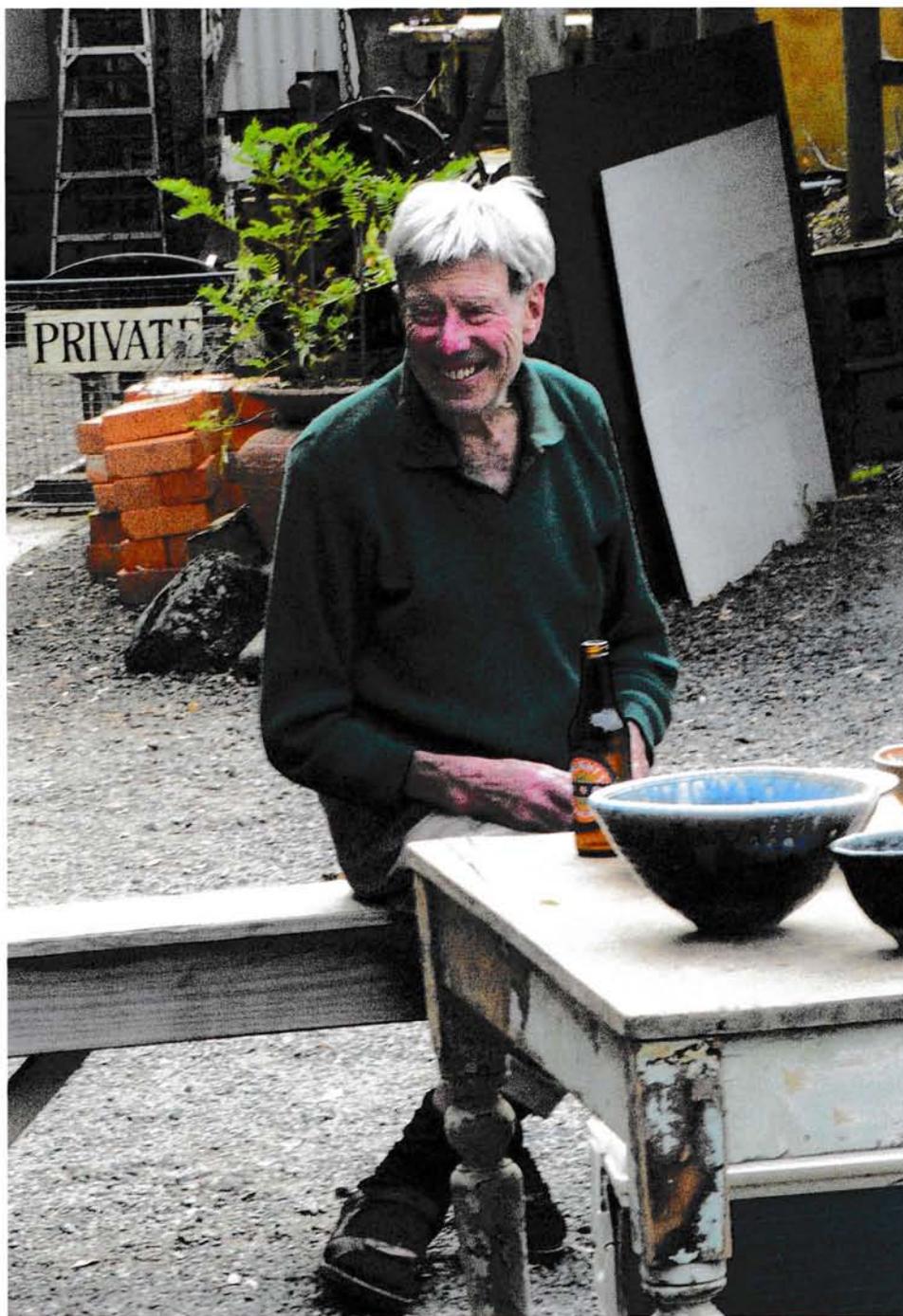


Barry Brickell

(1935–2015)



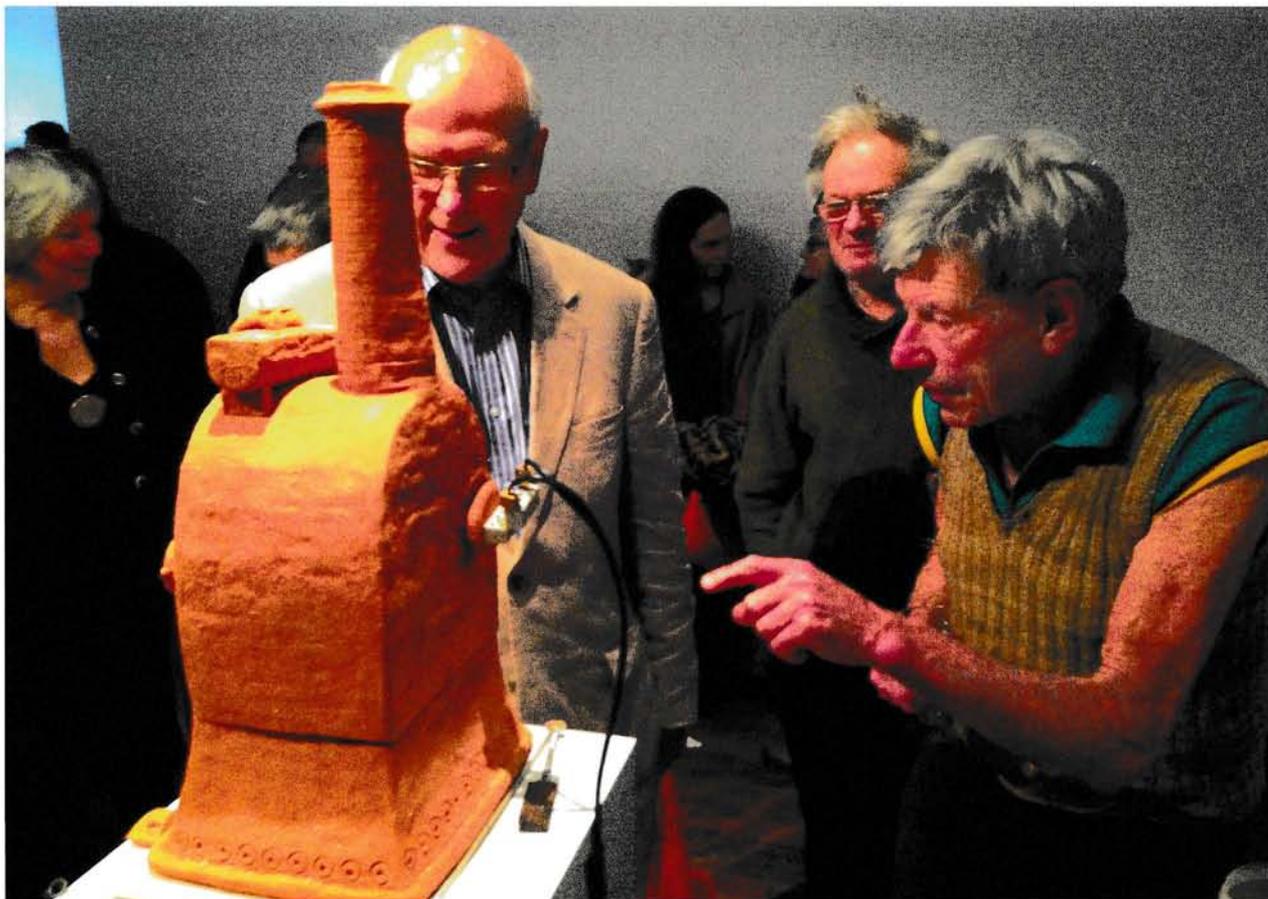
When you met Barry Brickell you never forgot him.

The first time I saw him was on the cover of a 1966 edition of *Coal* magazine (my father was a coalminer on the West Coast). There was Barry, a potter who used coal to fire his kiln. 'I want to meet this man,' I thought.

My first encounter with him was at Yvonne Rust's Greymouth pottery workshop, and she had invited Barry down to help build her kiln. Yvonne turned

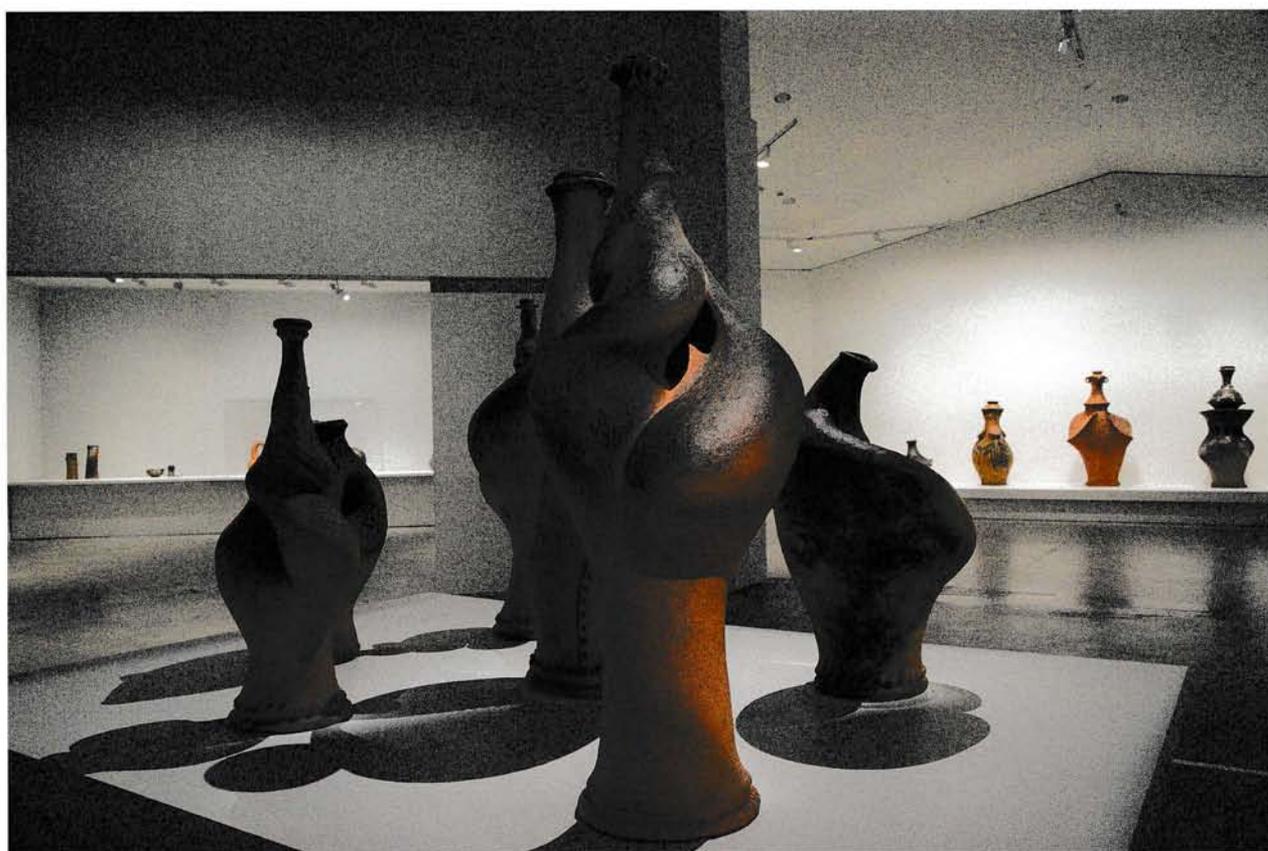
(above) Barry Brickell at his eightieth birthday
(Photograph: Piet Irwin)

Barry's visit into an event, and had invited the local mayor and the councillors to view the building of the kiln. Barry was there, working away, dressed in just a small pair of shorts, which resembled more a loincloth than proper attire, his flesh covered in sweat and coal dust, enveloped in smoke and noise, focused on the job at hand, oblivious to the sensibilities of the visiting local body. Yvonne and I may have been excited, impressed and enthused by the new kiln, but the mayor and councillors were appalled, and any goodwill that Yvonne hoped for failed to eventuate.



Barry showed the same commitment to his work at the end of his life, building a working steam engine from his hospital bed. Potter Paul Lorimer, whom he had known and mentored for 40 years, would visit and bring photos of the progress that had been completed from plans Barry had drawn. Barry would

draw more plans, update the existing design, upping the ante and pushing himself and, by extension, Paul. He would draw solidly, passing on his new instructions, even before the morphine shot kicked in the day before he died. The working clay steam engine, called Reciprocotta, is a complex machine,



(opposite above) Barry Brickell at the 150th anniversary of the Dunedin Gasworks, October 2013

(Photograph: John Gurney)

(opposite below) *His Own Steam: A Barry Brickell Survey* at Lower Hutt's Dowse Art Museum, 2013

(Photograph: John Lake)

(below) John Madden and Barry Brickell, 2012

(Photograph: Howard Williams)

with a flywheel and a piston shaft, and a pair of dangling balls that rotate 360 degrees. 'They must oscillate', according to Barry, 'not jiggle.' The project was unfinished when he died, but Paul and his team will complete it in the next few months.

Barry Brickell was a man of many facets. He was a potter, of course, and a kiln builder. He was also a sculptor and painter, an engineer and a mechanic. He was a conservationist, a botanist, a geologist. He was a collector of New Zealand art and a patron of other artists and potters. The wider public know him best as a railway and tourism magnate—the driving force behind the Driving Creek Railway. He seemed to be able to use all of his brain to achieve his goals. He was also a workaholic.

He would wake at 5am and work until dark. Back in the early days, when there was a team of us based at Driving Creek, we would spend our mornings potting and our afternoons at work on the railway. It was a cross between a commune, a work camp and an artists' retreat; we would eat, drink and work together, talk pots, glazes and clay into the night, and the dormitory resembled a barracks, the beds made of sack hammocks. All the machines were run by steam, so the labour involved in gathering and splitting wood was enormous. Barry was always first on the job. 'You thought I'd still be in the scratcher, didn't you?' he would goad us. The work was hot, dirty and noisy, and we were surrounded by belts, smoke, and boilers; it was more an industrial site than a bush idyll.

Driving Creek has become a major tourist attraction, welcoming its millionth passenger on Christmas Eve 2011. It is the largest tourist enterprise in the Coromandel and employs 18 full-time staff, encompassing the railway itself, as well as a pottery workshop and art gallery. It is the brainchild of Barry Brickell—he was the architect, the planner, and the creative mind and force behind it all—and took 15 years to build (1975–1990). It is like the man himself, a mix of apparently contradictory elements: engineering and art.

Barry wore his contradictions on his sleeve. He was a happily solitary figure who greatly enjoyed the company of others. He was constantly generous—his support for other artists was varied and ongoing, most recently he supplied materials to an artist in prison—yet he could be thrifty to the frustration of others. He was consumed by art—his life was his work and vice versa—yet held little store for the art world. He could castigate you for sloppy work and, in the next moment, share a joke.

His knowledge of New Zealand's geology was encyclopaedic. He visited when I was living in Whangamoā, and arrived on his pushbike, having

ridden from Nelson, 20km to the east. The next morning he suggested we go and find some clay, and he knew exactly where to go. 'Get the truck ready,' he said. He took me to a spot near the Tadmore saddle, pointed at a ditch and said 'Dig there!' I uncovered the best white clay I have ever used, strong, beautiful, pure stuff, flicked through with feldspar crystals. He came home, declared his distaste for my wheel, and within half an hour had thrown huge 'fatso' jug. 'Fire that,' he said, 'and the jug will always remind you of who showed you where to find that good clay.' I fired it, and I have the pot to this day.

Brickell was an unconventional man, almost famously so. He perpetually wore the same clothes (in fact, we buried him in them); he was a lousy cook; he had a penchant for working almost nude. He had a habit of speaking his mind with little regard for those to whom he was talking, and would refer to artists as 'fartists' and Auckland as 'Yakland'. He was boyish, energetic, profane, witty, wiry and strong; Paul Lorimer reports an embrace only a month before his death that still held remarkable strength. He invented two alter egos, a way of presenting himself to the world, and would refer to them in the third person: Humphrey Colfax (I painted a portrait for Barry) and Dr Erskine. He could be cantankerous; he was often infuriating; and I loved him deeply.

Barry was above all a potter, and a great one. This is general knowledge for those who visited *His Own Steam*, a survey exhibition at Lower Hutt's Dowse Art Museum in 2013, and Waitakere's Te Uru last year. He built his own potting wheel decades ago and had used it since, a wooden machine (in itself an engineering marvel) with a steel plate, a machine that he referred to as Stradivarius. Barry used Stradivarius so much for so long that there is a groove in the steel plate, the metal eroded where his hands would mould and shape the clay. The wheel won't turn any more—Stradivarius was, after all, part of Barry—but the impression that he made won't ever go away.

JOHN MADDEN

