

The Future of Dirt: A Response

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Ceramic artists have, it could be said, several things in common with dairy farmers. Both are reliant on land to produce their desired optimal outcomes; there are different grades of soil and clay that suit their purposes, and contribute to their respective success; both are subject to powerful, unpredictable external forces, and both spend effort and time trying to work with rather than against those external forces; and the best of both of them is concerned with the future of dirt.

At RM, three colleagues – Wesley John Fourie, Taarn Scott and Hana Pera Aoake – have elevated their future of dirt to the second level. Upstairs, in Samoa House the connection to soil is a necessarily virtual one – imagined, yes; spiritual, definitely; conceptual, certainly; physical, no way. Talk about whenua at RM, and attention is drawn to the built-up nature of the neighbourhood, and the plain, utilitarian, rather ugly floor of the gallery, and its impassable disconnection to the earth beneath it. To talk about dirt here is to muck up the white cube.

But this talk of dirt at RM comes off more like songs of the earth, sweet harmonies imported from other places, lullabies from home. Aoake has genealogical ties to Auckland, Waikato and Hokitika and displays samples of these local earths like a smorgasbord of terroir – a sweet palette for a land painter. The array of hues reads like a recipe for the gods (greens, chocolates, cocoa, rust, creams) and the textures, from powdery and crumbly to rock, inspire thoughts of candy, the kind that pops on the tongue. It all revolves around a sacred piece of earth, that comes from Otakou, Aoake's birthplace on the Otago Peninsula. Scott comes from Dunedin, and clays from there make up the ceramic pieces that she contributes: delicate, misshapen, shiny-glazed, pocked with colour from granules that explode when fired. Fourie bids farewell to a river (Whanganui, near to which he has lived for a while) with a wall drawing made of mud taken from river silt below his friend Tia's house. The all-over drawing is testament to this artist's spatial, painterly abilities, as well as his love of gesture. The work conflates two large, important things – a river and a true friend – and defines them both as a source of comfort and inspiration.

Wesley's river introduces water to *The Future of Dirt* as a concept and as a material, the element that complements that of earth. Taarn's vessels become exactly that, holding water inside, which then reflects and distorts them. Hana creates waves of stones on the floor, representing eels, acting like compass points that provide orientation. And more of that river mud makes up Fourie's medallions that are suspended over one of Taarn's vessels that has been coated in what was left of the same mud. Would that the building leak, and encourage that river mud to crumble and melt, exposing Scott's ceramic confection while forming a dun-coloured rivulet on that unforgiving concrete floor. Such alchemy would stand for the transformation achieved by both farmers and artists. Dirt is inert, yet stores huge potential for growth and sustenance – plants, food, expression, art.

Farmers and artists build and live in communities in order to thrive, and there is a healthy sense of community on show in *The Future of Dirt*: three individuals who respect and keep

an eye on their neighbours, helping out when required. They fill the gallery with further contributions that both surprise and expand on the agreed themes. A harakeke weaving – precursor of companion exhibitions opening at Christchurch’s Physics Room and Wellington’s Meanwhile – defines the upper edge of the room, but also speaks of the predisposition of plants to grow and propagate on the wind. Words inside a ceramic dish transform it into a wishing well. Text engraved on a cross-cut of kauri acts as a slogan on behalf of the endurance of flora. Beads of ceramic aqua mount the walls, disorientating the viewer’s downcast search for dirt. And Fourie provides an empty kissing grotto, invoking the thrill of skin-on-skin contact, or at least the role that memory might play in its meaning. His forest floor also reminds us that dirt is really just the organic matter of a distant past; it is the whakapapa of all of us. The future of dirt, for farmers and artists both, is us; it is a future that we can protect with the care and respect we show for our planet between now, our mortal demise, and our eventual earth-bound destiny.