

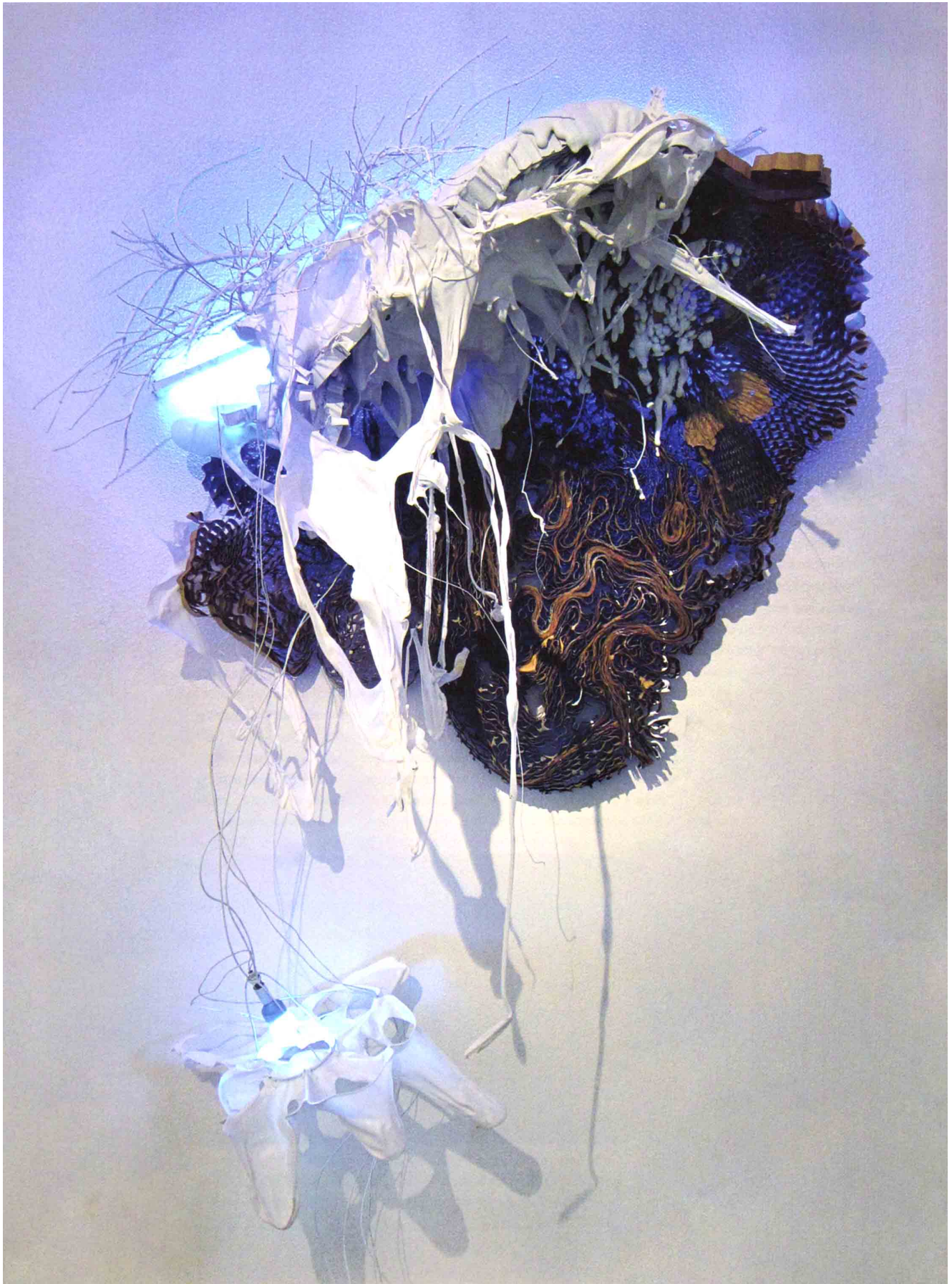
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Judy Pfaff

Evolution of an Innovator

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Opposite: *Lo, Laramie*, 2012. Honeycomb cardboard, expanded foam, plastics, and fluorescent light, 60 x 60 x 20 in. This page: *Moxibustion*, 1994. Fiberglass resin, blown glass, tar, bedsprings, lotus leaves, and steel, 14 x 35 x 20 ft.

Judy Pfaff's fierce independence has put her in an exalted but precarious position. Though she has been assembling abstract sculptures, installations, and drawings for over four decades, she is making some of her strongest work today. Pfaff was included in the 1975, 1981, and 1987 Whitney Biennials. In 1994, she began teaching at Bard College, where she currently co-directs the Studio Arts Program. Since starting at Bard, she has lived and worked in upstate New York—first in Kingston and now in Tivoli—a two-hour drive from her former Brooklyn studio and miles away from any art world tumult. She was presented with a prestigious MacArthur “genius” Award in 2004, and her work has been the subject of several documentaries, including a 2007 segment in the PBS series “Art21.” Although Pfaff has recently had exhibitions at respected galleries in St. Louis and New York City, including a five-decade survey at Ameringer McEnergy Yohe, she is an artist’s artist: deeply admired, respected, even imitated, by colleagues, youthful peers, and art world insiders, but not



... all of the above, 2007. Grape vines, Styrofoam, plaster, plywood, plastics, steel, fluorescent, black, and EL lights, and dyes and pigments, 15.5 x 40 x 44 ft.

aggressively acquired today by museums or big-name collectors. The reason may have to do with the ephemerality of her projects: her installations are temporary and site-specific, some of her drawings appear fragile, and her wall sculptures can be made of impermanent materials like bedsprings, honeycomb cardboard, sunflowers, ferns, and artificial flowers. Nonetheless, these works have intrinsic strength because of Pfaff's willingness to join low-brow objects to highbrow sculpture and weave a personal narrative with abstract form. Her installations relate so intensely to immediate and past circumstances that, as she recently recalled, "They were not only site specific, but a diary."¹

Pfaff was born in London in 1946. She recalls playing in piles of rubble as a child and how the devastation left behind by the Blitz and other German air raids was oddly liberating. "My experience in postwar London was that I was free," she said. "My world shifted when I came to America." When she was 10 or 12 years old, Pfaff immigrated via ship to the United States with her grandmother, mother, and brother, where her mother secured a job with the Ford Motor Company in Detroit.²

In 1950s America, whites were fleeing racially mixed urban centers to live in homogeneous suburbs, and Pfaff recalls that in high school she was "maybe the only white student," in contrast to her schooling in England. While she doesn't choose to reflect on her past and has said that she has "almost no memory of...

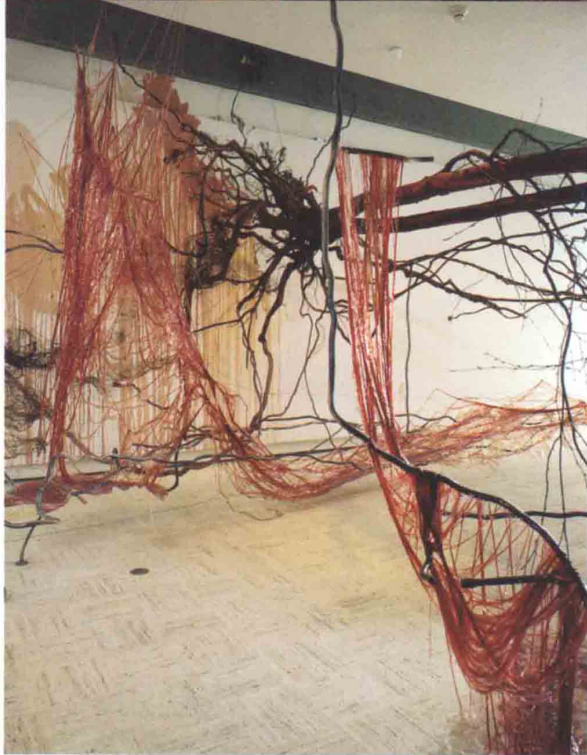
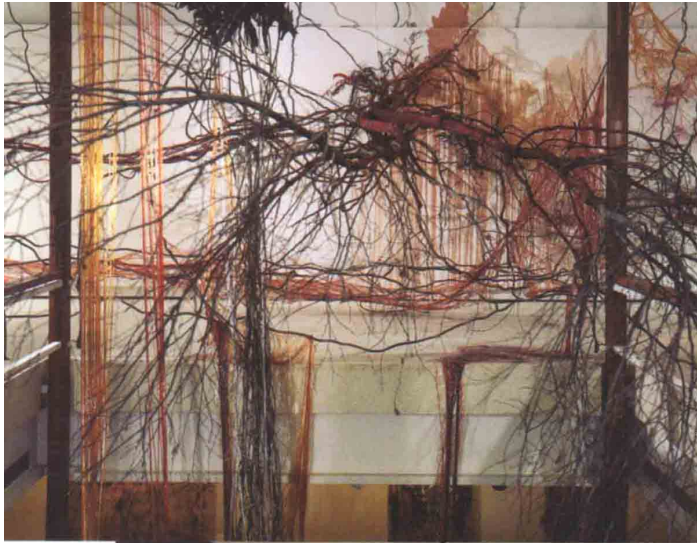
anything, so I think survival was my ticket to ride," she has also indicated that the social, political, and personal upheavals of the Detroit years could have spurred a later necessity to create large, complex artworks. Pfaff's exuberant projects are typified by pandemonium more than quietude and are a reverse response to any plea for the domestic calm associated with an idealized home life. According to Pfaff, "because there was no home that was secure, probably I made up and made all these things that were my kind of home...I thought they were beautiful places to go."

Pfaff chose to summon psychological spaces and literal places through multicolored room-size environments, dynamic relief sculptures, and wall-dominating drawings. She didn't make faithful representations of the home or house as a paradigm of the human condition, yet her work on this broad theme of memory and experience doesn't necessarily jibe with observations by her artist peers. Pfaff's layered projects are independent of the spare geometry of Joel Shapiro's small houses from the 1970s. Nor does she infuse irony into the vulnerability of childhood as Robert Gober does in his human figures, sinks, and playpens. On the other hand, she doesn't conjure an exaggerated vernacular of Americana like Liza Lou, whose beaded tableaux take the everyday into the realm of the psychedelic. To combat disquieting impressions that belied an idyllic youth, Pfaff turned to her work as a haven reflecting the various periods of anguish or exhilaration in her life. Neither



Above: Installation view of "Judy Pfaff: Five Decades," 2010. Below: *Lemongrass*, 2010. Paper, bamboo, artificial flowers, rice paste, ink, dye, paint, wire, parasol, and found images, 113 x 65 in.





Elephant, 1995. Birch tree, fiberglass resin, steel, woven copper wire, duct tubing, plant materials, and water, approx. 50 x 50 x 50 ft.

explicitly nor literally domestic environments, Pfaff's "homes" can be described as sanctuaries, often of riotous color.

She married when she was 17, traveled to Newfoundland, and lived in Sweetwater, Texas. When Pfaff left the marriage, she visited Europe and graduated with a BFA from Washington University in St. Louis in 1971. She then enrolled in the painting department at Yale University, studying with Al Held, who remained a longtime mentor and friend, and received her MFA in 1973.

In 1975, Pfaff created two installations in New York. One project—*Blue Wabe in 2* at the Whitney Biennial—was in a major museum; the other—*J.A.S.O.N. / J.A.S.O.N* at Artists Space—

occupied an alternative site. The letters in *J.A.S.O.N.*'s title refer to Pfaff's first months spent in New York City following graduate school (July, August, September, October, and November).³ The installation took on Minimalism, conceptual art, and content-based work by incorporating pieces of their aesthetic vocabularies. It also told a story of Pfaff's personal journey and her wrestling to energize her own language in the face of presiding styles: "That installation was more like my diary of what I had experienced in New York that year, an homage to all the art I saw. On one side of the gallery, all the imagery was personal. After acknowledging what I had learned, that side was *my side*, more autobiographical."⁴ These large projects only existed for the period of their exhibition, and then they were discarded, the materials tossed.

Pfaff's room-size environments opposed the strictures and sustenance of Minimalism in the sculptures of Anthony Caro, Donald Judd, and Tony Smith. She responded to their extreme geometry by creating organic forms, often from cast-off materials. So, while the Minimalists rallied against the gestures and emotional narratives of Abstract Expressionism, Pfaff responded with a provocation against cool forms and clinical content and a stance in favor of abstraction with meaning. "I was at war with Minimalism. I was at war with the single object with a singular identifying material," she said.⁵ Pfaff has been called "the ultimate anti-Minimalist," and her work is often deemed post-Minimalist, but other labels plague her.⁶ She is sometimes swept into the roster of the 1970s Pattern and Decoration movement, which she rejects because of its emphasis on ornamentation and beauty. "I was trying to be intense, heroic in a certain way, passionate, and emotional," she said in defense of her work's dialogue against Minimalism.

When she began to create site-specific works in the 1970s, Pfaff didn't realize that she would later be crowned "a pioneer of installation art." The term has followed her, for better or worse, across her career. A distinguished designation, it has also stopped time for Pfaff. "It cuts you long ago and far away," she said recently, explaining how she responds to being called a forerunner of a genre that has grown and transformed over the decades. "It means you can put someone in this very protected space, but you don't have to think about them anymore. So suddenly, I don't like it." While some critics and curators have placed Pfaff in a sacred hollow reserved for the history in art history, she bristles at the suggestion that her work is stagnant. Her recent projects, in fact, point to increased complexity in stylistic innovation and to a mind that continues to push and prod the very definition of what sculpture is and how it is in service to installation art. This evolution has inspired many contemporary artists.

Jessica Stockholder's work has been compared to Pfaff's because both artists create vigorous installations out of commonplace materials. Stockholder, the chair of the Department of Visual Arts at the University of Chicago, affirmed that she became aware of Pfaff's work in the early 1980s as a student at the University of Victoria. She also studied with Pfaff during her MFA work at Yale: "I'm sure it influenced me. She was a visiting artist at Yale when I was there...I am very glad to engage her work as part of my landscape."⁷



Said the Spider to the Fly, 2010. Paper, wood, wire, rod, and artificial flowers, 128 x 162 x 48 in.

Nathan Carter first saw one of Pfaff's installations in 1995 at Brandeis University's Rose Art Museum. "The show had an amazing upstairs-downstairs, all-over-the-place thing happening," he said. *Elephant* consumed two floors of the Rose and included a birch tree, fiberglass resin, steel, and duct tubing in its roster of materials. The juxtaposition of organic and industrial parts was transformative for Carter: "Here was a work that used a wide variety of metals, organic materials, and resins that all worked together simultaneously to create an incredible world of shapes, lines, emotions, sounds, atmospheres, and ideas. Her work lit a spark for me, and I knew that I needed to create my own collection of materials for later use."⁸

The 1980s saw Pfaff's work entering prominent museum collections, including the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney Museum, the Detroit Institute of Art, and the High Museum. Through the 1980s and 1990s, Pfaff's installation projects inhabited the warp and weft of three-dimensional space and grew to an architectural scale capable of overtaking galleries and viewers. At the Rotunda Gallery in Brooklyn in 1993 and Exit Art in downtown Manhattan in 1994, she turned alternative spaces into vast spider webs, where visitors became trapped in the tumult. *Moxibustion*, the combustible and cacophonous assemblage of blown glass, tar, bedsprings, lotus leaves, and steel at Exit Art, offered

an enveloping experience in which objects were draped and overlaid across floor, walls, and ceiling.

Today, Pfaff's work continues to engage space through dynamic and heroic proportions, as well as through disparate materials. *Lemongrass* (2010) doubles as a nine-foot-long travel diary or scrapbook from Pfaff's many trips to Japan and China over the last 20 years. A relatively restrained color palette incorporates a paper parasol with swirling red and yellow artificial flowers and grasses.⁹ Receipts from an art supply store that she patronized for her 1985 exhibition in Japan serve as a ground for the rest of the imagery. Pfaff also enlarged pages from a DIY manual on how to paint Chinese landscapes and affixed these to the background, paying homage to the traditional Asian reverence for nature while showing her respect for a landscape painting tradition and her interest in nature as a subject.

Said the Spider to the Fly (2010) refers to the 19th-century poem of seduction and entrapment, shrewdness and gullibility. "I do reference old fables, stories, childhood references," Pfaff said recently, "I like that beckoning." Her sculpture becomes a drama of good and evil in relief form. One half of the work has a light, organic buoyancy, with flowers and natural detritus like a carefree insect, while in the other half, a swath of black paper pods and rods evokes the complexities of a spider web about to



Missing Elizabeth and Jeanette, 2011. Steel wires, various plastics and papers, shellacked Chinese paper lanterns, and fluorescent light, 38 x 30 x 17 in.

ensnare unsuspecting prey. Throughout the complex strata and substrata of these sculptures, Pfaff often circles back to a personal subject.

In homage to Elizabeth Murray (1940–2007) and Jeanette Ingberman (1952–2011), the founder of Exit Art, Pfaff recently created a sculpture that suggests Murray's vivid semi-abstract

paintings and the range of work in Ingberman's shows. *Missing Elizabeth and Jeanette* (2011) includes steel wires and shellacked Chinese paper lanterns. Beneath the disparate materials, a paper lantern is electrified by a fluorescent bulb, a reminder that these two women remain guiding lights to Pfaff and generations of artists.



Left: *Dragon Arum*, 2011. Steel wires, various plastics and papers, shellacked Chinese paper, and fluorescent light, 70 x 49 x 21 in. Right: *Time is Another River*, 2012. Honeycomb cardboard, expanded foam, plastics, and fluorescent light, 94 x 72 x 20 in.

Pfaff is currently repairing, restoring, and photographing her sculptures and drawings from the 1980s and 1990s in order to create an archive. Several years ago, she became aware that there was scant record of her earliest installations from the 1970s. "Ironically, I never documented [them] well," she reflected. "I should have known better." Because the works were site specific, made of ephemeral materials, and not created for the art market, they existed only for a brief time. "Those were the days when there was a lot of rage against museums and commercial things," she says. "It didn't seem radical [to be casual

about recording an installation], it seemed like 'of course.'" Perhaps this conundrum is the spider to Pfaff's fly. Yet through the authority of her process, the rigor of her lifelong project, and the vitality of her work, Pfaff retains the power of the spider.

Brooke Kamin Rapaport is an independent curator and contributing editor at Sculpture, as well as a contributor to the ISC blog at <<http://blog.sculpture.org/>>.

Notes

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all quotations are from interviews with the artist conducted in 2012.

² Pfaff has said that she doesn't "have nostalgia." As a result, it is difficult to establish certain early dates in her biography. She said that "she was probably about 12" when her family immigrated to America. However, the catalogue for Pfaff's exhibition at the 1998 São Paulo Bienal indicates that the family moved in 1956, when Pfaff was 10. See the biography in Judith Olich Richard and Miranda McClintic, *Outside/Inside Landscapes*, exhibition

catalogue, (New York: Independent Curators International for the São Paulo Bienal, 1998).

³ See Irving Sandler, *Judy Pfaff* (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 2003).

⁴ Phong Bui, "Art: In Conversation with Judy Pfaff," *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 2010. Retrieved from <www.brooklynrail.org>.

⁵ See Russell Panczenko's introduction to *Judy Pfaff*, op. cit., p. 14.

⁶ John Loughery, "Judy Pfaff," National Museum of Women in the Arts, *Women's Art Journal*, Spring-Summer 1989, p. 52.

⁷ Jessica Stockholder in an e-mail message to the author, 2012.

⁸ Nathan Carter in an e-mail message to the author, 2012.

⁹ In a 2010 interview, Pfaff described her visits to an umbrella shop in Philadelphia, where she purchased hundreds of umbrellas to incorporate into her work. "Umbrella frames are so beautifully made, the engineering aspect is amazing. Maybe I also associate them with Duchamp's circles, but I like their geometry, and I just can't get enough of them." See Phong Bui, op. cit.