



**FIRST PHRASE**

**CAROLYN HAZEL DRAKE**



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**ESSAY BY ABBIE MILLER**

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**Photo Credits:**  
**Michael Brooks**  
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**Leah Nash & Christopher Onstott**

## FIRST PHRASE

*For her inaugural show at Waterstone Gallery, Drake presents tenderly crafted ceramic objects and textiles placed alongside familiar tokens of domesticity. The installations in First Phrase are bittersweet meditations on personal and collective experiences during quarantine: loss, isolation, fear, and claustrophobia, but also rediscovery and reemergence.*

*In music theory, there are three types of phrases: those that suggest continuation; those that suggest a temporary rest, and those that suggest finality. First Phrase haltingly considers these possible expressions through the cycle of one year: the spring of 2020, which brought a blossoming of pervasive fear, toxic smoke, and death, and the Spring of 2021, with new hope and an aching sense of possibility.*



# FIRST PHRASE

By Abbie Miller

Home is a site of identity that is shaped and cultivated; home is also a compressed space in which the internal crosses into external form. In Carolyn Hazel Drake's hands, home is the framework for a modern day and very personal memento mori. Her snapshot into the exploration of fragility and death within the construct of comforting domesticity creates a space for ponderance and paradox. The result is an environment imbued with quietude and creative reflection through sewn objects, ceramics, installation, and photography.

Drake's iteration is a home of the collective unconscious, an enveloping and ethereal space that resonates immediately but pulls us back to antiquity at the same time. One has the experience of walking into a space steeped in strangely familiar but undefined iconography. Her use of scent further deepens the descent into memory and rumination. It invites lingering to discover a concept that is not at all apparent at first glance. The title for the exhibition, *First Phrase*, alludes to a group of two or more words that express an idea but are not complete as a sentence. The artist was a literature major and for a decade taught both visual and language arts in Oregon school districts. This personal history plays an important role in how she conceptualizes and visually expresses her ideas as abbreviated symbols that denote parts of the whole.





She suggests that a phrase is a continuation, a rest, and even a finality. It can also manifest as mild dissonance between seemingly unrelated ideas. This type of suspension and fluid versatility are threads throughout Drake's works. They can be felt in the shifting combinations of found objects from everyday life, hand-worked textiles, and designed interior decor in First Phrase.

The variety of works in this show are staged in a nod to vignette or installation and cross the lines between sculpture and environment. This elicits an uncanny blurring of place that is neither home nor gallery. It successfully floats in the middle as an offering of respite, a place that is meant to be both occupied and observed, and takes on the guise of a sacred interior or ferectory. In this iteration, curtains are drawn back onto the gallery wall, where smokey imprints and residues of thought are held in vessels and corners are softened with appliquéd textiles.

The artist converts the gallery into a seamless space that is both exhibition and reliquary. Lines between display and habitat are blended creating a transitional space to reflect in and ponder. The exhibit emphasizes the subdued space of the domestic as it unfolds to remind us of the transient quality of life during the isolation of Covid-19. It is a fresh rendering of the classical memento mori, still lifes of the 16th and 17th centuries that referenced the ephemeral nature of life and inevitability of death.





## FORGET ME NOTS

*The vessel is always at some level a metaphor for the self. These were created with tenderness -- they are marvelous to touch and also incredibly fragile. First they are pinched, then burnished with terra sigillata until glossy, and then after the bisque fire they are smoke-fired using hardwood chips and a Weber Smokey Joe. All of the color comes from the smoke, and a slip resist is used to create the designs. It has to be scrubbed off after the smoke firing is done. From the start of the process through to the end, these pieces have a high mortality rate, as the materials are so delicate -- there were fourteen survivors.*

*The way these vessels absorb the smoke is akin to how susceptible we are to our atmosphere: an invisible virus, or wildfire smoke, or a digital interface, or the spirits of those we are surrounded by. By using the slip resist technique, I'm able to exert a measure of control over the marks made by the amorphous, shifting smoke.*

*I wanted these pieces to feel cozy and domestic. This mirrors the experience of the last year, where so many of us have been living our lives through the computer screen from our own homes. Working or socializing or going to events, all in socks and tucked into chairs or couches or even our beds. A few years back I was making little cloth bases for some of my smallest porcelain vessels, so I thought, let's go a step further, and have pillows for vessels.*



Upon entering the exhibit, the softening of boundaries can be felt immediately. Drake subverts the formality of the stark gallery, but the noticeably monotone palette creates a continuity between display site and art object through richly textured whites and neutrals. Rather than transform the space, the artist embraces and echoes it throughout the works. Familiar objects bring the comfort and homeliness of this exhibit into situated resonance.

Years spent in her mother's quilting store as well as her long relationship to the local craft community arise as personal histories that move into the work. Storytelling and the passage of time are stitched through material remnants, designed surfaces, and smoke-drawn glazes. Elegantly positioned and meticulously worked, each object has a narrative that becomes part of the whole. An example is the window box of the gallery that Drake converted into an intimate room, titled "Smoke, Fire, Stars, & Lungs." On the gallery wall facing the street is a tightly organized arrangement of items that look like they could have been abstracted from the artist's studio. A ceramic embroidered chair sits below a coated metal shelf, flanked by a quilted panel and gauzy muslin curtains on the side. On the shelf adjacent is a combination of made objects and found artifacts including a phone, radio clock, ceramic bouquet, thread spindles, and books, all covered in shades of white.

## FEAR BLANKET

*Fear Blanket is a meditation on the ways we are sensitive to our atmosphere -- how we are porous to our surroundings and to the invisible or visible things that move through the air around us, be they viruses or wildfire smoke or fragrant steam from a cup of tea, or spirits and voices of those who are not with us. The word "blanketed," with its direct connection to cloth, is also used to describe the experience of feeling the weight of something invisible but very real: fear, desire, anger. Most of us start and end our lives wrapped in blankets, and so this piece brings together the need for coziness and comfort during a time of extreme apprehension and anxiety.*



Drawing upon her early experience with window and display design at her mother's quilt store and at the Portland fabric store, The Whole Nine Yards, Drake uses the elements of interior design and product display to create situational stages for her work and the viewer to reside at an even hierarchy. Slipping into this space, it is impossible not to be in close proximity to the works, to smell the fragrant oils that have been purposefully laced throughout her textile objects that elicit personal memory responses. The shelf is hung at nearly face height and although to the street side viewer the exhibition occupant becomes part of the still life, when one is inside the space it does not feel obvious in this way.

The recreation of intimate spaces that blur the lines between public and private, melding artifact with artistic rendering, have a strong history in female driven contemporary art. Examples are the hotel rooms of Sophie Calle in which she documented personal belongings during her stint as a temporary maid and then went on to stage scenes in actual hotel rooms where the viewer is both occupant and audience. The forward, in your face revelations of Tracy Emin also come to mind, specifically "My Bed" 1998, in which she brought her mattress, with personal effects and debris after a breakup and laid it bare inside the Tate Modern.





Unlike the toil, bodily residue and voyeurism emphasized in these projects, Drake's installation is free of chaos and refuse. Her objects are carefully curated and sanitized with light paint, and have an enigmatic quality that leaves much open to the viewer's discretion. As an ensemble, the room invites the viewer to become a part of the narrative more than witness it. Akin to this style of open installation is the minimal, spatial work of Carmen Argote's 720 sq Feet: Household Mutations, 2010. The footprint of an entire home is rendered as a giant area rug that covers the floor and walls. It outlines and maps an emotional, spatial territory as a way to relate interior versus exterior and positive and negative spaces. The audience can choose to be on the inside or outside of the work.



There are several curtain pieces that Drake has constructed. The curtains are crisp and vinyl, opening up to a series of small stitched frames. Sewn motifs and patterns are bordered by clean, white, new domestic objects such as benches and candle sconces. Her stitched pieces combine her personal symbolism with geometry to manifest the internal landscape she occupied during the global pandemic. In many of the sewn pieces there is a distinct nod to quilts, where the dissected squares are top stitched and bound, some with centered compositions and the symmetry of traditional European quilting. The grid-like configuration in which they are displayed references a form of archival record, a codified tale of the time spent in isolation.

The sewn works harken back to a long history of appliquéd quilts that have survived from Egyptian times, when images of scarabs, ducks, snakes, and flowers were stitched to gazelle hide and dyed with natural pigments. Drake's figures and symbols have a primordial quality which along with the use of coarse, simple cloth evoke a sense of antiquity. Some pieces are anointed with cedar oil, redolent of tomb preparation in ancient Egypt. Further reference to the ages and memento mori is her stitched series *Fleur Du Mal*. Wilted flowers in vases were a common motif in the vanitas painting of the 16th and 17th centuries. They served to remind the viewer that beauty is ephemeral and death was ever present.





Memento mori are also metaphorically referenced in Drake's beautifully crafted porcelain vessels. She used wood smoke in the firing process to activate the intricate slip drawings on the porcelain surface. Smoke was a common motif in the vanitas painting of the Middle Ages, and was heavily present in the wildfire-choked atmosphere of Portland in which Drake made the pieces for this exhibition. As a theme in vanitas paintings, it is a symbol of the ephemeral; in Drake's skillful hands it permeates the fragile bowls with a sense of the ancient. The scarring, or tattooing of the porcelain surface is evocative of ritual. She further sanctifies the vessels by elevating them on hand crafted pillows.

The combined works paradoxically convey a sense of both fragility and strength, of antiquity and modernity. The works in First Phrase were completed during the worldwide shift we all experienced during Covid, and reflect the artist's inner personal vanitas with themes of beauty, transience, and death. They culminate in a rich reflection of domestic space, craft lineage, and storytelling. The works are sparse and ambient upon first gaze but embody an artful depth that envelops the viewer through the minutiae of handwork and mark making. Drake has masterfully combined a sense of the ancient, the sacred, and modern domesticity to create a suspension of space, and invites us to explore her Covid-inspired memento mori.



## BURIAL SHROUD FOR THE YEAR 2020

*After New Year's, it came to me that I needed to make a burial shroud for the year 2020.*

*Way back in March 2019, I had spent the first two weeks of the month isolated in a residency at Suttle Lake. The seasons seemed to go in reverse while I was there: days and days of spring sun ended with a sudden, silent snowstorm. All the while I was getting intermittent, terrifying updates from the world at large. I drove home and into quarantine, along with everyone else. Then all of the other things happened: isolation, sickness, fear, death, puppies, puzzles, bread baking, brutality, oppression, protest, destruction, despair, claustrophobia, wildfires, small joys. And we were participants, or witnesses, or victims, or we hid from as much as we could.*

*In January, I was invited to another residency, this time for Sou'Wester Arts Week, that would fall in March 2020. A year from my time at Suttle Lake. And so, while all of this was still not over, is still not over, I tried to begin processing it through my work. My first phrase. The burial shroud is an attempt at catharsis. It has symbols and icons loosely standing in for personal and societal elements and events that defined 2020. I hope it creates an opportunity for humor, joy, and sadness as we collectively try to process this year.*

*In her book Wintering, Katherine May states: "This year has brought us into close contact with loss. Many winters have come all at once. But within these winters, there is the seed of something necessary. We tend to imagine that our lives are linear, but they are in fact cyclical. As we grow older, we pass through phases of good health and ill, of optimism and deep doubt, of freedom and constraint. There are times when everything seems easy, and times when it all seems impossibly hard. Each time we endure the cycle, we learn from the previous round, and we do a few things better. This is how wisdom is made."*

*This last year has been a year of wintering for all of us -- but it has simultaneously been very much a year of "springing" for me: the promise and flowering of deep love and plenty in my home. This culminated in the sharp joy of getting married to Michael Brooks on March 21, 2021.*

*With this strange elixir of pain and promise in my blood I have felt a tenderness that is, I think, coming through in these objects. At the Sou'Wester, photographers Leah Nash & Chris Onstott were documenting the artists at work throughout the week. They visited my studio (coincidentally, the Bridal Suite) to photograph me interacting with the shroud -- it was an hour of suspended reality that connected these thoughts and feelings floating around in the air, and allowed them to settle throughout my body -- not just my head and hands, not just my heart, but my full self, and allow the weirdness of it all to just... be weird.*

*The shroud isn't finished yet. I haven't been able to bring myself to sit with it and add in all of the stitching it needs in the background. I think this is because I want to move on. I want to let go.*







**Carolyn Hazel Drake** is a Portland-based sculptor, arts educator, and third-generation Oregonian. Drake studied Literature & Architecture at Portland State University's Honors College and spent a term as a curatorial research & writing intern for the Smithsonian American Art Museum, with a particular focus on sculpture. She has an M.Ed. in Arts Education and has been a longtime arts educator in Oregon public schools. She is currently the Portland Public Schools Academic Program Administrator for Visual & Performing Arts. Drake has been awarded the GLEAN residency, the Leland Ironworks Residency, and the Suttle Lodge Artist Residency, and has shown her work throughout the Pacific Northwest.



**Abbie Miller** is a textile artist who lives and works in Portland, Oregon. She has a sartorial background in pattern making, clothing construction, and sculpture. She is interested in the deconstruction of traditional sewing and patterning techniques to explore how embodied surfaces are produced and consumed. She holds a BFA from the University of Wyoming, a Post-Baccalaureate Certificate from Maryland Institute College of Art, 2005, and an MFA from Cranbrook Academy of Art, 2007. She has had solo exhibitions at the Missoula Art Museum, Nicolaysen Art Museum, and Teton Art Lab where she was an artist in residence for two years. Miller has been included in group shows throughout North America, including the Craft and Folk Art Museum, Reading Public Museum, Cranbrook Academy of Art Museum, Portland Art Museum and the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her sculptures are included in the permanent collections at the Portland Art Museum and the Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art. She was the recipient of 2013 Contemporary Northwest Artist Award, and a Metcalf Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Most recently she was included in the China and USA Technology and Innovation in Fiber Art Exhibition and in 2021, From Lausanne to Beijing Fiber Art Biennale. Abbie lives in the Pacific Northwest and works as a studio artist, educator, and stylist.



