

***Everything Has a Story* work by Darlene Wesenberg Rzezotarski**

On view: FEB 20-MAY 31, 2024

Everything Has a Story offers a retrospective of Darlene Wesenberg Rzezotarski's work to date. Wesenberg Rzezotarski begins her creative practice by researching and reflecting on historical narratives, myths, or tales. Using this gathered information, she creates sculptures that delve into the lives of Increase Lapham and Lizzie Kander, as well as mythological beings such as Daedalus and Icarus, to name only a few. Rendered as ceramic objects, the main subjects of these stories are situated centrally and represented figuratively, while iconographic images and phrases float around each character, building the metaphoric scenery in which their stories occur. Wesenberg Rzezotarski's gestural approach to shaping the clay animates these characters and makes their presence palpable as if the represented individuals are themselves sitting within the vignettes. This vitality may be why some sculptures have inspired the creation of subsequent pieces, allowing the stories to unfold in series, furthering their narrative arcs, and creating rich tableaux. Wesenberg Rzezotarski crafts her stories using clay as well as the written word, with published books of prose and poetry. *Everything Has a Story* will comprise selections from both her sculptural and written works.

Darlene “Lolly” Wesenberg Rzezotarski is a storyteller—through word and clay. She arrived in Milwaukee in 1965, thinking she'd teach here one year to repay student loans and move on. But something happened: She fell in love with the place. More than fifty years later, she remains involved in writing, teaching, and creating ceramic art. With a master's degree in comparative literature from UWM, she has taught English for MPS and has shared her love of writing and the creative arts with generations of students. She looks back with gratitude on that day in 1982 when she first put her hands in clay. A coil-pot in the form of a snake emerged. She inscribed the word *hiss-story* inside. Since then, she has developed her ability to create ceramic sculptures, eventually setting up a home studio and offering hand-building workshops. Her sculptures are described as narrative in nature, anchored in history or myth, often site-specific. She is the author of three books: *Trick a Witch, Wed a Hedgehog, Save your Soul: An American Artist Encounters Poland*; *Memorable Milwaukee: Legendary Tales Depicted in Clay*; and *Tannenbaum Arms*, a novel set in Milwaukee in the Vietnam Era, first appearing in monthly installment form in the *Riverwest Currents* in 2022.

Everything Has a Story

A Few Words of Introduction

Welcome to the gallery!

As a ceramist and writer, it is my impulse to notice details and small occurrences, ponder them, retreat with them to my studio, and involve my mind and hands in the solitude of creation. Sometimes I just let the clay reveal itself and surprise me; but often there is research involved, as I live as a perpetual student. History often has been erased, but the landscape still wears its scars and recollections—clues to our past, individual and collective. Added to this are the truths found within the myths. I find affirmation in the words of art critic Lucy Lippard: “For all the art that is about place, very little is of place—made by artists within their own places or with people who live in the scrutinized place, connecting with the history and the environment.”

I first took on my “serious writing career” at 13, filling notebooks with poetry. This eventually combined well with a love of academics and teaching. As the oldest of five children, I had a ready source of not-always-obedient students. Clay came later and took me by surprise. It was Ground Hog’s Day 1982. I made a coil pot in the form of a snake at the UWM Craft Centre. I incised it with the word “Hiss-Story” and the date. I felt an affinity. This little pot was the first of many creations, over many years, through good and bad times.

I have my home studio and kiln, so I can work whenever I please. Through structured, challenging years of parenting and teaching; and emotionally demanding years as a caregiver, I developed a disciplined work ethic that made time for writing and ceramics. It continues to this day. Since retiring from full-time teaching, I have had the freedom and blessing of time to devote to my ceramics. My companion is a furry, high-spirited dachshund who is always ready to distract me. He insists upon coming upstairs to my studio when I work. He can climb up on his own but then needs to be carried down! He has been my buddy on countless walks and is featured in the sculpture “Virtual Pilgrimage 2020.”

How might our lives be without the stories we create to frame and explain ourselves? It is my pleasure to share my work with you. I hope that you can find sculptures here that will bring a twinkle or an occasional tear to the eye. Our lives are intertwined, and our stories allow us to build understanding and relationships with all types of beings across all ages.

Everything has a story.

Here are some of mine:

When I wrote and illustrated my first book, *Trick a Witch, Wed a Hedgehog, Save your Soul: An American Artist Encounters Poland*, I delved into Slavic mythology and folklore and intertwined this with my husband's familial story that has been rooted in Polish soil for generations. His relatives all seemed to be storytellers and they thought in terms of centuries rather than decades. My studies in mythology and folklore mainly had been in Northern European, Native American, and Mediterranean areas. A new world opened to me.

My second book, *Memorable Milwaukee: Legendary Tales Depicted in Clay*, found its roots in our local past. Over a decade, I created a series of sculptures that are location-specific, relating to Milwaukee people and events. My choices for sculptures were not based on any desire to create a canon of history of Milwaukee through sculpture; rather I followed my whims and fascinations with various individuals discovered through the reading of local history. I enjoyed the freedom of unstructured ventures into the past, not having to answer to anyone but myself for choices. Since I am a self-taught artist, I made my own rituals and processes, often forced to learn from mistakes along the way. Since I joined a group writing icons with egg tempera, I have developed certain glaze techniques that evolved from iconography to clay. I love this evolving process.

My novel, *Tannenbaum Arms*, had its origins in a challenge by author Alexander McCall Smith. He was writing a serial novel for the *London Telegraph* and challenged his readership to do likewise. I chose an era I was familiar with, 1969-1970, and drew upon actual experiences as a building caretaker in the UWM area. My fictitious couple lives through a tumultuous school year with anti-war protests, the December Draft Lottery and Kent State. I remember scenes vividly but I'm not very good with dates. Part of my inheritance from my bibliophile-historian husband was a complete run of *Kaleidoscope*, the alternative press newspaper of that time. With the help of these papers, I was able to place events in their proper chronology.

Everything Has a Story A List of Works

The works are displayed in loosely-arranged, overlapping categories. All credit goes to the remarkable Marla Sanvick, who skillfully pulled together works spanning 42 years for this show.

Reflection—\$1100 I found this mirror at the Goodwill and immediately snatched it! I knew it would become part of a work somehow. When the viewer looks in this mirror, the beholder becomes part of the work. When an artist makes a work and it goes out into the world, it is no longer private property; nor is it meant to be. The viewer partakes in the work and becomes a partner in creation.

Dream of Elephants—\$250

Tableau I (north wall, left side)

SOLD Harlequin—\$400 This is an early sculpture, with remnants of a previous life in puppetry showing. Gently pull the chain to watch the arms move.

213 Orchard Drive—NFS

Oregon
Wisconsin
USA
North America
Planet Earth
Solar System
Orion Spiral Arm
Milky Way Galaxy
Virgo Super Cluster
Immense Heaven
Mind of God

My father and grandfather built this ranch house and procured the adjacent apple orchard. The street was so new that my parents had the privilege of naming it. The orchard was on a small bluff and we had a tree house and a swing. On that swing, you could soar over the village and get some good thinking done. One morning, my baby brother turned up missing. Everybody was frantic. Eventually a “bump” in the hammock turned out to be a sleeping two-year-old. Now there’s a house on that corner and no sign of the orchard, so here it is again.

From the “Inquiring Minds Series.” Each piece—\$500 These are directly from tabloid headlines and are functional lamps constructed on berry boxes. I was struck by the way these newspapers appealed to the hopes and fears in our society.

My Husband is Turning into a Frog. He was a scientist at Chernobyl and now all he wants to do is sit on top of the television and catch flies.

Baked Bean Bath Cures Arthritis Have you tried this?

Snow Angels—\$600 I was thinking of some lines from a Kenneth Patchen poem:

*There is the muffled step in the snow; the stranger;
The crippled wren; the nun; the dancer; the Jesus-wing
Over the walkers in the village; and there are
Many beautiful arms around us and the things we know.*

Bird in a Cage—\$250

Tableau II (west wall, right side)

When the National Council on Education for the Ceramic Arts was in Milwaukee in 2014, I had the opportunity to share my work. At that time I was part-owner of THE Fine Art Gallery in the Marshall Building. I decided to work with a fairy tale theme. Here are a few of the works:

The Princess and the Pea—\$250

Goldilocks—\$800

Hansel and Grethel—\$800

SOLD Humpty Dumpty—\$100

Rapunzel and the Witch—\$400 both (This piece has been repaired when the braid broke.)

Alberich Guardian of the Nibelung Treasure—\$400 Immortalized in Wagner’s *Ring Cycle*

Corn Mother—NFS A recent bas-relief inspired by a rock beside the trail in Estabrook Park. This rock, depicted in the lower left corner, is possibly an Indigenous Peoples’ corn grinding rock. It’s easy to walk on by without noticing, as I had many times before; but having an ARTservancy has motivated me to look more closely at my surroundings when Little Gus and I go on our walks.

Tableau III (east wall, right side)

My father-in-law was a Polish immigrant. He and his two brothers were “drafted” to serve in the Russian army. Rather than let this happen, his mother paid to let the eldest son stay on the estate and farm the land. Her two younger sons, she sent to America until Poland would survive under a better regime. My father-in-law, so the story goes, fell in love with America and became a citizen. He passed away when my husband George was only five. Because of Stalinism, all family ties were severed. George thought he was the last Rzesotarski. It turned out that he was one of countless cousins, many still in Rzesotary, an area that was awarded to their ancestor in 1410. We had a remarkable reunion and over the years there have been several visits in both directions. My sculptures are based on notes I took during family storytelling and my research in Slavic folklore.

Wolf Woman—\$700 The hunter tried to “keep her captive” by stealing her wolf suit, but.... Goodbye and don’t look back! True nature cannot be denied.

Sir Hedgehog—\$700 When your child turns out to be a hedgehog, don’t give up. Raise a hedgehog as best you can. Good things might be in store!

Polish Man-in-the-Moon—NFS Nobleman Pan Twardowski sold his soul to the devil in a bargain for having wishes granted. He was tired of wealth and became a great healer. Read the book to find out how he ended up on the moon. Did he outsmart the devil?

Three Wishes—\$700 Be careful what you wish for, and don’t waste your wishes. You only get so many.

The Sorcerer’s Children—\$700 There are strange lands we don’t know about. What must it be like to have your beloved children trapped in a tree in the underworld?

Dust Devil Dervish Damsel—\$600 Also called “The Fearsome Maiden of Midday.” She will come in a cloud and send the wheat sheaves into chaos, and sometimes, she goes for fieldhands.

Tableau IV (south wall, left side)

Pieces from the “Memorable Milwaukee” Series

SOLD Increase Lapham—\$900 Arriving in 1836, Lapham viewed the landscape with a scientist’s eye and a preservationist’s heart. He documented territorial geological features, including Indigenous People’s effigy mounds quickly being obliterated by homesteaders and entrepreneurs. His weather observations led to him being called “Father of the US Weather Bureau. And much more....

Georgia Stebbins—\$700 A quiet beacon of a legend, Georgia arrived in Milwaukee in 1873 where her father was the Northpoint Lighthouse keeper. When he became incapacitated, she stepped up the long stairs to the top and lit the lamp and wound the clockwork every four hours. Although she had been performing this duty for many years, she became the official lighthouse keeper in 1881. She continued with this work until 1907. She kept detailed logs and never missed a single day.

Newhall House Fire—\$700 When the hotel was built in 1857 on the corner of Michigan and Broadway, it was considered the most splendid hotel west of the Ohio River. By 1883 it was a dilapidated place, a tinderbox. General Tom Thumb, 25 inches tall, and his small wife Lavinia were part of a traveling vaudeville show, staying on the sixth floor. They were rescued by a brave fireman who carried them down a shaky ladder. Almost 90 people perished, including many Irish and German maids trapped in their dismal rooms on the top floor. They are memorialized at Forest Home Cemetery.

Laura Ross Wolcott—\$700 Eastern-trained physician who came West, only to face the prejudice of the Milwaukee Medical Society. In spite of being denied membership, she persevered, became a consulting physician for the Industrial School for Girls among other places where medical assistance was desperately needed. Eventually she married Dr. Erastus Wolcott and with his backing, gained membership. Upon his death, she paid for the construction of a large sculpture of him on horseback honoring his Civil War service. It is in Lake Park adjacent to the trail of the Lion Bridges. She remained an advocate for women's rights and was a founding member of the Wisconsin Women's Suffrage Association. Her legacy continues to this day.

Coffee With Mary Nohl—\$1100 Although I never knew her personally, I feel close to Mary Nohl. I am sharing a snippet of a meditative poem I wrote, "Lake Michigan Voices."

"Mary Nohl 1953"

*Here near the rock-tumbled shoreline
I adorn my small house.
They say I am a witch of the lake,
that I build my sculptures because
my lover died at sea.
Tommyrot! Boo!
I love the sound of the hiss and hush
on a night like this.
I am no witch, just a bewitched
woman in bright-painted shoes,
an artist who takes from the lake
in sand and stone
And gives back,
No time to lament.*

Rohn's Swimming School on the Milwaukee River—\$700 Julius Rohn arrived in Milwaukee in 1855 and the next year he established the first swimming school in the nation. Students had to pass a swimming test strapped in a harness at the end of a “fishing pole” while the teacher shouted out instructions. Rohn made his money in the summer and according to stories, spent his winters living the high life.

Corn Baby Pollinators—\$250

Tableau V (south wall, right side)

When I was a student in Germany, I spent Spring Break in Athens and Crete. I was captivated by the island. At that time, there were still wild places and a person could wander around Knossos at will. It was the rainy season, so there were no tourists. It changed my life—the way I look at sky, water, rocks, the storied past.

Pasiphae—\$700 Queen wife of King Minos pondered what it would be like to mate with that white bull romping grandly across the island. She was sure it was Zeus in disguise. Daedalus was nearby and she demanded his assistance to mate with this mighty god. Of course, he could do that! *Why not?* He built her a cow frame and the relationship was consummated. But it was not Zeus, and the resulting offspring was a terrible miscreant, half human, half bull. I depict her as a majestic woman with the strong pull of motherhood, yet the revulsion of one who loathes the curse her hubris has brought upon her.

Tumbling Icarus—\$700 Daedalus lived with a series of mistakes. Long before his son Icarus was born, there was a nephew, Talus. Daedalus became jealous of his nephew's talent when Talus created the first saw after seeing how a snake's jaws worked. He threw him off a cliff. Eventually Nemesis, the Goddess of Retribution, caught up with him and caused the death of Icarus. “My son! My Son! Not so high!” But Icarus was enamored of the power of flight and ignored his father's warning. Now he's tumbling through time.

Narcissus—\$700 Beware the self-gazer, who will woo you with beauty but loves you only for the reflection of Self within your eyes. Beware the society that might at any moment drown in selfish deceitfulness. And think of Echo in her cave. She is equally important in the story.

Britomartis, She of the Fishnets—\$700 This legend takes us back to the days of King Minos, who pursued this beautiful, free spirit who roamed the forests and meadows and preferred the company of no man. Eventually, exhausted after a long chase, she found herself at the edge of a cliff. She jumped and was rescued by some fishermen who put their nets out. She kept her freedom. In mythology, she often is connected with the later Greek goddess, Artemis of the Wildland.

Persephone—\$700 Demeter loved her daughter so much that she was able to strike a bargain and get her back from the Underworld of Hades, at least part time. A mother's love is strong. Welcome, Spring!

King Midas—\$450 He received what he thought was his greatest wish, "the golden touch." It almost crushed him when his daughter rushed into his arms to hug him.

Daedalus—\$700 O you big-brained troublemaker, so filled with creative craft without a thought of consequence! O you inventor of marvels without thought of conscience! We know you only too well. Hubris is a mighty force, indeed. We love you so much!

Daedala—NFS This year I have been honored with an ARTservancy in Estabrook Park. I am creating images that tie trees and vegetation to myths and healing. This bas-relief is in honor of the oak tree. It represents the reconciliation rite of Zeus and Hera performed in the Grove of Daedala, a place sacred to Zeus. I have incorporated wood from a favorite oak tree in the park.

Tableau VI (west wall)

Catching Up with Myself

1 SOLD (middle) Three Covid Sisters—\$125 each During the first year before the advent of the vaccine, I spent time sequestered. I kept a daily journal for the Wisconsin Historical Society. I received a puppy who fortunately loved long walks. I was increasingly thankful for my home studio and kiln. One source of amusement was finding interesting sticks on my walks. I created the Seven Covid Sisters with some of them. The day I could get a vaccination, January 22, 2021, felt like a gift from the heavens. I received a call late in the afternoon when there was some leftover vaccine that needed to be used that day. I rushed down Humboldt Avenue so quickly I forgot to take off my moccasins and put on real shoes!

Virtual Pilgrimage 2020—\$1100 This depicts a walk of 480 miles across Northern Spain to the Shrine of St. James, Santiago de Compostela. It felt like I was operating in two spheres. With an on-line program, The Conqueror, I tracked my progress on Google maps. Little Gus the Dachshund was my rambunctious companion.

Aldo Leopold—NFS until series is complete This is part of my new series-in-progress, "Iconic Wisconsin." Aldo Leopold is the author of *A Sand County Almanac* and a leading environmentalist. You might have enjoyed a good rest on one of his benches in Estabrook Park.

Zona Gale—NFS until series is complete This is a writer from my hometown, Portage. She chronicles and celebrates the lives of the regular folks who live in her fictionalized *Friendship Village*. She was the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1923 for her play *Miss Lulu Bett*. She also was active in women's rights groups, the library system, and University of

Wisconsin governance. I knew of her from childhood since she was a personal family friend of my aunts and mother.

1 SOLD (orange/left-most) Sad Candle Family—\$90 each Families on Facebook are never quite what they seem. Stories are couched within stories. Many who appear to be ridiculously happy are really quite sad once you start having a real in-person conversation. This series was mostly just for fun!

Turtle Woman with Torch—\$900 She has been in my studio for a few years. Still carrying the torch. Ready to oversee the next project. Not exactly an Olympic champion, but that's okay.

All of this together makes another chapter in the story of my life, and maybe a part of yours. Some sculptures have been in shows before, but many pieces have been crammed on shelves in my basement. It has been an experience of a lifetime to have this show. I express my deep gratitude that Woodland Pattern exists and that they have honored my work in this way.

Darlene Wesenberg Rzezotarski
February 24, 2024