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City Hall exhibitions capture the fragility of life

VISUAL

BY PETER SIMPSON NOVEMBER 21, 2018

CHERYL PAGUREK'S RED AND GOLD TEACUP FEATURES IMAGES FROM THE CHARLOTTESVILLE RIOT.

Two exhibitions at Ottawa city hall show how fragile are the things we hold most dear — democracy, justice, freedom, and life itself. Even the art is fragile, as a sign warns visitors, “This installation is delicate. Please do not touch.”

The caution is at Karsh-Masson Gallery, where a collaboration between photographer Barbara Brown and sculptor Cynthia O’Brien is often fragile — and always better than suggested by its oddly stilted title, *Lifecycle Conversations*, which sounds like a gab session at spin class. In fact, the exhibition is a beautifully sad contemplation “of human fragility, mortality and the inevitability of death,” or, in other Latin words, *memento mori*.

Brown and O’Brien set flowers and plants as the main actors in their “observance of transience, loss, memory, decline and rejuvenation.” O’Brien’s small, ceramic flora is shown both in Brown’s photographs, and with them.

The title of the first piece seen, *Unending*, could refer to the extent of its visual stimulation. Brown’s photograph of mixed flowers is mounted on the wall, and before it stands a plinth topped with a mirror. Set upon the mirror is a loose wreath of ceramic leaves and petals. The lack of frames on the photograph and

mirror enhance the focus on all that stimuli, and the effect is of almost falling into reflective layers of paper and glass and hardened clay. Curiously, the flowers are dominantly greyish white but for one purplish bunch that is tucked into the back of the wreath, like a heart still beating.



BARBARA BROWN AND CYNTHIA O'BRIEN OFFER LIFESTYLE CONVERSATIONS AT THE KARSH MASSON GALLERY.

A much larger photograph shows O'Brien's flora on the ground in a forest clearing, arranged in the shape of a human body at rest. A similar image shows the ceramic pieces arranged in an outline of a human form, as if across the two prints the body is slowly disappearing. And unto dust shalt thou return . . .

The centrepiece, in that it's suspended from the ceiling in the centre of the room, is another restful human form, or at least a sort of shadow of one. A vertical panel hangs by wires and is covered with a photograph of lush grass, on which the supine figure is visible in a lighter shade of green. A cluster of tiny, white ceramic flowers stick out of the panel, as if growing from the torso of the body. On the floor beneath is a small band of soil.

On the other side of the panel the figure is seen from below ground, shaped in shadowy grey against the dark. From it grow the roots of those tiny flowers, each like a gnarled hand with fingers outstretched, pulling the body deeper into the dirt and the unknown. Life leaching into earth, and into memory.

Over at the City Hall Gallery, ceramics and the fragility of life are brought together again, this time by Cheryl Pagurek, who has, literally, put a tempest in a teacup.

Pagurek has projected images, both still and moving, from the global news cycle into the interiors of fine china tea cups. The images are uniformly disturbing — protests and violence in the streets, the indifferent wrath of natural disasters, or refugees overcrowded into small boats.

All the desperation and degradation plays out upon the incongruous, delicate prettiness of the china cups, with their brilliantly white interiors, pastel colours and classic motifs. The cups become allegorical vessels, an example of how the greatest achievements of human progress, imagination and co-operation — democracy, justice and the bed of social order in which they're planted — are concepts as fragile as a china cup. They take a lot of effort to make, and little effort to break.

Pagurek knows the threats to the civilization we've constructed are not the problem of "others." A video, projected onto an image of a white china saucer, shows more images of natural disaster and civil unrest, interspersed with clips of the artist strolling along a peaceful, white-picket-fence neighbourhood. At the end, Pagurek stops on the sidewalk and looks up to see a drone (one assumes) recording her every step. She looks up, vexed, as the drone slowly rises and flies away, a vague, omniscient threat to fragile freedoms.

Fragile continues at City Hall Gallery only to Nov. 27.

Lifecycle Conversations continues at Karsh-Masson Gallery to Jan. 9.



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