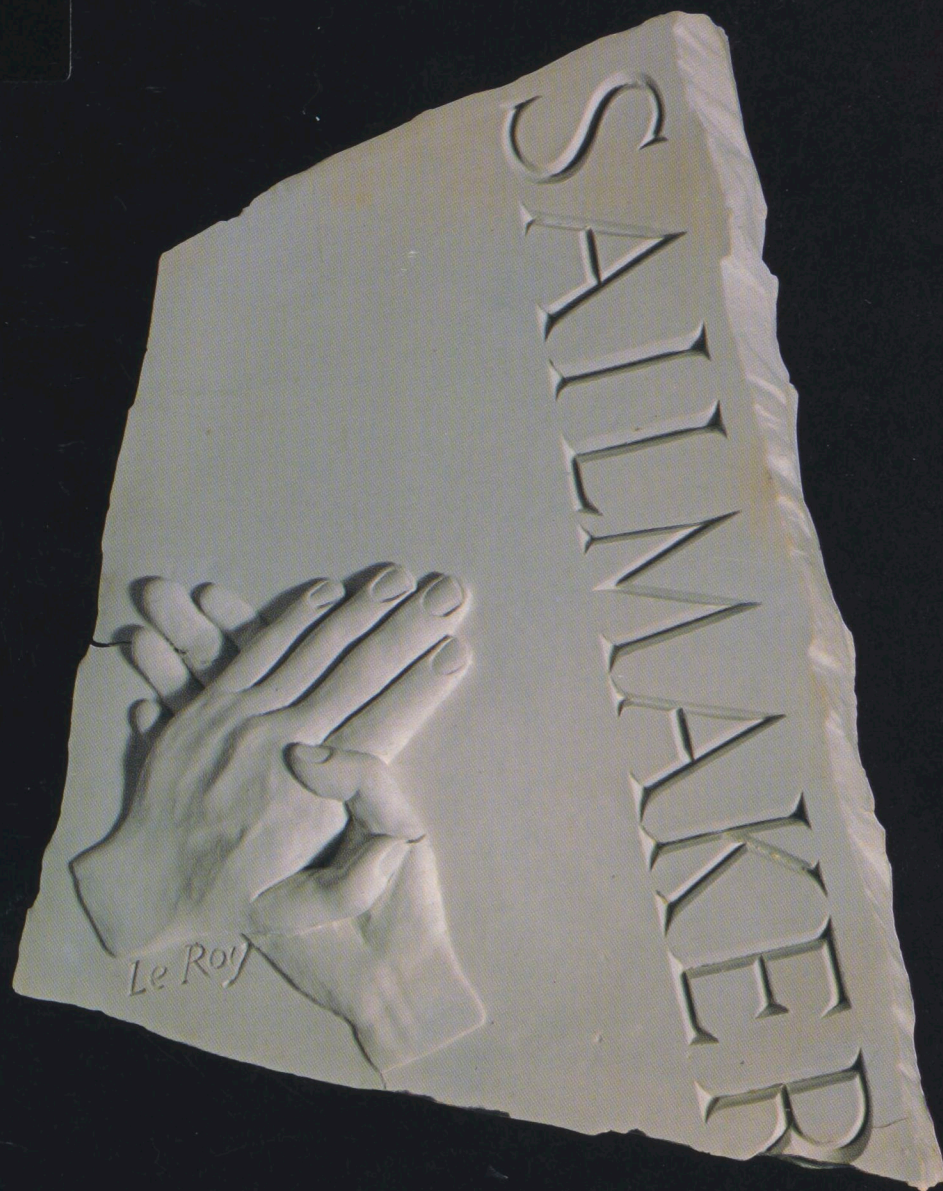
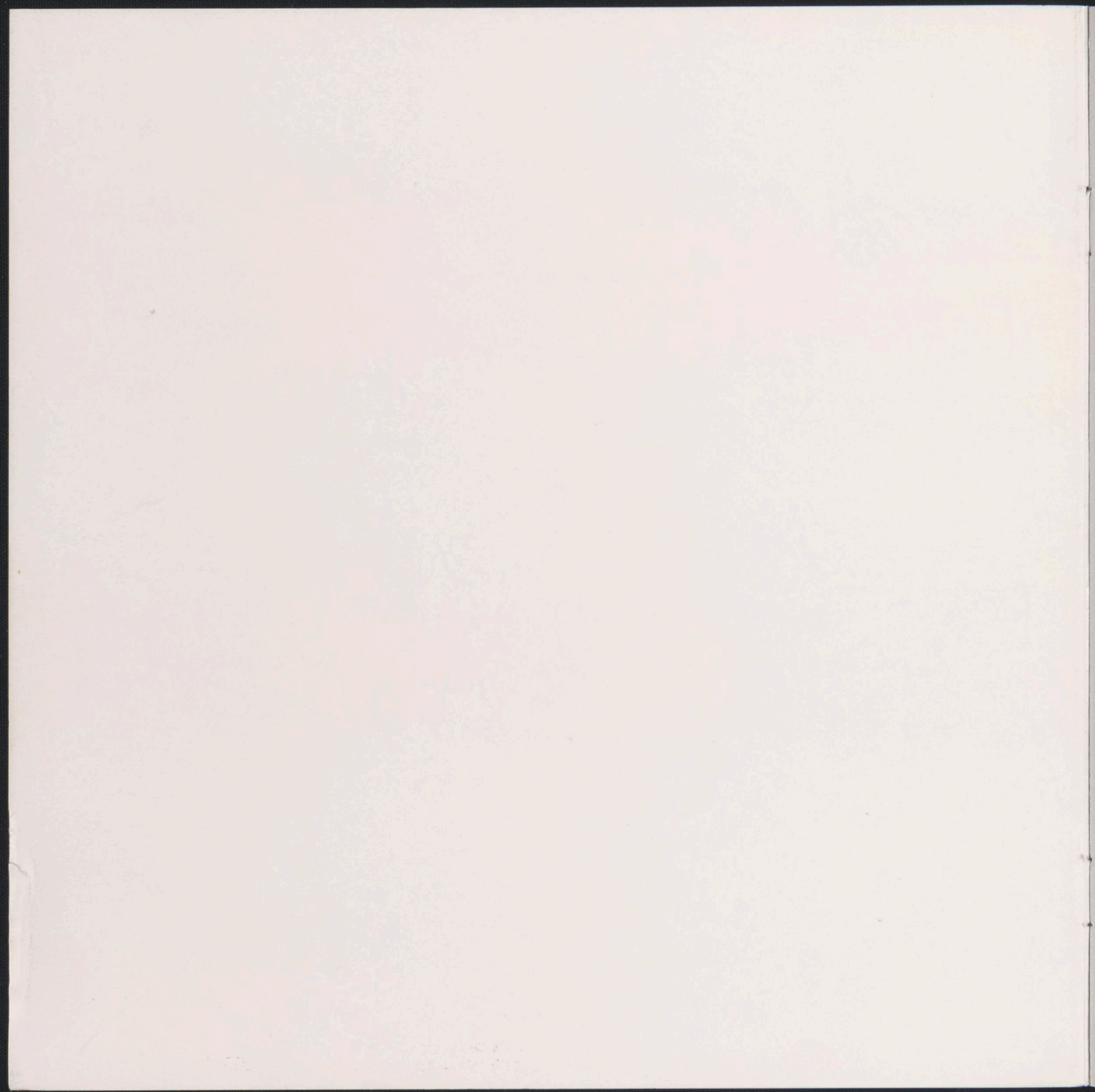


1984-85

Songs of the Gulf

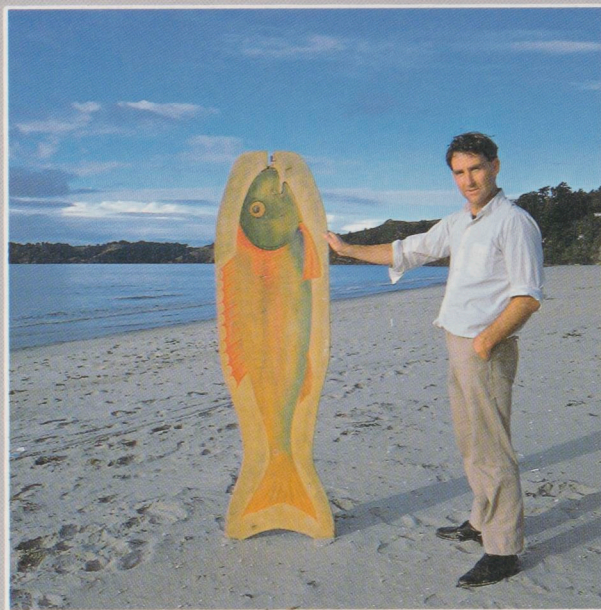
DENIS O'CONNOR





Songs of the Gulf

DENIS O'CONNOR



Denis O'Connor with a Kauri surfboard
made by Ernest Brown in 1939, and used to surf
the east coast beaches during the 40's and 50's

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Cover: TRADESTONE. SAILMAKER

Foreword

Denis O'Connor has established an important place within the burgeoning clay tradition in New Zealand. This tradition, with its lively and innovative recent development, can be traced back to the early years of Pakeha settlement.

Commercial clay manufacturing companies began producing ceramic objects for the domestic market as early as the 1860s. Production grew slowly, and firmly established a ceramic industry in New Zealand. By the late 1940s, studio ceramics had developed, people like Briar Gardner, and Len Castle under the tutelage of Robert Nettleton Field, provided the impetus which created a New Zealand studio pottery movement. Handmade domestic stoneware became a familiar product in the New Zealand household, the crafted coffee mug almost a Kiwi institution.

For a period of twenty years this movement developed rapidly and produced domestic ware that was vibrant, exciting and earthy. Changes of fashion, a saturated market, and more importantly, an urge to put clay to the test of pure ideas as well as functionalism, led a new generation of ceramic artists to push at the boundaries our domestic potters had drawn. An edge of funk and humour crept into the clay tradition but this proved to be ephemeral and slight. However, out of this new sense of freedom with clay emerged some individuals whose background in the medium provided the base for what has developed in the 1980s as a strong and powerful direction.

Barry Brickell, the patriarch of the group, who has never submerged his talents in the crass edge of the marketplace, was experimenting with a range of sculptural ideas based on engineering forms. He created low-relief wall murals for public places like the Devonport Public Library and the Waitaki New Zealand Refrigeration Company Ltd at their Christchurch and London offices.

Concurrent with this, Bronwynne Cornish started exploring large composite environments which were self-sufficient installations that grew from her funk objects into works of considerable aesthetic worth and substance.

Quietly in the background, while all this was happening, Denis O'Connor was producing experimental wall and freestanding sculptural pieces that were the origins of what has become SONGS OF THE GULF. He was starting to explore the ritual lore of stone and clay, and immersing himself in those areas of his roots that are the nucleus of SONGS OF THE GULF. This exhibition is a major event for New Zealand art, and established O'Connor as one of our foremost sculptors and clay as a vital expressive material.

James Mack
Director
Dowse Art Museum, Lower Hutt



Estuarine Eyes

Some Notes

As the son of a waterside-worker, living in one of those stucco State houses along the eastern suburbs, I was naturally aware of the port of Auckland from an early age. My father's pocket-sized notebook contained the names of ships he'd worked in and the hours spent on each, a code printed with a very black indelible pencil: it was an enigmatic, mysterious object. (As was his Gaelic passport). A sense of coastal mythology grew as I discovered the region, from the docks extending eastwards to beyond the beacons, the breakwater and the other sentinels, towards the outer islands and the entire Pacific, felt but not seen.

Moving to live on one of those outer islands with a young family in the early 1970s gave me a face-to-face chance to explore the spirit of the area. I became drawn to the visionary traditions in 19th and 20th century art. The poky little baches with their tongue n' groove interiors, their thick layerings of enamel paint and makeshift partitions led me into the intimate rooms of Mr Joseph Cornell. Our coast dweller's do-it-yourself backyard jack-up approach to work and survival echoed the poetry and humour of an H.C. Westerman construction. The gulf crossings sometimes took on the drama of an Albert Pinkham Ryder picture. Gradually, I sensed my involvement with clay could encompass what I felt was the rich source of cultural material around me.

In 1978, while living in California, I met many of my mentors from the clay revolution which struck the U.S.A. in the 1950s and 1960s, when Peter Voulkos (the most admired craft potter in the land) started experimenting with new clay forms after being exposed to a touring show of ceramics by the masters, Pablo Picasso and Joan Miró. On my return to New Zealand, seminal pieces for SONGS OF THE GULF began to inhabit my workshop at Putiki Point. All those talismans and coastal rituals I observed daily slowly forced their way into my claywork and provided a sort of heraldic alphabet for me to draw on. I'm thinking of

a talisman, now, in the original sense of being a charm — for a safe passage, a lure, an offering, or other such uses — the Maori left stone fish in the shallows to attract their catch. Domestic pottery was politely (but devoutly) put on the back seat.

I went to Japan in 1982 to test myself with two projects in mind. Firstly, to handle as many old Momayama pots as I could lay my fingers upon, and secondly to check out the **Sōdeisha** movement — literal translation 'The Running Mud Company' — to see how the avant-garde were coping with such a rich and powerful clay heritage.

From the example of a handful of clay artists (all of whom had abandoned any connection with **Sōdeisha**) I felt reinforced in the directions my own work seemed determined to lead me.

The pieces in this exhibition, except where indicated, have been made since returning to New Zealand and are a further unfolding of the series that started its genealogy in the late 1970s as a group of works entitled STONE CHANDLERY. I trace the roots of my own image-making down a long line of Irish stone-carvers ('Stonies') that stretches back to the artist-builders-workmen who have left us the wonderful **Sheelahs** over windows, doors, and high on the corners of medieval stone architecture.

The choice of clay mined out of (or more accurately dived for in) a tidal creek, is a strong factor in the austere look of many of these pieces. Saturated with impurities of manganese and iron, it is available from the locale in large quantity and sympathetic to the flame of the woodkiln. The Porcelain clay body, creamy white and silken, is the extreme opposite to my mangrove mud, and originates from Stoke-on-Trent, England. Although the Hauraki Gulf does produce pockets of a white clay derived from Greywacke stone, it does not fire white. Both these clays have been exposed to salt vapours at differing temperatures during the firing process.

Denis O'Connor
August 1984



Catalogue

1 BRICKWORK

fire brick from the now demolished Exlers Pottery, New Lynn

(a) Shard Box

1510 x 120 x 96 mm

(b) Joseph Cornell's knife and fork

155 x 233 x 109 mm

(c) Zingara 1906

155 x 233 x 109 mm

the largest scow built in New Zealand

(d) Vesper. Vindex. Vixen. All sister ships

155 x 233 x 109 mm

"A handsome bone in her teeth" (scowman's vernacular)

(e) Morandi's Bottle

155 x 233 x 109 mm

(f) Homage to Oriental clay

155 x 233 x 109 mm

For Koie Ryoji

2 TRADESTONE. SAILMAKER

woodfired porcelain, 415 x 355 x 50 mm

Dedicated to Captain Emilius Le Roy, founder of Auckland's biggest canvas products company.

3 TRADESTONE. SHIPBUILDER

woodfired porcelain, 440 x 507 x 52 mm

Dedicated to George Nicol, who built many of the square-bilge trading scows, especially between 1900 and 1918. He built the Zingara

4 TRADESTONE. ROPEMAKER

woodfired porcelain, 1130 x 307 x 54 mm

Along the ropewalk, the inner journey

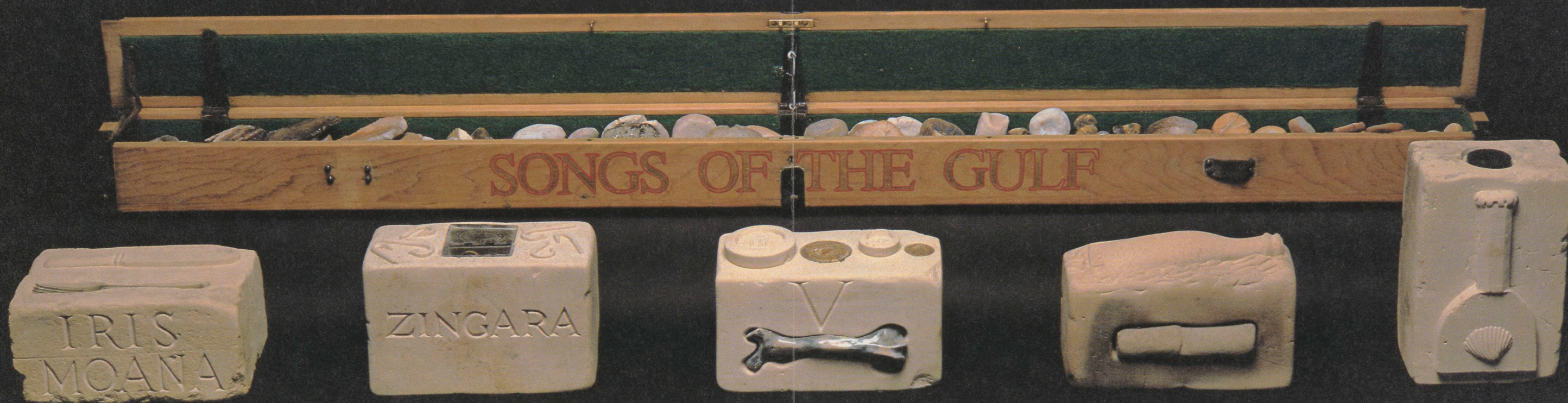
5 TRADESTONE. CHARTMAKER

woodfired porcelain, 470 x 550 x 50 mm

The living measure

TRADESTONE. THE ROPEMAKER





6 TRADESIGN II. VESSELMAKER
saltglaze porcelain, Coromandel granite, ebonized puriri, argillite shaft,
252 x 135 x 75 mm
A counter-piece

7 WHETSTONE
saltglaze swamp clay, porcelain, slate, 364 x 320 x 100mm
WAITEMATA — flintstone waters

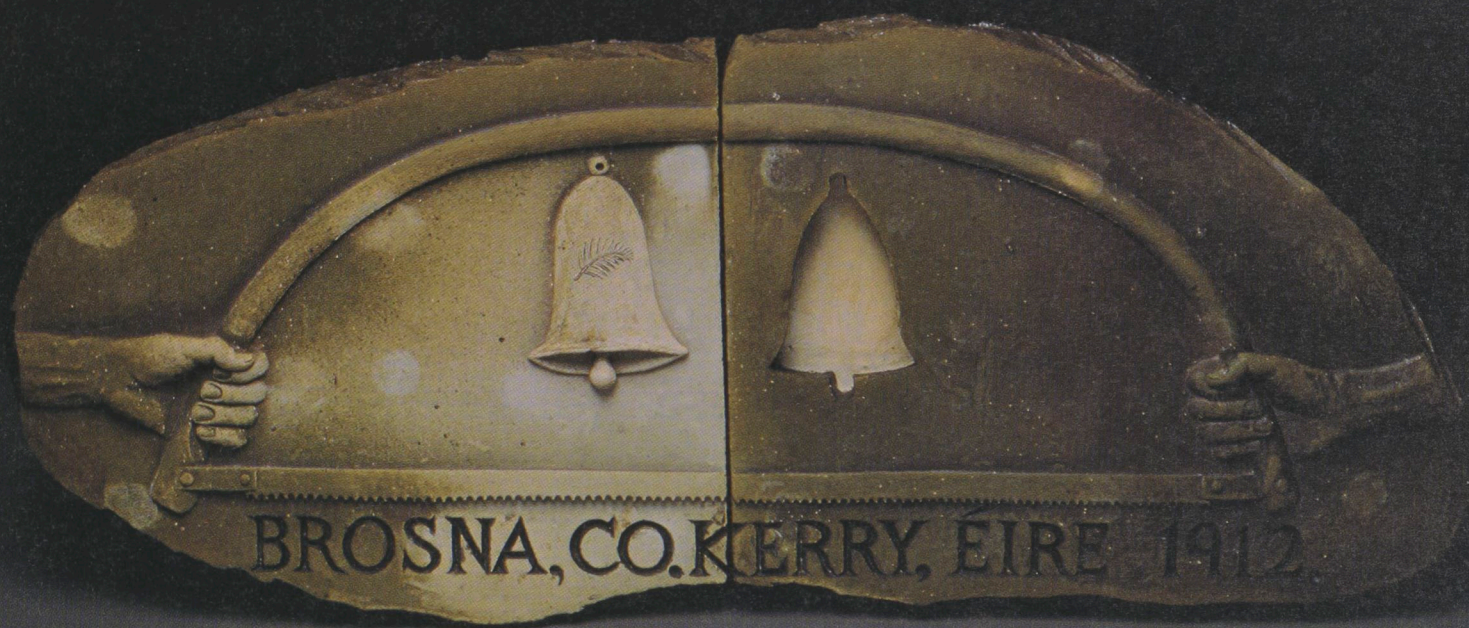
8 HARBOURSTONE
swampclay and stains, 445 x 445 x 74 mm
Rangitoto viewed from above, appears as a huge round stepping-stone in a
turquoise sea

9 BIRTHSTONE I. THE IMMIGRANT
woodfired swampclay, 1116 x 454 x 54 mm
Dedicated to my father, Michael Francis O'Connor.
The resonance of the home country

BRICKWORK

- 10 BIRTHSTONE II
swampclay, lead, 532 x 430 x 51 mm
TOREA PANGO — the black oystercatcher, guardian of the foreshore
- 11 STEPSTONE II
swampclay, 540 x 410 x 60 mm
The search for wholeness
- 12 FLAGSTONE I
woodfired swampclay, 1138 x 685 x 60 mm
TE MATUKA — the blue heron. This bay is the source of the iron-rich clay body.
Scraped from beneath mangrove roots. Reds, pinks, yellows, white under the dank
black mud
- 13 FLAGSTONE II
woodfired swampclay, 1006 x 525 x 50 mm
"Man to the hills, woman to the shore" (Gaelic proverb)
- 14 KEYSTONE II
woodfired swampclay, 520 x 455 x 50 mm
An index of coastal sentinels
- 15 GULF PULLEY-BLOCK
woodfired swampclay, tarred marlin, 285 x 220 x 65 mm
- 16 EAST/WEST LINTEL
woodfired swampclay, 1015 x 334 x 53 mm
- 17 FISH LINTEL
woodfired swampclay, 1310 x 300 x 54 mm
- 18 ROPE LINTEL
woodfired swampclay, 1150 x 205 x 50 mm
A sort of divining line : enter through your own arch
- 19 LODESTONE
swampclay, alumina wash, 483 x 305 x 56 mm
- 20 SHARD FROM A LIGHTHOUSE
woodfired porcelain, galvanised nails, 540 x 405 x 60 mm

BIRTHSTONE I: THE IMMIGRANT



BROSNA, CO. KERRY, ÉIRE 1912

- 21 IT'LL DO
swampclay, 394 x 390 x 69 mm
Corrugated bach, featuring the inset verandah, a disappearing feature of domestic coastal architecture. This piece is the only survivor of a group that featured batten n'board and fibrolite
- 22 STONE TIDE
saltglaze porcelain, 238 x 173 x 38 mm
Stones along the littoral
- 23 STONE SOUND
saltglaze porcelain, 233 x 195 x 42 mm
- 24 STONE FLOAT
saltglaze porcelain, 217 x 173 x 38 mm
A state of paradox
- 25 STONE MAKER
saltglaze porcelain, 398 x 160 x 37 mm
Another sort of tradesign
- 26 KEELSTONE I
saltglaze porcelain, 286 x 190 x 37 mm
Finding the balance
- 27 KEELSTONE II
saltglaze porcelain, 180 x 180 x 25 mm
- 28 KEELSTONE III
saltglaze swampclay, porcelain, alumina, 490 x 315 x 270 mm
TE MARAITAI - the enclosed sea.
My birth year 1947
- 29 PILLOWSTONE I
saltglaze porcelain, 125 x 130 mm
My stone on another from Stony Batter, at the North eastern tip of Waiheke Island
- 30 PILLOWSTONE II
saltglaze porcelain, 150 x 165 mm
The greywacke boulder from the high-tide line, Opapoto Bay. Water from the font

PILLOWSTONE I



31 PILLOWSTONE III

saltglaze porcelain, 265 x 73 mm

The arrival. A stone organ from Stony Batter

32 CARGO

woodfired swampclay, slabware, obsidian, totara, 1735 x 527 x 405 mm

For Bob Orr

Obsidian found at Putiki Point, Waiheke Island in 1970. The chain inscribed with the abbreviated code for coastal scow cargos

Shingle _____ Shi

Shingle Sand _____ ShiS

Shellsand _____ ShS

Freshwater Sand _____ FwS

Shell _____ Sh

Firewood & Timber _____ Fw & T

Sand _____ S

Kauri _____ K

33 NIGHTBOAT

saltglaze porcelain, rewarewa, jarrah, kanuka, 270 x 95 mm

Dreams in the night

Collection: Len Castle, Titirangi

34 ABANDONED

saltglaze porcelain, lino, 302 x 105 mm

A 1954 Austin, one of the many 1950s models (Morris, Bradford, Hillman, Ford) that provide gulf transport — unregistered, unwarranted — to the pub or the seclusion of the 'bottom end'

35 MUSICK POINT

saltglaze porcelain, slate, 279 x 104 mm

Radio Auckland: ship to shore

36 ESTUARINE EYES

saltglaze porcelain, bitumix plug, 287 x 100 mm

37 HALCYON DAYS

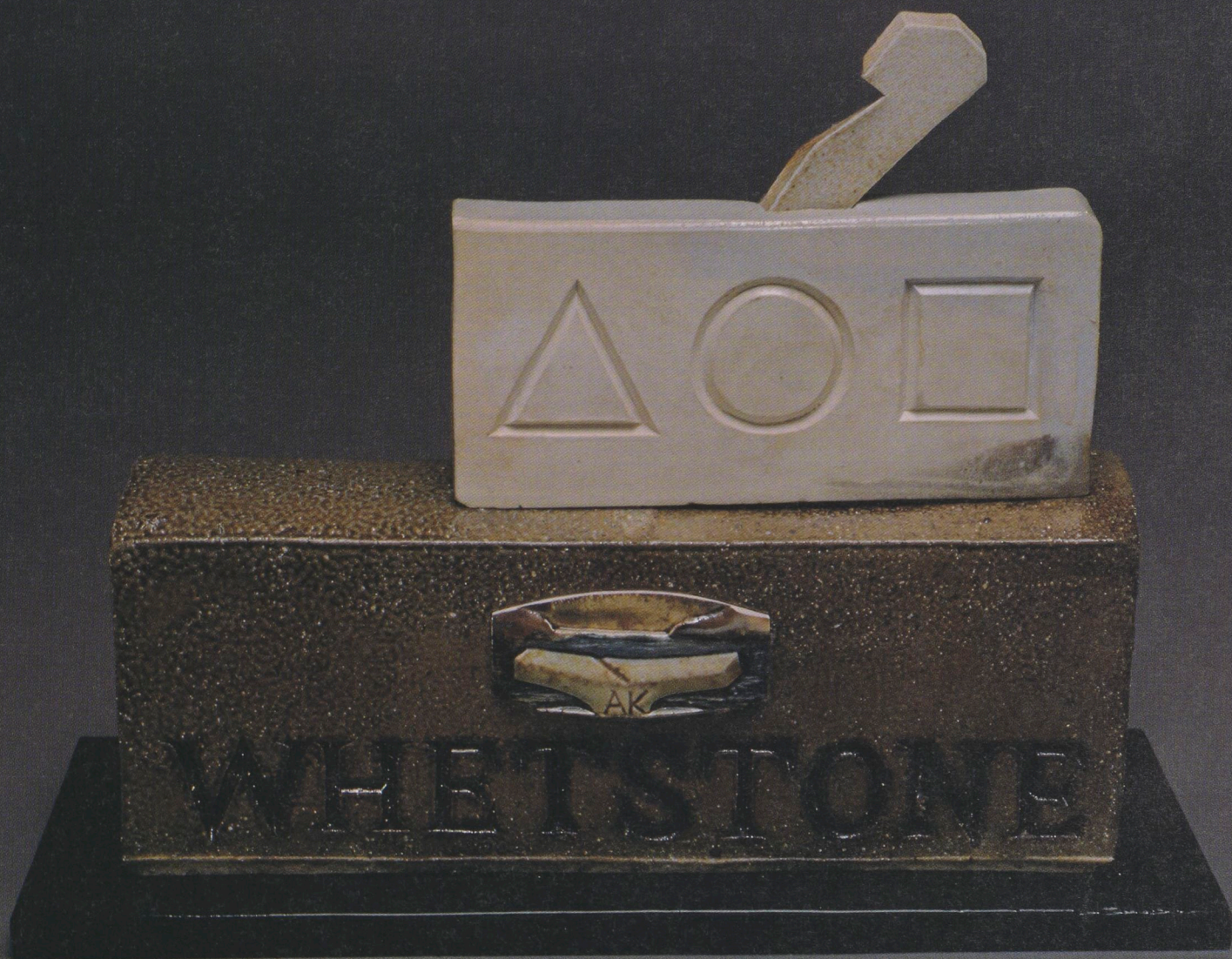
saltglaze porcelain, swampclay wads, fibrolite, 270 x 96 mm

A gulf idyll

38 MAILBOX

swampclay, porcelain, 1980, 180 x 210 x 385 mm

With respect to those knocked-up, hand-painted awkward constructions at the top of the track



39 THE VOYAGE

saltglaze swampclay, porcelain, bitumix plug, 260 x 90 mm

40 THE HARBOURMASTER

saltglaze porcelain, swampclay, rewarewa, matai, 370 x 332 x 370 mm
from a Frank O'Hara poem, 'To the Harbourmaster'

"I wanted to be sure to reach you;
though my ship was on the way it got caught
in some moorings. I am always tying up
and then deciding to depart. In storms and
at sunset, with the metallic coils of the tide
around my fathomless arms, I am unable
to understand the forms of my vanity
or I am hard alee with my Polish rudder
in my hand and the sun sinking. To
you I offer my hull and the tattered cordage
of my will. The terrible channels where
the wind drives me against the brown lips
of the reeds are not all behind me. Yet
I trust the sanity of my vessel; and
if it sinks, it may well be in answer
to the reasoning of the eternal voices.
the waves which have kept me from reaching you."

THE SELECTED POEMS, edited by Donald Allen,
New York, Vintage Books, 1974

41 THE TOOL-LOCKER

saltglaze porcelain, wood, metal, postcards, 752 x 320 x 347 mm
Installation piece

42 COLLECTION OF POSTCARDS OF THE HAURAKI GULF

43 ANONYMOUS OIL PAINTING OF AN ESTUARY, ON A LEAF

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Workshop Interior, Putiki Bay, Waiheke Island