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News

Friday, April 21, 2006

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Judyland in the limelight

Sculptor Judy Onofrio talks about her work, her life and her new-found fame

Elizabeth Noll
Assistant Editor

For more than 30 years, Judy Onofrio has been making art five days a week, 10 hours a day, in her Rochester home—at first in the basement; then, as the size of her sculptures grew, in a converted garage. Her whimsical art spilled out of the studio and into her yard, turning her gardens into something she calls “Judyland.”

As Onofrio's vision and skill developed, her intricate, playful figural sculptures found permanent homes in local, national and international collections (including the Weisman and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts).

But those living closest to her didn't know a thing about her success. Many of her neighbors didn't even know she was an artist. Not only was she not celebrated in her hometown; in most gatherings, she wasn't even recognized.

That all changed last month, when Onofrio won the McKnight Distinguished Artist Award. After three decades, her fellow townspeople finally know her name.

“I walk out now and everybody speaks to me,” Onofrio said. “So this has been kind of revolutionary.”

McKnight gives out the \$40,000 distinguished artist award each year to a Minnesota artist whose work has had a significant impact on the state's art community. Onofrio was chosen from a pool of several hundred artists: she's the second woman to be given the award in its seven-year history.

Though Onofrio has been practically a recluse for years—spending weekdays in the studio and weekends at garage sales and auctions, searching for materials and ideas—she said she's thrilled to be recognized, both by



Judy Onofrio draws inspiration for her sculptures from her great aunt, an artist whose work was never recognized. Photo By Mark Luinenburg

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McKnight and by her neighbors.

“What would be a greater sense of support, but to be recognized by your peers and in the place that you live? It’s just a wonderful feeling,” she said.

A collage mentality

Onofrio’s sculpture, which at times contains found objects like beads and buttons and makes heavy use of mosaics, is a natural expression of her personality, she said.

“Since the day that my feet hit the earth, I was a visual person,” said Onofrio. “I was always looking at everything. I always put things together—kind of a collage mentality—and I loved building things, three-dimensional objects.”

While she was growing up she spent a lot of time in Virginia with her great-aunt Trude—her grandfather’s sister—a suffragette who built a library in her hometown and who was an artist in her own right.

“She had a mind of her own and was always building things in the garden,” said Onofrio. “These kind of stacked tables, that would have doors you could keep opening into, and painted all surfaces, on the legs and everything. She’d go to museums and paint those pictures on the tables.”

Onofrio loved the time she spent with Trude and considers her a major artistic influence.

“When I’m working and when I’m really happy with what I’m doing, I’m right back there with her in the garden,” said Onofrio.

Sadly, Trude wasn’t seen as an artist—just as an eccentric, recalled Onofrio. “She was always considered the black sheep of the family. She suffered the lack of recognition for what she did, particularly in a time when women were expected to be a wife and mother. You didn’t expect some wacko to be out in the garden painting.”

Onofrio’s mother also influenced her art, but under even sadder circumstances: she died when Onofrio was a young woman.

“Most of my faces ... originally they all looked like my mother,” said Onofrio. “High cheekbones, sort of an exotic look. There’s sort of a question when you look at them, a sort of meditative feeling. There’s always a question of what’s going on on the inside of the head and what’s going on on the outside of the head.

“I really romanticized [my mother], and when my daughter was born she looked a lot like my mother,” added Onofrio.

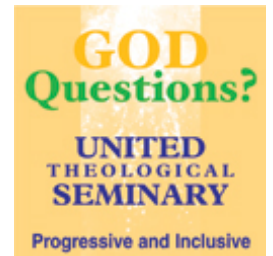
Onofrio’s daughter now teaches art at Augusta University in Georgia. She also has a son in Mexico City and another in New York City.

The creation of an artist

Having three children by the time she was 23 delayed Onofrio’s artistic development—but not by much. She started painting during a three-year stint in Washington, D.C., in a spare bedroom, when the children were still small; then she started working with clay. “It was all just really self-expression,” she recalled.

When the family moved back to Minnesota, she was asked to teach at the art center in Rochester. When the director left, she was appointed acting director for a year.

“That was a huge experience for me,” said Onofrio. “I got to know everybody in



the art community. After that year, I got really serious with my studio.”

She helped start a day camp for children in grades one through six—the Total Arts Day Camp, which is still running—and invited professional artists of all kinds to teach there during the summer. “I was learning as much as the children were,” said Onofrio. “It was just a wonderful experience.”

At that point in her career, Onofrio remembered, she had few role models. It was the early 1970s, and although she wasn’t ostracized like her great aunt, her world wasn’t exactly brimming with other women artists.

“I did not know anything but male artists, pretty much,” she said. “It was still 90 percent male at the schools.”

But Onofrio wasn’t intimidated: she was too far out in the boondocks to be swayed by conventional wisdom. “I was lucky,” she said. “I was on the outside working on my own.”

Eventually she met Carol Fisher, an artist in Minneapolis, who introduced her to other women artists. As she continued to work, and her art continued to evolve, she expanded her studio from the basement to an 800-square-foot addition on top of the garage. Later, she turned the lower level of the garage into studio space too—there she stores her welding equipment and works on her larger pieces.

Onofrio exults in her studio and the size of art it makes possible. One piece was 12 feet high and had to be taken apart to be moved. The piece she’s working on now— a woman with a cluster of monkeys for a hat—will be six or seven feet tall when it’s finished, she said.

“It’s wonderful to have space to do what you want to do,” she said.

Over three decades, she’s produced hundreds of pieces. She hasn’t kept count—she just keeps working.

“Ever since 1970 I’ve just steadily produced work always,” she said.

Onofrio’s early pieces used lots of found objects. Now she generally creates pieces from fiberglass, wood or iron (or a combination) and covers them with a mosaic.

For the piece *Mermaid on the Sofa* (2003), Onofrio made one arm, the head, the phone and the toucans from wood; the neck, body and couch are fiberglass. (Fiberglass is lighter than wood, so she uses it for the bigger sections.) The mosaic is made from ceramics and glass.

Of the hundreds of pieces she’s made, she can’t name a favorite, she said. “It’s always the one you’re working on at the moment.”

This year Onofrio has a traveling exhibit, “Come One, Come All,” which has been traveling the country since it opened in February at the Daum Museum in Sedalia, Mo. It’s now in Little Rock, Ark. and will travel next to Grand Forks, N. D. In April 2006 the show will open in Rochester; it will be Onofrio’s first major show in her hometown.

She’s excited at the prospect and pleased at the sheer bulk of her work on display. Seeing so many of her pieces together in one place “was an absolute revelation,” she said. The exhibit travels in a tractor-trailer, which is full “front to back to the ceiling,” she said. “Having that all set up where I could see work from 1978 to today, it was a great feeling. I just didn’t want to leave. It was like, ‘Wow, who did all this work?’ I felt completely outside the work.”

That’s a good thing, according to Onofrio. It means she’s developed artistically to the point where her previous work feels light years away.

“As an artist, you spend years inventing yourself,” she explained. “That’s what you’re doing, being an artist.”

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