

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 first question about Suzanne Camp Crosby is what was your relationship to the artist?

Lynn Whitelaw (LW):

I moved to the Tampa Bay area to work at Hillsborough Community College in 1975, and at that Gasparilla Sidewalk Art Show, which is what it was called then, I met Suzanne for the first time. She was just finishing up her master's degree from the University of South Florida and I actually bought one of her pieces and it still is on my wall and it's a very prized possession. From there, our paths crossed many times. I lived in Hyde Park, she lived over on Davis Island. We both went to the same church, which was St. John's Episcopal Church. I had a daughter, and she had three sons. One of her sons was the same age as my daughter. They went to Plant High School together. Las Damas de Arte, the Tampa Museum of Art, where I worked. I taught at St. Petersburg College and she was teaching there too. So our paths crossed and of course I worked at HCC and so did she as an adjunct at that point. So our paths crossed many, many times.

AM:

That's wonderful. How do you remember her - her personality and her art as well?

LW:

Probably the most sincere person I've ever known. I'd say she was an incredible

teacher and I think the legacy of a good teacher is through their students. You talk to any student who's had Suzanne, and they say she had a tremendous impact on their life. She was an incredible mother. She was a very strong community spirit. For whatever she was doing, whether that was as a Sunday school teacher or as working with Las Damas de Arte or working with the city. I mean, she was a community spirit.

AM:

Wonderful! Did she ever mention how she started getting into art and could you recall the story? I know I've seen a lot of her very early photographs from the 70s when I had the honor of going through a lot of her catalog and they're very, very interesting. Did she ever mention to you how she got into art and being an artist?

LW:

Yes, when I was at the Tampa Museum of Art as Curator of Education, and we had a Jerry Yulsman exhibit. And what I would do for those kinds of exhibits is we would have the director's table dinner. So we had a dinner for Jerry Yulsman, that people came to, and he spoke. Well, Suzanne had been a student of Jerry Yulsman. So Suzanne was a tremendous amount of help to me to put that event together. And in that process, we talked a lot about her influences. She got her master's from the University of South Florida, but I think the impetus for her art came from the University of Florida through Jerry Yulsman, and then a strong female photographer by the name of Evon Streetman. I think both of those two photographers had a tremendous impact on Suzanne's career. I think that what she learned from them is that they had strong aesthetics and they encouraged her to find her own aesthetic and to tell her own stories. I think that's what she did. Some might say she used some of Jerry Yulsman's techniques of the double negatives, but she did it in her own voice. I always admired her for all of that.

AM:

Oh, definitely. Did she face any evident challenges that she spoke to you about?

LW:

I think the only challenge was I spoke with her at the college when she was first starting to face health issues. And this is a concern that many artists have in that there are environmental issues that they can face. I think her years in the dark room and having to work with chemicals not only may have, it definitely had an impact on her life. I remember having that conversation with her and she was sort of lamenting

that she hadn't been maybe a little wiser. I think particularly a lot of artists in the 1970s were working with new materials, new chemicals, and we weren't as aware of some of the environmental issues or health issues that they might provide.

AM:

Exactly. I never really thought about that, especially with all of the new photographic techniques. That's really intense.

LW:

Oh, you know, a darkroom is very intense and you're in a very enclosed space.

AM:

Did she have a personal definition of her work?

LW:

I think that she was a visual storyteller. Every one of her photographs were, whether you say calculated - because she'd worked in series, so some of the things were a calculated aesthetic to provide these images. I think that each image stands on its own, even if it was part of a series. And so, I think that's how I would define her work, as a visual storyteller.

AM:

Oh, definitely. I think one of my favorite series of hers is the kid's series where she took that mannequin around with the dog. And oh, they're so whimsical and fun. *Moving* is my favorite one. It's just like on the house, it's on the truck. It's just like, I'm moving. It's so beautiful.

LW:

And they were her own. You look at those and you go, that's a Suzanne Camp Crosby.

AM:

She really had such a voice. I can recognize Suzanne Camp Crosby from a mile away because of how much of her work I've seen. It's so wonderful. Outside of her teaching, do you have any indication of how her work impacted the rest of the art community here in Tampa Bay?

LW:

Oh, well tremendously because she had community involvement. She was the photo laureate of Tampa I think in 2004. She had several state and local arts council grants. As an educator, she was probably better known than almost any college educator I can think of. Suzanne had a real impact. And then things like Les Damas de Arte was great. I had been Curator of Education at the Tampa Museum of Art, and I thought it was wonderful that when she retired, she became a docent at the Tampa Museum of Art. She always wanted to expose people to art, to have them better have appreciation for it. So, that is her legacy.

AM:

It really is. That was the end of my questions for Suzanne, but is there anything else that you'd like to say about her?

LW:

I'm very grateful that I was at Carolyn Kossar's retirement, which was on March 12th, 2020. That's when I had the conversation with Suzanne, and she'd already retired and was having some health issues. Carolyn and I were talking about doing some work together. I was retired and now she was going to have the time because she was retired. That was the last time I saw either one of them because Carolyn died of COVID in July and then Suzanne died later. That is profound to me, that encounter. Then the next day, Hillsborough Community College closed down for COVID. So that's etched into my memory.

AM:

It must have been a really intense time. I know I've seen Carolyn's work as well. That moment must have been really... when you look back on it now it is, but...

LW:

Oh yeah. I never thought that that was going to be the last time that I would see both - either of them, nor did I think that COVID was going to become a reality, that it would alter all of our lives. So that was a profound moment.