

Sylvia Nan Cheng is fascinated by how context affects the reading of a work of art. Responding to the theme of surroundings, Cheng focused her attention on the Thames Art Gallery. Using the permanence of ceramics as metaphor, Cheng gestures to the long-lasting effects that humans can have on their surroundings. Her site-specific response is informed by four intersecting but wholly independent ideas: the context of a professional gallery; the architectural elements of the gallery; the history of the area as presented in the adjoining Museum and Archives; and the geographical location. The exhibition venue itself becomes subject matter.

Educated at the Ontario College of Art & Design and Nova Scotia College of Art & Design, Sylvia Nan Cheng is a material conceptualist living and working in Toronto. She has participated in a number of international exhibitions, including the Cheongju International Craft Biennale. She was awarded an Honourable Mention in the 5th World Ceramics Biennale. Her works are included in the collections of the Canada Council Art Bank as well as the Icheon World Ceramic Center, Korea. Cheng is currently an Artist-in-Residence at Harbourfront Centre, Toronto.



Sylvia Nan Cheng: (front) *WARNING: this is NOT a life-saving device* 2008; ceramic (rear) *Glacial-esque remnant 551.79 C1* 2011; porcelain

Bernadette Pratt investigates traditional methods in ceramics and combines these with aspects of the natural world. She is stimulated by the calm and chaos of nature and of urban life — which, in turn, seems to reflect the calm and chaos of her own personality and life. As she explores these two opposites, she challenges herself to integrate these elements and allow the union to convey harmony.

The biographical component of Pratt's work is connected with her changing surroundings. Since leaving Germany in 1983 she has moved many times. First within Europe: Holland, Norway, England. Later her travels expanded to the New World: crossing the Atlantic twice, she finally settled in Canada.

In her most recent body of work she explores light and dark, using negative and positive space within the objects, and adding an element of chaos and fragility. Solid forms — not unlike buildings or rocks — stand watch, while the moving vessels symbolize change. The white forms are also fragments of something larger and more ancient, reminiscent of bones representing the past.

Bernadette Pratt is a German-born ceramic artist. She received a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in Ceramics from the Camberwell College of Art, London, England. She has participated in exhibitions in Canada and Europe and maintains a studio in London, Ontario.

Landscapes, seascapes and historical monuments have each had a strong influence on **Lesley McInally's** approach to clay. This new series of work examines the relationships between the natural land and manmade structures which were at some point in the past abandoned, left to be transformed through time by sun, sea, wind, and rain and later, by human interaction. The predominant structures and environment influencing her most recent body of work are the archaeological discoveries of Neolithic chambers, dwellings, and monuments found on the Orkney Islands. These dwellings hold evidence, traces and insights into the relationship between the people of Orkney and their immediate environment. We can begin to understand the details of their lives, community, their day-to-day existence of building with and employing the organic materials available to them, and how they developed a deep spiritual connection with the harsh landscape, giving meaning to their existence through visual monuments and socially constructed ceremony.

In Orkney, Lesley was struck by the monumental scale of the sanding stones, circles, chambers, and markers of time which have provoked the curiosity of many cultures and peoples for centuries. This ongoing curiosity can be seen in the layers of ancient-to-recent graffiti carved into the stones and sacred chambers. For centuries, megalithic monuments were constructed and worshipped by communities for every aspect of life and death. Today they draw individuals from all over the world, continuing to hold their presence for worship, celebration, and spiritual reflection.

Lesley McInally completed her Bachelor of Design Honours Degree at Dundee University, Scotland and has been working as a full-time professional ceramic artist for 15 years. In 2004 she immigrated to Canada, where she has won numerous prestigious awards for her slab-built paper clay vessels. Lesley's work can be found at the Gardner Museum, Art Gallery of Ontario and Ontario Craft Council.

Powerplay: surroundings
Sylvia Nan Cheng, Ania Czerwieniec, Lesley McInally, Bernadette Pratt, Andrea Vuletin
 March 25 – May 1, 2011

Guest Curator Andrea Vuletin
Essay Mary Calarco
Editor Alison Kenzie
Photography Austin Wright
Printing Aylmer Express Ltd.

ISBN 978-1-894651-71-4

COVER **Lesley McInally;** *What Lies Beneath (Cluster)* 2011; paper clay



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Thames Art Gallery exhibitions and programs are generously supported by The Canada Council for the Arts, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Municipality of Chatham-Kent.



List of Works

Sylvia Nan Cheng
Handmade shards 2011; porcelain
untitled Take a closer look... 2011; ceramic, plaster
WARNING: this is NOT a life-saving device 2008; ceramic
Glacial-esque remnant 551.79 C1 2011; porcelain
Glacial-esque remnant 551.79 C2 2011; porcelain

Ania Czerwieniec
Bee Space 2010; stoneware
Comb 2010; stoneware
Brood Pattern 2010; porcelain
Queen Cups 2010; porcelain
Punch Bowl 2010; stoneware
Single Comb 2011; stoneware
Queen Cell Combo 2011; porcelain
Queen Cells 2011; porcelain, stoneware
Swarm Jar + Tile 2011; stoneware

Lesley McInally
Sentinel 2011; paper clay
Moonlight Catcher 2011; paper clay
The Holding Place 2011; paper clay
Oracle 2011; paper clay
The Odin Stone 2011; paper clay
Watchstone 2011; paper clay
Huddle 2011; paper clay
Come Closer 2011; stoneware
Gateway 2011; stoneware
Annaio: Remote & Peaceful Place 2011; stoneware
White Cairn 2011; paper clay
Harbinger of Moonlight 2011; paper clay
Custodian 2011; paper clay
What Lies Beneath (Cluster) 2011; paper clay

Bernadette Pratt
Recovery 2011; stoneware
Two Rose Column 2011; stoneware, porcelain
Three Rose Column 2011; stoneware, porcelain
Vessel number 14 2011; stoneware, porcelain
Down the rabbit hole 2011; stoneware
Two make one 2011; stoneware
Fragile habitat number 1 2011; stoneware
Fragile habitat number 2 2011; stoneware
Over my head 2011; stoneware, Egyptian faience
Fine balance number 1 2011; stoneware

Andrea Vuletin
Council 2011; paper clay
Examination 2011; paper clay



POWERPLAY: SURROUNDINGS

SYLVIA NAN CHENG ANIA CZERWIENIEC LESLEY MCINALLY BERNADETTE PRATT ANDREA VULETIN

From the lively garden plot out back to the stark glaciers of the north, all facets of our habitat are intrinsically linked. But what is our understanding of the space around us? How do we position ourselves within our surroundings? The medium of clay seems to be the perfect vehicle to explore this topic. Beautifully tactile yet full of contradictions, clay can be fragile and durable, earthy and pristine. And as we discover in this exhibition, the diversity of clay allows viewers to enjoy the traditional techniques of the craftsman while further engaging them through discourse and self-expression.

Guest curator and participating artist Andrea Vuletin invited four artists to work with her in creating a collection under one common theme. At first glance, the exhibition *Powerplay: surroundings* is light and rhythmic, with forms flowing effortlessly from plinth to wall to floor. The individual pieces of stoneware, porcelain, ceramic and paper clay feel completely at ease together, and as a collection, there is an impressive level of cohesion throughout the gallery. The overall neutral palette offers exciting hints of celadon throughout, and viewers may need to be reminded that Sylvia Nan Cheng, Ania Czerwieniec, Lesley McNally, Bernadette Pratt, and Andrea Vuletin worked in isolation, each carving out her own vision to respond to the subject at hand.



Bernadette Pratt's sculptural pieces feel like masterful pre-historic forms. Outward-looking, confident and directional, work such as *Over my head* draw the viewer's eye forward as though it were a Viking's long ship sailing through the high seas, the bold glazes mirroring the strength of the stoneware structure. Her pieces are built with clarity and intention, yet Pratt's forms project an air of mystery. *Fragile Habitat Number 1* sits amongst a grouping of similar sculptures, each veiled in a delicate, stone-like texture. Could they be navigational landmarks, such as a cairn or inuksuk? Lesley McNally's works in paper clay also resemble ancient megaliths, yet her approach is more quiet and introspective. In *Huddle and come closer*, boulder-like slabs are placed in clusters, fooling us into thinking they spend their days on a mossy hillside as they shield themselves from the elements. There is a quiet, meditative quality about them. The individual pieces, so delicately textured, are positioned so that the shadows they cast add to the overall framework of the piece. *Annaio: Remote & Peaceful Place* appears to be made of two parts, but further inspection reveals that the larger form is actually a puzzle comprised of numerous blocks, all marvellously balanced to create a structurally sound whole.

These ceramic pieces are reminiscent of structures such as Stonehenge in England or Malta's Hagar Qim, where stonemasons combined their understanding of physics, materials and techniques to create architectural marvels. Pratt's and McNally's work invite us to broaden our interpretation of 'surroundings,' illustrating that we do not exist in a vacuum. Our environment is made up of both solid forms and empty space. Pratt's compositions speak to each other by turning, reaching, leaning and propelling themselves forward or holding back, while McNally's arrangements use positive and negative space to achieve physical and aesthetic balance.

Sylvia Nan Cheng's site-specific works echo the importance of location and placement as she addresses the fragility of nature through glaciers. We are all familiar with the concept of global warming: as the earth's temperature rises, glaciers and ice sheets dissolve. To the untrained eye, this process may seem like it's moving at a sluggish pace, but glaciers worldwide are shrinking more rapidly than scientists originally anticipated. *untitled Take a closer look* illustrates the gradual deconstruction of a glacier through four installments, each vignette revealing less and less of the frozen mass. Ice calving occurs when a large chunk breaks free from a glacier; surely it must be a majestic sight to witness an iceberg plunging into the ocean, but our knowledge of climate change instructs us otherwise. This is a cautionary note. Grab your lifejacket! Sound the alarm! This 'red flag' moment is cleverly illustrated through Cheng's *WARNING: this is*

Bernadette Pratt; *Over my head* 2011; stoneware, Egyptian faience

What are our surroundings, do they make up a physical, social, psychological space? Do we inhabit our surroundings as integral and connected parts of a whole, or do we exist separately, each in our own bubble of understanding? What is our relationship to our surroundings? Do we shape them or do they shape us? It is this rich ground that is addressed through both the practice and expression of the five ceramic artists included in this show. Clay, a primal medium that requires physical engagement, ties the artist directly to earth, our elemental surroundings. The artist's physical material knowledge resists the virtual and instead celebrates the actual, perhaps providing ballast to a steadily shifting cultural practice.

Andrea Vuletin, Guest Curator

NOT a life-saving device, a true-to-scale ceramic inner tube surrounded by a pool of broken clay. Created using a meticulous casting technique, the raw unglazed tire is breathtakingly realistic. A few feet away, we see *Glacial-esque remnant 551.79 C1*, a river of white plaster (with a splash of celadon glaze) streaming out of the wall and onto the gallery floor. Viewers should have a close look at the price list — and may notice a few peculiar totals. Cheng, a self-proclaimed "hesitant maker," recognizes that by creating work she is increasing her carbon footprint. With a nod towards sustainability, Cheng has calculated (and added) the individual carbon offset credits of each piece to the original price.

Many believe that the state of our surroundings has never been more fragile, yet even as nature breaks down, it transforms and reemerges into something different. Ice becomes water, clay becomes earth. In the novel *Regeneration*, author Pat Barker writes:

Cut a chrysalis open, and you will find a rotting caterpillar. What you will never find is that mythical creature, half caterpillar, half butterfly, a fit emblem of the human soul, for those whose cast of mind leads them to seek such emblems. No, the process of transformation consists almost entirely of decay.¹

Anyone who has ever spent time in their yard can certainly attest to this. Each year, colourless winter gardens threaten to remain lifeless. Yet as spring slowly emerges, seemingly dormant soil begins to crawl with activity and insects go about their business once more. Andrea Vuletin's full paper clay figures are beautiful depictions of this scene. As if meditating through inner dialogue, *Examination* lowers her head downward to view the ants, bees, and caterpillars roaming freely across her Rubenesque bodice. *Council*, in contrast, focuses outward, eyes wide open and palms together as she looks out towards her greater surroundings. Those who reside in the area may recognize all of the insects featured. The Monarch, Praying Mantis, Walkingstick bug, ant, bee, and caterpillar can be found in local gardens, and all are known for the value they bring to their environment. Vuletin, who studied illustration before choosing to focus on clay, has a fine eye for detail, and her hand-drawn

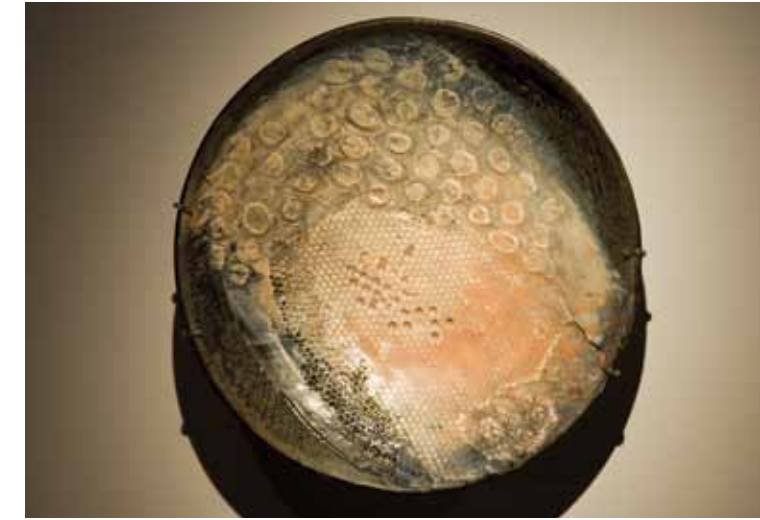
embellishments bring the idea of 'surroundings' back into context. We are our environment and our 'being' extends beyond the tips of our fingers.

Ania Czerwieniec also takes inspiration from the insect world, concentrating on the highly organized structure of bee colonies. The dramatic development of a bee (from egg to larva, pupa, and finally adult) is followed by a life defined by status and obligation. Each drone, worker and queen bee has a specific function to fulfill, and their collective roles are performed for the good of the colony.² Yet the physical outcome of their duties is remarkable: a densely-packed system comprised of pollen, eggs and honeycomb cells. Czerwieniec's porcelain and stoneware forms could very well stand on their own as *objets d'art*, yet *Punch Bowl*, *Queen Cups* and *Swarm Jar* are also highly functional. Like the repetitive habits of the colony, the vessels are rhythmically stamped with delicate bee indentations that sit beneath a honey-like glaze. *Queen Cells*, the most conceptual of Czerwieniec's pieces, is a collection of ten cone-like structures that protrude from the wall, each housing a single larva. Complex living arrangements such as this make it difficult to separate the bee from its colony. Where does the individual end and the broader society begin? The social structure of insect colonies demonstrates that the division between self and surroundings is a myth.

This exhibition is masterful in how it demonstrates habit, gesture, process, balance and form, yet the artists stay true to their craft by never losing sight of their medium. *Powerplay: surroundings* offers a diverse examination of how we relate to the earth, and the overall collection leaves me feeling energized. Whites and off-whites, cream and brown, traces of colour, texture, movement and purpose ... as we are asked to be mindful of our surroundings, I look ahead to see the optimism and freshness of spring.

Mary Calarco is a visual artist, cultural animator and gardener. A graduate of Ontario College of Art & Design, she is currently the Southwestern Regional Consultant for the Ontario Crafts Council and sits on the Board for the Guelph Arts Council. Mary is passionate about art, craft, and design, and resides in Guelph with her husband and son.

1. Barker, Pat, *Regeneration*. London: Viking Press, 1991.
2. Taber, Stephen, *Beekeeping in the United States*, Agricultural Handbook Number 335, Revised October 1980 (33–38).



Ania Czerwieniec; *Brood Pattern* 2010; porcelain

As a potter, **Ania Czerwieniec** is always drawn back to the vessel and how it relates to its purpose. As an artist she finds it necessary to draw from experiences outside the studio setting for both inspiration and motivation. This began with her first garden over fifteen years ago. Inspired by the crocus she developed a series of bowls covered in graphic floral motifs. Many years later and as her skill level improved, other aspects of Ania's daily life began to creep into her thrown forms — including her flock of laying hens and growing Purple Martin colony.

Most recently Ania has been caught up in what experts refer to as "bee fever," a state in which a neophyte beekeeper can neither think of anything nor talk about anything but bees. Naturally this obsession has spilled into her studio practice, and bees have taken centre stage in her decorative ware. The colours and textures of the hive have become a most welcome source of inspiration. Porcelain easily transforms into glistening white larvae in various stages of growth. Thrown vessels can be altered and stamped with textures directly from the hive.

Ania Czerwieniec received both a Bachelor of Fine Arts and Bachelor of Education degree from the University of Windsor and a Certificate in Ceramic Studies from Fanshawe College, London, Ontario. She has participated in numerous ceramic exhibitions throughout Southwestern Ontario and maintains a studio in Blenheim.

Andrea Vuletin's goal is to invite viewers to reflect upon their role in the ecosystem. In this body of work she uses the human figure, whose rich history and symbolism can communicate instantly through gesture and emotion. Viewers are asked to identify with the figures' various states, to become the subjects themselves. The female figures are ample, representing bounty; their poses are reflective and peaceful. With this she hopes a connection can be made to statues of the Buddha and to ancient fertility gods. The skin, not natural in colour but blue, green, and yellow, marries the figure with its surroundings. The tattooed images brand the figures with allegiance just as habit and belief mark and shape us. A peaceful relationship with the insects is offered rather than the usual revulsion. By presenting the figure in this way, Andrea challenges viewers to examine their own ideas of coexistence with flora and fauna in general.

Andrea Vuletin received a Bachelor of Design degree from the Ontario College of Art & Design and a Ceramic Certificate from George Brown College. She is a member of numerous potters' guilds, including those in Toronto, Hamilton, London, and Chatham, and has exhibited extensively in Southwestern Ontario. Andrea's studio practice is located in Chatham.



Andrea Vuletin; (left) *Council* 2011; (right) *Examination* 2011; both paper clay