Step right up and see the “Side Show” at the Yale School of Art

New Haven, Conn. — The Yale School of Art (YSA) launches its 2015 season at the 32 Edgewood Avenue Gallery with “Side Show,” an exhibition devoted to the “believe it or not” world of the American sideshow, in which display of the abnormal and bizarre was the focus of the event. On view Jan. 13–Mar. 20, 2015, the exhibition is free and open to the public Tuesdays–Sundays from noon to 6 p.m.

“Side Show” presents more than 70 works by 29 artists — including Diane Arbus, Otto Dix, John Waters, and Riva Lehrer — ranging from the mid-18th century to the present. The show includes original sideshow banners, props, promotional cards, photographs, historical ephemera, and works of art inspired by circus and carnival culture from the Yale University Art Gallery (YUAG), Yale Medical School Library, the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, the International Center of Photography, School of the Art Institute of Chicago, and private collections.

“Side Show” joins an array of television programs, Broadway shows, and books in recent popular culture highlighting showmanship of the exceptional. While some works in the exhibition celebrate the offbeat, taboo world of the sideshow, others explore issues ranging from racism to misogyny to politics to a society obsessed with superficial values, as well as the attitude toward those with disabilities.

“The sideshow celebrates the human spirit’s ability to overcome any and all challenges, and the acts performed there proved that nothing is impossible,” said performer and collector Todd Robbins, who is contributing a folk sculpture from his collection to the exhibition.

Traditionally, a sideshow was a secondary production associated with a mainstream carnival or circus, offering spectacles in a makeshift tent. The popular “10-in-1” format included 10 acts in one show for one ticket. The sideshows would feature people born with physical oddities, such as bearded women or conjoined twins; death-defying acts such as sword-swallowing or fire-breathing; and exotic animals. A final, extra act not advertised on the outside, called the “blow-off,” could be viewed for an additional fee.

“They were a fad of popular entertainment for the masses looking to forget their worries and cares and fears and problems,” said Lisa Kereszi ’00 M.F.A., critic and director of undergraduate studies in art at the YSA, and curator of the exhibition. “They were not unlike the proliferation of reality television today, the Honey Boo-Boos and the various ‘Housewives,’ or the afternoon talk shows of the eighties and nineties, like Sally Jesse and Geraldo.”

“Side Show” ends with a wink and a nod to the “blow-off.” After seeing the main show, visitors can walk down a side gallery to view historical sideshow banners. They are confronted with a velvet curtain and a sign warning

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of the graphic nature of what they are about to see. According to exhibition organizers, the final “ding,” to use carny lingo, it is not to be missed.

A complementary exhibition, “Teratology: The Science and History of Human Monstrosity,” will be on view Jan. 22–May 31 at Yale's Cushing Medical Library, which is lending three works to the School of Art show. Located at 333 Cedar St., the library’s exhibition includes books, prints, and broadsides. It is also free and open to the public.

In addition, an exhibition opening in January at the Wadsworth Athenaeum in Hartford, Connecticut — “Coney Island: Visions of America’s Dreamland, 1861-2008” — has been organized by Robin Jaffee Frank, former YUAG senior associate curator of American paintings and sculpture. Kereszi, who consulted on the Wadsworth exhibition, will have her own work featured in the Hartford show.

“Side Show” has been made possible at Yale by an anonymous donor, with support from the Hayden Fund for Arts and Ideas. An opening lecture by Ricky Jay, magician, collector, and historian, will take place on Tuesday, Jan. 13 at 5:30 p.m. at 36 Edgewood Ave., Rm. 204. The talk will be followed by a reception at the 32 Edgewood Avenue Gallery 6:30–8:30 p.m., with sideshow acts Johnny Fox and The Great Fredini, as well as a performance piece by Mat Fraser and Julie Atlas Muz.

Additional programs — all free and open to the public — include a panel discussion on Monday, Jan. 26 at 6:30 p.m. at 36 Edgewood Ave., Rm. 204, with performer Todd Robbins, sideshow impresario Dick Zigun ’78 M.F.A., performer and director Jennifer Miller, and artists Riva Lehrer and Pamela Joseph. The discussion will follow a performance by Coney Island Sideshows by the Seashore at 5:30 p.m., sponsored by the Traphagen Alumni Speakers Series and Yale Office of Student Affairs.