

Austin Embraces Ceramicist and Educator Tammie Rubin

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Tammie Rubin

For Tammie Rubin, ceramic is an extremely generative material. The artist uses clay to produce sculpture – and installation-based work that examines social legacies in relation to visual culture. "Ceramics is such a process-based medium, and it has a long history," said Rubin. "I constantly feel like, throughout my life, there will always be more things to learn about it, experiment with, and be able to stretch conceptually and materially."

As this year's winner of the annual Tito's Prize, Rubin gets a \$15,000 stipend and the opportunity to produce a solo exhibition to be held at Big Medium gallery next spring. Rubin celebrated the unique nature of the prize, which is presented by Austin-based Tito's Vodka and Big Medium, a local nonprofit dedicated to sustaining Austin's artists and creative infrastructure. Chicago-raised Rubin said winning the award is "such an honor" and "really exemplifies what has been special to me about moving to Austin."

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Rubin's work forms linkages between the ritual and functional nature of everyday items, often underscoring moments where their mythical and practical uses overlap. Growing up in parochial school, the sculptor was always fascinated by the way in which objects like chalices, mosaics, and candleholders aided in the performance of sacred ceremonies. "There's so much magical thinking in objects that we have within our lives, whether they be wishful objects or religious objects," Rubin explains. "We're always kind of infusing these forms with meaning and giving them power through belief."

While Rubin spent time as a child attentively observing the sculptures at Chicago's Art Institute and the Field Museum, and though she had many family members who engaged in creative labor, she did not initially see art as a career path. "I was surrounded by people who made, but they didn't necessarily call themselves artists," Rubin reflects. "I had aunts who made quilts, and there are people in the family who made jewelry, but it wasn't until college that I really could see [making art] as a life."

Rubin now works as a professor of ceramics at St. Edward's University, and she describes her roles as an artist and an educator as "very much fused." Recalling her time as an undergraduate, she said, "Higher education was so important and meaningful to me, and it was a place where I felt open to be curious, but it was also a place where I did not see myself represented. I'd never had a Black female professor in ceramics; I'd never had a Black professor in ceramics. ... I want to be the presence for a student that I did not have in my own experience."

Part of Rubin's ethic as a maker includes active participation in Austin's art community. "When I moved to Austin and I saw that there were these opportunities to volunteer, engage, collaborate with other artists, and show here, I just threw myself in." Rubin is a founding member of Black Mountain Project, an initiative that, according to their website, "aims to activate unexpected points of encounter while expanding perceptions of identity, community, and practice." She is also involved with ICOSA, an artist-run programming and exhibition space, and Art in Public Places, the city of Austin department dedicated to the production and promotion of public art.

For her upcoming exhibition at Big Medium, Rubin said she plans to "use the gallery as a laboratory." She hopes the show will offer "a place of immersion with the work, conversation, and development" and aims to use the support afforded by the Tito's Prize to facilitate collaborations while expanding and experimenting with her ceramics practice. Though some artists may be satisfied working isolated in their studio, Rubin said, "For me, I need to be a part of a larger organism. I found Austin is a place where you can do that."

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