

Designing the Future-Past: Ceramics and the forgetfulness of modernity

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The Anthropocene is characterised by an unprecedented increase in mass-produced material culture. While the shorter currency of objects contributes to cultural amnesia, the vast scale and synthetic nature of the contemporary built environment leads to a disengagement from place and production. This material forgetfulness is matched by our increasingly digital existence, where relationships, education, and even travel are becoming mediated in the virtual arena. Current archaeological approaches to the recent past often aim to counter this communal forgetting and disorientation. Here, archaeology is construed as a socially-engaged and inherently creative enterprise, where the past is constituted, or designed, in the present, both conceptually and materially. If archaeologists make the past in the present, ceramicists can be described as designers of the future-past, in that fired clay, perhaps more than any other creative medium, has the potential to endure and become archaeological evidence.

This paper explores these synergies between archaeological and creative research methodologies, arguing that ceramic practice may play a role in countering the widely problematised forgetfulness of modernity. It will focus on recent research undertaken in Seto City, Japan, regarding its pivotal involvement in the post-war ceramic figurine industry. This project employs art-archaeological methods to raise awareness of the endangered material practices of making associated with this industry, addressing issues of heritage, placemaking and sustainability. The whole fabric of this city, including former and current sites of production, is construed as a distributed design archive, providing an insight into a significant chapter in Japan's post-war recovery. As part of this, obsolete plaster moulds have been reused to make a new series of ceramic artefacts. The moulds act as stores of memory, their very materiality instructing their reanimation. Digital photogrammetry scans demonstrate the difficulty of reverse engineering these fragile objects once the tacit knowledge required to make them is lost.