

Palpable Vision

The Work of
Contemporary Ceramics Artist
Linda Swanson

Article by Naomi Frangos

IF ART IS THE TRANSLATION OF IDEAS INTO some kind of formal expression that reflects our culture, then what moves it from being a simple statement, to becoming a dialogue between the viewer and the work? Certainly, its abilities to ignite the imagination, arouse curiosity, engage the body and demand participation from its spectator, are what give it such power. This dynamic art goes beyond what is visible. It transcends the “retinal experience”¹ by inciting bodily responses, including memory and gut feelings. Our “perception [of the artwork], then, is not merely passive before sensory stimulation, but as [phenomenologist] Merleau-Ponty suggests, a ‘creative receptivity’.”²





Such synesthetic perception, or palpable vision, is strongly inherent in the work of ceramics artist Linda Swanson. While ceramics is most commonly appreciated in its final form, Swanson's body of work impresses upon us the experience of clay through its various processes, "bringing us closer to aspects of the medium that are usually felt by the maker".³ Transformation and transmutation are introduced as real-time elements that surpass static formalism. It is this metamorphic nature of her work that heightens our awareness and generates fascination about what is happening before us.

Swanson's preoccupations find commonality in Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe's late 18th century theories about botany. In his revolutionary treatise from 1790, *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, Goethe's understanding of "dynamic archetypes" focuses on transformation and evolution, rather than fixed forms and species.⁴ "This mode of inquiry aims to overcome subject/object dualism by endowing detailed sense experience of the outward forms of nature with the enlivening inward power of the imagination, while also grounding subjective imagination in objective forms and facts."⁵

Similarly, Swanson's approach blurs the boundary between the objectivity of science and subjectivity of our perception, instilling a sense of wonder in the observer. Her installations appear to be simple scientific experiments, when actually they are contrived situations⁶ that allow intrinsic reactions of




Facing page: Fig 1, *Osmogenesis*. 2011. Bentonite clay, water, metal and nylon. 6 x 10 x 11 ft.

Top: Fig 2, *Osmogenesis (Detail in Progress)*.

Above: Fig 3, *InFormation, Constellation in Foreground, Views on Back Wall*. 2011.

physical chemistry to occur.⁷ Just like Goethe explores the mysteries of natural phenomena by seeking a "deeper dimension in plant life",⁸ Swanson looks at different possibilities among ceramic materials, making her art truly about discovering inexplicable outcomes.

Enigmatic and revelatory, Swanson's captivating solo-exhibit, *InFormation*, which took place in 2011 at Montreal's McClure Gallery, displayed three works



a public spectacle of a metamorphic phenomenon. A translucent, white cloth, suspended from the ceiling and pinned at its centre, is holding water. Like a pregnant sky, two forms bulge downward over a large steel plate that hovers above the floor, covered in a thin layer of bentonite. The space in between them imposes a gravitational force on the water, while the viewer is captivated by the spontaneity of simultaneous material reactions. As water slowly permeates the fabric, the clay field becomes humid. The water's progressive penetration through the clay's skin ultimately reaches the impenetrable metal surface, and one observes varying behaviours of pooling, seeping, dripping, evaporating and corroding [Fig 2]. Like Goethe's theory, Swanson's piece brings into focus an "emphasis on interdependence of organism and environment, as well as organism and organism – 'in which one species is created, or at least sustained, by and through another'"⁹

that showed metamorphic clay processes: *Osmogenesis*, *Constellation* and *Views* [Fig 3]. Concerned with how we receive information and how we react to it, she regards information both as deduced fact and as the act of becoming something else. Existing among transmuting states, these works reveal nature's ability to change itself, connoting life, rather than stasis or death.

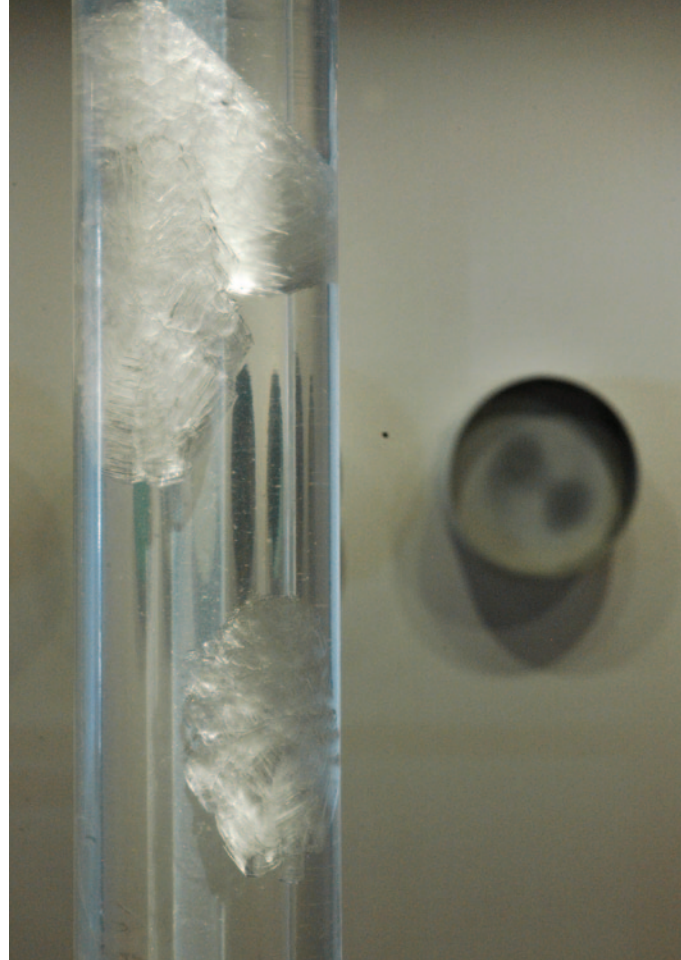
In each work, Swanson invites us back to her studio. As we witness their continual evolution, *Osmogenesis* and *Constellation* appear to be in-situ laboratory tests. In full view from the street, *Osmogenesis* [Fig 1] becomes



In the next room, *Constellation* [Fig 3] floats like an array of pendent stars, fulfilling the 'earth/sky' tension found in *Osmogenesis*. Transparent, liquid-filled tubes form a vertical forest of crystalline solutions that Swanson organised spatially by projecting two overlapping constellation paths. Again, Swanson captures alchemy in slow motion. *Constellation's* use of water instead of fire as an altering agent shows ceramics' ability to transform on its own. Crystal structures large enough to be seen by the naked eye grow sporadically during the exhibition [Fig 6]. Theoretically, we know crystals form through molecular attraction, but when we see them appear within a perfectly clear solution, reality becomes wondrous. Just like Goethe, Swanson "coupled rigorous empiricism with precise imagination to see particular natural phenomena as concrete symbols of the universal principles, organising ideas, or inner laws of nature."¹⁰

As works that unfold over time, *Osmogenesis* and *Constellation* extend the spectator's experience, making us acutely aware of each individual moment. A single drop of water falling mesmerises us. By decomposing ceramics into elemental composite parts of earth, water, air and fire and creating environments in various stages of evaporation, expansion, precipitation and dissolution, Swanson investigates the temporal dimension of what is hidden, while everything is actually in plain sight. She shifts our senses of time to that of the material or process itself. Her work is so vivid, that it stimulates our tactile perception, enticing us to trace its trajectories with our eyes.

Her third piece, *Views*, is a series of large, ceramic discs set into deep metal frames [Fig 3]. Colourfully potent, textured scenes appear like waterscapes of unknown depths or unseen worlds, resembling either telescopic views of miniature landscapes or life size microscopic matter [Fig 5]. Our understanding of science tells us these pieces are not moving, but the cracked lineaments and reflective surfaces give an impression of changing states [Fig 4], as if unattainable forces are at work beneath these layers. Indeed, Swanson claims the results come from the kiln's unique atmospheric environment, causing a strain between porcelain and glaze and creating fault lines in random patterns, similar to geological formations.¹¹



Facing page: **Fig 4, Neodymium View (Detail)**. 2011. Crystalline glaze porcelain and painted aluminum. 21 x 5.5 in.
 Above left: **Fig 5, Blue Copper View (Detail)**. 2011. Crystalline glazed porcelain. 21 x 5.5 in.
 Above right: **Fig 6, Constellation (Detail)**. 2011. Water, salt and plastic. 12 x 29 x 14 ft.

Swanson's purposely set up tensions echo Goethe's understanding that "the integrity and rising intensity of the inner impulse. . . give natural things a degree of autonomy and a measure of intrinsic value"¹² and that "nature [can express] itself from all quarters and in all directions as it goes about its work of creation".¹³ The plethora of extemporaneously emerging colours and morphed surfaces is evidence of how Swanson maps out events that we normally could not see during the firing process and puts them into play before our eyes. They are moments caught in slow motion or frozen in time. As Merleau-Ponty claims, the depth of a thing implies it is not only what is seen in the present moment, but of simultaneous moments and, therefore, a synthesis of various views.¹⁴

Outside the gallery, in two recent site-specific public artworks, *Infestation* and *Pommes de la Terre*, Swanson continues to explore ideas of temporality and transformation in ways that invite the spectator to become engaged over a certain length of time. *Infestation*, which took place at a national historic site by the Lachine canal in Montreal, involved



Top left: Fig 7, *Infestation*. 2011. Crystalline glazed porcelain and rubber cement. 30 x 200 ft with 1000 slugs 1.5 to 3 in x .5 in/h. Photo by Lily Lanken.

Above: Fig 8, *Infestation* (Detail).

Top right: Fig 9, *Pommes de la Terre*. 2011. Local earthenware clay, wood and fire.

Inset: Fig 10, *Pommes de la Terre*. Apple picking in three pits 6 x 1.5 ft.

the appearance of 1000 slightly larger than life size ceramic slugs [Fig 11]. Using the garden as a metaphor for the city, the presence of the slugs within a once thriving but now somewhat abandoned environment draws upon urban decay and renewal. People from the community were involved in both the installation of the work and its diffusion a week later by taking the creatures away with them [Fig 7].

The siting for *Pommes de la Terre* was at an orchard in Quebec's countryside. Swanson reproduced apples in large pits using the same elements as trees, but for her constructed fruit, water and earth came in the form of local clay and energy as fire rather than the sun [Fig 9]. The strong desire to touch is inevitable



[Fig 10] and is indeed fostered, but initially denied by the hot flames. All senses are encompassed at once: the smell and sound of fire, the smoke and heat released, the feel of hardened clay and the taste of autumn air. Socially, the warmth of the fire draws people to gather towards it, linger on and become part of the work itself.

By using an easily recognisable figure, apple or slug, to stand in for the idea of transformation, Swanson challenges our scientific knowledge of a thing by our experiential confrontation with a simplified version of it. Her use of hand held ceramic objects is a vehicle towards an event and opens up a questioning about origin and context. Apple picking itself is transferred from tree to ground [Fig 10], while slugs can be carried away without them squirming. By incorporating the site through history, ecology, and local materials, she physically alters a place so that the idea of what we know, think and understand can be re-examined.

In both works, Swanson's juxtaposition of contrasts ignites the imagination: soft and hard, alive and inanimate, organic substance and solid mass. Her creative interplay of opposites coincides with Goethe's inclusion of polarity, "a state of constant attraction and repulsion",¹⁵ as part of the metamorphosing plant. In *Infestation*, the shiny glaze on the slugs reminds us of the wet skin of the real creature, but in this solid state, it loses its



Figure 11, Infestation Site Overview. *Parcs Canada Lachine Canal National Historic Site Peel Basin Sector, Montreal. 2011.*

malleable, animal body [Fig 7]. It is in that moment when we physically engage with it, by picking it up and touching it, that we register this remarkable reconciliation of fantasy and truth.

Through haptic experience we turn on our intuitive sensors of understanding. Our vision is demanded to remove the image of apple from our minds and return to the free play of association. Earth and fruit together reinforce the full cycle of plant growth embodied in one, bringing the ultimate transformation of the seed closer to its origin of fertilisation, the soil. Swanson's apples are like Goethe's "supersensuous plant archetype lying beyond the empirically visible, touchable, smellable, classifiable plant, undergirding and guiding the formation and the transformation of the material shapes we see".¹⁶

Her work engages us in a playful inquiry that involves a constant re-interpretation of the world we inhabit. In contexts of specific environmental factors that provoke transformation, Swanson's archetype is dynamic art. What is familiar is changed and our curiosity is displaced from contemplating the simple essence of being to that of becoming other, as we encounter new meanings in fluctuation.

She moves us internally based on what our external senses perceive: the spectator's body, mind and spirit are awakened simultaneously. As Goethe claimed, "we must employ both the eyes of the body and the 'eyes of the mind,' both sensory and intuitive perception, 'in constant and spirited harmony'."¹⁷ Like magical worlds appearing before our eyes, Linda Swanson's works of art take hold of us directly and compel our senses to act with perpetual palpable vision.

ENDNOTES

1. Term used by Marcel Duchamp in *White Box* and *Green Box* on his work *The Large Glass*
2. Reynolds, Jack. Merleau-Ponty and Derrida: *Intertwining Embodiment and Alterity*, p 8.
3. Swanson, Interview with the artist.
4. Goethe, *The Metamorphosis of Plants* with introduction and illustrations by Gordon L Miller, p xxiii.
5. *ibid*, p xxiii.
6. Swanson, *ibid*.
7. Swanson, *ibid*.
8. *ibid*, p xvii.
9. *ibid*, p xxi.
10. *ibid*, p xviii.
11. Swanson, *ibid*.
12. Goethe, p xxi.
13. *ibid*, p xxi.
14. Merleau-Ponty's concept of depth in *The Visible and the Invisible*, p 219.
15. Goethe, p xx.
16. *ibid*, p xviii.
17. *ibid*, pp.xviii.

Naomi Frangos is a practicing architect, part-time professor, invited critic and multi-media artist living in Philadelphia. She holds a Master's degree in the History and Theory of Architecture from McGill University and a metalworking/welding diploma from Montreal's Trade School. Her interdisciplinary approach and analytical thought process informs her critical research. She is concerned with materials, methods and craft in the art of making and has experimented with ceramics in several recent projects. All photos by Paul Holmquist unless noted.