

HCC ART GALLERIES



HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller

Interviewee: Emiliano Settecasi

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Alyssa Miller (AM):

I am here in the department of Contemporary Art with Emiliano Settecasi for an interview about an artwork that he is donating to the Hillsborough Community College Art Gallery, and, hello.

Emiliano Settecasi (ES):

Um, hello. [laughter]

AM:

[laughter] Okay, well I have some questions. My first question is: what's the story of you coming into the art world?

ES:

Hmm, so it all started about third grade [laughter]. No, not really, I mean, maybe, yeah. That's where I sort of discovered, or at least recognized that people saw some kind of talent, in part from me, just from teachers and doing little assignments that forced us to draw. You know I noticed that maybe that came easier to me than some of my classmates and teachers were recognizing it. But really, we get to high school and kind of look out into the world as an 18-year-old and what I might want to do and art is one of those things that I was good at different subjects, a really good student, so I had pretty much any option.

But the thing about being excited or intrigued about a lot of things is that the world forces you to specialize, and you don't really know what to do. But being an artist

means that you can kind of do whatever you want, and I think that's what drew me to art rather than anything else, is that like as an artist you can just decide to jump to a big amount of research on any given topic or subject and then make something new in the world and that's really exciting to me. It seemed like that would be a better use of my time here on Earth than sitting behind a desk and doing something. And also, the responsibility of something like being a doctor or being an architect or engineer or something, I could not handle if I designed a bridge that fell apart -

AM:

You'd be a terrible architect!

ES:

Yeah, I know. And now I think about it as an adult and obviously there would be like multiple layers of people that would be checking everything, but I think at the time I think I was like "I'm going to end up building a bridge that's going to fall apart or I'm going to end up doing open heart surgery and someone's going to die!" The idea of checks and balances wasn't really on my mind. And also, I just want to be cool, and the only people that are cool are artists. That's not true, but the coolest people are artists, and I am very deeply concerned with always being cool. So, it kind of was a no-brainer; I don't like math so much, not the best at chemistry, I had no one to explain to me what an engineer does, so I'm going to be an artist and dabble in all those things and none of them if I don't want to. Bring things into the world with my own two hands.

AM:

That's fair, that's a fair point to be concerned about. I like that. I love that no one was there to be like "An engineer, actually-"

ES:

"You should maybe do this because your life would be much easier." Hmm, maybe not easier, just eat better.

AM:

Beautiful. What does your artistic process look like?

ES:

Oh boy, everything in that respect is constantly changing. People ask me all the time what I make, and truly I make whatever the idea calls for, so I guess the process from conception of something to an end product is like... I don't think I'm unique in this way, but I think I need to be experiencing things and consuming different types of media. There needs to be time for me to live life a little bit and then the things that I am either experiencing in myself, seeing out in the world, desiring to respond to in some way, or things that strike me and I feel that I have some kind of, you know, narcissistic essential commentary that I don't see anyone else giving then it really becomes "Okay, what is the best way to communicate whatever that commentary might be and then, maybe not even the best but what's the most exciting way that I can think of transmitting that, and then, you know, what do I need to learn or do in order to make that thing the best thing it can be?" So, sometimes that means I just need to make a painting in a certain way, or make it look a certain way. Sometimes that means something needs to be a video, something needs to be a photograph, something needs to be a sculpture, an installation.

Part of it is also dictated by the opportunities that arise because if I'm contacted by a venue or I am wanting to do something at a certain venue I try to work in service of the space, I try to think of all the possibilities, at least up until the first showing of it. After that, if it needs to be adapted, it can be adapted, but the work is usually in service of some display. Or not, I do have some secret works, but those are just for me.

AM:

Secret works!

ES:

Maybe they'll see the light of day. Don't hold your breath, though. Yeah, so yeah, that's the process. Maybe I should do a summary: experience, have an idea, find out the best way to execute the idea, execute it based on where it's going to be seen.

AM:

That's very well put together, thanks. Do you have any specific goals with your work, and if so, what are they? Or is it just a narcissistic need to create and comment? Sorry, I didn't mean to use narcissism like that.

ES:

That's what I said! I mean that is a part of it. Goals with my work? I mean -

AM:

Some people do, some people don't.

ES:

No, I mean I want to be in textbooks and large museums and collected around the world and be in the conversation in like, the canon of Art History, for sure. I'm also not holding my breath for that. Also, I'm not so sure that there will be such a thing as canon or art or a world in like 30-40 years. At the moment, I'm just trying to make the best things that I can make, or what I think are the best things that I can make and if I can use that as vehicle to maybe shine a light or improve things in my immediate surroundings and also in the grand scheme of things, that's a plus. You know, that's - I think I should be, most artists should be concerned with everything. Personal salvation in a way, and also expanding that to be a model for collective solidarity and world improvement.

AM:

That's nice, that's a good plan.

ES:

I hope so.

AM:

How do you - this is a pretty self-explanatory question because I'm sitting in your art gallery - how do you identify or interact with the local art scene? Besides being very involved?

ES:

Identify, I mean that's interesting.

AM:

It is interesting. I mean some people identify as inside or outside or influenced by or influenced with, or a lot of people are teachers and they teach others, like a legacy they brought down.

ES:

I identify as an artist, and from time to time I identify as a curator, and from time to time I identify as a designer, but I think mainly I would say I identify as an artist and an artist resource. I picked that up working at HCC, because HCC and Amanda, the galleries position themselves as resources for artists, and that's also how I see myself. So sometimes that means running a gallery, sometimes that means being an event coordinator, sometimes that means someone needs to borrow a projector, if they don't know how to stretch canvas I'm happy to help, or if they come in the room like "I can't get this bolt off" then I'm happy to do that, if I show up in another gallery and there's paintings all on the floor then I put them up back on the wall. I just - when I'm not actively making my own work, I still want to be as involved in the creation of art in my surroundings as possible. And that usually means helping a bunch of artists and I love that because I am one and we all need help.

AM:

That's a very nice way to put that. Okay, was there any specific inspiration for the piece that you donated, *Something to Remember*, and if so, what is it?

ES:

Big yeah. Big yes on that. Yeah, the piece comes from a book I read. The largest inspiration comes from a book I read called *The Wisdom of Insecurity* by Alan Watts and that's where the quote that's written on my hand that was scanned on the machine, that's where that quote comes from. Reading the book created like a revelation, or at least triggered some type of epiphany in me because for the longest time, so for a year I've been making work about myself, disability, how myself and my disability function within a larger late capitalist hyper consumer hyper social media-saturated environment that we live in, like how I fit in with all that and how I am sort of in terror, and like addicted to it and also against it in so many ways, but need it to survive also in so many ways.

Reading the book came after months and months of just making work about myself, but at the same time not being okay with myself in ways of low self-esteem, low image of myself, low self-worth. I think making the work about myself was a desperate attempt to find a way to be okay with myself and use art as that vehicle and try to save myself in a way but just doing the work and hoping that if I could see other peoples' reaction or if other people validate the work then it would be close enough to other people validating me and that would somehow make me feel good about who I am.

But then I read this book and it's been after months and months of like, constantly doom-scrolling on social media and a lot of my Instagram explore feed had become all this like, relationship advice and self-help advice and pop psychology about "you can't love somebody until you love yourself and you need to practice self-love and self-care and self-this and self-that and focus on you and do this and improve yourself" and I'm reading all this stuff and I'm like "okay, like yeah, it's like I'm shit, that's why" and the implication is that you're shit, so you need to read this blog and follow this psychiatrist who's going to have the answer to help you through all this. And in this book, Alan Watts is credited with making a lot of Eastern philosophy more palatable and more accessible to Western audiences.

So, the book is - well a lot of people read this and essentially, basically what Buddhism is, basically what a lot of what Hinduism is, but there were parts of the book that really stuck out to me. In particular, it just being up front about certain reality that I agree with, which is that our lives are "a spark of light between two eternal darknesses" and that could be this really - this moment of despair if we consider it that way, but also it's this moment of full possibility and this moment of "we're all just here, it's all very temporary, it's inevitable that we're going to have joy, that we're going to have pain." There's part of the book that's like "animals live and suffer and die and they don't make a problem of it. And humans are also animals." and reading that, and understanding that "Oh, I can live and suffer and die and I don't have to make a problem of it." I don't have to be so consumed by the wretchedness and disappointment and embarrassment of life, because it's going to happen. He says in the book "If you acknowledge the pain and you know it's there, but you don't make a problem of it then it becomes something other than pain. It just becomes another part of existing."

And then towards the end of the book he gets to the point of like "love is this thing that happens outward" and even at the time the book was written, which I think was in the '50s, there was still the same, people that were saying the same stuff about "Oh, you need to love yourself, you need to focus on yourself" and have this really individualized look of how to love and exist in the world, and he's like "the only time you should think about self-love is to fully reject the idea because love is something that happens outward. We like to think that we have this ego, this self that is separate from our bodies, that is separate from the nature of the world and everything else that exists in the world, and it's not. It's all part of the same big cosmic soup and love is something that happens outward." So, reading the quote

“One has no self to love” it was just like - it completely obliterated that idea of “Who am I?” and we’re talking about like the narcissism and that was a moment like “Oh, ego-death makes complete sense to me now.”

I don't know where the art is going to take me after that because now, I'm sort of in on this separate truth that I had not considered before. And before when I was doing all the rest of it, so there's going to be a little bit more soul-searching. But I think the work is going to be the work and it's just not going to function the same way anymore. I'll have to change the way it functions or change the way I talk about it, and it can honestly be more, now, of a vessel outward because I'm not using it in the same particular way that I was using it before. Sorry, I feel like I'm speaking all in the abstract.

But reading that book, consuming all that information, I did not know what I was going to make, I did not know what this image was going to be until the day I made it. Because the same week I read the book was the same week, just a few days later, I was going to be making the print. And the universe-cosmic fortune-synchronicity that was created that week happened in a way that I kind of finessed my way. I was meeting with the person that was going to print it, Kaitlin Crockett at Print St. Pete, and I knew we were going to print it on Sunday, we were going to do something on Sunday. And in the beginning of the week I didn't have an image, I didn't know what I was going to make and I was asking questions like “Can something be created fully on the machine? Can I scan things? Can it just be something that's fully experimental happening that day?” and she was like “Yeah, that's totally something that can happen” so I was like “Okay.” So relinquishing that stress of trying to come up with an image to then just show up and print it, that gave me a few days that I could read this book.

And then, after reading that book, I woke up the day of that Sunday I was going to print this, and I had gotten a stack of National Geographics from my old high school because they were changing buildings and didn't want them anymore. I woke up that morning at like 7 and just picked the first six off the stack and all the images that were calling out to me, I just cut 'em up. I brought all these images, and I brought a few more books over to the print shop and I started looking through everything. And for some reason, so many of the images were these where like either animals or people were in multiple numbers of themselves.

The largest image is these two, you can imagine they're twins but you can't really see the face, the one that's turned around, they could just be little blonde girls of a similar age, but they're wearing the same outfit passing a corn to one another. It's like the self of those two girls is kind of washed away because of the multiplicity of them. And that carries through throughout the print. There's a small herd of bison that all kind of look the same, there's a herd of horses that all kind of look the same, there's images of people on like an archaeological dig, and most of their faces are obscured but they're all wearing these white shirts, so that self is obscured. There's these eggs that are in the midst of this fiery, you know, ship that's burning, and the eggs don't have a self yet, they're all identical particles that we're looking at. These polar bears that are swimming, we don't look at these animals in these groups and ask "Which one of these is George?" We don't, it's not a thing that we do, you know, we just see them and we're like "Polar bears," and that's just part of the animal kingdom and part of nature.

So having that and tying that to some images of people engaged in destruction: there's smokestacks referencing climate change, as well as the flaming ship, which, referencing that kind of human destruction, but because the ship's on fire the faces of the people looking at it are obscured because of the light situation, you know. Some parts are blurry, there's at least one part, you know, where this person is walking with a fish on his back, but to walk with the fish he is literally become the fish, he is one with the fish, his head is in the fish's gills, which is a little bit disgusting, but he has fully assumed the fish's identity in a way.

And my contribution to the image was my hand, scanned in on the Risograph machine itself, but when I was solving some of the compositional issues, the second page that I turned to was an image of this whole crowd of people and their position is that they're holding up their hand and I saw that and I'm like "This is exactly what I'm talking about." That like, if we stop to notice, we are all part of something together, here on this Earth, there is a oneness to us, and it can be reflected in multiples of people, such that we could maybe forget that we are these islands even though it feels like we are sometimes, we're not, we're part of a greater whole. We don't have to be so consumed with the self because we are in community with everything else and a lot of nature is not consumed with that. They don't make a problem of that; they don't make a problem of being here in their brains.

I've shown this to a few people, obviously it was in the show as well, the Riso show, but I've gotten feedback about the hierarchy of the images, which I did consider because it was - Kaitlin asked me or told me in the beginning of the process we could change the size of any of them, we could scale them down or scale them up on the images, but I thought it was another layer, perhaps an important layer because these were all coming from National Geographic. You know, it kind of demonstrates the hierarchy, like the implicit hierarchy that they were working under. The images that are the largest, obviously being those two cute white girls and some of the images that are the smallest are people of color. That conversation I feel like, maybe isn't referenced enough, and this was an opportunity to be like: "No, these were the sizes that I found these images in, the juxtaposition does kind of communicate that to someone that would be attuned to that kind of information.

AM:

It's like working class versus innocence versus group in nature, but also like I love - Well, it's so interesting because I feel like that woman, she's basically overseeing the dig - and everyone else is digging, but also in a lot of places where you're digging up something, one person's going to take it, but you've done the work of carefully digging it out of the ground in your own country.

ES:

Yeah, that image in particular is also just like a painful reminder that for so long, white photographers just don't know how to take photos of black people. All of their faces are just like, fully black, no distinguishing features because they don't know how to use the light correctly to actually show them.

AM:

Do you want to talk a little bit about the show that it was in? Because that's part of its history now.

ES:

Sure, yeah, I probably wouldn't have made a Risograph print if not for this exhibition. The exhibition was called *Duplicator* because of the Risograph machine itself; it's also known as a duplicator machine. And for those who don't know, a Risograph is a type of printing machine that kind of takes the technology of screen printing and puts it inside of what looks like a photocopier. It's an automated process similar to a mimeograph, so it creates a stencil based on whatever inputs you put in, whether

that's a scan on the flat bed that it has, or any image that you bring in on a flash drive. It creates a stencil of that and then it wraps the stencil around an ink drum and then shoves ink through the stencil really fast as it's rotating onto paper. It ends up a pretty economical print process, but also environmentally friendly print process because the ink is soy-based, and the stencil material is rice paper. So, it's really decently environmentally friendly to do.

But I was contacted by Mia Makes It! (Mia Hollenback) I want to say in November of 2022 because they had done some workshops at a print shop in Gulfport called Print St. Pete and Kaitlin Crockett, who owns Print St. Pete, had been asking if anybody knew where they could throw a Riso print show. As soon as Mia told me that, I was fully on board because I had been familiar with Riso printing basically from the time I had a Tumblr, so probably over ten years of knowing this particular machine exists and it creates this particular aesthetic and being drawn to that aesthetic and also just being drawn to the idea like I knew if I did this show I would be able to learn more, like see one in the flesh. I wasn't even expecting I would be able to make one, but it was also like a no-brainer that me showing an interest in it, Kaitlin was like "you definitely should be in the show."

So, this exhibition took place in my gallery, The Department of Contemporary Art Tampa, Florida, in the Kress Building in Ybor City between May 4th and May 25th, 2023. And it was twelve artists, I believe, myself included, that all had Risograph prints printed at Print St. Pete, all on the same machine, by Kaitlin. Along with some zines, and information materials about the actual Risograph.

AM:

I love that, that's so cool. It's a fun show. I need to go to Print St. Pete. I have one more question, it's not on the list, but it is about your time at HCC. I know that you were there for quite some time, very instrumental, and also still involved. Is there anything that you want to say that you like that you took away from that situation? I know it was a job, but still an interesting one based on what you did.

ES:

Yeah, I've taken away so much from my time there. I feel like being engaged in that type of work, which I was working in the art galleries, doing basically what I'm doing now, every day coming to a place where my job was to essentially help artists make their ideas come to life in a space. Even when I was at my desk working on

paperwork or administrative things, all of that was still in service of, number one: bringing the arts to students, and then number two: being that facilitator for artists and making their grand visions something concrete and observable for the students to come and look at. And yeah, I think as I was saying before, that's really where I learned the value of being a resource. I've always been a helper, I've always wanted to help people, I find a lot of purpose and fulfillment from being that kind of person and having that kind of role. But I love art and I love being part of the art world.

I made so many connections from working there, learned so much about institution, and really just the ins and outs of - because I'm working with students, or was working with students there, learning how to meet people who are viewing art wherever they're at, and then to be able to speak with them in ways that can connect to the things that they've experienced or are experiencing and be that conduit for a greater understanding of art, I think is really important and something that was helpful for me to learn there.

And just having the opportunity to make so many exhibitions, I think it's just been, it was a place where I was able to refine - I've always had an interest in exhibitions, I've always had an interest in how space is organized when it comes to art. And that was just - to be able to be paid and do that every day was a real blessing. I left not because I was disappointed in my time there or because I was upset with anyone or anything in particular, I just felt ready that when the opportunity to open my space happened, I felt a greater responsibility. That's really what it came down to.

Everything that I learned at HCC, all the knowledge I had been accumulating that applied to HCC and then refined and built upon over there, set me up to be able to look at an opportunity and say "I'm the person that should do this." And maybe that's hubris, I don't know, but I didn't want no one to do it. So that meant I felt responsible that I should do it, and I should be that person for this building now, so that I could bring audiences that only I could bring, not even only I, but because I have a seat at the table and was being offered an opportunity I could say yes and be a greater resource for artists that even maybe the college wouldn't work with, not wouldn't, just that is limited in the amount of space and amount of time in the year and the parameters of institutional bureaucracy.

I can be very nimble on my own and do things really on the fly, make exceptions to things that working in an institution just doesn't allow. Not for any bad reason,

actually all good reasons, just because there are all these backstops and checks and balances and all these things whereas me as a private individual is like “Hey, I have this idea for this thing and it’s going to happen tomorrow.” I can be like “Alright, let’s make this work.”

AM:

Awesome. Is there anything else that you want to say?

ES:

Thank you for putting me in the collection!