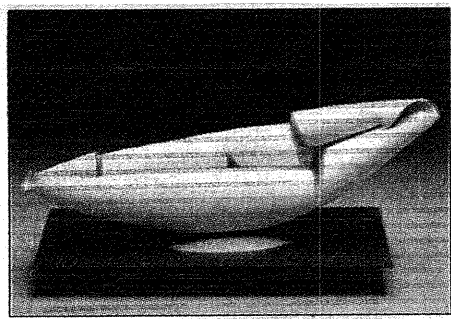


HOMES



DAVID BARBOUR

Fragile beauty

Paula Murray propels clay into uncharted territory, creating porcelain sculptures with a strong link to nature. **Janet Wilson** visits the artist in her Gatineau Hills studio.

Halfway around the weathered road skirting Meech Lake, Paula Murray can be found in her studio sculpting and firing clay into breathtaking porcelain sculptures.

Located in the Gatineau Hills, the celebrated artist's studio appears to have been carved into the rocky base of a steep hill, with a bubbling brook as company.

Her family home is located another 10 steps across the country road, and is one of only a handful set alongside the edge of the pristine lake. The property, which resembles a Group of Seven painting, is dotted with towering pines and cedars and has been in her husband's family since the 1920s.

For an artist who draws inspiration from nature, water and the sky, Murray has the perfect setting to live and work. Her mantra is to honour the natural world with her art.

"I know how lucky I am to live in nature next to the water. I pinch myself on a regular basis. My children both attend school in Montreal and my husband travels a lot with work, but this is the place where we find peace and rest."

Murray spent several years at sea, sailing between Canada and South America with her husband, John (Jock) Munro, one of Canada's top lighting directors, and their children. She credits her sailing experiences for helping to shape her artistic journey.

"When I create a porcelain piece, I have to balance the physical and spiritual. You have to respect the material, which is the clay, and the process it goes through. Each piece I make has been on a journey. Porcelain's fragility and its strength mirrors human experience and nature."

Murray, who was inducted into the Royal Canadian Academy of Arts last year, enjoys a solid international reputation as a ceramicist. Her works are found in galleries, museums and private collections around the world and often are given by the federal government to visiting dignitaries.

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'I was hooked on clay the first time I touched it.'

PAULA MURRAY,
ceramic artist

Fragile: 'Creating something beautiful out of chaos'

Continued from page 1

"I get a rush making meditative objects for someone else's personal space."

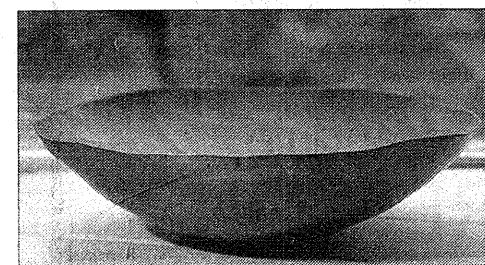
Her porcelains were a favourite of former governor general Adrienne Clarkson, who presented the artist's works to the likes of former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan and German ballet choreographer Pina Bausch. One of her sculptures is at U.S. President George W. Bush's Texas ranch, while another was presented to the Tragically Hip last week when the band was honoured with a Performing Arts Award at the Governor General's gala at the National Arts Centre.

The 49-year-old potter, who spends most of her time working alone in the studio, is one of five ceramic artists taking part in the Ottawa Art Gallery's annual auction next Thursday where one of her works will be auctioned off at the fundraiser. "I love engaging with the public — especially when people are curious about the mystery surrounding the origins of a piece."

Murray mixes her own clay recipe and casts shapes in her 600-square-foot studio, which houses her electric and gas kiln. A showroom straddles the back of the space and is encased in glass with views of the hillside. Visitors can see dozens of Murray's sculptures sitting on glass and wooden shelves. Some of her porcelain pieces resemble birchbark, crackled human skin, even parts of the human anatomy. She is working on a "cocoon series" that curl inward.

The glazes are a testament to the colours found in nature: subtle sky blue, muddy red and green and earthy brown and taupe. Murray revels in the texture of clay and how it warps and cracks during the firing process. About 15 years ago she began experimenting with a type of fibreglass called surface veil, which she originally purchased to restore a cedar strip canoe. She began embedding the fibreglass into the clay and has been exploring the technique ever since to create a variety of patterns and stress lines.

"There is so much trial and error and manipulation involved. A single piece has to go through so many processes and can be



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PAULA MURRAY
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PHOTOS BY JULIE OLIVER, THE OTTAWA CITIZEN

'After all these years, I'm grateful that my work has continued to grow and that I'm still working in this medium,' says Paula Murray.

fired up to six times. I spend a lot of time organically altering the form."

Murray creates about 25 sculptures a year and can labour for days over a single piece only to have it collapse and then have to start all over again. Her sculptures sell for \$500 to \$2,000.

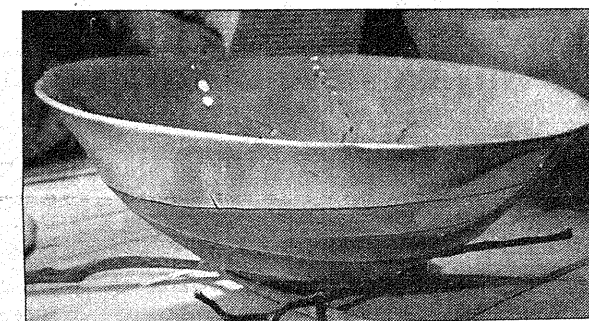
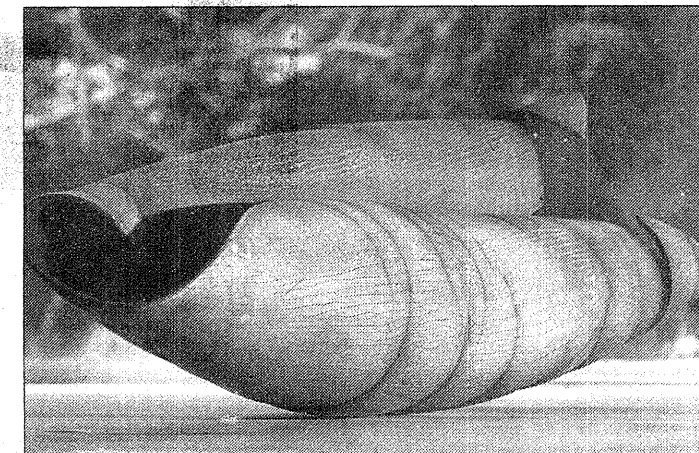
"I get attached to a piece when I'm working on a series, but I'm always excited to let it go. I enjoy creating something beautiful out of all this chaos. I take broken pieces that look fragile, but make something whole and strong."

Murray, who graduated from Sheridan

College in Toronto in 1979, worked for a time in shared studios on Bell Street in Ottawa, at a firehall in Hull and as a technician at the Glebe Community Centre. She set up her home studio in 1986.

She credits the support of curator Vicky Henry, who owned the Ufundi Gallery on Sussex Drive and is now the director of Canada's Art Bank, for showcasing her ceramic art in a gallery setting.

"After all these years, I'm grateful that my work has continued to grow and that I'm still working in this medium. I was hooked on clay the first time I touched it."



ABOVE LEFT: One of Murray's fragile bowls with a delicate leaf-like pattern inside.

ABOVE: A piece titled Bridging Space.

ABOVE RIGHT: A piece titled Abandoned Shell #3.