

# HCC ART GALLERIES



## HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Cort Hartle

Interviewee: Jenny Carey

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Cort Hartle (CH):

This is Cort Hartle, I am here with Jenny Carey conducting an oral history interview for the HCC Permanent Art Collection. I just have a few questions to ask about your art and your connection to the local art community. The first one is, what is your story of coming into the world of art?

Jenny Carey (JC):

I was thinking about this question in preparation for our conversation. In my artist statement, I write about my first camera. I received a Yashica camera when I was in high school. It was a box-style camera where you look down into the lens to photograph. I think that the camera influenced the perspective in my photography. But I realized during my preparation that I remember having a Brownie camera earlier or that the family had a Brownie camera. I grew up in a small town in Delaware, and my family documented many family events with that little Brownie, which I am grateful for now. So, I think photography as a memory source influenced me very early. My mother and I moved from Delaware when I was a young child, in about sixth grade. I consider that move to be a pivotal moment in shaping my identity.

I still strongly identify with living and growing up in that small town, Lewes, Delaware. As a child, I had a real sense of freedom there. A putting "pennies on the train track" kind of freedom. Now, I probably associate memory, which I think

influences much of my work, and photography with a sense of real freedom. So that's the beginning of my work.

The Yashica camera I received when I was in high school, I name it as shaping the perspective in some of my work, particularly in my *Erosion* series. In those images, I'm looking down into the sand and the sea, like the old Yashica lens perspective but with a different camera. I like to joke that I'm a happy person, but I have two or three series where I'm looking down into the subject matter, so maybe that has something to do with that early Yashica camera.

CH:

Your work deals so much with memory, and the process of making the work also has that kind of muscle memory to it too of looking down.

JC:

That's a remarkably interesting perspective. Yes, I like that addition to that narrative. I had included the personal history of my photography in a recent statement, and I had not spoken about it much before. People in this area are familiar with my work because I've shown so much with my Creatives Exchange Collective. But I also show much of my work outside the city and the state. Consequently, I think people don't know much [about when I started].

CH:

You kind of touched on this a little bit, but what does your artistic process look like?

JC:

I think I'm one of those photographers or artists that people say, "Oh, she has a really good eye." I am not unhappy with that. Because I am not someone who designs projects in my head. I can't say that I never do that, but I am primarily a seer. Once I am drawn to something and decide to photograph, I will work within that physical environment. I take a lot of multiples as part of the process. I like to show multiples. I mentioned I don't build still life's or create a lot of situations purposely, but I've noticed that's become more appealing, perhaps because of now having a physical studio.

But normally, naturally, what will happen for me is [for example], I will see the morning light out the window, and a discarded candle is in a small puddle on a table

after the rain, and the light is hitting it exactly right. That is how the photograph behind you, one of my favorites, was taken outside the door of my house.

I only use natural light. I'll move in the direction of the light and photograph. I shoot a lot when I travel. Sometimes, I think I'm at my best [when traveling]. I feel like we are just much freer and more open when we travel. I appreciate it when I can leave behind the responsibilities of home and all that comes with it. I also think I work best in a more relaxed emotional state. Many suggest, "You must work on your craft every day." It doesn't work like that for me, and I don't have that freedom daily. I need to be open. I prefer to be in a space and time where I won't be interrupted. And I can continue uninterrupted." There must be some flow for me. Scheduling to take photographs from 2 to 4 [every day] feels very foreign to me.

CH:

It's funny that you mentioned traveling as being kind of where you feel most inspired or motivated, where you can work too and be a seer. Because I feel that when we're traveling, we're seeing things differently, essentially because we are seeing them for the first time or seeing stuff that we're not used to seeing. Speaking of traveling, I understand the *Erosion* series was made during a travel period. Do you have any specific inspiration for the *Erosion* series?

JC:

I went to Costa Rica to study Spanish. We were staying in Playa Guiones, Costa Rica on the Pacific side. I was with a high school friend, we had raised our children at the same time, were friends for decades with a long history together. Right before we left, a close friend of mine had passed away. It wasn't 100% unexpected, but it was still shocking to lose someone your age and a peer, and we were quite close.

I like to pay attention to what I believe are pivotal moments. Just as I told the story where I believe that my small town was instrumental in giving me my sense of freedom; and the little Brownie camera for my interest in memories. This person (who passed away) was one of those people who played a part in several of the turning points in my life. She had been with me on my journey, as had the person I was traveling with. She also lost a friend, so we were discussing [that]. It wasn't that I was in mourning as much as I was just incredibly open to the experience of change and loss. And being in this pristine environment, Costa Rica is well known for being a

magical, Blue Zone, spiritual place. The beach was also a location where turtles come in to nest.

So, it's a powerful place. I would walk on the beach every morning. What you see in these works, which can appear to the viewer like a drawing instead of a photograph, is the waves are unearthing some of the black sand from the beach next door. The tide then left these shapes, figures, and images in the sand, and I started noticing them. It's repeating the looking down perspective, and I began photographing them. It was very different work for me and much more abstract than I had [made before].

And they are unique! I showed them for the first time at the HCC Ybor campus, and people were very receptive. What's interesting about this work is that people can't tell what it is. Several viewers first thought they were drawings, and [they asked me] how do you do that? I don't do any alterations or manipulations in photoshop, unless necessary. These photographs were taken with an iPhone camera. I prefer, particularly now that I'm doing digital, for the work to come out of the camera as if I developed it. It's my personal preference to do less editing, and it helps me to practice. It's so easy with your iPhone to take a photograph, fix it, change it, and cut it. So, I try to be a little more thoughtful when working with my camera.

Regarding the same images, my friend with me remarked: "I didn't even see that." I've returned to Costa Rica two more times to photograph. It often requires specific times of the day because of the tide and the sun. Sometimes people will approach me when I walk along the beach with my camera, looking down at the sand, and [they ask] what are you photographing? [laughter]

CH:

[laughter] "Why don't you take a picture of the sunset or the dolphin?"

JC:

Then, I'll show them [*Erosion #3*] newer works where you can see there's almost a sense of a forest. As if the ocean is drawing what it sees, and people say the same, "Oh, I didn't even see that." We all so rarely see. I think the sand is interesting, and I think it's unique to that beach. Of course, I haven't studied it. But I don't see it (drawings) in the area where I live now. Perhaps if I went 20 more miles down the road in Costa Rica, which would take you about 3 hours, you might see the same

thing. But that beach has been where this work is available to me so far. It has been well received and collected. But it has not been shown as a full series yet.

CH:

Well, now we have three of them, so we can [show them together].

JC:

These three were first shown as triptychs. It is still in my home as it reminds me of my friend and it's important work to me. It was also the first time the Creatives Collective exhibited together at HCC. Several of those artists are well-recognized. When we began showing [together], I had been an arts writer for almost 20 years in Tampa and had photographic works out there and in the paper. But I wasn't exhibiting as a photographer locally. I was unwilling to show with the group without it being juried, as it felt unfair to be allowed to participate as the group's chair or coordinator. So, we started jurying the shows—and now we've always continued juried shows—and that's how that work happened to be put in the show.

CH:

Would you like to speak a little more on the Creatives Exchange?

JC:

Sure! Creatives Exchange is a group of professional women artists. The group is based in Tampa. It will be ten years in November 2023 since we created the group. We have an anniversary show scheduled here in the Ybor Kress building. I used to work at the Arts Council of Hillsborough County, and one of my jobs was to oversee the Artist Advisory Committee. When I entered the group, they wanted “to make a difference in the community.” So, they started an event to recognize artists who received an individual artist grant at the end of the year, similar to what they do in Pinellas County now. We created a Day of the Dead celebration as a fundraiser for the Tampa Museum, with 20-foot puppets that entered the building. [Creatives Exchange] is a multidisciplinary group—we have photography, mixed media, dance, choreography, music. It is a fun group to work with, with exceptional artists.

When I left the Arts Council, I didn't want to lose touch with my friends on the committee. It was my favorite part of my job there. During breakfast with Kim Radatz (a member), I suggested a monthly group breakfast. She was enthusiastic, and that's how we [started] it. We have consistently met once a month for ten years. We have breakfast. True, that is what we do; we get together once a month and have

breakfast. But during that period, we've had a lot of personal conversations related to art and our work and how we felt about it. We do a round table of what we are working on. Or perhaps we'll review a proposal for residency. If an artist wants feedback on their work, that is available. Since the group comprises multiple disciplines, the choreographer sometimes has as much to add to the visual art dialogue as a painter. It's interesting. Some members have also collaborated, including a choreographer and one of the mixed media artists. I believe that performance piece was at HCC.

I also collaborated with the choreographer, creating shadow photographs of a dancer. I typically do not collaborate; I consistently want to be free to do my own thing. But it was a successful collaboration; she made use of the photos.

There has been a real symmetry within the group for all these years. It's a fun group of talented artists: a support base for a project you want to discuss. A group with common interests can be valuable in life and work. I believe that. People sometimes say, "Oh, this is so simple" (a concept), but it has been quite powerful.

CH:

Artists talk all the time about how important community is, not only as a person but also as an artist, as a professional, and as someone who is working on their work, whether the community is art school, collectives, critique clubs, or just a group of friends hanging out. [That is why] it's good to hear that.

JC:

Yes, I think that is so important. At the Arts Council, I started several groups as a part of our cultural plan. I was required to go out into the county and engage with Hillsborough County artists. I tried to get those going because I think the people thrive in them. They weren't all artists showing in Gasparilla or HCC or in the Tampa Museum. Some were artists making art in their homes (aren't we all) and community-based artists. But it's still immensely powerful to have that experience; at every level of art, it is the group experience.

CH:

We talked a bit about the *Erosion* series. On a broader scale, do you have any specific goals with your art as a whole? And if so, what are they?

JC:

I have been a photographer since I was in high school. I think I would photograph whether anyone ever saw the work or not. I have a lot of photographs that people haven't seen. I would say photography and travel, besides my children, are the most valuable things I treasure. I like a lot of freedom in my life; I think photography and a camera give you that freedom. The camera is like a companion, almost like permission to go anywhere I want. When I was writing some of the arts columns for some of the South Tampa news, I would do another smaller project for them, and I would take on the role in the kids' schools as the documentarian; it gave me entrance to any event.

After I did the arts column, I started my site. I love doing artist profiles and wrote them for *Flair*, the tabloid of the *Tampa Tribune*, and I wanted to continue them. And realized, "I can just call any artist that I want to call and say, 'I'm writing for this website, and I want to come and interview you.'" I went to Greenville, NC, to interview the artist who has work above the [St. Pete] pier, Janet Echelman. She was installing the first one on the East Coast of the United States, so I flew up there, and they gave me a press pass, and I interviewed her. I have the most gorgeous photographs of her work.

The camera is my sense of freedom, and I don't try to tame it too much. Now that I'm in the studio here and constantly surrounded [by other artists], I'm either showing more of my work or someone else's—I'm starting to feel more compelled to put work out there. I'm working mostly with multiples, diptychs, and triptychs. [Motioning to photos] That is a recent diptych I did, but I started with a nanotech! A nine-piece composite image for an invitational show at the Tampa International Airport. It was formed from nine 16x24" images. That work started my work on multiples.

I have another series that was made in my home over one year. I had an injury and a boot on my ankle on and off for a year, so I wasn't traveling as much as usual. I know everyone's annoyed when they have an injury, but I felt very confined. That nanotech at the airport was created at that time. I photographed my pool and the ripples in the pool from a water feature. There are four seasons in the photographic series of that water: some dark green, some almost black, and some bright blue.

I'm continuing to work [with multiples] frequently. I want to do more storytelling. Before, my works were more representational. I want to create more narratives similar to this one there [on the wall], which has a self-portrait juxtaposed with an

empty bed. I am looking at my images as larger storytelling, which is not an area that I've tried to explore.

CH:

Nice, yeah. I can definitely see where there's a narrative [in those photos]. Like there's something happening, or that has happened. So, I look forward to seeing that.

JC:

I recognize it has been a common element in my work. I have a photograph taken in Portugal of an empty staircase. It is in this book. It was included in an exhibition titled *Artificial Light*. The staircase presents a space where people can make their own stories. I prefer my work to allow the viewer to create their narrative. I hope my photographs inspire a memory of one's own or some experience of their own. So, the viewer may wonder, "What's happening here." I wrote the statement for the show I asked, is that where someone stole a kiss, is it where someone found light when they were afraid, is it people who are getting ready to come up the stairs as a group?

I like the viewer to have as many ways as possible to enter my work. I'm not trying to make work that you have to struggle with. I want it to be accessible. I don't worry about people liking it, but I like that there is room for them. There's room for them to experience it or to have a memory of their own similar experience.

CH:

My last question is kind of open-ended: is there anything else that we haven't covered here that you would like to touch on, either about the *Erosion* series, your work, or your connection to the local community?

JC:

Well, it's fun being here at the Kress and back in Ybor. I worked in Ybor City in the restaurant business for ten years when I was younger and was surrounded by artists here. That was my first exposure to art, for art's sake, as part of one's day-to-day life. I didn't study art in school. So, I was a bit awestruck. If you were in Ybor, Rauschenberg and Rosenquist were here sometimes, and Theo Wujcik was here. Strong artists were living down here. You couldn't avoid art. And all the artists came to the bar for happy hour. Near Christmas, I would commission artists to do something for all my staff. Art became integrated into my life.



It was also when the Rocky Auctions were held. I don't know if you've heard about those, but it was important. They happened three or four times a year, and all these good artists would be selling art for such cheap prices. They had to stop because [Rocky] wasn't paying taxes. But you could buy exceptionally good art—I still have art from that time—and everybody around the city would come and want to participate. Art became part of my everyday life in a way I hadn't [experienced before]. I might have been taking photographs, but I wasn't thinking of them as art or photography.

The Ybor City art walks began around the same time. I told Ben Easton, who owned Creative Loafing then, "You need an arts column." And he suggested, "Well, write it." So, I started writing about art, the art around me. I didn't do critiques because I didn't feel qualified for that, but I would write about shows, artists and events publicizing, "you should come see this, this is what's happening here." From there, I started writing artist profiles. That was my art education. I've had, I don't know how many years, 20 years of rubbing shoulders with artists daily. I haven't traveled as much since I've been here (in the studio). But I'm right back rubbing shoulders with artists. Perhaps there is a new narrative starting. Maybe I have something to say that I haven't said yet. We'll see.