



Sedimentary Antiquity (Pachyrhizodus? Shumka) (Cretaceous), 90 million year old Pachyrhizodus fossil, earthenware, terra sigillata, oxides, shale, 2014



Trilobites from Kevin Conlin's personal collection, installation view at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2015.



Paleozoic Explosion, Earthenware, terra sigillata, stoneware, cone 10 oxides and underglazes, 2012 - 2014



Trilobite Covered Jar, Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014.

KEVIN CONLIN

Kevin Conlin began his ceramic training at the University of Northern Arizona and received a BFA from the University of Regina. He has worked and taught at the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, Red Deer College, and Brandon University. He currently works and teaches at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba. He has worked extensively in the field as an amateur independent paleontologist, having collected fossils and done work for numerous museums, including the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, Canadian Museum of Natural History, Manitoba Museum, Nova Scotia Museum, and the Tyrell Museum.

Images by Kevin Bertram, courtesy of the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba



Sedimentary Antiquity, installation view at the Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba, 2015.



Ammonite Orb, Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

SEDIMENTARY ANTIQUITY KEVIN CONLIN

CURATED BY NATALIA LEBEDINSKAIA
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ART GALLERY OF SOUTHWESTERN MANITOBA
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Through research and field study, Kevin Conlin has worked closely with the historical record contained in layers of clay and bedrock. As a ceramic artist and an amateur paleontologist, he anchors his practice in the earth's ancient past and the inevitable effects that humankind will have on its future. Geological time, and the human relationship to its unimaginable depth, is at the core of *Sedimentary Antiquity*. To look forward in geological time requires a coming to terms with our own mortality, both individually and as a human species. Through the use of clay, Conlin traces a series of extinctions from the first explosion of life in the Cambrian seas over 500 million years ago, to layers that contain traces of our own waste and consumption. His new body of work challenges our understanding of time and suggests that instead of a vast diversity of fossilized living creatures, we will leave behind an archive of objects and evidence of our insatiable use of natural resources.

The exhibition is framed by two mural pieces, one depicting the explosion of multicellular life in the oceans during the Cambrian period around 530 million years ago, and the other positioning the fossil record in relation to the remains of our civilization. In *Paleozoic Explosion* (2012-2014), a mass of overlapping trilobites of different shapes and sizes is flanked on two sides by ceremonial vases. On a grade three school trip to the Manitoba Museum, Conlin used his lunch money to purchase three trilobites from the Museum gift shop, beginning his interest in these ancient creatures.

Trilobites are a marker of the beginning of multicellular life and its incredible abundance. 530 million years ago, in a span of as few as five to ten million years, marine life developed body forms and early ancestors for most animal groups that exist today. This event, precipitated by the breakup of the supercontinent Gondwana and the resulting creation of warm shallow seas, has become known as the Cambrian Explosion (the Cambrian is the first geological period of the Paleozoic era, giving Conlin's mural its title). It is the subject of ongoing debate whether this event was truly as sudden as it appears in the fossil record, or whether preceding life forms have been erased by the absence of conditions necessary for fossilization.

The blossoming of Cambrian diversity is the subject of Stephen Jay Gould's poetic exploration of the Burgess Shale in British Columbia in his seminal text *Wonderful Life*. Gould points to the history of the Cambrian explosion to contradict what he calls the "tale of steadily increasing excellence, complexity, and diversity," commonly depicted as a march towards the human species as its pinnacle.ⁱ Instead, he paints life's history as shaped by chance as well as gradual evolution, punctuated by sudden extinctions and explosions of diversity. In this model, humanity does not appear inevitable and our world always teeters on the brink. Over 20,000 species of trilobites, ranging from 3 to 30 centimeters, thrived in the ancient seas until 252 million years ago when they became extinct, along with 90% of all other species inhabiting the earth. The evidence of their proliferation and demise has become instrumental in dating other fossils and layers of sedimentary material. They have become a measure of time.

A series of tall storage jars throughout the exhibition is named after the species that appear on their surface: *Isotelus*, *Cleoniceras*, *Arctinurus*, *Euaspidoceras*, etc. They contain intertwining histories: of geological time, clay, scientific discovery, and the way in which humans have irreversibly altered the earth. Their clay surfaces are inspired by Conlin's experience in the field, translating his sense of discovery and recognition. While some

are imprints of actual textures and objects, others are simulated. The process of creating molds and imprinting textures echoes how prehistoric organisms were etched onto the earth through fossilization. The eye moves around the vessel, across textures and representations of species: the folds of the *Inoceramid* clam; the variety of ridges and curves in a species of Ammonites; the cliff face of the Manitoba Escarpment where Conlin spends time searching for fossils.

The storage jars contain what cannot be kept in the fossil record, or conveyed through clay. The empty space within the vessel holds the knowledge that the ancient creatures carry. The jars' walls are a membrane in the same way that the fossilized shell is a membrane between two layers of rock, separating the living body and the environment of the creature that has since become rock. Conlin refers to his vessels as incomplete without lids, suggesting that what is held inside can escape without them. Knowledge that has been transferred to him through finding these ancient creatures must remain enclosed, available to be passed on even if it cannot be accessed.

Conlin's relationship with clay has a powerful link to his passion for paleontology. His clay vessels are storehouses of ancient history not only through their shape and decoration, but also through their very composition. Clay contains - as well as mirrors - the history of the earth's constant metamorphosis. Clay comes directly from the earth, and is made up of remnants of its history and geological transformation; it carries ancient plants, animals, and minerals that have been ground down by constant flow of water. Through human intervention and artisanal knowledge, it is shaped into objects and fired in kilns, so that its chemical makeup is altered to resemble a material similar to its origin in bedrock. Much like fossilization that turns living creatures to stone, the transformation of earth into vessel and clay into rock involves an almost mythical reversal of time. In Conlin's work, the vessel is further impregnated with its own history through the imprints of fossils and cliff face onto its surface. It becomes a contact point between geological and human time, existing on the boundary of the vast history of the earth that stretches millions of years before and after its making.

The echo of the body is present in all ceramics, and the language used to describe elements of a clay pot accentuates this parallel. As one faces the tall storage jars in the exhibition, their neck, shoulders, waist, belly, and foot, align with their human counterparts. The volume that is created has the "capacity to hold something...something that forms a barrier or membrane between one space and another...becomes a point of contact separating the inside from the outside, which we understand in relationship to ourselves."ⁱⁱ The parallel between the ceramic and the human bodies is where the transfer of knowledge happens. Conlin succeeds in making us relate to the ancient creatures on his vessels, and accept their history as ours. The recurring images, imprints, and fossilized remains of ammonites, trilobites, and other creatures speak about the cycles of abundance and extinction, as well as of erasure and accidental preservation of history. Like fossilized remains, pots are often all that is left of past civilizations and the everyday lives of our ancestors. The ceramic vessels' ubiquity increases their chances of survival once everything else decays and vanishes. Clay becomes a language of the everyday that is embedded in the archaeological record, much like the fossil record contains traces of living organisms.

ⁱ Stephen J. Gould, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History*, New York: W.W. Norton, 1989, p. 25.

ⁱⁱ Amy Gogarty, Mireille Perron, and Ruth Chambers. *Utopic Impulses: Contemporary Ceramics Practice*. Vancouver: Ronsdale Press, 2007, p.16.

Conlin's work participates in the tradition of representation of the earth's history, and specifically responses to the challenge of conveying deep time. Deep time emerged as a concept in the 18th century with the work of Scottish geologist James Hutton (1726-1797) to describe the dizzying age of our planet. In *Time's Arrow, Time's Cycle*, Gould suggests that from the earliest studies of the earth, geological time has been represented as moving both as an arrow and a cycle.ⁱⁱⁱ Linear time, characterized by irreversible constant change, is always positioned alongside time's cyclical nature, which recognizes fundamental states as immanent. In the earliest representations, it is depicted as the earth's constant ebb and flow of great floods, while now it is found in the repetition of seasons, tides, geological shifts, extinctions, and other natural phenomena that provide the constant framework for the linear time's flow. *Sedimentary Antiquity* exists in both of these two models. There is a clear movement from the most ancient algae fossils on *Stromatolite Storage Jar* (2014) towards the appearance of humans in the Dawn of the *Anthropocene* (2014), and the irreversible extinctions of the living forms throughout the exhibition.

Despite this timeline, the process of making each vessel engages with cyclical time. Most of the pieces combine elements thrown on the potter's wheel with shaped slabs of clay. Clay thrown on the wheel retains its dynamic form, the movement of its making affects how its shape is perceived.^{iv} The rotation of the wheel, and the drying and firing of the vessel (thus returning it to rock) further embraces time's cycle. As Clark argues, the clay surface remembers everything that has been done to it. Conlin's vessels suggest that this memory goes back to the material's earliest history; it is part of the earth and will return to it.

The title piece of the exhibition, *Sedimentary Antiquity* (2014), combines a 90 million year old fossil of a *Pachyrhizodus* with clay tiles that visualize the remains of the Anthropocene on a human scale. Anthropocene is the term used to describe the current geological epoch, reflecting the extent of the shifts precipitated by human consumption, exploitation, and waste. A vast archive of objects, from plastic water bottles to coffee cup lids and discarded containers, fill a layer of dark red clay. The monumental fish, now extinct and potentially belonging to a previously undiscovered species, towers over these contemporary remains as a memento mori. Unlike the imprints of fossils on the storage jars, *Sedimentary Antiquity* contains a physical creature from deep time. Conlin brings it into our space, and stages an encounter between its fossilized body and the imagined remains that we will leave behind. In that moment, *Pachyrhizodus'* time and our own are given an opportunity to overlap, and we can see in both directions at once. Looking back into deep time makes human contributions to earth's history feel momentary, and the idea of a central and inevitable humanity arbitrary at best. The archive of our waste and consumption will make another layer in the geological history of the earth, and just like the numerous trilobites before it, we will become a way to measure time.

Discussing the animals of the Cambrian explosion found on the Burgess Shale in British Columbia, Gould suggests that they are 'holy objects.' Not in the conventional sense of veneration, but in the efforts that are put towards discovering their secrets: "They are grubby little creatures of a sea floor 530 million years old, but we greet them with awe because they are the Old Ones, and they are trying to tell us something."^v The fossil record is fragmented and entirely accidental, full of gaps that are themselves filled with speculation and guesswork. Fossils exist

on the boundary between images, objects, and metaphors for time. Conlin's ceramic pieces are created in dialogue with these ancient creatures. His ceramic vessels contain the inaccessible knowledge gleaned from traces of life that populated our world hundreds of millions of years before us. An encounter with their surfaces, both fossilized and ceramic, is filled with the desire to run one's finger along the ridges on their shells and the vertebrae of their backs, to open their lids and let the contents flow out.

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Natalia Lebedinskaia,
Curator of Contemporary Art,
Art Gallery of Southwestern Manitoba

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LIST OF WORKS

KEVIN CONLIN

Ammonite Orb, Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Leaning Towards Sedimentary Antiquity (Isotelus Trilobite Storage Jar, (Paleozoic)), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Stromatolite Storage Jar (Pre-Cambrian), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Cleoniceras Ammonite Storage Jar (Jurassic), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Ammonite Storage Jar (Cretaceous), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Arctinurus Trilobite Orb (Cambrian), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Paleozoic Explosion, Earthenware, terra sigillata, stoneware, cone 10 oxides and underglazes, 2012 - 2014

Coilopoceras Ammonite Container (Cretaceous), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Placenticeras Storage Jar (Cretaceous), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Euaspidoceras Ammonite Storage Jar (Jurassic), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Arctinurus Trilobite Storage Jar (Cambrian), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Anthropocene Storage Jar (Anthropocene), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Dawn of the Anthropocene Storage Jar (Anthropocene), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Inoceramid Storage Jar (Cretaceous), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Ichthyosaurus Storage Jar (Jurassic), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Pleuroceras Spinatum Ammonite Container (Jurassic), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Trilobite Covered Jar, Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Cleoniceras Container (Cretaceous), Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Ammonite Container, Stoneware, cone 10, oxides and underglazes, 2014

Sedimentary Antiquity (Pachyrhizodus? Shumka) (Cretaceous), 90 million year old Pachyrhizodus fossil, earthenware, terra sigillata, oxides, shale, 2014

