



Smithsonian

Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Ruth Duckworth

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Collection Overview

Repository:	Archives of American Art
Title:	Oral history interview with Ruth Duckworth
Date:	2001 April 27
Identifier:	AAA.duckwo01
Creator:	Duckworth, Ruth, 1919-2009 (Interviewee) Trapp, Kenneth R. (Interviewer) Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Extent:	67 Pages (Transcript)
Language:	English .
Digital Content:	Digital Content: Oral history interview with Ruth Duckworth, 2001 April 27, Transcript Audio: Oral history interview with Ruth Duckworth, 2001 April 27, Digital Sound Recording (Excerpt)

Administrative Information

Acquisition Information

This interview is part of the Archives of American Art Oral History Program, started in 1958 to document the history of the visual arts in the United States, primarily through interviews with artists, historians, dealers, critics and administrators.

Biographical / Historical

Ruth Duckworth (1919-2009) was a sculptor and clay artist from Chicago, Illinois. Kenneth Trapp (1943-) is curator-in-charge at the Smithsonian's Renwick Gallery.

Scope and Contents

An interview of Ruth Duckworth conducted 2001 April 27, by Kenneth R. Trapp, for the Archives of American Art's Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America, at the studios of Smithsonian Productions, Washington, D.C.

Scope and Contents

Duckworth speaks of her early life and the time prior to her family leaving Germany; the decision to leave Germany in 1936 due to Hitler and the War; acclimating herself to England; attending Liverpool School of Art; WWII in England and the psychological effects of working in munitions factories; her nervous breakdown and

seven years of therapy; her beginning to sculpt; her first exhibition of sculpture in London; her marriage and life with Aidron; difficulties in being an outsider in the world of art, specifically speaking about being a woman in sculpture; her first meeting with Lucie Rie; the devastation she felt after her brother died; attendance at the Hammersmith School of Art and not feeling her place there; switching to Central School of Arts and Crafts; her first job teaching ceramics at the Central School; learning the technique of glazing; visiting museums in London; how poetry nourished her during those early years, specifically the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke; the selling of her first pieces, "pieces that wouldn't sell"; the art scene in London; how the opportunity at the University of Chicago arose; her experience at the University of Chicago, an academic institution rather than a fine arts school; her first big show in the U.S. at the University in 1965; her graduate and undergraduate students; life as a foreigner in the U.S.; the opportunity to teach at the University of Iowa but becoming an associate professor at the University of Chicago instead; the cultural movement and ceramics movement in the U.S. during the 1960's; how her work changed from European influences to American influences; departments in art that were very unfriendly to women; her association with James and Nan McKinnell; her excursions and teaching trips across the U.S. as well as in Canada and Israel; her trip with Aidron across the U.S. and then their eventual separation; her friendship with Alice Westphal and the creation of the gallery Exhibit A; the unconscious changes in her work; her views on stoneware versus porcelain; Jack Lenor Larsen's summer show and the artists she met through that; her relationship with American museums versus European; unfortunate events at the Boston Museum of Fine Arts; her continued feelings as an outsider but acceptance in later life as an artist, more so from the ceramic community than from the museum community; publications and catalogues of her work; the influences other artists have had upon her work; the limited use of color in her work; her collection of bones; her love of gardening; her sketches; the therapy coiling clay does for her; her projects at the moment; where she gets her ideas from; how she sees herself fitting in versus not fitting in; her speech at an international symposium in Amsterdam; what she would include in a retrospective of her artwork; her hopes to have her work be therapeutic to viewers and cause them to contemplate it; more thoughts on color; American culture; what matters most to her right now and that is saving the Earth; wishing to continue with her work and have a better relationship with museums. Ruth Duckworth recalls, Henry Moore, Bernard Leach, Nellie Barr, Virginia Ferrari, Hardy Schlick, Richard DeVore, Nicholas Vergette, Jane Goodall and others.

General

Originally recorded on 2 DAT tapes. Reformatted in 2010 as 2 digital wav files. Duration is 2 hr., 29 min.

Names and Subject Terms

This collection is indexed in the online catalog of the Smithsonian Institution under the following terms:

Subjects:

- Ceramics
- Women artists
- Women ceramicists
- Women sculptors
- World War, 1939-1945

Types of Materials:

- Interviews
- Sound recordings

Names:

- Central School of Arts and Crafts (Birmingham, England)

DeVore, Richard, 1933-2006
Larsen, Jack Lenor
Leach, Bernard, 1887-1979
McKinnell, James
McKinnell, Nan
Moore, Henry, 1898-1986
Museum of Fine Arts, Boston
Nanette L. Laitman Documentation Project for Craft and Decorative Arts in America
Rie, Lucie
University of Chicago -- Faculty
Vergette, Nicholas, 1923-1974
Westphal, Alice

Occupations:

Ceramicists -- Illinois -- Chicago
Sculptors -- Illinois -- Chicago