

# HCC ART GALLERIES



## HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller

Interviewee: Aneka Ingold

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Al Miller (AM):

Hi Aneka. I am interviewing you for the HCC Permanent Art Collection summer exhibition, as well as for our archives generally. I'm going to thank you for your donation first of all. It's a beautiful piece, I'm so excited to exhibit it.

Aneka Ingold (AI):

You're welcome. I'm excited to see it up again. It's been a while so I'm looking forward to being part of the show.

AM:

My first question is: what is the story of you coming into the art world?

AI:

I always knew I wanted to be an artist. I was always making things when I was a kid. I was drawing all the time and dabbling at different creative things always. I always knew I wanted to be a creative person, but visual arts. I was into music too. I played the cello for a long time. I was always really interested in creative things. When it came time to decide what I wanted to do when I graduated from high school, I definitely wanted to be a visual artist. I got my undergraduate degree at Grand Valley State University in painting. And I will say that drawing was always the thing that I gravitated towards the most, but that wasn't really an option. So, when I went to Grand Valley, I did a lot of painting. And then in between undergrad and graduate school I worked at an art gallery for a while and another art institution that was a sculpture park that facilitated arts exhibitions. I really knew I was wanting to be a

part of the art world, but then when I decided I wanted to go back to graduate school, I wanted to really push myself harder. I never really felt like just oil painting was the right fit for me. So, when I got my graduate degree, my emphasis was drawing, but what ended up happening is a combination of painting and drawing, because I had already done so much painting. The technique I use now that's a mixed media one is one that I sorted out in graduate school, and I've been using that for about 10 years now to create these narratives that I do.

AM:

Thank you. My next question is what inspires you to create?

AI:

I always wanted to make work that revolved around the human form. I knew that when I was an undergrad that was something I really gravitated towards and that turned into a lot of self-portraits, which then turned into a lot of stories about women. Because I didn't want it to be just about me, but a lot of the work is related to what I'm interested in, which is the female experience. And so, the stories that I created, which first were just figures, then they turned into narratives, are really inspired by women's stories, maybe their roles in society, and trying to understand or dismantle those things.

AM:

That makes a lot of sense from what work I've seen of yours. Well, a lot of it.

AI:

Yeah, and I mean, it really came out of exploring fears and desires and feelings I had about my identity. And then it evolved into using animals and inanimate objects and environments and patterns and things like that to flesh out this sort of allegory and that became, you know, what sort of dictated what the figure was doing or what was important about their story. They are kind of cryptic and non-linear. I don't come up with an idea and say the story has to be about this, it just sort of evolves.

AM:

That makes sense. And that would also segue into my next question: what does your artistic process look like when you create these pieces?

AI:

It's a combination of things. I collect images. They're images from books and magazines and maybe I'll do some research online to find images of things that might be more specific as I start to put the story together. Even fabric, or I take my own photographs too. I always work with a few mirrors. So, I take all of these images and intuitively make connections between them. I don't always know why they need to go together, but it just feels right. And then I start to arrange them to see how they're going to work together. Sometimes I have more of a plan and sometimes I don't. Sometimes the plan changes, it evolves organically, and I let the different elements speak to one another to see how they respond and then feel it out from there.

But I always start with the figure. The figure is the first thing I do, I just place that on the page. I mostly work on paper, but sometimes panel. And so, I just have whatever size I'm going to work on. I have to establish where the figure is going to be. And then I build everything up around her to see what will happen, and I don't really analyze it until I'm done. I don't really want to know exactly what it's about until I've already mostly finished it. Because if I think too hard about it, it gets more controlled and contrived. Instead, I need to just allow things to flow. And then I'll go back and say, "oh, yeah, well, because of what I was going through in my life right now, or the story that so-and-so told me, or whatever's happening socially, politically, in our society right now" or whatever, I start to piece together why I've chosen these things and challenged some ideas that were in my head.

I got in trouble in grad school because my mentor would be like, you can't just stick a figure on there and then decide as you go what to do, it doesn't make sense. And I'm like, yeah, I can because it's the only way I want to work. I'm like, look, I'm making it work. I'm sure other artists work that way, but I think a lot of artists plan more.

AM:

I guess it's definitely also dictated by your medium as well. If you have to have something that involves a lot of planning, then that'll maybe be ceramics or things like that. But if you can place things as you go, then...

AI:

Well, I have a lot of control. Like when I took printmaking, I hated it because I had to know exactly what was going to happen on the plate or the wood block or whatever before I printed it. And I hated that I had to plan so much. The mixed media work

keeps me engaged. I could be painting flat color for a while; I could be rendering with paint, or I could be rendering with Prismacolor pencil. or I could be doing a stencil, like a pattern. I'm all over the place. It keeps me excited about it and not just set in one mode of thinking. I can also change things easily. If I don't like something, I can erase it or I can paint it out or I can move something.

AM:

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

AI:

I never set out to have an agenda with my work. I never wanted to make a specific statement. I did this in undergrad, but I developed it more in graduate school—I ended up challenging gender roles and trying to dismantle some of the societal norms that we're used to with the way women have functioned throughout history and into contemporary society. And so, I think that just happened, that just evolved. I didn't mean to push any specific ideas onto people. People often - especially since I've gotten a little more recognition for my work, and I do have to talk about it more. I talk about the aspect of exploring the female experience and the stories and gender roles, and people are like, "well, how did you decide to do that?" It wasn't a decision I made. It's just something that I felt like I needed to do to understand myself better. It's very natural and intuitive. I'm glad that there is a message in the end and that it is in many ways open for interpretation, but I do hope that people can take their own catalog of experiences or their history of images that they understand and find their own stories in there. I always like it if someone's like, oh, I know what you mean by that. And I'm like, okay, because I don't know if I even knew, [laughter]. [For instance, with] the piece *Postpartum* that was about my postpartum depression after my daughter was born, I've had a lot of women comment on and respond to that, which every woman's experience with postpartum is going to be slightly different, but there are some common threads in there of those feelings of isolation or inadequacy or confusion about that role. For me that feels really amazing if I can connect with other people in their own version of that.

AM:

Was there any specific inspiration for *Insidious*? Or could you tell me how you interpreted that piece?

Al:

Yes, that one I made the year that I moved to Florida. I'm from Michigan originally and I had lived there my whole life, and it was a huge change for me. I moved almost 10 years [ago] now, and I was actually still in graduate school when I moved. I was making this piece for my thesis show and my ex-husband and I moved here for his job, and I didn't know anyone here. I'd visited Florida before, but I wasn't used to the environment. It's a very different kind of environment, different weather, different biodiversity, the plants, the animals, everything. The sky, everything looked different, and being close to the ocean. So, I made that piece in response to a feeling of kind of exploring and acclimating to this new environment and what felt foreign to me.

If you look at what's happening with the figures in that environment, it feels very uncomfortable. You know, there's something that almost feels like it's turning upside down. There's a swirling, spinning kind of thing with the figures hanging over another animal. And then there's a [feeling] that you're laying down and the ground is shifting, where the water becomes more terrestrial and there's rocks floating and sliding. It's very much about feeling disoriented, and also fascinated. There's a lot of color, there's a lot of seductive things happening in there too, where it was sort of really exciting and everything I saw was kind of beautiful and scary at the same time. And so, I think that was very much an intuitive response to that experience. And then again, what I always would do, which was kind of questioning gender roles, again, there's a more feminine figure and then there's a more masculine figure, but they're somewhat still androgynous.

I think it's always me trying to figure out what my role is and relating to what I see around me. Sometimes I feel like I'm supposed to be the mother and the caretaker and the domestic housewife. And then other times I felt like I was supposed to be, especially still in graduate school, like I was supposed to be more studious and authoritative and understanding what I was doing, and I didn't always feel that way. I was playing with all of those thoughts and feelings and getting them out. And the other thing that I think is a really interesting part of that piece is the tardigrade. I didn't know why I wanted to use that creature, but I had seen it in National Geographic and read about it. It's a microscopic creature—I'm sure there's a better term for describing it—but it's really small and it can withstand extreme temperatures, different environments and go for long periods of time without food and water. I think they've even used it in experiments where they put it in outer space. It became a symbol to me of survival. And I made it really big because I

wanted you to see, like when you look at it under a microscope, how kind of weird and creepy it looks and also kind of cute it is. It's a weird combination of things that I wanted to show all the details in. The weird connection I made later is it kind of almost looks like a manatee, you know? It almost looks like it's the size of a manatee in the piece and the skin color and almost the body shape. So, I was like, well, maybe there's some connection there too, that it's kind of like the creature that I kept seeing in the environment and also symbolic of survival and maybe feeling really small sometimes and really big other times. I feel like that creature was important for that piece to symbolize what was happening.

AM:

Oh yeah, definitely. I love the tardigrade. It's fun that it kind of looks like a manatee, something that so easily dies versus something that's so difficult to kill. Manatees, because they've never had any kind of predation, they're really just hanging out.

AI:

I didn't know that, but I know that they're very vulnerable. I understand them living in the Hillsborough River and for friends that I know who live there, they come in and they get really close, and they get hit by boats all the time. A lot of them are scratched up and scarred. In some ways they're a symbol of survival too, even if they do unfortunately die more easily. They actually do go through a lot to try and survive as long as they can.

AM:

Do you have anything else that you'd like to say about *Insidious*?

AI:

One thing I want to say is that when people look at my work, they have a lot of questions and something I feel like is important specifically with my work and this piece is a really strange one—some of my work is smaller and more portrait-like and just a little bit more digestible—I think this piece is one that is hard for people to wrap their heads around. They always want to know things; they want answers and I think it's good art if you don't have all the answers. That's the kind of art I respond to, when it's something that you have to look at several times and process and think about and come back to because that's something that I do with my own work. I will try to dissect it a little bit after it's finished, but I can come back to it years later and see things in it that I didn't notice before.

And so, I think that bringing this piece into HCC and not really thinking about it for a few years, and looking at it again and remembering what I was going through when I made it kind of stirred up some of those thoughts of like, oh yeah, I'm recalling all those things that I went through. But I think that everyone that looks at my work should definitely have their own interpretation, even without knowing that story of my personal experience, but just be able to look for something in there that they can relate to or that makes some connection for them. And I don't want anyone to feel like, I think this happens a lot with my work, I don't want anyone to feel like they don't get it. It's not about getting or understanding it, it's about having a feeling, or an experience, you know, which I think is a lot of art, but I always want to remind people [of that]. Because I don't want them to be like, well, you were trying to say something. And, you know, back to that question you asked earlier, which is not, it's not a statement I'm trying to make.

AM:

Yeah, exactly. And I know when we've taken students through shows or the permanent collection exhibition, we'll ask them to think about it or what they think something is before we go into anything about the label or any background information because besides teaching the visual analysis. And there's some people who will make specific connections with certain pieces and interpret what their own feelings are on it, which is always really good to see. And it's great to be at HCC because you're exposing a lot of students to types of art that they probably wouldn't have seen otherwise because a lot of them don't go to galleries or things like that. It's a great experience when you can really go back and continuously think about something and explore new ideas around it.

Al:

Yeah, and encourage the students or the people just who are visiting the gallery to have that experience too and take their own visual history. That was the thing I was trying to think of earlier, where everyone has a catalog of imagery, and it can relate to specific cultures or places that people were brought up in. And certain colors and symbols can mean something very different to one person than another. And so, I think that for me, like when I was in grad school, I studied Carl Jung's thoughts and theories and sort of understanding the collective unconscious and the archetypal knowledge from the past. Because in some ways I feel like all of our brains are connected. I know that's kind of "woo-ey", but that's definitely something that I think

happens, especially when you see something visual that you tap into something that maybe is a collective thought or idea that has already existed and it's something that we just, I think as artists, have this desire to make. It's like there's something in your subconscious and you have to get it out. And I think that's something that people can hopefully find inside their own brains, their own subconscious mind or psyche.

AM:

Definitely. Oh yeah, I love that conversation. It's a lot of fun. And it just makes me think about how everyone has the same basic needs. So, you understand the basic symbols throughout like just living in your own life, which is very cool.

AI:

I think that I covered everything, but if there's anything else you want or need to follow up with, you can get in touch. But I appreciate you asking all the questions because I think it's nice to have that aspect of the show where you dig in a little bit with the artists and give a little background information about them.