

Ruth Rippon @ Crocker Art Museum

Posted on 28 December 2017.

by Elaine O'Brien



Ruth Rippon in the ceramics studio at the California School of Fine Arts, San Francisco, 1952–1953

Some museum exhibitions open at just the right moment. *Exuberant Earth, Ceramics by Ruth Rippon* at the Crocker Art Museum, five years in the planning, is, as it was intended to be, a fine retrospective homage to a revered Sacramento artist. Opening in late October of 2017 as revelations of the #metoo movement flooded social media and were reawakening fragile hopes everywhere, *Exuberant Earth* delivers more than was promised. From it we gain an expanded understanding of Ruth Rippon as an artist Northern California audiences have perhaps held too close to see fully.

A selection of 90 works of mostly narrative ceramic pottery and figurative sculpture made by Rippon from the 1950s through the 1990s, *Exuberant Earth* will impress every viewer with the artist's mastery of her medium and the consistency of her aesthetic choices and subject matter through five decades of production. The extraordinary vitality of her art – its exuberance – inspired the exhibition's title. These and other outstanding qualities have been discussed in catalog essays and reviews of Rippon's regional shows over the years. Ruth Holland's thorough 1969 art history master's thesis is a close study that includes an examination of the wide range of ancient to contemporary sources for Rippon's figurative style.

Exuberant



"Mother and Child," 1964. Stoneware, 29 ½ x 19 ¾ x 11"

Earth's beautifully illustrated catalog features strong new essays by Crocker curator Kristina Gilmore and historian Jo Lauria that situate Rippon in a unique position at the forefront of ceramic art history alongside her mentor, Antonio Prieto, lifelong friends Peter Voulkos and Robert Arneson, and others associated with the "revolution in clay." They also document the artist's many contributions to the ceramic arts, the education of students at Sacramento State, the Creative Arts League Sacramento and the region's art scene as it

developed during the 1960s and 1970s.

What has been left unexamined and uncelebrated about Rippon's oeuvre, though often noted, is the very feature that gives *Exuberant Earth* relevance beyond art to contemporary life: the predominance of representations of women. Women are the retrospective's central subject. Rippon represents them in sgraffito drawings and paintings on pottery and stoneware sculptures ranging in scale from Thumbelina to life-size. The Crocker exhibition thus gives us the rare pleasure, especially welcome now, of a woman artist's view of women. What is more and better, Rippon's women belong to a narrative where there is no battle of the sexes; society is gender-equal; men are dear brothers and partners, and women rule their bodies, their selves and their relations with others in confident grace.

Among the works that show women in relation to men are those that retell old tales from the Bible and Western classical mythology. The large mold-formed 1970 plate, *Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden*, for example, shows the progenitor couple in sculptural relief, facing forward, shoulder to shoulder as sister and younger brother. Another revision of Western mythology is the spirited 1964 *Europa and the Bull*, the sculpture greeting visitors at the entrance to the exhibition. In this striking work, the power equity between Europa and the bull – the young virgin and the formidable Zeus, a figure of overwhelming male force – surprises and delights those of us who have imagined the story through *The Rape of Europa* by Titian and paintings by Rembrandt and other male artists. Rippon's version is unique and quite likely the only one by a woman artist. She poses the protagonists with the same proud lift of the chin; she gives Europa



"Europa and the Bull," 1964, Stoneware, 23 x 21 x 11 in.

a straight spine and firm, relaxed hold, and melds the two bodies together with sweeping outline curves, all in all giving us a vision of reciprocal friendship and desire. Another work titled *Europa*, a 1964

sgraffito drawing on a plate, shows the princess waving a hearty goodbye to her women friends on the shore. She is off on an adventure of her choosing. Rippon brings her vision of good relations between men and women to contemporary middle-class life in *Winter in Central Park*, a 1983 mold-formed limited-edition sculpture, which physically joins a man and a woman of equal size in one piece. The couple's bodies and attentions, however, turn in separate directions, and each smiles privately at something unseen by the other. They are happily alone together: long and well married, one imagines, or intimate old friends on a winter afternoon walk in the park.

Among the most arresting works in the exhibition are those that show women in relation to women. At the exhibition entrance is *Sisters*, a graceful 1963 stoneware sculpture of two young women joined side to side and turned slightly toward each other. Each mirrors the solemnity of the other as they study the egg-shaped object one sister cradles in her hands. If the object is an egg, are the sisters contemplating their maternal fate, or are they considering maternity as a choice they can and must make? *Mother and Child*, created a year after *Sisters* and equally grave, depicts a pregnant mother holding her child as a figure of self-sacrificing, stoic devotion. These and other works, such as Rippon's life-sized outdoor tableaux of mothers and children in exclusive groupings suggest that for her, it is maternity that determines women's lives, including their relations to other people. Rippon's choice to make art the center of her life, not children, is the understood message of *Yes, Sir, That's My Baby!*, the ebullient 1969 Pop-Funk power baby happily playing alone. The artist's most popular depictions of women with women, the *Lollies*, have nothing to do with children. The long series, begun in the early 1960s, was inspired by the small groups of "little old ladies" who gather in public places everywhere for



"The Lollies," mid-1960s. Stoneware, 17 x 11 x 7 ½ in.
gossip and intimate conversation. The artist had long noticed the ubiquity of such groups and made sketches for the gestures and body language that make these tableaux convincing.

Rippon has also created many works about women alone: mermaids, goddesses, bathers, readers; women reclining, daydreaming, thinking. The artist's representations of these solitary, self-sufficient women are perhaps the most demystifying figures of her entire body of work.

There are many ways to appreciate *Exuberant Earth*. The Crocker's well-researched didactic panels and labels and the beautiful installation assure that the visitor will leave informed and impressed by Ruth Rippon's life work. While it is rare to see a woman artist's view of women, what is rarer still is to see a woman artist's narrative of human relations that revises the ancient patriarchal script with such astute good humor. The serendipitous timing of the exhibition allows us to see the artist's vision in the context of the #metoo movement and the widespread hope for a gender-equal workplace and society. Ruth Rippon's art takes on the added dimensions of prescience and societal relevance.

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Exuberant Earth, Ceramics by Ruth Rippon @ [Crocker Art Museum](#), through February 4, 2018.

About the author:

Elaine O'Brien is a professor of modern and contemporary art at Sacramento State University. Dr. O'Brien has lectured regionally, nationally, and internationally on topics in global modern and contemporary art. She is the editor of the anthology, *Modern Art in Africa, Asia, and Latin America: An Introduction to Global Modernisms*, distributed internationally. Her current research is for a book about art produced in Northern California in the 1960s and '70s in the context of that era's sociopolitical revolutions and shift from the modern to the postmodern.