

# HCC ART GALLERIES



## HCC Permanent Art Collection Oral History Interview

Interviewer: Al Miller and Emily Tuberville

Interviewee: Babs Reingold

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Alyssa Miller (AM):

Welcome. So, I have a few questions for you. They're all related to you as an artist, but also to the work that you donated to HCC and your experience with us. They're very general. To start off with, what is the story of you coming into the art world?

Babs Reingold (BR):

Oh my goodness, the story of me coming into the art world. Well, I'll have to go back a little ways obviously, because I've been around a little longer than you guys. As a young kid, it was kind of strange how I knew I was going to be an artist. One of the things I said recently in one of my talks, I think that my father, who was a photographer, I came to recently find out that he used to enter shows as well. It's kind of funny to think about, there were letters written that my sister discovered from an aunt who recently died, my mother's sister. She sent all these letters, or our cousins sent all these letters about my father entering competitions. He had also sold his work to *National Geographic*. I like to say, in my life, it's kind of an interesting life because I had what I called exotic beginnings.

I was born in Caracas, Venezuela, and we lived there until I was five, and then we lived in Barbados for a year. My father took these incredible pictures, during our time in Caracas and in Barbados, and sold some of these pictures to *National Geographic*. Obviously, he also took a lot of pictures of the family, though over the years many of them got lost. My father became ill with Multiple sclerosis (MS) and in fact there were five kids and we ended up in the projects in the East side of Cleveland and that's where poverty comes into my work.

In the beginning I can remember that first time, I must have been about four or five years old, and I remember him developing [film]. He let me into the dark room to see that first image here in the tray and the magic of that. It was this idea that it was creating magic in there. I suppose you could say at that point, I kind of knew that this was something I wanted to know more about. I was always the one building things with whatever. I would put pieces of paper together, I would decorate our walls with things, and this is even when we were living in the projects as I was older.

I can remember though as a young kid when we did move to Cleveland, and I was always envious of all the Christian kids, so I would pretend that we were Christian and not Jewish because I never lived in Jewish neighborhoods. I would put these pieces of paper together and draw giant Christmas trees and put them up in our thing. I would do big Halloween things. I remember I did a huge Santa Claus all made out of eight and a half by eleven pieces of paper taped together that decorated the door and I just did all this crazy stuff, right.

Then when we ended up in the projects, we were the only white Jewish family in the projects, which was a real thing in itself. Then I lasted a few weeks in an all-Black high school in the inner city. Suffice it to say, I was at that point five foot three and a half and I was a skinny little thing, like I'm still a skinny little thing, and very afraid. So, they ended up getting me a special transfer to another school that I took three buses to get to. I took two buses anyway to get to the school I was supposed to get to. So, then I was in this all-Polish Catholic high school on the other side of town, and I was one of the transfer students and my group became the other transfer students, so we were the outcasts. Meanwhile, I heard a lot of anti-Semitism then, and it's a weird thing to be thinking about today especially because it's sort of the same thing that I heard back then, it's like it never goes away, it keeps resurfacing. So, one of the biggest things that happened to me really was that they had an incredible art teacher. It was totally the luck of the draw. And the art teacher was a Jew. There were two Jews in the school, me, and the art teacher. The art teacher had gone to the Cleveland Institute of Art, and he helped me develop my portfolio, he saw my talent and I started winning awards. The Scholastic Awards in high school and he helped me get into the Cleveland Institute of Art. So, it's a long story, but it is a path where I had a teacher that had a major influence on my life and is in some ways responsible for where I am today. So that's to question number one, how did I get started at - does that kind of answer it?

AM:

It definitely does. It's different for everyone. There is definitely a pattern of teachers, which is wonderful, which happened to me as well.

BR:

Yeah, and when you get a good teacher, it's like an amazing thing. But there was this special bond that happened obviously. I don't know where you went to school but we lived in Dallas for four years and oh my goodness. We were also not living in a Jewish neighborhood and there wasn't a huge Jewish population in Dallas at that time and I'm trying to say it was basically my father and my uncle, his brother. There were just two of them - my uncle went into business with an Italian man into the industrial sewing machine business.

We ended up in Caracas because my father could fix anything. He was that type of guy. So, he had to make a living, he had kids. The photography wasn't giving him a living. Then, when my father and uncle had a falling out, he got a job at Union Special, which was one of the leading industrial sewing machine companies. He was the manager of the shop; he would head up the shop type of thing. Then he got sick, and they couldn't figure out what was going on. The Cleveland Clinic, that's how we ended up in Cleveland, was really because of him being ill. We had one relative in Cleveland, and he went up there to see if they could figure out what was wrong with him, and we stayed in Cleveland, and they found out that he had MS. In those days, it was very different discovering MS. MS was a difficult disease to diagnose. In some ways, it's still a bit of a difficult disease to diagnose.

I'm trying to think like why I was telling you, though, the sewing machines. It was not a conscious thing that until I started sewing again or putting sewing into my work that I remember it was already a few years into putting sewing into my work. At that time I was stitching pieces of canvas together and smoking and burning and doing different things like that and I thought: "oh my God, I'm sewing," but the main reason I was sewing was because I didn't have a sewing machine until the 90s and when we were living in Jersey, there was this friend selling this little tiny sewing machine, one of those portable ones that are just a single portable sewing machine which was a piece of garbage, right?

So, I get this sewing machine and I'm like, "okay I remember how to use this" and I

couldn't get it to work, and I could never get the tension correct, so it made all these bad stitches and the bad stitches I went "oh, art! I like these bad stitches!" And that's how it began. So, then I was almost simulating bad stitches and crude stitches and this idea of when you're mending something. That's how I began making all these pieces about a marked and parked and pocked life that went through all of these different versions. I should say all these ordeals. Like what happens to you over the course of a life and all of the wounds and how the wounds heal. Then I was creating wounds and patching up the wounds in my work to simulate this idea that the wound that was stitched was stronger than the two pieces. When you make a weld, the weld actually is stronger than the two individual pieces, that part. It was this interesting metaphor for a lot of things that were going on.

I was like - there was no intention. I have an MFA in painting. I was making big paintings. And suddenly, you're sewing. I did not study sculpture in school, though as when I was younger, I was always making all kinds of three-dimensional things. Even in my early days, the first year of painting, I started attaching things. The first year at the Institute of Art, I was going to be a painting major and then I switched. I switched in my second year to graphic design so I could make a living. I was coming out of poverty, and I had to have some way to sustain my work.

One of the things that stood out to me was I had started to sell work in the early 2000s when I signed on with the Bill Lowe Gallery in Atlanta. I was doing these stain paintings, and the stain paintings were about skin. They're called *Skin One*, *Skin Two*, *Skin Three*. That came out of all that idea of what happens to your outer covering during the course of your life and how you use it as a protection, how you use it as a mask, how you hide behind the layers. I was selling these pieces, but I had started also doing three-dimensional work. I was already doing three-dimensional work. I had done my first hanging sort of sculptural piece in '97 at the Newark Museum of Art at an Invitational. Then in 2003, I had my first really big room installation at the Savannah College of Art and Design. So, I was already doing that while I was making this other work. But the gallery only wanted that other work and that's what they can sell. That's what they can put on their walls.

There's this pigeonholing that people want to do to you as an artist that the moment you're making a particular body of work, they want you to stay with that body of work. It happened to me even after I got my MFA from SUNY Buffalo, and I had the director of the Albert Docks Museum. I was invited too into a show a year after, right

away with my paintings and my monotypes and the director of the museum loved my monotypes. When I stopped making those particular type of monotypes, he kind of got annoyed like “why aren’t you making more of these monotypes?” So, whenever you get some notice from somebody that is influential in the art world, these are museum people. And they want to be able to say, this is what all your work looks like. That's a very important thing to them. And when you buck that, it drives them crazy.

I have all this work about the environment. The environment's a very important issue to me. So is poverty. The two to me are inextricably linked and I'm going to talk to you about that because the poverty work leads into the environmental work, and how the two came together. I'm going to tell you that. But someone goes, “wow,” she got my email, or she did it on the site the one way or the other. I don't know if it was an email blast, but she said, “this is such different work for you. I don't, I don't understand this. I don't get it. Where's this coming from?” I said, “Well, it's older work.” I said: “but, it's still work that deals with ideas of decadence and aging and the loss of the environment is the same as the loss of beauty, it's the same as the loss of your body, it's the same as ephemerality.”

I deal with things that are very ephemeral. I deal with this idea that we're only here for a short period, so the work really is related even though it doesn't manifest itself in the same visual way. It's definitely coming from the same mind let me do that way or the same ideas. The ideas grow as you change over the years. Your ideas change, I mean. We don't all remain the same, we keep changing every day. We keep changing, something new comes into our orbit and we change. So, when I started, I had not done work about poverty.

But once I started - although I started collecting my own hair, and hair loss was a thing already, I started collecting my own hair in 1998. I am now a full 25 years of trying to collect all my hair loss. I don't always get it all, but from the brush, on the floor, wherever I see it, if I put my fingers through and I get some hair, I go doodle it up and then set it to the side - that's my hair that I lost that day. Now I do it by month in case I want to make like nests by the month and now I'm making nests by the year, so it doesn't really matter, but I've always liked that daily hair loss idea and it came to me in 2004 but it didn't manifest itself until 2005.

In 2005 - so here I am dealing with this idea of loss. And in 2005 I see Hurricane

Katrina on the screen, and I'm glued to this catastrophe that's happening, and I'm watching the impoverished people of New Orleans dying. Like a thousand people died in that hurricane. People don't remember how bad that was and what happened in those stadiums, and they couldn't get these people out. These people didn't have automobiles. They didn't have a way to escape. The rich can always escape. They didn't even fly someplace else. The frickin' poor, they're stuck. It became this whole metaphor for my first project I started. The first one was in 2006. I made the first *Hung Out to Dry* piece. It was these pieces on a clothesline, skin pieces. I had already done the skin pieces. So, the skin pieces were now representing bodies. Then I started putting literally distorted bodies. And I hung out in the projects, I put distorted bodies in there.

Then in 2006, I went to a lecture by Jared Diamond. He's an anthropologist and he's written several books, but the book that he was talking about at that time was called *Collapse: Why Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed*. He had written this very famous book *Gun, Germs, and Steel*, which is about economies and how they influence people's lives. He was talking about all these past societies and how they came to pass. They're gone. One of the societies that he talked about, which had such a powerful impact on me, was Easter Island. And Easter Island had once been this lush, forested, thriving island, and they over time completely deforested their island. I don't know if they had outside influence. I believe there was, and he didn't really talk about that, like people who landed there that then also raped the land in a way. The point is that they devastated their resources, and they could not grow the trees back fast enough. The problem was there wasn't an accounting for how long it would take to grow the trees. To this day, it's an island by the way that is owned by Chile. It's about a thousand miles off the coast of Chile and you know floating there in the middle of the Pacific and it's a poverty stricken, completely deforested island.

I started thinking about, he said in his talk, when we look at this, we can almost compare this Earth. Like, what were they thinking? What was the islander thinking when he chopped down the last tree? And, that stupid saying, "we can't see the forest through the trees," but it feels like one of those cliques where you're in the middle of it and we're slowly killing ourselves. But we don't see it. We keep doing this or we do that, or we dirty up this or we dirty up that. Then I started thinking about the fact that, what happens when you destroy the environment, you create poverty. Now I'm tying poverty to the environment. I started thinking about, well, I can make some of these works that specifically speak to the environment because it's an

important message.

I started doing this when the first ones appeared. I did the first drawing though for this big installation called *The Last Tree*, which ended up having two great venues, one in New York City and the other one in Buffalo, New York at the Burchfield Penney Art Center, which is the museum that houses the Charles Burchfield Collection, the famous painter. He was from Buffalo, or he lived many years in Buffalo, and he was friends with a big collector there. And that, of course, was Penney. Penney was his name. So that's why it's called the Burchfield Penney Art Center.

Anyway, so I came up with this idea. It takes a long time to conceive. How am I going to do this? In fact, there were other drawings I realized, but the first drawing I think was in 2008 and then I did another one in 2009 and then in 2010 I did this bigger drawing of the initial 2008 drawing. I have to go back and look at the dates but all in around that time. Meanwhile, I'm doing *Hung Out to Dry*. I got *Hung Out to Dry One*, I've got *Hung Out to Dry Two*, I've gotten to *Hung Out to Dry Four*. I got those.

Then I changed, by 2010, the big installation became *Hung Out in The Projects*. So, I thought, I'm just going to say it. This is what it is. This is what I'm talking about. I'm talking about poverty. I'm talking about it in my terms, specifically in this country, where we're the richest country in the world, we're still the most powerful country in the world. And yet we have poverty that looks like a Third World country.

To me, that's what was so striking about New Orleans. It looked like a Third World country to me. And the response was like a Third World country. Bush screwed that up so bad. That was a giant screw up of how he responded and helped with that hurricane. Years later, people sort of forget. Don't get me started on the Bush presidency. Anyway, all of a sudden, I'm tying these two together because I'm thinking it's like Earth writ small, looking at this Easter Island picture.

Jared Diamond has these five factors of what causes the demise and it's the climate, the ability to adapt, the ability to overcome the issues that you have. Right now, what is going to come back from what we're doing, the devastation to our resources. So, I don't know, and I always question, are we at the tipping point? Everybody has different ideas about what's really going on. Will it matter in the end? Who knows? We may never be around; humanity may not be around. Earth will still be here, and

finally it'll recover by the time we're gone, and there'll be some other new age that will appear. Meanwhile, we're still here and it means something to us. So, we have to make it better for you guys and then your children. So, we have to keep doing that.

I thought, well, I'll do these hundred and ninety-three pails. The significance of the number is that it relates to the number of countries that are recognized by the UN. I'm saying: "you countries" \*knocking\* "you need to do something," these are the countries that are represented there and are recognized in the world. So that's why there's a hundred ninety-three. The hundred ninety fourth pail is the lone tree standing up there in the middle of this thing. Then the big question is, is it surviving? Has it decayed?

I came up with this idea of stuffing the silk organza - now the stumps are made out of rust and tea-stained silk organza. There were like, I want to say there were 2,000 roots that are sewn onto these - because each pail had, I don't remember how many roots that are hand sewn and everything is hand stuffed, and they're stuffed with human hair. So, when people look at this picture, they think they're real stumps. There's no real wood in this whole thing. It's a soft sculpture. There is a core, because I did a test, they were completely filled with hair that was too mushy and wouldn't hold the form well enough. So, there's a core of cotton batting that sits in the center and then I fill in around so that the hair is on the outside. If you look at my website, I have a picture on my profile of me sewing on one of the pails, although I'm going to soon change that one. But there I am sewing on one of those and I was thinking, gosh, do I need to go to my installations and look at some of the things I said about the lost trees because you want to know about the stumps that you have in your collection, the drawing you have in your collection.

In this instance, the first drawings I made were the smaller drawings, which were the massive pails. I wasn't doing the individual pail, but then I sewed the first one I thought, "oh my God, these would make such great little studies. I want to do some studies of my own sculptures." So, I started doing these stumps as a study of just the sculptures that were in the piece. I meant to keep going because I really liked doing these. I love drawing. So, you can see I include drawing in my work because I like to do it.

So back to the pails. I have always liked working with a lot of different mediums and I had already been incorporating silver cans and staining with it. The stain paintings



became baggage paintings, or I call them *bag one*, *bag two*, *bag three*, and they are now called *vessels*. These vessels morphed and became the stain paintings, the skin paintings, and that's why on my site they're called skins and vessels. Both groups of work are together, but they're about the same thing because we all carry baggage. We all bring our baggage with us everywhere we go.

But it wasn't really until *The Last Tree* that I started manipulating the different yarns and the different thicknesses of thread and perfecting that stitch that I used to attach the roots. Once I figured out how to attach the roots and in 2012 is when I really started working in earnest. It took me a year to make all these pails and that was with also hiring some people. I had someone who sewed the cores of it and then I would stain it after. He would sew all the organza, the basic stump, and it was just the top and the thing and then the bottom was open so I could stuff it. He sewed some of the roots, but I sewed a lot of the roots myself. They're all different shapes and sizes. I would have bins with the large ones, the short ones, the thicker ones. I had it all organized on these shelves of the different varieties so that I got to make enough short ones because I got to make enough long ones, and then I would go and pick the ones I wanted for each stump. Then it's attached with almost like a box-stitch. It's almost when you cross over, and you make this kind of box-like stitch, and it has to be stuffed so well so that the root will stick up or it won't flop down completely. Then I put my husband to work. He drilled all the holes in the pails, and we had the pails lined up. It was like an assembly line to get 193 of these or 194 of these things going. Towards the end I suddenly said, "you know, I got to make some drawings of these." I just love these different shapes, and they were anthropomorphic. I see a lot of that in my work. I think the latter pieces are very anthropomorphic and even in some of that there's a tree drawing that I did that feels like it's this person that's going to come out at you like the trees in the *Wizard of Oz*, where the trees suddenly become alive. And these became like little creatures.

Some people said to me, they are like little creatures when you get up close. But the reason I wanted this organza, also was because I realized if I put hair stuffed in it, the little hairs would come out like your skin. So here is why I was trying to develop this skin. I thought, well, your skin has all these little hairs. So, when I stick the hair in there, it'll look like an arm or a leg or... And that came really before this. I had already started doing these silk organza distorted bodies. Remember, I'm trying to simulate skin and I did it with paper and I did it with organza. The silk organza forms in my *Hung Out in the Projects* piece, for example. If you look at that, is just all these

distorted bodies hanging on a line. I had gone away almost completely at that point from the paper representing the human form as to really using the silk organza, the stuffed objects to represent the human form. In a way, then I decided when I did this last tree that I would set up the pails.

At first, I was going to do it at random. Then I said, I'll set it up like a graveyard. Because I'm saying, is this the last tree? Is it dead? So, they're all lined up just like headstones would be in a graveyard and it does have that kind of feeling to it. So, you know people say did you do the studies before? Now there are a lot of studies that I did before and in fact I did all of the *Luna Windows*. Those drawings are how I'm going to make the sculpture. I conceive it, I look at it, and I follow the drawing because I'm trying to picture what it's going to look like. How am I going to make it, what length do I want it, where do I want the window to hang, how long does this have to be, and then I start to make it. With the stump drawings they were just a little bit different in that it was like I thought they were such cool sculptural shapes that it would be interesting to make drawings of them.

AM:

Beautiful.

BR:

I got to here, didn't I? I got you through it all and I was making those drawing stumps. I love my stumps and in fact, you need to know one of the stump drawings is in the collection of the Burchfield. The Burchfield Penny is one of the stumps out of this series and there are not that many. So, you guys are kind of lucky you got one of the stumps.

AM:

We are. Where did those stumps go? Do you have them to install?

BR:

Oh, I have them. Yes, and in fact, I've been trying to get a showing. There's been no showing down here of this project, but I want a big venue for the showing. It's like, what's the problem? Somebody give me a venue down here. It's never shown down here. And it has a video component to it. In the video, which if you go on my last tree, under installations in my website, you'll see that's the picture of it in the vertical Penny and the video is up on the wall so it's nice if it has a huge ceiling because it's

very dramatic and it's got to be in a semi-darkened room for the video and the video is a chopping down of a lone tree and it's with an axe and it's this it starts off Chop. Chop. Chop. Noise.

Then there's a soundtrack. Now I have a friend who's a sound artist and a musician, and she made the soundtrack for three of my projects. So, this was the third project. The soundtrack, I said I wanted eerie, almost Alan Parson-like. Pink Floyd-like, dark side of the moon-like music that would make you feel like you were in some other land that you were not in this world anymore. I merged that with the chopping noise of the axe. Then as the video goes on, we switch to a chainsaw. Because you can't get the damned thing chopped down. I got my friend who's got such incredible equipment. He worked for TV, so he had like a \$60,000 camera and he's videotaping this. My husband is the one chopping the tree down. It was a tree that was dead in our backyard. It was not that big of a tree, but a fair size tree. It was a dead fruit tree that had died. So, I said, well, this is perfect. And fruit trees have very hard wood. I don't know if you're aware of that, but they were really hard.

And I didn't even realize that until I was chopping this down. He goes, OK. I said, well, let's just do the next part of the video. We'll have you chain sawing it. I mean, this is modern day. It's real life. This is what goes on. So, then it switches to the chainsaw. Then after the chainsaw, I slowly bring in Jared Diamond speaking about what do you think they were thinking, the Easter Islanders, he goes "well what do you think?" This was a recording I got from him talking about it in 2003 and he says: "what do you think people in 100 years from now will say, what were those people thinking when they devastated all their resources? What were they thinking?" When we're now sitting here all up in Canada, there's no more United States, because they destroyed it all "what were they thinking?" So, I have him that little bit. It's not very long, but he's saying that because I got permission. Can I put this into my video? I don't know if it ever became known really enough when I need to get that permission. And he sent me a letter with permission. He said yes, you can have permission to do this.

Anyway, so the video then starts to die down, and it's just that stump that's left. And lo and behold, this giant ant decides to go crawling up. So it's like a big ant. It probably looks like an inch long for God's sakes. I don't know where the hell did this thing come from. And I'm like, oh, it's perfect. It's perfect for the video.

So, he zooms in on it. Then it just kind of fades away and that's the video. It's like a six-and-a-half-minute video of this. I said to them like how long before you get tired of hearing that chop chop chop, I know when it showed in SoHo, they would turn it down when people weren't there. I came in and I said they had it really low and it wasn't supposed to be that low. I said Hey guys, the video's got to be a little louder. "I know we just can't stand listening to it all day long." And did the same thing when I showed *Hung Out in the Projects*, I showed it at the Morean Arts Center. It's a cacophony of noises of the city. And it's in a trash can on a boom box. I have it playing on a boom box in a trash can because it was about the urban environment. I wanted that look, although only if you're looking down can you see. It was a sideways trash can and there's a boom box in there and the noise is emanating out of there. It was all these street noises from New York, and I had my sound artist, she recorded some stuff and sirens and foot traffic, bus going, cars, just the regular everyday traffic of the city, of urban life. Even I think like some breaking noise, but the screeching siren. And that had video too. That video is only words— words swirl across the front wall of it with phrases that I had come up with about one in five children. And that's living in poverty. I think it's even worse now.

They also had a soundtrack. They said, oh my God, we're tired of listening to the soundtrack because it's just repeating over and over and over. So, it's my job to make people tired of the soundtrack.

AM:

I mean that's important to the concept. Isn't it?

BR:

In a way, it actually is, isn't it? There's a part of that that's kind of, the whole thing's radical. Now, the one thing I will tell you about the poverty work, which doesn't really have anything to do with the little drawings of the stumps, but in the poverty work, the reason it's named *Luna Window* is because of the projects being built on what was originally a place called Luna Park. And Luna Park was the Coney Island of Cleveland. I just thought the irony of that was too much not to use that as the title of the work, because I thought about all these previous ghosts and lives that had joy on that land. Now it was really this hellhole. It was not a place you wanted to be, this place of escape. And one of the words that scrolled across, was shame.

For years, I was ashamed of my past and thought that there was shame in being

poor. And my mother had a lot of issues with it. Because it was Jewish family service that came in and got us out of the projects and subsidized the house of the poor side of Shaker Heights, but when you're the ones that don't own the house and you're the ones that are still living in a house that was this disheveled looking house, and our father at that point is living in another projects in a worse place in Cleveland alone because that's all they did was fight. You are ashamed and you don't want to bring people to your house. You want to go elsewhere, and you want to escape. So those were some of the thoughts that were put up on the wall. I have to go back and look. I don't remember all the phrases. I had several of them. I think I had about five or six of them. Just what that was like. It was really that watching Katrina that, for some reason, all those memories just flooded back. There was something weird about it being an environmental event. That the hurricane and then having that Jared Diamond together and suddenly you're going... [inaudible]

But there was something about that that just, I suddenly realized I had to make work about it. I don't really subscribe to or believe that you're having something where you're getting it out of you that if you make the work about this you will be able to deal with issues, they even talk about that in art therapy I imagine. I really don't know, I've never taken an art therapy course, but this idea that if you get it out on art then you're excising it from yourself or you're getting out of your body. But the reality is that it's more about the idea of dealing with it and coming to terms with it and thinking about it and what it means to you and what it means to other people and how it affected your life.

Every one of us, I don't know anything about your lives because you're just asking me about mine right now. But the point is that you've gone through many things that no other person has gone through. We all have our individual paths, and they all have an effect in some way and they also have an effect on how you view a piece of art. I just had a curator ask me Well, do you consider yourself an activist? And I thought, what is an activist really? I'm a socially engaged artist. I'm not out on the street protesting with a sign. Although I have done that, and I've done it for the moment that Trump was elected. I was out in the mass marches. I canvassed. I made phone calls. I have done political stuff. That to me doesn't make me an activist. A true, task-driven activist is a person that's what they're spending a lot of their time doing. They form groups, they get together, and they do something. My way of activism is that I'm putting art out there that are about subjects that I feel are important. How a person reacts to it, I have no idea.

Everybody comes to every piece of art in their own way. One of the things that fascinated me though was the woman that decided to plant those trees in my name in the Florida Panhandle and then send me certificates for it because she was so moved by *The Last Tree*. So, my hope is that you or another person will say, oh, maybe I should do something about this, or maybe I should donate. I do donate to the Nature Conservancy. So, people that are doing these things, I want to help them in a way I can help them and if I can give them 10, 15, 20 dollars, what is that? A couple of meals out, or one meal out. It's like that's what I can do. I'm not the one that's there saving the animals. I'm the one giving the money to save the animals. So, I don't know. It was an interesting question to ask me, and I thought it's like when you're seeing all this work that is about these subjects, I feel that the mere act of making art about the environment, poverty, or what have you is activism. The act of making it. So, it's like it almost felt like a silly question at first. Then I started really thinking about it. And I came up with a whole philosophy out of this, it was just a strange thing to think about after you think about what you do and why you want to do it and then you just do it. But then what does that make you? And that also becomes about labels, you see?

And now I can take a really full circle about the labels. Well, you're this kind of artist or you're that kind of artist. Why? Why do we need to do that? Okay, I've said enough. I think I've answered every question possible on earth.

[Laughter] Okay, now do you have any other questions?

AM:

I'm just going to ask you one more question because I don't want to take up too much of your time and I know you are thinking about how you say that like art, how other people bring to it different things. Has the creation of any artwork impacted you specifically? Maybe *The Last Tree*? Because I know it took a very long time with long labor.

BR:

I think that every piece that I make, I put my whole self into it. I like the act of making. I was thinking about how artists who become very successful and how they have this whole crew of people making it for them. And I can have one or two people doing things for me because I realized I can't do it all. But that act of making it, and I

remember about the artist, there's an artist named Liza Lou, do you know this artist?

AM:

Yes, yes I do.

BR:

And you remember her making that giant kitchen that she became famous for, and now she's got these women in Africa. I think since she's in Africa, having them make all these pieces. I always wonder, how do you feel after you start getting more and more people making the thing that you were originally making? And there is something about that creating part that, I don't know if I want to say it soothes the soul or something, but it's that, it's like that woman that gets together and then they sew and there's the task that needs to be done. But I think that every work that I make, I do research, I look into things, I want to know more things. So, it sates my curiosity and it's a necessary thing to keep me going. There's the other part where you have the tasks that you don't particularly like. If I didn't have to do another thing on the computer and somebody would do it for me, that would be a great thing.

But it's that every day that you're talking with people who have different theories and philosophies and you're having exchanges that are, I don't consider myself an intellectual but in a way it's like having these intellectual exchanges about why you're doing what you're doing, what makes us want to create, do this stuff and there is for me it's some drive I don't even know where it comes from. Jerry Saltz was just here at the MFA, and I ended up going down, God I'm still not feeling well, and I still went to that thing because I wanted to see Jerry Saltz. I know Jerry Saltz and he knows me and he's such a boost because he talks about that thing where you're, that whole being involved and making and just doing is a thrilling crazy thing and you don't really understand it but he asked the question "did you think you would be making the work that you're making today?" Nobody thinks that they really don't. When you start, the work sometimes takes you there. It just starts taking you there, or an idea takes you there. Then you want to make the idea and you think, how can I best make this idea and bring it across to people? What will touch people, not just intellectually, not in their mind, but have a visceral reaction? I'm always after that visceral reaction. And I love the idea of transforming a space. That to me is just the ultimate. You come in, like right now I have this idea in my head that I want to make more of these columns, the silk organza white columns, and you walk in, and you're blown away by the amount of these silk organza columns. Then as you come in, you

hit a tree here or there and then you come into the nucleus, the center of that spiral and the spiral would be bigger that you could walk into, but it would still be the center part, but you don't see it from the outside. So, you're let slowly into the space. It would be a very different feeling, but it would be interesting to see if I could create it. Like when I created this space for *The Last Tree* at the Burchfield Penney, it's like you came in and you were like, oh my God, that's what I want to feel. When I go into a fabulous installation, someplace in New York or whatever city, and you're going, wow. I want to do this.

There's always the beauty part. Even though *Lost Trees* at HCC was a conscious attempt to flip the script along with the big hair nest drawings and focus on the beauty of the tree instead of focusing on the decadence of the tree or the demise of the tree. To give the tree these big hair nest drawings are really to give it its due. They're giving a reverence to the tree. I want you to come in. That's why I wanted it at a certain height. So that it was just a little bit taller than a human being and it was close to the size of what a tree might be and so they would also feel totem-like. So that they would feel important, and you come in and you say, "ah, this is a beautiful tree. I need to give respect to this beautiful tree. And how do I give respect to this tree?" By taking care of this tree. When even though they just look like a very good way of taking care of them. It was this idea of if I wrap them, maybe people will think I'm trying to take care of them. I'm giving that, it's a thing that's dead, and I'm taking care of it anyway. At times you think of the own absurdity of your ideas, but it'll work. This'll work. And so, it does work.

So, I think that every act you take affects your life. It affects your life because it also determines the people that you meet. Look at me talking to you today. I'm having this interview today. If I hadn't done this project there, I wouldn't be having this interview with you. My piece wouldn't be in the collection if I hadn't done that show there. It's like every action has a reaction. It's like the best part, this is why Jerry Saltz is always so damn enthusiastic. That's what's so nice about going to see him, because it's like, "just get out there, make the work, and this is what you should do, and don't worry about what other people think, just make what you want to make."

I wouldn't be answering these questions like I am 20 years ago. I would not be having this conversation. I couldn't have it without having lived through that 20 years of what I just talked to you about, or the 30 years I just talked to you about. So, it's an interesting thing to think about. I know when I was younger, I loved talking to



older people. I was always upset that there were a lot of younger people that didn't have respect for older people. They didn't understand what they could get from older people. Jesus Christ, they had a lot of information. They've been through a lot. Ask them questions, ask them a bunch of questions. What was your life like? What did you do, this, that, and the other thing? So, it's interesting because I have a nephew who loves hanging out with us. He's 30 years old and he just loves hanging out with his aunt and uncle because, and especially my husband, we got all these stories. It's like, that's what happens. You've lived a life. You've done some things. And it is interesting because I said to him, I can't even know old people. He goes, oh yeah, old people are great. You hear these people speaking and it's always fascinating to hear their tales about how their life has influenced who they are today. So, it just makes life a fascinating trip. That's all I can say. It's like this creating and being around creators makes it a fascinating trip. And there's a whole bunch of those out there.

I was fascinated by all the art, but I was never thinking that I was going to be the art history part. And part of it was... talk about self-esteem. When I was younger, I had some dyslexic problems and reading problems. Now, I was talking two languages at five, and I was fluent in both. I started talking at one or something. I was a blabbermouth. I always had very stimulating conversations, even as I was a very old soul. But somehow, I never thought I had enough of my intellectual capabilities to really do the museum study besides which I was possessed to make the things. I was more fascinated with that than I was in, although I was fascinated with others making things too. One of the other things I remember was in high school, I think when we went on a trip and I went to the museum, but I knew instantly, this is home. This is home. I will someday be on these walls. I knew then, but I just love the fact that people made things. Where you can go into museums in New York, see some of this ancient stuff. I'm so captured by it, fascinated by it. Do I need to know exactly the period or what came before or what went on? No, not always. I'm fascinated with the mere object in and of itself, which is interesting. And there were certain things that stayed in my head all the time.

All right, so did you have any other questions related to art and life? Because that's what Jerry Saltz was talking about, art is life, that's his book. Yes, it was a lot of fun. He's a lot of fun. He really is. The museum was something he talked a bit about. And what's going on with museums today and how the reality is they really are changing. Museums are changing and of course the unfortunate part is that they're back still

to ignoring the older white ladies unless you're really ancient and right now it's all about black women artists and that's a fascinating thing to watch too. But they need to still also talk about the disparity. There are still very few women in museums. The vast majority of museums are collections of work by men. And it's going to take a long time to change that equation. You're probably very familiar with all the Guerrilla Girl activities and what you need to do to get into a museum. And my first bodybuilding work also referred to some of that stuff because I was juxtaposing these bodybuilders against these icons of women. The Western man's icon of a woman or whatever you want to call them, their masterpieces, but the Botticelli's and the Rubens, and I literally juxtaposed them to this big bodybuilder. That was a fascinating thing to think about just what the female form is supposed to be and then how they were interpreting it. There are women artists that are making work that are all, it's great to see them having a discussion about the female body, how they see it, and what it means to them versus what the female body means to a man. So anyway, I think that's kind of a nice note to end on.