

# HCC ART GALLERIES

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## HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Amanda Poss

Interviewee: Tracy Midulla

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Amanda Poss (AP):

What is your story of coming into the world of art?

Tracy Midulla (TM):

So coming into the world of art, I suppose depending on where you want that story to begin. I would say that visual arts were the first thing that I was like truly competitive about as a kid. I wanted to win art, basically, as a child. It was the only thing I liked in school. And later in life I thought I was going to be a ballerina. And I was a really well-trained ballerina, but it was before we had gotten to different shapes and sizes of ballerinas in contemporary dance. And so, I got to a certain point—I was 19 and I knew I was never going to be taller than I am, and I had zero expectations of being less curvy, and so I gave up ballet and went back to visual arts and I found myself with a need to go to college but an interest in absolutely nothing but art. So I did community college for a year or two here at HCC.

AP:

With Suzanne Camp Crosby?

TM:

With Suzanne Camp Crosby. It was wildly inspirational. I did not expect—I did not expect to get emotional about that.

AP:

But she was, you know, a big figure here.

TM:

Yeah, I had a dark room in high school in my parents' laundry room and sometimes bathroom and sometimes both, and I just knew when I started taking college classes

that I needed to do something creative, and so I took that class with Suzanne. And I think the whole time I was enrolled at HCC, I took a photo class and she had to basically create new directed independent study classes just so that I could keep taking photo classes. I wanted to get out of Tampa, wanted to get out of community college, and left for Atlanta and went to the Atlanta College of Art, which is no longer around. But it was probably the best and most formative creative experience in my life.

AP:

You continued with photo there?

TM:

I started with photo, but I didn't like their photo instructor and then I was totally seduced by printmaking. And I think that's when I became a printmaker, and I always had an interest in sculpture. So, my undergraduate degree was an interdisciplinary degree with an emphasis in printmaking and sculpture. But yeah, I got there, and I didn't like their photo teacher because she made me retake Photo 1 after 4 semesters of working with somebody that I felt was far superior to her, she made me retake Photo 1 and I think I dropped it. I don't think I ever finished.

AP:

So, then the shift started happening in the kind of art that you made.

TM:

Yeah.

AP:

So speaking of, that's a good transition to the next question. What does your artistic process look like?

TM:

My artistic process is completely different now. I don't really make art on a regular basis. I make exhibitions now, which I find equally as rewarding and equally as frustrating, and the only difference is that I never work independently. I'm always collaborating with somebody. So, that's what my process looks like now. My finished product is events and exhibitions. I do still make some things. I dabble secretly, but I don't see any reason to share.

AP:

But I think it's interesting that you mentioned it's collaborative because of printmaking. It's a fairly, you know, you have a shop, right? It can be a collaborative spirit.

TM:

I was never good at working in a studio by myself because of the training that I had that started here having like a gang dark room, and then when I went to ACA there was a print shop, and it was wonderful. But all those facilities are shared. The sculpture facility was shared and I just never, never felt like I excelled in the studio alone. Even if the work wasn't collaborative, having people around me was good. I still have a hard time working alone.

AP:

So when you were making more regularly, or you can talk about how the process is like with exhibitions as the curator and the director. What specific goals do you have with your art or creative process in general? If so, what are they?

TM:

I would say that aesthetically I'm incredibly selfish. I only want to work with artists who I feel like they make beautiful or relatable objects. I'm finally in a position in my life where I can be a little selfish and self-centered about that. In fact, people often ask, what kind of gallery is Tempus? What do you show? And I can never really answer that question other than saying, you know, we don't show landscape paintings or portrait photography or finite graphite renderings. And it's not because I don't like those things. It's just because I don't feel like we need to house those things. I guess maybe the best way to describe it is that I enjoy making a place for artists that need a voice and would like to have an experimental exhibition. Originally when Tempus started, I just wanted it to be a place where artists can make work outside of what maybe their regular gallerist could not sell. And now I just want to sell things and make money. [Laughter] But I want to sell very good things to very good people for decent amount of money. But you know, that's what drives me. I want to bring beautiful things to other people, and I like working with easy to get along with artists because it is a collaboration.

AP:

Mm-hmm. Absolutely. There are so many good artists who are also good humans, right?

TM:

Yes, and I have very little interest in working with artists that know exactly what they want to do, exactly how, they don't want to consider the space, and they don't want to consider the history of the organization because I do think that it should be a collaboration. And ultimately, they always get their way, but I don't like working with them unless they can let me and my staff collaborate.

AP:

This again transitions nicely to the next question. How do you identify or interact with your local art scene? So, for you it's very hand in hand right now.

TM:

It is. It's 100% hand in hand. I actually don't have any facet of my life aside from my relationship with my parents and my daughter that aren't in some way intertwined in the art community. And then finding even as I, in that situation, as I'm having some successes in the community, my parents will reach out and call and say "Ohh you met so-and-so the other day, we know them from..." and so ultimately it has crept into every part of my life and my daughter's going into theater. She's now working for or alongside people that I've known in the creative community for a long time. So, I interact with the art community everyday all the time, no matter what. But I find it to be really rewarding. I do think it's strange that I don't have really any friends that aren't in some way linked to the art community.

AP:

That's not strange. I think when you're in it, it's a passion too.

TM:

It is, and it's also an all-encompassing field, I feel. Especially with a non-profit background, you work every day and on the days that you don't work, it's just because you're too tired to work. And so, you just don't have a lot of connections with people that aren't somehow related to what you do for a living, and that's why it's so important that you have some control over what you want to do and how you want to do it. Because if you work for joy, you have to love what you're doing. And many of us have to work all the time so it's not really worth doing. It's not enjoyable.

AP:

Amen. [Laughter] So the piece in our collection "*So this was her kingdom: an octagonal house, a room full of books, and a bear*", what was the specific inspiration for that?

TM:

I'm embarrassed that I don't remember exactly where the quote came from. It's from a book. And ohh gosh I have it earmarked. Do you have it?

AP:

Found it. Marion Engel's novel "Bear", from 1976. About a lonely female librarian who engages in a very intimate relationship with the bear. [Laughter]

TM:

Yeah. Yeah, that's so funny. It's such a good title, I've totally forgot it. You read it to me, and I was like, ohh this one ends with a bear! I think I read that book in art school, which is crazy because I didn't make that piece until what was that 2016-17?

AP:

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TM:

2015? Huh. That's weird. I thought it was— I totally thought that it was 2016. I thought I was already divorced.

AP:

Maybe it was the end of it.

TM:

Had to have been. That whole body of work is— OK, to go back to the creative process, when I was actually making things. I never ever made one piece; it was always a series. It was always this body of work because I'm formulaic and I work through the process of communicating ideas. And at the time, I was very interested in metaphors for being veiled, being hidden. At that time, I felt like a lot of myself was being pushed back or covered up. And it became very much about intimacy, a lack of intimacy, hidden intimacy, and for a lack of better terms, just having the joy sucked out of my life. I don't even know if I realized at the time that that whole body of work was about rediscovering who I was after being in a fairly—not fairly—an incredibly oppressive relationship for over a decade. So the whole body of work was about transparency, like literally those all of those pieces, have a transparent veil over them. And the exhibition was called *Second Seer*. And I was just talking about this morning. I was talking to Jenn Miller about it. And we were talking about how the exhibition title got totally fumbled and they had to reprint everything, because the gallerist at the time thought it was a typo and changed it to “second seed.”

Which is really insulting because the second seed is what farmers throw away because you can't harvest from it. And I was like, no, my work is not a second seed. It's about a second seer, and it was really about hiding and looking at the same time, hiding from people that are seeing you, but knowing that they see you and you see them no matter how many layers you try and cover up. And then I always just find hands to be super seductive. The first three pieces that I made from that series were all based on beheadings. They were all Judith paintings, which are my favorites, and so they were really about the line of sight in Renaissance paintings. I always thought it was very interesting looking at paintings from the Renaissance that you didn't really need anything else in the painting other than hand gestures and eyes. And

you could pretty much tell what story was being told. And then I became more interested in fewer and fewer people in those scenarios and then what self-portraits look like just through what's in someone's eyes and how they're holding their hands.

AP:

That's so telling because when we first started researching these pieces, the one that's in the show and then also the other one with the darker washes, "*sometimes I'm an actual woman standing perfectly still in the dark*," we didn't know the information was on the back. Because they're on museum postcards. And we literally searched and found the companion image just from what we could see, which was the eyes and the hands and matched it with the corresponding Raphael painting. So yeah, I mean absolutely you can convey it with just the eyes and the hands.

TM:

Yeah, kind of weird. And this is also the last large body work that I've made. I pretty much stopped working after this show.

AP:

So is there anything else you want to tell us about that series?

TM:

You know, I think it's interesting to look back on them and think about your favorite pieces, and then your least favorite pieces that made the cut. Like usually things don't make the cut. But "*The Conversion of St. Paul*," which is a Caravaggio piece, when I think about that body of work, I think about Judith, and I think about that painting because I showed that piece upside down. And I showed it with a pencil drawing of sacred geometry. Which, I don't believe in sacred geometry, I'm not into any real spiritual or occult practice outside of entertainment purposes and nostalgia. But for somebody who has zero ability to "math"--I like to use it as a verb--sacred geometry is so beautiful to me and it's the antithesis of anything that I can actually practice in life. And I just really, really enjoyed using these symbols that I thought were kind of false and trite on top of biblical stories, which I also find to be false and trite. And I just thought that they married very nicely together. And I just really love taking other people's work and turning it upside down too. [Laughter]

I don't know if I have much more to say about [*Second Seer*]. I don't think it's the last work I'll make, but it was the last work that I have made. And I think I knew that when I was making it. It was very much about the end of a relationship, it was about a new beginning to my relationship with my daughter, which has not been easy or even pleasant. Which most parents won't say out loud, but I think every single parent thinks it. And so, it was very much about, like, the finality of spending my time

in a certain way. And I think I definitely was acknowledging that in the work when I was making it.