



*Reverie of Memory:
Grace of Luminous Time*

*Reverie of Memory:
Present in Past Moments*



Brenna Busse

by Ricë Freeman-Zachery

Brenna Busse came to art as an adult, years after a middle school art teacher had told her, bluntly, that she had no talent, and at the tail end of an unhappy early adulthood. Her life had finally settled into a good place, and she had found her creative footing, rediscovering an interest in art that had been quashed. Reclaiming her life and her creativity, Brenna began to make. “As I see it, art saved my life,” she says. “My 20s were painful years of depression — destructive behavior manifesting in an obsessive eating disorder. When I knew I needed to change my life, art appeared as a place to transform that negative energy, a kind of safe place to be obsessive.”

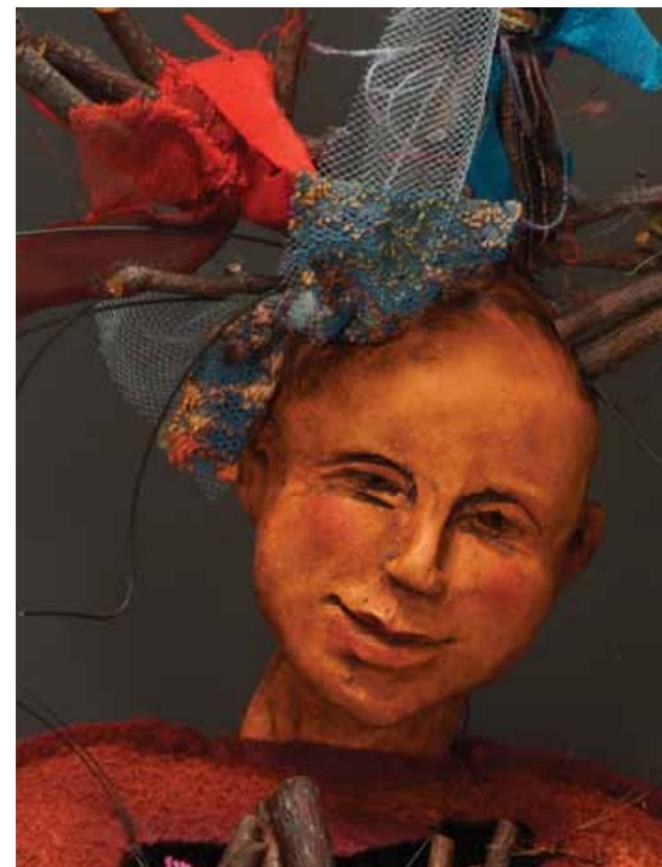
She created large painted quilts and baskets, mixing fiber work with acrylic paint and exploring the wide world of feminist art. She joined WARM, Women’s Art Resources of Minnesota, in her hometown of Minneapolis, and began working on the process of healing. She went back to school and finished her degree, with a focus on studio art, women’s studies, and family social science. And then, in her 30s, in “a sweet relationship,” Brenna knew she wanted to become pregnant. With joyful intention, she sat down and created a fertility doll. She had no idea that there was any such thing as an art doll world or even any other adults who made dolls. It didn’t matter. It wasn’t about that. Brenna explains, “My first doll was a prayer for a child. I was aware of women’s traditions and world cultures that created fertility images. So I made my version of one to focus that energy and desire.” It was all about that positive, hopeful energy, so the doll →



itself was raw and simple. “I started with green velvet, and stitched a simple face, and bunched the fabric into a body. Then I just wrapped threads and torn fabric strips, and wrapped and wrapped until the body had some form. I put it under my pillow.” And it worked. That first little doll fulfilled its purpose perfectly. “When I became pregnant, of course, I kept making dolls, manifesting outward the creative energy that was happening inward — a quintessential metaphor, and the beginning of an ongoing intuitive relationship between my art and my life that continues today, 29 years later.”

She explains, “As I created these dolls for personal expression, it felt like a calling, [like] many parts of my life converging to make these pieces that had to be made.” At first, Brenna was making dolls just for the enjoyment of making, but it wasn't long before others began to notice her work. She remembers, “When my daughter, Antara, was about a year old, I had all of these dolls that I had been making just for the sheer joy and love of the form. I worked small, lots of fiber and handwork that I could do during her nap time. I don't even remember how this store owner found me. She came to our home and gathered up a lot of that work for her store opening. Two days later, she called me and asked for more. She had sold them all!”

Encouraged, Brenna began making work for galleries, and then she discovered the world of art festivals, which have proved to be perfect for her: she can spend most of her time working at home and then, about a dozen times a year, take her work to a show and meet the people who connect with what she's created. Although her work has changed considerably over the years, the figures still resonate with viewers in a deep, personal way. Early on, the figures were mostly about fabric and mixed-media. Brenna explains, “The bodies were usually constructed with fabric — sewn and stuffed — and then embellished with materials such as rusty metal, shredded money, balloons, bubble wrap, zippers, buttons, wire, keys, rocks, seed pods, dried tea bags, nails, beads, needle felting, puzzle pieces, broken jewelry, driftwood, sea glass, braided or bundled fabrics. . . .” She laughs when she thinks of how thoroughly she embraced the concept of mixed-media, but she adds, “Each of these materials would be in service to the metaphor, somehow relating to our human condition.” One figure was covered with pieces of rusted metal that Brenna wired into the soft cloth body until the surface was completely hidden. ➔





*Reverie of Memory:
Glimpses/Fragments, Falling Away*



“That became a metaphor for aging,” she explains. “The metal no longer functioned with smoothness, but the patina of rust gave a rich color and beauty.”

For a long time, the figures were about the body, in all its forms. “Healing from an addiction about body image, I made and remade bodies — all kinds and shapes with a plethora of materials. As an ardent feminist and new mother of a daughter, the dolls I made were all female. They showed a broader range of womanhood other than surface beauty — they were funny-looking, whimsical, wise, spiritual, complicated, etc. It was a heady time of making for me.”

Over the decades she has been creating the figures, Brenna has experimented with a variety of materials and refined and honed her techniques. All of them are designed to be hung on the wall, but while her earlier figures were often quite large, up to 36 inches tall, her current work is smaller, something that happened organically as she turned more toward clay. These new pieces have been embraced by her collectors, and that is, of course, gratifying. “That is the most beautiful thing about doing art fairs. You get to see what people see when they’re moved, when they totally get what you’re doing, and then they get to buy it if they want. Then they ➔



doll artist Profile

come back a year later and tell me what it's like to live with this piece. This feels like a gift."

All along, there has been a shifting balance between the fiber and fabric and clay, sometimes with more of one and sometimes more of the other. As she's simplified her life and work, and downsized the scale of her figures, Brenna has found that the clay seems to be taking over in a way she didn't consciously plan. "I'm surprised," she admits. "It's a totally different process, of course. It's like playing in the mud! There's an immediacy of creating an entire figure that I didn't have before. I would just make heads and hands and feet, and I would do a kiln-load and all of these pieces would come out, and there was the complicated journey of looking at this set of little hands and feet. In my search for simplicity, I wanted to just make a figure all together."

This search began a couple of years ago, affecting all areas of Brenna's life, and she began practicing mindfulness meditation. "This change started after the death of my dear younger sister, Janet. At her death — and for months after — a cardinal would appear, with insistent song and

bright color. Five months after her death, in the early morning hours of her 60th birthday, she came to me in a vision, like a waking dream. Among assurances of love and company, she showed me images to make." Brenna and Janet had always been close, and the comfort of feeling her sister's continuing presence and support manifested itself in Brenna's current work. "So I began what I call the Messenger/Message series," she says. "The figures always include a bird — or several. A couple of their limbs may be tree branches, or they have hands that cradle a bird, or an egg, or are open to welcome, or let go. There is a new simplicity and spirit to this work that I cherish, that touches me and also others who have seen it." She laughs about putting birds in her work, saying that while the appearance of birds after Janet's death was very real and very moving, she knew that including birds in work was kind of a cliché, something that artists would tell each other: "Oh, put a bird on it; it'll sell." But she couldn't ignore what was calling her, and the presence of the birds balanced and gave company to what had until then been solitary figures. ➔

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*Messenger/Message
Hold Safe, the Miracle*





*Messenger/Message:
Meet all, With Love*

*Messenger/Message:
Dare to Dream*



When Brenna looks back at the darker pieces she created during those early years of healing herself, she can see the obvious difference not only in the figures themselves but also in the creative force behind their genesis. “I think I’m not in the same place. I feel like I am creating from a place of joy. I don’t have the same dark, destructive images or feelings toward myself, and I feel like, even with the death of my sister, although I miss her — I also just know that she’s still here. I feel her, I see her. I think it’s coming to terms with change and with life changes. Today, I want to be joyful, and I am. My choice is to be joyful and to create from there, and to share it.”

Brenna Busse lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. You can see more of her work and check out her art fair schedule at brennabusse.com. Visit her Etsy shop at brennabusseart.etsy.com.

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