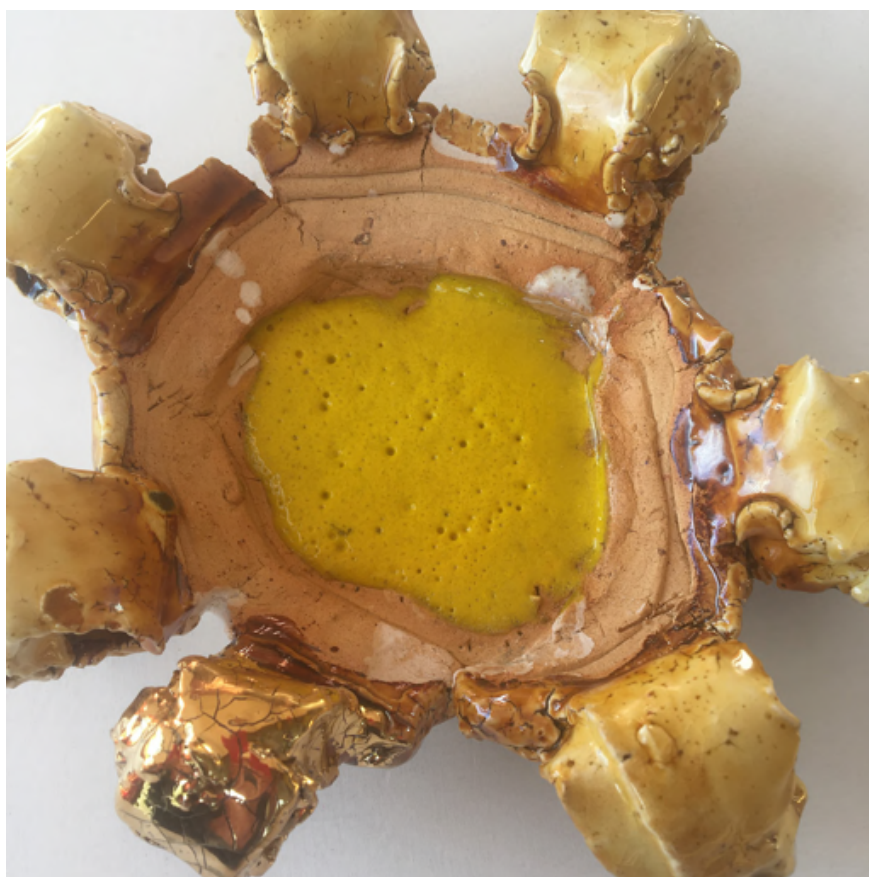


MADELEINE CHILD



**RDS GALLERY
2020**

**RDS GALLERY,
6 CASTLE STREET, DUNEDIN**

**DRIED FLORAL
ARRANGEMENTS**

NEW CERAMICS by

MADELEINE CHILD

Cover Image:

MADELEINE CHILD *Daisy Plate (loves me loves me not)* 2020,
Earthenware, Egyptian paste, gold lustre, 220 x 200 x 60 mm.

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**A New Take on a Traditional Theme:
'Dried Floral Arrangements' by Madeleine Child**

Madeleine Child's new ceramic series, 'Dried Floral Arrangements', can be placed in a long tradition in which the daisy has been used as a floral symbol with rich and sometimes contradictory associations. For the Romans, the daisy was associated with Belides, a nymph who turned herself into a daisy to escape the attempts of Vertumnus, the god of seasons, to seduce her. In Christian mythology, having become a symbol of chastity, grace, and purity, the daisy was used as an emblem for the Virgin Mary. There was a rival tradition, however, in which the daisy became associated with the experience of love, not merely in terms of its hopes and joys, but also of the fears, uncertainty, mutability, unforeseen consequences, and sheer luck (good or bad) that can attend it.

Medieval art and literature are full of such tropes. In the late 1400s, the French poet Pierre Sala gave his beloved a *Little Book of Love* in



which a painting shows him placing his heart within the opening

petals of a *marguerite* (the French word for a daisy), thus signifying his devotion to her while at the same time paying a tribute to her purity. Similarly, in England, the poet Geoffrey Chaucer professed his love of the daisy above all other flowers:

To seen this flour agein the sonne sprede,
Whan hit upryseth erly by the morwe;
That blisful sighte softneth al my sorwe.

(To see this flower spread its petals to the sun,
When it rises up early in the morning;
That blissful sight softens all my sorrow.)

He also acknowledged, however, that as dusk falls, the daisy closes up, 'For fear of night, so hateth she darkness!' – a sentiment that acknowledges the existence of a more ominous dimension to human experience.

In France, where the daisy as an emblem of love received its fullest elaboration, it eventuated in the game known as '*Effeuiller la marguerite*' ('remove the petals from the daisy'), in which a girl plucks the petals of a daisy one by one to answer the question, 'Does he love me?' – a game that endures across many cultures to this day. As always, however, the act of 'plucking the daisy' recognizes the element of chance and the possibility of misfortune. In Charles Gounod's opera *Faust* (1859), the aptly named Marguerite decides, after plucking a daisy, to believe in

Faust's love, resulting in her seduction, pregnancy, and utter worldly destruction.

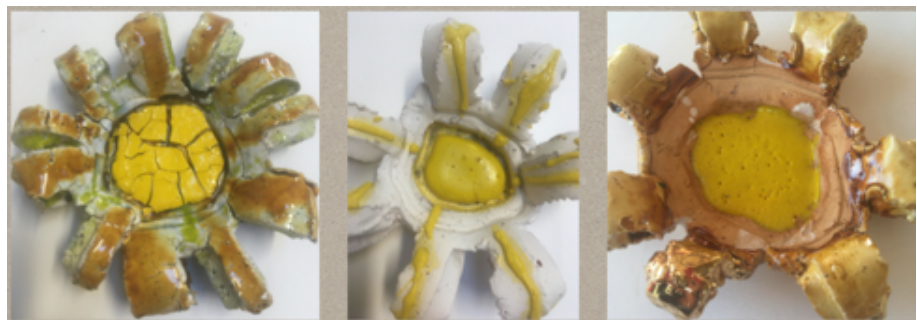
It is not coincidental that the idea for Madeleine Child's ceramic flowers originated during a residency in France, in the Provençal town of Vallauris, whose art pottery became famous after the arrival of Picasso, Marc Chagall, and others in the 1950s once they turned their attention to the fired arts. As her artist's statement, and the titles of the works themselves, attest, with the repeated reference to 'lovesmelovesmenot', Child was fully aware of the association of the daisy with love and the *effeuiller la marguerite*,



or 'pluck-the-daisy', game. Her take on this traditional theme is very different from anything that had come before, as one can see from a comparison of Child's daisy plates with a ceramic daisy

planter made by Jérôme Massier in Vallauris during the late 19th century.

In Child's modern take the romantic associations are still there,



and the fact that the daisies all have an odd number of petals

ensures that the game of 'pluck the daisy' will always end up with a confirmation that 'he loves me', thus catering to a wish-fulfilment fantasy. At the same time, however, the sentimentality of the daisy as a romantic emblem is undermined because of certain ironic twists. In particular, Child de-sentimentalizes the erotic element. Her daisy plates, with their folded clay petals, originally, at least in part, were inspired by 'those little paper things you might stick on a roast turkey leg', the very opposite of the exalted symbol of purity and idealized love that one finds in medieval art and poetry. In form, too, her daisies display an Antipodean irreverence towards the refined aestheticism that characterizes the style of Vallauris art ceramics, as can be seen from a comparison of her daisies with a stylized daisy stand from Vallauris.

In contrast to the Vallauris type, Child's daisies are provocatively rough and crude, with the clay left thick so as to brutalize the filigree. Even though she retains the effect of Vallauris majolica, Child's selection and deployment of colours invites us to recognize that she is presenting a different take on the daisy, with muddy browns and ochres subverting the idealized connotations traditionally associated with this symbol. Similarly, the horseshoe shapes at times gouged into the base of certain items serves to reinforce the idea of chance and, as she puts it, 'the need to make one's own luck.'

Altogether, then, Madeleine Child's daisies are more complex and resonant in their expressive connotations than they might at first seem. Instead of being an emblem of the freshness of spring, these daisies participate in a show called 'dried floral arrangements' with twig vases suspended on twisted and distorted wire. These add a contextual dimension to the daisies that deepens the idea of an experience of love that counters the association of daisies with the happiness of spring by suggesting the bareness and dryness of winter.

This exhibition, then, is truly a manifestation of the extent to which a modern sensibility has intercepted and reinterpreted one of the longest-standing and most revered tropes in our cultural heritage.

Alistair Fox

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Contributors

Alistair Fox, Professor Emeritus, University of Otago, began his career as a university lecturer, moving to Dunedin in 1974. His initial area of scholarly expertise was English Tudor literature and history, in which he published a number of foundational texts. His later work focuses on New Zealand literature and culture, and cinema studies, extending into contemporary literary and film theory and New Zealand art. An interest in the creative process lends coherency to his published research as it extends over forty years. Among his numerous publications, he counts 7 single-authored and 2 co-authored monographs, numerous articles and book chapters, several co-edited volumes, and four volumes translated from French into English.

An award-winning New Zealand artist, **Madeleine Child** moved to New Zealand in 1968 as a young child from Sydney, where she was born. She initially completed a Ceramics Certificate at the Otago Polytechnic in 1978, continuing her education in London where she received a BA (Hons) (1990) from the Camberwell School of Art, and a Masters (1992) from the Royal College of Art. In 1993 she enrolled in Advanced Studies 3D at Central St Martins College of Art, graduating in 1994. She has won numerous awards, among these the 2013 Jury Award, Wallace Art Awards, the 2009 Portage Ceramics Premier Award (joint), and the 2000 Sidney Myer Fund Premier Art Award (joint).