

HCC ART GALLERIES



HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller

Interviewee: Aimee Jones

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Al Miller (AM):

I'm going to be asking you questions for our summer 2023 permanent collection exhibition as well as for our archives here at Hillsborough Community College. My name is Alyssa Miller here with Aimee Jones, and I'll just jump right into our first question: What is the story of you coming into the art world?

Aimee Jones (AJ):

Okay, so thank you so much for having me here. I kind of have always been a painter, like when I was in high school. And then in college, I really wanted to get this art degree, but I have family members who discouraged that and encouraged getting into advertising and mass communication. So it was always my minor, but I've always felt like in my head, I was like, "I want to be an artist." My heart's always been in art and also education. I ended up teaching abroad and while I was there, I decided to go into an artist residency in Barcelona. I ended up creating a huge body of work and decided, you know, it was time for me to really take it into a professional level. So I used that portfolio to get into my Master's degree. And that's how I ended up in Tampa and just graduated in May of 2022.

AM:

Awesome, what does your artistic process look like?

AJ:

It kind of depends. I started as a portrait artist in the beginning. I was always wanting to paint people that I've met, you know, people who were close to me. And then after

the pandemic, I turned a lot more inward and started doing these really strange coverings. And a little bit more of my inspiration now is Florida's landscape, but just like plants in general and finding forms and corporeal objects within nature. A lot of it is collecting photographs, patterns, especially when I travel around, sometimes going into estate sales and vintage shops. And just using my own personal anecdotes and using my own body and how it's changed over time. I collage the things that I want to see.

AM:

Isn't that the fun of art?

AJ:

Yeah!

AM:

If it doesn't exist, I'm going to make it.

AJ:

Exactly, exactly. I'm like, "I want to see this. I want to see this all together." Right, and so, a lot of it has been these strange, covered figures, which a lot of people are like, "why did you do that? It's the pandemic." Now I'm going to get more into it, but it's always good for me to refer to what it was like as a portrait artist. And now it's just completely transformed as something different.

AM:

My next question is: do you have any specific goals with your work? And if so, what are they?

AJ:

As a painter, you're always working in the square or the rectangle, like in quadrants. And so, right now, I've been thinking a lot about the painting as an object. My goal is to find a way to expand my painting practice outside of just the bounds of canvas and see what ways I can expand it more, make it bigger, more immersive. I don't really know what that is quite yet, but I'm trying to do some experimenting this summer and then hopefully something comes out of that. Or maybe it's just staying in the bounds of the canvas, but it's the goal.

AM:

Yeah, you've got to experiment to really cement yourself in what you know you like to do. How do you identify or interact with the local art scene?

AJ:

Because I got my master's degree here, I was put in it quite quickly. So, we really were introduced a lot with my colleagues at the University of South Florida. It's been helpful as well teaching now at HCC. I've really started to meet a lot of people through that. And then just as of recently, I got the emerging artists grant with Creative Pinellas, which has been fantastic. And they really connected us with other emerging artists, there's a lot of promotion within them. They've really been very supportive. They give us a chance to have public artist talks. And meeting all of these people at shows and things like that made it to, "oh, I met this gallerist and like, oh I worked at HCC so now I know Amanda." So, I would have to attribute that to getting My master's degree— just having the exposure to it. It's a great art scene. It's growing. I think there's a lot of potential in the Tampa Bay area. I think there's a lot of really great contemporary artists and a lot of unique types of artists, like contemporary artists here that are really starting to build a community and foundation.

AM:

Oh yeah, I know, I went to the Kress building last night for their openings. And then I was like, this feels very much like '90s Tampa. It's just so cool with all the galleries and everyone there.

AJ:

Yeah, yeah, it's nice! Yeah, I think more people are coming here too outside of it just being a retirement community. I think people especially from the East Coast, right? So, I think that there's a lot of potential here and it's growing pretty quickly. So...
[laughter]

AM:

Was there any specific inspiration for *Grounding Technique*, the piece that we have in our collection?

AJ:

Yes. So, I said before, as a portrait artist during the pandemic, I was very frustrated. Something I should also mention is that I was always painting in person, like Alice

Neel and traditional plein-air painters. But I was pretty frustrated not being able to do that, so one thing that I was playing with during 2020 was looking at forms within this invasive plant species called kudzu. It's this plant and it grows all over everything and covers everything. You start to see these almost weird human forms or whatever it is. At that time, I was thinking of it poetically, like it's an invasive disease, you know, or virus coming in here and changing the landscape and how it's so aggressive and covers. And also, how we were all masking ourselves and keeping away from other people and this protection and shield. So that was the inspiration. And then I started playing with the colors, which ended up being pink, which looks pretty corporeal for it.

At that time, I was in a class, and we saw someone doing a presentation about Jackson Pollock and his gestures or something and his clothing. He's kind of this toxic male. And no disrespect to Jackson Pollock, but he was a toxic man, right? The person who's giving the presentation was talking about how he was a symbol of masculinity and the way he wore his clothes, the way that he painted was very much a masculine performance. And so, I was like, oh, let me take one of these gestures and cover it in kudzu, but I'm going to play with it in pink. I was thinking of him as being a version of this gesture in time instead of this living, moving person. So that was the inspiration. And I really wanted to see something, you know, I wanted a desolate blue, creepy figure coming out. Too bad you can't see my hand movements in these videos.

AM:

Right, very gestural like that. Alright, and the last question is if you can tell me anything else about *Grounding Techniques* specifically? But yeah, I love like - his figure is very, kind of dominant, in a way.

AJ:

Hm-hmm, yeah, I guess I didn't even mention the title. And that's probably very important to that. Because I heard that term so often during the pandemic, right? There were a lot more conversations about mental health during that time. And "grounding techniques" were something that I heard a lot as a way to get out of your mind and back into your body. Or to connect the two. I was at that time feeling a bit like this, like protections and shields of invisibility and invisibility of identity and I'm not saying I'm against masks or anything like that, but it was just like that, you know, being closed at home, not out with others, and not having the same social lives that

we used to. It feels like a grounding technique of this, like covering or something.

It's also one of the very few men that I've ever painted. I never usually paint the male figure. That one's unique for that, and it's also a unique color choice that I usually don't go to. I usually like Florida tropical greens and use a lot of plant life that's from Florida. But this time I was using Aspen trees because I thought they were kind of corporeal looking, monster eye looking stuff, nodules. And you know this flat white moonlight whereas everything I paint usually is like daylight type. I think it was a good challenge in that respect.

AM:

Of course, I just realized about the tree. It's very Jackson Pollock because he crashed into the tree and died. That's how he passed.

AJ:

Oh, you're right. With his mistress, yeah, yeah. Yeah, well, he was drunk. And her work is so amazing, too. It really is. And like, it's fine. I mean, I don't really have much commentary on it. I was just like, it's just that that gesture was always bent over really like, oh, like throwing stuff, you know, he's like, "I'm a worker man," you know?

So I was like, "I'm going to cover him in pink." But the interesting thing too, is a lot of people kept thinking that it not only looked like it was a transformation for me, it was kind of like frozen, right? And many people thought it was a transformation. I even have one person say that they thought it was somebody turning inside out with pink, that corporeal stuff. So I was like, "oh, that's not my intention, but if you want to think that that's okay."

AM:

Very Stranger Things.

AJ:

Then it gets too weird, yeah. [Laughter] They were like: "that's like a worm man," I was like: "no, it's not. It's kudzu."

AM:

It's so interesting what other people see.

AJ:

Yeah it is, sometimes they change the narrative a little bit. I guess the other thing I was going to say with the process. Something that I found interesting was I found the facial form while playing with the little squiggles. And then all of a sudden it started to make this three-dimensional face come out and it even kind of scared me. This looks weird. It's like that's a good - that's a good painting.

AM:

I know you mentioned that this is one of the only men that you've painted. How was that process?

AJ:

You know, it's interesting because he's also clothed. I don't usually paint only nude women, they're covered women, right? But there's exposed body parts. So it was interesting to just go into blue jeans and folds and fabrics. Yeah, I don't usually paint men. I only have one other painting of a male figure and he's naked, because I wanted the vulnerability of it, I guess. So, yeah, I think it is something more to explore - different bodies, you know?

AM:

That's about the end of my questions, but is there anything else that you'd like to say about this process or HCC or your work?

AJ:

Just keep making stuff. Making a lot of bad paintings or a lot of bad artwork has been one of my biggest lessons in creating work. I mean, I like *Grounding Technique*, but if I had made other work, sometimes you fail and that's always a good way to learn from yourself. And sometimes work can get outside of the narrative that you want, but it's always good to take other people's opinions. When a person's like, "oh, I thought it was somebody like turning inside out. Oh, I thought it was this." I think it's a good way of rethinking your practice. And sometimes the work does the talking for you. Do you know what I mean? There's so much you can say, and sometimes the work says something different. Sometimes it's out of our control, but sometimes it's the duty in it too.

But HCC has been really great. I'm super glad that I was able to get the piece donated. The person who did purchase the work is Carlos Malamud, who's a

wonderful human being. He's really supportive of the arts, really supportive of emerging artists. I met him through a prize that I was a finalist for but didn't win. But yeah, super supportive person. And I was very glad to give it to a really great institution.

AM:

It's so great to have one of your works in the collection, honestly.

AJ:

Thank you!

AM:

Oh, I was going to say something like, I know what you mean about the work speaking for itself. When I've taken students on tours upstairs, really the first thing you see is the work. We have as much information as we can for everything, but until someone reads it, it's speaking to you visually first, and then people will make their own assumptions.

AJ:

Sometimes the explanation can be more interesting than the work, but sometimes it's the opposite. Sometimes the work doesn't need an explanation. I think it's good to know both though, and to make kind of those assumptions yourself.

AM:

Is there anything else you'd like to say?

AJ:

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it. This was awesome. I feel very honored to be a part of this project, and it's just super cool that I get to come here and talk about myself and talk about my art. Somebody wants to listen and I'm like: "really? Okay!" I'm honored to be with the other artists as well. They're super talented.