Damp clay was broken up, dried out and slaked, exhausting my work ethic and labour commitment to recycling. Iron-bearing clay was mixed with white earthenware or white stoneware? I hide and stockpile clay for recycling with the strategy of ‘out of site, out of mind’. The construction and removal of armatures for large-scale sculpture has bothered me for years. It is the time-consuming and not particularly creative process of rebuilding and repairing the work, once the armature has been removed, that I find so irksome. Then there are the methodical building processes like coiling or slab-building, processes that require meticulous attention to the maintenance of consistent thickness, joining, drying and firing.

This mass of dos, don’ts, whatnots and maybes, can make it a long journey before you get to the good stuff – spontaneity and creativity. I wanted to easily recycle clay, to sculpt without the constraints of armatures, body thickness or any concern for bad joining, the introduction of air pockets, slow drying or slow firing cycles.

The term ‘barbecue clay’ came from desire and necessity. How do I take advantage of my stashes of clay waiting to be recycled? There were no more guilt-free hiding places left. How could I use all the waste clay (contaminated with plaster) from mould making?

My line of research started with this common problem – recycling. After using my extensive supply, I collected waste clay from educational institutes and many potters generously donated their ‘shame collections’ of mixed un-recycled clays.

Barbecued Clay. Yum!

Jenny Valmadre cuts corners with recycled clay

There are a few things about working with clay that many, if not all, potters loathe. The recycling of clay with the slaking, kneading and wedging requires a much stronger work ethic than I have. Then there’s the separating of different bodies into different bins. I often end up with that mystery bucket of sludge – is it white earthenware or white stoneware? I hide and stockpile clay for recycling with the strategy of ‘out of site, out of mind’. The construction and removal of armatures for large-scale sculpture has bothered me for years. It is the time-consuming and not particularly creative process of rebuilding and repairing the work, once the armature has been removed, that I find so irksome. Then there are the methodical building processes like coiling or slab-building, processes that require meticulous attention to the maintenance of consistent thickness, joining, drying and firing.

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fast firing. However, this mix still left me with the armature and body strength problems unresolved.

The solution here was comparatively straightforward – change bagasse and chaff for a long fibre material. I tested a number of organic materials and settled on hay because of its affordability and robust fibre. Hay has varying fibre lengths that are interwoven creating a kind of mesh, which imparts brilliant dry strength to the clay. Hay, with its lengthy fibres, and my long-suffering and very tolerant partner’s barbecue solved the armature problem. The long fibres made little tunnels through the body. This honeycombing made clay thickness relative to the space between the tunnels; consequently solid could also be thin and the interweaving quality of hay gave plenty of avenues for the free, efficient movement of steam. The barbecue gave me an easy and foolproof force drying system. I started by using my kiln but found that it was too easy to heat the work to the point of organic burnout. Using the barbecue meant I could never over-heat the body so it didn’t matter how long the pieces sat before I removed them; indeed they were often forgotten and spent the night slowly roasting.

The construction was a simple process of building, drying for stiffness and adding more layers and stiffening until the final size was achieved.

Wet to dry fit was not a problem as the shrinkage rate was reduced by the addition of hay, which acts in the same way as paper does in paper clay.

Wet and dry strength were amazing due to the varied lengths of the hay. Many of the test pieces hit the concrete floor of my shed when dry, only requiring minimal or no patching.

I found that mixing the hay and clay was best done as it was required, i.e. a handful of clay squeezed and massaged into a handful of hay. Although it was easier to premix the hay and clay by stamping the mix together (a great exfoliation for the feet), there was a mould problem. Clay that was not used within a matter of days grew an abundance of mould spore that I would ill advise inhaling.

All the testing and tribulation came to fruition in Sweet Tooth, a ceramic installation consisting of fourteen 2 – 2.5 metre poles constructed entirely from recycled and waste clay. No kneading or wedging was done. No armature or meticulous construction was used. All were barbecue-dried and fired fast without a single loss.

All this avoidance and simplifying of process is great; however, I must emphasise I have a sound understanding of ceramic processes and materials, knowledge which could not have been bastardised if I had first not acquired it.

To view the complete Sweet Tooth exhibition go to www.jennyvalmadre.com.au