

Medalta International Artists in Residence – Carol Grant (June 2009)

I was a participant at the Medalta International Artists in Residence program for the month of June in Medicine Hat Alberta. The residency concept creates an opportunity for ceramists, who for the most part work individually, to enter a community atmosphere and take part in rejuvenating dialogue while working with like-minded artists. Interaction at an international level helps greatly to evaluate one's own ideas, philosophies and desired changes. This mutual exchange between participants increases awareness of the creative activity for the individual and group.

The interesting history of the city of Medicine Hat explains why this location is home to the International ceramics program today. Medicine Hat began as a community on the CPR rail line and in 1904 a very large pocket of natural gas was discovered below the town. Medicine Hat's industrial economy developed on the basis the availability of cheap energy. Natural gas was the principal guarantee of the city's importance and prosperity. The sheer abundance allowed the city extravagances, the most famous of which was that the streetlights of Medicine Hat stayed lit day and night, as it was cheaper to keep them burning than to pay someone to turn them off and on.

The boom began in 1905 when many mills and factories sprang up. Medicine Hat's other natural advantage for the clay products industry was of course the available supply of clay. For centuries, the South Saskatchewan River deposited alluvial silt along its banks, creating rich deposits of high quality clay and natural gas provided reliable, consistent fuel to burn at the high temperatures needed for firing kilns.

Some of the clay companies that flourished over the years were Medalta Potteries, Alberta Clay Products, Hycroft China and others. The factories produced brick, tile and sewer pipes to supply the massive construction business that followed western immigration. But they also produced the typical stoneware crocks as well as hand-painted art ware. At a time when Western Canada supplied nothing but raw materials for the factories in the east, Medalta Potteries was the only western factory shipping finished goods of any kind east of Lake Superior and once produced three-quarters of all stoneware in Canada.

In 1910, Alberta Clay Products constructed a huge facility using only bricks manufactured in its own kilns. A gas well was drilled on site. The plant complex was enormous with fourteen round downdraft kilns. By 1912 it was the second largest plant of its type in North America with 325 employees and daily production of 80,000 bricks and 24,000 sewer pipes. ACP used heavy stoneware clay that had to be fired at much higher temperatures than traditional red earthenware bricks. The bricks were much stronger but still had to be glazed to be watertight. To achieve this they were fired in beehive salt kilns. When a certain temperature is reached, rock salt is injected into the kiln atmosphere. It vaporizes and the sodium combines with the silica and alumina to produce a distinctive glaze.

While in Medicine Hat, we were invited to a Town Council meeting to be introduced to the council members. One item on the agenda was the current price that the town charges for its gas. Residents have very low property tax as a result of this income for the town.

Today, the Friends of Medalta Society is overseeing the restoration of a number of buildings in the Medalta Potteries National Historic Site in order to showcase the companies, people, machines and products made there in the early to mid 20th century. Interpreters show how the casting, jiggering and pressing of stoneware pottery was done and a museum provides a historical background for visitors.

The Medalta International Artists in Residence program has been operating for eight years, hosting visiting artists from around the world. The artistic director, Les Manning previously headed the ceramics department at the Banff school of arts for 25 years. Les grew up near Medicine Hat and has been involved with the national Historic site for many years. Les, who has also been volunteering his time for the past 8 years, has been working along with other dedicated volunteers to offer a month long residency each year. Up until this year the resident studios were housed in very old buildings. This year the visiting artists' studios were in the new International Centre for Contemporary Ceramics. In fact, much work was still being completed as we were there. All levels of government officials as well as many ceramists attended the grand opening ceremony. This was a very exciting and satisfying event for those who have worked so long to make this facility a reality.

The new facility has thirteen studios with a variety of kilns including salt, soda, wood, raku, gas and electric. With the opening of the facility, the MIAR program is looking toward expanding its programming and offering year long artist residencies. This past September, Les Manning was able to step down from his position as artistic director as a new director has been hired to oversee the facility.

I personally found that my experience at Medalta to be very rewarding and added both to my development as an artist as well as a person. The idea of getting out of your comfort zone by physically spending time in another environment is known to be a great way to promote individual creativity. During this time I allowed myself to focus on one aspect of my work, the forms in particular, and not worry about finishing each piece.

During my visit, I shared a residence dorm with three other women. I made some very good friends as well as developing professional connections. Furthermore, the Medicine Hat ceramics community was very generous and welcoming. I am happy to be part of a much larger ceramic community now.

I was strongly affected by my experience of working with twelve other professional artists who were all so encouraging and supportive. The other artists were from all over Canada and two were from the U.S. Through seeing their processes and discussions of their work, I was able to have a greater appreciation of the subtleties of their work. My experience at Medalta has given me a new perspective and enhanced feeling of gratefulness. I now have a broader view of the possibilities open to me. As a direct result of this residency I will be giving a workshop at the Peterborough Arts School and a talk at the Peterborough Potters guild in November.