



ArtSeen

July 10th, 2006

WEBEXCLUSIVE

Arlene Raven

by Phyllis Rosser

The art critic and historian Arlene Raven died of cancer in Brooklyn on August 1, 2006, at age 62. I met her in 1984 when I was 49, a year after she moved to New York City, when she gave a series of four lectures on feminist art at the New York Feminist Art Institute. Impressed by her presentation and knowledge, I asked if I could write an article about the series for *Women Artist News*. She invited me to interview her at the apartment she shared with her partner, sculptor Nancy Grossman, and immediately, or so it seemed, she became my mentor.

I saw her as an intellectual force of nature: energetic, commanding, sure of herself. She had been an important leader in the California feminist art movement of the 1970s, co-founding the Feminist Studio Workshop with Judy Chicago and Sheila de Bretteville and helping launch the famous Women's Building in Los Angeles. She started innovative teaching programs based on consciousness raising and in 1977 founded the Lesbian Art Project, a collective of artists who explored Lesbianism as a consciousness, not just a sexual preference. She wrote numerous articles, curated significant shows, and wrote catalogue essays promoting known and unknown women artists. In New York she became chief art critic at *The Village Voice*, continuing to discover and promote artists, establishing their careers.

When I first met Arlene, I had just left *Ms. Magazine* after nine years as a Contributing Editor. She saw in me someone who wanted to make a difference and decided I should interview women artists who needed to be better known. She couldn't write about them herself because the magazines that published this work didn't pay and she couldn't write for free. On a daily basis she guided my development as an art critic.

I had come from a puritanical family in upstate New York where art was a taboo subject and hard work was valued way above personal fulfillment. My childhood had been dreary and boring except for the art lessons I received in grammar school, on a scholarship from the Rochester Memorial Art Gallery. As a teenager I put aside my dream of becoming an artist because it terrified my parents,

although I majored in Art History in College. I spent several years working as an Interior Designer after graduation but found myself more interested in the social revolution of the 1960s and 70s. Arlene was perfect for me. She saw feminist art as revolution and thought women artists could change the world.

She was like a sister to me—developing not only my criticism but also my art. Praising, raising my spirits, chiding me for lack of focus. It seems that her attitude and the courage it gave me helped me find my way to becoming a sculptor when I was nearly 50. She was always offering to come to my studio and critique my work and I didn't take advantage of her generosity nearly enough. Five months before a solo show in 2005 I told her I was stuck, everything seemed too contained. I felt I was running out of juice. She came for a visit and said, "put those two baskets in the middle of the room. Now, fill them with branches. Keep Going!" she commanded until something began to take shape. Finally I felt a shift and she decided it was okay to stop. I went on to create my first installation, called *Fantasy Garden*, which I made with branches trimmed from my son's privet hedge. Three years ago she bought my *Night Blooming Cereus* painting for her collection.

Arlene's creative love was writing. She told me, if she'd lived in a later time she would have been an artist who incorporated words into her paintings. She wanted to be evocative and poetic in her criticism, put new images together that would resonate with her readers, help them see life in a new way. She published nine books on contemporary art and art criticism and taught criticism all her life—at Cal Arts, Parsons, Maryland Institute, among many others. Her teaching included the Art Group, fifteen or so women art lovers and collectors whom she took to visit artists' studios, galleries and museums twelve times a year for twenty-one years. I was one of those lucky women. She mainly visited feminist artists, asking them to tell us how they became artists and then, "tell us all the gossip."

Her loss is unbearable, part of my life lopped off. I feel a current of sadness flowing under my daily activities but I haven't been able to cry about her death, which seems strange to me. Maybe my childhood deprivation has habituated me to loss or maybe I'd been grieving the whole year she struggled with cancer. Even before that, there was a mysterious infection that had her living on antibiotics for several years. She tried to keep her appointments with "the ladies" as she called the Art Group. I can see her walking through Grand Central Station several years ago to show us some new work on the walls. When the tour ended and we headed back to a restaurant for lunch, she threw up on the polished marble floor. But she insisted on coming with us. Finally the source of the infection was found and she had major intestinal surgery. She felt healthy again for about a year before she was diagnosed with cancer, primary source unknown.

When the cancer returned ten months later, I didn't have much hope. After she was told it was spreading throughout her body she decided on no further chemo but couldn't face her own death. In one of her more lucid moments she said, "This is the hardest thing, psychologically, that I've ever tried to wrap my mind around." First she emailed me, then she stopped communicating entirely and wouldn't even talk on the phone. Just two weeks before she died, she had a breakthrough in her fear

and emailed me to phone her. “It’s after ten, should I call,” I asked my husband. “Don’t be silly,” he said. For about an hour we talked about her health and the feminist art show we were working on together. I tried to act normal. Her breathing became labored and I felt I should let her go. I wish I hadn’t. It was our last conversation.

Arlene changed everything for me. Before her illness we had talked nearly every day about work, family, hopes and dreams. She encouraged me to keep showing my sculpture, developing my painting and writing and working to change the world. I can see her designing my sculpture exhibitions, scuttling across the gallery floor on the wheeled secretarial chair from the front desk. She is part of everything I do—goading me on, demanding more, keeping me focused.

The first book of what will be a continuing evaluation of her work has been published by Critical Matrix: The Princeton Journal of Women, Gender and Culture. Entitled Arlene Raven's Legacy, it appeared in Volume 17, Spring 2008.

For further information, email: matrix@princeton.edu or visit the web site: http://www.princeton.edu/~prowom/graduate/critical_matrix/matrix.html

CONTRIBUTOR

Phyllis Rosser

RECOMMENDED ARTICLES



WHEN ATTITUDE BECOMES A FOUNDATION

“Making the Impossible Possible” in North Rhine- Westphalia and—for a Few Days in July— New York City

by *Thyrza Nichols Goodeve*

JUL-AUG 2015 | ART

Nowhere is the myopic New York-centrism that Saul Steinberg so famously captured in his March 29, 1976 cover of the *New Yorker* as ubiquitous as it is in the art world. Although international travel is a given for most art professionals, in 2015 the art-infested boroughs of New York City, branching out from Soho to Chelsea, to Williamsburg, Long Island City, and Bushwick, with museums expanding in ways both depressing (MoMA) and exhilarating (the Whitney), it is hard not to continue to call New York the center of the art world.



Brooklyn Rail Highly Selective Music Events

MAR 2015 | MUSIC

A thoughtful, discerning, and carefully compiled list of the most notable, promising and unique musical events for the month of March in New York City.

Brooklyn Rail Highly Selective Music Events

MAY 2015 | MUSIC

A thoughtful, discerning, and carefully compiled list of the most notable, promising and unique musical events for the month of May in New York City.

HIGHLY SELECTIVE LISTINGS

Brooklyn Rail Highly Selective Music Events

FEB 2015 | MUSIC

A thoughtful, discerning, and carefully compiled list of the most notable, promising and unique musical events for the month of February in New York City.

SUBSCRIBE

to the *Brooklyn Rail*
start your subscription today!