

ceramics

M O N T H L Y

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Carol Gouthro at Gallery IMA

[Matthew Kangas](#) • April 5, 2016 • [Add Comment](#)



Aurlia gouthroii: Raphanus, 17 in. (43 cm) in length. All pieces are handbuilt, press-molded, and slip-cast terra cotta, stains, underglazes, glazes, oxidation fired to cone 04, 2014. All photos: Richard Nicol.

Although the West Coast ceramic sculptors who have attracted attention have made figurative work—among them Robert Arneson, Viola Frey, Akio Takamori, and Patti Warashina—it is important to remember the other wing—including artists making undersized and oversized vessels—that attained a sculptural status of its own. Carol Gouthro belongs in the latter category following Adrian Saxe, Ron Nagle, and, above all, Howard Kottler, the late University of Washington professor who was the godfather of conceptual ceramics. In addition, Gouthro's friendship with Kottler reaffirmed directions she was already travelling in: an aesthetic of pluralism rather than one arising out of painting or sculpture; a facility for invoking a pulsing life force from a fired inert material, earthenware or terra cotta; and an openness to sly erotic puns that appear alternately inviting or threatening.

The dozen or so new sculptures shown last year at Gallery IMA (www.galleryima.com) in her 12th Seattle solo gallery exhibition since moving there in 1978, are strong on the exuberant, colorful side; more threatening than before (bigger

size, with carnivorous plant allusions), but still not threatening enough to transcend their impeccable decorative lineage. Gouthro has always developed her sculptures at a glacial though steady pace. After all, she simultaneously maintains her custom tableware production line, so she can only manage so many time-consuming sculptures per year. Imagine what would happen if she were freed from making the tableware.

Averaging 9 to 15 inches high, Gouthro's pedestal sculptures recall the folded abstractions of Kathy Butterly's work in some ways, but veer toward more evident horticultural imagery. Titled with mock plant-species names, Gouthro is toying with the viewer, burying inside jokes for other gardeners, and amping up botanical mutations to approach convincing samples from a studio garden of extraordinary objects.



Aurlia gouthroii: Butterflies, 13 in. (33 cm) in length.

The peasant crudity of terra cotta is undercut by an amazing delicacy of detail: frond-like filigrees, lacy stamens, and pistils that resemble human nipples, and darkly blushing under-skins that cradle furry blossoms and bulging, probably inedible, berries and seeds.

Most of Gouthro's out-of-town solo shows in Quebec, Manitoba, Oregon, Pennsylvania, and California, have been in fine art and craft galleries whereas the group exhibitions that have included her work are more closely associated with the clay world, i.e., clay workshops at academic institutions in New York, Arizona, Wisconsin, Turkey, and China. Her breadth of knowledge about world ceramics is evident throughout the exhibitions like the one at Gallery IMA in that many different ceramic cultures and civilizations (chiefly Mediterranean in origin) are summoned up. However, viewers need not be aware of the histories and references to Persian lusterware, Italian Renaissance majolica, Tang Dynasty terra cotta, and Noritake Art Deco, as Gouthro mentioned in an interview. (Kottler's Noritake Art Deco collection was perhaps the largest in the US and widely shared with students and friends like Gouthro.)





1 *Aurlia gouthroii*: Resupinus, 21 in. (53 cm) in length, 2014. **2** *Aurlia gouthroii*: Blastula #2, 17 in. (43 cm) in length, 2014. **3** Hortus Vasa #3, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, 2014.

Within the new imaginary plant species, the Aurlia gouthroii, Butterflies (2011) and Blastula #2 (2013) share the same green bulb shape, like a giant garlic bud. Resupinus and Raphanus #2 (both 2014) also share a squash- or gourd-like core that has black, fern-like patterns over it.

More varied in forms and different from one another are two teapots, Viridis and Chromatello (both 2012), that have exposed cavities displaying mineral-like interiors and, in the former, a handle resembling a stalk of broccolini. Regardless of the teapot title, it's easy to forget the traditional crutch of a familiar shape because the intensity of the surface treatment overwhelms its container.

Portal #2: Anthozoa Enticement and Hortus Vasa #3 (both 2010) conclude the survey with a similar contrast—or dilemma. Portal #2 is over the top, drenched in ornament and about to become an insect or tarantula nest. Hortus Vasa #3 is tall, elegant, and restrained, but carries none of the focused seduction of the Aurlia gouthroii series. With such a range of tones at her fingertips, I'd like to see Gouthro go down a darker road, taking a garden path toward the next fantasy, another unknown plant species that could smile but might bite back.

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