

PAULA MURRAY

Silence and Light

by
Maureen Korp



Paula Murray in her studio

Deep in the forests of Gatineau Park, Quebec, Paula Murray works in her studio beside Meech Lake. Quietly, waves are lapping the shoreline. Raven, deer, and bear are close by. These woods have long been theirs.

Paula Murray has been pondering volume and edge, line, height, and direction for more than 35 years as she shapes and fires her work. The artist knows well both the elemental use of fire, earth, water, and the tensions provoked by hand, tool, and kiln.

The deep background of Paula Murray's work, however, is found in tidal memories – wind, water, the push-pull of the moon, the earth's seasons. For very many years, she has sailed the seas with her family. In three recent exhibitions of the artist's work, we see the depths of those voyages, stillpoints of silence, fissures of light.

Moving towards the Light

In 2015, as part of the Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale in Korea, Paula Murray exhibited a porcelain series entitled *Moving towards the Light*, 2014.

Entering the museum, the visitor saw seven vessels – similar in height, width, depth, colour – aligned in a straight row upon a low platform. Not one is the same as another. Some fold inward. Their edges and volumes ripple on the plane of vision. Some unfold, break. At the further end of the row, however, the top line of one vessel forms a perfect circle, its edge open to the light. Here is stillpoint.

You Are Me, 2016, porcelain on muslin wrapped aluminium frame, Ottawa Art Gallery, 3.4 m ø (detail)





Connection X Connexion, 2014, 95 suspended porcelain scrolls, Peace Study, Galerie Art-image

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Moving towards the Light has the discipline of a tanka chain, of poetry arranged line by line, syllable by syllable in a precise repetition of thought seeking insight.

Of nearly 2,700 individual entries from 74 countries submitted to the Biennale, fewer than a hundred were chosen for honours by Gyeonggi's jurors. Paula Murray's work was among that select group.

Connection x Connexion

In 2014, in Gatineau, Quebec, Paula Murray presented a site-specific, dramatic installation entitled Connection x Connexion

at Art-image, Maison de la Culture. Within the gallery, the artist constructed four focal points for the eye to ponder - from floor to ceiling, wall to wall. The whole was a dynamic scene of swooping gestural lines in porcelain, light, and shadow.

First, Bridges, 2014, a suspension of five loop-de-loops, began at floor level, rising with each loop before reaching ceiling height clear over to the other side of the room. The suspension was fashioned of 95 long, thin porcelain scrolls, each 91 cm long, each knotted with steel wire into a ribbon 8.5 m long. Under each of the five loops, visitors walking beside Bridges saw midden

Sanctuary, 2014, porcelain, live edge quilted maple, Galerie Art-image





Moving Towards the Light
2015, Gyeonggi International Ceramic Biennale (Detail)

You Are Me II, 2016, porcelain, 43 x 45.7 x 45.7cm



heaps of unfettered, unattached, broken scrolls. These had been piled into dark-edged circles.

The terminus of Bridges was Peace Studies, 2014, a large white disk on the far wall. Upon the disk, hundreds of thin white porcelain strips were entangled – germinating energies going nowhere. All remained within the circle.

To the right of Peace Studies, along another wall of the gallery, two narrow wooden shelves displayed rows of porcelain scrolls, each one standing upright, one in front of the other. Entitled Sanctuary I, 2014, and Sanctuary II, 2014, the two shelves prompted thoughts of order, discipline, even prediction.

The many scrolls of Connection x Connexion are palimpsests of one another – words and languages inscribed, forgotten, overlooked, remembered incompletely. Against the third wall on the left of the gallery, however, was evidence of another mythic tale, another path to knowledge. Against the wall, a low bench displayed a large, elegant porcelain bowl. Its interior is luminously white. The source of its light? Rising from the base to the bowl's topmost edge is a fissure, a crack. The bowl is entitled *Fragmented Earth*, 2014.

In Japan, kintsugi is a traditional method of “repairing” fis-



You Are Me VII
2016, porcelain, multiple firings
20.3 x 76.6 x 30.5 cm

sures in ceramic bowls. The artist “repairs” the fissure by filling it with gold or silver lacquer. Nothing is hidden. Nothing is made “like new.” The repair strengthens the bowl, stops further damage, and makes the work even more precious for having been saved from the trash heap. “Fragmented Earth” has been constructed in that manner. Light repairs the wound.

In his song Anthem, Canadian poet Leonard Cohen wrote, “There is a crack in everything, that is how the light gets in.” “Fragmented Earth” is of that tradition, too.

Paula Murray seeks the circumstance of breakage, time and again, in her work. She incorporates fibreglass into the slip clay to create possibilities for fissure and warp. As she stacks the claywork in her kilns, she uses multiple firings in multiple kilns (gas-fired, salt and electric) to create further probabilities and possibilities. All of the fissures of the artist’s porcelains are welcomed, honoured as evidence of elemental forces: earth, water, fire, plus happenstance.

You are Me

The Ottawa Art Gallery, Ottawa, Ontario, is the site of “You are Me”, Paula Murray’s 2016 solo exhibition. Here, in a large, quietly lit room, seven bowls have been placed in a low circle. Their surfaces are gently swollen, their edges rhythmic curves. Inside are complex cracks and fissures, all with coloured caesurae of counter-rhythms.

Not one of the seven is of the same shape, size, or colour as another. A shallow vessel of white porcelain furls inward like a large drying magnolia leaf. Another is knotted along its outside edge. Deep veins can be seen inside its curve. Beside it, a bowl of soft dusky hue is the largest of the seven. Its interior is clean.

A wide, flat bowl displays blue, rose, grey, and green-veined fissures. The cracking is complex, yet the bowl is whole. Another vessel, cut and folded in on one side, stands without support. Two vessels have interior breakages, blunt and deep as a tortoise’s carapace. Their colours, however, are not those of a tortoise. One is coloured blood-orange with a white-veined edge against grey. The other is marked in white and brown.

Mystics of many cultures have pondered break and repair, whole and part, silence and light. Paula Murray is of that truth-seeking tradition. Of her work for “You are Me”, the artist writes:

“By embracing wounds, deeper meaning can be brought to our lives, transforming suffering into something worthy, sensuous and beautiful.”

Conclusion

We live in broken worlds. Nonetheless, the ocean’s waters swell with the tides. In Paula Murray’s art, we find silence and light.

Paula Murray was born in Ottawa. She lives on the shores of Meech Lake, where she opened her first studio in 1980. Regarded as one of Canada’s finest ceramic artists, she was elected into the Royal Canadian Academy of the Arts in 2006. Exhibiting internationally, her work appears in collections in Italy, Taiwan, Korea, Romania, Canada, and the United States. In 2015 she was named Artist of the Year and awarded the Prix du Conseil des arts et des lettres du Québec for Work of the Year. Since 2006, the ceramics of Paula Murray have been presented by the Government of Canada as gifts of state to visiting dignitaries. Among the recipients are Kofi Annan, George W. Bush, Vladimir Putin, and Akihito, Emperor of Japan. The artist studied sciences at the University of Ottawa and ceramics at Sheridan College, Toronto. She and her family are sailors, and have sailed the deep seas of the Americas from 1985 to the present. When her children were small, the family was at sea for much of a five-year period. Paula Murray’s ocean voyages inform her approach to earth, water, fire, and happenstance, fissure and wave.

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