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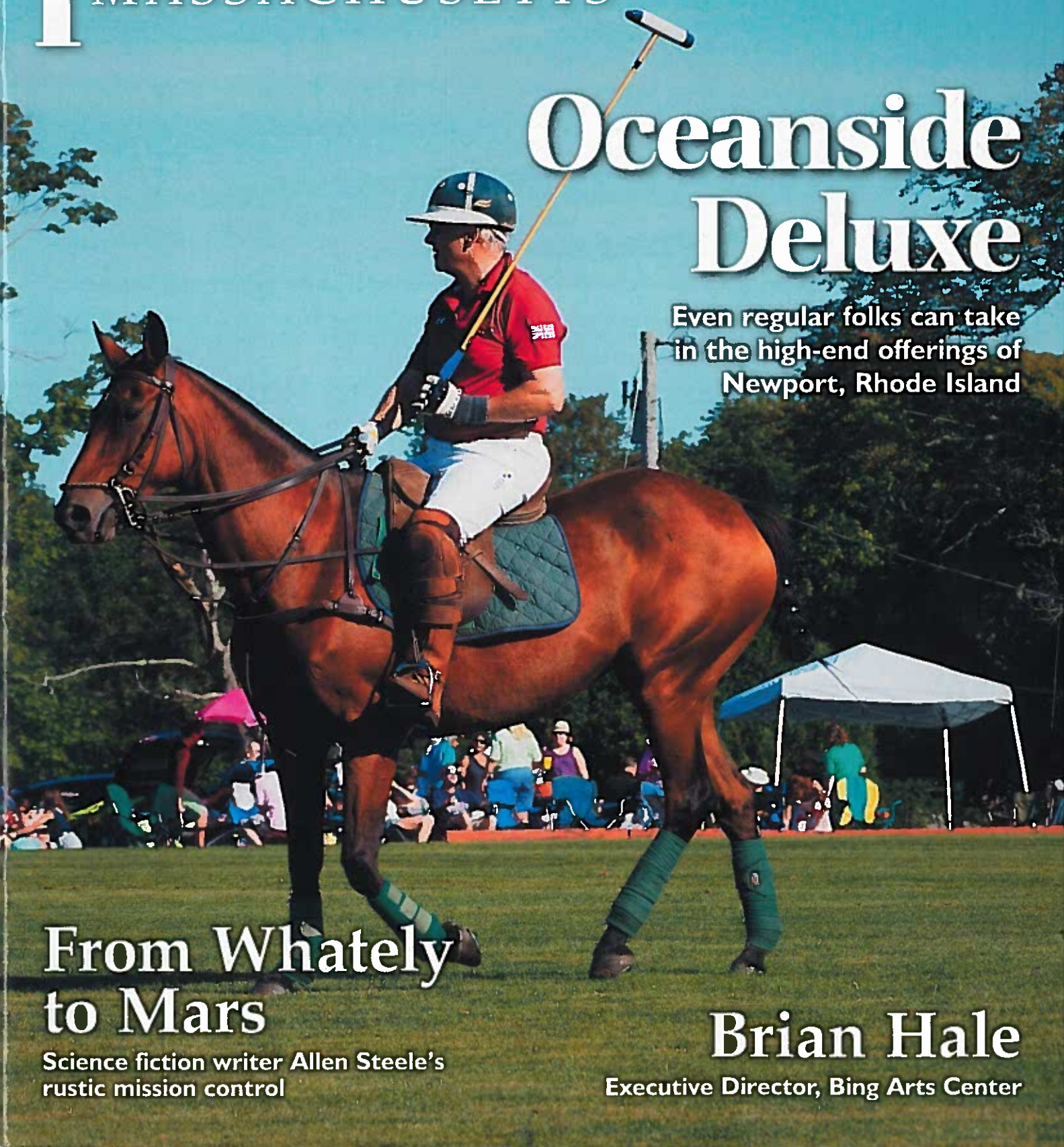
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# Exploring Betwixt and Between

Judy Pfaff's painterly sculpture

BY LAURA HOLLAND



Installation view, *betwixt: Judy Pfaff 1985/92*, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum; "Mattarello" 1992, woven magnet wire, steel, and blown glass.  
© Judy Pfaff

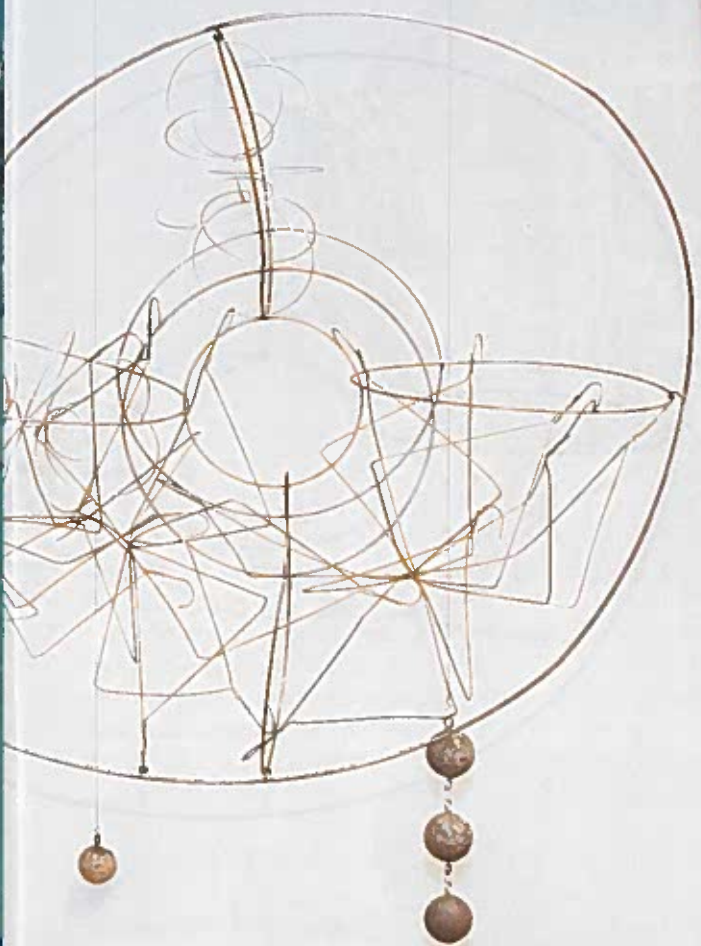
LAURA SHEA PHOTO

Pushing into three dimensions, engaging multimedia material, and moving her art off the wall and across the floor (and the ceiling), Judy Pfaff creates work that resides in a twilight zone between conventional categories. On display at the Mount Holyoke College Museum of Art, *betwixt: Judy Pfaff 1985/92* selects work from a seminal era when the artist was first exploring ways to expand her painterly work into dynamic sculptural assemblage and immersive installation. "Wallabout," 1986, is a good starting point, as a recent addition to the museum's collection that served as the catalyst for the entire exhibition.

A work of drawing, painting, printmaking, and



LAURA HOLLAND PHOTOS



Left to right: closeups of  
"Barcelona" and "Mattarello" at  
Mount Holyoke College

sculpture, "Wallabout" incorporates balsa wood, plywood, and steel, all painted in combinations of red, yellow, white, and black. It pulsates with splashes of painterly energy, yet also pushes out of the picture plane into the three dimensions of sculpture. Shadows cast by different parts emphasize disparate elements from various vantage points in three-dimensional space.

Beyond simply employing multiple media, the work is also a playful mix and match of stylistic elements. There's the geometry of the grid and the minimalist implications, visual organization, and art history it carries in its criss-crossed pieces. But there is also the explosive exuberance of abstract expressionist line and color in the forms that burst out of the sculpture. The primary color palette evokes Pop and Op Art, while the blocks of wood are incised and inked up in various colors, as if ready to roll in a woodcut print.

Two woodcuts hanging near "Wallabout" demonstrate, in two dimensions, Pfaff's fluid moves across boundaries of different media. "Yoyogi II," 1985, is a complex color woodcut that becomes painterly with its swirls of many colors. The grain of the wood, picked up in printer's ink, becomes surrogate brushwork. "Six of One — La Ceña," 1987, offers a limited palette of blues arranged in circles, stripes, and dots. But the top left bursts from the rectangular frame, and the bottom also breaks up the formal alignment, if less explosively. Though more subdued in color than "Yoyogi II," this woodcut print also pushes at the conventional edges of its medium.

Big, bright, and bold, "Barcelona," 1990, seems to simplify, expand, and extend some of the visual ideas in "Wallabout." The work is wall-bound, but just barely. It includes a painted circular tabletop, with echoes of the table popping up in transparent panels of purple, red, and green. Smaller circles in wire framework push out on the right. Although the form plays with interlinked geometries, areas of flat color offer a unifying force.

While "Barcelona" pits substantial elements against immaterial forms created by wire and shadow, two sculptures from 1992 play



Judy Pfaff, "Wallabout," 1986. Painted balsa wood and plywood, steel. Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Purchase with funds from Astrid Rehl Baumgardner (Class of 1973), 2014.8a-k, © Judy Pfaff.



with voids as much as solids. "Los Voces," made of lacquered steel, unlacquered steel, and aluminum wire, hangs in mid-air. Slender wire coils swirl over an armature of thicker wire, arranged in open arcs and closed circles, with what looks like an enlarged slinky toy snaking its way through. Made of woven magnet wire, steel, and blown glass, the graceful "Mattarello" entwines copper-toned and silver wires with glass elements. A glass globe rests on the floor, but all the other parts are suspended in the air by a series of metal weights. These sculptures are more like drawings rendered with a fine-pointed pencil than paintings made by a brush dripping with pigment. Lines, rather than solid shapes, define form. But as with the other sculptures, what starts in two dimensions pushes into space, and demands to be explored from different vantage points.

If we play "One of These Things is Not Like the Others," then the outlier would be "La Calle, La Calle Vieja," 1990. Constructed of wood and steel with the addition of found objects and signage, this sculpture incorporates recognizable components rather than transformed materials. The back-



Installation view, betwixt: Judy Pfaff 1985/92, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum: "Barcelona" 1990, steel, plastic, glass, table and chairs. © Judy Pfaff

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ground includes a lettered sign advertising soft drinks and cigarettes, while the foreground thrusts out from the wall with blue plastic propeller blades, a watering can, and a one-gallon olive oil canister. Such found objects stubbornly retain, and even scream out, their individual identities rather than being seamlessly absorbed into a sculptural whole. And that makes this artwork quite different from the other pieces selected for the show, which present an integrated, albeit unruly, whole.

Pfaff has been widely recognized and well rewarded since her innovative work in the 1980s and 1990s, ranging "betwixt and

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between" painting and sculpture. She has had numerous one-person exhibitions around the world and received major honors including MacArthur and Guggenheim Foundation Fellowships, National Endowment for the Arts grants, and memberships in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences as well as the American Academy of Arts and Letters. Her recent work has grown far more massive and immersive: in one, an ancient tree trunk and its sprawling root system filled the entire ceiling of a large gallery space; in another, two towering forms suggesting the inside of a sphere confronted viewers as they emerged from an elevator.

In contrast, *betwixt* offers a series of discrete moments

Installation view, *betwixt*: Judy Pfaff 1985/92, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum: "La Calle, La Calle Vieja" 1990, painted wiggle board and steel, found objects, signage. © Judy Pfaff

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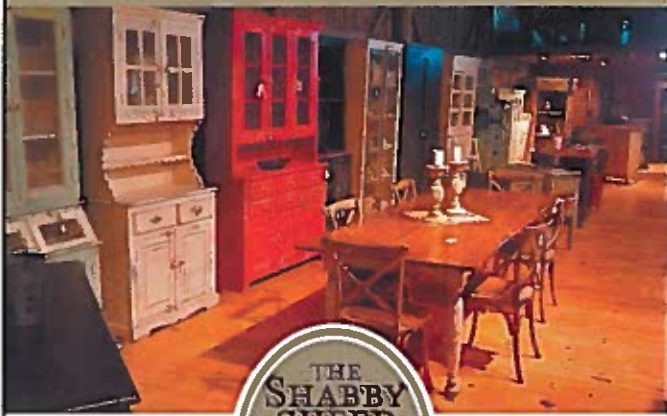
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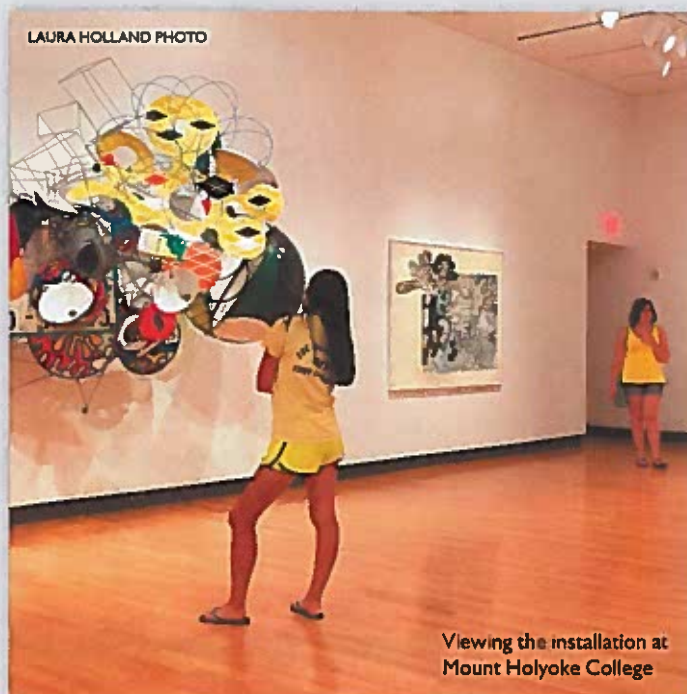
Installation view, *betwixt*: Judy Pfaff 1985/92, Mount Holyoke College Art Museum: "Six of One — La Ceña" 1987, color woodcut. © Judy Pfaff  
LAURA SHEA PHOTO

(encapsulated in each sculpture) that engage Pfaff's dynamic forms. However, those sculptures are carefully selected — with the artist's participation — to reveal a significant moment of artistic practice as Pfaff plunged into the physicality of her materials and pulled her artwork off the wall of painting into the three-dimensional forms and immersive, multiple perspectives of sculptural installation.

***betwixt*: Judy Pfaff 1985/92: Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, South Hadley, through Dec. 20.**

**Gallery Talk: John Stomberg, Director of the Mount Holyoke College Art Museum, Nov. 19, 12:20 p.m.**

LAURA HOLLAND PHOTO



Viewing the installation at Mount Holyoke College