

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.

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

45 *Millipede*

2008

Bronze, 60 x 48 x 300 in.

Museum Commission with funds from Marcia and Ted D. Ayres, The Bastian Foundation, Joan S. Beren Foundation, Ralph and Alta Brock, Carter Community and Memorial Trust, n.a., UMB Bank, Corporate Trustee; Emprise Bank, J. Eric Engstrom, Fidelity Bank Charities, Dr. Sam and Jacque Kouri, Jane C. McHugh, Dee and Mike Michaelis, Paul Ross Charitable Foundation, Dan Ray Rouser, Wilson Foundation, and the Student Government Association, 2008.0005

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 (*personnages*) 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

1. Otterness to David Butler, Director, and Katie Geha, Curator, Edwin A. Ulrich Museum of Art, n.d., Ulrich Museum of Art object file.



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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