Art of Our Time

Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art
Wichita State University

Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey

With contributions by
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and Robert Silberman

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Whether located in parks or subway stations, in front of courthouses or libraries, on streets or plazas, Tom Otterness’s public sculptures have a common aesthetic. Contrasting extremes of scale, substituting animals for people, and referencing myths and fairy tales, he imbues his works with an endearing playfulness that engages viewers’ attention.

Wichita State University’s Millipede originated as a smaller sculpture in an installation Otterness created in 2004 for Puerto Rico’s Camuy River Cave Park. Since then, he has produced multiple millipedes, each version possessing different attributes. The one at the Phoenix Convention Center in Arizona, for instance, is part of an installation, titled Social Invertebrates (2008), which also includes a bronze walking stick, a scorpion, tiny rounded humanlike figures, and a scattering of coins. The Wichita Millipede stands on a concrete apron across from the Ulrich Museum’s front entrance, bracketed by a key-shaped flower bed whose springtime tulips are a well-loved campus amenity. Although it is not installed among other Otterness creatures, it keeps deliberate company with its surroundings.

As the artist explained in his proposal, the work is meant to connect metaphorically to the university as a whole and specifically to the other sculptures near it. A millipede’s body is composed of linked segments working together and heading in one direction... The content relates to the playful surreal birds and insects within [Joan Miró’s mural] Personnages Oiseaux. The Millipede within the tulip beds presents a symbiotic relationship — millipedes eat tulips in fact. The sectioned construction of the Millipede also relates to Andy Goldsworthy’s Wichita Arch.1 Otterness’s knack for provocatively matching content to context is evident, for example, in the Millipede’s marching feet, which call to mind the notion of collective work. Note that half of them sport women’s heels while the other half wear men’s loafers, a configuration that would require coordination and cooperation in order to complete a task. A much-bigger-than-life insect boasting shoes pairs nicely with the morphed human (personnage) and bird (oiseaux) figures in the Miró mural (cat. no. 16). Furthermore, as Otterness’s proposal suggests, the Millipede relates organically to both the flower bed surrounding it and to Goldsworthy’s nearby Wichita Arch, in which a growing tree marks the passage of time (cat. no. 49).

Here, as with all Otterness sculptures, interpretive possibilities abound. Children can incorporate Millipede into a world of make-believe. Someone who has read Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland might link this bronze creature with the quizzical, hookah-smoking caterpillar in Lewis Carroll’s book. A geologist looking at it would know that millipede fossils are among the oldest ever found. This potential to spark thoughts and conversations is what makes the Millipede an apt addition to a university campus, where meaningful exchanges of ideas foster discovery and learning.

Emily Stamey

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Toby Kamps is senior curator at the Contemporary Arts Museum, Houston. He has organized exhibitions on the work of Vanessa Beecroft, Ellsworth Kelly, and Claes Oldenburg as well as such themed exhibitions as Small World: Dioramas in Contemporary Art (2000), Lateral Thinking: The Art of the 1990s (2002), and The Old, Weird America (2008).

Patricia McDonnell is director of the Ulrich Museum of Art. Her scholarly focus is upon European and American modernism, and she is a leading specialist on the painter Marsden Hartley. Her publications include Marsden Hartley: American Modern (1997), On the Edge of Your Seat: Popular Theater and Film in Early Twentieth-Century American Art (2002), and Painting Berlin Stories (2003).

Laura Moriarty is the author of three novels and the recipient of several literary awards. Before becoming a full-time writer, she was a social worker. Moriarty lives in Lawrence, Kansas, where she teaches creative writing at the University of Kansas.

Antonya Nelson has written three novels and published six short-story collections. She contributes often to the New Yorker and the New York Times Book Review. Nelson holds the Cullen Chair in Creative Writing at the University of Houston. Her award-winning novel, Loving to Tell (2000), takes place in her hometown of Wichita, and her forthcoming novel, Bound, is set there as well.

Timothy R. Rodgers is director of the Scottsdale (Arizona) Museum of Contemporary Art. Formerly chief curator at the New Mexico Museum of Art, Santa Fe, he is involved in a range of writing and curatorial projects. His scholarly concentration is in American early modernism.

Robert Silberman is an associate professor of art history at the University of Minnesota’s Twin Cities campus. His chief scholarly interests have been photography, film, and contemporary art. Silberman collaborated with former New York Times photography critic Viki Goldberg on the companion volume for the 1999 PBS series American Photography: A Century of Images.

Larry Schwarm is a professor of art at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas, and a nationally regarded photographer whose work has been shown at the Art Institute of Chicago and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, D.C. His 2003 book, On Fire: Larry Schwarm, won the Honickman Book Award and Prize.


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