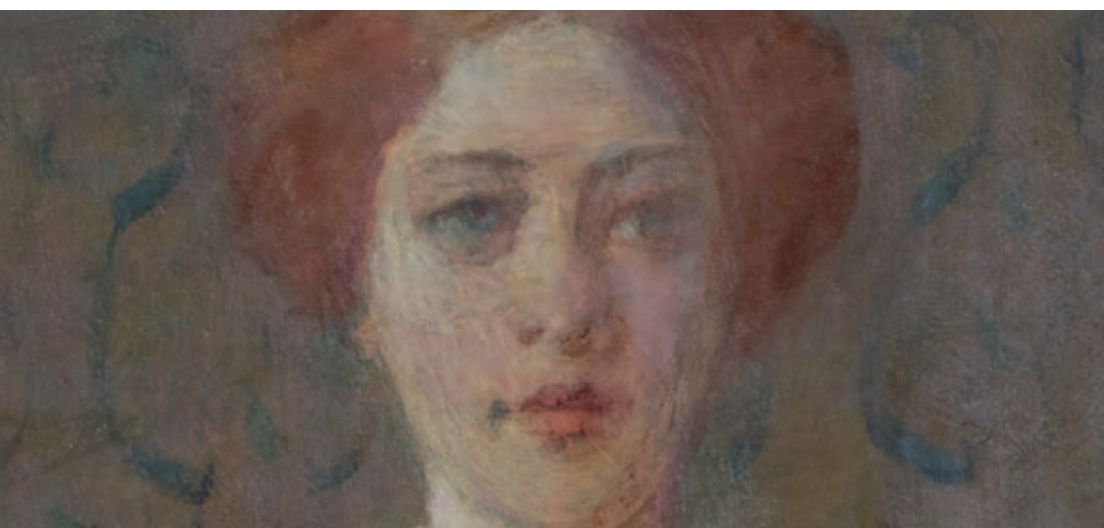


# Life Stories in Art

**“FOREVER SEEING NEW BEAUTIES:”  
THE ART OF MARY ROGERS WILLIAMS**

**Kari Russell-Pool:  
Self-Portraits in Glass**

**MODERN FIGURES:  
MARY KNOLLENBERG SCULPTURES**









## Introduction

As a museum named after a woman who devoted herself to the arts, the Florence Griswold Museum has long championed the role that women artists have played in Connecticut, with past exhibitions devoted to both historical and contemporary figures. *Life Stories in Art* brings together three individual exhibitions celebrating the art and life of three American artists—Tonalist painter Mary Rogers Williams (1857–1907), modern sculptor Mary Knollenberg (1904–1992), and contemporary glass artist Kari Russell-Pool—who are particularly deserving of appreciation.

At first glance, the juxtaposition of a painter, a sculptor, and a glass artist, each from a different century, would seem to offer more differences than commonalities. Indeed, their diverse artistic practices are highly individual and each exhibition has been conceived to stand on its own. But the three artists share something important in common—a willingness to chart one's own course against the grain of society. Mary Rogers Williams, for example, is virtually the only woman artist associated with the Tonalist movement in American art. Each artist has faced obstacles—whether it be the historically circumscribed opportunities for women to exhibit their

works, the choice of genres long dominated by men, or the challenge of balancing multiple roles in modern life—and produced accomplished bodies of work that invite close study.

Their life stories are also fascinating, and beneficial to understanding both the context and singularity of their work. When she died unexpectedly in Florence, Italy, just shy of the age of fifty, Mary Rogers Williams descended into an obscurity not unlike that faced by generations of women artists. Fortunately, the bulk of her art, and hundreds of her letters, were entrusted to her friend and fellow artist Henry

C. White. Thanks to his grandson, the artist Nelson H. White, and the in-depth research of journalist Eve Kahn, the Museum is able to present “Forever Seeing New Beauties:” *The Art of Mary Rogers Williams*, the first retrospective of this Connecticut native.

*Modern Figures: Mary Knollenberg Sculptures* reunites a group of critically praised but seldom-seen works by this sculptor who made Chester, Connecticut, her home from the mid-1940s until her death in 1992.



Mary Rogers Williams,  
*The Connoisseur (George Dudley  
Seymour)*, 1897



Mary Knollenberg, *Morning (Standing Figure)*, 1949–1959

Many of Knollenberg's works explore the representation of the female form, a choice that reflects her lifelong journey toward self-discovery. Knollenberg embraced stone carving, a demanding medium not traditionally identified with women artists. With a probing, searching quality, her sculptures embody the vitality of the modern woman.

*Kari Russell-Pool: Self-Portraits in Glass* highlights recent works by the Essex, Connecticut, glass artist who creates complex sculptures using historic forms to reflect ideas inspired by contemporary life. Ancient Greek vessels, teapots, birdcages, and needlework samplers are all ingeniously

reinvented in glass, invested with new meanings drawn from her personal life and contemporary culture. With precise — even amazing — control over the realization of these unique forms, she comments with wit, irony, and a subtle edginess on the ambiguities of contemporary life.

Curators Amy Kurtz Lansing and Benjamin Colman have mined a wealth of primary sources, including letters, diaries, and personal interviews, to give us a fuller understanding of these women's lives and their contributions to American art. We are deeply indebted to several friends who partnered with the Museum. The presentation of Mary Rogers Williams' work would not have been possible without the close collaboration of artist Nelson H. White and scholar Eve Kahn. They were a joy for curator Amy Kurtz Lansing to work with. Former gallery owner Barbara Delaney was an unwavering advocate for exhibiting the sculpture of her friend Mary Knollenberg at the Florence Griswold Museum. The artist's great-niece Ippy Patterson generously provided Amy with access to Knollenberg's diaries, letters, and unpublished autobiography. At a hectic time when Kari Russell-Pool's family was preparing to move to Cleveland, Ohio, so her husband, the glass artist Marc Petrovic, could assume a new post at the Cleveland Institute of Art, she not only worked closely with assistant curator Ben Colman, but produced a new large-scale glass installation that debuts here.

*Life Stories in Art* celebrates the differences found within the works of these three artists. Through the juxtaposition of their art in adjacent spaces we invite the viewer to compare and contrast their accomplishments and imagine the strands of creative expression that connect them as part of the rich tapestry of American art history. *Jeff Andersen, Director*



Kari Russell-Pool, *Steel Blue (Banded Vessel Series)*, 2010



*A Profile*

## **“FOREVER SEEING NEW BEAUTIES:” THE ART OF MARY ROGERS WILLIAMS**

Here is a partial list of the accomplishments of the largely forgotten painter Mary Rogers Williams (1857–1907), a baker’s daughter from Hartford, Connecticut, who invented herself. She studied with artists James Wells Champney and James McNeill Whistler and knew the eccentric painter Albert Pinkham Ryder. Her landscapes and portraits, mostly pastels in Tonalist and Impressionist veins, won acclaim when shown at Manhattan’s National Academy of Design and Macbeth Gallery, the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts, and the Paris Salon. From 1888 to 1906, she ran the art department at Smith College under the Tonalist painter Dwight W. Tryon.

During her vacations and an 1898–99 sabbatical, Mary traveled in Europe, from Rome to the Arctic, by steamship, ferry, train, horse-drawn carriage, bicycle, and foot. She learned French and Italian and attracted crowds while sketching outdoors. Thousands of pages of her letters survive,



addressed mostly to her sisters and her Hartford artist-friend Henry C. White (1861–1952). Mary wrote about everything she saw: murky Gothic churches staffed by caretakers demanding tips, a soldier’s gold epaulets, delivery wagons laden with radishes, a Norwegian cliff’s “dainty waterfall that came fluttering down like a pretty ribbon.” In them, she doubts herself often. Mailing letters, she wrote, gave her “one moment when I feel sure that I’ve done just the right thing.”

Williams was one of the only women to embrace Tonalism, with its emphasis on mood and suggestion. Art journalists of her time praised her “rare poetic instinct and feeling” (*Quarterly Illustrator*) and talent for evoking “a smoky veil that hangs like a dream of sea fog over the surface of things” (*New York Sun*). Her sudden death in Florence, of an unknown ailment, left her sisters to perpetuate her legacy. They had little money and few art world connections. So the painter vanished from the historical record. Henry White’s family eventually inherited and preserved her lively letters and about 70 of her paintings. Their stewardship has made this exhibition possible.

There are still maddening gaps in her biography, but records do show that Mary was orphaned with her three sisters as a teenager and raised by an aunt. By her mid-20s, Mary listed herself in the “artist” category in business directories. At Smith, she taught, organized shows, catalogued the collection of plaster casts of ancient and Renaissance sculptures, and advised the college on art purchases. (Tryon came in periodically to critique student work.) Mary, at every chance, escaped Northampton, Massachusetts, where



*Untitled [landscape]*

Smith is located, to sketch, traveling along the eastern seaboard and in Europe.

She was feisty, enthusiastic, and fearless. In her letters, she mocked Whistler as pompous and Childe Hassam, who she encountered through visits with Henry White's family at the Lyme Art Colony, as repetitive. The French postimpressionist artist Puvis de Chavannes, however, was "the only mural painter who satisfies me," she wrote. She disliked churches renovated with "gaudy modern atrocities," American blowhards monopolizing dinner conversations on steamships and crowds attracted to the 1899 Paris Salon's showings of "the weird, the fantastic or the vulgar."

In 1906, Mary asked Smith for a promotion to associate professor, and the president indignantly demanded her resignation. She resettled in a bohemian Paris studio for a few months and then headed off for a jaunt in Italy. Her last letter informs her sisters, "I'm going out towards Fiesole this afternoon to try to find a sketch; it is a gorgeous day." Her death certificate specifies no cause.

Mary's work has scarcely appeared in public since her death. Two institutions, Smith and the Connecticut Historical Society, are now known to own her paintings, placed there by friends and family in celebration of her talent and achievements. By preserving Mary's works and writings, Henry White's family has made it possible to tell the story of an intellectual who—counter to expectations for female artists of her day—exhibited widely, to enthusiastic reviews; had fierce opinions and far-flung adventures; and left detailed accounts of the joy of running off to sketch. *Eve Kahn, Arts Journalist*



*Grand Canal*



*Homeland*

## **Kari Russell-Pool: Self-Portraits in Glass**

Kari Russell-Pool (born 1967) fills her intricate glass sculptures with meaning in both their form and decoration. At first glance, her works may call to mind familiar objects from museums or antique shops like brightly colored teapots, ancient Greek clay vases, or ornate Victorian birdcages. Yet the artist carefully updates these historic forms, and fills them with new meanings drawn from her biography and contemporary culture at large. In order to layer eclectic meanings from past and present, the artist challenged herself with, “the task of making heirlooms.” She does so “to explore what makes an object dear; dear enough that it transcends the original owners, and acquires its own magic.”

Sometimes these meanings reflect her struggle to simultaneously navigate different identities as a woman, artist, mother, businesswoman, and wife. In works like *Homeland* (2006), she uses a composition inspired by historic

schoolgirl needlework and storytelling quilts, but updates its imagery to explore contemporary anxieties about safety and security. *My Funny Valentine* (2008) adopts the shape and mosaic technique of nineteenth-century shellwork Sailor's Valentines, but replaces the romantic platitudes of that tradition with a drolly ironic aphorism.

In these and other works Russell-Pool often whimsically undermines the function of the objects she creates to explore tensions and ambiguities from everyday life. Vases are sliced in half and pieced back together with bands of glass flowers. Fully formed teapots are decoratively wedged between elaborately outsized bases and lids. A flock of glass birds escapes from an open cage.

Russell-Pool's craft and sophisticated technique are carefully calibrated to give her precise control over her medium. To begin, she mixes and melts custom colors of glass in a furnace that can be pulled into long, thin rods. Once these rods cool and harden, she then uses a technique called *flameworking*, heating the rods of glass over a single, intense flame until they begin to melt and become pliable. At this stage she can combine elements, melting and stretching different rods together into polychrome shapes like flower petals used in works like *Midnight Blue* (2011) from her Tacoma Series. These flowers epitomize the impressionistic, painterly approach the artist brings to natural forms in her work, interpreting the visual beauty of



*My Funny Valentine*



*Coloring Book Cage (my favorite color is purple)*

blossoms instead of replicating their form with scientific precision. The technical refinement Russell-Pool achieves in her flameworking allows her to capture fleeting impressions from the natural world.

The artist's interpretive, intellectual approach to glass making has its roots in the American Studio Glass Movement. Beginning in the early 1960s, a close-knit group of artists began experimenting with techniques like glassblowing and flameworking, traditionally used to make functional or decorative objects, to create expressive, sculptural forms with deeper thematic content. In its personal, nearly biographical specificity, Russell-Pool's unique practice adds new dimension to that movement.

Born in Salem, Massachusetts, and raised in Essex, Connecticut, Kari Russell-Pool worked for many years with her husband Marc Petrovic in their Essex studio after graduating from the Cleveland Institute of Art (BFA 1990). She has exhibited her work internationally, and examples are included in the permanent collections of the Smithsonian Museum of American Art, Seattle Art Museum, and Corning Museum of Glass, among many others. *Benjamin Colman, Assistant Curator*



*Lincoln Kirstein [Frowning Man]*

## MODERN FIGURES: MARY KNOLLENBERG SCULPTURES

Mary Lightfoot Tarleton Knollenberg (1904–1992) created a body of sculptures to capture the modern spirit. Reflecting her evolving quest to define herself as an artist and a woman, her practice paired the clean lines and taut surfaces of substantial works with a probing, psychological interiority. These deceptively straightforward sculptures reflect both modern aesthetic principles in their stylized mass, and the artist’s modern process of self-discovery.

Born in Great Neck, New York, into a background of privilege that evaporated before she reached adulthood, Knollenberg enrolled at the School of American Sculpture in New York City in 1922. She thrived in that environment of “hard, dirty work,” and her sculptures captured the attention and admiration of her teacher, the American sculptor Mahonri M. Young. Mary Knollenberg’s early works centered on the theme of horses, symbols of the power and freedom for which she yearned. “I was something of

a tomboy,” she recalled, “and at one time I didn’t know whether I was a girl, or a boy, or a horse.”

“I felt as if I’d been born in Paris when I was twenty-one,” Knollenberg recalled about the time she spent in France from 1925 to 1927, where she continued her training like many young American artists of the era. She studied there under the sculptor Antoine Bourdelle and with Young, who had also come from New York. Despite a nearly 30-year age difference, their relationship progressed to a romantic one and would constitute a guiding force for Knollenberg for the next several years. The talent Young recognized in Knollenberg garnered her accolades in the 1930s, including a Guggenheim Fellowship and membership in the invitation-only Sculptors Guild, founded by the most prominent practitioners of the day to promote Modern sculpture.

After a nearly fatal bout with tuberculosis in the late 1920s that stymied her work in the studio, she began to focus on women’s bodies. “I’ve always had this feeling I didn’t know what it meant to be a woman,” Mary would



*Dora Washington*

later say, “what women look like, or what they were, and I think a part of doing a woman’s figure is a way of educating myself—a search for identity.” She struggled to balance her artistic ambitions with the social demands of marriage to the prominent American history scholar Bernhard Knollenberg (1892–1973). She would largely step away from the art world when she and Bernhard settled in Chester, Connecticut, in the mid-1940s, focusing instead on pursuing through her work questions of a more personal nature.

From the late 1920s until her death, Knollenberg probed femininity from all angles, reflecting her own lifelong effort at self-definition.

She undertook mythical or allegorical subjects such as *Diana*, Greek goddess of the hunt, or the sea nymph *Ondine*, who seems to ascend a curtain of water. She executed portraits of acquaintances (such as her vigorous portrayals of two domestic servants, *Dora Washington* and *Josephine*), and modeled her own form. Each of these works articulates the artist’s awareness of women’s complex roles as well as her admiration for female grace and physical vitality. An enthusiast for dance who studied her own movements for inspiration, Knollenberg conjured the energy and feeling of her female subjects rather than a more conventional sensuality. At times, the creative process tortured Knollenberg, whose passion for truth and for expressing the life force through the human form drove her to begin several monumental works, only to destroy or abandon them following fierce internal criticism. “To me both life and art, in the last analysis, are nothing but a search for truth,” she declared in 1928. The minute you stop “searching for the truth in life one’s art loses both life and truth and runs a dangerous risk of becoming an empty and futile thing,” she warned. Her commitment to honesty recalls that of her close friend, the photographer Walker Evans, one of a number of Connecticut artists with whom she formed relationships after she settled in Chester, Connecticut, in the mid-1940s.

Through her courageous career as a sculptor, Knollenberg helped transform the medium from a physical man’s game oriented toward public monuments into a means for women artists to explore their own vital questions. *Amy Kurtz Lansing, Curator*



*Ondine*



*This exhibition booklet has been made possible thanks  
to the support of trustee Nelson H. White*

**IMAGE CREDITS FOR WORKS IN THE BOOKLET:**

**FLYLEAF** Mary Rogers Williams, *Girl in Red*, detail. Oil on panel, 20 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 14 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. Private Collection

Kari Russell-Pool, *Jade (Tacoma Series)*, detail, 2011. Blown and flameworked glass, 14 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 11 inches. Courtesy of the artist

Mary Knollenberg, *Dora Washington*, detail, 1930–1931. Bronze, 12 x 8 x 10 inches. Private Collection

**OVERLEAF** Mary Rogers Williams, *Portrait of Henry C. White*. Oil on canvas, 36 x 19 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. Collection of Bill Freyvogel and Carla White Freyvogel

Kari Russell-Pool, *Midnight Blue (Tacoma Series)*, 2011. Blown and flameworked glass, 13 x 10 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Courtesy of the artist

Mary Knollenberg, *Josephine*, modeled 1935; cast 1938. Bronze, 15 x 4 x 3 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches. Collection of Ippy and Neil Patterson

**PAGE 2** Mary Rogers Williams, *The Connoisseur (George Dudley Seymour)*, 1897. Oil on canvas, 22 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 18 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> inches. Collection of Lorinda Jennings Bigler

**PAGE 3** Mary Knollenberg, *Morning [Standing Figure]*, 1949–1959. Limestone, 77 x 16 x 16 inches. Collection of Ippy and Neil Patterson

Kari Russell-Pool, *Steel Blue (Banded Vessel Series)*, 2010. Blown and flameworked glass, 17 x 10 inches. Courtesy of the artist

**PAGE 4** Mary Rogers Williams, *A Profile*, ca. 1895. Oil on canvas, 21 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 16 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches. Private Collection

**PAGE 5** Mary Rogers Williams, *Untitled [Landscape]*. Oil on canvas, 20 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> x 27 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches. Private Collection

**PAGE 6** Mary Rogers Williams, *Grand Canal*. Pastel on brown paper, 16 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 11 inches. Private Collection

**PAGE 7** Kari Russell-Pool, *Homeland*, 2006. Flameworked glass, plate glass, wood, and silicone, 39 x 34 inches. Photo by John Polak

**PAGE 8** Kari Russell-Pool, *My Funny Valentine*, 2008. Flameworked glass, 12 x 12 inches. Courtesy of the artist

**PAGE 9** Kari Russell-Pool, *Coloring Book Cage (my favorite color is purple)*, 2014. 12 x 10 x 7 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> inches. Courtesy of the artist

**PAGE 10** Mary Knollenberg, *Lincoln Kirstein [Frowning Man]*, modeled 1943–44; carved 1945–1946. Grey marble, 20 x 8 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> x 13 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches. Collection of Nancy Norman Lassalle. Photo: Scott Bowron, courtesy of Conner–Rosenkranz, New York

**PAGE 11** Mary Knollenberg, *Dora Washington*, 1930–1931. Bronze, 12 x 8 x 10 inches. Collection of Ippy and Neil Patterson

**PAGE 12** Mary Knollenberg, *Ondine*, 1976–1980. Hammered lead, 34 x 19 x 9 inches. Collection of Ippy and Neil Patterson

**PAGE 13** Photo of Mary Rogers Williams, ca. 1900. Smith College Archives

Photo of Kari Russell-Pool in her studio, 2014. Tammi Flynn

Paula Ripon, Photo of Mary Knollenberg, ca. 1935. Collection of Ippy and Neil Patterson



Mary Rogers Williams



Kari Russell-Pool



Mary Knollenberg

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