



Stone Zombies and Lonely Child Gods

Artist Rhonda Gushee discusses her unique visions

MATT MORRIS // SEP 19, 2007

artist. Its frequent public appearances suggest that Gushee's art holds an important key to our community's visual aesthetic.

I stopped by Gushee's studio with the hopes of articulating our corporate attraction to her art. The space is like a time-wizened counterpart to a girl's playroom, with rows of faces and hand-sewn dresses to correspond with every possible outlook on life.

"I was a child with dolls and toys, with a sister who had dolls and toys," she says. "And I had four girls."

Each small person that Gushee builds is a composite of arms, legs, heads and torsos that she casts from doll parts of all different sizes. Most of her recent work is raku fired clay, with bodies blackened by the firing process that contrast patches of glossy color. A crackle in the special glazes used in raku makes details on the faces, hands and feet appear partially shattered. Some of the figures are dressed up in fabric or fur that harkens back to her earlier work, when dolls and toys were mummified in vintage cloth and sutured like a wound.

Occasionally they are outfitted with sound boxes and moving parts taken from toys; when squeezed, the ashen characters belt out eerie songs, prayers or giggles. Each piece (or small series of pieces) has a pedestal or stand designed specifically for it, offering the viewer a very "finished and polished" set of objects. But the objects are mysterious enough to beg questions about the tales they might symbolize.



Gushee's take on the world transforms real-life characters into stone zombies and lonely child gods. The faux-aging, broken edges, vacant expressions and pale gray "skin" on the sculptures make them ideal receptacles for all the projections viewers can cast on them. Like dolls used in therapy sessions, each figure can be possessed with the ghosts of sick parents, abortions, ex-husbands or whoever else a viewer is forced to recall. They open people up to their regrets and the bittersweet confrontations that make up existence. A confluence of her art and the viewer's content amounts to a fictional ghost story that retells actual events.

"Everyone sees themselves fictionalized anyway," Gushee says with resignation. "You can't escape putting part of yourself in their somewhere."

Like the old black-and-white vampire movies that came up in our conversations, she says, "The worst that can happen is in your imagination."

As life happens to her, she is withdrawn, filing away happenings, promising, "I'll react later."

And so she does. She is not unlike her patchwork people, salvaging pieces of the different lives she's lived and the role shifts in relationships she's weathered. I notice that while the childhood memories of her parents that are mentioned aren't particularly good ones, the time she shared with her father leading up to his death was loving and intense.

"As my dad was dying," Gushee tells me, "some of the blood treatments caused his feet to swell up into these big pink balloons."

Likewise, many of her figures have enlarged feet or elongated arms. It was a revelation that the deformities in the characters are directly reactionary to her life experiences. In her sculpture she assembles all the messy parts of a person's experience — the sweet, pretty baubles and the fractured, troubling shards as well.

As appealing as Gushee's art is to curators and collectors, in some cases the public reacts strongly to its provocative tone. *CityBeat* reported (issue of Oct. 19, 2005) on the censorship of her installation *Friends Forever* from the exhibition *Shape, Form, Texture and Color* in University Hall on UC's campus.

"I was told that it was objectionable nudity, and that it looked like it had been burned," Gushee explained, following with a sigh of pointed irony, since clay is essentially burned in the raku firing process.

Local art prophet Mason Paul (who founded SYN GALLERY on Central Avenue in Brighton) has been a longtime admirer and follower of Gushee's work, appreciating the unexpected parts to which others object.

"I consider her a master," Paul says. "And yet she's working with that edge. Her skill level is so high; she's able to put art we're not used to seeing in front of people."

And certainly, anyone who is familiar with Gushee's work has discover a trove of not only sculpture, but also sewing and printmaking, all highly crafted and mirroring a world we know, but with an added "edginess."

RHONDA GUSHEE's work will appear as part of Tha Blast celebration (6-10 p.m. Friday and 4-8 p.m. Saturday) at Base Gallery (1225 Main St., Downtown).

<https://www.citybeat.com/arts-culture/visual-arts/article/13025518/art-stone-zombies-and-child-gods>