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Media Preview: Thursday, Jan. 29, 2015; 10 a.m. – 1 p.m.

**AMERICA’S OLDEST PUBLIC ART MUSEUM TO PRESENT FIRST
EXHIBITION EXPLORING CONEY ISLAND THROUGH VISUAL ART**
*“Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008,” Inaugurates
Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art’s New Special Exhibition Galleries*

“Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861–2008”—the first major exhibition to use visual art as a lens to explore the lure that Coney Island exerted on American culture over a period of 150 years—opens Jan. 31, 2015, and runs through May 31, 2015, at the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art in Hartford, Conn. The exhibition will be the inaugural presentation in the museum’s newly expanded and renovated special exhibition galleries.

“Coney Island” will feature more than 140 objects, comprised of both celebrated icons of American art and rarely-shown works from both public and private collections, including paintings, drawings, photographs, prints, posters, architectural artifacts and carousel animals. Ephemera, sound recordings and film clips will immerse visitors in the popular culture of Coney Island. Dr. Robin Jaffee Frank, Chief Curator and Kriebel Curator of American Paintings and Sculpture, is organizing the exhibition.

“‘Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland’ traces the rise, decline and struggle of Coney Island to be reborn, revealing how and why this place became part of Americans’ collective memory,” said Frank. “We hope, by examining the resort’s evocative past through the eyes of artists, the exhibition will contribute to reimagining Coney Island’s possible future.”

Coney Island’s fascinating history as a world-famous resort and a national cultural symbol was shaped by the times—and it helped to shape the times. Artists’ visions of Coney Island became a vehicle to imagine the future, to convey changing ideas about leisure, and to

explore the mixing of people from different racial, ethnic and class backgrounds, transcending social boundaries.

An extraordinary array of artists viewed Coney Island as a microcosm of the American experience, from its beginnings as a watering hole for the wealthy, through its transformation into an entertainment mecca for the masses to the closing of Astroland Amusement Park following decades of urban decline. From early depictions of “the people’s beach” by Impressionists William Merritt Chase and John Henry Twachtman, to modern and contemporary images by Diane Arbus, Walker Evans, Robert Frank, Red Grooms, Yasuo Kuniyoshi, Reginald Marsh, Joseph Stella, and George Tooker, “Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland” will investigate America’s playground as a place and an idea. The exhibition will bring to life the excitement of Coney Island, which occupies not only a strip of sand in Brooklyn but also a singular place in the American imagination.

The modern American mass-culture industry was born at Coney Island, and the constant novelty of the resort made it a seductively liberating subject for artists. What these artists saw from 1861 to 2008 at Coney Island and how they chose to portray it varied widely in style and mood over time, mirroring the aspirations and disappointments of the era and of the country. Taken together, these tableaux of wonder and menace, hope and despair, dreams and nightmares, become metaphors for the collective soul of a nation.

The exhibition’s section titles are taken from contemporary quotations that communicate changing popular perceptions—vividly conveyed by the artwork—about America’s Playground through the generations: “Down at Coney Isle,” 1861–1894; “The World’s Greatest Playground,” 1895–1929; “The Nickel Empire,” 1930–1939; “A Coney Island of the Mind,” 1940–1961; and “Requiem for a Dream,” 1962–2008.

“Coney Island” will be the first exhibition presented in the Wadsworth Atheneum’s newly refurbished galleries. The museum’s renovation project, which will be complete September 2015, is reclaiming nearly 16,000 square feet of space for the presentation of collections and special exhibitions. Several of these new galleries will open Jan. 31, 2015, with an innovative installation of nearly 100 pieces of modern and contemporary art—both audience favorites and new acquisitions.

“The Wadsworth Atheneum is honored that this epic exhibition about Coney Island will inaugurate our exquisitely refurbished special exhibition galleries,” said Susan L. Talbott,

Director and C.E.O. of the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art. “This exhibition commences another chapter in the museum’s legacy of presenting artistically and historically significant works of art to inspire our visitors.”

Media Preview

An exclusive preview of, “Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861 – 2008,” for members of the press will be offered Thursday, Jan. 29, 2015, from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. Members of the media wanting to attend the preview should contact Amanda Young.

Exhibition Programs

An array of educational, member and public programs about, and inspired by, the exhibition are planned. For details visit, <http://thewadsworth.org/coneyisland>.

Michael C. McMillen / MATRIX 171

The 171st installment of the Wadsworth Atheneum’s pioneering contemporary art exhibition series, “Michael C. McMillen / MATRIX 171: Side Show,” will compliment “Coney Island” through an installation of moving shadows, light, and wall projections that create an atmospheric setting for a collection of unusual curiosities and mysterious artifacts. More information is available at, <http://thewadsworth.org/matrix171>.

Collaborations

The Wadsworth Atheneum will collaborate with several other organizations in the Greater Hartford area and surrounding region to present auxiliary programming related to “Coney Island.” Satellite exhibitions being organized to compliment the exhibition are: “Sideshow,” Jan. 13 – March 20, at Edgewood Gallery, Yale University School of Art in New Haven, Conn.; “Skeeball,” Jan. 15 – May 31, at Real Art Ways in Hartford, Conn.; and “Coney Island: Side Show,” Jan. 23 – March 14, at Westport Arts Center in Westport, Conn. Additional programs will be presented in partnership with the Connecticut Historical Society, Connecticut Humanities, Hartford Public Library, Hartford History Center; Hartford Symphony Orchestra, Mark Twain House & Museum and New England Carousel Museum. Details about collaborations and related programs are available at, <http://thewadsworth.org/coneyisland>.

Publication

A fully-illustrated 304-page catalogue, co-published by Yale University Press, will include the first sustained visual analysis of great works of art about Coney Island by Frank, as well as essays by distinguished cultural historians, including Charles Musser, Professor of Film

Studies and Media Studies at Yale University; Josh Glick, Assistant Professor of English and Film Studies at Hendrix College, and Mellon Postdoctoral Associate in the Integrated Humanities at Yale University; and John Kasson, Professor of History and American Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. An excerpt by Charles Denson, Executive Director of the Coney Island History Project, will address the future of Coney Island. The catalogue will be sold for \$50 in The Museum Shop and online at, <http://wadsworthshop.org>.

National Tour

“Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861 – 2008” will tour to three additional venues: San Diego Museum of Art, San Diego, Calif., July 11, 2015 – Oct. 13, 2015; Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, N.Y., Nov. 20, 2015 – March 13, 2016; and McNay Art Museum, San Antonio, Texas, May 11, 2016 – Sept. 11, 2016.

Exhibition Credit

“Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861 – 2008” has been generously supported by the National Endowment for the Humanities: Celebrating 50 Years of Excellence, the Henry Luce Foundation, the Robert Lehman Foundation, Inc. and The Mr. and Mrs. Raymond Horowitz Foundation for the Arts, Inc. Additional support is provided by the National Endowment for the Arts, Bank of America, and the David T. Langrock Foundation. Support for the Wadsworth Atheneum is provided in part by the Greater Hartford Arts Council’s United Arts Campaign and the Department of Economic and Community Development, which also receives support from the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency.

About the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art

Founded in 1842, the Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art is the oldest public art museum in the United States. The museum’s nearly 50,000 works of art span 5,000 years, from Greek and Roman antiquities to the first museum collection of American contemporary art. The museum’s five connected buildings—representing architectural styles from Gothic Revival to modern International Style—are located at 600 Main Street in Hartford, Connecticut. Hours: Wed – Fri: 11 a.m. – 5 p.m.; Sat & Sun: 10 a.m. – 5 p.m.; First Thursdays: 11 a.m. – 8 p.m. Admission: \$5 – 10; discounts for members, students and seniors. Public phone: (860) 278-2670; website: <http://thewadsworth.org>.

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Note to editors: select high-resolution images are available for publicity of “Coney Island: Visions of an American Dreamland, 1861 – 2008.” Please email media@wadsworthatheneum.org for permission and files.