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What happens when you leave four artists at the bottom of a clay pit? Grant Gibson finds out

Material values from the play pit

The beginnings: curated by Neil Brownsword, the Marl Hole project eloquently combines the ephemeral with the lasting. An exercise in the process of making, the initial brief allowed four internationally renowned artists five days and a rudimentary set of tools to experiment with the clay found at the bottom of a pit owned by Ibstock Brick Ltd at Newcastle-under-Lyme.

Brownsword has long been fascinated with the red burning clays found in the area, and the official blurb describes the project as a chance to 're-evaluate the status of a material logically consigned to its dominant industrial connections'. But there's also a rather more personal angle – as a child he used to play in a similar pit at the back of his parents' house.

When the allotted time was up, the pit was to return to its industrial use and the results destroyed. Only a 25-minute film shot by Johnny Magee, who shadowed the artists as they worked, would remain. Finding this idea irresistible, *Crafts* made two separate visits to the Marl Hole (on the first morning and final afternoon) to witness how they got on....

Day One: In an environment best described as imposing, the artists -Brownsword himself, Torbjørn Kvasbø, Alexandra Engelfriet and Pekka Paikkari- arrive with very different working methods and expectations. The sky is battleship grey, the clay in the pit cloyingly wet. The pit feels distinctly isolating.

While Kvasbø and Engelfriet attempt to come to terms with their surroundings, Finnish maker and designer Paikkari has a very specific idea. With the help of a dumper he is trying to flatten a 25 square metre section of the pit floor-this is to be his 'canvas' for a series of letters lifted from *The A-Z of the Clay Industry*. 'What I'd like to see is the clay cracking. I think that will happen after Wednesday when we're expecting rain. Maybe Thursday we'll paint and then it will disappear.' But things aren't looking too promising, as the dumper leaves deep furrows in the slurry.

Nearby, Norwegian artist Kvasbø is working at the pit face on a very different scale, rolling the clay into over-sized sausages and inserting them into the landscape. He's palpably still finding his feet. 'You have to find practical methods to understand the surroundings', he explains. 'It's very, very existential. You make solutions where you are, from scratch. You start with nothing; your self-esteem really is zero. It's a good lesson. Everyone should do that now and then. Then build themselves up again slowly.'

Dutch artist Engelfriet, meanwhile, has elected to use a slope at the edge of the pit. Her reason is simple. 'I'm from Holland and it's very flat. So I'd like to use the opportunity to work with slopes and with gravity'. She's digging out the stones with a spade and then intends to use her body to manipulate the clay. 'If it rains it's OK,' she says. 'It's the dryness that could be a problem'.

Brownsword has the difficult job of making sure the other artists are happy while simultaneously concentrating on his own work. 'It's a sense of responsibility because you can't help but feel a bit paternal. You've got 'em over here and if it goes tits up....' He trails off for a moment. 'But I think they've all got a kind of open attitude. It could be great or it could be a complete disaster.'

Day Five: I return on the final afternoon and things have definitely changed. The floor of the pit itself is drier. Remarkably Paikkari's canvas is flat and he's working with his wife to finish the final letters in time. Engelfriet's slope, by complete contrast, is pocked with craters made with an intriguing combination of a digger and the artist's knees. And Brownsword has made a number of interventions in different places across the pit that emphasize contrasts of colour and texture.

Without doubt though the greatest transformation has come from Kvasbø, who used the dumper to create a slope and shift a series of boulders. The rocks were then moved by hand, and slip was added

layer upon layer from the top of the slope by the machine. 'You get here. You have no idea what it's about and you're totally overwhelmed', he explains. 'So you start with something very small and comfortable. But then you stay here and you get a little more qualified to understand what's around you and how to deal with the massive surroundings.'

Magee has quietly been filming how the pieces unfold, the one permanent reminder of the entire project. 'They were responding to the clay, and I was responding to them,' he says. 'So in the end what I've come to is capturing the energy: the physical exertion, the breathing, the grunts, the stabbing of spades in the ground, the mechanical diggers.'

The Aftermath: 'The film is shown at Stoke-on-Trent's AirSpace Gallery during the British Ceramics Biennial, alongside a mound of clay from the pit itself. The idea was that visitors could get their hands dirty creating something. As Brownsword pointed out: 'Kids aren't allowed to get dirty or go out in the woods to play anymore, so it's about opening up the possibilities of materials again and people handling them in a very low-tech way.'

And this gets to the nub of the project – the second and perhaps most charming aspect of both its ephemerality and its lasting legacy: watching a bunch of grown-ups give themselves license to play, taking their time to understand and experiment with both material and environment. If it encourages even one visitor to think about the material in a different way then it will have served its purpose.



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