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## Bettina Captures Birth, Death and the Infinite at Ruth Arts in Milwaukee

An expansive and evolving exhibition of the late New York artist's questing catalog.

Fire, resurrection and the infinite. These are the propellants that fueled the artistic life of Bettina Grossman, known simply as Bettina.

BY RAFAEL FRANCISCO SALAS |  
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"Original Order Order Original: The Art and Archives of Bettina" launches the Ruth Foundation for the Arts' second season of programming in Milwaukee. Ruth Arts and the Rivers Institute for Contemporary Art & Thought, a Ruth Arts grant awardee, have collaborated to curate an expansive and evolving exhibition of Bettina's questing catalog.

In 1966, Bettina's Brooklyn studio caught fire, destroying her entire oeuvre of painting, sculpture, photography and textile design. It was a traumatic experience for the artist, but one that compelled her into another expansively productive career. At times it seems as if Bettina was trying to outrun the fate of the fire itself, staying in front of her painful experience, frantically making art to keep destruction at bay.

The term "original order" refers to an archival practice where records and objects are maintained in their original arrangement, preserving information and narrative context around them.

The inverse of the title, "order original," seems to suggest a cyclical practice, an endless loop of making and meaning. The exhibition, which includes at least 250 works, begins from the first objects Bettina made after the fire—eggs.

For the artist, these shapes contain everything: birth, life and the infinite encapsulated.

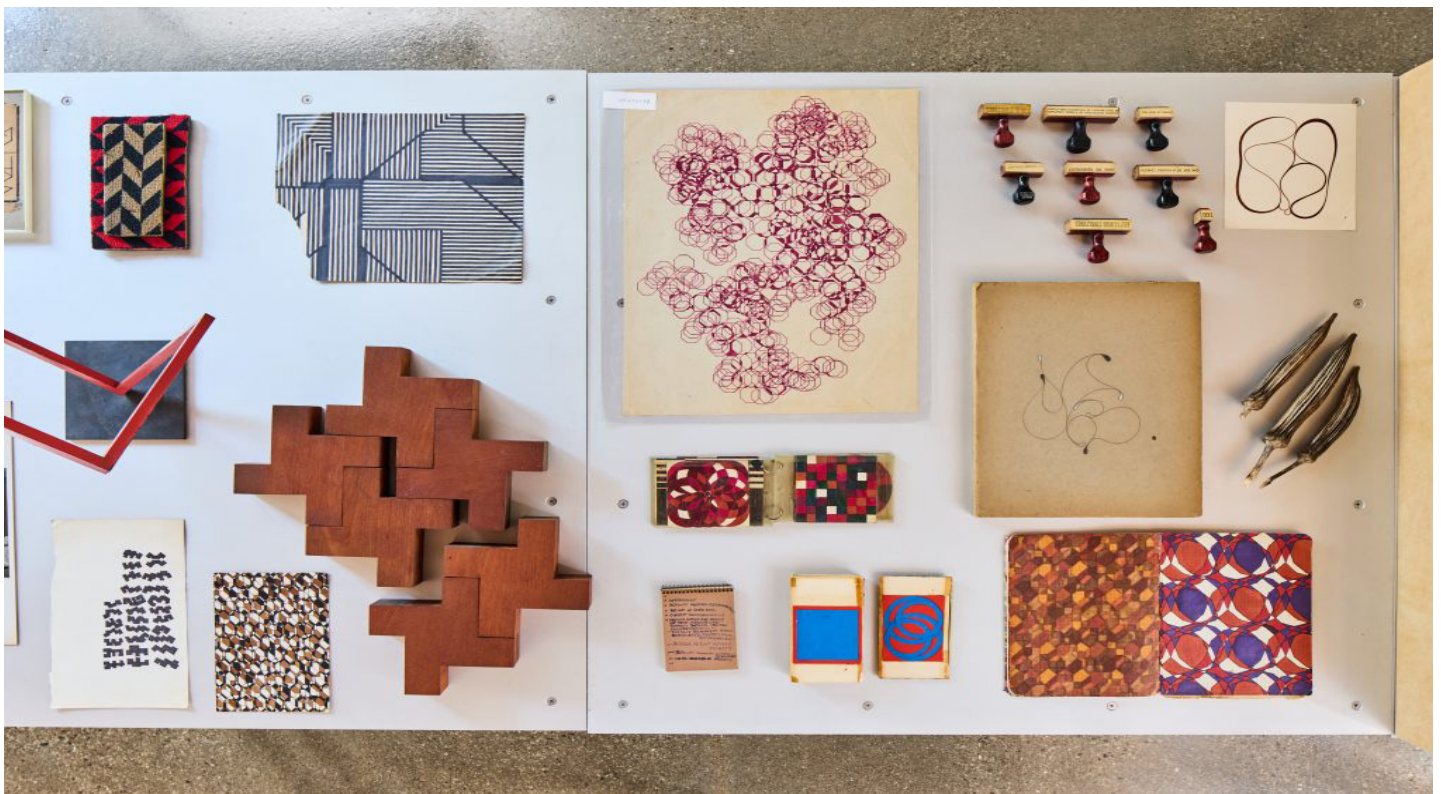


*Installation view of "Original Order Order Original: The Art and Archives of Bettina," at Ruth Arts, 2025/Photo: Alex Marks*

A table that runs the length of the gallery holds, among a wealth of drawings, found objects, photos, notebooks and other ephemera, black and white eggs carved in marble. They are humble in scale, and hold an Op art effect as black and white bounce back and forth.

From this origin, the long table offers a palimpsest of indexical experimentation and creation. Notebooks folded into vertical accumulations resemble compressed ziggurats. Some of the other objects that emerge from this collection are geometric drawings of leaves, dried okra pods, notebooks with bullet points that state, in all caps, "Horror beyond human dignity," "Belief in God's will," "Inalienable rights." Organization and the reorganization of objects create juxtapositions and iterative conversations that were part of the artist's process.

In 1972, Bettina moved to an apartment in the iconic Chelsea Hotel in Manhattan, where she lived and worked for the next fifty years. At times the density of her artistic accumulations required her to sleep in the hallway.



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From her vantage point five floors up, the artist observed and documented life on the street. Photos, drawings and video depict the world from above. Bettina categorized what she saw into "red, rain, readers, bicycles," and so on.

The artist's work vacillated endlessly between mediums. The exhibition offers drawings, prints, paintings, video, sculpture, found objects, writing and textiles, and probably other approaches that I missed. Though maximalist in many ways, Bettina's compositions often echo minimalist traditions.



The viewer can see the artist move quickly from a black-and-white composition of curved shapes to a corresponding one using rectilinear forms, or a red-colored gradient pattern moving from angular and dynamic to rigid and contained. This pushing and pulling of small changes demonstrates the accumulation of endless decisions being pushed incrementally, but not to an end point. The artist stated, "I can see that it would go on forever, and therefore it wasn't necessary to arrive at any conclusions... I could see that it would go on to infinity...."

In consideration of the vast catalogue of Bettina's output, the Rivers Institute and Ruth Arts states that the exhibition will evolve, with new works replacing current installations, which is also in keeping with Bettina's process.

The Rivers Institute says that they are "predicated upon and consigned to displacement and... diasporic living." The artwork and biography of Bettina reflect such a lived experience in a questing, boundlessly imaginative way.

"Original Order Order Original: The Art and Archives of Bettina" is on view at Ruth Arts, 325 West Florida Street, Milwaukee, through April 3.



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