

Rhea Giffin

**Multi-media artist
explores life in all its layers**

by Kate Spencer, Editor

*“Life is like an onion:
you peel it off one layer at a time,
and sometimes, you weep,” wrote the
American poet, Carl Sandburg.*

Rhea Giffin would agree with the layering part, and with the tears. But instead of peeling off the layers of life, she is building them, one piece of paper at a time. Rhea is a painter, sculpture and poet. One of her favorite mediums is papier mache, which literally translates as “chewed-up paper.” The deceptively simple and economical ingredients of papier mache — strips of paper soaked in paste — belie its rich artistic opportunities.

“There’s something about paper that draws me,” Rhea says. “There’s something very primitive, textured and sensual about it that lends itself to so many possibilities. I love the feel of it and I love that it’s recyclable. I could cast in bronze, but it doesn’t appeal to me.”

What does appeal to her is using the ancient art of papier mache to create a visual metaphor of life in all of its deeply layered, richly textured complexity.

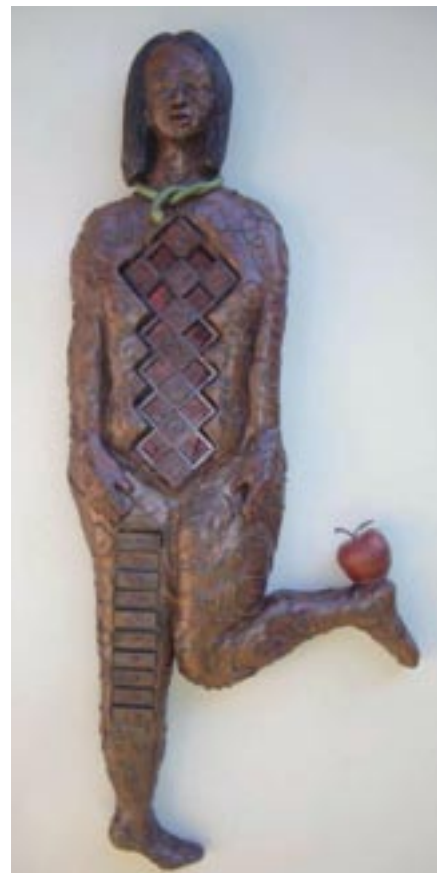
“It’s who I am, it’s who we are,” says Rhea. “Life is layered and diverse, it’s amazing and appalling. This is the perfect medium for me because it’s so like life itself.”



Although her themes are universal, there is also a strong autobiographical component in Rhea’s work. One of her first series was a collection of poppy bowls born of a period of transition in her life. She had just returned from South Africa where she had gone as part of a group that took American children to Africa to learn about its environment.

While readjusting to life in the States, Rhea began reading Sue Bender’s book, *Everyday Sacred*, a meditation on finding grace in everyday things. A central image in the book is of a begging bowl, traditionally, an empty bowl that a monk takes out into the world each day in search of his daily nourishment.

“I thought, maybe I could make bowls that tell their own story,” says Rhea, who wanted to fuse her passion for painting, sculpting and writing together and who, like the monk, was searching for some nourishment of her own.



A friend volunteered her basement, which Rhea and fellow artist and poet, Lisa Conger, turned into their studio. It was there that Rhea created the Story Bowls that solidly launched her into the professional art world. Invitations to show her work and coverage in the press grew, as did Rhea's imagination and desire to express life, and herself, through art.

It has been a lifelong pull for Rhea, who cites her mother and Dr. Seuss as two of her early muses. One of Rhea's earliest artistic endeavors was selling wildly colored frosted butter cookies door-to-door. By third grade she was writing poetry and short stories and had formed her own in-house (literally) publishing company. Decorating rocks and painting ceramics were other early mainstays.

Today she works from a private studio in her home. Over time, Rhea's art has evolved from smaller to larger pieces, retaining her distinctive blend of personal and global themes. Her work has been displayed in over 50 exhibitions. Some of the themes of the exhibits are assigned, while others are what Rhea describes as "self-imposed."

Such was the case with her *Mindful Navigation: Points of Autism* series.

"I needed to purge things within myself," she explains. "I was having what I would call points of autism within me where I would get stuck not knowing what to do or say. I needed to transform that energy and move it."

That movement is exemplified in the piece, *Mindful Navigation*, in which a determined woman, oar in hand, canoes through a mysterious sea accompanied by a cat who playfully bats at the apples that sprout from the woman's head. Floating among the apples is the equation, $E=MC^2$. More than 70 accompanying paintings, titled Paintings of Apples,



explore the theme of mindful navigation through the sea of life's energy, matter and time.

All of Rhea's pieces are signed and numbered originals. The work is often long, requiring drying time and patience, both for the piece and the artist herself.

"I'm a slow artist," Rhea says. "The struggle to get it right is always there and you have to be forgiving of yourself to continue. All of it takes time and papier mache itself takes time too. It's not fast food art. I like slowing down for that."

Rhea is a member of the Papier Mache Guild, a small group of self-taught artists who, in Rhea's words, "come out of the woodwork for each other." There is little formal instruction in this medium, so the artists draw mostly upon their own passion for the work to continue. To Rhea, this drive is the essence of art.

"It's not a practical thing," she says. "It's survival. I don't think of art as a luxury, I think of it as a necessity. It's what I live and breathe." ▲

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