

Kathy Ruttenberg: The FRONTRUNNER Interview



Shana Beth Mason
August 14, 2023

Kathy Ruttenberg was born in 1957 in Chicago. She received her BFA (with Honors) at the School of Visual Art (SVA, New York) in 1981 and continued her studies with the SVA in Tangier (Morocco), and with New York University's Graduate Program in Venice (Italy) from 1983-4. Emerging from New York's early 1980s East Village art scene, Ruttenberg's allegorical art stood in stark contrast to the conceptual, Minimalist work that dominated the commercial art world in the 1970's. A 1998 ceramics class at the Greenwich House Pottery resulted in two decades – and counting – of creations in clay. Ruttenberg has exhibited at venues including Sladmore Contemporary (London), the Dubuque Museum of Art (Iowa), the Caramoor Center for Music and Art (New York) the International Ceramic Biennial (France), the 5th World Ceramic Biennale (South Korea), and the 59th Faenza Prize International Competition of Contemporary Ceramic Art (Italy). Ruttenberg's works are permanently installed at the Tisch Children's Zoo in New York's Central Park and the Mamiraua Sustainable Development Reserve in Amazonas, Brazil. She has produced five short animation films, and has contributed animation projects for the beloved children's television program, Sesame Street. International press outlets featuring Ruttenberg's work include Artforum, The New Yorker, The Brooklyn Rail, The Art Newspaper, and The New York Times. She lives and works in upstate New York.

FRONTRUNNER is proud to present a conversation with Kathy Ruttenberg. Our thanks to Lyles & King (New York) for making this interview possible.



Kathy Ruttenberg
WET (2018)

Outdoor fountain, ceramic, pond pump, bronze leaves, copper petals
82 x 58 x 38 in

Courtesy of the artist and Lyles & King (New York)
Photo credit: Fionn Reilly

When you refer to working with ceramics, what do you mean when you say it's "temperamental"? Physically? To the touch, is the ceramic temperamental to you?

Because I'm working on a giant scale. This is big, like a fourteen-foot tree out of ceramic, which is big. I'm working very thick. My studio is heated, obviously – which it has to be for clay – to try to keep the drying slow. The insides, it's a big tree, so it's a cylinder. You keep the inside and outside drying at the same pace. It's something new we're doing this time, which I've never done before. I don't have a fourteen-foot kiln, you know?

I was going to ask, you must have a kiln in-studio, or you hand power-dry?

I have five kilns, actually. From baby, test tile kilns to a big gas kiln. The height of that is five feet, but it's a dome, so five feet in the center. Really only four feet, if it's wide. I'm just waiting until it's leather-hard, taking a saw, and cutting it. So, it has this beautiful clean cut because, at that weight and size, it's going to need a cylinder structure, anyway. I put plastic in between and I make a joint and it fits together, but things move and it never quite fits correctly that way. This is a whole new thing, it's very exciting. We're building things and we're taking saws to cut them up, which is – I just feel like the magician lady in the box cutting things up.

Well, isn't the art of deconstruction all about construction?

There you go. I love that. That should be a title, something.

At the current moment, there's such a mad rush to build up and out, with everything around us. Whether it's technology, architecture, even just content related to everything that we see. It's meant to be so vertical, deconstructing, and being able to break into pieces that which we've long forgotten about in a desire to really digest things, properly. Your piece "All Caught Up" is on par with what we're talking about.

Also, when we talk about this, I think a lot about the pandemic. It just cut culture into pieces. I think the people really stood back to see what they're doing with their lives, right? And you know how to reconstruct and make a happier world. A happier life.

I would hope so. I'd suggest that certain things, we became slower about. We became slower about talking. Slower about self-reflection. But I do think, unfortunately, we've gotten much quicker to add judgment because we're so screen-oriented now. Even post-pandemic.

I don't think that just goes away. I think we all jump into hiding. I feel socially disabled. I just kind of lost a skill. But when you mention self-reflection, I thought it was something people really did during the pandemic. Did you?

It depends. I think it's dependent on the nature of the conversation. I think every conversation was still tinged with panic regarding the nature of the disease. In terms of us being able to deconstruct socially – again, not being able to exchange gestures, not being able to exchange that kinetic energy about being together – I think we did lose something, and I don't know how and when that can really be repaired.

I agree with that.

Getting back to the tangibility thing, I noticed that you started your education in Venice and then you went on to Tangier.

Well, I mean I was already in school when I went to Venice. But that was something incredible.



Kathy Rutenberg
Topsy Turvy (2018), from the *In Dreams Awake* series
Cast silicon bronze, polychrome patina, cast polyurethane resin, cast concrete, LED lighting
189 x 52 x 52 in
Public sculpture at Broadway and 117th Street, New York (New York)
Courtesy of the artist
Photo credit: Fionn Reilly

What prompted Tangier? Tangier is a big leap from Venice. From Chicago to New York and then to Venice and then on to Tangier. That kind of intrepid, breaking away, was that natural for you, or did you feel you had to push for that?

When I decided to go to the program in Tangier, I was living in a loft downtown in the Financial District a couple blocks from Wall Street, in this shithole with rats. Just feeling so removed from the social life that I had been living when I was in Chelsea, just dark days. Then at one point, I shared the living space with a drummer that was with the Lounge Lizards. That was intense. He was very moody and drunk. We weren't lovers, so I had to change. Something had to change.

That was a big leap and it was terrifying, the readying for it. Because I was like, "God, do I need to bring cans that I use for turpentine? How far do I go in my preparation for this program?" I hooked up with people, and it was an incredible, incredible eye-opening time. I did get very sick, though. A friend of mine and I went down to Marrakech on the train and ended up staying with the Berber family that we just met. He invited us to his boss's house for the night, to dinner. Then on the train ride back, I said to my friend, "God, I'm itchy, are you?" So, I had scabies.

Oh no!

And my father was living in Scotland. So, I went to Scotland. I was really sick. I actually went to this American or English hospital in Tangier. This guy with a hairy chest and gold chain was showing me in the book what I had. He said it was an allergy or something. We both had itching, bumps everywhere, and I was sick to my stomach. I ended up in a hospital in Scotland with a sign that said "diarrhoea" on my door. They gave me a spinal tap, but first, the local doctor that went to the hospital said, "Oh my

God, I haven't seen this since the war! You have scabies!" "We're burning rugs and shaving the hair!" I was in the hospital reading *Sheltering Sky*, asking the nurses for some tobacco. I was young. It was an amazing adventure and I pride myself for being an adventurer. Venice was obviously much easier, and I fell in love immediately, like Day One, with an Italian.

Easy to do.

Yeah, I had a relationship with him for a while, and he killed himself in a car accident. But amazingly enough: the Internet. His brother has started following me.

I think that adventurers do have that wonderful capability of being able to trampoline between different experiences and all the while maintaining their sanity. That's a class act.

I still am pretty adventurous. Yeah. Still am. I know what it's like to be a nomad, but now I have a lot of animals that I care for, here. I split up with my gorgeous, sexy, artist husband who is a good friend, now. I thought he was a nomad, but it's more that he's just unsettled. That's very different. One is very detrimental to my wellbeing. Because I do a lot of pieces where I'm grounded, like now, I see myself as a tree. I just feel very grounded here. I moved here almost thirty years ago.

Where are you, exactly?

I'm thirteen minutes from Woodstock.

So you're upstate (New York).

It's not like I couldn't do what I do if I weren't upstate. Having to come to New York is fairly complicated, and I started ceramics at a course in New York. Then bought myself a kiln, and then another kiln, and then another kiln, and now I have a vast kiln which makes me feel incredibly uncool.

Cool is just a vibe. You are it rather than just feeling it.

It was an adventure. I ordered this kiln without ever having operated a kiln. I burned everything in that kiln to start with, because I didn't know what I was doing.

You were just breaking it in, that's all. But tell me, you talked about this sculpture in the garden of Lyles & King, of which I had no idea about this space in the gallery. I had seen snippets of your work in the public space, in film, the books you've published. So you talk about being grounded, which is incredible for someone who has crossed so many media – in terms of the works that you produce however and whichever order that you produce them. Is there a sequential movement to your work? Is it scheduled or spontaneous?

I guess it's just spontaneous evolution. Does that make sense? When I first started doing ceramics here, I was really feeling like the ceramic was in control of my hands. It just led me places that were not previously explored. There was a lot where I kind of saw myself as a rabbit. Then, I saw myself as a bird, and now I'm very much planted. I feel like I see myself as a tree. So, even though I like to wander,

I feel like this is definitely home base.

When I got divorced, it was the weirdest thing. I just started rescuing animals, and never was lonely. There are very difficult moments, clearly, but the animals had such a profound emotional presence that it's a support. With the career I have, it's up and down and not always just straight up, and I'm glad about that, actually. When we talk about time to self-reflect and gather material, I feel like then I really focus back on the animals. I feel like it's a cyclical process.

Do you feel that sometimes the ceramic and the material are self-animating?

Yes, that's what I was saying, that it's just amazing that it's ground. It's Earth, and it gave me my subject matter. It's amazing. I started with ceramics in New York, but I didn't really evolve my subject matter until I was here. I bought myself a kiln here and just jumped in. It's been, as far as subject matter, just a straight line of research and seeing myself as part of the animal-scape, or landscape.

It's so convenient for a lot of comparisons to be made to other movements, to other artists. You could say there are Nativist or naturalist elements, a lot of symbolic or ritualistic thematics. Does that bother you that people apply those terms to the practice? Or, do you embrace it?

I don't really think that I do mind saying that I'm flattered if I'm part of the group. I'm flattered if I'm an innovator. I feel like with the ceramics that I was part of something that now has just exploded. When I first started with ceramics, I was with a gallery and the guy said, "Well, we're going to have to decrease your prices, now [that] you're doing craft."

That was 25 years ago. Now, things have really changed. It's funny, because of the Internet, I see what I feel is something I've been working with, or subject matter that I feel close to, then I see it elsewhere. I have to feel like I'm part of the movement, or I just feel like if things are referential, I think it's beautiful. It's where we are in the world. I feel like I could take something from an artist and chew it and spit it out and it's going to be completely different.

Do you still sense a lingering bias versus other sculptural materials like steel, glass, etc.?

Well, I feel like I do a lot of watercolor and I think that the ceramic and the watercolor really go hand in hand. I think they complement each other nicely. But I have been working with other media. Like for the Broadway ones, I did a lot of different mediums and jumped right into bronze, which I think is incredible, but it doesn't have the immediacy that ceramic has. Anywhere where there are moulds, it's a process. It just takes forever and by the time the bronze is finished, you're past it. I feel like ceramic is so immediate. I can have an idea and can slap it together and put it in the kiln and have it in a week.

I know what you mean. It seems to me that you enjoy the immediacy of it all.

And the surface, as well. Resin is fun, it's immediate. But the surface is plastic. You're never going to get away from that.

Is there something about your medium that you wish you knew back when?

Yes! Yes! I wish I had gone to Alfred instead of SVA and just learned all these different crafts. I feel bad about that. I wish I had more glass, but all in due time. I just feel like...all in due time. I mean, I've been doing it 25 years, and I feel like I haven't taken it to its end. I'm still exploring the possibilities of it, which are endless. But now, I'm going to do a frog in a pond, and I'm going to use resin poured into ceramic.

I like to mix glass and ceramic. I just think there are so many directions that you can take the ceramic. I think it's so cool that it's both utilitarian and art, as well. Sculptural. I love that aspect. So interesting. I made a washbasin and a toilet for my mother! It's just endless what you can do.

We spoke briefly about your gallerist, Isaac Lyles, from Lyles & King. I've spoken to so many artists that have found a rebirth and a reinvigoration with working with younger people, young professionals, like Isaac. So many people: Mira Schor, Betty Tompkins,



Kathy Ruttenberg
Climate Crisis (2022)
Ceramic
90 x 23 x 23 in
Courtesy of the artist
Photo credit: Fionn Reilly

Deborah Kass, Patricia Cronin. All of these women that I have interviewed over the years, they always tell me that they get such life from being around and working with younger people. Do you feel that way, also?

Absolutely. Always. Absolutely. I'm not a "generational-ist" at all, on both ends. I'm just really getting close to my sister's daughters and it is just so great to see through their eyes. So yes, Isaac and his team are really really wonderful and I feel so 'hipped' that I've ended up in his care. Uptown hipster gallery!

Betty and I have been lucky to be not just professional acquaintances, but friends over the last eight or nine years. She tells me all the time, "I have young people to thank for my career!" Do you feel there's something missing, in the art world, that you wish younger artists could hang onto?

Younger artists or art dealers?

Both?

Yes. I feel like a little bit sometimes, I wish people understood that there is a beauty to the weight of time and the process. I feel like ceramic, you can't rush it. You can't rush it. I feel like I'm always delivering work in the eleventh hour. "Can you have a few vases for April?" I say, "Well, I'll try!"

Do you feel they don't have that time?

Time is a very different concept for younger people. But, well, it should be. When I was younger, time was different, as well. But I think you don't have to lose a youthful approach. My mother is 91 and she is the hippest, youngest – she is growing as an artist. Her artwork is amazing, and the pieces that she's worked on for twenty years are absolutely stunning. The things that she thinks are fresh and quick. I don't like them.

There's some beauty with this patina, this age of patina. But I am learning. I'm building this tree. I have this young assistant, and she just showed me this technique, and I felt very proud that I was open to it. Show me what you want to show me. Instead of hand-building these branches, she just rolled them in newspaper. It's just going to expedite this process. I'll have these branches built in a week instead of hand-building each one. We'll do, like, sushi rolls of these branches just wrapped around newspaper. So incredibly excited to have some new technique that somebody younger showed me that no one who's older in all my classes has learned.

FRONTRUNNER has a signature thrust: to make sure that we give on-the-ground, practical ways to uplift young artists. That's why I sort of went in that direction.

I just think through the ups and downs just to stick with your vision. When you talk about so much influence and so much coming in, you just have to stay your path, because I feel like young people can get pulled in every direction. It's not all about an Instagram post. To stay inside and stick with it, it's very hard to feel that the world is not really seeing what you do. That's very hard. But I just think there are some people that are touched with the opportunity of success, and some people just never have it. But, it doesn't reflect on their work.

That's a good thing to know. Failure isn't the end.

It's not. Andy Warhol said that art is a business. It's very new that artists can have it [as] a job. Or, they can conceive of it as money-making. I just think it's really important to stick with it, no matter what. To come in and out of these times where you're not feeling inspiration, or you're not getting money, or feedback, just really try to stick with it, if possible. Things are very fast right now and that, especially for evolving your vision, that takes time. And, I see that. I have a friend who has always been struggling, and now I see she really has pulled her vision together. She has an art career, and she's my age. My mother had four children. She married very young. My father was coming back from the war and swooped her up. She was nineteen, she was in art school, and she drew us for twenty, thirty years.

In your newer works, like “Before the Drought”, and “Inside her Majesty”, we talked about these varying motifs that happen throughout your practice. What's been driving this new series most for you?

Well, I think living through the pandemic really brought my work and world issues together. “Before the Drought” was beautiful and green, and I was feeling so proud to live where I live. All of a sudden, California and other places that are not as healthy as this area, had this major drought this summer. Here, I just saw the pond empty, so I just feel like that was really something that I brought out with me from the pandemic.

Do you sense that it's a way of capturing or petrifying the natural world in this more pristine state? I don't ever get a sense of deprivation.

Did you see “Climate Crisis”, that piece? It's so lush. No matter what you do through glazes, that's what's incredible about the medium. It's always going to have this incredible surface. I'm walking through the woods here, we have a terrible disease now, an issue that came from Asia, because they

were importing trees. They were diseased, and its destroying all the hemlocks on the East Coast. So, if you walk through the woods, there are so many trees fallen, but there's a beauty to that, too. To that destruction.

Like an organic ruin.

Like going to an industrial site. I know some artists who would think that's beautiful, photographers that would think that's beautiful, and capture it. So yes, I do see my work also when you say "a recording of what's happening", I do. You've given me an idea. I see the image right in my head, you gave me an idea, thank you. Did you see "The Moment After"? That's about decay and rebirth so with every death there's a birth.

I think that there is a desire for this regeneration, almost like nature's revenge in a way, because we see consistently how much we scrape away violently at the Earth and all of its resources. So maybe this is a common element for artists to want to repopulate this Eden-like landscape. Do you see a little bit of that in you as well?

Absolutely. Absolutely, because you're right, I do add kind of a utopian quality to my landscapes. That's like when I see all the trees falling, or whatever, there is such a beauty to where I am. Yes but I, wherever I go I feel like I bring that vision.