

Linda Sormin's ceramics-based installations have long explored uncertainty, risk and survival, precarious and fragile structures. She is attentive to how we seek stability in the midst of chaos and transition, how we might pause during times of upheaval, how we hold onto the familiar through experiences of migration and change. Sormin emigrated from Bangkok to Canada at the age of five. Returning to Southeast Asia to work for a non-governmental development agency in Laos and Thailand in the early 1990s, she became acutely aware of the instability of everyday life.

Sormin's interest in chaos and precarity finds an analogy in the instability of Leda clay, which underlies much of the Ottawa-Gatineau region, an earthquake-prone area. On a site visit to CUAG last June, Sormin was struck by the prevalence of this clay, left behind by the Champlain Sea 10,000 – 13,000 years ago, at the end of the last ice age. Due to its molecular structure, Leda clay turns to liquid when agitated. It presents building and engineering challenges and is a factor in landslides and sinkholes throughout the region.

Sormin's methodology is one of experimentation and improvisation, accumulation and responsiveness to a site. During her June visit, she envisioned CUAG's high gallery as a dry dock. She was excited by the possibility of sourcing some Leda clay. Her ideas and plans evolved over email and Skype conversations, developing into the form of a foam core model conveying the idea of a ship, snaked through by a boardwalk.

Serendipitously, Carleton's Engineering Department had a cubic-metre sample of Leda clay excised from a site in Navan that they were happy to give to Sormin. Hardened where exposed to air, the layers of clay were forcefully cut, chunk by chunk, bagged and transported through the tunnels to the gallery by Patrick Lacasse and me over the better part of a day in November.

A wintry week in December. A 26' truck driven by Seth Hisiger, Linda Sormin's partner, transports large ceramic sculptures and various other objects and materials, from Andover and Alfred, New York. More than 100 boxes and crates crowd the lower gallery; large sculptures are liberated from their crates, while smaller pieces are unpacked onto tables. Other boxes still hold their contents secret. Lumber, plywood and hardware arrive and Sormin's vision of a ship, as interpreted by Peter Shmelzer and aided by Lacasse and Marc Nerbonne, takes shape before the gallery's holiday closure.

Walking to and from the high gallery to survey the progress of construction, I pass Sormin's waiting sculptures. Low light from the ceiling pot lights reflects off the shiny surfaces of her complex, hand-rendered forms, catching my eye and inviting me to sit and spend time with them. Alluring, angular extrusions and tangled, pinched-length matrices of clay, seductively glazed in earthy colours, hot pink, crimson, yellow and dark green. Multiple firings. These artworks have travelled; they have histories. Bits of paper clay added to serve as "connective tissue" in previous exhibitions have broken off here and there.

In January, Sormin will work with Hisiger, Lacasse and Brian Barnes, positioning large sculptures with a forklift. Some will be buttressed by newly fashioned wooden supports and others skewered by lengths of metal. Sormin will compose space with them, clustering the fragile forms in constellations and archipelagos.

Sormin's immersive installation echoes the provisional structures humans build and use—rafts, ships, shelters, supports and platforms: a raised path to walk on, a ship's hold to carry people and belongings. I wonder what people might bring in response to Sormin's invitation to share objects that "carry us like fierce passengers" through experiences of change, transition, migration or loss. I am keen to hear the stories such objects hold and the conversations they will generate. These loaned objects, together with Sormin's sculptures and the Leda clay, will form a kind of temporary community in spite of—or perhaps because of—the shifting ground and tumultuous times in which we live.

Heather Anderson

Linda Sormin acknowledges the support of the Canada Council for the Arts and the New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University.