

On Monday morning we had a workshop with the artist [Rodney Harris](#). He first talked us through his practice, both conceptually and practically. He talked of his reasons for working in clay, as an abundant, natural and free resource, especially where he lives in the Severn estuary. It was fascinating to hear of his process, the way in which he uses soft un-fired clay bricks as his medium, builds blanks to work from using clay as mortar, then sculpts in relief before dismantling the bricks once dry, firing them and incorporating them into a building. I was really struck by the way in which Rodney's sculptures served as a way of embedding memory into the fabric of a new building.



Rodney Harris,

Washing Line, 2013

His work challenges our perception of brick as being flat and hard, causing us to pause and consider, thus contributing to the commemorative intentions of the sculpture. It is this intention which interests me most about the work, as it encouraged me to reconsider my own perception of clay, particularly where functionality is concerned.

I was hugely inspired by Rodney's approach to function in his work. He spoke of his work as having a function in society, something which I hadn't fully considered previously, but has stuck in my mind like glue. He had a very strong connection to the nature of place; both in his subject matter: exploring and celebrating the identity of a particular place, and his medium: local clay. The two are so intertwined with his practice, a process which, I feel, lends greater meaning to the work as well as making perfect sense.

Rodney encouraged us to ask questions of ourselves:

What might your role be in society?

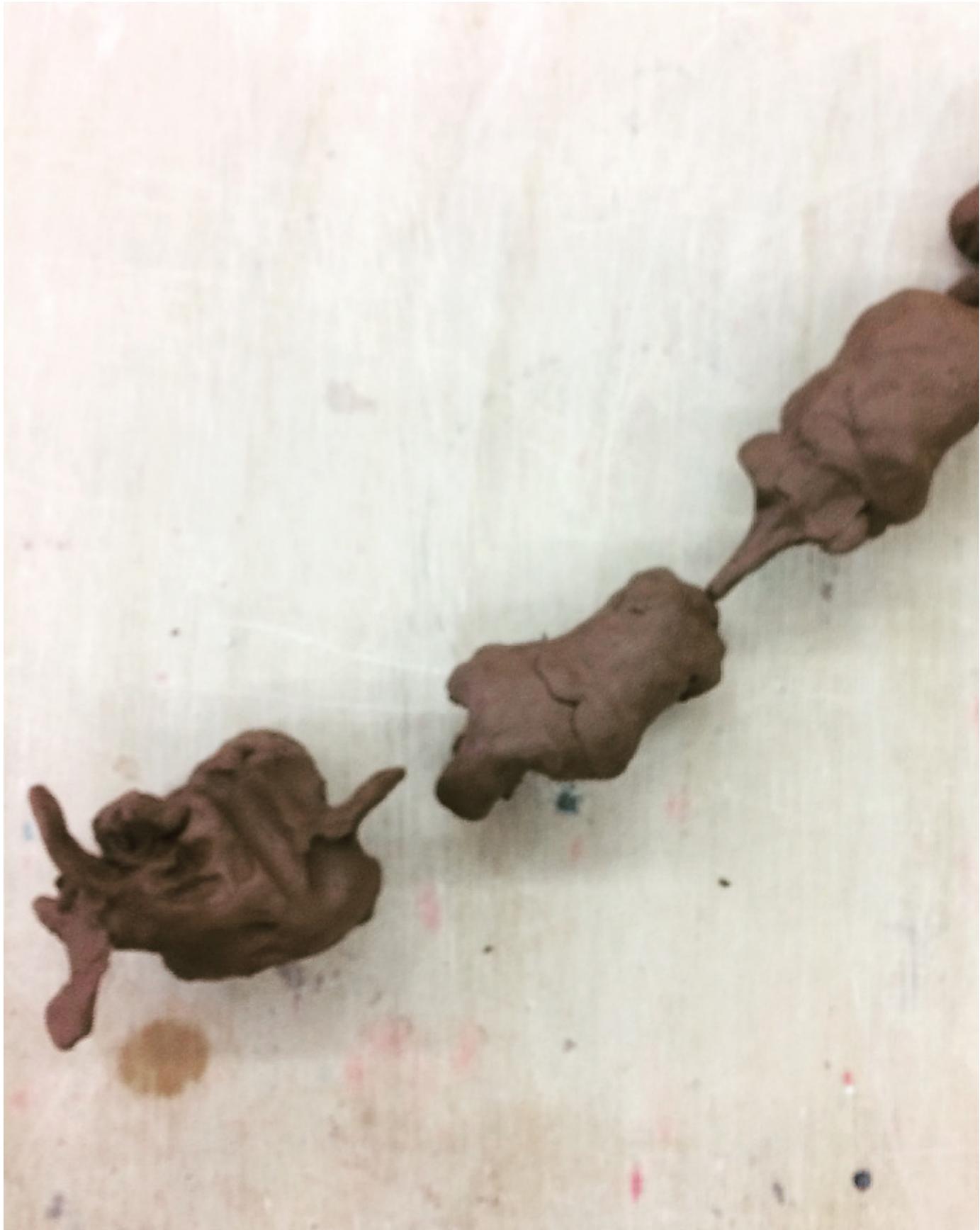
How do you relate to your society?

What can you give through your work?

These are BIG questions, ones which I accept I am unlikely to be able to answer just yet, but I am hoping through my research and practice to begin asking these questions of myself and my work.

He also encouraged us to work collaboratively, to seek help and use other people's expertise and knowledge in order to make amazing things and take bigger risks! This, he argued, is our role as artists.

What followed was a practical workshop, in which we had fun messing around with clay! This was exactly what I needed. It sounds silly, but I think I had forgotten how much fun clay can be. My work in repetition, though great for my throwing skills, had somewhat diminished my love for the material and its potential for creative freedom and expression. Under Rodney's guidance we created and destroyed, approaching the clay with a child-like vitality, focusing not on the outcome but the process, the experience, the feeling. We worked in groups to create the tallest possible sculpture from a bag of clay, we worked together to stretch the clay out into the longest coil possible without it breaking, we created an imagined universe out of clay! It was BRILLIANT. I especially enjoyed an exercise in which we took lumps of clay and formed them behind our backs into elephants.



elephants made behind our backs
Removing sight from the process of making was liberating in a way I never imagined it could be! Somehow, the pressure of producing something which was visually accurate or “good”

was removed, resulting in an easier and more enjoyable experience. Surely this is what making is all about? Enjoyment. Fulfillment. It made me wonder, what could I make if I close my eyes?

Ultimately, the greatest and most inspiring words from Rodney and the words which sum up the morning for me are

JUST MAKE SOMETHING

These words signify a light bulb moment for me – I realized I have been so caught up in thinking and theory and concept, when all I really have to do to get to grips with my process is make!

JUST BEGIN

So I have begun.

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