



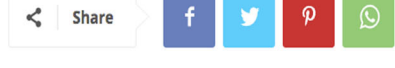
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Interviews Artists

# Judy Fox

By **Brainard Carey** September 21, 2023

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**Brainard Carey:** You're listening to Yale radio, WYBC. This is Brainard Carey with the lives of the artists, architects, curators, and more. Today on our show I'm talking with Judy Fox.  
Judy, thanks so much for being with me tonight.

**Judy Fox:** Thank you so much for having me,

**BC:** Judy, we're going to talk about your show currently running at Nancy Hoffman Gallery Through October 21st of this year, 2023.

I love the name of the show, Harvest, which of course relates to so many things: it is the fall, it is harvest time. But for your work, of course it means something very different, right? Harvest relates to the fact that these all look like vegetables or growing materials. Is that correct, what you meant by harvest?

**JF:** Sure. I'm living right now up in the Hudson Valley, and there's a lot of farm country around, so I did get inspired to do farm produce; and yeah, it's harvest time.

**BC:** Well even the way it's laid out in the gallery; there is what looks like a harvest table that much of this is laid out on; it seems to reflect that language of the vegetable harvest like you see-

**JF:** -in a farm market! The tables are built so they look like a farm table; but also they're painted white on the top, to transition into pedestal.

**BC:** And let's talk about the beginning of this work because I know, as I've read, it was in the pandemic that this particular series began, can you tell me a little bit about that? Because I think that's so interesting how the pandemic affected different artists' practice, and some were able to work, some weren't, in a variety of ways. How did the pandemic give birth to this series?

**JF:** So, I was sitting in my studio all by myself, and not socializing very much, like a lot of other people, and feeling a little afraid of disease, and insecure about mortality altogether. You think about how to express something that's not pleasant in a way that will convey what you're thinking about, but not be a bummer.

So, these fruits and vegetables do relate to mortal conditions. You might see that they are imperfect and might have little spots of disease. They are imperfect in ways that relate to body problems, and the general fragility of life that we have in common with vegetables.

**BC:** And also specifically in the pandemic, right? Because the series began in the pandemic, didn't it?

**JF:** Oh yes, of course- everyone's a little frightened about what could happen to them, and thinking about the problems of the body and problems of disease. That was definitely set into the undercurrent of vulnerability in this work.

There's also another pandemic factor in that instead of seeing friends I saw Instagram. A lot of my source material for this work were things that people posted there. There are a lot of weird vegetables and strange self portraits on Instagram, the imagery of which became source material for these vegetables.

**BC:** That's really interesting to me - a little more about that, because you're searching for that, or that happened kind of accidentally? How did that Instagram research take place?

**JF:** Well, I was thinking about how I could make my produce seem interesting to look at and how I could make it relate to the audience. I had been amused in the past by things people posted, of roots that look like human bodies and stuff like that. So I started looking more into that. It turns out you can Google "carrots look like legs," and you'll get a whole bunch of carrots that look like legs that people are putting up. But also, on Instagram, people post themselves when they're having problems. There's a whole thing that you can get into on Instagram about people's experiences that can weird you out. But they're also meant to be self-asserting and uplifting in a way. There is a strange combination of problematic things, and the persistence of beauty.

**BC:** "Problematic things and the persistence of beauty." I sort of love that as a show title in itself. So that's not something I'd see on Instagram, because we all see different things, right? Instagram seems to be tailored to our needs. But "problematic things, and the persistence of beauty" is just a beautiful phrase. On Instagram, you're not just talking about visual imagery that you're looking at and getting inspired by, but there's also something about these stories of vulnerability, of fragility, or something, even more - you said some of them are really difficult, in the stories, to understand.

**JF:** People post their trials with missing limbs and prosthetics, and learning to walk after an accident, all sorts of stuff. And you can really see it in my work, for example, in the Cassava. Cassavas have many roots sticking out of them. [Mine] has lost some of its roots in a way that leaves it with legs and arms. But it's a cassava, so they're not really all the same length. But if you think of it as a person, then it's a person with an extra short arm. That was straight out of things I saw on Instagram, where people just - on the one hand there they are with a misshapen arm; on the other hand, they were like, "Hey, I'm cool, and I have a misshapen arm." It's a really strong trend on Instagram that I picked up on and has fed into my work: The flaw and the beauty.

**BC:** That is so interesting and something I wouldn't have picked up on. But now, of course, the work has a whole different sense to it because that's also about the perception of our own bodies. Instagram is also full of selfies that seem to be much more shallow - the kind of imagery that I've also seen, people just about looking as beautiful as possible, as good as possible, as perfect as possible, with filters. But you're talking about something quite different that is feeding into your work, which is these kind of things that aren't perfect. And that, I would imagine, is sort of a comfort as well as a kind of fascinating research in the pandemic. Is that part of the interest?

**JF:** I would almost say there's a movement of imperfection pride that I had never been aware of before. For example, there are many people who post their Down syndrome kids and they say, "Down syndrome is okay." And they post their kids in fashion. It's really interesting. There is an upside to Instagram that I found: It is full of strange truth.

**BC:** That's so fascinating because that's not what I see. So let's talk about some of these works: the one you just mentioned, which is one of the largest works in the show, which you mentioned specifically: it's a carrot. You say you can look up "carrots that look like people." I mean we can look at all of [the work] and see where some of these forms are derived, but the carrot seems almost like a human, like it is about to walk towards you. It is leaned up against the wall as well. That one seems to almost be set apart from the rest.

**JF:** That one is one of the later pieces that I did. There are many, many different carrots on the internet. Carrot legs, and all different kinds of carrots-: carrot bodies, carrot poses. It's kind of funny. But I decided that I wanted sort of an MC for the show, someone leaning against the wall and being a little saucy. And the funny thing about that carrot is that I ended up modeling it on Freddie Mercury's legs. Freddie Mercury was showing up in my Instagram feed a lot. And I wanted kind of the cowboy leaning against the wall for that, to show off his stable mates.

**BC:** And I like that. We've been Talking about a few different types of things: These kind of body anomalies, but then of course, as happens with fruit, there's also things that look like penises or vaginas, which is the case with lemon and, is it called, ackee?

**JF:** Yes, a fruit I had never been aware of before. These are the last things I did. I looked over all my body parts: I have breasts, I have hands, I have ears, I have a long kidney, intestines. And I'm like: OMG I don't have a penis or a vagina. And I'm an artist! So I went looking for penis and a vagina. You can find a lot of them, but I chose the lemon for the penis and an ackee for the vagina.

The interesting thing about body references in the fruit is that you don't really have to make them look exactly like the body. In fact, I wanted to keep the sculptures in fruit language. But I've thought about what makes the genitalia different than the rest of the body. They are this little area of unusual detail; and just having a little area of unusual detail in a fruit will almost do it, it being not that hard to make people think about sex.

**BC:** Right, because it's something that we kind of read into it in a sense? We're used to reading that into it without it being even so close. And maybe we can read into it when we say to someone, "This looks like a penis to me," but it may not look like that to someone else because it's an approximation. That's what you're saying?

**JF:** Well, there are many, many cylindrical things in the world, most of which are not penises at all, but people do see them. So, getting people to take the references is not hard. But what you want to do is make it interesting and make it evident that there are common forces that form all life forms. And they will end up referring to each other in a way because they are all biological. And many plant features sort of look like slow motion or frozen animal features because they grow too. So I look for those commonalities.

**BC:** So now we're, of course, post pandemic. You're having a show and we're talking about both an intimate and a social landscape during the pandemic; what people were struggling with or sharing; what you were looking at and researching and getting inspired by. How do these look to you after the pandemic? This is work that you've done that now might mean something slightly different to you, or no?

**JF:** I'm very happy with the discovery that I could talk about or make form about problematic things, using something almost literally palatable. Because those problems that people have, disease and malformation and all those other things, are still around. I and my friends are getting older and are threatened by those things all the time. I have sore knees that I never had before. And I'm like, "what is the problem here? Is it age, or is something wrong?" So all those pandemic fears linger; they have a lot in common with the fears of aging. And some of the problems that my fruits have are just things like drying out, wrinkling up- the joys of aging.

**BC:** That's very, very difficult. It's so interesting to hear you talk about because it's something we don't talk about much, or enough. I think it is a dialogue is important to be had, this sense of what's happening to my body as I age, as we age.

**JF:** Yes, mortality is around the corner. Also, the threat of losing life really changes the way we think about life. If nobody died, it would just be very different. First of all, it would get really boring. My new ideas are going to run out. It's probably better to replace me with something new and fresh.

But, on the other hand, there are real, disturbing things happening to plants and animals in the world now, and those are environmental concerns. And I think there is guilt that a lot of people in my generation feel for having ruined the earth for the next generation. That's a whole other topic though.

**BC:** Right, but it points to that, part of the Harvest in this show includes that dialogue. It's about everything we've been talking about, but also the environment itself and the legacy that the next generation will have.

**JF:** Yes. A lot of the problems that my fruits have are problems of mutation. For example, I have conjoined tomatoes. They're very nice looking, but they're still a little weird. And there is the broccoli that looks like lungs. I actually looked at smokers' lungs, so they have that coloration, the dark coloration within. There is some environmental stuff in there.

**BC:** Well, it's a beautiful show and it's great talking to you about this because there's so many levels to be looking at this on, and at the same time it's also the title of the show, right? This is bounty, this is abundance, is another read on this. Is that correct?

**JF:** Sure. Also, I shouldn't forget to mention that I try to put humor into it. I try to do all this stuff with a light touch. And the most frequent comment that I got at the opening was actually "oh it's so funny." But of course, if you ask any comedian they're funny about serious stuff. So yeah, I try to use humor to get at truth in my work.

**BC:** I think it succeeds very well in the show.