

## Miani Johnson Interview with Daisy Youngblood

1. We can start with the beginning. The 1970s. Why did you start making clay pieces? My recollection was that you were making “toys” for your children, but not really taking yourself seriously as a person making art; sort of backing into making art, rather than head-on deliberately. Was it easier to express this part of yourself without declaring it? How did your sense of making art relate to what was the early Tribeca community? It was tight-knit, with lots of rules and unsaid judgements. Your work had little to do with what was going on around you, you were just following your inner life. What motivated you? Do you remember how we met?

2. I recall that you were making small clay pieces and firing them out on the “beach,” which was the landfill area later used to build giant buildings, but still undeveloped at the time. You fired them in little fires of sticks, so they were very soft and delicate. Can you explain how you were attracted to clay, how your working methods have evolved, why you choose the earth-bound materials you use, how you imbue these natural materials with so much emotion, how you get the coloration you want? Do you start with the feeling/idea and let it evolve, or do you start with the subject, elephant, portrait, gorilla, head, torso, and then find the message/emotional punch in the subject? Can you explain low fire, and how you get those rich colors and variations? How do you choose what material to use? It seems they always come from nature, your environment. With the exception of two birds, I do not recall any bright coloration. Your palette? Do you ever sketch or draw the images first to conjure them?

3. How do you choose your subject? Animals and humans: why are you drawn to them as subjects? What do the animals you have made repeatedly—elephants, goats, gorillas—mean to you? The humans are often portraits. How have you chosen them?

4. Is there a broad message you want people to glean from the total body of work? You reference older other cultures and a huge range of emotions. Is this to point to larger themes, or to comment back on the things you find lacking in our current world? Or where the world is headed?

5. Why did you leave New York? I recall you saying you wanted to be in a place where nature was more threatening than the people in it. That’s probably not quite what you meant, but why did you choose Costa Rica, what were you hoping to leave behind, and what were you hoping to find? Have you found it? Please describe how you live in Costa Rica, so different from N.Y.C., where most of the audience for your work resides. Do you show your work in C.R.? Are there other artists you know in C.R.? How would you position yourself in relation to our times, the New York art world, your world in C.R.?

6. What, who (other artists?) have influenced your work? What cultures do you feel the most affinity with? I remember some Greek pantheon titles. Archetypes? Repeated use of certain animals. Several portraits of Dick Bellamy.

7. What have been the biggest challenges in your life? Decisions you have been glad you made,

or regretted? What makes you happiest or most fulfilled?

8. Can you talk about where you think you got the insight to make the kind of work you make? How have you been able to reach into the depths of human experience and embody that in an object? Most of us run away frightened from the content your work alludes to, but are then attracted to your pointing to its powerfulness. Can you put into words how you have harnessed this?

9. Open-ended...what have I overlooked that you want people to know?

My family acknowledged me as artist from the beginning. My grandparents' walls were covered in beautiful paintings and carvings by my great grandmother and her daughters. She took them from North Carolina to Europe as children to study painting in the late 1800's. One later became a Theosophist and spiritualist. These paintings and the talk of spirits meant a great deal to me. My grandmother, Daisy, was the carver, and though she died when I was 3, we had bonded. So art was about communicating in a way that transcends generations, I always felt I would be responsible to continue this. It was the South in the 50's, no art museums, but I was always drawing and painting and wanting to understand what made some art very important.

In the 60's I was in art school in Richmond, Va., which was Hans Hofmann based and had a good art history department, also cool teachers who knew what was going on in N.Y. and were able to bring down a few performance artists from the era. Pop Art was being talked about, I was losing interest and decided to leave and go live in the Amazon with the Indians.

Instead I had my first child and followed his father to N.Y. where we spent the next 18 years immersed in lower Manhattan's art world. As I wandered the streets with our son, Joe, my husband worked supporting us, his art and his ambition. I continued to work but as secretly as I could and without ambition. Though I was interested in the culture going on around me it didn't seem to have anything to do with the family lineage that I felt a part of. We had no money so my medium had to be free, I carved and built with wood I found on the streets until I felt the need for the forms to be hollow. So I looked for clay. I got caught trying to smuggle a big wad of clay under my shirt from a Long Island park. But other mothers guided me to clay. I preferred wild clay, not store bought and knew nothing about firing. I would just build a fire out in the empty lots near Chambers street, digging a hole and putting wood on top. One time while firing I went around the corner to get something to drink and came back to see one of the hobos who lived in the area jumping up and down on the fire. I screamed him off and the little sculpture, Horse Crucifixion, was unharmed.

As the marriage was breaking up in the 70's I needed to work, but no experience, no degree and insanely introverted. After a brief time waitressing I got a van from my father and helped

people move. This was a devastating several years, the Wired Waitress comes from then, as well as several crucifixions, marking the death of an old me, waiting for the resurrection.

My father's side of the family, the Youngbloods, were mountaineers of western North Carolina. Smart, self-sufficient, extremely private. They could have been Dutch trappers with possible Cherokee mixed in. They hid out the Civil War and possibly hid during the Trail of Tears the Cherokee had to walk in the 1800's, but they didn't tell stories about their past.

My first sculpture was a Bear from clay I made at 4 while waiting for my brother to get home on the school bus. He was a cub scout and I remember thinking I must be a Bear scout, having had a visitation from a Large Bear who told me she was my real mother. Not often but throughout life I have had Visions appear and guide me, they were outside of myself, never scary and always a puzzle. I remember wondering where that woman went when she wasn't with me, is she off drinking tea? This one had no bones and would move with the breeze, I couldn't understand how she had no bones. She would point at me and laugh, mocking the new skinny little body I now inhabited.

As I was breaking up and cracking up, someone told me about the C.G. Jung Library in N.Y. By then I was supporting myself and children driving my van for people moving in and out of apts. I had no money for a therapist so I would drive by the Jung Library and tell the librarian a dream and she would hand me the book I needed. She was wonderful. I read while people moved their furniture in and out.

Jung and the ancient works at the Metropolitan Museum kept my intentions true to upholding meaning in Art. The other mothers in the park, particularly Susan Rothenburg, Silvia Whitman, Poppy Johnson, held my hand and pulled me into the lively flowing, competitive reality of the day.

The galleries in those days were pretty white and minimal, Susan's big warm colored horses were a huge opening and great inspiration for me to go ahead with what I do. When she saw my work she said "I can get you a show but it will break up your marriage." But it was already coming apart. She brought Miani Johnson of the Willard Gallery to my studio and I was soon showing.

The Willard Gallery was the most enviable place to be at the time but I was not ready for it. After a few years of attention and success I realized that I felt like I had been adopted by a foreign culture and had lost contact with my own. So I suddenly quit, connected with a less prestigious gallery to keep some money coming and left for Costa Rica.

The things I make need to come from an unknown place, on their own time, spurred along by upheaval, inner and outer...being public was making it very hard. But upheaval never let up and I had to learn how to dance with it.

This kind of dance is authentic ritual, a means of holding a space in time to allow for change to take place gracefully. I am putting form to an unintegrated part of myself. Some of the portraits have to do with taking back whatever projection I had on another person. The problem of relationship would dissolve thru the ritual of putting form to what I experienced of the other. It was freeing, wonderful, until I tried it with my current husband 37 years ago when I was angry and wanting to leave that attachment. I was in France and he was refusing to come join me. I made his portrait, built a kiln to fire it, and when I peeked in the hole to see how it was doing, it blew up and my left eye with it. The portrait survived, though I broke it later, the husband came and took care of me and the relationship lives on.

From a Jungian perspective feeling is my weakest function, it's the last place I will go to express myself. When I started out I recognized that I was passing through something with each sculpture, like I was a sea creature constantly changing shells. And with completion I could sense the release of a tension and a big change of heart. It's that heart opening that I now understand as feeling, and it grew.

The animals that I use I think of as actors, very specific carriers of intuited content. There is no verbal expression. It is the experience that I am after, my own and then the viewer's. The experience doesn't come easily, it's invited.

Though they are technically ceramics, I prefer calling them low fired clay, brought only to a temperature that makes them stable. So I under fire, leaving them soft and absorbent so that the wood fire soaks in to give them a warm color. I try to keep the feel of earth and water. I have painted a few with oil paint and stuck them in the kiln for a short time to make it more subtle. The Pregnant Torso is done that way. I can only think of one that I left bright, a little pink clay bird with a red head. It must have been the clue that got me to Costa Rica.

Mid 80's I was so eager to leave N.Y., still driving my moving van, I met a man who was in N.Y. buying equipment for the Sandinistas of Nicaragua. I fell in love and wanted to go join him and the revolution. He said I needed to go to Costa Rica first and learn Spanish. I never learned Spanish and Costa Rica was so sweet and peaceful I forgot about revolutions. Instead I met Tom on a bus and lived happily in the cloud forrest, barefoot and pregnant, digging clay and firing a wood kiln.

With the shock of a baby born with Down's syndrome we began our 35 year voyage into real Heart. Tom was a practicing Buddhist and wanted community, it was the time of great Tibetan teachers coming to the U.S. so we traveled for years learning from them. We were always looking for a practice community near a Down's syndrome community, not near a city. Giving up the search, we came here and it's pretty much manifested around us, a few practice friends, and a growing community that has welcomed our daughter as a kindergarten teacher assistant.

I rarely go to the city or talk art with anyone, not too interested in the changing art scenes of the world. But I am grateful for being kept afloat in N.Y. by The David McKee Gallery who so

tenderly left me alone, coaxing out shows every 8 or so years and managing to keep me relevant for over 20. They closed in 2015.

After a 4 year pause I am now very pleased to be taken care of by Van Doren Waxter at 23 East 73rd street in New York City.