

austin monthly

MEET TAMMIE RUBIN, THE ARTIST WHO WON THIS YEAR'S "TITO'S PRIZE"

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April 27, 2022



Photo by Whitney Devin.

Earlier this month, Tammie Rubin, associate professor of ceramics & sculpture at St. Edward's University, was awarded the fifth annual Tito's Prize. Given to local artists with exceptional skill and talent, the award shines a light on Austin-based creatives through a generous check (\$15,000) and a solo showcase at Big Medium Gallery. Naturally, competition is steep. However, one look at Rubin's dynamic ceramic pieces—which are rooted in history, identity, and magical thinking—and it's easy to see why she came out on top. We were lucky enough to chat with her about her art form, what this award means to her, and her biggest piece of advice to those just starting on their creative journey.



How is ceramics different from other art forms, and why did you choose that to be your specialty?

Ceramics is a very process-based art medium. There is always more to learn and it can be incredibly humbling as a medium. As an undergrad I was taking all of these art classes as an elective and the ceramics studio was the place where I saw real exchange and community happening. Everyone was generous with information and there were open exchanges between the professor, the undergrad students, and the graduate students. The professor, Ron Kovatch (a friend and mentor still), opened his studio to students and talked about his practice. It was the first time I understood what an artist's life could be. That's the long answer. The short one: I caught the ceramics bug. It happens.

As part of the Tito's Prize, you'll be awarded \$15,000. How do you plan to spend that money?

What an honor being awarded the 2022 Tito's Prize. I'm genuinely grateful for the selection and animated by the support and expansion this award will provide. My sculptural practice is dependent on tools, materials, studio space, equipment, and all the many expenses that come up as an artist. This financial support is tremendous in that regard. I look forward to experimenting and creating new work for the exhibition at Big Medium Gallery.

Speaking of the solo exhibit in the Big Medium Gallery early next year, are you working on new pieces that will be part of that show, or will it be comprised of pieces from your previous collections? (In other words: can you give us a hint of what to expect?)

The Big Medium Gallery is a space I know well, so I am looking forward to playing within the space. With the Spring 2023 exhibition I wish to use the gallery as a laboratory, a place of conversation, development, and possible collaboration. I want immersion and transformation. I hope that piques your curiosity.

Many of your pieces include cone-shaped figures—why is this shape significant for you?

The cones are all cast of everyday objects such as funnels, safety cones, vintage lighting, and food containers. Yet when these recognizable objects are composed as sculpture they take on a myriad of associations and meanings. In the *Al/ways & Forever (Forever, ever) Series*, the cones freed from their original functional now reference objects of power, fraternity, anonymity, absurdity, and belief. From the Ku Klux Klan and the Catholic Brothers of the Nazarene hoods, dunce caps, images of wizards and witches, to West African headdresses, medieval helmets, and the cone-wearing figures in Hieronymus Bosch paintings, these intimate ensembles are suspended within familiarity, uncertainty, and foreboding. The common denominator is the utilization of costuming as means of pageantry, uniformity, concealment, ritual, and power. In other bodies of work, the cones become these sculptural contraptions for unseen communication. I am fascinated with how objects, divorced from function, allow the mind to wander freely over a range of associations, to skip magically between different categories of experience, opening up dream-like spaces of unexpected associations and dislocations.

What inspired you to co-create Black Mountain Project, and what do you think the art platform is doing for our community?

Conversations and friendship. Betelhem Makonnen, Adrian Aguilera and I had these conversations about art, approaches to practice and how to create spaces for encounters. Black Mountain Project is a formal way for us to embark upon interdisciplinary programming that creates communal experiences and encourages intimate exchanges. When we are excited about a new idea we collaborate to put it out into the world. We are currently in partnership with Fusebox and curator Michael Anthony Garcia for “It’s NOT” Fair for the visual arts programming taking place at the Fusebox Hub. BMP is sponsoring the amazing artist hiba ali, a new media artist, educator, scholar, DJ, experimental music producer and curator. I think it is for others to decide how our projects contribute to the Austin community.

If you weren’t making art, what would you be doing?

I feel incredibly fortunate to have found my calling as a sculptor. I was able to complete a degree in my areas of study, pursue and develop as a professional and have an established career. I’m not taking that for granted with speculative scenarios.

Can you list five of your biggest inspirations?

The lineage of my family as Black Americans. Black women artists of the Harlem Renaissance. Literature. Music. Travel.

What is the biggest piece of advice you give your students?

As an artist, all your answers are in the studio. The biggest challenge early artists face is establishing a consistent and sustainable practice. Self-direction, time, and curiosity are needed. Try to eliminate time thieves: any elements that don't serve your life as an artist.

<https://www.austinmonthly.com/meet-tammie-rubin-the-artist-who-won-this-years-titos-prize/>