Susan Collett

Impiluvium

Article by Kristen den Hartog

Stepping into the courtyard that frames the art of Susan Collett’s ceramic installation Impiluvium is, in some ways, like stepping back in time. The plain concrete walls of the courtyard soften amid lush trees and a dense carpet of petrified grass, but what seems to have been here longest are six large ceramic vessels and a narrow sculpture that rises out of a pool filled with smooth grey stones. In spite of their aged appearance, however, the ceramic pieces were only made in 2006 with the courtyard in mind. When Collett won the commission as the 2006 courtyard artist at the Burlington Art Centre in Ontario, Canada, her task was to build a unitary installation that would pay homage to the gallery’s enclosed outdoor space. She first looked at the courtyard in the dead of a Canadian winter, so it was difficult to imagine how the finished work would appear in a different season. “I wanted the space to leap into the work,” she says, “but I didn’t want the work to leap into the space and be lost.”

Despite the size of these sculptures, and the inherent challenges in making ceramic work so large, Collett says the six vessels, or Motes, are nothing more than a “gracilized coiling” of hammered strips of earthenware paper clay. The Motes reach up 1.5 m without pedestals and the pond sculpture stretches to almost 2 m. Because of this, Collett’s first concern was how to secure such large-scale works outdoors against the elements. Together with a fabricator, she worked out a plan for anchoring the pieces on steel pedestals.

“The steel I figured would be heavy enough to balance the clay.” she says, “and also offer a nice counterpoint of hard steel against the soft, seemingly fragile clay.” Once that was sorted, she felt confident to continue working and let the sculptures grow in scale. The tallest piece, Impiluvium, the installation’s single pond piece, is a deliberately stacked tower of ceramic tiles, hand-built layer upon layer, like a dry seed castle you’d find on the beach. Some of the appendages resemble branches of a tree not yet fully formed but looking, nevertheless, centuries old. At various points up the sculpture’s slim body, an array of shapes — fungal or shell-like — spill from the trunk, recalling the decorative motifs of ancient Rome. An inner core of reinforcing wire gives the many appendages their necessary strength and allows for what Collett calls “this, drawing-like areas,” which are otherwise difficult to achieve when working with clay. A man of this same wire tops the sculpture like a tangle of hair. Despite its subtlety, Impiluvium is the most chaotic piece in the group, a bustle of frenzied anchored by the uniform stones on the floor of the pool.

In Roman architecture, the impiluvium was a pool that captured rainwater from the roof’s opening and channelled it through to the cinemas below. Collett’s use of the term here is a poetic reference to the traditional Roman courtyard, and a nod to the gallery’s physical space. The irony, though, is in what isn’t here: the Motes’ vessels surrounding the pond piece are so relentlessly pierced with holes that any water poured into them would simply drain right through. In making the work, Collett says she considered the concepts of “life building — of building your own life in all its aspects — but then being unable to hold it all. The work is really about falling through and letting go.”

At a 2006 residency in Jingdezhen, China, where she experimented with porcelain, she found herself amazed by all the “shaping and movement” that resulted when she fired the clay at high temperatures. “It reminded me of how we can’t grip life, or control it — that it is a constantly moving entity. I wanted the work to say something about that as well.”

Set as they are upon simple steel pedestals, the Motes take on a formal look, like relics rediscovered in an ancient garden. On a sunny day, light pours through the countless holes in their undulating structures, and makes the sculptures glow and sparkle. Though ordinary, they seem to shift and hover as the light moves through them.

Like the pond piece, each Motus is built a layer at a time, and fired in separate sections in order to reach its large scale. It is this risky building process that gives the work its tension. And yet, the constant puncturing, bending, shaping and firing only makes the clay stronger, though it seems more fragile. The paradox lies at the core of Collett’s work, which speaks about growing and changing and warping and lasting. “I didn’t realise how much the China trip had affected me until I was well into making the work.” says Collett. “And it kept coming back to memories of the Chinese landscape, and how they carved up the strips of land for the tea farming. It struck me and inspired the idea of pieces with layers.” In China she also saw tiny bowls carved from eggshell.

Potter Kristin O’Hare’s project, titled ‘Implacable’, explores the ephemeral aspects of natural forms, and in consequence, she has created a series of porcelain sculptures. By manipulating her clay and firing it at different temperatures, she has created a sense of change and decay, as if the sculptures are decaying into their natural form.

The sculptures open up questions about the life cycle of an object and the inevitability of decay. Through this exploration, O’Hare seeks to provoke an emotional response from the viewer, encouraging them to reflect on their own personal experiences and memories.

O’Hare’s work is not just about the beauty of the objects themselves, but about the experience of looking at them. The sculptures are delicate and fragile, and it is easy to imagine them being broken or damaged by a simple touch. This adds to the sense of fragility and impermanence.

Overall, ‘Implacable’ is a thought-provoking project that invites the viewer to consider the transience of life and the beauty that can be found in imperfection.