

Metaphor for Love

Hank Murrow's stoneware tiles

Migrations of the Heart: *New Ceramics by Hank Murrow at White Lotus Gallery, through March 2, 2004.*

A couple of migratory birds emerge from storm clouds, flying high above a snowy landscape with rolling hills, heading toward a dark unfrozen lake. Where the snow is thinner, a reddish earth is revealed. The birds are lovers. Their story is made not of words, but clay and glaze.

Hank Murrow's recent work, "Migrations of the Heart," is metaphorical in nature. It is also an open-ended narrative on the theme of romantic love told through a series of ceramic wall-plaques. Each tile is itself a mini-story representing one of the myriad possibilities and configurations in the dance of love and courtship. Each reflects a moment in time, only hinting at what may happen next.

"These are speculations about love stories," Murrow said. "We're wondering how it will turn out for each of these lovers. Allusion is one of the qualities that I court in my work. I don't like when things are spelled out."

This body of work began as a "study of romantic relationships using the migration of geese and cranes as central metaphor" conducted on pottery: platters, trays, bowls, jars, vases, some of which are on display. Soon however, Murrow shifted to medium- and large-format tiles as support.

"With pottery," he explained, "the story is just impressed on a form. By getting rid of the form and using a flat surface instead, everything serves the metaphor, and the story can expand."

All the tiles represent aerial views of gently rolling terrain. "These are highly eroded soft forms," Murrow said, "a landscape of rolling hills such as you can find in Eastern Oregon by Snake River Canyon."

They evoke a soft feminine earth, sometimes erotically so. Turn #11 counterclockwise once and you'll notice a stylized cream-colored female torso, with two birds entering the cleavage between rounded breasts and heading toward a dark pubis. #3 offers a similar but coppery torso, with a white-lace ribbon over the breasts and birds heading between them toward a jewel-like navel.

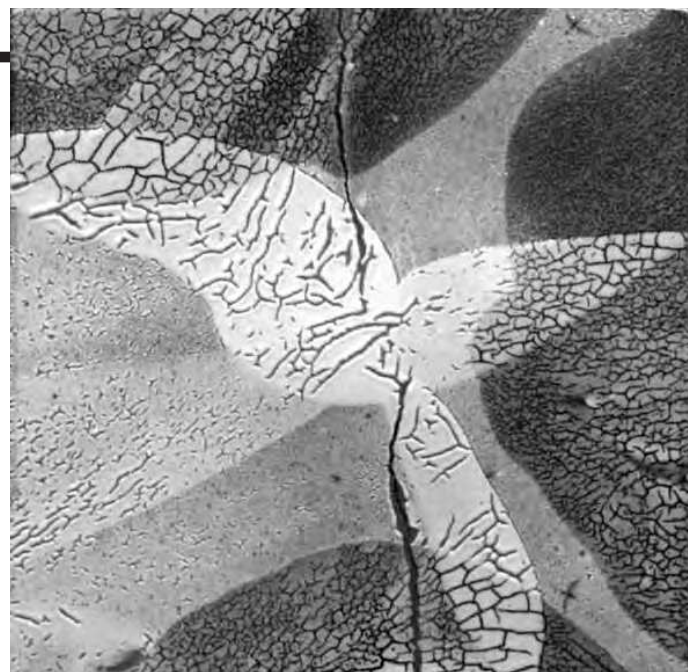
The tiles share as vocabulary a number of elements functioning variously combined to recreate the different stories of romance. The avian lovers may fly side by side, toward each other, or follow each other at a distance. Sometimes they are complemented by a flock of birds but are not part of it. The lake, a recurrent motif, is small, teardrop-shaped and dark, free of ice. Tilled fields and man-made marks are represented with stamped geometric patterns set in a corner or along an edge.

"I'm alluding to rational quality with those geometric marks," Murrow said. Tiny

geometric solids in porcelain stand for farm-buildings. The moon is sometimes present as an unglazed wedge in a corner. Fall season, symbolized by pressed-in rust-colored leaves, is for Murrow a "time of fermentation when things are mutating into silence."

A similar palette unites all the tiles, but shades and overlapping patterns vary. Different strengths of red, from deep rust to light blushes, diversely combine with creamy white snow, blue-grey patches of clouds and bluish-black accents. Snow may figure as a thick layer or as snowdrifts blown by storm winds. In #2 the white glaze evokes the shape of a bird in flight, like a great white shadow swooping across the landscape. Textures range from smooth to dramatic crack patterns due to natural shrinkage in the glaze coat when thickly applied. Indeed, most of the surface effects result from Murrow's manipulation of the dominant glaze, Shino, which is responsible for both whites and reds.

In 1969, Murrow saw a 400-year-old Shino tea-bowl "with a curdly white glaze suffused with orangy passages," which led to



Migrations of the Heart #2, stoneware with Shino glaze by Hank Murrow

years of research and experimentation with Shino that included his designing special kilns. Murrow discovered he could get "a range of effects, from curdly white with fire-color blushes to blood-red all over, just by treating the cooling cycle as an equally important and active part of the firing."

He uses oxygen reduction during firing to pull the rust-colored iron from the clay into the colorless glaze. During cooling, the iron on the glaze surface reoxidizes and turns red. Application of the glaze also matters. The thicker the layer, the whiter the color; a thinner layer is redder. Yet no matter how vivid the red, it is never thicker than 20 microns over the white glaze.

This is an exhibition not to miss. **ew**

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