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Celeste Berteau

Cathy Rose

To enter the New Orleans studio of sculptor Cathy Rose is to enter a sanctum where magic happens. The magician is of course the artist, and the products of her magic, in various stages of creation, pull the fortunate visitor into their private world. Enchanting figures invite us to share the secrets of their journeys from conception to completion, and though the journeys are long, they are guided by self-less devotion, extreme care, and extraordinary talent.

Rose employs a variety of materials to create her sculptures, with porcelain, wood, and metals being predominate. The 1700 square-foot studio is articulately organized to accommodate each step of a sculpture's creation, as well as to store in plain sight the hundreds, if not thousands, of found objects and pieces and parts the artist has collected over nearly twenty years.

Growing up in central Florida, Rose had no other ambition than to share her passion for art with others. With a Bachelors degree in fine art and a Masters degree in art education, she taught art to elementary school students, as well as college students for fourteen years. Having specialized in drawing throughout her own fine arts education, she found herself lured to the medium of ceramics in 1992. And in 1993 she discovered the specific ceramic medium that interested her most. It was the type of clay called porcelain.

"It has a temperament," Rose says of porcelain. "It fights me and shrinks in the kiln, but it's so smooth it's like working with cream cheese."

In 1996, after three years of creating porcelain mixed-media sculptures, Rose began to exhibit her work outside of Florida. Her first two shows proved to be notably successful. At this point Rose recognized what she was meant to do, and asked for a leave of absence from her teaching position. Despite her love of teaching, she has devoted herself fulltime to creating fine art ever since.

In Rose's studio, eying items like a miniature metal cart and pieces of ornamental wooden molding, one cannot help but ask again and again, "Where did you find this?" and if the answer is not, "At an architectural salvage shop," it will most likely be, "A second-hand store." A particularly attractive iron grate had been reclaimed from a house in Kansas, and an unusually large set of springs had once resided within the seat of a Ford Model T. Over the years Rose has become known to owners of salvage yards from New Orleans to Memphis to Kansas City, who routinely save items they believe may interest her.

Rose has set up her spacious studio to accommodate every stage of her creative process, from minute drawings rendered in a miniature sketchbook, to forming the figures in clay (no molds or castings are ever utilized), to then firing up to thirty pieces in her onsite kiln, where the porcelain transforms from the clay form to something more like glass. It can take Rose up to six weeks to load her kiln, as the porcelain pieces are much too fragile to handle once they have dried. When the firing is completed the artist stains the faces of the figures using both acrylic and oil paint. Then it is time for "piecing the puzzle together," as Rose refers to the operation of assembling the sculptures. The materials she uses are chosen from the plethora of architectural elements, and numerous pieces of wood in various sizes, but also from baskets and boxes filled with porcelain hands and heads. Copper wires that will be transformed into flowing tresses atop the heads of Rose's charming characters are abundant, and swatches of leather and fabric are on view, along with antique toys.

The studio reminds one of an enchanted workshop, the type that could be manned by a troupe of elves, but Rose employs no assistants. When viewing Rose's work it is apparent that in addition to her aptitude for drawing and clay sculpting, she is also a gifted woodworker, metal smith, and seamstress.

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It is fitting that this artist whose work often represents the theme of rebirth has chosen New Orleans as her home, a city still laboring to fully rebuild after the devastation induced by post Hurricane Katrina flooding in 2005.

Rose says she has loved New Orleans from the first time she visited. She finds it to be “a city with a heart and a soul,” and she continues to admire the “passion of the people.” New Orleanians are indeed a passionate citizenry. They have a well-known passion for food, as well as for great art and great music. They also have deep affection for history and preservation. Although much of New Orleans’ historic architecture has been lost over the years, vestiges of these buildings and homes still exist in Rose’s sculptures.

One may encounter trees sprouting from a piece of a cypress shutter that once protected the window of a nineteenth century shotgun house, or find a section of a newel post from a Creole cottage serving as a base for a boat and its passenger. A portion of what was once a mantel in an Italianate camelback home carries on in the 21st century in the form of a horse’s body.

Like many artists, Cathy Rose creates works which are highly personal, a sort of “emotional journaling,” Rose says, yet the pieces represent ideas and emotions which everyone who beholds them can relate to. At some point in our lives we will all suffer great loss, then experience the need to recover from it—we will struggle to move forward, yet we will always remember. We are reminded of the importance of having patience. And that there is always hope.

Included in this exhibition are eloquent examples of sculptures which have already touched the hearts of admirers, not the least of which is *Your Presence, Still*. In this piece the artist has placed a solid porcelain figure upon a wood-patterned grate. Small porcelain tiles rest inside of every opening of the grate, representing the momentary thoughts and memories that run through the artist’s mind every day. When an acquaintance of Rose’s, another artist whose son had passed away, encountered this piece, she understood it without explanation. That is the power of true art.

In *Letting Go* the figure is on a journey. She is indeed letting go and moving forward. The figure’s pensive face conveys her resolve, yet we may wonder if the exceedingly fine strands of copper wire which attach the figure to the boat, are attempting to hold her back, or are in fact, holding her steady and keeping her on course.

To create the powerful, glass-encased *Cicada*, Rose has incorporated another figure of solid porcelain fitted with the preserved wings of a cicada. A fragile piece to assemble, the artist

coated the wings in resin, attached brass wire along the edges of the wings, then sewed thin copper thread along the wire to stabilize the wings. For Rose, the piece represents transition, rebirth, and our ability to reinvent ourselves.

The first of a new series, *New Skin* is open to interpretation, but some may find it symbolic of joy and freedom. The figure is in motion, and although it is constructed of wood and leather, it could conjure up lightheartedness. It could also represent rebirth, since the white leather covering the wooden armature was once an antique doll. After Rose fitted the leather shapes to the torso of the figure, she glued and nailed them in place. Rose says she found the creation of *New Skin*, particularly the “methodical tapping of nails into leather and wood and the textures it creates,” to be “a soothing form of meditation.”

There is a peaceful quality about the sculptures of Cathy Rose that invites the viewer to enter an almost meditative state as well. The figures draw us into their world and we accompany them on their journeys, whether they are into the past via memory, or into the future aboard boats or astride horses. The figures, mysterious at first and somewhat otherworldly in appearance, upon closer inspection, reveal themselves to be all of us. That’s the magic of the art of Cathy Rose.