



*Impluvium (base detail), glaze texture detail.
Below: Impluvium (studio shot) 203 x 45.5 x 50.5 cm.*

Susan Collett Impluvium

Article by Kristen den Hartog



STEPPING INTO THE COURTYARD THAT HOUSES TORONTO ARTIST SUSAN COLLETT'S ceramic installation *Impluvium* is, in some ways, like stepping back in time. The plain concrete walls of the courtyard soften amid leafy trees and a dense carpet of periwinkle, but what seems to have been here longest are six huge 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 unified 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 seep into the work," she says, "but I didn't want the work to seep 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 *Moirés*, are nothing more than a "glorified coiling" of hammered strips of earthenware paper clay. The *Moirés* reach up to 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, *Impluvium*, the installation's single pond piece, is a delicately stacked tower of ceramic tiers,

hand-built layer upon layer, like a drip sand castle you'd find on the beach. Some of its 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 out from the trunk, recalling the decorative cisterns of ancient Rome. An inner core of nichrome wire gives the many appendages their necessary strength and allows for what Collett calls "thin, drawing-like areas," which are otherwise difficult to achieve when working with clay. A snarl of this same wire tops the sculpture like a tangle of hair. Despite its subtlety, *Impluvium* is the most chaotic piece in the group, a burst of frenzy anchored by the uniform stones on the floor of the pool.

In Roman architecture, the impluvium was a pool that captured rainwater from the roof's opening and funnelled it through to the cisterns 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 *Moiré* 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 on your 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 2004 residency in Jingdezhen, China, where she'd experimented with porcelain, she found herself amazed by all the "slumping 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 *Moirés* 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 sedentary, they seem to shift and hover as the light moves through them.

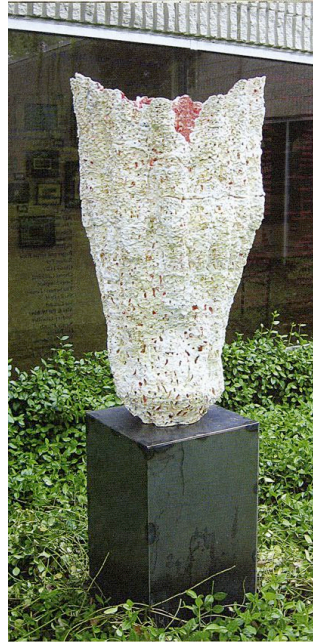
Like the pond piece, each *Moiré* is built a layer at a time, and fired in separate sections in order to reach its large scale. It is this risky building process that gives the work its tension. And yet, the constant puncturing, bending, shaping and firing only makes the clay stronger, though it seems more fragile. This paradox lies at the core of Collett's work, which speaks about growing and changing and warping and losing. "I didn't realise how much the China trip had affected me until I was well into making the work," says Collett. "And I 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



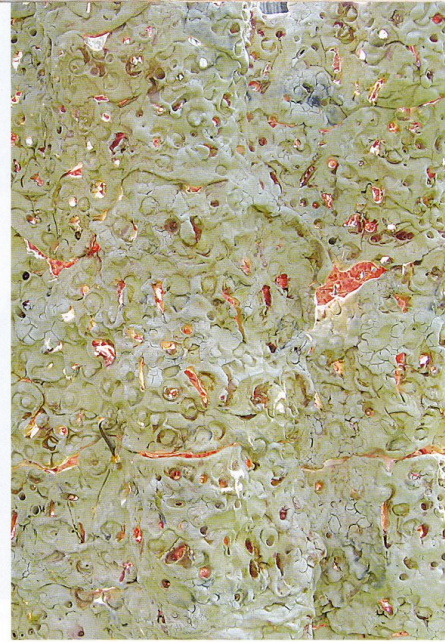
Amalgam. 96.5 x 71 x 45.5 cm.



Crimson Moire, Idyll, Vespiary. Trio Installation.



Crimson Moire. 106.5 x 55.5 x 50.5 cm.



Crimson Moire (detail).

porcelain and towering hand-painted porcelain lampposts, all of which directly inspired the concepts of strength versus fragility featured in this courtyard body of work.

After the swaying and warping she'd experienced with the porcelain, she returned to her Toronto studio and began to experiment with earthenware paper clay in order to gain more control, and introduced the scoring and puncturing that give the *Moirés* their ragged appearance. As she worked on the Burlington show in her studio, she was anxious to see how the *Moirés* would "hold the space," or if each piece would be lost in a sea of foliage, blue sky and concrete. "I wanted to know how the forms would shift in the light," she says and, in the end, "the light was more than I could have imagined."

Collett's entire process is a complicated series of adding and taking away, and ending up with something both rough and serene. After the initial building, pounding and piercing, she multi-fires at different temperatures, runs shiny glaze over dry glazes, and constantly works the surface to give each piece an

honest-seeming weathered appearance. Serendipitously, the scarring of the sculptures seems to echo the courtyard's birch trees.

These kinds of natural elements have long influenced Collett's work, and have resulted in pieces that look like peculiar archeological finds. All at once, her work manages to resemble bone, rock, shells, nests and something less definable, giving it an unparalleled impact. The pieces that make up *Impluvium* continue in that vein. And always, the inside is different, winking out through the holes, hinting at a metaphor about the infinite layers of not just us, but the world around us.

Kristen den Hartog is a Toronto-based arts writer and novelist whose most recent books are *The Perpetual Ending* and *Origin of Hales*. *Impluvium* was exhibited at the Burlington Art Centre, Burlington, Ontario, Canada, from June until September 2006. Photography: Nicholas Stirling.