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Rochester artist receives award

July 22, 2005 - Mary Abbe, Star Tribune. Award won't deflect Rochester artist from obsessive work and flea-market forays.

Even a \$40,000 windfall isn't going to deflect Rochester artist Judy Onofrio, 65, from her obsessive work habits and perennial flea-market forays. In fact, she's going to use some of the money, an award from the McKnight Foundation, to upgrade the ventilation in her studio so she can sculpt in greater safety.

Onofrio is the 2005 recipient of the McKnight Foundation's Distinguished Artist Award, an annual prize given to a "working artist whose long career has made a significant impact on the arts in Minnesota and beyond."

In a statement announcing the award today, Erika L. Binger, McKnight board chairwoman, praised Onofrio as one of the country's most innovative sculptors whose work presents "some of the most fundamental elements of the human experience—at times dark and serious, but always with humor and true imagination."

Onofrio, a native of Virginia Beach, Va., has lived in Minnesota for nearly 40 years. She is known for colorful sculptures of humans, birds and animals in tropical or circus-like environments. Garnished with bright bits of broken china, marbles, beads, gelatin molds, syrup bottles and other baubles, her sculptures offer an effervescent carnival of high spirits and good will.

Many of the figures are larger-than-life-sized women in bold and brassy poses, oozing confidence and sporting parrots or monkeys on their shoulders. They invariably elicit happy smiles, which is why both the Weisman Art Museum and the Minneapolis Institute of Arts often position their Onofrio sculptures at their entrances to greet visitors.

When McKnight officials surprised her with the award about a month ago at her Rochester studio, Onofrio was uncharacteristically "mute for a day," she said Thursday.

"It's such a wonderful honor to be recognized by your peers for what you're doing. There are so many talented people in this state that I just can't imagine, why me?" she said. "It was like being queen for a day."

Onofrio's work was featured at the institute in a 1993 show called "Judyland," and she exhibits at Thomas Barry Fine Arts gallery in Minneapolis. She founded and for 25 years ran a summer art camp for kids at the Rochester Art Center. Nationally she is represented by galleries in Kansas City and Milwaukee and regularly shows at SOFA, an annual international expo of Sculptural Objects and Functional Art, in Chicago.

An Onofrio retrospective of 40 sculptures and installations up to 15 feet tall opened at the Daum Museum of Contemporary Art near Kansas City in February and will travel to museums in Arkansas and North Dakota this fall. It will open at the Rochester Art Center on April 15, 2006.

Previous recipients are composer Dominick Argento (1998), ceramic artist Warren MacKenzie (1999), writer and translator Robert Bly (2000), choral conductor and arranger Dale Warland

(2001), literary artist and publisher Emilie Buchwald (2002), painter Mike Lynch (2003) and orchestra conductor and composer Stanislaw Skrowaczewski (2004).

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