

Nancy Azara**ARTIST**

Being an artist, it's being engaged in a mystery. There is something about making art that is involved in such a tangible abstract experience of living that it really does feel like an engagement in a mystery. So from very young I've always been interested in the unseen, in the unknown, the unexplained, the unexplored. By making art it gives me a vehicle to work with this. It gives me a root and a direction to kind of understand what words don't give us and to kind of understand also what's around us all the time and what we take for granted, which when you make art there are many things that manifest themselves that you are just familiar with in such a way that you don't realize that they are special. So even watching a sunset sometimes is something we can take for granted but when you are an artist and you look at a sunset in a special way and than you work with your art in relationship to that, it becomes or it can become a whole new world.

Well, I think an artist in society can and should have a role of being a spokesperson. Leading and guiding people to an insight, which the artist has, or hopefully is working towards. So that as you make your art, you begin to develop an understanding which when the art is finished the viewer has an opportunity to experience. And it's about that mystery, its about that kind of very ephemeral unspoken unseen places that's within us that the artist is sharing with the person. That has a lot of political, social and spiritual ramifications because if you are talking about a kind of peace within or kind of turmoil within of which you are looking to resolve than you're presenting to the viewer a place where they can examine that within themselves. And have another dimension, another way to look at things other than a concrete form. Because we are so, almost imprisoned with concrete reality in our culture that we forget that it's only part of our existence. And so art is really about taking people from that place to another space. Or can be. I mean I don't think all artists are interested in doing that. Some artists are just interested in working with their mind. Other artists are interested only in working with their sensate feelings. But to me one needs to put it all together to really make a kind of presence so that the viewer can have a way to rethink things perhaps.

Well, for me my route of direction has been probably I was trying to place it in time in my live but I think my route in direction from very young has been feminism. You know the questions about what women's art is really like and if we had an opportunity to experience the world they way we should than I think that we would really advance ourselves in a way that we can't at the moment or it was very hard and I think that that's my place as an artist is to present this point of view. And that's my place in the art world too and I think in a lot of cases the art world may be close to me because it's not a very popular point of view. It's changing now because the younger generation is seeing feminism as a very necessary essential part of existence, which of course we, all the feminists have always known and we're beginning to embrace each other in a new way. So I would say that my place in the art world is about speaking from the voice of the feminine, speaking from the voice of the goddess, whatever that means, and the voice from the (not clear: infinite power of women within?). And I think I have a lot to say about that. And I think it's very valuable for men as well as women and don't think it's important to say it in big bright letters. I think it's there and I think people experience it.

Well, I had a traditional art education at a place called the art students league, so it wasn't an academic collage setting. But it was still as patriarchal as anything. The sculpture teacher for instance, of course a male, there were really only maybe a couple of women who were teachers at that time and those women taught children or I think maybe there was one who taught design and I'm talking about the 1960's. So the sculpture teacher used to come to class and he used to give demonstrations to the ladies. And he, lets say, pick up clay and put it in his hands and shape it and said: Ladies you make the work like hamburgers and he'd slap it onto a wall. Or hotdogs and he roll up a hotdog and slap it onto the wall, and it would go on like that so on and so forth. And then after he finished the demonstration with the ladies he'd go out to lunch with the men. And that was the way, that's a good metaphor for the way art school was for me. Most of the women were told that they were good artist who were there to be excellent wives to a male artist. They would be very supportive and be very perceptive because that was really their role in live was to be an accessory. So I think that's most why women artist were brought to experience art school [audio setzt aus] in

those days. I mean I don't think it's changed a great deal because there is still an underlying part that exists today. But nobody would say that anymore. So that planted a seed in me and then this first piece I made, a major work of mine, it really belonged to me, was a huge maple, carved maple, a piece of the crowning. You know the crowning is the experience of the actual birth. Well, that's what it's called in English, I don't know what it would be called in another language, and so it was the actual sensate feeling of the crowning of when my daughter was born. And it's an immense piece. I have some nice pictures of it. So that piece I think was a seed piece because it was about feelings and it was about the intellectual experience of feeling and it was about an expression of a female experience. One of the ways in which art was dealt with in those days, was that if you didn't like a work of art and or if it was done by a woman, and you felt it was not so good you would say that this work is too personal. You would always say, that person doesn't make very good art because it's too personal. So personal was something that was deeply looked down upon. And the women's movement came along and just smashed through all of that, and so this is my first conscious awareness just before the women's movement started because my daughter was born in 1967 and the women's movement started in 1968/69. It was beginning in '67. So as that information came from the women who were working on change, like I was working on change and we were all working on change, most of us in isolation. Some of the women were very political so they were working on change in a more broader scale in the world in terms of politics but those of us who were artists in the New York art world were working on a kind of understanding of where our inner forms came from and giving ourselves permission and saying the personal is political. Here we are and we're gonna make art out of that deeper place inside of us. Too bad guys, that's not what we feel and figure out a way how to make that seen. How to make that really become part of our environment and part of the art world and it did happen. I can't say that it happened as well as we would liked it to happen. Someone was pointing out the other day that most of the women's work that did get known came out of the same kind of place that was already set up like a conceptual reverence, or some kind of sort of reverences that were already established in the male environment, so that was the case. But now I'm thinking that maybe that's gonna change because the younger generation of artists make work that is so different in many ways. I as an older artist, a women artist, because it is gender specific in some ways. I as a women artist have to make myself look at some of this work, I have to tell myself, ok I don't like it, but if I don't look at it what will I ever learn and maybe I'll understand it and maybe liking is not that important anyway. Maybe really understanding and dialog and dynamic is the most important. Which is what I always believed in anyway. But when you are contested with that, when you really experience that out front like that, then you have to rethink, you know, o yeah I don't care if people don't like my work, but what about this work that I don't like either, what does that mean. So a lot of the younger women artists, who make works that I don't understand, and I don't feel comfortable with but I don't really think that that's a reason not to experience it and find a dialogue with it, or lack of value. I mean it has real major value, much of it, and of course it's fun to get to know them then because I can have a dialogue with them, too.

Most of the women in the New York art world worked in solitary. Most of the women in California worked in groups. And a lot of times we think that that's why the California women feminist women's art experiences got more attention because there were large groups. Whereas the women artists in New York, most of them worked singularly in solitary in a much more traditional manner. And many of them didn't want to be just called feminist artist. Many of them wanted a broader term, even though they were working out of a feminist place. So as the years began to develop in the 1970s and as we were doing, consciousness was raising more and more, and we started to think myself, and the school started with myself and five other women, but many of us began to think and talk and explore whether or not there really was a women aesthetic, whether or not women had a particular unique way of making art, and whether or not women had a particular vision that would be expressed in their art. And so since it was a whole new movement, we really thought we are gonna solve this quicker than we did. But you know women have been oppressed for thousands of years, we are not gonna change that in 20 years or 5 years or 10. We are not. So we don't know. And mostly now people don't talk about this anymore, but it is possible somehow, sometimes to see the women's work has a bit of different touch to it. Maybe in a hundred years, maybe two hundred years we will be able to know. Maybe we'll never know, maybe it doesn't exist. But that was the basic goal of starting a feminist art institute. Plus women in art school have my experience. There will be special classes for the ladies. They were just diminished, they were told that they were going to be excellent

artists for male artists as a husband. So they were always diminished, and they were made to make art that didn't come from inside of themselves. You know, women would go into art school and they'd be so excited to go to collage, to get a degree in art, They'd been so excited because they would be making art and they would have all this images and ideas. And they'd get to art school and their teachers, who were all male, would say, no you don't make it like that. And you are not gonna graduate, you are not gonna get a good grade if you don't follow this formula. And there are many different formulas, but there were formulas, male formulas. So New York feminist art institute NYFI, wants to just demolish that. Now your work from within, now you see what you are, what your forms are, and what you want to make from them. And so that's how that began to build. So we get women from all over the country. Some women would be very young, our oldest student I think was around 67, 68 at the time. Hellen, I have some pictures of these, I showed them yesterday. And we were exploring that. And out of that came some very interesting art. I can't say that its particular female, because after that men, began to make art like that too, so I don't know. But it was exciting, it was vital, and it made them revive within them the sense of making art, with excitement they had all their lives, to become an artist which had been lost. Many, many people from graduate schools came, who just dropped out or went through graduate school and never made art again, because they just couldn't take working at this formula. So we start making a formula and they fell in love again. So that was the idea, I guess we could call it falling in love with art in a way that belongs to you. You know, not somebody out there of one or another.

ARTWORK

So the art starts with the tree. These are all card wood pieces, branches, trees. Old beams from buildings like that pieces there, and you have kind of a community with the tree, that happens between myself and the tree. So you might say that the tree is a metaphor for myself in this art. And then I take a shizzle and I work with what the tree, it's like, the tree is speaking to me, It's saying, it's giving me a dialogue about what it would like. So I work with that and I follow a journey. Making a piece of art is a journey. Its starts at the beginning when there is nothing and its just develops into something and it becomes transformed. And when you are working with a tree or with an old piece of wood like that piece of wood, or this was just a plain tree. It has one feeling and then after I work on it for a while in becomes transformed into something else. In the church there are a lot of pieces that are battered that have nails in them or they were used. This one looks like a battering ram, and since I'm working with the stations of cross some of those pieces are were appropriate for that. There is a piece all over at the end which is from birch wood. It's the white piece and it's the skin of the birch wood, the bark, inside its almost all rotten. So it's a very light piece and what happens to birch as it gets older the inside sort of deteriorates but the skin is so strong and very tough that it adheres. Thats an interesting metaphor, they are all metaphors for people in some way.

PRODUCTION

I work here in this studio in Tribeca, This is the wall where I hang my pieces up, take them down, put them on the table to work, put them back up. Discard them in the back, almost like a space that's just a space to ignore them for a while.

I'm very interested in collaboration. I've never really wanted to do it, in terms of the actual process of art making. I'm more interested in the experience of the quietness, the solitude the almost like a meditation, it is a meditation. The inner voice that happens when you're working by yourself. I do have an assistance come in and help me so that's a sort of collaboration. And I do a lot of collaborative things in terms of discussions and dialogues and teaching in communal groups but in terms of the studio I like the silence. I find it essential to really make work that I feel has power to be just with that silent place within myself and just spent time there.

At the beginning I have an idea, and I start to put pieces of wood together to work on this idea. Then I start to cut the wood and I listen to the wood as I said that's why I like to be solitary, so I listen to the wood, listen to myself, kind of work with these ideas. And if I get stuck I'll draw them. I make a series of drawings. Most of the time I just kind of carve and put things together, move them around. Sometimes I think they don't work and what I do is, I'll discard it but I won't throw it away, I'll just put

in somewhere. Somewhere at the back of the studio here. And leave it for another day. Sometimes that will be good and sometimes and hold, and sometimes it doesn't hold so three or four days later I bring it back. How do I know it's finished, when it feels finished. Sort of says its done, but that doesn't always mean I believe it. You know, it really is. So sometimes I say it's finished and then leave it for a month or two, and then I rework parts of it. Like this piece here, this white part, this white log, I'm gonna recarve the spirals. I thought they were done, and since I had this show at the church I had to have this whole studio filled with pieces that I made. That I was going to use in the church and that are being used in the church. So I just put this up a couple of days ago, to take a look at and it's not finished. That part, I mean the whole thing wasn't finished anyway. So that's sort of how it works. It's that kind of interchange with it and sometimes I think it's finished and it looks great. Two weeks later I think it looks embarrassed. Sometimes you just have to put the work away and not look at it for a while and then I like it better after a month. So it has all these variations.

MATERIAL

Physical material are logs. They are trees, there are tree that have been cut down, sometimes there're trees that have been made into logs, sometimes there're trees that have been made into logs centuries ago. I think that that piece that I was talking about before, was probably about a 150 year old. Because they did a lot of renovations in this area, making these now artist lofts often into fancy coops and condos and when they did that they took out all these wonderful old beams. So that's the materials... and paper! I make collages with paper and nylon, which is a very tough material. I just did a series of banners, which I had printed and that they hang. They are ten food banners. So, I have those. And those are made out of plastic. And they printed them in a shop that prints them. Prints those things.

On the sculptures, paint, wax, gold leave, pigment, egg yolk and water, which is traditional tempera paint. And that's why the blue color is so vibrant.

MEDIUM

It's sculpture and than the sculpture is painted and then it often has wax on it, or it's gilded with sculpture leave or aluminum leave and gold leave. Sometimes it's just jazzel (?) so I leave it white and raw. Sometimes I add things to it and paint with the added parts like this piece here. Sometimes it's a group of pieces, some are painted, some are not painted, some have silver leavened and than are painted over and waxed over. So that's a whole spectrum of things.

PROCESS

For instance, that piece. The blue triangles came from some lumber that had been cut like that, and had been just lying around for a while. And I decided to use them as two triangles like that, and I use several other pieces like that in other works of art. As you can see from the pink piece over there, there is also repetition of the idea of triangles. And then the piece underneath it, is one log, one piece from a tree that's been sliced in half. So that you like that, these two parts, the lower parts came to me like that. Somebody just gave me some wood, and this one had all these projectile branches coming out of it and that one had just one little branch and so I just sat with it for a while and thought, cut off some parts of it, and I just thought it would be interesting to see if it had marks on it. So then I painted it and marked it with the white. And this other piece with the white and the blue, the blue is underneath and white over it is like a layer. The idea of skin is really getting a lot of attention in my work right now. As I talked about with the birch bark. And that piece also feels like its got a skin but now I decided in the process of looking at it, as I mentioned before, I had been feeling it was done. Which I also mentioned, even when I think its done, it doesn't mean it is done. But now I've seen that I want to make those spirals rather beautiful. And I've been doing a series of drawings of roses, so I'm gonna carve the spirals more like roses. And so I'll be working on that the next few weeks, as I open that up. And I might make those white spirals now, into rose-like forms which are more pink. So I will see how that works with it but that's how I do the process.

It's all connected together. Teaching is a wonderful way to get inspired. And it's always interesting to see how people, given the same project, will make it very different. It's people, you know. Are given the same circumstances, each one will come up with something very different. Sometimes they are similar but there is enough unique quality to them to be different. And so it's interesting to me and I teach a lot by using questions. I find it that's the best method. That ancient method and so I try not to be judgemental, especially when you are dealing with art making, because when you are dealing with art making, it has that mystery to it, it's so intangible. And by putting it into a formula, like I think that this is, you know this X makes the student kinda frozen. Makes the person, who is working with you when you are the teacher frozen. And with confidence and what they are exploring. And something very special can happen, when people are exploring this kind of space that's within. So that it could be really not so interesting to start with and then it could blossom and flower into something very exciting, or have the presence of that. You know, it could have almost a forecast of something very exciting. So I try to teach like that, and I find it always interchanges and interacts with what I'm making with my art, and I get inspired with my teaching. Sometimes I get so exhausted that I forget that I'm tired because it's so engaging.

PRESENTATION

Well for me an ideal is to have the work presented in a place, I don't care about the background so much, all though it's interesting, if it's white it has one presence and if it's not it has another, in a place where people walk a lot. People walk a lot, many people see it. A whole environment is my favorite, and I have a piece that I did for the Robert-Wood-Johnson Hospital in Hamilton, New Jersey, which is as people coming outside of the operating room, the piece is a huge 28 foot tall wall. And it's all carved, mostly gold leaf, and it's called *Hand Garden Doctors* wall. And it's using the doctors hands as if they were flowers for plants. I wanted to celebrate the doctors hands, so they gave me twelve head doctors and I traced their hands, and I made their hands like leaves or flowers. And they are carved in there, as people walk through the hall, there are on the wall, and there are all those gold leaf hands.

I like the gallery concept enough, because it's interesting to hang your work on a white wall. But what I don't like is if not enough people see it. In museums, more people go, so I like that part is better. But I really like the idea, people walking by my art, spending time with it, or even fleetingly go by but every day, so that the work begins to unravel and speak to them in some way.

I got invited to show in the church and the work has a real spiritual quality anyway. It'd be the third time I show in a church. It gives people an opportunity to spend time with the work. It gives people an opportunity to really look at the spiritual connection, like the mystery of the art, or to feel it and I think that that quality is something that is kind of exciting to me.

As an artist it's hard to be objective, so I'm not sure if I'm properly objective, but people responded very nicely to the work. And it means that every Sunday several groups of people will come and spend time with my work. During worships in the middle of the week, people will come and spend time with it. This is, to me, and artists dream you know, because the work then dialogues, and I'm interested in what people have to say about that so I ask them to do that and they have children there who spend time with it. And they are even going to do a thing, with the way the sticks and logs are done. With the station of the cross I have kids do works with sticks and little logs and things, so that'll be fun.

INTENTION

Why I am doing art? Oh I don't know it's such a series of different things. One I could say is that I had no choice, I was so compelled to do it. Or I could say that it gives me wisdom, which is really what I think is a major thing, because the more I make art the more wisdom I get and the more connected I feel to whatever it is inside it's all of us it's connected and makes me feel, makes me take a place in the world, that I don't think I would feel I had if I didn't make art. And it also makes me understand other people, in a way I don't I would understand if I didn't make art. It's was like an empathy and a compassion and a dialogue with other people that happens. It's an internal dialogue but it's there.

I wanted to have a dynamic. I don't wanted people to look at and go: oh...you know. Even if they dislike it I want them to have a feeling about it. Often when I myself dislike work, I go back to it, as I was saying that younger generations art, I'll go back to it in my mind and think about and sometimes I like it better. So I'd like all those things to happen. I really like people to interchange with the work.

METHOD

Yeah, my method is not to let my brain interfere with it so much, that it freezes work. My message is to allow the flow of energy to kind of interchange with me, so that the work and I have an excitement. And when it sort of gets dead and it stops happening than I stop working, and I give it some time off.

than I'll leave the work for a while. I think about it a lot. Since I haven't worked on some of these pieces in a long time I don't feel the energy that I felt when I left them and start to work on a new pieces because as I said there was a deadline at the show. So now I spend a lot of time looking at them and thinking about them, not so much working with them, I might do a touch here and a touch there. Yesterday and today I put these pieces together, and got a chance to look at it, I did decide to work on the spirals. So like that but, I couldn't feel anything special for them yesterday, and I also felt: what was I thinking of? You know, I hadn't seen it together for a long time, so I was trying to think: what was I thinking of?

ART

Well, it's a scrappy art that's both formal and has a traditional quality to it, but yet it breaks away from it. And has a quality that demands of people in more of a subtle way. That they pay attention to it, you know. And hopefully bothers them to think, you know, really the idea is to think. I think and to share with them what I think and feel but if you look at the buddhist idea about thinking and feeling, the buddhists think its all one, so that the sense of feeling, loving it all really goes through the mind, it's really about thinking, and that's sort of the way I want to my work to look to be. I wanted to have a strong statement that affects people in a certain way, and I'd like them to like, but I don't care if they don't, I mean I do care, but I don't care a lot, I just want to have a response, a dialogue a dynamic with it, an interconnection with it, like that.

BIO *

* New York, lives and works in TriBeCA section of Manhattan. Nancy Azara's sculpture is carved and painted wood, often with gold and silver/ aluminum leaf and encaustic. Azara's Collage/Scrolls include large rubbings, tracings and painted cutouts on Mylar scrolls. The wood, the paint, the layers that make up the sculpture and collage/scrolls record a journey of images and ideas from within memory, often using leaves, hand prints and tracings and rubbings as a metaphor. Azara recently exhibited her work in one person exhibitions: I am the Vine, You are the Branches at St. Ann & the Holy Trinity Church, Brooklyn Heights, NY; Of leaves and vines... A shifting braid of lines at SACI Gallery in Florence, Italy and in group exhibitions: Allegory of Leaves at New Jersey State University; Atwater Art Gallery in Rhinebeck, NY; Pseudo Empire, Brooklyn, NY; Gallery Sensei, NYC; Scripps College in Claremont, CA and at the Asya Geisberg Gallery in Chelsea, NY. Earlier one woman exhibitions: Donahue/Sosinski Art, the Andre Zarre and A.I.R. Galleries in New York City, the Froelick Gallery, Portland, Oregon, the Tweed Museum in Duluth, Minnesota, Rudolph E. Lee Gallery in Clemson, N.C., the Gwinnett Fine Arts Center in Duluth, Georgia and group shows such as the traveling Rutgers University exhibition, How American Women Artists Invented Post-Modernism. She was the featured sculptor at the SANYI Museum, NANCY AZARA in Taiwan in 2008.

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Credits:

The interview was conducted on March 4 2015 at the artist's studio in New York.

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Filmed and recorded by: Konstanze Schuetze

Edited by: Paul Barsch

Transcript by: Wolfram Eggebrecht, Lea Hoßbach, Ella Tetrault

Produced by: University of Cologne (Cologne), Institut für Kunst&Kunsttheorie