



WHALE FALL

Collaborative works by
Nicholas Crombach & Nurielle Stern

July 2 to September 8, 2019



The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery brings exhibitions to the public that are grounded in craft materials and processes, engaged in contemporary experimentation, and meaningful to diverse audiences.

We are proud to present *Whale Fall*, an exhibition by ceramic artist Nurielle Stern and sculptor Nicholas Crombach in the Dr. Douglas Wright Education Gallery. Both are emerging artists from Toronto and their collaborative installation engages with “narratives of manipulation, transgression, and beguilement,” woven within the history of ceramics. Their work is layered with meanings in an exhibition where the visitor is surrounded by a sense of mystery. The central installation in the exhibition, also entitled *Whale Fall*, engages with the surrounding works and demands attention. Details emerge, questions arise.

This thought provoking exhibition is accompanied by a publication that was made possible, thanks to the generous donation by The Office of Gilbert Li who offered the design work. We also wish to thank Mr. Robert Grant who made the printing of the catalogue possible. The Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery is supported by The City of Waterloo, the Ontario Arts Council, and the Canada Council for the Arts.

Bringing such an ambitious project to the Gallery requires team work, and I thank our staff for their contribution to this project, at all levels. Finally, thank you to Nurielle Stern and Nicholas Crombach for sharing with us their passion and their work.

Denis Longchamps

Executive Director

Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery



Ripples and Divinations:
Whale Fall as Immersive Cabinet of Curiosities

Esmé Hogeveen

“This is the freshly dead carcass of a thirty tonne grey whale. It’s resting on the seafloor a mile down. It’s only been on the bottom for six weeks, but already it’s attracted hundreds of [ancient scavengers] from miles around.” So intones the gravelly, grandiose, and ever-so-slightly bemused voice of Sir David Attenborough at the beginning of a *Blue Planet* BBC Earth YouTube clip entitled “Sharks Feasting On A Whale Carcass.” Attenborough goes on to explain the ways in which a whale carcass can sustain a hyper-specific ecosystem at the bottom of the ocean. In *Whale Fall*, which opens at the Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery in July 2019, Nicholas Crombach and Nurielle Stern invoke the phenomenon of whale fall as a conceptual framework for a richly textured exhibition centring ceramics and their material and aesthetic histories. The artworks, presented in an immersive, multimedia installation, evoke the paradoxical ways in which attempting to order nature inevitably calls into question the legitimacy of existing epistemological systems, leaving space for potent speculation.

Featuring clusters of porcelain objects arranged around a central carved wooden apparatus (*Whale Fall* [2019]), and flanked by images of hybrid creatures on silk-printed cyanotypes (*When you can see right through me* [2019]), a suspended cast-resin manta ray (*Chardin’s Ray* [2019]), and five cast paper fibre manta rays (*Rays Ascending [Fever]* [2019]), *Whale Fall* recalls the ethos of meticulous collection and evaluation that one might associate with a 17th-century natural scientist’s study. Observed as a whole, *Whale Fall* is reminiscent of an upturned cabinet of curiosities—a term for the armoires or, more often, entire

chambers where Enlightenment thinkers would study books and objects related to natural history, civilization, archaeology, botany, religion, and ancient and foreign cultures. This association is fitting given that Crombach and Stern were initially brought together by a shared interest in natural science, particularly Early Modern object collection and hoaxes, and historical still lifes. Rather than attempt to reproduce or reframe a specific historical approach or artefact, Crombach and Stern have created a space wherein questions concerning museum display techniques, collection practices, and the seemingly eternal human fascination with the natural world, are activated along both historical and contemporary lines.

Within the gallery, Crombach and Stern's sculptural ceramics are positioned in sprawling assemblages that suggest varying stages of decomposition—the exhibition's title prompting the viewer to consider the potentially preserving or corrosive effects of subaquatic saline. Slender and bleached wooden carvings, derived from pieces of found wood furniture including an ornate couch and a rocking horse, form a large, skeletal tangle in the centre of the room. Tucked into niches around this 7-metre long wooden armature are partially slumped ceramic clusters glazed in pastel shades of peach, coral, pink, blue, and mint green. Dotted with fuschia and saturated orange and offset by glimpses of bright blue and white on found and re-glazed porcelain plates, these ceramic structures appear to melt into one another, an effect emphasized by the runny, crystalline glazes, and other glazes that leave trapped, frothing bubbles when fired. Though viewers will recognize particular objects amidst the ceramic figurations—a violin, a poppy, a skull, a candlestick, another poppy—the effect is more impressionistic than taxonomical. The inclusion of recognizable domestic and botanical objects within the ceramic clusters, as well as the armature's vague resemblance to its furniture origins, reminds the viewer of the ways in which natural and manmade objects ultimately share ecosystems and co-experience degradation due to time.

Around the perimeter of the gallery hang delicate sea blue cyanotypes. Strange hybrid creatures, created from digitally collaged

animal x-ray images sourced from the Royal Ontario Museum and the Toronto Zoo, contribute an unearthly quality to the space. Are we at the seafloor? In a ransacked laboratory? Or perhaps in the basement of an overcrowded natural history museum? Who and what is being studied, and why? These questions multiply when one observes the clear, plastic trays filled with tiny, soft-paste porcelain and found trinkets atop a worn drafting table. The cyanotypes are lit by retro x-ray light boxes and the trays by an in-built table light source, fixtures that draw the viewer into the 20th-century. The gleaming, reflective industrial glass surface treatment applied to *Chardin's Ray* meanwhile evokes a more contemporary LED visibility, and glowing LED tubes also light *Whale Fall* from within.

Seen in context with the more visceral collection of objects comprising *Whale Fall*, the ceramic and wood artwork, the cyanotypes, smaller porcelain pieces, and hanging rays invoke the praxis of museum display. Again, we may think of cabinets of curiosities and the instability of perceived facts and knowledge. Such cabinets were often repositories of hoaxes—unicorn horns, mermaids, mythological plants and relics, to name a few—which buyers would sometimes purchase fully aware of their dubious origins, yet value nonetheless. The stacked glazed porcelain and aluminium creatures in *Jenny Haniver* (2019), displayed at eye-level upon entrance to the gallery, demonstrate Crombach and Stern's interest in fetishized Early Modern objects and mythology building. During the 16th century, Belgian sailors marketed Jenny Hanivers, dried skates resembling fantastical water demons, so successfully that they became kitsch objects. Crombach and Stern's reference reminds us that they, too, are interested in how false knowledge can itself be a source of information, pleasure, and engagement.

In a Sunday Scene talk Stern gave in 2017 at the Power Plant (Toronto), she remarked: "I find that the discipline of ceramics has moulded my way of thinking about art, materials, language and the world, to the point that even when I work with other media now, I tend to treat everything as if it were clay." In *Whale Fall*, the latent animism of the clay bodies and bodily objects themselves are indeed

revealed. The exhibition reflects a fusion of Crombach’s background in contemporary, mixed-media sculpture and Stern’s parallel engagement with sculptural ceramics and installation. Working together since fall 2017 and receiving a 2019 Ontario Arts Council Project Grant for collaboration, *Whale Fall*’s immersive tableau format and oblique narrative reflects a turning point for both artists. As viewers, we see the effects of Crombach and Stern’s collaboration ripple out not only through coalescing perspectives and skills, but also through the interplay between works that concomitantly reference Enlightenment science and 19th-, 20th-, and 21st-century technologies vis-à-vis cyanotypes, x-rays, and digital photo editing, respectively. All of these methods are exposed as potential false fronts, equally capable of divining truth and misinformation. Much like the producers of *Blue Planet*, who had to work with a scientific team to simulate a naturally occurring whale fall, in *Whale Fall*, Crombach and Stern make use of highly specific technical processes and experiments in order to present the so-called “natural” world and draw attention to the human fascination with reading—and misreading—it.

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Esmé Hogeveen is a writer based between Tkaronto/Toronto and Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal. She holds an MA in Critical Theory and Creative Research from the Pacific Northwest College of Art and has participated in the School of Criticism and Theory at Cornell University. Her writing has appeared in *Artforum*, *The Brooklyn Rail*, *C Magazine*, *Border Crossings*, and *Another Gaze: Feminist Film Journal*, amongst others.













Whale Fall

2019

Glazed porcelain, found and altered furniture.

Dimensions variable (roughly 260" × 72" × 60")

Pages 4, 10–11, 13, 16, 17

Chardin's Ray

2019

Cast resin, reflective glass coating.

28" × 52" × 18"

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Rays Ascending (Fever)

2019

Cast abaca fibre.

Five sculptures each 28" × 52" × 18"

Installation dimensions variable

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When you can see right through me

2019

Cyanotype prints on silk, x-ray illuminators,
soft-paste porcelain, drafting table and found objects.

Dimensions variable (roughly 444" × 144" × 36")

Outside and inside covers, pages 9, 18–19

Jenny Haniver

2019

Glazed porcelain, cast aluminum.

20" × 25" × 13"

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Whale Fall Exhibition

(works: *Whale Fall*, *Chardin's Ray*,
Rays Ascending (Fever), *When you can
see right through me*)

Installation view at the

Canadian Clay and Glass Gallery

2019

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WHALE FALL

Strange bodies meet
where taxidermists stitch
by tall tales and lamplight.

Flesh erupts in putrid neon,
and bones float softly in their sockets.

Filtering anodyne dreams, you sleep
wrapped in sweat-damp sheets
yellowed and rippling.

A wake attended by the hungry.
And I'm standing here,
sucking in iodine tears
for a fallen whale.

Nicholas Crombach holds a BFA in Sculpture and Installation from OCAD University (2012) and has exhibited his sculptural work nationally and internationally. In 2016–17 he participated in a year-long studio residency at The Florence Trust in London, UK. Crombach has been awarded the Elizabeth Greenshields Foundation Award, and the Abraham and Malka Green Award, among others.

Crombach's solo exhibitions include *Trapped* at Angell Gallery, Toronto (2015), and *Captured* at The Ottawa School of Art (2017). *Behind Elegantly Carved Wooden Doors*, his first solo exhibition at Art Mûr Montreal in 2017, was reviewed in *Border Crossings* (June 2018) and *Vie des Arts* (Winter 2017–18). His most recent solo exhibition, *The End of The Chase*, was exhibited at New Art Projects (London, UK) and Art Mûr Berlin in 2018, and at Art Mûr Montreal in 2019.

In 2012, Crombach won the First Capital Realty public art competition. The commissioned work, *Billy, Nanny, and the Kids*, is located in Burlington, Ontario. Crombach's work is also in the collection of the Museu Europeu d'Art Modern (MEAM) in Barcelona, Spain.

www.nicholascrombach.com

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Nurielle Stern is a ceramic sculpture and installation artist and a graduate of the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University's renowned MFA program in Ceramic Art (2014). She has completed the ceramics program at Sheridan College Craft & Design (2012) and holds a BFA in Sculpture and Installation from OCAD University.

Stern's most recent exhibition was commissioned by the Gardiner Museum in response to *Ai Weiwei: Unbroken. Unswept Floor (Tesserae)* (2019) is an assemblage of the fragmentary but tangible results of experimentation and inchoate ideas that accumulate on a metaphorical studio floor. Stern has also exhibited at the Art Gallery of Burlington, Harbourfront Centre (Toronto), Craft Ontario (Toronto), and Pratt Institute's Steuben Gallery (Brooklyn, NY), among other venues. *The Bone Runners*, an immersive installation commissioned for Nuit Blanche, took place at the Gardiner Museum in 2015.

Stern has been recognized for her achievements with multiple awards, including the Gardiner Museum Award (2012) and accompanying exhibition (2013), the Craft Ontario Volunteer Committee Emerging Artist Award (2015 and 2018), and the Winifred Shantz Award for Ceramics (2019).

www.deepbreathely.com



Crombach and Stern began working together in Toronto in Fall 2017. They are the recipients of a 2019 Ontario Arts Council Project Grant for their collaborative work. *Whale Fall* is their first collaborative exhibition. Photo by Andrew Rowat.

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 #CCGGWhaleFall



