

Lady and the water

For potter Paula Murray, H₂O is an elemental force that inspires her lustrous porcelain creations

PAULA MURRAY IS FASCINATED BY WATER. Over the years, the elemental force has become more than a daily necessity for the ceramics artist – it's become a muse that has transformed both her life and art.

"I've always woken up looking at water, how the light plays off it ... it's such a symbol of life energy," explains Paula from her studio gallery in Old Chelsea, which borders the shores of Meech Lake. Her home – a summer cottage in her husband's family since the 1920s, now lovingly restored – is also a literal stone's throw away from one of Gatineau Park's most famed bodies of water.

Water is "so connected to the elements," she continues, highlighting the link between earth and fire that ceramics also evokes. "It's a very nourishing tie for me."

For the celebrated artist, well-known across Canada and on the international art scene for her porcelain vessels, the connection to water extends well beyond a beautiful lakeside view. Paula first completed a year-long sailing trip down south in 1985, later hitting the high seas with her husband and children for her second major trip in 1990 and sailing predominantly in the Bahamas and through the Caribbean. Taking her kids – then aged two and five – on the four-year voyage may sound like a daunting task, but spending almost a half-decade on a sailboat was a refreshing experience, Paula recounts, and one that is often reflected in the shapes, colours and figures of her work.

"You're not living with a lot of objects – it's a materially stripped-down existence, but spiritually very rich," she explains. "You feel how small you are ... what your role is."

For Paula, who initially began her post-



Paula Murray's studio gallery is open year-round in Old Chelsea, by chance or appointment. For more information, please visit www.paulamurray.ca or call 819-827-0399.

WRITTEN BY LAURA CUMMINGS

PHOTOGRAPHY BY DARREN BROWN

secondary schooling back in the '70s with science at the University of Ottawa – later moving to Sheridan College to study ceramics – it's a message that transcends to her art as well.

"I was always interested in the connection between the mind and the body," she says of the inspiration that led her from chemistry equations and biology charts to pottery and sculpture. "We are, at our core, spiritual beings having a physical experience in this world."

After her tutelage at Sheridan, Paula began experimenting with firing techniques to create a distinct look, using self-taught methods amalgamating a variety of influences and styles. Employing another technique of embedding clay with fibreglass – to stress the pots into unique shapes and reliefs during firing – has also yielded impressive results, including one piece that eventually caved into a cocoon-like form mimicking a seashell, she recounts.

"There's that aspect of surprise," Paula explains of her work, which has been given to former UN secretary-general Kofi Annan by then-governor general Adrienne Clarkson, and to the Tragically Hip as this year's National Arts Centre Award. "(The pieces) are on the brink ... it's pushing that edge of my creativity. That's just how I work, and to me, what art is about – pursuing the unknown, what excites you."

With a busy year ahead, Paula plans to put most of her time aside to focus on creative research rather than crafting new objects in the studio. On the personal side, Paula and her husband recently purchased a steel schooner he "just fell in love with," she says, with the vessel currently undergoing renovations before it hits the water. And though Paula doesn't expect to set up camp on the open seas again any time soon, she's open to all possibilities on the horizon.

"We'll see where (the new boat) wants to take us."