

Elemental Forms

When I visited Daegan Wells's Olivia Spencer Bower residency studio last year he had a turned plate by the late Yvonne Rust on his desk. It had been loaned to him by foundation trustee Malcolm Ott and is memorable equally for Daegan's awe at the very presence of the object and for its distinctive markings. The plate is a coarsely speckled stoneware of mushroom grey and warm dark brown, punctuated by one rusty geometric segment, and a few large watery blotches haloed at their edges, as if the pre-firing glaze had been blemished by three colossal raindrops.

Daegan's stepfather took the family to live in Manapouri in 1996 for a position as 'above ground superintendent' on the second hydroelectric project. The initial underground hydroelectric power station on the western arm of the lake was completed in 1972 and utilises the 250 metre drop between the station's location and the Deep Cove branch of Doubtful Sound. A proposed raising of Lake Manapouri to connect it with lake Te Anau to its North and increase the station's head, precipitated the Save Manapouri Campaign. Of the campaign, historian Neville Peats summarises that "At its simplest, the issue was about whether Lake Manapouri should be raised by as much as thirty metres. But there was much more at stake than that. There were strong economic and engineering arguments opposing lake raising, and there were also legal and democratic issues underlying the whole debate. What captured the public's imagination across the country was the prospect that a lake as beautiful as Manapouri could be interfered with, despoiled and debased."¹

Meaning "lake of the sorrowing heart," Manapouri was mistakenly named by an early pakeha surveyor who mistook it for one of the Mavora Lakes – an incongruous foresight to the lake's sorrows of the following century. Waged for thirteen years, the environmental campaign was a success. A 'Save Manapouri Memorial' was erected by Norman Kirk's independent body, the Guardians of Lake Manapouri, who are still presently active in the lake's protection. During construction of the second tunnel that runs parallel to the first, Daegan's stepfather was involved in the maintenance of the Wilmont Pass road and, on completion of the underground construction, remediation of the National Park land to restore excavation damage caused by the project.

Having fallen through a torn seam of clay on Lake Manapouri's Frasers beach as a kid, Daegan knew this source and returned on an excavation trip last year. Frasers Beach Road runs parallel to the lake edge between the shoreline and State Highway 95 and the clay was excavated from the the high tide shoreline, roughly adjacent to the Save Manapouri Memorial. Of mining her own clay, Yvonne Rust writes, "I began potting with clays around me. They were difficult to harvest but cheap to work with and most of them were there for the taking... Every geological area has its

¹ Peat, Neville, *Manapouri saved!*, 1994, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Save_Manapouri_campaign

own problems and should have its own type of pottery... It's our heritage, our raw material. Get to know ourselves.... First find your clay, then seek miners' rights, then buy a section close by to live on and bring other things like glazes and fire to it. It may mean you're living miles from anywhere but life as a potter comes to you."²

Yvonne found her clay and moved to the West Coast, where at Greymouth High she taught art and in the early 1970s my dad was amongst her students. He recalls her leaving misbehaving students taped into cardboard boxes on the classroom floor. Later, he would return to the coast on University holidays and visit Yvonne for meals served on densely gritty plates from which you'd "pick the food out from between stones." Shortly before her death in 2002, we made an impromptu visit to Yvonne's Runanga cottage during a family road trip. She welcomed us with emphatic enthusiasm and thunderous laughter, feeding us shortbread and recounting a captivating misadventure about dyeing her white hair some garish shade of red or orange.

Daegan's vernacular vessels are like rubbings taken from the lake's edge that narrate collective and individual stories; of returning to Manapouri with a spade; of falling through the clay seam on Frasers; of a fishing trip and a buried beer can time-capsule; of the movement that fought to protect the lake's waterline.

Olivia Spencer Bower and Yvonne Rust were close friends for many years. The tussocks in Olivia's garden had been dug up from Arthur's Pass and planted by Yvonne. Olivia made a watercolour sketch of Yvonne working in the studio, the date of it is unknown. On a dusty mauve ground, watery pocks suggest a room strewn with pottery, tools, furniture and cold shadows. A central figure is backlit in sunlight through a door or window, sitting on a stool, crouched over, working. The markings that form this sketch are remarkably similar to those on the turned plate in Daegan's studio – casual and impulsive. As with Daegan's Manapouri pots, the material in all its semantics and intimacies denotes the portrait's form. They are as Rust described her own pots in a member's directory of the New Zealand Society of Potters – 'strong elemental forms.'³

² Sjoquist, Theresa, *Yvonne Rust: Maverick Spirit*, David Ling Publishing, 2011, p83-84

³ *Ibid.* p155