



SMART MUSEUM OF ART
THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Ruth Duckworth: Life as a Unity

September 21, 2023–February 4, 2024 | Public reception Thursday, September 21, 6:30–8:30 pm

Major exhibition offers new perspectives on “sculptor in clay” Ruth Duckworth across her nearly half-century-long career in Chicago



The Smart Museum of Art presents the first monographic museum exhibition devoted to Ruth Duckworth in nearly twenty years, foregrounding the artist's sculptural production across a prolific period in Chicago and at the University of Chicago. *Ruth Duckworth: Life as a Unity* (September 21, 2023–February 4, 2024) brings together a diverse array of nearly sixty objects made between 1966 and 2005—earthy vessels, large-scale clay-tile murals in high relief, bird-like stoneware figures, and nearly translucent porcelain sculptures—and traces the influence of geomorphology and the nascent environmental movement across Duckworth's work.

“Like many women working in craft media at mid-century, Ruth Duckworth did not receive the critical consideration her work merits,” said Laura Steward, Curator of Public Art. “This exhibition and accompanying catalogue are the result of the growth of ‘eco-criticism’ in the field of art history. This novel critical framework allows us to center the artist's relationship with the natural world, which in Duckworth's case was profoundly influenced by the ‘Satellite Era’ and her engagement with the geophysical sciences at UChicago.”

Life as a Unity also marks the arrival of Duckworth's *Clouds Over Lake Michigan* to its new home in the first floor reading room of the University's Joseph Regenstein Library. This monumental, 240-square-foot, 1976 ceramic slab wall sculpture is a recent gift of Cboe Global Markets and was a fixture of the Cboe headquarters in Chicago's Loop for decades.

“Libraries like Regenstein are simultaneously places for intense study and research, as well as sources of inspiration and community,” said Torsten Reimer, University Librarian and Dean of the University Library. “The creation of knowledge and the inspiration of art have always been closely

linked, and we are delighted to highlight this connection by displaying Ruth Duckworth's *Clouds Over Lake Michigan* prominently at the entrance of the Regenstein Library. We are also pleased to know that the archives of the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center proved useful to the creators of the Smart Museum exhibition as they were researching Duckworth's connections to UChicago."

On campus, *Clouds Over Lake Michigan* joins *Earth, Water, Sky*, from 1968, an environment in clay that covers four walls and the ceiling of the foyer of the Henry Hinds Laboratory for Geophysical Sciences. Both works will be accessible to the public throughout the exhibition, and beyond.

"The Smart is honored to present *Life as a Unity*, celebrating Ruth Duckworth's expansive life, career, and deep connections to Chicago and the University," said Vanja Malloy, Dana Feitler Director of the Smart Museum of Art. "This exhibition reintroduces Duckworth as a critical and compelling visual artist and reexamines her practice and research through interdisciplinary scholarship. Duckworth's impact can be seen and experienced in every aspect of this presentation: from partnership opportunities with UChicago students and colleagues, to programming that engages the community, and in the public installations of the artist's work across campus. As the Smart approaches its fiftieth year, it is important that we share and reflect on the significant history and cultural exchange at UChicago and the Museum itself. *Life as a Unity* embodies the Smart's mission, as well as its vision for the future."

Life as a Unity features several objects on loan from close friends of the artist that have never been publicly exhibited. Other objects are on public view for the first time in decades, including a 1974 ceramic wall relief from the Smart's collection. The exhibition also presents other more well-known works in new contexts, such as the mural *Clouds Over Illinois* (1985), which was on permanent display in the State of Illinois James R. Thompson Center prior to the building's sale last year.

About the exhibition

"I think of life as a unity. This includes mountains, mice, rocks, trees, women, and men. It's all one big lump of clay."
—Ruth Duckworth

When Ruth Duckworth arrived in Chicago from London to teach at the University of Chicago's Midway Studios in 1964, she planned to stay for a year. Instead, she lived in the city for nearly fifty years until her death in 2009—half her life. It is strange, then, that she is still primarily known as a "British studio potter," rather than as an innovative Chicago sculptor, deeply engaged in the natural world and responding to artistic developments in the United States in the 1960s and 70s.

This monographic exhibition makes use of art historical advances of the last several decades to examine Duckworth's Chicago work in a new light. Duckworth referred to herself not as a potter or ceramicist, but as a sculptor with clay. The exhibition takes her at her word, foregrounding her

sculptural practice, fascination with geomorphology, and contemplation of the interconnectedness of nature.



The exhibition begins with a presentation of nearly thirty works across a series of gently curving tiered platforms in a large central gallery. Combined on these open-air plinths are varying sculptures made between the 1960s and 2000s: spherical *Mama Pots* with fractured surfaces, tall abstract forms in stoneware, and other clay objects. Large-scale murals and wall sculptures are presented throughout, highlighting reoccurring geological and meteorological motifs and showcasing the influence of geomorphology on Duckworth's overall practice. Another section of the exhibition is dedicated to a series of small, pristine "cups and blades," which the artist returned to at different points in her career.

As a coda, the exhibition also presents archival material that documents the dawn of the Satellite Era, the emergence of a more unified approach to the natural sciences, and the new environmental perspectives and activism of the 1960s. Through archival materials from the Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center at the University of Chicago Library and other sources, it connects Duckworth to key figures at the University of Chicago and Hyde Park, such as Professor of Meteorology Tetsuya "Ted" Fujita, whose photographs of clouds the artist first encountered when working on the commission *Earth, Water, Sky*; Martyl Langsdorf, who designed the iconic Doomsday Clock for the Bulletin of Atomic Scientists; and Laura Fermi, who founded the Hyde Park Committee for Cleaner Air.

The 58 objects featured in the exhibition are drawn from public and private collections in the Midwest, including the Smart Museum of Art, the Illinois State Museum, the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, the Racine Art Museum, and the Schweikher House and Studio, as well as the artist's estate.

Life as a Unity is the first exhibition devoted to Duckworth since the 2005 touring retrospective *Ruth Duckworth: Modernist Sculptor*.

About the artist

Born in Hamburg, Germany in 1919, Ruth Windmüller Duckworth fled to England in 1936, where she built a career as a ceramicist during the post-war period. As a young artist in the 1940s and 50s, she struggled like so many others, working as a tombstone cutter, button-maker, and puppeteer,



trying several art schools before finally graduating from the Central School of Arts and Crafts.

In 1964 at the invitation of the University of Chicago, Duckworth immigrated to the U.S. to teach ceramics at Midway Studios. In 1966, she had her first solo exhibition in the U.S. at the Renaissance Society, where she attracted the attention of Julian Goldsmith, Dean of Geophysical Sciences. Goldsmith, an avid collector of pre-Columbian ceramics, commissioned Duckworth to create a ceramic installation for the Hinds Geophysical Laboratory, then under construction. This experience had a profound impact on the artist throughout her long career.

She died in Chicago in 2009, at the age of 90, having significantly expanded the possibilities of her chosen medium.

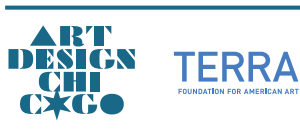
Related public programs

In conjunction with the exhibition, the Smart Museum presents a series of free programs, from tours, kiln crawls, and musical performances to family days and scholarly talks featuring faculty from UChicago's Department of Geophysical Sciences and the Divinity School. A complete schedule of programs will be posted online at smartmuseum.uchicago.edu/calendar.

In Chicago

Ruth Duckworth: Life as a Unity is part of [Art Design Chicago](#), a citywide collaboration initiated by the Terra Foundation for American Art that highlights the city's artistic heritage and creative communities.

In the lead up to the exhibition, participants in the Smart Museum's 2023 summer teen program, offered in partnership with the Chicago Housing Authority, are working with teaching artist and Art Design Chicago Engagement Fellow Kahari Blackburn on a capstone project to engage with and map the Chicago ceramics community. The cohort will create materials charting the network of kilns around the city, for inclusion in the exhibition.



On campus

The exhibition draws on research conducted as part of the UChicago course “Ruth Duckworth and Ceramics in Chicago,” taught by exhibition curator Laura Steward in winter 2021.

Visitors to *Life as a Unity* at the Smart Museum are invited to experience Duckworth’s two large-scale installations that are part of the UChicago collection of public art:

Clouds Over Lake Michigan

Joseph Regenstein Library, 1st floor reading room
1100 E. 57th Street

- Coming soon—visitors are welcome and may get a visitor pass to the University of Chicago Library to view this work by checking in at Regenstein Library’s entry desk.
- Prior to visiting, check the Library’s current hours at hours.lib.uchicago.edu

Earth, Water, Sky

Henry Hinds Laboratory for Geophysical Sciences, foyer
5734 S. Ellis Avenue

- Building hours: Monday–Friday, 8 am–5 pm

Related publication

The exhibition’s catalogue explores Duckworth through the lens of eco-criticism and other art historical approaches that offer an expanded understanding of the artist’s body of work. Fully illustrated with images of all the works in the exhibition, including new documentation of the recently reinstalled public mural *Clouds Over Lake Michigan*, the publication features an introduction by exhibition curator Laura Steward with essays and other contributions from Abigail Winograd, Jack Schneider, and Kendra Thornburgh-Mueller. The catalogue is published by [Radius Books](#) and will be available in fall 2023.

About

Ruth Duckworth: Life as a Unity is curated by Laura Steward, Curator of Public Art. This exhibition is funded by the Terra Foundation for American Art. Major support has been provided by Cboe Global Markets. Additional support has been provided by an anonymous donor.



The exhibition is presented in the Presented in the Robert and Joan Feitler Gallery and the Joel and Carole Bernstein Gallery.

#

Images

Ruth Duckworth, *Untitled (Mama Pot)*, 1975, Stoneware, 18 x 21 x 23 inches, Courtesy of the Estate of Ruth Duckworth and Salon 94. © Estate of Ruth Duckworth.

Ruth Duckworth, *Untitled*, 1990, Porcelain, 9 x 8-1/2 x 8-1/2 inches, Collection of Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art. © Estate of Ruth Duckworth.

Ruth Duckworth, *Earth, Water, Sky*, 1967–1968, Ceramic mural, 400 square feet, covering four walls and the ceiling, Located in the entrance to the Henry Hinds Laboratory for Geophysical Sciences, The University of Chicago, Presented to the University in honor of Jane H. Sherr by the Leonard J. Horwich Family. Photo by Michael Tropea. © Estate of Ruth Duckworth.

Ruth Duckworth, *Untitled*, 1972, Stoneware, 17-1/4 x 19 x 3 inches, Smart Museum of Art, The University of Chicago, Gift of Margaret Fisher, 1967.24. © Estate of Ruth Duckworth.

Ruth Duckworth, *Untitled* (wall sculpture), 1984, Porcelain overlay on wood base, 18-1/2 x 66-1/8 x 2-1/2 inches, Courtesy of the Estate of Ruth Duckworth and Salon 94. © Estate of Ruth Duckworth.

Ruth Duckworth, *Untitled*, 1996, Stoneware, 17 x 11 x 7 inches, Collection of Maxine and Stuart Frankel Foundation for Art. © Estate of Ruth Duckworth.

Portrait of Ruth Duckworth inside of *Earth, Water, Sky*, undated. The University of Chicago Archival Photographic Files, apf1-05879. Photo courtesy of Hanna Holborn Gray Special Collections Research Center, University of Chicago Library.

About the Smart Museum of Art

The Smart Museum of Art at the University of Chicago is a site for rigorous inquiry and exchange that encourages the examination of complex issues through the lens of art objects and artistic practice. Through strong community and scholarly partnerships, the Museum incorporates diverse ideas, identities, and experiences into its exhibitions and collections, academic initiatives, and public programming. The Smart Museum will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2024. Admission is always free.

Smart Museum of Art

The University of Chicago
5550 S. Greenwood Avenue
Chicago, Illinois 60637
smartmuseum.uchicago.edu

Press contact:

C.J. Lind, 773.702.0176, cjind@uchicago.edu