

Q+A WITH TAMMIE RUBIN

Rebecca Marino
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Originally from Chicago, Tammie Rubin is a visual artist living and working in Austin by way of Seattle. She is an assistant professor of sculpture and ceramics at St. Edward's University, one of the newest member of ICOSA Collective and was recently selected as one of Dimension Gallery's 2019/2020 fellowship artists. Her solo exhibition at Women and Their Work opens in November and her performance *This is Everything* debuts in Cage Match Project (Round VIII) on Friday, July 27.



Tammie Rubin, *Family Unit - 1 from He is Gone*, slip-cast and handbuilt ceramics, underglaze, glaze

Rebecca Marino: Tactility comes up quite a bit when talking about your work; why do you think it plays such a critical role? Do you think that role is inherent to a medium like ceramics?

Tammie Rubin: My practice can only happen with the direct engagement with materials in the studio. I've only been gratified by working in three dimensions. While I use other materials, ceramics is central. You can't separate touch from the process of working with ceramics. I can utilize ceramics in many ways; as a liquid, a slip, a solid, the material can be made into a paste, extruded, whipped, cast, and drawn with like ink. As I examine the spaces between the handmade and readymade object, "handedness" becomes an essential element in the work. Sculptures are meticulously layered with extruded clay creating surfaces of bulbous dots, spikes, drips, piping, beads, incised and sgraffito lines, inlay, stipples, and pits. The tactile surfaces are used to both accentuate and obscure, encouraging an intimate experience where I pull in the viewer to immerse in sumptuous exteriors and sensual possibilities. This triggers an instinctive desire to touch, to stroke, and a sense of dissatisfaction and longing once that action is denied. I believe the desire for sensory experiences, and feelings of dissatisfaction, mirrors a longing often felt in our consumer society.

RM: You mention examining the spaces between the readymade and handmade object; what draws you to certain objects and compels you to recreate them?

TR: As many artists are, I am a bit of a collector. As a born-and-bred city kid, I have always been attracted to the man-made objects that form the urban environment. I collect mass-produced items, both new and old and often with volumetric forms that strike me, that fascinate me, objects that often are familiar, trivial, and yet fulfill some sort of allegorical ideas I'm contemplating.



Tammie Rubin, *Always & Forever (forever ever ever) No. 1*, slipcast & handbuilt porcelain, underglaze, pigmented clay

I explore the form and function of such objects, reimagining how they might be used, or contemplating how their forms, separated from their function, suggest new ideas. I recreate selected objects in porcelain, highlighting their mundane as well as their obscure qualities. My porcelain casts become more precious and more fragile than the original objects, many of which are cheap and disposable. I use porcelain to amplify the suggestive qualities of the original objects, and I assemble various reproduced objects into finished sculptures. Porcelain is itself a medium often associated with functional objects, but I loosen the ties of both porcelain and the original objects to functionality, opening up a dream-like space of unexpected associations and dislocations.

RM: The cone shape is prevalent in almost all your bodies of work; can you talk a little bit about your fascination with this particular form and how that fascination has evolved or changed?

TR: The simple conical form first became the basis for my sculptural assemblages in the *exhibition He Is Gone, Imagined Contraptions for Last Communications* (2009), in which I imagined contraptions or mystic mechanisms for communicating beyond this world. The cone attracted me because it is often used for channeling, transmitting, or filtering, as, for example, in early telephones called speaking tubes or voicepipes, or in megaphones, gramophones, and satellite dishes. I was also interested in the cone's many other associations, with such things as dunce caps, traffic cones, and steeples. My sculptures played with the form's connotations, introducing what I call magical thinking, or an ability to cross over between different registers of thought, so that a form can metamorphose from, say, a commodity to a religious object, to an anthropomorphized object. I attempt to incorporate the range of associations that a form carries. For example, the dunce cap denotes idiocy, but for the followers of the philosopher John Duns Scotus it was a mark of their allegiance to his teachings. The Dunsmen believed that the hat directed knowledge down to the wearer. In the painting of Hieronymus Bosch, and the movie and original drawings for "The Wonderful Wizard of Oz," the same hat is used as a sign of madness or folly. In the auto-da-fé of the Spanish Inquisition, apostates and heretics were forced to wear the same hat as they were tried or paraded around in public. In my current work the cone forms more directly reference the processional capirotas worn by the brotherhood of the Nazarenes, the hoods of the Ku Klux Klan, the cultural images of wizards, shamanistic headdresses, and Mardi Gras parade participants. The common denominator is the utilization of costuming as a means of pageantry, uniformity, concealment, ritual, and power. I am not interested in a single invention; rather, I am interested in how forms, abstracted from any particular use of them, allow the mind to wander freely over a range of associations, to skip magically between different categories of experience.



Tammie Rubin, *Always & Forever (forever ever ever) No.1*, slipcast & handbuilt porcelain, underglaze, pigmented clay

RM: You've mentioned you make chimerical forms; could you explain what that is for our readers and how it connects to myth-making in your work?

TR: The original definition of *chimera* is a Greek, fire-breathing female monster with the head of a lion, the body of a goat, and the tail of a serpent. It can also mean any mythical creature made from various animals. But my favorite definition of *chimera* is "a thing that is wished for or hoped for but is in fact illusory." In earlier bodies of work, I often cast many industrially made and domestic objects, then, through a process of deconstruction and assemblage, built hybrid sculptures. The sculptures were not the original objects, nor did they retain any functions of those forms. Each sculpture contained familiar parts but created a new possibility.

RM: You've got a show coming up at Women and Their Work in November; can you reveal some of the ideas behind this exhibition and how it fits in to the trajectory of your work?

TR: I have a solo exhibition at Women and Their Work in November and a group exhibition at Dimension Gallery in October. Anyone who has seen my work will find some of the sculptural elements familiar, yet there are different tangents to this body of work. For instance, I am using a specific natural object as an allegorical reference: ball moss. As I walk around the campus at St. Edward's University where I teach, I see trees covered in these air plants. It's the first time I've lived in a place with ball moss, and at first I thought these were parasites, taking over the tree, which it would eventually kill. There seemed to be more accumulations on trees that are obviously sick. But no, the ball moss is not killing the trees; it thrives on trees already dying. This hit me as an intriguing emblem for what's happening today. There is a segment of the population that is constantly surprised by the racist, misogynistic, xenophobic, and homophobic rants, actions, and acts of violence happening daily. There is a belief that an outside force has spurred these displays, while I posit that these views were always there. The tree was already sick. I'm dipping ball moss and other organic materials into porcelain slip and firing the work so that the original is burned away and a shell of that material remains. These remains are assemblages for my sculptures. I'm also delving into historic and symbolic forms that reference animism, ritual, domestic, and liturgical objects. Relying on informed intuition and process, I am continuing to transform the familiar and trivial into the mythic and fantastical.

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RM: Congrats on being one of the newest members of ICOSA! Have you ever been in an artist collective or co-op before? Anything in particular that you look forward to as a member of this group?

TR: Thanks! No, I've never been in an artist collective before, and I'm thrilled to engage with the other artists. There was a time where I was living in a small college town, and I found it so isolating as a visual artist. I vowed I'd never let that kind of isolation happen again. I want to use my time in the collective reaching out and collaborating with other makers outside of the artists I know. There are so many clusters of artists in the Austin area that never overlap, and I'm interested in creating platforms and dialogues in those in-between spaces.

RM: What do you enjoy listening to when you're working in the studio?

TR: I'm an avid listener of music, podcasts, and audiobooks. What I have been listening to this month:

Musicians on my playlists: Meshell Ndegeocello, Beach House, The Carters, & Lizzo.

Podcasts: The Black Guy Who Tips, Caliphate, el Puente, The Frame, Blessed Be the Fruit Salad.

Audiobooks: *Who Fears Death* by Nnedi Okorafor, *What We Lose: A Novel* by Zinzi Clemmons, *The Hate u Give* by Angie Thomas.

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