

HCC ART GALLERIES



HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller

Interviewee: Renato Rampolla

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Location of Interview: Tampa, FL

Duration of Recording: 00:24:25

Al Miller (AM):

What's your story of coming into art?

Renato Rampolla (RR):

I grew up my father's son, and I ended up going into music. I went to HCC, got a music scholarship. I was a guitarist in the jazz band and played music for a lot of my life, but I also had taken pictures. My father got me my first camera and taught me some basics about composition, chiaroscuro, balance of light and dark and that kind of thing, you know some real basics. I mean, what can you do to a 10-year-old to teach him? But he did teach me some stuff.

And then I kind of put it off and took a soul-sucking job, that thing you know, and had to make a living, got a family, 2 daughters. So now about 5 or 6 years ago I started doing [photography] with passion. And this is the interesting thing: my mom was - when my father died, he didn't have insurance because of his heart condition, didn't have a will so his car was in probate, and we needed to sell his car for groceries. I mean it was really tough. So, my mom was amazing, just an amazing woman. She went and took a job for \$2 an hour at Kmart. It was tough, you know, but we got through it because of her. She went on to get her Master's in social work, and she worked for the Child Development Council at the Florida Mental Health Counselors Association and we'd have these arguments and she'd say "well, I'm going to go to the projects today and I'm going to meet with these people" and I'd

asks what was their problem and she'd go "well they hit their kid" and you know I have a problem with hitting kids. I don't like that, you know, and my mom was so much more understanding. And the same thing with the homeless you know, I'd be like "if they're homeless, just get a job" and my mom would be like "you don't know, you haven't been in their situation, you can't judge, you can't do that" and I never really viscerally understood it. I understood it intellectually, but...

She ended up having a stroke and I ended up being her caregiver for 11 years before she passed. I saw this guy [shows picture] over by Hard Rock Cafe, and I went and talked to him, and he was a really nice guy. We spent about 45 minutes under an overpass on Orient Road and I was like hey, can I take pictures of you? And he went yeah, and he loved it. I got maybe like 100 pictures of him doing all kinds of things and we had a great time, and it took off his troubles and my troubles. I gave him some money for it, it was great. I said alright when I see you back here, I'll come back, and I'll bring you some prints. Let me process them and all that.

So, I see him back there in about a week, and he's walking about a mile from where I saw him, and he was so drunk, and now I get it. It's mental health, and addiction is part of mental health from what I understand, and all that can be an issue. And of course, there's people that have hardship and all that, but this was something different. And you know what struck me about him, is he wouldn't go into a shelter because of his dog Coco, because he couldn't take his dog with him. I guess what got to me is the loyalty to his dog, or stupidity, however you want to call it, but it was loyal, and that impressed me.

Then I went on to probably a hundred and something more people I interviewed and took pictures of, and I did a book on it... For the original we sold like 300 copies, and the profits went to Blanket Tampa Bay which is a local nonprofit. So, what happens now is I have collectors that buy stuff, and if they spend like—a large print is over \$1000—if they buy a large print, I give them a book as a sweetener to it. And the printing is much better than the paperback version that came out, there's more stuff in there.

[Looking through the book]

It's my encounters with them or their stories or sometimes it's just poems, cause sometimes their stories are really heavy, and kind of personal. Him, this is A, in St

Pete, and he said, this is sad about our culture, "I used to be somebody I used to have money, I used to be somebody. "He literally said that. However he said it I wrote word for word on my phone and it says more about our culture I guess, but... [continues to look through book] This is B. You see that hinge right there? Cause when he did cocaine he would become "unhinged" and these little holes here where the screws go for the hinge is where he would shoot up all the time. And so, he put that [unsure] and he beat that, and then he started lighting something up and I said, "what's that," he said, "it's spice you want some?" [laughter] So, this guy, that's F, he would, we're under a billboard, we're talking, and he doesn't speak much English, but he was telling me about Cuba, and it was funny, he goes, okay put the camera down and he starts singing with a cigarette in each hand. I think you can see it in here. Yeah, he's singing to me in Spanish, and he's telling me, I'm talking about the mountains and rivers, or the mountains and streams and he'll say something like that but in very broken English he'll tell me. And its really kind of a beautiful, kind of a Zen type thing that you can't recreate that event, it was like, really nice. So, yeah... just to give you an idea.

I started that project doing man's inhumanity to man but it's kind of a run-off of that. Basically, how we're letting people live like that. And you know it's such a contentious thing, if you talk to somebody who's very right wing, they'll say well that's their choice, if you talk to somebody left wing, well that's society's choice. I'm an artist; I'm not a social worker, I'm not a politician. I'm just looking at and interpreting what I see. That's all I did. And you can judge for yourself whether it's a good thing or a bad thing, but it was done in a non-exploitative way, where I got their permission. You won't see anybody in there that's asleep or didn't know I'm there, plus I describe the encounter with their permission. Because I see so many pictures of homeless people laying there passed out and it's like, you know, I mean come on. I don't like that because it's like, they have nowhere to go. Like, they can go into a bush and get away from you, but they can't get into their house and get away from you, they have no privacy. Anyway, that's just a pet peeve I have.

AM:

What inspires you to create art? Like you said before it's just like breathing, you just have to do it.

RR:

I know, it's something you just have to do. Like when I started doing the first project with the homeless, I called it *Dignity No Matter What*, I just couldn't not do it. I see somebody, I need to go talk to them, get their story if they want to talk to me. Not everybody does. I may have [photographed] over 100 people but there were maybe another 200 that didn't want anything to do with me because I had a camera in my hand.

But what inspires me? I've always had to create, because before that it was music, you know? I used to do film photography; I had my own darkroom. Some of the people who are in the collection—Suzanne Camp Crosby, I studied with her, Jerry Meatyard, I studied with him. I may know some of the others—Steve Holmes studied with my father. I don't know, I think he passed away. Cause if he's alive I'd love to talk to him about my father, because I did try to reach out, but I couldn't get a hold of him.

AM:

In my research I haven't found any kind of contact for him. I think we might have had an old email theoretically, because another “found in collection” art was another print of his that he had donated to the theater and then they gave it to us because they wanted it to go somewhere so now, we have two Steve Holmes.

RR:

If you do, can you pass it on to me? I'd like to try to reach him because from my understanding he was a very good student of my father's.

AM:

Yes, and they (Steve and Jerry) ended up working together, actually. He (Steve Holmes) worked at HCC. he was the 2D guy and Jerry was the 3D guy.

RR:

Jerry! [laughing] I love Jerry. I mean, I'd go at night, I took a sculpting class, and he'd go on these rants, you know, and talk and I just, I loved it. I would listen to him. I took composition, I took sculpting, it seems like there was something else but there was like a directed reading, and just basically I learned so much from Jerry Meatyard. I mean, I learned a lot from Suzanne Camp Crosby, but it was Jerry that was just incredible. He was just so giving... but he was funny, he would just go on these rants. Anyway, I liked him, he was one of my favorite teachers.

AM:

He has some of my favorite work in the collection. Just the more I found out about him and found out about the sculpture, it's so much fun.

RR:

He's only like 5 foot 2. He was. Yeah, he's short, not that I'm tall but he's shorter than me. And he's so into sculpture. In his composition class he's doing this slideshow. And there's this one guy that works with sculpture, realistic sculpture, like that big [gestures], and then puts them in a transparent dollhouse. And he said something like, this is one of the few times I wish I was smaller. You know his brother was Ralph Eugene Meatyard? But he didn't talk about him, I didn't find that out until after the class.

AM:

What is your artistic process like?

RR:

I have two. I have an artistic process, and it depends on where I'm at. I just got back from St Louis, and I was taking pictures of, just street photography. Usually, every week you can find me at Trout Creek or Lettuce Lake taking pictures of nature. So that's that process, that's the acquiring and getting a vision of everything.

And then I come here, and I process everything. So, I would think it starts with a vision, and it very seldom is the vision I started with. It comes here, and then it's like I'm over here but that's okay because it's doing something. So, I start with a vision and I end up with something. It may not be the vision, but it's something else.

AM:

Very cool. Do you have any specific goals with your work, and if so, what are they?

RR:

Now, I feel like I just want to create as much as I can. I accidentally stumbled into some shows recently. I'm going to be at Mount Dora, they asked me to do the art center there, an exclusive show, so I'm going to do it in January. I'm going to be at the arts center in June doing—I'll show you the works, you'll get a sneak preview—there's just three pieces in it, a show called *Humanity* or something like that. But I

haven't really tried to do shows, just this year I've been trying to find out who I am as an artist. Like I did this [shows pictures] you can look through some of my nature stuff as we talk. My wife and I get these points on credit cards, so we travel for free. So we went to St Louis to see the Monet and Joan Mitchell show. And I love Monet. I like Joan Mitchell but my wife *really* likes Joan Mitchell and Helen Frankenthaler. So we went to see it.

Wherever I am, I like shooting and interpreting what I see. I'm not really what you would call a representational photographer. Like some landscape photographers, they are just beautiful, they're just absolutely meticulous and beautiful. I like more interpretive, more poetic in some ways. This is just a mixture of stuff, street photography and landscape put together. I've actually got a book I'm putting together on landscapes, which is, it's my spiritual cleanse. A spiritual cleanse is what I've been working on recently, it's more stuff like this.

AM:

Yeah, it does look like, I know its nature, I think, but it's definitely hard to tell.

RR:

You think, yeah, it's hard to tell. It could be a piece of metal, right? But it is nature. I've titled them all too. But this [referencing the book] is just a mock-up, just to play with, just to get an idea of what works and what doesn't work.

AM:

Was there anything specific, I guess when you were talking to Dan, [the subject of] the work in our collection, is there anything more you can say about that or about him?

RR:

Dan? Yeah, yeah. I'll show you. I have the book; you can see behind the scenes if you want. [shows book] He was in a wheelchair, and I'm a firm believer in not showing... I'm not a documentation photographer. I don't really show their circumstances, I'm showing their humanity. So, I focus my lens on their eyes. And I want you to see the human being that's there, not "oh it's some guy in a wheelchair" you know? You can't judge someone because you never know what they've been through. My mom would always say that. So, this is Dan. Oh, Marlborough Mike and spooky, those were

actually tattoos. Read this and the next page, you can read my encounter with them...

So, this is T, who would push him around, and this is what I call behind the scenes shots, you know. He (Dan) did it since I got him his lighter, but T wanted - and he was like this. I literally took a picture like this looking at the thing because he was like 6'4, he was a big kid.

AM:

Meeting all these people, and photographing them, have they changed your opinions or changed you at all?

RR:

Yeah, both. It solidified the fact that my mom was right. I start the book with "there but for the grace of God go I" because it could happen to anybody. I could have a stroke, and I could be like that. My wife could just kick me out, like "he's a vegetable I don't want anything to do with him" you know? It could happen to anybody. It made me feel, really feel, not just know-because I knew it-but it made me feel how fragile life really is. And these people are just hanging on, and dignity is the only thing they really have and sometimes they lose that and it's really sad.

I remember talking to the Berkeley kids in the 8th grade. I talked to their class, and they are so self-conscious and with peer pressure, you know when you're in 8th grade it's clique-ish, so I said, "imagine you're the only one here who hasn't showered in a month. You haven't washed your clothes, or brushed your teeth, you've been eating scraps and then when you come to sit down everyone goes away from you because they think you might give them some sort of contagious disease or something. Imagine how that makes you feel about yourself." And that's the one thing when you're talking with homeless people, and you have to be careful, some are mentally deranged and it's very dangerous, but what I've found is you can give them money, it doesn't help them. I mean if they go and get a beer with it for me that's fine, it gives them 5 minutes' worth of something to get their mind off their life.

But if you say, "hey how you doing" and not in a patronizing way just say, "yeah you know what just happened to me I had to go buy a camper for my daughter and now I have no money" you know or whatever, you just talk to them like people. Like M,

you see the Black man there in the middle. He's one of my best friends. He was homeless in Ybor City and now he's not homeless. I helped him, he actually had two houses, he never did drugs, he drank beer but not to excess, but he was a hoarder. And he had two little shotgun houses in Ybor City. Finally, after about 6 months he trusted me enough and he took me through with my cell phone light and we're climbing through stuff and there's like beans from 1960 in there, there's all kinds of old stuff and he had all this construction stuff for him to fix it up. Now, he's 70 years old at this time and he was going to fix up these houses. I knew that wasn't going to happen. And he had \$900,000 worth of city fines on him, because he lived on the sidewalk, and we'd sit down and talk and once a week we'd walk around the roughest areas of Ybor City. He's 6 foot something but he's really lanky, really skinny, feeble looking, walked slow, and he'd pick up cans and I'd pick up pictures and we'd walk together, and he'd go, "don't you worry about your camera or you, I'm your bodyguard," but everyone respected M. He's like the elder of the homeless community so it was really cool I'm really happy to have that friendship because as a friend of mine says you never see a hearse towing a U-Haul. Right? So it's not about money in life, it's about relationships and what you do and how you live your life.