

“HEAVY LUGGAGE”

Debbie Fleming

In order to fight back we must connect, we must communicate, we need to learn solidarity, we must translate in more ways than just verbal translation, we must attempt a translation of the streets, a deep translation. Collectively we must move on to somewhere new.

Philip Rizk¹

I have been inspired by one of the most important political and social dilemmas of our time, climate change – its impact on our cultural identity and the role of art activists to open dialogue in as many languages as is possible.

I am not alone in experiencing uncertainties concerning the ability of a global population to address and find solutions to the complex challenges we all face regarding anthropogenic climate change. The incalculable threat it constructs to vulnerable communities and countries alike is beyond most of our imaginations.

Doubting that humans will reverse the escalating temperatures and associated weather patterns we are experiencing appears counterproductive. Collectively altering the behaviours that we know have contributed to the crisis – unfortunately too numerous to cover in this essay, but well documented – has been the subject of much theorising and debate.

My goal in creating “Heavy Luggage” has been to question and open discussion within the language of art, creating a metaphorical narrative navigating our preparedness for an altered environment of the proportions talked about in the media and forecast by science. I discuss the impact of the climate crisis on cultural identity and provide relatable analogies questioning how resourceful we can be in addressing collective trauma. For many, the response to the crisis of climate change has been that it is too big, too depressing and too hard to solve.

To simplify the conundrum, I have been encouraged to find solutions at a local level, sourcing local experiences and finding within local communities a resilience and a willingness to adopt altered perspectives. There is a grief and resistance associated with this which I have explored in ‘luggage’ such as *Waiting Room* and *Stateless*, created to address and develop empathy for the emotions and attitudes of stakeholders in the crisis, boosting vulnerable communities.



Figure 1. Debbie Fleming, “Heavy Luggage” (installation).
Photograph: Robitti Stanley.

Ai Weiwei speaks of the resilience and vulnerability of the human condition, and the role of art in providing a voice for the voiceless: "If anything, art is about aesthetics, about morals, about our belief in humanity. Without that, there simply is no art!"²

"Heavy Luggage" is an installation of 29 individual pieces of ceramic luggage, created using an array of glazes and finishes, fashioned to reflect the fragility of vulnerable communities, challenging the way we think about our world. The installation navigates political and social narratives surrounding climate change, culture, social cohesion and order, essential for connectedness and resilience; examples are *Away* (Figure 5) and *The Way Back* (Figure 8). Collective trauma is part of our landscape. Uncertainty and loss carry a realisation that we are on the threshold of considerable change, the two inextricably linked.

Unpacking the materiality of this body of work reveals a combined narrative of connection, aesthetics, history and politics, social responsibility and neglect. Each individual piece reaches out to connect, subliminally presenting its own conversation, united through pattern-making and process.

Like each piece of luggage, *See Me Through Rose-coloured Glasses* reveals a sense of time and place, a nostalgia for a period in history that can never be returned to. The fragility of the possessor, expressed through the medium of ceramic, divulges delicate links with family, occasions and connection, while appearing strong or invincible. The faded bloom resting on this bag is a symbol of mourning. The image tucked into the pocket is of a beloved, honouring the significance of relationships past and present. The satin finish of the glaze, diffusing light, improves readability and is honest, denoting a time of durability. Vinyl and non-recyclable, the piece lays claim to a dubious yet specific place in time. This simple carry bag is a metaphor for, and reminder of, valued memories carried forward. The loose, well-used handles, relaxed and touching, providing evidence of connections and experiences shared. The tarnished buckles reveal a path well-worn and the strong zip holds tight contents held dear and private.

Undertaken for my Masters degree in visual arts (MVA) at Otago Polytechnic, my journey over the last year with "Heavy Luggage" has focused on researching climate change, cultural identity and art activism. The current political and social climate has prompted not only changes to our cultural identity as the result of changing weather and rising sea levels, but also the altered perspectives and opinions of populations forced to navigate an uncertain future, forced to question what is real and what is fake, what is truth and what is opinion. The satchel bag, *Speaker of the House*, was designed to metaphorically canvass these issues.

This project was born following an investigation into my own family history, titled "Out of the Fire and into the Sea." This research project for my postgraduate certificate described the journey of my great-great-grandfather from Poland to Hokitika, Westland, around 1850, as a refugee escaping war, starvation and disease – he was part of what is referred to as the Great Polish Migration. The bag *Collaborating with Uncertainty* reflects the resilience he demonstrated and passed onto his children. Gottlieb felt it necessary to camouflage his identity, remaining incognito until his death in order to feel safe in his newfound country. Historical trauma stayed with him throughout his life.



Figure 2. Debbie Fleming,
See Me Through Rose-coloured Glasses.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

Is this my bag?

*Carrier of hope, communions of earth
and life, past and future.*

A swaddled embrace embodies my being.

Strong thread stitches my body.

Soft handles grip tightly.



Figure 3. Debbie Fleming, *Collaborating with Uncertainty*,
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

My concerns about the impacts of climate change intensified following my move from the North Island to Westland in 2018. Very little was being said about climate change at that time, especially in the Bay of Plenty where I had lived for 25 years. Communities continued with business as usual until they were told otherwise by local and central government. It was not until I investigated climate change and the impact it was having on the cultural identities of communities locally and nationally within New Zealand, that I began to realise the complexity of the situation.

At the beginning of 2019, local government, councils and NGOs were becoming more aware of the issues, but lacked direction. Unwilling to invest time and money without a mandate from central government (not forthcoming at the level required to provide clear guidance), the inaction of these groups inculcated a sense of denial and scepticism in communities, one way or another. By 2019 the New Zealand government had completed a stocktake report revealing the levels of preparedness (or un-preparedness) for climate change by all sectors within the country. After reading it, I realised that the only organisation prepared for the coming crisis was the insurance industry.

From the many conversations I had started and the questions I had asked, it became obvious to me that the subject of climate change was too hard for most people to contemplate. I questioned people at random, enquiring if they had gone online to investigate water levels in their immediate environment at predicted temperatures. This resource was universally promoted and well documented. The response was always a resounding NO!! Most considered the topic "too depressing" and asked me to "change the subject." Subdivisions and new homes continue to be developed on vulnerable beachfront dunes. I questioned values such as open-mindedness, authenticity and personal responsibility, appearing



Figure 4. Debbie Fleming, *Ink*,
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

to challenge the right to such basic values as joy and happiness. The dilemma was profound. I became increasingly curious about the reasoning behind the evident cloak of scepticism and denial enveloping people of all ages.

The mental shift required to view the world as a different place from the one people know was as profound as the dilemma in my attempts to open conversation about climate change. There was also the problem faced by residents of coastal communities in the Bay of Plenty, an area marked by soaring property values, who appeared unable to contemplate the negative effects of rising sea levels on their futures. The levels of investment required, not only in their homes, but for their retirement were high. They were typical of the residents of most coastal communities around New Zealand.

Following my arrival in Westland, serious complications and vulnerabilities faced by small communities, such as those scattered along the district's extensive coastline, became apparent. Regional and district councils faced problems of inadequate funding due to a shrinking population, as well as struggling to repair infrastructure destroyed by storms of increasing intensity and frequency. Old landfills had become exposed, flooding rivers that swept away large areas of land.³ The ecological disaster which occurred in Haast in April 2019 when the Waiho River bridge was washed away was unprecedented; the inaccessibility of the area forced the authorities to abandon much of the clean-up, involving over 50 km of rugged South Westland coastline.⁴



Figure 5. Debbie Fleming,
Away.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

*When we throw something away, where is it
thrown?*

When we go away, where do we go?

*When notions do not fit, where do we place
them?*

*When problems appear to have no answers,
where do we bury them?*



Figure 6. Debbie Fleming,
Within.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

Within this smooth perfect skin

Within this shiny bag

Within this disguise.

Within this blackness.

Within a few years

To have omitted the rubbish sack as a form of luggage would have denied the obvious 'go to' receptacle for bagging up last-minute items, the afterthoughts, the nearly forgotten and the notions that cannot be discarded. The reference it brings to the narrative of climate change and cultural identity is also pertinent on many levels. There is an ephemerality and transience associated with both rubbish bag and insidious climate change – the forms beneath the sheaths, indicative only of what lies below and how tightly packed it is. There lies scepticism and denial.

I have used a variety of clays to create the luggage. New Zealand high-fired stoneware clay, fine but proved to lack resilience, was used to construct bags such as *Artisans Die Poor, I Rest my Case*, included to open up a narrative about the position of the art activist and the role of art in providing a voice for the voiceless. While the legitimacy of its label can be disputed, I intended to raise ethical as well as moral questions about values and beliefs. The piece speaks an alternative language; it reveals fractures and fragility, design and pattern, elements to be considered when exploring questions of politics, social cohesion and change.

I have also used raku clay, imported and heavily grogged (including previously fired and ground clay and sand). Raku clay is strong and particularly resilient to thermal shock and resistant to fracturing, though it demands less defined detailing. It proved particularly suitable for my nineteenth-century sack bag, *The Way Back*, and the two contemporary upright trolley bags, *Waiting Room* and *Stateless*, all of which required alternative solutions and special resilience in their making. In their nature and purpose they reflect a weighty and knowing resilience (required within their own significant time and space) to counter their tentative uncertainties.



Figure 7. Debbie Fleming,
Artisans die Poor, I Rest my Case.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Figure 8. Debbie Fleming,
The Way Back.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

*Having reached my destination, I find myself
untying the rope. The threads course in my hands,
remain tightly twisted, their helix pattern
reminds me of DNA.
Unpacking the contents of my Pikau, I am
unpacking my life and I am taken back to the way
it was.*



An abandoned vestibule of collective trauma. I wonder what will be revealed when the tape gives way?

Figure 9. Debbie Fleming,
Stateless.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.



Resting in the waiting room, emotionless and moody.
An unknown void of uncertainty, balancing on the threshold between here and there, darkness and light.

Figure 10. Debbie Fleming,
Waiting Room.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

Resistance to thermal shock is a significant aspect of firing large enclosed items such as these works. To ensure success, the difference in heat between the outside and inside needs to be managed in the drying and firing process. Rushing the process places the luggage under enormous stress, as fractures demonstrate. Survival depends on intensive management, research, testing, record keeping and reporting, care and understanding. The analogy with navigating the political and social impacts of climate change is a pointed one.

Communities experiencing collective trauma (linked to climate change) often demonstrate significant scepticism and denial. Most affected by the crisis are those with the most to lose: the mines which have employed so many in coal and other extraction industries throughout Westland, for example, and those whose families have been supported by these industries for generations. These same corporations, companies and communities have been the most critical of environmentalism and climate science.⁵



Figure 11. Debbie Fleming,
Speaker of the House.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

*He always had an opinion,
transporting it with authority.
We never really knew where
it came from, as the evidence
was kept locked away in an old
saddlebag; strapped, buckled,
stitched and domed.*

Loss of huge tracts of coastal land as the result of extreme weather events is also an historical reality for those living in Westland – people who have fought to hold onto dwindling industries, homes and jobs that enable sustainability. Isolated and vulnerable communities are often the ones desperately seeking quick answers, and/or someone to blame for their demise. These communities are also the guardians of substantial local knowledge that is lost when they become fractured. “Heavy Luggage” has been designed to encourage conversations not just about potential migration, but also about voice, memory, change, vulnerability and loss –all key links to support the narrative of those affected.

Media coverage, focusing on environmental devastation combined with stories of insurance companies, banks and governments all struggling to safeguard futures, has created a sense of numbness, potentially counter-productive to resilience. The importance of dialogue, social cohesion and order has never been as vital as it is now, challenging though it may appear:

I have scrutinised the luggage coming from the kiln, seeking positive affirmations and answers. I found amid the cracks, misshapen objects and faded finishes, solutions, keys and responses. Collectively, the objects possess a distinctive power in their sheer number and diversity.

*Shouldering grief by the bagful, I see your
hoard in places and spaces perished and
dormant.
Captured images of another time, openly
shared. Identity worn like a badge contrasts
with the blackness of loss.
Your glossy zip so neatly maintained as you
attempt to secure your essential past from
becoming lost in the abyss of overload.
Why do you carry so much?*



Figure 12. Debbie Fleming,
Broad-shouldered Old Bag.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

Through researching the psychological impact of climate change – for example, on local communities such as those in Westland over the past year – I became increasingly aware of the reasoning behind the scepticism and denial. Historical preconceptions of environmentalists and scientists meant that locals often referred to them as hippies, tree-huggers and impractical geeks. The rise of ‘fake news’ and world leaders with a propensity for undermining climate initiatives, an unwillingness to address rising sea levels, temperatures and greenhouse emissions have created doubt and uncertainty. Climate protestors are being arrested across the globe. Fear has become paralysing, a condition referred to as “pre-traumatic stress disorder” – a response to what Timothy Morton refers to as a hyperobject,⁶ something so large and complex that it can only be charted on a graph.

An indicative, self-selecting survey on climate change undertaken by the news media site *Stuff* in July 2019 revealed an overwhelming 15,248 responses by those emotionally motivated enough to complete the questionnaire – 15 times the numbers expected. The facts were clear; readers stated: “Give us hope. Show more solutions – and less doom and gloom.” *Stuff* responded: “Interestingly, there was a correlation between age and alarm – with the youngest the most concerned”. *Stuff* also commented: “The survey wasn’t a glowing report card for journalists. Asked how well the media cover climate change, on a five-point scale where 1 was terribly and 5 was superbly, only 51 per cent rated us 3 or above.” These statistics were backed up by the levels of protest by youth worldwide, protesting our continued dependence on fossil fuels and ongoing environmental degradation.

Stuff quoted one survey respondent: “Gloom and doom scenarios rarely lead to action, although I do agree it is essential to inform about the catastrophic future scenarios. People seem to be inspired by examples of ‘good climate behaviour’ stories.” It was also clear that the public were asking the media to “show stories of mainstream New Zealanders (lawyers, nurses, builders, doctors, teachers, office workers) who are making real and meaningful changes in how they live ... and who everyday people can relate to.” Another respondent suggested: “Increase attention to tangible things we/the govt could be doing to make a positive change. Be solutions-focused, rather than focusing on how bad things are.”⁷

In a controversial act of disruption (which pointedly demonstrates the liminal phase we currently share), art activist Ai Weiwei recorded his work *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn* (1995), in which he captured himself destroying a precious, 2000-year-old ceremonial relic. A series of images record Weiwei holding the vase, the vase in mid-air and lying shattered on the ground.⁸ This cultural and symbolic act could be considered absurd. The images incidentally became more valuable than the urn itself. Weiwei countered the subsequent outrage by quoting General Mao:



Figures 13 and 14. Debbie Fleming, "Heavy Luggage" (installation). Dunedin School of Art, February 2020.
Photograph: Pam McKinlay.

"The only way of building a new world is by destroying the old one."⁹ This example of activist art is explicit and monumental. Weiwei's smashing of the vase is symbolic – the process is fast, hard to comprehend and potentially damaging. Weiwei's images metaphorically communicate how systems and communities are inevitably broken, and the speed at which the process can happen. This artwork is as relevant today as it was in 1995 – possibly even more so.

Cultural identities, values, rituals, lifestyles and ambitions – important cornerstones of daily life – are constantly being re-evaluated and renegotiated to keep pace with our changing world. In my installation, this concept is demonstrated by the process of creating the ceramic luggage from raw ingredients where possibilities for change are realised.

Challenging how we think about our world has been the focus of my body of ceramic work, "Heavy Luggage." The quantity and variety of luggage displayed – or, as some would call it, *baggage* – reflects the complexity of contemporary life and the intricacy of spirit.

Each item of ceramic luggage was created to help me unpack the social and political dilemmas I currently face, as I have discussed them within my immediate family and also in the broader community. Each one was created to open conversations about our readiness; and to break from the past, as demonstrated by Weiwei, while appreciating the significance of memory as each broken piece remains part of the whole, though in an altered state. Each item of luggage carries the marks of the maker; the applications and layers which produced the final product and which will remain in the memory of the object. The analogies and metaphors are significant.

My installation contains many weighty applications relating to my particular journey, researching the response to climate change within each ceramic object. My chosen methodology and materiality constitute both my journal and an explicit response to my world.

Each piece of luggage was uniquely handmade. The clay, of this earth, was carefully rolled out and formed to reflect pattern and construction, life, structure, embellishment and journey. Within the clay, memory has been stretched, compressed, impressed, dried, heated and cooled, coated, and coated again. Each object was created with and without contrivance. Each manifestation makes no apology for its existence. Each exists and therefore is, sitting comfortably among and comfortably separated from its peers sharing the same space.

We each carry our own significant stories, memories and local knowledge, invaluable in the task of creating sustainable futures. The luggage presented as an analogy in the installation explores these topics. Our personal luggage or baggage provides evidence of the positions we maintain. In the face of imminent catastrophic climate change and the inevitable consequences, I question if we can (and will) let go of those positions which stand in the way of change. As Weiwei demonstrated by dropping the vase, once the decision is made, the future is irrevocably altered.

Deb Fleming recently completed her MVA at Dunedin School of Art. Her passion for ceramic art began in Wellington in the late 1960s and early 70s when she discovered the joy of making, specifically hand-building, within a developing culture of talented and innovative potters who were creating and exhibiting their work at the Antipodes Gallery in Courtney Place. By the late 80s, drawn to the Coromandel pottery scene, Deb was firing her own work in a 25 cu ft gas kiln in Waihi and supplying craft shops throughout New Zealand. Debs's work now focuses on social and political narratives close to her heart.

- 1 Shuruq Harb, "Interview with Philip Rizk by Shuruq Harb," *Mona Baker*, 20 September 2015, <https://www.monabaker.org/2015/09/20/interview-with-philip-rizk-by-shuruq-harb/>.
- 2 Ai Weiwei, *Humanity*, ed. Larry Warsh (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018).
- 3 Paul Gorman, "New Zealand's Piles of Historic Rubbish – With a Sea View," *Stuff*, 8 April 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/111720292/new-zealands-piles-of-historic-rubbish--with-a-sea-view> (accessed 7 July 2020).
- 4 Paul Gorman, "Scale of Beach Clean-up after West Coast Rubbish Dump Burst 'Big, Nasty,'" *Stuff*, 1 April 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/111545102/scale-of-beach-cleanup-after-west-coast-rubbish-dump-burst-big-nasty> (accessed 7 July 2020).
- 5 Joanne Carroll and Paul Gorman, "West Coast Regional Council Wants Proof of Human-caused Climate Change before Supporting Zero Carbon Bill," *Stuff*, 29 January 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/climate-news/110223334/west-coast-regional-council-wants-proof-of-human-caused-climate-change-before-supporting-zero-carbon-bill> (accessed 7 July 2020).
- 6 Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology after the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1-16.
- 7 Patrick Crewdson, "We Asked about Climate Change Coverage and Got 15,000 Responses," *Stuff*, 16 July 2019, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/environment/climate-news/11371124/we-asked-about-climate-change-coverage-and-got-15000-responses>.
- 8 "Why did Ai Weiwei Break this Million-dollar Han Dynasty Vase?" *Public Delivery*, <https://publicdelivery.org/ai-weiwei-dropping-a-han-dynasty-urn/> (accessed 7 July 2020).
- 9 Ai-Weiwei, *Dropping a Han Dynasty Urn*, <https://www.artsy.net/artwork/ai-weiwei-dropping-a-han-dynasty-urn-13> (accessed 7 July 2020).