

Title: Extermination Tents: The maker's perspective on displaying new ceramics

Article by Kim Bagley

The installation discussed in this article formed part of a practice-led PhD at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, awarded by the University of Brighton in January 2015. A section of Chapter 4 of the written thesis that accompanied the viva exhibition explores this work in detail and so covers some of the material in this article. This article is not a re-worked version of the thesis but there are references and ideas that appear in both.

Abstract

In designing the installation *Extermination Tents* for the James Hockey Gallery, UCA Farnham, physical aspects of display were a significant concern and integral to the design process. Access and proximity, height, light, shade and movement enhanced and altered how this work was perceived. The visual language of modernist sculpture and installation art influenced the style and layout. The collection of skin-like objects were inspired by fumigation tents for the treatment of wood boring insects in Durban, South Africa. The objects addressed permanence and transience in relation to migration and identity construction in South Africa. For this essay, the work was analysed as an example of an installation strategy for a transnational African artist expressing personal narratives using clay.

Key words

Sculptural ceramics, South Africa, installation art, Wood Borer,

Introduction

This article is an artist's perspective on the public display of African ceramics. It is written in the

first person, and reveals how I conceived of a ceramics installation, *Extermination Tents*, from conception, through to design and installation in the gallery context. This approach to displaying ceramics also has the potential to translate into a museum context. Aspects of museum displays of African ceramics have, in turn, influenced my own installations. *Extermination Tents* was first shown in its entirety at the James Hockey Gallery, University for the Creative Arts, Farnham, 24th June – 18th July 2014.

The *Extermination Tents* installation consists of a group of pieces that sit on the ground, as well as work designed for suspending from above. The final installation consisted of 10 suspended tents and 9 placed on the gallery floor (**Fig.1**). It formed a major part of the output of my practice-led PhD thesis, which explored notions of ‘African-ness’ in contemporary ceramics using a skin-clay metaphor.



Fig.1
Bagley, Kim. (2014).
Installation view of
Extermination Tents,
James Hockey Gallery.
Photo: Stephen White

Extermination Tents is made up of several ceramic tent-like forms. Making these fragile ceramic tents involved using my experience of growing up in the port city of Durban, South Africa to raise questions about contemporary South African issues. I was searching for a physical form or symbol to address issues of freedom, belonging, safety, privacy and identity that continue to occupy the minds of many South Africans. On an emotive and ideological level, what a house or home means in South Africa, as in other countries, is complex. The notion of occupying and owning a home has political as well as personal implications and so provides a way to consider how contrast and difference, as well as shared experiences, seem to define what it means to be a South African.

In Durban, particularly in older, historically white suburbs, there is a problem with Wood Borer and white ants (termites). They thrive in the hot and humid Durban weather. These wood eating insects damage furniture, wooden roof-trusses and any other untreated wood they can find. Some of these insects are indigenous but others, such as the Bamboo Borer (*Dinoderus minutus*), arrived from other parts of the world on ships, reminding us that Durban is an international trade port where both goods and people from all over the world arrive, pass through or leave. If a house is infected with Wood Borer, the usual way to eradicate them is to cover the house, rather conspicuously, in a large tarpaulin tent and then release poison inside (**Fig.2**).

Fig.2
Suburban house
covered in a tarpaulin
during fumigation,
Durban, South Africa.
Photo: Liza Bagley



During this process the houses are temporarily transformed into something resembling a wrapped installation piece, similar to the artists Christo and Jeanne-Claude. The tents that are used to both kill insects and protect the home, and the homeowner's lifestyle, were also the starting point for my *Extermination Tents* series and installation. The fumigation tents both conceal and reveal the form of the house. The solid geometric architectural forms dominate, but the tents also have a softness suggesting ambiguity and instability or even a sense of restlessness. They lend themselves to creating unusual metaphors to talk about issues in the South African present that are rooted in the complicated colonial and apartheid past. Recurring themes of protection, censorship, ownership, colonial history, entitlement, comfort and unease can be inferred or suggested by these fumigation tents.

Translating tents into clay: Tents and traces

It was not only the tent forms that interested me. There are other, more subtle visible, visual signs of the insects that I used in my ceramics. If your house is infected you are unlikely to see the insects themselves unless you know what you are looking for. Even then, you are more likely to see traces

of their invasion than the creatures themselves. This includes small holes in furniture or books and dust on shelves, pelmets and dado rails. The ambiguity of this invisible threat to suburban life (with a very visible means of removing that threat) appealed to me. I used the aesthetics of the traces to decorate the surfaces of some of my tent forms, in a subtle homage to these small traces. Some have little pockmarks and dark dust-like marks. Some of these are purposeful marks I made with metal oxides applied to the surface and others are happy accidents from the firing process. The old gas kilns used to fire the white porcelain tents tend to leave little specks of minerals from previous firings or from the slowly degenerating walls of the kilns.

Using visual evidence of borer infestations, fumigation tents and Wood Borer traces as my starting point, I began making a series of tents. After a few early experiments with making tent forms, the initial idea was to create an ethereal floating tent-city. Even at this early stage, the idea of hanging the objects from the ceiling was in my mind, as demonstrated by the very early sketch shown in

Figure 3.

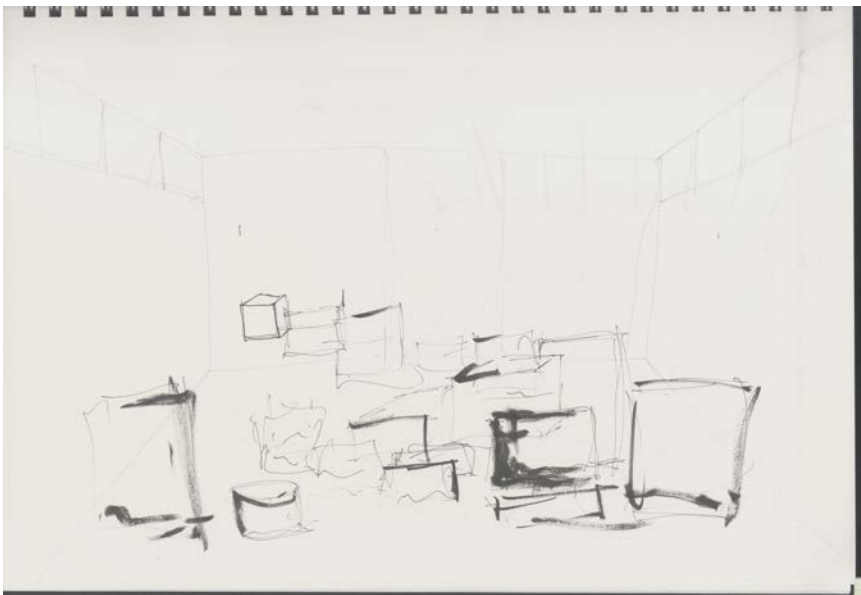


Fig.3
Early sketch of what developed into the *Extermination Tents* installation.

Initially these were just house-shaped tent shells designed for suspension, but as I progressed working out the best way to make the tents in the studio environment, I began to notice similar

bold, covered architectural forms around me wherever I went. While Durban was my starting point for making the tents, I soon noticed the plastic or tarpaulin covers stretched over scaffolding at construction sites or during building maintenance all over the world (**Fig.4**). These various coverings, with their different purposes made me think of my ceramic tent making as having broader resonance.



Fig.4
Covered scaffolding on the
side of a building, Paris, 2012.
Photo: Kim Bagley.

The most common things I noticed were the covered scaffolding structures around buildings. While I was originally looking at the coverings and how they puckered or how taut they had been pulled, I began to pay more attention to the scaffolding itself incorporating its structural elements into the tents. The new inner structures are part aesthetic and part practical. Throughout the tent-making process I had been looking for ways to support them during firing so they retain the basic house

form while still developing the fluidity and lightness in the work imitating the tarpaulin. I've done this with kiln furniture and refractory materials, cardboard armatures and whatever else I could find and use in the studio. As a consequence of observing scaffolding, I eventually began to build my own using strips of extruded stoneware clay. After much experimentation these tented 'scaffolding-building' objects were designed to sit on the ground, with their delicate tents permanently resting on the geometric inner skeleton.

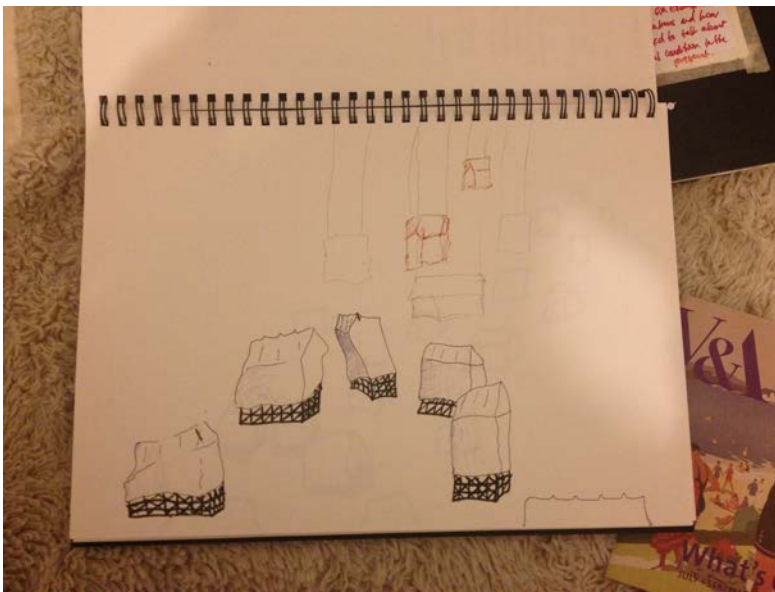


Fig.5
Planning sketch
showing the intended
visual relationship
between pieces in the
Extermination Tents
installation.

Once initial technical problems arising from the scale of the pieces were resolved, I began thinking more carefully about how to place these ceramics, both the original tents and the supported scaffolding tents, in the gallery to realise my original tent city sketch. This is shown in **Figure 5**, a sketch from much later in the design process. I generally avoid what I perceive as conventional modes of display for ceramics; by conventional modes I mean gallery furniture such as plinths, cabinets and tabletops. Instead, I borrow from the bold and minimal visual language of displaying modern sculpture as 'installations' in white-cube type spaces where the entire space becomes part of the artwork. Think of the stark exhibition spaces in Tate Modern for example, where work is often placed directly on the floor such as Ai Weiwei's *Sunflower Seeds* or suspended from above, as in Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter: An exploded view*. The idea is that the primary visual

relationship is between the pieces themselves. Selected elements of the architecture of the space, such as the floor or the height of the room also play an important role in how the work is consumed, but these are far less intrusive than the frame and glass of a cabinet for example. Instead I thought about city grid formats, informal settlements in South Africa, and urban planning conventions, to come up with a format appropriate to the forms I made. I tried to use the display design to focus and affect the way my objects are perceived, adding another layer of meaning or interpretation. The intended display format has to be integral to the way I design and execute my pieces from the very beginning of the making process right through to physically installing the work. On a mundane level, this translates into making holes to accommodate hanging devices on the suspended tents while the clay is still in a raw, unfired state.

While ceramics has historically enjoyed an expanded physical relationship with landscape and architecture, and thus the expanded field, it was not until after ‘installation’ art became popular in international sculpture and painting, that it took hold in the realm of artistic ceramics in more recent times. On the (re)emergence of ‘installation’ in late twentieth century ceramics Edmund de Waal wrote:

The desire for ceramics to achieve parity with sculpture in ‘the white cube’ of the modern gallery and museum, the placing of objects on plinths, had led to a less interrogative sense of what was possible - only to find that these sites were being regarded as conventional and outmoded by sculptors and painters.¹

Ceramics, when displayed in galleries in the twentieth century, seemed not to participate in equivalent developments in sculpture, explained by Rosalind Krauss in 1979 as ‘*Sculpture in the Expanded Field*². There have been many artists working with ceramics who work in a way more closely aligned with modern and contemporary sculpture (and beyond it) who exist in this

¹ Edmund De Waal, *20th Century Ceramics*, London, Thames and Hudson, 2003, pp184.

² Rosalind Krauss, ‘Sculpture in the Expanded Field’, *October*, Vol. 8, Spring, 1979, pp. 30-44.

‘expanded field’. These artists have influenced the way I approached the design for *Extermination Tents* and I see my work as a continuation of this tradition.

On the international art scene, the participatory installations of British ceramist Clare Twomey and sculptor Antony Gormley’s memorable *Fields* of ceramic figures are the type of works that have influenced my own practice. Artists like Twomey and Gormley have ‘*broken the mould*’ within the studio ceramics field through their approach to installing ceramic works in the gallery and museum. These artists and the sympathetic curators they work with have expanded the way artists working in clay today (including myself) dare to show their work. The spatial and experiential elements of work by Twomey, Gormley and their peers, continues to influence how I think about exhibition design. In South Africa, comparable examples include the work of Wilma Cruise and Hennie Meyer.

Twomey’s work in particular has a participatory element giving the viewer a real, physical sense of the ceramic object. In *Consciousness/Conscience* (2001-2004) the audience was expected to walk over Twomey’s tiles, breaking them to get to another part of the exhibition. At the V&A *Trophy* (2006), blue jasper birds, scattered amongst busts and figures, could be taken away by the museum visitor. The small, smooth objects easily held in the hand, could be quietly slipped into a pocket. Inside a ceramics gallery or museum this is still a very unusual and very direct way to get a sense of the physicality of the ceramic material. At the V&A for example, most objects are hidden behind glass; there are only a few select pieces designated for touching and handling. My work exists between these two modes. While I do not go as far as encouraging the theft or destruction of my pieces, the idea of really getting a physical sense of the material and the scale of my work in relation to the human body is an important and distinctive element of my visual language.

Extermination Tents was designed to allow the viewer to walk among the ceramics and right up to their surfaces with no cabinet, cordon or plinth to inhibit access. Displaying ceramics in this way is risky, but can be very satisfying for the viewer because the view is not mediated through a conspicuous frame. In the museum context this experience is not safe or practical for most displays. However, there are some precedents in African ceramics museum displays that came to mind. Although my *Extermination Tents* installation is intended for the white-cube-type art gallery context more than the museum, there are subtle connections to be made between existing museum displays of ceramics and how I approach my work. Museums and their objects are important points of research and inspiration for my ceramic practice.



Fig.6
Installation view,
Sainsbury Africa
Galleries, The British
Museum, London, 2010.

A well-known example is the tree-like structure in the Sainsbury Africa Galleries at the British Museum in London (**Fig.6**). While there is a low cordon to prevent access, it is a spectacular display that allows one to get relatively close to the work and see it without glass or the usual interruption of a flat horizontal surface. It is a practical and aesthetic solution for pots with round bases that were never designed to sit on a completely flat surface. The design borrows from the realm of installation art and sculpture, adding an interpretative slant to the museum display. The

round pots are like ripe fruit; the structure invites comparisons between the objects displayed in shape, texture and colour. While the frame is significantly more obtrusive than my design, this type of museum display has some parallels with my own approach, which also allows the work to be seen from all angles, using a dynamic format.

In the same gallery as the tree-like form, there are glass cases containing a mix of ceramics from different parts of Africa and made in many different times and contexts. The curators have also used proximity to help the viewer see connections between objects. An example of this associative positioning can be seen when one observes an untitled contemporary vessel by Magdalene Odundo, made in 2000, Farnham, England. It is a coil-built and beautifully burnished pot with a very anthropomorphic form. This piece is close to a trio of equally exquisitely burnished Baganda pots of royal origin. Odundo's pot also shares a glass shelf with a detailed figurative shrine vessel with three main figures, dated late nineteenth century, from Igbo, Nigeria. The figures on the Nigerian piece and Odundo's figure-like pot both reference inverted cone-shaped headdress forms.

Physically close groupings like these encourage the viewer to make connections across times and places based on visual affinities. Their proximity is part of the way meaning is created in this display.

In my own practice I use the power of proximity. The careful positioning and distance between objects can give the viewer a sense that the pieces are 'talking' to each other. The anthropomorphic relationship between ceramic objects is one of the ways I construct meanings in my work. This is particularly apparent in the front group of tents in the James Hockey Gallery installation, where nine pieces in *Extermination Tents* sit on the ground (**Fig.7**).



Fig.7
Bagley, Kim. Detail of
installation view of
Extermination Tents,
James Hockey
Gallery, Farnham,
2014. Photo: Kim
Bagley

A pairing or grouping can make static, inanimate objects appear to converse and become animated in the viewer's imagination. My ceramic tents appear to lean into or away from each other, emphasising their anthropomorphic qualities. This adds layers of meaning that the viewer may see in the work. For example, a group of forms may suggest community, affinity and relationships within cities or neighbourhoods; while the work refers to architecture, it is about people.

Installations comprised of many objects have a different impact to that of objects shown singly. Like the British Museum objects bring together related practices across time and place, inferring connections rather than differences; I tend to show my work as crowds or groups showing the similarities and differences between the pieces which are all both alike yet very individual. This is my way of meditating on human relationships and communities.

Fig.8
Bagley, Kim. Installation view of
Extermination Tents I, Foyer Gallery,
Farnham, 2012. Photo: David Summerill.

Before attempting this major installation, I used 5 of the earlier hanging pieces to create an

installation in the Foyer Gallery, at UCA Farnham as part of a group exhibition in 2013 (**Fig.8**).

This made me aware of how the objects worked together in space, and what the experience would be like for the viewer. I used this exhibition to test mundane but important aspects including how much they moved, how close together they should be hung and it gave me an idea of how close viewers tended to get.

Like many of the vessels on the tree at the British Museum, these pieces could not be displayed on a flat surface. I prefer this because it removes the distraction or association of gallery furniture or tableware conventions, focussing the viewer on the sculptural and material qualities of objects themselves.

In positioning them for hanging I wanted to use both geometric and organic lines to echo this contrast. A simple solution was to hang them at different points on a grid, but at different heights. I think this adds to the sense of lightness as well as my concerns about contrast and ambiguity, both of which are important formal and conceptual elements of this work.

Viewers could get right up close to see the details of tears, folds and kinks in the clay surfaces. I avoided crowding the space with too many pieces. They moved very slightly because they were suspended. The combination of their fragile appearance and the slight movement meant that viewers tended to approach them slowly and cautiously even though they were installed in a busy reception area.



Fig.9
Pots drying in
Magdalene Odundo's
studio, Farnham, 2014.
Photo: Kim Bagley.

The notion of a fabric or skin-like covering having both a protective function and a striking appearance is beautifully illustrated by a photograph of pots drying under cloth in Magdalene Odundo's studio (**Fig.9**). The pieces may be obscured, but the light fabric covering made me look differently at the forms, seeing them as three veiled figures that might turn their necks and twitch the cloth at any moment; a very evocative, yet ordinary occurrence in a ceramics studio. Like museum displays or looking at pest-control tents and scaffold-covered buildings, the studio itself can be an important source of inspiration.

As Odundo has in these coiled pieces, in *Extermination Tents* I tried to achieve a sense of movement. The twisting and leaning of inner support structures gives the tents their movement. Weaknesses built into the design deliberately cause the stoneware to twist or lean under the weight of the porcelain (**Fig.10**).



Fig.10
Bagley, Kim.
Studio
photograph of
two pieces
from the
*Extermination
Tents* series,
2014. Photo:
David
Summerill.

The Exhibition Design

The James Hockey Gallery is a long, double volume rectangular space with good natural light. It is the art gallery of the UCA Farnham campus. From my earliest sketches, it was clear that the viewer would move around amongst the tents, getting close enough to touch them. This exhibition was in a university setting with a curator who was open to my design. From my original sketches (**Figs.3, 5 and 12**) of how I envisioned the work, and with most of the pieces made and measured, I created a floor plan sketch for the space (**Fig.11**). At the front I intended to have a fairly close-knit group of pieces on the ground. The idea was to arrange the tents in a loose circle on the hard green-grey floor of the gallery, as if gathered there informally for a chat.

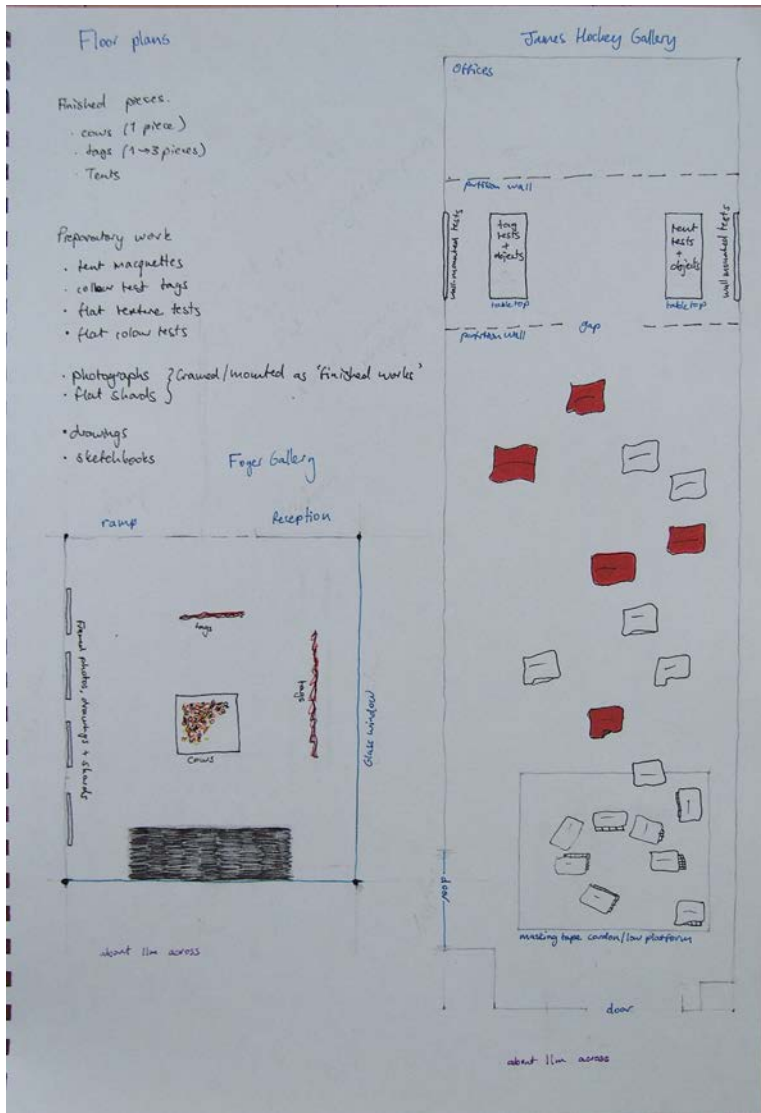


Fig.11
Plan drawing of
proposed layout of
objects in the gallery
space, presented to the
curator, 2014.

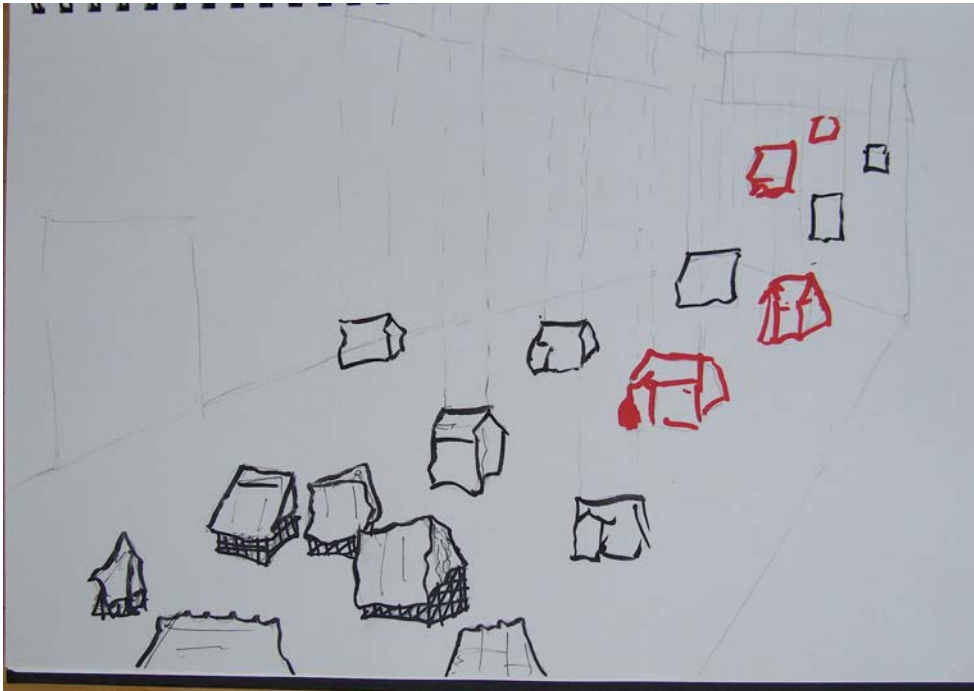


Fig.12
Sketched
impression of
proposed layout of
objects in the
gallery space,
presented to the
curator, 2014.

Moving back from the front group I planned to suspend the remaining tents, arranged according to a loose grid pattern, suggesting some of the order of urban planning, yet appearing to float up and away in an organic manner, loosely from front to back.

Therefore the lowest piece needed to be only just higher than the ones on the ground, as you moved towards the back of the space, the pieces would be higher up. This type of installation is meant to enliven the work, and get the viewer to consider my ceramic objects in a way that sculptural mediums have been routinely viewed since the mid-twentieth century.

The pieces, made from thin porcelain and terracotta paper-clay are light and organic. Some form a casual group in the front of the exhibition, as you move towards the back of the space the format becomes more geometric, but at the same time variation in height counteracts this formality. Despite the geometric house-like structure the forms themselves appear quite soft, like textile or paper, and yet are hard fired ceramic (**Fig.13**). This contrast and

Fig.13
Bagley, Kim.
Detail of
installation view of
*Extermination
Tents*, James
Hockey Gallery,
2014. Photo:
Stephen White

ambiguity between softness and hardness, sharp edges and rounder ones, grids and curves are elements that describe to me the ambiguous relationship many South Africans have with their country.



The pieces may have begun from the literal extermination tent, but now they hint at many possible interpretations, somewhere at the intersection of protection and suffocation, permanence and impermanence. As I worked on these objects I thought more and more about tented refugee camps, Western global occupation protests or the superficial facelifts given to cities for international sporting events. There are rich conversations to be had starting from this simple tent metaphor in combination with a minimal, yet spectacular exhibition design.

Dr. Kim Bagley is an artist from Durban, South Africa. She recently completed a practice-led PhD in ceramics at the University for the Creative Arts, Farnham and is a studio resident at 318 Ceramics, Farnham Pottery. She writes here as an artist.

De Waal E, 2003 *20th Century Ceramics*, London, Thames and Hudson.
Krauss R, 'Sculpture in the Expanded Field', *October*, Vol. 8, Spring, 1979, pp. 30-44.