



By Holly Bridges Elliott

Before you pass through the bejeweled archway entrance of the Minnesota Artists Exhibition Program's latest installation, the inlaid Astroturf rug at your feet tells you where you are--"Judyland," a magical exhibition by artist and fanatical collector Judith Onofrio.

Named for her fanciful backyard sculpture garden in Rochester, "Judyland" is a product of Onofrio's longtime fascination with "outsider" art and the influence of her great aunt Trude (an artist who worked outside the art mainstream for many of her 90 years). Trude's unorthodox approach to collecting, gardening and artmaking instilled in Onofrio a profound regard for naive and self-taught artists. Trude's influence also has fueled Onofrio's perpetual search for wonder in places such as the Watts Towers in Los Angeles, the Dickeyville Grotto in Wisconsin and flea markets across Minnesota.



In this exhibition, Onofrio combines these passions with her sensitivity to personal spaces, her love of stories and her dedication to object making. The strong, graceful exhibition entrance arch is embedded with 800 plaster-cast see-no-evil, hear-no-evil, speak-no-evil monkeys and a myriad of collected found objects such as illuminated Christmas lights and plastic fruits, broken mirror glass and plaster busts and heads of the likes of Abraham Lincoln. Onofrio is involved not only with the painstaking detail of obsessive ornamentation but with larger architectural concerns as well.

Inside "Judyland," one has entered a realm of forms and minutiae. Four enormous flowerpots on pedestals are encrusted with Jell-O molds, fountain pens, pencils and artificial fruit. Two eight-foot-tall spires are copped with bowling balls and seashelled rebar. More see-no-evil monkeys join other collectibles to adorn the 13-foot-high archway "shrines" that line the east and west walls of the gallery.

The shrines house a range of characters and creatures. George Washington, Paul Bunyan, Babe the Blue Ox and Sport the Reversible Dog are present to show Onofrio's love of folklore, Americana and storytelling. The subtle interactions between a bead-covered bird and an apple or between two pearl-coated deer (each of which seems to have a human persona) reveal themes of temptation and the Garden of Eden. Onofrio tends to make surprising combinations of objects--a fierce bear and small coconuthead turbaned women, For instance--to investigate opposites such as strength and fragility or humor and fear. Also, by placing something as ordinary as a mug handle in a novel setting, she jolts us into questioning what we rake for granted about a given object's role in the world.

The walls surrounding the "Judyland" shrines are emblazoned with thousands of cast fruits, evincing both her interest in the della Robbias, the Florentine Renaissance artist family famous for its polychrome reliefs, and the fact that Onofrio began her artistic career as a ceramicist.

Onofrio's longtime fascination with grottos, evident throughout the exhibition, played an important role in inspiring her to transform her backyard into a sculpture garden. Working with a number of her artist friends, she turned the wooded three-acre hillside behind her house into a "meandering pattern of outdoor rooms," each of which evokes the feeling of a grotto. Laden with quirky sculpture and laced with inlaid walkways, Onofrio's garden is highlighted by a pond, fish, and a fish graveyard, where real fish rest in peace along with ones made of Lucite and bullhorns.



"I tend," Onofrio says, "to form nests around me." She has been gathering material to feather her nests for some 30 years. A regular at rummage sales, yard sales and flea markets, she pursues an obsession with collecting that began when she was a

child. The daughter of a United States Navy admiral, she started picking up shells while living in Virginia Beach, Virginia. Her early beachcombing days instilled in her an expectancy and wonder about collecting. "Something always comes up on the beach," she says. There is always an air of change." She has remained devoted to what that seaside atmosphere taught her while pursuing her collecting as an adult here in Minnesota. "Change is always in my work. I enjoy the constant adventure of collecting."

Onofrio says she approaches a yard sale with an open mind. Her eye may be drawn by anything from old china to chairs to buttons. "I love things that I can get a lot of," she remarks, noting that she now owns "about ten barrels" of seashells and vast quantities of costume jewelry. Occasionally, however, she has to employ her self-styled collector's motto: "If you can't find what you're looking for, lower your standards." Onofrio forestalls the chaos that could threaten her teeming stockpile by being highly organized. Her studio is crammed with hundreds of containers, drawers and boxes that she uses to order her collections. Objects are sorted and categorized by type and size, and sometimes by color.

The exhibition "Judyland," with its large-scale pieces of controlled excess, has thoroughly integrated Onofrio's identity as a sculptor and collector and has helped her accomplish something she never before thought possible: "It has actually put a dent in my collection."



Top: *Garden of Delight*, 1992, mixed media
Now You See It, Now You Don't (*detail*), 1992, mixed media
Detail of *Compotes*, 1993, mixed media
Bottom: Judy in front of *Temple*, 1993
photos: Rik Sferra