

# LET'S TALK ARTS

a series of interviews providing context &  
consideration to the arts in southeast missouri

## **An Interview with *Wild Things* Juror: Ruth Ann Reese**

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Ruth Ann Reese is known for her surreal porcelain sculptures where animal forms merge with human figures and flora grafts to fauna. From these fantastic beings, psychological questions concerning the nature of identity naturally emerge. At present, she is a studio artist living in St. Louis, MO and the founder of Reese Gallery, where she curates exhibitions of other emerging and mid-career artists. She graduated with her MFA in Sculpture from Washington University in St. Louis, where she used clay-dirt to create architectural installations. She has also been a Studio Assistant for Esther Shimazu at the Penland School of Crafts while exploring figurative sculpture and the nature of presence.

During a recent interview with Reese, she commented that the traditional notion of fine art and craft as distinct entities is not part of her ideology. She believes that "there really is no distinction between craft and fine arts. Clay, the medium in question, is malleable, sensual and alive as the earth itself. It has the ability to be representational, non-objective, design orientated or even functional. Clay is abundant under our feet and is as old as time itself. As an ancient material force, it helped define how we understand materiality." She goes on to say "the emerging MFA artist pursuing clay in their studio is walking a fine line between [the] two worlds... It takes years of investment and lots of expensive equipment to become proficient in clay. Clay needs a system of specialty studios, foundations, niche museums and galleries to support that - that is the craft world. To gain access to clay you must access the community – the craft community. On the other hand, these young emerging artists also may find themselves at a sort of contemporary art round-table with a variety of other mediums where they need to speak the language of the dominant contemporary art culture and where they must also contextualize their own work for the broader art world. However, we all are becoming more fluent in each-others 'worlds'."

Reese addresses a variety of topics in her work ranging from the whimsical to the terrifying. She imbues these issues into her ceramics by manipulating the proportion of her figures, which often changes them into monsters. She compares this transformation to the manner

in which the Mannerists and Baroque artists exaggerated the human figure. She often combines serious issues with fantasy in the same piece. She explains, "The work is whimsical, especially in form, but there are deeper (sometimes darker) under currents. At my best I hope I'm double coding. I enjoy looking at porcelain figurines that come out of the Baroque period. Arising from that aesthetic, there is exuberance, tension and exaggerated elegance. Somehow it fulfills my needs as an artist to take those Baroque and Mannerist conventions and make monsters out of them...My work explores concepts of divine femininity, which can be devouring, toothed and/or peaceful. In some cases, these are mother figurines, icons that consume individuality.

The process of making art can be daunting for both the professional practitioner and the student. According to Reese, there is an "anxiety of completion" that ceramicists face as they create their work. She states, "For me, ceramic sculpture is not a quick process like making functional ware. It's not really a direct process, either, like painting, drawing, [or] stone-sculpture. A piece must be tried by fire before you really know what the finished product will look like. For instance, an applied but unfired glaze doesn't look anything like it will after it comes out of the kiln. I might be applying what looks like a green toothpaste to my piece, which will (if all goes like planned) be a shiny cherry-red glaze when it comes out of the kiln. You have to learn to use your mind's eye and imagine how you might want it. Even all the consideration in world often leaves me stumped when I open a kiln. How did that happen, I wonder? However it's the thrill (the flip side of anxiety) that makes opening a kiln so wonderful. Long tentacles move in the firing, cracks open, colors change...but sometimes an unexpected miracle happens, too. So, mainly I've learned to do a lot of testing, pray to the kiln gods and hopefully detach a little bit!"

Reese's experience as a gallery owner and curator give an added dimension to her artistic vision. When choosing artists for her gallery she considers the relationships between the work of various artists and how they speak to each other within the gallery space. She is also interested in a unique vision that strays from traditional ways of seeing. When asked about her thought process when choosing works for her gallery she commented, "When I organize an exhibition at Reese Gallery I'm thinking of two artists that will pair well. When their work comes together, I hope that a dialogue emerges. It's very interesting me, at this point in my life, to hear the visual conversation between two concentrated bodies of work. In a group show, there are lots of individual voices. I'm listening for the voices that stay true to themselves, that are focused and driven... I often think that the artists chosen will bring their communities and provide the audience. In a sense the audience is an extension of the artwork chosen."

When choosing work as a juror for exhibitions outside of her community, Reese applies her ideas concerning the integration of fine art and craft to her decision making process. She is hopeful that small communities will benefit from exposure to non-traditional subject

matter. According to Reese, as a result of their experience “more people will be bold and create art which gives meaning and context to their own lives. With exhibitions like this, people can take that next step and collect an art-object. People will feel more interested and comfortable going to a museum, art fairs and galleries. Perhaps they will grow a curiosity about artwork - not simply for being decorative - but because every object carries meaning and knowledge. If I want to be close to a certain line of questions, [or] a certain knowledge, I collect that item. If you collect something, you become interested in its background and it’s art history, its greater framework. Eventually, our culture becomes more aesthetically literate – and that’s because of each and every exhibition.

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The *Wild Things* Exhibition will be on view at the Arts Council of Southeast Missouri from June 5-27. The opening reception will take place on June 5 from 5-9 pm with awards announced at 6 pm.

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