

# Legacy, History, and Patronage: The Racine Art Museum

*by Neil Goodman*



Bruce Pepich, Executive Director, Racine Art Museum.  
Photo courtesy of Racine Art Museum.



Karen Johnson Boyd at the Racine Art Museum.  
Photo by Nicholson's of Racine.

The Racine Art Museum's (RAM) collection offers a refreshing surprise for viewers accustomed to a somewhat overly familiar roster of principal players. Founded in 1999, and designed by the late architect Brad Lynch, of Brininstool + Lynch, RAM has a distinct point of view unparalleled in other modern museums. Focusing on contemporary crafts, RAM's collection includes more than 10,000 works, with half of its holdings comprising works on paper including photography, watercolors, drawings, and prints.

The history of Racine is, in part, due to its relationship with SC Johnson (not to be confused with Johnson & Johnson pharmaceuticals). Headquartered in Racine Wisconsin, H. F. Johnson, Jr., grandson of the company's founder, commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright in 1936 for the company's flagship administrative building. This legacy also included the Johnson family home in Racine, which has since become the Johnson Foundation at Wingspread. This patronage has extended itself through more than three generations and parallels the cultural history of Racine Wisconsin.

Bruce W. Pepich has been the long-time Executive Director of the Racine Art Museum. The edited interview is as follows:

**Neil:** When I first approached you about doing a piece on RAM, you sent me a very succinct and profound synopsis of the museum and its relationship to the Johnson family. I would like to use your opening paragraph as the cornerstone of our conversation, as you introduced some very key points which are unique to RAM and your experience with the Johnson family both in legacy, history, and patronage.

**Bruce:** I keep thinking about the creative aspect of the Johnson family. Karen (Karen Johnson Boyd) became a collector of paintings and works on paper after her family sponsored ART: USA: NOW and then became a major craft supporter after they organized OBJECTS: USA. As you know, she took those interests further, creating Perimeter

Gallery in Chicago to represent artists working in a variety of media whose work aligned with her aesthetic, but with an emphasis on contemporary craft. Her daughter Henni (Karen Henrietta Keland) assembled archival holdings of some of the artists her mother represented, creating a second generation of a family who directly supported artists in the production of new work. Then they helped fund the creation of an art museum, designed by a talented architect, Brad Lynch, who grew up down the street from them. RAM has the largest contemporary craft collection of any art museum in the US. It also represents and documents the talent and commitment of these three people now that they are no longer living. It's an interesting story—I don't know if this is particularly Midwestern, but there is certainly something very American about it.

Karen was a unique person. She was thoughtful, sensitive, and attuned to artists and the visual world. She studied art at Bennington College and after living as a teenager in Wingspread, raised her four children in a house Wright designed for her in the 1950s. The works she connected with through these two exhibitions set her on an important path. Karen was one of the early collectors who saw no hierarchical differences between craft and traditional fine art media. She turned her home, with its built-in furnishings, into an ever-changing stage on which she arranged objects from around the world. The combination of objects she selected, the way she paired pieces with each other to help make visual connections, and her use of Wright's interiors was one of the best environments I have seen a collector create. Karen's home functioned in a way, like Kurt Schwitters's architectural *Merzbau* in that she was always adding, editing, and moving pieces to present different artists' messages together.

Henni was raised in this setting and developed an equally impressive sensitivity for responding to and living with objects. Like her mother, Henni had an intense admiration for artists and their ideas. However, she created a number of different homes that each reflected their different exterior settings—a hillside overlooking the ocean, an urban high-rise apartment, and a historic log cabin on a lake. The aesthetic of her interiors maintained its focus on the artworks and the dialogues she established by selecting which works would be in proximity to each other, encouraging conversations between the artists and her guests prompted by her arrangements.

While Karen acquired some artists in-depth, she was more interested in bringing together a wider array of works and her collection included many of the artists Perimeter represented over its three decades. Henni frequently focused on particular artists Perimeter carried, collecting their work in-depth. For example, she assembled career surveys of the ceramic sculptors Jack Earl and Toshiko Takaezu with work covering a number of decades. Karen's son, who is an artist, collects seriously and his daughter, who has been raised amidst all this creativity, does too. Like her father, she has an ongoing active relationship with RAM.



Henni Keland in her home. Photo by Frank Paluch.



Jan Hopkins, *Isadora*, 2008. Alaskan yellow cedar bark, grapefruit peel, lotus pod tops, Sharlyn melon peel, and waxed linen thread. Photo: Jon Bolton.



Julie Lindermann and John Shimon, *Trish and Matt Downtown (No. 2)*, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, 1995. Platinum palladium print, 9 7/8 x 7 7/8 inches. Photo: Racine Art Museum.



Frank Paluch at Perimeter Gallery. Photo by Crain's Chicago Business.

Karen started donating artwork to RAM's Wustum Museum of Fine Arts campus in 1975. In 1991, in response to our announcement of establishing a focus in contemporary craft in addition to our focus in works on paper, she contributed 200 works in craft media in one week. This gift immediately established significant holdings in contemporary ceramics, baskets, and jewelry. Her initial gift drew national attention to the museum and we now have collectors living in over 32 states who are artwork donors. Over a 40-year period, Karen donated nearly 1,750 works to RAM and last year, Henni's Trust donated an additional 1,000 pieces. These two women have contributed almost 20% of the museum's entire collection. Their generosity attracted thousands of other works from American collectors and artists who have been inspired by the way RAM uses these works to teach the public about craft and the importance of handmade objects. Their legacy established a solid footing for RAM's collection.

**Neil: Can you tell me a bit more about Art: USA and Objects USA? Both of these earlier exhibitions seemed to have influenced the direction of collecting for Karen initially and later Henni. Also, they seemed unique for their time in the sense that they combined craft and traditional modes of painting and sculpture.**

Bruce: Art: USA: NOW and OBJECTS: USA seemed ahead of their time, taking place before today's massive proliferations of Art Fairs and Biennials. Lee Nordness, a visionary New York gallerist who carried both painters and craft artists, presented the concept for both shows to the Johnsons. SC Johnson commissioned comprehensive collections of American painting and craft that toured the US and abroad. The paintings are now in Washington, DC at the Smithsonian Institution. OBJECTS was the first-time contemporary craft exhibition that was featured at most of the host museums. The majority of OBJECTS pieces are now at the Museum of Arts and Design in New York. These exhibitions were watershed moments in this country's cultural life at the time and members of the family that organized them were also affected by their involvement with these shows.

**Neil: You mentioned Karen's interest in silently backing Perimeter Gallery in Chicago. Was this another arm of her patronage, and interest in creating a more public venue for contemporary craft, as well as Wisconsin based artists?**

Bruce: Karen specifically told me, on a number of occasions, that she saw the focus of the Gallery as bringing craft artists to greater attention in the context of painting and sculpture movements and to bring Wisconsin artists into the national spotlight by presenting their work in the Chicago art marketplace. The Gallery's name suggested that she and Frank Paluch, Perimeter's Director, worked on the outer edge of what Chicago galleries offered at

the time but Perimeter was in business for 34 years and became one of the most respected galleries in the city. They organized exhibitions for major figures like Lia Cook and Peter Voukos, hosted lectures and panel discussions, and regularly published books and catalogues including a monograph on Jack Earl. Perimeter featured a series of shows of the work of the Cuban-American painter and ceramic sculptor, Margaret Ponce Israel, whose extant archive of work Karen acquired after the artist's death in an effort to bring her work to greater public attention. Karen, herself, curated two exhibitions devoted to figurative sculpture, *The Nude in Clay I* and *II*.

**Neil:** You mentioned that Brad Lynch, who designed RAM, was from Racine. Did he have a longer relationship with the Johnsons prior to his commission, and do you think he designed the museum with the collection in mind?

**Bruce:** Brad was raised in Racine and grew up down the street from Karen's family. He played with her children when they were young and they all remained close to the end of their lives. Brad was always proud of his connection to Racine and he completely understood what RAM could do for the local community and the national field. He designed a building that made that intent clear and the positive results possible. He created a well-proportioned thoughtful environment in which the building gives the attention to the artworks. Many craft pieces are small in scale and his large spaces reveal but never overwhelm the household-sized nature of some of the works. He paid particular attention to the interiors and there is an almost Japanese aesthetic to the sense of space and light RAM has that is reminiscent of contemporary craft's close association with Japanese aesthetics and practice.

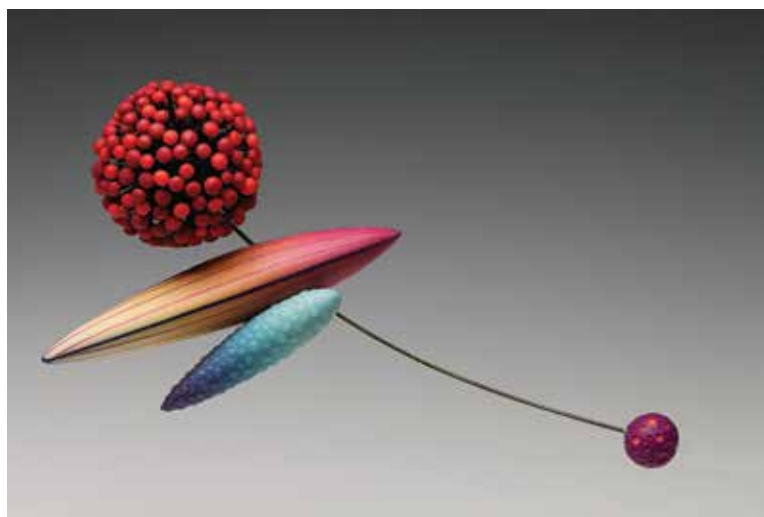
**Neil:** You have been the longtime Director of the museum. In an age where directors move with frequency, you have established both direction, stability, and continuity for the museum. Your story has a center parallel to the Johnson's as you and your wife, Lisa Englander, seem firmly entrenched in the community of Racine. How do you feel about your legacy in this regard?

**Bruce:** I did not plan to spend my entire career at one institution but found that I was able to do many things here due to the encouragement and commitment of this community and our out-of-town supporters. I was able to focus on my interests in craft and works on paper in the collection and exhibitions. The craft specialization was my initiative, which enhanced Racine's role as a cultural at-



Brad Lynch. Photo by Nancy Keay.

Jeffrey Lloyd Dever, *Blossoming Radii*, 2006. Polymer, nickel-plated, glass beads, and plastic-coated wire. Photo: Menina Meisels.





William Harper, *Albino III (Brooch)*, 1978. 14-k gold, 24-k gold, enamel, pearl, sterling silver, quartz, and moonstone.  
4 3/8 x 3 1/8 x 3/4 inches. Photo: Jon Bolton.

Kéké Cribbs, *Grainne Uaile*, 1991. Glass and painted wood, 22 1/4 x 41 3/8 inches. Photo: Jon Bolton.



traction while giving us a national platform for our programs. Lisa is a New Yorker and we are both big city kids who found Racine a great place to contribute to the visual arts field through our dual work at the museum and in Lisa's career as a studio artist. I realize the model in the field is to move around frequently to gain new experience and face new challenges, but I was able to do this at one place while providing it with the stability it needed to make these changes effective.

**Neil: In an age of cinematic installations, how does a museum that focuses on craft and works on paper connect to the next generation?**

Bruce: Not every society on this planet had Impressionist painters in the 19th century, but most made storage containers, clothing, and jewelry. The broadness of craft's appeal opens doors to many underserved communities and craft artists have been an underserved portion of the visual arts field. We need our children to be interested in staying in school and for adults to become lifelong learners. This ties in directly with RAM's equity efforts to reach the many communities we serve. As an example, just over 50% of the participants in our educational programs are children of color and craft enables us to speak to them.

**Neil: What is your commitment to local artists?**

Bruce: Racine was home to Western Publishing (Golden Books) for many years and they would employ art graduates in full-time jobs drawing all day. Many of those people taught in our studio programs and served as volunteers. For a city this size, we have a large and sophisticated visual arts community. Our public school system had an art program that was used as a model for decades. RAM collects local artists as part of our documentation of Wisconsin artists and contemporary craft. Thanks to

local funders, we offer a biennial fellowship to five artists who receive funds to support their careers and a show at our Wustum campus. There are local college and university art departments and we have offered studio art classes for children and adults at Wustum since 1941 so there is a solid foundation for this sector of our community.

**Neil: Reciprocally, how do you select your exhibitions, and do you feel that your mission has changed in the wake of BLM?**

Bruce: The first slightly different thing we do at RAM is that all of our galleries change two-three times annually and about 90% of our exhibi-

tion content is from the collection, so works we hold make up the shows and they come in and out of storage on a rotating basis. Our Curator of Exhibitions selects topics, ideas, and subjects and we have at least one show each year that presents an archive of an artist whose work we own in-depth as a small career retrospective. As often as possible, we present a variety of art media to demonstrate what they have in common, rather than how they may be different. We keep an eye on what's happening in the art field but also look at pop culture, current events, and what artists are doing in their studios for our inspiration. Sometimes we devote galleries to recent acquisitions.

In 2020, we determined that 41% of the artists in RAM's collection were women and we are proud of this fact. At the same time, we researched the collection and determined that 10% of the works were created by people of color, so there is still work for us to do there. Since 2020, we have inaugurated a series of RAM Showcase exhibitions that feature artists of color in the collection. We produce special educational handouts focusing on people of color and women artists in each exhibition, so the public can learn more about them. We also have special pages on our website—one for women artists and one for artists of color, whose work we hold, that contain images, quotes, and links to video interviews with the subjects. An out-of-state foundation has recently provided us with a grant to purchase craft pieces and we are using it to add artists of color. Our progress in this area of operations is recorded on our website and regularly updated in the portion of the website devoted to our Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility Statement.

**Neil: As RAM has been strongly linked to family and locale, what has been the impact of the loss of Henni, Karen and Brad?**

**Bruce:** The museum functions very much as an extended family with its audiences, artists, and funders. We share an intense interest in art with each other that cements our relationships. There is also a social aspect in that many gatherings are also occasions where we connect with each other. It's a difficult passage for the institution to no longer have these three partners however, we still have the results of their work with us to share with the public.

To have collectors who so closely align with our institution's mission with a concerted commitment to share their works with the public is a gift to any director. I fre-



Kéké Cribbs, *Grainne Uaile*, 1991. Glass and painted wood, 22 ¼ x 41 3/8 inches.  
Photo: Jon Bolton.

Akio Takamori, *Young Men with a Woman*, 1992. Glazed porcelain.  
Photo: Jon Bolton.





Terence Main, *Animal Form*, 1988. Wood and color serigraph on canvas, 46 x 21 x 26 inches. Photo: Jon Bolton.

quently think about how pleased Karen and Henni would be to see the public's response to their artworks and delighted by how many collectors have been inspired by their initial gifts, to add to RAM's documentation of the field in Racine.

When an art museum constructs a new building, its director usually forms a close bond with the architect. The RAM project was no different. Brad and I realized that it was seven years between our first dinner, when we spoke about the possibility of a new museum, until the day RAM opened. These kinds of projects bond people in meaningful ways that last.

**Neil: What do you see as your most significant accomplishment in terms of the RAM?**

Bruce: It has to be sculpting this collection and creating the craft focus so that the museum could be of service to others. I think of RAM's building, as the largest artwork in its collection. To be able to contribute this to a community that adopted me has been a wonderful experience. ■

Neil Goodman is a sculptor formerly based in Chicago with an extensive exhibition history. Presently living in the central coast of California, he retired from Indiana University Northwest as Professor Emeritus of Fine Arts. He is currently represented by Carl Hammer Gallery as well as serving as the South Central California Region Editor for the New Art Examiner.



(Left) Chunghee Choo, *Peace Lily*, 1981. Silver-plated copper, edition 21/35, 21 1/4 x 11 1/4 inches diameter. Photo: Jon Bolton.



(Right) Ginny Ruffner, *Envisioning the Weather* (from the Envisioning Series), 1995. Lamp-worked glass and enamel paint. Photo: Jon Bolton.