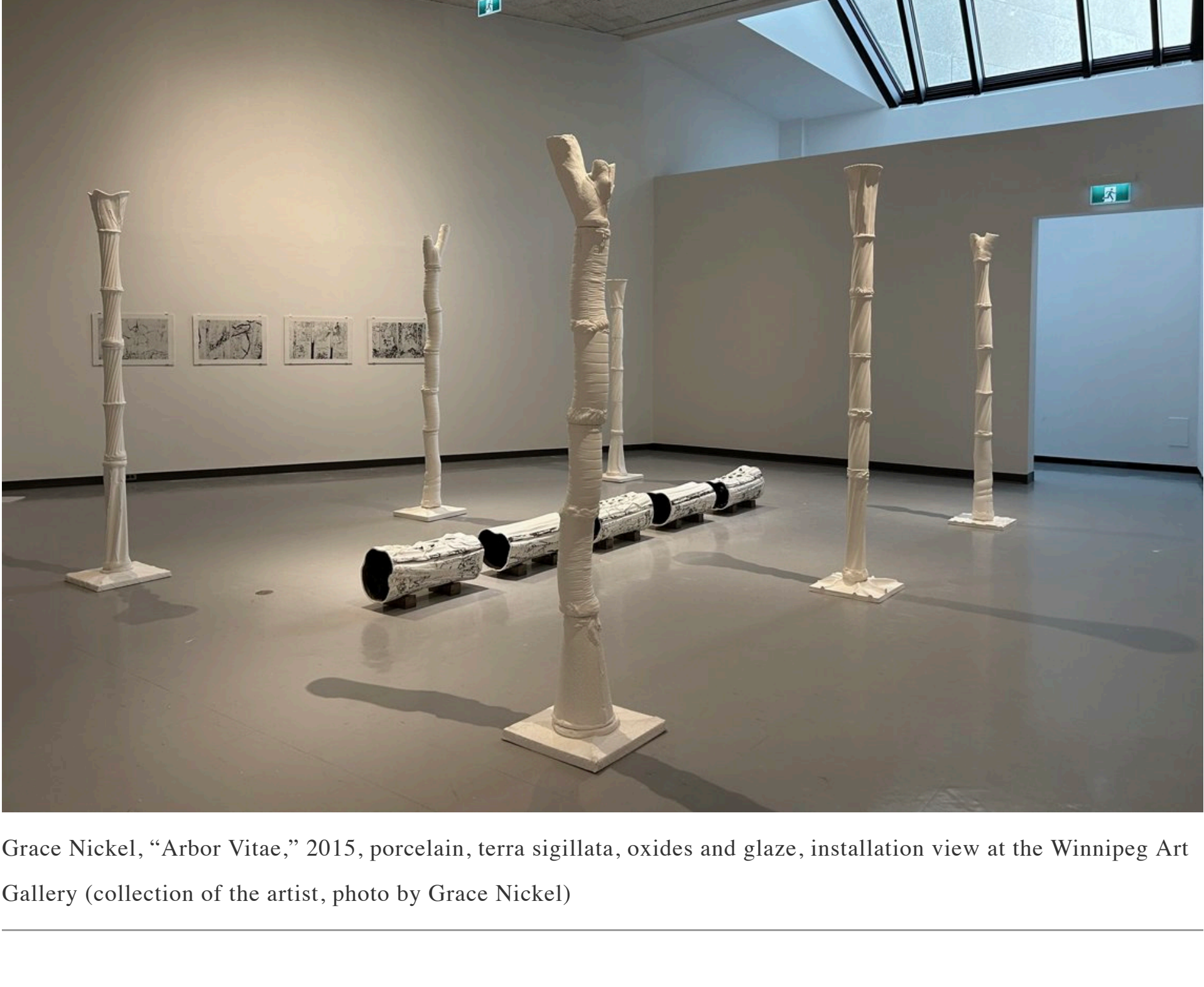


Grace Nickel

Commemorating life, death and rebirth through ceramics.

by Lindsay Inglis
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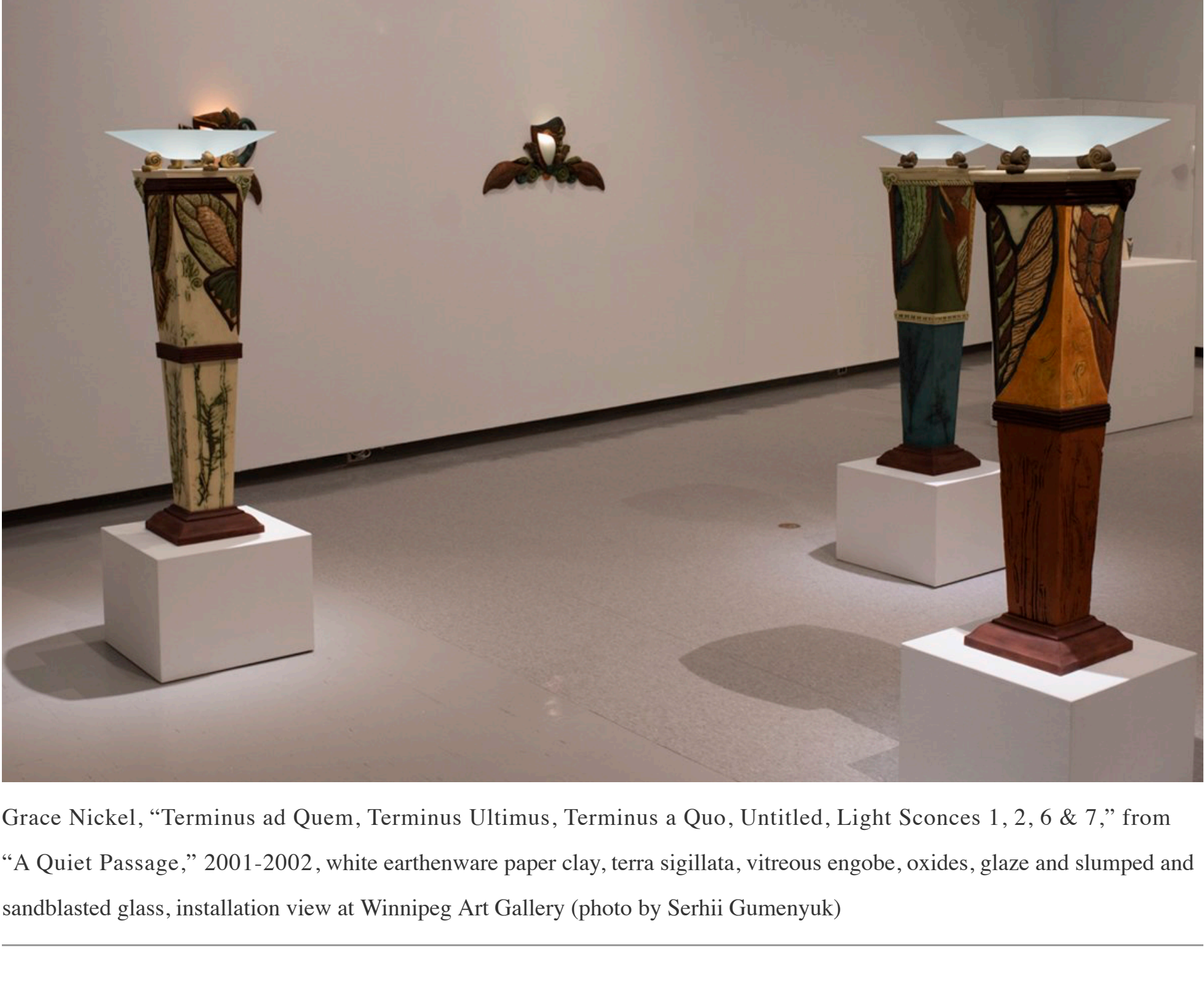
Grace Nickel, “Arbor Vitae,” 2015, porcelain, terra sigillata, oxides and glaze, installation view at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (collection of the artist, photo by Grace Nickel)

Winnipeg artist Grace Nickel has spent her career pondering the relationship between ceramics and architecture, as well as nature and its life cycles. Her achievements, recently recognized by a **Saidye Bronfman Award**, the country’s most prestigious honour for craft artists, are highlighted in a remarkable exhibition at the Winnipeg Art Gallery. *Inter Artes et Naturam (Between Art and Nature)*, a partnership with the Manitoba Craft Council, is on view until Aug. 27.



Grace Nickel, “Vessel, from the Moth Series,” 1989, earthenware, glaze, 8" x 19" x 2" (collection of the Winnipeg Art Gallery, photo by Ernest Mayer)

The show explores the breadth of Nickel’s career, starting with pieces from her *Overlay Series*, her first major body of work, dating back more than three decades. It portrays moths, larvae and bones, among other natural elements, initiating a recurring theme of destruction and regeneration. It is exhibited alongside light sconces and terminus forms originally displayed in *A Quiet Passage*, her first solo show at the gallery. The terminus, an ancient architectural object that marked boundaries, is a word now used to indicate points of entry or departure, as with airports and other transit systems. And, in medical lingo, terminal refers to fatal conditions, ones from which you are unlikely to recover.



Grace Nickel, “Terminus ad Quem, Terminus Ultimus, Terminus a Quo, Untitled, Light Sconces 1, 2, 6 & 7,” from “A Quiet Passage,” 2001-2002, white earthenware paper clay, terra sigillata, vitreous engobe, oxides, glaze and slumped and sandblasted glass, installation view at Winnipeg Art Gallery (photo by Serhii Gumenyuk)

Nickel, a professor at the University of Manitoba, created the work after her father’s cancer diagnosis. While his physical body declined, his spirit strengthened. Watching this transformation influenced her work, leading her to consider “the fragility and sturdiness of the body and soul.” The columns of each terminus represent the human body, while the glowing glass bowl atop them evokes the human spirit.

The next room is filled with porcelain columns that seem almost angelic. *Arbor Vitae*, the tree of life, connects nature with architecture through six slender tree-like columns that are either topped with a capital or tree branches. These elegant textured structures, built using various experimental technologies, evoke ghostly drapery while also recalling the patterns insects make in wood.



Grace Nickel, “Prone,” detail from “Arbor Vitae,” 2015, 12" x 12" x 24" (collection of the artist, photo by Michael Zajac)

Between the two rows of columns are five hollowed out porcelain logs. Some are filled with large fungi while others have no signs of new life. To one side is a seventh larger column, *Host*. Departing from tree motifs, this column has no roots at its base or branches at the top. Instead, a crown-like capital signals the possibility of regeneration following loss.



Grace Nickel, “Commemorative Cameos,” 2020-2023, porcelain, terra sigillata, rare earth oxides, glaze and inkjet prints on fabric, installation view at the Winnipeg Art Gallery (collection of the artist, photo by Serhii Gumenyuk)

The show includes Nickel’s latest work, *Commemorative Cameos*. With this series, she integrates her Mennonite heritage through Haban ceramics, a 16th-century Anabaptist pottery tradition from Central and Eastern Europe. The five cameos on display draw on imagery from Mennonite quilts and traditional crafts. They are mounted on digitally printed backdrops that sport colourful patterns.

Several cameo designs resonate with earlier works in the show, such as *Devastated*, which resembles cross sections of a tree and responds to the destruction wreaked by a 2003 hurricane in Point Pleasant Park in Halifax. This recent work commemorates Nickel’s own history, making it a perfect finale. ■

Grace Nickel: *Inter Artes et Naturam (Between Art and Nature)* at the Winnipeg Art Gallery from May 27 to Aug. 27, 2023. Curated by Tammy Sutherland, director of the Manitoba Craft Council, and Riva Symko, curator of Canadian art at WAG-Qaumajuq.

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Lindsay Inglis is an arts writer and researcher from Winnipeg. She recently completed her MA at the University of St. Andrews, and has contributed to Canadian Art and HASTA Magazine.

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