

C O N E Y I S L A N D

THE VOICE

Island Girl

She spent her childhood in a mythic world, where sideshow freaks were family guests.

Marie Roberts, 50, grew up in Coney Island surrounded by tales of armless women and endless conversations about magic potions. She has carved a career out of creating hundreds of hand-painted banners that celebrate Coney Island, whose beaches officially opened for the season on Thursday.

STILL live in the same house in Coney Island in which I grew up. It hasn't been changed since 1920. The realtors like to call my neighborhood Midwood because it sounds better for sales, but according to my family it's part of Gravesend and Coney.

In the 1920's a lot of sideshow freaks stayed in my neighborhood. They were dead by the time I was born, but I grew up with all these ghosts. My family would tell me stories: the Baron Paucci, billed as the world's smallest perfect man, could have stayed in the bedroom, or Violetta, the woman without arms and legs, could have stayed there.

I was tortured by all this when I was a kid. I wanted to be normal. I wanted normal parents. I didn't want parents and family who were always talking about the Bitter Wonder, a snake oil that Uncle Lester used to make. I didn't want to be baptized at St. Malachy's with the show people. I wanted to be baptized at the church around the corner like all the normal kids.

I went to college, so I'm not comfortable back home, but I'm not comfortable in academia, either. I remember too much of my roots. Nobody was really interested in sideshows and amusement parks by the 60's and 70's. When I was in college, my friends couldn't have cared less.

In the early days of Coney Island, there were three major amusement parks. One was Steeplechase, one was Luna Park, and the third, the most moralistic, was Dreamland with its Creation exhibit, and one on Heaven and Hell. Dreamland opened in 1904 and burnt to the ground the day before opening day of 1911.

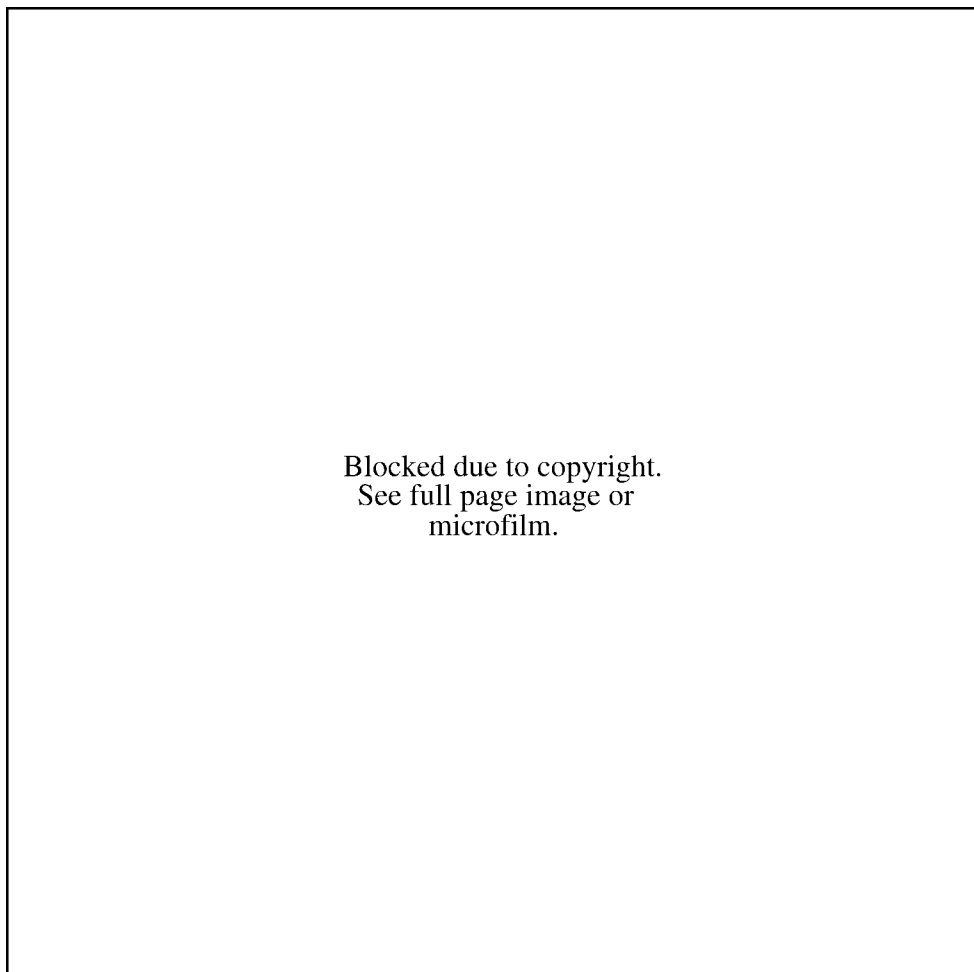
My grandfather was the fire battalion chief for the Coney Island district, so my father and his brothers saw it happen. It was a mythic event. The next day the impresario Sam Gumpertz regrouped the members of the Dreamland sideshow as the Dreamland freaks.

Where the Cyclone is now, that's where the Dreamland freaks became the Dreamland Circus Sideshow. It was the mother of all sideshows, and for years, my Uncle Lester was its talker, the guy who would stand out on the stage and say, "Ladies and gentlemen, come on in, we brought you all these wonders and curiosities." Lester could talk your ear off. I clocked him at 13 hours once when he was in his 80's.

I was reading The Times one day in 1991 and I saw this article about a guy who was running a freak show in Coney, so I went down to meet him. His name was Dick Zigun. He had come to Coney Island in the 80's, fallen in love with the place and decided to do theater there. He started Coney Island U.S.A., a nonprofit arts organization that's the umbrella for Sideshows by the Seashore, the Mermaid Parade and the Coney Island Museum.

Dick was the first fellow who understood

As told to Kate Jacobs



Dean Cox for The New York Times

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Marie Roberts

the two halves of my life. I have a picture of a old-time Sideshow actor named Lionel, a man who looks like a lion. What made me fall in love with Dick's Coney Island revival operation was when he looked at that pic-

ture and said, "It's great to know that somebody like Lionel could put on a silly hat and go have a good time like everyone else."

Dick mentioned he needed banners for the sideshow, and I don't know what put it in my head, but I said, "Why don't you let me do it?" So I got a whole bunch of my students at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, where I teach art, and we painted 25 banners.

I was an oil painter, I did watercolors, I studied fresco, but I had never painted on acrylic. But Dick wanted these painted on cotton, the way the old-timey ones were, and he wanted them to be able to withstand the elements. So I got an 80-year-old guy in Red Hook to sew them for me. By the seat of our pants my students and I figured out how to paint them, and I fell in love with it. I've done hundreds of banners at this point.

Pain, the person who pounds nails into his nose and sits on a bed of nails, has become a kind of feminist icon for me. I also like the snake lady. Painting actual people can get dicey. The biggest challenge is painting tattooed people; they're very picky about how their tattoos look. Last summer, when we put up a banner of the Amazing Blazing Tyler Fyre, I decided to make him look like a

Southern gentleman. I painted him wearing a big straw hat with a mint julep in his hand and a pitcher of ice, blowing fire. Tyler looked at the final painting that I'd worked so hard on and said, "I don't think my arm looks like that."

BUT the people who come visit Coney Island love the banners. Besides, how many people get this kind of audience for their work? The Siren Festival, for example, is mobbed with people, mostly people who like rock. I don't have good ears, so I couldn't tell you about the music, but for me, the whole thing is like being Michelangelo. I've got 24 feet of painting at one place, I've got 28 feet on West 10th Street, I've got 60 feet at the Sideshow. It's like my own personal chapel.

The 20-somethings who come to Coney Island expect that I'm their age. They meet me and say, "You're Marie Roberts?" They're surprised to find out that I'm 50. But they say painting is an old person's art, and I've always believed that. On his deathbed, Hokusai, who did the famous Japanese painting of the wave, said: "If only I had 10 more years. I'm just beginning to learn how to see." That's how I feel.