

# Paula Murray You are Me....

by Heidi McKenzie

I walked away from my experience of Canadian ceramic artist Paula Murray's one-room exhibition at the Ottawa Art Gallery ([www.ottawaartgallery.ca](http://www.ottawaartgallery.ca)) in Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, with an irrepressible sense of the preciousness of life. Not an easy message to translate with such clarity of vision and execution. "You are me, Tu es moi" is an installation of seven large ceramic vessels placed equidistant from one another on tubular rings designed by Murray that create the illusion of the works floating in space. These concentric metal rings, suspended on metal posts approximately two feet above the ground, are bound with neutral-toned muslin that conceals plexiglass supports for each vessel. Poignant in the exhibition design are both the floor surface—a stark poured concrete, and the walls—painted a deep indigo tone that enhances the feeling of the fragility of human existence within an infinite expanse. The artist's statement hovers unobtrusively overhead, as if to oblige the viewer to look to the heavens. Its partial transcription lays bare Murray's intent:

"I am drawn to how these ceramic materials and processes have affinities with the human condition; how we respond and engage with the injury of experience—within, with each other, with the other. By embracing wounds, deeper meaning can be brought to our lives, transforming suffering into something worthy, sensuous, and beautiful."

It's difficult to dissect the parts from the whole in this exhibition. Four of the vessels reach upward with vertical walls, evoking impossibly large tulips, as if plucked from a fantasy world. The bottom of the interiors of each are resolved with bright red or deep earth tones filling the cracks of layer upon layer of slip—the effect of which resembles fragments of parched desert—deep lines of cracked minerals/earth cleaving apart from each other; not dissimilar to the physical process of the clay forming with these random geometric patterns. Two of the vessels present as more formal in bowl structure, yet upon inspection, their veins belie a masterful complexity. Murray expertly applies engobe to





1 Paula Murray's seven vessels, 11 ft. (3 m) in width, porcelain, aluminum frame wrapped in muslin, 2016. Photo: David Barbour. 2 Detail of Paula Murray's installation *You Are Me, Tu es Moi* at the Ottawa Art Gallery.

fill in cracks, at times on the interiors, at times the exteriors. This, coupled with her liberal use of terra sigillata and multiple firings, breathes life into each of the works on a visceral level. The deep reddish tones of one of the bowl-shaped vessels speaks volumes of the raw pain of chronic illness and suffering, and at the same time offers up a sense of resilience and renewal. The last vessel denies the original structure of the plaster mold in which it was fashioned, wrapping around itself, encrusted with what appears to be organic outgrowth of its furling—and yet is surely a considered response.

The exhibition's title tells a poignant story about the fragility and endurance of life, and the often contiguous journey of twists and turns each of us face in varying degrees of intensity and/or severity during the course of our lives. That's the macro sound-bite to the a much larger narrative. The personal story, a recent chapter in the story of artist Paula Murray's sister-in-law, Mary that I share here with the permission of the artist, carries disarming intimacy. Mary has been living with multiple sclerosis for 30 years. Murray avows a special bond with Mary, in her words "it's as if we were sisters ourselves since birth." Murray describes Mary's *joie de vivre* as irrepresible and her selflessness as boundless. According to Mur-

ray, Mary seems more than stoic in the face of her now literally crippling disability, but is serene in its wake. Last February, Mary contracted pneumonia, and within her physical constraints, the illness raged to acute with alarming speed. As Murray set about drawing in Mary's circle of family and close friends to help her face perhaps the hardest decision any of us will ever have to make about ourselves or a loved one—the decision whether or not to move to life-support should her condition reach that critical stage. In an instant, the moment was upon them. Paula just turned to Mary and spoke the plain truth: "This is your life, what do you want to do?" Mary looked into Paula's eyes and simply uttered her truth, "You are me." On the final day of the exhibition at the Ottawa Art Gallery, Paula and her husband hosted Mary and her husband's 30th wedding anniversary (and her husband's birthday). Storm weathered, at least for the time being.

Weathering of storms is familiar territory for Murray, both figuratively and literally. She and her family took five years to sail the world. Murray anchors her life and her practice in her rural home studio in Meech Lake, Quebec, near the nation's capital of Ottawa. The symmetry of metaphor deepens as we explore Murray's relationship with vessels in form and function.





3, 4 Details of *You Are Me, Tu es Moi*. 5 View of a rolled individual vessel from the installation. 6 Detailed view of the interior of one of the seven vessels. 3, 4, 6 Photos: David Barbour.

Murray constructs her works by layering casting slip into plaster molds and incorporating fiberglass mesh into the structure of the vessels. The results are organic and, to a large extent, unpredictable. As the clay dries and shrinks with its enmeshed fiberglass (a signature technique Murray devised), cracks form their own latticework on both the exterior and interior of the surfaces. Murray considers that each piece brings a unique opportunity to the table. She enters into dialog with her vessels—listening to what they offer up, and responding with gentle and considered

interventions. Consequently, the firing, glazing, and other finishing processes are not a prescribed methodology, tried, tested, and true; rather they present variables to which Murray intuits her reply with careful attention to detail. There is an ethereal quality to the whole, that in a non-cliché way, translates as greater than the sum of its parts.

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