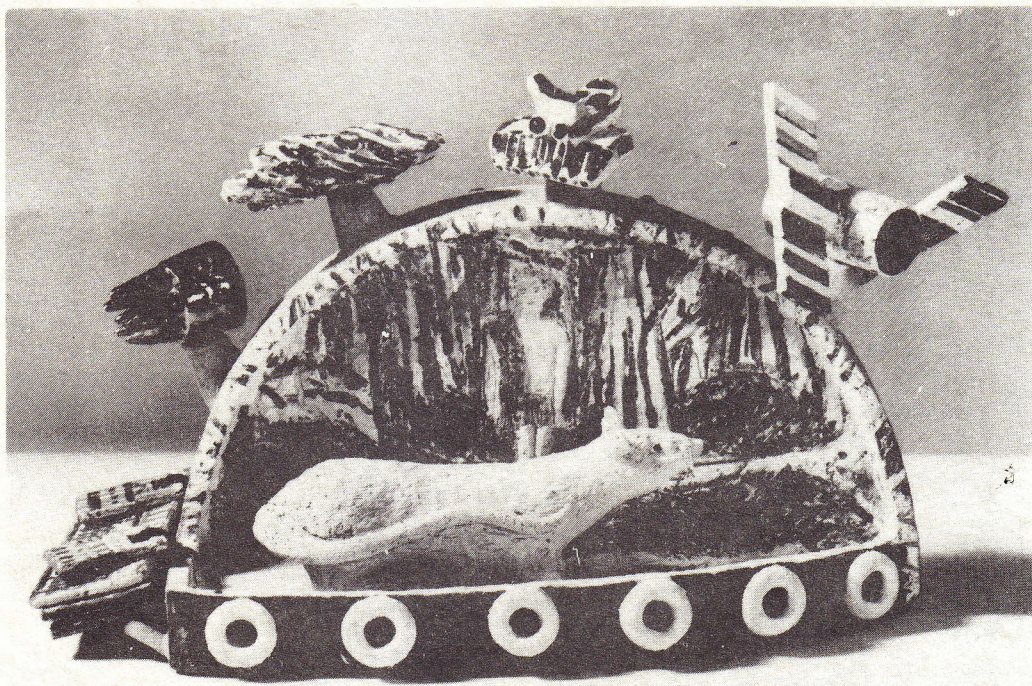


## OBJECT SCENARIOS



**Allegorical Contraction**, 58 x 37 cm, earthenware with vitrified slips and metallic glazes.

The works in this exhibition were produced during a six-month residency at Griffith University, sponsored by the Crafts Board of the Australia Council and conducted between June and December 1985. The residency was designed as an experiment in combining studio practice with community-based work in the arts. The pieces exhibited here were made by Toni Warburton in the Ceramics Studio of the Queensland Film and Drama Centre at Griffith University. The works produced during the community project by Toni and thirteen other participants are being shown concurrently in a complementary exhibition entitled "Brick Works", so called because the sculptures were constructed from brick-making clay, and fired at a Brisbane brickworks.

Toni Warburton was born in Sydney in 1951 and educated at Alexander Mackie C.A.E. and the National Art School. She trained as a high school teacher and taught art in schools for three years. She visited New Guinea in 1973, was apprenticed at a production pottery from 1977 to 1979, and travelled through Europe in 1981. A job as a microbiology laboratory assistant stimulated a pre-existing interest in microscopic shapes and patterns. Most recently she has taught ceramics part-time at the Sydney University Arts Workshops and Nepean C.A.E..

Strong memories from her childhood, and an almost romantic awe of nature are important influences in Toni's work. Family homes by the sea, her grandmother's extensive shell collection, her grandfather's work in watercolours, oils and handmade tortoiseshell jewelry, her maternal grandparents' china painting, and her father's wrought-iron work are all sources of inspiration and imagery.

The desire to create forms which express natural beauty through metaphor has been intensified by a knowledge of the many forces at work to destroy that which is beautiful in nature. Toni sees the role of the artist as an active participant in society, as a responsible citizen who must be accountable through her life and work for the kind of world she lives in. This belief has led to a sociological as well as an aesthetic perspective in her work. Childhood imagination and patterns of free associative thinking are used extensively alongside imagery based on contemporary personal experience, personal perceptions, and wide research. Her working method often involves exhaustive reading on the subject, and working drawings prior to commencement of the maquette for a clay construction. Individual pieces in this exhibition are responses to the work of particular writers such as Jean Baudrillard and Merlot Ponté. Single pieces often contain enormously wide-ranging references such as the allusions in "Les Choses Cachées" to pioneering nineteenth century scientific experiments, paintings by Magritte and Gauguin, a speech by Jo Ballantine of the Nuclear Disarmament Party, and a video clip by contemporary rock group Talking Heads.

Like most Australian artists, Toni has grappled with the conflict between an indigenous sense of place and an education in European cultural history. Her solution has been a careful but relaxed borrowing from whichever forms and traditions are most appropriate to express a mood or idea. On the one hand she has a fascination with the narrative style and atmosphere of Homer's Iliad, with the audacious vaults and complex decoration of Byzantine and Baroque architecture, and with the shapes and surface quality of pre-classical Greek and Etruscan sculpture and ceramics. At the same time she has an admiration for the intrinsic vitality in the ceramic work of Arthur Boyd and Margaret Preston.

For several years Toni has worked almost exclusively with red clays, and in ever-increasing scale. Her experience in throwing and decorating production pots led her to strive for greater scale and to reject white clays in favour of the stronger colour base of darker clay bodies. Six years ago she began creating hand-built and heavily decorated vessels. These pieces increasingly developed a metaphorical and sculptural presence beyond that more generally associated with the pot as vessel. As models she looked at African coil pots made by women, and at the traditional Japanese juxtaposition of textures, of opacity and transparency, of colour shifts and densities, and of clay revealed and clay hidden, which are especially strong in Shino and Oribe ware. As an artist who enjoys painting as well as working with clay, Toni had the time during her residency at Griffith to experiment with vitrified clay slips, using their dense surface quality and bright colours to paint on both wet and dry clay in her sculpted pieces.



# TONI Warburton OBJECT SCENARIOS

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Her interest in the performing arts, mythology and ritual first appeared in her ceramic work when she began to elevate domestic ware, adding feet and pedestals to cups and teapots which contributed a ceremonial tone to the works. Over the past two years quotations from theatrical tradition and the human figure have become increasingly overt in her work. Vessels began to develop arms and legs. Handles became whole human figures. Plants, leaves and branches, often strategically placed on platforms, hinted at the human form. Dancers and acrobats with linked arms began to form arches and prosceniums which soon became theatre sets with costumes and flowing skirts doubling as stage wings and curtains. Toni's interest in the relationship between elemental forms and the human face and figure was also transferred to the stage. Mask-like faces were formed from the features of the human figure, with eyes and noses quoting clasped hands and bent arms. The human head became a metaphor for the stage, with the orchestra pit in place of the mouth.

The shrunken proscenium arch provided Toni with the opportunity to construct figurative scenarios from small elements. This allowed for an enquiry into habitual perceptions of scale in the interpretation of figurative sculpture: Must a small glazed clay figure always become a figurine in the imagination of the viewer? Can the viewer apply the same laws of perspective to a three-dimensional ceramic tableau as those used to see life-sized reality in a small painted canvas? The multiple references in the "object scenarios" of this exhibition constitute a complex layering of interconnected images whose totality conveys a clear message, but whose subtexts may be read in various ways. Toni is interested in telling stories through her work, but rather than using the continuous narrative most appropriate to the curved surface of a pot, she chooses a disjunctive style of relating her messages in a series of fragmentary references or vignettes. The discontinuous narrative style provides the opportunity for a free association of images which highlight the connections between certain events and ideas not normally associated with each other. This method of formal construction is also intended to lead the viewer to look more closely at the work and the ideas incorporated in it.

"Les Bouffants" is an image in miniature of Toni's working method in this series. It combines free associative image making with allusions to a strongly didactic artistic tradition. The piece refers to the twentieth theatrical convention of the Grotesque, in which everyday features are transformed into memorable sights and occurrences through exaggeration of form or behaviour. Images of horror and deformity are set against a background of normality and natural beauty. At the same time the piece conveys a strong interest in the patterned surface, in gesture, in positive and negative shapes, and in the influence of shadow on form.

"Seventies Scenario" is a tableau of reality drawing ironic contrasts between a peaceful suburban swimming pool and radio reports of the effects on Australia of French nuclear testing in the Pacific in the early 1970's. Water is the life force. The aerial perspective in the piece is the view of the creator, or in the case of fighter bombers, the destroyer.

The quadruple scenario in "Les Choses Cachés" may be read from four separate angles, each telling a series of related stories about the "hidden things" of the title. The theme is again French nuclear testing in the Pacific. Here the viewer peers at images of concealment revealed in Madame Curie's purse; in the deliberate subterfuge at Northwest Cape; in the gonad protector worn by a European holiday maker; in the despatch of Polynesian sculptures to French museums; and in human physical features so deformed that they require labelling. The images are blatant and horrifying. The "Aloha Man" emits a mushroom cloud from his mouth in the form of a speech bubble. A reconstruction of Gauguin's painting "The Spirit of the Dead Watches" mirrors an image of malignancy hidden beneath a hospital bedspread. Scenarios of secrecy, mortality and cultural appropriation are played out in front of curtains and backdrops which hint at further subterfuge.

"We Are All Hand Picked" is an expression of the artist's misgivings about the pursuit of knowledge without regard to humane considerations. This issue is exemplified for the artist in the moral assumptions she sees as inherent in both structuralist philosophy and scientific experimentation for military purposes. The gloved hands which appear to be operated by remote control evoke images of manipulation, corruption and contamination.

"Allegorical Contraption" is an image of vulnerability. The Rainbow Warrior is sunk. A man stands tentatively at the edge of the wilderness. Beneath a rainbow of promise, an experimental rat voyages on the ark into unknown frontiers, accompanied by a comet, a space vehicle, and an MX missile. A medieval diagrammatic representation of the cosmos in the form of a hemisphere surrounded by threatening extra-terrestrial creatures, assumes a stark new reality in the late twentieth century.

Toni Warburton's passion for nature, for language and ideas, is manifest in the hand-built or collage methods she has used to conceptualise and construct the pieces in this exhibition. The unique features of a residency situation are also evident in the work. The residency provided Toni with the time and financial security to experiment in her work. It also supplied her with a private studio in natural bushland, the resources of an excellent library and an accessible contemporary art collection at the University, proximity to scientific laboratories, and an atmosphere of debate. The opportunity for experimentation, with its inherent failures as well as successes, provides the artist with a necessary reassurance that progress is being made towards a resolution of the constant dialogue between actual art practice and the philosophy of practice.

Margriet Bonnin  
August 1986

Toni Warburton exhibits with Mori Gallery in Sydney. Toni gratefully acknowledges the assistance during her residency of friends in Brisbane and colleagues at Griffith University.

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