

# Shirley Rimer

Article by Mary Beth Laviolette

SHIRLEY RIMER CAN STILL REMEMBER WHEN SHE FIRST walked into a ceramics studio at a local community college and knew that clay would be her calling. That was in 1979. Initially, as a young mother of a two-year old, her intention was to pursue art education but there was something about the tactility of clay and its malleable nature that changed her mind. In more colloquial terms, Rimer was 'bitten by the bug' and she has not looked back.

In the story of art, anecdotes about sudden conversions are not unusual. But less remembered, perhaps, is how it takes a community to nurture an artist and in turn, for an artist (if so inclined) to play a reciprocal role. Rimer has had the experience of both and it is one reason why her 30 year residency in the central Alberta city of Red Deer (population 85,000) has been a fruitful one. Throughout, there has been the give and take needed to sustain the challenge of the creative process. In one instance, it involved a commission to create a clay wall sculpture for the city's historic library. In another, it was Rimer, as volunteer, orchestrating the building of a paper kiln for over 30 potters during, as she puts it, "a mud-licious" community equinox celebration.

As an artist then, situated in a modest-sized burg, Rimer is interactive, rooted to place, as expressed in some her earlier work, but open to influences from elsewhere. At artist residencies in Greece, China, Mexico and Turkey, the artist has seen first-hand older traditions like the rich cobalt blue Talavera of Puebla (Mexico) and the Turkish red clay pottery of Avanos. At a Shanghai pottery workshop, it was the challenge

of working with Jingdezhen porcelain. In her hands it was a dry and crumbly substance. For ancient Ming and other dynasty potters, it was a clay body worthy of an imperial ruling class. As for her predicament there, sympathetic advice was given about how mastering the material would mean she could handle any clay in the world.

There have been two trips to China so far in this decade and the results of her persistence are two series: the *I Ching* clay *The People* and *Made in China*, the latter consisting of framed tiles with overglaze decals.

Built of porcelain and devoted to traditional Chinese subjects such as violets, fish, birds and fishing villages, *Made in China*, struck one observer as being an uncanny "three-dimensional embodiment of water and ink drawings". Exhibited at Shanghai's *Moganshan Lu* in a juried one-person exhibition, Rimer was the first to admit using a clay body not really intended for sculpture was almost a 'mission impossible' but

handbuilding is and continues to be her preference. In this respect, she is linked with a long tradition in her own home province of ceramics-as-sculpture; a notable feature in the critically admired work of

Luke Lindoe, Chuck Wissinger, John Chalke, Annemarie Schmid-Esler, Les Manning, Barbara Tipton, Sally Barbier, Diane Sullivan, Garry Williams, Linda Stanier, Ed Bamiling and Franklyn Heisler.

Rimer has also taught wheel work throughout her career including at her *alma mater*, Red Deer College, but since her time in instructor Chuck Wissinger's classes, the impulse to shape and



Top: *Made in China; Village Life*. 2007. Jingdezhen porcelain wall piece. 15 x 15 x 3 in.  
Above: *China Series; Red Fish 1*. 2006. White earthenware wall piece. 9 x 12 x 2 in.

mould has always been present. As a young artist, it found expression in the form of neo-primitive, hollow ceramic tubes and a little later, large *millefiore* coloured bowls, decorated with inlaid clay and legs sometimes attached to the bottom.

The full-time ceramics program at the college was barely a decade-old when Rimer graduated with an Art and Design diploma in 1981. Established by the Ohio-educated Wissinger, he is noted in Gail Crawford's groundbreaking 2005 book, *Studio Ceramics in Canada*, as being an "exceptional instructor and a singular influence in the West".

For Rimer, this meant having an instructor who, himself, was also a maker of sculpture and who, in the counter-culture spirit of time, gave students lots of freedom to express themselves. Getting stuck with a problem, though, might also mean him finishing the student's project but only as she remembers (smiling) in the interests of teaching. Wissinger moved back to Texas in 1999 and by then his enthusiasm for artistically engaging with the larger world had been thoroughly soaked-up by his former student as a cultural programmer, curator and all-around community participant. She had also been hard at work developing new forms metaphorically linked to her own growing interest in the autobiographical, heritage, gender, the role of the Goddess and travel.

As a prevailing theme, the vessel form or the container became reconfigured in the Red Deer artist's *oeuvre*. Initially, it began with the bowl and the possibility of its rounded, inclusive shape embodying ideas about home, the family, food and other things that sustain life. Later, in the mid 1990s, the bowl became inverted, a support for the placement of small clay figures atop. Acting less as a stage and more as a metaphorical presence, the coil-built half domes, enhanced with coloured textured glazes, are elegantly grounded forms. Made of earthenware, the evocative

domes appeared in *Folktales*, related to the stories of Rimer's Jewish upbringing; *Alberta Voices*, concerned with the multicultural character of the province and Greek Goddesses, the outcome of a three-week residency with 10 other Canadian artists on the island of Euboea. Rimer's Greek excursion into the country's ancient world of ceramic achievement was partly funded by the Alberta Foundation for the Arts, a long-time supporter of such creative activity in the province. It was there while visiting museums that she became fascinated with the many examples of Cycladic figurines. Prehistoric and a mystery as to their function, these

distinctive abstracted figures with their angular features, long folded arms and generally female gender, inspired Rimer to create her own clay female forms, as simple and, at times, as refined as the marble originals. There was also the matter of those breasts, small and pointed, recalling their Cycladic origins.

Throughout the decade, this figurative element added another dimension to Rimer's art, both formally and conceptually. Varied in shape and scale in a series of self-portraits, the female is a flattened, two-part earthenware entity where, in one self-portrait, it alludes to her inner-cowgirl sensibility. In the woodfired stoneware *Madam* and others, the shape is now coil-formed; conveying a steadfast presence connected to Rimer's ideas about being a woman. From *Madam's* abdominal area protrudes a delicate cluster of rolled sticks, a shape always interesting to the artist but interpreted as "emphasizing – a kind of bursting forth – from the reproductive area of the woman". Also resembling scrolls, there is the suggestion of woman being a carrier of wisdom.

This series of female forms, from the early part of this decade, was also distinguished by being made of stoneware, a clay body long associated with the development of ceramics in Medicine Hat, Alberta. Another



Top: *Casa del Sol*. 2001. White earthenware. 10 x 9 x 4 in.

Above: *Uriarte Collaboration*. 2000. White earthenware. 9 x 6 x 7 in.

mid-size city but located near the Montana border, this clayful-burg is the century-old site of such enterprises as Medalta Potteries and later, the Luke Lindoe-founded Plainsman Clays (still in operation). Not long ago, Rimer served as Artist-in-Residence at Medalta, now a national historic site honoured by Canada for its rich history of pottery manufacturing.

Over her career, the artist has demonstrated versatility in the kinds of clay used and in the white earthenware, *Casa* (2000) and the recent medium fire clay, *Goddess Temple*, this is again evident. In the *Casa* series too, another kind of metaphorical container appears, this time as a simple house with another version of a Cycladic-inspired figurine sitting on top of the roof. Featuring chalky-coloured glazes and a modest decorative motif at the bottom of each house, the sculptures are, on one hand whimsical and on the other, evoke a deep stillness reinforced by their spare, minimalist appearance. As for the figurine, with its long and attenuated legs, it could be said she is firmly 'attached' to her place.

The feathered motif is something Rimer came across while collaborating with other artists at Mexico's Uriarte Talavera Tiles Factory and *Casa* is what later percolated in response to this intercultural exchange between Canadian and Mexican ceramists. Taking place over a two-year period and organized by The Banff Centre and FONCA (*Fondo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes*), the challenge of the collaboration was, as she describes it, for all of them "to infuse aspects of a 400 year old tradition into our individual pieces". At the factory residency in Mexico this indeed did happen but it is the long term impact of these experiences that sometimes produces the most engaging results. In the case of Rimer, who tends to work very spontaneously, verbs like 'permeate' and 'suffuse' apply but always with the idea that what comes out in the end is distinctly of her own melding.

The dome shape has

re-emerged in Rimer's most recently documented body of work exhibited: *In the Land of the Goddess*.

In this instance, the heritage of her own surroundings in rural Alberta and Greece are stirred together. Weightier in appearance and more heavily glazed than her half-domes of the 1990s, this earth-bound form now supports rustic buildings associated with cultivation and husbandry. Fondly described as 'goddess temples', these sculptures, with the bottom of each dome incised with Greek-style motifs, pay homage to the Goddess Demeter who, as the deity of agriculture and in particular wheat, has as much connection, in Rimer's

imagination, to the cycle of farming near her home as it does to a Mediterranean country's mythology. Together, with a group of undulating and elongated house-shaped sculptures, each titled a *Goddess Sanctuary*, life, art and the personal were all intertwined in *The Land of the Goddesses* as they have been for much of her engagement with ceramics. Beginning with the bowl-shaped vessel which has always represented for her, the essential form of pottery, Shirley Rimer has created sculptures of a gentle, reflective and occasionally whimsical kind.



Top: *Alberta Voices; The Dutch*. 1998. Earthenware with steel rod.  
Centre: *Folktales Series: Leviathan and the Fox*. 1996. Earthenware with steel rod. 13.5 x 16 in.  
Above: *Self-portrait; Clowning Around*. 1997. Earthenware. 10 x 10 in.

Mary-Beth Laviolette is a writer and author specialising in the visual arts and regional history. She is the author of *An Alberta Art Chronicle: Adventures in Recent and Contemporary Art* and the co-author of *Alberta Art and Artists: An Overview* with Patricia Ainslie. Based in Canmore near Banff, Alberta, she also freelances as a curator and critic.

Below: *Shirley Rimer Signature*.

