



Jungle Dance. 2008. Mixed media. 4 ft x 5 ft x 16 in.

A BELOVED AND DEPARTED FRIEND, ROBERT BRAWley, often commented to me that art does not require fixed or static meanings. Delight in the visual, he claimed, was sufficient motivation to create. Our culture demands explanations while our hearts rejoice in mysteries.

I am reminded of his words as I walk into Sherry Leedy Contemporary Art, a gallery located on Baltimore Street in Kansas City, Missouri US. Immediately, Jungle Dance, a massive wall relief that dominates Twist of Fate, Judy Onofrio's recent show of work, confronts me. In *Jungle Dance*, Onofrio has removed her iconic female figure from the composition, to better plumb the depth of her message of ebullience and wisdom; that life and death are entwined; being merely an ephemeral and uplifting dance of Eros with Thanatos. In her 'dance', events occur along the periphery of the composition while the centre of the wall relief remains relatively unembellished and simple. On the central left edge, a pear, shaped like a uterus, is situated in a nest of bones. A hummingbird captured in mid-flight is taking nourishment from the pear. Other hummingbirds drink from fecund pomegranates and luminous peaches. Intertwined throughout are bones, snakes and fragments of furniture, teeth and shells. The centre of the composition presents the viewer with a greenish grey bone jutting heavenward and capped by a

red glass bulb that is evocative of Rudolf's red nose. However, this 'light', situated as it is on a bone rather than a nose, illumines our mortality with insouciance and humour. The bone capped by the 'happy' bulb is a funny and very real giggle over shared mortality. The luxuriant and lush imagery throughout this tour de force communicates that we live in a fecund heaven, lit by our stories and parables. Bits of mirror embedded in the back wall of the piece confirm that this 'jungle' is a universal dwelling, as we catch glimpses of our own reflections becoming part of the environment. If art can be read from left to right like a book, then a second red glass bulb situated on the top right edge of the piece points outwards, thus seeming to light our way on our respective journeys.

Three pieces by Onofrio are displayed on the main wall of the gallery. *Jungle Dance, Twist of Fate* and *Pair of Hares*; each speaks eloquently about the human condition. *Pair of Hares* lies farthest along the wall. It presents a cornucopia of blue sequins capped by a clear light bulb. Half of the cornucopia's form is articulated by entwined bones that evoke a pelvis. Beneath this pelvic form hangs a pomegranate and a banana, blatantly and respectively phallic and vaginal. A snake curls just above them. I do not believe that Onofrio is telling one specific story. Rather, the images and symbols that she employs communicate that the viewer is standing on sacred ground because



Comedy of Errors. 2007. Mixed Media. 37 x 20 x 20.5 in.

it is ground made universal by archetypal imagery. Our lot, as humans, is to be a cornucopia of lush experience and hard fact. We are both fruit and bone.

In Pair of Hares, Onofrio's consistent references to furniture allow the viewer to understand that our wild joys; carnal experiences and mortality are often enacted in a domestic context. Bones and furniture knot together, weaving a structure supportive of the disparate elements of the composition in much the way that body and home support and contain the myriad details of existence. The two hares of the title are actual elements of the piece. They face each other on the upper right rim of the composition. Hares have multiple meanings, from homosexuality and transgression in the medieval period to the 'rabbit hole' of Lewis Carroll's Alice In Wonderland but I think that these hares serve a solely formal function. The negative shape formed by their facing ears and noses creates an almost cervical opening that pulls the viewer's eyes downwards into the piece. The terminus of the work is the aforementioned pomegranate, snake and banana. In Onofrio's world, life seems to be an Eden in which we have



Above: **A Pair of Hare.** 2008. Mixed Media. 30 x 24 x 16 in. Below: **Twist of Fate.** 2008. Mixed Media. 43 x 21 x 10 in.





Above: Sucker for Love. 2007. Mixed Media. 31 x 25.5 x 11 in.

both corporeal delight and the bone-hard pain of learned experience.

Twist of Fate is displayed between the above mentioned works. This oval-shaped piece is embedded with broken mirror. Light bulbs adorn the edges suggesting a ride on a carnival midway. The centre of the work presents a cluster of bones, teeth and ornamental furniture fragments. Balanced on the bone is an acrobatic woman, her red hair the only red in the composition other than a smudge of pigment on the edge of a bone, tying the figure to it thematically. Her fair and vibrantly painted face lead into a precariously balanced, upended body clad in a pale yellow cat suit that is adorned by black sequins. The pale and almost neutral hue of her outfit connects her to bone as well. Onofrio seems to be communicating through the figure that we all share the same balancing act, in which we try to find equilibrium and ebullience within mortality and to find the carnivalesque joy of life amid the bones.

A covey of women dominates the opposite wall. Comedy of Errors hangs closest to the entry and presents the viewer with the head of a woman upon which is balanced a jester. The woman resembles a fortune-teller, with her heavy mascara and bright, full lips. The jester she supports is clad half in yellow, half in black, colours that suggest day and night, life and death. In one hand, the jester holds a sceptre capped by his own likeness. In the other hand he holds a black dice. Hence, the collective fortune this woman envisions telling describes the comedy of life because the jester measures self (as represented by



Above: Presenting Ruby and her Amazing Balls. 2007. Mixed Media. 43.5 x 19.5 x 18.5 in.

the sceptre) against chance and fate (as represented by the dice).

Sucker For Love is similar to Comedy of Errors in that a woman balances an iconic figure on her head but in this case the 'figure' is a bluish grey octopus with human eyes. A left facing lobster claw and an ornamental furniture fragment curling right balance the piece. It is uncertain whether the woman is aware of the octopus, just as it is unclear in life just what



An Important Moment in the Life of Teeth. 2008. Mixed Media. 27 x 29.5 x 16.5 in.

we discern about the absurdity and meanings of our own situations. Yet, she is rooted formally by a downward facing, yellow faucet that serves as her neck and from which hangs a small, black anchor. For all that is surreal, dreamy or precarious about Onofrio's scenarios, her female protagonists are ultimately steady and poised. A yellow fish, like an errant thought, leaps from her hat, seeming to escape the melee. The colour yellow connects the faucet to the fish. Is it possible that it is both flow and freedom that root us?

There is a formal dexterity throughout the exhibition that allows the viewer to move through complex images and connect them into cohesive visual units. Colours are used almost as tracking devices that pull the eye through a diversity of forms. Maraschino cherries adorn rib bones and dark blackbirds and vibrant clowns cavort behind acrobatic heroines, creating unexpected visual patterns and sensual rhythms. In this way, Judy Onofrio is able to

make the viewer understand that sea detritus, coral, peaches, faucets, fish, teeth, birds and bones are all part of the human story, a universal inheritance of awe, mystery and humour that never tells any one story specifically, but instead alludes to shared wisdoms and common truths.

This is an exhibition that nourishes.

Tanya Hartman was educated at The Rhode Island School of Design and at Yale University. She now teaches painting and drawing at the University of Kansas. She has received numerous awards including two Hall Center Creative Work Fellowships and a Fulbright Research Fellowship to pursue post-graduate research in Sweden, as well as others. Other honours include a grant from the Puffin Foundation and various teaching awards at Yale University and at the University of Kansas including the TIAA-CREF Award for Excellence in Teaching and an award for outstanding teaching at the graduate level from the Center for Teaching Excellence at the University of Kansas.