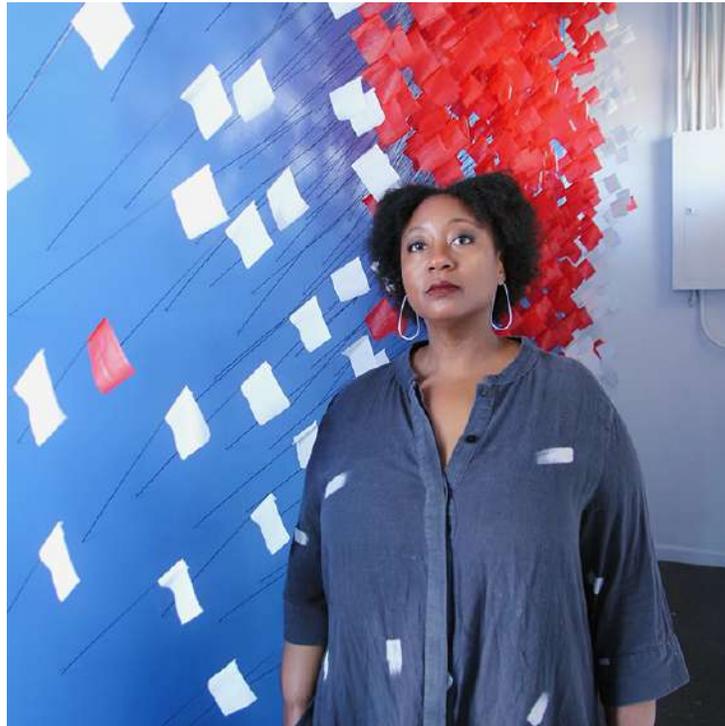


SHOW UP: TAMMIE RUBIN AT BIG MEDIUM

Casey Gregory
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Tammie Rubin; photo courtesy of the artist.

When I caught up with artist, professor, and 2022 Tito's Art Prize winner Tammie Rubin, she was deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains, about to begin her second session at the Penland Artist Residency. Rubin had just come off a busy Fall, with exhibitions at Austin's Gray Duck Gallery and Dallas's Galleri Urbane and was busy preparing "body-sized" ceramic sculptures for her upcoming exhibition at Austin's Big Medium. The show, which runs from March 17 through April 29, is the culminating event of the Tito's Prize, and the artist is using it as a chance to go big.



Tammie Rubin, *Cheer*, 2022. Pigmented porcelain, underglaze, glaze, 6.5" x 14.5"

Despite this clamorous schedule, Rubin sounded relaxed, in that enviable state of creativity that residencies like Penland provide as fully resourced laboratories for all things creative. “My first two weeks were in ceramics,” she says, with a second session in wood. “Being in the studio with furniture makers, the way they approach their craft,” she says, “it’s opening up my vernacular.” It feels good to “have that part of your brain turned back on,” she says. “Great things come from uncertainty.”

Rubin is talking about her own experience, but it might as well be a motto for her work as a whole. This “slippage between contexts,” as she calls it, is what makes her sculptures so compelling. Her signature *Always & Forever (forever, ever)* ceramic series, mostly conical ceramic forms with slit openings that appear to be like eyes, can be interpreted as KKK hoods, medieval European religious pageantry, dunce caps, or mystical funnels to other worlds. They are equal parts menacing and cute, grouped in clusters that encourage the viewer to search for comparisons and disparities. Some are recognizable as cast forms, repurposed from items one might find in their garage, while others appear more stylized. “Familiarity is a way to open the door for people to enter,” Rubin says. There’s “something innate within us that overlaps. There’s this resonance, a shared visual language through objects.”



Tammie Rubin, *Always & Forever (forever, ever) No. 12*, 2022. Pigmented porcelain, underglaze, glaze, 12" x 10.5" x 9"

If objects are a shared visual language in Rubin's mind, color is more like a finely cultivated accent. Blue is a common theme, "I'm thinking about spirituality. It resonates and vibrates," she says. "It's a familiar place to inhabit." But it also pulls the work of other artists into the conversation. "Yves Klein talked about the blue as an actual plane of existence," Rubin says. "It's in the conversation with other artists, it's the blue in jazz music." But like an accent, the viewer shouldn't confuse it with the substance of what Rubin is saying. "I'm not trying to hide or disassociate with ceramics and all of its complicated history and hierarchies in the art world," she says. "Because I'm using porcelain specifically, I was trying to think of the material in its purest form...the color of the clay, physically scratching through the surface so you can see the white or red through it. It's got a lot of grog, kind of glitter. I'm thinking about the contrast."

Rubin's dimensional drawings are scored into the otherwise smooth walls of the sculptures. Including maps, migration routes, and familial narratives, Rubin layers information and wisdom from Black history and from her family's own experiences, tying broader themes to personal ones. Investing hours in these intricate patterns also connotes a respect and tradition for Black women's labor. She says, "My last aunt passed away in the fall of 2020. I was attending all these funerals. It made me think about their experiences in relation to myself. The choices that I was able to make that they couldn't. Black women work, they have jobs. Even my aunts that didn't work outside the home, they did these things with their hands. I come from this tradition of women who work with their hands."

This practice of building and processing in three dimensions is innate. Unlike many artists who begin in their youth with drawing tools and paper, Rubin says she is first and foremost a sculptor. “I started with 3D, that’s the place I feel most comfortable,” she explains. For the first time, she has started to exhibit flat plotted drawings on the wall, admittedly a very sculptural solution to the problem of two dimensions. “The machine is imperfect, just like your hand is imperfect,” she says. “In my sculpture, I can’t leave a lot of things to chance. I’m always trying to find ways to experiment and expand my practice.” Printmaking may also be finding its way into Rubin’s oeuvre. “Monotypes are appealing. It’s very physical.”

Continual artistic experimentation and resistance to categorization is part of what makes Rubin’s work so exciting. She’s creating an iconography of loose associations and disparate imagery that somehow gels into a very specific signature style. She imagines the large forms of the Big Medium exhibition catching the passerby’s eye. “Even if you’re not going in, it becomes this other realm.”

<http://artsandculturetx.com/show-up-tammie-rubin-at-big-medium/>