



**MAP  
FOR  
WILD  
CLAY**

Before beginning my residency at Franconia Sculpture Park for the Spring 2021 session, I had a zoom meeting with Ellie, the Residency Director, and Don, the Production Manager, to discuss my project proposal which involved ceramics and clay firing. I was told by Don that there were a lot of natural clay deposits underneath the Sculpture Parks grounds. He suggested I consider using this for my project.

A week into the Residency program, I accidentally found wild clay at the Park during one of our field-work shifts. It was the day Lexis, one of other Emerging Artists-in-Residence and I, were assigned to assist Asako Nakauchi re-install the fabric flags on her sculpture *Navigation*. A boom-lift was ordered by Matt, the Site Manager, to help Asako reach the top of her sculpture. As Matt drove the boom-lift towards Asako's sculpture, the wheels dug into the muddy ground since it had been raining earlier that week. At one point, it even got stuck in the mud. After we lifted the truck out, I noticed the cracked texture of the mud and realized it was clay.

I remember seeing the impression that the wheel marks made from spinning against the wet mud. It was like dry chocolate cake batter. It was stiff and soft. When I poked into it, my finger came out clean without any dirt stuck to it. I work with clay all the time in my art practice as a sculptor and mold-maker, and there was no doubt that this was certainly clay. Lexis showed me a technique for checking the clay's elasticity. She took a bit of it and rolled a small sausage on her wrist, then folded it onto itself. It broke a bit at the fold, but the rest of it still held together. I was also able to tell just from grabbing a handful of it that it was clay. It had a similar texture as any store-bought clay. The difference with this was that it was gritty and rough, in addition to all the bits of grass, roots, and pebbles that were in it.

Shortly after I had my meeting with Ellie and Don, I watched a few YouTube videos on how to process wild clay. I reviewed them after

finding the wild clay. The best method I found that worked best for my situation was the wet process, which involved mixing the clay with water to make mud water, straining the mud water to remove the plant and pebble bits in it, and then pouring it into another bucket so that the clay can settle to the bottom and separate from the water.

The first thing I did was grab a wheelbarrow from the Red Barn where all the equipment for lawn maintenance was stored. I then went to the site next to Asako's installation and fill the wheelbarrow with the wild clay. I set up a station at the side the Red Barn, next to the tractor, to mix the clay with water and pour into buckets. I had about five to six five-gallon buckets ready for mixing in. Three buckets would have clay mixed with water, and two would be used for pouring the mud water into. For the two buckets, I made strainers by cutting off the top rim of other five-gallon buckets and stapled screen-door netting over them. With these, I would easily lay them on top of the two buckets and pour the mud water through them. After it had been poured through and the pebbles and plants were left sitting on the bed of netting, I simply removed the netted strainer and tossed out all the debris. The process of mixing, pouring, and straining continued until there was no more clay in the wheelbarrow.

It would take about a whole day for the clay and water to separate. With the clear water sitting at the top, and the clay settled at the bottom, I would gently tip the bucket over to slowly pour out the water until the water was no longer clear. The clay at the bottom of the bucket was still very watery. As I ran my hand through this watery clay (clay slip) I found the very bottom of the bucket to be much grittier and sandier than the top part which was much smoother and finer. I then mixed it all together and dumped the clay slip into an empty pillowcase. I then dumped the watery clay into an empty pillowcase.

The next step after straining would be to remove more water. Since this clay slip was about fifty percent water and fifty percent clay, I needed to extract more of the water by straining it one last time through the finer pores of the pillowcase fabric. With the clay slip in the pillowcase, I tied a long piece of cotton twine around the opened end to close the pillowcase and used the other end of the twine to hang onto the branch of one of the trees that stood behind the Residency House. I also placed an empty garbage bin underneath the hanging pillowcase in case it fell.

More water would drip through the bottom of the pillowcase for the next few days. I would check whenever I could to see if any more water was coming out. By the second day, I noticed the top part where it was tied was dry, but the bottom part of the pillowcase was still wet and bloated. On the third day, I got impatient that I untied it from the tree and laid the pillowcase of clay slip flat onto one of the wooden workbench tables at the Pad to let it dry in the sun. My theory was that the wooden table, which was dry from the sunny weather that day, would absorb the rest of the moisture from the pillowcase. Luckily, this worked, and I opened the pillowcase a day later to find perfectly clean clay. It was coloured brown with a very slightly red tint to it. Its surface was soft to the touch, but as I would squeeze it in my hand, I would feel the coarseness of the sand particles in it.

My journey of processing wild clay ended with wedging. I took a folding table from the Residency House and stapled canvas cloth over it to use as a wedging table. Lexis showed me a pressing down and pushing up technique similar to kneading bread dough, except it required two hands and more force. The point of wedging is to ply out all the air bubbles that could be in the clay. Stopping was intuitive and so once I felt all the bubbles were gone, I gathered the clay into a bundle and patted its sides with the palm of my hand to make a cube and placed in a closed bin to let ferment.