HCC ART GALLERIES

HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Cort Hartle
Interviewee: Georgia Vahue
Date of Interview: January 9, 2024
Location of Interview: Tampa, FL
Duration of Recording: 00:53:37

Cort Hartle (CH):
This is Cort Hartle, and I am here interviewing Georgia Vahue for the HCC Permanent Art Collection. First of all, welcome and thank you for doing this interview with me. My first question is: what is your story of coming into the world of art?

Georgia Vahue (GV):
Wow, that's a big one. First of all, I've got to let you know that I'm a Libra, and the reason why I'm saying that is because I actually have two different names that people know me by. The first name was Georgia "Jodee" Conaway. I was very much involved in the arts in the city of Tampa and in Hillsborough County through USF and HCC. When I remarried, I took my husband's name, and so I became Georgia Vahue. That being said, I think it is [known that] Libras lead two different lives, and basically, I have.

In the 1980's, I was very heavily involved in the art scene in the city of Tampa. And there actually was an art scene, [but] it was a bit hidden. I was the first director of the Artists Alliance, which was an alternative space for artists in Hyde Park. I was there mostly with the support of the University of South Florida College of Fine Arts Professors serving as the Alliance's Board of Directors. It was started with funding from the Junior League of Tampa. The Alliance became very instrumental in encouraging the [Tampa Museum of Art] to move forward in support of Florida Artists. There was also another organization called El Sama in Ybor City, but that was

run strictly for artists by artists, which was a bit of a different take [than the Artists Alliance]. El Sama and the Artists Alliance did collaborate on a number of exhibits.

So the work [that I did] for a number of years through the '80s very much involved promoting the arts in Tampa. At that time Tampa was viewed by the public—and probably rightly so in the beginning—as a desert when it came to the arts. The Artists Alliance was the first in bringing Art in Public Spaces to Downtown Tampa in '81 and '82. They were also very instrumental in bringing "What the Arts Really Need" through their vocal fight for [the arts], by questioning the *Tampa Tribune* as to why they and the city are ignoring the arts. Why not have a culture and arts section in the newspaper? I didn't realize when I wrote that editorial the newspaper editor would actually come to my doorstep and discuss with me how they could change it.

But oftentimes, people who lived here felt that they had to leave Tampa, to go to New York, go to Atlanta, go elsewhere to buy fine art, to support the artists, and to visit museums. At that time, the Tampa Museum of Art was just getting off the ground and [the Artists Alliance] was very outspoken in its opinion that the Museum should also exhibit Florida artists. The Museum Director and Board listened, and they dedicated a gallery to promote Florida artists. So that was my start and involvement with the arts. USF College of Fine Arts and the Artists Alliance played a central part in the beginning of my career in 1981-82. I moved on from the Alliance to Ybor City Playmakers Theatre as Development Director. My whole arts administrator career just kept going.

One of the fun parts about working as the Artists Alliance Director, was that I had the opportunity to work with artist James (Jim) Rosenquist. Jim was working with USF Graphic Studio and had his own studio in Florida. Jim did several shows for the Artists Alliance, one where he was the curator. We called it the "Rosenquist Invitational. We had over 50 artists submitted artworks. Jim was to review them and select the works to exhibit—and he did review them—but when we got ready to hang the selected works, some of the artists brought more than one. And James Rosenquist being who he is—a kind person, not just a gifted artist—who always wanted to inspire and to encourage young artists. He said, "Jodee, we're going to hang it. And I said, "but Jim, we have such limited space," and then he says "no, no, I think we need to hang it." We ended up doing a salon-style hanging. We had paintings and works from the middle of the gallery all the way up to the ceiling and back down. Jim was always a really big supporter of emerging artists. In addition, we

had a show with him, Theo Wujcik, and two USF College of Fine Arts Graduate students called “Dog Days of Summer”.

Again, the Alliance was attempting to bring recognition of artists to the Tampa Bay region. I think we succeeded in some ways. Will it be forgotten, what happened? I’m hoping no, that it won’t. The Artists Alliance and El Sama made a big difference in the Tampa arts community. They laid the ground work.

Now that being said, when I moved to the Playmakers in 1984, it was one of the first two theaters located in Tampa. One was the Tampa Players, and the second was Playmakers Theatre. Playmakers was located in the Cuban Club in Ybor City. I was hired to be the Director of Development because I had grant writing experience. And while there, and maybe someone will remember, Guavaween [started in 1985]. I was one of the six founding members of Guavaween, which was a nationally recognized annual wild party held in Tampa’s Latin Quarter, Ybor City. It was so tongue-in-cheek. There was a Mama Guava Stumble parade that would be outrageous going down 7th Avenue. I’ll give you an example: there was the intersection with Dale Mabry and Fowler in Carrollwood that constantly was jammed with traffic causing lots of discontent. There were 25-30 people carrying Dale Mabry and Fowler signs walking very close to each other and barely moving forward in the parade. Then there were the Mafia Mothers, about 30-40 women, pushing shopping carts with fake dead bodies all dressed up in black. There was the farting black bean, there was Mama Guava, who is very much still involved in Tampa, Pat Fenda on an elephant. Following the parade there would be a big party at the Cuban Club. These parties were at a time when we were trying to bring more life back into Ybor before bars. El Sama held a Writer's Ball, the Krewe of Santiago also threw a ball after the Gasparilla night parade.

I’ve always been involved in the arts. However, while at Playmakers I was recruited by a retail company called Sacino’s Formalwear, which had 23 stores throughout the state of Florida, to be their advertising and marketing [person]. I had met Ron Sacino at one of our Playmakers fundraisers, where he said, if you can do this, why don’t you come and do [marketing] for my company. Thinking that I could make more money in the “real world” rather than the art world, I took the job. I did that for about three years. Was I happy? I was happy with being able to be successful and bring attention to the organization, to the company. Did I like it? I’d say that I did not like being away

from my family, because I had to travel a lot. Did I like the creative design part of it? Yes, but I thought there was something missing.

So that's when I decided that I needed to go back to school, to USF. I thought maybe I'd [go into] teaching art. And my daughters were getting older, they were in elementary and middle school, and I wanted to be home. I went back and got my degree in arts education, which complemented the art history degree. Then I started my Master's in Educational Leadership. I really enjoyed teaching art. I must say, I enjoyed working with the kids, I enjoyed sharing the art history part of a lesson that brought that lesson alive. I liked the hands-on experience.

In Hillsborough County, they started Art Teachers out in two schools. I started out at Gorrie [Elementary School] in Hyde Park and then partnered with West Shore [Elementary School] in Port Tampa. It was "art on a cart" basically. Then I had the opportunity to go to a school five days a week and have my own classroom. So I took a position in Wimauma at Wimauma Elementary School near Ruskin. I loved it; I was there for a number of years. I was working primarily with Mexican migrant kids, and you learn I learned their schedules: are they going to be here in the fall, or in December and then leave maybe in April? I had my own classroom and won a lot of student awards because the kids were creative. We came up with some wonderful ideas and worked with my students to develop a confidence that they could be more than agricultural workers. I was very proud of that.

Then an opportunity came up with a Math, Science, Technology school, Young Middle Magnet School, much closer to my home. [They were] looking for an art teacher, and I applied. I always believed that the arts and sciences were partners, they went together. You can't have art if you don't have science, and you can't have science if you don't have art.

I was offered that position and I thought I'd died and gone to heaven because I had a huge new classroom, I had an office, and I had drawers that I could store examples, posters, and the kids' work. And I had a kiln room and a supply [room] and I thought, "whoa, this is really special." While that was going on, Did I do my own art? No, I probably did more research and went to see more art. I made sure I stayed on top of what was going on.

Reflecting now, on being at the Skowhegan School of Painting in 1979 [where I was] interviewing women artists and doing a directed study in painting with George Pappas from USF, I realized that I wasn't a painter. I realized that I liked putting things together. I had so much luck to work and interview Elaine de Kooning, Lois Dodd, Nancy Graves, oh my gosh, to be able to talk to those women, and to discuss their artwork, it was spectacular.

I had found out that I was pregnant, in 1979 while I was going to Skowhegan, [and I asked] what am I going to do? I had just found out, it maybe wasn't even six weeks. One of the ladies—Elaine de Kooning—asked if I was feeling okay and I said yes, let me just pull over and get a bit of a Coca Cola to settle my stomach. And I asked her, I said you know, I'm pregnant, I'm looking forward to a career in writing and art history working with museums, and she said "you know, I always wanted a child. But, when Willem de Kooning and I were married (and I still have the transcript) I thought that I wanted to have a child. What I did was one of my girlfriends had just had a baby, and I borrowed that baby and brought him to my studio. He was about a year old." And she said, "what I found was that every time that he smiled, he cried, he whimpered, I stopped painting, and I had to go over to him. And that's when I realized that if I wanted to continue my work, I couldn't have children." She said it was a really big decision, and she gave me the confidence to move forward, but also to make the right decision for me. I wanted this baby, and I wasn't going to let it keep me from doing what I wanted to do. I was surprised at her candor, how candid she was in that. The other ladies, once they learned that I was pregnant, it was really funny. They were becoming very motherly toward me and telling me how they would handle it or they wouldn't do it.

Nancy Graves, she wasn't married at the time–I don't know if you know her art history background, but she was known for her first work, which was a glass sculpture of a penis. You may want to look that up. Lois Dodd, Agnes Denes–now Agnes Denes is finally being recognized by the major museums–it was like the summer for women and that was what my specialty was, women artists.

That being said, let's get back to more modern times. After I had been teaching at Young Middle Magnet, I got a notice that the Fulbright applications were open if you were interested in applying to a Fulbright teaching [exchange]. I applied, little thinking that it was possible, and was called in for the interview in December 1998. I was called into Gainesville for the interview. I remember two questions, one of them

was “what if your exchange was in the middle of nowhere, and you don’t really have any or much art supplies, and you don’t have paper?” And I smiled and said we’d make our own paper. We’d collect newspapers and make our own paper. The other one was, “what’s the wildest thing you ever did?” And I said “well, I was one of six people that started Guavaween, this party that still goes on in Ybor.” Not quite so much now, and they made it more family friendly. But I thought, oh god I probably just slammed it, but I might not be the one, I’m from Tampa.” So, I had requested England, and I didn’t really care where in England, but I wanted England because I’d studied English literature, my father’s side of the family is British-Canadian, and I just had been really involved in the history. They did ask me if I’d go anywhere else and I said sure, just for the opportunity.

In late March they notified me that I was selected. Unfortunately, my husband at the time and I were going through a great deal of issues. To make a long story short, he did not want me to go. And I thought, no way. I did take the Fulbright. To me, it was a wonderful honor. The British teacher who was coming to Tampa to teach while I was teaching in her East End London School, and I met up in DC to discuss the exchange.

It was a wonderful experience. I must say, there were other Fulbright teachers who had been assigned to England, and London who didn’t make it through the year. The reason why I think is, the Brits had recently changed from being a very strict school system to a very loose one and not quite so structured. However, it worked for me and I think that’s because—not just because I was in a girls’ school, and these girls were really rowdy and noisy—but because I had had the experience in the States of setting up structures and procedures in the classroom. I knew that was the first thing I had to do. I definitely had challenges, certainly with some of the words. [For example, I would say] “put up your sketchbooks” and they’d all put them up in the air, and I’d say “throw your stuff away in the trash,” and they were like, not, it’s a bin, because “trash” is for people that are trashy and low. I was teaching art and design, and the girls were from second-generation Somalia, Bangladesh, some Asian, and then the rest all East Enders. I thoroughly loved it. It was the most wonderful experience, making lots of friends, [it was] just amazing. I wouldn’t trade it for the world.

Did it inspire me as far as my art? Yes, because I started collecting little bits and pieces of things. When I came home in August of 2000 I started back at school. I

reconnected with one of my fellow schoolmates from USF and we had started dating. He was living in New York, and I was living in Florida. Then 9/11 happened, and that was a big change in my life. My fiancé's client, Merrill Lynch, was across the street from the World Trade Center and he had a meeting to be in lower Manhattan that day. After I dismissed my homeroom, and was watching the news, we saw the second plane hit the tower. I was scared to death, tried calling him on his cell with no luck. I did not hear from him until about 2 or 3 in the afternoon, he was safe. We decided that we weren't going to wait another year until the school year ends for me to move to New York.

I took a leave of absence and went to New York. I did not want to teach again, but I did sub for a bit in New York. Elementary was okay, but high school, not so good. What I did was I volunteered for a non-profit called Great Neck Arts Center, now known as the Gold Coast Arts Center. The Great Neck Arts Center was the school for the visual and performing arts. It had about 400 students and probably about 40 or 50 classes per semester. [They had] after school classes for kids and weekend classes. It was a good fit. They were expanding, and they needed a Director of Education. I eventually did education, development, and then [I became] Gallery Director.

That's when I started working with assemblage and mixed media. My first show in New York was working with other artists. I continued to do it, again finding things that seemed to go together, but most people wouldn't think they would. It was a way to put something together to tell a story. Someone at the show wanted to buy my very first piece. They offered way more than the price I was asking for my other pieces. But I still have it; I didn't want to sell it. I thought, that's my first work, and it's like, whoa. It is all old rhinestone jewelry from the 1930s to the 1960s. Odd pieces that I had found in the junk pile at an antique store for five or ten cents each, or "buy a handful! One dollar!" [laughter]. So, anyway, that's when I started doing my work.

One of the things I forgot to mention before: was the opportunity of meeting a lot of people in London, and working with a lot of other artists at my school who were real artists and not just educators. They introduced me to the Chelsea Arts Club. The Chelsea Arts Club was started by [James Abbot McNeill] Whistler, of all people—an American who started it—in the late 1800s. So these good friends decided that I needed to become a member, and they nominated me for membership. You have to wait [to be accepted for membership]. You put your name on a book, and then people have to sign it. They were such active members in the club that they would

go around telling all their friends “sign Georgia’s page!” So, since 2004 I’ve been a member of the Chelsea Arts Club in London, which is a lot different from The National Arts Club in the United States or The [London] Arts Club. It’s different, it’s more bohemian, it’s more laid back, and it’s older. It’s the oldest club.

The reason why I threw that into this interview is that was my first [solo] show, I did there. That was in 2022. I actually had my own show at the club, and then had my own show here [at HCC]. I never thought that I would ever really exhibit them, but because I like them I’ve got a small section where I hang them. Now the Kress [Collective], expressed interest in doing a show, so we’ll see what happens.

CH:
My next question—and that actually kind of segues quite nicely—is, what does your artistic process look like?

GV:
If anything, I would say collecting. It’s really, going into a secondhand store, or an antique store—and sometimes antique stores are overrated, I mean they’ll charge you an arm and a leg for something—but places where there’s secondhand items are more interesting. And then you see pieces that seem like they go together, or there’s one piece that you really must have. And then I’ll be walking somewhere else or in another shop [and I’ll find something] and I’ll go, wow this will go with the other piece. Or it’ll happen completely by accident. You don’t know that they’ll go together, but you collected them, and you lay them out, and you have them in your box, your treasure box, and it’s like, oh my gosh, this now goes with this. So that’s my process, it’s about finding pieces that will work together.

But then, it’s like how will they work together? First of all, how high are they? Will they fit into the frame I’m using? Do I have to go to a bigger or thicker frame? And what kind of background do I want to use with it? Do I want to use old books, or do I want to use paper, or do I want to use fabric? So, it’s like searching for what goes with what I’ve collected. Then, is it done? Well, you put it in, you walk away, you come back and you tweak it, and then you walk away again. Then there’s something that says, “I think it’s done.” And you say okay, and you’re ready to seal it up, title it or not title it, but it’s finished. Some of them come so easily, and then others–I mean, *My Darling*, the one in your collection, that was probably one of the easiest pieces I ever did, because it all just came together, and then the last thing was the green

ribbon to tie it all together. But then there were other pieces where [it wasn't so easy,] where there's still one piece not right, and I don't think it's finished, or I think it's got too much stuff in it, and I'll probably go back and change them. That's all part of the process.

CH:
Thank you. Do you have any specific goals with your art and if so, what are they?

GV:
Right now, I think I'd like to have another exhibit. I'd like to have it at the Kress [building], and so I'll be reaching out to Tracy [Midulla], because she had said she wanted to contact me if I was interested. Also in talking with Lisa [McCarthy], I know she has a show coming up too in Ybor. Other than that, I'm not sure. I think probably my health has a lot to do with it right now.

CH:
Very understandable. You talked about *My Darling* a little bit just now. We have three of your pieces in the collection, and thank you very much by the way, we're really happy to have them. Was there any specific inspiration for those pieces? We also have *Dressing Table* and *Honey Bees*.

GV:
With [regards to] *Dressing Table* especially, that didn't come easily either, because it involves so many pieces from my grandmother's and great-grandmother's dressing tables. First of all, it's probably the biggest piece I've done. One of the challenges was, good grief, how am I going to get that brush in there? Will it fit? As I was saying, [part of the process is] walking away and then coming back, and then walking away again and coming back, and thinking it's not quite finished. And, should I put the earrings in there? Well yeah, it's part of a dressing table, it's something they may have taken off after they've been out in the evening. What else do I want? And it's like, is it time to walk away? And I was able to finally walk away from it. I mean, the hand mirror, the curling iron, the piece of jewelry, the necklace. Whenever it falls, how is it going to fall? I like the way it was displayed [in *Leftovers*] a lot. I think that it does better as a tableau, because if you had hung it on the wall, it's going to hang differently in some way. It may bring the viewer into it, because of the mirror. The tableau with Lisa [McCarthy]'s book and the clock, to me, was perfect.

The other piece, *Honey Bees*, was an easy one. I knew immediately when I found these gold-plated bees by the handful, that I had this magnificent huge compact—I didn't even know they made them that big—that it was perfect. It was absolutely perfect. Of all the pieces that you have [in the collection], that was probably the easiest. Now, what's interesting is that I did have those bees somewhere else. I had them in another artwork with some lavender and more flowers, and I took them out because it wasn't working. So I moved [the bees] from one work to another.

CH:
I have a question that's off-script. Going back to something you said earlier about when you were at Skowhegan, you said that you figured out that you were not a painter, but that instead you liked putting things together. How did you discover that these assemblages are what you want to be making?

GV:
When you're in school, in a college of fine arts, you have to take painting, you have to take drawing, you have to take all the basics. In one of my first painting classes, whenever I started painting, I would always add things to [the paintings]. I painted a landscape, and I took old film from a camera and put it into my painting. That was the first thing [I made]. I wasn't happy with what I was doing, but then when I started using this film, and twisting it, and making it more three-dimensional, I realized I liked putting things together. I did a portrait of my daughter and myself sitting on the fireplace based on a photograph, and I realized that I would overwork it. People would recognize, hey, that's not too bad, but that's for a dilettante or for someone who's not that good, so I thought, eh. But it met my class requirements [laughter]. So what did I do with that painting? I think I either destroyed it—because it was huge—or reworked it for another lesson.

And then the one I did in Maine when I was going to Skowhegan, man oh man, I struggled with that. I ended up with an abstract. I think Dr. Pappas gave me a B, which I thought, if he had given me an A, [laughter] I don't think so. But I put things on it, maybe a wildflower that I found. Again, that's when I realized that I did much better with putting things together than with painting. There was a sculpture class where we had to make something out of wood. I don't know how in the world I even passed it. I made something into a cone, and kept going around and around, but again, I'm like, that's not me. To me, it was really fun to discover things that I had put

away, and thought, “why don’t I put those together?” That’s what I did with the first [assemblage], “why keep them in a drawer?”

CH:
Are you willing to talk about your first assemblage?

GV:
Yeah, that’s the one with the watch shop. My grandfather-in-law, my first husband’s grandfather, owned a watch shop, he was a partner. It was in downtown Tampa, on Florida [Avenue]. He had all these drawers in the watch shop, and I would go into the watch shop and pull out the drawers and say, “do you ever use any of these things?” He said “oh no, that’s just stuff that’s left over, those are parts that maybe…” I mean, I have no idea why they kept it all. But these are all parts of watches that they had taken apart, the containers for some of the parts they used, the bifocals that they used to fix the watches, and the tag of someone who never came and picked up their watch. They seemed to fit in that old frame. I will tell you what was hardest was actually gluing them in, because I did not have the special type of glue [needed], I had to use some sort of builder’s glue, not gorilla glue or something like that to keep [the pieces] from moving. I think if I were to do it again, I would take every drawer they had of watch pieces and just fill it, just totally fill it. I wouldn’t have made it quite so open that you could look through it. That may have been a reason, because it was a window, but I think I would have definitely done more.

CH:
I like this a lot, because it’s not just the watches and the watch parts but also the attendant items that go with watchmaking and using watches.

GV:
You can actually see some of the little pieces. Some of them are little tools that they would use to fix the watches. I kept it for the longest time, but then left it in Great Neck at the Art Center there. I have no idea what they would do with it.

CH:
Maybe it’s part of their permanent collection [laughter].

GV:
Yeah, let’s hope.

CH:
My last question is—and you answered this a bit earlier too—how do you identify or interact with the local Tampa Bay arts community today?

GV:
Well, we're scheduled to go Thursday night to the Tampa Museum of Art with the [Tampa] Arts Alliance, their organization. Which, to me, is close to what the Artists Alliance was, but they're actually looking to find housing and studio spaces for artists. So, definitely want to stay on top of that. I've been serving on the Arts Council of Hillsborough County for probably eight years, if not longer. This year is my last year. I'm the chair this year. I think they voted for me because I've been on so much longer, but I don't know why [laughter]. I've served on the Public Art Committee, but I'm actually resigning this month. I've been part of that for six years. I support the HCC gallery program as a Foundation member. We support local artists through the organization that I work at now, Community Stepping Stones. It's an after school program for children in arts and education. I stay pretty involved. I am, though, trying to slow down a bit. Every time I've said I'm slowing down, they say, look, you're strong. And they say no, we're not letting you resign.

CH:
Well, thank you. Is there anything else that we didn't cover that you would really like to say?

GV:
I think the only thing is, that if anyone does any research on the history of [Tampa], is research about the Artists Alliance, the first Arts Alliance and alternative space in Tampa. They made a mark so strong that it became a base for other arts organizations, they were able to build on that and keep growing. And always support Florida artists, always support the Tampa Bay area arts organizations. The arts are not dead in Florida anymore. They never were, but they oftentimes were thought to be. I would give credit so much to USF Graphicstudio for bringing in early on, in the early 80s, these outstanding artists into Tampa. I would also like to praise HCC Ybor and Dale Mabry campuses for their gallery program. This brings, once again, the arts to the forefront in the Tampa Bay area. And it's still growing. I think artists now know they can live here and make a living. They don't have to move away. At least that's what I'd like to think.