

A Coromandel Project

The works of Deirdre Airey: artist in clay



Friends of Deirdre Airey
Coromandel
February 2004

Can you help?

Friends of Deirdre Airey in Coromandel seek to locate and catalogue all the works of Deirdre Airey. We also want to get in touch with those who knew of her life and art. We hope to prepare a catalogue, a monograph and create an exhibition of her works with other artists. We have applied for help from Creative New Zealand but intend to proceed anyway. Below is a summary version of our application.

Can you help us by sharing reminiscences, putting us in touch with her friends, or locating tiles? If so we would very much like to hear from you.

Contact: In Coromandel, Jenny Dow, Wailin Elliot or Susan Fraser, or contact:

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RD5 Thames
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Project aim:

To promote the work of Deirdre Airey, artist in clay, recognising her place in relation to the arts in Coromandel and New Zealand. By promoting Deirdre's work we hope also to increase recognition and understanding of the Coromandel arts community in which she was active.

Description of the Project:

This project is of one years duration, and consists of the following stages:

- 1) **Catalogue the entire body of work**, researching the chronology and location of the tiles, including those in public, private and church collections. To help us we have Deirdre Airey's own papers, photographic albums and since 1976, excellent photographic images by Mr Graham Power of Waiomu, Thames Coast.
Objective: research & record a full list of tiles, dates, locations, owners
Outcome: images with details, contact list, approval to publish locations
- 2) **Research her artistic background**, especially those who worked with her or collected her work. Many are elderly but still active in the artistic community. We hope this will develop into an important record of the local arts community. We are concerned to establish this context while it is still possible.
Objective: record & preserve relevant context of Deirdre and her work
Outcome: raw material as well as written summary monograph; also extensive list of contacts
- 3) **Publish our catalogue and background information**, making the research available in a small printed monograph as well as a comprehensive web catalogue of images. Using the web will allow coloured images to be recorded and made available cheaply, i.e. without the prohibitive print costs of colour. This will require digitising the photographic images, something we see as essential to preserving a proper record of this wonderful work.
Objective: make available printed interpretation and website catalogue
Outcome: printed monograph circulated to contacts, perhaps published in established journal, e.g. Art New Zealand; website catalogue on Internet
- 4) **Celebrate with an exhibition** that includes tiles of Deirdre's alongside work of selected Coromandel artists including mentors and those she influenced, thus providing context. We hope to celebrate and contextualise the work and generate a lively local interest in the exhibition and the arts. We will invite all our contacts to make her work more widely known elsewhere. The exhibition is to last a week at Hauraki House in Coromandel, 8th – 15th December 2004. Tiles which remained in her collection when she died will be exhibited, as well as painting, carving and ceramics of selected local artists. We hope to offer inexpensive art for sale, and reproductions of Deirdre's work.
Objective: a celebration of Deirdre's work and the local arts community.
Outcome: an exhibition that is well-attended, enjoyed and stimulates appreciation of her work and the local arts scene.

This project may lead to further developments including perhaps exhibitions further afield, and perhaps an annual Coromandel exhibition in December.

Completion dates:

Stages 1 through 3: until October 2004: We intend to work on each of these stages together from now until October 2004. These stages can be initiated when we have images of each tile, i.e when the digital images are produced from the photographs. Cataloguing, researching, contacting interested people and developing the monograph and website will all take place at the same time, with each of the four Friends of Deirdre Airey taking responsibility for part of the project, meeting at least monthly as it progresses.

Stage 4 October till December 3004: In October the emphasis will switch to the exhibition and the earlier stages of the project will form the basis for organising and marketing this exhibition.

Target audience and marketing:

Artists, literary community: Our aim is to make this work more widely known among artists, including literary New Zealanders.

Marketing to this group: We shall communicate with these people directly, through our own contact list, and through art and literary journals, using press releases, our short monograph and contacts. The website can also be used.

Local community: Deirdre Airey was an artist of the Coromandel and we aim to involve local people in the project.

Marketing to this group: We shall contact these people through local news media, including local papers and radio, as well as through the local libraries, art societies and other organisations (religious and environmental networks for example). Driving Creek railway and other arts outlets will also be used to advertise the project.

Evaluating the success:

The aim is to increase appreciation of Deirdre Airey's work and enhance understanding of its context, particularly of the Coromandel artistic community in which she worked. The success of the project will be demonstrated if we capture accurately all known information about the life and work of this important ceramic artist so that researchers in the future will have this information, and will have the opportunity to raise future discussions about the relevance of this artist to New Zealand's art history. Already we have two notable people interested in writing about her work – Michael King and also Francis Pound from Auckland University. Success in fostering local appreciation will be evident if we achieve good attendance at the exhibition, comparable to the well-known Easter exhibitions. If the interest is sufficient we may make this exhibition an annual event in Coromandel, adding to the cultural calendar of our region at the very start of the summer. We shall also use this project to interest galleries further afield (e.g. Waikato Art Museum). The website catalogue will remain as a resource for continued use.

Reporting:

We shall report on: number of contacts in our list; number of works catalogued; number of works located; numbers of reminiscences recorded; numbers attending exhibition; dollar value of sales of reproductions.

Meeting Creative NZ aims:

The project meets the aims of the Creative NZ Presentation, Promotion and Audience Development funding programme.

1. The nature of potential audiences:

Collectors: The body of work consists of 550 or so tiles, perhaps more. We aim to locate and contact several hundred collectors of her works. These include individuals who purchased tiles over several years of Easter exhibitions in Coromandel, churches and some of the nations major galleries and gallery owners. When her close friends and wider circle of literary and artistic acquaintances are added, we estimate at least two to three hundred people have a direct interest in her art and will respond to direct mailing.

Locals: A large body of local people also have an interest in her for her role in this community, as evidenced by the crowds at her funeral. We would like them to see her as an artist among a group of artists, to understand her strong desire to create artworks, and the traditional European and specifically New Zealand influences on her work. Exhibiting her tiles with works of presently active artists from this community will help to widen the audience for her work. We hope to interest local schools in the work and in her medium.

Wider arts community: We hope by recording, reproducing and exhibiting her work, Deirdre's tiles will become better known among the New Zealand arts community. Already her work is in several major collections, including Te Papa, and we hope these will be better understood when her entire body of work is recorded and available for public viewing.

2. Evidence of public demand and interest:

Collectors and locals already familiar with her work can be identified, and number in the hundreds. By holding a December exhibition we hope to widen the audience for her work, as well as raise awareness of artists working in this community. Regular Easter exhibitions have become a tradition, are well-known and supported. We hope a December exhibition will be similarly welcomed.

3. Marketing strategies: See also "Target audiences and marketing".

Direct mail to our database of contacts; press and media releases and visits for local media; also releases and monograph for specialist arts media; listings on arts websites;

4. Growing the arts community - understanding and debate of arts:

Deirdre Airey's work has themes and concerns that are universal and religious, concerning man's place in the world and the Christian understanding of it. Yet these tiles are not only specifically New Zealand but specifically of the Coromandel. The local landscape, community and environment of this region are referenced in works using a form and discipline that harks back not only to early Christian, but even more ancient art. Local Coromandel clay is the means of expression, and we believe local people, with Deirdre's memory still fresh in their minds, will find much to ponder and admire.

Key People:

Friends of Deirdre Airey (FODA) was set up in September 2002 with four members: Jenny Dow, Wailin Elliott, Sue Fraser, Rachel Garden, in association with Alistair Airey, Deirdre's brother who lives in Coromandel.

Deirdre Airey: (died August 2002) Deirdre Airey qualified at the Otago Medical School in 1950. Following some years working in England she settled in Coromandel where she was the local doctor for 25 years. Inspired by some early relief tiles by her friend Barry Brickell, Deirdre started working in clay for recreation and as a means for expressing her interest in religious art. An estimated thousand or so tiles have been produced and are in private and public collections - Deirdre's work has been included in various north Island centres, is displayed in a number of churches and has been purchased by the National Gallery of New Zealand.

Jenny Dow: BFA (Elam), Diploma of Teaching (Auckland); Jenny taught art and art history at Baradene College, Auckland 1980–85 with a years study leave in Europe in 1984. Jenny moved with husband Andrew Turnwald to Coromandel in 1986, where she became friends with Deirdre. She taught art at Coromandel Area School, served on the Coromandel Community Arts Council and has organised many exhibitions at Hauraki House Gallery. Jenny has participated in collective Coromandel Painters' Exhibitions and CCAC exhibitions, with the first major showing of her work with Mary Foreman in 1993. For last 10 years has worked at her painting and writing, enjoying her children Helen, 16 and Benedict, 14.

Wailin Elliot became a full time potter in 1968. She was associated with Browns Mill, NZ's first co-operative craft market in Durham Lane, Auckland for 11 years. In 1973 she moved to Coromandel where she now lives, and has been associated with Barry Brickell and the Driving Creek Railway and Potteries ever since. She now works mainly in local terracotta clay, dug at Driving Creek Railway & Potteries and woodfired in the kilns there. Wailin has exhibited widely throughout NZ. She has taken part in many exhibitions in Coromandel and has extensive experience organising the Easter shows there. She also has a special interest in handset and handbound books, and has published several small books.

Sue Fraser: B.A. (Victoria) MA Hons (Auckland). Sue is presently head of English and literacy leader at Coromandel Area School. She was previously employed by Waikato University to work with teachers on the English curriculum. A long time resident of Coromandel, both her children (Josephine and Patrick) were born in Coromandel hospital. Sue maintains an active interest in art history, contemporary art and literature, with a particular focus on NZ poetry. Sue was a long standing friend of Deirdre Airey's, sharing a love for Shakespeare which deepened through the regular readings of the local Shakespeare group. Also in common was a love for the community of Coromandel and the environment.

Rachel Garden: BA Hons (Auckland and Victoria) MA and PhD (University of Western Ontario). Rachel is a philosopher, mathematician and painter presently working as technical writer in the IT industry. She writes and produces documents including brochures, help systems and websites. Rachel is an academic author and mathematical reviewer. She lives on the Thames Coast, Coromandel, where she brought up her 5 children with husband Peter. She is currently chair of the Thames High Board of Trustees, and past chair of the Thames arts council. Rachel was a close friend of Deirdre Airey, and is the sole surviving executor following the tragic death of the other executor, painter and poet Joanna Paul last year.

Support for the project - excerpts:

The Coromandel Community Arts Council:

"We strongly support and endorse your project" -

Tim Walker, Director Dowse Gallery:

"I am a great fan of her work, which is extraordinary. I was involved in the purchase of a number of her works for the Te Papa collection and have three works at home... I'm very happy to assist with this very worthwhile project to honour one of our significant ceramic artists."

Barry Brickell, potter:

"I was immediately impressed by her early compositions... she found that she could organise images without the need for finer detail, yet retaining their essence, into balanced compositions. Flat undetailed surfaces could be made to contrast with more highly worked areas to give a variety of dramatic messages...{she found she could} translate what she knew and felt about painted art works into two-and-one half dimensional works in clay."

Micheal King, Coromandel writer and historian:

"Deirdre ...was an immensely charismatic person who had a profound influence on those around her - other artists and workers in clay, but also fellow art consumers and any published catalogue documenting her work would explore her reverberative influence on a wide spectrum of other practitioners, including writers such as myself... I am privileged and happy to commend this project to Creative New Zealand and to contribute in any other way I can to its realisation."

Campbell Smith: retired Director of Fine Arts from Waikato Museum

"...This project by the Friends of Deirdre Airey will bring focus on the unique work of a very special woman and will enable her work to be appreciated and enjoyed by a wider public, and will without doubt, enrich the wider fabric of New Zealand Art...I would urge Creative New Zealand to look with favour on this project. I know from a long experience of working in, and for, the arts that THE WORKS OF DEIRDRE AIREY is something very special."

Natasha Conland, Te Papa curator:

"I think an assessment of the role of Barry Brickell's work and community of ceramic artists (rather than his own life history) is overdue. Deirdre is not so much a subordinate figure in this history but a partner in establishing a vibrant, artistic environment, which many artists have sought out over the last 30+ years..."

Dr Francis Pound, University of Auckland:

"Airey, like McCahon and like Angus, and like many New Zealand artists and writers of their time, is clearly a lover of *Quattrocento* Italian art, both for its style and for its Christian subject matter. This love is everywhere visible in her work. Like McCahon, she takes the traditional biblical stories and places them into a local, New Zealand context..."

Letter from Tim Walker

12.02.04

Mr Tim Walker
Director
Dowse Gallery
Lower Hutt

Dr Rachel Garden
RD5
Thames

Dear Rachel,

Re: Deirdre Airey project

I write to express my support for your proposal to record, research and exhibit the works of Deirdre Airey, with a short monograph to set her work in the context of local and New Zealand art.

I was a great fan of Deirdre's work and was lucky to meet her twice, once soon before she died.

I am a great fan of her work, which is extraordinary. I was involved in the purchase of a number of her works for the Te Papa collection and have three works at home.

Dame Janet Paul introduced Deirdre and her work to me. I know Janet holds the work in high regard, and collected many works.

Deirdre's work has particular importance not only for its own fine qualities, but also for its influences on and from local artists such as Coromandel potter Barry Brickell. The fact that he is now a nationally known artist while she is less well known reinforces the importance of the project you propose.

Her use of local clay and also the tile relief genre she made her own make her work particularly interesting. I know she was also a great source of encouragement to other crafts people and artists especially in Coromandel.

I'm very happy to assist with this very worthwhile project to honour one of our significant ceramic artists.

Yours sincerely

Tim Walker

Letter from Campbell Smith

801 River Road,
Hamilton
14/02/04

Elizabeth Kerr
Chief Executive
Creative New Zealand
Wellington

Dear Elizabeth Kerr

THE WORKS OF DEIRDRE AIREY

This letter is to endorse and support the proposed project by the Friends of Deirdre Airey. It involves researching and cataloguing the work of Deirdre Airey and celebrating with an exhibition in December of this year. The exhibition will be held in Coromandel for it is an event which, rightly, celebrates this area. For this is the place where Deirdre Airey served so well as the local doctor for twenty-five years but also where she first learned from that other unique Coromandel person, Barry Brickell, how to enjoy and handle clay. This was a new beginning for Deirdre when she started to fashion and fire clay tiles which allowed her to express, through her art, her own, deep religious beliefs.

This project by the Friends of Deirdre Airey will bring focus on the unique work of a very special woman and will enable her work to be appreciated and enjoyed by a wider public, and will without doubt, enrich the wider fabric of New Zealand Art.

I would urge Creative New Zealand to look with favour on this project. I know from a long experience of working in, and for, the arts that THE WORKS OF DEIRDRE AIREY is something very special.

Yours sincerely

S Campbell Smith M.N.Z.M

Life member: Waikato Society of Arts
 Hamilton Community Arts Council
 Friends of the Waikato Museum of Art & History

Letter from Micheal King

19 February, 2004

Elizabeth Kerr,
Chief Executive,
Creative New Zealand,
P.O. Box 3806,
Wellington

Dear Elizabeth,

I write in strong support for Creative New Zealand assistance for the project to research, document and exhibit the works of Deirdre Airey of Coromandel.

There are, it seems to me, at least three arguments in support of such assistance:

One is that Deirdre's work in the medium of clay tile relief, using local clay, was pioneering in this country and reached a very high standard indeed. For this reason alone her accomplishment deserves to be better known and better understood.

Secondly, Deirdre herself was an immensely charismatic person who had a profound influence on those around her other artists and workers in clay, but also fellow art consumers and any published catalogue documenting her work would explore her reverberative influence on a wide spectrum of other practitioners, including writers such as myself.

Thirdly, Deirdre was of course an influential part of a Coromandel arts and crafts subculture, which includes the likes of Barry Brickell and his protégés, and this group too needs to be better known and understood nationally.

I am privileged and happy to commend this project to Creative New Zealand and to contribute in any other way I can to its realisation.

Sincerely,

MICHAEL KING
(Historian)

Letter from Natasha Conland

Natasha Conland
Curator art and visual culture
Museum of New Zealand
Te Papa Tongarewa
PO Box 467
Cable Street
Wellington

Tuesday, 24 February 2004

Dr Rachel Garden
RD 5
Thames

To Whom It May Concern:

Re: Project application for “The works of Deirdre Airey: Artist in clay”

I would like to extend my full support to this project application. I believe the ‘friends of Deirdre Airey’ are being economic in their assessment of their time and the value of this project. In particular I believe the work towards cataloguing Deirdre’s work will be of enormous benefit to future research on this artist, without such work ‘who she is as an artist’ will continue to go unaccounted for.

Deirdre was an innovator in clay, and her pursuit of a form that would express the context of place and religious context and belief, mirrors the determination of many New Zealand artists who worked in more expansive media. The terracotta material she chose, has a strong lineage and relationship to many New Zealand ceramic artists such as Barry Brickell, Len Castle, Tony Fomison, Helen Mason and Warren Tippet, all who elected to work with the raw ‘gritty’ qualities of Coromandel clay.

I think an assessment of the role of Barry Brickell’s work and community of ceramic artists (rather than his own life history) is overdue. Deirdre is not so much a subordinate figure in this history but a partner in establishing a vibrant, artistic environment, which many artists have sought out over the last 30+ years.

One of the remarkable things about Dierdre’s work was her persistence with the form, with over 500 tiles; she consistently sought a vehicle for the communication of her ideas. I think establishing the extent and nature of this project is highly valuable, and I wish them well with the project, and the best professional support.

Kind Regards

Natasha Conland

Letter from Dr Francis Pound

From: Dr Francis Pound

19 Picton St.,

Ponsonby

Auckland

25 Feb., 2004

I wish to express my support for the Deirdre Airey Project proposal. Though to produce a complete catalogue of an artist's works is an ambitious and demanding project, in this case, the group undertaking it is so clearly capable, well organised and well motivated that I have no doubt they will succeed. Indeed, I wish they were working with me on my catalogue project on Gordon Walters—the thing might be finished twenty years sooner.

Airey, like McCahon and like Angus, and like many New Zealand artists and writers of their time, is clearly a lover of *Quattrocento* Italian art, both for its style and for its Christian subject matter. This love is everywhere visible in her work. Like McCahon, she takes the traditional biblical stories and places them into a local, New Zealand context—a device borrowed from 15th century Italian and Flemish artists. At the same time, the style of her reliefs, in its disposal of narrative figures in a box-like or stage-like space, and with the action performed parallel to the relief plane (the actual flat, background plane), has its origin in *Quattrocento* reliefs. Airey is an interesting manifestation of the constant Christianity of so much New Zealand art of the period.

If it be held against Airey that she was a mere amateur, well so too was McCahon an amateur until he left his Elam job, and likewise Walters could not make a living from his art until he was in his seventh decade. And if Angus did not do other work for a living, it was because she was financially supported by her family.

Finally, Airey has strong regional connections. The fact that the present project emerges from Coromandel itself is significant, I think, and, given your wish to support regional developments, is a further good reason for granting this proposal your generous support.

Yours faithfully,

Dr Francis Pound.

Notes by Barry Brickell

Feb 2004

Before Deirdre started making clay relief tiles, she had been doing many pencil sketches and drawings, mostly landscapes and natural features. Her younger brother Alistair shares with her a decided talent in drawing and sketching. We should not forget that the late May (Hardcastle) Smith had a profound and positive effect on Deirdre, encouraging her to believe that she was capable of "making art". I recall several occasions when Deirdre would collect me in her car and drive over to her little escape batch at Tuteawa where we would both sit down with our sketch pads and practice getting the feel of the land captured in our drawings. It was never easy but Deirdre could dash off a mere few lines that did it.

Deirdre was a regular visitor to my pottery studio. As an over-worked G.P. she would find some relief in these visits as we would discuss art, morality, aesthetic and the like. She took an interest in clay; I recall her watching me make a pot about the early 1970's. Returning from a visit to Dunedin to pay her respects to her dying friend Charles Brasch, she enthused about making a series of clay relief tiles of the 14 Stations of the Cross. The inspiration for this came I think on reflection, from a visit to a church in Dunedin where artist (Joanna Paul?) had completed a Stations of the Cross series. This would have been about the mid 1970's. This was Deirdre's immersion into clay work; her tiles were installed in the nearby St Colemans Catholic Church, here in Coromandel. From then on, Deirdre took up hand-modelled relief tile-making, almost as an obsession, which she pursued with tremendous passion for the rest of her life. It was often done as a means of relief from the human and physical demands of a country GP.

It was now my turn to visit Deirdre to see her clay work and learn something. She already had a knowledge of, and feeling for, medieval "renaissance" and later religious art, enhanced by her earlier travels through Europe and through an extensive collection of her own books. I was immediately impressed by her early compositions, for the "Stations" tiles. By this stage she had learned to hand-form the slabs of clay into the shape desired and to finger-pinch the relief figures and objects of the highly considered compositions. Arthritis had not yet set in, so she could manipulate the stiffish plastic clay without help. It was a very exciting discovery period for Deirdre; She found that she could organise images without the need for finer detail, yet retaining their essence, into balanced compositions. Flat, undetailed surfaces could be made to contrast with more highly worked areas, to give a variety of dramatic messages. Then she found how raised edges contrasted with flat edges could enhance the composition of a tile. It was indeed a very exciting experience for her, attempting to translate what she knew and felt about painted art works into two-and-one half dimensional works in clay.

My own part in all of this was in preparing the clay to her requirements, and then firing the tiles, also to her requirements. There were many occasions when I failed to get it right. As Deirdre advanced with her clay work, naturally she became increasingly specific about the texture of the clay and the fired colour of the final result. It became a challenge.

There are two basic, different types of clay tiles that we use and therefore which Deirdre made, earthenware (terracotta) and stoneware. The latter uses a lighter coloured clay, firing to a higher temperature and able to be glazed. At my suggestion Deirdre made a few stoneware tiles which I glazed and fired, but we felt that the glazing did not necessarily add anything to the composition or character of the work. Perhaps also it lacked the earthy or even bronzy warmth that the terracotta had. So terracotta became the medium in which Deirdre

worked for the rest of her life. It should be mentioned that Deirdre became a convert to Catholicism. As an avid student of the Bible and the Catholic Catachism she was able to draw upon stories, parables and images (and also Shakespearean scenes), which enriched her imagination and therefore her art. Apart from a few tiles "depicting" local identities, her work was bases almost entirely on religious themes. The passion with which she did this is strongly evident in her work, to an extent which only too slowly became recognised.

After Deirdre's retirement as our local GP in _____ she could pour more time and thought into her clay work. But this was increasingly tempered by arthritis in her hands and fingers. Whereas I could supply her with plastic clay of normal consistency in earlier times, I later had to make it increasingly soft for her to manage. Towards the end I was supplying clay in smaller lumps with the softness of half-melted butter, wrapped in plastic. She would then manage to shape it into the tile form she wanted then as it gradually stiffened through natural drying, she could pinch up the lay to form the relief of her composition, with swollen fingers. A friend gave her an easel table with adjustable height and angle, which was a considerable improvement from working on a flat surface.

Towards the end, while on a clay supplying visit, and to collect finished and dried tiles, I would find Deirdre in her cigarette smoke-filled fuggy room, seated in her mobile electric wheelchair, attending to a tile near the window. I became her "Doctor", supplying medicine in the form of soft, carefully prepared plastic terracotta clay.

Finally a note about the firing of Deirdre's tiles. In this she was totally reliant upon our skills. We had many discussions, sometimes verging on argument, as to the preferred colour of the final result that she required. While Deirdre preferred a hard-fired deep bronze-like colour, I felt that a lower temperature red/brown suited the work better. In the end, and rightly so, we fired to the temperature that she wished. At best the woodash fluxing with the raised parts would produce a shiny "topping" as she called it. This always gave Deirdre great pleasure, as it fire-emphasised her compositions.

