

# Amidst the Vortex

## THE CINEMATIC INSTALLATIONS OF JUDY PFAFF

By Jan Lhorner

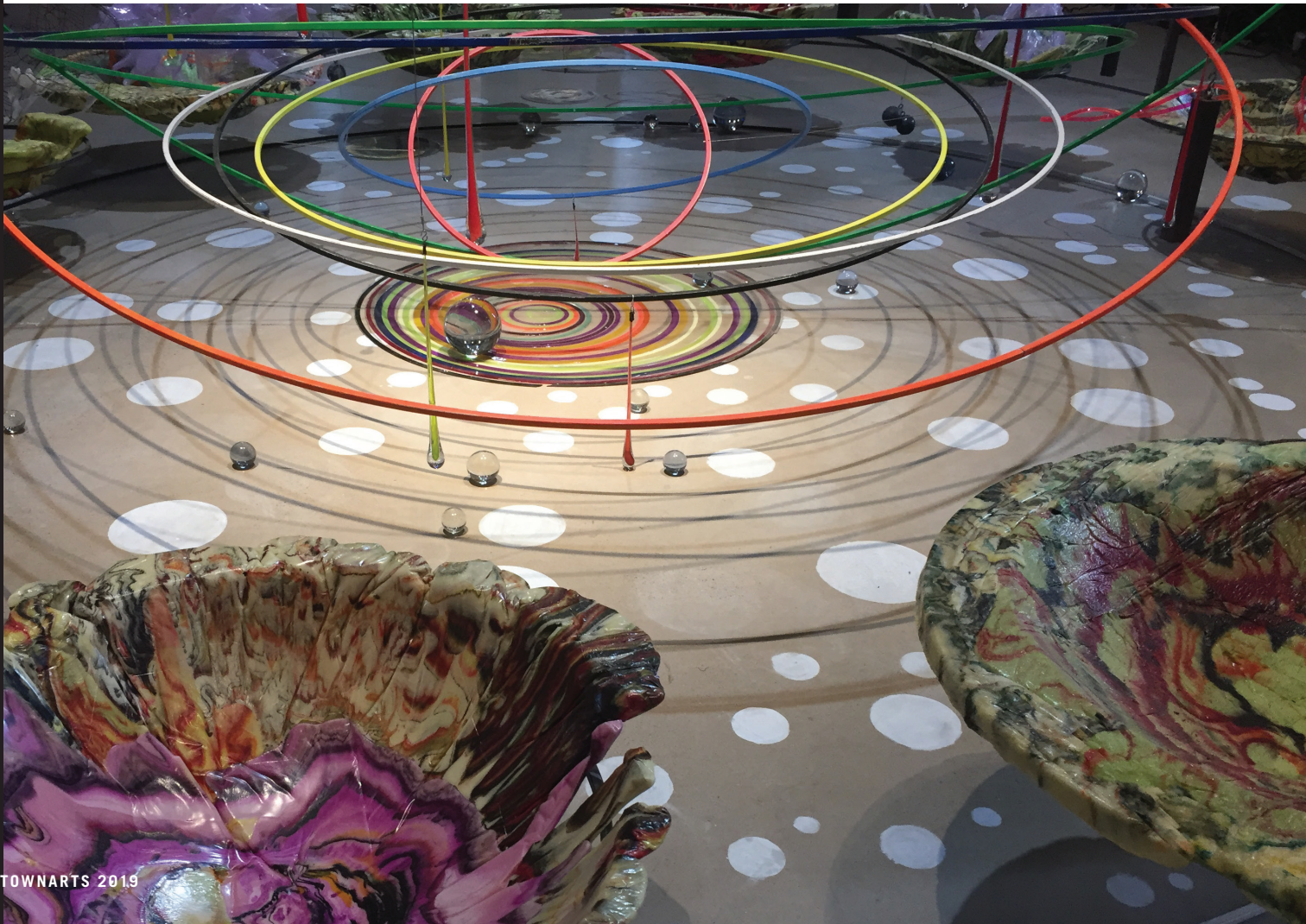
A JANUARY VISIT to Judy Pfaff's studio in Tivoli, New York proved to be more fascinating than I anticipated. Nestled in the Hudson River Valley, Tivoli borders the campus of Bard College, where Pfaff has taught and cochaired the art department since 1994. The bucolic area is ripe with cultural offerings of art, music, and dance. Arriving during the college winter break, I found much of the small town was shut down—ruling out a stay at the revered artist Brice Marden's Hotel Tivoli or a visit to Bard's acclaimed Hessel Museum of Art.

Pfaff later explained that many towns along the Hudson River have been revived by an influx of Brooklyn expats escaping the frenzy of the city. Seeking a greener lifestyle, they venture into farming, or open organic breweries, yoga studios, and other wholesome businesses. Two and a half hours north of Manhattan, the Hudson River Valley has also become a new frontier for artists and gallery owners needing more affordable and larger spaces.

The trek to find the artist's address led me through rambling rural roads, barren apple orchards, and antiquated horse farms. Perched on a hill stood a sprawling industrial building cradled by the Catskill Mountains, with ample open space, a sublime fit for Pfaff. She is considered a pioneer of site-specific environments—animating space with dazzling drama and

sentient energy. The turbulent reality of her work combines painting, sculpture, and architectural elements. Her studio, throbbing with joyful energy, houses fragments of previous exhibitions that remain available for reconfiguration into future projects. Previously based in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, in 2001 Pfaff renovated an abandoned Snapple bottle factory, creating enviable storage and workspace. A compact, contemporary, energy-efficient home for the artist stood across from the refurbished studio areas.

I entered the cluster of buildings, sidestepping a sweet and protective golden retriever named Micky. Pfaff welcomed me with offers of coffee or tea, and breakfast choices. We settled on hot tea in the rustic kitchen warmed by a blazing wood stove. A brief chat blended naturally into a tour of the studio





She also recharges and finds inspiration through travel, and recounts a trip to India five years ago. Travels throughout the Far East find expression in some of her works' exotic flavors and forms, such as paper umbrellas, lanterns, or Oriental text. Discussing her motivation and mindset, Pfaff said, "We live in an unsettled, unstable world, raucous and staccato. Installation allows me to dive in and edit that chaos into a wider spiritual world." She follows no organized religion, but feels mostly aligned with Buddhist philosophies.

The day of my visit, Pfaff was in the midst of preparing for an upcoming show at the Miles McEnery Gallery in Chelsea, New York. One of her two

complex, which seemed to expand the more we walked and talked. Vibrant and voluptuous sculptures made of melted plastics, papers, and other materials swirled from walls, tables, and floors. Nearby, cast balusters or columns cascaded down from the ceiling. Additional walls displayed complex images incorporating a plethora of techniques and materials, including digital prints, collage, and paint. In another room, she pointed out some impressive drawings on vintage Indian papers coated with anything from encaustic and stenciling to epoxy and glitter.

I felt the visceral enchantment of Alice, swallowed into a Wonderland, absorbing intoxicating layers, visual and tactile. Despite the grand scale and scope of the works, a brilliant order prevailed in which everything fit into place amidst the vortex of energy. A circle or mandala-like form is a significant motif, repeated amidst dense menageries of fluorescent images and lights offset by earth-toned areas and organic detritus. Pfaff explained that she is drawn to circles because "they are open-ended, and show the connectedness of all things." She says her students are often quick to put up walls and build boxes, so she challenges that convention. "A circle is all-encompassing—it can represent anything from a polka dot to God." Pfaff considers herself a strong feminist, but her iconography relates more to science, complex systems, and engineering, rather than political or social dogma. As for her Maximalist style, Pfaff states that she likes her artwork to "feel like a good party with a buzz of energy in the air—not passive,

but a cacophony or ensemble of simultaneous sensory experience."

We proceeded through an entryway to a hidden library overflowing with shelves of books and magazines. Pfaff handed me a stack of catalogues and monographs documenting elaborate installations from venues around the world.

"Oh, you must see the greenhouse!" she interjected suddenly, as if reluctant to converse too long about her own work and processes. Another door opened, revealing a dense, effervescent garden illuminated from skylights above. Gardening provides respite and rejuvenation, Pfaff said, "since my mind can run on overdrive."

assistants was focused on production of some large-scale digital prints displaying a bold floral pattern. Pfaff left to take a call, so I had a chance to talk with her young assistant, Jeff Kitchen, a painter in his own right, and recent Bennington College graduate. He felt fortunate to have been employed by the studio for four years, he told me, and was knowledgeable about the many techniques Pfaff favors, explaining how she uses blowtorches to sculpt, and how she paints plastic. Typical of Pfaff's ambitious exhibition schedule, the Chelsea show would be immediately followed by her first solo booth at the prestigious Art Dealers Association of America (ADAA) Art Show held at the Park Avenue Armory.

Amidst all the activity, Pfaff soon returned to recount to me more slices of her unique experiences in the art world. She was the only woman in her graduate class at Yale in 1973; with an all-male faculty, she felt fortunate to have gained the support of painter and professor Al Held, who, she said, "protected and took me very seriously." She further explained how a growing distaste for art school critiques and the inevitable university politics steered her away from painting, her original focus. Critiques required students to transport paintings to an upstairs room for feedback. Being a self-described anarchist, Pfaff began defiantly making her work inside the walls, or affixed to floors or ceilings so it could not be moved—simultaneously paving the way to a new art genre. The 1970s were a notoriously open time for experimentation and free-thinking in social, political, and artistic arenas. A synthesis was coalescing amongst



(above, left to right) Installation view of *Quartets 1-3, 5*, 2018, photographic inspired digital image, wire & steel frame, acrylic, melted plastic, expanded foam, aluminum discs, paper, Styrofoam, wood, light bulbs, fluorescent lights, fungus, and glitter MILES MCENERY GALLERY, NY

(opposite page and right) Views of *Tivoli* —> *Tisbury (A Romance)*, 2017, steel, acrylic, glass drops, and expanded foam MESSUMS WILTSHIRE, TISBURY, ENGLAND PHOTOS BY ALON KOPPEL



PHOTO BY ALON KOPPEL

above and below: more views of *Tivoli* → *Tisbury (A Romance)*, 2017, wooden beams, fluorescent light, expandable paper, painted steel, expanded foam, chalk, glass drops, steel weights, steel column, wooden cutouts, sycamore tree roots, and stones MESSUMS WILTSHIRE, TISBURY, ENGLAND

dance, performance, and multimedia, giving shape to installation art, where Pfaff found her distinct voice and passion. Paying homage to her most significant creative influences, Pfaff muses, "If Al Held was my artistic father figure, Elizabeth Murray would be the mother." Kiki Smith is a close friend and mentor of Pfaff's, as well the sculptor Ursula von Rydingsvard.

Strikingly modest and understated, Pfaff was excited to recall a 2017 milestone installation mounted with Messums Wiltshire in Tisbury, England, just north of Stonehenge. The Messums Museum was recently converted into a large-scale art space from a magnificent thirteenth-century tithe barn. In Pfaff's studio hung a stunning black-and-white wall piece with bursts

of emerald jewel tones from the exhibit. She explained that it provided a backdrop and set the mood for the installation, creating a "Harry Potter feel through its distortions, sense of fantasy, and magical landscape," while also tying in many symbolic references to the historic area.

The show was Pfaff's first in England, and represented a sort of homecoming. She was born in London in 1946 and lived there until age twelve when she moved to Detroit, Michigan. Perhaps the artist's creative roots could be traced to childhood memories of the rubble in the post-war England landscape. Working towards the exhibition, a perfect storm congealed between the spiritual prominence of Stonehenge, the fecund and wooded English countryside, and the historic architecture of the area. The artist conjured one of her most significant and expansive art environments. The base of a massive sycamore tree with sprawling roots from a nearby farm was transported, and flanked the entry of the exhibit. Multiple circle forms referenced nearby Stonehenge and other mystical dwellings typically constructed on circular foundations. The arcs also alluded to rings of a Celtic horde. Pfaff paid tribute to England's Salisbury Cathedral by reconstructing one of its soaring fluted columns as a focal point of the space, and ties in architectural features of the tithe barn and many other jaw-dropping highlights.

Pfaff has longstanding ties to



PHOTO BY ALON KOPPEL



PHOTO BY NOAH SHELDON

Judy Pfaff, 2004

Provincetown and Truro through teaching and exhibiting. She is currently represented by Gaa Gallery of Wellfleet; summer 2018 marked her first show with the gallery, which received accolades from the *Boston Globe* and *Art News* magazine. Gaa Gallery will host another summer exhibition this year. Pfaff showed me a small model of the gallery she had constructed to map out the placement of many photographs, paintings, drawings, and small sculptures to be installed.

In early June 2019, Pfaff gave the keynote speech for the 13th International Encaustic Conference, sponsored by Truro Center for the Arts at Castle Hill. The conference has attracted worldwide attention and is one of the main events that kicks off the summer arts season on the Outer Cape. Pfaff has taught many workshops over the years at Castle Hill and has also been a visiting artist at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown.

Pfaff has been the recipient of the Lifetime Achievement Award from the International Sculpture Center (2014), the MacArthur Fellowship (2004), and the Guggenheim Fellowship (1983). In keeping with her humble nature, Pfaff said the MacArthur Fellowship was “kind of embarrassing—I don’t think I went into the city for about a year.” Yet she felt deeply honored and grateful, noting the financial boost it provided to further her art.

Having produced over four and a half decades of masterful installations, Pfaff continues to dazzle us with eccentric possibilities and cinematic rigor.



*JAN LHORMER is a painter, art professor, and arts writer living in Falmouth, Massachusetts. Her large-scale abstract landscapes have been exhibited in galleries and museums across the region, including a 2017 solo show at New York City’s Painting Center. This summer she will be exhibiting with Speedwell Projects Gallery in Portland, Maine.*



JUDY PFAFF STUDIO

Pfaff's studio with works in progress, 2019, Tivoli, NY

## The Pollock-Krasner Foundation

Announces its ongoing Grant Program, which provides financial assistance to individual, professional visual artists. The Foundation welcomes, throughout the year, applications from painters, sculptors and artists who work on paper, including printmakers. Photography applications are accepted by nomination only.

There are no deadlines.

Artists interested in applying for the grant must do so via our online application form. Applicants should consult our website for the application, detailed guidelines and frequently asked questions.

[www.pkf.org](http://www.pkf.org)

**Pollock-Krasner Foundation**  
**863 Park Avenue**  
**New York, NY 10075**  
**E-mail: [grants@pkf.org](mailto:grants@pkf.org)**