

Figuration & Abstraction

Adina Balint-Babos looks at the work of Canadian artist Susan Collett.



A brand new form emerges, an unexpected combination of the visible and the invisible

Marked by duality and ambivalence, the sculptures of the Toronto artist Susan Collett are concerned with developing new forms, producing something between figuration and abstraction, baroque and minimalist art. In tune with postmodern discourses and convinced that it's all been done before and nothing remains but reiteration, Collett is an artist to really think about new forms, their polysemy, and what they might produce in terms of an imaginarium.

In Collett's art pieces, this approach involves modelling big sheets of earthenware paperclay that are highly worked and torn, and finally turned into huge vessels; or vases if you think in terms of reproducing the shape of a 'readymade'. Her sculptures from the *Labyrinth* series (2007-2009), as well as the collection of *Carpets* (2004-2007), are based on soft and solid materials – clay and copper – that gradually transform layer-by-layer, piece-by-piece, to represent or mask an ordinary object, be it a carpet or a vase. In the process, a brand new form emerges, an unexpected combination of the visible and the invisible.

Sometimes, the pieces are made to disfigure a first perception on the part of the viewer. The seashell trunks or coral reef bodies in the *Maze* series (2009-2010) are denuded of their marine appearance by painting over them. What remains is a solid visceral core that looks us over from behind a veil of turquoise bluish black paint, leaving us with the feeling that we need to search for meaning. These shapes, which regard us from an aquatic world, also appear in the artist's monoprint compositions, especially in *Navigation* (2008-2009), approaching the elements of nature and of the sea world: water swirls, laces of algae, roots, bulbs, branches, leaves... Rivers could be imagined in the landscape as soon as one distinguishes a bridge. Actually, Collett recognises she has a fascination for bridges as symbols of linkage and correspondence between different dimensions of her own work: sculpture, sketching, printing; between two continents of her family origins, Europe and North America; the bridge also as metaphor of passing to, and being passed by, new forms, new lands of inspiration.

INFLUENCES These new combinations of elements of nature seem to derive from a formal imagination vaguely derived from Chinese art, particularly the fine brush, which works the tensions between nature and the inner spirit. Collett's artworks constantly lead us to envisage connections between the shapes and their concealed message. Do these shapes give image to harmony or clash, to elevation or collapse? The discreet contact with oriental art is also evident in the *Flying Carpet* series, which refer to the leitmotifs of the *One Thousand and One Nights*. As for the shells of *Maze*, Collett smilingly talks about her childhood escapades at the Royal Ontario Museum in Toronto and her interest in shells, gems, and stones. The little Susan used to buy them at the museum's boutique for her in-progress collection, her magic treasure box.

Nevertheless, what the artworks of Susan Collett remind us of most are vessels, cosmic spirals, aquatic swirls, unknown recipients challenged to hold space and time, dark and melancholy suns, all things that transgress and break the light. The forms she creates are inevitably frail. The world these pieces open onto is not that of stability and certainty and glorious mastering of matter; the works



3 Cluster (from *Maze* series), hand-built earthenware paperclay, multi-fired, slips, oxides, and glaze, 2009, H68cm
4 *Maze I* (from *Maze* series), 2009, H74cm
5 *Trumpet* (from *Labyrinth* series), hand-built earthenware paperclay, multi-fired, slips, oxides, and glaze, 2010



They give expression to good and bad tendencies in the human being

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delightfully convey the impression of collapsing, the sense of danger, and the need of protection. It all turns around stability and instability, force and vulnerability. This world resembles our own.

FUSING MEDIA When looking at these pieces – sculptures and monoprints – we can't decide whether they are abstract or figurative. As we all know, this distinction no longer holds, and therefore, the artist prefers to fuse media: opaque and clear, smooth and torn, solid and malleable, flat and three-dimensional. On the one hand, she seems to embrace a tendency that could be called 'baroque', expressed by organic and biomorphic forms: shells, laces, embroidery pieces, and tree trunks. On the other, there seems to be what we could call a 'minimalist' dimension made up of geometric figures like circles, bridges, spirals, straight and wavy lines in the printings.

In other words, there would be a universe that is anthropocentric, ruled by emotion and passion and torment, which generates both light and dark shapes opening to the sky or tearing the space. They give expression to good and bad tendencies in the human being. And another universe, more reassuring and stable, reminds us of an ordered world governed by logic with maybe the possibility of imagining a real-life reference: a bridge over a river in Ontario, a tree branch in bloom in a garden in Canada's Cottage Country.

Furthermore, duality, dissimulation, and encryption are the foundation for the astonishing sculptural work Collett has been doing since 2004 in the *Labyrinth* and *Maze* series. Her viscous or bright-looking 'creations' sit atop high pedestals. What landscape do they

Forthcoming Exhibitions Susan Collett, The Weiss Gallery, Calgary, Alberta, Canada, October 13-12 November 2011.

Collections Musée National de Ceramique de Sèvres, Paris now holds one of Susan Collett's clay works, *Cluster* (2009-10), in its permanent collection

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belong to? Marine? Solar? Lunar? Or are they surreal things? Visions of Roman temples and outdoor installations come to mind.

UNFINISHED ASSEMBLAGES These sculptures don't look like anything we know (they seem to be huge bells or clusters of fungus on branches) and yet there is something strangely familiar about them, in the sense of Freud's concept of the uncanny. They turn out to be skilful assemblages of earthenware, plaster, clay, and stitches, combined to cohere into a single big-scale piece that will sit on a pillar. For the artist, 'nothing is quite finished'; the drive to go back and envisage a sequel is imminent. There is paint on some of the pieces: a sign of vitality of the unidentified creation. And the viewer needs to discover something through the concealment, and make something visible through encryption.

Certainly, the quest for unprecedented forms seems to be Susan Collett's statement as an artist. In a way, she sees making art in terms of the myth of the phoenix: from the reversing and destruction of one form, the vessel, arises another one, totally unrecognisable, the coral trunk. The tandem figuration and abstraction remains the spine of this artist's process of creation. ■