



Photo by Charlie Ahearn

Guggenheim grant recipient **JUDY FOX** is a visionary, an irreverent ceramic sculptor, painter and teacher living and working in New York City. A pioneer of contemporary figuration, she began showing her work in the East Village circa 1985 and has since participated in countless private and public exhibitions around the US and Europe. Her imaginative folkloric sculptures are, in a sense, worldly—yet, simultaneously, grounded on very familiar real-life forms and creatures. Subtle, layered variations in gradient color choices bring her fictitious characters to life. Judy is represented by the Nancy Hoffman Gallery in New York. Judy studied sculpture at Yale and Skowhegan and received a master’s degree in art history from the Institute of Fine Arts, NYU. She also guest lectures at schools and museums.

Curated by Sandra Evertson



# I GREW UP

in suburban New Jersey in a moderately religious Jewish family. My paternal grandparents and my mother were immigrants from Poland and Austria, and the atmosphere at home was very old world. Nothing was more important to my parents than education; it is a wealth you can't lose. Loving art and science, I entered college thinking I could be an artist and a doctor. That turned out to be unrealistic. I continued to take biology classes, but by my sophomore year, I had fallen in love with sculpture.

With a bachelor's degree in art, I knew I would have to learn a trade to support myself. Since my background was in science, I found I was perfectly prepared to study art conservation, which I did at NYU, receiving an MA and certificate in that field.

I stayed in New York and have loved it for over 30 years in the thick of culture, museums and motivated creative types. Starting out, I worked like a maniac—three days per week restoring modern and contemporary art, and four days doing my own old-fashioned looking sculpture. In the late 1980s, I also worked for no pay as an artist's assistant, ghost sculpting clay figurines. I rented my first studio around 1990 and slowly began to show and sell my work. I was able to retire completely from art conservation by 2005. Now, I teach figure modeling at the New York Academy of Art, a grad school that teaches traditional skills in service of contemporary art.

My studio is a classic urban white loft with a bank of windows, worktables and a sink. I work in daylight by the windows, listening to the radio, usually in solitude, though sometimes, an intern or two work with me. My new favorite device is a hydraulic lift table that saves me from some of the contortions of reaching different spots as I work. I love that studio, but commercial rent in Manhattan is getting so expensive that I may soon join the stream of New York City artists moving production upstate, where I have a house.

The kind of work I make relates to my personal experience and education. As a feisty young child, I felt strongly that girls deserved as much respect as boys, and I fought against gender roles. In intellectual terms, I'd say I am concerned with life's challenges, insecurities and rewards as they relate to societal expectations and biological drives. Of course, those themes are way too broad, so I have to find specific images that slice into some of them.

Since my work is all about the human experience, it made sense to gravitate toward the human image. However, when I was starting out, figuration was pretty tired. To be a figurative sculptor is to compete with thousands of years of great works, and everyone was bored with the modernist nude. If I had gone to art school, I couldn't have pursued the figure, so it was fate that I studied art history and conservation.

To break into the art world in this unfashionable genre, I knew I had to do something new with it. I wanted intimacy, realness and frankness about our animal nature. Eventually, I mined my art conservation education, repurposing a gothic or renaissance style of painted carvings, as you'd see in Old Catholic churches. I took famous characters from the art and mythology of various cultures. Exposed and vulnerable, the figures were like our inner child trying to be the grown-up we aspire to be.

“As individuals playing roles, the figures embody the way we project our expectations onto others or feel the pressure of others' expectations.”





**MY SECRET IS** that while finishing a piece to that point can be very tedious, towards the end, I am dying to get the work over with. But, as I work with my hands I have plenty of time and brain left to consider the next project and to tinker with images in my head. Those curving outlines I imagine and eventually make real are a great visual pleasure to me, both as anticipation and reward.

Strangely, a finished piece becomes its own thing—I no longer control its meaning, even to myself. For example, the relationship between the individual I channel and the role he or she plays can be a surprise. The way an appropriated pose looks to a contemporary viewer might be different than I expected. Reactions to my work vary. In the absence of clothing cues, people bring their own issues and attitudes to the body. I think contemporary art reveals people to themselves.

My subjects, at first, were small children, and then, got older. More mature subjects beckoned as I became interested in portraying the inner workings of mind and body more directly. That's how I started with my surrealist work. Surrealism historically was not just about being kooky; it was about expressing psychological truths. My first scaled up surrealist creatures were part of an installation called "Snow White and the 7 Sins." Snow White was a beautiful unconscious adolescent. The sins were creatures that might populate the dreams of a girl in the scary transition to womanhood. They were harsh and funny. Then came "Out of Water." I continued combining a human figure with expressive creatures that commented on her nature. It was inspired by the Babylonian creation mythology that began with the mixing of waters. The emergence of divine life from muck has a mystery to it that echoes the mystery of life forming out of chemistry in the early earth. My general theme was our connection as humans to more primitive things.

My next installation will be "Eve in the Garden." Eve is human, the tree and everything else is surrealist. I am trying to get to issues with the surrealist plants: reproduction, competition and predation— aspects of the flesh that cross with our spiritual nature in complicated ways. But, the images will still have to make simple sense.

As for the artists' role in society, in ancient times artists collectively described their real and spiritual world in human terms. They portrayed the proper order of society, rendering nature and its' relation to divinity and civilization. They presented heroes who defined beauty, honor, courage and recorded dramatic or important events. They decorated usable things that connected to the realms of nature, imagination and practicality. Contemporary artists try to break out and share an individual way of seeing. If you are a lucky artist, your attitude resonates with others; your work gets shown and considered. I want my work to touch people intimately. I want to reveal preconceptions, to show how compassion and truth coexist. Collectively, artists still accomplish what the ancients did, voicing the culture of our time and maybe even showing us the future.

**i**

**More On Judy**  
[JudyFox.net](http://JudyFox.net)



# MY PROCESS GOES SOMETHING LIKE THIS:

I choose a character and pose from the past that might have an interesting read currently. Once I have a completed image in mind, I might make a little model in clay, or just start shaping the clay like a pinch pot. I usually work from photos that I have taken or found to incorporate the surprises of form that are in nature. I start from the bottom and work my way up, firing bottom sections before continuing higher if it's a big piece. I can get something looking identifiable pretty quickly. Then, I let the clay stiffen to leather hard, and I carve it so that the surface and outlines are organized into curves without losing the likeness. It takes weeks or months before those curves lock into a rhythm that has the feeling I'm looking for.

After a piece is fired and assembled, I paint it with casein. I use many layers built up to get a translucent, skin-like quality. I try to use color in a way that simulates lighting and also conveys underlying flesh and bone. The color is important to how the piece looks, but it does veil my true passion, which is the magical power of the geometry that animates the form far more than anatomy or likeness.