

ESPACE

79 SCULPTURE

Susan COLLETT: *Impluvium*

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An *impluvium* is a small sunken pool usually found in ancient Greek and Roman homes. It would catch the rainwater, trapping overflow in a subterranean cistern for reserve until later when needed. It was not uncommon for the *impluvium* to be decorated with mosaics or small sculptures and flowers. Susan Collett's *Impluvium* exhibition consists of six large sculptural works set amidst the birch trees, plants and flowers that ornament the Burlington Art Center's cloistered courtyard. These sculptures may indeed catch rainwater, but they cannot hold it—any more than we in the present can truly hold onto the past and the passage of time.

The sculptures developed out of her *Moiré* series which began when she undertook a residency in Jingdezhen, China, the centre for porcelain production, after winning the \$10,000.00 Winifred Shantz Award for Ceramists in 2001. Collett's response to the layered environment that she experienced there, with its multi-tiered tea

farming, layered tile rooftops and willowing bamboo forests, became an inspiration. She said that the exquisite environment inspired her in a daily ritual of sketching. Suddenly disparate objects such as piles of building bricks, the light from cut window panels and the delicate design of beehives and wasp nests became the foundation from which the *Moiré* sculptures grew.

The resulting works are sophisticated and unexpected, consisting of an elegant synthesis of contradictions and illusions. Roughly they are vessel shaped yet any potential for them to be seen as traditional markers of containment has been repudiated. Constructed with bands of paper clay, these undulating structures are pierced and punctured, thereby allowing the interior space to spill out into the exterior and bringing light and air back into what would otherwise be the space hidden within.

They look unbearably fragile and delicate, seeming somehow vulner-

able and on the brink of disintegration. They appear to be folding in and upon themselves with edges and bodies that ebb, flow and gracefully undulate. This however is naught but illusion. The works are sturdy. They are heavy, solid and definite. What we think looks to be something in the midst of transition from one form to another is, in fact, in a state of stasis. While these sculptures continually appear to be on the brink of change and transformation, they are in fact eternal in their composition.

Central to the artist's motivation was engagement with the viewer's understanding and expectations of temporality. Placed upon large gunmetal grey plinths, the sculptures appear to grow upwards like moss or lichens surrounding trunks of trees or covering stones. Collett's use of colouring in the glazes is sophisticated and subtle, referencing her years of experience as a printmaker



and painter, as well as sculptor. Like the leaves on the bushes and ground cover that predominate the courtyard, Collett's interior/exterior are different. Exterior colours refer-

Susan COLLETT, *Impluvium*, 2006. Detail Courtyard Burlington Art Center. Photo: Technica Stirling.

58 ESPACE 79 PRINTEMPS / SPRING 2007

ence those found in redolent nature—mossy greens and rusty earth colours, birch-bark whites and storm cloud greys are judiciously applied in such a way as to appear to have been the result of the natural intrusions of time and weather. The more one looks at the works, the more they seem to integrate and insinuate themselves within the landscape they inhabit.

The interiors glow with an infusion of warm patinas of blush and saffron, looking as if they bear the markings of having spent the summer being kissed by the sun and the moon and the stars as they have stood night and day exposed to the elements. They radiate from within.

Their situation amongst the flora and fauna of the courtyard was ultimately an important factor for Collett in their creation. These are not sculptural forms that have been placed upon plinths for decorative effect. Rather they are associational, referencing and responding to the environment where they have been installed. And interestingly the environment seems to have reacted by responding to the works. The largest sculpture sits within a pool, an *impluvium*. It is differentiated from the other sculptures in that its construction consists of forms taking the shape of recognizable natural phenomena—shells, plants, rocks.

Each layer of this sculpture, which stands over six feet tall, has a distinct sensibility, rather like the Renaissance palazzos whose first floors were for trade or commerce, second floors for entertaining and upper floors for family and those of intimate acquaintance. The first layer is foundational and rock-like, with each ascending layer becoming more organic and delicate in appearance and composition. Within the pool in which it is placed are algae-covered rocks and drowned leaves. The colours of these mosses and leaves and rocks mimic those found in the sculpture, having occurred after the passage of summer's time and well after the creation of the work by Collett.

Impluvium is a body of work that is harmonious and symbiotic with the environment it inhabits and, in a certain way, transcends. The natural setting and its proliferation of birch branches and twisted foliage parallels physically the composition and forms of the sculptures. Viewers cannot help but make the association between the artworks and the natural world they inhabit. And as the days pass into weeks, the weeks into months and the months from one season to another, the changes in the plants and trees, the rusting of the steel plinths, echo the fabricated markings of time's passage which

Collett has given her work.

Many of the statues stand, upon their plinths, at figure-size. In viewing them one almost has the sensation of encountering another figure or form, but one that has been transformed by the migration of time. Perhaps too, this association is furthered due to their materiality—ceramic works are created from clay from the earth. And as we all know, one day each and every one of us will also return to the earth—ashes to ashes and dust to dust.

Any act of creation can be regarded as a leap of faith on the part of the artist and of the viewer. The artist creates work hoping that his/her meaning will be apparent and meaningful. The viewer hopes that the meaning(s) s/he brings to the work are ones that the artist intended. In this way, through time and cultures, across religious and language separations, people have connected with those from the past, purely through experience with an artwork. But one is always reminded of the hands that created the work, that may now have been still for generations or centuries. Nonetheless, despite the temporal divides there is a connection with that man or woman that links the past and the present. The art object becomes a symbol that "speaks" and whose

voice can be heard by generation after generation.

The *Moiré* sculptures that make up *Impluvium* with their evocations of rust, age and time passing do not speak to the viewer only of decay, but also of growth. They reflect the transience and brevity of life but also remind us that some things do not change and are eternal. Their physical construction mimics the layers of history and the myriad possibilities of meaning to be found in the world around us.

These sculptures may not be able to contain the rainwater, but they do become vessels that contain meditations upon mortality and temporality. As such they are truly *impluviums*, with their symbolic import being the reserve from which present and future generations can draw meaning. ←

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