

COURTNEY M. LEONARD

Essay for *The New Transcendence*
By Glenn Adamson

Why do we ever speak of a shore line? Where the water meets the sea, we find anything but a fixed boundary. All is flux, in all dimensions. As the tide rolls in and out, natural forms are perpetually revealed, concealed, and incrementally shaped. The forces involved are of astronomical scale, but this perpetual metamorphic flow is an intimate matter for those who live by, and make their living from, the sea.

Among those with that deep understanding are the people of the Shinnecock Nation, whose unceded aboriginal lands are on the eastern end of Long Island. That heritage of insight, in turn, forms a firm foundation for artist Courtney M. Leonard. For the past decade, she has devoted herself largely to a series entitled, simply, *Breach* – a word that can imply underhanded betrayal (as in “breach of contract”) or on the contrary, a sudden emergence into visibility (as when a whale breaches).

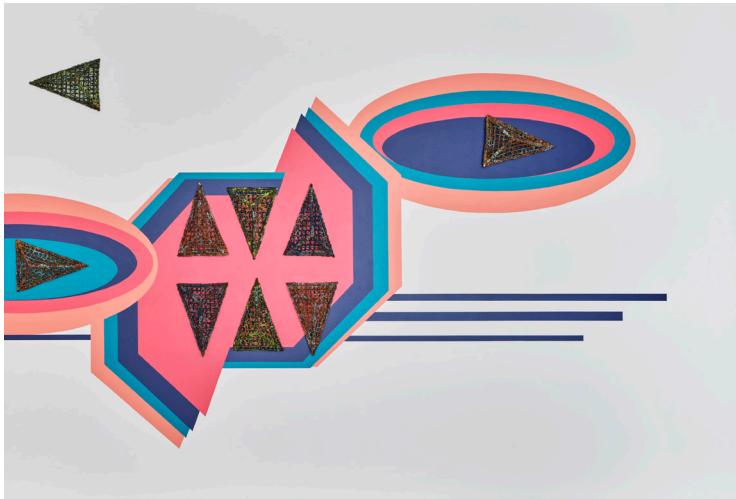
The ambiguity is telling, for fluidity can be seen throughout Leonard’s work, not only at the level of depiction – the wall-based work included in *The New Transcendence* can be read as the aerial map of a coastal zone, punctuated by fishing weirs – but also at the levels of making and meaning. It could also be an abstract painting, or a constellation. For as Leonard notes, “to understand the land and water, you also need to understand the sky.”



“BREACH: LOGBOOK 24 | TRANSCENDENCE”,
2024, coiled and woven earthenware, acrylic
paint, Installation: 96 x 201.5”



Ceramics is, of course, a discipline born of the encounter between earth and water. Leonard has said that as she coils and interlaces the wet clay, bestowing intricate form upon it, the repetition of process prompts her to enter a meditative frame of mind, a self-transcendence akin perhaps to dreaming. When looking at the finished work, we are to some extent admitted into that same state of transport. To borrow from the late anthropologist and art critic Alfred Gell, Leonard's cage-like structures function as traps, snaring us in a nexus of intention and reference.



But if Leonard's work is about various forms of capture – of time, space, and yes, of thought itself – she also approaches that dynamic with great care. She speaks of Indigenous techniques of aquaculture as being in a relationship of respect to nature; rather than locating weirs within migratory channels, for example, they are positioned off to one side, so as not to obstruct passage. Those fish that do get caught are, in a sense, offering themselves as sustenance; practically speaking, this method also prevents overfishing, ensuring the sustenance future generations. This ought to be the model for how we humans treat natural resources; it ought to be the model for design.



"BREACH: LOGBOOK 24 | TRANSCENDENCE", 2024, Images courtesy of Friedman Benda and Timothy Doyon Photography, 2024

The New Transcendence. Installation at Friedman Benda Gallery: 96 x 201.5"