

Paula Murray Resilience

By Gil McElroy

Oh ye purists of ceramics, take heed. Paula Murray is not of your ilk.

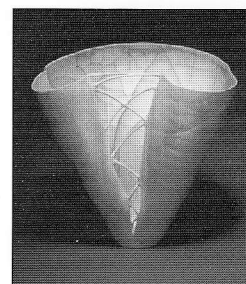
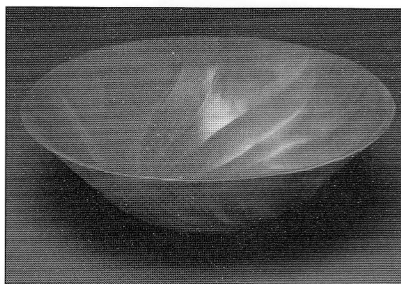
Now, that's not really news, but it is a fact worth the further examination and discussion. The work comprising her recent exhibition at the Oeno Gallery in Carrying Place, Ontario makes it so.

It's all porcelain, but porcelain with a decided twist. The very qualities that make it so attractive a material for many ceramists have, of course, created a status quo. Many ceramists have settled comfortably into the medium, content to employ its qualities to their aesthetic and utile advantage, but not really poke around at the boundaries and see what might come of a little experimentation, a little daring. Great work can, of course, come out of sticking to the middle of the ceramic road, but, as in any artistic medium, most of it is quite ho-hum and (no pun intended) pedestrian. To borrow from Neil Young, the ditch can be a lot more interesting place.

Paula Murray has chosen the proverbial ditch, opted for a path that lies out along porcelain's very fringes. She's pushed the material's tensile qualities way past their literal and figurative breaking points and in the end created work of enormous beauty, power, and meaning. It all has to do with a willingness to abandon (or at least, put aside) the aesthetic fundamentalism of a purist approach. For Murray, that has meant a profitable encounter with fiberglass.

In works like *Eggshell* (all works are 2006) and *A Fine Balance*, the blending of porcelain and fiberglass - two materials valued for their strength-to-weight ratios - has resulted in thin-walled vessels of tremendous delicacy and surprising lightness. Both works are bowls without inherent footings and so are dependent upon separate bases - trivets - comprised of small wooden twigs tied together with gut for stability. The bowls also demonstrate Murray's use of multiple firings to create stress-cracked surface patterns that strongly allude to the organic patterns of the natural world, especially the veins and cellular structure found on leaves. Fiberglass may be an entirely industrial product, but combined with porcelain and in the able hands of Murray, Nature has come calling.

The referencing to the natural is common to all the works of this exhibition; beyond generic leafy allusions, some of Murray's pieces - specifically, *Phosphorescent Sea* and *Shimmering Blue* - incur other, perhaps more domestic readings courtesy the cabbage leaf patterns and likenesses of



broad and shallow vessel forms.

But none of these pieces engage medium-specific notions of the decay, potential collapse, and the rupture of the vessel form as does the most interesting of Murray's works, the stuff where she confronts, head-on, the utilitarian rationale underlying ceramics. *Release* makes for a fine example. It's a tall vessel with scalloped sides and vein-like cracks and lines of revealed underglaze that maintain the organic overtone common to the entire body of Murray's work comprising this exhibition. But she's addressed the very idea and structure of the vessel form directly by undoing it. From the lip, *Release* is cleaved fully two-thirds of the way down to its foot, rent by a long narrow "V". The consequent chasm is spanned by a series of nine thin filaments that visually hold the shape together, seemingly preventing the vessel from entirely splitting clear to its base.

Unbound is a shallower container, but here the cleft indeed spans from lip to foot, nine filaments - two of them crossing one another, the others zigzagging a path down - all that visually holds things together. The rupture of the vessel is near total - the piece's mouth is spread wide, as if the clay were about to wholly give way and the work fall open in a process something akin to, say, the blossoming of a flower.

There's another Nature analogy, if one only of my own making. More clearly, there are those of Murray's devising at the heart of two works: *Eroded Shell #1* and its companion piece, *Eroded Shell #2*. Both are, as their titles suggest, incomplete shells (like those of a snail or maybe a nautilus, though larger) as if decayed or worn away by over the course of time. Enough is absent of these things to reveal the interior shell structure, the spiraling form wrought by a living creature as it lived and grew.

Of course they are no such thing, but are porcelain and fiberglass artefacts mimicking an organic form. But the allusion to the habitation of a living creature - to the world of *creatura* - is indeed powerful, and our response to these two pieces has everything to do with the sense of loss and absence they thereby connote. Perhaps even more importantly, it's the passage of time of which they eloquently speak, aesthetically iterating the Second Law of Thermodynamics: things fall apart.

Out here, off the well-beaten ceramics path, Paula Murray is making time.

Gil McElroy is an independent curator, critic, and poet. He will be curating an exhibition of the work of ceramist Keith Campbell in 2007.