

HCC ART GALLERIES



HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller

Interviewee: Lynn Whitelaw

Date of Interview: May 19, 2023

Location of Interview: Tampa, FL

Duration of Recording: 00:37:55

Al Miller (AM):

So my next series of questions are about Tom Kramer. What was your relationship to Tom?

Lynn Whitelaw (LW):

Well, I was the director of the Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art up in Tarpon Springs at St. Petersburg College, and Tom and Paula, and another nice group of people from St. Petersburg became members of the museum. They were very supportive of the Leepa-Rattner, and I was always very grateful for that connection. So I first knew them as members of the museum and then I found out they were great art lovers. Then I found out about Tom and Paula and that they're the *it* couple of dance in the Tampa Bay area. I really have to say that there is dance before Tom and Paula and there is dance after Tom and Paula. They were a pinnacle of change in the public's understanding, perception, and enjoyment of dance. There were some great dancers here before, but they really had a tremendous impact upon bringing awareness of dance.

AM:

Yeah, oh really. Obviously all of the pieces in the HCC permanent art collection of Tom's are the dance photographs, many of which were collected by Carolyn at Ybor, which was very wonderful. How do you remember Tom?

LW:

I remember Tom as a dance photographer for over 50 years. As I got to understand dance better in the Tampa Bay area through Tom and Paula, and Helen French and others who were in the dance community, I realized that this was something extraordinary. So I offered Tom an exhibit called *Dance Alive in Tampa Bay by Tom Kramer* that was up in late December or in late 2014 and early 2015 at the museum. The photography that Tom does was he captured the decisive moment and he befriended the dancers. He observed them, he understood them, he captured them. He's doing that with lighting and color and texture and composition. I think over his 50 years of doing photography, and he had been a photographer in other areas, but the last 30 years of his life was primarily dealing with dance photography and he became the master of that realm.

AM:

Truly, sometimes I think about a lot of the titles for his work are the names of the dancers, which I think is really wonderful, especially for someone who's getting into fine art photography to show appreciation for the person you're photographing as well.

LW:

Absolutely. He was remarkable. I was working with Tom on the last body of work that he had done during COVID. But that kind of is your next question. Did the artists face any evident challenges? Is that your next question or?

AM:

We can go to that one. The next one was how they became an artist, but we can transition into this.

LW:

Oh, I have a great story to share. I asked Tom to write an artist's statement when he had the exhibit at the Leepa-Rattner. I'll read this because I think it was wonderful. He says: "when I was about eight, I cleaned out my father's coal bin, found an old workbench. Bored three of my mother's Pyrex pie plates, revived her - relieved her of two clothespins and proceeded to develop my first roll of film, taken with my prized new box camera. In the glow of a red light that I had found at the Five and Dime store, I witnessed incredible magic. Pictures miraculously emerge from a blank roll of film. My pictures. I was eight and I had found myself. I was a photographer." Isn't

that great?

AM:

That's beautiful! That's such a wonderful story.

LW:

Yeah. Well, he had written that for a part of his artist statement. I thought that has to be shared because that magic can't happen again. It's one of the things that fascinates me with both of these photographers: I tell people, buy gelatin silver print photography because it is an art form that no longer will exist in our digital world. It truly was an art form, because it required a dark room and all of these elements to make it work. So it's remarkable.

AM:

No, it really is. I've had some friends who are photographers who like to shoot on film. I remember helping them develop their roles. Granted, the smaller Kodak films are not quite the same. There's a lot more that goes into this than I really thought. You set the figures off, you get them back when I had my little camera. But that's how it really is. So it's a difficult art form.

LW:

And we just had the death of Herb Snitzer, the jazz photographer. Robin O'Dell did a talk on Herb's work and I actually have two of Tom's dance photographs. I have a whole wall of black and white photography. So I have two of Tom's dance photographs from the 1970s. I have the work by Suzanne Camp Crosby from 1974, but I have five Herb Snitzer's and they're remarkable works of jazz photographers or jazz musicians.

AM:

That's beautiful, I wasn't aware of that, but I need to look more into it.

LW:

Herb died on January 31st of 2022. He was a remarkable, remarkable man. It's a shame if there are not some photographs in the collection of Herb's, because Herb was so much an educator. Maybe I can talk to Carol, his widow, but HCC should do an exhibit of Herb's work.

AM:

Okay, I can talk to Amanda about that. The collection is actively collecting, mostly through donations, because we don't have the budget to have an acquisition fund. As long as they're a Tampa Bay artist who is also an educator and so impactful, we would love to. We love collecting those kinds of works. My next question about Tom is, did he face any evident challenges? I know you were about to speak on work that he was producing with you.

LW:

I think this is what's consummate about someone who is an artist. They see challenges as opportunities. For Tom, he's in the twilight of his life, he's actually producing, and there was a big retrospective of his work for his 85th birthday. That showed a lot of wonderful work, but then along comes COVID. And here he is, trapped at home, wanting to produce what he thinks is going to be the best work that he's been able to do because he's got the connections, and he's got the equipment, and he's got opportunities to work as he befriended so many artists. Then COVID happens and everything shut down and he's in the twilight of his life So he looks at that challenge as an opportunity. What he did was working with Paul Wilborn and the Palladium Theater was to go to the theater, be given full access to theatrical lighting and to (still they're with masks and there's very few people) engage dancers in doing improvised dance and he's photographing from behind. He's not photographing a dance performance. He's photographing dancers who are improvising and he gives them things like the mask series that he did or the long drapery that he did. He was constantly reinventing himself so he took the challenge of COVID and turned it into probably his most important body of work because it takes dance to a different realm.

AM:

Wow, that's beautiful. I haven't seen those works before. I would love to explore those, because that sounds really beautiful.

LW:

The works were at the Morean Arts Center. That show has come down. We had the big Beacon Festival, and he worked with HCC, he worked with SPC, he worked with the Palladium. He worked even out at USF, but he was documenting dance everywhere that he could.

AM:

Did he have a personal definition to his work outside of the dance photography? Did he really consider himself a dance photographer or is it someone who happens to photograph dance as an artist?

LW:

Well, he had been a photographer for 50 years. Now, dance became his passion. It became his muse. What he defined as dance and the relationship of he as a photographer and the person as a dancer was that they were creating a sense of community and that they were in collaboration over their creativity. So it was to be an amalgam of this spirit. So he's not just doing a gig, like there's a dance this weekend, we need a dance photographer, come on down and photograph it. That is not the way he worked. Particularly with the COVID works, that really was the culmination of his artistic career, because it was that collaborative one-on-one. So, I think that became a personal definition of his work.

AM:

Oh, definitely. Do you have the indication of how his work impacted the local art community, maybe outside of the dance community?

LW:

Well, his photography is in the collection of the Leepa-Rattner Museum of Art, the St. Pete Museum of Fine Arts, and the Florida Museum of Photographic Arts. Robin O'Dell, who's now the co-director of FMOPA, is a very dear friend. Don't we all wish that at the end of our lives, we have these things that celebrate what we have accomplished? I think it was because of people like Robin, myself, Paul Wilborn, and others who had such admiration for Tom and the work that he was doing. There was a PBS, Channel 3, Arts Plus that was done on Tom. What a wonderful documentation. You should have a copy of that in your collection. That Beacon, the dance program that he and Paula helped to start, will now continue for years to come through younger dancers. So his work will be shown in museums, his interest in dance will be shown on stages, and we have a wonderful visual legacy through the WEDU production. So to be in your 80s and to really have that be your crowning time. What an honor. So for Tom, I was just devastated when he passed. I'm grateful that because he passed rather quickly, it didn't diminish the memories that I have of him and the vibrancy and I'm sorry he didn't get to see these exhibits. We were working on these exhibits when he passed away. So he never saw them, but he

knows they happened. And that's wonderful.

AM:

Exactly, that's so beautiful. That was the end of my questions for Tom, but is there anything else you'd like to say about him?

LW:

No, I just hope we continue to attract people to the Tampa Bay area of the caliber of a Tom and Paula Kramer. This area is so rich in the arts, and it can be a magnet. So I look forward to the next Tom and Paula, or the next Herb Schnitzer, or the next Suzanne Camp Crosby, who will come into our art community life, not just as singular artists, but ones ingrained in our artistic milieu.

It's one of the things that has bothered me over the years because I'm old and I have lived in the Tampa Bay area for almost 50 years. When I retired, I wrote an article called "40 Years of the Visual Arts in the Tampa Bay Area as a Personal Reflection" and that was published and I gave some talks about that. When you go back and look at the evolution of the arts in the Tampa Bay area, it's an amazing story. It's a story where I feel so many artists who were so important, and certainly Suzanne Camp Crosby is key to that, for the growth of the arts in our community, sometimes haven't gotten the recognition because we're always about the new. I think that's even more pronounced now than it ever has been because of social media and other things. And COVID has kind of made a breaking point in history too. So anything I can ever do to honor some of the incredible artists that have made the Tampa Bay area into the arts center that it is today.