

LET'S TALK ARTS

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

A Question & Answer Session with *Wild Things* Juror: Ruth Ann Reese

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JH: One issue that you speak about is the division between craft and fine art. You said in an interview that ceramics is making its way out of the realm of craft and is reinventing itself. How do you see that manifesting in the work of younger artists?

RR: For the artist young at heart, 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.

However, that being said... the emerging MFA artist pursuing clay in their studio is walking a fine line between two worlds. That line was drawn in the sand by *New York Times*, art critic Roberta Smith when she made the distinction between "art world, as opposed to ceramics world, ceramics." These emerging artists have one foot in the legacy/tradition of ceramics - which has promoted and archived clay learning. 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". Think Theastor Gates – clay artist gone contemporary. Or, maybe Julie Green or Sterling Ruby who crossover from the contemporary world and into clay. I might mention, John Mason, who exhibited "ceramics world, ceramics" at the Whitney Biennial 2014. In Missouri, I think of artists like Gin O'Keefe, Arnie Nadler, Phil Finder, Kahlil Irving and Erica Iman. These artists have created

clay work with real agility and sensitivity to both traditions and trajectories. They have taken risks that not everyone will like and are aware of their simultaneous and yet very different audiences as they commit to a body of work. Today, young artists have to be fluent in both cultures. Nevertheless, I still think clay will surpass these momentary delineations (between craft and fine art) in surprising ways for eons to come.

Now that's not to say that I don't think functional work is simply craft (whatever that slippery word means!) For one, functional work offers a counter-narrative to the shapes and forms of mass production found in big box stores. For me, dishes from most store shelves have an overly produced cookie cutter moment that is ultimately very de-humanizing. It's a restorative/healing act to make a cup or bowl and then to use it. That may not be philosophy or contemporary art - but it's a vital, rebellious act in such a commercial environment as what we live in.

JH: There is a lot of whimsy in your work, even though some of your pieces address serious issues. How do you reconcile the fantastic elements in your work with these themes?

RR: I hope that my work can connect with people on a variety of levels. I'd like to draw people in with voluptuous forms and at the same time give the more sophisticated viewer something to consider. 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. Most of these monsters are female and allude to an evasive archetype: the monstrous feminine as discussed by Kristeva, Lacan and Freud in psychoanalytic criticism. My work explores concepts of divine femininity which can be devouring, toothed and/or peaceful. In some cases, these are mother figurines, icons that consumes individuality. These figurines are often a way to make peace with death, with ones changing identity, with the idea that we are one yet separate. I'm allowed to work out the psychological content of these ideas, as does the viewer and culture at large. However, we don't have to talk about these ideas directly - that's a little too scary - even for me. Instead, I make whimsical monsters out porcelain, that mimic the gallantry and coquetry of Meissen figurines. Even though these are difficult and hard-to-pin-down topics, I think the culture is relieved to engage in them - even if these ideas aren't acknowledge directly. Terms that help me get a hold of the work are manifest content, mythology, psychoanalysis and fantasy.

JH: How does your undergraduate degree in English literature influence your art?

RR: The English degree gives me a rich sense of metaphor, poetry and trajectory of narrative. Reading stories, plays and novels still gives me an interest in characters and even absent protagonists. I like to think of my work as representing absent or hidden protagonist.

JH: In a promotional video for the exhibition, "Feat of Clay" at the PHD Gallery in St. Louis, which you curated, you spoke about the "anxiety of completion" that ceramicists face. How does this anxiety affect your work?

RR: For me, ceramic sculpture is not a quick process like making functional ware. It's not really a direct process, either, like painting, drawing, 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!

JH: How does your approach to selecting work for the Reese Gallery compare to selecting work as a juror for another location and audience?

RR: 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. Even as I'm looking for strong compositions, I'm also looking for clarity of intent – which can be intuitive! It's true, I'm also captivated by pieces that are essentially outside of artistic clichés offering new viewpoints. Sometimes, the quietude of piece speaks volumes. 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.

JH: How can shows, such as “Wild Things” at the Southeast Missouri Arts Council inform the public of issues in contemporary art? Do you think that these types of shows, which are sometimes conservative in their offerings, perpetuate the divide between craft and fine art?

RR: I don't think so – I'm going to be glass half full here! Because of this exhibition, more people are going to see more art. The more art we see, the more subtle our understanding will become. Hopefully, by seeing this exhibit, 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 museums, 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, a certain knowledge, I collect that item. If you collect something, you become interested in its background and it's art history, it greater framework. Eventually, our culture becomes more aesthetically literate – and that's because of each and every exhibition.

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 with awards announced at 6.

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For more details on the *Wild Things*, please visit: www.capearts.org/WildThings.aspx