



*Conjoined Geographies, 2016. Pit-fired, hand-built earthenware with terra sigillata and glaze, 14 x 24 x 6*

*in. All photographs by the author.*

## **The Transformative Geographies of Murmuration**

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Murmuration displays ceaseless, continuous change; flocks' movement relies on trust, collaboration, and improvisation. The birds shape-shift into unexpected patterns, dismantling and reconfiguring, always on the edge of transformation. On my morning walk, I ponder murmuration and reflect on my partner, her movements, and

the boundaries of those movements. My collaborator, in life and work, lives her life mostly indoors due to her disability. Outside, I note the topography: The contours of the landscape slope and rise, bodies of water and landmasses flow and roll into one another, the prodigious profiles of cityscape and countryside collide, and the clay and mud ripple in the earth beneath me. I wonder how nuanced fluctuations of movement in expansive landscapes can be shared with those of us who exist within constrained environments?

I make discursive vessels that reference bodies as individuals, collective groups, governing systems, bodies of water and land, and bodies of evidence. These containers are an axis upon which viewpoint and significance turn. Meaning and perspective maneuver through culturally defined boundaries of power, capacity, and normativity and manifest as either inhibition or freedom. The former marginalizes, constricts, and closes borders, while the latter dismantles, and provides access. I consider these concepts within three discrete bodies of work. Through fragmented forms, allegoric containers, and mundane assemblages, I explore mutable topographies of systemically obfuscated interior terrains and dominant exterior perspectives. I aim to reveal stories erased through past and ongoing repression.

I live in a county where the prison and a center for people with disabilities are the largest institutional structures. As communities, we can criminalize, stigmatize, and incarcerate, erect rigid confines, and designate borders. Or, through collective endeavor, we can provide access, allow movement, and foster an interdependent web of supportive resources. Last summer I worked as the resident artist at the center for people with disabilities, a multidisciplinary program that nurtures collaborative, creative inquiry among people with disabilities, students, and area residents. In this accessible, inventive space woven into the fabric of the region, I began to explore the possibility of using clay to record and translate movements—both fleeting and glacial—of the landscape on my walk.



As I considered the potential of the phenomenon of murmuration to express collective endeavors in community, I experimented, tearing clay bit by elemental bit, embracing the evocative material and marks that evidenced my touch. Piece by piece, I laid down a map of the shifts of geologic features, translating earth into the body of a vessel. I folded the horizontal land into the vertical contours of containers that crossed boundaries of space, place, and time. Using this process, I developed my *Torn Geographies* series. I combined iconic vessel shapes in unsettling juxtapositions. These pots' profiles began with pinched planes as bases that transitioned upward to heavily textured, rhythmically torn sections. Dismantling the boundary of the base, I added small torn pieces of clay, layer by layer, to develop a new form, which revealed its shape slowly as a reflection of past and future landscapes. The pots varied in scale and surface; some were covered in terra sigillata and pit-fired to a black finish, others glazed in yellow and red tones. The contrasting finishes utilize both ancient and contemporary techniques. I built these containers as metamorphic reassemblages, as reconfigured bodies, to hold my movements through the environment of my walk and to represent the capacity of a community without barriers that marginalize it. Gathered together, these pieces are permeable interwoven terrains with which I articulate the gestures and possibilities of murmuration.



In contrast, my series *Overlooked* examines the tension of isolation from the external world. Using a still life framework, I investigate containment and the restrictions of movement through interior tableaux. I scrutinize the power and ownership of the gaze and unpack boundaries that “other” individuals through societal demarcation and institutional erasure. I use a window frame as a literal and figurative border that outlines unique human constraints, and the windowsill to delineate our position with respect to those constraints. I scrutinize the ways in which physical and systemic boundaries of inclusion and exclusion are constructed to impede movement. In this work, I attempt to erode the binary opposition between inside and outside and to expose cultural and contextual power ascribed to those with more access and greater means. In this liminal narrative, I question the capacity and worth of household objects and detritus. I hope to highlight a spectrum of possibility in which everyday moments and overlooked corners exude beauty. For example, “Window Sill Lives: Cactus Tea” depicts a mundane grouping of objects—a sardine can holding spools, a repurposed matchbox containing razors, a teacup with a cactus growing from it, and a small collection of acorns with a candlestick—on an interior windowsill that reclaims the discarded items and refuse of the domestic. This piece envisions with meaning, purpose, and grace the activity and movement of life bordered inside, unseen by the exterior world.





In addition to the prosaic still lives in this series, I offer one more poetic study. “Stone Soup Spoon Theory” illustrates a soup of interdependence in which we all have nourishment to offer. I combine the fable “Stone Soup,” where each villager contributes to a meal started from a magical stone, with “Spoon Theory,” a term people with disabilities use. Spoon theory refers to how they sometimes feel that they have just a few spoons to get through the day. Inspired by historical cornucopias, I coil-built a large tureen with pronounced pinch marks, an elevated foot, and decorative handles. The tureen is finished in black terra sigillata and overflows with glazed spoons of multiple colors and textures. Through the content and form of this piece, I entwine parables that encourage collective empathy. I demythologize the capacity of the individual and community, and question the veracity of immovable boundaries.



Envisioned broadly, movements can be shifts, actions, groups, crusades, and they give rise to transformation. Oppressive power obstructs movement by marginalizing borders and prevents the agency of multiple systems of knowledge. In my third series, *Bifurcated*, I locate the vessel as body, as a place of movements, of borders restricting movement, and a site of historic resistance. With these works, I conjoin adversarial forces. Two distinct shapes combine in one form as narratives struggle to overwhelm each other. In “What if the Dandelion Told the Story of Tea?” I depict imperialisms through upending classical and traditional tropes, as I call into question the historic definitions of the two terms. Instead of representing classically shaped teacups as occupiers of status, and traditionally built coil pots as static and unchanging objects, I pinched scores of teacups, bisected them, and attached them like parasites to a formidable coil-built water bowl, its walls bisecting the teacups. With this large, yellow-glazed earthenware piece, I interrogate mythology as fact and chronicle competing narratives in the global history of tea. Through colonization, trade wars, and forced mass migrations, imperial powers exploited resources such as tea, commodifying it. When the narrative is told from the perspective of the



colonizer, multiple truths are erased. For example, the dandelion is not a worthless weed, but the beneficial succor in dandelion tea. I use this symbolic work to highlight history's distortions, so that the dandelion, not the teacup, tells the story.



Ruling narratives dominate through war, enslavement, and legislation and constrict movement through fear and greed. *Bifurcated* navigates boundaries as bodies move out of imposed stations. With “Dandelion,” I tell the story of historic colonial movements. Analogously, I made “The Volume of Flint: Not a Nestle Colony,” as a contemporary telling of imperialist practice. Here, plastic bottles simultaneously spill out from and infect an elegant coil-built water bowl to showcase the Flint water crisis and protest the colonial practices of corporations. The glossy deep-purple tones of the glaze that drip down into a golden yellow are illustrative of greed and a reverse alchemy—instead of turning lead into gold, government officials, fueled by greed, polluted water with lead. While the residents of Flint drink poisoned water, Nestle profits from their control of fresh water access by bottling the Michigan resource and

selling it back to the people of Flint. These juxtaposed vessels and fragmented forms elucidate the impositions of power, privilege, and policy to create borders that reduce individual capacity and agency through restricted movement.

During the period when I was wrestling with the issues of borders in historic and contemporary geopolitical structures, my family's home burned down. I lost the physical space—the frame, its border, and contents—that held decades of living. The house, no longer a substantive container, was dismantled. The conflagration destroyed the partition between inside and outside and resolutely unsettled and ungrounded its former borders. Days later, standing in the midst of debris on a quiet, gray morning with only the sound of a bird chirping, I felt compelled to create new work from that place of the unknown, of wonder. If borders were not a fixed thing but instead were always moving and could be disaggregated, could I manifest the same dissection of boundaries I had embedded in *Torn Geographies*? Could I use additional tools to transverse sensory borders? Could I reimagine entry points to other systems of knowledge and provide different ways of seeing as in *Overlooked*? Could I refuse the lie of the border altogether as revealed in *Bifurcated*?



In response, I pit-fired earthenware tiles and laser-etched them with the audio waves I recorded of the fire and a lone bird. The result became a set of walnut-framed tiles called “Bird’s Eye View.” Collectively, they appear emblazoned with an imagined landscape, its depth achieved through layers of ash, carbon, and combustible material to convey the feel of space and movement. As I merged bird song, clay, and fire, I



reimagined the creative potential of movement and fallen borders.

Through the medium of clay, I consider eras of repressed movement, of superimposed boundaries, and the power of creative potential. In *Torn Geographies* I explore the potential of broken boundaries and how the freedom to move exists in conjoined forms. This series simultaneously disorients and reorients, dismantles borders, and reimagines anew. I recognize movements—those fluctuating, developing struggles that occur in intersectional spaces. Through *Overlooked*, I deconstruct the borders of perception to bring visibility to those of us made to feel invisible. When the frame for our spaces demands the success of the few at the expense of the failure of many, the border itself becomes a place to unsettle, to move, and to celebrate potential. In *Bifurcated* I depict places of impact and power struggles, and illustrate how the freedom to move exists concurrent with oppression. These systems of control distribute dominant narratives to perpetuate authority. With this series I display the lie in these false mythologies. Finally, I learned with “Bird’s Eye View” about the beauty of the unknown, the transmogrified possibility when borders fall, and the trust in the transformative effects of murmuration.

Clay is torn, coiled and pinched, simultaneously becoming and unbecoming. A vessel at its symbolic and formal apex is both uncontained and contains. Through my work, I narrate uncontained movements that contain ongoing alterations. I question the structural and cultural systems, both subtle and large, that crack and dissolve boundaries. When we conjure together, feel the tiny and great shifts, the quiet and the loud, we move with an awareness of each other to dismantle and reimagine.