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Judy Onofrio

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A Sensational Sculptor

WORLD RENOWNED ARTIST EXPRESSES LIFE THROUGH SCULPTURE

BY NICOLE BENNETT ENGLER

PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARK LUINENBURG

Judy Onofrio's passion for art is perhaps best illustrated in her southwest Rochester home. A chandelier composed from deer horns and teapots, a genie head that offers fortunes from his mouth and an entryway covered in jewels, shells and colored glass shards are among the art found in her eclectically-decorated home.

The eccentric ambience does not fade outside the sculptor's back door. Even when blanketed in snow, her garden, known as "Judyland," is an amazing mirage of statues, monuments and welded art, including a 125-bowling-ball pyramid, a tin ant eater on a stick and a large cement bird monument, dedicated to a bird laid fallen to her cat. In the spring and summer, the art is hidden

among lush perennial gardens.

Judy's lifelong obsession of frequenting garage sales, flea markets and auctions is apparent in her second-floor studio by the labeled shelves of materials that line the wall.

A spotlight shining on the far wall highlights the inception of Judy's newest sculpture, which resembles a woman by a dolphin, both carved from basswood.

Magic Through Mosaic

A wildly-imaginative sculptor, Judy describes her creations – from humans to vegetables – as "visual journeys of life" that portray dreams, wishes, seduction, duality and temptation.

"I don't know how to separate what's happening in my life from my sculpture," says Judy.

"They are all a culmination of my life – of where I've lived and what I've learned."

Often working on a larger piece for more than a year, Judy says her sculptures are formed day by day and are influenced by her past experiences. Using glass fragments, ceramic shards, buttons, beads, costume



At 4.5 feet high, Judy's 4-foot "Big Escape" is a mosaic wonder.



From her garden to her entryway, Judy surrounds herself, and her home, with artwork.

jewelry and shells, the artist's mosaic sculptures intertwine magic, movement and memories into complex forms and textures to take the viewer wherever the imagination allows.

"I work out of a stream of consciousness, and when I create art, it's like I'm searching for something," says Judy. "It's totally clear to me when I find what I'm looking for. Many times, I'll work on a piece for months and then find something I don't like, so I'll take a chain saw and make major modifications."

Judy considers herself lucky to be an artist. "Art is a spiritual journey for me – I can't think of a more powerful experience," she says. "Every day, I have the opportunity to construct a world of memories, humor and stories through my work. Best of all, I live in that world and invite others in. There is nothing I'd rather do and no place I'd rather be."

A Creative Career

The pinnacle of Judy's career came last summer when she received the McKnight Foundation's 2005 Distinguished Artist Award. The \$40,000 award is given annually to a working artist whose long career has made a significant impact on the arts in

Minnesota and beyond.

The Foundation also wrote a commemorative book about her work. Along with this honor came a summer filled with writers and photographers. Although this took time away from her studio, Judy says it was a wonderful experience.

"Art is a spiritual journey for me – I can't think of a more powerful experience."

"I was truly amazed when I received the McKnight Award," she says. "It is such a privilege to have the freedom and support to do what I do. This award is an example of how supportive the Minnesota art community is."

Another monumental period in Judy's career was her "Judyland" show at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1993, which was extended due to popular demand. Although she had been creating exhibitions for years, Judy felt this was the first major turning point in her career.

Most recently, Judy has been hard at work on her "Come One, Come All" exhibit scheduled to open April 15 at the Rochester Art Center in the Burton and Judy Onofrio Gallery. Named after a common phrase

heard at the circus, the exhibit showcases circus life and self-portraiture from 1997 through today.

"I'm hoping that people who've known me for years will come see what I've been doing over time," she says, adding that her work has rarely been showcased in the community. Judy is excited to display her work in her hometown and says the art center makes it fun to live in Rochester.

The artist is a familiar face to the art center. After signing up for an art class the day she moved to Rochester in 1960, the instructor asked her to teach after the first lesson. Judy was appointed acting director the following year. She also founded and managed the Total Arts Day Camp and for 25 years helped teach children – including her own three – to think "outside the box."

Like many professionals, Judy spends about eight hours per day in her studio, although she admits to working as long as 18-hour days when she is preparing for new exhibits.

A somewhat humble artist, Judy does not take complete credit for her work. Her husband, Burton, is her support system. A semi-retired Mayo Clinic neurosurgeon, Burton builds the wood crates in which Judy's exhibits travel and is her "road

boss,” managing the setup of her shows across the nation. He is also the “Judyland” master gardener.

An Aspiring Artist

Growing up, Judy frequently moved along the East Coast due to her father’s career as a navy admiral. She was exposed to the political arena in Washington, D.C., which she says now subconsciously aids in the development of her art. As a child, Judy combed the ocean shores in search of shells and similar objects for creating jewelry. Her role model and source of artistic inspiration was her great aunt, Trude. A strong and independent woman who ignored social norms, Trude’s eccentric passion for art influenced Judy well before she realized.

Although inspired by art, Judy did not pursue it as a college career because her father insisted on a practical degree, which translated into business law and economics. Judy admits, however, to frequenting the campus art studio.

After meeting Burton during a visit to Japan, the couple married and by the age 23, Judy was a mother of three. While living in Washington, D.C. during Burton’s naval service, Judy transformed their spare

bedroom into an art studio and, for the first time, felt a clear sense of direction in life. “I was finally doing something I had always wanted to,” she says. “It was a very heady experience to love what I was doing.”

Years later, the self-taught sculptor continues to share her love of art, conducting workshops nationwide in university and museum settings. In 1994, Judy appeared as the guest artist for a national art conference in Las Vegas.

She says many women who attend her workshops have never truly given themselves the permission to try art because they have been so involved with their families or careers. “I give them that permission,” she says. “I take for granted that I can just walk into my studio of endless materials and possibilities and create anything any time I want. Many of the students need to be taught that – to jump in, explore and just create things.”

Judy says her children, like their mother, have always been artistic. Gregg is an art collector and software training manager in New York. Scott is a Baptist minister and missionary in Mexico. Jennifer followed in Judy’s footsteps to become an artist and professor of art in Georgia.

Judy’s lifelong passion for art is illustrated through private and permanent collections displayed around the world, including art collectors’ homes, the Minneapolis Institute of Arts, the Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in New York City and the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia.

Having worked hard to build the dynamic career she has today, Judy says like her sculpture, her career has evolved over time.

“Although I’ve been acquiring objects, images and ideas all of my life, only recently has everything – my art, environment and life – come together and merged into a wonderful oneness.”

To see Judy’s work: www.judyonofrio.com

Nicole Bennett Engler is a communications coordinator at Mayo Clinic Cancer Center and a freelance writer.

Mark Luinenburg is a Minneapolis based photographer who took photos of Judy as part of her McKnight award. www.virtu.ws

Work in progress: Judy works on the sculpture that will become “Delicate Balance.”

