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(Un)Earthings: The Artist as Occult Technician

Within the medium of ceramics, I see the potential to make tangible a fictional world of my own imagining. Ceramic, though inert and opaque, has a trans-substantial ability to mirror the thrumming, life-like quality of things; it's worked by human hands and appears to retain some of their liveliness.

I work sculpturally, creating objects and immersive installations that often combine ceramics and other media. Thematically, I navigate the malleability of language and materials, the historic role of maker as storyteller, and the dialectics of inside and outside—the tamed and the wilderness.

I saturate my work with texture or luscious glazes.

In searching for this preternatural quality, I look to the one found in Baroque still-life paintings where a cherry or lemon—depicted as so brittle, bright and translucent—could almost be made of glass.

Since 2016, I've been expanding a way of working with clay inspired by the fleshy materiality of oil paint, layering and smearing it to create permeable, lattice-like structures as in *Fable* (2019), a commissioned installation for the Gardiner Museum. These works combine drawing (coiling as line) with sculptural relief and a fleshy, organic surface. Playing with flatness, verticality, and fragmentation, they oscillate between image and object.

Some of my sculpture incorporates rear-video projection on mirrored surfaces encased in a ceramic object, such as a hollow tree (see *Creek & Crossing*, 2013) or a cathode-ray tube television, part of *The Bone Runners* (2015), an installation commissioned for Toronto's Nuit Blanche festival by the Gardiner Museum. The integration of video projection and reflective surfaces with ceramics complicates the viewing experience by layering dimensional and illusionistic space. "There" becomes "here" and the ground becomes the sky where the concrete and ephemeral collide. Just as we are absorbed into the magical world of the moving image, we are bounced back into our physical universe by the presence of sculptural objects—still fictional, but just real enough to invade our world.

On earth, alchemy, light, and a metamorphic medium

The word *chthonic* implies a non-origin or existence within the earth. It's a word with a built-in echo, folding onto itself and resonating with a low strum across the vocal cords. Its associative meanings expand into dualities—darkness and vitality, timelessness and cycles, burial and germination. It tells the story of Persephone and the folding and unfolding of the seasons, but also implies dormancy and depth. In the Shaanxi Province of China, 10,000 terracotta warriors stand guard swallowed by the earth they were baked from, waiting patiently to be called to battle. *Chthonic* is a measure of time; its weight increasing with the passing, layering, and compression of civilizations.

Ceramics is a medium of dualities. Its use in art invokes a kind of archaeological imaginary¹—the weight of its history inextricably linked with the nascence and growth of human civilization—while in other fields it continues to be developed into new and futuristic applications. Ceramics is also a medium of transformation, easily lending itself not just to chemistry, but to alchemy, and not just to history, but to storytelling.

British social anthropologist Alfred Gell writes about art



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making in terms of alchemy, describing art as a technology of enchantment. According to Gell, “the essential alchemy of art is to make what is not out of what is, and to make what is out of what is not.” He describes the role of the artist as that of an occult technician, effecting the transformations of both materials and ideas. He uses the word *occult* in the sense of mysterious, opaque, magical, or beyond common knowledge, and *technician* in the sense of one skilled in the application of science, technology, or (artistic) technique.²

Like powdered pigment in oil, plaster, and the raw materials of ceramics, artists rely on substances that have been sourced from within the earth and pulverized. British literary scholar Steven Connor echoes Gell in writing of dust as a “medium of transformation.” He describes it as “a powerful quasi-object, or magic substance, something to conjure with.”³ Although the historical and physical weight of ceramics is heavy, there is a lightness to dust; the tiniest particles float in the air, suspended for hours, only visible in direct beams of sunlight. Dust has within it a kind of generative potential.⁴ What is ground down (matter, pigment, clay) can materialize once again into something akin to its origins, or be recombined into something unexpectedly new.

I’m constantly engaged in finding ways to transform ceramics into something antithetical to itself. My work often incorporates levity (as opposed to gravity), permeability through various hollows, spaces, and lacunae, temporality, reflection, and light. Together, these attributes challenge both my own and others’ assumptions of the material. In graduate school at Alfred University, I began placing video projectors inside ceramic sculptures to combine time-

based media with three-dimensional objects. In one such piece, *Creek & Crossing* (2013), a five-foot hollow ceramic tree balances impossibly on a spindly pile of chairs. A sanded mirror positioned inside the trunk acts as a rear projection screen, superimposing a moving image with a reflected one. In a mirrored reversal of the balancing ceramic tree, the video portrays a small figure balancing precariously on a fallen log in order to cross a stream. This creates a flux between the world of the moving image and our own.

In my most recent work, *Fable* (2019), I created an installation spanning 20 vitrines mounted on the windows on all three levels of the Gardiner Museum’s stairwell. The work would be seen in changing light conditions: back-lit and silhouetted in bright sunlight during the day, and against the deep blue and black backgrounds of twilight and darkness in the evenings. Individual components of the work are fragmented but connected visually across the gaps between the vitrines, creating an overall composition. Each piece was constructed with a lattice-like structure, so that light was able to filter through, and I incorporated stained glass behind some of the sections to unify them and add color. The work has a temporal component with both the changing light conditions, and the act of ascending and descending the staircase while viewing the piece. This echoes the temporal nature of narrative structure alluded to by the title.

The word “fable” shares an origin with fabulist, and is grounded in the action of speaking; stories, inventions, and lies all coming from the immediacy of speech. Language, another medium of transformation, is built on metaphor, and the roots of words are often based on things physical and sensory. Metaphors render



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NURIELLE STERN 1 *Fable* (installation view at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto), mid-fire porcelain, stained-glass, steel-stands, polymerized gypsum, 2019, photo by Toni Hafkenscheid 2 *Whale Fall* (detail: 300" x 72" x 60"), collaboration with Nicholas Crombach, found, altered and carved furniture, glazed slip-cast porcelain, tube-lights, 2019, photo by Nurielle Stern 3 *Whale Fall* (installation view: 300" x 72" x 60"), collaboration with Nicholas Crombach, found, altered and carved furniture, glazed slip-cast porcelain, tube-lights, 2019, photo by Nurielle Stern 4 Nurielle Stern in her studio, 2019, photo by Andrew Rowat

abstract concepts into something sensible and tactile that we can grasp firmly in our understanding. Fables traditionally reveal a didactic message through metaphor, anthropomorphism, and archetypal imagery.

The imagery of *Fable* draws on the visual language of historic relief sculpture, medieval manuscript design, and other historical or contemporary representations that exude a playful flatness such as tapestries, woodblock prints, and theatre sets. The use of metal stands to “float” each component draws on the conventions of museum display, referencing artifacts and creating a feeling of objects or fragments removed from context, and somehow pulled outside of time. The creatures in *Fable*, depicted through a layering of lines (coils and ribbons of clay) with a rich textural surface, simultaneously appear to crumble and come to life. Any absolutist reading of the work called for by the title is lost in the fragmentation and ambiguity of the forms.

Other recent installations, *Whale Fall* (2019) and *When you can see right through me* (2019) incorporate light directly in the work. Both these installations were created collaboratively with sculpture artist Nicholas Crombach. We created every aspect of the works together, learning from and with each other, and combining our individual strengths and expertise.

Whale Fall is a thirty-foot installation composed of piled furniture that we carved into skeletal forms. A whale fall is a scientific term for an ecosystem created by the dead body of a whale that has sunk down to the abyssal plain, and in our version, the lattice of skeletal furniture suggests the bones of a whale. Ceramic assemblages float on or merge with the structure, alluding to decaying whale flesh, shipwrecks, and Baroque still-life painting. A chain of tube lights is woven through the structure creating a stark and otherworldly atmosphere, illuminating the work from within.

When you can see right through me (2019) turns bodies, bones, and ceramic objects into image and light. The first component of the installation is a series of x-ray images of hybridized and monstrous creatures printed on diaphanous silk suspended in front of medical illuminators. The second component is a light table covered in trays

of translucent porcelain objects evoking bones, odds and ends, and workshop tools, as well as found objects. We included some of these objects in the x-ray imagery to emphasize the Frankenstein nature of the images, sourced from zoological archives and printed as cyanotypes, a historical photographic process. Partially inspired by the 16th century trade in fake specimens, which was documented by early European natural historians, *When you can see right through me* constructs a partial narrative surrounding our mysterious collection of objects.

Working in ceramics has molded my way of thinking about art, materials, language, and the world, with the result that I treat other materials as if they were clay—malleable, formable, and able to undergo transformation. The aggressive carving of the wood furniture in *Whale Fall* (2019) and *Creek & Crossing* (2013), although executed with power tools, creates organic forms that mimic modeled clay. Much like Alfred Gell’s “technology of enchantment,” ideas also become malleable materials and transform alchemically: a pile of furniture becomes a shipwreck and then a whale, a hollow tree becomes a portal, and in the temporal experience of viewing a work, fragments reassemble into the shapes of stories.

Nurielle Stern (MFA Alfred, 2014) works in sculptural ceramics. Her commissioned installation, *Fable*, is on view at the Gardiner Museum, Toronto, until November, 2020. Stern is the 2019 recipient of the Winifred Shantz Award for Canadian Ceramics, and is currently a resident artist at the CSULB Center for Contemporary Ceramics.

1 For a critique of the archaeological imaginary in contemporary art see Dieter Roelstraete, “The Way of the Shovel: On the Archeological Imaginary in Art,” *e-flux*, March, 2009, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/04/68582/the-way-of-the-shovel-on-the-archeological-imaginary-in-art/>

2 Alfred Gell, “The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology,” in *Anthropology, Art, and Aesthetics*, eds. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), 40 - 63

3 Steven Connor, “Pulverulence: The power of powder,” *Cabinet*, Fall, 2009, <http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/35/connor.php>

4 Connor, “Pulverulence”