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# Helen Pollock

## Ceramic Sculptor

ELIZABETH GRIERSON

Invulnerable and irreducible, the stone became the image and symbol of being

we stream into the unfinished  
the unbegun  
the possible

MIRCEA ELIADE<sup>1</sup>

ADRIENNE RICH<sup>2</sup>

I like using clay, an ancient building material. I am part of a continuum of history.

HELEN POLLOCK<sup>3</sup>

Helen Pollock seeks to engage. But the terms of that engagement are not a ceaseless confirmation of the subject-viewer's position. Aware that cultural practices are specific to their moments, Pollock generates forms which evolve as systems of visual transformation, recognition and regeneration.

A ceramic sculptor, Pollock works in clay. 'A primary material, I like the slow process, taking it out of the earth, altering it, firing it, mirroring my own internalized activity; I have time to think, to turn things over.' Her connections to a New Zealand ceramic tradition have no more impetus than a remembering of Gaia as the one you never bothered to name, or Willendorf's fertile forms, or dancing Minoans of clay, of Inanna, Asherah, Hecate or Ishtar. Pollock seeks a language of re-vision and re-placement.

'Up from the earth under her feet into the pit of her belly, coursing up like benevolent fire through her breast to the crown of her head.'<sup>4</sup> Pollock's large scale *Storehouse* installation, sponsored by an Arts Council

grant in 1992, evokes such continuities with its *Vessel for Entering, Grinding Stones, Receptacles* and 2.6m high slab-formed *Altar* revealing a rounded terracotta Goddess. The scale is somewhat reminiscent of the sacred house of Inanna at Uruk, an enormous mud-brick construction of 30 metres square, or Athena's grandeur, well before the mythologizing of a male God's creation of the perfect garden for man's dwelling and identification. 'The God of Israel shares his power with no female divinity, nor is he the divine Husband or Lover of any,' wrote Elaine H. Pagels<sup>5</sup> — Pollock seeks a female counterpart, a linchpin, not in terms of a physicality of being, but of spiritual position, a place from which to utter the unutterable.

Pollock says, 'Making sacred images as feminine images is political and important and needed because women have been thoroughly disempowered by not having the sacred expressed in female terms. When the sacred is expressed in male terms everything else follows.' Awareness of the privileging of the sovereign subject, the unitary status of the 'one way' within logocentrism, phonocentrism, and phallogocentrism, Pollock's imagery reverses, sometimes routs, the Symbolic order. She intercedes to provide us with alternative pathways to new ontological insight. With their presence, their roundness, their tactile surfaces, Pollock's female references are potent.

With titles such as *Ritual, Reconstructing, Solstice Reflection, Head Hunting, Storehouse* and *Craving Images* Pollock's solo exhibitions, from 1986 to 1994, reveal her political and poetic thrust. Redefinitions of the feminine as a 'potent force' speak not only through overt references such as the fertile body of the Goddess, but in the roundness of a line of terracotta jars, the reaching of columnar heads, curving hands

(above) Helen Pollock firing in Takapuna garden studio 1994  
(Photograph. Sarah Lawn)



and rough surfaced forms like stone from the earth. The sexuality of the unsexed Virgin is restored, her physicality celebrated and revived.

No stranger to loss, like Persephone, Pollock has journeyed through the underworld of grief. Pollock's works visualise a spiritual unfolding, a history of female revelations of the divinity. Is this a 'leading back' in a spiritual sense to what the formalized church has lost? Seeking the divine principle as a sustaining power, Pollock prefers to see it as a breadth, a leading back, forwards, and in all directions, giving an image to depth, 'making the darkness conscious'.

In St Lukes Church Remuera is Pollock's expression of suffering and redemption in female terms from the 1989 exhibition *Spiritual Trends in New Zealand Art*. Her female figure in crucifixion, *Wounded Vessel*, was seen alongside pieces by Ralph Hotere, Emare Karaka and Pauline Thompson. In 1994 her works were again seen in the context of a Christian church; this time St Georges at Takapuna, in the exhibition *Works with a Spiritual Theme*. And again her piece was purchased for the church, *Vessel for Entering*

now standing in the church entrance. 'We crave such images and signs,' says Pollock of the dogma and dearth of such visual expression in the history of organised churches.

Making contact with what is unknown and unseen, Pollock's visual processes in *Craving Images* (1994) enable the viewer to intersect with complex histories of spiritual desire. Her containers of spiritual longing are the visible forms of invisible states . . . channels in a quest for sacred knowing.

But is knowing enough? A fixed destiny implies the existence of an answer. Pollock presents possibilities. Her Greek-inspired columns and Pacific listening faces, her Celtic-like tree forms and hands in supplication are reminiscent of dawning dreams of human life. There is no final solution in this work. They imply different cultural and historical references: Hers is a dialogic encounter where no one single historical precedent holds the absolute answer to the search for spiritual identity or truth. We, the viewers are taken in, around and through, and it would be incongruous to suggest an intention of imposition upon us. Nor does the artist propose the possibility of concealed or concluded sacred truth. She is content to accept such state of unknowing and there lies the focus of her work.

Her *Tree* forms like stratified rock, weathered as it is born. The molten surface has hardened as the clay has worked the artist. A source idea develops over time and the *Tree* becomes stone. In that in-between state of unknowing, whether it be in a studio or garden, in a gallery or church, Pollock's work stands as a focus for others' sense of the sacred. It holds to a concept of openness where 'the horizon will never be circumscribed'.<sup>7</sup>

Outside the privileging of the sovereign subject, Pollock's visual language evolves from the artist's

personal reflections. Eager to language our world in terms other than the historically ordained, this artist dives beneath the surfaces to chart a course through our shaping histories and give them form. She releases her own and others' memories, holding to the unfathomable, the intangible of spiritual existence.

1. Mircea Eliade, *The Forge and The Crucible*, transl. Stephen Corrin, Rider & Co, London 1962, p. 44.
2. Adrienne Rich, 'The Dream of a Common Language,' quoted in 'Homesick for a Woman, for Ourselves: Adrienne Rich' in *Diving Deep and Surfacing, Women Writers on Spiritual Quest* edited by Carol P. Christ, Beacon Press, Boston 1980, p. 87.
3. Statements by Helen Pollock are from conversations with Elizabeth Grierson, Takapuna January 1995.
4. Keri Hulme, *The Bone People*, Spiral, Wellington 1983, p. 448.
5. Elaine H. Pagels, 'What Became of God the Mother? Conflicting Images of God in Early Christianity' in *Womanspirit Rising, A Feminist reader in Religion*, Carol P. Christ & Judith Plaskow (editors), Harper & Row, San Francisco 1979, p. 107.
6. C.G. Jung: 'One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but making the darkness conscious', quoted in *Meeting the Shadow*, Jeremiah Abrams & Connie Zweig (editors), G.P. Putnam's Sons, New York 1991, Endpaper.
7. Luce Irigaray, 'When Our Lips Speak Together in Signs', transl. Carolyn Burke, in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol 6, 1980, pp. 69-79.



(opposite above)  
HELEN POLLOCK *Stone* from *Craving Images* (1994)  
Terracotta, c. 2 m high  
(Photograph: Sarah Lawn)  
(Collection of XPO Exhibitions, Auckland)

(opposite below)  
HELEN POLLOCK *Ark* from *Craving Images* (1994)  
Terracotta, 800 mm high  
(Photograph: Howard Williams)  
(Private collection, Auckland)

(left) HELEN POLLOCK *Tree* from *Craving Images* (1994)  
Coloured composite clay, c. 750 mm high  
(Photograph: Howard Williams)