

# CYNTHIA LAHTI

**Selected Press**

Reviews PORTLAND, OR

## Cynthia Lahti

PDX CONTEMPORARY ART

By Jon Raymond ☒

“Daughter,” a recent exhibition by Cynthia Lahti, a long-underrecognized artist’s artist based in Portland, included works in a variety of media, all addressing the bonds of love and grief as experienced by girls in the same family tree. Lahti’s purposefully raw, emotionally direct objects bring to mind the accidental elegance of childhood craft projects, but here the results are fraught with disturbing nuances that make a viewer wonder: Can one feel nostalgia for pain?

*The Kip Twins*, 2007, for example, is a small plaster sculpture composed of two busts of twin girls set side by side. At first glance, they have near-identical facial features and sport identical French-twist hairdos. On closer inspection, however, differences appear out of the girls’ small-scale flaws—a broken nose on one, a long mouth on the other. In a different artist’s hands the not-quite-identical twins might suggest an arch, Baudrillardian comment on the simulacral—genetic copies without an original—but here the effect is more plainspoken, a declarative, Diane Arbus-like observation on human identity as a systematic proliferation of imperfections.

*Ruthless 2*, 2007, a sculpture made of porcelain that looks more like white plaster, similarly skirts conceptual heavy-handedness on the way to deeper emotional terrain, depicting a girl in a simple pinafore lying flat against the wall, such that the wall is reimagined as the floor. Akin to Lahti’s past sculptural works featuring only the backs of figures—a girl running or a woman with a cane—this work deploys a controlled crudeness to plumb feelings of aching loss and unfocused anxiety. As always in Lahti’s work, an insistent emotional logic drives the conceptual innovation, rather than the other way around.

Among the most physically satisfying pieces in the show is *Annette*, 2007, a portrayal of a matronly Victorian woman with sunbonnet and plunging neckline, holding a kitten to the bosom of her frothy thumbed-clay dress. The centerpiece, though, is surely *Cousins*, 2006, a collection of raku-fired sculptures of young girls sharing a single large pedestal, some on posts, some on white plinths, one with her legs overhanging the main platform itself. The figures' skin is lusciously colored from its fast, hot firing, fading from charcoal to tan to cream, and the poses describe a variety of moods, some frivolous, some anguished, some private. Taken together, the gang of girls suggests a crosscut of a spreading family tree, a web of one-off relations haunted by the missing generations above and below.

Some levity arrives in the gracefully hung show, which also includes unfussy ink drawings, with the sculpture *Up on Puddy Tat Mountain*, a collection of lumpy white porcelain cats in frisky poses, displayed on a circle of slender pikes. Nearby, the sense of catlike playfulness and the use of time-lapse serialization are picked up in "Black Beauty" (2007), a series of photographs featuring a woman's hand fidgeting with a black crepe-paper ribbon. The works' balancing of diversion and mourning, simple fun and dry worry, is distinctly precarious.

Lahti's art, while far from cleverly allusive, does bring some influences to mind. Louise Bourgeois is one, in the recurring representations of the female body informed and deformed by a surreal imagination. Another is Hilda Morris, the late Portland-based AbEx sculptor whose hoary, indelible shapes seemed retrieved directly from a dark, existentialist void. Other predecessors might include Rodin, Giacometti, Dubuffet, and even Portland-bred cartoonist Lynda Barry—all artists, like Lahti, who make rough-hewn imperfection an eloquent virtue.

—Jon Raymond

Pop Culture

## Artist Cynthia Lahti Opens Up About Her Very ‘Particular’ Sculptures That Anchor the New Michelle Williams Film ‘Showing Up’

The Portland-based artist's work stood in for the objects created by Williams's onscreen sculptor.

Min Chen, March 29, 2023



Michelle Williams as Lizzy in *Showing Up*. Photo: Allyson Riggs, courtesy of A24.

Cynthia Lahti is getting the shivers just telling me about seeing her work featured in the new film, *Showing Up*. It's a feeling, the Portland-based artist said, of pure glee: "It's pretty incredible to see your work so large and as an element of such a beautiful film, you know?"

Indeed, there are few scenes in *Showing Up* where Lahti's work doesn't, well, show up. Directed by Kelly Reichardt, the feature follows Lizzy, an unassuming and idiosyncratic sculptor played by Michelle Williams, as she prepares for a show opening at a local gallery. In that weeklong run-up, Lizzy produces a group of sculptures, all of them created offscreen by Lahti.

We glimpse Lahti's handiwork throughout the film: in the opening montage that also includes Lahti's watercolor drawings, in Lizzy's studio where she works the clay at every spare moment, and finally, in the gallery where Lahti's knotty sculptures of female forms anchor Lizzy's solo exhibition.

Though small-scale in real life, these pieces possess an alluring screen presence when viewed large and even though, Lahti would be first to admit, they're hardly specimens of the Greek ideal. They're imperfect ceramic figures, gnarled in form and glazed with surreal hues, their sensibility tending toward abstraction as much as outsider art.

"I like accidents," Lahti explained. "I feel like my work is always a clash between something that's really beautiful, but then there's a huge crack. Where those two opposing things meet is very, very interesting."



André Benjamin as Eric and Michelle Williams as Lizzy in *Showing Up*. Photo courtesy of A24.

It's this strange, otherworldly quality that drew Reichardt and screenwriter Jon Raymond to Lahti's work. The pair had initially wanted to make a biopic on Canadian artist Emily Carr, until they found her too "iconic." As the director put it, "We didn't want to write about a hugely famous artist."

Instead, Reichardt and Raymond turned toward their own community in Portland, Oregon, developing an intimate portrait of a local artist, neither an icon nor a genius, making art while life happens around her. Raymond shared the screenplay with his friend Lahti in the hopes of using her art in the film, alongside the works of other artists including Michelle Segre and Jessica Jackson Hutchins. The sculptor happily signed on.

"When working on the script, this is the art Jon and I imagined for Lizzy," said Reichardt of Lahti's work. "Her sculptures are so particular I'm not sure what else could have worked in their place."

Williams, too, saw Lahti's lively sculptures as representing a bliss far removed from Lizzy's personality and environs. "These figures are where she is able to embody whatever she wants, where she isn't limited to her physical self, and she's allowed to play in an imaginative, free place," the actress said.



Cynthia Lahti, *Slip Not*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

Lahti, now 60, has spent most of her life and career in Portland, where she's primarily and actively exhibited—at venues including PDX Contemporary Art, Imogen Gallery, and the Portland Institute for Contemporary Art—since 2000. She also sells her sculptures and works on paper [on her website](#), and after focusing on her sculptural practice throughout 2020's lockdowns, now hopes to find her way back to creating combines. It's the life of a working artist of the sort so deeply observed in *Showing Up*.

Lizzy, after all, isn't just occupied with creating work for her solo show, but fielding myriad crises that crop up along the way, from a broken water heater to dysfunctional family dynamics, and dealing with her dull admin job at an art school (shot on location at the now-defunct Oregon College of Art and Craft). Her personal tribulations bubble alongside her creative practice in ways sympathetically yet comically shaded.



Cynthia Lahti, *TWA Twins*. Photo courtesy of the artist.

One could in fact be tempted to draw parallels between Lizzy and Lahti, but only because the film's particulars also happen to be pretty universal. In Lahti's view, the film nails the reality of being an artist, whether it's holding down a "shitty job" or dealing with a "stupid water heater because you don't have any money." "But," she added of the movie's ending, "the great thing is that Lizzy's work shines through."

Seeing your art on the big screen, though, is the one thing Lahti has no context for. "I do not understand what is happening," she said, laughing. "It's not like a big opening, not like getting in a biennial—it's your work in a movie. It's just really wild."

But if anything, it puts a nice glaze on a decades-long practice. "I survived," said Lahti, "and here we go."

*Showing Up opens in theaters April 7.*



## THE QUEUE

# The Queue: Cynthia Lahti

Get to know the people featured in the pages of our magazine as they share what's inspiring them right now.

Wednesday, May 10, 2023



Cynthia Lahti. Photo by Sam Gehrke Photography.

### **Cynthia Lahti's sculptures in *Showing Up* bring craft to the big screen.**

In Kelly Reichardt's new film *Showing Up*, sculptor Lizzy (Michelle Williams) prepares for an upcoming show while balancing interruptions from her administrative job at an arts and craft school, her negligent landlord, an injured pigeon, a kiln mishap, and the demands of her difficult family. Director Reichardt grounded her film in her local craft scene, inviting Cynthia Lahti, a longtime artist in Portland, Oregon, to have her work stand in for Lizzy's. Reichardt's camera lingers on Lahti's richly textured figurative sculptures of girls and women. Lizzy shapes and carves greenware duplicates of Lahti's sculptures made just for the film. Lahti's drawings hang on the walls of Lizzy's studio. The viewer is invited into a vivid slice of Lizzy's life, a rare cinematic look into life as a craft artist. We spoke to Lahti about her involvement in the film (now in theaters nationwide) and about her practice.

[cynthia-lahti.com](http://cynthia-lahti.com) | [@cynthia-lahti-artist](https://twitter.com/cynthia-lahti-artist)  
[a24films.com/films/showing-up](https://a24films.com/films/showing-up)

### **How do you describe your work or practice in 50 words or less?**

Encompassing drawing, collage, altered books, and ceramic sculpture, my art is influenced by human artifacts and personal experience. The belief that even the smallest artifact can evoke the most powerful feelings is central to everything I make, drawing inspiration from objects and images, both historical and contemporary, that have the potential to reflect beyond themselves.

### **How did you come to make ceramics for Kelly Reichardt's *Showing Up*?**

Both [Jon Raymond](#) and [Kelly Reichardt](#), the co-writers of *Showing Up*, had seen my art in shows and studio visits, and it resonated deeply with them. When they were writing the screenplay for the film, they thought of my ceramic sculptures as being the works Lizzy creates in the film. I was asked if my art could be used in *Showing Up*. After reading the script, I agreed to it.

**Did you read the script before making the work that was featured in the film? Did you collaborate with production staff or Michelle Williams to create a body of work for the film? How is what you made different from—or the same as—your own work?**

The artworks were not made specifically for the film. I spent six months before the film was shot making a body of work, wanting to create the best sculptures I could from which the final selection would be made. I tried not to think about the film as I created the sculptures. Also during that time I unearthed a series of sculptures I had done of my niece Sylvi over 15 years ago. They are very active sculptures—she is doing a handstand in one! Shortly before filming began, Kelly Reichardt and I selected artworks to be used in the film. Kelly loved the ones of my niece, and five of them are in the film. Michelle Williams was not involved in this, but I did have many Zoom sessions and three studio visits with her. I showed her everything I could about my life as an artist and how to sculpt in clay. She was a joy to work with.

**Did you have any say in how your work was installed and displayed in the film?**

No, once they had the artworks, they used them as was appropriate for the film. For the drawings, they wanted to replicate how they looked hanging on my studio wall. Kelly decided to put the drawings in the film after visiting my studio and seeing them hanging there; they were not originally a part of my artistic contribution.



Lahti's studio with sculptures and drawings used in the film *Showing Up*. Photo by Cynthia Lahti.



**How has having your art in *Showing Up* impacted your practice or life?**

The film has been screening for a month, and my life has been consumed by the response it is getting. I often have to remind myself to breathe. I'm just at the beginning of processing what that really means, but it sure feels great. I will not change my art practice at all—I know what works for me.

**What are your favorite depictions of art in film?**

[Death in Venice](#) by director Luchino Visconti is my favorite film about an artist's practice. It portrays an artist's obsession with beauty. I believe that being obsessed with something and letting it consume you is at the heart of making great art.