

Paula Murray '05

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Honoring the Natural World

by Nancy Baele

From a high shelf in her Québec, home, Paula Murray takes two black and rust, elongated pots. She places them beside a vessel from her latest "Fragmented Earth" series and laughs at her beginner's luck, saying the two pots are held together by wood ash and glaze. Weighted with pennies to prevent them from tipping, the pots are just as weighted with the ideals she had as a young potter. They mark the first step in a singularly focused journey: to balance the physical and the spiritual, and to show, through porcelain's fragility and strength, parallels in nature and in the human experience.

Murray lives on Meech Lake, in the heart of the Gatineau Hills, and has spent four years at sea, sailing from Canada to South America with her husband and two children. What she has absorbed from her close connection to seas, rivers and lakes, and from living in and walking through forests and along shorelines, is reflected in the sky and earth colors of her glazes and in her forms. Her pieces

mirror her sense of wonder at the vast range of the genus mollusk; at the way rock is riven by water and ice; at the power of hurricane strength winds; at undulations imprinted on sand; and, at the earth, verdant or seamed and drought-cracked.

Thinking about the stress inherent in nature has made her revere it as a necessary catalyst in the cycle of renewal and regeneration, physically, emotionally and mentally. Over the past 25 years, her work has been devoted to exploring the nature of stress and its particular porcelain aesthetic. Her pieces have become larger and more sculptural, weighted with an equilibrium that is both meditatively philosophical and firmly grounded in the material properties of clay and the elemental shaping forces of fire, air and water.

She hastens to make clear that when she is working she is conscious of symbolic elements but she does not like the intellectual pretension that often accompanies an analysis of a potter's work.

"Pulse of Life," 6½ in. (17 cm) in height, porcelain with fiber glass, fired to Cone 10 in an electric kiln, glazed with terra sigillata, then salt fired to Cone 06, with sticks tied with gut, 2004.



PHOTO: DAVID HARRIS



"All that Remains," 19 in. (48 cm) in height, coil-built paper clay, fired to Cone 6 in an electric kiln, with glaze and terra sigillata, then salt fired to Cone 06 and sandblasted.

"First and foremost, there is the physical act of making a pot," she says. "It demands a long apprenticeship, and respect for the materials and the process."

The first significant step in her apprenticeship began at Sheridan College in Toronto, where the late Ruth Gowdy McKinley was her mentor. "She had a quiet, strong personality and never worked at a frenzied pace," Murray explained. "She was a powerful influence on me because of her reverence for craftsmanship. Her work was chaste. Her philosophy was that everything she made be beautiful and useful. I felt honored when she asked me to help with wood firing. Every month I would split the wood and see Ruth's relationship to the firing process, her ritualistic way of starting early in the morning, raising the heat slowly, controlling the fire. It was a Zen experience."

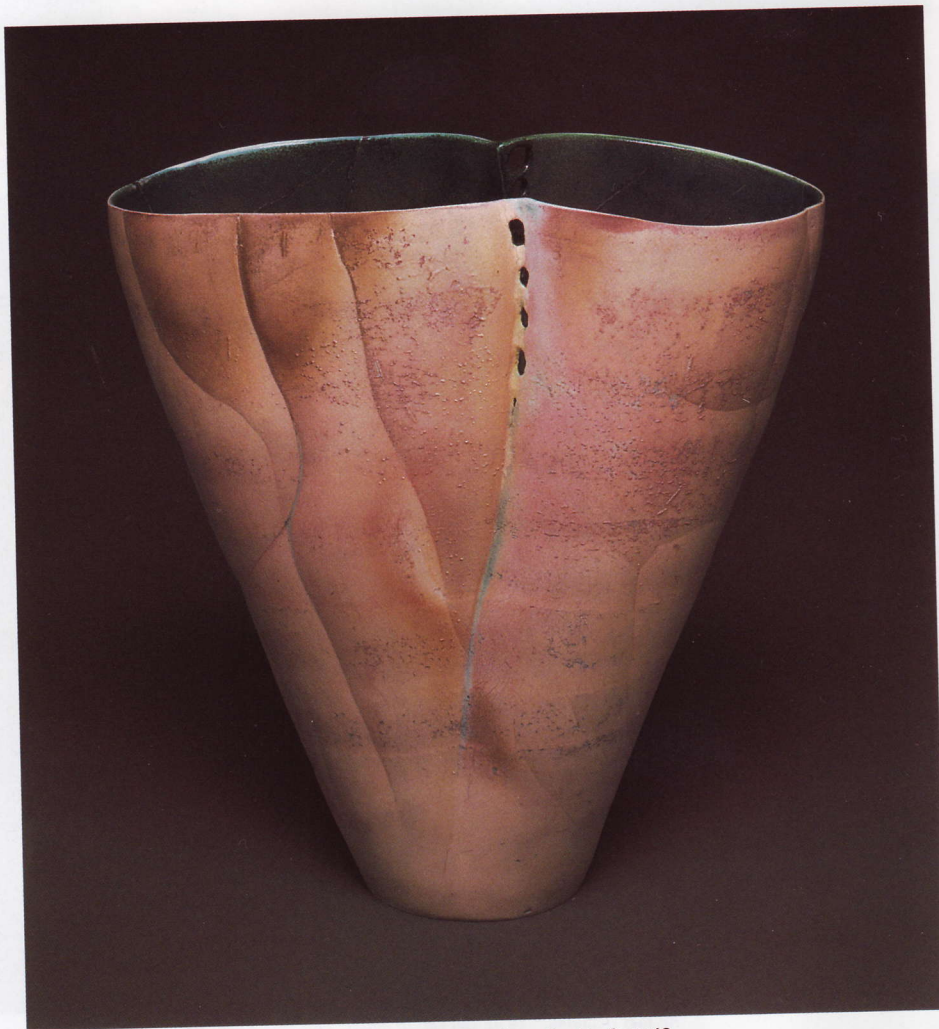
When she left Sheridan, Murray worked twelve- to fifteen-hour days in shared studios, perfecting her skills in throwing, casting, handbuilding and firing. Eventually, she and her husband were able to build a studio beside their home, where she continues to devote herself to the exploration of porcelain's possibilities.

Fifteen years ago, she began experimenting with incorporating into the clay a type of fiberglass, called "surface veil," which is used in wooden boat restoration. At the time, it was a solution to a technical problem for a sculpture entitled "Nautilus," commissioned by the Regional Municipality of Ottawa-Carleton for the atrium of its new building. Nautilus consisted of 33 large porcelain arcs that needed to be strong enough to be removed from the mold and transferred to the kiln without breaking. Since then, she has evolved the technique to exploit the warping, stress lines and patterns that can be created by the fiberglass. This marriage of materials has become central to her ideal of 21st-century life, where clay—a symbol of primal earth—and fiberglass—a symbol of a highly developed commercial technology—are in balance through creative choice and an appreciation for the ephemeral moment when there is a unique conjunction of forces.

Her appreciation for the ephemeral was heightened by experiencing storms at sea. "With a boat," she says, "you can steer but that's the limit. Your responsibility lies within that parameter. I have discovered that skills in sailing and in potting are remarkably similar. Both are dependent on being observant and disciplined and having purposeful intentions. I find the more I train myself to appreciate my experiences, even if it involves loss or pain, the more it leads to clarity of vision."

Her recent work shows how honed this clarity of vision has become. They are fusions of near rupture and serene beauty, echoing nature and human history in their forms of shell and tortoise shapes, classic vases or round-bottomed bowls. Salt glazed in earth and sky colors, they seem distillations of a slow evolution, their surfaces bearing almost invisible traces of small assaults, delicate reminders of peril, near ruin. All offer a Zenlike promise of a calm center.

Murray works in four-month cycles, developing a series, stabilizing the forms over several electric kiln firings, then glazing the work and firing it in her salt kiln. She explains, "I like the tactile intimacy of this process. A lot of my pots express fragility and beauty, stresses. I want to convey the shape of a feeling, and always, in my finished work, I want the firing technique to reflect the sense of mystery that comes from the process. I want each piece to carry with it the idea of being on a journey with other pieces. When they support each other in the kiln and influence each other's coloration by their very presence, they are, for me, a symbol of the strong sense of community I felt at sea, where there was a great sense of interdependency necessary for survival, even though each boat, like each pot, represents an isolated and individual way of life."



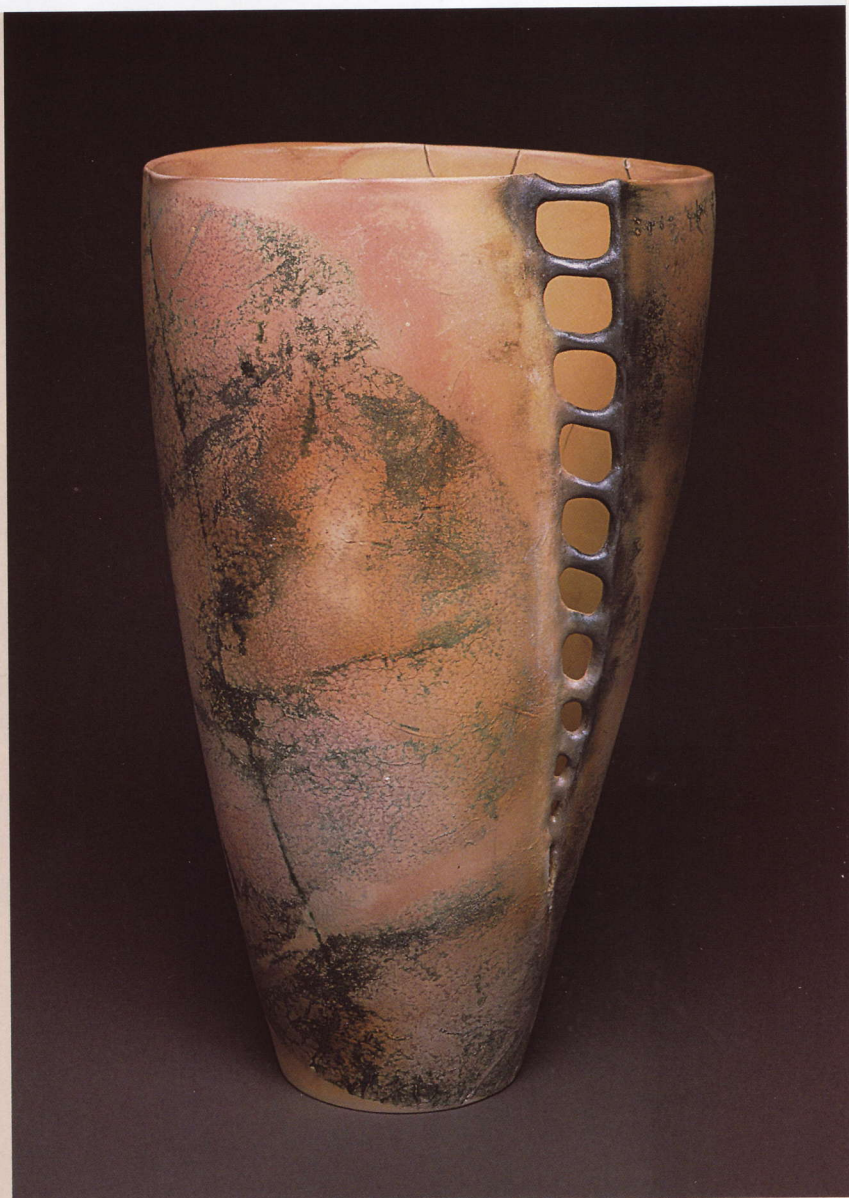
"Weathered," 11 in. (29 cm) in height, porcelain with fiberglass, fired to Cone 10 in an electric kiln, with copper saturate and terra sigillata, then salt fired to Cone 06.

Stress Management

by Paula Murray

For a number of years I have been developing a body of work that I call my "Stress Management" series. These pieces are made of porcelain casting slip with a 25% ball clay content to encourage movement of the clay when the work is drying. I layer the casting slip in a plaster mold and imbed a pattern of fiberglass in the clay as I go. The fiberglass I work with is a type called "surface veil," which was originally acquired to restore a cedar strip canoe. Purchased by the foot in 48-inch-wide rolls, the fibers resemble angel hair pasta. Through much trial-and-error with a very high loss rate, I have developed quite an expressive tool to explore my interest in our strength and fragility, and the ephemeral nature of life. The organic warping and cracking of the forms and the wonderful patterns that emerge are the result of the tension created as the clay shrinks in relation to the fibers, the thickness of the clay, and the speed of the drying process.

The vessels are fired in stages. First they are fired unglazed to Cone 10 in an electric kiln using saggars filled with silica sand to support the forms. The stress cracks are filled with slips, glazes, eroded by sandblasting or knit together with paper clay as work on each piece continues. The work is completed in a small, low-temperature salt kiln. Terra sigillatas, slips and glazes are applied with an airbrush, with a final coat of sugared water to toughen the surface. The pieces are stacked directly touching each other, filling the kiln to enhance the flame patterns and texture induced by the reducing salted atmosphere. This kiln is fired to Cone 06 over eight hours, reducing heavily after 800°C (1474°F) and salted twice above the burners.



"A Way Out," 15½ in. (39 cm) in height, porcelain with fiberglass, fired to Cone 10 in an electric kiln, with copper saturate and terra sigillata, then salt fired to Cone 06, by Paula Murray, Chelsea, Québec, Canada.

Her home is filled with collections of shells and her own work. She is pleased that the pots she placed on the table to mark the start of her journey have such an affinity with her latest work. "To think these came out of near disaster," she says, recalling how she and other students at Sheridan had been told by their landlord that they could tear down an old garden shed for their first wood firing. The wood was so old it didn't burn slowly but seemed to evaporate. They were firing for 27 hours but couldn't get the kiln up to temperature. Ruth came to the rescue by bringing her own wood. "These pots came from that firing," Murray says. "They mean a lot to me because the older we get, the more we realize that we choose our

own perspective and I see them as part of the unity of my total work." The distance she has traveled from this salvaged beginning is most apparent in the perception, implicit in her latest work, that clay, shaped and glazed to her vision, represents both earth and human body. Beauty lies in the unique imprint of the object's passage through time. Her Fragmented Earth series is tangible evidence of her belief that creativity is an indication of the life force unfolding over a broad span of time. She says, "I believe the artist's role is to try to understand this life force by articulating it and giving it form. My intention has always been the same. I want to make objects about the nature of being in and honoring the natural world."