

Judy Onofrio

Earth Bound

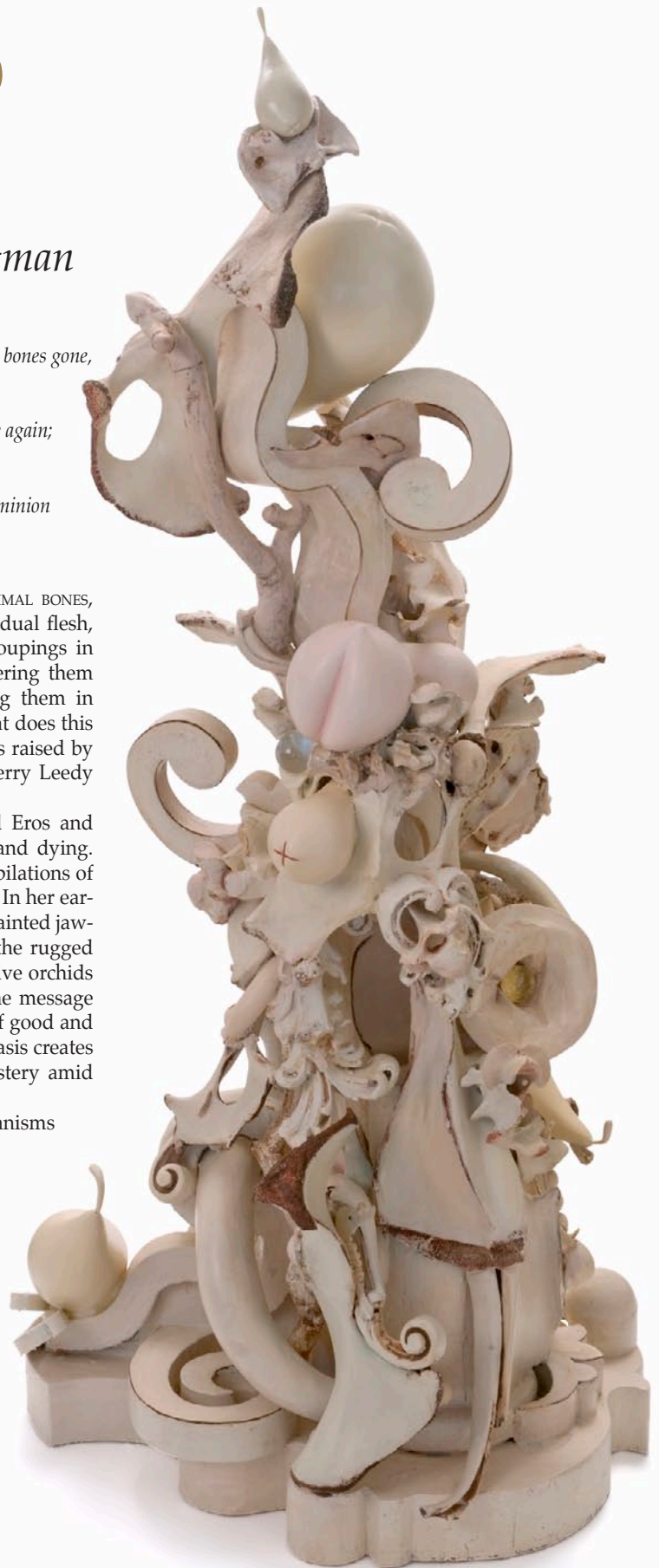
Review by Tanya Hartman

*When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though they go mad they shall be sane,
Though they sink through the sea they shall rise again;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And death shall have no dominion.
~ Dylan Thomas, Death Shall Have No Dominion*

WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO GATHER ANIMAL BONES, to reverently strip them of residual flesh, laying them out in orderly groupings in the studio, choosing among them, gathering them in gestural, poetic bundles and painting them in the subtle, evocative hues of nature? What does this creative ritual imply? These are questions raised by Judy Onofrio's show *Earth Bound*, at Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art in Kansas City.

Onofrio's work has always celebrated Eros and Thanatos, the linked energies of living and dying. She has done this through colourful compilations of found detritus with sculpted clay objects. In her earlier works, ceramic fruit cohabited with painted jaw-bones and circus daredevils navigating the rugged landscape of broken mirrors and aggressive orchids into which they were placed. For me, the message in these works was that the coexistence of good and bad, living and dying, momentum and stasis creates an awareness of both harmony and mystery amid the tumult and chaos that is life.

The bright colours and diversity of organisms and objects are now mostly gone. Instead, multiplicities of bones and horns gesture; swarming, clumping and climbing over and under each other to create magnificent, complex bouquets. The range and assortment of the bones is startling and displays the scope and wonder of nature's innovation. Tiny skeletons (sometimes no thicker than a human hair) pour through vertical slits in some works. The



Flux. 2010. Mixed media. 74 x 26 x 36 in.



openings through which they spill seem like mass graves. The surfaces that contain the openings are smooth and dispassionate, painted in a greenish, grey hue that suggests soil. The pieces allow the viewer to look beneath the surface, to glance a teeming reality that is always present but rarely glimpsed. What is fascinating about *Earth Bound*, is that fecundity and sterility are conflated. The prolificacy of bones suggests seeds, cells or mushrooms – something that multiplies rapidly and creates new life, rather than arid bones that imply the end of generation and productivity. In fact, the exhibition, which is composed of 30 sculptures, passionately implies that even at life's end and beyond it, there is beauty, harmony, surprise and striving.

Along the back wall of the gallery, which spans 30 feet, 12 medium sized sculptures are displayed, salon style. Most are created using bones as gesticulations analogous to strokes of paint or expressive line. Each sculpture has an upward thrust and seems kinetic, caught mid-gesture in an attempt to transform to something entirely non-corporeal. In this way, shadows play an

important role in the works. Each casts an image of itself freed from material reality and turned into simple, elongated shape. These 'bone bouquets', as I have come to think of them, are painted in subdued but luminous golden hues that increase their presence as valuable artefacts.

Onofrio sees the incredible, individual beauty of each bone as a poem that speaks of the perfection of the life cycle. All parts of nature work together

Facing page: Secret (Detail). 2011. 20 x 11.5 x 9 in.

Below: Compote. Mixed media. 21 x 24 x 17 in.







seamlessly to create a momentum that carries us to oblivion and into the realm of the unknown. The hidden bursts of warm colour within these works and the forms of the bones themselves imitate tropical flora. Other compositions evoke genitalia, or the regal architecture of cathedrals. It is important to emphasise that the bones Onofrio employs never read literally. They sweep like swathes of sculpted clay, clump like squeezed handfuls of earth and dance like branches in the wind. Seeing the work in aggregate allows the viewer to experience bones merely as a diverse and available material rather than as a static entity with one fixed meaning.

Earlier works dating from 2009–2011 are displayed in a more intimate section of the gallery, a wise decision on the part of the curator, because the close interplay between the works allows the viewer to experience Judy Onofrio as a colourist. These sculptures are painterly, with sculpted ceramic flora interwoven amongst the bones and set against painted backings made from wood. All forms are draped and swathed in lush paint in a plethora of hues: fleshy pinks, chalky yellows, pale tans and subtle, subdued greens. Like small surprises, or

Facing page, left: **Bloom**. 2011. 25 x 15 x 9 in.
 Facing page, top: **Rhythm**. 2009. Mixed media. 57 x 36 x 16 in.
 Facing page, below: **Vessel**. 2011. 22.5 x 17 x 17 in.
 Above: **Oasis**. 2009. Mixed media. 36 x 55 x 16 in.

bursts of emotion, flashes of richer, hotter colours reveal themselves. Scarlet, Cadmium Red and Burnt Sienna reward a viewer willing to look behind and into the composition. These objects are sculpture, low relief and painting concurrently, entities original, magnificent and genre defying. They are lamentation and exultation simultaneously, strange flowers commemorating cradle and grave.

Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas. She has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden, as well as others. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-CREF Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.