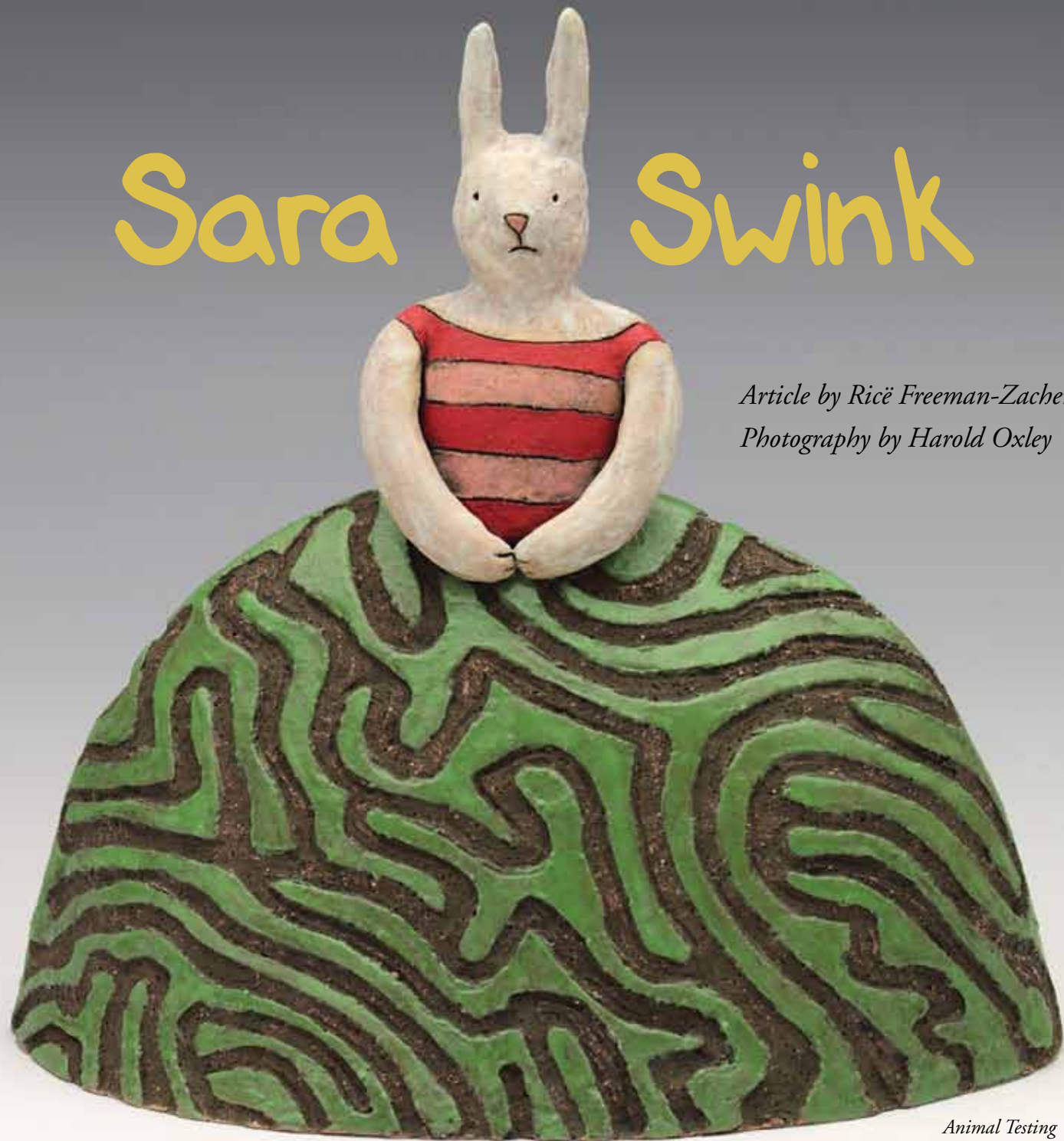


Sara Swink

Article by Riccè Freeman-Zachery
Photography by Harold Oxley



Animal Testing

Sara Swink has come to suspect that clay is encoded in her DNA, as much a part of her genetic makeup as her straight hair and brown eyes. “Just a couple of years ago, my brother was visiting and I showed him my studio. He said, ‘You know, our father could make anything in clay.’ I said, ‘What?!’ He went on to tell me that our dad made all kinds of things in clay, including a character known as Swami who could tell your fortune. This was before I was born. The kids used to put on neighborhood events with Swami and other characters supplied by my dad. I never knew this all these years.” It made sense, though, given Sara’s innate affinity for clay, even though that affinity took a while to manifest itself. Like many kids, she’d loved to draw and color, but she had never imagined herself as an artist.

“My sister, Suzanne, who was nine years older than me, was always the artist. From my child’s point of view, I could never hope to have her abilities. I didn’t even aspire; it was so out of the question.” Still, when Sara looks back at it now, it seems her introduction to clay was perhaps more than just a coincidence. When she was 8, her family moved to the San Francisco Bay area from Illinois, and their new neighbor was a potter. She and her husband were antique dealers and lived in a gorgeous Victorian house with a pottery studio, and with three sons and no daughters, she relished Sara and Suzanne’s company.

“With her kindness and attention, Margie Ruggles somehow implanted the idea that clay was a great thing for me and I could do it,” Sara remembers. “And a few years later, in high school, I did.” Sara’s high school in Marin County had an excellent ceramics program, and she happily enrolled in introductory courses. “So I did ceramics in high school and cleaned houses to earn money, and bought a potter’s wheel.” It seemed she was off to an auspicious start, but as with many artists, Sara’s path from introduction, to a medium, to submersion in it wasn’t a straight one. The wheel that had seemed to be the vehicle that would →



Birdhouse Boy

*Blind Faith*

take her there turned out to be more a burden than a help.

"I didn't really have anywhere to fire work, so I mostly just dragged it around from house to house during my college years until I finally sold it." In 1977 she dropped out of Berkeley and got certified as a massage therapist, and eventually she and a friend started an alternative publication titled *Catalyst*. A few years later when desktop publishing was in its infancy, Sara became fascinated by the possibilities for graphic design and enrolled in a certificate program, completing that while raising a family. She worked at several Silicon Valley high-tech companies and then started her own graphic design company, where she worked until 2006 when she and her partner moved to their current home in West Linn, Oregon, 20 minutes south of Portland. "I really got swept up in the graphics work," she says in explaining the hiatus between buying that potter's wheel and, two decades later, rediscovering clay.

Wanting to find some creative outlet beyond designing for clients, she began taking classes at the Palo Alto Art Center: drawing, life drawing, and painting. The ceramics studio was right next door, so of course she had to drop in. She signed up for classes and met Norma Lyon, from whom she took classes for years. Perhaps her most transformative experience was taking a workshop titled *Art and Spirit* from artist and sculptor Coeleen Kiebert. The goal of the workshop was to teach students to use doodling and collage to find their unique style and to develop a personal vocabulary of images.

"It was just what I was looking for," Sara says. "After that I took many workshops with Coeleen, and she became a mentor to me. And it wasn't long before she invited me to teach her creative process methodology, which I began in 2000 and still do today." The process itself isn't something you learn, do once, and then set aside; it's an ongoing way to access inspiration and ideas. "It starts with collage, finding juicy imagery that resonates, and bringing aspects of that imagery into the clay, often in combination. The doodling is a key to personal style, as individual as handwriting. It's a clue to the types of lines, shapes, colors, and compositions I'm drawn to that help make up my style." ➔

*Cat People*



Hombre



Each time Sara teaches the process, she creates another personal collage, and these fill a series of image journals she keeps lined up on shelves. Along with quick drawings in sketchbooks and snippets of dreams captured in a bedside journal, these notebooks contain more than enough ideas to last Sara the rest of her life and then some. "I do have a lot of ideas," she admits; the problem is finding time to bring them all to fruition. Working with clay takes time, and as Sara's work has become increasingly in demand, she is forced to spend a large part of her studio time making work for upcoming shows. She also supplies new work to her galleries and accepts commissions, and often it seems the sparks waiting on the pages of all those journals will never get the attention they deserve.

"I can never make as much work as I'd like to for shows and events and the requests from my galleries for more work. I am always working toward deadlines and never come close to my ideal of what I'd like to have done." Even now that she has eased out of design work and is, theoretically, a full-time artist, there are never enough hours in any day. One of her two studio assistants creates simple blanks of the popular Wallies, smaller figures designed →



House on Fire

*Growing Concerns*

to hang on the wall, and then Sara takes over, disassembling and re-assembling them and, basically, totally Swink-ifying them. That's what they call it in the studio when she works her magic in making clay come to life: to Swinkify. Sara thinks of it as riffing off a basic idea, like a jazz musician who never plays a piece exactly the same way. Because the work comes from her subconscious, it's intuitive and organic and never, ever boring.

Every morning begins at the kitchen table where Sara does all her planning and organizing. "Sometimes I write down dreams I remember. I might work on notes for a workshop or sketch ideas for pieces. I make lots of lists." That's an understatement: The walls of her studio — half of a 2000-foot shop building she shares with her partner, Harold — are bare sheetrock, which just happens to be perfect for pinning up notes. And lists. And sketches.

"I make lots of lists and pin them to the wall. I have collages and sketches on the wall." Once she has figured out the plan for the day, Sara tackles whatever needs to be done, usually in preparation for the next event, whether it's a show or an open studio or a workshop, often held in her own space. If it's the rare day when she can work on a new idea, she either refers to the image journals or perhaps opens her subconscious to see what comes up. She uses the process methodology she teaches and then watches what bubbles to the surface. She transfers that to a rough, gritty clay on which she uses a wide variety of techniques including pinching, coiling, and slab building, as well as creating solid pieces that she then hollows out — whatever the individual piece seems to need. ➔

*I Love You so Much*

“Sometimes the piece becomes something else while it’s in process, and I go with it. My whole approach is pretty loose. I like to make room for lots of improvisation.” She refers to her work as “my life in clay,” and it can be viewed from many angles, both literally and figuratively. At first glance, much of what Sara creates is charming and approachable, anthropomorphic animal figures sculpted with a healthy dose of humor. On a deeper level, each piece is a concrete representation of a story, idea, or archetype, and at their core, they are about Sara’s life, her dreams, her imagination, and the issues she’s pondering in the back of her mind. Regarding *Of Blind Faith*, a sculpture created in 2014, Sara writes on her website: “The idea for this piece came about while sketching in my sketchbook one day, though it’s one of those things I’ve pondered. It’s the idea that I may not consciously know where I’m going, but maybe there’s something greater that does know. Maybe I have an angel or a higher self that guides me and I can surrender to it, because it knows. The truth is, sometimes it’s like groping in the dark, and it can be scary.” What makes it less scary for Sara — and infinitely more fun — are the clay companions who accompany her along the way. ❖

You can see more of Sara Swink’s companions on her website at saraswink.com, saraswink.etsy.com, and on Instagram (@Sara.Swink).

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Photography by Harold Oxley of West Linn, Oregon.

