

# HCC ART GALLERIES



## HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Cort Hartle

Interviewee: Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz

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Cort Hartle (CH):

Well, first off, hi Wanda it's really nice to meet you and thank you so much for donating your work to the collection. It's a really great addition, we're really excited to have it. Okay, so I just have some questions for you. We're going to start just simply with what is your story of coming into the world of art?

Wanda Raimundi-Ortiz (WR):

Oh, how much time do you have? [laughter]

CH:

As much time as you want to take.

WR:

Gosh I've been making art - drawing for a long, long, long time. I think I started taking drawing and art seriously at around maybe 8 years old. And so that's 42 years I've been holding pencils. Coming into art, I think if there is a story to tell, it really is anchored in a couple of things. Now in our society we have real language around erasure and untold stories, and the stories of people of color kind of being modified or just ignored entirely, right? And somewhere in my 20s, I became very aware of the fact that—I mean, I was trained as an illustrator, trained to tell other people's stories visually—but I realized that I didn't really want to do that. I don't have the temperament to be told that my work needs to be changed. I just felt this nagging sense of, "I need to tell our stories," because no one else is going to tell our stories.

This is the late '90s, early 2000s, and you know, I was thinking a lot about the immediacy of my family, very much first, second wave of Puerto Ricans who arrived in the 1950s from Puerto Rico to here. Ours is one of those communities that never really mattered to anybody. We are not American enough and not foreign enough, and certainly too brown or just difficult to place, just not seen as valuable. And that kind of knowing that in my gut was really a driving force for me to make work simply so that my parents wouldn't be erased. What made me pursue my practice in a very concentrated way was... if somehow my name and my work is published in a book and my name is attached to a book that's in the Library of Congress, that means that we're here, you know? If you can find me, I've got a birth certificate, so you can find my parents.

That is how I kind of started taking art seriously and making it my mission to be seen and recognized. Not for me, but just to kind of cement my parents, who did not have access to school or reading, and were living very much an American tale, a Bronx tale, if you will, right? Very much an American tale, a Puerto Rican tale and as soon as they passed away, they would be over. They'd be just part of the faceless and nameless, and so that really is the impetus for why I've been making my work with this kind of determination for so long... All these amazing things are starting to really happen, and some big ballers are starting to pay attention. It's very nice, but the impetus hasn't changed. Just my game is getting better. [laughter]

CH:

Yeah, that's amazing. Thank you. Would you mind speaking on how you got from that decision to start taking your art seriously and working off that impetus to tell your stories, making sure that your parents weren't erased... would you mind talking a little bit on the process of getting from there to here?

WR:

I want to say something really campy like, "10% inspiration 90% perspiration..." But you know, I think really it's been a one foot in front of the other kind of a story. And I goof around when I say that I fell ass-backwards into this what I was doing. Like I said, I trained to be an illustrator. But then... it didn't feel right to me to have to take direction from somebody else or tell someone else's story when I've got this killer story right here, right? And in terms of pursuing my craft and pursuing my career, it just became increasingly obvious to me that I am not suited to do anything other

than this thing. I've tried every job in the world. I've tried to work in a real estate office and a bookkeeping department... That does not work. I worked in supermarkets, in retail... I was a cocktail waitress, a karaoke hostess... I've done all these other things. And [I realized] that this is not my life.

CH:

What does your artistic process look like?

WR:

So I think creatively, I usually like to modify or adapt what I'm making. I'll pick the medium that best fits or accurately conveys the message I'm trying to deliver, or create the sense that I'm trying to build... At [my exhibition with] HCC, I wanted the idea of coming into a grove or this sort of sanctuary, this sort of green, lush space with these weird tree things, right? And with the hair, and then the photos... the work is in conversation with each other. And so, in terms of my process... I'll have this idea, and I'll think about a project and how am I going to execute this project [or theme] ... For the last few years, I've been thinking a lot about sanctuary and safe space. And so, when I go into the studio, I may not always have a direction, but I'll have to keep my hands moving just because I've also noticed that when I'm making something, especially if it's labor intensive, it's got my hands busy, but my mind is free to wander and then I can keep building on that story. So now that I've been sitting on this idea of sanctuary and safe space, this is becoming this big blanket for where my work—all of these pieces—kind of fit. And so, one of the places where I feel safe is in nature, although it's not really because I'm allergic to everything. [laughter]

CH:

Safe, but also not.

WR:

But I guess more grounded and more connected to something that's more wholesome, that's not dangerous in the way that like... rebel flags are dangerous to me, right? But it's like I have this kind of blanket idea and then I'm building components around it. So, the pictures that were taken that were donated to HCC, for example, is me trying to draw, to build a bridge between how I made these works around like the sort of royalty and these big crowns that during the pandemic, the idea mutated in my head, right? I'm thinking, for example, if you need a story to anchor [these]... and this pandemic happens... Trumplandia happens... George Floyd

happens and I'm saying, "Oh my gosh, we're looking at a perfect storm of all these ideologies crashing into each other." Masking and anti-vax, Republican, Democratic, white supremacy versus Black Lives Matter, public health crisis versus don't tread on me, right? You're looking at all of these incredible sociological forces coming together and crashing into each other. And what happens when you push—when you force two things together? They're going to bulge. They're going to crash, they collapse, or they smash into each other, they distort, and they break. And at the time—like most people that had access to green space—I started gardening.

I thought that, you know, I have sun, soil, and rain in Florida, what could possibly go wrong? And you just throw something in the ground and watch it grow and you know, and I realize that I was also imposing my will against nature. Like there's a rhythm to how you plant when you plant and what you put in there and how close you put things together. And my own willful imposition onto nature didn't [work]... I thought I read enough to understand how I could grow things, and I did grow things, but also other things happened because I timed it wrong. I timed it when living creatures were laying their eggs... I have to wake up earlier, put bug spray on, go pick the bugs out of things by hand... There was mildew, the sun was too hot, and it was searing things... And all the things that could go wrong did go wrong. I found myself being schooled by nature and trying to tell me what to do. Me. That's me again. I couldn't. I didn't want to take criticism from an art director. I didn't want to take criticism from you, from nature. I'm way too headstrong, but that became a kind of humility, and it was humbling.

Being in the garden was really humbling and I took that into the studio with me. And I'm looking at what happens when people are forcing ideologies, things are going to crash into each other. It's not graceful, there's no ebb and flow. And so, I was like, well, I'm not going to be able to do public performance anymore, and I don't feel safe during public performance anymore for a myriad of reasons. So, what if the wigs that are so central to my performances start to mutate the way our societies are mutating, the way my gardens are mutating, the way our bodies are mutating around these diseases? What if they mutate as well? And so, I started to look at my failed garden and all the weird bulbous things that were growing... And I was looking at these textures and taking inspiration from that slick, viscous nature of things hatching or mold. Like I went to pick up a zucchini that I thought was whole, but it had been rotting from the inside because vine bores got through them. So, it looked beautiful, but when I picked it up, it just collapsed in my hand.

It was gelatinous and slick. And I was like “ohhh,” how quickly the veneer just collapsed because it was rotten from within. And so all of these things were really inspiring to me. So I decided to add the element of chance, [which] was something that I never really played with before. I mean, I guess I did in terms of the element of surprise or changing my performances which start out very structured but are open ended. So I don't know when they're going to end and I'm open and vulnerable to the whims of the public, and I have to be prepared to respond however that goes, which is what made me not want to perform anymore... If you look at my drawings, they're very controlled. There's a very, very, very, very disciplined, and very specific and controlled. There is very little element of chance there. Which speaks to my need for control and rigor and discipline. So I said, “well, if I go to make these wigs or these wig variations, I need an element that I can't control and how am I going to get these weird, bulbous things?”

And I said: “wait a minute, spray foam is unruly,” and so I created an understructure, an armature, and then went to spray foam knowing that I wasn't going to be able to control it and I was going to have to let my hand - I was going to have to let go and respond, you know, and creating what was happening in the garden. OK, I went to the garden yesterday. I left it looking like this yesterday. I don't know what I'm going to find tomorrow. I don't know if it's going to be there. But I have to be willing to surrender. And so, like the sculptures, the photos have all this back and forth... This dance between what you can control and what you can't control. Do I have the humility to approach this with kindness and as opposed to like and approach it with - like I have to be supple, right? And so that has been how I've treated my studio practice since the pandemic. It's been a really amazing learning experience because working project to project, to project is still very controlled. This is the idea. This is how I execute. This is the idea. This is how I execute, but that whole lesson of like well, you don't know what's going to happen. There's something that's exciting and there's an openness to that practice, which has actually made my creative studio garden really flourish, because I just start these experiments and have no idea what's going to happen as opposed to project, project, dictate, dictate and it becomes the work is the work is really open to possibility. Now I'm doing paper pulp and embedding hair beads into paper. It just cracked everything wide open. That was a very long answer.

CH:

No, thank you, that was amazing... I really like that idea of this kind of quote unquote "failed garden," providing fertile ground for a new process emerging and new ways of thinking about things.

WR:

I've been thinking about like, you know, like taking up space, holding space and like this is where I'm from and this is my place in the world, and so sometimes the themes will happen from a sentence or conversation. Something will click like where I'm from. This idea of sanctuary, like, I felt like I needed a place to hide, I needed a place to heal, I needed a place to, you know, convalesce. And from all the stuff, right, I mean. Just thinking about let's say Black Lives Matter. People went all up in Ohh all lives matter. Yes, yes, they do. If all lives really matter, we wouldn't have to say that Black Lives Matter.

If people really thought about what that phrase meant, right, it shouldn't be "all lives matter" and then dot dot dot, right and as a mother to a brown child. Like I'm light skinned, I'm not an "American," if you did a Google search "I want [to see what] an American woman looks like" it's not going to be my face, but my skin color tone buys me some latitude because white supremacy is how this country was built. That is a fact. It's not a woke thing. It's just that it is what it is. This is it and we are all "other" right? But when you become a parent and your child is much more brown and much more susceptible to the ills that are par for the course in a supremacist society, you all of a sudden feel that vulnerability. Like you feel it in a very, very, very real way for yourself, for your child. You feel way more vulnerable. And for myself and for my family, I wanted sanctuary.

You know, a mental sanctuary like worrying when you know when my child was going to experience their first, their first taste of injustice, which in our case is already at the age of 3...

And you're exhausted and you're exhausted and you're always, you know, and it is - there is a trauma to that to like watching a child cry because you washed their very, very curly hair and when it's dead, when it's wet it lays flat and as soon as it starts curling the child is holding their hair because they don't - they want their hair to be flat like they're like their counterparts in school, and they're crying, you know? So it's like all these small moments that... just a little. A little nick, a little cut a little. Nick, a little cut, but you see it and then so sanctuary was all I wanted for myself and for my

family. And what ended up happening is I'm building these imaginary worlds with or like highlighting these small moments of real deep joy, because those are - those are the moments that make the hard stuff worth it. Right? And in *Sanctuary* in creative, creating *Sanctuary* in the studio is when I decided that I didn't want to work out of trauma any longer where I wasn't going to create anymore. I wasn't going to cut anymore from the fabric of trauma and grief and sorrow of brown people. A, because I don't want to create trauma porn for somebody else. And also becomes burdensome, spiritually, emotionally, because you have to keep picking open scars and picking open scabs to kind of feel the pain again for some kind of authenticity. And I don't want to do that anymore. It's too exhausting. It's too taxing.

Especially if it's - if you're doing it and then you make the work and it's for. It's cathartic for a little while, but now if you're bleeding, if you're bleeding yourself to try to get more, get to the - get to the root of more authentic work. That's not OK. Joy is authentic as well, exactly.

CH:

I guess after a while it becomes like, who are you making it for? Who's the audience for this?

WR:

Yeah. Like what you guys want to see more black sorrow? More back in BIPOC Alana sorrow. No, no, no, no, no. I ain't doing...

CH:

I think that's a good kind of transition to the next question too, and I know that you answered this a little bit previously, but do you have any specific goals with your art and if so, what are they? And that could be generally or now based on what you've learned from making *Sanctuary*?

WR:

World domination.

CH:

Valid. [laughter]

WR:

No, no, absolutely not. What is the goal? I've always - my, my goal as an art maker was longevity in my craft. So that I could still be making stuff at 70 still be making stuff at 80 like I never wanted to be a hot shot because, what goes up must come down, right? And I've always wanted to, like, slow and steady, like the hair. You know what I mean? Slow and steady incline. I've always envisioned myself in this practice as a long-distance runner. I'm a sprinter in every other aspect of my life, but I've always envisioned this as a long game, and increasing my growth to match my maturity level as a person, you know? And so right now, I feel like I'm very much ready for the bigger shows because I think my head is squarely on my shoulders. My heart is deeply ingrained into my chest. My sense of self-worth and value is not anchored in fast flattery, but deep connections. And so those are my goals. And then ultimately like I - my desire versus my goals, those are my goals, longevity. It's always been that longevity in the game. Recognition. Recognition, sure, but respect from my peers is much more important. Respect is something that's very, very, very important to me. Longevity and respect. I've always wanted to be an artist's artist. Like if you know you know.

I don't have to be on the cover of Time magazine, but for those that know, know and that's meaningful to me. My desire, though, is to be able to sustain that longevity through my craft. That would be very nice. Because I teach and teaching is how I sustain my family, but more so it's how I extend my legacy, right? So, I treat my classes kind of like little babies. And so, I've seen my first wave of students that have graduated from undergrad to master to now teaching, and so now they're taking what I've taught them. And in conjunction, what they learned from other people and they're lengthening my line. So that's my mother, me, and now my students. So, my goals are personal. They're deeply personal, like I meant something to someone or a group of people, and I gave something. It's funny because of the story of my mom, who was not allowed to go to school as a girl and me chugging along and making it, you know, to like middle school, art high school, which is already out the box. Like just getting into art high school already knocks everything out the box, then going to college, then going to grad school, then becoming a professor. Like that? Just way eclipses everything, so if my mom gave me that one thing as a determination, I already am her wildest dream manifest.

Like, I'm going to let that hang in a minute like I'm. I'm my mother's wildest dream and I'm Puerto Ricans' wildest dream you mean manifest it. And so how dope is it to,



like, watch that dream manifest? And then then, now you're watching and multiply like the garden, like a wild peppermint like oregano. Like just growing wild like the seeds are kind of out there and watching them properly. I'm not even trying to propagate them like the teaching is the propagation but watching them grow and spin off on their own, I did something right. That's dope to me like, that's legacy, you know? Umm so I don't know if I answered your question.

CH:

Absolutely, yeah.

WR:

I think I did, but yeah. If it's goals, desires, goals, and desires like I think I'm, unless I'm like I'm watching and this whole idea of like fertile soil is like because I'm talking in language of planting and that's what it is. It very much feels like that.

CH:

Thank you so much. I just have a couple more questions and this one is kind of related to the previous one— how do you identify or interact with your local art scene?

WR:

I mean, there's not exactly a crazy robust art scene in Fairfax, but I also just got there. So, I'm kind of tilling the soil in Fairfax right now with my students. They're starting to get to know who's this crazy chick? Who's this crazy lady who's making us draw these weird boxes? And, you know, driving us crazy with these stupid measuring strategies. But that's just me - and it's rocky ground right now, but I know it's fertile. It's just stony, so I'm tilling it and pulling out the rocks and preparing the soil for what looks like it's going to be quite a lush garden and should make for a very beautiful harvest in a couple of years. So, I really need to be in the country house with some dirt.

But also like within my community of my peers, nationally, what I'm also looking at is my personal harvest. Right? Like years and years and years of working my creative ground and failing miserably in certain projects. Maybe having amazing artwork but not having the emotional sensibility or the emotional maturity and the ups and downs and you know you have lean times, you've got drought, emotional drought like all these other things like I'm looking at, how I've been a good gardener lately.

Right? Like I've been, I've been humbled to know, to learn that I didn't know what I didn't know and ask the questions and do the deep work to prepare. I have been feeding and fertilizing my soul, my community, and certainly doing a lot of weeding too, plucking and pulling and rooting out things that just don't belong anymore, that have not served me that have that have usurped energy and vital nutrients from my life. Now the fruits are bigger, right? The flowers are - and then I talk about vegetables because you can't. You can eat flowers, but I like things that I can eat.

But the products are bigger, they're more robust. There's a deeper, richer color, and the connections are more meaningful. And like a good gardener, you have to wake up early. You can't stay out late. So giving the work the time that it deserves and not treating it like an afterthought, which is something that I think is very not even like an afterthought. I'm not going to say that because that's diminishing the practice too much. It's more like, giving it the respect that it deserves, right the art deserves - that's respect and I know that socially, culturally. As a society, we do not give art the credit that it deserves. We look at it as a commodity and tradable commodities and you know ohh I want to collect this work. I want to see the show. I want to whatever we but we privilege it as a commodity, but don't give it the same respect that we would give an architect or give her a lawyer or a doctor or something. The artists thought of an afterthought. And I think the danger is in as a first Gen person of color, the danger is you want your child to succeed. And so we think of the starving artist archetype and we'll try to discourage our child - our children from doing that because we can't see a real way for that - our children to survive and trying to get under the hood - or those are the weeds, right? Get in there. Find the root, find the deep roots. You got to go real deep. Get that sucker and dig that thing out. And spray you got to spray.

CH:

So it doesn't come back.

WR:

You got to spray, you got to spray, you got to spray, you got to keep and if you see sprouts coming, you got to get that quick because you don't want it to damage your emotional garden, right? And your creative garden. And so this is something that I've been doing that a lot - I've been concentrating heavily on this portion because I've had to learn to prioritize my craft because I've worked so hard at it and it is now yielding fruit, real fruit that people can respect like I might love my tiny little orange,

but when you see like a big bushel, you're like, oh, man, that wow, that person really knows what they're doing. And so now I'm producing these giant amazing bushels of creative fruit, that is proof that I am doing what I'm supposed to be doing and I'm in the right place and I'm answering the call and I'm living in my truth and I'm giving it what it needs. I'm going to bed and waking up early. I'm drinking my water, minding my business. Yeah, but this is how I'm moving in my community. Like and I treat my community like fellow farmers, right? We're all like, you know, you go. You check out the crop.

CH:

Going to art openings is like going to the farmer's market. Like, what are you making? What did you use?

WR:

Doing the studio visits and talking with people who I really respect and admire. And here's an important thing. If there was anything I needed to say is envisioning myself as someone who stands lockstep with people that I admire like, yes, I should be in the room with so and so. And so, I'm glad I'm at this table. I'm like my mother would say. Ohh, I'm going to go see some and so are they going to see you? Well, yes, yes they are. I want to make sure you see me.

CH:

That's amazing. OK, so I don't want to take up too much more of your time, so I just have one more question and this is about the performance portraits about the work in the collection. Is there anything else that you want to say about that work in particular about process, challenges, et cetera?

WR:

So I had remembered that the earlier work is all these like Queens and such. Right. And then I make this big jump to making objects and then if I'm not making the objects I'm drawing, I'm doing small studies from the objects, but I noticed that people might not be able to make that leap with me. It's like, well, how did you get from performing at the Smithsonian holding people or walking through the streets in this, like, Afro Puerto Rican gown to making these weird hair tree things? And I realized that people weren't making the leap with me. Not that I wanted to handhold them, but I also needed to fill in a few pieces to kind of tether everything together. And I was like, well, what happened? We don't see the wigs mutating. We

only see them growing out and taking up space on their own so that I don't have to be in the room. But I wanted to—because I'm still a kid storyteller in my head, like I'm a narrative type of person and I love telling stories—and there's a piece missing in my mythology and in my own head. The wigs are mutating, while I'm wearing them, and I started drawing these prototypes of what that would look like.

And please know that I made these before I even knew what the hell Bridgerton was. Because people keep asking me, have you seen Bridgerton? Did you see the wigs? Those wigs are gorgeous and they're very beautiful. And I was not thinking about that. That's not what I was really thinking about, and it wasn't Bridgerton. I need to make sure that's on the record. I was not inspired by Bridgerton. I think the wig makers need to call me. I really think they need to call me so that they could make something cause my hands are limited and they clearly know what they're doing around wigs, but I've got some wacky ideas. Let's talk. So, help me fabricate please. But I wanted, I was like, well, what happens if like, OK, so you've got these jewels on these crowns. But what if the what if the jewels start growing on the skin? If you know, like Groot, you know, like I am Groot.

I love sci-fi. I really do and I love these sorts of fantastic stories. I love mythology and so I'm - like these are such an offshoot, another form of mythology. This is where my imagination really goes to play, and so I made that wig. I made both of those wigs in those photos as my first prototypes of what if the wig started growing on me, through me? And I'm sitting in the trees and I'm, you know, I am not a makeup artist by any stretch of the imagination. And I don't see myself being physically grafted into a tree. But if someone wants to help me graft myself into a tree for the dopest picture ever, that would be awesome. But you know, thinking about Daphne, right thinking about - but I wasn't thinking about her like escaping and being turned into a Laurel tree. I'm thinking about fading into trees as a form of - actually, she becomes a tree as a form of safety and sanctuary. But she's trapped in a situation. I want this woman to kind of come in and out at will. Like, I don't want her to ever feel trapped. [I don't want] these women to ever feel trapped but just to kind of commune. And sort of be fluid in and out at will. And so that's why I said, well, I've got to be part of the landscape. And so, you know what I should do? I should get in the lake and pray to God that a water moccasin doesn't come and bite me in the bum in the water. [laughter]

The tropical southern and Caribbean landscapes are really important to me. And that's another thing about nestling into this sort of tropical landscape. There's a mystery and a danger to this landscape that I'm really drawn to. If you look past the malls and the sprawling highways, and if you look at the tropical forests, and I was talking about that with his fellow artists and fellow Floridians, well, I'm a New Yorker. She's a Floridian. She's in Tallahassee. Well, she's in Florida and we both talk about how the landscape is sort of mysterious and primal and, you know, feral, but really beautiful too. Right? Like you're from another time and it's sexy. It's dangerous sexy, right? I always want to play in it, and be in it, and then if the mosquitoes don't chase me out, it's all the other critters and you've got like gators and snakes and vultures and just all the most dangerous things that I can think of and nothing that I can outrun. So there's this kind of push and pull. There is an attraction, but you know it's dangerous. It's like that bad boy, bad girl lover. You know you should... Like you can't resist?

And so, in the photographs and then ultimately the drawings, I neutralized the danger. Where I can exist harmoniously for a little while and I think that's something else that happens in my practice that starts to show up in these works. It's a thread that a lot of people don't pick up on in my practice, but there's a sense of restoring order, right? Where like my *Ask Chuleta* series from like 15 or so years ago or before that? So, she's this urban hood chick who shouldn't be talking about art and it's using very much her vernacular but has it but has a foundational understanding of how the art world works and is also calling out bullshit. So, there's that recalibration, the *Queen* series... It's things that I personally am traumatized by, and the Queens themselves become these archetypes that are each individual that have come from this trauma. And it's me myself trying to reestablish and reorder where things are by acting out and playing these characters. And the *Sanctuary* series is me trying to regulate myself, personally. And so there's always like this, neutralizing the danger, bringing down, tamping down the anxiety, self-soothing, all that like self-help language. But it's all in there. It's all about recalibrating and you know, refocusing. My graduate show was called *Homeostasis*, because your body needs to regulate. If you're too hot, you sweat. If you're too cold, you shiver. But it's about balance and I think that's something that has always been a through line in why I made the work, because it's just something's off balance and I need to put it back. I need to restore order. And people should know that about my work, I think.