

# **Research residency and public workshops Wheal Martyn Clay Works, St Austell 21-24, 26 June 2021**

**Partners:** Wheal Martyn Clay Works, Whitegold International Ceramic Festival , Spode Museum Trust and IMERYS

**New works:** *Taskscape* performance and film, 2021

**Public Workshops:** Wheal Martyn Clay Works 25, 17 June 2021

## **Introduction**

### **Context**

For over two centuries the histories of North Staffordshire and mid-Cornwall have been intertwined through traditional industry surrounding the material culture of clay and ceramics. Both regional landscapes bear the environmental scars of an extractive economy that has financially sustained local communities for generations. Yet in recent decades they have experienced major economic and social transitions due to global competition and the outsourcing of skilled labour. As a result, there exists a general sense of detachment to the historic fabric of these industries which have shaped communities, heritage and the identity of place. Alchemy and Metamorphosis seeks to explore this 'entanglement' of histories and bring to the fore interconnections embedded within regional livelihoods.

### **Aims and objectives**

The research residency at Wheal Martyn Clay Works engaged new modes of improvisation that reconfigured procedural knowledge embedded in the histories of china clay extraction and ceramic production, that evolved to achieve industrial efficiency and cultural notions of perfection. 4 tonnes of china clay kindly donated by IMERYS was deposited in one of Wheal Martyn's settling tanks. The clay was activated in a range of material states, from dry, wet to plastic. The temporary nature of the works were captured by photographer James Darling to record fleeting moments of interaction using tools such as moulds and historic profiles replicated from the collections of the Spode Museum Trust (an archive testimony to the symbiotic relationships between the histories of Cornish China clay and the manufacture of North Staffordshire bone china), together with implements developed for China clay extraction (e.g. shivers, ladles, and dubbers).

Using the settling tank as an 'open laboratory', with no predetermined output other than to enter dialogue with the clay via a series of an unfolding actions, the research reconfigured the linearity of procedural knowledge into a series of speculative encounters that revealed material properties shaped by a variety of historically informed and improvised actions. The performance aimed to reconnect audiences to the physicality of raw materials, their geological origin and wider cultural context using tools loaded with the histories of extraction and manufacture.

## New works:

*Taskscape* live performance and film, 2021

**NEIL BROWNSWORD**

TASKSCAPE 2021

### WHITEGOLD INTERNATIONAL CERAMICS

*Whitegold are delighted to present Neil Brownsword's inter-connected artworks for St Austell: 'Relic' an installation on the pan kiln at Wheal Martyn, together with a live work 'Taskscape', performed here within the former clay settling tank.*

*The principles of china clay extraction and refining have changed little since William Cookworthy discovered it in 1746. Traditional wet-mining methods harnessed the forces of erosion and gravity of natural watercourses to 'win' the clay from granite dug manually from hillside sites.*

*Today explosives, high pressure water cannon and systems of dry mining have greatly increased access to reserves improving maximum yield. The arduous labour once performed by teams of workers with picks and shovels has been substituted by the likes of dump-trucks, bulldozers, centrifugal gravel pumps, jaw crushers and belt conveyors. These 'performative landscapes' coined as 'taskscape' by the social anthropologist Tim Ingold, remain an active assemblage of human and material actions that intertwine in a constant state of flux.*

*In his performance, Quartz Award winner Neil Brownsword reconnects the relationships between St Austell and the Potteries of North Staffordshire, bound historically by the mining of china clay and its transformation into ceramics. As global economics and new technologies have significantly impacted regional clay extraction and ceramic manufacturing, Neil highlights the human ingenuity embedded within objects and practices that have shaped the identity of industrial regions such as St Austell and Stoke-on-Trent. He draws our attention to the overlooked relationships between human actions and the behaviours of raw materials through his use of replica historic tools from both industries employed to experimentally shape four tonnes of raw china clay.*

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**AUSTELL  
PROJECT**

whitegold  
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**Valentine Clays Ltd**  
Manufactured in the Heart of the Potteries...

  
**WHEAL MARTYN  
CLAY WORKS**







**Alchemy and Metamorphosis: Residency at Wheal Martyn Clay Works**  
*Taskscape, 2021, performance/film stills.*





*Taskscape*, 2021, performance/film stills.

This 5-day 'live research' period involved the use of digitally replicated historic tools from Spode Museum Trust, to intersect 4-tonnes of china clay deposited in WM'S settling tank. Repetitive actions associated with the historic extraction of china clay to achieve industrial efficiency, were re-enacted through new modes of improvisation using replica 'shivers' vernacular to clay refining, and 'ribs and plate profiles' of ceramic manufacture. Entering into dialogue with the clay without a predetermined outcome via a series of unfolding actions, extended material experimentation with scale, ephemeral gesture, materiality, and historic re-enactment. This live research process has expanded the reach of my work with new audiences based in, and visiting the south west. It has also contributed to Saint Austell Bay Economic Forum's national agenda to develop greater links between historic 'clay towns'.

















Taskscape, 2021 performance/film stills













Taskscape, 2021 performance/film stills