Jennifer McGregor: How do the Palisades differ from the Southwestern rock formations that you have studied?

Paula Winokur: In the Southwest, there is a big vista, with a grand expanse. You can see for miles, and the geological formations are distant. The light is really bright. The works I created in response to those landscapes were smaller, like memories. By contrast, the effect of the Palisades is more subtle. The color of the stone is different, more subdued. I responded to the immediacy of walking right next to the stone, touching it, getting up close.

Scale is integral to your work. Can you talk about the scale of Palisades Pinnacle (Porcelain) in relation to the viewer’s body?

Scale is very important in this piece. Walking along the Palisades, I felt really small. Looking up at the pinnacle felt like soaring. So, with this piece I wanted to create a soaring feeling, to emphasize the verticality of the formations. Palisades Pinnacle is one of the larger-scale works that I have done. Earlier in my career, I started working larger by creating fireplace pieces and doorways. I liked the physicality of creating large pieces, of dealing with the wall. These larger pieces relate to the body. The viewer confronts the work physically and not just visually.

How did you zero in on the pinnacle?

I was intrigued by the pinnacle. Looking up, it’s so dramatic. The idea to capture the pinnacle came very quickly on my first visit. I realized immediately what I wanted to do and how I wanted to bring it inside. From across the river, the stone is so distant, that monumental pinnacle is barely visible. I wanted to bring it up close into the gallery, to present what visitors can only guess that they see from here.

Here, you have interpreted a remarkable section of the natural landscape in an indoor space. How did the room itself affect your approach?

This room provides an intimacy for the viewer to respond to something that isn’t exactly intimate. It offers the opportunity to transpose feelings I had, the connection to the stone itself, here in the gallery. I would like viewers to respond to the scale and want to touch the surface of the clay. Interestingly enough, my studio ceiling was too low for me to be able to view the piece before I installed it here. Since the clay shrinks during the firing, I could not be exactly sure of the scale ahead of time.