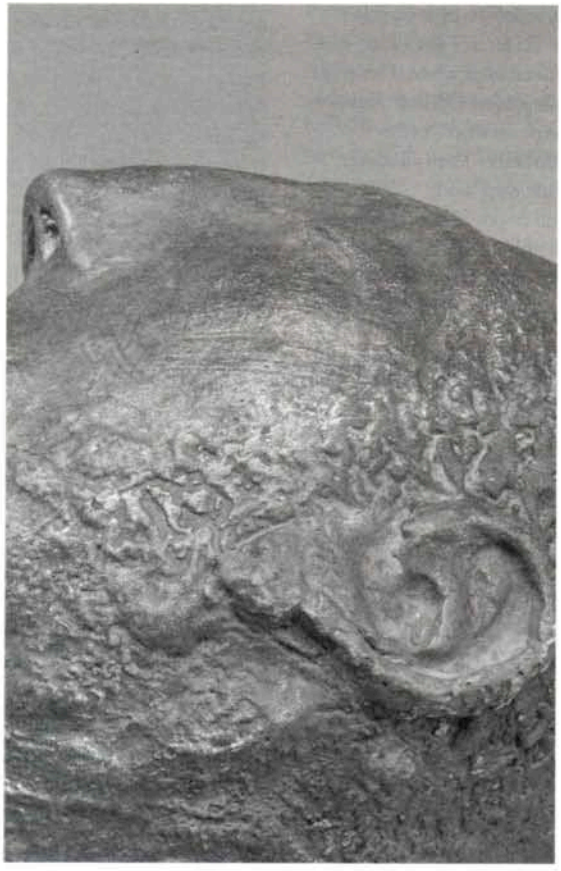
Paper pulp fictions

Mixing clay with paper pulp produces the versatile medium 'paperclay'. Experimental makers are increasingly discovering the virtues of hybrid clay media and producing works with unprecedented narrative and sculptural qualities. Here several of these innovators talk about their experiences with these unconventional clays.

CLAY IS ONE OF THE EARTH'S MOST abundant, useful materials. Unfortunately for some artists and makers, its creative use is only associated with thrown or hand-built pots fired in kilns and surrounded with the attendant technical mumbo-jumbo so beloved by some studio potters. But clay has a varied and distinguished history in the hands of people around the globe: as a material to write on, for modelling and sculpture, for tiling, and for making pots.

Mixing clay with other materials extends and alters its properties and takes its use into different realms: from mixes with straw and other organic material for house building, to china clays coated onto paper to produce high-tech glossy paper used in the magazine print industry. Recently artists and makers have begun to explore the creative possibilities of using clay mixed with different materials, using non-firing clay, and coating it (fired or unfired) with unfired decorative media. Without need for a kiln firing, clay becomes a realistic usable material for the visual artist who has little technical knowledge of firing and kilns, and minimal equipment. The malleability of clay hybrids enables makers to produce three-dimensional canvases for painting, printing or sculpting.

PAUL SCOTT, Ceramics Editor



Rosette Gault, *Life Size* (detail), paperclay.

Beyond sculpture and painting with paperclay ceramics

Rosette Gault

WIDESPREAD USE OF PAPERCLAY HAS extended the scope and freedom of expression of the ceramic artist and sculptor further than ever. Only a few years ago this extraordinary medium was inaccessible, the possibilities mysterious, the practicalities unexplored. Today, the range of paperclay works includes a wide variety of free-standing sculptures, figures, tiles, pots and works for the wall. Its use has been included in installations and performance.

Unlike papier mâché, this type of paperclay can, if required, be fired in kilns with or without glazes. A small percentage of paper pulp, recycled from the office or other places, is added to the clay. The paper and residual inks evaporate in the kiln leaving a familiar and durable ceramic which is virtually indistinguishable from a conventional, ceramic except that the fired paper-ceramic weighs less.

Increased sculptural freedom is the most attractive aspect of the medium. Many conventions and 'rules' of clay sculpture have been overturned. For example, I discovered that I could model multiple layers of paperclay with dry paperclay, using wet paperclay slurry (paperslip) as an adhesive and could fire the entire structure intact. I can carve, sculpt and assemble without having to cover the sculpture with plastic between work sessions. I can break off and re-attach dry or wet sections like a twenty-first century art surgeon. Sometimes I embed or insert fragments of dry, bisque or glazed clay directly into wet paperslip. These insertions can even be slip castings. Moreover, paperclay works very well with plaster moulds, and can be combined with conventional clay.

As the paperclay greenware is very strong, it is much easier to transport to the kiln. Cracks can be repaired at the green (bone dry but unfired) or even bisque (partially fired) stages. This versatile clay is also an excellent choice for use with ceramics and print. In fact, the potential of this medium has only just begun to be explored.

To date, a broad assortment of works have been created in paperclay throughout the world. Imagery ranges from the lifelike human, animal or vegetable to the surreal, imaginative, mythological and expressionistic. Complex assemblages and structures of abstract or figurative subjects are possible, as are drapery, clothing, and textile-like interweaving of forms and shapes. Outrageous forms have been made using string, wire, branches, leaves and other items soaked and dipped in paperslip.

Eggshell-thin, translucent, pillow-like folded forms and ultra-thick but lightweight forms have been made by coils, slabs and moulds. Adventurous potters have further adapted this medium for the wheel.

The time investment needed for intricately carved and glazed detail no longer entails the familiar inherent risks of clay. Seamless integration of flat and sculptural elements is evident on warp-free slabs, some as large 70 x 55cm (28 x 22"). This clay is at times treated more like a very exotic paper or canvas. It is possible to incorporate screened images, text and imprint textures, lush and rich coloured glazes, or collages and mosaics made from a wide assortment of ceramics and glass. Some of the 'clay paintings' contain embedded minia-

ture sculptures. Various concoctions of other additives can result in speckled and pitted surfaces.

Several groups favour paperclay over chicken wire and steel-net structures; fired with the wire. This is paradoxical since paperclay will function as its own armature. Nevertheless the pleasing results speak for themselves, despite visible shrinkage cracks in some, which are technically unnecessary.

For installations, artists report that dry unfired paperclay forms have strong green strength and are easy to recycle at the close of the show.

It is my hope that a wider range of original thought can now be seen in the field of artistic ceramics. There is little excuse now for less than the fullest expression of artistic vision no matter what clays, or combination of clays, are used.

Rosette Gault MFA has written numerous articles published on the subject of paperclay. The author of *Paper Clay for Ceramic Sculptors*, she has over twenty-five years of studio experience. Her work has been exhibited widely and is included in many collections among them the Gimmerhaus Museum in Denmark and the International Museum of Ceramics in Faenza, Italy.

Paper Clay for Ceramic Sculptors is available at the Contemporary Ceramics Gallery in London (tel 0171 437 7605) or by order prepaid US$26, from PO Box 9060, Seattle, WA 98109 USA. A&C Black will be publishing a book by Rosette Gault in the 'Ceramics Handbook' series on Paperclay, due 1996.

Paperclay changed my life

Susan Halls

PAPERCLAY CHANGED MY LIFE! THE transformation happened in Canada during a six month residency at the Banff Center for the Arts.

The clay wouldn't perform. I was draping soft slabs of it over sticks and cylinders, trying to up the scale of my animals – really big stuff. Disastrous! The clay flopped, cracked and split, I was asking too much of it. In the next studio Rosette Gault was working with a seemingly impossible mix of slip and mashed paper. She dared me to try adding paper to my clay. The staff threw in the suggestion of mixing in nylon fibre as well. I was sceptical and resisted their advice for weeks.

I gave in through sheer desperation, and making no calculations at all I overloaded my clay slops with both ingredients. The result was magical. The feel and character of this material was more like wet cardboard or fabric: both chewy and pliable. I set about it: rolling it into big slabs and shaking them in the air, throwing them across the table, draping them over chairs, and giving them a generally hard time. The clay loved it. Equally exciting was the range of textures that appeared, wrinkles; stretch marks and a general hairiness very appropiate to my work. Since then I have used paperclay in everything I make. Even thrown pieces. I find unadulterated 'real' clay just too limiting.

I have had problems setting up the process over here. In Banff I had access to paper pulp donated by a local factory. Over here I had to resort to producing my own. Blotting paper would have been ideal but was far too expensive. Newspapers were inky, and cardboard too difficult to breakdown. In the end, eggboxes proved a good substitute, as did those brightly coloured trays used to package soft fruits, which can be found in the general debris of street markets.

Finding a source of chopped nylon fibre was more difficult. No one had heard of it. So I tried hair, barbershop sweepings. It was free, came in different lengths and colours but it smelled awful when the clay was fired. It did the job well enough but I was never quite comfortable using it. There's something unsettling about working with hair.

Fortunately, it turned out that potter Colin Pearson had persuaded one of the potters' suppliers to start selling the fibre I wanted. It is known over here as polyester fibre, not nylon. Chopped glass fibre should not be used. It is a health hazard and will not burn out anyway.

Through trial and error I've developed a mix based on the addition of twenty per cent paper pulp and eight per cent 'nylon' (dry) by volume to a very sloppy clay body. Sometimes I add a higher proportion. I like to feel the paper, I don't want it too discrete. I've no idea what the upper limit is, though there must be one.

So how does it work? When the clay is rolled or moved in any direction, the fibres align; the combination of fibres create a lattice to reinforce the clay body. This makes the raw clay an exceptionally forgiving material. It will happily be thrown, pressed, coiled, cast and pinched, though its real speciality must be in soft slab work. There is no clay it cannot be combined with. It vastly improves the workability of 'short' clay.

Susan Halls, *Rider V*, 1995, stoneware with paper pulp and nylon fibres, raku, fired with colloidal slips.

Unfired work is very robust: an important factor for me, as I often need to transport large pieces from the studio to use larger kilns far afield. As all the non-clay additives (pulp and fibre) burn out during firing good venting of the kiln-room is important. Glazing and firing can be carried out successfully at all usual temperatures: raku, earthenware, stoneware, salt/soda firings. And because the final weight of any piece is reduced according to the volume of paper and fibre used, the cost of transportation is reduced. Weight reduction is an obvious advantage in murals or wall pieces. I recently made a life-sized pig which I carried quite easily under one arm!

There are a few disadvantages to paperclay: preparation of material takes time and needs to be ongoing if used regularly, and in turning the material on the wheel the fibre tends to drag. The most frequent doubts I've heard are about fired strength. However, I've noticed no difference here, except where the addition of paper and fibre exceeds fifty per cent by volume. Even then, the only fragility is in the bisqued piece and not in subsequent firing. Such a temporary side effect seems slight when compared to the benefits.

Reward Clayglaze have supplied polyester fibre, but with no great publicity. Reward Clayglaze has recently bought Pottterycrafts and a new catalogue and range of products is shortly to be available contact them on: 01782 745000.

The next focus on ceramics will continue to look at work which involves ceramics with other materials (glass, metal, plastic, wood). In Continental Europe specialist publications are dedicated to glass and ceramics together. Are there close links for makers working in glass and metal in the UK? If you are working with ceramics and other materials, and would like to suggest contributions for this supplement, write to Paul Scott, Editor *Artists Newsletter* Ceramics Supplement, 2 Holly Cottages, Blencogo, Wigton CA7 OBZ.

Fracture and fragility

Juliette Thorne

Juliette Thorne, *Breathe*, fired paperclay, 53cm

I FIRST USED CLAY AT SATURDAY Adult education classes, full of anticipation for the new creative field I was entering, but ignorant of the rules and traditions involved. I expected too much and knew too little. My first piece of work, a dish, was made by overlapping thick strips of clay, building up in steps. I bumped straight into one of the basic problems of clay: it will almost always crack apart if used in significantly differing thicknesses in the same object. I then found out that it isn't possible to make any additions or alterations to a piece once it has dried out. It seemed that the more technical knowledge I accrued, the less creative avenues were open to me.

My enthusiasm was not diminished though. Some years later, in the final year of a degree in ceramics, I was creating rugged, open-textured ceramic surfaces and exploring themes of fracture and fragility, areas which still occupy my work today. I added vermiculite, tore fabric into strips and dipped it into liquid clay fabric, I experimented with different glazes and firing techniques. Building a series of torsos I wanted surface cracking in the ceramic body. This meant using a fairly non-plastic clay – by its nature crumbly and fragile – to give the desired effect, but an undesirable side effect was that the clay was also prone to completely breaking apart, an element of chance that was unacceptable.

I read an article on paperclay by Rosette Gault in *Ceramics Monthly*, and so began experimenting with additions of paper to the clay body. I found that the addition of paper pulp clay gave the desired cracking, with the cellulose fibres keeping the clay body bound together.

Working with paperclay eliminates many of the disadvantages of working with pure clay, whilst retaining the softness and malleability. Limitations such as keeping the clay damp, uniform in thickness, and having to work hollow no longer apply. A wide range of clay bodies and papers can be combined, and I have found that recycled paper, especially toilet tissue, breaks down quickly and mixes easily with the clay slip.

Recently, needing to produce soft organic qualities, I used paperclay in a very wet state (the wetter it is the more difficult it is to handle). Rolled out in thick slabs and then built up in layers, I billowed the forms out from behind, creating very open textures and cracking. This gives a sense of volume and containment, and a feeling of softness contrasted with fracture.

Producing paperclay is a relatively long, messy process compared to simply opening a bag of clay, but it's such an interesting, flexible and expressive material that it makes the effort worthwhile.

Rosette Gault's influential article was pulished in the June/July/August 1992 issue of *Ceramics Monthly* (Vol 40, number 6), pages 96-99. She has recently written on the technical processes involved in using the material in *Ceramic Review*, September/ October 1995 pages 10-13.

Helen Talbot, *This Way, That Way*, fired paperclay with printed detail.

Shredding stories

Helen Talbot

I FIRST HEARD OF PAPERCLAY DURING experimental sessions at Lowestoft College. At Lowesoft, and later at Loughborough College of Art and Design, I began to explore the properties of paperclay, and consider its potential for my work. I discovered that thin sheets of paperclay behaved almost like fabric: they could be cut with scissors, torn, layered and wrapped, basically worked in ways most normal clays would not withstand.

At Loughborough I used rag paper-pulp, shredding old cotton sheets by hand and then milling them through the print department's paper-making machine. I found it very labour intensive and time consuming, but those days spent in the print department opened my eyes to the potential of print with paperclay.

When I set up on my own I did some tests. I found newspaper broke down more easily than rags to form pulp. The paperclay was then produced with a glaze mixer.

I've always responded to ceramics with a strong narrative. Incorporating paper adds its own associate qualities. I like the idea that I am shredding the world's news and stories, soaking away the print until an undecipherable inky film sits on top of the pulp. When mixed with the clay slip and dried on plaster bats clay and paper converge in blank sheets, ready to tell a different story.

Surfaces are developed at this stage, I often paint engobes[1] onto the plaster bat and then force the paperclay sheets to pick up the image using a print roller. The surface is further developed by screen or clay-printing. Often the slabs are still quite wet but the paper content means that they are less prone to sticking.

Sheets are now ready to be cut and manipulated into three dimensions, the printed surface often dictating the form. Like a tailor cutting cloth to fit body and shape, I cut and mark the body pattern. Paperclay is very flexible, so sections are propped and draped as if around a mannequin, and left to dry to a leather-hard stage when they are joined together. With the form complete I work further into the surface, building the printed image up, by mark-making directly onto the clay, or through monoprinting. After initial firing I may continue to work onto the fired surface using enamels and small areas of glaze, often firing up to three or four more times until I am satisfied with the work.

London clay and laser copies

Jefford Horrigan

WHILST I WAS GIVING A TALK TO A GROUP of students, one said,"Tell me more about your work." "Well," I answered, "I am not so much interested in nature itself but the way...". She fixed me with a glare and in a cut the crap tone of voice said: "Tell me about your technique, you don't use a kiln and its cheap."

If truth be known, cheapness is one of the main reasons why I began to use clay: discarded dry unfired clay, clay with plaster in it, rain-damaged ball clay, clay found in skips, on wasteland and dug up from building sites around my studio. I like brown London clay complete with its ready-mixed grog. It has more body, is less fine, and what's more, its free!

I first used clay mixed with different pigments, oil and watercolour as a way to make drawings, pressed directly onto the wall.

Clay was also introduced into my performances which centred around simple everyday activities such as dressing, washing, etc. During one performance clothing was covered in clay and ended up pressed onto a wall and left to dry, leaving a mark or residue of the event. Later when I tried to scrape it off the wall I began to appreciate the qualities of clay mixed with fabric.

By using different types of clothes in performance work and sculpture I learnt how clay responded to various fabrics, which fabrics rejected clay altogether (and how to use that) and, most importantly, how they shrank with the clay. Clay mixed with fabric does not crack, it retains all its intrinstic plastic qualities, it can be layered in such a way that, when dry, the structure is flexible and can even bend.

Photogrpahy and the printed image have always played an important part in my work. In a 'when in doubt cover it with clay' mood, I took a sheet of newspaper, covered it with clay but left the photographs of faces. Rolling this into a ball I pressed it onto the wall leaving the face on the top to soak up water and clay from the back.

During a residency at a primary school in East London I made a number of these works directly onto the wall. While they were still wet I asked a passing five-year-old what I should do next. Without saying a word he went outside, returned with a stone and pressed it into the clay and newspaper next to a face. The work held the stone in place, and distorted the photograph, creaing a three dimensional illusion.

Later I took a series of photographs of people from different angles which were then transferred onto paper using a laser copier. I could stretch the x or y coordinates which helped me to aline the different photographs and offered more 'wrapability.' Each figure was made from clay and fabric. While the clay was wet the laser prints were cut out and pressed around the figure. The result was a modelled form with a photographic surface.

I continue to experiment with the different qualities of photographic print, transparencies and negatives with computer and laser copy. These 'wet' and 'dry' printing processes are brought together in an exploration of the physical properties of photographic material, alongside the imaging qualities.

Jefford Horrigan, *Mass* (detail) 1989, laser print, clay and fabric.

As well as the making process and the content, I also attach considerable importance to the placing of my work. Although I exhibit in galleries, most of my work is made in response to other sites and locations. These may include streets, buildings, pubs, rooms and trees and usually involve working closely with the people who are connected to that particular place.

Sometimes permission to use a location is sought and negotiations entered into, at other times a more guerilla action is taken when the work is just put up, unattributed, for people to chance upon.

It is difficult to talk about how works come about divorced from their content, for it is often through trying to solve problems that different processes are found. It is important that a work transcends what it is made of. The danger of focussing on technique alone is the temptation to produce virtuoso pieces in which the employment of a material is the dominant concern.

Clay as sculpted canvas

Pete Mountford

I AM NOT A NATURAL CERAMICIST OR craftsperson. I have more interest in the development of fine art than the traditions of the potter. Yet I have always adored exploiting the simplicity and tactile qualities of clay, and the way it allows me to improvise, whilst covering up my technical imperfections.

I spent time on exchange, and later doing an MA, close to New York City. Like many before me, the images of the world's most graphic and fabled metropolis – and American culture in general – began to surface in my work.

Initially I had worked with large slab-built ceramic forms, and reduction glazes spray-painted after firing, but I switched to earthenware and brightly coloured engobes[1] to try and accommodate the new influences. I was frequently frustrated. I wanted the painters' freedom to add and change colours on a piece instantly. I was not the greatest student of glaze chemistry either, and the kiln's perverse sense of humour – often inflicted on a piece of work – meant that after firing I was frequently repainting parts of pieces with acrylics to get the desired results. One day it occurred to me to use just one

Pete Mountford, *Mapscape of habitation* , 1995, ceramic, photography, drawing other media.

high- biscuit firing to vitrify, then apply colour in acrylics, and glaze by varnish.

The liberation from glazing also meant that I could fuse other media, acetate, Xerox and collage with clay after firing. I admired the work of Raushenberg and Johns who made objects of popular and general culture implicit in their work. I incorporated vehicle reflector lights (fixed with strong epoxy), sculpted topography and maps in the work.

Sometimes clay maps are made using moulds from casts of folded sheets of paper. In a recent series of works I used photographs re-shot from newspapers and magazines. These were projected on to a range of clay maps coated with 'Liquid Light'. This is a light-sensitive photographic gel, which can be coated onto most surfaces, under darkroom conditions, then exposed and developed like any photographic paper. In spite of promising results, the chemical reactions between the clay body and the various photographic chemicals were just too erratic to be trusted. With the banal but realistic issue of a looming exhibition deadline I sidestepped the problem by printing onto thin paper and then sticking it onto the clay.

My work is in a period of transition since returning from the USA to live in Britain earlier this year. I envisage my work acting in the space between two and three dimensions, rather than simply as sculpture. I am concerned with the way we perceive place and values via the news media rather than through direct experience. The maps and topographical features in the works relating to the metropolis help give a sense of landscape and distance, based on this dialogue between the media representation and direct experience.

Whilst attending a college I used conventional clay bodies because of their (relative) cheapness and availability. Having since left – and with the firing process not being integral to my work – I am gravitating towards various non-firing clays and paperclay. The sheer flexibility of clay – and its new offspring – means that it still forms an integral cornerstone of my thinking and work.

'Liquid Light' and 'Silverprint Emulsion' (a similar photographic emulsion) are available from: Silverprint, 12b Valentine Place, London SE1 8QH.

[1]**Engobe**: used to cover clay, produce a buffer or alter surface. Similar to slip, but whilst slips are fluid, engobes can be fluid, jelly or stiff. Unlike a glaze, an engobe does not fuse to a glassy state.