

Reclining Women (2010)

By Robert Silberman

Judy Onofrio's reclining women recall any number of famous females in the history of art: Titian's Venus of Urbino, a ripe Renaissance image of the goddess of love; Jacques-Louis David's Madame Recamier, an elegant neoclassical lady on an elegant neoclassical couch; Manet's Olympia, a tough demimondaine with a direct, unabashed gaze; the odalisques of Ingres, with their alluring exoticism. Yet Onofrio's figures are thoroughly modern, with a style all their own. Created by a woman artist, unlike all the historical examples, they tell a very different tale.

The series as a whole translates personal experience into artistic form, presenting a narrative of illness and recovery. The symbolic beginning is *Twist of Fate*, a tableau that shows the world turning topsy-turvy. If other works show the women reclining, that is not lolling about or seductive posing, but mandatory resting to aid the healing process. The title of *Still Life With Pleasure* indicates an artistic genre, the still life, that often combines the virtuoso depiction of flowers and beautiful objects with a sense of decay or even death, as a memento mori. The "with pleasure" therefore suggests more than mere self-indulgence. The work is about survival, and maintaining a passion for life in the face of death. William Blake remarked, "Exuberance is Beauty," and no artist embraces that credo more wholeheartedly than Onofrio. *Still Life With Pleasure*, with its irresistible vitality, glories in all the world has to offer, its colors and forms, its sensuousness and sensuality. The reclining woman is recharging her batteries with support from her loyal (if unusual) companions and sustenance from all that luscious fruit. The pleasure flows to the viewer as well, because of the sheer energy of Onofrio's art.

Onofrio's women have character. A temporary setback may knock them for a loop, but after a respite on a couch, they are not just walking, but flying. The aviatrix in *Black Bird Sings*, with birds to help her stay aloft and a clown posse to keep her spirits up, sails off on her flying carpet with impeccable makeup, a dazzling outfit, and a sure sense of balance. *Voyage* replaces couch with canoe, a classic Minnesota swap. The work suggests that dangers are always lurking, represented by the enigmatic assemblage of lobster claw, bone, and teeth down below. But by being adventurous our heroine stays afloat, moves on with life, and even catches a fish.

In the *Reclining Woman* series bones make their first significant appearance in Onofrio's work, possessing their full force as emblems of the body and of mortality. The series forms a bridge between her earlier work, which culminates in the great circus sculptures, tours-de-force of spectacle and theatricality, and her latest creations, in which bones—raw, painted, or bejeweled—take center stage as the primary material in a sublime meditation on the transformative and transcendent power of art.

If the *Stories of Reclining Women* have a moral, it is that although life includes pain as well as pleasure, we need to remember the delights of the world and the joys of the imagination. In a perfect crowning touch, the artist takes a pair of bones in *An Important Moment in the Life of Teeth* and—pure Judy!—gives each a cherry on top.