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# Gayle Fichtinger Carving a Path

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*"See how many traces from which  
I may learn the chopper's history.  
From this stump we may get  
the sharpness of his axe.  
And from the slope of the stroke on which side he  
stood. And whether he cut down the tree without  
going around or changing hands.  
And from the flexure of the splinters we may  
know which way it fell.  
This one chip contains inscribed the whole history  
of the woodchopper on it and of the world."*

Henry David Thoreau,  
*A Winter Walk*. October, 1843

*Firewood #42*. 2002. Terracotta. 47.5 x 32.5 x 30 cm.

THE SENSITIVE ARTIST CAN SEE IN ONE SPLIT LOG THE HISTORY OF a person and the history of the world. America in the 19th century was dealing with the environmental and societal pressures brought on by the Industrial Revolution. The dictates of Manifest Destiny told Americans our natural resources were boundless and should be exploited, while forsaking the landscape. A group of literary luminaries led by Henry David Thoreau, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bronson Alcott and Nathaniel Hawthorne, sounded its sagacious voice as greed held sway and government turned a blind eye. This sentiment was shared by painters of the period who offered a romanticised portrayal of the pillaged landscape. The painters of the Hudson River School and the Transcendentalist writers helped renew an appreciation of nature, spurring society on to consider change.

The intent of Gayle Fichtinger's ceramic objects comes from a similar cast. Unlike the painters of the Hudson River School, hers is not a romanticised narrative. Living in the Sunapee region of New Hampshire since 1994, she and her husband, the goldsmith, Paul LaFreniere, live in a one-room schoolhouse which was built in 1824. Added on to and having

served as an American Legion Post, it sits in the shadow of Mount Kearsarge, in the town of New London.

The fauna and flora of the natural world have always resonated through her work. She was raised in Minnesota on the family farm and her affinity with nature reflects her rural upbringing. Fichtinger's undergraduate training was at the University of Wisconsin, Madison, studying with Don Reitz. During those years the Madison Art Center brought in numerous shows. Among them was an exhibition of California Funk artists (including the work of Robert Arneson, Richard Shaw, William Wiley and Robert Brady) which opened her up to new possibilities. This led her to graduate study at Arizona State University with Randy Schmidt whose aesthetic preference was to California Funk. There she received a Master of Fine



Arts degree in ceramics, in 1985. From that time onward the essence of an Arneson *Typewriter* or a Claes Oldenburg *Light Switch* have remained at the root of her work. Couple those influences with her affinity to nature and we can begin to understand her aesthetic leanings. Fichtinger's earlier figurative pieces of ceramic heads, produced from 1984-91, are rock-like, massive and seemingly chiselled from stone. She moved on to using source material of discarded remnants most of us ignore: an old cast iron heating radiator, a dented bucket, broken farm and garden implements. She covered them with vines, leaves and insects or had them serve as a perch for passing birds, thus speaking of the fleeting here and now and the passage of time. These 'artifacts' from our modern world, transformed into clay and decorated with coloured slips, became symbolic narratives that acknowledged the beauty and sculptural qualities in the cast-offs of modern society. Having made the move from the figure to the still life in 1996, she began executing her sculptures in bronze. The change of medium created an inner struggle. After a two-year trial, she returned to clay.

This most recent body of work, made with terracotta, began with the new year in 1998. Early in January a devastating storm hit. Trees lost their crowns under the weight of the ice. Power lines were down. Branches and cracked logs were strewn about. The backyard of the house was piled, like a gigantic nest, with broken tree limbs. It took the town days to restore services and weeks to remove the debris, but it took Gayle and Paul months to clear their yard. Fichtinger internalised the arduous experience of stacking one pile and another of wet heavy icy tree limbs. From this one ruinous event there was ice-storm wood to burn for two years but, as it turned out, source material to draw upon for much longer.

The idea of portraits from logs sprung into her head. As she described it, "It was like a homecoming. I laughed." This began the *Broken Branch Series*. She approaches each split log as if sculpting a portrait, seeing them as heads with faces. As with any good portrait, the inner character of the subject must be revealed. Each log has its own nuances in the accumulation of growth rings, scars, saw cuts, lichens and bark patterns. The logs are meticulously sculpted knot-by-knot, wormhole by chew mark. Fichtinger, like Thoreau, shares the allegory through the residual evidence. Her intent is to be a purveyor of information. She is simply delivering the object for our consideration, letting each ceramic log tell its own story. The narrative within it is for us to discover.

The number of artists who have been inspired by the New England landscape is countless. The affinity Fichtinger's *Firewood Portraits* and *Forest Fragments* have with the writings of Thoreau or the New Hampshire poet, Robert Frost, seem clear. Asher B. Durand's *Study of Wood Interior* (c. 1850) comes to mind for its detailed portrayal of the forest floor. The intricate relief carvings of the 19th century sculptor, Augustus Saint-Gaudens, also comes forth - his house and studio are a 20-mile drive from Fichtinger's own.

Homage is also paid here to the Chinese Yixing tradition of realistically reproducing nature in unglazed red clay. Philosophically, the Yixing potters by way of their strong association with the Chinese literati developed their aesthetic sensibilities



*Firewood #47*. 2002. Terracotta.  
50 x 25 x 22.5 cm.

from a belief in Chan Buddhism. Chan was a sect of Buddhism adopted by the Japanese that they called Zen. I believe Gayle Fichtinger comes close to these Buddhist ideals. Her terracotta reliefs were arrived at internally and a connection to Eastern philosophy comes that way. Her use of material is direct, raw and unembellished. There is no functional reference. The objects are simple, unaffected and meditative. They are a pure study of nature and the ephemeral.

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Marvin Sweet is an artist living in Merrimac, Massachusetts. In addition to his ceramic work, he has authored several essays on artistic influences shared between Eastern and Western cultures as well as organising the exhibition, *The Yixing Effect*. This essay was written on the occasion of Gayle Fichtinger's exhibition, *New England Currents*, August - November 2002, at the Danforth Museum of Art, in Framingham, Massachusetts, USA.