“Side Show” is an exhibition investigating the intersection of fine art and the historical popular entertainment world of the carnival sideshow – in which the bodily display of the abnormal, human or animal, is the focus of each piece. Sideshows existed just beyond or to the side of the mainstream carnival or circus midway, offering a spectacle of oddity in a makeshift tent. It would feature human oddities, “freaks,” such as bearded women, the fat lady, the skeleton man, the conjoined, or “Siamese” twins, as well as dangerous-seeming acts like fire-handling and nasal nail-hammering. They were a fad of popular entertainment for the masses looking to forget their worries and cares and fears and problems, not really unlike the proliferation of reality television today, your Honey Boo-Boos and your various “Housewives,” or the afternoon talk shows of the eighties and nineties, like Sally Jesse and Geraldo.

The impetus for the show is the concurrent early 2015 exhibition at the Wadsworth Atheneum, “Coney Island: Visions of America’s Dreamland, 1861–2008,” spearheaded by former Yale University Art Gallery senior associate curator of American paintings and sculpture, Robin Jaffee Frank. Our show stands as a literal side-show, in a way, to that main show, which I consulted on and in which I have work included. Sideshows were a part of Coney Island, but they existed all over the country, and globe, travelling from town to town.

Artists seem to have always been interested in and entranced by the depiction of the “other,” the outsider, the oddity in nature, as can be evidenced by collections of curiosities assembled over centuries all over the world. Living curiosities have also been a part of these private and public museums, most popularly known in America thanks to local Connecticut hero, P.T. Barnum. Why do many artists feel an attraction to these images and objects, which are sometimes disturbing and depictions of unethical treatment of human beings, animals, and corpses? Is it because it is forbidden? Is there some empathetic response to being the outsider in society? Painter David Carbone says that he sees “archetypal images of otherness...[as] really images of our secret selves.”

Diane Arbus, one of the artists represented in the show via a loan of a suite of photographs from the collection of the Yale University Art Gallery, famously said, “Freaks was a thing I photographed a lot.... There’s a quality of legend about freaks. Like a person in a fairy tale who stops you and demands that you answer a riddle. Most people go through life dreading they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats.” (New Yorker, April 8, 2014) Arbus, being from a bit of an aristocratic Upper West Side furrier family, committed suicide after a bout with health problems and depression. Her demons were her trauma; was this why she was attracted to this underworld as her subjects?

In the show, some artists seem to celebrate this offbeat, taboo world, but others, like Arnold Mesches, Chris Daze, Roger Brown, Pamela Joseph and Toni Lee Sangastiano, use the conceits of sideshow signage and imag-

*(continued)*
ery to critique issues ranging from racism to misogyny and objectification of women to politics and a society obsessed with superficial values. Roger Brown, whose piece in the show proclaims “Motto for the Masses,” is quoted as saying, “As an artist your role is to sit back and observe objectively. If you become part of the freak show, you’re dead. You’re just another whore. The real job of an artist is to use what’s going on, not be used by it.” (Dialog magazine, 1987) His painting in the show uses the sideshow banner advertising style to make a political statement. In Arnold Mesches’ piece, “It’s a Circus 3,” he uses the carnivalesque to “re-create the sense of utter instability and sheer insanity” he finds in American society.

Those issues of race, ethnicity and gender will be considered, as well as the attitude towards those with disabilities. Although some acts in a traditional 10-in-1 sideshow (10 acts in one show for one ticket, that run continuously all day and evening long, so an audience member could walk in and out at any point, and still catch the whole show) are firebreathers, glass eaters and sword swallowers, defying nature, many were also people with some physical oddity that they were born into that made them fodder for display. It is argued that although some of these performers were, indeed, practically enslaved, many had self-agency, and the circus or sideshow gave them an opportunity to contribute to a family’s expenses; otherwise, many of them could not otherwise work for a living.

The artist Riva Lehrer, in a lecture titled “Jarred,” talks about her experience as a person born with spina bifida confronting a dead baby in a jar at an anatomy museum, and realizing she was, in a way, quite possibly seeing herself, in another reality, put on display for gawkers, rather than buried and grieved over. Her immaculate drawing of performance artist Mat Fraser (who now stars in TV’s “American Horror Story: Freak Show”) is included in the show, and is a full-frontal male nude of a person born with a birth defect caused by his mother’s use of Thalidomide, an anti-nausea drug now banned from use. In his sideshow act, he pays tribute to “Sealo,” a performer who has the same deformity as him. He is a self-proclaimed disability activist, with a punk rock edge whose work transcended sideshow performance and acting to performance art.

Fraser is a good example in one body of the intersection of high and low culture, a theme this exhibition rests upon. I wanted to see what would happen if we took actual low-brow ephemera from the sideshow era – a feeegee mermaid (a vernacular sculpture made from fish and monkey parts), a two-headed calf, sideshow banners meant to hang in a line as cheap and loud advertising, pitch cards or giant’s rings sold by the acts for a quarter her and there – and put these items up against unrefuted high art, such as paintings by the contemporary artists mentioned previously, as well as by Joe Coleman, Susan Meiselas, and Jane Dickson.

The show ends with a wink and a nod to an integral piece of the 10-in-1, the “blow-off.” For this, after the visitor views the main show, and then walks down the side gallery to view the historical sideshow banners, he or she will be confronted with a velvet curtain and a sign warning of the graphic nature of what you are about to see. It would be at this point that the emcee would collect another dollar from each of his marks to enter the last display. At Coney Island’s Sideshow by the Seashore, created by YSD ’78 alum, Dick Zigun, the blow-off is a cheap videotape of a woman giving birth. As a knowing nod to Zigun’s knowing nod, I chose to include the piece, “Birth Control,” by John Waters, a series of film stills of childbirth, as our own blow-off, or “ding,” in carny lingo.

Performer and collector Todd Robbins sums it up well, by saying, “The sideshow celebrates the human spirit’s ability to overcome any and all challenges, and the acts performed there prove that nothing is impossible.”