

Transplanted • Present prairie • Metiers d'arts • Rural Craft • Bronfman winner

Studio

CRAFT AND DESIGN IN CANADA

Spring | Summer 2016

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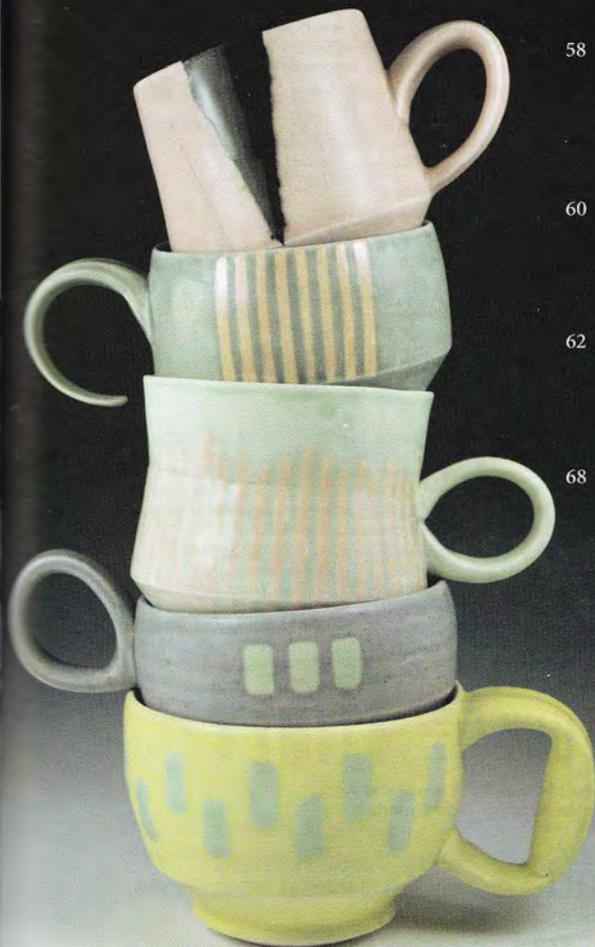
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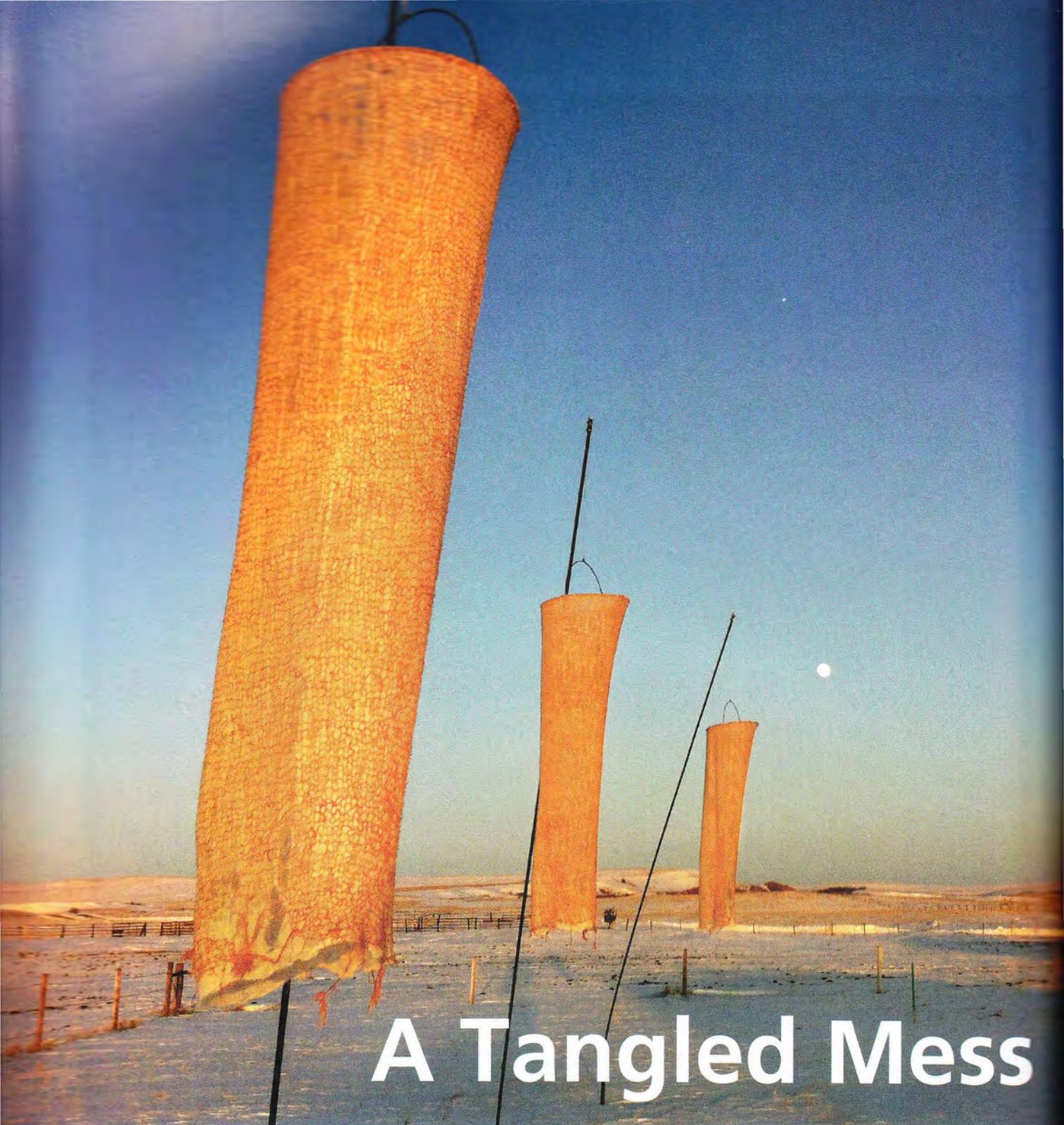
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COVER: Janet Morton,
Strange Music, 2012.
PHOTO CREDIT: DEAN PALMER

BELOW: Mynthia McDaniel,
Mug Stack, 2015.





A Tangled Mess

The Present prairie
in Saskatchewan and
Alberta Craft

BY JULIA KRUEGER



OPPOSITE: Mackenzie Kelly-Frere.
Air Over Land 51.511, -112.4079, 2013.
Wool, madder root. 130-140cm each.

RE-FRAMING THE MIND

Most landscapes will look shabby up against the stimulating imagery packaged and sold as "nature"...In actual life, very few roads have waterfalls, canyons, or craggy peaks. Even fewer have polar bears, trumpeting elephants, or great herds of wildebeests.¹

– Trevor Herriot

There is a common complaint about driving through the prairies: it is boring. There may be no herds of elephants or towering waterfalls, but there is a lot to see and experience on the Prairies. However, in order to do so, one must be in a certain frame of mind—a *present prairie* frame of mind. The word "present" is a play on words as it refers to both time and physical presence, and prairie, with a lower case "p," refers to the prairie as environment where a capitalized "P" refers to the idealized or mythologized landscape.² Present prairie craft is a conceptually rich theme explored within certain craft-related fields as early as the mid-1960s. Saskatchewan ceramists such as Lorraine Malach (1933–2003), Beth Hone (1918–2011) and Jack Sures engaged with the present prairie. Their work draws one into an intellectual dialogue that moves beyond how it was made and fits into the long and storied history of ceramics—common tropes of craft-related writing.³ It is time to expand the scope of discourse to articulate how historical and contemporary craft is experienced and is relevant to today. Moving from a six-foot high viewpoint, to one on hands and knees, and then delving below the native prairie surface, this article will examine some early Saskatchewan ceramic examples as well as contemporary craft from Saskatchewan and Alberta that engages the present prairie.

A SIX-FOOT HIGH VIEWPOINT

These ever-present pieces ask to be thoughtfully digested; to use the words of Jon Paul Fiorentino and Robert Kroetsch they are poetically descriptive rather than prescriptive. The work of Sures, Hone and Malach has gently expanded the understanding of what constitutes Canadian Prairie/prairie themed craft by moving beyond the stereotypical Prairie scene filled with wheat fields and grain elevators. Instead, these pieces and their contemporary counterparts evoke, in a "present" way, the sublime wonder of the native prairie. Presence, also invites the viewer to become aware of the fact that the Canadian prairie grasslands are "one of the most threatened ecosystems in the world."⁴

In her essay "Sense and Place," Alison Calder explains the characteristic Prairie scene is divided into two parts: sky and land as seen in W. C. McCargar's *Open Spaces* and Robert N. Hurley's *Grain Elevator, Water-Tower, Leney, S. of Perdue, Sask.* The horizon line, with a small, nostalgic town atop of it, is typically placed one third of the way up the image above productive golden fields. This six foot high sightline generates a



LEFT: David Thauberger,
A Prairie Piece, 1974.
 Earthenware, glaze, acrylic,
 mixed media. 23 x 36 x 33 cm.
 COLLECTION OF THE MACKENZIE ART
 GALLERY - GIFT OF RICHARD SPAFFORD.
 PHOTO: DON HALL.

OPPOSITE PAGE: Jack Sures,
Menage a trois...et quatre...et cinq
 (detail), 1979. Stoneware and oxide
 glaze. 64 x 16 x 16 cm.
 COLLECTION OF MOOSE JAW MUSEUM
 AND ART GALLERY. PHOTO: DON HALL.

sense of walking through the environment which implies ownership, the landscape has always been this way and that it only grows one thing in its yellow fields.⁵ Calder differentiates between "Prairie" as concept and "prairie" as environment.⁶

The Prairie icons and vantage point described by Calder and seen in the work of McCargar and Hurley were also visible in the 2005 exhibition *Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making*. For example, David Thauberger's Pop-inspired *A Prairie Piece*, 1974 playfully and ironically adopts a number of iconic Prairie symbols while consciously paying homage to a nostalgic pioneering culture celebrated by artists such as McCargar and Hurley. To be clear, the intention here is not to be retroactively critical of Prairie landscape artists as they bring to their work a deep understanding and respect for small town and farming culture. Instead, the purpose here is to complicate what representations of the Canadian Prairie/prairie can entail. Hone, Sures and Malach were also included in *Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making*, but their prairie is different—it is unrecognizably present.⁷ They too engage with place, but the vantage point changes to one on hands and knees, on the surface, and moves into the ground rather than floating six feet off the ground.

ON HANDS AND KNEES

*The perspective from hands and knees opens up and fills in the prairie. Why should I let a six-foot view of the world tyrannize my vision?*²⁸

— Don Gayton

Present prairie changes the vantage point by moving the horizon line up causing the viewer to feel like a miniscule component of the sublime grasslands ecosystem. In 1971, Jack Sures created a ceramic mural for a stairwell in Minouru Yamasaki's 1965 Classroom Building on the University

of Regina campus. This mural's horizon line has been dramatically raised three quarters of the way up the composition, a dramatic shift from the work of Hurley and McCargar. As the viewer descends, the stairwell plays along with Sures' ingenious use of ribbons of clay, an important role as it vertically reinforces the 'on hands and knees' viewpoint. Complete loss of horizon line is seen in Malach's *Spring and Summer* and *Fall and Winter* murals. Within these murals, small organic matter has been enlarged to the point where nothing can be definitively identified causing the viewer to feel even smaller and lower to the ground.

A low perspective brings into focus the cryptogamic layer that plays a vital role in protecting the surface of the prairie.⁹ This biological soil crust is made up of living organisms such as cyanobacteria, lichens, mosses and fungi that can be on and below the surface.¹⁰ Hone was particularly interested in fungi and mosses as seen in *Fluted Gills #1*, c. 1972.¹¹

Alberta ceramist John Chalke's work *Hips and Hoar*, 2013 adopts the 'on hands and knees' perspective of the present prairie while uncannily referencing the cryptogamic layer. Chalke dramatically captures that frozen moment in time when hoar frost envelops rose hips, creating an unrecognizably present depiction of the prairie's changing seasons. He states, "My recent work has been an attempt to preserve in a frozen moment some of the experiences we are unable to touch, like the pristine edge of certain melting snow, hoarfrost on a berry..."¹²

Preserving a moment can also be seen in the work of Saskatchewan ceramist Mel Bolen. *Vessel*, 2013 depicts the instant when the surface of a Duckweed-covered slough is broken by the splash of a pebble, creating a hiccup of blue water to appear. The depression and upheaval of the vessel's form formally strengthens the sensation of a captured moment post pebble strike. By adopting a low vantage point, at surface level rather than above, Bolen's work becomes a powerful present prairie statement about those small, beautifully wondrous moments that fill the prairie but are easily overlooked.



John Chalke
Hips and Hoar, 2008
Cryolite glaze with
chrome red, 22 cm wide
PHOTO: BARBARA TIPPON

Mel Bolon
Vases, 2009
Salt glazed stoneware,
17 x 39 x 24 cm
PHOTO: GRANT COOPER

BELOW THE NATIVE PRAIRIE SURFACE

There is an unseen world beneath the prairie surface. Sures' *Ménage à trois...et quatre...et cinq*, 1979 resembles a core sample. It is an example of Sures' witty investigation into the concept of surface as it relates to ceramics. The top of the vase serves as the surface of the prairie with curious flora and fauna, and the surface of the vase represents the active, subterranean life found below. Just as scientists cannot definitively identify all that lives beneath the prairie's surface, so too it is impossible to identify the creatures found 'below the surface' of Sures' vase. Although there are no recognizable Prairie icons, it is this engagement with what lies beneath that makes this a present prairie piece.

Burrow, 2012 by Alberta glass artist Julia Reimer investigates the regenerative forces found below the surface. Reimer is interested by all that remains dormant below the surface waiting for rain so that it can burst forth full of life. *Burrow* with its clean and crisp design (inspired by the land and quality of light found on the prairie) does not immediately appear to be about the prairies but on a formal, conceptual level, the prairie is unrecognizably present.

SEEING THE UNSEEN

*When explorers and traders first came to the prairie, they saw a lot of not: not-trees, not-mountains, not-people...Think of how much energy this not-seeing takes. Imagine what could be done here if that energy were redirected.*¹³

– Alison Calder

Contemporary prairie craft artists draw our attention to the unseen and untouchable which is an aspect of present prairie. Through the erosive power of wind, Alberta textile artist Mackenzie Kelly-Frère's evocative piece *Air Over Land 51.511, -112.4079*, 2013 represents in a non-representational way the invisible and not-seen within the prairie landscape. Unlike the examples, *Air Over Land 51.511, -112.4079* reveals a bodily presence with a decomposing knitted skeletal form. As the 'windsock' flew approximately 4.5 meters up in the air near Delia, AB, parts of the piece eroded away, materially and visually capturing the power of the prairie wind but also metaphorically excavating the not-seen skeletons buried deep within the colonial history of the Prairie provinces.

From a six-foot high viewpoint, to one on hands and knees, and then by way of a deep view of the unseen, the unrecognizably present prairie can be found in the work of Saskatchewan ceramists from the late 1960s to contemporary crafts people practicing in both Alberta and Saskatchewan. Present prairie is another way to understand and explore the enveloping, wondrously sublime, experiential environment of the Canadian grasslands while bringing to attention its endangered status and colonial history. The prairies of Alberta and Saskatchewan may not be filled with polar bears and canyons. However, they are replete with wonder and the unknown—the present prairie. ■

(Endnotes)

1. Trevor Herriot, *The Road Is How: A Prairie Pilgrimage through Nature, Desire, and Soul* (Toronto: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2014), 204.
2. Alison Calder, "The Importance of Place: Or, Why We're Not Post-Prairie," in *Place and Replace: Essays on Western Canada*, ed. Adele Perry, Esyllt W. Jones and Leah Morton (Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2013), 173.
3. Paul Mathieu, "The Brown Pot and the White Cube," in *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramic Practice*, eds. Ruth Chambers, Amy Gogarty and Mireille Perron (Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007), 47–48.
4. Nature Conservancy Canada, "Thinking about Canada's Prairies," Nature Conservancy Canada, 2013, <http://www.natureconservancy.ca/en/where-we-work/alberta/stories-thinking-about-canadas-prairies.html> (accessed July 8, 2014).
5. Alison Calder, "Sense and Place," in *Scratching the Surface: The Post-Prairie Landscape*, ed. Steven Matijcic (Winnipeg: Plug In Institute of Contemporary Art, 2007), 15.
6. Calder, "Sense and Place," 12.
7. "Unrecognizably present" is used by Fiorentino and Kroetsch to describe Post-Prairie poetry. I am aware of Calder's criticism in relation to the concept of "unrecognizably present." However, I am using the term here not to indicate a rupture or a way to state that colonialism is over but as an ever-present rendering of the native prairie grasslands that I have only come to recognize within the last few years. Jon Paul Fiorentino and Robert Kroetsch, *Post-Prairie: An Anthology of New Poetry* (Vancouver: Talonbooks, 2005), 9 and Calder, "The Importance of Place," 172–173.
8. Don Gayton, *The Wheatgrass Mechanism: Science and Imagination in the Western Canadian Landscape* (Saskatoon: Fifth House Publishers, 1990), 10.
9. Jason Nielsen and Ian Toews, *Grasslands*, directed by Ian Toews (Victoria: 291 Film Company, 2014), DVD.
10. USGS Canyonlands Research Station, "An Introduction to Biological Soil Crusts," *Biological Soil Crusts*, last modified April 24, 2006, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://www.soilcrust.org/crust101.htm>.
11. Her interest in fungi was inspired by her time in Northern Saskatchewan. However, these organisms are also found on the prairies in the southern portion of the province. Beth Hone, "Natural Forms," *Regina Clay: Worlds in the Making*, 2007, accessed November 23, 2015, <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/sgc-cms/expositions-exhibitions/regina/english/hone01hone.html>.
12. John Chalke, "Old Glazes," *Ceramics Monthly* 50, no. 3 (2002): 65.
13. Calder, "Sense and Place," 14.

