

NYFAI – Oral History

Interview: Regina Tierney interviewed by Katie Cercone

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K.C. This is October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2008. Katie Cercone interviewing Regina Tierney. When did you first become involved in NYFAI? How did you learn about NYFAI? Why did you become involved and how long were you active in the institute?

R.T. One of the first things I did when I arrived in New York in 1983 was to go to an Open House at NYFAI which was, at the time, over on Spring Street. I had read about NYFAI in Heresies Magazine when I was an art student up in Boston and was thrilled to finally get the chance to study there. Shocking as it is, I never had a woman art teacher. I was hungry for it.

K.C. How long were you there?

R.T. I was affiliated with NYFAI from 1983 until it closed.

K.C. How would you describe your relationship to art in general at the time? Were you an artist, teacher of visual arts, art student or interested in the arts?

R.T. All of the above. I was a painter, a teacher and I was interested in the whole artist community, and particularly the feminist art community. I had always been politically involved. For me, art was an extension of my political beliefs, thinking and philosophy.

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

R.T. Well when I first got to NYFAI, I had just gotten out of graduate school with an MFA in painting so I didn't really have all that much experience outside of school but I had enough to know that the gender ratio of the student body in the undergraduate painting department at Boston University was close to 80% women and 20% men and that it flipped when it was time to apply to the more competitive Graduate school. BU had 10 slots each year for the MFA in Painting degree and they chose 7 men and 3 women in the year that I was admitted. Men who were far less the painters than many of

the women who had applied were accepted right away as if there was a secret policy about ensuring that the art teachers would stay predominately male. I had a lot of issues about the blatant sexism of that and as I said, I was just really eager to have some female teachers.

K.C. How were you involved at NYFAI: Student teacher, administrator, organizer? What classes did you take? Were you involved in the programs: Open houses, panels? Did you exhibit or participate in the salon exhibitions at Ceres Gallery?

R.T. I started out as a student in Harmony Hammond's women's art history class. That was amazing. She had the most extensive collection of slides and I got to see the work and the history behind the women's art movement. Harmony described the atmosphere in which NYFAI along with the Women's Building in LA and the publication Heresies had been born. So that was my initial experience as a student at NYFAI. I went on later to become Assistant Director to Nancy Azara. That was an important part of my education too and I always attributed my later success in business to all that I learned from Nancy and the others about keeping an entity going. I was involved, for about four years, with every aspect of the school from helping to organize our Open Houses which got more and more ambitious as the semesters rolled on, to working with teachers and putting together curriculum. I participated in the panels and in the group shows we had downstairs in the Ceres Art Gallery. Helped to run the art studio. And I helped organize the very successful Tenth Anniversary event we held in the Great Hall of Cooper Union.

K.C. Please describe your experiences at NYFAI in terms of sense of community, friendship in the studio and classroom.

R.T. Well it was a great community. It was very supportive. And diverse. We had younger women and older women and everybody in between. They would come to the classes and the big events we held and many women rented studio space from the school so they could create art in a supportive atmosphere for a reasonable fee. So it was really great. People were there – in and out – all of the time. It was a really interesting community – a lot of fun.

K.C. Can you describe the visual work and written work that you produced at NYFAI. If you were an instructor, how did the experience influence your work?

R.T. during the four year period of my being actively involved with NYFAI I painted large narrative paintings with a lot of Dream imagery and Angel imagery. I also loved teaching at NYFAI. We usually had a model come in for my class and that was great.

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

R.T. Community. Support. Education. I *learned* so much. When we are young, I think, we tend to take a lot of things for granted and when I look back now, twenty five years after first finding NYFAI, I realize that I hadn't really seen the once in a lifetime significance of having found that magical place, coming to it, as I said right out of Grad school. It was a community of women artists, I mean where can you find that type of place today? It was as if it was always there and would always be there; it was a place to go and talk about art with other like-minded women; a place to make art and look at art and discuss the challenges that face all artists. It was a community; a family almost.

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

R.T. I was a feminist. I guess in many ways I would have described myself as a radical feminist.

K.C. What type of activism?

R.T. In school I had been involved with the pro-choice movement; the anti apartheid and No-Nukes movements; The Take back The Night events. I always went to all of the rallies against war. I was always an activist at heart but as an artist I think I preferred to find a way to express my beliefs in my art.

K.C. Did NYFAI contribute to your development as a feminist and/or art activist?

R.T. NYFAI was like my family in many ways so of course it influenced me completely.

And becoming the Administrative assistant gave me, as I mentioned earlier, a myriad of skills that I then took out into the world.

K.C. How did your experience at NYFAI further your development as an artist, writer, or interested participant?

R.T. Later on in my life I became a computer animator; business owner; a videographer and digital photographer and now, a writer. I had a very successful advertising agency and a lot of the things I learned about business, and about dealing with people, I learned at NYFAI. I learned how to organize a successful organization from Nancy, really and it served me well later on in my life. It was a very entrepreneurial experience. It taught me how to take risks and how to get out there and get something done

K.C. When you came in as an administrator, what did it look like when you were getting money? Were you writing grants? How did people respond when you were actively asking for money?

R.T. My main responsibility was to fill the classes and the art studio and to get the word out about the school. I was also a commentator on the Arts for WNYC for awhile and was plugging the school that way also. I was a bit of a public relations worker, I would say, for NYFAI and I talked about it everywhere I went. And, of course, we had a great roster of people who would always contribute as patrons, benefactors. There were a lot of women (and a few men) who understood the importance of supporting NYFAI and they were loyal; sent whatever financial support they could afford to send. And then we received grants from various organizations.

K.C. How do your experiences at NYFAI influence your art and life today? What is your current involvement in the arts? Do you consider yourself a professional artist? What is your current involvement in feminism?

R.T. The digital art movement was just beginning when I was at NYFAI and in fact I left NYFAI to pursue that world. I accidentally started an Advertising Agency and produced more commercial images in that realm. I was also a Professor of Computer Graphics at the New York Institute of Technology for a few years. Later I became Hillary Clinton's

personal videographer and photographer for about two years and for the last four years I have been writing a memoir.

K.C. What is your current involvement with feminism?

R.T. I'm a feminist in my everyday life . . . in the way I interact with people. In the way I view the world and my place in it. I didn't feel discriminated against per se in business. My business partner was also a woman and we had very corporate clients, mostly men, and I have to say that I never felt the sting of being treated differently in business. I have certainly seen it happen to other women in business; in politics. It is an interesting question and I know that one of the reasons I have been so fortunate is because of all of the women who fought for that equality before I came of age..

Basically, I would say that I am a feminist in everything I do; in the way I think and view the world. In the way I approach my life.

K.C. Do you see the way that you do business feminist in any way? If you look at other animators, other people in the corporate world do you see differences?

R.T. I never had the feeling in business that people were going to be against me because I was a woman. I think I had a lot of confidence about what I was bringing to the table in business and with my digital imagery which was revolutionary at the time. As I said, I felt the full force of sexism and discrimination when I was applying to graduate school back in 1981 because I saw that a lot of my women colleagues in undergraduate school were rejected from graduate schools when all of the guys from the undergraduate school got in. Having gotten into graduate school myself, I didn't feel the sting of sexism personally in that regard but I did see that many of my female colleagues were rejected even though they were much better painters than a lot of the men who got in. . . .

K.C. Did you always feel really confident about your work when you were presenting it?

R.T. I had a lot of confidence about my digital work. As a painter, I was always a little afraid of the art world. It seemed very male and of course I had had that sexist experience in art school. But there were women like Pat Steir and Elizabeth Murray; like Louis

Bourgeoise and Elaine deKooning who had these huge superstar art careers but for the most part I felt it was mostly a man's world. I guess I was intimidated by that but for some reason I was never intimidated by presenting my digital work.

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

Well having grown up with three older sisters who were avant guard and involved in the anti-war movement and the pro-choice movement, I got very involved at a very young age with going to marches on Washington and working for McGovern's presidential campaign in 1972. One of my sister's best friends was a lesbian and a radical feminist so I had been exposed early on to feminism and other progressive philosophies. And I had always been an artist of one sort or another,

K.C. Did you want to talk about your book at all? You said that you were writing a memoir.

R.T. I am. My book is about growing up in a working class town, in an alcoholic family system. Its about getting sober which I did back in 1983 and about coming back to the place where I grew up to take care of my elderly mother at 47 years of age. Its about the creative experience in general and about all of the things I have experienced from being a starving artist to a rich donor to the Democratic party to an Ad agency entrepreneur to Hillary's traveling digital chronicler to a sober person struggling with addiction and co-dependency. Writing my book has been the most grueling and the most rewarding creative experience of my life so far. And interestingly I discovered in the process what I was born to be – a writer. I had developed a sort of amnesia about how much I had written as a young person because when I entered into my first relationship with a man who was also a writer I felt that, you know I couldn't or rather I shouldn't compete with him by writing also. SO, I forgot about my desire to write and concentrated instead on the performing arts and later on the visual arts. Mine has been a diverse life but one which is held together, always, with the invisible string of the creative process.

K.C. How would you describe the legacy of NYFAI? Is there something you'd like to share with the younger generation about your experience there?

R.T. Yes. I encourage young people to create communities like NYFAI. To take the time to formulate a plan or a mission statement like the founding Mothers of NYFAI did. To understand both the struggle and the creative impulse behind NYFAI. To claim our power as women and as artists. That's what NYFAI helped me to do in my own life; to find my own unique voice and my own power.