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From mosaics to bones

Rochester artist Judy Onofrio is taking her work in a new direction

by Norma Smith Olson

Colorful, whimsical, multimedia sculptures of people and creatures, including circus performers and monkeys, have been the hallmark of artist Judy Onofrio's work. But these days she is focusing on form without color.

The materials of her sculptures today are all white. She creates huge vessels that look like big woven baskets made out of found animal ribs.

"Right now, I'm only using cow ribs. I'm just really attracted to their minimal form and curve," she said. "I go out and find them and then clean, process and sort them. I'm just really interested in the form."

Working with bones reminds Onofrio of her earliest artwork. She began her sculptural career working in clay, more than 40 years ago when living with her husband and three children in Washington, D.C.

Onofrio's work is in galleries around the world, including the Minneapolis Institute of Arts and the Weisman Art Museum in Minneapolis. In 2005, she was given the McKnight Foundation Distinguished Artist Award for her ongoing contributions as an artist and educator in Minnesota.

'It's fanatically done'

"Full Speed Ahead," on the cover of this month's magazine, represents a transition in her work. "I was holding on to my mosaic work, while I was already starting to move out of it," she said.

This piece is a meaningful one for Onofrio, created several years ago at a time of her recovery from a serious illness. "It's about feeling successful and coming out the other side. It felt like 'full speed ahead,'" she said, "like a self-portrait, portraying a slice of my life."

The multimedia sculpture is large (3 feet tall by 2 feet wide by a foot deep). Onofrio carved the woman, canoe and fruits out of wood. Glass beads and jewels cover the woman's jumpsuit and the inside of the canoe.

"It's jeweled all of the way on the inside and outside. It's fanatically done. It's as precise up close as it looks from a distance," she said. "The fruits are sensual and beautiful forms, they have a certain abundance and deliciousness about them. The woman is in a canoe with the notion of full speed ahead. But she was surrounded by the seduction of all of the fruit and the environment I put her in."



"Full Speed Ahead," above, "Twist," lower left; Judy Onofrio, lower right. Photos courtesy of the artist.

"Right now, I'm only using cow ribs. I'm just really attracted to their minimal form and curve".

-Judy Onofrio

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Collecting bones

Each piece evolves and grows as Onofrio works on it. Large pieces can take six months to a year to create, and she works on several pieces at a time.

She has collected bones for years, setting them aside in her studio. She started using them in her sculptural work when she was recovering from her illness. "The bones represented a positive transformation from death to life," she said. In fact, for "Full Speed Ahead," Onofrio used cow bones for the ornate elements around the canoe.

Her intention is not to be macabre. She uses the beauty of the curvilinear forms of bones to reference mortality in a positive way. These newer pieces have a botanical feel for Onofrio.

"I'm thinking about orchids and plants," she said. "They are very celebratory."

Onofrio calls herself a "fanatic." Her work is detailed and precise. You can't tell how she puts the bone vessels together-and that's intentional. "They look like they fell out of the sky, like they kind of pulled themselves together in a very natural form."

At the beach

Onofrio has been collecting found objects since she was a kid. Her dad was an admiral in the Navy and her family moved frequently, but she always lived by the ocean while growing up.

"I was always just visually oriented," she said. "I collected stuff on the beach and I would put it together, save it. My whole upbringing was about putting things together."

A self-taught artist, she got serious about her work at age 30 and worked with clay for about 15 years. When she settled in Rochester, Minn., in the late 1960s, she built a large studio in her home, deciding she was going to be an artist "forevermore," she said, laughing.

"I don't think my home is really separated from my studio," she said of the spot she fondly calls "Judyland." "It's like a process in life, I guess."

With the big studio, she could do more expansive things, so the space is filled with multimedia, mosaic sculptures-many made of found objects. The hill behind the house became "an extension of my studio," where she can build sculptures out in the garden.

"I love what I do. There isn't anything I'd rather do. I think that's a big accomplishment," Onofrio said. "I think I'm clearly on my own path. What I'm doing right now is not what's going on in the art world at all. We'll see where I'm going to get to."

FFI: www.judyonofrio.com

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