



Judy Onofrio: Context for Content

By Patricia McDonnell

A.

A.
 Judy Onofrio
 Delicate Balance, 2005
 carved wood, ceramic,
 glass beads, mirror,
 fiberglass, acrylic paint
 168 x 120 x 60
 photo: Rik Sferra

Subtle. This is not an adjective often associated with the work of Judy Onofrio. Baroque and boisterous are terms one typically encounters in the Onofrio lexicon—but the audacious boldness and labor-intensive craft of her work can veil its rich metaphors and subtle meaning.

I met Onofrio in 1994 when she gave an illustrated presentation about her work, before I ever encountered one of her sculptures. In her talk, Onofrio emphasized her passionate love of materials and objects, and she also displayed a keen awareness of her art-historical lineage. Artists from Della Robbia to Sam Rodia were cited as predecessors and she spoke knowledgeably of contemporaries Viola Frey, Robert Arneson and others. By then, Onofrio had evolved beyond her beginnings in the ceramic world, a heritage confirmed by these references. Anyone would have left the lecture hall impressed by Onofrio's self-reflective range of inspirational sources—a deft combination of historical devotional art, visionary art, Avant garde, and California funk. Her sources, I should note, are more expansive than can be tidily knit into a one-hour talk. No one in the

audience that day could fail to observe Onofrio's gleeful addiction to flea markets, garage sales, salvage haunts, and junk stores. The more kitsch and over-the-top, the better.

Missing from what she shared about her work, which I later mentioned to her, was the complicated narrative of her content. This was covertly hinted at, but not fully addressed. A child of the 1940s, Onofrio grew up at a time when women achieved important new social liberties. While her coming-of-age in the 1960s exactly coincided with the flourishing Women's Movement and zesty feminist artmaking of the 1970s, Onofrio's personal self-confidence developed against a backdrop of highly successful men—her father, a Vice Admiral in the Navy, and her husband, a Mayo Clinic neurosurgeon. These models raised the bar for achievement in the family; paradoxically, they did not create an assumption that Onofrio, as a woman, must go on to do the same. But they did prod her, one imagines. And the roles newly opening to women and the surge of women's artmaking framed a context for Onofrio's development and artistic commentary.

Onofrio is a person of profound intelligence who has pushed for achievement and meaningful self-expression, despite societal barriers of her generation and multiple personal hurdles. Her art reflects such circumstances—it celebrates strong women, defiant actions, underdogs, odd ducklings, even misfits who exude a proud braggadocio. It also, wisely, imparts a resonant humanity acknowledging human vulnerability and foibles—the fine balance of personal relationships, precariousness of good health, whimsy of good fortune, inevitable human blunders and faux pas. The titles of work such as *Delicate Balance*, *Game of Chance*, *Loaded Dice*, *Ring of Fire*, or *Anything You Want* hint at the subtext of desire, transgression, and playing against the odds. They impart the message that we should accept the risks and stride positively toward and against any hurdles society may throw our way. They also allude to the clichés and conventions that Onofrio embraces and probes in her art.



B.

It fascinates me that Onofrio began her confrontation of the roles and role-play of powerful women as artists like Cindy Sherman, Eleanor Antin, and Barbara Kruger, also questioned the tropes of the feminine in their art. In related ways, Onofrio's and the oeuvres of these artists embrace feminism yet explore complicated cultural and psychological territory well beyond it. Mrs. Butterworth, Aunt Jemima, Mae West, assorted burlesque queens, fortunetellers, enchantress mermaids, and female acrobats—such is the lineup of bold babes who hold a special place in Onofrio's art world. Like the clichéd B-movie heroines of Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills series, Onofrio presents ordinary feminine prototypes lifted from the orbit of everyday life. These stock characters seduce the viewer through their pleasing familiarity as much as Onofrio's expert showmanship. Nonetheless, the repetition of types and the persistent precariousness of their activities suggest that Madame Twisto and The Amazing Miss Laverne are gusty performers, yet their flawless execution is not always a given. They defiantly strut their stuff boldly navigating beyond the safe social world that kept June Cleaver at home and in the kitchen. Both their confidence and vulnerability are on display.

Onofrio creates a world in which her characters defy cultural boundaries and transgress social norms. The vehicle for this expression, it is important to note, aligns Onofrio with other strong women artists with a penchant for meticulous craft. The installations and sculptural tableaux of Ree Morton, Viola Frey, Liza Lou, Chakaia Booker, and Tara Donovan are part of her complex lineage, marked by meticulous perfectionism and an amazing labor-intensiveness. This painstaking attention to detail and creative reuse of materials are keys to Onofrio's work's powerful visual impact. The precision of her sculptures' markings add another layer of meaning to their content, anchoring them in the rich history of 20th-century feminist artmaking. The pointed labor of Ann Hamilton's or Michelle Grabner's artistic practices, among other examples, establish plural metaphorical meanings surrounding women's toil—part menial grind, part loving effort. The tremendous exertion involved in creating such complex extravagances aligns Onofrio with this tradition.

The razzmatazz of Onofrio's vivid artistry of surface opulence initially seduces the eye and the senses. Don't be fooled. Her art, beyond first impressions, carries a depth and an incisive commentary on American life and culture. An individual work is a wonder to behold. A distinctive sculpture or installation grasped more fully within and against the career of artist Judy Onofrio, well, there one finds subtlety.

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C.

B.
Ring of Fire, 2000
mixed media
103 x 75.5 x 58

C.
Loaded Dice, 2005
mixed media
39 x 24 x 16.5