

PAULA MURRAY: YOU ARE ME

OTTAWA ART GALLERY, OTTAWA, ONTARIO
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REVIEW BY VICTORIA HENRY

Paula Murray's exhibition of seven porcelain vessels in *You Are Me* at the Ottawa Art Gallery throughout the summer of 2016 quietly showcased the breadth of her personal journey through the expressiveness of clay. Arranged on a circular form – like a children's play structure that could spin on its axis – the seven vessels expressed fragility, sadness, vulnerability and strength.

Each of the works in the exhibition was unique in how it was altered and reconstructed, in how it was pulled apart through the interaction of clay and fiberglass. All were reworked and fired multiple times. Fissures were in-filled or coloured. Some surfaces were smoothed and polished, others left raw. In all seven vessels, the veins created by the fiberglass filaments inserted into the wet clay at the beginning of the process, remain visible and link the understanding of each of the vessels to Murray's expression of her own fragility.

Murray's personal journey was unveiled in the selection of the works for *You Are Me*. Each of the works told a slightly different story and each was, more or less, fragmented. While 'You Are Me VI' maintained its functional role as a vessel, 'You Are Me III' was a broken and fragmented whole. 'You Are Me II' linked these two significant vessels to Murray's body of work from the previous decade. 'You Are Me II' uses the process of pulling a form from a bowl-shaped mold, which was then manipulated and rolled inward not unlike the structure of a shell. This was the gentlest of the works in the exhibition. It was suggestive of the sea and the years Murray spent living on a sailboat in the Caribbean.

In 'You Are Me VI', the fissures created by the fiberglass layering within the clay body were filled in with clay and carefully colored with a blue dye. The fissures become veins that arise from the perfection of the bowl's interior base. Rather than limiting the understanding of the walls as a human infrastructure, the dye delineates the contours of what appeared to be an undulating natural rock formation. The surprise of 'You are Me VI' was that no matter how much destruction and re-creation the bowl form had seemingly endured, it survives as an elegant whole.

Murray's significance as an artist whose medium is ceramic, lies in her ability to create a composite of fragility and strength.

'You Are Me III' was a more complex and disconcerting work. The bowl form was intentionally slit from the lip to the base; the interior bottom was cracked; the interior walls were left raw and the outer surface was softened and in-filled with clay. 'You Are Me III' was analogous to life's realities: its pain and struggles. On the exterior surface, it is smooth; on the interior surface, raw. Through successive firings, Murray created an undulating exterior, while leaving the interior fissures created by the pulling apart of the fiberglass as open wounds. The cracking of the surface at the bottom of the bowl, not unlike dried earth when the water recedes and the sun bakes the wet ground, was made more dramatic by the appearance of the pool of red glaze underneath.



A visitor contemplating the installation *You Are Me* 2016, 3.35m diameter. PHOTO CREDIT: DAVID BARBOUR

BELOW: Paula Murray
You Are Me III 2016 Porcelain, multiple firings
 43 x 43 x 53 cm
 PHOTO CREDIT: DAVID BARBOUR



‘You Are Me III’ is the most challenging of the works in the exhibition. Murray does not repair the surfaces in order to create a more pleasing whole. Instead the wall remains broken and the fissures are still raw, yet it survives. ‘You are Me III’ carries a powerful message of endurance. It best embodies a comment by Murray from October 2016 that, “Acceptance that all our journeys carry meaning might be the best one can hope for.”

Murray’s work with porcelain spans several decades. Her earliest work maintained functionality: stacked bowls and other utilitarian objects. During the years spent in the Caribbean, the work became more organic, influenced by the tides and the patterns of waves. The ceramic structures referenced shells. With the introduction of fiberglass and the vein-like threads created on the surface of the porcelain, the vessels became more obviously identified with the human condition.

The installation of the seven vessels in the gallery, darkened except for the lit centerpiece, provided a place of profound human contemplation. While each vessel captured the attention of the viewer, it was the magic of the whole that captivated and provided a spiritual place of serenity and calm. ■

A QUESTION OF FREEDOM

DIGITAL HANDMADE: CRAFTSMANSHIP IN THE NEW INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

LUCY JOHNSON
 New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015. 9780500517857

POSTDIGITAL ARTISANS: CRAFTSMANSHIP WITH A NEW AESTHETIC IN FASHION, ART, DESIGN AND ARCHITECTURE.

JONATHAN OPENSHAW
 Amsterdam: Frame Publishers, 2015. 9789491727610

REVIEWED BY JANNA HIEMSTRA

Since the early 80s, the development of digital technology has transformed the way in which we communicate, travel, educate, farm, record and store information, and of course, create and fabricate objects. This transformation has had a profound impact on the development of contemporary craft practice, and two recent publications that contribute to this discourse are *Digital Handmade* by Lucy Johnson and *Postdigital Artisans* by Jonathan Openshaw.

Both provide a glossy anthology of makers from across the globe, albeit primarily from prosperous countries, and they profile a range of work from jewellery to environmental installations that operate within the framework of a high-art and design culture. *Digital Handmade* offers a selection of images and accompanying descriptive statements of eighty accomplished makers, while *Postdigital Artisans* offers sixty makers, along with essays by prominent cultural theorists and practitioners. If you are looking for a survey of how digital tools are being used across the overlapping disciplines of art, fashion, craft, design and architecture, then both publications are a great resource for keeping up with current trends.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect in comparing publications is how each author explains the pairing of the term ‘digital’ with that of ‘handmade’ and ‘artisan’. Johnson introduces *Digital Handmade* with the somewhat cliché question of whether the two approaches can ever coherently align. She then proceeds to describe the industrial revolution as a shift away from craft to mass production, which has been overtaken by today’s ‘new industrial revolution’ where digital tools allow for individual expression on a mass scale. Essentially, Johnson asserts that the digital and the handmade are not mutually exclusive, and that contemporary ‘digital artisans’ are “...producing individual, crafted products of exceptional quality that retain the soul of the material and the skill of the human hand, while also benefitting from the precision, efficiency and increasingly unrestricted structural parameters of digital design and fabrication”.¹

Johnson highlights quotes from each maker to provide further insight into the impact of using digital tools. For instance, Louise Lemieux Bérubé (Montreal), a textile artist who is recognized for her work in Jacquard weaving and computerized embroidery, states: “Digital tools are the tools of today, and bring more opportunities. The digital preparation of files takes less time, which forces me to be more creative, to perfect the result, to experiment with the yarns. There is no excuse to feel limited”.² This belief in the freedom afforded by digital tools is likewise expressed by Michael Eden (London, UK), whose 3D printed piece, *Bloom* (2010),



is featured on the cover. Eden’s career includes over twenty years of practice as a “craft potter.” When he began experimenting with digital tools and reverse engineering, Eden shifted his practice to create laser-sintered objects that reference iconic Wedgwood pieces, which are then coated in unfired coloured slip and finished with resin. His quote in the publication states: “I realized these technologies had the potential to free my creative process from the constraints of design for manufacture, and to free the making process from the centrifugal forces and gravity of the potter’s wheel”.³

In *Postdigital Artisans*, Openshaw provides a more nuanced account of how the freedom provided by digital technology contributes to the creation and production of aesthetic experience. He contextualizes tools such as 3D printers and CNC routers within a larger framework, and argues that “What the postdigital describes is a world that has been reformulated by the digital moment, and where a digital mindset is inextricably entangled with our existence, whether or not the digital technology is actually present”.⁴ Openshaw’s selection of makers is framed by what he believes is an already-given and inescapable relationship between digital and physical formats, and he praises the ingenuity of each maker for experimenting, extrapolating and inventing within this environment. From this standpoint, the work of Maiko Takeda is highlighted on the publication’s cover. Her work exemplifies a digital aesthetic with the use of materials such as acetate and mobile phone sheet glass, though it is created entirely through analogue processes developed from a solid base of training in millenary and jewellery design. *Atmospheric Reentry Collection* (2013) creates forms that mediate the relationship between bodies and technological interfaces through the very materials and skills that she employs.⁵

Glenn Adamson’s essay in *Postdigital Artisans*, entitled “Craft in the Digital Age”, presents the argument that craft has never existed in opposition to other categories (such as industry and art), but has been an essential factor in the development of all technological tools

and manifestations of aesthetic movements.⁶ As an aesthetic form itself, craft prioritizes skill, quality and a deep knowledge of materials and tools. Adamson warns that despite the freedom offered by digital tools (including the ever-increasing volume of ‘how-to’ videos and online access to resources through global delivery systems), specialized, trained knowledge should not be taken for granted. He states: “To grasp the true impact of the digital on making, we need to think both laterally and in depth, as good makers themselves know how to do. Our horizons get ever broader, but that makes it all the more important to retain respect for artistic commitment at every level”.⁷

Overall, both *Digital Handmade* and *Postdigital Artisans* endeavor to profile the finest of contemporary work that engages with the interface of the digital and the material. Johnson provides a collection of work that profiles the possible beauty of objects created through a combination of hands-on skill and digital processes. Openshaw does the same, while also reminding us that the creative freedom offered by a postdigital world must still be navigated according to a driving desire for the analogue. ■

(Endnotes)

1. Lucy Johnson, *Digital Handmade: Craftsmanship in the New Industrial Revolution*. (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2015), 7.
2. Johnson, *Digital Handmade*, 26.
3. Johnson, *Digital Handmade*, 68.
4. Jonathan Openshaw, *Postdigital Artisans: Craftsmanship with a New Aesthetic in Fashion, Art, Design and Architecture*. (Amsterdam: Frame Publishers, 2015), 5.
5. Openshaw, *Postdigital Artisans*, 91.
6. Glenn Adamson, “Craft in the Digital Age,” in *Postdigital Artisans*, ed. Jonathan Openshaw. (Amsterdam: Frame Publishers, 2015), 286.
7. Adamson, “Craft in the Digital Age”, 288.