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EXQUISITE WOODS



Hilde Lambrechts, *The Bark Archive*

Review by Judy Donaldson

The recent exhibition *Exquisite Woods* January 18 – March 15, 2015 at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, was curated by Christian Bernard Singer long before his departure from the gallery in the fall of 2014. The group show filled all of the exhibition spaces, and represented the ambitious work of four Canadian ceramic artists. It was the first major installation overseen by the gallery's new curator Sheila McMath.

The “woods” theme is most literally represented in Hilde Lambrechts' many pieces, all portraying aspects of actual trees, often stylized or not to scale. Lambrechts' concern for the future of our forests was her driving force behind most of this collection and her academic background as a plant biologist lends a scientific context to some.

“...I have always been intrigued by...the beauty of plants and their function in maintaining balanced ecosystems...with ongoing global deforestation, I cannot stay indifferent to the destruction of our natural environment.” Hilde Lambrechts

“The Bark Archive” documents the unique textures of different trees from around the world and captures the attention and time of gallery visitors; kindred spirits as they interact with the enormous grid of 100 large tiles, hung

individually on the wall. Each is stained with red iron oxide to highlight the textures without the visual interference of different palettes. The names, both Latin and common, can be found for 99 of them on the artist's portable map. There is one compelling tree without a name, despite the artist's attempts to identify it. Lambrechts hopes that someone visiting the exhibit might recognize the tree from her rendition, but also worries that it could be one of many as yet unidentified species that could disappear to deforestation before its properties and potential uses are known.

The other pieces in Lambrechts' show, *The Aftermath*, which fills the entire Dr. Douglas Wright Education Gallery maximize the artist's intention to portray vulnerability. *Ponderosa Downfall* is another bark-centric piece. Composed of more than 5,000 units, it covers a span of wall 4.5m high and 1.5m wide and exaggerates the effect of natural shedding done by this Ponderosa Pine species. The bark has been stripped away from many other works, exposing the wood-grain and leaving them exposed and vulnerable to decay. One vertical, tree-form has been perforated by woodpeckers, while others are arranged in ruined states on black bases to suggest asphalt and man's culpability.

Marié-Andrée Côté's works are also comprised of thousands



of individual components, arranged artfully, thoughtfully, most within strong and large but unobtrusive round frames. In fact, 12 of the 13 pieces Côté created for this show are arranged within circles. “Drawing on the ‘rosette’ theme, I explored the tondo form to create large circular works with relief, curves and spirals. I am intrigued by nature-inspired shapes and motifs within the confines of a circle,” Marié-Andrée Côté.

One such work, *Point de rencontre/Barcelona* literally inspired by a piece of architecture, draws on and incorporates a broken ceramic tile the artist brought back with her from a trip to Barcelona that features an elegant leaf motif. Replicating the leaf shape in thin, shortbread-like porcelain wafers, Côté plays with stacks, repeat pattern, random orientation and other graphic tricks, all within the confines of two separate circular frames, one within the other, each with a redwood stained backing.

Her method of forming and finishing her thicker, unglazed, porcelain elements is compelling to the point of a visceral urge to caress them. Imagine bars of white soap or fine marble, cut into intriguing shapes and worn over time until either their centres are depressed and edges are softened as in “Rivière/comme un murmure” where the overall effect of

hundreds of loosely angular chunks, fixed in an oblong, flow-pattern to a black background does impressive justice to Côté’s nearby photograph of light, penetrating the rippled surface of water. In other pieces, the edges are worn away to the point of all cross-sections’ becoming elliptical as in *Eau douce* where myriad botany-inspired critters, symbolic of microscopic or macroscopic life forms dangle separately on filaments. They appear as if suspended, in concentrated proximity in a giant, imaginary, lense-like drop of nearly still water. The strong, natural, back-lighting in the tall Tower Gallery during the day, brings this illusion to life. Here and there, deep-red, lead fishing sinkers add to the beauty of the creatures’ environment on one hand, while acting as warning beacons on the other.

“My motivation is to put the beauty, fragility and vulnerability of the plant world into perspective; to create atmospheres that challenge us to think about the cycle of life and the environmental damage that threatens our planet,” Marié-Andrée Côté.

The circle as a symbol for unity features prominently in the work of Paula Murray. Drawing on the beliefs of her Bahá’í faith for inspiration, *Peace Studies* is a metaphor for the interconnectedness of all existence. Myriad delicate, ribbon-



Michael Zajac, *Grace Nickel Espalier – C*

like arcs or ribs of porcelain, leap gently over each other and into the glossy, resin ground affixing them to the 1.2m disc. The effect of low loop upon loop with no beginning or end in sight is reminiscent of elegant mangrove roots, each one growing in careful deference to the others, each important in lending its strength and cooperative spirit to the whole.

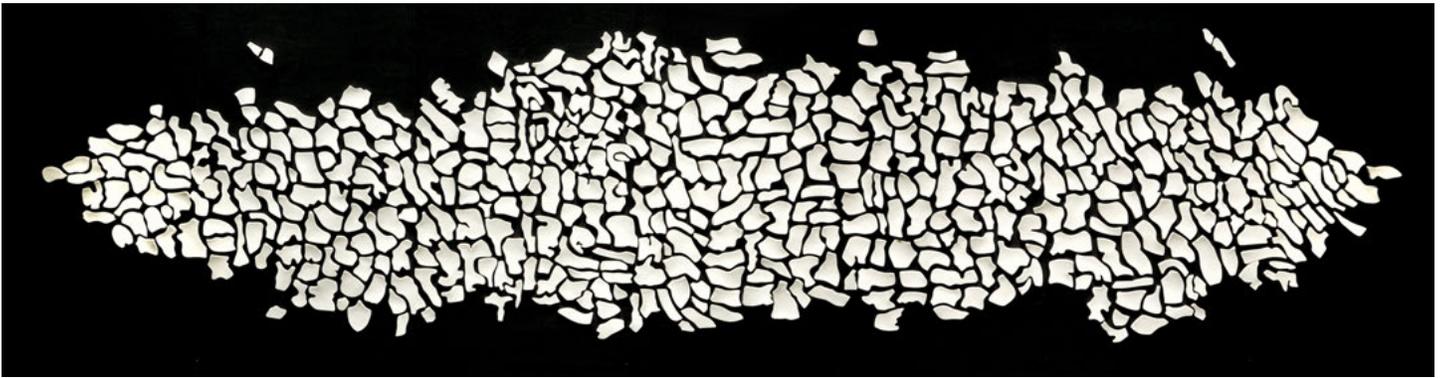
Six dark paper circles advance on the floor, directly below *Peace Studies* from the deep blue wall, erected for this installation of Murray's show. Comprising the base for this work entitled, *Bridges*, these glimpses into the past offer up small collections of broken and discarded porcelain scrolls, either being eclipsed by or emerging from piles of sand. Ascending from the first circle of cast offs as if into the sky, with a touch of deliberate precariousness, are a series of 95 of these scrolls, intact and wired individually to hang in a series of swooping arcs, creating a symbolic suspension bridge. Each scroll is similar to every other in dimension (75cm x 5cm) yet each has unique aspects to both its rolled form and most significantly to the natural crackle pattern that develops upon curing, rolling and drying. These crackles, highlighted with subtle staining appear to be text, carefully inscribed in precious material, for recording cultural truths and beliefs for posterity. While there is evidence in the detritus on the floor, that some beliefs get dropped, forgotten and left behind, the overall message about the advancement of humanity and its ever evolving ability to communicate is

obvious in the upward march of rungs. The criss-crossing of sections in this ladder may acknowledge the conflation of divergent philosophies, and the intermittent skewed angles and slight gaps remind us to take care and pay attention as we learn from the past and carry on into the future.

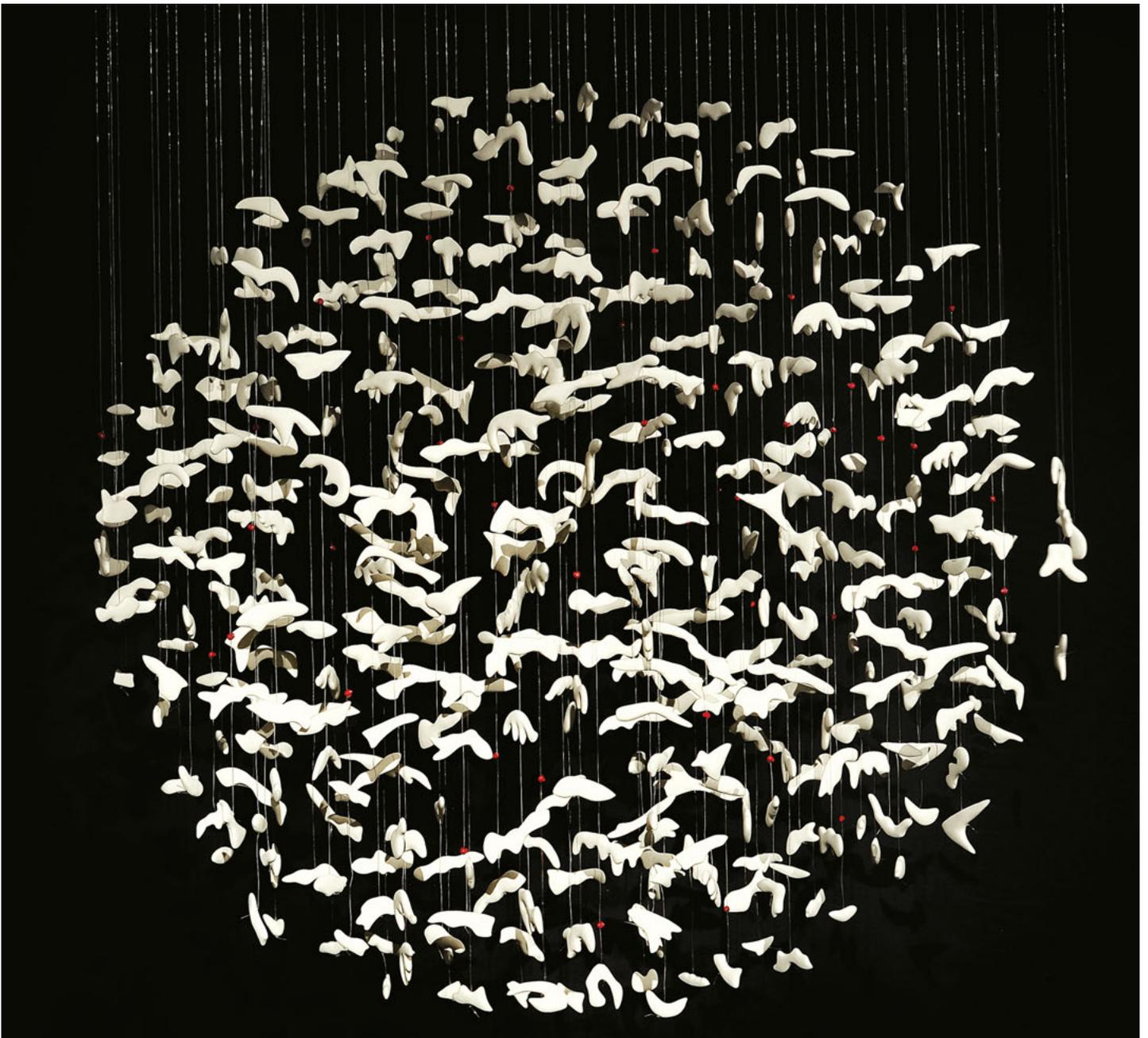
"This installation offers a poetic metaphor for the continued search for meaning, for deeper understanding of each other and ourselves, how all existence is ultimately connected, creating a bridge from the individual to the universal," Paula Murray.

On the adjacent, end wall of the Keith and Winifred Shantz Gallery, mounted at a comfortable height for extended viewing, are *Sanctuary I & II*. Employing similar, scrolled, porcelain modules to those in *Bridges*, but in a vertical orientation, Murray creates a contemplative space that serves to remind us of the inspiration and connectedness we feel when immersed in nature. Mounted on a horizontal landscape of beautiful, curvy, live edge quilted maple, dozens of upright scrolls invite the viewer into the woods, to engage with the stand of quiet unarticulated birch or aspen; their subtle marks' naturally recording the passage of time and personal growth.

Each and every element of Murray's installation here exemplifies her mastery of the medium and the techniques she has pioneered with which to manipulate, form and embellish.



Marie Andree Cote, Riviere – comme un murmure



Marie Andree Cote, Eau Douce



Paula Murray, *Sanctuary I & II*, 2015, 12' x 22 x 6, Photo Credit Paula Murray

Grace Nickel's work in this exhibition is more about the whole tree form, liberally stylized, using metaphor and even the odd pun. *Arbor Vitae* is a series of 6 columns or trees, arranged in parallel lines of three. It looks uplifting at first, reminiscent of a peristyle garden, except instead of flanking a fountain, the rows of columns stand witness to the decay of a large, prone and fractured log. The columns decline their architectural purpose because the traditional flat tops that would have supported the roof of a portico, sport fanciful, unique "crowns", some regal, others a visually literal reference to their tree selves. The dual, linear arrangement of trees could also be a rural, tree-lined driveway, and in its path a fallen ancestor, sawed into lengths for removal, but instead allowed natural reclamation. The external surfaces are predominantly white, as are the columns, but inside each is an elaborate melange of fungus, glazed bronze in reference to monuments. "The large-scale porcelain sculptures and installations in *Arbor Vitae* negotiate the relationships between the natural and the fabricated, the austere and the embellished, growth and decay, loss and recovery," Grace Nickel.

Espalier the series of 5 photographs by Michael Zajac that employ high-tech laser marking, visually unwrap the bark textures of some of Nickel's earlier tree sculptures, map-style in an ethereal multi-grey tonal range and on close inspection ironically hearken back to pixelated newspaper photos.

The largest single work in Nickel's collection, stands alone, dramatically lit from above in the Donald and Pamela Bierstock Circular Gallery. The totem-like tree or column form *Host*, a contraction of Holy and Ghost according to the artist, is the best example of this technique-driven body of work, developed by Nickel, with assistance from master mould-makers over multiple trips to China. The four twisted, tubular components began as

heavy drapery fabric, textured with floral patterned stitching, still visible after the complicated vacuum forming and moulding. The architectural reference is obvious with its all-white, ribbed, stacked columnar form. The tree portion is confined to the "crown" as in a tree's crown, in this case made of three distinct visual layers: the top appears to be the plant reference and provides a slight flare of overlapping lettuce or cabbage leaves; the middle appears to be twigs on a fabric ground; the crown's base, connecting it to the column has architectural décor-inspired, press-moulded finials. These seem appropriate as a nod to the fabric below and its visual puddling as with long draperies on the floors of formal rooms, swelling at the base of each component with the weight of the liquid that filled the tubes before moulding. Every piece in Nickel's installation exhibits evidence of basic handbuilding techniques, contrasted with technically ambitious moulded components, which combine to present stately shows of grandeur with mundane vulnerability.

Though the four artists' variations on the *woods* theme covered a wide range of ideas and techniques, there were striking commonalities. The ubiquitous concern for the environment, both social and natural was explored in depth, with a strong message of warning from Lambrechts and Côté and a hopeful, encouraging nudge from Murray. But what of the bold, large, circular frames featured by three of these artists too? Round discs are common among potters but none of these are remotely related to the potters wheel, nor are they references to tree rings. Nods to *unity*, the circle of *life*, and *tondi* were proffered in the words of the individual artists, but the coincidence was a puzzle without an answer. Overall, the massive scale of the expertly crafted installations was a delight and transformed the large gallery into a magical space to explore.



Hilde Lambrechts, Side Gallery,



Grace Nickel, Host WEB



Grace Nickel, Arbor Vitae, WEB detail 3



Paula Murray, Peace Studies Detail, 36" diameter, Porcelain