

Endless possibilities

Artist connects with clay, tile to form beautiful pieces of sculpture

Jill Ruhlman's world is filled with fantastic women, juggling impossible demands, taking huge risks, celebrating life and watching over one another. The women are strong, playful, adventurous and caring.

"They are very physical, dancing, leaping, jumping, flying and exploring," said Ruhlman, an Atlanta artist whose work often expresses themes of women's strength, mystery and friendships.

A dancer herself, she forms clay figures into pieces that seem ready to leap, pirouette or back flip right into the coffee mug.

Ruhlman will exhibit some of her latest creations at the American Craft Council Atlanta Show at the Georgia World Congress Center in March. The council is a national, nonprofit organization that stages juried shows featuring America's top craft artists.

Her Black and White series employs the precise touch of "scraffito" (Italian for "scratch"). She paints a black clay slip over the white clay body and then carves through to create expressions, texture, forms and patterns.

Recently, she also has become interested in the craft of tiles. Her bathroom tile is handmade, with ethnically diverse mermaids protruding from various parts of the installation. Ruhlman is putting her own spin on Italian tiles, creating intricate, colorful patterns for tabletops, backsplashes and trim.

The mosaics inform some of her sculpture. Broken pieces (some deliberately sun-dried) peer out of a series of pots, creating a clay quilt of the fractured yet beautiful pieces of life held together by powerful forces.

Ruhlman grew up in the tiny town of Miller, Neb. She graduated from Westmar College in Iowa, served with the Peace Corps



Atlanta artist Jill Ruhlman's clay figures capture the strength and dexterity of the human form, but she also recently has become interested in the craft of tiles.



PHOTOS/JOANN VITELLI

in the Philippines and worked as a special education teacher in Florida. To relieve the stress, she took up pottery and advanced her craft with three years of study at the Penland School of Crafts in the Blue Ridge Mountains in North Carolina.

She worked out of her grandparents'

home in Candler Park for years. Now, she lives in Druid Hills, in a home big enough for her partner and 7-year-old triplets, with the studio in the unfinished basement.

Once a week, she turns her studio into a creativity classroom, encouraging students, mostly professional women, to experiment with clay, painting, pastels, collage, mosaics and other media until they find the art form that clicks. She also gives one-on-one creativity consulting, helping people express their own imagination.

"It is exciting to see people create," Ruhlman said.

— Jan Costello

JUST THE FACTS

If you can't wait for the American Craft Council (ACC) Atlanta Show, you can see Jill Ruhlman's work at www.jillruhlman.com or at The Signature Shop & Gallery in Buckhead at 3267 Roswell Road N.W.; (404) 237-4426.

The 17th annual ACC Atlanta Show is March 10-12 at the Georgia World Congress Center.

For more information and discount coupons, visit www.craftcouncil.org/atlanta.