

## BACK STORY: An artist clearly at one with nature

Catherine Fox -Staff  
Sunday, May 22, 2005



JOEY IVANSCO / Staff

Pandra Williams is at home in her West End studio with "Protaeus," a partially complete piece that hangs in her sitting area. Viruses, dust mites and other hidden things that thrive in homes inspired the pockmarked work.

Pandra Williams is one of those lucky souls who has found a way to fuse her avocation and her vocation.

"I've always been intrigued and delighted by nature and sad when it gets smashed," says the Atlanta artist.

Her ceramic sculptures take inspiration from nature's forms, express her sense of wonder and sometimes campaign, subtly, to let it be. And her works succeed with visual aplomb and a sometimes wicked wit.

A seed husk she found in the Blue Ridge, a deciduous magnolia, was the jumping-off point for "Ostentatio Virga," one of the striking ceramic sculptures in "Clay: A Celebration of Organic Form" a group show at the Swan Coach House Gallery.



A magnolia seed husk that Williams found in the Blue Ridge inspired "Ostentatio Virga," on view in the current exhibition at the Swan Coach House Gallery.

It got her to thinking about the seeds that had been dispersed from the pod, and the new growth that had resulted. She combined the pod and the new growth in this piece, in which pale green, entwined shoots rise, with balletic grace, out of a delicate ruffled pod.

Sitting in her West End studio, the artist, 47, begins speaking about seeds and segues into nature's intelligence. "By being delectable, fruits trick animals into spreading their seeds," she says. "I find that beguiling. . . . Plants are not as passive as they appear."



Pandra Williams' "Vermiculi Di Nozze" is a bouquet of fantastic flowers with menacing stems.

With "Secret Dreams of Fruit," Williams gives what is commonly seen as an edible item a human, even carnivorous, quality.

Just take a look at "Secret Dreams of Fruit" at Swan. Williams' fantastical imagination --- Salvador Dali meets Gregor Mendel --- comes out in this pillowy but spiky pink object with a hole in the middle. It hovers between plant and human form, invitation and menace.

"It's fruta dentata," she says, referring to Freud's theories of "vagina dentata" [with teeth] and castration anxiety. "You don't know whether it is giving birth or consuming."

Come June, you'll be able to experience the more self-effacing and ecological side of Williams' work. She is currently spending six or seven days a week (and some overnights) to complete "Incognae," an installation for Freedom Park. She will arrange 16 ovoid forms and 100 native plants to create an intimate space that welcomes visitors to rest or picnic.

Hollow forms of different sizes and stages of completion rest on tables and cook in her kiln. She has set up a

device to project images of the cellular structure of fungi called mycorrhizae onto the surfaces of the ovoids so that she can carve the pattern onto the clay.

Mycorrhizae, which live underground and nurture plant roots, are the key to the piece, which grew out of her dismay that we are killing this fungus, and undermining our ecosystem, with pesticides, chemical fertilizers and such.

"This unrecognized part of the ecosystem interacts with approximately 90 percent of the planet's flora," she writes in her artist statement. "Lowly, hidden microorganisms directly impact our food as well as the planet's enormous biosphere."

No ivory-tower artist, she acts on her ecological concerns. For the past four years, she has worked with the Southeastern Climbers Coalition in its efforts to save Boat Rock, in southwest Fulton County, from encroaching development. So far, the group has managed to save 12.1 acres of this forested area with large boulders that climbers love.

"When we would climb at Boat Rock, I started noticing the natural community that was thriving because it had been left alone," she says.

This moved Williams to rescue specimens of some 50 species of native plants from the property under development. They are in gallon pots in the back yard of her Decatur home until she can replant them in nature centers and the wild.

Williams' work is so mature that it's surprising to discover that this direction is fairly recent. Although she graduated from the Atlanta College of Art in 1979, where she met husband Michael, a photographer, she didn't feel ready for graduate school at that time. She spent her child-rearing years devoted to mothering, working in graphic design and enjoying an active outdoor life.

Something clicked when her two daughters reached their late teens. She went back to school and earned her Master of Fine Art in sculpture at Georgia State University in 2003. That experience pushed her to bring form and content together.

Her thesis exhibition was a haunting environment of white clay spheres and other shapes and an installation of moss with magnifying glasses that revealed the life within.

"Pandra's MFA exhibition project was possibly the most inventive I've seen during my time at Georgia State," says gallery director Cathy Byrd. "She transformed the gallery into a delightful experiential environment."

"Her exquisite new clay work refines that sensual physicality."

Williams has continued to push herself. She plans to introduce lights into "Protaeus," the piece that hangs, partially completed, on the wall of the sitting area in her studio. Viruses inspired the intentionally icky forms pocked with many holes, but the piece was inspired by dust mites and the other members of the natural community that thrive in homes --- yours, too.

"You don't want to know what's under your wall-to-wall carpet," she says with a laugh. "Nature fills all the cracks and crannies."

This summer, however, Williams is taking a breather. She has offered her studio to a friend and plans to spend her time coasting the Internet to research more natural communities.

Actually, she already has an idea cooking.

"I'm interested in the forest canopy in temperate climates like ours," Williams says. "There is a metropolis up in the branches out of our reach. I want to explore that."