

Trudy Golley Lucent:

by Monique Westra



The distinctive and exquisitely crafted ceramic sculptures of Trudy Golley¹ speak not only to her skill and imaginative daring but also to her passion and emotional depth. Her unusual objects and their luminous auroras of light are expressions of a personal and spiritual longing. For it is the infinite beauty of nature, especially its myriad and ever changing light, that is the underlying inspiration for all of Trudy's probing work. She is not content to be a passive acolyte of nature or a distanced observer. Her desire is to do as nature does; to be a part of a grander whole. Her objective is audacious, ambitious and ultimately unattainable: "All you have to do is step outside and it is that much more amazing. I have made something only this big and an aurora fills the whole sky when it happens. But there is that element of wanting to capture some of that spirit and bring it inside..."² For even as her ability to produce light effects is ever greater and more astonishing; even as she is thrilled and awed by her own creations, she remains cognizant that on some level, her efforts, however heroic, remain puny in face of the magnitude of nature. This humbling consciousness combined with awe is the essence of the sublime.³

Golley seeks to entice the viewer to fully experience her work. She does not want the spectator to merely admire her installations, 3-D wallpapers and ceramic sculptures but to actively engage in a transcendent experience. Shimmering light reflections that go beyond the object are not just dramatic effects. They represent poles of attraction to touch the heart, the mind and the spirit. The glowing effect of a Golley-inspired encounter is an ineffable feeling that transcends ordinary experience.

Ever since she was a toddler, Trudy Golley knew with certainty that she would be an artist. Her nascent creativity was nurtured by her artistic mother who was a talented seamstress. Golley's earliest memories are of always playing outside with her brother. Her happy BC childhood is the source of a deep, almost reverential love of nature and a finely attuned sensitivity to its every nuance. Her principal fascination is with the myriad light effects found in nature ranging from the dappled reflections of sunlight through a canopy of leaves to the grand spectacle of the Aurora Borealis.

The art of Trudy Golley presents an eloquent testimonial to her love of light. Light, in all its manifestations, is a potent symbol of the unfathomable spirit that she senses in nature. Although her irregularly-shaped objects are not representational, they are reminiscent of the natural world, vividly present as material three-dimensional forms. But light plays a different role in Golley's work, suggestive of a profound, intangible level of meaning. Intense beams of light directed at gilded and metallic surfaces cast shadows and create ambient reflections, beckoning beacons of another sphere of sensibility. In their immateriality and ephemeral glow, reflections are the artist's poetic evocation of spiritual essence. That is why Golley's art is essentially transcendent at its core, going beyond the material to invoke the immaterial. Golley's fervour to externalize and make visible that which is invisible is like an expression of mystical longing.

In addition to light and its mesmerizing attendant effects, Golley is drawn to shapes that are rich in associative meaning. She has been using the spiral since the 1990s: "The spiral is one of those transcultural symbols too; the beginning of life, the unfurling of something; growth; cosmos. It is one of those symbols that goes across languages, cultures. You don't really need to know much about it except that you respond to it in that way."⁴

Because she had used the shape many times in her work, she was particularly struck by the depiction of clouds that she saw when she visited China.⁵ In traditional Chinese art, clouds are stylized as spirals with a succession of rounded bumps along their curving outer contours. In her wall-based installation, *Chinese Clouds (3D Wallpaper)* (2007), spiral forms are arrayed in an orderly ascension. Although the spiral clearly references nature, Golley's huge clouds add another layer of interpretation. Because they are gilded with 24Kt gold lustre, they reflect light in a particularly beguiling way, casting a glow within the negative space of the spiral, as well as illuminating the space around it.

Golley's fascination with both tangible aspects of the natural world and its intangible elusive essence is expressed in the play of positive forms and negative spaces. Of particular importance is the light that extends beyond the object. Stunning examples can be found in the Aurora Series, such as the glowing spiral of *Great Wave* (2010). "The space where only light exists is as important as the object that defines it. Such parergonal light effects are incorporated into my work in order to attract and locate the viewer, to provide an unexpected sense of discovery."⁶

It is not only the viewer who makes unexpected discoveries. It is also the artist. Golley relishes the chance factor in her work. An unpredictable outcome excites and motivates her. She is driven by curiosity to see what happens next, especially with the effects of gallery lighting. Unabashedly delighted, Golley is thrilled and inspired by her own art. "I love being surprised by it. And in some ways, I set it up to surprise myself. To have that transformation and that risk in it as well. Because I don't know what is going to happen with those parergonal effects. And I do love that element of risk and change."⁷

The spiral also appears in a playful wall-based installation, *3-D Wallpaper v2.0* (2012) which combines Chinese cloud iconography with fecund feminist imagery. Climbing up a wall is a group of decidedly gendered objects. Each flocked and velvety uterine triangle is flanked at the top by the reciprocally mirrored spirals of fallopian tubes. This irreverent and witty representation of female reproductive organs is a vestige of an earlier phase in Golley's development as a feminist artist. *Memory Squared* (1999), a brilliantly conceived multiple floor piece, is representative of a time when Golley's ambitious ceramic sculptures and installations were ideology-driven.⁸ Her more recent work is more about sensory experience and beauty. A case in point is Golley's most recent work entitled *(a)blaze* (2014).



(a)blaze, 2014
Slip-cast, hand-built & assembled glazed porcelain, glazed porcelain with PVD (physical vapour deposition) L2014.13.2
Collection of the Artist



2 Chinese Clouds (3-D Wallpaper), 2007
multi-fired ceramic, glaze, 24Kt gold lustre
L2014.14.4, Collection of the Alberta Foundation of the Arts



3 Great Wave (Aurora Series), 2010

multi-fired ceramic, glaze, with 24Kt gold lustre
L2014.14.3, Collection of the Alberta Foundation for the Arts

This spectacular installation is a *tour de force* comprised of the lateral alignment along a 21 foot long shelf of 13 large compound “vases.” Structurally similar but individually varied in form, each matt glazed “vase” is made up of two parts - a broad convex belly from which emerges a compact cluster of thin, branch-like forms. Each of these stacked hollow structures is sited toward the back of a compressed flat slab that serves as a base. This arrangement underscores the contrast between horizontal and vertical elements and between the shiny, metallic PVDed⁹ surface of the dark bases and the matte, satiny texture of the brilliantly white porcelain “vases.”

Like all of Golley’s complex work, *(a)blaze* elicits a dual level of material and immaterial associations suggested by the objects and by the light. The branchlike forms clearly resemble trees. Collectively, the repetitive composition is suggestive of a particular topography, recalling a row of trees silhouetted against the horizon where the rolling expanse of prairie abuts the sky. In this drama, the allusion to nature is further intensified by Golley’s masterful direction of light, aimed at exactly the right angle of incidence to strike her ceramic players. A brilliant new twist in her light vocabulary is illusionism. When the beam of intense focused light hits the highly reflective, textured surface of the base, it looks like light reflected off water. Even more dazzling is the effect of the light which ricochets from the base onto the matt surface of the “vase” creating a stunning simulacrum of fire.

The light also spills out and animates the surrounding space, diffusing its fiery intensity into a shimmering ethereal glow, like an aurora. The effect is magical. The viewer is subliminally transported to another realm of being. Golley’s ability to elicit a strong emotional response is related to her own intense and spiritual awareness in nature. Through her art, Golley is the conduit to heightened experience.

As she responds intuitively to nature, so too has Trudy Golley internalized aspects of art history. In her quest for the sublime and her vital, primordial connection with the natural world, Golley is essentially a Romantic for whom intense emotion and sensation are intrinsic to her aesthetic. Yet her work displays certain stylistic similarities with Baroque art as well. This is especially evident in the *chiaroscuro* that is so central to her work and in the propensity for movement in her forms. Golley’s ceramic objects are never static. They appear to slowly rotate, rise or unfurl, always in a state of flux, of becoming. The focused light, the gilding and reflections do more than enhance this sensation of movement - light signals transcendence. Golley is expressing the very essence of transformation through sculptural form, light and shadow - of change from one state of being to another, as in nature. Transformation is also at the heart of ceramic practice, as clay is permanently altered by firing in the kiln: “Transformation is what is really important to me. That notion of making something and putting it into the kiln and then giving it up to the fire and having it transformed during the firing.”¹⁰

Further, many of Golley’s “vases” are actually non-functional, ambiguous creatures which glow from within and without, inhabiting unseen worlds. As the *informe*¹¹ of Surrealism, Golley’s quasi-organic forms seem familiar and alien at the same time, perverse but strangely elegant *Doppelgänger* of plants in the natural world as in the refined and delicate *Faux Banksia Vase* (2010).¹² The unusual shape of the upper shaft had an artificial and experimental genesis. The stretched skin and elongated tubular form was produced using HST,¹³ inserted with chain-link fence wiring and making a mould from its taut and torqued shape. Upon completion, the stalk-like form reminded Golley of the banksia pods she had seen in Australia. From China came the highly reflective 24Kt gold moth decals which animate the inner surface of the lower segment. In this work and in subsequent variations, the pair of “vases” engages in tender encounters, reinforcing an analogy to human behaviour. There is humour and sentiment in these highly original and beautifully crafted series.

What all of Golley’s work displays is her consummate skill with her beloved chosen medium. Golley’s husband Paul Leathers notes that “... love is a reciprocal relationship and clay loves Trudy Golley.”¹⁴ After years of working with clay, she has come to understand why this age-old material continues to have such appeal for her. “I had enough time to reflect on what it is. And clay is inherently formless. It is not pre-prepared in any way. You are responsible for everything that happens to that clay. It is not a flat surface; it is not a curved surface. It doesn’t have any dimensions... It just *is*, until you act on it. And that’s what I like so much.”¹⁵

Paradoxically, the empowered artist must relinquish control in the final phase when she “... gives it up to the fire.”¹⁶ Further compounding the irony is the potential for annihilation in the kiln. “So the very thing that completes it is also something that could potentially destroy it.”¹⁷ This dance of control and surrender, calculation and chance, awe and humility is characteristic of Trudy Golley and her very personal, intuitive approach to art. As Paul Leathers observes: “The great thing about watching Trudy work clay is that she knows when it is right to move and she won’t touch it if it is not right for what she intends to do. She does not push the relationship. She does not say “I am going to make a vase.” She makes a slab and when the slab is ready to be made into a vase, then it is caressed. She has such an intimate relationship with the formless material that she knows when it is appropriate to have that conversation with it.”¹⁸

Monique Westra, M.A.
Calgary, 2014

4 3-D Wallpaper v.2.0, 2012

slip-cast glaze stoneware, underglaze transfers
L2014.13.5, Collection of the Artist



Endnotes

- ¹ Trudy Golley was born in 1957 in Revelstoke, British Columbia. She resides in Red Deer, Alberta. For more about the artist visit www.alluvium.ca
- ² Trudy Golley, personal interview with Monique Westra, July 31, 2014
- ³ The concept of the sublime was elaborated in English by the philosopher Edmund Burke in 1756.
- ⁴ Golley Interview
- ⁵ Golley has participated six times in residencies in Jingdezhen, Jiangxi, China at the JDZ PWS Experimental Factory.
- ⁶ Trudy Golley, RCA: Artist’s Statement (for Lucent)
- ⁷ Golley Interview
- ⁸ The larger original version, comprised of 70 units, was part of an installation exhibited from September 30 to November 24, 1999 at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. For an excellent discussion of this important work, see Glenn Alison, Embodied reCollections: An Installation by Trudy Golley, exh. cat. Brandon: Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 1999.
- ⁹ For an explanation of the process known as Physical Vapor Deposition (PVD) and its importance in Golley’s work, see Paul Leathers, “All that Glistens: Trudy Golley’s Exploration of Durable Luster Technology,” www.ceramicsmonthly.org (February 2011), p.32 - 35
- ¹⁰ Golley Interview
- ¹¹ Georges Bataille invented the term *informe* in 1929.
- ¹² See Kevin Murray, “Lusus Artefactae Rust Never Sleeps It Just Dreams,” *Ceramics: Art and Perception* (No.18, 2010), pp. 102 – 105.
- ¹³ Golley collaborated with her husband Paul Leathers, the Red Deer-based studio metalsmith and writer, in creating unusual forms by stuffing found materials into HST (heat-shrink tubing). The two artists have been collaborating for a number of years. For more about Alluvium, their unique joint enterprise, see the statement for their collaborative 2010 exhibition *Anima Motrix* at the David Kaye Gallery in Toronto (http://davidkayegallery.com/?page_id=645) and the exhibition review by David Walker (Catherine Auriol, trans.), “Aurores Boréales – Exposition Australe,” *Cahiers métiers d’art / Craft Journal* (Vol. 3, No. 2, Spring 2010), pp. 110-114.
- ¹⁴ Paul Leathers, personal interview with Monique Westra, July 31, 2014
- ¹⁵ Golley Interview
- ¹⁶ Golley Interview
- ¹⁷ Golley Interview
- ¹⁸ Leathers Interview



5 Faux Banksia Vase, 2010

cover image

slip-cast and assembled porcelain, glaze,
with 24Kt overglaze decals
L2014.14.1

Collection of the Alberta
Foundation for the Arts

All images: Paul Leathers