank Heidi McKenzie for her thorough consideration of Grace's work, which firmly contextualizes the important contribution of *Eruptions* to the artist's oeuvre and to the field of contemporary art more generally. Finally, we wish to express our appreciation to Marcelle Lussier of Urbanink for her dedication to the design of this beautiful publication.

Artist's acknowledgments

The artist gratefully acknowledges the Canada Council for the Arts, the Manitoba Arts Council, and the University of Manitoba for their support in making *Eruptions* possible. She extends a huge thank you to Michael Zajac for his collaboration on the *Plume* series and invaluable assistance with all things digital, photographic, and technical; and to PJ Anderson, Jacobi Heinrichs, Alexandra Ross, and Julianna Zwierciadlowska-Rhymer for their studio assistance. Grace Nickel dedicates this exhibition to her strong, resilient, and wise mother. Elma Nickel.



List of works

Measurements are height × width × length

1. Eruption No. 1, 2018, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $11 \times 13 \times 42$ cm.

- 2. Eruption No. 2, 2018, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $11 \times 13 \times 42$ cm.
- 3. Eruption No. 3, 2018, porcelain with rare earth oxides stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $11 \times 13 \times 42$ cm.
- 4. Eruption No. 4, 2018, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $11 \times 13 \times 42$ cm.
- 5. Eruption No. 5, 2018, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $11 \times 13 \times 42$ cm.
- 6. Eruption No. 6, 2018, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $11 \times 13 \times 42$ cm.
- 7. Erbium Plume, 2019, inkjet print, 45×45 cm.
- 8. *Kaolin Plume*, 2019, inkjet print, 45 × 45 cm.

- 9. Manganese Plume, 2019, inkjet print, 45 × 45 cm.
- 10. Neodymium Plume, 2019, inkjet print, 45 × 45 cm.
- 11. Praseodymium Plume, 2019, inkjet print, 45 × 45 cm.
- 12. Robin's Egg Blue Plume, 2019, inkjet print, 45 × 45 cm.
- 13. Tangerine Plume, 2019, inkjet print, 45 × 45 cm.
- 14. Pyre with Amphoras and Lifeline, 2019 2021, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $27 \times 20 \times 83$ cm.
- 15. Pyre with Flower Brick and Lifeline, 2019 2021, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $27 \times 20 \times 84$ cm.
- 16. Pyre with Tumble Stack and Lifeline, 2019 2021, porcelain with rare earth oxides, stains, terra sigillata, glaze, $27 \times 20 \times 82$ cm.

Publication of the exhibition *Grace Nickel: Eruptions* presented at Gallery 1Co₃, The University of Winnipeg, 2O₂₂

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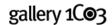
Gallery 1Co3

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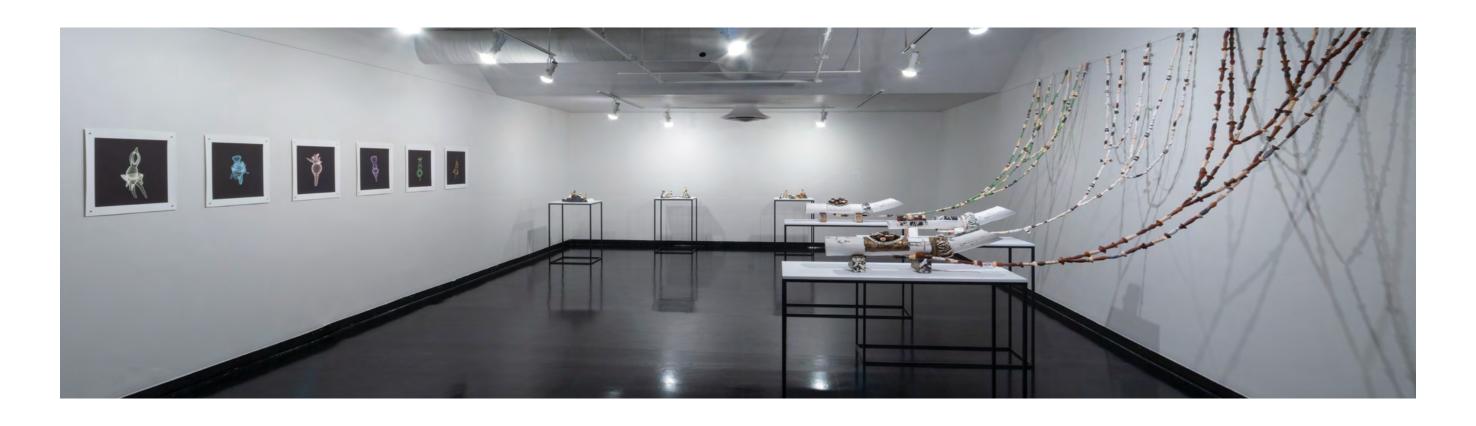
Phone: 204-786-9253 uwinnipeg.ca/art-gallery Introduction: Jennifer Gibson

Essay: Heidi McKenzie Photography: Michael Zajac Graphic design: Urbanink Printer: Quantum Printing











Kaolin Plume



Neodymium Plume



Erbium Plume



Tangerine Plume



Praseodymium Plume



Robin's Egg Blue Plume







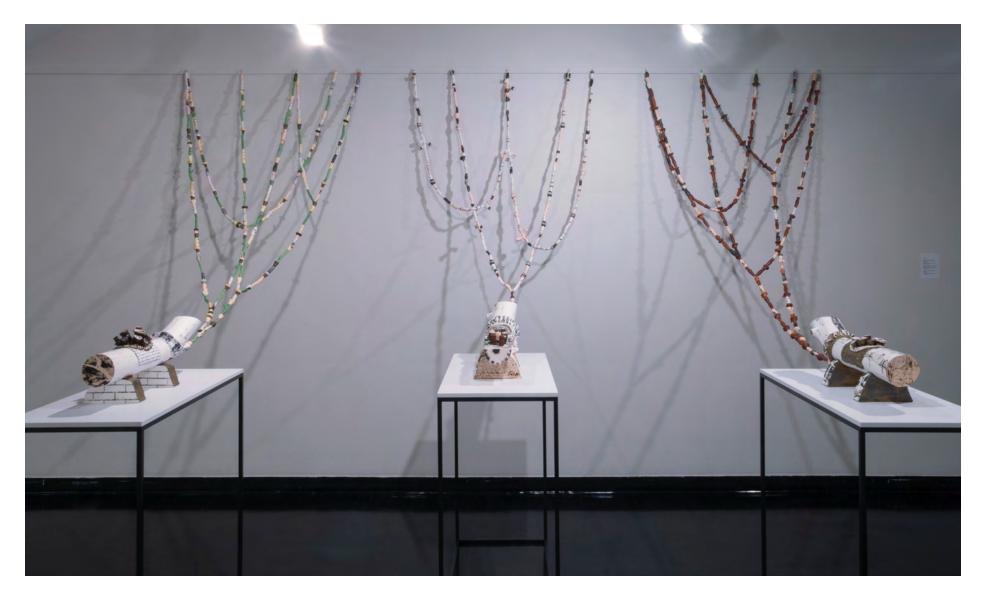
LEFT TO RIGHT: Eruptions 1 & 2, 5 & 6, 3 & 4; Eruptions 5 & 6 (detail); Eruptions 3 & 4

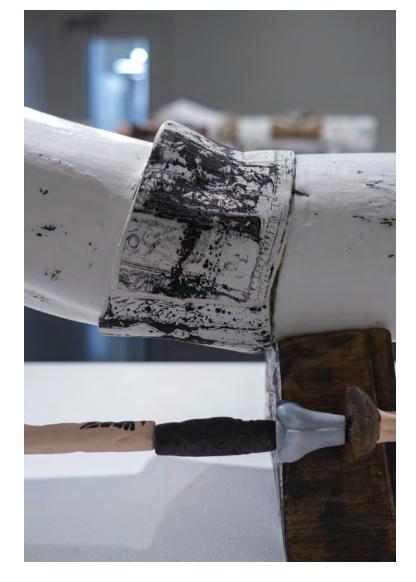






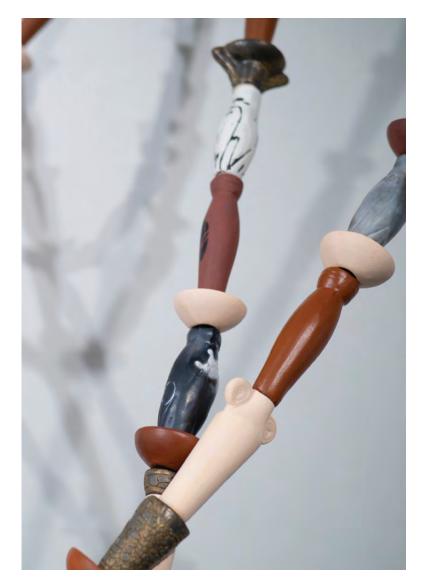
LEFT TO RIGHT: Pyre with Flower Brick and Lifeline (detail); Pyre with Amphoras and Lifeline (detail); Pyre with Flower Brick and Lifeline (detail)

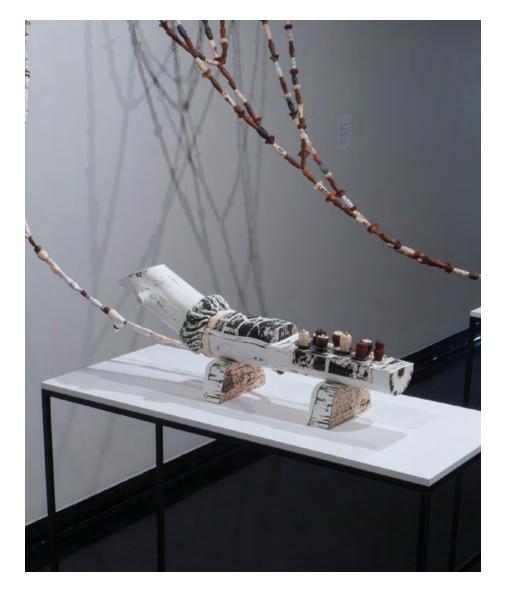




LEFT TO RIGHT: Pyre with Flower Brick and Lifeline, Pyre with Amphoras and Lifeline, and Pyre with Tumble Stack and Lifeline; Pyre with Flower Brick and Lifeline (detail)







LEFT TO RIGHT: Pyre with Tumble Stack and Lifeline; Pyre with Tumble Stack and Lifeline (detail);
Pyre with Amphoras and Lifeline

