



EBULLIENCE and GUSTO

with Carol Gouthro

by Heidi McKenzie

Aurlia gouthroii Flammeus, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, handbuilt and segmented terra-cotta clay, slip, stain, underglaze, glaze, luster, 2015. All photos: Stan Hain.

Above and beyond the conceptual notion that all ceramics being made of organic matter are by default organic by nature, Seattle sculptor and potter Carol Gouthro's work embodies and inhabits organic with ebullience and gusto. The essence of Gouthro's sculptural practice springs from a myriad of inspiration found in the natural world: pods, seeds, blooms, stamens, petals, gourds, stems, leaves, pine cones, shells, sponges, and lichen. Her muse is Mother Nature herself, both the flora on the earth and below the sea. The work is lush with color and gushing with vibrancy. The variegation, complexity, and diversity of her work seems limitless, and yet, most, if not all of her recent and current work are derived from several basic press molds. This article seeks to unpack Gouthro's process of making in the spirit of open-source sharing. An educator herself, Gouthro is keen to download her process of making so that it might continue to morph and take up new life at the hands of other makers. Gouthro herself cites having been influenced by both historical and contemporary artists as well as media-specific and cross-disciplinary artists: from 16th-century French Huguenot potter Bernard Palissy to the work of German photographer Karl Blossfeldt, the 20th-century Spanish architect Antoni Gaudi, and the textile design of the British Arts and Crafts Movement founder, William Morris.

Gouthro hails from Winnipeg, Manitoba: she's a prairie girl from Canada, and moved to Washington state's west coast in 1979. She recalls having been very interested in plants from a young age. One of her earliest memories is of being stung by a bee who came face to face with a curiously brash Gouthro as she examined the innards of the flower up close and personal. Gouthro admits, "I've just always been attracted to looking into things." In addition to organic matter at life-size scale, Gouthro also turns to the compound shapes of microscopic images, biomorphic forms, molecular imagery, and close-up imagery of seed pods, spores, and pollen. When she turned thirteen, she was offered a choice of gifts between a mini-skirt or a microscope—she chose the microscope.

A Flash of Inspiration

Gouthro started making work in what she calls the quarter-segment mold process approximately ten years ago. She was preparing for an exhibition and trying to figure out a way to make a large pleated form, which she envisioned having twelve sides. She considered hand building each part, but quickly discarded this methodology as she realized that would require making ten pieces of essentially the same shape, and in her words, "It would take forever." In a flash of inspiration, she conceived of building in the round—i.e. building a piece in parts that once joined together would make up a 360° whole. As she was visualizing, her mind's eye conjured an orange, and the segments of the orange falling away from each other. It was then that she realized she only had to make a quarter of the form to realize the whole. That was the original light-bulb moment.



Top: *Aurlia gouthroii Resupinus*, handbuilt and segmented terra-cotta clay, slips, stains, underglazes, glazes, 2014. **Bottom:** *Aurlia gouthroii Undulate*, handbuilt and segmented terra-cotta clay, slips, stains, underglazes, glazes, 2014.



Above left: *Effluescence gouthroii*, 25 in. (64 cm) in height, made in a large segment mold. **Above right:** Smaller segment molds and clay pressings taken from the molds. **Left:** Work in progress, terra cotta, slips, underglaze, made using Gouthro's segment mold process.

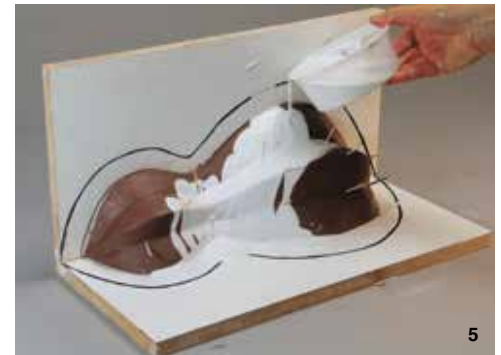
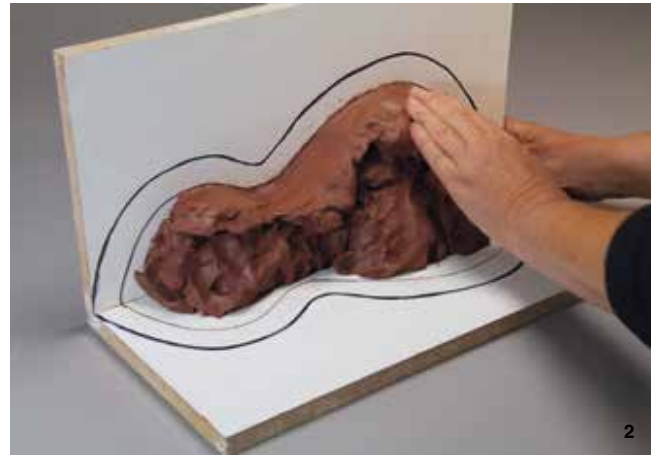
Gouthro's husband is at ease with wood and saw, so Gouthro had him build her two joined perpendicular planks. She then carefully considered the outline of the form, and traced one elevation of it on a folded piece of newsprint. She cut out her pattern in order to discern the form's two-dimensional shape (1). Then, she placed the pattern against the perpendicular boards with the fold line running along the seam. Next, she traced the pattern (which makes up a quarter of the final form) onto each side of the two adjacent boards. She then filled the spaces between the lines with soft clay (2). Gouthro prefers to work with red earthenware for a number of reasons, not the least of which is its rich and visceral earthiness, but also because the colors she ultimately uses to adorn her art tend to be vivid, and low-temperature firings offer more generous luminosity with bright palettes. Gouthro uses slips, underglazes, commercial glazes, and her own apothecary of glazes. Her credo is that the end result justifies the means.

Making of the Form

Gouthro sculpts her original form out of clay with care and precision (3), thinking through on a conceptual level the full rotational

outcome like a chess player who plans several moves ahead of the game. Once sculpted, she gauges the thickness of the plaster by placing toothpicks in the clay form (4), leaving the toothpicks sticking out ½ inch above the surface. She covers the form by pouring on a thin layer of plaster and then uses her hands to apply the majority of the plaster (5) once it's at that soft, scoopable cheese state (6). Once the plaster covers the ½ inch exposed section of the toothpicks, she pulls them out and smooths the surface of the mold (7) adding a slight coating of plaster where needed. After the mold is poured, she allows the plaster to set up and then pops out her form (8). The plaster mold of one quarter of the whole piece is the seminal tool that enables Gouthro to build the base of her complex sculptures relatively quickly and with ease (9–13). At times she chooses to open up the forms and work into the inside; at other times she will stand the piece vertically. The expediency of the method is freeing; Gouthro notes that it allows her to let go of any feeling of preciousness about the piece that she might have if it had taken a period of days or weeks to sculpt the base form.

Gouthro has control over the making of the form within the press mold by varying the clay's thickness. She recommends rolling out ¼-inch thick slabs as a point of departure. She can also choose to only use part of the mold, just the top, or the base for different applications. The permutations and combinations are only limited by her imagination, a bountiful resource in Gouthro's mind's eye. Her imagination is fueled by the home and garden she has been cultivating since 1991. Her garden has become her laboratory where she explores and imagines—a very real form of fantasy world. The titles of her works stem from this fantasy world, and tease viewers with cleverly conjured nomenclature.



1 Draw silhouettes of symmetrical shapes, then make paper templates by folding the paper in half and cutting out the shapes. These must be symmetrical to work for the quarter-segment mold process. **2** Trace the outline of your paper template onto the right-angle support boards. Next draw a line ½ to 1 inch (depending on size of mold) above this outline to mark the thickness of the plaster mold. Begin filling in the space with clay to create the solid clay model. **3** If you want a faceted, fluted, or carved surface, begin carving the solid clay form with a trimming tool. Other options: leave it smooth, stamp texture, or add bas-relief elements. **4** Push toothpicks into the high points on the clay model, leaving ½ inch exposed to make it easy to gauge the depth of plaster as you apply it. **5** Begin pouring a thin coat of plaster over the clay model that will flow into and preserve any texture on the model and prevent bubbles and gaps in the surface of your mold. **6** Continue to add plaster as it thickens, building your mold to the depth that you need. Pull the toothpicks out as the plaster is setting up to avoid having holes in the surface of the finished mold. **7** Smooth the plaster surface of your mold with a sponge and water as it starts to solidify.

Because Gouthro can press the overall forms so quickly, she chooses to focus her time and unleash her creativity individualizing each piece with intricate or multifarious decoration. Pattern and intensity of color are of prime importance for Gouthro, “I live for color—it’s like food for me, I can’t be without it.” Beyond nature’s color palette, Gouthro draws on the richness of textiles from around the world. Her wanderlust has taken her to many

corners of the globe; she has been to India six times, China five times, as well as Japan, Turkey, and most recently South Africa.

A committed and consummate educator, Gouthro teaches at two art centers in Seattle; Seward Park Clay Studio and Kirkland Arts Centre. True to her open-source philosophy of making and creating, Canadian ceramic artist, Trudy Golley sought and received Gouthro’s blessing to teach the segmented mold process



8 The completed and dried segment mold with the clay model removed. Dry your segment mold well before you use it so it will be easier and faster to use. **9** Begin using the plaster segment mold, pushing a wet clay slab in to the mold. Experiment with different ways to push clay into your mold using coils, balls, or strips of clay if you want additional texture. **10** Use a rubber or wooden rib to push the clay into the mold to ensure a good transfer. **11** Cut the edges and leave the clay slab in the mold to stiffen up or flip out and prop to stiffen. **12** Four sections pressed and ready to be assembled by scoring and slipping. Timing and slipping and deep scoring are the key to successfully building your completed form. **13** Four sections put together when leather hard to create the whole segmented form, then coated with white slip.

in her syllabus at Red Deer College in Alberta, Canada, and has subsequently continued to forward images of her students' work that is rooted in the method back to Gouthro.

Gouthro will be teaching this methodology on Vancouver Island in Canada at MISSA (Metchosin International Summer School of the Arts) in the summer of 2018 and then again at La Meridiana in Tuscany, Italy in the spring of 2019. Gouthro would be interested

to see what this article might inspire, and she encourages readers to contact her through her website, www.carolgouthro.com, Facebook (www.facebook.com/carol.gouthro), or Instagram (@gouthrocarol). We are all looking forward to what's next on her garden's path.

the author *Heidi McKenzie is an artist, author, and curator living in Toronto, Canada. Learn more at <http://heidimckenzie.ca>.*