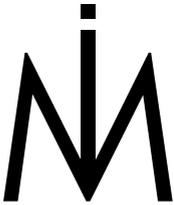


SEE ACTS OF AUDACIOUS DARING!
THE CIRCUS WORLD OF JUDY ONOFRIO



MOTHERS^o_f
INVENTION
SERIES **No.1**

See Acts of Audacious Daring! The Circus World of Judy Onofrio
September 25, 2011 – January 8, 2012

**See Acts of Audacious Daring!
The Circus World of Judy Onofrio**



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Front cover: Judy Onofrio, *Ring Master* (detail), 2005, Mixed media, 32 x 23 x 15 in., Courtesy of the artist

Back cover: Judy Onofrio, *Sideshow Artist* (detail), 2007, Mixed media, 27 x 15 x 11.5 in., Courtesy of the artist



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INTRODUCTION

Colleen J. Sheehy, Ph.D.

With *See Acts of Audacious Daring! The Circus World of Judy Onofrio*, Plains Art Museum initiates the ongoing exhibition series *Mothers of Invention*. This series will periodically present solo exhibitions of important artists from our region who belong to a generation of women who contributed to opening up the art world since the 1970s. These women came of age artistically in the 1960s and 1970s and now are in their sixties, seventies, and even eighties. They are part of a national and international movement of women who insisted on being taken seriously as artists and courageously endeavored to break into what had been predominantly male terrain. They made art, formed collectives, started galleries, taught at art schools, and gave each other critical and moral support to dismantle the barriers that had existed against women in the visual arts. They changed the art world profoundly, altering ideas about the canon of art history and the meaning of terms such as

“masterpiece,” “artist,” “gaze,” and “body,” as well as expanding what could be considered acceptable art materials, subjects, imagery, and boundaries between art forms. Their impact has spread throughout art and culture and is not confined to their own or other women’s work. Indeed, this generation deserves the accolade “Mothers of Invention.”

Many are, in fact, mothers, a position formerly perceived as an impediment to a woman’s potential as a creative artist. Motherhood was conventional and pulled back toward traditional expectations for females; art was considered a male domain, where creative minds and spirits were unbound by domestic responsibilities or the constraints of child rearing. While most artists featured in *Mothers of Invention* are mothers (as is our first artist in the series, Judy Onofrio), maternity is not necessarily the subject of their art, even though it is a significant element of their lives.

Onofrio and others were interested in inventing their lives in ways that contradicted societal expectations. Amid the constrictions of the early twentieth century, Sigmund Freud had declared that “biology is destiny”: women created babies while men created art and culture. Much about Freud’s ideas and research has since been discredited or called into question. *Mothers of Invention* proves that women can be mothers *and* artists, nurturing *and* creative; these terms are not mutually exclusive. Our series points primarily to the fact that these artists have been influential on *all* of us—as viewers, as art lovers, as artists of all genres and genders. They have given birth, in other words, to the expanded art world that we live in today and sometimes take for granted.

Plains Art Museum is proud to recognize this generation of women artists at an advanced stage of their careers. Our goal is to acquaint new audiences with their work and to remind those who may have seen their earlier art that they are still active, still vital, still experimenting. Not conceived as retrospectives of an artist’s work, the exhibitions in *Mothers of Invention* will be singularly shaped by the approach of the curator of each project, who will collaborate closely with the artist. These women and their art deserve continuing critical and popular attention and ongoing visibility, which solo exhibitions and catalogue publications can ensure. The *Mothers of Invention* series thus strives to prevent the erasure of these women from the art historical record, something that has happened repeatedly over the centuries and requires diligent art historians to recover, as we have appreciated recently

with rediscovered artists such as Artemisia Gentileschi from seventeenth-century Italy, expanded research on the nineteenth-century American Mary Cassatt, and, closer to home, new documentation on twentieth-century Minnesota artists Wanda Gág and Clara Mairs.

The tendency to overlook, ignore, or forget the artistic contributions of women has been particularly prominent in the Midwest, where fewer women participated in the art scene compared to East or West coasts. These patterns are being rectified by a number of recent projects. In 1997, I curated *The Unseen Wanda Gág* at the Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, in Minneapolis, which presented the largest body to date of original visual art of this artist from New Ulm, Minnesota, and even included her handwritten diaries. The exhibition aimed to alter popular perceptions of Gág as primarily a children’s book author rather than an East Coast experimental artist and “New Woman” of the 1920s.¹ It moved her from wholesome to avant-garde.

In 2007, Minnesota Historical Society art curator Brian Szott brought attention to Gág and others in the exhibition *In Her Own Right: Minnesota’s First Generation of Women Artists* at the Minnesota Museum of American Art. Julie L’Enfant, art historian at the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul, published a book in 2011 that was inspired by this exhibition and delves deeper into the lives and work of Gág, Mairs, Frances Greenman, Elsa Jemne, Jo Lutz Rollins, Alice Hugy, and Ada Wolfe.² In 2002, L’Enfant had published a study of Wanda Gág and her creative family.³

In 2006, Joanna Inglot of Macalester College in St. Paul curated a landmark exhibition, *WARM: 12 Artists of the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota*, at the Weisman Art Museum, accompanied by a valuable catalogue.⁴ Launched in 1976, the Women's Art Registry of Minnesota (known by its acronym, WARM) was a significant collective similar to those started around that same time in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. In Minneapolis, artists such as Harriet Bart, Hazel Belvo, Sandra Menefee Taylor, and Carole Fisher, among many others, founded WARM to expand art in the Midwest. They established the first art gallery in downtown Minneapolis's warehouse district, a neighborhood that would soon be teeming with galleries featuring regional artists. Several artists who were members of WARM will be presented in exhibitions of *Mothers of Invention*.

Though focused on the upper Midwest, *Mothers of Invention* participates in national and international curatorial projects that recognize the contributions of this generation of women in the art world. The year 2007 marked a watershed in acknowledging women and feminism in art; a flurry of major projects on women in art history and contemporary art occurred regionally and nationally. The Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art opened at the Brooklyn Museum that year with a permanent display of Judy Chicago's installation *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) and the international exhibition *Global Feminisms: New Directions in Contemporary Art*, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin. Nochlin's 1971 essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" served as a spur and touchstone to women's claiming space and status in the

art world.⁵ Also in 2007, the Museum of Contemporary Art Los Angeles presented *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, with a major catalogue. Curator Cornelia Butler argued in one essay in the volume that feminist art "fundamentally changed contemporary art practice, critiquing its assumptions and radically altering its structures and methodologies."⁶ Jeremy Strick, MOCA director, forcefully agreed in his foreword:

Few social movements more profoundly marked the end of the last century than feminism. In the space of a generation, feminism transformed social relations, personal identities, and institutional structures . . . The feminist revolution in art was no less radical and transformative than the social movement from which it drew strength. The very terms of current artistic practice are made possible in numerous respects by the groundbreaking work produced by feminist artists in the 1960s and 70s.⁷

That same year, a group of art historians—Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal, and Sue Scott—published *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art*, which assessed more broadly the incredible progress and initiatives that women had accomplished in current art. With chapters devoted to single artists, the authors discuss several generations, from Louise Bourgeois and Nancy Spero to Marina Abramović, Jenny Holzer, Cindy Sherman, Ann Hamilton, and Judy Pfaff, to younger artists such as Dana Schutz and Kara Walker. These artists demonstrate how women have

moved in myriad directions in media, concept, spatial strategies, and performance, without any single aesthetic, issue, or ideology dominating. They are central to contemporary art and have generated much of its most experimental and influential work.

In the book's introduction, the authors note that, despite having transformed the art world, women still do not have parity with their male counterparts. In an update of the Guerrilla Girls' tactics of presenting statistics on the low number of women artists represented in museum collections and exhibitions, the authors offer statistics and graphs that reveal that even now women lag significantly behind men in number of solo exhibitions at museums and galleries and in number of monographic publications. They document that women's solo exhibitions in museums averaged at 22.5 percent of solo exhibitions mounted from the 1970s to the first decade of the twenty-first century, reaching a high in the 1990s at 30 percent; the percentage dipped in this century back to about 25 percent.⁸ These continuing disparities mean that museums and curators must remain thoughtful and intentional about presenting women artists to public audiences.

The neglect of women for solo exhibitions that more frequently go to male artists is one reason for launching our *Mothers of Invention* series. Other factors are at play as well. Much has been made of the recent practice of curators, collectors, and museums to seek out ever-younger artists—sometimes right out of art school—for exhibitions and permanent collection purchases. While emerging trends and young talent can be exciting, this results in fewer opportunities

for mature women artists to show their oeuvre and to enjoy the ongoing critical attention often afforded elder male artists.

It is fitting to launch *Mothers of Invention* with the big, bold work of Judy Onofrio, specifically her sculptures that explore the enthusiasm and metaphorical potential of circus acrobats, magicians, and animal trainers. Onofrio is an iconoclast, breaking rules of the art world right and left, championing outsiders and claiming territory for self-education, women's expressions, and the value of folk art and common objects. Based in Rochester, Minnesota, and now in her early seventies, Onofrio performs her own "acts of audacious daring" in her work and career. An ardent and largely self-educated student of life, material culture, and art, Onofrio has forged a dynamic career, with dozens of solo and group exhibitions and one of the highest honors for an artist based in Minnesota—the McKnight Distinguished Artist, awarded in 2005.

Judy Onofrio's art expresses a generous spirit that reaches out to viewers. She embraces a populism of image and material that offers a good deal of pleasure and makes her work particularly enjoyable to broad audiences. Today, her over-the-top inventive use of materials and labor-intensive methods resonate with younger artists who have discovered the rich associations of folk arts and crafts.⁹ At the same time that she revels in materials, Onofrio offers philosophical wisdom in physical form. Shouldn't we *all* attempt acts of audacious daring, like the acrobat in the sculpture of that title? Isn't that what life is for—living to the utmost?

Who among us doesn't feel like we have jumped through a ring of fire, or would like to pull off a magic trick, real or metaphorical? Sometimes life calls for such boldness. In Onofrio's oeuvre, extraordinary figures stand in for all of us facing the many challenges of life. May we be brave enough to approach our own challenges with the confidence and aplomb of Onofrio's characters.

Catherine (Cassie) Wilkins, a freelance curator in Minneapolis, superbly curated this project, reprising an idea she first executed at the Chazen Museum of Art at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Her graduate work in art history required considerable research on the history of the American circus, much of which was conducted at the archives and collections at Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin (now affiliated with the Wisconsin Historical Society). In addition to that specific history and such topics as the design of circus posters and banners, she has been interested in how American artists have adopted circus imagery in painting and sculpture. Along with recognizing Cassie's curatorial talents and her fine essay in this catalogue, I acknowledge this exhibition's origins in *Ringmaster: Judy Onofrio and the Art of the Circus*, an exhibition at the Chazen Museum of Art in 2008 in which Cassie brought together Onofrio's work with graphic arts and artifacts from Circus World Museum. I thank Russell Panczenko, director of the Chazen Museum of Art, for approving our mounting this version of the exhibition at Plains Art Museum.

Another essay here is by Patricia McDonnell, who became acquainted with Onofrio and

her art while curator at the Weisman Art Museum, where she and I were colleagues. I am grateful that Patricia, now director at the Ulrich Museum of Art at Wichita State University in Kansas, agreed to write an essay that places Judy Onofrio within the context of contemporary art and within the history of American artists' interest in spectacle and mass entertainment. She also underscores Onofrio's feminist underpinnings. Both essays expand the critical readings of Onofrio's work in important dimensions. Editor Laura Westlund polished and sharpened the essays and texts in this catalogue. We also thank the McKnight Foundation, which gave permission for us to reprint Onofrio's biography from its publication issued on the occasion of her Distinguished Artist Award, which Cassie Wilkins updated to the present.¹⁰

I sincerely thank Judy Onofrio for her warmth and generosity as together we bring her circus world to the Fargo–Moorhead community for the first time. After working with her at the Weisman Art Museum and seeing her exhibitions at other museums and venues, I am excited to share her sculptures with our audiences at Plains Art Museum. We are grateful for the help of Jeremy Kilkus, Onofrio's studio assistant, with installation of the larger pieces. Stephen Freese, director, and Peter Shrake, registrar, at Circus World Museum generously loaned unique circus banners, historical posters, and circus carvings for our exhibition.

At Plains Art Museum, I thank our dedicated staff for contributing great ideas to realizing this project. Mark Ryan, director of collections and operations, managed

the securing of loans and the installation of the exhibition with meticulous care, assisted by preparator Frank McDaniels. Megan Johnston, our director of curatorial affairs and interpretation, joined our staff just prior to the arrival of artwork for the exhibition and was involved with many aspects of its installation in our galleries. Director of development and marketing Joni Janz secured support for the project and oversaw its marketing and opening events; Cody Jacobson, graphics director, applied his inventive skills to the fun graphics and to the design for the catalogue. Sandy Ben-Haim generated lively programs to extend the educational impact of this exhibition. Kris Kerzman, communications manager, ensured that news about *See Acts of Audacious Daring!* reached broad audiences. Executive assistant Amanda Sayre helped to secure images and permissions for the catalogue as well as assisting with many other responsibilities. I thank Mark Henze, CFO and deputy director, and his staff, JoAnn Abrahamson and Monica Quenzer, for their diligent financial work. Our building staff (Steve Johnson, Jade Larsen, and Aaron Eisland) make sure that everything in our historic building is tip-top, and visitor services manager Tonya Scott and her staff are appreciated for warmly welcoming our visitors while also safeguarding the art. As museum store manager Tonya extends learning into merchandise that complements the exhibition's ideas and content.

I express our heartfelt gratitude to our local supporters, U.S. Bancorp Foundation (with special thanks to Ron Robson), Fargo-Moorhead Area Foundation, and

Hugh Cowan for their enthusiasm for this project. We could not present *See Acts of Audacious Daring!* without them.

Here at Plains Art Museum we are pleased to transform our space into a “Big Top” as we inaugurate *Mothers of Invention* with the delightful and stimulating sculpture of Judy Onofrio. While we celebrate this opening exhibition of the series, we also look forward to summer 2012 and its second show, which will focus on North Dakota abstract painter Marjorie Schlossman. Future projects will ensure that our audiences continue to see and appreciate the accomplishments and contributions of the *Mothers of Invention* generation.



NOTES

1. *The Unseen Wanda Gág* was at the Weisman Art Museum from October 25, 1997, to January 26, 1998. A gallery guide with an interpretive essay and checklist were produced with this exhibition.
2. Julie L'Enfant, *Pioneer Modernists: Minnesota's First Generation of Women Artists* (Afton, Minn.: Afton Historical Society Press, 2011).
3. Julie L'Enfant, *The Gág Family: German-Bohemian Artists in America* (Afton, Minn.: Afton Historical Society Press, 2002).
4. Joanna Inglot, *WARM: A Feminist Collective in Minnesota* (Minneapolis: Weisman Art Museum, 2007).
5. For a recent reflection on Nochlin's question, see her essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists? Thirty Years After," in Carol Armstrong and Catherine de Zegher, eds., *Women Artists at the Millennium* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2006), 21–34. Nochlin's original essay was published as "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" *ARTNews* (January 1971): 22–39, 67–71.
6. Cornelia Butler, "Art and Feminism: An Ideology of Shifting Criteria," in Cornelia Butler and Lisa Gabrielle Mack, eds., *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution* (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art, and Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2007), 15.
7. Jeremy Strick, "Director's Foreword," in *WACK!*, 7.
8. Eleanor Heartney, Helaine Posner, Nancy Princenthal, and Sue Scott, *After the Revolution: Women Who Transformed Contemporary Art* (New York: Prestel, 2007), 22–25.
9. This trend has been evident in several recent exhibitions and books of contemporary art. See Darsie Alexander, *The Spectacular of Vernacular* (Minneapolis: Walker Art Center, 2011); Toby Kamps, *The Old, Weird America: Folk Themes in Contemporary Art* (Houston: Contemporary Arts Museum Houston, 2008); Shu Hung and Joseph Magliaro, eds., *By Hand: The Use of Craft in Contemporary Art* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2007).
10. *Judy Onofrio: 2005 McKnight Distinguished Artist* (Minneapolis: McKnight Foundation, 2005).



RINGMASTER: JUDY ONOFRIO AND THE ART OF THE CIRCUS

Cassie Wilkins

The circus—that is, the circus of our memory and our youth—is a place where humans accomplish superhuman feats. It’s a place of magic, mystery, and intrigue and a place where the individual performer is overtaken by a “personality” that is sold to the audiences. I love the theatrical quality of the circus and the way it transports people from their everyday lives to something surreal and magical.

— Judy Onofrio

Mixed-media sculptor Judy Onofrio looks to the drama and spectacle of the American circus as inspiration for her art. Over the past decade the artist has assembled her own elaborate troupe of aerialists and acrobats from wood, fiberglass, beads, ceramic shards, and collected objects. In Onofrio’s figurative sculptures, spangled circus stars sail through fiery hoops (*Ring of Fire*, 2000, Plate 11) or balance on the paws of wild beasts (*Act of Audacious Daring*, 2006, Plate 1). These thrilling performances act as metaphors for daring personal adventures, real or imagined, and enrapture audiences with center ring’s enchanted pageant of comedy and danger, the bizarre and the superhuman.

In *See Acts of Audacious Daring! The Circus World of Judy Onofrio*, the artist’s life-sized sculptures of performers, animals, and circus acts are, for the first time in North Dakota, exhibited alongside historic circus banners, posters, and carvings. Onofrio helped select examples of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century lithographs, painted sideshow banners, and carved wagon figures that typically influence her work. These original circus arts are all on loan from the Wisconsin Historical Society’s Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. This museum collects and preserves all types of material related to American circus history, from business records and paper ephemera to clown wardrobe and elephant

trappings. Highlights of the collection include approximately 8,200 posters (dating from 1835), the world's largest collection of circus wagons, and more than five thousand negatives of circus scenes and performers taken by Chicago publicity photographer Harry A. Atwell from 1909 to 1952. These traditional circus promotional materials provide fantastical imagery and inspiration for Onofrio as she creates the expression of her wildest dreams.

The old Big Top extravaganza has fascinated Judy Onofrio (born 1939) since her childhood in the era of the traveling tent shows. From the 1870s to the 1950s, as many as thirty-eight tented railroad circuses crisscrossed the country for eight months of every year. These trains, sometimes more than fifty cars long, were loaded with wild and trained animals, performers, laborers, and equipment and materials to erect and populate a fleeting fantasyland. They stopped in rural and metropolitan areas, and their arrival was celebrated as a holiday second only to Christmas in most people's minds. Colossal canvas cities magically transformed empty ten-acre fields into world bazaars for a

single day, then disappeared overnight. After several weeks of fervid print advertising to build anticipation, circus day officially began with a free midmorning street parade. Elaborate wagons, wild beasts, costumed performers, and brass bands marched down Main Street, leading onlookers to the showgrounds—although many townspeople had already gone to the lot at dawn to watch the roustabouts unload the train and raise the tents.

Crowds funneled onto the circus lot through the open-air midway, which was lined on one side by larger-than-life sideshow banners promoting unusual attractions now hidden from view and on the other side by ticket wagons and concession stands selling lemonade and roasted peanuts. Straight ahead, the main entrance marquee beckoned audiences into another realm.

Patrons passed through the menagerie filled with exotic animals, then entered the Big Top. The Big Top alone could be larger than a football field, and it seated up to ten thousand people on risers around a wide hippodrome track that encircled up to three



Photographs by Harry A. Atwell, Collection of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

rings and four stages. Here a full program of death-defying athletic feats, clown gags, horse races, and opulent pageants enchanted audiences of all ages.

Out the back door of the Big Top lay a world the public did not see. The circus backyard was a highly regimented nomadic city. Canvas dressing tents, stables, a blacksmith shop, a doctor's office, a barbershop, and a cookhouse served the everyday needs of up to a thousand or more people and hundreds of animals. Everyone received three meals a day and two buckets of water to bathe or wash clothes, accommodations on the train, and a weekly salary. The mind-boggling logistics of feeding, sheltering, and moving the circus from town to town were studied by U.S. army troops to learn ways to increase military efficiency.

Even more fascinating than the circus operations were the roustabouts, animal trainers, clowns, human marvels, and center-ring stars. From all nations and all walks of life, these itinerant showfolk were united in their quest to live life on the edge. "I'd rather be a racehorse and last a minute than be

a plow horse and last forever," proclaimed celebrated aerialist Lillian Leitzel, who ultimately sacrificed her life for her art, falling to her death at age thirty-nine while performing in 1931. Circus society, though hierarchical, offered a community to many individuals who might otherwise have been outcasts. Tattooed ladies and cross-dressing men could find acceptance and earn a good living besides.

The golden age of the American circus still stirs Judy Onofrio's imagination. She draws from memories and looks to the remnants of this magical era (circus banners, posters, and carvings) as a source for her art. Capitalizing on curiosity, the circus masterfully blended illusion and reality to evoke the exotic and grotesque. Late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century artisans crafted fantastical pictures and slogans to entice crowds on circus day. Lavish posters plastered on storefronts and barns several weeks before the circus arrived promised incredible sights like "Acting and Dancing Lions." As American circuses began to travel from town to town in the midnineteenth century, they increasingly depended on advance



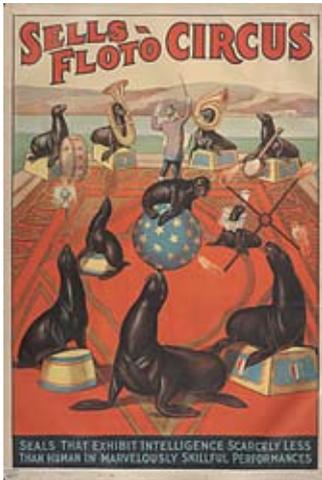


image: Erie Litho. & Ptg. Co., American, active first half of 20th century
Seals That Exhibit Intelligence Scarcely Less Than Human, Sells-Floto, 1932, Color lithograph, image: 39.25 x 26.125 in., paper: 42.25 x 28 in. Collection of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

print advertising:
 newspaper ads, heralds, handbills, booklets, cloth banners, and, most common, lithographic

posters. Produced in some multiple of a standard 28 x 42 inch sheet of paper, circus posters ranged in size from a half-sheet broadside to an enormous 100-sheet billboard. An unparalleled team of illustrators and printers at the Strobridge Lithographic Company in Cincinnati created exquisite show posters for the great circuses of the day. Their abundant use of color, hyperbolic language, iconic symbols, and comprehensive detail combined



The Strobbridge Litho. Co., American, 1867-1960, *A Series of New and Most Astonishing Feats by the Best Trained & Greatest Herd of Performing Elephants* (detail), Barnum & Bailey, 1893, Color lithograph, paper: approximately 30 x 40 in., Collection of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

all the wonder of the circus in a single message.

To announce the Big Top's much-anticipated arrival, ornately carved wagons rolled down Main Street leading onlookers to the showgrounds. The free parade was the *pièce de résistance* of circus advertising. It offered a sneak preview of the spectacular sights, sounds, and smells of the circus. The public judged a show by the opulence of its parade, so circuses competed to create the most elaborate wagons. They hired skilled—and expensive—wood carvers to chisel white pine into fantastical figures from fairy tales and foreign lands. These carvings were bolted or screwed onto panels, gilt with silver or gold, and decorated with mirrors and other reflective surfaces, producing remarkably detailed and glistening tableaux. Even the massive wheels for these processional wagons were designed to catch the eye, featuring sunburst patterns that produced a kaleidoscopic effect when in motion. After following the parade to the circus lot, people then faced brightly painted sideshow banners strung along the midway that offered tantalizing glimpses of oddities they could pay to see “ALIVE” (though these illustrations often bore little resemblance to the real-life performers inside the tent). Skilled artisans, employed by tent and awning firms, let their creativity run wild when hired to paint advertisements for spotted leopard girls and fearless alligator handlers. They rarely saw the actual performers yet conjured chimerical images designed to appeal to people's curiosity toward the exotic and bizarre. After sketching their visions in charcoal on a stretched and primed canvas, they outlined

the figures in black paint and applied layers of color. In a single day, eight-foot-tall personalities like “Booptee,” “Sadie,” “Yogy Ray,” and “Miss Louise” could come “ALIVE” on canvas. The banners’ massive size, brilliant reds and oranges, theatrical framing devices, and arresting language, as well as their placement as a barrier between the audience and the act, provoked drama and fueled interest in the shows. Many a sideshow sucker claimed that the banners were more entertaining than the acts they promoted.

Reminiscent of circus promotional art, Judy Onofrio’s work lures audiences by offering strange and splendid sights. Like the banner painters of the great American midway, Onofrio unfurled her creativity when she envisioned *Act of Audacious Daring* as a pyramid act featuring a female acrobat and two snarling tigers. Performing a headstand on the paws of these ferocious felines while balancing an umbrella on her toes, Onofrio’s acrobat wows spectators with her derring-do. Yet the acrobat’s extraordinary performance disguises more mundane realities.

According to the artist, many sculptures reflect her own struggles to overcome physical and societal obstacles. Chronic health issues coupled with a car accident in 2000 left her largely wheelchair-bound for several years, and freedom of movement became one of her central themes. Juggling her roles as an artist, mother, wife, and community leader has also led Onofrio to make balance a focal point of her artwork. Yet even as her metaphorical sculptures spring from personal experience, they also



The Strobridge Litho. Co., American, 1867–1960, *The Mathews Sisters, Female Jesters, Together with Miss Dunbar, the Lady Ring-Master*, Barnum & Bailey, 1896, image: 38 x 28 1/4 in., paper: 40 1/2 x 30 1/2 in., Color lithograph, Collection of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

speak to universal dreams. Who hasn’t wished for the courage to tame a roaring lion or the confidence to sail through the air without a net? We applaud these allegorical acts of grace and fearlessness.

The circus provides Onofrio a cast of female daredevils in the guise of snake charmers, lion tamers, jesters, and acrobats. Suspended within a blazing ring of fire that teeters on a seal’s nose (*Ring of Fire*) or poised one-handed, midair, on the feet of two male tumblers (*Delicate Balance*, Plate 12), Onofrio’s heroines are risktakers, invoking

laughter in the face of danger, exhibiting both delicacy and strength. They flaunt their exceptional abilities and assert their individuality.

But Onofrio knows that every flyer needs a catcher, and so her aerialists rely on a company of human and animal helpers to soar. The artist thus acknowledges the support that she receives from her huge network of colleagues, friends, and family. Mystical men, allusions to her husband, often make appearances as conjurers (*I Put a Spell on You*, 2006, Plate 7) and wish-fulfilling genies. Elephants, tigers, monkeys, and birds dress up, impersonate people, and work the crowd, a menagerie that blurs the boundaries between human and beast in true circus fashion.

Onofrio's sculptural feats begin simply, with a quick pencil sketch. After an architectural stage set has been built, performers are then carved from basswood, or molded in foam and cast in fiberglass, and painted. Their stunts evolve intuitively, over several months to a year. An avid collector, Onofrio dresses the final scene with ceramic shards, shells, beads, and other evocative bric-a-brac. The sculptor commands this wild material abundance like a ringmaster: every object is carefully selected and integrated into a highly structured arrangement, underscoring the lively tension between chaos and control displayed in these skillful balancing acts.

In designing her work, Onofrio plays off the attention-grabbing baroque conventions and enticements practiced by circus folk artists. Their bold colors, simplified forms, exaggerated scale, complex compositions,

theatrical framing devices, and eye-catching patterns and textures inform her multilayered constructions. The elaborate bases of her large floor sculptures recall the rococo decoration of circus wagons with their profuse scrollwork, mirrors, and organic motifs. Onofrio's preference for wood carving (the foundation for most of her central figures) also pays homage to the craftsmanship of circus wagons. The multiple viewpoints and simultaneous actions common in early circus posters are reflected in her shrinelike wall sculptures, such as *Believe It or Not* (1999). The circus posters' playful use of big words, colorful adjectives, and over-the-top claims are echoed in her natural tendency toward exaggeration. The titles of many of her sculptures, especially the title work of this exhibition, recall the audacious language of circus billing.

Center ring has intrigued many artists as an otherworldly realm where passion and pathos play out to their extremes amid a dizzying array of colors, lights, movements, and strange sights. For more than a century, European and American painters and sculptors have explored the circus as a subject for their art, from Marc Chagall's surreal human-animal hybrid performers and Alexander Calder's kinetic miniature Big Top to Ed Paschke's holographic clown self-portraits. Judy Onofrio contributes to this great tradition with her sculptural circus acts. As ringmaster, she presents dazzling new contortionists, acrobats, and magicians who bend, leap, and cast spells over audiences.



Portions of this essay were originally published in a gallery guide for the exhibition *Ringmaster: Judy Onofrio and the Art of the Circus* at the Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin–Madison, April 19 to June 29, 2008. Like *See Acts of Audacious Daring! The Circus World of Judy Onofrio*, this exhibition focused on the influence of the circus on Onofrio's recent work. Her artistic practice and sources of inspiration are actually diverse, as described in Patricia McDonnell's comprehensive consideration of the artist's career in her essay in this catalogue.

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JUDY ONOFRIO: MEDIA AND MEANING

Patricia McDonnell, Ph.D.

Upon first encounter, the artwork of Judy Onofrio and its exuberant profusion can be dizzying. The bold work has an immediate, visceral, often joyous appeal. Who wouldn't fall head over heels for *Madame Twisto*? Only a sourpuss, surely. After closer viewing, it becomes clear that astute choices have been made in the creation and design of this sculpture. Onofrio's constructions comprise an impressive inventory of materials and objects, all purposefully selected and each item meticulously set in place. Amid the lavish bounty, a coherence obtains; a keen eye ordered the seeming chaos. The selection evident in this artist's style carries through—perhaps even derives from—the breadth of sources and list of concerns she builds into her compelling art. All artistic production involves a culling process, as creative artists determine what stays and what goes, what should be dominant and secondary. Artists of exceptional merit deftly layer a depth of meaning and content that they draw from various artistic and cultural sources, then

viewers and scholars examine the work for its aesthetic rewards and intellectual rigor, looking for visual pleasure and discovery of inherent, though sometimes elusive, associations. Judy Onofrio belongs to this special category of strong artists because she deliberately and sensitively unites so much into the compendium of ideas and traditions that defines her inventive, original art.

Onofrio entered the art world in the late 1960s as a ceramist. She and her husband, Mayo Clinic neurosurgeon Burton Onofrio, moved to Rochester, Minnesota, in 1967. True to her outgoing, voluble personality, she immersed herself in the community of Upper Midwest artists and helped to found and served as an early president for the Minnesota Crafts Council. (In 2001, the Council selected her for its Lifetime Achievement Award.) Onofrio came to the orbit of crafts at a propitious moment, because a revolution and redefinition was then well under way. The questioning



Judy Onofrio, *Madame Twisto*, 2002, Mixed media, 112 x 73 x 73 in., Collection of the Weisman Art Museum at the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis. Museum purchase with funds from Constance Mayeron and Charles Fuller Cowles, 2006.

and boisterous antics of the American counterculture in the 1960s and early 1970s bled into the crafts, inspiring artists to overturn tradition and create new paradigms unimaginable even a decade earlier. In ceramics, these seismic changes shifted the art form from a primarily decorative arts tradition into closer alignment with larger art world concerns. Robert Arneson, Rudy Autio, Viola Frey, Howard Kottler, Peter Voulkos, and Betty Woodman were pioneers

who literally reshaped the landscape and expanded the ambition and scale of the art form. Because Onofrio concentrated on sculptural ceramics, these and other compatriots inspired her progress.

In addition to inserting a heightened cultural critique into their work, many ceramic artists of this moment boldly experimented with the possibilities of clay. Onofrio received profound encouragement from this precedent. The license to push her material into new directions—whatever direction the work at hand demanded—was liberating. This spirit of open exploration reinforced a lust for materials that is fundamental for this artist. She has always been enthralled by physical properties of materials, as her work demonstrates. The juiciness of wet clay, the glimmer of fired porcelain, the iridescence of shell: these features and many more have fueled Onofrio’s imagination. By the early 1980s, she had moved from ceramics into soft sculpture, followed by installations and then wooden wall-mounted heraldic shields. With each episode of her artistic career, a new manipulation of the stuff of her art was in play.

Gradually, Onofrio evolved to a stage in her work that allowed her to pair her artist’s investigation of materials with her personal guilty pleasure of hunting curios and knickknacks. For decades, she has enjoyed a gleeful addiction to flea markets, garage sales, salvage haunts, and junk stores. Now, some purveyors even contact her directly to tell her about some amazing new trove of items she is sure to covet (and, they hope, take off their hands). “Objects energize me,” Onofrio freely confesses.¹ An obsessive

collector of collections, she squirreled away estate-sale finds for years, and only with the chapter of her artmaking that began in the 1990s did she discover a beneficial use for these salvaged treasures in her work. Making the leap to employ found and recycled material in her art places Onofrio in a now-distinguished tradition of artists who have explored this terrain. Pablo Picasso reworked generic cardboard and tin cans to create cubist sculpture and pasted newspaper clippings into drawings to profound effect. Louise Nevelson transformed scrap wood and discarded furniture into elegant sculptures, and John Chamberlain appropriates wrecked car parts. Public artist Nancy Rubin finds expressive potential in crashed-airplane bodies and salvage-yard boats in another recent contribution to artistic, inventive reuse.

The adoption of such vernacular materials points up a conflation of high and low, refined and populist, that characterizes modern and contemporary artmaking. Since artists began rejecting the iron grip and classicizing protocols of the academy in the nineteenth century, they have willfully blurred the line between art and life.² A larger humanity reverberates in Onofrio's art when the dross of everyday living—soda can pull tabs, broken dishware, bottle caps, buttons, pencils, dime-store jewelry, even Jell-O molds and industrial electrical covers—is found in abundance, played back to us in joyful excess. Viewers react with knowing appreciation when they recognize the familiar artifacts in such an unexpected context. When Onofrio appropriates such a wealth of discarded and common whatnots into her art, it bristles with deeper pathos.



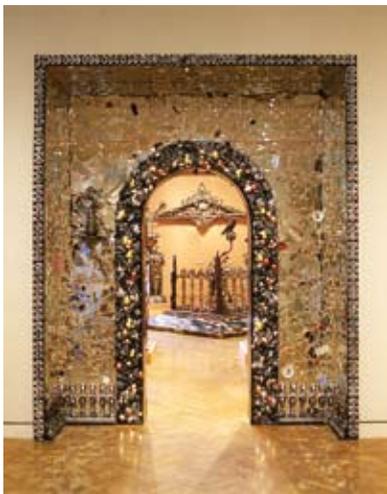
Dickeyville Grotto and Shrines, Holy Ghost Parish, Dickeyville, Wisconsin.

For Onofrio, incorporating flea-market bits into her larger constructions elucidates another aesthetic very consciously and imaginatively integrated into her work: the ebullience of outsider art also thrives within Onofrio's lexicon. Her introduction to the joys of self-taught artists began at home with her great-aunt Trude, who creatively painted her furniture and featured fanciful and unorthodox décor in her garden. Onofrio acknowledges that Trude set the stage for her own appreciation of Simon Rodia's Watts Tower in Los Angeles, Father Paul Dobberstein's Grotto of the Redemption in West Bend, Iowa, and Howard Finster's Paradise Gardens in Summerville, Georgia. Onofrio made what she describes as pilgrimage visits to nearby visionary art environments—Father Matthias Wernerus's impressive Dickeyville Grotto and Shrines in Wisconsin and Fred Smith's Wisconsin Concrete Park. The idiosyncratic mosaics with countless shards of bottle glass, pieces

of dinnerware, and other fragments in these sites relate clearly to Onofrio's mature work. Yet, as the art critic Rob Silberman wisely noted, "Judy is not a folk artist, a naïve artist, or an outsider artist. She is, however, among the many contemporary artists whose work is linked to the revival of interest in naïves and visionaries, outsider and folk art, popular culture and kitsch."³ The unconventional and raw nerve in the spectrum of outsider artmaking is celebrated and expressed in Onofrio's art during the past twenty years. Unbounded by anything save their own imagination and will, outsider artists often convey an ebullient sense of possibility that Onofrio has tapped for her own practice.

The two largest public projects by Onofrio (let's say epic scale, among her many giant individual works) are her *Judyland* installation at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1993 and *I Just Play for Fun*, a commission for the Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis in 1995. *Judyland* comprised several rooms at the museum, with surfaces

and architectural constructions bedecked and adorned with all manner of ornament. The St. Louis project involved a ceremonial arch over the steps from the museum terrace, looking out to acres of sculpture garden. The structure, literally encrusted with baubles and tchotchkes, was rooted in dozens upon dozens of repurposed, colorful bowling balls with an arabesque of twining forms that extend beyond the top of the arch. The energy, patterning, finesse, and excess of these works recall the apex of eighteenth-century European rococo exuberance, while the special allure of the Dickeyville Grotto hangs palpably in the air. Onofrio unabashedly mines art history and popular culture for her purposes much as she ruthlessly cherrypicks the best finds at the flea market. Multiple sources fuse seamlessly into her unique and savvy artistic vision. A demonstrative love of kitsch and extravagance parallels Onofrio's fascination with spectacle, and the spectacular has gained her increasing attention over recent years. One measure of this predilection, above and beyond the force of over-the-top

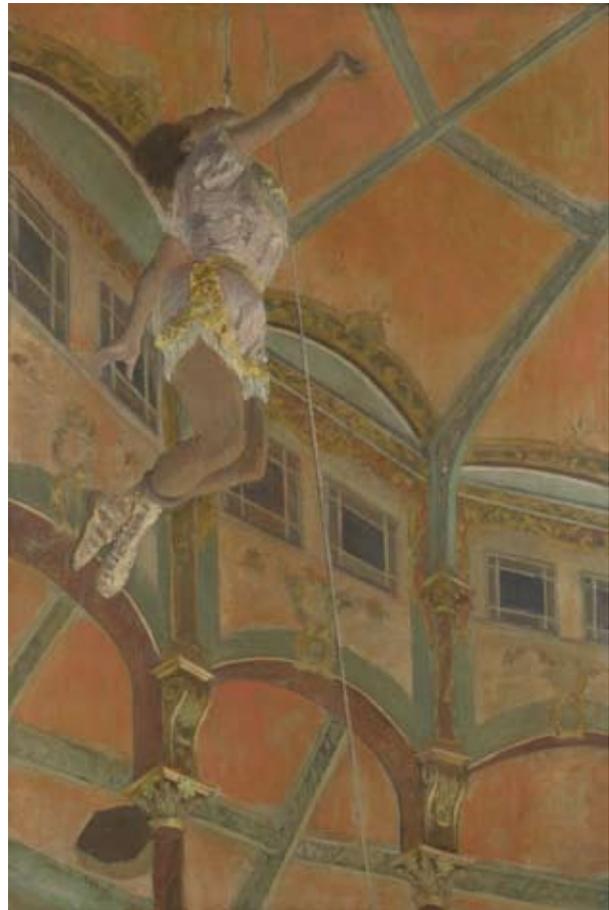


Installation views of *Judyland* at Minneapolis Institute of Arts, 1993.

visual display, is Onofrio's escalating number of subjects related to vaudeville and the circus. Both entertainment forms pursued spectacle and visual titillation for the sake of bombast alone, and this emphasis on thrill seeking registers in Onofrio's art as well.

Onofrio fell hook, line, and sinker for the hit film *Moulin Rouge* and saw the movie five times during the first weeks of its release in the summer of 2001.⁴ The film takes viewers on a roller-coaster ride of visual exhilaration as it follows the story of star-crossed lovers who meet at the eponymous cabaret in fin de siècle Paris. The film's director, Baz Luhrmann, acknowledged that "the whole stylistic premise has been to decode what the *Moulin Rouge* was to the audiences of 1899 and express that same thrill and excitement in a way to which contemporary movie-goers can relate."⁵ Onofrio would certainly agree that the movie succeeded in that ambition. The maxim "we see what we are looking for" applies here, for *Moulin Rouge* captivated Onofrio because she was already engaged in the mechanisms and charms of visual spectacle.

The turn-of-the-century European music hall, American vaudeville, and circus variety shows on both continents offered amusement that consciously replayed the new conditions of modern, urban living within a theater setting. In the early twentieth century, increasing industrialization drew more people to city factories, and urbanization and the expanding embrace of technologies ushered in new modes of living and social conduct that quickly ushered out Victorian-era decorum. Popular theater blossomed in this metropolis of electrical streetlights and subways, department stores and overhead



Edgar Degas (1834 -1917), *Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando*, 1879. Oil on canvas, 117.2 x 77.5 cm. Bought, 1925 (NG4121). National Gallery, London. © National Gallery, London / Art Resource, NY.

advertising billboards, and theater managers conceived an original entertainment format that spoke to the different sensibilities of modern city dwellers. Novelty, spectacle, and frenetic intensity stood above all else in these venues. Scholar Ben Singer noted that "the demand for thrills escalated as the blasé perception required increasingly intense impressions."⁶ City streets offered an assault on the senses, with swarms of people moving about and sights and sounds bombarding the pedestrian repeatedly and from every direction. Entertainment

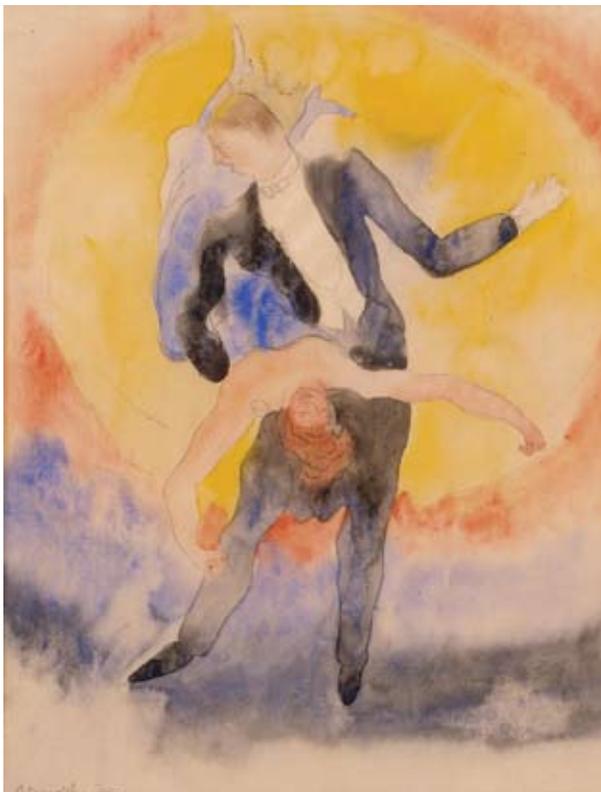


Max Weber, *Burlesque #2*, 1909, Oil on canvas, 20.25 x 14.5 in., Courtesy Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, Bentonville, Arkansas. Photography by Dwight Primiano.

modes brought that same disjunctive, raw energy indoors and into the theater. Popular theater performances cycled a fast-paced string of acts in which discontinuity rather than calm narrative reigned, intensified by the compelling energy of performers and innovative possibilities of incandescent, electrical lighting.⁷

In Paris, Edgar Degas at the Cirque Fernando and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec at the Moulin Rouge captured the fervor of these theatrical environments in their paintings through garish colors, cropped and often asymmetrical compositions, and skewed

as well as curiously novel perspectives. Vaudeville in the United States flourished in the 1880s and 1890s, drawing a larger audience than European music halls because managers sanitized the performances and auditoriums to attract families and female theatergoers. Circus acts (whether animal acts, acrobats, or high-wire stunts) were a mainstay in the vaudeville variety format. American artists fell captive to the lure of this stimulating entertainment, and many innovated artistic means to convey its energy and visual thrill. *Burlesque #2* (also known as *Vaudeville*) by Max Weber and *Acrobats* by Charles Demuth foreground this electrifying performance mode. Weber distorts and simplifies his two central female performers, willfully ignoring academic precepts for foreshortening to yield an active, abstracted field. The figures' large scale in relationship to the canvas size presents them as powerful Amazons of the stage. Collectively, the perspectival distortions, unorthodox figural scale, brilliant colors, and animated patterning evoke the jarring and caffeinated experience of vaudeville performance. The two performers in Demuth's watercolor float in an abstracted space of richly saturated color. Concentric rings of gold, red, blue, and charcoal portray the incandescent stage spotlighting, a technology that was then very new to American theaters. The twists, turns, and lifts of the acrobatic duo received the high-octane fuel additive of dazzling electrical lighting, and Demuth's watercolor captures the mesmerizing visual spectacle of a daring physical performance heightened by the best special effects then available. In the twenty-first century, when we are inured to and expect a visual barrage powered by constantly and insistently new technologies, it can be hard to imagine how striking the



Charles Demuth, 1835–1935, *Acrobats*, 1916, Watercolor, 10.125 x 7.625 in., New Britain Museum of American Art, Harriet Russell Stanley Fund.

electrical theater lighting would have been for vaudeville audiences, when many in the theater seats still had oil or gas lamps in their homes. For artists and audiences in this era, the theater was captivating, as Demuth's innovative series of vaudeville watercolors attest.

In this condensed consideration of modern artists enthralled by popular theater, Alexander Calder is essential, given his rich exploration of the circus and its performance mode.⁸ Before devoting himself to art, as a freelance illustrator for the *National Police Gazette* in 1925, Calder spent two weeks illustrating the Ringling Brothers &

Barnum & Bailey's Circus. In Paris a year later and with the spark ignited by his timely New York encounter, he began making sculptural circus figures from wire, cork, and bits of fabric. Between 1926 and 1931, he built *Cirque Calder*, an articulated series of mechanized sculptures in miniature scale that he activated in playful performances.

Alexander Calder, 1898–1976, *Wire Sculpture by Calder*, 1928. Wire, 48.25 x 25.875 x 4.875 in. Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; purchase, with funds from Howard and Jean Lipman. © Estate of Alexander Calder/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.



Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still*, 1978, Black and white photograph, 10 x 8 in., Courtesy of the artist and Metro Pictures.

He met many in the international avant-garde when they attended his idiosyncratic showings of this unique and complex work of performance art during the next decade. The mobiles by Calder that now grace the vast atriums of prominent late twentieth-century buildings often recall the “fantastic balance in motion that the performers exhibited.”⁹ The experience of awe at the circus provided a touchstone that resurfaced throughout a lifetime of highly creative artmaking for Calder’s extraordinary talent.

Following Calder, Demuth, Weber, and others who enriched their art by imbuing it with experiences from popular theaters, artists in the late twentieth and now twenty-first

centuries continue this artistic exploration. Onofrio’s art, however, is not aligned with the growing league of artists engaged in a critique of image-making in the mass media and its structures of control and power. Artists Jennifer Steinkamp and Gregory Crewdson, rather than Doug Aitken or Jeff Wall, reveal sensibilities and strategies close to Onofrio. Her art is not a social critique of visual rhetoric per se; instead, it exudes enthusiastic uplift despite and contrasting an acknowledged, troubled social order. Her focus remains on spectacle as a lightning strike and on a tour de force visual assault that can hook the viewer, and dazzling materials and jumbo constructions are part of her arsenal to yield this desired effect.

The guilty indulgence found in extravagance is by no means the only impetus behind Onofrio’s embrace of circus and vaudeville characters and subjects. With the advent of her mature work in the 1990s, female characters began to populate the scene. Her women are not shrinking violets or vapid starlets but self-possessed creatures with skill, daring, and knowledge. Onofrio’s female protagonists, often from the performance circuit, constitute another rich vein of content in her accomplished work. She celebrates strong women, defiant actions, underdogs, odd ducklings, even misfits who exude a proud braggadocio. The actions of these characters impart a resonant humanity that acknowledges vulnerability and foibles—the fine balance of personal relationships, volatility of good health, whimsy of good fortune, inevitable blunders and faux pas. Titles such as *Delicate Balance*, *Game of Chance*, *Loaded Dice*, *Ring of Fire*, or *Anything You Want* hint at the

subtext of desire, transgression, and playing against the odds. Onofrio's tableaux convey the message that we should accept risk and stride confidently toward and against hurdles that society may throw our way. They also allude to the cultural clichés and conventions that she probes in her art.

Judy Onofrio introduced the roles and role play of powerful women against a backdrop of feminist artmaking as artists such as Cindy Sherman, Eleanor Antin, and Barbara Kruger also questioned the tropes of the feminine in their art. Onofrio and these artists embrace feminism and also suggest cultural and psychological territory well beyond it. Mrs. Butterworth, Aunt Jemima, Mae West, assorted burlesque queens, fortune tellers, enchantress mermaids, and female circus acrobats—such is the lineup of bold babes in Onofrio's world. Like the clichéd B-movie heroines of Cindy Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* series, Onofrio presents

ordinary feminine stereotypes lifted from the realm of everyday life. These stock characters seduce the viewer through their pleasing familiarity and Onofrio's expert showmanship. The repetition of types and the persistent precariousness of their activities suggest that *Madame Twisto* and *The Amazing Miss Laverne* perform capably, yet their flawless execution is not always a given. They strut their stuff and do so defiantly to navigate beyond the safe social world that kept June Cleaver and Carol Brady at home and in the kitchen. Both their confidence and their vulnerability are on display—sometimes, the artist slyly suggests, we take one on the chin.

Onofrio creates a world in which her characters defy boundaries and transgress social norms. The vehicle for that expression aligns with other strong women artists and a penchant for meticulous craft. The installations and sculptural tableaux



Liza Lou, b. 1969, *Kitchen*, 1991–1995. Beads, plaster, wood, and found objects. Overall (in situ): 96 x 132 x 168 in., Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; gift of Peter Norton. Photography by Sheldon C. Collins.

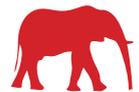


Judy Onofrio, *Delicate Balance*, 2004, Mixed media, 138 x 126 x 64 in., Courtesy of the artist

of Ree Morton, Viola Frey, Liza Lou, Chakaia Booker, and Tara Donovan are part of another lineage in which Onofrio participates. A meticulous and uncanny labor-intensive perfectionism marks this tradition. For Onofrio, the painstaking attention to detail and creative reuse of materials contribute special verve to her work's powerful visual impact. The precision and care of a work's construction is one more important code to Onofrio's content and ties it to the rich history of twentieth-century feminist artmaking. The pointed labor of Ann Hamilton's or Michelle Grabner's artistic practices are other examples that establish metaphorical meaning aligned with women's toil—part menial grind, part loving effort.

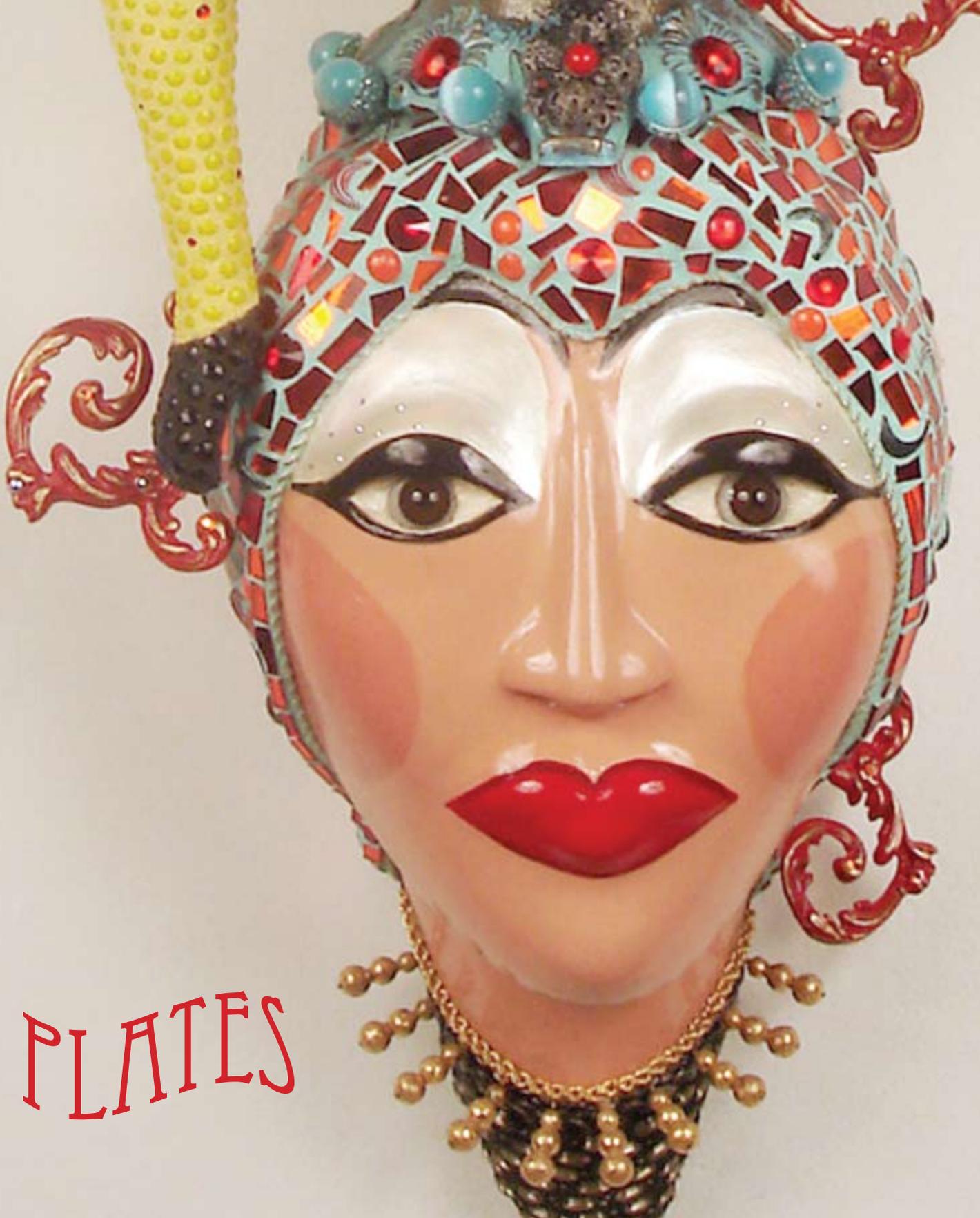
Onofrio belongs to this tradition through her tremendous exertion to create such extravagances.

It is possible to absorb Onofrio's art as eye candy, for her work offers an arresting visual tour de force. The seductive colors and patterns; the quirks of often comical tableaux; the endlessly fascinating materials and their inventive recasting—there is much to savor. But the poignant content of her inventive art requires more from viewers and rewards our greater reflection. From work so resonant with whimsy and humor, Onofrio articulates serious cultural commentary. Each particular ingredient and each particular metaphor contribute to a compounding effect with greater nuance and richer meaning. As writer Tanya Hartman aptly commented, "Onofrio seems to be communicating through the figure that we all share the same balancing act, in which we try to find equilibrium and ebullience within mortality and to find the carnivalesque joy of life amid bones."¹⁰ The trickster Judy Onofrio dazzles while she also deftly conveys a complex and profound humanism. The wealth of traditions, sources, and materials she layers within her art results in its deep sophistication. Viewers do need some focus to arrive at this ultimate meaning, because the artist, in her visually overwhelming creations, seems also to be beckoning: "What, the circus is in town? Can we go? Can we go now? Quick, grab the car keys!"



NOTES

1. Judy Onofrio as quoted in Laurel Reuter, "In Pursuit of Joy: Judy Onofrio," *Judy Onofrio: Come One, Come All* (Sedalia, Mo.: Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, 2005), 7.
2. See Kirk Varnedoe and Adam Gopnik, *High & Low: Modern Art, Popular Culture* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, distributed by Harry N. Abrams, 1990).
3. Robert Silberman, "Mrs. B and Great-Aunt Trude Go to the Museum," *Judy Onofrio: 2005 McKnight Distinguished Artist* (Minneapolis: The McKnight Foundation, 2005), 20.
4. Author's conversation with the artist, summer 2001. The U.S. wide release of the movie occurred in June 2001.
5. Baz Luhrmann, liner notes, Special Edition DVD of *Moulin Rouge*.
6. Ben Singer, "Modernity, Hyperstimulus, and the Rise of Popular Sensationalism," in *Cinema and the Invention of Modern Life*, ed. Leo Charney and Vanessa R. Schwartz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 93.
7. For early twentieth-century artists' responses to popular theater, see Patricia McDonnell, *On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, in association with Frederick R. Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, 2002).
8. Robert Silberman made the apt connection between Onofrio and Calder in "Mrs. B and Great-Aunt Trude Go to the Museum."
9. Alexander Calder as cited in Donna Gustafson, *Images from the World Inbetween: The Circus in Twentieth-Century American Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, in association with the American Federation of Arts, 2001), 29.
10. Tanya Hartman, "Judy Onofrio: Twist of Fate," *Ceramics: Art and Perception*, no. 77 (2009): 46.



PLATES





Plate 1

Judy Onofrio, *Act of Audacious Daring*, 2006, Mixed media, 130 x 60 x 48 in., Courtesy of the artist



Plate 2

Judy Onofrio, *Abracadabra*, 2007, Mixed media, 75 x 30 x 34 in., Courtesy of the artist



Plate 3

Judy Onofrio, *Meow*, 2005, Mixed media, 46 x 39 x 22 in., Courtesy of the artist





Plate 4

Judy Onofrio, *Black Bird Sings*, 2008, Mixed media, 27 x 30 x 16 in., Courtesy of the artist



Plate 5

Judy Onofrio, *Three of a Kind*, 2005, Mixed media, 53 x 36 x 24 in., Courtesy of Harvey Filister and Ted Bair



Plate 6
Judy Onofrio, *Ring Master*, 2005, Mixed media, 32 x 23 x 15 in., Courtesy of the artist





Plate 7

Judy Onofrio, *I Put a Spell on You*, 2006, Mixed media, 52.5 x 40 x 24 in., Courtesy of the artist

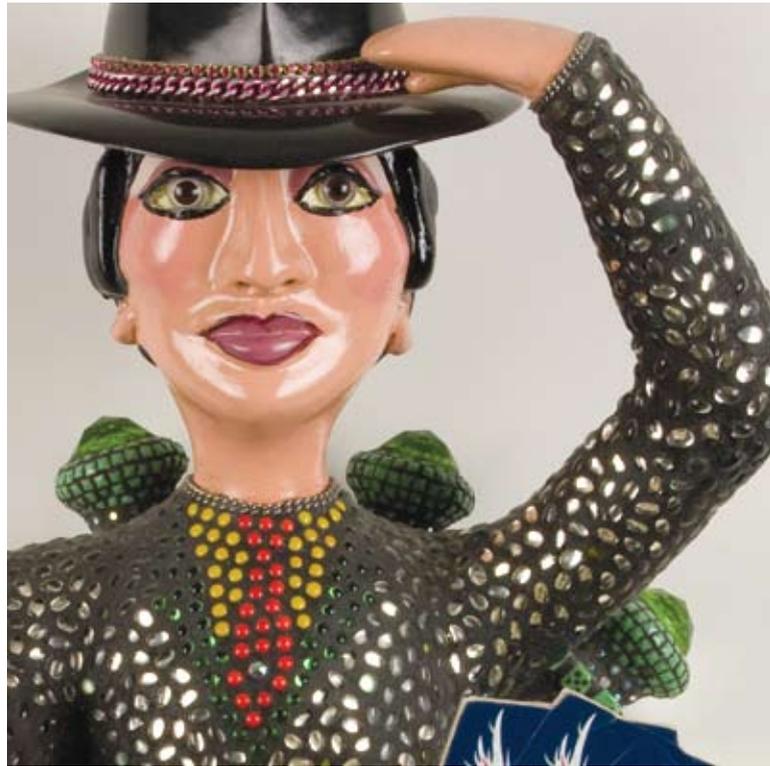




Plate 8

Judy Onofrio, *If You Play Your Cards Right . . .*, 2002, Mixed media, 20 x 11.25 x 8 in., Museum purchase



Plate 9

Judy Onofrio, *Sideshow Artist*, 2007, Mixed media, 27 x 15 x 11.5 in., Courtesy of the artist



Plate 10

Judy Onofrio, *Flip-Flop*, 2007, Mixed media, 32 x 15 x 19 in., Courtesy of the artist





Plate 11

Judy Onofrio, *Ring of Fire*, 2000, Mixed media, 103 x 75.5 x 55 in., Courtesy of the artist





Plate 12

Judy Onofrio, *Delicate Balance*, 2004, Mixed media, 138 x 126 x 64 in., Courtesy of the artist



Plate 13

Judy Onofrio, *Comedy of Errors*, 2007, Mixed media, 37 x 20 x 20.5 in., Courtesy of the artist



Plate 14

Judy Onofrio, *Estelle and Her Amazing Birds*, 2005, Mixed media, 52 x 37 x 24 in., Courtesy of the artist

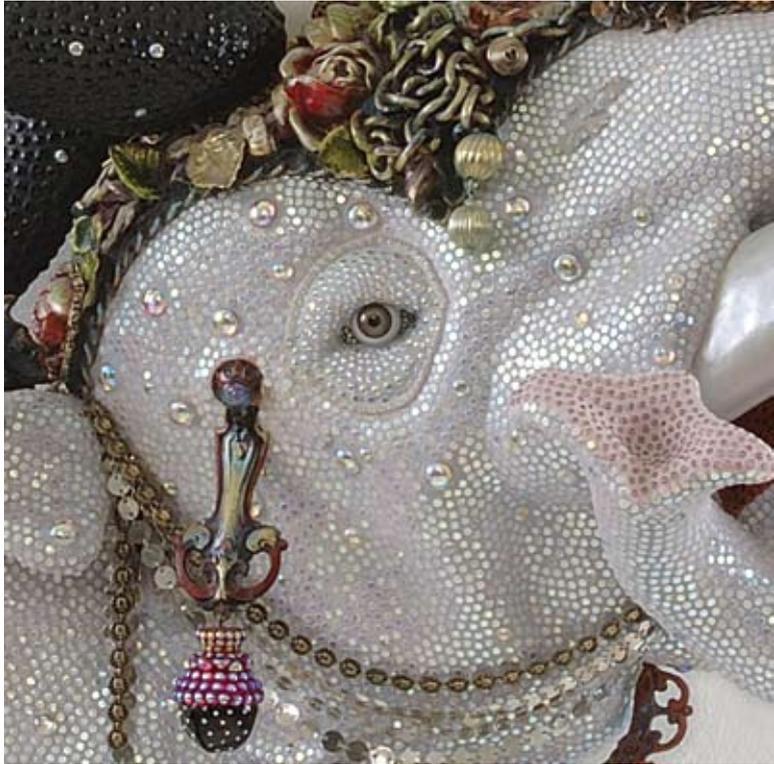




Plate 15

Judy Onofrio, *Riding High*, 2004, Mixed media, 53 x 37 x 14 in., Courtesy of the artist





Plate 16

Judy Onofrio, *Big Secret*, 2006, Mixed media, 36 x 35 x 16 in., Courtesy of the artist

JUDY ONOFRIO

considers herself a self-taught artist, trained through her studio practice and a large network of fellow artists in lieu of art school. She has been involved with the Midwestern arts community since she moved to Rochester, Minnesota, in the 1960s. She continues to live and work there at her home/studio/sculpture-garden complex known as Judyland. Her artistic practice has evolved over four decades from ceramics to large-scale, mixed-media sculpture. She combines interests in the formal issues of modernism and the performative aspects of contemporary art with an appreciation for folk and visionary arts and a fascination with American popular culture. Her often autobiographical sculptures of circus performers, mermaids, Mrs. Butterworth, and other mythological figures and cultural icons address dualities and utopian dreams.

Onofrio has exhibited at many museums and galleries, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts; North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks; Rochester Art Center, Minnesota; and Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, Missouri. Her sculpture is in the permanent collections of more than twenty-five institutions worldwide, such as Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia; Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts, Canada; and Museum of Contemporary Art, The Netherlands. She has received numerous grants and awards over the past thirty years and was named a Distinguished Artist by the McKnight Foundation in 2005.

For more information on Judy Onofrio's life and work, visit the artist's website at www.judyonofrio.com. The 2005 McKnight Distinguished Artist publication is available at www.mcknight.org/resources/publications_archive.aspx.



Photo by Mark Luinenburg

ARTIST CHRONOLOGY

1939

Born Judith Keith Tyree in New London, Connecticut, to Marge and Vice Admiral John Tyree.

1939–57

Multiple moves between the port cities of New London, Virginia Beach, and Washington, D.C., provide ample ground for exploring and collecting: picking up shells, watching whales wash up on the beach, exploring deserted nightclubs buried under sand dunes by hurricanes.

1957

Vice Admiral Tyree vetoes art school for his daughter; at his insistence, Judy stays in Bristol, Virginia, to study business law and economics at Sullins College while her parents and younger sister, Johanne, move to Sasebo, Japan.

1958

Joins her family in Japan for the summer after completing her first year at Sullins. While teaching swimming lessons, meets Lieutenant Commander Burton M. Onofrio, a neurosurgeon stationed at the naval hospital. Their romance lasts just two weeks before she returns to Virginia.

1960

Burton joins Judy in Virginia over Christmas break, and the two are engaged. They marry in June, the day after her graduation from Sullins.

1960–64

The Onofrio family moves to Rochester, Minnesota, for Burton's four-year neurosurgical residency at the Mayo Clinic. Son Scott is born in 1962, and Gregg in 1963. Judy begins to bake bread, a pastime that later influences her work with clay.

1964–66

A move to Washington, D.C., where Burton fulfills his naval service at Bethesda Naval Hospital. Daughter Jennifer is born in 1966. Judy takes classes in clay at Potomac Stoneware and the Corcoran College of Art + Design.

1967

The family moves back to Rochester when Burton accepts a permanent neurosurgical position at the Mayo Clinic.

1970

Judy is appointed acting director of the Rochester Art Center, beginning her lifelong involvement with the regional arts community.

1971

At the Rochester Art Center, founds and acts as director of Total Arts Day Camp for children in grades 1–6. The program is the first in the region run by artists and providing studio space for children; it still operates today.

1971–78

Judy's first solo clay exhibition at the Rochester Art Center, 1971. Participates in numerous solo and group exhibitions, primarily throughout the Midwest.

1972

Helps found and acts as president of the Minnesota Crafts Council, launching *Craft Connection Magazine* during her tenure.

1975

Serves on founding committee of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts (MIA), an artist-controlled program in which exhibitions are set by a panel of artists elected by their peers.

1978

Receives a Minnesota State Arts Board Fellowship Grant, a critical factor in shaping the next stage of her career.

1979

Collaborates on *Frog Hearts and Lima Beans* exhibition with artist Gregory Bitz, curated at the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul by Thomas Barry. Barry becomes a close friend and later shows Judy's work at his Minneapolis gallery.

1982

Builds a new studio at her home to accommodate her desire to create large-scale sculpture. While giving a lecture at the University of Northern Iowa in Cedar Falls, meets Sherry Leedy, then associate professor and later an art dealer based in Kansas City, Missouri.

1984

First large-scale pyrotechnic work created at Drake University in Des Moines.

1989

First show of wall constructions at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art in Kansas City.

1992

Accepted for Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program for an exhibition in 1993 at the MIA. Receives a Minnesota State Arts Board Career Opportunity Grant to produce the exhibition.

1993

Judyland, described by Sherry Leedy as “a visual tour de force of flamboyant surfaces,” opens at the MIA. Exhibition is held over for six weeks due to popular demand.

1994

Receives an Arts Midwest/NEA Regional Fellowship Grant.

1995

Receives a McKnight Foundation Fellowship in the Visual Arts, which she uses for the yearlong work of building a 19-foot sculpture, *A Woman and Her Bear*. *Judyland* travels to Laumeier Sculpture Park in St. Louis, where Judy's first public sculpture, *I Just Play for Fun*, is installed. The exhibition also travels to the North Dakota Museum of Art in Grand Forks. Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art begins showing Judy's work annually at SOFA (Sculpture Objects & Functional Art) in Chicago, gaining the attention of national and international collectors.

1999

Receives a Bush Artist Fellowship and uses the funding to double the size of her studio by building a wood shop for large power equipment in her garage.

2000

With Burton, receives the Rochester Art Center Lifetime Achievement Award for their contributions to the growth and development of the center over thirty years.

2001

Honored with the Minnesota Crafts Council Lifetime Achievement Award.

2002

Presents four-day onstage workshop at Minnesota State University, Mankato, with friends and fellow artists Rudy Autio and Don Reitz.

2005–6

Receives the McKnight Distinguished Artist Award.

Works with Sherry Leedy to develop *Come One, Come All*, a traveling exhibition featuring new sculptures and selections from the past decade.

2008

Collaborates with Cassie Wilkins, interim curator of Chazen Museum of Art in Madison, Wisconsin, on *Ringmaster: Judy Onofrio and the Art of the Circus*, the first museum exhibition to explore her circus-themed work alongside traditional circus promotional arts that served as inspiration. Makes her first trip to Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin.

Begins to incorporate animal bones into her work.

2009–10

New work becomes increasingly monochromatic and less narrative.



Onofrio in her Rochester, Minnesota, studio.



SOLO EXHIBITIONS

- 2011 *See Acts of Audacious Daring! The Circus World of Judy Onofrio*, Plains Art Museum, Fargo, North Dakota
Work of the Moment, Swan Song Gallery, Maiden Rock, Wisconsin
Minnesota State Fair 100th Anniversary Invitational, St Paul
Work of Judy Onofrio, University of Wisconsin, LaCrosse, Wisconsin
- 2010 *Stories of Reclining Women*, Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota
Going Yard! Art about Baseball, Thomas Barry Fine Arts, Minneapolis
- 2009 *Jungle Dance*, Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri
- 2008 *Stories of Reclining Women*, Thomas Barry Fine Arts, Minneapolis
Ringmaster: Judy Onofrio and the Art of the Circus, Chazen Museum of Art, Madison, Wisconsin
- 2007 *Voilà!* Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri
- 2006 *Come One, Come All:* Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, Missouri;
2005 Arkansas Arts Center, Little Rock; North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks;
Rochester Art Center, Rochester, Minnesota
- 2003 *The Greatest Show on Earth*, Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri
- 2001 *New Sculpture*, Thomas Barry Fine Arts, Minneapolis
SOFA (Sculpture Objects & Functional Art), Chicago
- 2000 *Three Ring Circus*, Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, Kansas City, Missouri
- 1995 *Temptation*, Leedy Voulkos Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri
New Sculpture, Thomas Barry Fine Arts, Minneapolis
Judyland, Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis

- 1993 *Judyland*, Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program, Minneapolis Institute of Arts;
North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks
- 1992 *Bejeweled Brooches and Shrines*, Mia Gallery, Seattle
Temple of Jewels, Leedy Voulkos Gallery, Kansas City, Missouri
- 1991 *Button Shrine Installation*, Ann Nathan Gallery, Chicago
- 1990 *Recent Work*, Eugene Johnson Gallery of Art, Bethel College, St. Paul
- 1988 *Altered Planes*, Rochester Art Center, Rochester, Minnesota
J. Furlong Gallery, University of Wisconsin–Stout, Menomonie
- 1985 *Clay Paintings*, College Center Gallery, Rochester Community College,
Rochester, Minnesota
- 1984 *Reconstructions*, Peter M. David Gallery, Minneapolis
- 1983 Installation, Waterloo Municipal Galleries, Waterloo, Iowa
Fresh Paint, Callaway Galleries, Rochester, Minnesota
- 1982 Installation, Conkling Memorial Art Gallery, Minnesota State University, Mankato
University Art Gallery, University of Wisconsin–Stevens Point
- 1980 Talley Gallery, Bemidji State University, Bemidji, Minnesota
- 1979 *Frog Hearts and Lima Beans*, Catherine G. Murphy Gallery,
College of St. Catherine, St. Paul
- 1977 University Art Gallery, Winona State University, Winona, Minnesota
- 1976 The University Center Gallery, Southern Illinois University, Edwardsville
J. Furlong Gallery, University of Wisconsin–Stout, Menomonie
- 1974 Sordoni Art Gallery, Wilkes College, Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania
Octagon Art Center, Ames, Iowa
University Galleries, Illinois State University, Normal

PERMANENT COLLECTIONS

Arabia Museum, Helsinki, Finland

Chazen Museum of Art, University of Wisconsin, Madison

Cooper-Hewitt, National Design Museum, New York

Daum Museum of Contemporary Art, Sedalia, Missouri

Decorative Arts Museum, Arkansas Art Center, Little Rock

Greenville County Museum, Greenville, North Carolina

Hallmark, Kansas City, Missouri

Hawaii State Foundation on Culture and the Arts, Honolulu

Joan Mannheimer Collection, Des Moines

Laumeier Sculpture Park, St. Louis

The McKnight Foundation, Minneapolis

Minneapolis Institute of Arts

Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul

Minnesota Museum of Art, St. Paul

Montreal Museum of Decorative Arts

Museum of Contemporary Art, Voor Hedendaagse Kunst Het Kruithuis,
Hertogenbosch, The Netherlands

National Council on the Arts, Washington, D.C.

National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia

North Dakota Museum of Art, Grand Forks

North Hennepin Community College, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota

Northwest Bank, Rochester, Minnesota

Plains Art Museum, Fargo, North Dakota

Rochester Community College, Rochester, Minnesota

University of Wisconsin–LaCrosse

University of Wisconsin–River Falls

Weisman Art Museum, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis

EXHIBITION CHECKLIST

Judy Onofrio
Believe It or Not, 1999
Mixed media
55 x 29 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Ring of Fire, 2000
Mixed media
103 x 75.5 x 55 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio, *If You Play Your
Cards Right. . .*, 2002
Mixed media
20 x 11.25 x 8 in.
Museum purchase

Judy Onofrio
Delicate Balance, 2004
Mixed media
138 x 126 x 64 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Riding High, 2004
Mixed media
53 x 37 x 14 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Meow, 2005
Mixed media
46 x 39 x 22 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Ring Master, 2005
Mixed media
32 x 23 x 15 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Three of a Kind, 2005
Mixed media
53 x 36 x 24 in.
Courtesy of Harvey Filister
and Ted Bair

Judy Onofrio
*Estelle and Her Amazing
Birds*, 2005
Mixed media
52 x 37 x 24 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Act of Audacious Daring, 2006
Mixed media
130 x 60 x 48 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Big Secret, 2006
Mixed media
36 x 35 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Abracadabra, 2007
Mixed media
75 x 30 x 34 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
I Put a Spell on You, 2006
Mixed media
52.5 x 40 x 24 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Flip-Flop, 2007
Mixed media
32 x 15 x 19 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Sideshow Artist, 2007
Mixed media
27 x 15 x 11.5 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Comedy of Errors, 2007
Mixed media
37 x 20 x 20.5 in.
Courtesy of the artist

Judy Onofrio
Black Bird Sings, 2008
Mixed media
27 x 30 x 16 in.
Courtesy of the artist

CIRCUS POSTERS

The Strobridge Litho. Co.
American, 1867–1960
*Chaste, Charming, Weird
& Wonderful Supernatural
Illusions*, Barnum & Bailey,
1898
Color lithograph
Paper: 30.125 x 40.125 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The Strobridge Litho. Co.
American, 1867–1960
*The Ching-Ling-He and Tia
Pen Troupes*, Barnum & Bailey,
1915
Color lithograph
Image: 26.5 x 36.5 in.
Paper: 30 x 40 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The Strobridge Litho. Co.
American, 1867–1960
*Great Groups of Trained Wild
Beasts*, Barnum & Bailey, 1915
Color lithograph
Image: 26.5 x 36.5 in.
Paper: 30 x 40 1/4 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Erie Litho. & Ptg. Co.
American, active first half of
20th century
*Seals That Exhibit Intelligence
Scarcely Less Than Human*,
Sells-Floto, 1932
Color lithograph
Image: 39.125 x 26.125 in.
Paper: 42.25 x 28 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The Strobridge Litho. Co.
American, 1867–1960
*Exclusive Rare Zoological
Features*, Barnum & Bailey,
1917
Color lithograph
Paper: 40.125 x 30.125 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The Strobridge Litho. Co.
American, 1867–1960
*The Three Famous Herbert
Brothers*, Barnum & Bailey,
1893
Color lithograph
Paper: 30 x 39.5 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The Strobridge Litho. Co.
American, 1867–1960
*The Mathews Sisters, Female
Jesters, Together with Miss
Dunbar, the Lady Ring-Master*,
Barnum & Bailey, 1896
Color lithograph
Image: 38 x 28.25 in.
Paper: 40.5 x 30.5 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

The Strobridge Litho. Co.
American, 1867–1960
The Paldrens, Barnum & Bailey,
1915
Color lithograph
Image: 36.5 x 26.5 in.
Paper: 40.125 x 30.125 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

SIDESHOW BANNERS

David “Snap” Wyatt
American, 1905–1983
Sadie, Alive, 1960s
Oil on canvas
82 x 120 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Sigmund Bock
American, active early 20th
century, *Miss Louise and Her
Den of Alligators*, c. 1915
Oil on canvas
136.5 x 97 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

David “Snap” Wyatt
American, 1905–1983)
Booptee, Alive, 1950s
Oil on canvas
138 x 114 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Nieman Eisman
American, active first half
of 20th century, *Yogy Ray,
Mystery Man*, 1940s
Oil on canvas
84 x 102 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

WAGON CARVINGS

Unknown maker, American
Side panels from Sells Bros.
Circus tableau cage wagon,
c. 1895,
Wood and paint
65 x 144 x 4 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Bode Wagon Company
American, about 1890–1934
Queen figure from Sells-Floto
Circus cage wagon, 1906
Wood and paint
Approx. 60 x 20 x 12 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Unknown maker
Male lion head, n.d.
Wood and paint
14 x 23 x 11 in.
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

Unknown maker
American
Wagon wheel, late 19th century
Wood and paint
38 in. diameter
Collection of Circus World
Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin

DVDs

Ringling-Barnum Circus,
1928–1933, Chicago, IL
Black and white, silent
with intertitles,
Approx. 45 minutes
Circus World Museum,
Baraboo, Wisconsin

Judy Onofrio Interview
Rochester Art Center, 2006
Video and editing by Scott
Stulen, Curator of Education
30 minutes



Examples of wagon carvings from the collection of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin.

ABOUT CIRCUS WORLD MUSEUM

For this exhibition, Judy Onofrio helped to select examples of circus posters, sideshow banners, and wagon carvings that have influenced her work. These original circus arts are all on loan from the Wisconsin Historical Society's Circus World Museum in Baraboo, Wisconsin. The museum collects and preserves all types of material related to American circus history, from business records and paper ephemera to clown wardrobe and elephant trappings. Highlights of the collection include approximately 8,200 posters (dating from 1835), the world's largest collection of circus wagons, and more than 5,000 negatives of circus scenes and performers taken by Chicago publicity photographer Harry A. Atwell from 1909 to 1952. Circus World Museum encourages the research use of its collections and makes its holdings available to the public through exhibitions, programs, and loans. For more information about Circus World's collections and programs, visit its website at www.wisconsinhistory.org/circusworld.



Photographs by Harry A. Atwell, Collection of Circus World Museum, Baraboo, Wisconsin



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Behind Onofrio's studio in Rochester, Minnesota.

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