

*Practicing Ecopsychology in Brunei Darussalam: Creating Clay Vessels in Memory of a Disappearing Landscape*

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**Abstract**

Ceramists are generally thought of as studio artists that craft either functional ware (pottery) or nonfunctional ware (fine art/sculpture). Sometimes, if they are a teaching artist working in an art center or university, they might be obliged to be an expert in both of these artistic categories. Geiger-Ho is a teaching artist (senior lecturer) at the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD), located in the Sultanate of Brunei Darussalam on the island of Borneo. Geiger-Ho produced her latest body of work, "Vessels that Serve the Earth" out of the need to find solace from the onslaught of development and environmental degradation in Brunei. This paper is an account of how Geiger-Ho used the concepts of ecopsychology to activate her art making activities so that she could recover important links between the gathering of clay from a patchwork of small, shrinking wild sites on and around the campus of UBD and her internal desire to create work that would help to heal the damaged landscape. By taking photographs and using materials from the earth that she could fashion into vessels that reflect the spirit and landscape forms found in the degraded ecosystems at her university, Geiger-Ho was able to comfort her own battered psyche while bringing her art students closer to understanding the importance of their own environmental heritage.

Keywords: Ecopsychology, Brunei Darussalam, terra-cotta pottery

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## Introduction

Geiger-Ho's ceramic pieces are entirely formed from ceramic materials found in the now partially excavated hill-site near the back area of the University of Brunei Darussalam (UBD) campus. Geiger-Ho chose this area for gathering clay because the land was being assaulted and turned into a parking lot without any regard for its flora and fauna. Realizing that she could do nothing to stop the construction of the parking lot and the adjacent cement pad that would eventually support a pre-fabricated building, Geiger-Ho decided to take photographs of the remaining unspoiled landscape and create ceramics from clay recovered at the construction site. All of her different clay forms were inspired by the area's geology. Her sculptures and vessels have not been glazed because she wanted to create work that did not rely on purchased ceramic materials or ingredients. Her pieces were electric kiln fired on the UBD campus. Geiger-Ho believes that even if her photographs and ceramic pieces cannot stop the destruction of the last few remaining patches of carved-up land on the UBD campus, that perhaps her works can serve as a kind of memory or archive for these disappearing and unappreciated places.

Geiger-Ho's photographs, like her recent body of ceramic work made from found clay (Figures 1 and 2) were taken of tiny enclaves of green areas that are either being developed or are under threat from human degradation. One of these sites will be discussed in this paper in terms of how this work could help to preserve the essence of other areas and perhaps influence preservation measures for what still remains of these wild and irreplaceable locations on and around the UBD campus.



Figure 1: Martie Geiger-Ho, *Earth Watching Vessel with Iron Clay Skin, Cone 04* electric kiln fired red earthenware clay from UBD campus. 9.5”H x 14.5”W x 4”D



Figure 2: Martie Geiger-Ho, *Thrown Hill-Draped Vessel*, Cone 04 electric kiln fired red earthenware clay from UBD campus, unglazed with colored with oxides. 9.5”H x 7”W x 7”D

Using photography to both document habitat loss as well as to celebrate and capture its profound spiritual eloquence, Geiger-Ho uses her camera to record details of the immediate natural world around her to simultaneously celebrate the richness of Brunei's varied landscapes while at the same time lamenting their loss, (Figures 3 and 4). By using different approaches for photographing the terrain around her, she hopes that she can stir a sense of longing in the viewer for what has been lost through the development of what most people would consider to be insignificant parcels of land that are prime choices for adding to the infrastructure. Geiger-Ho's work should not, however, be considered a compilation of "before and after" images of damaged ecosystems, because she does not deny the fact that in the end, the changes made to the landscape result in buildings and parking lots that are of social value and not necessary unaesthetic. What Geiger-Ho is trying to do through her aesthetically trained eye is to connect her own senses, and later, that of her viewers, to the rhythm of the natural world that is profoundly different to our time driven human environment. Because these different environments affect our human psyche in various ways, it is of the utmost importance that our responses to these differences are noted so that as human beings we can learn how to balance our needs and desire for wilderness with our need for a controlled and almost sterile "civilized" world. This sentiment is best expressed by the contemporary depth psychologist James Hillman (1995) in his opening essay, "A Psyche the Size of the Earth", where he explains that:

Environmental medicine and environmental psychiatry have begun to look at actual places and things, like carpets and drapes, for their effects on human disorders. When some cancers are hypothesized to begin in people suffering recent loss, what loss? Is it only personal? Or does a personal loss open the gates to that less conscious but overwhelming loss—the slow disappearance of the natural world, a loss endemic to our entire civilization? In that case, the idea that depth psychology merges with ecology translates to mean that to understand the ills of the soul today we turn to the ills of the world, its suffering (p. xxi).



Figure 3: Documentation of flora site at UBD before construction. Photo credit: Martie Geiger-Ho.



Figure 4: Parking lot construction after one week, March 2014. Photo credit: Martie Geiger-Ho.

### **Linking Pottery Making and Photography with Ecopsychology**

In his discussion of how to experience a spiritual and deep connection to the natural world that he says the human race was born into, the Jungian analyst, Lionel Corbett (2007) explains that, "Whatever form it takes, spirituality includes the intuition or insight that there is another level of reality beyond our ordinary perception of the world" (p. 215). Corbett also notes that:

We realize that our everyday personality is not the deepest part of ourselves, that there is something More to us. We recognize the spiritual importance of relationships and the profound mystery of the other, which is not separate from us or from That Which Is. We treat animals and the environment with respect because we instinctively recognize that they too are manifestations of the Source. We recognize that our creative work happens *through* us and does not originate within our ego. We notice and value beauty, which expands our sense of self to include more than ourselves. We realize the dangers of sectarianism, competitiveness, and exclusivity (p. 215).

Finally, Corbett reminds his reader that people lose sight of these important insights into living a more natural and spiritual life because the fragility of their selves makes them respond to everyday events in ways that are defensive, self-protective, and self-centered.

The sentiments that Corbett lays out as being essential to living an enlightened and spiritual life correspond with many of the ecological ethics of another closely related philosophically driven concept, ecofeminism. Corbett believes that ecofeminism as a philosophy, provides a framework for practicing values and actions for correcting humankind's androcentrism and the environmental destruction that it causes. Although the focus of this paper is on how Geiger-Ho has used the practice and outlook of

ecopsychology to further bolster the content and rationale behind the production of her latest series of interdependent environmental photographs and ceramics. She has also decided to couple this approach to environmental awareness and mindful solutions by selecting a few ecofeminist concepts to bolster her research. Only those ecofeminist philosophies that are pertinent to her research practices and work production will be discussed here. By selecting a few ecofeminists that resonate well with her own psychological ties to environmental issues, Geiger-Ho has been able to strike a balance between making art that expresses her convictions about ecology while at the same time allowing her room to explore images and forms that can speak to others about the mystery and grandeur of the natural world.

Janis Birkeland (1993) notes that ecofeminism is a holistic value system. In outlining this system she lists nine basic precepts to which she claims most ecofeminists subscribe to. For the purposes of this presentation, Birkeland's second ecofeminist precept will be used as a lens or concept for understanding Geiger-Ho's photographic aims since she arrived in Brunei in June 2012. According to Birkeland, before ecofeminism can take hold, "Everything in nature has intrinsic value. A reverence for, and empathy with, nature and all life (or 'spirituality') is an essential element of the social transformation required" (p. 20). In listing her criteria for a successful ecofeminist policy, Linda Vance (1993), writes that for her a fourth framework element is: "a process that respects difference and encourages discussion, and that embraces a range of praxis. Diversity of experience and expression, like diversity of life forms, is a necessary goal of ecofeminism" (p. 135). Vance also explains that, "To be an ecofeminist means to be constantly aware of relationships—between humans, between humans and nonhumans—and to be keenly attuned to the patterns of domination that may be at play" (p. 134).

### **Vocational Expression Through Elemental Forces**

In his book chapter, titled "Jungian Psychology and the World Unconscious," Stephen Aizenstat (1995) notes:

Underpinning the creative process of human intervention are the archetypal patterns of the natural world. As individuals and as professional people, we are called to rediscover the elemental forces that generate and give form to our vocational expression. Once these connections are rediscovered, each of us will know, in a deep and essential way, what part of the restoration of the natural world we have access to and what part we are responsible for preserving (p. 97).

In keeping with the aforementioned values of both ecofeminism and ecopsychology, Geiger-Ho has consistently photographed the natural phenomenon of UBD and a small hill site of eroded orange, iron-rich, clay soil on its campus. Although, she has photographed other areas of Brunei, her interest in UBD arises from its accessibility and the fact that the area is rich in clay and visual scenery.



Figure 5: Martie Geiger-Ho. *UBD Natural Clay Forms I*. 2014. Digital print. 14"H x 11"W.

Geiger-Ho's ceramic pieces are entirely formed from ceramic materials found in the now partially excavated hill site near the back area of the UBD campus. Geiger-Ho chose this area for gathering clay because the land was being assaulted and turned into a parking lot without any regard for its flora and fauna. Realizing that she could do nothing to stop the construction of the parking lot and the adjacent cement pad that would eventually support a pre-fabricated building, Geiger-Ho decided to take photographs of the remaining unspoiled landscape and create ceramics from clay uncovered at the site, shown in Figure 5. All of her different clay forms were inspired by the area's geology. Her sculptures and vessels have not been glazed because she wanted to create work that did not rely on purchased ceramic materials or ingredients. Her pieces were electric kiln fired on the UBD campus. Geiger-Ho believes that even if her photographs and ceramic pieces cannot stop the destruction of the last few remaining patches of carved-up land on the UBD campus, that perhaps her works can serve as a kind of memory or archive for these disappearing and unappreciated places.

## Conclusion

The ecopsychology movement offers many paths in support of environmental solutions. By carefully choosing and tailoring a personal ecopsychological value system for understanding the social problems that allow cultures to degrade and destroy their environment, photographers and other artists can erect a framework for creating art that echoes positive ecological values. For Geiger-Ho this framework has included shifting her understanding about her inner psychological world to one that embraces and identifies with features of the natural world. By photographing the natural environment in a manner that appeals to the aesthetic sensibilities that most people retain as at least one, if not their last connection to the outside world, Geiger-Ho hopes to participate in an environmental revolution that Lester Brown (1995) describes as a change in values that comes from the growing realization that everyone is dependent upon the [natural] world (p. xvi).

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