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Exquisite Woods exhibition examines ecological concerns



Fragmenting Earth by Paula Murray

photo:Peter Lee,Record staff

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By Robert Reid

*Sun, moon and stars give answer; shall we not staunchly stand
Even as now, forever, wards of the wilder strand,
Sentinels of stillness, lords of the last, lone land?*
— "Trees" by Robert Service

WATERLOO — Gertrude Stein would have it that a tree is a tree is a tree is a tree.

But the American expatriate writer who hosted the Lost Generation in her Paris salon between the two great wars of the last century isn't telling the whole story about trees.

If you doubt this assertion, drop by the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery and check out "Exquisite Woods," an exhibition of sculptural works and installations by a quartet of Canadian ceramic artists curated by Christian Bernard Singer, the Waterloo gallery's former curator.

Before turning to the work, let's briefly rhapsodize about trees.

In addition to the actual trees we see in our backyards, local parks, wood lots and forests, trees act as similes, metaphors and symbols that span mythologies, religions, folklore, science, technology, literature and psychology, in addition to arts and esthetics.

Trees purify the environment by turning deadly carbon dioxide into life-giving oxygen. In his exhibition notes, Singer refers to trees as "the lungs of the planet."

They also regulate climate, influence weather and control drainage, preventing soil erosion and silted streams and rivers that suffocate fish and aquatic life.

Trees comfort and protect by providing shade and warmth. They have been a source for heat for millennia. They are the basis of building materials used to construct structures in which we live, work, conduct business and play. They provide habitat for birds and animals, not to mention insects.

Trees sustain us by providing food, including, fruits and nuts, for humans, animals, birds and insects.

Trees are both profane and sacred. They inspire contemplation and reflection, offer spiritual solace and, in pagan cultures, are talismanic sources of magic and healing. In the Bible, they are associated with the acquisition of knowledge and the nature of Good and Evil.

Trees are icons of beauty. They are integral thematic and formal elements in landscape and nature art.

In Canadian art, the solitary tree — from the Group of Seven, through the late Ken Danby and the late Alex Colville, to Ottawa-based Stephen Hutchings — is ubiquitous as a national emblem.

"Exquisite Woods" features work by four female artists — Marie-Andree Cote (Quebec), Hilde Lambrechts (Ottawa), Paula Murray (Quebec) and Grace Nickel (Manitoba) — who, in the words of Singer, "poetically interpret ecological concerns while exploring the interconnected relationships between humans and the natural world."

Trees are transformative, literally and symbolically, as they go through the organic process of growth, decay and regeneration. Combining two natural elements of earth and fire, ceramics is the ideal art form through which to embody and enact transformation.

Similarly, ceramic art is the perfect art form through which to explore the relationship between nature (organic) and culture (manufactured, artificial, fabricated), not to mention the ecological concerns associated with pollution, population growth, urbanization, industrialization, deforestation and extinction of wild species.

The artists represented in "Exquisite Woods" give elegant shape to the urgent concerns resulting from the collision between nature and culture. While each artist is distinct, it is interesting how their works complement and reflect each another.

Drawing their inspiration from water, flora and architecture, many of Cote's works utilize the circle or mandala. The exception is "River/Like a Whisper," a six-metre long, rectangular wall piece featuring cream-coloured, porcelain shards that seem to be swimming on a black ground, suggesting a river.

Assembled under the title of "The Aftermath," Lambrechts' 10 works represent various elements of trees including leaves, branches, bark fragments, trunks and exposed grain.

"The Bark Archive" consists of 100 square blocks mounted on the gallery wall. Each block, featuring an array of textures and colours spanning brown, red, ochre and grey, represents a variety of tree found throughout the planet.

Acknowledged as one of Canada's leading ceramicists, Lambrecht returns to the Waterloo gallery after participating in last spring's "New Function/Non-Function: Design as Exploration" exhibition.

Murray's four pieces are anchored by "Bridges," a stylized bridge constructed from steel cable and 95 rolled porcelain tubs resembling bamboo shoots or scrolls. Placed beneath the bridge are four piles of

sticks suggesting camp fires.

The installation is a visual metaphor for the ancient pursuit of knowledge, which is rendered urgent if humanity is going to insure its survival by healing the ailing planet. It creates a quiet, meditative mood reminiscent of an Oriental garden.

Nickel's three works are anchored by "Arbor Vitae," a large-scale installation consisting of four horizontal pieces resembling logs with fungi in their interior walls. The logs are bracketed by six tree/drapery columns running parallel, alongside the logs.

Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery

Exquisite Woods

Featuring Marie-Andree Cote, Hilde Lambrechts, Paula Murray and Grace Nickel.

On view through March 15.

Information and gallery hours available at 519-746-1882 or online at theclayandglass.ca

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