Invasive Species
Altair Roelants reports on the Clay-Slip Wallpapers of Charlie Schneider

American installation artist Charlie Schneider’s recent projects in New South Wales, draw attention to man’s ‘patterning’ of the world by transforming overlooked and forgotten structures through striking, large scale clay slip stencilled ‘wallpapers’ that illuminate invasive species, both animal and plant, in Australia. The artist’s vast ephemeral murals depict common pests such as rabbits and cane toads through a variety of bold motifs cast in hues of scorched red, green, warm greys and off-whites. Schneider’s practice functions on multiple levels, representing both the challenges invasive species pose, as a metaphor for man’s widespread impact on the world’s environment, and our desire to exert geographic and spatial control over nature and landscape rather than finding a balance and sense of belonging within them. Schneider’s projects in Australia resonate in a country that often aligns its national identity and, in turn, visual culture, with the scale and severity of its landscape and history of colonisation.

Heralding from Davis, a small town in the Californian Central Valley, Schneider’s invasive species series has developed from the artist’s broader interest in man’s relationship and integration into landscape and place. While working in ceramics in the United States, Schneider initiated his clay slip wallpaper project in April 2009, during a period in which he had began to think about the conceptual gravity of street art, an area that the artist has strong but mixed feelings about. Schneider felt impassive about the territorial bravado contemporary street art is often fuelled by; rather he wanted to extract the historic and symbolic potential the medium offers to make bold, site-specific visual statements about belonging and place. By incorporating ceramic materials and tools as a base for this process, Schneider was able to harness this urban aesthetic but with a natural and ephemeral twist, creating large-scale anonymous works without leaving any permanent damage on the structure or environment in which he worked. Subsequently, Schneider’s clay slip mixture has become a fundamental conceptual element of his work. Because the artist never fixes the clay slip with a binder, the works undergo natural processes of decay, in sync with the surroundings they are responding to. Thus, the wallpaper eventually reintegrates into the place of making and its natural decomposition is an essential component of the work. This cyclic process reflects one of the artist’s key concerns: that we need to find a synthesis and sense of belonging with landscape and nature. The choice of site is key, as Schneider often chooses to work on structures that represent environmental or geographic restraint and moderation – as he explains, “dams altering flow patterns, culverts showing where a road has gone over a stream, bridges spanning undulations in the landscape for more regular movement”. The absurdity of a wallpaper motif in a rural setting, or on the exterior of a building (traditionally associated with the domestic or interior space), communicates this observation visually with great effect, as the natural is superimposed over the man-made, a reversal of history and fortune. The process of research, documentation and logistics that precedes the finished wallpaper is a long and involved one, and just like the wallpaper’s final decay, is an important part of the overall work.
Charlie Schneider, *Cane Toad Rabbits on Glass (Bufo Marinus and Oryctolagus cuniclus)*, 2010, clay slip on glass, h.5m, w.2m, Faculty of Build Environment, UNSW, S -33.917901 E 151.229451
Photo: artist
In February 2010, Schneider relocated his clay slip project to Sydney in order to complete a Graduate Certificate in Sculpture, Performance and Installation at the University of NSW, College of Fine Arts. On previous visits to Australia, the artist had been fascinated by the landscape, the people and Aboriginal culture’s relationship to place. While based in Sydney, the artist applied his unique ceramic-based wallpapers to un-noticed or ignored structures and, not surprisingly, he has received a great deal of institutional and peer encouragement. Fittingly, the first of his Sydney based installations was *Cane Toad Rabbit*, an evolving wallpaper that slowly spread across a brick wall in the artist’s backyard in Chippendale. Schneider further developed this motif in June, when he was invited to create a wallpaper on one of the external glass walls of the University of NSW, Faculty Building of Environment. The resulting work, *Cane Toad Rabbits on Glass (Bufo Marinus and Oryctolagus cuniclus)* is a vertical, floor to ceiling clay slip mural measuring 5 m x 2 m with an army of leaping and squatting terracotta and white rabbits and cane toads who peer out onto the pathway that surrounds one of the faculty’s grassed communal areas. As with all his works, the composition of the rabbits and toads is carefully thought out to mimic antique wallpaper. Their silhouettes are assembled in a grid of circles, the rabbit’s legs taking on the opulent swirls found on flocked wallpaper. As well as being two of the most widespread and destructive pests in Australia, Schneider liked the fact that “they both hop”,

Below and opposite page: Charlie Schneider, *Cane Toad Rabbit Wallpaper (Bufo marinus and Oryctolagus cuniclus)*, 2010, clay slip on brick, h.270cm, w.355cm, S -33.88571 E 151.195837; photos: artist
hinting towards an animated wallpaper. Similarly, by working on glass, the viewer experiences the pedestrians’ silhouettes as they pass behind the piece and the light reveals the natural texture of the clay slip, this further animates the work and highlights the interrelated themes of nature and man.

In contrast, Schneider’s commission *Vessels of Smoke and Flowers*, completed in June for the Hunter Institute TAFE in Newcastle, inscribed the exterior brick wall of the institute’s gallery entrance with a fleet of stencilled grey coal ships. Unlike the majority of his other works that take their inspiration from organic forms, Schneider designed this motif to reflect Newcastle’s relationship to coal, it being one of the major exporters to the Asian market. The coal ship
reminds us that many of the invasive species in Australia, and much of the world, were introduced to foreign shores through shipping routes. Interestingly, the piece also functions as a ‘Rubins Vase’, a cognitive optical illusion created through a single image that presents the viewer with two conflicting visual readings. As the title alludes, Schneider’s design can be read as either a ship with a thick plume of smoke, or a vase heavy with flowers. The double-reading of Vessels of Smoke and Flowers, is a play on the artist’s theme of interrelation, in this case the necessity of coal to the economic livelihood of Newcastle and the surrounding region and, in turn, its devastating effects on the environment. Schneider hopes that students and visitors read the inscription on the exterior of the gallery as a positive metaphor: that once the wallpaper has washed away, art remains; similarly, when the coal ships leave Newcastle’s harbor their economic legacy should be reinvested back into the community.

One of Schneider’s most ambitious Australian works, that saw the artist return to the landscape he is familiar with, was Dam Wallpaper #2 (Datura Inoxia). This piece was completed in May 2010 during his COFA Residency at Fowlers Gap Arid Zone Research Station, an internationally renowned research centre located in a remote rural area in Western NSW, about a twenty-hour drive from Sydney. The work at Fowlers Gap is a follow-on to the impressive work Dam Wallpaper, Yellow Starthistle (Centaurea solstitialis) that Schneider and nine cohorts completed over the course of a few weeks in Yolo County, California in October 2009. For Dam Wallpaper #2 (Datura Inoxia) at Fowlers Gap, Schneider and a friend spent three and half days covering a battered 40m long concrete dam wall of varying heights ranging between 1.5 m and 3 m, with a vast burnt red and white clay slip stencilled mural detailing the infamous and often deadly plant Datura Inoxia. Schneider chose this particular species because it is invasive in the region and because the plant teeters between being a toxic hallucinogenic and deadly. As the artist describes, “I liked that symbolically it represented how a little alteration of the environment can be a profound windfall for humans, but a large amount can be fatal.” The subtle stencilled design that covers the length of the dam cuts an arresting, almost hypnotic divide, between the arid landscape on one side and the reflective deep waters of the Fowler’s Gap Reservoir that the dam contains.
Above: Hunter Institute, Newcastle TAFE
Below: Charlie Schneider, *Vessels of Smoke and Flowers*, 2010, clay slip on brick and timber, h.4m, w.11m, Hunter Institute, Newcastle TAFE, S -32.927174 E 151.766855; photos: Nicky Whelan
The floral wallpaper juxtaposed between these two starkly different terrains draws our attention to the dam’s function and materiality and, quite dramatically, its forced and constrictive relationship to the surrounding environment.

Charlie Schneider’s on-going clay slip projects bring into focus the interrelated patterns expressive of our own actions that we now seek to regulate. Schneider hopes that his work will bring an awareness and sensitivity towards man’s relationship to nature and the careful balancing act that these two powerful, conflicting forces oscillate between, encouraging us to consider where we are now as a society and where we hope we are heading, and, ultimately, to be more inquisitive about our own relationship to landscape and place.

Charlie Schneider is currently undertaking a Master of Fine Arts in Ceramics at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. The artist recently returned to Australia to create work for Sculpture by the Sea 2010.

www.sculpturebythesea.com

1, 2 and 3, Quotes from an interview with Charlie Schneider, September 2010