Representing the subject of war and the violent devastation that it endures is challenging in art, for art's formal qualities—the visual capture—often lays an aesthetic sheen over that which is otherwise a barbarous affair. Alison Ruttan's recent show at the Chicago Cultural Center has created a lot of buzz in this regard. Tabletop ceramic sculptures modeled by hand after images of bombed out buildings in Beirut, and a massive diorama of the "Highway of Death" (a massacre of thousands in 1991 when the US bombed a 60-mile stretch of highway between Kuwait and Basra), have elicited agitated excitement from inside the art world and by a public that frequents the center. At the heart of her oeuvre is an inquiry into the complex nature of human behavior: a query that led her to primatology, evolutionary biology, and to a three month artist's residency observing bonobo primates at the Wild Animal Park in San Diego. In person, Ruttan is somewhat of a paradox. She is a gentle, diminutive woman, living in a bungalow in Oak Park, Illinois with her husband of 35 years, gardening, cooking, and raising a child, but taking on some of the darkest subjects of our time with a grit that belies her suburban image. This is a bit of hyperbole, of course, as Ruttan is an educated arts professional on the faculty at the School of the Art Institute, and her husband is also a professional artist.

Ruttan has worked in numerous mediums, including painting, photo, video, film, animation, sculpture, installation, and fiber. Her earliest work was the Eros to the Thanatos of the recent production. "I did illustrations for the 'Joy of Sex'," she recalls. "I water-colored different types of cookies over the different coitus." It was a feminist tactic, an attempt to bring "lightness to the feminist dialogue" of the '90s, but still one committed to the mandate of representing female pleasure. *Chromophilia,* an animation using Henri Matisse and a XXX anal porn video followed in 2001. Set to the "Dance of the Sugar-Plum Fairy" from the "Nutcracker Suite," the slowly pulsing, highly abstracted figures were a brilliant send-up of Matisse's cutouts into the digital age. The pornography got Ruttan thinking about "biological triggers and hardwired behavior… things that act on us but seem to be beyond our control." But then 9/11 happened, and the inquiry shifted to "bigger questions of why we behave badly."

Ruttan engrossed herself in research, as she does with most of her projects, reading evolutionary psychologist Frans de Waal and Jane Goodall. After discovering a specific account in Goodall's research where "a civil war happened among a chimpanzee troupe," Ruttan choreographed and filmed a reenactment of the primate war, substituting humans for chimps. A series of photographic installations, collectively titled *The Four Year War at Gombe* (2009-12), present the artist's strange version of this still unexplained event. "The [chimpanzee] troupe had lived together for 30 years," Ruttan tells me, "and they'd had children together, they'd hunted together, they had long relationships. Half of the group for some reason decided to split off and form a new community. And the original group, over a period of four years, hunted down and killed all but one of them." Ruttan worked on the project for two and a half years. Shot along the Des Plaines River in Chicago, the resulting vignettes of figures in the landscape, part Corot and part Pre-Raphaelite, tRuttan reveals, are wonderfully bizarre—primitivism gone amuck in a richly verdant setting.

In 2012, Ruttan moved from the chimpanzee source material to war imagery she was witnessing on the Internet and in print. The carnage came to dominate the work, but this time absent the figure and in an entirely new medium. Ruttan chose ceramics. As she put it, "The horror of it in painting would have been overly emotional to me and with a photograph, they would have been too clinical. The sculpture put them back in reality. Ceramic was the most straightforward because the buildings would break exactly the way cement does." Indeed Ruttan's ceramic structures at the Cultural Center are disorienting in their "realism" played against the *objet d'art* scale, the richly glazed surfaces, and the artful arrangement of their hand-made wooden pedestals. Ruttan disturbs our register of looking as we bend in to examine such deft visual proxies of an extraordinary circumstance—the shattering of a domicile in the midst of the cacophony of war.

Ruttan's most recent production of a 40-foot diorama of cars, sand and paved highway, rests low to the ground in the Cultural Center, affording a bird's eye view something akin to the American pilots who created the havoc. The artist located vintage toy models of the same Russian cars and trucks from the event in Iraq and Kuwait, and made nine molds that she then hand-worked into 600 different ceramic pieces. But again, the fine craft is quickly overshadowed by the horrific gestalt of the piece. And this back and forth between pleasure and horror, seduction and repulsion, aesthetics and politics is the work's strength. Ruttan has realized an instance of the sublime, one that she has been chasing in many guises through all the work for years.

—LISA WAINWRIGHT

"Alison Ruttan: if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail," can be seen at the Chicago Cultural Center, from January 24 – May 10, 2015.
www.cityofchicago.org/city/en/depts/dca/supp_info/ruttan.html

ABOVE: **Alison Ruttan** IN HER STUDIO

RIGHT: "LINE IN THE SAND" (DETAIL)
PHOTO: COURTESY CHICAGO CULTURAL CENTER

