

Step Right Up! 'Coney Island: Visions Of An American Dreamland' At Wadsworth Atheneum

By James D. Balestrieri

HARTFORD, CONN. — Carnival: from the Italian *carne*, signifying meat, and *levare*, a verb meaning “to lift.” In the Catholic year, the period known as Lent. Meat-free, a period of self-denial, of sins and excesses given up and given over in favor of spiritual introspection. Strange, how carnival has come to signify its opposite.



Detached from Lent, traveling carnivals came and went, springing up for a few days at the edges of towns during the warmer months and then, just as swiftly, vanishing, leaving only their midsummer's night's dreams behind.

(Previous Page) "The Barnum & Bailey Greatest Show on Earth / The Great Coney Island Water Carnival / Remarkable Head-Foremost Dives from Enormous Heights into Shallow Depths of Water," Strobridge Lithographing Company, 1898, color lithograph poster, 387/8 by 28¾ inches. Cincinnati Art Museum.



(Left) "Astroland" by Frederick Brosen, 2008–13, watercolor over graphite on paper. Courtesy of Hirschl & Adler Modern, New York. —Joshua Nefsky photo; ©2013 Frederick Brosen/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York City



"Harlem Black Birds, Coney Island" by Edward J. Kelty, 1930, photograph. Collection of Ken Harck. ©Edward J. Kelty

But what if the carnival were permanent? What if carnival, with all its carnal delights and transformations of identity, its revealings and concealings, could be had at any time from spring to winter, for nothing more than the price of a ticket, or, as the barker cries, “One thin ticket!” You would need a permanent place, one with a large and growing population nearby, a hardworking multitude hungry for fresh air and escape. A strand along the ocean, somewhere near New York City, would be great. And it was.



“Coney Island Pier” by Daze, 1995, oil on canvas. Collection of the artist.

“Beach Scene” by Samuel S. Carr, circa 1879, oil on canvas. Smith College Museum of Art, Northampton, Mass., bequest of Annie Swan Coburn (Mrs Lewis Larned Coburn).



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— and continues to attract — artists of all stripes. The ways in which artists have seen Coney Island is the subject of a new and fascinating exhibition, “Coney Island: Visions of An American Dreamland” at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art.



(Right) "A Congress of Curious Peoples" by Marie Roberts, 2005, acrylic on unstretched canvas. Collection of Liz and Marc Hartzman.

The exhibition rounds out its celebration of the art of Coney Island with a host of artifacts: postcards, posters and illustrations from newspapers and magazines; photographs, film stills and schematic drawings of amusements; carnival games, carousel horses, tickets and other souvenirs — the ephemera of “America’s Playground.” Collectors should find interesting and useful perspective here, as the careful array suggests that focus and connoisseurship can be had in all kinds of subjects and at a wide variety of price points.

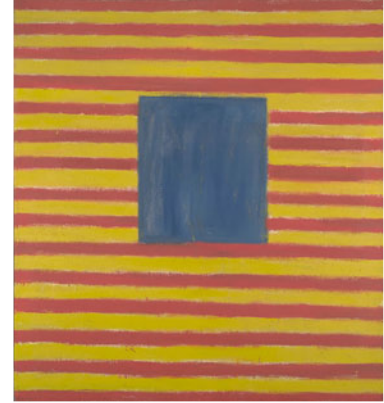


“Little Fugitive” by Morris Engel, 1953, production still. A Morris Engel Production.
—Joseph Burstyn/Photofest photo; ©Joseph Burstyn, Inc; ©Morris Engel



"Pip and Flip" by Reginald Marsh, 1932, tempera on paper mounted on canvas. Terra Foundation for American Art, Chicago, Daniel J. Terra Collection, 1999. ©2013 estate of Reginald Marsh/Art Students League, New York/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York City

Gambling wheel, 1900–20, wood, glass, metal. Collection of The New-York Historical Society, purchase, 1995.



"Coney Island" by Frank Stella, 1958, oil on canvas. Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, Conn., gift of Larom B. Munson, BA, 1951. ©2013 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS) New York City

The Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is at 600 Main Street. For further information, www.thewadsworth.org or 860-278-2670.