

I was sitting in the kitchen on a stool, resting my bum knee and shucking an ear of fresh corn from Balsam Farms, when the variegated pattern of the white and yellow corn caught my attention. In the blink of an eye, my mind thought of the exterior surfaces of Toni Ross' "Sanctuary Entwined", an installation piece housed at LongHouse Reserve.<sup>i</sup> You see, Toni's sculptures consist of three steel cubes, enveloped by 240,000 running feet of hemp rope woven around the armature, each enclosing a live tree in situ. Interior and exterior surfaces interest me, so it is natural that I am drawn to Toni's work which creates and charges the atmosphere of a given space. The energy of which I speak is not exclusively aesthetic, though there is grounding in it. The intricate visual patterns which emerge from these woven objects are engaging. The subtle patterns of the woven hemp speak to nuance, variety, and accident which occurs organically, carrying intrinsic visual appeal. However, the concept of sanctuary is central to her work. Perhaps it is my background experience, or the scale of the woven cubes, but I can't help but thinking of Japanese tea huts made of bamboo and rice paper when I see her work. In a tea house, you bow low to enter. Also, ceremonial tea houses were established as a place of serenity and camaraderie wherein preparing and serving tea took place within the context of very defined rituals. The ceramic tea bowl itself became a treasure in that culture.<sup>ii</sup> I believe it is healthy to have a sense of reverence. When human beings are at our best, we can have reverence for nature, for art, and for each other. This leads me to consider the importance of conversation and sanctuary, as I believe they are related. Looking at the big picture, sanctuary and conversation are also critical elements of Toni Ross' work.

What makes for a sanctuary? By definition it is a safe space, or as the Oxford English Dictionary would say, a sanctuary is a "refuge or safety from pursuit, persecution, or other danger", or the "inmost recess of a temple or holy place."<sup>iii</sup> Toni Ross has created a sanctuary within a sanctuary with her recent work. For individuals who wish to experience being in a contemplative space within an inspired landscape, I suggest a pilgrimage to LongHouse Reserve. It is a 16-acre shared gift of Jack Lenor Larsen in East Hampton, NY. The grounds are beautiful, its aura tranquil, and its purpose: to be inspiring and restorative. It is a treat to retreat. Solitude has its virtues, but for most, greater satisfaction may be found in community. Intentional communities have a long history in American history; so, it is not unusual to think of creating an arts community, and building community through the arts. That is exactly what Toni Ross has done by bringing into fruition "Women Artists: Reshaping the Conversation."

On a beautiful day in August, for Toni's second of three gatherings at LongHouse Reserve, a remarkable panel moderated by Andrea Grover, Executive Director of Guild Hall, spoke to a welcoming audience. The artists, curators, and critics included Barbara Rose, Michelle Stuart, Terrie Sultan, and Alice Aycock. The distinctive accomplishments and achievements of each these women are remarkable, if not legendary. To draw all four of these women into the same sphere at the same time for a conversation makes the event historic. They shared, told stories, and provided insights into the lives of creative artists. In doing so, they revealed themselves. From the outset, we know they are driven and ambitious. However, their words illuminated aspects of their lives, personalities, and values that transcend what

actress Jessica Lange refers to as “absolute willfulness.”<sup>iv</sup> In addition to sharing stories of their lives, two themes emerged during the sharing. A critical topic was how they confronted adversity or challenges throughout their lives. Another important topic pertained to what motivates them to pursue and sustain their work. What follows are snippets in their own words

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Women Artists: Reshaping the Conversation - Excerpts

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**On personal biography:**

Alice:

I grew up in a little town in Pennsylvania. My parents were New York centric. I came to New York City very frequently from the time I was six. From the moment I got there, at six, I said this is the city I wish I was born in and this is the city I want to live in. I went to Douglas College, Rutgers University where I studied with some phenomenal teachers. Most of them were Fluxus artists. We were not taught craft. We were taught to think. I was kind of a closet artist. I was academically oriented. I basically gave in at Douglas College, my second year, my sophomore year to art. I gave in because it was taught in the context of liberal arts. I had a very good foundation in history biology, sociology, and English. It was only when I saw art within that context that I allowed myself to become an artist. I still believe very strongly that art should be the center of many different discourses. And that while absolutely composition, which I believe in, and craft and all of that are extremely important; it should resonate in a deeper, more complex way which is the challenge I give myself. My work appears to have changed over the years but in fact it is the same story, I just come at it from a different way.

Terri:

I was born in Ashville, North Carolina. My father was an amateur artist and my mother was an amateur actress. I thought I was going to be an artist my entire life because I saw my dad making Jackson Pollock’s and Vasarely’s in the basement. I left school when I was 16 and went to Syracuse University, and unlike Alice, I went to the College of Visual and Performing Arts we were actually taught craft and not how to think. Consequently, I was a really great art student but by the time I finished four years of a very rigorous craft oriented program I had no idea what to make when I got out of school and didn’t have anybody to give me an assignment. I realized I probably wasn’t going to be that kind of person by myself in a studio trying to make something... I finally figured out that I needed a real avocation and profession, not something I did during the day, in order to do something else at night. That’s when I went back to school and got my degree in museum studies with a minor in history. I met my husband in California and that was 32 years ago. I will say that being a curator married to an artist is a really good combination because insights come from various different ways. Having someone who is still sitting in a studio all by himself making something out of nothing really helps you when you are trying to talk to other people [about art].

Michelle:

I was conceived in Sydney and born in Los Angeles. {laughter} I've always wanted to be an artist from the time I was five. My mother took a drawing of mine and tacked it on the wall. Voilà..... There were a lot of other things I was interested in growing up. Of course, nature. I spent a lot of time travelling around California. I wasn't very good about time. Time was always interesting for me. I couldn't tell time. I was dreadful at math. Reality was another problem. {Laughter} I did take art all through school. I took some classes in high school, also outside of high school with contemporary artists which were very important to me. I had a lot of training with immigrants from Europe. One of them was a Hungarian artist. He taught classical drawing. He brought in voluptuous models and taught us in a classical style. I think it is one of the most important things I ever did. And then I got very interested in archeology and mural painting.

I went to Mexico and I went to some archeological sites on my own. It was not that difficult. And then I got a job with Diego Rivera which also wasn't that difficult. I showed up and said I was willing to help. That was a crucial experience. I met a lot of other artists through that. I spent about a year working in Mexico painting. Then I went to Europe for three years and lived in Paris and traveled around Europe which was very important in my trajectory. I always yearned for New York, so I came back to the United States in the 1950s and I experienced the Abstract Expressionist {laughter}. That was really, really important and exciting. But my heart was not in abstract expressionism, so I did plaster sculpture. I liked working with my hands. I made a lot of plaster sculpture. It was almost like ceramics which I always loved. And then I experienced the '60s. {Laughter} It was extremely difficult for a women artist at that moment. I mean it always is, but it was particularly difficult, because there was this huge transition between art being made not for money and then art being made for money. I think it was fine until money entered the picture, then it became a lot more difficult. I would say the next trajectory was the '70s which is maybe my most favorite decade. A lot of people were working in very different ways, I started working in the late 60's with the earth and making large pieces, incorporating earth. I did a very large piece in Art Park in 1975 and started having shows. I did everything. I did a lot of drawing. I made drawing my main focus for some years and then I started painting and doing sculpture again. I did sculptural objects. All along I was documenting with photographs. It is almost from the beginning. As time went by, the image became more important to me, as sort of this mysterious thing.

Barbara:

As I am listening to these stories, I realize that we were really very much formed by our teachers and our educations. There are certain things I can do and can't do because of my education. I was trained by German scholars. They were refugee scholars at Columbia University and the Institute of Fine Arts, including Meyer Shapiro. It was all about perfection and footnotes. To be an art historian was 14 hours a day and seven days a week. And that is constraining to me, there is a certain freedom I don't have. In fact, I had just done a tape of Jasper Johns and sent him a transcript and he said, "You made all that up." And I said, "No, I

don't have the imagination." I said, "I have the mind of an archivist. I don't make stuff up, I document." We are really creatures of our education and our families and our family structures.

**On facing adversity:**

Alice:

What I would say is this, in preparation for this panel, usually I have a lot of slides and images I can speak to. I read a little Emily Dickenson, about the grain being wider than the sky. I also re-read an editorial by Charles Blow who writes for the New York Times. He wrote this in 2013, and he said, "I choose to achieve as an act of defiance."<sup>v</sup> That is something I tell my students, regardless of who they are and where they come from. That you define yourself. You do not let others define you. You choose to achieve as an act of defiance against everything that might stand in your way.

Terri:

Alice's quote from Charles Blow is very inspiring. I would say if I had a quote of my own which is the guiding principle how I have tackled my challenges as a professional: you don't want a crisis to go to waste. It is an opportunity to do things you would not have done otherwise. I was at the Corcoran Gallery of Art when the director cancelled the Robert Mapplethorpe show. I ended up being about the only curatorial employee there for several years and managed to make that crisis work, in a way. Coming to the Parrish in 2008, and witnessing the collapse of the world economy, could have also have had a very negative outcome. In fact, it gave us an opportunity to rethink our approach to the building. It has given us something which I hope has been a real impact on our community.

Sometimes the biggest or strongest act of defiance is to keep turning up every day, even if it seems hopeless, or your challenges are too great, or you are not getting the support you need, or people didn't turn out the way you thought they would, or any number of things that could happen. That is the way you achieve actually. Simply by turning up. Woody Allen said it. 90% of success in life is turning up.

Michelle:

I don't feel defiant actually. That word kind of hit me. I think .....I never felt defiant. I feel...I wonder more about understanding what connections things in the world have. That brings me a lot of pleasure. The relationships between the patterns .....We just had the eclipse. The eclipse was amazing.

Barbara:

What do these women have in common? I like them, but why. It is about survival. It about the fact that none of us have had an easy time. But somehow, we muddled though and we survived. As Terri said, we turned a crisis into an opportunity. I think the ability to do that in the long run is what counts. Because everybody comes up against whatever it is that life dishes out

to you. The question is, how do you deal with it? I think you try to do it with dignity, and you try to survive, and you try to remain yourself, which is very difficult and not compromise. I admire all of these panelists I have to tell you because they have never compromised. And that is a really tough thing to do in this world.

**On creativity, community, and commitment:**

Alice:

What Charles Blow goes on to say, he says a lot of things about where you are born and fate.. he talks about climbing the hill. Some people are born half way up the hill, some people are born at the top of the hill, or others at the bottom. Everybody needs to climb the hill....

For me it's not just about whether I am recognized in the world, which I love; but am I really living up to my expectations about what I need to do next?

Terri:

Chuck Close told me that the reason that he makes the work he way he does as an artist is that he knows what he is going to do every day. He comes to the studio. He starts in the upper left-hand corner of the painting and works his way down to the lower right-hand corner. Then he turns it around and begins the next day, and the next day, and the next day after that and after all that he ends up with an extraordinary achievement.

There is this notion that in order to achieve you have to be defiant. The way that you are defiant is just don't let any of those other challenges stop you from turning up every day.

Michelle:

Curiosity is probably the greatest aspect of our character. Curiosity is really what drives us, to see things, to understand other worlds, other things in nature and own them in a sense by drawing them or converting them to some other mystery, from one mystery to another. That is the incredible thing about art... the fact that we are doing this sends us down a road to enlightenment in a sense, though not in the religious sense.

Sometimes I find something I can't explain and I have to look at it. I don't understand it. I don't know where it came from, but there it is. I really am happy when that happens, because it is a totally unplanned event you know. {Pause} Maybe it is me or part of me; it just slips in the door when I am not looking. I think if my curiosity ended, I'd be dead. It is something that you just have to have and put to use.

Barbara:

Alice and I have long careers as teachers. Both of us have taught at Yale. I have always said to my students from the first day. Can anybody here do something else? To anyone who raised

their hands I said, “Go do the other thing.” {Laughter} I really believe that. It is very hard to be an artist.

I think everything depends on community today, everything. If anyone is going to survive in this country, it is through community. I applaud the efforts of everybody here for trying to build this community.

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As we ruminate over these jewels of these words from the wise, I would like to underscore the significance of having the freedom, opportunity, and privilege for these presenters and audience members to engage in respectful, civil discourse. Freedom to converse respectfully is part of our national and cultural heritage. In this particular instance, it was also a gift from the hearts and minds of Toni Ross and Jack Lenor Larsen. If only civility and respectful discourse were more present in today’s society. It might help a few folks get on track to being and doing their best while being human. At the end of the day, this expanded social experience is what Toni Ross’ “Sanctuary Entwined” is all about: conversations with self, others, and nature. We are all meshed together somehow.

-Andrew Buck

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.longhouse.org/pages/toni-ross>

<sup>ii</sup> [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jtea/hd\\_jtea.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/jtea/hd_jtea.htm)

<sup>iii</sup> <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/sanctuary>

<sup>iv</sup> AARP The Magazine, *Jessica Lange: On Life, Happiness, Resilience and Aging*. August/September 2017.

<sup>v</sup> Charles M. Blow. *For Some Folks, Life Is a Hill*. The New York Times. Op-ed. November 29, 2013