



@2015 Ruth Chambers and Godfrey Dean Art Gallery

RUTH CHAMBERS: CONSERVATORY

Regina ceramic artist Ruth Chambers created an installation intended to intervene and interact with the small gallery in the Godfrey Dean Art Gallery in a playful, decorative and architecturally transformative way.

Ghostly forms in the dusk of a summer evening, *Conservatory* is an installation created specifically for the Godfrey Dean Art Gallery by artist Ruth Chambers. Eighteen columns, slender, just above human height, hollow and airy, are set in a square and suggest four walls. The forms are calligraphic, open. Some are laced through with clay-slip coated branches, others are topped off with fanciful white-work lace capitals. Each column consists of 8 to 11 sections, apparently balanced on delicate bases. In fact, they are suspended invisibly, with jewellery wire. Hollow and airy, they visually defy ideas of support, and play with the functional purpose of the column—to be solid. Three of the bases are distinctly leafy, suggestive of oak, lotus and aspen forms. Theatrical shadows magnify the sense of column dancing in and out of tree forms. The front facing columns are spaced to encourage entry into the central area, suggesting the roofless remains of an ancient building, a pergola or a forest grove.

To create the components, Chambers uses porcelain paper clay. She mixes kaolin with cellulose fibre for greenware strength. The material is mixed to a slip consistency and initially applied with a squirt bottle in

a calligraphic manner to a flat board with lace cloth. Nothing girly or granny's house of doilies about these—think zen master applying mustard to a hot dog. When hardened but still in a workable state, the surface is rolled with stamps, patterns created by Chambers. Then the lace cloth is used to lift the clay and wrap it around a cylinder to attain a rounded form, which will suggest a column when finished. Chambers has created a variety of sizes using both rolled paper or sono-tubes. When the dried clay is strong enough, this paper interior is removed, and the greenware is fired. Some of the larger forms are fired over porcelain forms in the kiln, and slump into shape. They are all fired to cone 9 or 10—so the sculpture can properly vitrify. The result is porcelain at its personal best—impossibly thin.

The hand of the artist is very present in Chambers work—recorded in the calligraphic gesture that makes up the form of each piece, and in the marks rolled and printed into the surface. She has developed a series of silicone and bisque-ware stamps through research into botany and art history. The mark of the kiln is also present, as the clay moves during the firing process. The clay body is subjected to extremes, pushed to the limits of what is self-supporting.

The component “building block” nature of this body of work allows Chambers to install these forms responsively to each gallery site, sculptural installation created in response to the hosting space. *Conservatory* at Godfrey



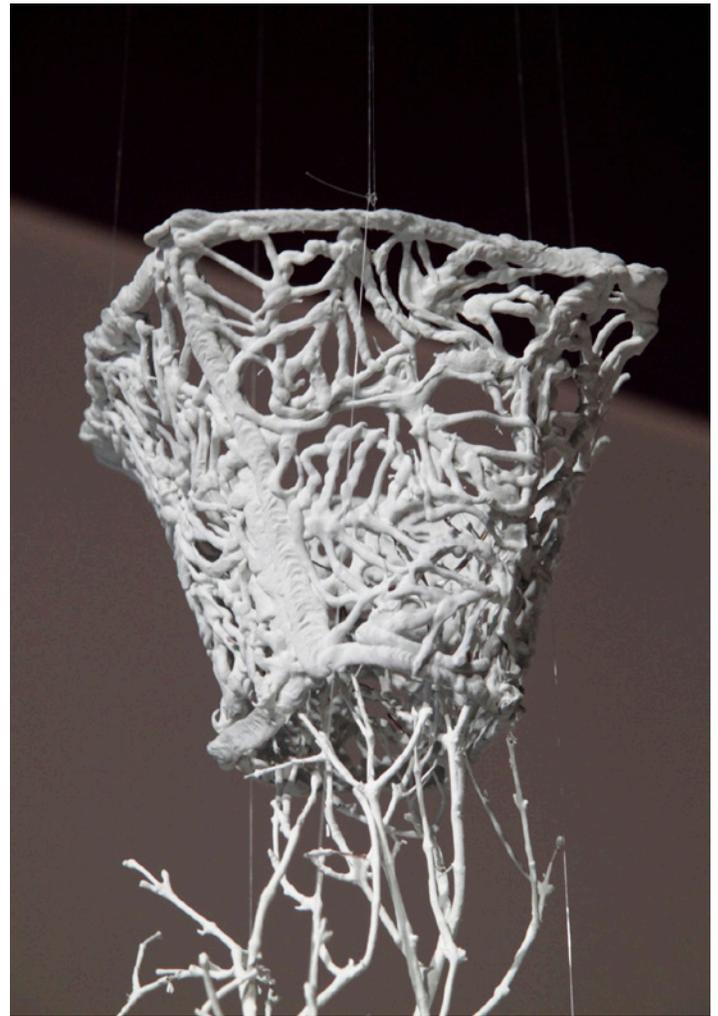
Dean Art Gallery was one of many installations. This work first exhibited in 2008, on a much larger scale in *Temporary Adornment* at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in Waterloo, Canada.

Installation does not consider the gallery an empty stage, an invisible host for art work with a universal meaning. It addresses the gallery, responds to location. Chambers work in fact, interrogates the white cube that galleries have become during modernism. She creates a building within the building, but not a rectangle in a rectangle. Instead, she builds a dream of a trees, a poem invoking architectural history. She uses light to animate the work. The single-source focused lighting maximizes the textures within the columns, and each column casts a shadowy twin onto the nearby gallery walls. These become drawings that reveal the double identity of column as tree. Chambers seeks to remind us of ornament, not frivolously applied decoration, but an aesthetic vocabulary with historical links to our environment. In so doing she questions the way contemporary building clings to the modernist aim to provide a “machine for living”.

Classical pillars are round, and tapering. Their design is based on the early materials of architecture. Trees or bundles of reeds were used to support the weight of roof boards. Later, this building style was repeated, but in carved stone material. The stone columns used in the historic architectures of Egypt, Greece, and Rome

enabled buildings to be created on a heroic scale, much larger than human size. The pillar is used structurally in a post and lintel style of construction—think of a doorway, two posts with a board on top, like Stonehenge. The posts and lintel need to be solid enough to hold up the weight of a roof. Western systems of architecture have also devised aesthetic rules for the appearance of solid, so that the pillar also looks solid and strong. To see examples of columns that do not look proportionally strong, one only needs to drive around a new building site in the suburbs. The renewed fashion of porches is being built with 4X4 support beams, and they look too spindly to hold up the weight of a porch roof, until finished off with a decorative cladding of a moulded fibre glass “columns”, derived from classical Greek or Roman architecture. For example, the order or style of Tuscan column has a plain design, with a plain tapered shaft, and a simple base, capital, and frieze. The column height is normally seven times the diameter width, and in comparison to the other orders, the Tuscan order looks the most solid.

Even as ruins, these buildings influenced generations of philosophers, artists and architects who went on the “Grand Tour”. Humanist philosophy, Romantic garden design, and Palladian architecture are a few examples of classical revivals. Today, with improved building materials, columns and other classical elements are still incorporated into Post-modern buildings to function visually.



Contemporary strip malls and office buildings make it difficult to imagine the links between the original building materials our ancestors used, and their reasons for building. Our urban lifestyles have little experience with the grandeur of the forest, and consequently it is almost impossible to imagine that the first created sacred spaces were in imitation of naturally occurring places of awe. Examples in western history include the hypo-style hall, a series of columns placed to create the illusion of trees and shadows that must be walked through before entering the deeper sacred parts of an Egyptian temple. Greek temples, imposing white stone ruins today, were also once based on wilder places—groves of sacred trees. In Saskatchewan, once a landscape of gently rolling plains made treeless by the overgrazing herds of North American Bison, trees played an integral role in the physical and spiritual lives of people. The first nations of the plains region lived a migratory life, following the herds in portable homes, tipis, made of trees set in a conical circle, covered in hide. The poles of the tipi were carefully gathered from trees in woody areas, and carried with them. Each tree made pole symbolized a pillar of tribal value.

The title “Conservatory” alludes to hothouses, glassed-in rooms to grow fragile plants. Today, advertisers for glasshouse additions to the home boast of blurring the

line between nature and nurture, the home and the wild. The conservatory is a way of bringing the outside in. In our northern climate, a conservatory is a sheltered place, preserving the delicate from harsh weather, no different from any sheltering architecture—it all keeps the cold wind out. The conservatory is also a place of reflection, a plant filled retreat for quiet thought. Studies have shown that (insert footnote) that visiting the forest can change human brain waves, calming “hyperactive” minds.

Chambers’ installation reminds us that survival is not the only reason we build. Her columns invite us to dream about the poetic history of architecture, our relationships with trees and our ideas of beauty, created and natural.

Conservatory - An installation of suspended porcelain sculptural columns, created by Ruth Chambers for the Godfrey Dean Art Gallery, July 11 to August 13, 2010.

Article by Margaret Bessai