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Grace Sheese on a Career in Art and Her Exhibit, Red Thread

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Laura Kennedy: In Grace Sheese's artwork, rabbits, squirrels, and other animals cavort 'round ceramic cups. Yet, under the whimsy, the artist has a powerful message about connection to share. Her new show is called "Red Thread" and is currently up at the Wakeley Gallery at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington. She says ceramic cups are perched on small shelves jutting from the wall and each is connected to a strand of red thread that runs from cup to cup, occasionally snarling, but always connecting. After falling in love with ceramics in college, she's pursued a career in teaching. She teaches ceramics at IWU and also teaches at Bloom Community School. But in her mid-thirties, she began to feel the pull of the studio. Teaching was no longer enough for her, so she flipped roles, becoming a student again in pursuit of a Master's Degree and a dream to become an artist.

Grace Sheese: It was a huge decision but I realized that I was getting really bored with my work and I was finding things to do like laundry, and doing the dishes...and it was my dream to be a full time potter and it felt really silly that I was avoiding it all the time and so it either had to change or I had to do something else. And so...um I decided to go to school and see if I can rekindle that love I had for...for clay. And it was also a really interesting time in my life because I had my son at the end of my first year—

Narrator: Wait a minute—you were studying for your Master's Degree and then you had a baby?

Sheese: --I did. Yep.

Kennedy: Boy, you just did it all at once.

[Sheese laughs]

Sheese: Yes.

Kennedy: So speaking of your son, actually he inspires and influences some of the vessels that you create. Can you tell me about that?

Sheese: he does...uh I had a series of work that I did at one point called "Grayson Draws" because one day I was looking at his drawings and I thought these...these drawings are...they're just wonderful and the stories that he tells with them were in line with a lot of stories that I think about and sometimes I try to tell in my work. And the other thing is...is often times he's one of the first ones that gets my stories. So he'll come in the studio and he'll look at one of the pieces I'm working on he'll say "so what's happening?" and I'll say "well what do you think is happening?" and he a lot of times will understand oh this black cloud means this animal is upset. Yup. And then this animal did this thing because you know he was upset. Yup. And you know so he...he gets my stories....um and so I think a lot about that when I make my work. I think a lot about motherhood, because it has definitely been both a struggle and a rewarding experience to be a mom and one who is trying to figure out how to be a mom, a full time teacher, and a working artist and so I think a lot about those things and I think a lot about the

experience that I have with him and the things that he has me thinking about as like...such as what happens when he gets older and who am I as a person and how this little...right...this little guy that we created is reflecting me, the...the good parts and the parts that I could probably improve upon. And so I think about all of these things when I'm working and so...um so he inspires my work on lots of different levels.

Kennedy: So let's take a closer look at some of your work. And you mentioned animals, and there's animals everywhere on your vessels and there's a wonderful whimsical quality to them and there's text that you include along with these animals that you have painted on these ceramic cups.

Sheese: I chose animals very specifically because you know I think about how sometimes in...in a lot of stories...stories that have a moral...like sometimes fairytales and allegories, they're telling a story because there's a lesson to be learned or there's a really deep idea behind it. And I think that sometimes it's easier for us to think about those ideas if it's not so closely related to who we are and so I feel like if I put images of humans on my pieces it's a little harder for us to think about some of the deeper ideas that I'm trying to tell um behind these whimsical drawings...um—

Kennedy: And it looks like fun too!

Sheese: It is a lot of fun and I love uh children's books and so I have a collection that's just for my studio of artists that I...I love their drawings...um I feel like you can look at certain animals and we all have this—whether its real or not, this uh...idea behind...a...human traits, I guess behind these animals. I tend to think of rabbits for example as being really shy and maybe skittish...um and I think of squirrels as being more mischievous and really jumpy—

Kennedy: Yeah let's...let's look at this squirrel one over here where we have some text along with some uh squirrels—It looks like my backyard to be quite honest with you [Sheese laughs]...with all the squirrels back there. So what's going on with this uh...trio of squirrels on this vessel?

Sheese: Well uh so all the pieces here are inspired by real people in my life—

Kennedy: Do they know that?

Sheese: Actually they do...I...I've told everybody I believe—maybe...I...I think I told my parents. I figure they'd be okay because they're my parents.

Kennedy: And each of these vessels is connected by a red thread that is in fact the name of the show so tell me about the red thread and the animals and how it's connecting them.

Sheese: I was first encountered um...with this idea of a...a red thread through two...two things. And one is there's a singer songwriter by the name of Lucy Kaplansky and she had a uh an album out called "Red Thread" and so there's this idea that uh...it's a Chinese idea, that uh everybody we meet were connected by a symbolic red thread. And so a lot of people who—families who adopt children from...from Asia and from China in particular, um they talk... think about this as in we're...our families are now connected by this symbolic red thread and so even though your biological child may be on the

other side of the world we're still connected. And I just think that it's a really beautiful idea...um and so this idea has been sitting in the back of my head for a long time and so this show is really inspired by that idea and about how...my life is connected with these...by these people and we're all connected by these threads. And then I also think about how I have these different parts of my life. So um about three years ago—three and a half years ago I started going to the gym. There are an interesting group of people because I spent both a lot of time with them and not at all because we see each other at usually 5:15 in the morning and we spend an hour working out and then we go on with our regular lives. And then I have these group of three other women and I...we started Bloom Community School and our lives are really closely intertwined because I teach their children, what we work together to build this school, and all of a sudden our personal our professional lives became really entangled. And then I have my husband and my son and my family and then other friendships outside of who I am here in Bloomington-Normal. And so the idea of this show is how all of these people are connected or not but how I'm connected to all of them and so what I did is I tried to show the different types of relationships by the different types of thread represented here. Some of the threads are thinner...um some of the threads—

Kennedy: Some of them are darker.

Sheese: --they're a little darker. Some of them are um...have knots

Kennedy: There's knots, yeah.

Sheese: um because I feel like our relationship is really entangled. The thread between my husband and I are thicker and it has knots throughout because we've actually been together for twenty seven years and so we have smooth times, we have patchy times. And then I have really thick thread that connects my parents, and my sister and I together because we are bounded not just through being families but we are also bounded by blood. And so this squirrel piece that we're um...was looking at here...this is one of the actually instructors that um...I take classes from at Four Seasons. His name is David Vale. I take his Insanity classes and I also take his yoga classes. And um...and he...for me he's really influential because he was the first person I took classes from and I've never been to the gym, I was really really out of shape and I was really intimidated and he's a fantastic teacher. And so that's what you see here is that the squirrel is—

Kennedy: Oh, it's a squirrel doing yoga!

Sheese: yep. There's a move in insanity called x-jumps and so what it looks like is this squirrel is jumping down and then it turns into him doing yoga because David teaches both the Insanity classes and the yoga classes.

Kennedy: How do you feel that you connect with your viewers, with your audience, through ceramics?

Sheese: The...the pieces that I make are all...can be all functional and so I love the idea that—

Kennedy: You mean I can have coffee in one of these?

Sheese: Yep! You know you can wash them, they can go in the dishwasher and the ones that don't have metal in them you can put in...in the microwave. And so I do love this idea that people are using my work on a day to day basis. A lot of people will initially come up and say "oh these are so cute" and they're drawn by the whimsy of the pieces. You know I feel like I have a fairly uh...eclectic personality and I have a good sense of humor and so I am drawn to the whimsical things and so I think my work reflects that. My hope anyway is that if somebody takes a piece home and they're first drawn by the whimsy and then maybe after a while they'll start realizing that the drawings are organized in such a way that its meant to tell a story...um and then maybe overtime that story slowly reveals themselves and maybe even the story changes overtime, it...depending on how you feel or where you are in your life...the...the cups may...or in the...my other pieces could potentially talk to you in a way that...that is dynamic because it changes depending on who's using it, where you are in your life, what you're going through at the time.

Kennedy: That's artist, Grace Sheese. Her new show is called "Red Thread" and runs through October 22 at the Wakeley Gallery at Illinois Wesleyan University. A reception and artist talk will be held at 2pm on Saturday at the Wakeley Gallery. I'm Laura Kennedy.