



NATURE  
*Inspired*

# NATURE

*Inspired*

From the Permanent Collection  
of the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery,  
with guest artist Ann Cummings



Keith Campbell, *Plate with Maple Leaf and Gold Accent*, 1998, Porcelain, glazes, lustre.  
Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Anonymous gift. 2020.014.005.

## Like morning glories growing out of a crack in the cement

The cycle of the seasons highlights the power of nature. From the rebirth every spring, to the full splendour of the summer that moves into the bright colours of the Fall to eventually die under the slumber of snow of the Winter; nature emphasizes its capacity to rejuvenate itself, year after year... and to grow and to expand. This past Summer, I cared for several morning glory vines unexpectedly growing out of a crack in the cement. I'll explain: In front of my backyard studio, that used to be a garage, there was a cement driveway, and through numerous seasonal changes and time, it cracked and broke—probably long before I moved in, and only got worse since. I installed a wooden fence and gate to secure my property and to have some privacy. Near the fence gate, there was a web of such cracks and in June I noticed a couple of stems sprouting out. I knew they were morning glories from their recognizable leaves. It didn't take long for the tenacious vines to climb on the fence and go over the gate canopy, buds started to appear by the dozens, and they opened up every morning at sunrise to become magnificent blooms of a stunning blue by mid-day, only to fade late in the afternoon and eventually go to seed. The blue spectacle lasted until late September when I hired contractors to replace the cement driveway. They had to remove the vines but not before I collected some seeds. The landscaper was impressed to see such

a large plant coming out of such a restrained space in the cement.

As an avid gardener and nature lover, I recognize that the damage humans brought on to nature is undeniable. Many fauna and flora species have disappeared completely, and others are on the path to extinction. That said, recently, an essay on the web caught my attention by its title and subtitle *The Power of Nature: While natural systems are under threat like never before, nature is not as fragile as we sometimes think*. In the words of its author, Guilio Boccaletti, Chief Strategy Officer & Global Ambassador, Water, at The Nature Conservancy:

There is no doubt humanity has inflicted untold damage on the world's ecosystems. Our footprint is everywhere. As modernity chips away at the last great wild places, cutting down forests, polluting rivers, and spreading invasive species, the fossil fuels that power its march burn up the sky, altering the chemistry of the atmosphere, shifting the energy balance of the planet. When atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen baptized this human era as "the Anthropocene," he crystallized into geological nomenclature a simple fact: Homo sapiens is the only species in Earth's long history to have been able to fundamentally alter the geochemical cycles that regulate the planet in a mere few decades.'



Gaëtanne Sylvester, *Nature Ondulée*, 1992, Earthenware, wood, oil paint.  
Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the Artist. 1994.009.001a-c.

For many years, activism has brought to the forefront these issues that have changed and challenged our natural environment and our relations to it. Boccaletti continues, "The narrative of nature's fragility misses something important. Nature has agency. Nature acts on the planet on a scale that dwarfs most human processes. The Earth's powerful climate system is a case in point."<sup>2</sup> Nature has power... a power and beauty that has fascinated artists through centuries.

A flower opening up in the morning sun. A rainstorm darkening the sky. Dead trees covered with mushrooms and moss. The colour of the seas, and the changing colours of the seasons. Snowstorms. Thunder and lightning. Hurricanes and tornadoes. Trees growing out of ruined buildings. Vines growing out of cement. The power and beauty of the natural world has often been a source of inspiration for artists as meta-

phor or symbol, poetically or realistically.

The first accounts of botanical representation in art are millennia old. The crown of unified Egypt (3100 BCE) combined a lotus flower with a papyrus fiddlehead. Roman naturalist and philosopher Pliny the Elder (23-79 CE) recounted in his *Naturalis Historia* the legend of a contest to determine the best Greek painter between Parrhasius and Zeuxis in the 5th century BCE. He wrote that Zeuxis painted some grapes so realistic that birds came to peck at them. During the Renaissance, flowers, and their life cycle, took on symbolic and religious meanings in historical and Christian works. During the Golden Age of Dutch painting, through most of the 17th century, still life painting became quite popular - while remaining at the lower level of the art genre hierarchy - for its secular and spiritual significance. The art hierarchy in terms of prestige was topped by the history and allegory paintings,



John Kepkiewicz and Heather Wood, *Tree Spirit*, 1999, Glass. Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the Artists. 2001.002.001.



then portraits, followed by genre (scenes of everyday life), and landscape work, to still life at the lower echelons. However, in all of the genres, nature often played a role to set the mood, to locate an event, or to identify a person through a landscape or some botanical specimens. Furthermore, as art historian Meyer Shapiro writes in his seminal essay *The Apples of Cézanne*, "still life, as much as landscape, [...] calls out a response to an implied human presence."<sup>3</sup>

Clay, glass and copper enamel artists shown in the exhibition *Nature Inspired* offer their interpretation of the natural world, in landscape or still life compositions. The landscape inspired works are discussed in Peter Flannery's essay in the following pages, and the ceramics collage creations of Ann Cummings are the subject of Jonathan Smith's text. In the following paragraphs, I will focus on the botanical world and its influence on clay, glass and copper enamel through a few examples from our permanent collection.<sup>4</sup>

Among the most recent acquisitions, Karl Schantz's sculpture *Still Life Series: Irises and Espresso* (1990) is a stunning example of implied human presence and still life tradition. On a glass table covered with a painted aluminium runner, a tall vase of irises is set beside an espresso cup. The work is not without recalling the vase of irises painted by Vincent Van Gogh in 1890 but with a contemporary facture. The triangular shaped cup and saucer are reminiscent of Italian post-modern design. The glass tabletop sits on three tubular legs capped at the end with

Karl Schantz, *Still Life Series: Irises and Espresso*, 1990, Glass, ceramic, aluminum, steel. Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of Karl Schantz. 2020.006.001a-b.

spheres. From Schantz, we are also presenting a functional piece from 10 years before. *Flower Garden Hyacinth* (1980) is a beautiful dark blue vase with mauve hyacinth and foliage around it.

Also recently acquired, the Gallery owns a copper enamel panel by Yvette Mercier Gouin (1895-1984) of a bouquet of red and white roses in a vase. The enamel work is mounted on green velvet. She is mostly known as a writer for radio and theatre in the 1930s and 1940s, but an exhibition of her copper enamels at the Galerie Agnès Lefort is mentioned in *The Gazette* of December 3, 1960.

A bouquet of flowers also found its way on a plate by ceramic artist Jan Phelan. The untitled plate from around 1980 is pierced to highlight the shape of the flowers and the edge of the petals are emphasized with gold. The vase is suggested. This exhibition also presents one of her more recent vases using her signature technique of cut and gilded work.

*Métaphores mortes* (2016) from Amélie Proulx, winner of the Winnifred Shantz Award for ceramics in 2016, is also a bouquet of flowers. It was created with fragile porcelain flowers

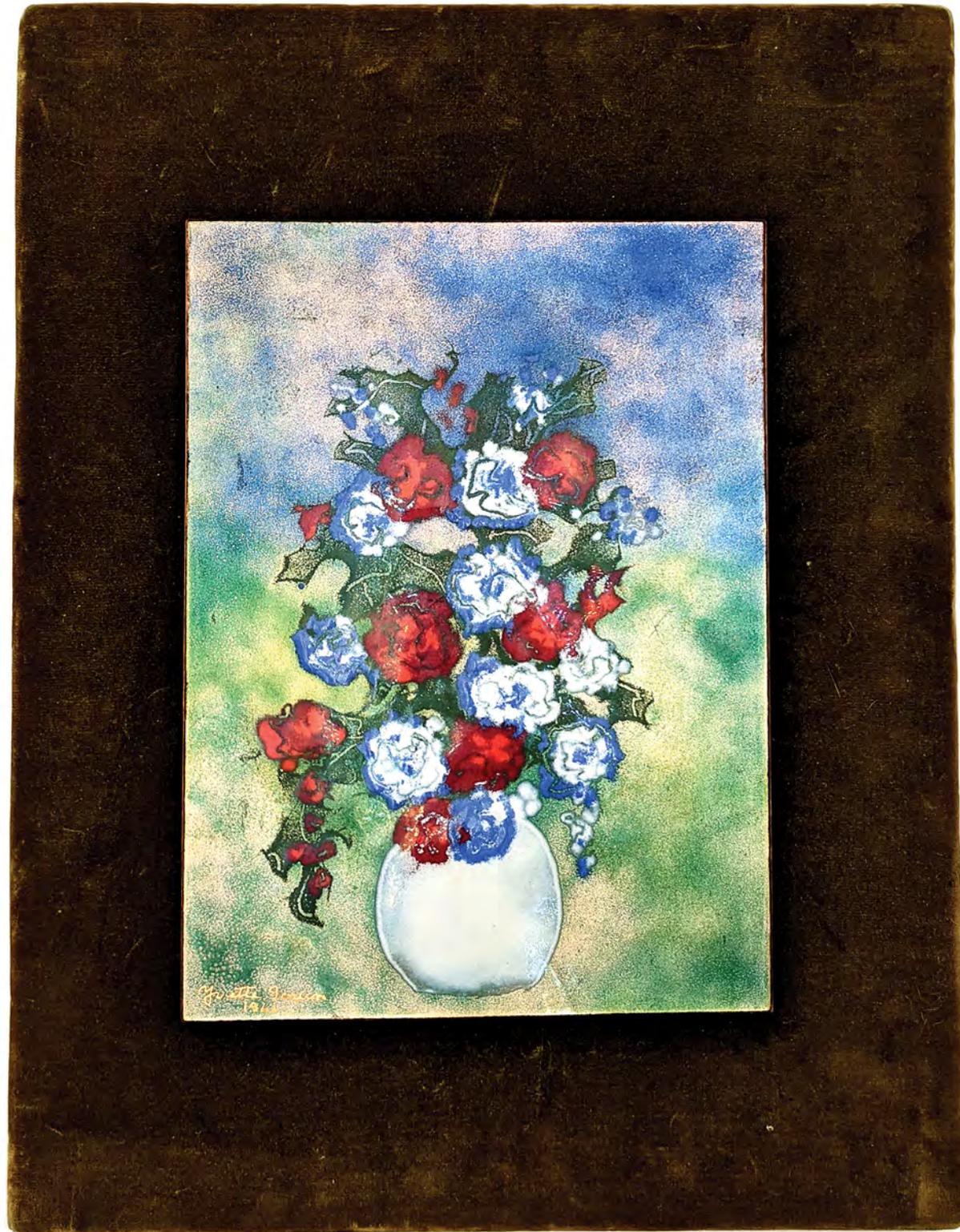
Karl Schantz, *Flower Garden Hyacinth*, 1980, Porcelain, glazes. Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of Shirley and Michael Molot. 2019.009.013.



hand-built one by one and then planted straight up in a porcelain pot. When fired, the high temperature caused the flowers to get soft and bend under the weight and created an organic composition of a lifeless plant. Still life in French is *nature morte* or dead nature. *Métaphores mortes* highlights the irony of the still life genre: the death documenting the life that once was.

Taking a different approach, Susan Edgerley brings us to consider the beginning of the life of a plant with her work *With / Within / Without / Through* (2009) creating seed pods in glass. The choice of her material, glass – strong and fragile – highlights the force of nature in reproducing itself but also its fragility. The seed represents both the beginning and the end. A germinating seed will give birth to a new plant until it blooms, then af-

ter pollination fruits appear, and subsequently seeds. The imminent death of the plant is foretold when the fruit ripens, or the flower reaches maturity and turns to seed. And getting closer still to the beginning, Gaétanne Sylvester studies the earth, the soil and the effects of nature on its forms.



Yvette Gouin, *Untitled (Still Life)*, 1961, Enamel, copper, wood, fabric.  
Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of Jonathan Smith. 2019.010.001.

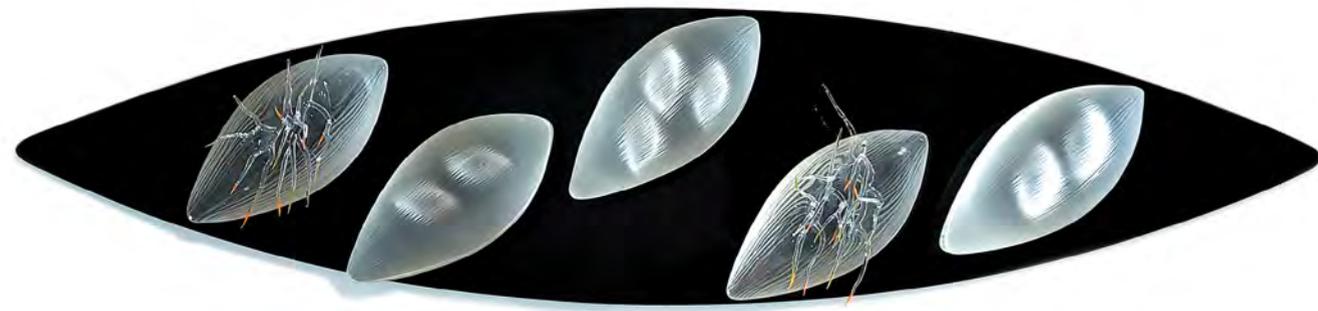


Amélie Proulx, *Métaphores mortes*, 2016, Porcelain, terra sigillata.  
Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. 2016.005.001.

With *Nature Ondulée* (1992), she offers a closer look at the soil and its texture after weather changes; how it transforms the landscape with blowing winds and rainstorms, hot sun of the summer and the cold months of winter. It could also be the soil worked by the farmer to grow a seasonal crop, the furrows of the plow that will facilitate the watering once the seeds are planted, and the

power of nature over the crop. Weather changes can make the crop successful or destroy it. It highlights our dependence on the goodness of nature.

The exhibition *Nature Inspired*, from the permanent collection of the Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery, offers a unique look into nature, as the



Susan Edgerley, *With/Within/Without/Through*, 2009, Glass, wood.  
Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the Artist. 2011.008.001a-m.



Susan Edgerley, *With/Within/Without/Through* (detail), 2009, Glass, wood.  
Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the Artist. 2011.008.001a-m.

Jan Phelan, *Platter Form*, c. 1986, Porcelain, glaze, lustre, stoneware.  
Indusmin Collection. On loan from Unimin Canada Ltd. 1991.001.162.



artist's muse. Nature is powerful. And while some humans may feel we have the ability to control it, we are often reminded that this is not the case. Nature will always win, even if, in its battle against humans' self-destructiveness often lead by greed, it loses some specimens. In a way, nature is giving us all the signs we need to

change our behaviours, it highlights that we are the ones who are going to pay a high price for what we destroy. Nature's power will continue to fascinate, and inspire, artists around the world.

**Denis Longchamps, PhD**  
**Executive Director and Curator**

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Giulio Boccaletti, "The Power of Nature: While natural systems are under threat like never before, nature is not as fragile as we sometimes think." The Nature Conservancy (online), site visited on January 6, 2021, <https://www.nature.org/en-us/what-we-do/our-insights/perspectives/power-of-nature/>

<sup>2</sup>Boccaletti

<sup>3</sup>Meyer Shapiro, "The Apples of Cezanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still Life." *Modern Art: 19th and 20th Centuries* –

*Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1978): 23.

<sup>4</sup>The permanent collection includes nearly 1000 works, with the majority of them generously given to the Gallery by artists, donors and collectors. A few works were purchased. The collection focuses on contemporary works (produced after 1950) by Canadian artists. The collection also includes some international and historical works for reference. We thank all of the artists and donors for their generosity.

## The Vistas that Unfold before Us

Most landscapes that we encounter are those that are all too familiar to us. Views along our morning commute, or an image that we walk past every day. These views often go unnoticed unless something spectacular like a striking sunset happens to pull us from the monotony of the scenes that we tend to ignore. And yet, landscapes are among the most common inspirations for art, sometimes for their magnificence and their power to pull us out of the everyday, but also for the still, quiet beauty that we fail to recognize around us all the time.

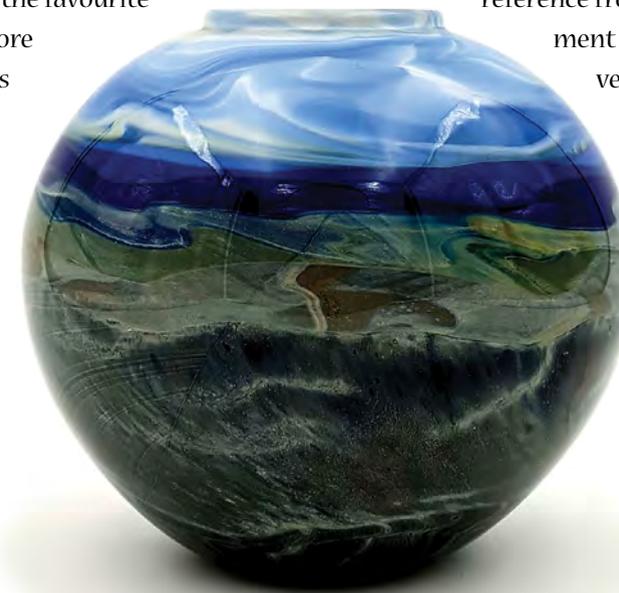
of the Renaissance, Romanticism, and Realism. Stunning paintings of Venetian scenes by Canaletto, sublime landscapes in the British tradition by Constable and Turner, and raw, dirty landscapes of Realism stay with us, and remind us of the natural environment and of the ways in which artists interpret the scenes that they encounter. Rarely would most people think of works in ceramic or glass, however, even though many draw reference from the world around us and they are physically connected to the landscape through the clay and sand that provide their form.

When most people think of landscapes or seascapes, they probably think first of the physical places around them, or the favourite places they've been, before turning to the artworks that remind them of those places. But those thoughts are probably drawn to the immense and powerful landscape paintings

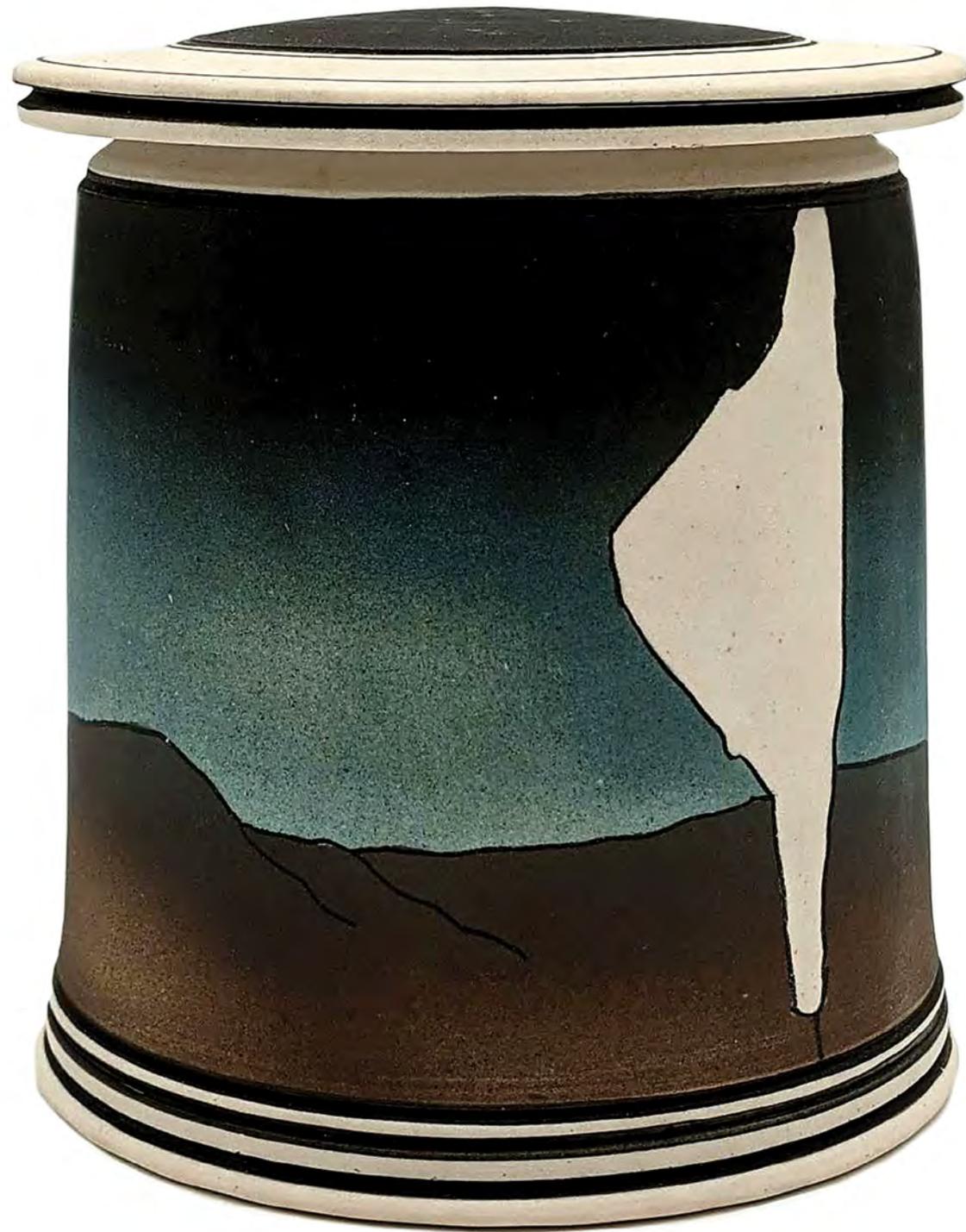
Edward Roman's *Earthsphere* is one piece that encapsulates the idea of landscape and drawing reference from the natural environment in the way in which it conveys not only an image, but the emotion of the scene.



Peter Lane, *Mountain Sky: Winter*, n.d., Porcelain. Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the Artist. 1998.023.001.



Edward Roman, *Earthsphere*, 1980, Glass. Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of Shirley and Michael Molot. 2019.009.001.

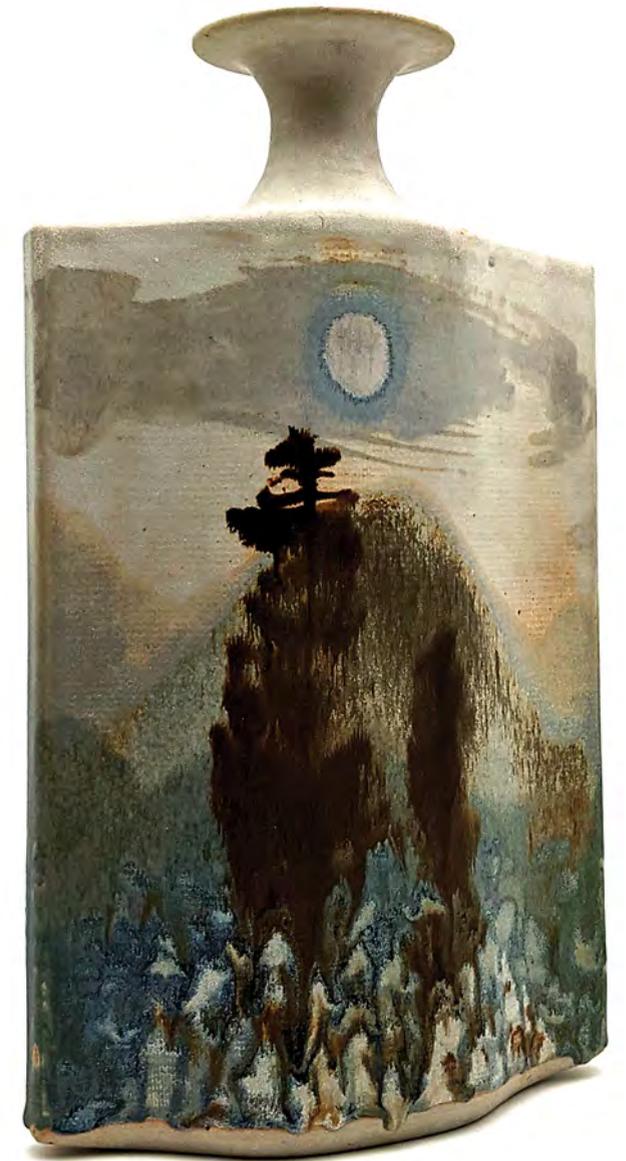


Keith Campbell, *Four Dimension Jar with Night Scene*, 1981, Porcelain, glaze, stain. Indusmin Collection. On loan from Unimin Canada Ltd. 1991.001.042a-b.

Abstracted to leave only forms, colours, and movements that evoke the image of a landscape, the vessel immediately brings out the feeling of standing at a vista, overlooking the land that spreads out towards clear blue waters below the blue sky and drifting clouds above. Viewing the piece, your own mind fills in the blanks created by the abstraction of the view, drawing your own memories into the piece in the creation of an image that is at once familiar and unknown. The creation of an experience of the environment and a view that far surpasses the scale of the small vessel before you.

*Robin Hopper's Metchosin Mists #2* works similarly, in this case in a ceramic vase that reveals a landscape that has been slightly abstracted once again, particularly in the running of the glazes that pulls and distorts the image. Reminiscent of a cold, mountain landscape lit by a full moon, the unique form and decoration of the vase brings about a moody experience in the almost hazy landscape. Similar to Hopper's other landscape-inspired pieces, this vase encourages an emotional response in the abstracted forms of land, nature, and sky that draws the viewer to the outdoors.

Moving towards abstraction as well, but in this case towards clean, minimalist landscape, Keith Campbell's *Four Dimension Jar with Night Scene* and Peter Lane's *Mountain Sky: Winter* bring a different response in the calm and quiet that they evoke. Reducing their landscapes to simple forms and gradients of colour, Campbell and Lane produce night images that feel completely still, as though standing at a silent and uninterrupted landscape. The slight light



Robin Hopper, *Metchosin Mists #2*, 1978, Porcelain, glazes. Indusmin Collection. On loan from Unimin Canada Ltd. 1991.001.035.



of the horizon from a sunrise or sunset provide the only indication of change yet still a slow, soothing movement. *Four Dimension Jar with Night Scene* does, however, give the viewer pause, in the white form that crosses the horizon, rising up to the sky in an unidentifiable object that interrupts the scene in a moment of uncertainty that requires a second look. This shape breaks our attention away from the scene just slightly, only enough to make us look even deeper, searching the scene for a clue to the origin of the white shape and at once pulling us out of and deeper into the vista before us in a striking use of form.

We see a unique approach to the landscape both in its representation and in its use in the physical creation of the piece in George Whitney's *Untitled*. Made from clear glass, Whitney's piece was cast from a piece of ice, producing a work that appears to have an actual piece of the icy landscape inside of it. The ice becomes both inspiration and tool in Whitney's work that is often influenced by the way that clear glass allows interior and exterior forms to be blurred. The icicles used create beautiful textures inside the glass that become the surface the viewer experiences when looking at the piece. Being transported to an icy landscape, the viewer questions the materiality of the piece before them, as the lines between glass and ice are crossed.

Turning now to a sculptural piece, Benjamin Kikkert displays his merging of glass with mixed media to alter our perceptions of landscape and culture in

George Whitney, *Untitled*, 2009, Glass. Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. Gift of the Artist. 2011.010.001.

*Telephone Landscape*. In this piece, metal and glass form a telephone pole that either melts into or sprouts from within a landscape-inspired glass form. Bending and tilting, the form blends natural and industrial landscapes into one as the bands of brown, red, and blue that denote a desert or rocky landscape that gives way to the telephone pole that rises above. These forms reveal to us the imperfect balance between natural and industrial environments, in a piece that seems as though it wants to tip over, yet is bending upwards to just stay standing. In the beauty of the natural and built environments, Kikkert brings about industry and environmental concerns in a subtle, yet striking way.

In their often smaller scale and more utilitarian forms, works in ceramics and glass can still capture and convey the landscapes of the world around us, and have a unique ability to bring these scenes into our worlds and our homes. These items can be quite unassuming and invite a closer look as the beauty unfolds across three dimensions, as all sides envelope the viewer and expand their horizons to the world outside. Bringing the outside in, these works provide a glimpse of wonder to the everyday, in the unexpected moments that bring about a memory or a sudden sense of calm. In a world in which we often ignore the beauty of the landscapes around us, works such as these surprise us in our daily lives, for brief moments of unexpected respite and beauty.

**Peter Flannery**  
**Curator**

Benjamin Kikkert, *Telephone Landscape*, 2019, Glass, copper, steel. Canadian Clay & Glass Gallery Permanent Collection. 2013.021.001.





Ann Cummings, *Around the Bend Over the Hill*, 2018, Porcelain, glazes. Collection of the Artist.

## Nature's Accumulations: The Art of Ann Cummings

**Nature:** the phenomena of the physical world collectively, including plants, animals and other features and products of the earth as opposed to humans and human creations. (Oxford Dictionary, online)

To rationally take nature as an inspiration is an enormous task that would challenge all but the most gifted scientific mind. But an artist can pick and choose those elements that fascinate them and that they may readily explore from a personal viewpoint. The artist Ann Cummings moved out of Toronto over a decade ago to live in the rolling landscape of the Oakridge Moraine, south of Lake Scugog. This change of location from an urban to a rural setting had a profound effect on her art. Cummings was originally well known for her technically challenging raku ware and then for her functionally based pieces with their decorative references to classical ceramics and art. Her latest work has been inspired by 18th-century Rococo white ware. The Rococo style was inspired by a yearning to look at the bucolic aspect of nature by one of the most sophisticated and worldly societies, the courts of Louis XV and XVI. These societies were attracted to the beauty of and the exotic nature of the natural world, often found in their favourite motifs of the era - flowers, shells and plants, an antidote to the highly rigid, artificial and regimented life of court society. The

word Rococo is originally taken from the French word 'rocaille' meaning shell.

But Cummings work is not just a rehash of that playful but decadent world. At first glance there are all the elements of the eighteenth-century Rococo - the shells, animals and leaves, the serpentine lines and asymmetric forms. With closer observation however, one can see how these elements have been turned to a much more nuanced and serious intent.

It is apparent in *Around the Bend Over the Hill* there is a much more ambiguous interpretation. This fanciful accumulation of fragments, at first glance delights the viewer, but with further study its meaning takes on added unnerving characteristics. As one examines the various elements, confusion arises - why are the birds stacked one on top of another, why is there a unicorn (a mythological beast or perhaps a genetic mutation), are those forms leaves or are they fish skeletons, or where did the seashells that sit on top of the oak leaves come from? That these questions only arise from a prolonged examination of the piece leaves an ambiguous impression. The title *Around the Bend Over the Hill* reveals that characteristic of the natural world, that the world is not static - it moves forward and what will happen cannot necessarily be seen. The phrase 'over the hill' particularly can



Ann Cummings, *Isolation Blues*, 2020, Porcelain, glazes. Collection of the Artist.



Ann Cummings, *Wanna Get Off*, 2019, Black clay, porcelain, glazes. Collection of the Artist.

be seen as an indication of the aging process and an allusion to death. There is nothing malevolent about this, more along the lines that without death there can be no life. This is the balance of nature moving forward. Only when the balance is upset is nature endangered, as with the looming danger of climate change that we are now experiencing. In *Isolation Blues*, human's place in the overall scheme of thing is investigated. On the lip of the leaf encrusted vessel a figure is seated. The styl-

ization of this creature reminds one of the early-twentieth-century figures: the kewpie doll. The kewpie originally designed to be a male was an excessively cute and prudishly desexed figure that has become an icon of repressed libido and the banality of all things cute. The odd proportions, the blocky, truncated, somewhat geometric torso and the black details all add to the disconcerting feeling of this figure. The suppression of sexuality that neuters the doll sterile is in contrast to the leafy

organic buds that seem to spout from the cup form the doll sits on. These leafy tendrils display the vitality of nature where a seed can spout out of the smallest of cracks and can grow and flourish. Yet a layer of runny blue glaze drips and runs over parts of the piece as if a slime is growing from within the work. The title is very much from a human viewpoint, *Isolation Blues* – this can only be a statement of the figure that is stylistically (and genetically) at odds with organic forms of the rest of the piece.

*Wanna Get Off* is a stacked vessel similar to *Isolation Blues*, but constructed in a more organized manner. This piece consists of several layers, the first a layer of swirling plants and flowers moving in a counter clockwise direction topped with human arms and then swirls. Above this is a ring of horses moving in a clockwise direction. These animals circle around a cup that is full of twigs, creating a nest for a stack of birds, far too many for the size of the nest. This stack of birds reminds one of the cuckoos, a bird known to lay its eggs in another bird's nest. This intruder will eventually hatch and be raised by its 'foster' mother and will grow so large it will push the other chicks out of the nest. Cummings has constructed the nest form with several black ceramic twigs in the otherwise white nest. With white being the predominant colour in all of her work, the black twigs stick out as an ominous omen. This is even more apparent in the piece *Fallen Trees*. Here a pile of leaves is covered by a layer of black twigs. These twigs, sitting on a layer of leaves, seems to indicate that something has taken place, perhaps a severe windstorm has blown through or maybe

a lightning strike has hit a tree and burned its branches, but no matter what, some unknown action has taken place.

A characteristic of Cummings work is the suggestion of change, that she has emphasized with her titles. Her compositions are complex and suggest motion as seen in *Protection in Flight*. The organic nature of her forms, often with a diagonal or swirling motion, suggests a constant state of flux. While she portrays life forms, animals, branches or leaves, there is a suggestion of rot. Aside from the white constructions with the odd black accent, one other colour is the runny blue glaze that trickles over and down many of the pieces, suggesting a slime of algae slowly rotting these living forms and returning them to the earth. These processes of change and death are not presented as fearful but are often shown with evidence of rebirth, the circle of life. The unnatural elements such as the kewpie doll (a creature rendered sexless and therefore sterile), the mythical unicorn (a genetic mutation), the runny blue glaze (like organic slime) and the accumulation of animals and birds (an indication of nature thrown out of balance) are all indications of the power of nature to rebel against human's attempts to dominate nature. While all these elements could indicate chaos, the pieces still visually hold together – a ray of hope that in the end nature will heal itself and perhaps man will find a place within its embrace, not against it.

**Jonathan Smith, MFA University of Chicago  
Curator Emeritus Art Gallery of Burlington.**



Ann Cummings, *Protection in Flight*, 2018, Porcelain, glazes. Collection of the Artist.

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Back Cover: Ann Cummings, *Fallen Trees*, 2020, Black clay, porcelain. Collection of the Artist.

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