

HCC ART GALLERIES

HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Amanda Poss

Interviewee: Tracy Midulla

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Amanda Poss (AP):

Thank you. So, this will officially end part one, [in] part two I'll ask you some of these same questions in relation to Suzanne Camp Crosby's work. Did she talk to you much about how she came into the art world?

TM:

Not about her entrance into the art world, but she did talk to me a lot about coming up as a professor, as a female in a very male program, in a very male dominated world. I think that was one of the things that drew me to Suzanne immediately. Also, I just thought she was incredibly weird, like in a really good way. I remember meeting her the first day, and I thought this is an odd duck, and I really like her. She was tough and I really enjoyed how difficult she could be, and I mean that in every way. But she did talk to me a lot. She spoke to all of us, especially the female students, very much about how difficult it would be for us as women in this field, and she would always say, especially photographers, especially in academia. She was an adjunct for 16 years. She was an adjunct for 16 years! That blows my mind!

AP:

That takes incredible strength and results and dedication to hang in that long.

TM:

I also just think she loved what she was doing. You know, I think that a lot of artists become professors because they want the accolades, they want the respect, they want to be in academia. I think that Suzanne taught as an adjunct for 16 years because she enjoyed teaching. I think she genuinely enjoyed passing on knowledge.

But yeah, I don't know what her earliest - no, I mean, I know that she studied with Yasmin[?]. She talked about it all the time.

AP:

What do you remember about her artistic process? How she would describe it.

TM:

I think she worked in a very solitary way. If you saw the retrospective of her works, so much of it - they're self-portraits or they're staged objects and places. And so she did often talk about working well alone. I think that Suzanne in a lot of ways for being someone with three children and a husband, she was a very solitary person. And I think that was the case in

Creative's Exchange and I know she was part of, like, creative collectives, but I think that Suzanne was a lone wolf creatively and I always really respected that.

AP:

Did she talk much about having specific goals with her work? And you mentioned the cut-outs and the kind of things that she would do.

TM:

I think she was a feminist. I don't even know if that was her known goal. But I do think that especially the time that she was making when her career really blossomed. I don't know if she was actively pursuing being a feminist, but I just think she was a feminist and I think she was really strong. I think she was a really strong woman and I think that she was tough. She was really tough.

AP:

Now we have in our collection a few from her time as a photo laureate for Tampa. Do you remember her talking about sort of the inspiration for these? You know, it seems like there's some that are kind of in series as well. When she was a photo laureate, she was documenting a lot of iconic places while she was in Tampa, for instance.

TM:

When I think of her photo laureate work, there's a super iconic piece on Bayshore and I love that piece because I never could tell for the longest time I was like "is that a cut out of the ship? Or is that the ship?" And I was like, "well, this is interesting." You know, it's funny because I just told you that I think that Suzanne was a lone wolf and I really do think that she was. She was a really strong individual, but I do think that she had a real sense of community and I think that she always could tell you what was going to be important. She always knew what you had to document because it was either going to go away or be forgotten or it was going to change. I

think that's a really interesting quality in her work, you know, and that's not even my favorite piece.

AP:

What is your favorite piece then?

TM:

Actually, this is funny, for being such a grouchy lady, I am also incredibly sentimental. I love her self-portraits and I love this piece that she gifted me. I worked with Suzanne for I don't even know how many years. I don't know how many years I was working with her before I was pregnant, but she was the first person to pull me aside and say, "are you pregnant?" It's like, you know, like the question that you're not supposed to ask anybody, it's like the rudest question you can ask. And I'm just thinking this is a woman that I think about as, like, a badass feminist. And she just like, basically yanked me aside and, like, totally violated my boundaries and asked me the world's most uncomfortable question. Because what if the answer was no? And I said "well, ohh," you know, I didn't want to answer her. And she said "it's ok, you don't have to answer me, but I had noticed that you have, like, bruises on your arms from getting blood work done. And you know, you're a little perkier than normal." And I was like, "I don't feel perky," she said, "No, I'm talking about you look perkier" and I was just like... I felt so uncomfortable.

And she waited the appropriate three months and then gifted me this image of a plastic baby in a bird's nest. And I was just like, this is the weirdest f***** gift anyone has ever given me. And I brought it home. I was so excited about it and I showed it to—I wasn't living with my mother—but I showed it to my mother and I was like, "look at this" and my mom was like, "you are not going to hang that in the baby's room" and I was like, "I am absolutely going to hang this in the baby's room." And I did. And that's still my favorite piece, cause it's so weird. It's just a weird thing, you know, and it's just a little plastic pink baby in a brown bird's nest. There's nothing else to the piece other than that. I just, I love it, but I do love her self portraits. Specifically, I just really love all the black and white from the 70s. I think they're just so good. They're interesting and I think that for the same reason I love those, it was the same reason I fell in love with Cindy Sherman's work. Because Suzanne taught Cindy Sherman's work really well. And I love everything that Cindy Sherman has done, even the terrifying work, her work got really weird, but so did Suzanne's. Some of it got really weird.

AP:

And I love there's a piece that we have on display in one of the Dean's lobbies, and it's a piece with this derelict truck that appears like it could be moving this mobile home. But I mean you look at the truck and it's not going anywhere, right? It's been

there a long time. And as you look closer on the porch if you will, there's this, like, kids size doll and very obviously fake dog and it is so bizarre and charming in equal parts.

TM:

The kid-sized doll was always- she used it for a while, and I loved seeing that. I love that she worked with scale so well. I really love the weird images she took of [the Lowry Park Safety Village]. It was the children's park at Lowry Park that had a miniature everything. So it was scaled for 3-year-olds and when she heard that it was being torn down she was like, "I'm going out there and I'm photographing all of it." And so, if you look through all of her imagery you'll probably find some of it. It was, you know, the part that you could get to that was public. You didn't have to go to the zoo.

AP:

So it's part of the river.

TM:

Yeah, part of Lowry Park that was... and I remember her photographing that. What's funny is I've known Suzanne through so many different parts of my life creatively, that I'm like, "was that from when I was a student? Or was that when I was teaching?" Because there wasn't that much time in between. Like I took classes with Suzanne and then I went to art school, and I went to grad school and I like, fumbled my way through the tragic drama of teaching high school for three years and then started teaching at HCC

AP:

Well Suzanne was a part of your start at HCC, right?

TM:

Yeah, she was. She was really happy to give me a class as an adjunct and then I do believe when I interviewed for the position, she threatened the hiring committee and said, "if you don't hire her, I will quit my job." And I thought that she was exaggerating when she told me that story. But, later on in my time at HCC, there was (and I will leave this person unnamed) but they were always a little resentful with me for a long time and I thought- I kind of thought I nailed the interview with this person, they just don't like me and at one point they said, "well, you know, it's a good thing had Suzanne and your corner because you weren't my top choice, but she threatened to quit if we didn't hire you. And she held us captive." I thought "Right on." [laughter]

AP:

This is off script a little bit but, we haven't really talked about how Suzanne really founded the photo department at HCC.

TM:

Yeah. I know less about that; I just know that she was instrumental. I know that she had to put her foot down a million times. I don't know all of the history behind it, but I know she has history with USF and that she... I believe she did start the program here, could be wrong, but I think there was no photo department until it was her photo department. And if you know anybody that's ever worked with her, it was her photo department. It was absolutely her photo department. I'm not speaking ill of her when I say that it was impossible to work with her if you did not want to work in her department the way that she wanted you to work in her department. I feel like that's fair because she knew what she was doing, and I mean, I have my history here too, and she hung in for a really long time. But her decision to retire, it was time, but I think she also just felt like this is going in a way that I don't want to be a part of. And they're not going to support what I built. I don't want to support what they're building, and I respect that. I mean, I left too. [laughter] No, I mean she was, she was phenomenal. I feel weird putting this on record, but I don't care.

The last conversation I had with her, she told me. "You're going to have to quit that job". And I said, "Yeah, I know. I think I'm going to have to quit that job," she said. "No, really, it's never going to go back to where it was, and it might go good places, but it's not where you're going to want to be. You're going to have to quit that job". And I spoke to her maybe, I think I spoke to her for like an hour a few days after that, but that was it, that was her parting. Those were her parting words to me. "You're going to have to quit that job" [laughter]. It's just like, OK. Yeah so, she's really been, she's been inspirational in my career my whole life. You know, she was my very first college professor. She's my very first college professor. Crazy. Are there any more questions?

AP:

Is there anything else you want to share about Suzanne?

TM:

For me personally and creatively, she taught me the whole time I knew her. From my first class to the last conversation I had with her. She was like, "I'm going to tell you how to do it. I'm going to tell you exactly what to do, and then I'm going to tell you exactly how to do it." And I do miss her, and I just think that she was just an incredible badass, and she was an incredibly difficult person to love. And I don't mind putting that on the record. I think that everybody who had a close relationship with her felt that way. She and I only had one real argument. One real argument, because I always backed down because I respected her, and she was usually right. But we

had one argument where we just—and I don't even remember what it was about at this point. It was work. And I think that I just really felt a certain way about the way that my program was going because I felt very strongly about the printmaking program here. And we just kind of looked at each other and she said, “I don't think I like you right now”. And I said, “Well, I don't think I like you right now” and we just both stood there and looked at each other. And I said, “I'm going back to my office” and she said “I'm very unhappy with you right now Tracy” and I said, “Well, I am equally unhappy with you.” And like I turned on my heels and like, you know, clomped down the hallway, and by lunch, she came in and she said, “How's your day going?” And I said, “My day's alright” and she said, “do you want to have lunch together?” You know, so she was really difficult, but she was really, really warm. She was a warm person and she really cared about the people that she cared about.

I do have a really funny story about her though. Yeah, it was really funny. I mean, and I think it's funny because if you've ever taken a class with her, or if you've ever worked with her, she can be tough. And I remember when *Ratemyprofessor.com* was new. It was new, right? And she was like “Tracy, come in here, I want to ask you something,” and she pulled me into her little shoebox of an office and was like “Have you seen this?” And I said, “Ohh yeah ratemyprofessor.com.” She said, “They judge you on everything” and she said “And look at this right here,” she's like, “This feedback, they said I am as cold as a frozen turkey. “I started laughing. I couldn't contain myself and I said “Yep”. And she said, “Well, I suppose that's true”. And we had a really good laugh about it. And she said, “Do you want to know what they have to say about you?” And I said “Absolutely not”. And of course, I went to my office and I read every comment they had to say about me. And clearly, they liked Suzanne more.

AP:

Cold turkey, frozen turkey. [laughter]

TM:

Yeah, as cold as a frozen turkey. And you could tell it hurt her feelings. But it took about 30 seconds for her to embrace it and be proud of it. She was fine with it. As cold as a frozen turkey.

AP:

She was really warm on the inside.

TM:

She was totally warm, she was totally warm. She used to bring us banana bread and, like, really weird little gifts for our birthdays, as a colleague. She never forgot my birthday and she was like— when I tell you, as a student I was like, this is an odd duck,

right? But she was just a wonderfully peculiar person at times like she would give weird gifts, but always super thoughtful. And she never forgot a birthday. And she was always super hospitable and I found her to be incredibly warm for someone who was as cold as a frozen turkey. Best thing, the best thing that day as she and I laughed intermittently between every class together, like we didn't even have to talk about what it was about. We just—it was fun- it went on as a joke all day.

AP:

Thank you for sharing that story and sharing hers.

TM:

Oh of course. She was a special lady.