

'An Exhibition of Ceramics'

'The clay never forgets; it has a memory-' Mayela Leiva

Mayela Leiva speaks with intense conviction as she describes the physical challenges of shaping clay into form.

A highly trained and technically skilled ceramist, she is happy to be called a 'potter', yet proves by many of the works in this exhibition that she, like others in her field, uses the medium of clay to make not only utilitarian pots, but works which, other than being functional and decorative to a high technical degree of shape, surface design and finish, also interpret ideas in unique ways: ways that are distinctive and peculiar to the ceramist as artist.

That may be why she and her output have been varyingly described as 'the queen of sculpture' (Cartago, Costa Rica), and as 'Ceramics (receiving) artistic consecration' (Port-au-Prince, Haiti), among numerous reviews from the many group and solo exhibitions that she has participated in over the last forty years.

A native of Costa Rica and later a naturalized Mexican, Leiva has lived and worked in many countries, accompanying her husband, an official of the Mexican Ministry of External Relations, on his postings around the world. And in virtually all of these locations, she has brought her unending interest and dedicated pursuit of learning and a love of the ceramic art to a new environment, creating new work, learning from new and other traditions and skills, and also teaching, with an instinct to contribute to but also to benefit from a new community with its unique combination of circumstances and stimuli.



Totem - tree branches with unglazed leaves, 2011

This unending pursuit has led her to continually learn the myriad ways of technical methods and materials that have now given her the range of skills and enabled her imagination to follow its several paths and new directions with confidence and boldness.

Leiva's earliest days of training in art began in Costa Rica with the foundation of drawing and painting in 1968-69, followed by a general art degree programme where she first chose to specialize in ceramics, earning her Licenciatura (Master's equivalency degree) by the mid-70's from the University of Costa Rica. A scholarship from the Mexican government, which took her to the University of Guanajuato, Mexico in 1975 for further studies in ceramics, silver, arts and crafts, and related theory and technical programmes, started her on her course of additional learning.

This has included workshops and classes in a range of disciplines including silver and other metalwork, porcelain, glazes and kilns, large form (advanced) wheel throwing, slab building of forms in porcelain,

screen printing on clay – the latter three whilst living in the United States where she studied at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and the Lillstreet Art Center. Other studies have included physics for industrial designers, bamboo furniture making, paper clay courses, and studies in languages, arts and teaching. Over these years she has also taken part in over forty group exhibitions and ten solo exhibitions.

Armed with a great wealth of knowledge there is however, with the best of artists, the paradoxical instinct to begin anew, to rediscover the potential of the media (one's materials) allied to the urge for self-expression and articulation of ideas. Her travels therefore bringing her to Guyana some eighteen months ago, in Guyana no less, the urge to respond to and interpret her surroundings was once more a challenge and a necessity.

Personal duties in Guyana along with the search for the right quantities and types of clay left her, the artist laments, with only six months to prepare and work for this exhibition, for which she noted that she needed much more time, for what she wished or had intimations of doing.



Yellow bowl - stoneware, glaze c. 2008-9

Hence her fervent comment about the 'memory' of clay: the art of ceramics being a highly technical exercise, with numerous possible stages of refinement and variation, elements of surprise and random results, but also in tandem with precise monitoring of the firing of clay in the kiln (oven) depending on the methods and treatment of the material and additional overlays of glazes or other treatments and desired outcomes.

So that the works shown in this exhibition reflect this complexity and the duality of the ceramist's art: the challenge being always to marry instinct and vision (imagination, ideas) with technical skill, the merging and balance of the two resulting in expressive and memorable

works of art.

The landscape renderings from an earlier phase of her work, c. 2008-9, reflect this duality. Her works interpreting her response to landscape have resonant and poetic titles, such as 'Mountains carrying the wind', 'Under dense mountain', and 'Clouds in the Twilight'. Though unusual, they are simply descriptive of the artist's apprehension of landscape and the atmospheric phenomena which change colour, light, shape and texture, as observed by the artist's eye. They are in fact an expression of the artist's empathetic but observant identification with the natural world and its phenomena of changing elements and effects.

By contrast, the one work on exhibition that is solely in wood, 'Kilometer #38 – Todos Santos, La Paz', indicates a glimpse of hills seen at a point thirty-eight kilometers from La Paz on the way to an area called Todos Santos. At the beaches of Los Cabos, part of the journey, driftwood was picked up and worked diligently to the smooth planes of sloping triangles that make up this work.

Striking too are the shapes and silhouettes of 'Duality=2+2 the sun and the moon', in ceramic and wood, monumental shapes with the delicate counterpoint of forms of sun and moon on silver wire. Notable also are the brilliant and subtle colours achieved in glazing such as the shot blues of 'Clouds in the Twilight'.

Tellingly, these poetically experienced works, along with the more utilitarian bowls and pots, vases and plates of recent and current date in the exhibition, are also described and notated with the details of method and technique of their making : from the basics of clay and decorating stages, to firing temperatures and the means by which firing and its completion are gauged (the reference to ceramic 'cones' which in the kiln indicate through their melting the rate and culmination of temperatures at which the ceramics are fully fired).

Overwhelmed but inspired by the unending variation and abundance of vegetation and wider landscape while living in Guyana, the artist was compelled to produce work in 'Homage', acknowledging her time in this country. She has produced here delicate and varied leaf plates in an attempt to echo her delight in the variety of leaves she has seen, found and collected. Her 'Totem' similarly and her 'Ten Trees', hung with ceramic leaves and with a base of sand scattered with ceramic and dry leaves, express this 'homage' to the landscape and natural world; the crossed branches of the trees echoing, she says, the points of the compass, echoing the ten regions of the country, and the scattered leaves on the ground, along with those hanging above, indicating the never ending cycle of the seasons, here in Guyana as elsewhere in the world. Her 'Totem', in particular, represents 'energy...a contrast that links Mother Earth with the skies' and further 'represents the heartbeats of the earth and the water from the rivers of Guyana'.

These installations are in fact, and can only be, a distillation of her awareness and response to the enormity of the landscape and vegetation, the scale of the land and its natural and infinitely varied plant and forest life, of Guyana. Yet again, however, we are reminded that the artist's language is one of personal interpretation and expression, often an approximation in form that captures the spirit and essence of place, time and experience. Further, the quest of the artist, as much as his or her work, seeking to challenge, renew, refine and always create, can be an enlightening and revealing example in itself. Mayela Leiva, drawing inspiration from her surroundings, and sharing her work with a new community, is one such example.

Elfrieda Bissember
Curator
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Artist's Statement



Mayela Leiva Ulloa

For this exhibition I will tell my story in Guyana.

Since I came to this enchanting town in November 2009, I began to enrich myself with the culture and everything in my environment, the people and art, pottery and clay. I was concerned about finding potters and the materials for making sculptures.

I had the opportunity to meet a friend, Imma Subirana, who had been working with clay in Guyana and encouraged me to undertake this challenging work.

First, not all clay used has the same characteristics and therefore I had to get used to handle the type of clay that we get in Guyana. It is clay suitable for turning or throwing, manual techniques, of low temperature and with a lot of

iron oxide and plasticity. I got the mud from my friend's provider, but unfortunately that vendor stopped selling. This was not a barrier to further thinking about making my work in ceramics. After several months of comings and goings, I came across new materials to make the pieces that you find in this exhibition.

As this soil is suitable for manual work, it reminds me of the first toys I made as a child in my family's brick factory in Costa Rica, where I started to learn about clay modeling. When I was perusing my degree in fine arts at the University of Rodrigo Facio in Costa Rica, I was excited to specialize in ceramics because it seemed a very rich material to create forms of any kind. With the support of my teachers from Costa Rica and other countries, I got to understand, love, and appreciate this art even more.

Before coming to Guyana, I lived in La Paz Baja, South California, Mexico. It is located in the north of the country. It is a very dry and desert landscape, it seldom rains during the year and water is scarce. Like Guyana, it is warm and the sun shines every day. There we can find a lot of cactus, a variety of clays, diversity of woods eroded by nature, a very good alabaster. All materials inspire me to create my sculptures and pottery pieces.

But in Georgetown, which is surrounded by jungle, the picture changes. The brightness of the sun, the rivers, the rain, its thick nature, the color of its flowers, its trees, their leaves with thousands of unique shapes and designs, inspire me in my work. This work permits to appreciate the engraving and printing of the leaves on the clay, which emphasizes its veins, retaining their shape and making it everlasting. I present different facets of the leaves, such as single leaves, curling, flat, round, triangular, long, oval, and with bowl shapes. For this exhibition, leaves are on the floor and hanging from the ceiling, walls, and on trees.

There are also sculptures in low temperature, a tree sculpture in wood eroded by nature, another two pieces with the name 'Duality = 2 + 2 the sun and the moon', made in clay and wood, and a sculpture in two pieces 'Confrontation' in stoneware clay.

I have other utilitarian pieces like bowls, of different sizes, shapes and glazes in stoneware clay, and baked at 1.300° degrees Celsius.

Mountains and clouds

Sculptures inspired by the landscape around us

Mountains and clouds have also been part of my inspiration for previous exhibitions and I am presenting them because they are part of nature. I grew up in Costa Rica, a country covered by clouds and surrounded by high mountains, all caressed by the rain, with intense green and blue colors within an infinite range of shades. I chose them as the theme for my last sculptures. The shape of the mountains and clouds resemble the contours of the mountains we see when we go anywhere by land, by sea or by air.

For me this subject has been of great affinity. In each sculpture, clouds and mountains have been shaped as I sometime happened to see them. Each sculpture and every detail that is present in nature, its function, its link with mankind, remind us that they are part of the environment that we live surrounded by them and that we must take care of them for the survival of all.