

The Many Lives and Art of Toni Ross

The latest manifestations of the ascendancy of the artistic career of Toni Ross

By Jennifer Landes | August 10, 2017



Toni Ross paused for a moment during the installation of her work at the LongHouse Reserve in East Hampton this spring to enjoy the atmosphere "and one of the happiest bird sanctuaries in the world," she said. Below, Jack Lenor Larsen and Toni Ross enjoyed a golf cart ride around the grounds of the LongHouse Reserve. *Studio Toni Ross*

In a stand of three trees just past the pond at East Hampton's LongHouse Reserve, what appear to be cubic hives have gathered around each of the trunks. Too sculptural and hard-edged to be perceived as organic, the layers of hemp twine wrapped around steel frames still seem perfectly suited to the environment, as if they were spontaneous manifestations of an atomic force or a giant caterpillar's Euclidian chrysalis.



They are also the latest manifestations of the ascendancy of the artistic career of Toni Ross, one of the most hyphenated of the multi-hyphenate class of creators and organizational founders who have made the South Fork their home and left it better than they found it.

Some might only know Ms. Ross from her predominantly ceramic artwork, something that has occupied much of her attention for the past several years, shown regularly at the Drawing Room in East Hampton and in New York City. Others might know her solely as the Toni in Nick and Toni's restaurant, which she co-founded, along with its offshoots.

What may surprise both groups is that she is also a founder of the Hamptons International Film Festival and the Hayground School, with her husband, Jeff Salaway, who died in a car accident in 2001. In a recent interview in her studio, she said Mr. Salaway was the impetus behind starting the restaurant and helping create the school. He was known to the community as an enthusiastic ringleader and gracious host whose death touched both celebrities and busboys, and left her a single parent to two young children.

“I have lived many lives, all kind of wonderful,” she said, despite the tragedies and challenges. “It’s like watching my children grow up,” she said. “The festival is running wonderfully on its own, the school is doing really well, and my kids are great.” She is still involved with the restaurants, making design and food concept decisions and was busy writing thank-you notes for Hayground’s Chefs Dinner, held in honor of her husband and the kitchen classroom he dreamed of creating there. Yet through it all, she has always found her way back to art.

Ms. Ross majored in film at Wesleyan, but studied ceramics, sculpture, and other art forms at school and in Italy after graduating. She met Mr. Salaway, a full-time sculptor at the time, in Carrera, the ancient Italian marble center. (His sculptures can still be seen, albeit somewhat overgrown, in the garden behind Nick and Toni’s.)

When the couple returned to the States, she tried the film business, an interest she shared with her father, Steve Ross, who created Time Warner and remained its head before his death in 1992. Mr. Salaway went into restaurants, eventually convincing her to try the business too, as a pastry chef.

Tired of working for others, in 1988 they took their love of Italian food and headed east, where they opened Nick and Toni’s, bringing the city’s food revolution with them. With their partner Mark Smith, the company now owns and operates Rowdy Hall in East Hampton, Townline BBQ in Sagaponack, and La Fondita in Amagansett, which next year will have its own offshoot, Coche Comedor, in their old Honest Diner space.

She continued working in the restaurant after their son, Noah, was born. Then, while pregnant with her daughter, Sara, she helped establish the film festival, now in its 25th year. The idea appealed to Ms. Ross as a way of extending the season for local businesses. “I loved the idea that something could happen here in October. It was a creative, fun, complicated, and very hard project.” The development of its educational mission and its Conflict and Resolution section are components that she said were highlights from those early days.

With two children at home, she left the restaurant to raise them. In 1996, after a conflict arose between two factions at the Hampton Day School, Mr. Salaway helped found what is now the Hayground School, with her participation. “I was the one in the group that said, ‘Excuse me, I don’t think we should do this. I just founded something and it was a lot of work.’ The reaction was, ‘Sit down, shut up.’” And she did. “So we met for four days a week for six months and then we had a school. It was crazy.”

As her young children started school, she returned to ceramics. “Once I got my hands back into clay, I was rehooked.” She had her first show at the Celadon Gallery in Water Mill, before Mr. Salaway died. A single parent to a grieving family, she basically abandoned art again until her children came of age.

She initially worked small, but took notice when people said her pieces reminded them of models for larger sculptures. After several gallery shows, the Parrish came knocking twice last year with a commission for its popular “Road Show” series of off-site installations, and then Cindy Sherman chose her for “Artists Choose Artists.”

Although they seem to have little in common stylistically, Ms. Ross said she was thrilled to have been chosen by her and added that they shared a singular focus, pushed further and further to pursue a vision. Like Ms. Sherman’s portraits, she also limits “my palette in that way with one thing over and over.” Ms. Ross showed work from her “Strata” series, strips of clay that are remnants from other pieces. Typically shown vertically, she extended them horizontally, adding movement to what had felt like mass and compression. Horizontally, “it almost feels like something you can read, like musical pauses and elevations.”

Jack Lenor Larsen of LongHouse approached her about an installation after seeing “Permanent Transience,” her work for the Parrish at Marders in Bridgehampton. “He wanted me to create something out of straw,” like the work at Marders, which was inspired by its straw wall, “but I really like responding to a particular site and what I perceive needs to be there,” Ms. Ross said. “I wanted to use a material that made sense in thinking about Jack and to highlight some area of grass or trees.”

The three trees attracted her because she has often used groups of three in her work, such as at Marders, where stacked blocks of straw partially enveloped three large boulders on the property. The hard stone seemed to float out of her straw structures. Using twine made sense to her as a “reference to Jack’s work in textiles. Much of my work has thread or twine wrapped around it to examine the interplay between fragility and strength.”

Mr. Larsen asked that the piece, which she called “Sanctuary Entwined,” allow entry. She accepted the challenge on her own terms. “My work is about not being able to get inside of things, not completely being able to see the mystery of what’s inside.” The narrow or low openings were made “so that you need to make a decision to go inside, that you are curious and want to go in.”

Inside, the structures are private cocoons, enveloping but translucent, with light coming through the gaps in the twine. When she entered the piece for the first time, she said it reminded her of a bamboo structure that Jon Snow, the resident artist of Hayground, built on the beach in Sagaponack for the students to honor Mr. Salaway after his death. “It was an incredible place of refuge for me, more peaceful than the cemetery.” She said the connection never dawned on her until that moment. “I’m a little slow on the uptake,” she said with a laugh.

The LongHouse piece will be up through the season and perhaps longer, depending on how it survives the elements. Ms. Ross has also organized “Women Artists: Reshaping the Conversation,” a series of talks beginning on Saturday at 11 a.m. with Christophe de Menil, Michele Oka Doner, April Gornik, Uzoamaka Maduka, and Neda Young. Other talks in the series will be held on Aug. 26 and Sept. 23 with participants such as Barbara Rose, Andrea Grover, Michelle Stuart, Alice Aycock, and Almond Zigmund.



Nighttime photos of “Sanctuary Entwined” capture the detail and interiors of Ms. Ross’s hemp-twine cubes. *Jenny Gorman Photos*