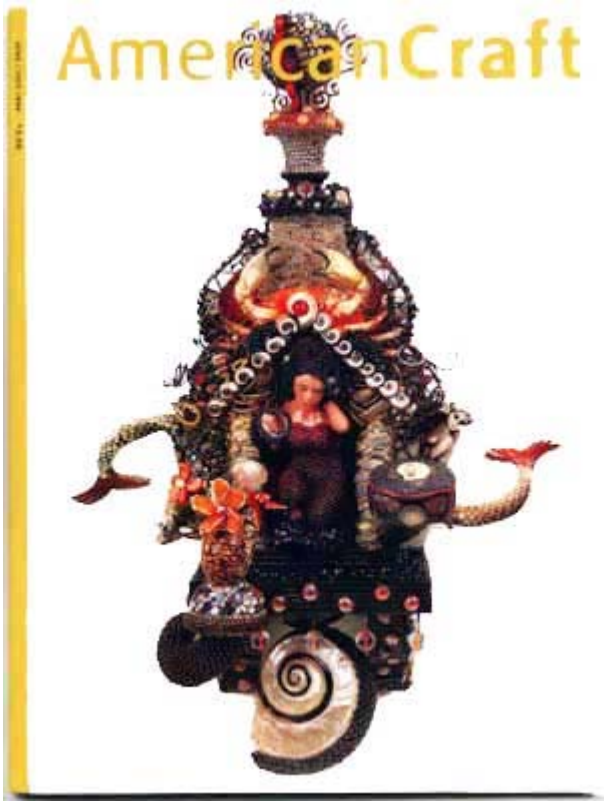

*American Craft cover photo, June/July 1996. "**He said I look just like Elizabeth Taylor**", 1996*
photo credit: Gus Gustafson

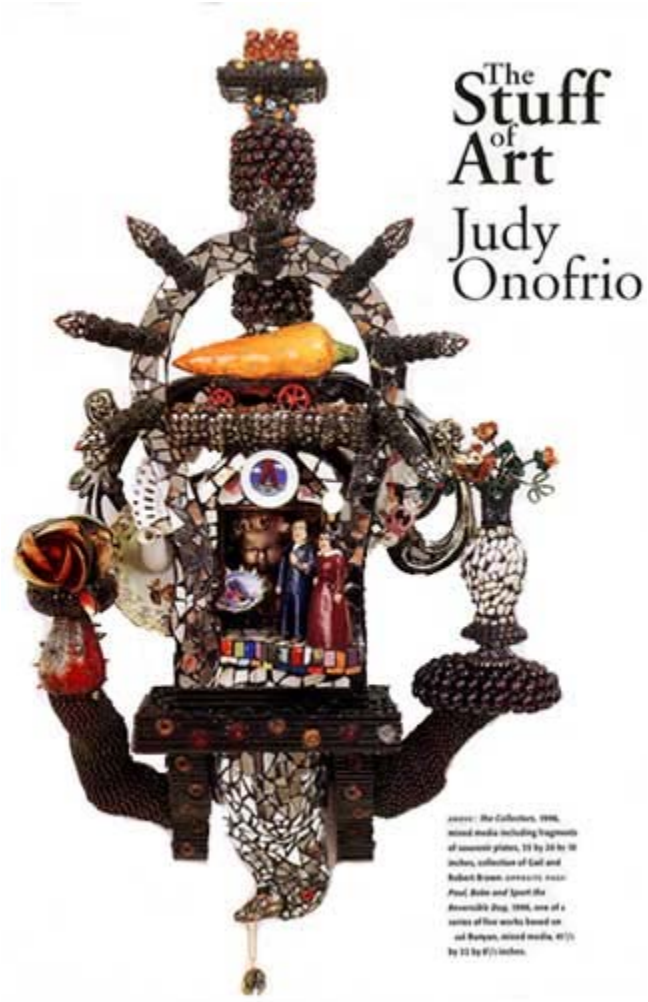

photo: ***The Collectors****, 1996 mixed media, 35 x 20 x 10 inches, photo credit: Gus Gustafson*

BY ROBERT SILBERMAN

Michelangelo, at the quarries in Carrara, no doubt felt aesthetic lust in his heart when he saw the blocks of marble being carved out of the hillside for his use. Arshile Gorky, even when he was a classic example of the poverty-stricken, starving artist, haunted the art supply stores and found a way to buy large quantities of the finest, most expensive brushes. I once saw the painter Russell Chatham lovingly, almost ecstatically, unroll a huge piece of canvas that he had special-ordered from Europe and just received, and was about to transform into an immense landscape commissioned by the Museum of the Rockies.

The Minnesota artist Judy Onofrio has a slightly different approach to acquiring the materials for her art. You see, she has this thing about house sales: she's never met one she didn't like. And when she returns, the spoils are not a block of marble just waiting to have the figure inside liberated, or a handful of beautiful brushes, or a pristine canvas calling out for the first touch of paint. No, more likely she has acquired a bunch of cookie tins, some busted-up old wood furniture, a batch of costume jewelry, and a few unmatched china plates nobody else wanted and which she was therefore able to buy for a song.

For a long time, Onofrio's love of collecting was just a sideshow, with no direct bearing on her work. Finally, however, her vocation as an artist came together with her avocation as a collector, and all that stuff she'd been gathering since her childhood days picking up seashells on the beach suddenly became the stuff of art. "I've been an artist for 30 years," Onofrio has said. "But it's only in the last five years that I finally got it. Of course, I've always worked like a demon."

The "it" in question, the breakthrough leading to the major work of recent years, joins Onofrio's unabashed collecto-mania and the wide range of skills she has acquired as an artist, beginning with ceramics in the late 60s. "I was seduced by clay," she says. She never liked throwing, but loved the relation between working clay and kneading bread (a familiar comparison, as she well knows) and, more important, between lumps of clay and body parts. Clay, however, had a problem. It wasn't "big enough" for her. She did some large wall pieces, hearts that had nothing to do with Valentine's Day but, like much of her work, were sexy, full of suggestiveness in the way the sensuous surfaces resembled skin, with enticing, voluptuous folds.

The Stuff of Art
Judy Onofrio

photo:
***Paul, Babe and Sport the Reversible Dog**,*
1996, mixed media,
41 1/2 x 22 x 8 1/2 inches,
photo credit: Gus Gustafson

Then, when clay couldn't measure up to Onofrio's ambitions, she started making soft sculptures, hearts and lima bean shapes that could be stacked, so that the compression became part of the treatment of the material--"big buns," as Onofrio describes them, and she obviously wasn't talking about just hamburgers and hot dogs. They led to sewn environments, complete with enormous trees and other organic forms that looked like mutant vegetables. Then there were some peculiar installations featuring truncated ceramic poles, phallic forms, with areas covered with Astroturf, gravel and piles of dirt. Those works from the late 70s and early 80s occupy an artistic zone bounded by minimalism, pop, funk and earth art, and they have a boldness that seems appealing enough in post-postmodern retrospect.

The Stuff of Art
Judy Onofrio

"I like change," Onofrio has said, and she has gone through a remarkable range of styles In the mid-80s she went on to architectural pieces, rough wooden works that suggest a love of plywood, balloon frame construction (shades of Frank Gehry), and the vernacular slat style found in corn cribs. They gave way to some unusual installation/performance works that consisted of large wooden structures built only to be burned, a kind of drawing with fire. A related piece used garden pots acquired--where else?--at garage sales, with colored (gun)powder, to suggest both fireworks and a new twist on a kiln firing. These also enabled the artist to indulge another enthusiasm: "I've always been a pyromaniac," she admits with glee.

And a collector. As she was accumulating stuff on the side while moving energetically from ceramics to more architectural work, she retained the interest in outsider art she identified with her great-aunt Trude, who painted on trays and furniture and had a garden filled with wonders. Onofrio has always loved the visionaries who created large-scale, often madcap works, from Simon Rodia's Watts Towers in Los Angeles to Howard Finster's Paradise Garden in Georgia to Gaudi's Parque Guell in Barcelona, with its magnificent undulating benches covered with china bits and pieces. She sought out midwestern examples, such as the Grotto of the Blessed Virgin in Dickeyville, Wisconsin, a fantastic display of assemblage. Over time, on the hillside behind the house on a quiet street that she shares with her husband, Burt (a retired neurosurgeon from the Mayo Clinic), Onofrio has created her own version, Judyland, a continuing work-in-progress. It combines grottoes, sculptural pieces and other delights featuring a dizzying range of materials, from barn-roof ventilator covers to tractor seats, from horseshoes to glass telephone-wire insulators. In an attempt to "move the outside inside," the artist has started on the interior of her house. The front hall is gradually being coated with buttons, plastic flowers and all manner of other stuff; one of the latest additions is a hand juicer that is now part of the ceiling decoration.

Photo: Judyland installation, Minneapolis Institute of Art, 1993, photo credit: Rik Sferra

The decisive moment for Onofrio's art came in 1989 when she found herself flat on her back after surgery. She started making brooches, collage pieces that included elements such as the charms she had been collecting as far back as junior high school. The brooches led to small shrines, where the brooches could be shown to advantage, and then things ... got bigger. Before she knew it, Onofrio had fashioned a full-scale environmental installation entitled Judyland, like the hillside garden, and first presented at the Minneapolis Institute of Arts in 1993.* In addition to the small wall shrines, there were bigger wall pieces, many featuring elaborately beaded animal heads, still bigger freestanding compotes and, biggest of all, a giant gate topped with bowling balls and tendril forms encrusted with seashells. The installation led to a McKnight Foundation grant and a monumental tour de force: a 20-foot-tall figure covered with bits of mirror, bottle caps, pencils, marbles, keys, plastic fruit, cut-up cookie tins and much, much more.

The Stuff of Art
Judy Onofrio

Stylistically, Onofrio's work might be described as "baroque to the max." Yet for all its wild exuberance, it is carefully designed and beautifully crafted, so that, for example, the colors are subtly balanced throughout each piece. There is clearly a lot of skill and painstaking labor involved; it takes more than a little while to cut hundreds of bottle caps in half and then attach the pieces individually. Onofrio, self-described "demon worker," leads the way, but she does have two assistants who help fill in areas once the materials and pattern have been determined.

Largely self-taught, Onofrio has an adventurous attitude when it comes to trying something nay. That's good, because her work constantly requires trial-and-error development of new techniques. Her animal figures were originally created using taxidermy molds as a starting point. Now Onofrio carves them with a chain saw, that favorite Minnesota sculptural tool, then shapes the surface with more delicate instruments. The snakes that frequently wind around the human figures are made from vines she has gathered in the woods, reinforced with aluminum cable and wrapped in fiberglass.

After a long day, Onofrio goes to an upstairs den and relaxes by beading in a lounge chair next to a kind of shrine/storage unit she made, filled with her bottles of beads. "I'm a bead fanatic," she proclaims, and in this case, the collecting excursions take her to the garment district in New York City, a byzantine realm where the quest goes beyond garage-sale encounters and seems close to the netherworlds of spies or drugs, with elaborate plotting necessary to gain access to "the really good stuff." The results are bracelets that begin with fine beads in a peyote stitch--"I have to wear glasses that make them appear as big as bowling balls"--but are encrusted, in another reminder of her basic collage aesthetic, with larger, gemlike chunks.