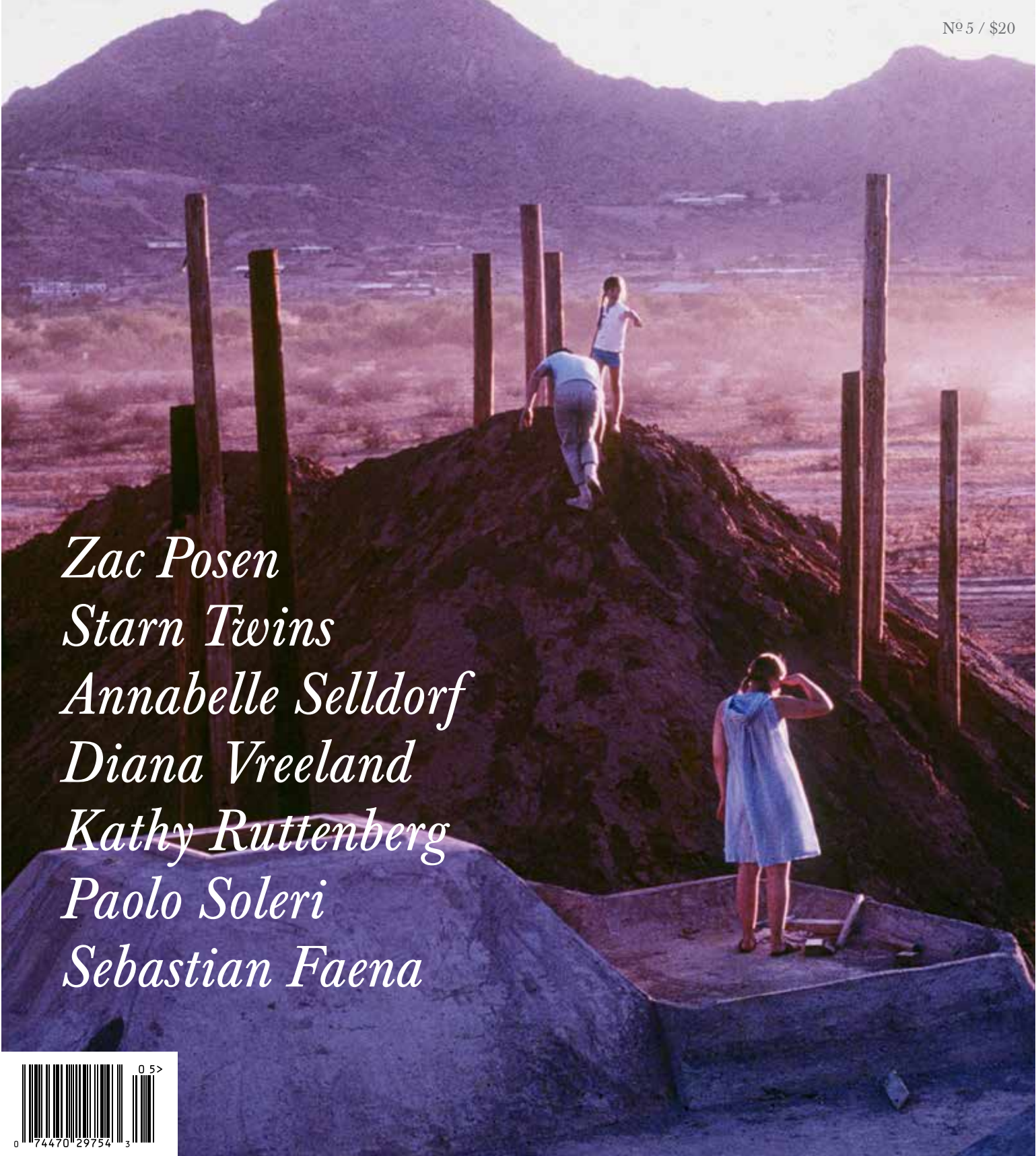


CREATIVE LIVES IN PRIVATE LANDSCAPES

UpstateDiary

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Zac Posen
Starn Twins
Annabelle Selldorf
Diana Vreeland
Kathy Ruttenberg
Paolo Soleri
Sebastian Faena



Soleri and his family standing on the earth mound formed for the Pool Canopy at Cosanti, 1973. Photo by Annette Del Zoppo.

A woman with red hair, wearing a grey coat, a grey hat, and red rubber boots, is walking a small black pig on a leash. They are in a grassy field with a wooden fence and trees in the background. The pig is wearing a harness and has a small white flower on its head. The woman is holding the leash in her right hand. The background shows a blue house and a forested hill.

A trip through the looking glass

We each create our own worlds. And when introduced to one as fascinating as Kathy Ruttenberg's, you could easily spend a lifetime trying to interpret it. One's senses can't help but be immediately exhilarated; there's an overwhelming sense that you've left reality behind and taken a trip through the looking glass.

By Chris Hartman Photos by Guzman



Top: Greenhouse with *The Enchanted Forest*, '00, in the foreground. Above: *Escape*, '01 among other works.

Top, left to right: In the ceramics studio: *Wet*, '17, in foreground and *Feeling the Wind* in background. A study for a monumental work-in-progress of a deer man holding a mermaid in bowl. Woman's legs belong to a work-in-progress (as yet untitled). Ruttenberg in mask with *In Sync* (for Broadway Malls) work in progress.

S naking along a winding road to her bucolic residence on a mountain ridge, you begin to notice some of the trademarks of Ruttenberg’s world: horses, pigs, owls and cats and the lovingly maintained pens housing her menagerie of pets, her confidantes and source of inspiration; as well as the beautifully painted sculptures of men and women adorning the tops of fence posts, her home and its roof. In some ways, it is reminiscent of the Federal-era Massachusetts estate of “Lord” Timothy Dexter, who perched statues of lauded historical figures (Napoleon, Admiral Nelson, George Washington, etc.), atop the wall surrounding his home.

Ruttenberg is a lively and affable presence; flashing a broad smile and dressed in an artist’s smock, vintage glasses and a colorful tam set at a provocative angle above her long, dark red hair. Entering her studio – a cheery and well-lit space – you’re treated to a breathtaking view of the mountain through a large plate-glass window. One side of the room includes a table that reveals old coffee cans filled with paintbrushes standing at attention, and seemingly every surface is occupied with sculptures in various states of completion the walls covered with her watercolors and glazes.

Asked about the similarities of her world to the one portrayed in *Alice in Wonderland*, Ruttenberg asserts, “I’m living it, I’m writing my own Alice ... it’s just that everything has its own spirit and its own life and so I’m very influenced by each animal or each plant. I walk through the woods and my hair will catch on a branch and I feel like the tree is stopping me and wanting me to acknowledge it. Everything has its spirit and I’m really sensing that.”

Noticing her kiln and the sculptures of flora and fauna that serve as her daily companions, it’s apparent that clay plays a significant role in her career and her life. She’s been working with the medium for over fifteen years and admits that it rescued her at what was a precarious period in her life. In effect, the kiln allowed her to start a new life in a more rural setting. Ruttenberg reminisces, “When I started working with clay, it seemed to be telling me what to make. As I say this, a shiver just went through me... I had been living in New York City doing paintings of dark entryways... and the clay literally created its own story. The evolution of that has been really magnificent and every experience that I’ve encountered in my life; clay expresses it somehow.” She then added that, before clay came into her life, she had different rural and urban artistic styles separated by the hundred or so miles

between her city and country studios. According to Ruttenberg, every day her experiences in this mountain sanctuary are rich. (Her daily routine during the summer includes an early morning swim, feeding the animals and then heading to the studio). She says, “Visually, emotionally, and mythologically, it’s so powerful here. Every time I see a bear, it’s when something amazing is happening in my life. It just kind of represents raw power to me. Every time.”

Her affection for animals featured often in her sculpture in both literal and anthropomorphic interpretations has been a key element in her art. “I’m a friend of the Wildlife Conservation Society and they wanted me to do a sculpture in the Children’s Zoo in Central Park. They said I could go there and figure out which animal I wanted to do. So I was hanging out with the goats and I thought, ‘Oh my god! These animals are so amazing!’ So I got a couple of goats and, of course, once you have something living and for which you are responsible, you can’t go back.” One of her pigs lives on the first floor of her home in her own little cubby (complete with her own art collection on the walls).

For Ruttenberg, animals are not only friends and family, but also her muses. “I really learn a lot about the cycle of life through an animal’s eyes... there’s always some explanation of some bad behavior. I find that really, really so interesting. I think my relationship with animals gives me more empathy for people.” The beasts of the world have also permeated her aesthetic. Much of her sculpture is informed by mythology: Minotaurs, both shirtless and in proper suits; mermaids and Sirens reminiscent of magnificent ship figureheads of the masted-ship era; women with the heads of unicorns; and men with bird and stag heads. This half-man, half-beast theme, often near various forms of flora, dominates her studio space accompanied by the occasional flower with a glazed human face surrounded by metallic petals.

When asked if she considered her sculptures as humans transmuting into nature or vice-versa, she was contemplative. “That’s so interesting. I hadn’t really focused on that. It’s a lot like *Fertile Ground*. Do you know that piece, a woman lying in the earth with all the leaves and rocks and everything all over her? It asks, is she going to decay... or is she going to stay there? I hadn’t really thought about what’s next.”

And though Ruttenberg’s animals are her muses, she confesses that they are an enormous responsibility. She also considers

the animals her family, providing some needed grounding because, as she adds, “I could just lose the earth otherwise. I feel like the animals really keep me real. You could be feeling really on top of the world, really arrogant, and then the cat pisses on the rug.”

All around Ruttenberg’s studio are studies for larger works, including six sculptures for a forthcoming (Spring 2018) installation, *Kathy Ruttenberg on Broadway: In Dreams Awake*, in New York City, for the Broadway Mall Association. There is also a study of her iconic sculpture *Ice Age* (2014). Its imagery includes a Siren out of Homer’s *Odyssey*, and a chained whale’s tail, which conjures in the mind’s eye a scene from *Moby Dick*. Ruttenberg visited Antarctica about five years ago and the experience was life changing for her. But it all began with a hot summer in upstate New York. She was desperate. “I said to myself, ‘Whoa! I’ve got to get out of here. Where is the coldest place in the world I can go?’ So I booked Antarctica and, as the trip was approaching, I thought, ‘Oh my God! What am I doing?’”

She sailed on a Russian vessel from Argentina, and en route to and from Antarctica, filled her watercolor album with renderings of the awe-inspiring landscape. Her photos and artwork from that trip, along with those from a later trek to the Arctic, were published in her book *Bipolar* (2015). As she has done since the beginning of her career, Ruttenberg spends a few hours of quiet time each night working on watercolors. “I do really think they are just so idea-rendering. I have hundreds of those little notebooks. You see the little spiral notebooks? I look through them and I get so inspired. Any one of them could become a body of work.”

Recalling another of her nautical installations, *Amphitrite* (2015), she confessed a fascination with kinetic sculpture. And with respect to another of her works in progress in the studio, “I did not show it to the photographers [for *The Nature of the Beast*] because it’s something I’m working on where I have a base in parts and it’s moving. In one sculpture I have a woman looking through a tree while she spins amidst clay islands. It’s similar to the approach I took with *Ice Age*.”

Ruttenberg attended a ballet recently that inspired her to visualize a ballet based on her world. One thinks of Puck and Bottom from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and imagines people as trees, and women with rabbit heads dancing about a forest in floral skirts. The way she tells it:

“How much fun it is to play with that theme, including instinct, sexuality, and nature: so



A study for *Topsy Turvey* (to be included in upcoming Broadway Malls installation)



Ruttenberg touching *Again*, '08



*“Imagination is the only weapon
in the war against reality.”*

–The Cheshire Cat, Alice in Wonderland.

Top, left to right: In her bedroom with one of her lampshades. A stroll with Trixie, the pig, amongst *Dog Breeds* (Cairn, Norwich, Norfolk), '03, ongoing. Roulette, the dog, and Dakota, the horse, with Kathy next to *Big Dog Girl*, '02.



Top to bottom: *Young Love*, '12. In the studio with *In Sync*, a work in progress for the Broadway Malls exhibition. Kathy in her garden between *Again*, '08.

much of what animal life is based on. As in my current work, dresses are a canvas to tell a story... It would start with a storm and then curtains would lift up and be semi-transparent. I then see a forest where the deer man meets the tree... and this whole dance that he does around this tree, and all the other trees in the forest will be stagnant because they will be on curtains. She will be the only tree – she's alive. The others will be just representations. The deer man does a dance around the tree and then a pack of coyotes chases him off... and on it goes."

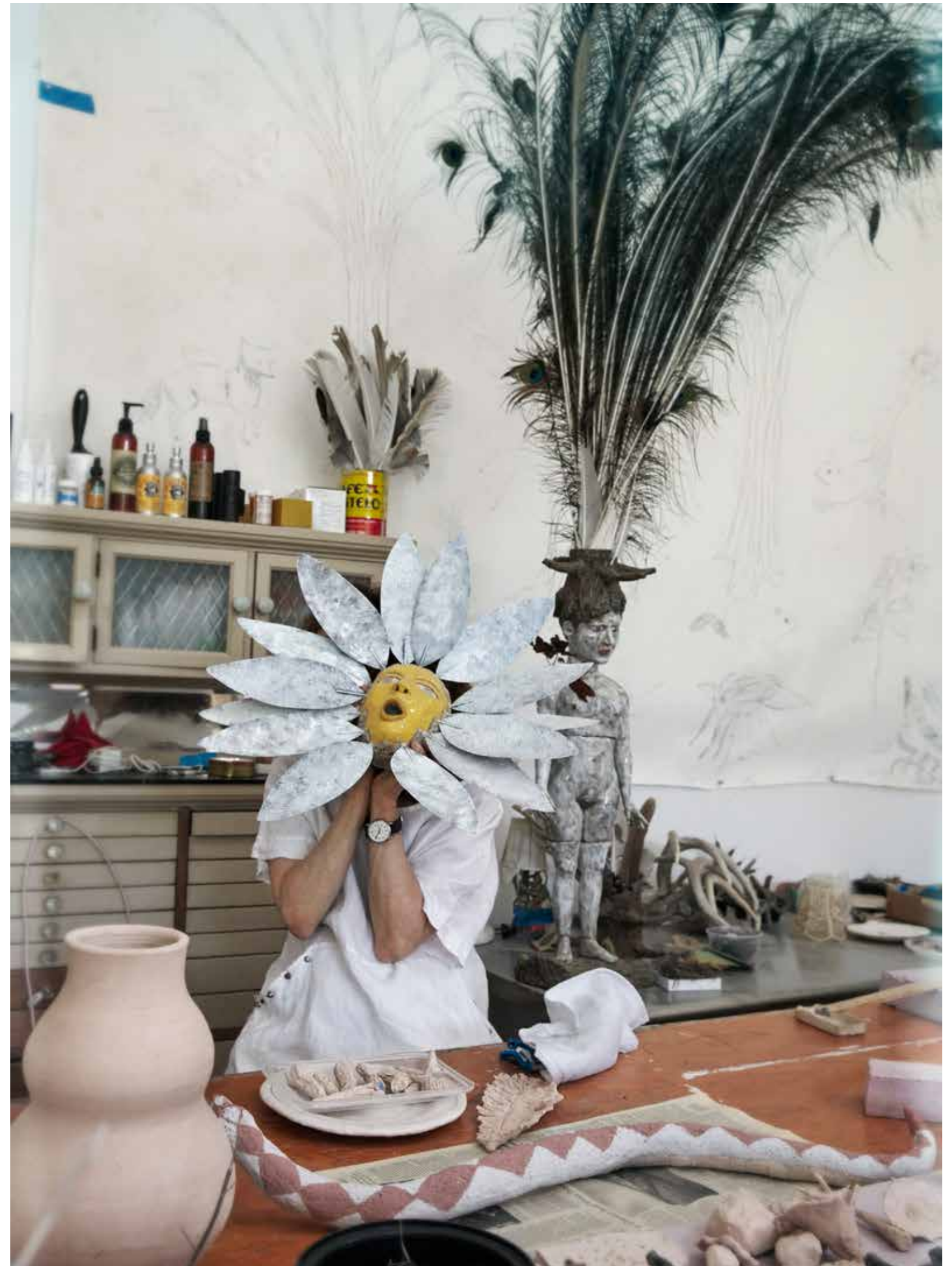
Asked about her relationship with her mother, the artist Janet Ruttenberg, Kathy said that she tried so hard for so long to be as different from her as she possibly could, "and now, I just I want to grow up to be like my mother." When Kathy started making her own art as a profession, her mother commented, "Oh, it's very difficult and I don't really think that's a good idea." But eventually, she became very encouraging, even as she didn't really fully understand her daughter's work. That encouragement has since grown into a profound respect for each other's work and vision, even as there is a healthy competitiveness between them.

Ruttenberg's home is also filled with her creations: the dining room and kitchen feature magnificent chandeliers of women with diaphanous white paper dresses; and a bedroom, which reveals a wallpaper made from her pencil drawings, contains a house for her two white angora rabbits. That room is also furnished with a combination of a few outstanding vintage animal pieces and her own sculptures. Floating above the bed is a translucent rendering of a woman illuminated by miniature white lights resembling a constellation.

When she first arrived here, she felt somewhat isolated. "Living here has been such an interesting process for me; immersed in nature, working with clay and metal. I really had to learn to appreciate my own company... and that has been such a growing process. I have learned so much about myself." Ruttenberg's keen sensibility about adapting to this pastoral landscape has helped to broaden her artistic vision, but, she adds, "I do find that... I'm so out of practice with people, I'm going to have to get back... I think Broadway Malls will bring me back into the light a little bit."

Chris Hartman is a regular contributor for Upstate Diary.

Guzman are internationally known for their sophisticated and eccentric photographs.



Ruttenberg in her studio with *Flower* from *Amphitrite* installation, '15.