

QUADRANT'S FEATURED ARTIST

Darlene Wesenberg Rzezotarski

Spirit of Clay:

*I am your metaphor, your golden door,
Your silent prayer, your primal roar.
Earth, water, wind of spirit echo in the flame
And give expression to my hidden name.*

In my world, clay and words mingle and entangle. I create ceramic sculptural works and mosaics, finished with a variety of layered lusters and glazes. Archetypal images emerge as I give my imagination free play, drawing on a vast array of sources from dream and folklore alike; there is an element of unknowing and revealing.

Doing ceramic sculpture allows me to enter a timeless state of mind. The process and the outcome are not separate entities, just as a human is not just the flesh appearing before you at any single instance in time. Clay speaks to me, and I reply. I punch, pick, soothe, and smooth it with my hands until it is shaped to my liking. I let surprises happen. As I work, sometimes words and voices emerge; I never stop the sculpting to write things down. They will float around and have their due. Since I have taught myself how to work with clay, I don't play by anyone else's rules. I revel in this freedom.



In recent years, I have taken up iconography using ancient egg tempera methods, mixing the minerals and meticulously layering the colors. When I began “writing” icons, I thought I was taking my art in a different direction, but like many aspects of a life, things begin to merge after they are internalized. I eventually realized that my method of applying ceramic glazes had changed: I layer color upon color, using floats and highlights as one does in iconography. It has given my glazes a new depth and luminescence.

I was nourished on a rich Wisconsin diet that included a belief in incredible occurrences, the power of love, the value of an education, and the falsity of colored oleomargarine. Nursery rhymes and unadulterated Brothers Grimm, the radio music of Gene Autry (the singing cowboy), a grandpa who lived with us for a time and brought me puzzles, a cupboard filled with art supplies, and a generous sandbox of silica sand from the banks of the Wisconsin River all came together to create this self that could not live without artistic enterprise in word and deed.

As the eldest of five children, I was expected to set the standard of academic excellence in the family. That wasn't hard, because I was a quick learner and always loved school. When I was thirteen, I wrote an ode to the statue on top of our capitol building in Madison. It began: “Miss Forward, way up there so high, where all can see as they pass by...” Amusing in retrospect, but through its many stanzas of rumination on the human spirit, it opened a door for me to the power of words and ideas that I felt within my grasp. I began keeping “secret” notebooks of my poems—a practice that continued many years. How did that influence my art? How did this writer evolve into a clay artist?

My introduction to clay was serendipitous. Once upon a time my daughter was taking a children's art class at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. As a parent assistant, I was allowed to dabble. I made a small coil pot in the form of a serpent. This felt just right, actually better than just right: Instant affinity between hands and imagination and the ancient medium of clay! I inscribed the word Hiss-story inside the pot, and the date, 2-2-82. Since then, I never have separated from clay, and will stay within its realm as long as grace allows.

I have been a teacher of literature, mythology and folklore, creative writing, and humanities, combining art with the written and spoken word. Early in my teaching career, I ran an elementary school learning center with emphasis on puppetry. My students made the puppets, wrote the scripts, and performed the plays. After completing my master's degree in Comparative Literature, I taught high school and college-level courses. When I was awarded a Kohl Teacher Fellowship, I used the money to establish a school magazine, called *The Sphinx: A Journal of Fine and Necessary Arts*, at Milwaukee's Rufus King IB High School. Student work ranging from poetry to prose, from painting to photography, found its way onto our pages.

In 1991, my husband reunited with Polish first cousins. This led to exploration of Slavic folklore, eventually resulting in a major show of my Polish sculptures at THE Fine Art Gallery in Milwaukee. A book ensued, combining my sculpture and writings, *Trick a Witch, Wed a Hedgehog, Save Your Soul: An American Artist Encounters Poland*.

My husband of 49 years and eight months died on Christmas Day, 2015. I was his caregiver through years of slow decline. That necessitated my retirement from teaching, but I used this transition time to focus on my creative work. For comic relief, I completed the first draft of an unpublished novel, *Tannenbaum Arms*, loosely based on our experiences in the 70's as married students with a child, going to the university during this tumultuous era of Vietnam protest while living rent-free in a basement apartment in exchange for building maintenance duties. Of primary importance, an attic upper room became my lifeline, my ceramics studio. I could have distance and a space of my own, but still be as close as a whispered call.

After a lifetime of being surrounded by people, I am now learning solitude. It is the latest influence on my work, as I delve into the mysteries of life and death.



My work has appeared in the Milwaukee Art Museum, the John Michael Kohler Arts Center, the Cedarburg Art Museum, the Wustum Art Museum, and the Portrait Society Gallery. At present, I am represented by curator Ric Hartman at the Gallery of Wisconsin Art, West Bend, WI. (info@galleryofwisconsinart.com). I also have an artist page on Facebook: Rzezotarski (Lollyclay) Ceramic Studio, and I periodically add more images and show information. Inquiries about purchases or commissioned works are welcome at DWRZ@aol.com.

All images of Ms. Rzezotarski and her works are presented in this issue courtesy of photographer, Francis Ford.