

Artist Biography

Susan Byrnes is a visual artist whose work encompasses sculpture, photography, multimedia installation, radio broadcasts, writing, and curatorial projects. Her art has been exhibited in galleries and museums throughout the US, including the Sculpture Center in Cleveland, the Dayton Art Institute, the Weston Gallery in Cincinnati, Antioch College in Yellow Springs, Woman Made Gallery in Chicago, the Massillon Museum in Massillon, OH, the University of Minnesota's Nash Gallery in Minneapolis, 516 Arts in Albuquerque, and the Amarillo Museum of Art in Texas. Susan is the recipient of a Yeck Fellowship from the Dayton Art Institute and awards from the City of Cincinnati, Cincinnati Summerfair, and the Montgomery County Arts and Culture District. She has served as a teaching artist in residence for the Ohio Arts Council for K-12 students and Creative Aging adult initiatives. She has written art reviews for the Cincinnati online arts journal AEQAI and published features with the national publications *Acrylic Artist* and the *Artist's Magazine*. Currently she produces arts and culture stories for radio, including the recent series "Studio Visit", broadcast on WYSO in Yellow Springs, OH. She earned an MFA in sculpture from Eastern Michigan University and a BFA in photography from Syracuse University. Susan resides in Cincinnati, OH.



Susan Byrnes (contributed)

GALLERY GUIDE

SUSAN BYRNES: *LIGHTNESS AND WEIGHT*

January 17 – April 12, 2025

THE DR. ROBERT L. BRANDT, JR. GALLERY
THE IRA H. & SUSAN P. THOMSEN FAMILY GALLERY

The Contemporary Dayton is proud to present new work by Susan Byrnes, a sculptor and audio producer who most often uses her work to challenge and reflect on the burdens of sexism and the resilience of the female body. Drawing in part from the seemingly disparate cultural touchstones of Milan Kundera's novel "The Unbearable Lightness of Being" and the MGM musical, "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers," the exhibition explores themes of individual freedom versus societal expectations, the weight of choices, and the search for meaning in relationship.

Lightness and Weight

Lightness and Weight, Susan Byrnes' thoughtfully focused exhibition at The Contemporary Dayton, owes a measure of its power to the animating tension between control and discovery, a dynamic that runs high in her work and is due, in part, to her choice of media. The risks inherent to their production result in opportunities for the play of chance and invention.

Byrnes' love of material, of texture and tactility, her deep engagement with process, and therefore with time, is evidenced throughout *Lightness and Weight*, examples of which include: castings of clay, iron, and glass; strands of dolls' hair woven along a grid of nails; textiles. Whether two or three dimensional, her work is palpable to the eye.

Several paradoxes govern Byrnes' art, which is both strikingly direct and intimately allusive. In *Lightness and Weight*, Byrnes' subject is what she's described as women's "shared burden of sexism," and the intervals of "pleasure, wonder, and joy" in which they find release. Both Milan Kundera (whose novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, inspired the title of the exhibition) and

Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence provide Byrnes with a lens to think through the paradoxes of life and meaning.

Consider, for example, *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, in which Byrnes references the 1954 film of the same name while alluding to its source, the ancient world's legend of the rape of the Sabine women by the men of Rome. The film recontextualizes the legend, while staying true to its subject, the coercion of women through force. In the western musical film, townswomen are kidnapped by seven backwoods brothers to become their brides and helpmeets. Unlike the women of the legend, the women of the film reach a point of happy acquiescence to their condition.

Seven Brides has three components, exclusive of the whole. From the ceiling, dozens of white vintage petticoats depend in an airy cluster that recalls a chandelier. Seen from beneath, their diaphanous whorls and folds are suggestive of amoebas—sea anemones—female genitalia—the strange innards of an orchid and, more viably, the bodies that once inhabited and now haunt them.

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The allusions are manifold, fleet yet condensed, a prevailing feature of Byrnes' art, one that poetry shares.

In contrast to the lightness of the petticoats, slabs of marble and exquisitely delineated cast iron cow bones, including a winged pelvis, are loosely gathered on the floor. The sound of crows, raucous and loud, fills the space like some immovable object, impossible to get past.

The impression gained is of a kind of self-sufficiency. Each element sufficient unto itself, whole as an egg and, while salient, indivisible from the others. This effect is not limited to Seven Brides. Much of the artist's work projects an aura of completeness or discretion, intensifying its energies rather than snuffing them out. The poet Louise Glück has a phrase for this: *Restraint so passionate implies possession*.

Two works in the exhibition, *Volcano* and *Red Hoodie*, offer particularly resonant illustrations of this quality. The latter is an imposing cast iron bust of the familiar garment. Its contours are those of an average woman's body, hips and breasts defined though not exaggerated. The bust's shoulders are squared, the hood upright, outlining a deep, pitch-black hollow instead of a face. As if to bare a sinewy arm, the hoodie is sleeveless, its front-facing pockets and leather and iron shoulder clasps—replicas of the Roman army's—suggest a tactical vest. Both inspired and thoughtful, such details enrich the whole without distracting from its immediacy.

Volcano is what it says it is—and more: a cast iron petticoat, its full skirt narrowing into a flat waistband. Pleats in the skirt bring to mind the runnels of lava produced by an active volcano. Where a body would be expected, real smoke wafts. A video of smoke and recorded sounds complete the installation. In *Volcano*, as well as *Red Hoodie*, we are confronted with an absence, to which the force of their material bearing adds dimension. Both works share an economy of expression, an unassailable unity or cohesion, no

matter their constituent parts. And, like other works in the exhibition, they also possess an elevating wit.

In *Crowns*, the wit is joined by lyricism. Six glass crowns of varying dimension make up the whole. The crowns are a watery fluorescent pink, their slightly wobbly, slightly blunted spikes recall icicles or birthday candles in the process of melting. Light passes through them, changing their aspect. Their weight is surprising ("Heavy is the head.."). *Crowns* has an appealing directness, a simplicity uncompromised by its inherent allusiveness.

This is also true of *Fenêtres du Ciel (Sky Windows)*: four glass kites bearing the impressions natural to thin paper. The freedom a kite represents is paradoxical: no matter the heights reached or how 'jubilant' its motions seem, a kite's 'freedom' is limited by wind and the hand holding the string. Yet the exhilaration of sudden release from gravity, from what weighs us down, is felt by the person flying the kite. Whether glass is a clarifying or complicating medium—or both—hangs in the air.

Sky Windows and *Crowns*, in their strange beauty and directness, speak to Byrne's preoccupation with the reciprocities between that which burdens and that which frees. Here, it's important to emphasize that Byrne's art does not arise from conclusions she's reached, nor does it function as illustrations of her thinking.

Process is a means for discovery, valued not only for the sake of what it produces. This is what gives Byrnes' art its energy and freshness, its level of mystery. Byrnes, like the poet, John Keats, is *capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact & reason*. Keats was criticizing the didacticism that marred the poetry of certain writers of his time.

The installation, *Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board*, is the most ambitious and inventive of the works exhibited. It features a cast iron business suit that belonged to the artist, the richly impressed surface of which reveals the folds and buttons, textures and idiosyncratic components of a real garment. Laid out horizontally, as if it were a corpse or ready for

ironing, the suit appears to levitate above a wooden plinth. The sounds of low chanting become audible as a viewer draws close to it.

The title of the work references a game popular with girls at slumber parties. One girl stretches out on the floor while others place two fingers of each hand under her body in an attempt to lift it, all the while chanting, *Light as a feather, stiff as a board*. The game is centuries old. The earliest description of it appears in a diary entry from 1665, the era of the Bubonic Plague (proof, maybe, that black humor is housed in our DNA, ready for when we find ourselves *in extremis*). As with other works in the exhibition, the connotations evoked here are many, the work itself unfussy. *Light as a Feather, Stiff as a Board*, is a marvel of construction and imagination. It contributes to the exhibition's cohesion insofar as it references clothes, which figure prominently throughout. For Byrnes, as for Louise Bourgeois—an important influence—clothes symbolize the feminine. In *Light as a Feather and For Ruth*, another work in the exhibition, they are intensely personal. The latter work features a cast iron collar reminiscent of the kind Ruth Bader Ginsburg wore draped around her court robes, and also of the sort of random item one might find in an antique store. The Ruth of the title owned a famous antique shop on Route 66. She became a friend of Byrnes' who frequented her shop while participating in iron pours in the West.

Byrnes is interested in the idea of recurrence; in particular, those aspects of female experience that repeat over time, appearing again and again but within new contexts. According to Nietzsche's Doctrine of Eternal Recurrence, we are fated for all eternity to repeat each second of our lives exactly as we've lived them. Whether possession of this knowledge is a terrible burden or an opportunity for what Nietzsche calls *the deepest affirmation of life*, freeing us from doubt and guilt, is a question that runs beneath the surface of *Lightness and Weight*. In his novel, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera rejects this notion: life doesn't last. We are borne into life once and only once. Given its

ephemeral nature, the beauty of life, its joys and pain are as precious as they are insufferable, whether we know their meaning or not. Byrnes is able to keep both notions alive in her art, favoring continuity over conclusion.

It's been said that the right hand must never know what the left hand is doing. Artists and writers interpret the adage as a reminder of the importance of the unconscious to producing work that is imaginative, free of the tyranny of reason and received opinion. Poet Robert Frost put it this way: *No surprise for the writer, no surprise for the reader*. The processes Byrnes has engaged with to create the works in the exhibition are inherently immersive. The bodily strength and stamina they require distract the conscious mind. They leave a space for new ideas and connections to evolve, an opening out of which the artist begins to hear what the thing she's making is trying to tell her.

In *Lightness and Weight*, Byrnes has found equivalents for the vision within, especially as it is formed out of lived experience, whether personal or communal; actual or imagined. Her work projects a singular, calm authority that consolidates its intensities.

Its impact occurs both before and long after arrival, when the viewer is confronted by art as vital as any strong emotion, and as elegant as a particularly brilliant solution in math.

JoEllen Kwiatek is a poet and former Associate Professor in the English and Creative Writing Department at SUNY Oswego. Her first book, *Eleven Days Before Spring*, was published by Harper Collins. Her second book, *Study for Necessity*, won the University of Iowa's Poetry Prize. Among Kwiatek's awards are a Pushcart Prize and a Constance Saltonstall Grant. Her poems have appeared in such places as *The Antioch Review*, *The Indiana Review*, and *The American Poetry Review*, where in 2000 she was the featured poet, appearing on its cover. Kwiatek has a Bachelor of Arts in Creative Writing from Syracuse University, and a Masters from The Writing Seminars at Johns Hopkins.