

## **IN HER TITO'S PRIZE EXHIBITION, TAMMIE RUBIN EXPLORES MIGRATION, ESCAPE, AND FAITH**

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Tammie Rubin's solo exhibitions 'I am at my best when I'm escaping' at Big Medium. Photo by Héctor Martínez.

The 2022 Tito's Prize exhibition "I am at my best when I'm escaping" by Tammie Rubin at Big Medium includes murals, drawings, conical sculptures, and ready-mades unified by a dominant shade of blue. But beyond color, the works are connected through a series of recurring symbols that Rubin uses to explore power, spirituality, and navigation in the United States.



In the foreground, Tammie Rubin's "Unknown Ritual Mask" (2023), stoneware, underglaze. Photo by Héctor Martínez.

One of the routes of escape the exhibition's title alludes to is the Underground Railroad. Three large monochrome murals — "Flying Geese" (2023), "Crossroads" (2023), and "North Star" (2023) — use geometric patterns drawn from quilts that, according to legend, guided escaping slaves to safety through coded messages. In Rubin's variations on these symbols of Black freedom, blue and white stake flags — reminiscent of semaphore flags — stick out from the center of one mural, "Crossroads." Rubin's flags suggest another way of sending coded messages, but also point viewers back to the land in which they are traditionally staked, where they demarcate hazards and boundaries.

The flags appear in another mural, "Portals," which is a map of the U.S. Interstate Highway System. Positioned next to the Underground Railroad quilt pattern murals, "Portals" presents roads as a means of escape. When other maps appear throughout the exhibit, they carry this potential while also suggesting the impermanence of place, as people are pushed out of their homes or communities.

More subtly, maps appear on many of the ceramic cones in the exhibition. These maps are carved into the ceramic cones' glaze and composed of textured dots that emphasize roads, topography, and other features. On some cones, lines of red dots surround portions of a map, evoking both highways filled with cars, and the discriminatory practice of redlining. While geometrically simple, the cones contain elements like these red dots that code them in complex ways.

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The cone shapes are simultaneously reminiscent of megaphones, totems, and wearable cones, from dunce caps and wizard hats to West African headdresses, from medieval helmets to the capiotes of the Catholic Brotherhood of Nazarenes and the pointed hoods of the Ku Klux Klan. They are objects that could be used to amplify voices — or as costumes of concealment, power, ritual, and penitence.

The cones in the “Always & Forever (forever, ever) Series” (2022), feature eye holes that make them more mask-like. And subtle changes in their dimensions and shape render the cones more vacant or more sinister.

Other conical sculptures include mouths as well as eye holes and are even easier to personify. “Cheer” (2022), for example, a cone with semi-circle eyes and an oval mouth, looks sleepy, while “Rapt” (2022) has a classic smiley face. Smaller forms hang off these two cones, like the beaded figures on Yoruba crowns, and even these details open new possibilities. As the gallery guide asks, “Are they treasure or detritus, offerings of thanks, or wards of protection?”

Two sculptures made from church pews, “Sunday Morning Offerings No. 1” and “Sunday Morning Offerings No. 2” (2023), along with a collection of collages on masonite prayer fans explore ritual from another angle. An element of Black church culture, Rubin’s fan’s bear collaged images of family photos, maps and floral patterns. Literally a means of combating oppressive heat, church fans developed as part of life in spaces that sustained communities facing oppression. Peanuts fill the hymnal racks in Rubin’s pews, and alongside the porcelain covered ball moss, cotton, and twine that sits on “Sunday Morning Offerings No. 2,” reference the landscape of the American South. For some religion/church is a power structure to escape from, while for others, it offers a spiritual community through which to escape from the difficulties of the world.

Throughout the exhibition, Rubin exposes the absurdity of power by turning its symbols into bright blue artworks. The cone masks, are, ultimately, empty. And in foregrounding symbols that point to freedom, Rubin incorporates her own family history and experience as an American citizen.

“I am at my best when I’m escaping” is a reminder of the successful escapes to freedom of the past and creates a space where escapes to freer worlds can be imagined.

“I am at my best when I’m escaping” continues through April 29 at Big Medium, 916 Springdale Road, bigmedium.org

<https://sightlinesmag.org/in-her-titos-prize-exhibition-tammie-rubin-explores-migration-escape-and-faith>