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Racine Art Museum Announces the Acquisition of an Archive of Works by Ceramic Sculptor Mara Superior

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The Racine Art Museum (RAM) is pleased to announce that it has recently acquired a multiple-piece archive of works by the contemporary American ceramic artist, Mara Superior, for its permanent collection. In 2018, a Kohler Foundation project focused on the preservation of a major portion of the artist's work. This effort included contributions of her ceramics to important museum decorative arts and contemporary craft collections across the US including the: Chipstone Foundation, Milwaukee; Currier Museum of Art, Manchester, New Hampshire; Everson Museum of Art, Syracuse, New York; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; Peabody Essex Museum, Salem, Massachusetts; Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design; and Renwick Gallery of the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC.

Part of the Foundation's gift included 1 of the artist's ceramic works presented to RAM. Spanning the years 1982 through 2018, these pieces join three other examples of Superior's career output already in the museum's collection. RAM will debut this archive in the exhibition, *CollectionFocus:MaraSuperior* which will run from August 18, 2021 through January 15, 2022.

Superior was born and raised in New York City. She received a BFA degree in painting at the University of Connecticut and an MAT in ceramics at the University of Massachusetts Amherst. In her youth, Superior visited the Metropolitan Museum

(more)



PRESS RELEASE

of Art constantly, becoming familiar with a wide range of cultures from around the world and from different time periods. She considers the icons of art history as points of departure for the diverse compositions in her works, and her pieces reference the education she received as an avid museum-goer.

Superior's preferred medium is porcelain. She creates high relief wall works and three-dimensional sculptures that use the shapes of historic decorative arts objects, such as teapots, serving ware, presentation items, and articles for domestic use but in a larger scale. Superior is known for her thorough grasp of historical precedents and her charming reinterpretations of themes from art history, culture, and the experience of travel. She employs these interests as the subject matter and imagery for her work.

Her pieces frequently have large flat areas which provide her with a substantial surface on which she creates elaborate painted compositions. Superior's drawn imagery recalls a large range of visual resources from cultures around the world, ranging from classical Greece and Renaissance Italy to the United States. Her work is also inspired by a number of historic sources, including decorated British and American ceramics and stitched textile samplers, much of which is traditionally considered to be "women's work." These pieces are narrative in nature and range from personal and domestic subjects to contemporary culture and its relationship to history, and also to political and environmental issues.

RAM Curator of Exhibitions Lena Vigna notes that Superior's work is as provocative as it is playful. She states, "Akin to a few stand out makers in the late 1800s, Superior so sweetly yet so pointedly subverts assumptions about women as merely the decorators of porcelain vessels. While that may seem a removed point for contemporary audiences, it serves to underscore the historical framework in which this type of object resides. Her palette full of soft—almost pastel—colors and decorative embellishments seems traditional yet her vessels upend function and her narratives full of personal and meaningful content remind us that this is a modern artist filtering the world through her own lens."

"RAM has a particular interest in assembling archival collections of major artists working in the contemporary craft field," said RAM Executive Director and Curator of Collections, Bruce W. Pepich. He added, "We believe that by presenting examples of work from early, middle, and late portions of an artist's career we can better demonstrate to the public how an artist develops ideas and how these aesthetic concepts change over time. This body of work documents how Superior selected different life experiences and blended these with the encyclopedic resources of references to culture and history that she has developed. Her work

(more)



PRESS RELEASE

makes the joy of visits to art museums and the educational opportunities they offer readily apparent.”

Pepich continued, “We are very grateful to the Kohler Foundation, Inc. of Wisconsin for its support of our efforts to serve artists by presenting their works to the public in ways that help explain artists’ motivations, intents, and interests. We also greatly appreciate the support of Ferrin Contemporary, North Adams, Massachusetts in coordinating this project on behalf of the artist and facilitating the gift. RAM exists to foster conversations between artists and the public. Presenting multiple examples of artists’ works helps clarify and reinforce the messages that artists seek to communicate.”

In addition to the aforementioned art museums, Superior’s work is represented in numerous public collections across the US, many of which are famed for their decorative arts and contemporary craft holdings, including the: Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Museum of Arts and Design, New York; Philadelphia Museum of Art; and the White House Collection of American Crafts, Clinton Presidential Center, Little Rock, Arkansas. She has received a National Endowment for the Arts Visual Artists Fellowship and numerous individual artist grants from the Massachusetts Cultural Council. In 2010, Superior was interviewed for the oral history program of the Smithsonian’s Archives of American Art.

RAM currently holds the largest contemporary craft collection of any art museum in the US. The museum collects broadly within the craft field with examples of artists from the US and abroad who work in clay, fiber, glass, metal, polymer, and wood—both functional objects and sculptural pieces. These works make up more than half of its 10,000-piece collection. The other portion is devoted to works on paper by internationally recognized contemporary painters, sculptors, and photographers. By continually showing works from these two sections of its collection in changing temporary exhibitions throughout the museum, RAM places craft media within the context of works produced in the painting and sculpture fields of the same time period, demonstrating commonalities rather than differences. By current count, 40% of the artists in RAM’s collection are women, a figure substantially greater than at many other collecting institutions. The museum’s long-term interest in these artists has been reinforced by open-minded donors who have collected quality work, regardless of the artist’s gender, and presented them as gifts to RAM over the past 80 years.

Exhibitions at Racine Art Museum are made possible by: Platinum Sponsors—Anonymous, Nicholas and Nancy Kurten, Wingate Foundation, Wisconsin

(more)



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Together, the two campuses of the Racine Art Museum, RAM in downtown Racine at 441 Main Street and the Charles A. Wustum Museum of Fine Arts at 2519 Northwestern Avenue, seek to elevate the stature of contemporary crafts to that of fine art by exhibiting significant works in craft media with painting, sculpture, and photography, while providing outstanding educational art programming.

After temporarily closing its doors in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, RAM and RAM's Wustum Museum of Fine Arts are currently open to the public. Both museums are operating with limited hours, open Wednesday through Saturday from Noon to 4:00 pm. Information regarding safety protocols and what to expect when visiting the museums are available on the RAM website, ramart.org.