

# Hiving Mesh/Neil Forrest

Edited by Philip Beesley



## INTRODUCTION

Neil Forrest's Hiving Mesh considers architectural ceramics not by producing an architectural prototype, but rather by presenting a complex, modular form that threads a line between sculptural object and architectural concept. The work integrates unique ceramic forms within a mesmerizing grid of steel wire that reasserts the fundamental flexibility of ceramics as an artistic and construction material. In this way the installation highlights Forrest's interest in exploring the intersections of different disciplines and providing forums where inventive applications of advanced ceramics can be presented.

The result of two years of research and experiments, Hiving Mesh could not have come to fruition without Forrest's focus and dedication. The work incorporates almost a thousand wires and ceramic elements, and involved careful engineering. On behalf of the Gallery, I congratulate Neil Forrest on his success in creating this startling installation.

I extend thanks as well to Phillip Beesley, the guest writer for this exhibition. He provided not only the insightful essay on the installation, but served as an important contact in the lengthy research that went into the creation of the work. His interest in the project was again apparent in the panel discussion "New Ornament: Architectural Ceramics" which he moderated, and that served to place Forrest's installation within the broader consideration of architectural ceramics, and of the use of ornament in the public sphere.

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Forrest's installation most immediately confirms his inventiveness with ceramics, but it points as well to the dynamic possibilities when disciplines meet.

GORDON LAURIN



Neil Forrest: Hiving Mesh - An Architectural Screen

Saint Mary's University Art Gallery, Halifax  
February 19 to March 18, 2000

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# HIVING MESH

by Philip Beesley

*A constructed porosity  
lying inside of a hard crust...  
and a darker tone  
of cellular forms that misfire.*

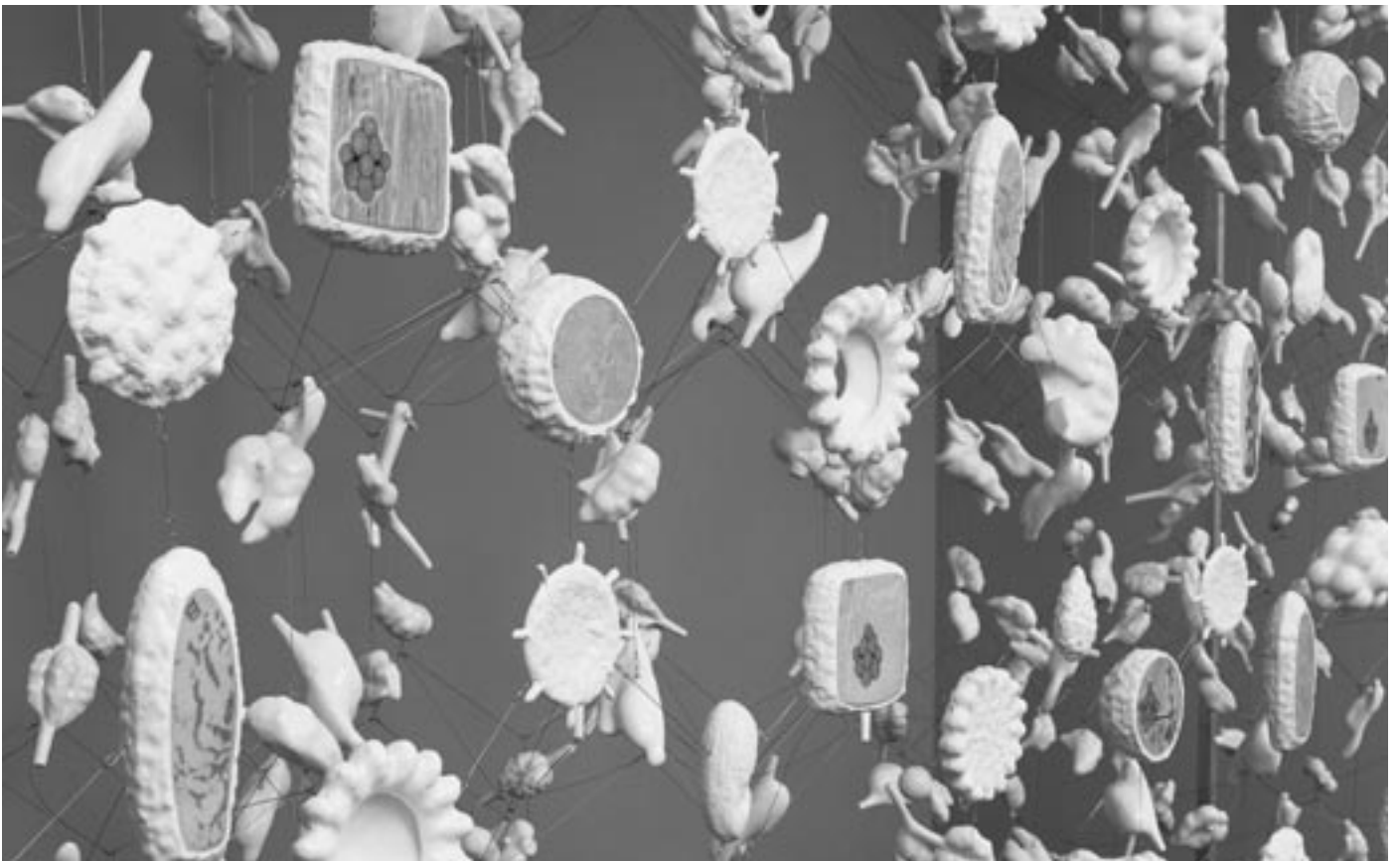
Neil Forrest

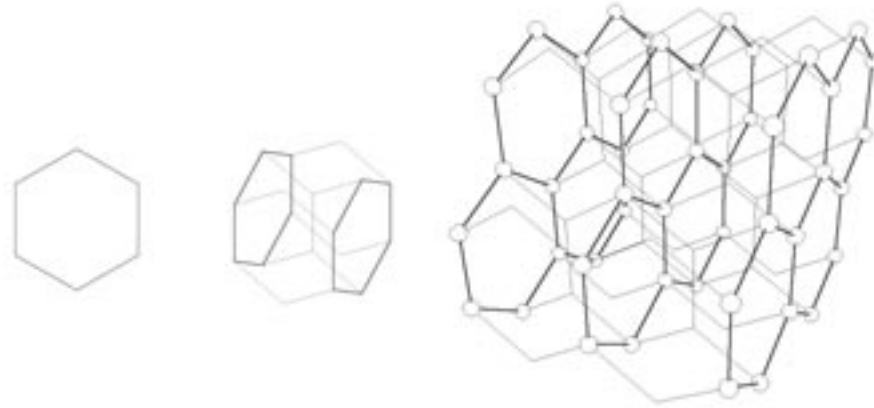
An array of fired porcelain clay forms and glass paste plaques hangs vertically, its aligned surfaces forming an outer face. Behind this crust is an interlinked matrix of hundreds of small ceramic objects, densely compressed fragments resembling plant bulbs and body organs. A delicate meshwork of stainless steel wire struts connects each fragmented element to its neighbour, making a cloud of forms like an enormous mass of molecules hovering in open space. Immersing us.

Neil Forrest's new architectural ceramic work was produced after repeated walks in the woods near his home in Nova Scotia. In Polly's Cove, near Peggy's Cove, he found pines with thin, spindly branches deformed by severe winds from the ocean. In one tree he found masses of diseased cones growing in dense clusters, curling and clumping together, their skins scarring and blurring in innumerable oblate lobes, dissolving into each other. Forrest took these forms as the basis for a new work exploring a special porosity where fields of space intermingle, melting the borders between discrete elements. This expanded structure has a peculiar anatomy with poignant implications. It is a work of crystalline geometry whose lattice structures expand out in a radiant mathematical efflorescence, and at the same time it is built out of natural organs making a complex flesh with a living presence. This expanded formal space and these acute poetics renew the traditional medium of architectural ceramics. They act as a refreshed ornament expressing a new kind of architectural space.

The profusion of the assembly makes a thicket. The ceramic forms, numbering nearly a thousand, float in a three-dimensional hexagonal array several feet thick.







They hang connected by a radiating matrix of fine stainless steel wires fitted with miniature eyelets and snap connectors coupled to formed steel eyebolts inserted within the bodies of the porcelain forms. The structure is an expanded beaded curtain. It traces out a primary organic geometry of triple and quadruple joints making hexagonal groups within a three-dimensional space-frame. But while it refers to crystalline formations of molecules and grid-works it is anything but pure. Instead the geometry flexes and twists, laden with variations and corruptions. Kin to the labyrinthine structures of bee's nests and termite mounds and as delicate as froth, this is an organization of living things. And this presence is not benign. Forrest treated the pine cones from Polly's Cove as the source for a series of castings in porcelain slip, adding thin coats of plaster and clay over the original forms, thickening and blurring their detail and transforming them into generalized viscera: hearts and lungs. The deformities within the cones are softened in this rendering, lessening any sure sense of normality—of what is healthy and what is not, of what fits and what does not fit. Both the geometric organization and the forms that inhabit this organization carry a lurking tinge of disease. Cell division seems rampant here. Within the crystalline fields, cancer.

Forrest used a mixture of kaolin clays from Georgia and Britain, extremely pure materials allowing firing at very high temperatures. This firing gives the clay a nearly vitreous quality that allows it to handle tensile stresses far beyond the range of earth-based compressive forces that clay forms normally can bear. Even so the hanging positions of the porcelain elements stand precariously close to the limit of this material. The oxidizing firing has given the forms a faint warm tinge, straying from the pure white that we might expect of porcelain. Like the memory of a full-blooded blush in a warm earthenware, this hue emanates from the vitrified, frozen medium of the white clay. These qualities—blurred forms, tensile forces, blushing tone—inflect towards a latent fertile presence, anima.

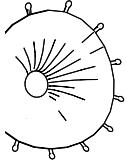
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A complex floating crust stands at the front of the installation, covering the interlaced meshwork of cones. A mixture of ceramic forms is interspersed on this surface: pillow shaped squares, funnel shaped ovals, and shields. The funnels, ringed with knuckled protrusions, are an enlarged version of hive entry formations that bees make. The pillows and shields have a sharp, aggressively textured outer case of potter's clay. Their relief stands in sharp contrast to the smooth dissolving lobes of the porcelain meshwork behind. In counterpoint to the austere tones of the interior, the front faces of this surface array holds intensely coloured inlays—saturated orange-reds, chartreuse, acid yellows.







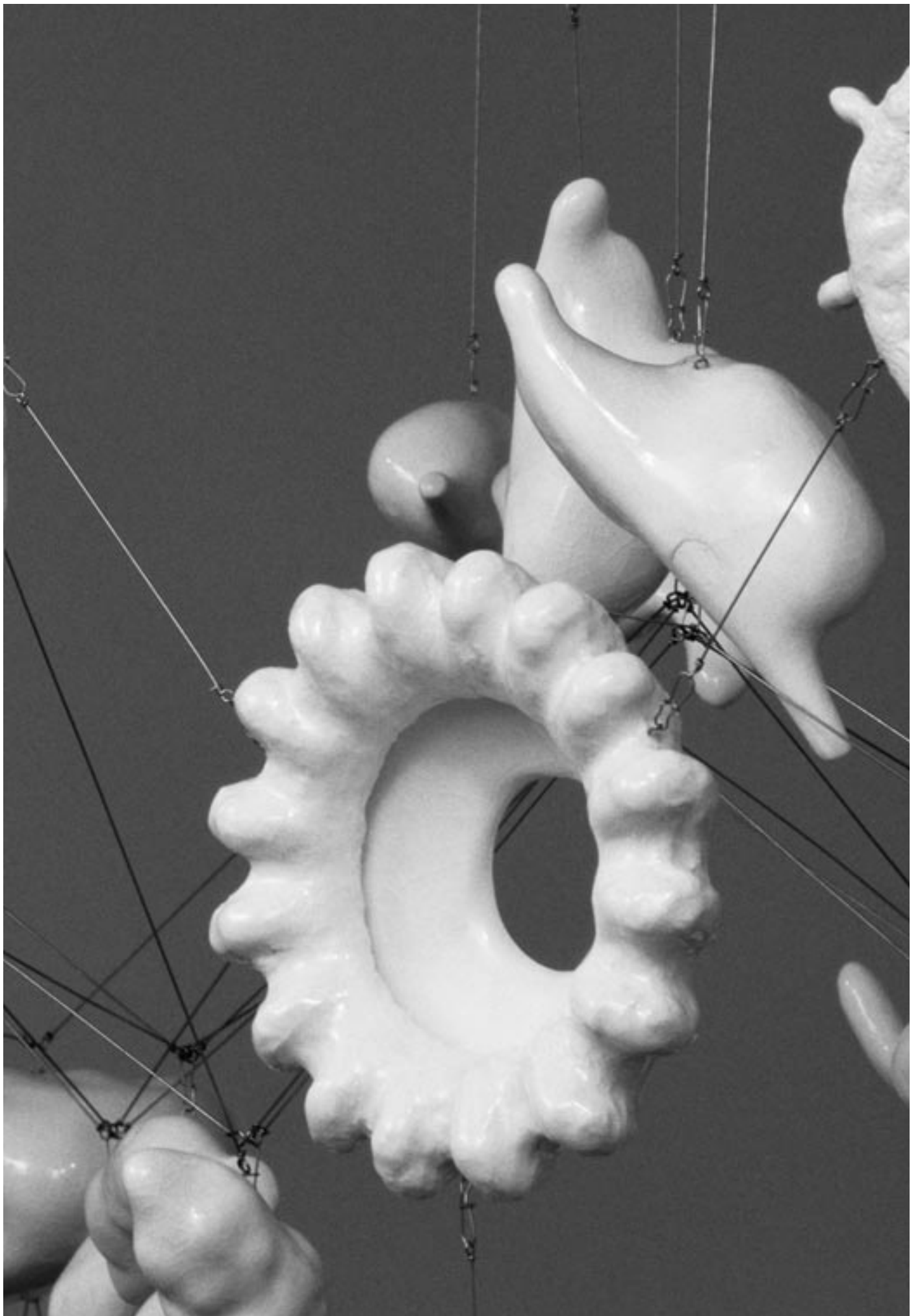


The glass surface of this inlay is a kind of millefiori developed by Forrest as a contemporary process based on the ancient art of Egyptian faience. This work uses mixtures of clay and powdered glass frits carrying highly saturated pigments. The rich surfaces are made by compressing tiny fragments of these pigmented glass pastes in their unfired state into a solid which is then sliced into layers, yielding tapestry-like, integrally coloured thin slabs of densely patterned material. After firing, the surface fuses, nearly glass, glistening from the self-glazing action of the salts laden within the material. Like a textile worker manipulating miniature yardage, Forrest then uses templates to cut out individually shaped sections of the material, each fitting into hollows formed within the porcelain vessels.

The faience pattern laid into the pillows and shields lining the front layer of Forrest's new construction show brood cells in their larval stage, and storage containers made of arrays of close-packed spherical tubular cells. This front face is in effect an *involutrum*, the resinous, waxy mantle that bees and wasps excrete as an outer protective lining between a hive and its larger host. Like a placenta, the involutum is a cover that supports the brood cells and storage pots within. In Hiving Mesh, this patterned element is scattered into a field holding shards and fragments of discrete images: an archipelago. The individual fragments are dispersed, but together they make a coherent picture plane. The funnels, pillows and shields that contain these inlays all hang in a single plane. This brilliantly coloured, sharply defined zone operates like a cut through the soft curves and austere white skins of the mass of cones, as if an atomized body has been seared open. The cut exposes saturated, seething colours and vitrified fields laid within the porcelain skins of each cellular form. This is a face for the work, but the face violates any sense of a decorous presentation for a public gaze. Instead of covering the body, the action of this cut face exposes intimate layers of inner anatomy. An oscillation results for the viewer: intimacy, and at the same time voyeurism.

These facing elements relate to the artists's earlier work. Forrest has been developing ceramic table trivets for many years. He conceived these domestic works as background elements supporting a social ritual of dining. The trivets acted as a kind of silent witness that provided a surface and stage for the action of the gathering. The new work at Saint Mary's is similarly conceived: it is an architectural screen that supports occupation by framing and lining a space. The installation is intended not for central focus but instead for peripheral vision. In the past, the trivets usually had two parts: a porcelain casing rendered in sculptural relief, and an ornamental face composed from brilliantly patterned faience. These inlaid patterns showed insects arranged in swarms: fields of dispersed space. The outer casing holding the patternwork was typically developed into slightly abstracted forms that evoked primordial life. They were like lobed microorganisms and Precambrian plants: living forms distilled into their essential natures. Forrest has spoken of the outer shells of these trivets as primal, 'ur' forms evoking archaic vegetal origins.

The earlier imagery of dispersed fields of insects, previously rendered in two dimensions, has now been translated into a space that virtually surrounds the viewer. Also translated in this expanded field is a curious, impersonal tone. In the earlier work, the faience inlays contained a static quality resulting from the approach to manufacturing the pattern. In contrast to the virtuosic calligraphic



patterning that countless generations of brushed ceramic glazes have established as a norm, Forrest's method of assembling the coloured pastes for his decorative surfaces has been consistently mechanical, nearly anonymous. Similarly his new field of three-dimensional forms is modeled in slip castings, a repetitive process that tends to mute the persona of the maker.

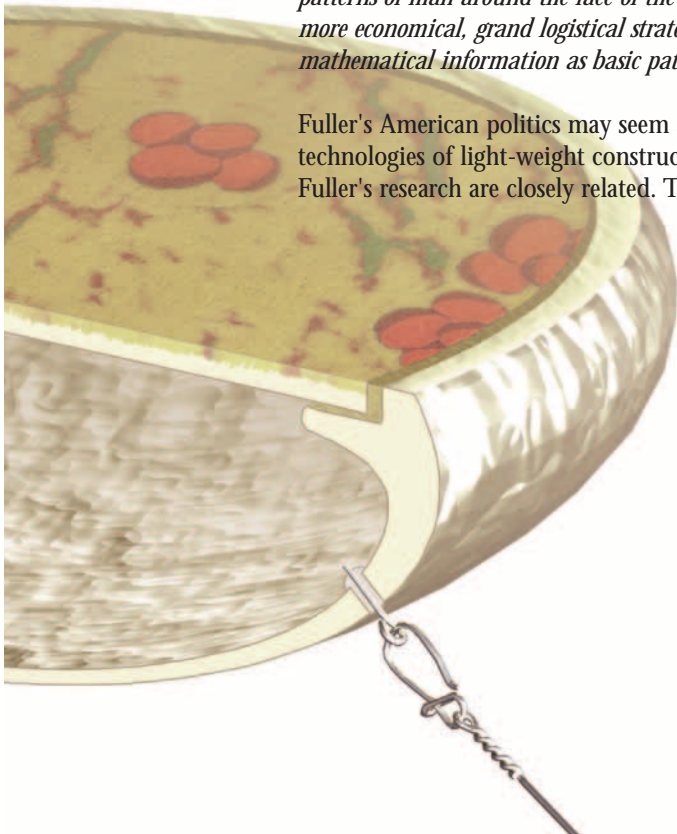
These approaches have direct implications for the new work. Within this special new space— at margins verging on disease, not at the centre of normative health, and at the dissolving margin of peripheral vision, not the clarity of discrete forms— what qualities emerge? In a discussion that accompanied the installation at Saint Mary's University, Forrest spoke of this work as an open field offering freedom:

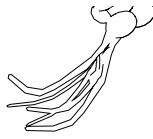
*There are fragments of stories: moving from front to back, a frontal crust, moving deeper within. It is an environment that doesn't tell you which way to move. In terms of material, I think I'm telling one story: the progress of beauty. On the other hand, the images open the story to a darker humour. The disease process of the cones is the content, but it is not a story as such. It is not a composition in the sense of a narrative with a focal point and action happening. When you deal with things that are porous you are not restrained: you can move through without any absolute surfaces to relate to. We are surrounded by foam. <sup>1</sup>*

The terms 'foam' and 'porous' describe a new class of free space. A century ago, Marx said "all that is solid melts into air". Those words, from the Second Communist Manifesto, celebrated the dissolving modern world and effectively defined the technological project of the century. Searching for optimally light structures, that same mission was embodied in a mid-century manifesto issued by the American engineer Buckminster Fuller:

*In order to make the resources of the earth adequate to the needs of all people, we must increase the performance per pound of those resources in a very big way, thus giving man environmental controls... This must be done to accommodate all the new shifting patterns of man around the face of the earth. We will have to employ nature's much more economical, grand logistical strategies. Emulating nature, man must distribute mathematical information as basic pattern... <sup>2</sup>*

Fuller's American politics may seem a strange bedfellow for Marx, but the physical technologies of light-weight construction that result from both Marx's analysis and Fuller's research are closely related. The delicate lattice spun within Neil Forrest's





installation falls within this tradition, cousin to Fuller's work in space-frame geodesic structures. Instead of standing on the ground, the work is suspended. It introduces the possibility of tensile forces and lace-like openwork to a class of construction in fired clay that traditionally has known mostly compression and mass. And, refreshing a ceramic craft that has usually concentrated on precision, clarity and density of surface, it explores new kinds of space—foam, porosity. If these new qualities were the only ones that were central to Forrest's work, we could understand him as a member of the Modern project, continuing the same quest for lightness and transparency that defined the past century's 'progressive' mainstream. However, moving within his own hybrid spatial field, Forrest describes conflicting emotions:

*We are mapping human transit on top of animal behaviours, on a ground that is indeterminable. One pierces the net and finds lumpen things, embryonic things, holding a promise that might be of beauty or one which is horrific. It may turn on you: nothing is guaranteed. I remodeled things so that they have embryonic qualities, holding life; but life might not follow the pattern of the fittest. We fear this: disease that is embryonic holds the possibility of the grotesque, and of long lasting destruction. At the same time hope lurks everywhere in this piece: the colour, the smoothness of the glaze...*<sup>3</sup>

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'Lurking hope' and 'embryonic disease' are Romantic terms. Within these sentiments lies a quest for immersive experience, a search for living presence vastly larger than ourselves. The use of such language during the last two centuries normally accompanied a cultural anxiety that came along with the power to engineer nature. Quests of this sort inevitably come tinged with a loss of innocence. The substance encountered may be artificial; the experience may have been constructed. In a passage written in 1943 the Parisian surrealist writer Georges Bataille wrote vividly of such an ambivalent experience hovering between ecstatic immersion and an alienated sense of loss:

*Only my legs—which kept me standing upright, connected what I had become to the floor—kept a link to what I had been: the rest was an inflamed gushing forth, overpowering, even free of its own convulsion. A character of dance and of decomposing agility...I was thrown into this hearth, nothing remained of me but this hearth. In its entirety, the hearth itself was a streaming outside of me...*

*The next day, I wrote of this flame: "It is not aware of itself, it is absorbed in its own unknown; in this unknown, it loses itself, annihilates itself. Without this thirst for non-knowledge, it would cease right away. The flame is God, but ruined in the negation of itself."*<sup>4</sup>

In contrast to the striking optimism evoked by Buckminster Fuller's brand of Modernism, Georges Bataille's experience described an uncanny and radically dispersed energy. A spiritual presence prevailed for that writer while at the same time layers of artifice were unmasked. Similarly Forrest's 'oceanic' construction evokes a complex reaction. The power of natural growth is invoked within the gallery installation, giving glimmers of vitality, but the possibility of interminable banal repetition looms large. Alongside benign natural presence there is the brutal reality of infinitely repeating systems of construction. Void.

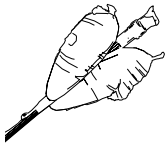
This approach moves us out of the oceanic depths that historical Romance plumbed, but at the same time the naively positive values of Modernism afford little comfort. While the art supporting this experience inevitably employs mechanical systems and repeating structures, that technology is no longer used to achieve powerful, unified states. Instead the work seems deliberately delicate. In recent writing, the Catalan writer Ignasi de Solà-Morales has proposed a substantial approach to ornamental work based on this kind of strategic 'weakness':

*Experience can no longer be founded on the basis of a system: not on a closed, economical system such as that of the classical age; not even on the illusion of a new system such as that which the pioneers of modern design sought to establish. On the contrary, contemporary architecture, in conjunction with the other arts, is confronted with the need to build on air; to build in the void...*

*Together with the precarious nature of the event and this untimely fold of reality, what I have called weak architecture is always decorative. Decoration, then, or the decorative condition of contemporary art and architecture, not in the sense of vulgarity, of triviality, of the repetition of established stereotypes, but as a discreet folding back to a perhaps secondary function, a pulling back to a function that projects beyond the hypothetical ground of things... This is the strength of weakness; that strength which art and architecture are capable of producing precisely when they adopt a posture that is not aggressive and dominating... [this posture allows] sudden, unanticipated coagulations of reality, events that are produced not through linear and foreseeable organization but through folds and fissures. That in some way afford the refuge, the tremulous fluttering of a brief moment of poetic and creative intensity.<sup>5</sup>*

*Ornament*, then. But this ornament is not laid over a form: there is no edifice to decorate, no functional vessel to amplify and elaborate. The residues of those institutions remain all around us but their authority has vanished. We move instead back to a hollow surface. By expanding and contracting, and folding and flexing, this surface makes its own topography and its own gravity.

This void (and at the same time very substantial) site locates Neil Forrest's new work. This work has several implications. One is an expanded picture of natural forms, arranged artificially, increasing and mutating. A contemporary kind of nature. Another is an expanded space, a space that questions boundaries. Where solid walls and floors might have stood before, this space offers delicate open lattices and hybrid filters. And another speaks of architectural ceramics itself, reclaiming ornament as a contemporary art.



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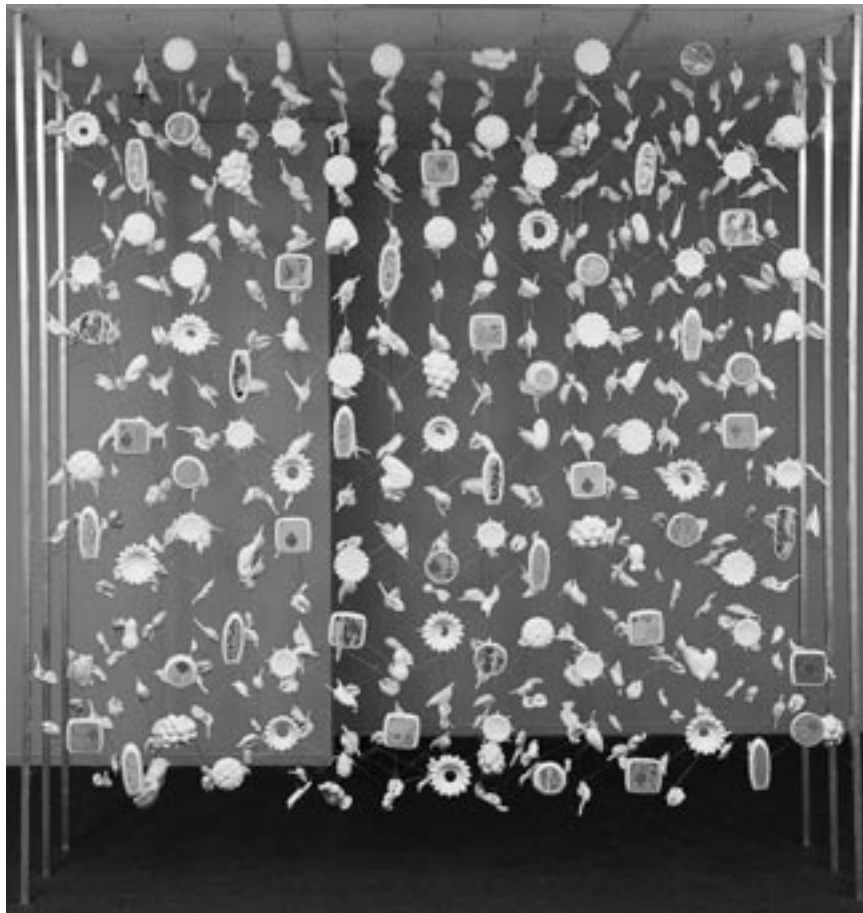
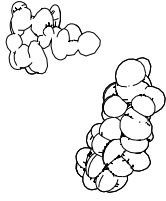
1. Neil Forrest discussion with Philip Beesley, Toronto, February 2000

2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.

4. Inner Experience, Georges Bataille, trans. Leslie Boldt, SUNY Press 1988 (originally published as L'expérience Interieure, Editions Gallimard, 1954)

5. Ignasi de Solà-Morales, Weak Architecture, in Differences: Topographies of Contemporary Architecture, ed. Sarah Whiting trans. Graham Thompson, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996



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