

Art OF OUR TIME

SELECTIONS FROM THE | ULRICH MUSEUM OF ART
| WICHITA STATE UNIVERSITY

Patricia McDonnell AND *Emily Stamey*

WITH CONTRIBUTIONS BY

Toby Kamps, Laura Moriarty,

Antonya Nelson, Timothy R. Rodgers,

AND *Robert Silberman*

PHOTO-ESSAY BY *Larry Schwarm*

Ulrich Museum of Art | Wichita State University
in association with the University of Washington Press

This book is published in conjunction with the exhibition
Art of Our Time: Selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art,
Wichita State University

April 24–August 8, 2010.

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University of Washington Press
P. O. Box 50096
Seattle, WA 98145-5096
www.washington.edu/uwpress

Book design: Patrick Dooley, Lawrence, Kansas

Assistant manuscript editor: Susan C. Jones, Minneapolis

Photographers: Larry Schwarm and Jim Meyer for the Ulrich
Museum of Art, except work by Zhang Huan (courtesy of the
artist)

Printing and binding: Greystone Graphics, Kansas City, Kansas

This book was typeset in Adobe Garamond Pro, designed by
Robert Slimbach (based on the roman typefaces of Claude
Garamond and italic typefaces of Robert Granjon), and Gill Sans,
designed by Eric Gill.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art.
Art of our time: selections from the Ulrich Museum of Art,
Wichita State University / Patricia McDonnell and Emily Stamey;
with Toby Kamps . . . [et al.]; photographic essay by Larry
Schwarm. – 1st ed.

p. cm.

Published on the occasion of an exhibition held at the Ulrich
Museum of Art, Wichita State University, Apr. 24–Aug. 8, 2010.

ISBN 978-0-295-99024-8 (cloth) – ISBN 978-0-295-99025-5 (paper)
1. Art, Modern – 20th century – Exhibitions. 2. Art, Modern – 21st
century – Exhibitions. 3. Art – Kansas – Wichita – Exhibitions.
4. Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art – Exhibitions. I. McDonnell,
Patricia, 1956 – II. Stamey, Emily. III. Kamps, Toby. IV. Schwarm,
Larry, 1944– V. Title. VI. Title: Selections from the Ulrich
Museum of Art, Wichita State University.

N6490.E36 2010

709.04'007478186 – dc22

2009051477

Front cover: Joan Miró, *Personnages Oiseaux* (Bird People), 1977–78
(cat. no. 16)

Back cover: Tom Otterness, *Millipede*, 2008 (cat. no. 45)



This exhibition and book have been made possible through the
generous support of Emprise Bank and the National Endowment
for the Arts. Additional sponsors include the Joan S. Beren
Foundation, Edward and Helen Healy, Harry Pollak, and
Richard S. Smith and Sondra M. Langel. Support has also been
provided by Jon and Kelly Callen, Mike and Dee Michaelis, Jayne
S. Milburn, Christine F. Paulsen-Polk, and the Wichita State
University Office of the Provost and Vice President for Academic
Affairs and Research.

9 *Daisies and Peonies*

ca. 1930s

Watercolor on paper, 13 x 18 1/2 in.

Gift of Dr. Theodore Leshner, 1974.0089

A FEW EVENINGS AGO, I TOOK MY FIVE-YEAR-OLD DAUGHTER TO THE LIBRARY, and on our way out, we saw a sign on the door of the auditorium: "BELLY DANCERS TONIGHT, 7:00!" I looked at my watch. Two 'til seven. I looked at my daughter. "You want to see some belly dancers?"

She squinted up at me, needing more information.

I raised my arms, moving my hips a little. She frowned.

"No, you'll like it," I said. "Belly dancers. Like Princess Jasmine in *Aladdin*."

"She's not a dancer," my daughter said, but she walked past me into the auditorium.

Of course. I had made the magic reference. My daughter, true to her marketing demographic, loves the Disney princesses, those animated beauties with heroic hearts. I appreciate that the princesses are more ethnically diverse than they were when I was a girl. I had Snow White, Sleeping Beauty, and Cinderella. My daughter loves those Anglo beauties, but she also loves Pocahantas, Mulan, Esmeralda, Tiana, and the aforementioned Jasmine. (To be fair, I should mention that Esmeralda and Mulan aren't princesses. They're just brave and beautiful, so they get to run with the pack.) Still, even the new princesses all share one body type: not too tall, slender, with perky but unobtrusive breasts, the faintest trace of hips, an invisible butt, and a tiny waist.

Early on, I tried to steer my daughter's interest toward Dora and Lilo – both squat, sturdy little creatures who actually look vital enough to undertake all of their cartoon adventures. My daughter likes them well enough. But she longs for the princesses, just as she longs for their more-endowed sister, Barbie. I know some parents of young girls censor these images and toys, rightly worried about planting early desires for a rare, if not impossible, body type and dissatisfaction with anything else. I considered banning them myself. But it seemed like trying to hold back the tide. The wasp-waisted ladies are everywhere, in every toy store and bookstore, and on the backpacks and T-shirts of friends. My daughter's school keeps a box of Barbies as one of several rewards for good behavior. The marketing and the strong preference start to seem like a chicken-and-egg scenario. Maybe you can't blame the marketing. Maybe the preference comes first.

And yet, the belly dancers: When they first appeared in the auditorium, I held my breath, my right hand poised to clamp over my daughter's mouth. Like most five-year-olds, she has a tendency to speak her mind, and I wasn't sure what she was thinking. Like the princesses, the belly dancers represented a range of skin colors: two were white and two black. Unlike the princesses, they represented a range of body types. One dancer was slender. The others, to varying degrees, were not. Yet they all stood smiling before us, bellies bared, hips accented with jingling belts, jewels pressed into their foreheads and onto the backs of their hands. My daughter stared at the one who smiled the most, the one with sunflowers and beads in her hair. When the music started, the others followed her lead, and it turned out there were strong, practiced muscles under even the looser bellies. Scarves twirled over their heads.

"Oh, Mommy," my daughter whispered, mesmerized, and with all the certainty of her youth. "They're all so beautiful."

Laura Moriarty



About the Contributors

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, *Living 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 on 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 Vicki 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.

Emily Stamey, the Ulrich Museum's curator of modern and contemporary art, is the author of *Jolan Gross-Bettelheim: The American Prints* (2001) and *The Prints of Roger Shimomura: A Catalogue Raisonné, 1968–2005* (2006). Her scholarship centers on ethnic identities and social themes in American art.

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