

# HCC ART GALLERIES



## HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller and Emily Tuberville

Interviewee: Akiko Kotani

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Al Miller (AM):

Okay, we are all set. Oh you got - look at those pictures! They're so beautiful.

Akiko Kotani (AK):

Aren't they wonderful?

AM:

I love looking at those! Do you know what kind of fiber they use?

AK:

Um, no. They used bark, though, whatever was available there.

AM:

I love that, I know. It's such an interesting juxtaposition because the tapa cloth that I had been researching, everything is so - all the symbols mean something and the patterns are very specific to what they're trying to convey for themselves and others, but this is, like, next level. It's really cool.

AK:

Now this gentleman, He's the expert on Mbuti technique. He did an ethnographic study on it and tried to get it, but it's really very - it's a very turgid - in a university or college setting I shouldn't say that, but I think you understand what I'm saying. It's really finely researched about the peoples, about their culture, the art, that takes up one little portion of it, but he really is - he's the guy you go to for Mbuti culture. So,

now, I don't know where my books are. After I moved I had no clue as to where all my stuff is, but I have several books with beautiful plates on it. So I went to the internet to see if I could find images. They're all over now.

AM:

Really, is everyone just collecting them and selling them?

AK:

They - it has been discovered, and they're trading it there right now. And what do I do? I looked up under Google Mbuti art scratching, my name came up because I have done work in it, and so under this site it says I've done work. So, of course. I'm very happy, but I did this just to show you where my work comes from. I sort of extracted a lot of inspiration, I was very inspired by their work. They're kind of humorous, the rhythms of it and so, anyway, ask your questions. Sorry.

AM:

You're okay! We love any information that you have. Some of the questions are just like generally. We do have some of your other resources, but how has creating art impacted you personally, if at all? I know it's a very big question.

AK:

That's a HUGE question! Let me see if I can give you a reasonable answer to that. I would say that ever since I can remember, even as a child, this is how I was, how I am today I feel I was then. My mother had difficulty with me because being Asian also, I was expected to behave in a certain way - I never could. And for some reason, my mother always gave me room to explore. I mean, I just am so happy that she did that because ever since I was a kid, I had incredible curiosity. I was very bright, but I had incredible learning disabilities. Now, we're in an education system, community or so, I can say this and you can understand because I was also a professor, you know, for 20+ years. And just because someone is right in one area doesn't mean that they can be right in all areas. We know this, okay. But growing up, I could not read. That I became a professor is some kind of miracle. But a person who is bright, resourceful, and creative like I was, we tend to compensate with our losses and we go with what we have. And that is how I was able to manage my difficulties. So when I was a professor, I was given many students that had learning disabilities. When they found out how successful I was with students with learning disabilities, they sent them all to me and I loved it. Because intuitively I really understood what they were going

through, and that all we had to find was where they were - where their overabundance in education lay. Once we found that, everything else came into place. Because you have to overcome and compensate if you don't have something - in our culture, we tend to want to fix it, but there are people that are so talented in one area that it's not possible to fix it. We're in America and we want to fix everything! We want to make everything even and fix it. Well, I found out that isn't always possible. I'm sorry, I'm taking a long time to answer your question -

AM:

That's okay.

AK:

And so, ever since I was born, I've always had a very strong trajectory towards this way of living, being curious, being -you know- bright, but not bright in the way that was, according to our educational standards. And I just simply, by trial and error, found my way to where I am today. And it was being an artist, that was the most fulfilling avenue for me. And so, I just put all my energies into being an artist. Does that answer your question?

AM:

It does.

AK:

I'm sorry, I took kind of a long way around to get to the end.

AM:

It's all important.

ET:

And then our next question would be: How do you personally identify or interact with the local art community?

AK:

That's a really good question. I am - I will tell you I'm 82 now, because I've been at this a long time and I consider myself a long-distance runner because I haven't - obviously I'm still producing work. And so, when my husband and I decided to live in Florida my primary thought was "Hooray, I can retire from art!!" Because for me it

really was all-consuming and it took quite a bit of my energy. Well, I came here and, lo and behold, I found a community that liked my work [laughs]. So I said, "All right, let's try this out." And so here I am, I am still producing work. I've been invited to show here in group shows and there for one person shows. In fact, in your beautiful, what is it, 221 gallery?

AM:

Mm hmm.

AK:

I had my soft walls here, and it was very well-accepted. So, does that answer your question?

AM:

[laughs] Yes it does.

AK:

Okay.

AM:

My next question is: How has the creation of this series, that you donated a part of, affected your other work? And I guess the influence of the bark cloth?

AK:

Okay, that's a very good question because I came upon, as I told you before, the images of Mbuti scratchings while visiting Amsterdam. And I had never really seen this work before. And looking at the work, the plates, and reading about the Mbuti pygmy peoples of the Ituri Rainforest in Central Africa, what captured me was that they were abstract, they were about their cyclical life. As far as I understand, I don't think they're literate in the sense that we know literacy in our country. But this is a way that they can express themselves; they can express something more than the cyclical nature of their life, but you can see and discern that there is humor, there is seriousness, if you look at the works and the whole - the composition is tight. I mean, everything about the work is as complex as any kind of education that one can provide from a master's program in our country. And so, as I looked and looked at their work, it really inspired me to combine my stitching on various soft materials. I did a whole series of works on silk and something called *kasa sheer*, which is a

polyester-like material in layers. Then of course what I did was, I was inspired by the work, I took images and proportions and rhythms, especially rhythms I would say, from their work and I translated into my language and did layered work and did works that I - in your collection right now is a piece that is hand-woven, I did the weaving of the substrate and I stitched lines onto it. I did a whole series in wool-on-wool, a whole series in silk-on-silk, handwoven silk. And so, really I would say it consumed me for about a two year period. Now that also was a transition from my weaving, which was tapestry weaving. Tapestry weaving and I started to seriously do my work with stitching, the running stitch. I'll stop there.

ET:

[laughs] And then we're kind of going to go back to your experience at HCC: what was that like? As a professor, or any other experiences that you've had here?

AK:

Oh, wonderful. I first had - when I first came to the area - there was a curator that I met in Tulsa, Oklahoma and she said you must go to HCC on Dale Mabry campus and I said "Okay." So, I came here to an opening and I was stunned, first of all, at the quality of the gallery. The gallery was small - not small, but scaled to the institution, but what surprised me was the quality of the gallery, meaning the lights, the walls, everything about the gallery said to me, "This is really a very well-run gallery." And I said to myself "It's in a community college." I was very impressed. Normally a community college, even if they have the budget for such a facility, or that is not a priority. I would say it's probably more the latter than the former. But I did notice that struck me immediately because I've been through many shows and participated and seen and I can recognize this immediately. So I met the curator here, and it was interesting that curators were here, that also impressed me. And one curator told me "You're new here." "Yes, I'm new here." And he told me, he said "Now, this is a very good place to show." And I said "Oh, thank you for telling me this." He said "because curators come to see the shows." I took note of that. And I was very pleased to hear that.

So since being new here, I think "Oh wow, I hope I can show here someday." So who was assistant at the time, Selina, Selina Roman was the gallery assistant. I met her at this opening. And so, I think about a few weeks or months went by and I emailed her and I said "Selina, how does one have a show at HCC?" And she said "Oh, we were wondering how we could ask you to show here!" So it was a very happy - it was a very

happy occurrence. And by the way, I've always said to my students "You really have to be - if you want something you have to ask. The worst thing that can happen is no. And you can get over it." If you like something, if you go somewhere and you see something that you want to show somewhere, ask "how does an artist have a show in this space?" Because that's really for an artist, that's the last thing they would do. They're so afraid, they're so scared, it's a very natural - it's a very natural reaction, not to be, once again, have a refusal, because we have so many. But you never know, they might want to show your work. So that's how I came to show my work here.

AM:

So what, in the same vein of thinking about students, what would you want your art to convey to students here at HCC, or generally?

AK:

Well, let's start with the work *Red on Yellow*. I want them to understand that a work that was made with many layers to an artwork, and what you see in front of you may be - for me anyway, let me explain it this way, for me it's a distillation of a lot of research, a lot of training behind me, all of that is in the work in front of you. And this particular work happens to have been inspired by the Mbuti forest people, from the Ituri forest in the Congo. And my fascination with their work in studying and trying to understand where their work comes from - this is all training I had as a student, and then as a professor that I tried to impart to my students, that research is very much a part of doing artwork. And I think that many young artists or even the public in general, they may think that artists are just - their head is kind of just in the clouds, they just pour out this thing on the canvas, they don't have a thought in their head that's not organized at all, but it's really quite the opposite. If you look at work of artists that are solid, that holds your interest for a long time, it's because there's a lot of thinking, a lot of thought, a lot of research, hard research behind what is done. And so I would like the students to understand that all the work they're doing with their liberal education, they may hate to go to one class and like another one, but they all add up to art, or whatever field they're entering, it will all add to that. So that's really what I want them to understand.

AM:

Thank you

ET:

And then, how would you encourage students to get more involved in the local arts scene?

AK:

It's really not that difficult. First of all, just find out where the openings of shows are occurring, and that is well-publicized. Now, I totally understand that going to a gallery can be intimidating. I worked at the university at Slippery Rock in Western Pennsylvania, and most of my students, I would say 80-90% of my students, were first generation students at the university level. My students' parents were farmers, they were really very hard-working people. And at first, it was difficult for me to - because I had just come from New York City, it was difficult for me to adjust to this environment, but then I began to understand that they were afraid. It was something new, it was something that was not in their lifestyle. In other words, they did not have parents that took them to these places. In fact, many of the students, for the first time in their whole life, attended our university gallery. And it's intimidating for them, they're scared. So, I would say that: find a friend, and go to - the first thing you should do is try to attend as many openings of events that you can. Now something very interesting is going to happen if you do that. You will begin to see people, repeated people at these openings and eventually you have enough courage to speak to them. Don't be afraid to ask a question of anyone there. Now, when you are brave enough, speak to the artist that is showing. They are just as scared as you are at an opening, believe it or not. They have no idea how their art will be taken. Most artists have very poor self-esteem, believe it or not. So if you go up and ask a very simple question, they will be very happy to engage and talk to you. So this way you will begin to get to know people and then you can ask more questions, and you'll get the hang of it. You will start to see how things are done because many of these rituals, as I say, are repeated.

AM:

So, I know that the - you said you hand-wove those fabrics for the pieces. Do you see any similarity between the creation of the bark cloth itself and weaving for your artwork pieces?

AK:

Yes, of course! Because it's tactile.

AM:

Yes!

AK:

It is a process that is as you are - your hands are within the work, so to speak. There was a - not today, I mean for your generation it's wonderful, you don't have this overlay of craft as being not fine art. I don't think you grew up this way, but when I started that was really - if anyone heard that you were doing anything with that much involvement with your hands, it was just not - although sculptors use their hands a good deal, but you get the point. It's not a piece of sculpture, nor is it a piece of oil painting. But it has to do with a process and the process involves involvement with your hands very much involved in the work. I happen to really enjoy working with textiles. Now, if you ask me if I enjoy using my hands in clay, I would say "No, please keep me away from clay!" because I am not - I am just not - my hands love textiles, but not clay. Don't ask me, I was just born this way. And so, also I have to add this because this I realize much much later in my life, that the repetitive nature of the work that I do seemed to soothe my internal situation - my internal self, my equilibrium, whatever it might be called - I'm sure psychologists would have all kinds of fancy names for me, but all I know is if I am working with my hands in a repetitive nature it calms me. And so, that's probably why I work in the field that I do.

AM:

Beautiful. Oh, also I'm thinking about how you said that when they create the cloth, the men will kind of push out the fiber and the women will incise and then fill it. Do you see anything with the running stitch and incising, that feels very similar?

AK:

Wonderful question! Because I have always thought when I'm stitching with my threads, silk thread on silk especially, or well any other material, I always thought of the action of the needle and thread, of, actually tactile even more so than the bark scratching because you're puncturing the surface of the textile and you're also coming back up again to the surface. And so it's a repetitive motion of punching down and punching up and it is an odd but very satisfying procedure to be able to do that. Now if you use a sewing machine - a sewing machine will naturally do this for you, but if you do it with your hands, you can actually see the process of a stitch. Now perhaps at this point I could talk more about how my work, and it is sort of, I can say - yes, mostly all of my work - I am very attracted to the elemental in my work,

and by that I mean this - I always love - I tend to gravitate, let me put it that way, it's not a very conscious thing, but I tend to gravitate towards the essential nature of stitch. What is the most used stitch that embroidery cannot do without? And it's the running stitch. And that is a stitch that I love to do. And for me, the action of punching up with the thread and punching down and having a continuous line, for me it's extremely satisfying. Someone else, it may not be, for me it is. And for the kind of installation work that I'm doing right now, which is crocheting, crocheting the most elemental is the chain stitch. And a chain stitch and a single stitch. Someone who crochets would understand my language, but it is really the most essential two stitches to produce any kind of matrix in crocheting that I use for my work. Now one of the things that appeals to me is to use a very elemental process, but to make big statements, to make large statements with it. It attracts me very much, this whole idea of using something really simple, something that is overlooked many times, but makes very beautiful statements on a grand scale.

AM:

Well, I think my last question is kind of like out there, but the colors for *Red on Yellow*, are you kind of - I see the red on yellow in that piece right there - are you - was it more referring to the colors of the bark cloth, or was that just so it stands out? Because the red really stands out against the yellow background.

AK:

It has - It is not so much an extension of the Mbuti colors, no, or the bark, no. But that, I would say, we move more into my aesthetic process. I start here and then I move here and then I begin to think "What would red or yellow look?" and then so I would that - it really is in that line of process.

AM:

Okay. Thank you so much for everything!

AK:

Oh, thank you!

AM:

Is there anything else that you wanted to say that we didn't get to? Or?

AK:

No, it's just that I am - as I said in the beginning - I think that HCC, as a community college, is putting their resources in the right place, and that is art. I've met your Dean and they're all very much backing both here and Ybor, they're very involved and very happy to support the arts. And I'm very happy about that.

AM:

Beautiful, we're so happy that you came! Thank you so much for your time and your information!

AK:

Of course! I really enjoyed it and as I told you before, if you want to - at any time during the year, have me do a lecture more organized with actual slides of the work I'd be very happy to do that.

AM:

Of course.