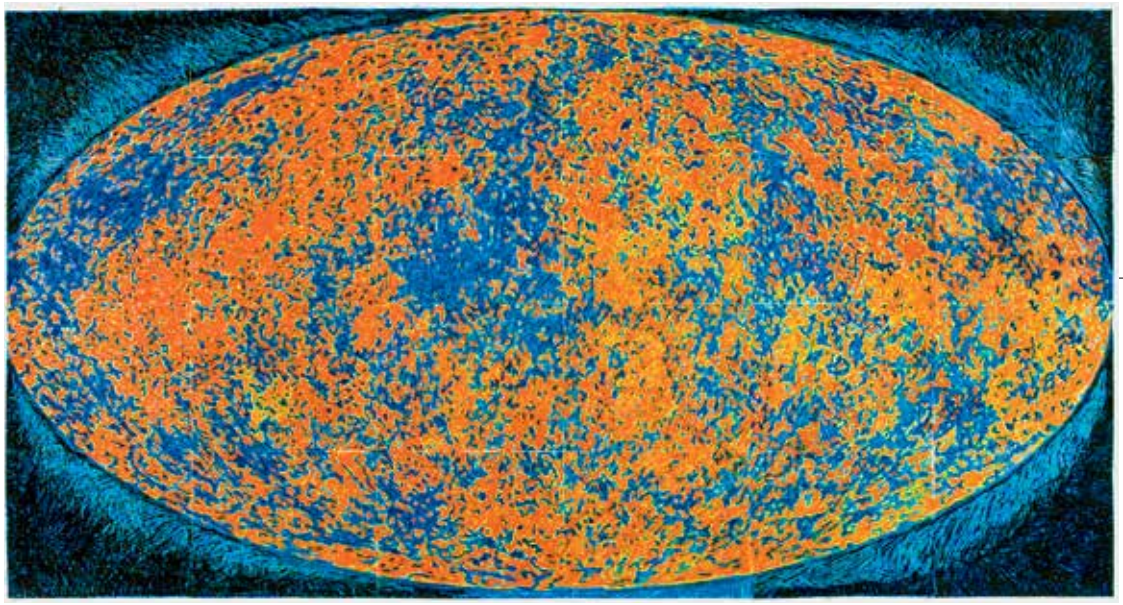
Montage

Art, books, diverse creations



Beauty from Disarray

Judith Brodsky's work in art and advocacy

by VIOLET BARON

Judith Brodsky with works in her current series, The Twenty Most Important Scientific Questions of the 21st Century: (from top) *Could Science Prove There's a God?* (2014); *How Many Body Parts Can Be Replaced (Male)?* (2013); *How Many Body Parts Can Be Replaced (Female)?* (2013); and (opposite) *How Does the Brain Work?* (2013)

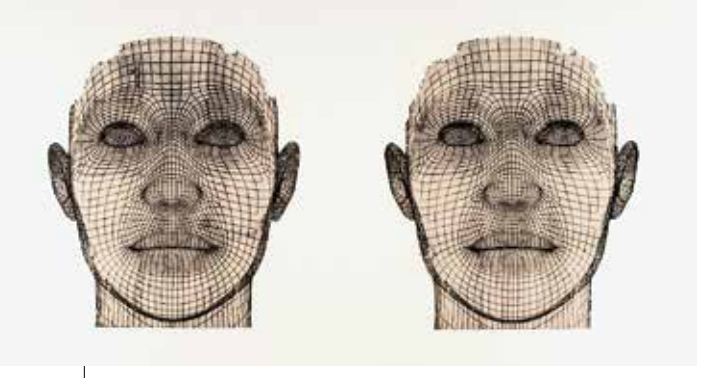
JUDITH BRODSKY'S ENTRY into the art world began with a hand-drawn circle. Then a young wife and mother just years out of Radcliffe, Brodsky '54 traced a radius around a map of her home in Princeton, New Jersey, and considered how far away she could go to study art and still be home by the time her children returned from school. Now an accomplished printmaker and Distinguished Professor emerita of the visual arts department at Rutgers, Brodsky recalls that at college, "There were these pulls in different directions": students were encouraged to be scholars, but *The Radcliffe News* was filled with news of engagements and weddings. While pursuing her degree in the history of art, Brodsky herself was married by the end of her junior year.

By the early 1960s, she was itching to stage her first rebellion. The radius of her circle brought her to Temple University's Tyler School of Art, in Philadelphia, where she studied printmaking and began to identify male dominance in fine art. When women's movements rose to challenge this status quo in the 1970s, Brodsky helped launch FOCUS, a festival celebrating women artists that drew feminist art pioneer Judy Chicago and abstract expressionist Lee Krasner, among others. The program's success became evident from the pushback: "We got sued," Brodsky recalls, "by a male artist who said he couldn't get a show during that period because the galleries were only showing women."

She kept up this dedication to outsider

All images courtesy of Judith Brodsky; portait by Andrea Warriner

The series The Meadowlands Strike Back includes: (clockwise from top) *The Animals Run Away* (1990); *Iron Horses* (1988); and *Garbage Bag Mountain* (1990)



artists: in 1986, she founded the printmaking center at Rutgers that now bears her name, The Brodsky Center for Innovative Editions. The center provides studio space and materials for women artists, artists of color, and gay and lesbian artists, whose work might be too politically charged for museum curators. It has also helped place their art in collections throughout the United States and around the world. The genius was in the medium: "It was easier for an institution to buy a print," she explains, "than to risk spending a lot of money to buy a painting or sculpture."

Brodsky has also earned acclaim for her art: provocative print installations, etchings, and collaged images. Her own attraction to printmaking comes from its physicality, she says. The sketching, etching, and transferral involved in the medium constitute a whole-body procedure that "becomes almost meditative" and provides a deep connection to her work: "There's no part of you that's not involved in the process." More than 100 museums and companies now house her pieces in their permanent collections, including the Library of Congress, London's Victoria and Albert Museum, Berlin's Stadtmuseum, and the Fogg Museum at Harvard.

Some of her projects skew more personal, addressing her own memories as they align with historical themes. One major series, Memoir of an Assimilated Family (2003), consists of black-and-white photographs, each enlarged and framed by a black background. She culled these images from her personal archives; the selections show several generations of a Jewish-American family moving through a changing world. Beneath the sometimes somber, sometimes joyful images is stark text that explains what Brodsky knows about the subjects, and the particular memories they evoke.

In other series, Brodsky offers a playful look at relationships between humans and nature. The Meadowlands Strike Back, from 1996, was conceived as a reaction to her workday commute on the New Jersey Turnpike. "As I was driving up and down the Turnpike," she writes in a statement accompanying an exhibition at the Rhode Island School of Design, "the imagery of the refineries, the garbage mountains, and the ports impinged on my consciousness." One image, "The Animals Run Away," is a deep red hell-scape of burning pines, with oil derricks rising to the top of the frame while bear-like creatures flee at bottom. "Garbage Mountain" shows a rising pile of fly-covered bags, with interlaid images of dead fish saturating the print's lower half in Technicolor. "It's one of my ways of making people aware of what the world is like around them," she says of her habit of rendering apocalypse in cheery hues. She likens her style to literary satire, forcing commentary by drawing beauty from disarray.

Elsewhere, Brodsky blends popular science with philosophy. Her latest series, The Twenty Most Important Scientific Questions of the 21st Century, is a science fiction-like response to a *New York Times* list from 2003; it offers her take on what these questions, and their answers, could look like. One work, "Why Do We Sleep?" is an enlarged sepia image of wide-open eyes, surrounded by a neat halo of bulbs as if in an old diagram. The eyes themselves seem distressed by the question, as if it is what keeps them awake. Another, "How Many Body Parts Can Be Replaced? (Male)" centers on a Vitruvian Man-like figure, with skeletal parts and human organs orbiting him; an almost whimsical pattern of eyes and ears frames the piece. This neat menu of parts mocks the question, as if invasive surgery could be ordered from a buffet. By carrying them to their absurd extremes, Brodsky makes the questions themselves a target for her cynicism, and forces this century's

thinkers to consider what they are really asking. "If you replace all the body parts," she says, "is it really science at the bottom of this? Or is it the desire never to die?"

Balancing her competing commitments as artist, curator, and advocate has not always been easy. During her lengthy career, Brodsky has periodically paused to consider her direction and legacy: "I thought, when I'm on my deathbed, do I want to look back and think about what I've done as an administrator, or do I want to have made more artwork?" But since that first, private rebellion, when a younger Brodsky sought to expand her creative horizons, her radius has expanded outward—drawing others, who were previously excluded, into the circle of accepted art.

Supporting Cast

The "mystery" of composing movie music

by SOPHIA NGUYEN

Nicholas Britell '03 fell in love with music through the movies. *Chariots of Fire* made him want to study classical piano, and as a 12-year-old, he took obsessive notes on James Horner's score for the 1992 hacker film *Sneakers*. If, like Horner's shimmer of flutes and choir, his own work as a film composer doesn't immediately jump out at the average viewer, it's because Britell considers his role a supportive one, aimed at realizing another artist's vision.

Understatement can be especially key with documentary scores, he says Overly explicit music can hinder the narrative: "You have to be very careful, because it can be very easy to veer into melodrama." Recruited to work on *The Seventh Fire*, a documentary on Native American gang life, by friend and collaborator Jack Riccobono '03, Britell began

OPEN BOOK

Making a Beeline

Thomas D. Seeley, Ph.D. '78, studies swarm intelligence, notably in the complex lives of honeybees. *Apis mellifera* arrived on this continent with European settlers, perhaps in the 1620s. A long line of scientists has engaged with the species, including Seeley, of Cornell, whose *Honeybee Democracy* was sampled here in 2011. A delightful new book, *Following the Wild Bees: The Craft and Science of Bee Hunting* (Princeton, $22.95), is, as the subtitle suggests, a personal guide to finding wild hives (as opposed to the industry of keeping colonies of bees in hives). With enriching nods to such Harvardian predecessors as Henry David Thoreau and George Harold Edgell (*The Bee Hunter*, 1949), Seeley's book is richly informed by both research and the author's sheer love for "the most intelligent insect in the world." Here's what you are in for, if you follow his directions during the autumn goldenrod bloom:

Generally speaking, the best times for bee hunting are when the bees are experiencing a definite honey flow, such as the milkweed flow or the goldenrod flow, for this means that it will not be hard to find bees on flowers. Bee hunting only works well, however, during *the start or the end of a honey flow*—that is, when nectar is available but is not super plentiful. The peak days of a honey flow are usually useless for a bee hunter because the rate at which a honeybee colony is taking in nectar has a strong effect on the motivation of its nectar foragers to recruit additional bees to their food sources…. This is true regardless of the source, be it a patch of flowers brimming with sweet nectar or a bee hunter's comb loaded with sugar syrup.

The bees' disinclination to bring nest mates to a comb filled with sugar syrup during the peak of a honey flow is a serious problem for the bee hunter. After all, once you have found bees on flowers, have caught a dozen or so bees in your bee box, have baited them with a comb filled with sugar syrup, and have released these bees to fly home [suitably marked with dots of paint!], what you desire most keenly to happen next is for some of your bees to reappear quickly at your comb. Even more, you want your baited bees to bring lots of their sisters to your comb, so that you will have plenty of bees to observe flying home from where you are launching your hunt [so the hunter can time their flights and mark their course].

If the honey flow is just starting up or is winding down, then the bees that you've trapped in your bee box were probably experiencing only mediocre foraging success before you captured them. If so, then they are likely to be sufficiently impressed with your sugar syrup to want to return for more and to share with their nest mates the news of your wonderful free lunch. Indeed, if the bees are receiving only vanishingly small nectar rewards from the flowers, and the weather is delightful, then you could soon have dozens of bees mobbing your comb.

Autumn harvest: a honeybee on *Solidago gigantea* (goldenrod)

Photograph by Helga R. Heilmann