

humanus

new york university
journal of human rights
volume nine, issue one
fall 2009





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The Process and Perspective of an Artist: An Interview with Katherine Dolgy Ludwig

Arianna Koudounas

Katherine Dolgy Ludwig, a prominent Brooklyn artist, strives to work in a fashion that draws universal connections between the varied individuals she encounters. In 2009 she met writer Arianna Koudounas while painting the Brooklyn Bridge, and the following interview took place shortly thereafter.

Arianna Koudounas: Your style of painting, as well as the mediums you paint with and the content you paint vary on quite a wide spectrum. Has your art always been like this, or has it been a consistently expanding progression?

Katherine Dolgy Ludwig: My projects always start from the personal story, with an outreach that has a universal narrative.

Arianna, think of how we met, in a well realized example of my work, on the project *LightBridgeStory*. During Brooklyn's Dumbo Arts Center (DAC) 13th Under the Bridge Festival last September, for three days I painted the Brooklyn Bridge eighteen times from sunup to sundown in the changing light, while the public wrote down stories for me about their most affecting personal experiences there. These paintings we made while together, these stories shared, the photos given to me afterwards, by former strangers from all over the world - Germany, Italy, Russia, Israel, Canada, Sweden, India, Ireland that day - who just like your self are now in this friendly relationship and feel part of a larger collective endeavor entirely through art. And this is only one phase of a project typical to my art practice. There is also the first setting up of such a project where there is initial contact where a meeting of the minds is explored, in this case with the organizers of the festival, and in other cases with the leaders of specific communities like the London police, Vegas bunnies, Brooklyn religious groups, Toronto naturalists, the US Military - which is about exploring communication with people in mythic or stereotyped communities one by one. Later when the work is exhibited, it becomes an opportunity for all the persons to meet each other and hear each other's personal narratives, simply because we have that first art experience in common. So for me an art opening is about the process of finding what we share, and also finding out surprising new things about each other with equanimity.

Sometimes people ask - how can you interact with so many strangers, who bring so many outcomes, in the element of chance, when usually an artist prefers to have private time alone to concentrate - especially in the medium in which I work, watercolor, which requires that each mark be visible, no corrections are possible. But I know who I am in the work - just a catalyst - and I am thankful for that role with the public. So there are no watercolor strokes that are mistakes in that sense, everything is what it is. *LightBridgeStory* was one project in the single largest urban forum for experimental art in the United States, where 150,000 people pass through. When I laid down my tarp on the beach alone at 6 am that first day, I was afraid that I might be distracted by having that many random encounters, I was afraid that with all that publicness I'd actually forget how to paint, I was afraid of weather like hot sun knocking me out, wind that would lift the light paper, and rain that would wet the work, and I was afraid I'd collapse from never having a break. But it was essential to *LightBridgeStory* that I make that marathon commitment to the bridge, and to the lengthy process speaking together all day long while painting. It was important to experience the arduous weather because it affected how I saw the light and my response to nature. And I needed to see that after years of technical study you do have to indeed forget about how to paint in a sense, and trust that painting is in the end not a plan but a spontaneous trust. It requires a full awareness of time in that very moment. Lastly, I was again convinced by the process of *LightBridgeStory*, as I realize with all my community projects, that for me public work even with large groups of visitors is not enervating but energizing. I believe in the courageous act of making relationship, with people, with time, with painting. And that for everyone involved this can have impact stretching globally. Individual by individual we get to know each other's connected story, the universal narrative.

AK: As we are a journal on human rights, I am most interested in the choices you have made for subjects to paint. Why Orthodox Jews, Muslims, Hindus, members of the armed forces, etc.? And more specifically, what inspired you to paint groups of various religious denominations?

KDL: Sometimes I am approached to do the work - as in the case of the bunnies and military; sometimes I initiate the project - as in the case of the religious groups, police officers, and naturists. No beginnings are typical but I've found the outcomes always positive. Religious groups, military, bunnies, cops, naturists - all are people in uniform whom I like to show to be individuals - we develop, together and with the public, personalized relationships that have a larger meaning. The example of *FaithPainting* is telling. On a group show in Brooklyn I met thirty artists, smart hip people, and I heard a few of them telling racist jokes. I was raised in a multicultural environment and I was surprised -



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while I don't think you can control stupid thoughts, I thought the lack of embarrassment at voicing those thoughts was disturbing. I decided to approach the four religious groups I'd heard derided to do a project together where the art process would further communication and understanding. I was told that none of these groups would accept a female bare armed artist in a bicycle helmet and jeans, but in fact when I called the Muslim Imam, the Orthodox Jewish Rabbi, the Catholic Mother Superior, and

the Hindu Pandit, everyone was eager to facilitate the project. They welcomed me on frequent occasions over the next six months into their homes, places of worship, community centers, and introduced me to their families and friends. The project called *Sacred Spaces: FaithPainting in Brooklyn* was sixty watercolors, fifteen made with each religious community, painted in conversation together. These paintings showed all together at A.I.R. Gallery in Chelsea for Immigrant Heritage Week in 2008. Guillermo Linares the Commissioner of the Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs surprised us with a visit and spoke about the welcome religious communities often provide for new immigrants to New York, and the importance of mutual connection here in America. Our local bakery Fortunato Brothers donated three five foot cakes in the shape of the Betsy Ross flag, the traditional American flag, and the New York City flag.

I find that if you set out to do something that reaches out to people, it invites other people to join in and be incredibly generous - Biagi Fortunato designed the huge cakes and made them himself, trucked them to the Chelsea gallery from Brooklyn, and carried them up with his brother and friends staying for the whole opening. And everyone with whom I'd painted, along with those that had marginalized them, was personally invited to the opening to meet each other. You realize at such an event that an elderly Hindu woman has a lot in common with an elderly Jewish woman, a Muslim teen can enjoy music with a Catholic teen, we are in New York where 40% of the people are immigrants, and we achieve best together not alone. So, from an awkward evening of demeaning jokes comes an engaging celebration of strength in diversity, because of a socially engaged art process.

AK: Many have commended the personalized relationships you develop with the subjects you paint and the unique meaning you assign to each individual you engage with. How do you find these meaningful bonds translate to your work?

KDL: Painting personal subjects has been one of the cornerstones of my art practice, and that has become universalized and politicized for me. I work hard and travel so much, and I appreciate the home life I can return to, so I paint it with a kind of awe and gratitude that I am lucky enough to have it, which has a meaning for others that they perceive as relevant to their own experience. When you make work about what is closest to your heart, as Kollwitz, Vuillard, Bonnard, Matisse, Picasso, and Opie have done, it's freeing because this love is central to the universal human experience. I portray the feeling in my paintings that you can be yourself in the home you make among understanding family and loving friends, individual yet belonging to the extended world community.

A relevant ongoing exhibit is *freedom2BRselves*, shown as 60 paintings at the National Arts Club in Manhattan in 2007 and 80 paintings at Christ Church in London in 2009, made with whole classrooms of preteens whom I paint while they ask me about being an artist and talk about themselves. The work is shown accumulating so that each group see they are just like the children I've painted in other cities. They don't really want endless products and distractions - all children everywhere I go simply hope for the freedom to be them selves, want to tell this to the whole world, and want to know this about other

children, and that's a powerful message communicated. Toronto, Brooklyn, Manhattan, and London children will join Paris, Los Angeles, and Washington children in upcoming exhibits.

AK: You recently had a show entitled *Sacred Spaces: FaithPainting in Brooklyn*. Any idea of what the overall reaction to this series was? And what message did you intend on delivering to your viewers? Do you believe this was achieved?

KDL: *FaithPainting* and all the social outreach projects really begin with a way of working that is a musicians' model. Since 2006 I've made hundreds of paintings in music communities, and 25 paintings with Ornette Coleman specifically who has influenced my work. His discussions of the process of making art that allows creativity to come forward, have been revelatory for me in my work leading to a work phase of limitless energy: In New York in 2007 joining with musicians I did the *Censorship* show, *Together Again!*, *OneGrrlGal*, *Splash!* coproduced with Ron Gaskin on Toronto Island, and work at the London Jazz Festival. In 2008 in New York I coproduced *AIRplay08* with Oscar music nominee Tevin Thomas; and made *JustAmericanWords* about music lyrics. In 2009 I did *IJustWannaWatchYouDance* at Jack's in Toronto, and in Brooklyn I made *NewYorkLoveNotes* about music notation. Jazz musicians especially, from an early age when they are first playing their instruments, share the jam, learn to be collegial, allow for a solo but don't solo for too long, are generous with time and listening consideration and attitude side by side in tight spaces, because it makes the music best. As an artist I am fortunate to learn from my musician friends, working together where no one is the star and there is no audience relationship. There is only respect for different modes of expression. In the words of Sam Cooke, "What a wonderful world this could be!" Following on this musicians' model, I approach each new subject with an open heart and a feeling of awe at the neverending differences I encounter, and when I am done painting we have shared something irrevocable that matters. In thanks I send the subject a jpg of the painting, we meet again at the opening, but it's never the end. As I bike through the streets of New York where I came as a stranger knowing no one in 2006, now people lean out of cabs to say hello or call out on the street, I receive emails and surprise visits, and it's the wide array that means so much to me. For me as an artist, a person's gender, class, money, age, background, these differences are nothing - only our shared humanity has meaning.

AK: In my middle school studio art class I recall a project where each of us sent a painting to a Cuban student and in exchange, each of us received a painting. This project was part of a grant that a local artist had received to bridge peaceful relations between American and Cuban youths. Do you believe in art as a means for promoting peace, or at least, as a tool in giving a more human face to a group of people that are demonized? If so, how does this reflect in your work? Also, what possibilities for peace/human rights promotion do you foresee in the artistic community?

KDL: I believe in public service. I don't know how to do all the ways of giving that I admire in others, but I do know how to push paint on paper arranging colors and shapes in communication with others, and it seems to make people feel good about their personal stories and welcoming to the stories of others. I think we each know in our hearts how to be helpful, how to complete the world, utilizing our

individual strengths. The project I've been working on for a year, portraits I made with the US Armed Forces - Navy, Army, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard - in early 2010 a selection will be installed enlarged life size at the Pentagon, in their visitor reception area welcoming the public. When I paint portraits I look for a light source inside the person that shines brightly through the surface color. Arianna, I think the fact that you recall a middle school arts project, exchanging art with Cuban painters, speaks to the lasting connection of art processes of all kinds that engage us visually to open up a dialogue. You didn't know how you would react to your new friends, but you began the communication with a feeling of unconditional good will, because art opens your heart.



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Katherine Dolgy Ludwig is a Brooklyn artist, featured widely in publications including The New York Times, New York Daily News, Saatchi Editorial, and The Globe & Mail. Her work can be seen at A.I.R. Gallery DUMBO, at her Toronto Island studio, and online at www.katherinedolgy ludwig.com. After her MFA at Chelsea College, the London Institute, she taught at Toronto's Ontario College of Art & Design. She is the 2007 recipient of the A.I.R. Fellowship, the 2008 winner of the National Arts Club's Best in Show for BrooklynFunkUniverse and Mayor Bloomberg's choice to represent Immigrant Heritage Week citywide for Liberty&ManhattanSkyline1.