

# Slip: Awakening Metaphor

in the ceramics of

## Amélie Proulx

BY ROBIN METCALFE

ONE DOES NOT GENERALLY THINK OF ceramics as a time-based medium. Durability and chemical stability are among its defining properties: we do not expect ceramics to move or respond dynamically to our presence. Such assumptions fall quickly away in an encounter with the work of Amélie Proulx. This emerging artist's deep commitment to the ceramic medium underlies a practice that activates that medium in surprising and thought-provoking ways.

In *Poussières de langage* (2010), the artist arranges a fleet of small porcelain shards, each roughly crescent shaped, like a small boat, on the floor of the gallery in a rectangular field the size of a long narrow bed. A motorised mechanism beneath the floorboards rotates poplar rods beneath the ceramic pieces, causing the surface gently to rise and fall in swells, like waves or the breath of a sleeping person. These movements are controlled by a microprocessor, which activates the motors at random intervals. (Not visible in the gallery proper, the mechanism is housed in the gallery basement.)

People entering the gallery trigger a motion detector: those electronic impulses influence the process that generates random patterns. However, there is no predictable relationship between the presence of viewers and the generated motion. As the pieces move, they click softly together, creating a murmuring clatter, like the sound of beach stones settling after a receding wave. These seven thousand "small waves," as Proulx calls them, are built mainly from porcelain slip, whose whiteness shows through a translucent glaze of subtle colours ranging from grey through green.

Proulx identifies *Poussières de langage* as a "durational installation that responds to the space where it is situated as well as to the viewers visiting the space."<sup>1</sup> While the movements of the piece seem repetitive, they never repeat exactly.

Formed from the clay and silica sand that moving water generates (through erosion) and collects (by silting), Proulx's objects promise to return to their source, both by representing it (the moving picture of a river) and by re-enacting the physical process of erosion. Given enough time, they should break down again into dust from rubbing together. We hear them rustling, in their gallery bed, as they dream of the past and future of all ceramics.

Proulx speaks of her "alchemical desire to make ceramics soft again."<sup>2</sup> She sets up a semiotic hall of mirrors in which the part represents the whole, the thing contained its own container, a metonymic interplay often referred to as *mise en abyme*. In her Masters thesis, Proulx, a recent graduate with a Master of Fine Arts in Craft from NSCAD University (Nova Scotia College of Art



ABOVE: Amélie Proulx, *Poussières de langage*, 2010. Porcelain, glaze, stainless steel wire, polyester thread, motors, ball bearings, circuit board, microcontroller, motion sensor, poplar, steel structure, felt. (89 cm x 251 cm x 76 cm). Photo: Jenna Edward

LEFT: *Poussières de langage*, 2010. Detail.

& Design), places these ideas in the context of Freud and Lacan, by way of Borges and Marguerite Yourcenar. Citing both the Freudian and the Lacanian 'slip' – discursive ruptures that reveal unconscious, alternative truths – she puns on the material 'slip' from which she forms her ceramic objects.<sup>3</sup>

Proulx was named Grand Prize winner of the inaugural \$5,000 Starfish Properties Student Art Award for her work, *Ébauche d'un nuage de pluie* (2010). The work was displayed at NSCAD's Port Campus and subsequently added to The Reznick Family Art Bank within the permanent President's Collection of the College. It also won the People's Choice Award, sponsored by the NSCAD student union and voted on by attendees at the Award Gala on May 7, 2010.

*Ébauche d'un nuage de pluie* (Sketch of a rain cloud) consists of a small overhanging structure of lexan and electronic circuitry from which hangs an array of porcelain stalactites. A microcontroller causes them to move at random intervals, like a thicket of jittering icicles, the sound of their movement amplified and played back through a speaker audible to a viewer standing below the work.

In *Voilà, Vois là, Voile (a)* (2009), exhibited as part of Proulx's NSCAD graduating class exhibition, hundreds of porcelain drops are suspended within a sealed acrylic box that occupies part of an exterior window of the gallery. The box is misted with water particles from four ultrasonic mistmakers. As with



ABOVE: Amélie Proulx, *Voilà, Vois là, Voile (a)*, 2009. Detail. Porcelain, glaze, mdf, acrylic box, polyester thread, ultrasonic mistmakers, water, circuit board, microcontroller. (224 cm x 206 cm x 33 cm). Photo: Jenna Edward

RIGHT: *Voilà, Vois là, Voile (a)*, 2009. Installation view.

the other two works here discussed, the operation of the mechanism – the density of the fog it produces – varies in a random sequence determined by a microprocessor. Drops (of condensing water) drop from the (porcelain) drops within this hermetic environment. Likewise, one can view the (often foggy) external environment of historic downtown Halifax through the theatrical fog of Proulx’s installation.

“Ceramics is my second language,” says Proulx, “after French.”<sup>4</sup> *Poussières de langage* means “dust of language,” and as the title suggests, Proulx’s concept has a linguistic origin, reminding us that ‘bed’ denotes both a riverbed and a human sleeping place. In her Masters thesis, the artist speaks of this as a “dead metaphor,” or alternatively as a “dormant metaphor” or a “depth metaphor” that she seeks to bring back to life, re-awaken or bring to the surface.

The Oxford English Dictionary hedges its bets on whether the naming of a river ‘bed’ originates with a metaphor for a sleeping place, or whether both originate equally from a common source meaning a dug place such as an animal’s lair.<sup>5</sup> The Indo-European root syllable, *bhedh-*, ‘to dig,’ is also the root (via the Latin verb *fodere*) of the word ‘fossil,’ which intersects nicely with Proulx’s notion that “materials are a marker of time and that they can hold memory,” which she describes as “a foundational element in the installation *Poussières de langage*.”<sup>6</sup>

The deep archive of human culture consists to a large extent of fired clay. Unlike fibre, ceramics do not decay. Unlike metal, they do not corrode and the irreversible process of their making means they cannot profitably be reformed into new objects, except as rubble. Their archival stability is part of the comfortable field of ideas around ceramics that Proulx destabilises through her work. Not quite upsetting the apple cart, she nevertheless causes it to jiggle and twitch in ways that keep the viewer guessing, and thinking. ■



FOR FURTHER INFORMATION VISIT:  
[www.amelieproulx.com](http://www.amelieproulx.com)

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 Amélie Proulx, *Falling Asleep in a River Bed: The Slip of Meanings in Language and in the Perception of Natural Phenomena*, unpublished Masters thesis, March 2010, p. 24.
- 2 Op. cit. p. 14.
- 3 Op. cit.
- 4 Interview with the artist, 12 June 2010.
- 5 *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, Volume 1 (Oxford University Press, 1971), p 188.
- 6 Proulx, p. 25.