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SALVAGE BEAUTY

Shimmering bits of shattered glass and household relics from the past are the tools Holyoke, Massachusetts, mosaic artist Mo Ringey uses to create her thought-provoking works.

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SALVAGE BEAUTY

TEXT BY BRIT HAMMER | PORTRAIT BY JULIE BIDWELL

Imagine that you are dining out with friends when you casually announce your plans to mosaic your refrigerator, rendering it utterly useless. Do your friends (a) call you an artistic genius or (b) question your sanity? For the museum curators, university art professors and other private collectors of Holyoke, Massachusetts, artist Mo Ringey's work, the answer is undeniably (a) genius. >>



They're all familiar objects—grandma's old refrigerator, wringer washing machine and ironing board. Just mundane domestic appliances, right? Look closer. Like Michelangelo, Ringey sees the hidden potential waiting to be released as she transforms these castaways into works of art that have graced dozens of galleries and museums, including the Springfield Museum of Fine Arts. "The domestic aspect of my sculptures is intended as homage to the 1950s—an era when women had few options and so the avocation of many was 'domestician,' for lack of choice," Ringey says. "Perhaps a lot of my work is a retroactive double-dare. Yet the physical minutiae of my process mirrors the very domestic chores it might seem to chide."

As a child, Ringey was fascinated with the objects in her grandparents' home, a place that was, to her, part refuge and part museum. "I use domestic objects and appliances as the base because they are part of my own domestic history," she says. "Each of these objects represents a set of memories or a bookmark to a place in my past, mostly those of myself as it evolved as part of my family, and particularly, as part of my grandparents' household."

Over the past decade, Mo's childhood fascination has grown into a large body of work that captivates those who see it. "We have relationships with our appliances," she says. "We just don't consciously realize this. These are not the relationships that perplex and confound us. This is the dialogue of everyday life, for even the most alternative of us has a domestic life that we share with our things."

Identity has long played an underlying theme in her work, and Ringey spends much time pondering the former lives of the appliances as well as the lives of the people who were bound to them. "My objects bring with them the secrets of past lives—lives lived and possibly unlived. While I will never

ABOVE: *The Premier Grand* (2007), vacuum cleaner, fiberglass, resin, tempered glass, stain, sanded grout, Bondo, 49" × 25" × 23" LEFT: *Narcissivision* (2005), Philco TV, tempered glass, glass stains, sanded grout, acid stains, glass door-knobs, neon, mirror, 21" × 21" × 18"



ABOVE: *Here I Stand Ironing* (2007), vintage ironing board, tempered glass, stain, sanded grout, 52" × 33" × 14.5" **RIGHT: *The Pharaoh Wringer Washer* (2005), 1950s washing machine, tempered glass, glass stains, sanded grout, acid stains, 23k gold leaf, 50" × 24"**

know their secrets, they prove an ability to assert themselves and control their aesthetic destiny," she says. "I often refer to my work as the adoption of, and psychic nurturing and reupholstering of, the objects that appear at my door. The objects I use all appear at my door unbidden, brought by friends and strangers, making my work fate-based. Sometimes objects just appear on my doorstep, anonymously hopeful."

Ringey, who received her B.A. from the University of Massachusetts at Amherst and has also studied photography, graphic design and watercolor, began her art career as both a painter and sculptor, so it seems only natural that her work has evolved to include mosaic. And although she shrugs off high-brow labels, describing herself only as "an accidental recycler of objects from way back," don't



SHELLEY LAKE



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ABOVE LEFT AND RIGHT: Interior and exterior views of *The Kindness Coolerator* (2007), vintage icebox, tempered glass, glass stains, sanded grout, found neon, gilding, 60" × 32" × 21"

let her modesty fool you. She is actually one of the pioneers of tempered-glass mosaic art—and she has the guy who smashed her car window in the 1990s to thank for it. “The pile of glass glittering in the sun was so stunning that I picked it up and took it up to my apartment to experiment with,” she recalls. “I was so fascinated with the glass that I forgot to move my car to a secure garage. Leaving my car with an open smashed window all night apparently tempted some opportunist to come by and take my car stereo. I didn’t mind.”

Nowadays, Ringey uses tempered glass reclaimed from abandoned buildings, which she patiently stains by hand, often painstakingly applying the expen-

sive stains with an eye-dropper. It sounds tedious and laborious. It is. Once the glass is stained—with feminine flowers, perhaps, or a masculine plaid—Ringey wraps it tightly in a canvas blanket, leaving one corner peeking out, and dons her safety gear. Now if you’re thinking she’s going to whack that piece of glass with all her might, you’re the one who’s crazy. A few gentle taps with a hammer on that exposed corner follow. Tap, tap, tap. That’s it. What ensues is a fleeting, almost inaudible sigh, then the glass explodes outward and releases the tension it’s been holding.

“Smashed glass is often associated with accident, crime, vandalism and perhaps violence, yet it is an obvious metaphor for the faceted nature of people and the never-ending evolutionary process that is a society, complete with roles and expectations,” Ringey explains over the snap, crackle, pop of the glass as she carefully unwraps it from its blanket.

Still decked out in protective gear

and now holding jewelry pliers, the artist coats each shard with adhesive before applying it to a prepared appliance. “It took a while to get the process to where it is now,” says. “In the early days I went through a lot of bandages. Now I have a relationship with the glass and find I can handle it without getting cut. It’s like I relate to and respect the glass—I see habits and patterns in the smashed sheets and feel a familiarity that is the result of past associations.”

Pointing to her *Self-Portrait: Fridge* as an example, Ringey adds, “Completely changing the aesthetics and function of an old fridge from something you might see abandoned at the dump into a glittering and beautiful curio cabinet surprises the viewer. And most often, surprises are happy and inspiring things.” **NEH**

EDITOR'S NOTE Mo Ringey is represented by The JH Miller Gallery, Springfield, Massachusetts, (413) 732-9128. Her pieces range in price from \$1,500 to \$14,000. To see more of her work, go to www.moringey.com.