



Air and Grace

INTERNATIONAL – KRISTEN DEN HARTOG admires the grace and sway of Canadian artist Susan Collett's large but delicate vessels.

PHOTOGRAPHY – NICHOLAS STIRLING



Each huge, handbuilt ceramic piece in Toronto artist Susan Collett's *Moiré* series is so thoroughly pierced that it is as much air as sculpture. In an astonishing collision of strength and fragility the pieces assume the shape of a vessel, but, riddled with holes, their ability to contain is challenged. Light spills through the openings, exaggerating the contrast of the bone-strong, multi-fired clay with all its fissures and fossil-like markings. The work has a distressed beauty not unlike the ancient Chinese shards that inspired it.

CHINA

Moiré is the product of Collett's time at the Sanbao Art Institute in Jingdezhen, China, the world's porcelain capital for more than a thousand years, and thus a city steeped in ceramic history. Her three-month residency – bestowed for winning the prestigious Winifred Shantz Award for Ceramists at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Canada – introduced her to a Chinese landscape permeated with light and shadow. The region's hand-painted porcelain lamp-posts, multi-tiered tea farms, layered tile rooftops and leafy bamboo forests are all recorded in Collett's quick, graceful sketches, which became a pictorial diary of an experience she describes as a turning point in her career. 'The residency allowed me to leave behind my studio responsibilities with designers and tile commissions, and to just free-think and wander.' As much as she had enjoyed, and was successful at making, more functional pieces and commercial tile work – approaching each creation as fine art since her career began in the late eighties – she had felt the need to push herself to a new level.

China held that opportunity, but, unsure of how it would manifest itself, Collett spent the majority of her time sketching and observing as well as working with porcelain for the first time. In China she was amazed to watch lamp-post being made where 'teenage boys throw on the wheel in pairs and hold hands as they pull 100-pound clay balls. They make the rings that another pair of boys trim, and then another piles them up high to create the posts, and still others paint traditional Chinese scenes on to each pole in preparation for the kiln'. Everyone had a purpose and a specialty at the ceramics factory; the man who wedged the clay knew only that, and sat by the throwers all day, repeating his task. 'Here [in western culture] we learn the whole nine yards: I can make clay, mix glazes, fire the kiln, even build a kiln,' says Collett. She was fascinated to watch such a different approach unfolding and to ponder a history stretching back for centuries.

RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST

In the year 1004 Jingdezhen became the production centre for the emperor's china, making all the Imperial porcelain during the Yuan, Ming and Qing dynasties. Today it is home to the Zhushan Imperial Porcelain Factory, a museum situated next to an ancient kiln site where great deposits of ceramic shards have been discovered. The story goes that the emperor took only the pieces he wanted – anything else was smashed. Painstakingly, the shards have since been unearthed and collected, pieced back to together and displayed with all their scars visible. 'You could see all the glue joints', Collett recalls of her visit there, 'and a few would have a giant chunk

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missing, but standing out proudly. It was a beautiful melancholy. The photographs on the wall showed the local women huddled around tables of broken pieces piled high that had been gathered from the ground – just an incredible puzzle.'

In a sense, Collett's *Moiré* constructions are also puzzles in that they are built one layer at a time and, more recently, fired in separate sections before being reconstructed in her Toronto studio using nichrome wire in order to achieve a large scale that is unusual for ceramics; the largest *Moiré* stands approximately 1.2 metres, but there is no telling how big they will get in the future since Collett's recent 'exciting discovery' of creating interlocking sections means she can make a piece any size she wants and not be restricted by the kiln. The sculptures, finished with copper-enamelled tabs, delight Collett by the way the light moves through the seams between these sections. The precarious nature of the building process 'pushes the work towards the edge of physical collapse', says Collett, and renders the theme of strength and fragility more potent.

LARGE SCALE WORK

Each piece begins life inverted over a newspaper armature and grows out of hammered strips of earthenware paperclay – though it was her trials with porcelain in China that influenced the shape of these pieces. 'I had never worked with porcelain before... so I immediately and stubbornly tried larger shapes than I should have, and lo and behold, I had a lot of warping after the firing. I liked the natural wave and sway that occurred, but I needed more control', so she strived to emulate the movement and shape of porcelain while using the stronger paperclay. The twenty-five percent paper content, crucial in the construction of such large work, makes the clay more flexible and able to withstand the tearing and perforation so intrinsic to *Moiré*'s conceptual elegance. The finished pieces, subtly glazed, fired and flooded with light, have a mysterious, organic quality that resembles coral. Though hard and fixed in place, they twist and undulate like living creatures, symbolising both growth and decay.

At the LaCoste School of Art in France and the Cleveland Institute of Art in the United States, Collett studied print-making, only taking up ceramics toward the end of her

schooling. She liked carving woodcuts so a teacher suggested she try working with clay. 'I took to it quickly and at my BFA review no one knew what my major was as I had an equal selection [of prints and ceramics]'. She has spent her career following the instinct that these different disciplines inform each other and, combined, form the root of her work. It is not surprising, then, that the *Moiré* sculptures are inherently linked to a series of mono-prints that developed alongside them. 'The prints feed the clay feeds the prints,' she says. Hand-pulled from stitched copper sheeting, the prints are inflected with recollections of the Chinese landscape and allow for an investigation into floating forms and fragile appendages impossible in clay.

Since her return from China, Collett has kept a dish of shards on a table in her living room. They remind her of a fifteen-hour train trip from Shanghai to Yaoli, a small town that produced the emperor's china even before that task was given to Jingdezhen. As she walked through the outskirts of the still inhabited village she noticed blue and white tips poking up from the soil and stooped to retrieve them. 'I keep them because it's a connector to what I do – because I found them, they are truly buried treasure and appeal to the notion that ideas are everywhere. All the things around us are parts of a whole and we're perpetually trying to keep them together. The irony,' says Collett, 'is that my sculptures can't hold any water – they're all about letting go, and falling through.' **CR**

Susan Collett's *Moiré* series was on show at Galerie Elena Lee in Montreal and at Ontario's Oeno Gallery in spring 2006. At the Burlington Arts Centre in Ontario, Canada, she will create a courtyard installation called *Impluvium*, in which the *Moiré* sculptures will surround a pool and a fountain-like centre-piece made of a chaotic stacking of organic life.

Kristen den Hartog is an arts writer and novelist whose recent books include *The Perpetual Ending* and *Origin of Haloes*.

OPPOSITE PAGE INSET: Susan Collett lifting sections to the kiln | LEFT TO RIGHT: *Sway*, earthenware paperclay, H58cm | *Red Moiré*, earthenware paperclay, H69cm | *Funnel*, from *Moiré* series, earthenware paperclay, H114cm | *Discus*, earthenware paperclay, H56cm.

Review