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A turning point for mother-daughter artists

* Article by: [MARY ABBE](http://www.startribune.com/bios/10644306.html) , Star Tribune
* Updated: March 18, 2010 - 2:53 PM

Judy and Jennifer Onofrio explore mortality and regeneration in an elegant new show.

Always a good-time gal, Rochester artist Judy Onofrio has long celebrated feminine sass and vitality in colorful sculptures of circus performers and zaftig dames wrapped in snakes and sporting parrots and monkeys. Even a bout with cancer a couple of years ago didn't shake her innate confidence, but it did transform the art that has earned her acclaim throughout the United States and as far afield as Australia, Finland, Germany and the Netherlands.

Instead of exuberant figures and lush exotica, her new sculpture is abstract and pastel, a serene display of sensual shapes that has been paired with dark photo abstractions by her daughter, Jennifer Onofrio Fornes, an art professor at Augusta State University in Georgia. The unusual mother-daughter exhibit, called "Arabesque," is on view through April 11 at the Flaten Art Museum at St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minn.

Both women recently said they had wanted to show together "since forever," but it took a health crisis to bring them together. Fornes was en route to the Mayo medical complex for back surgery when she learned about her mom's cancer diagnosis. Both were treated successfully in Rochester and spent much of 2008 recovering.

"Our work just came together as a result of some major life changes and looking at mortality for the first time," said Judy. She is 70 but said, "I always think of myself as 16 years old."

Onofrio's work changed the most, as she jettisoned figuration for abstraction and bright primary colors for creamy ivory tinged with pink and lemony shades of blue and green. Instead of saucy dames with overripe lips and pineapple headgear, she offers oval wall sculptures garnished with bones (deer, cow), gnarled branches, architectural curlicues and surrealistic blossoms made from carved fruit and clustersof teeth.

She assembled a free-standing "Bone Basket" from the pelvic and leg bones of various animals; it cradles a ghostly hand-carved pear as well as a ragged jawbone. Another 6-foot-tall sculpture is rich with floral motifs fashioned from bones and architectural ornaments.

Making art out of bones and teeth sounds a little ghoulish, but there's no whiff of the graveyard in Onofrio's sculpture. The ivory and peach paint that flows over her constructions gives them a fleshy warmth and sometimes surrealistic elegance. Inevitably, her humor shows through, too, most notably in "Ow!," a stylized high-heeled "shoe" made from a long jawbone tinted blush-pink and lined with opalescent jewels the size of pearls.

**The bone collector**

A natural magpie, Onofrio collected bones for years, imagining she might someday build a fence with them in the yard behind her Rochester studio. After the cancer, she began thinking about traditional still-life paintings in which vegetables or half-eaten fruit were symbols of mortality. One day she dragged out a box of bones and set to work. Her studio assistant notified other artists and friends that she wanted bones, and "people started sending them from all over the country," Onofrio said.

After scrubbing the bones with ammonia and hydrogen peroxide and sun-bleaching them for months, she affixes them to wooden frames and garnishes them with curlicues salvaged from old furniture and Victorian-era buildings. Next she adds mirror fragments, glass balls and an infinity of glazes and stains. Each bit is sanded and painted dozens of times to get the exact whiff of color, glaze or shimmer she wants.

Fornes' dark photos perfectly complement her mom's sculptures. Taken with 35-millimeter film at very slow shutter speeds, they record Fornes, 44, dancing and twirling with gauzy scarves that puddle and shimmer in ghostly shadows. After printing the images on matte photographic paper, she dry-mounts and paints them with multiple layers of thin pigments. The resulting images are hard to define, hovering aesthetically between the antique look of 19th-century photographs and minimalist contemporary paintings. The images do have a ghostly quality and only rarely suggest their origins by revealing a hint of a woman's back or hip or folded leg. Most often they are mere flutterings, smoky shadows that drift and hover in darkness.

The question of how to suggest and depict the human spirit has puzzled artists since our forebears first sketched the outlines of bison on cave walls many millennia ago. Birds, watery reflections, smoke and shadows have all evoked the spirit world. While nodding to those ancient traditions, Onofrio and Fornes go a step beyond, creating their own yin and yang of darkness and light, animation and silence, bones and blossoms, death and regeneration.

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### ARABESQUE

**What:** Sculpture by Rochester artist Judy Onofrio and painted photos by her daughter, Jennifer Onofrio Fornes.

**When:** 10 a.m.-5 p.m. Mon.-Wed. & Fri.; 10 a.m.-8 p.m. Thu.; 2-5 p.m. Sat.-Sun. Ends April 11. Gallery closed March 27-April 5.

**Where:** Flaten Art Museum, Dittmann Center, St. Olaf College, 1520 St. Olaf Av., Northfield.