

NYFAI

Interview: Kay Towns interviewed by Katie Cercone

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K.C.: This is Katie Cercone interviewing Kay Towns on January 4th, 2009. When did you first become involved in NYFAI? How did you first hear about NYFAI, a friend, a newspaper, or other source? Why did you become involved? And how long were you active at the institute?

K.T.: I first became involved with NYFAI the summer of 1984. I know because I've documented that period of my life in a scrapbook.

I had moved, from Michigan in 1981 to New York City and I found myself looking for a venue to pursue my interest in art. Around 1982 I began noticing ads for NYFAI. I still have the ad here [references scrapbook] and a couple of years later in 1984 I finally worked up the courage to sign up for a class.

In the fairly rural area in Michigan I hailed from, art was never a focal point in my life other than I knew I received fulfillment and satisfaction when I was painting or drawing. But it just didn't blend in with my being active in the family business of funeral homes. I was too intimidated to think of or refer to myself as an artist.

I attended my first class in January of 1984 in NYFAI's new location on Franklin Street, between Church and Broadway. From the winter of 1984 through November of 1988 I was active then I joined a women's art support group and began taking courses at the School of Visual Arts

K.C.: And how long were you active at NYFAI?

K.T.: As I mentioned, my first class at NYFAI was January 1984. It was a Visual Artist Diary class, with Nancy Azara and I continued taking various classes with great enthusiasm. My affiliation then ended when I signed up for a small women's art support group that was starting up. I was involved with the support group for about a year; then I ended up matriculating into the School of Visual Arts Fine Arts program the Fall of 1989. I am certain my enrolling at SVA would not have happened had it not been for my involvement with NYFAI, along with friends outside of NYFAI.

K.C.: You talked a little bit about this, but how would you describe your relationship to art at the time? Artist, teacher, student or interested in the arts?

K.T.: My relationship to art at that time was very naïve, stiff and unfocused. I was unsure about making reference to myself as an artist. At the time I thought art was a simple matter of applying paint or executing a drawing with an exact likeness of it's model;. In High School my high school art teacher constantly reminded me art should reflect my experiences as an artist not the experiences of another artist. It took me a very long time to comprehend what he was saying. Creative expression was difficult leaving me feeling lost and confused. I felt as though I was floundering and I knew I needed to continue creating art.

It was great to mingle with other women artists at NYFAI, along with exchanging and sharing thoughts and ideas. The commraderie helped me to expand and come to terms with my creative side. I felt support through each instructor's passion for their work. A special connecting energy existed between myself and the other women artists who, were also looking for a safe, comfortable place to express themselves.

NYFAI, later on, opened its space to its members who did not have a place to do work on their art. I took advantage of the studio space and as a result had a great experience being in an environment to develop my own artistic language.

K.C.: Did you have a studio prior to that?

K.T.: No, I was living in a women's residence (Ten Eyck-Troughton) operated by the Salvation Army on East 39th Street between 3rd and Lex. The single room I occupied there only had room for a bed, desk and chair. I did take a painting class offered at the residence. I've kept the painting to remember where I started from, it's a reminder of how I lacked emotional connection to the canvas. I never did finish it. I recall how intimidated I felt comparing myself to the other artists in the room, wishing I could be freer in my gestures and approach.

The classes I took at NYFAI helped me to understand the meaning of expression and inspiration. The Artist Diary classes were especially beneficial for me. I still have the several I created. They hold memories of how I learned to come into touch with my inner eye.

K.C.: Describe your experience of art as a woman artist prior to NYFAI. For example, experiences in the studio, in the classroom, exhibitions, publications, press.

K.T.: I worked for awhile in the Publications Department at Toledo University. As an employee I was able to take some free art courses. Later, before entering Wayne State University's Mortuary Science program, I joined an art organization in junior college and a couple of art classes. We did a few art related shows but nothing noteworthy. I had a room in my apartment devoted as a studio but I burnt out with frustration in finding subject matter. In Mortuary College I found great pleasure in taking the creative courses such as Restorative Art, sculpture and a basic arts class.

I did not have close artistic ties back then. I had a friend that on occasion we would get together and talk about art. Both of us attended a community art club but I never was comfortable with my art and continued to feel isolated.

When I moved to New York City I was overwhelmed and blown away when I realized I was living in the heart of the art world.

I participated in art critiques at NYFAI. In the beginning I had no idea what a critique was. That was one of my hardest moments, when my turn would come to be critiqued and I had to speak about my art. By listening to other artists talk about their art I eventually learned to understand how to express myself about my art.

K.C.: How were you involved at NYFAI? Student, teacher, administrator, organizer? Please describe the classes you took or any programs you were involved in, and in salon exhibitions at the Ceres Gallery.

K.T.: My experience with NYFAI ranged from taking classes, helping with some office related work, taking part in exhibitions, open houses, as well as being a member of a studio group.

Some members needed space to work on their art so NYFAI offered to rent its space when classes or events were not being held. It was a terrific experience to at long last have a place to go that was purely dedicated to making art.

In 1985 the studio group, about 12 of us, brainstormed and put together a member group exhibition. We titled the exhibition “Free Martinis”. We gave out free martinis as a promo. In addition to our sending out invitations, I recall, we made a banner to hang outside the second story window of NYFAI, the day of the show, to draw people in from the street below. It worked famously. We had a huge crowd. Everyone in the studio group had a great time putting it together.

Working a day job and trying to take part in NYFAI’s activities was a juggling act but I would not have traded the experience.

K.C.: What was the job? Have you worked in the same line of work since you came to New York?

K.T.: During the day I am a legal secretary. Before coming to New York I was a licensed funeral director in a family business. I still maintain my mortuary license in Michigan but no longer have any interest in the profession. My father owned three funeral homes, so I grew up in the business. I worked in the family business for 10 years after receiving my Mortuary of Science certificate. After losing one of the locations in a fire, at age 32, I decided I needed to leave the business and create another lifestyle for myself. I was living a 24/7 life married to a business and I really had lost the dedicated feeling I had once had. So, I moved to New York. I had always been intrigued by the City and urban life. The first job I had was working in a corporate accounting firm as a Word Processor. A few years later, after receiving a paralegal certificate from NYU, I worked as a legal secretary and 23 years later that is still my “day job”. The idea of going to work and being able to leave it behind at the end of the day appealed to me, along with experiencing the theaters, galleries and museums.

K.C.: Please describe your experiences at NYFAI. For example, the sense of community, friendships in the studio and classroom.

K.T.: I spent every spare moment at NYFAI. Having access to studio space, taking courses and making friends with other artists definitely gave me a sense of community. I remember taking

painting classes from Regina Tierney and Melissa Meyer and Nancy Azara, These classes were to become the backbone of my artistic development.

K.C.: Did it feel radically different than what you were doing in prior school or more traditional settings?

K.T.: Absolutely, the camaraderie I had with other women artists there was electrifying for me. Along with influence of the feminist movement my eyes and thinking were enlightened to the dilemma women artists were constantly confronted with in the art world.

K.C.: Can you describe some of the visual work and written work that you produced at NYFAI?

K.T.: I have logged my experiences with NYFAI into binders. This has created a little history of my time at NYFAI. I have saved flyers, photos and exhibition announcements among other things relating to my NYFAI experience. The visual diaries were really hard but after awhile I appreciated what they were all about and now I refer to these diaries as seed books. Whatever creative thoughts I may have I place into these diaries. They are usually in the form of a steno pad or a small bound notebook, it's like gardening. I'm planting seeds of ideas, in sketch or written form, for future reference.

K.C.: Has painting been your main focus?

K.T.: Yes painting had been my preference, using oils, then acrylics. Now my leanings are toward collage, assemblage, mixed media and experimenting with Artist Trading Cards.

K.C.: I've made a couple.

K.T.: I find it difficult not to treat these cards as precious, because of their small size. Sometimes I feel they give off a lot of energy as I work with them. I liken them to Visual Diaries and my Seed Books.

This painting, a mixed medium/collage piece (*FOOTPRINTS*), hanging on my wall . . .

K.C.: The red one?

K.T.: Yes, it turned out to be a break through piece for me. It developed from my experience as a 9/11 survivor. In another room I have a piece created with wood, acrylic and plaster bandages. It also came from my 9/11 experience. It was in a show, called "Politics", this past March. I seem to still be experiencing 9/11. I feel compelled to tell of my experience, visually, as a

survivor escaping Tower Two of the World Trade Center after the first plane flew into Tower One.

At the moment I'm preparing a piece for a group show called "Encryption" that's to take place in a few weeks.

K.C.: They're all painted by hand?

K.T.: The piece for the "Encryption" show is collage, acrylic and mixed media. I've collaged five forms of encryption into its 36" by 24" format. It's a long way from the piece I was telling you about when I first came to New York. I've grown immensely from the days I would copy and mimic other artists.

K.C.: What was the most important aspect for you of your experience at NYFAI?

K.T.: My most important experience was being surrounded by other women artists at NYFAI. I took in their energy and by listening to them I was able to work up courage to participate in the various classes. NYFAI was the most enlightening period of my life, it helped me break free from the shell of artistic doubt blocking my creativity.

K.C.: How would you describe your relationship to feminism at the time? Feminist, radical feminist, lesbian feminist, interested in feminism? Were you an activist and/or activist for women in the arts? If so, please describe.

K.T.: No, I was not an activist. I was trying to figure out where I belonged in the scheme of having an artistic life. After all, I was coming from, Middle America, a totally different environment from New York. Feminism, in the activist vein, was the furthest thing from my intentions. I've never walked around with placards, though I've always been supportive of feminist viewpoints.

K.C.: Did NYFAI contribute to your development as a feminist? We kind of just went over that.

K.T.: Yes. I would say NYFAI enhanced my development as a feminist.

K.C.: How did your experience at NYFAI further your development as an artist?

K.T.: It gave me confidence I was looking for and helped me begin learning how to focus with my art. In the scrapbook I created of my experiences at NYFAI I ran across notes I had typed after taking a particular painting class. It's clear from reading those notes how I was floundering

with my art and how I was trying to understand why I was floundering. My growth at NYFAI helped connect with a women's art support group, along with the additional encouragement from friends to go after a MFA.

Eventually I was accepted into the School of Visual Arts Fine Arts program. It took me 7-years to receive my degree. I always felt it was my good fortune finding the Feminist Art Institute. It proved an invaluable stepping stone toward realizing my creative potential.

K.C.: What is your current involvement in the arts? Do you consider yourself a professional artist? What is your current involvement in feminism?

K.T.: On certain levels I do. I would like to one day consider myself a professional artist living from the income of my art. Until then, I need to keep my day job.

The Internet is my most valuable tool now in keeping abreast with what is going on in the art world. One day I dream of getting my master's, but it's just not in the cards right now.

K.C.: How would you describe the relationship between art and feminism in your life and work?

K.T.: I wouldn't say I was an activist, however I do support feminism. In support of women artists I joined, as a Charter member, the National Women's Museum of the Arts in Washington, D.C.

K.C.: The last question is how would you describe the legacy of NYFAI and is there anything that you'd like to share with the younger generation about your experience there?

K.T.: Had it not been for NYFAI's influence on my becoming an artist along with the feminist movement, I do not believe I would have had the courage to pursue my art. NYFAI, offer a connecting force for women artists that created a firm sense of community. I don't believe it's as strong today in the same way. Also, it seems women artists then were smaller in numbers than now and that made it more significant that they banded together joining their voices to demand the attention of the art world to push for what they were entitled. I guess that's what I feel is NYFAI's legacy

K.C.: It sounds like that's what it was that pushed you to be confident. The community. . .

K.T.: Absolutely. The biggest part of my experience in the art world was gaining confidence; finding a niche where I felt safe and could dare to experiment to gain focus.

K.C.: **Yes. Is there anything else?**

K.T.: I can't think of anything. I'm very flattered that I've been asked to be a part of this. This is terrific. I am honored to be part of its history.

K.C.: **Thank you so much. It's been wonderful. I felt like I was heard myself in your story too of not wanting to say I was an artist, or being afraid. In New York it's kind of that everyone is but especially – even where I grew up – it's not really something that people said, or heard, or wanted to hear.**

K.T.: You really have to live and breathe what art is all about in order to appreciate it. Making art pushes, pulls and stretches the artist's emotions, creating an excitement and at the same time causing frustration. I ask myself time and again why I continue trying to make art. The answer is that nothing else could make me feel alive and content. Not being able to create would make me wither away into dust.

K.C.: **Well it's a long journey for an artist.**

K.T.: Right. But as long as you enjoy what you're doing – in anything – everything else will fall into place. One just needs to read the road signs of life to reach a destination and for me that is creating art.

K.C.: **I guess we could end on that positive note.**