

## Fire and Form: Masters of Clay and Glass

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Exhibition Text

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Featuring nine leading Canadian ceramic and glass artists: Susan Collett, Steven Heineman, Loren Kaplan, Grainne McHugh, Paula Murray, Susan Rankin, Julia Reimer, John Paul Robinson, and Cheryl Wilson Smith, *Fire and Form: Masters of Clay and Glass* is committed to blowing your mind. Pun intended. Together these artists are part of the mid-20th century ceramics movement responsible for “**releasing the medium from the tyranny of function,**” as Rachael Gotlieb, (Gotlieb, 2006), emphatically described of the *Funk Art* clay movement that began in Saskatchewan with David Gilhooly, Viktor Cicansky, Joe Fafard, and Marilyn Levine in 1969. While it is not the case that clay and glass have always been used for strictly ‘functional’ purposes - after all the first artwork in our art historical ‘timeline’ is the Venus of Dolní Věstonice, from a small prehistoric settlement near Brno, in the Czech Republic, in 28,000 BCE - nonetheless clay and glass artists have fought against the pigeon-holing of their medium for much of the post-modern and contemporary time period.



*Venus of Dolní Věstonice*, 28,000 BCE, Ceramic, 4.4 x 1.7 in. Discovered in 1925 in Moravia, then Czechoslovakia, now Czech Republic.

Victor Cicansky, *Large Rutabaga*, 1993, Ceramic, 8.5 x 17.5 x 9.5 in  
A fine example of the playfulness of the Funk Art movement.

Susan Collett, Steven Heineman, Loren Kaplan, Grainne McHugh, Paula Murray, Susan Rankin, Julia Reimer, and Cheryl Wilson Smith have wrested the form of ceramic and glass from the strictures of quotidian functionality and embraced its conceptual, socio-political, socio-cultural, philosophical, and aesthetically compelling potential. Every medium has within it a message that is at once unique and infinite. Sure, the medium may in fact *be* the message if we are to accept Marshall McLuhan’s 1964 thesis, but its ability to communicate is multi-vocal and contingent on the form it takes.

For Susan Collett, Steven Heinemann, Paula Murray, John Paul Robinson and Cheryl Wilson Smith the nature-culture paradigm is at the forefront of the form of their practice. Collett, unhindered by the history of clay began including wire armatures into her sculptures in the late 80's. Collett came to clay circuitously through monoprinting, her first love, and carried her attraction to entangled curvilinear lines with her. Without having trained in the medium of clay she was entirely unburdened with conceptualized notions of its limitations. With her *Laden Series*, Collett is playing with the tension between order and chaos: "As I push the work towards the edge of physical collapse, I aim to make this opposition more potent, *Palisade* and *Elysium* culminate in blooms, a notion of light coming out of darkness; analogous to life being cumulative, inevitably changing, never quite finished, unable to be ordered or tidied, messy and chaotic but not without beauty." Her clay works are hand-built of earthenware paper clay and multi-fired to achieve a complex patina of surfaces. These intricately entangled sculptural compositions are contemplations on life's cycle of renewal.



Susan Collett, *Elysium*, 2021, Paper Clay, Wire, Steel, 10 x 8 x 9 in  
*Palisade*, 2021, Paper Clay, Wire, Steel, 11 x 8 x 11 in

With Heinemann's vessels one might be reminded of Heidegger's thought dialectic, *What is a Thing?* Is it what it does, what it looks like, what it feels like, what it's made of, how it's formed, or how we use it? I've synthesized, but the point is made, the nature of things and the culture of things are intertwined. Heinemann's ceramic creations are definitively of the earth, but his creative interventions implore you to consider the evolution of time through their drying craquelure, and our relationship with the world. For example, *Heavy Weather* asks its viewer to gaze down into the broad opening of its vessel-like form while at the same time contemplating the illusion to the sky and clouds above. Art Critic, Murray White, has aptly accused Heinemann of being "a high-order Modernist, guided by forces not subject to the particulars of their day (The Star, 2017)." And this is demonstrably evident through Heinemann's near-scientific exploration of the nature, essence, and extent of the medium of clay.



Steven Heinemann, *TP #1*, 2021, Diptych, Ceramic, 10.6 in diameter each plate

*Heavy Weather*, 2019, ceramic, 24.75 x 19.75 x10 in

Likewise, Paula Murray is preoccupied with nature, culture, and the fragility of human lived experience. The subtle fracturing, furling, curling, and controlled collapsing of her ceramic work encapsulates this. An avid material-based artist, Murray commits to the exploration of the outermost technical edge of her medium: she embraces fragility and tension, and the brink of existence, breakthrough, and catastrophic loss. Adding fiberglass to her clay Murray muses on the tension and sometimes destruction that occurs during the drying their process despite the close similarity of the material constituents of the two mediums. The fiberglass makes the porcelain stronger unless it destroys it. Now that is a metaphor for life one can sink their teeth into. Like all great leaders, inventors, and avant-garde warriors, who explore the limits of possibility, Murray has come to accept loss as an inevitable component of exploring uncharted territory.

When one explores the edge of possibility, loss is inevitable. An avid ocean voyager, Murray is interested in the notion of control and how we respond when we cannot maintain it. This is something one must entertain when on a 44-foot sloop vessel for four years surrounded by the vast unpredictability of ocean waters as Murray was with her family from 1990 - 94. She lives the same way she makes art: pushing limits and embracing the unknown.

Murray reflects, "I think ceramics have a long view of time because they have so much history and the process is so long." Clay has been instrumental throughout history and Murray is interested in its metaphorical potency and ready ability to simultaneously explore fragility and strength. "I am always working with high fired porcelain, so the pieces look like they are holding on by a thread but they are actually quite strong." And like their creator, they are indeed incredibly strong.



*Passage III*, 2015, Porcelaine, 24 x 4.7 x 4 in; *Passage V & VI*, 2015, Porcelaine, 27.5 x 18 x 4 in

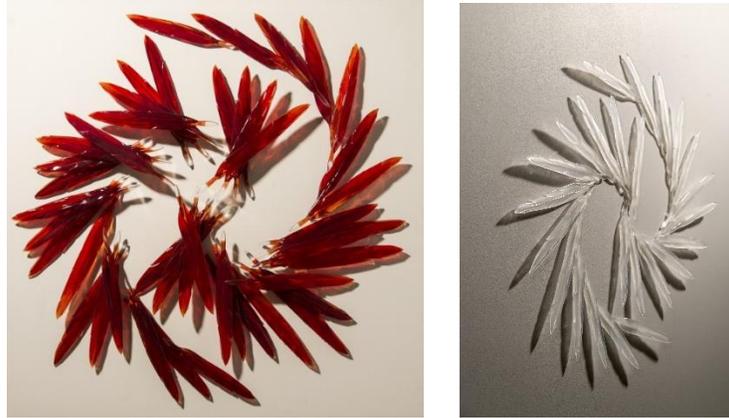
During the 1970s a Canadian sensibility entered the aesthetic of ceramicists. The rugged Canadian terrain reflected in ceramic form. Susan Collett, Steve Heinemann, and Paula Murray, while not part of an organized school, each in their own unique way carried this movement forth. Later in the 1980s and 1990s the conceptual and philosophical potential clay and glass gained emphasis. John Paul Robinson and Cheryl Wilson Smith work with glass and explore themes of nature/culture as well as themes of becoming, inheritance, the weight of history, and the potential of humans to move forward while learning from their past. Cheryl Wilson-Smith is exploring the tensions between nature and culture through notions of genetic memory - can we inherit memory and an affinity to form? Wilson-Smith believes we can and was awarded a Chalmers fellowship through the Ontario Arts Council to explore her thesis. Wilson-Smith resides in Red Lake, where the highway ends in Northern Ontario, and through her work she seeks connectedness. Wilson-Smith spends her days in the bush absorbing its history and her work with paper-thin layers of glass frit is reflective of the lively interplay between the macroscopic and the microscopic experienced in forested ecosystems. For Wilson-Smith layering is performed as both an aesthetically charged formal mechanism and a metaphor for memory, inheritance, and the layering of time. And like Paula Murray's work it lives at the evocative edge of fragility and strength.



Cheryl Wilson-Smith, *Intensity*, 2018, Glass Frit, 24 x 9 x 3.5 in

John Paul Robinson deftly bridges conceptual- and material-based art practices and proffers philosophical ponderings for rumination in the form of forged glass. Preoccupied with the mythic potential of science throughout his career, glass is the medium through which Robinson has been able to grapple with and explore the potential of mythology to catch up with the science of now. Robinson asserts, "We have a common origin and a common future; we live in a global economy and it is going to take all of us to soar forward together."

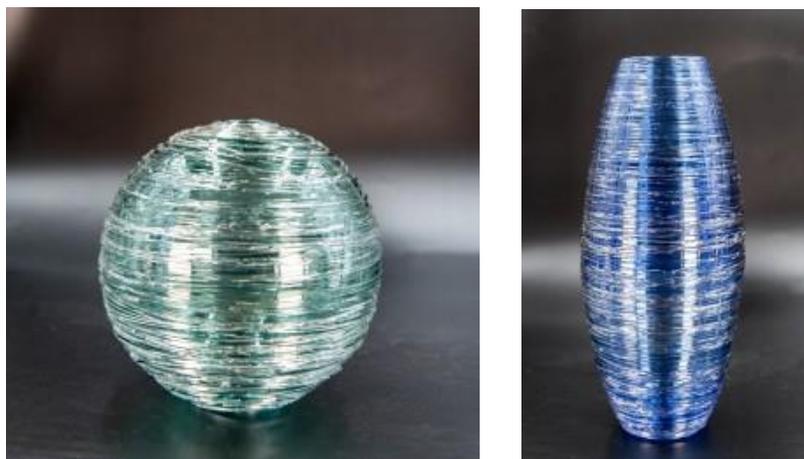
In *FireFly* Robinson arrays a sequence of feather-like forms in a spiral formation to symbolize the interrelationship between the earth and the galaxy to which we belong. Feather forms are used strategically in place of stars because of their recognizable function. Feathers are intended for flight - it is possible to understand their movement even when they are stationary. Whereas the movement of the earth can be understood scientifically and intellectually but not intuitively (*we know* it is moving, but we can *feel* it moving). These are the types of musings Robinson ponders and proffers with his art. He has catapulted the medium of glass into the realm of conceptual art and they make for a dynamic duo. By way of explanation Robinson states, "the stomach tells us we are standing still but science tells us we are flying." The earth is rotating at 800km/hour and that earth orbits the sun at a few thousand km/hour, yet incredibly, our daily lived experience has no gauge for the speed at which we are moving. John Paul Robinson is interested in the rupture that occurs between mythological belief systems and scientific discovery and uses his art to explore the nature of meaning, belonging, reality, and responsibility. One may not be able to feel the movement of the earth, but Robinsons work will surely move you.



John Paul Robinson, *Fire Fly*, 2020, Solid Glass, 40 x 40 in  
*Home*, 2020, Solid Glass, 37 x 37 x 2 in

Julia Reimer and Susan Rankin deploy the medium of glass to convey and heighten a connection with the organic environment. Reimer's glass is infused with the essence of the crisp prairie light of her childhood home in the foothills of Alberta's Rocky Mountains, while Rankin takes inspiration from the ever-changing colours and forms of her garden, her ceaseless muse.

Reimer, aptly ordained "the foremost magician of light," by art historian James D. Campbell (Campbell, *Art Mur*, 2010), weaves delicate translucent strands of gossamer glass concentrically such that her vessels capture light and appear to glow from within. Minimal in design, sensually soft in palette, the gossamer vessels are inspired by the earth, and realized by the creative vision and technical mastery of a glassmith who has found her calling. The meeting of artist and material was like synchronicity for Reimer, "I was always drawn to the muted luminescence of river ice on bright brisk days in winter. So, when I had a chance to combine the essence of light, color and movement with a material, it was a perfect fit."



Julia Reimer, *Gossamer Sphere Medium Steel Blue*, 2021, Blown Glass, 6.75 x 6.25 x 6.25 in.  
Julia Reimer, *Gossamer Vase Medium Cerulean Blue*, 2021, Blown Glass, 11.25 x 5 x 5 in.

Organic meets psychedelic in the flattened vessels created by Susan Rankin. Rankin's creative drive, permeated by the wild forms she works with in her garden all summer, finds outlet in the form of glass. Sometimes she works with flattened vessels, sometimes with abstracted groupings of glass flower rods installed outdoors, and always in an inspired palette.



Susan Rankin, *Small Flattened Form with Shards in Oranges*, 2021, Blown Glass, 7 x 6 x 3.5 in.  
*Large Flattened Form with Shards and Cane in Blues*, 2021, Blown Glass 10.5 x 9 x 5 in.

Loren Kaplan and Grainne McHugh both launched their ceramic careers in South Africa. Kaplan moved to Toronto in 2013 and McHugh, born in Ireland, lived in South Africa for many years and is currently in the process of moving to Canada. These artists offer a different perspective on ceramic form. Kaplan is consumed by the many possibilities of the vessel form - both how it is shaped and how it is patterned. While McHugh approaches ceramic from a distinctly sculptural position.

There is a calming elegance to Kaplan's style. Following the tactile sensation and body of the clay medium Kaplan incorporates botanical carving, geometric patterning, anthropomorphic characterization, and soft additive texturing into her creations. Moving easily from small scale to large scale, in a sophisticated, muted palette, Kaplan explores vessels because of their potential to contain. The possibilities are endless. Kaplan reflects, "I make vessels because containers are about potential – defined spaces of emptiness that can be filled with something.... Or nothing. Resonances of light, or sound, sight or touch." Kaplan's vessels exude an insistent self-contained presence.



Loren Kaplan, *Marriage Vessel Blue*, Porcelain, 2020, 9.5 x 10 x 5 inches, \$550  
*Large Engraved Ginger Jar*, Porcelain, 2021, 17 x 13 x 13 inches, \$1,450

Gráinne McHugh works back and forth in an intuitive fashion between image and idea to create work which responds to contemporary political and environmental issues. McHugh prefers clay over words or written text: it is with low fire terracotta, glazes, and intuitive mark making that she can express herself concisely. Often working with human head forms, McHugh uses a dark, organic palette, to amplify the gravity of her message. Her work is engaging and essential.



Gráinne McHugh, *Seas Four Meters Building to Six*, 2017, Glazed Clay, 12.6x 7x9 in.

*Metropolis*, 2017, Glazed Clay, 14 x 13.5 x 11.5 in.

