



POWNING

[Home](#) >> [Exhibitions / Lectures](#) >> Coverage - The alchemist

[Peter's Home](#)  
[Shards of Time](#)  
[Resume](#)  
[Essays](#)  
[The Work](#)  
[Public Commissions](#)  
[Technical Articles](#)  
[Exhibitions / Lectures](#)  
[The Studio](#)  
[Workshops](#)  
[Books](#)  
[Contact](#)

## THE TELEGRAPH JOURNAL

### Salon section

#### The alchemist

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Peter Powning presents his first major solo show in the province in nearly a decade. In *Transmutations*, which opened last night in Fredericton, he creates meaning and metaphor in clay, glass, metal, photography and found objects. He hopes the works hit viewers in the gut and the heart, before their heads take over. 'It is the experience that matters, not the response to that engagement,' he says.

One day Peter Powning is at an \$80,000 party in Toronto. The next he is back home in Markhamville, outside of Sussex, where there are 100 acres of field to mow, horse fences to mend, three big gardens to weed and more art projects on the go than he cares to contemplate.



Kate Braydon/Telegraph-Journal

While his professional life often arcs far from the little green valley where he lives and works to the bright lights of big cities where his sculptures are exhibited and installed, New Brunswick has been a constant in his 40-year career, a source of inspiration, a quiet corner of the world in which to think and create, and a market for his work.

For the first time in nearly a decade, Powning presents a major solo show in the province.

*Transmutations* opened Friday at Ingrid Mueller Art Concepts in Fredericton. It is on display until Nov. 7.

The work in the show is smaller than what he would typically present in a bigger centre, such as the massive solo exhibition he staged in June 2008 at Toronto's Sandra Ainsley Gallery, located at that time in a nearly 7,000-square-foot space in the trendy Distillery District.

"I wanted to work on a more intimate scale," Powning says.

The show features photography and ceramics as well as sculptures crafted from clay, glass, acrylic, steel, stone, wood and rubber.

It is this mix of media and his mastery of them that so impressed the jury of the Saidye Bronfman Award (now the Governor General's Award for Craft), the top craft award in the country, which Powning won in 2006.

This mix of media also holds his interest.

"I'm a juggler," he says. "I like the breadth of the things I do."

*Transmutations* features a series of six sculptures that reflect the title's reference to alchemy, of turning one material into another.



In Powning's hands, "substances take on the qualities of other seemingly disparate materials, and opposites exist in tandem. Stone becomes wood-like, glass seems like water," Mireille Eagan, a curator, writes in the exhibition catalogue.

In *Transmutation* #3, ceramic glazed with a verdigris finish reflects the form, colour and texture of its aged bronze base. In *Transmutation* #4, Powning has mirrored the arc of a section of old rubber tire in cast bronze.

Some of the works are marked with "cryptic calligraphy," letters or symbols he has created.

## Exhibitions / Lectures List

[Sandra Ainsley Gallery - 2015](#)

[Studio 21 ~ New Work and Outdoor Sculptures](#)

[backtalk series](#)

[Studio 21 ~ Between the Pages](#)

[Cheongju International Biennale](#)

[INGRID MUELLER ART + CONCEPT](#)

[SANDRA AINSLEY GALLERY](#)

[Beaverbrook Art Gallery](#)

[Centre Materia](#)

[Harbourfront Centre](#)

[Burlington Art Centre](#)

[Habatat Galleries Virginia](#)

[SANDRA AINSLEY GALLERY](#)

[Habatat Galleries](#)

[Florence Biennale](#)

[Habatat Galleries](#)

[SOFA Chicago](#)

[Lafreniere & Pai Gallery](#)

[Harbinger Gallery](#)

[Mary E. Black Gallery](#)

[Creative Glass Center of America](#)

[SOFA NYC](#)

[Galerie Elena Lee](#)

"For a long time, I have been engaged by the humanness of them, and their sense of meaning without the burden of specific content," Powning writes in the catalogue.

"I attempt to create a sense of being at the threshold of meaning, a place where you have to accept the experience as the meaning, and relinquish the need to explain."

He hopes the viewer's initial response is purely visceral, a gut reaction before the brain takes over and starts questioning, answering and analyzing.



"It is the experience that matters, not the response to that engagement," he says.

"I think one of the problems in how people approach sculpture is thinking they need to understand, that there is an explanation."

In Red Earth Branch Vessel, a ceramic pot topped with a bronze lid cast in a fanned crown of twigs, he intentionally broke the vessel, refiring the shards with different glazes. Along with the metaphor of the broken being mended, the esthetics of fracture and repair appeal to Powning. It reminds him, he says, of ancient vessels he once saw in a British museum whose missing pieces had been replaced with gold-coloured plaster.

"It made them more interesting," he says.

The twiggly metal lid atop the pot is as close to an overt natural reference as Powning will make.

While he lives close to nature, it is not an obvious theme or subject.

"My work isn't rustic scenes," he says. "It's informed, presumably, by the way I live and my preoccupations. But rural isn't an ingredient that I deliberately put in."

While he and his wife, author Beth Powning, deeply value the time they spend outdoors, including mountain biking and bush skiing on 10 kilometres of wooded trails on their property, he dispenses with romantic notions of country living.

"We love having our space and living this so-called rural idyll but it is a demanding way to work."

Along with the vessel and sculptures in the show, Powning has made 10 photographic works mounted on aluminum and framed in shadow boxes that explore his obsession with books as cultural icons.

"Messing with the idea of books as sacrosanct objects," he calls the project as he defies society's rules that prohibit writing in a volume, dropping it in the tub or leaving it out on the veranda for a year.

Powning has done all of this and more. While he feels a bit bad sometimes for ruining perfectly good books, he is drawn to experiment with their ephemerality and fragility.

One of the books he photographed for the show is baked, its blackened pages ruffled and velvety, the reddish light bathing it rich and hot.



Another book is open, the pages stuck together in a mass of rough peaks. Set against a black backdrop, there is no sense of scale and the line of clouds Powning added to the image enforces the impression of a mountain range rising from the dark.

The words on those pages aren't legible, but that is the point: it is not about a textual story or information but about the book as object and a sculptural medium.

In others of this series, Powning has caught the play of books as they toss in the clear surf off Grand Manan or tumble down a coppery creek near his house.

"The water books, I love the way they move," he says. "It is such a dance."

Water's fluidity is reflected in the wavy stretches of glass he has mounted below some of the photographs. Beneath others are book fragments or smaller photographs that reflect something of the nature of the featured book.

There is a dynamic quality to the work, in the way Powning's camera froze the book's motion in a static image, transforming it from three dimensions to two, from a text-based item to a purely material object.

Powning works in a group of buildings tucked behind the white clapboard farmhouse where he and Beth live.

His foundry, one of the few art foundries in Atlantic Canada, is housed in an old barn. It gives him creative control over his metal work, but also makes experimentation possible, as the cost would be prohibitive if he had to contract the work out.



"Part of how we make a living is by pouring our own bronze," he says. He and his son, swordsmith Jake Powning, pour 20 to 30 times a year. It is heavy, careful work. They can melt down about 110 pounds of bronze at a time, but the crucible and thick handles bring it up to more like 170 or 180 pounds.

When they are pouring molten bronze they wear head-to-toe protective gear. One time, at a foundry in the U.S., Powning saw how a moment's inattention can be dangerous, if not deadly. Reacting with a damp steel ingot mould, a steam explosion sent molten bronze flying like shrapnel, including a piece that cut through the artist's leather jacket, burning into his arm.

"That's when I discovered the healing power of aloe vera," he says.

While Powning's early reputation in New Brunswick was based on ceramics, his majors at art school at the University of Connecticut were sculpture, photography and ceramics. These forms have been a constant in his practice, but when he and Beth moved to New Brunswick in 1970, he figured he'd need to do something a little more practical to make a living. He turned to pottery.

"It was a narrow container for me," he says.

"Even in my heavy ceramic years, I was always doing stuff on the side."

He delved into metal and glass in earnest in the '90s, after he burned out on making large numbers of ceramic works. Around that time, a long-standing assistant left his employ.

"I thought, 'Well that's that.' So that kind of freed me in a way."

Almost everything he knows about bronze and glass, he learned on his own. In lieu of formal, full-time studies he learned through reading, talking to artists who work in the media, one- or two-day workshops and experimenting.

"Most of what I do I learned on my own."

More recently, that includes video work for *Fantasm*, a massive wall sculpture that will be installed in the lobby of Festival Tower, part of the new home of the Toronto International Film Festival. *Smack-dab* in Toronto's entertainment district, condominiums in the building start in the \$400,000s and run up to \$2 million.

Powning's eight-by-12-foot work comprises 96 bronze squares. The dark, gun-metal grey frames are brightened by glossy glass squares with video projected behind them.

"We are so surrounded by TV screens and hand-held distractions and such, I wanted to resonate with that without it being anything literal," he says.

Powning shot the film footage himself, including scenes from a ferry ride to Grand Manan and the blur of woods flying by the car window. The squares create a sort of grate over the images, while the glass distorts them, creating an impression of movement and colour but no definitive picture.

The filming was fun, Powning says. The most tedious part was learning to use the editing software.

He laboured over *Final Cut Express* in the bright office in his studio where he spends much of his time. At a desk dominated by a large iMac he writes proposals, handles correspondence, edits catalogues for his shows and prepares proposals for grants and commissions.

This year he applied for between 10 and 15 public art commissions. He is short-listed for two, and is at the contract stage for another big project in Toronto that was not the result of a competition.

Preparing proposals is a lot of work. For each, Powning compiles a book that includes a detailed description of his proposal and specs and mock-ups of the design. He must also estimate the

time and expense a project will take.

"You have to make sure you don't end up subsidizing public art," he says, by underestimating the cost to make it.

While the rejections are frustrating, he has had a number of successful applications, including Portal, a tall bronze and stone arch that will be installed outdoors in Mississauga, Ont., next year, and Light Spirals at the corner of Bay and College Streets in Toronto.

With Moncton and Saint John recently adopting cultural policies that stipulate one per cent of the construction or major renovation budgets for municipal buildings be spent on public art, the opportunities to make this sort of work in New Brunswick are growing.

Nest, his four-foot-wide cast bronze roost was installed atop the tower of the Botsford Street Fire Station in Moncton this year; and Bolt, a 15-foot-high stainless steel sculpture, was commissioned by Saint John Energy in 2008.

While public art tends toward the literal and thematic, Transmutations and other exhibitions offer the chance for more personal work.

Powning turned 60 this year, passing the milestone of making a living from his art for some 40 years. Still, he continues to experience that blend of confidence and terror so common to visual artists.

"It's hard not to feel that you're only as good as what you're currently working on," he says.

Moving from a project's conception to its completion, "you go through a lot of insecurity and panic and self-doubt," he says.

He likens the early stages of the creative process to a conceptual river the artist frolics in, plucking and playing with ideas as they drift past.

Following the excitement of the early idea comes the challenges of making it manifest, the frustrations of bringing the vision into being.

"I think one of the things that happens is the analysis and understanding of what the work is about happens while or after the work is made," he says, not before.

In other words, that initial glimmer of inspiration is just that: an early, unformed idea that will grow and change as the work progresses.

"I think it's like making compost: you just keep throwing things into the hopper, and keep turning it and eventually you have something of interest."

Call it creative alchemy.

*Kate Wallace covers the arts for the Telegraph-Journal and is a frequent contributor to Salon.*

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