

*Christopher Minafo in conversation with...*

# REBECCA SALMON

**CM:** *What is the earliest moment you can remember that seems relevant to the way you make work now?*

**RS:** I think it's hard to pinpoint an exact moment, especially considering how much of my work—my ceramic pieces specifically—are made with techniques that I taught myself when I was a seven-year-old kid, spending hours on end alone in a tiny room in my basement, cranking out countless tiny sculptures. A lot of my work calls back to that—to my need for facility—as well as my need to sort of figure out materials and discover and develop techniques on my own. My pieces are heavily thought out in conceptually, but as soon as I start working with the materials, I sort of revert back to that kid just playing around and it becomes this natural, automatic, typically fast-paced endeavor.

**CM:** *Do you ever envision yourself as the material of your work?*



<sup>1</sup>

**RS:** My body is an almost direct source material for many of my pieces—though I'm shifting away from that a bit with my recent work. Conceptually, so much of my work is autobiographical and has a narrative based in my personal history. So, yes, absolutely.

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<sup>1</sup>(image) Jonathan Glazer, *Under The Skin*, 2013.

*CM: Would it elevate or distract from your message if the materials you used were once living?*

**RS:** It would definitely be a distraction. Actually, it's funny that you bring this up because it's something that I think about so often that I've made a rule for myself about it when working on my "skin" pieces—the NO BLOOD RULE (very creative name, I know). My work—though clearly referencing real flesh and hair—is never meant to look like they were actually chopped off of, or came from, an actual person. They aren't meant to elicit such a concrete violence. Plus, my work isn't really rooted in death or reality, but more in a suspension of time—of strange and unfamiliar creatures that look like us and maybe came from us, but are still "other." There's a bit of fantasy there, so I want to avoid anything too recognizable—again, like actual body parts—as that could take it away from my intentions and make the piece something quite different.

*CM: What is the ideal reaction you envision a viewer having to your work?*

**RS:** It really varies from piece to piece. What I hope for most of all, is for there to be any reaction, period! Meaning the viewer actually cares or is invested, which is really all I need.

*CM: What's the first thing that comes to your mind when you hear the word success?*

**RS:** Stability, self-respect, fun, and consistent intellectual stimulation.

*CM: How would you explain your artwork to your future children?*

**RS:** I've taught art theory classes to kids as young as four and five years old, and I have to say, they are fully capable of understanding contemporary art. For me (and them), it really helps to remind them that art isn't just about looking, but also thinking and feeling, and that each artist is trying to tell a story. I taught them that if they put together the visual clues within a piece, they can start to come up with a legitimate meaning of their own. I want all my viewers to become emotionally invested in my work—even if just for a moment—so the only thing I would want to explain to children viewers (mine or others) is that they have a place in my work, that it belongs to them as much as any adult. I would explain to them to not just let the work wash over them visually, but to place themselves in the world of the piece and be an active participant as much as a passive viewer. I would also tell them to not be scared by the work—which of course could be a possibility, given the imagery—because all of my pieces are made with so much care.

*CM: Fun and bright or soft and squishy?*

**RS:** Soft and squishy, of course! I mean look at me—practically every feature is soft! Plus, I'm all about the confusion of a bright, slightly manic energy contained in something soft and approachable.

*CM: One song that embodies your work?*

**RS:** It would probably have to be some oldie—a vocal jazz standard. My music taste is totally all over the place, but when it comes to my art, it always goes back to the standards. I've recorded myself singing several vocal jazz songs for sound installation pieces and really love how the raw

emotionality and the creepy sweetness of their inherent nostalgia pairs with my sculpture.

*CM: Dream place in the world to have a studio and make work?*

**RS:** I want to (and plan to) stay in some borough of the city! I don't need my studio to be in NYC, but it needs to be close enough that I can stay here. My family has been here for forever and New York is so culturally ingrained in me as a person that I don't think I'd feel in place in another location—at least not for long. Plus I don't think I could handle how “calm” anywhere else might feel... Of course I want to travel, but this *is* my dream place.

*CM: If you were to receive an unrestricted grant for a million dollars, what would you make and where would you want the piece to end up living?*

**RS:** I've been wanting more and more to create a claymation video. With that much money, I could hire a large, skilled team to produce the piece for real—as in, feature length—with a well written script, haunting soundtrack, and practical effects. Even with a large crew, I'd want to be the one principally fabricating and handling the physical elements of filming, but I want the piece to look good so I'd use the money for help with on-set assistance, cinematography, and post-production work. I'm envisioning the piece to be more atmospheric than narrative so wherever it would be screened, I'd want to have the “world” of the film carry over into the sculptural and installation elements of the room or theatre.

*CM: Write an acrostic poem using your name that accurately spells out your most prized possession?*

**RS:** I haven't had to face the fact that I'm bad at writing acrostic poems for years, so thank you for the opportunity...

**R**really worn out.

**E**ventually I'll be too old for it, though I never really will.

**B**ear. It's a bear.<sup>2</sup>

**E**xtremely unoriginal name.

**C**omforted me at night for years.

**C**ushy.

**A**pparently smells like me.



*CM: What's one way you could imagine using a brush in making an artwork, without using it to paint?*

**RS:** Basically all the hair I use in my “skin” pieces comes from paintbrushes—I'm very particular about that hair! It has to be tapered and brush hairs have been the best source for that so far! Plus they don't get tangled.

*CM: If you could alter human skin to be more like that of another animal, what would you change it to?*

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<sup>2</sup> (image) Boo-Boo, the bear

**RS:** You can't really see the skin of a lot of other animals—so definitely not a mammal or anything with fur or feathers. What I love so much about flesh is how varied it is in texture and color. It has so much depth to it, and holds so much tension while still remaining malleable... I guess I'd choose fish scales. They're absolutely gorgeous and have a lot of variety in texture, color, and depth as well.

*CM: What was the first work you made that you feel could still stand with your current body work?*

**RS:** Oh, my “candy / hot dog” piece<sup>3</sup>, for sure! Before that, I was making some really unfortunate, emotionally taxing work that never seemed to sit right with me. That piece was actually the first thing I made that I truly loved—that made people react viscerally and played with color and scent, as well as form. That piece gave me the confidence to take more risks in my practice and people's reactions to it were absolutely priceless.



*CM: How does gender and sexuality manifest itself in the aesthetic of natural decomposition referenced in some of your work?*

**RS:** This question automatically makes me think of the “drips” and “puddles” I've made in certain sculptures, so I'll discuss that. The drips are often intended to connote the residual awkwardness of inhabiting a body: the waste and excess that we create simply by... being. Usually, if the drips aren't taking their cues from some kind of seminal fluid, they refer to grooming products—which are often kept private and are very gendered things. I like to focus on pairing what is gross and awkward in the body with something hypersexualized (this is something most people don't realize about my work) because that is very much what life feels like for me as a bigger woman. If my body isn't labeled as disgusting, it's labeled as lewd, often more so than less curvy bodies. I want to cope with that in my practice—to work myself through it, but I never want it to feel super obvious, and try to avoid becoming limited overtly by gender and narrative. Instead, I take all those personal experiences and concepts and pare them down until they are just a drip or a puddle.

*CM: How serious or satirical would you categorize your use of pink tulle?*

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<sup>3</sup>(Image) *Hot Dog (Cinnamon)*, 2014. Cast cinnamon hard candy, ketchup, and ceramic. 10 x 10 x 3 inches.



**RS:** Usually, when I'm employing the color pink, it's in reference to the body—to blush or to orifices—before anything else. Pink, as a gendered color isn't a real thing, or if it is, I think it shouldn't be. That division feels silly to me and isn't something I want to contribute to in my work. Any color is for anybody, so when I use pink it is meant neither as a serious statement, nor as something mocking pink and what it represents culturally. I guess it's somewhere in between levity and gravity—especially since I'm drawn to the color because of my own personal narrative. In spite of how much I want to avoid a topic like the politics of pink, I'm partial to a certain peachy color and can't resist using it in a lot of my work. At least part of its appeal is that it looks like me, considering I use my body as reference for my pieces frequently. I think I'm also interested in it because of my upbringing as a dancer.<sup>4</sup> I did ballet for most of my formative years and it really had an impact on me and my relationship with the body. My love for that peach—a color my mom calls "ballet pink"—and using tulle is probably leftover from the remnants of that past life creeping back into my current practice.

**CM:** *What is a material you are dreaming of working with, but haven't had the opportunity yet?*

**RS:** Weirdly enough—air. I kind of have this pipe dream installation piece that I would love to one day create (if I have the space and the budget) that incorporates the manipulation of the air in a room as a means of stimulating the senses in a subtle, yet wholly immersive way. It's the largest piece I've ever conceived and I don't think it will be easy to realize, but I have my fingers crossed and the rest of my life to work towards it. So, I guess we'll see!

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<sup>4</sup> (Image) Salmon studying ballet, age 12