NYFAI –
Interview: Sandra Lara interviewed by Dena Muller
Date: Friday, December 8th, 2006

D.M. This is Friday, December 8th. Dena Muller interviewing Sandra Lara at Nancy Azara's studio at 91 Franklin Street. So just to get started, when did you first become involved in NYFAI?

S.L. Good question. I think it was '79 . . . the early 80s. They were already involved. They already had classes running. Somewhere I had seen a flyer for Nancy's carving class. So I took a class with Nancy and then she told me that there were other classes at NYFAI. Then I started taking classes here.

D.M. It was a flyer posted in the neighborhood?

S.L. I was living on the Lower Eastside at the time and the poster about Nancy's carving was somewhere around where she lived on Grand Street. That's where I saw the flyer.

D.M. And flyering was a good form of advertising. It really worked, huh?

S.L. It was, yes.

D.M. Why did you become involved?

S.L. I was taking a carving class with Nancy and Nancy told me about the other art classes that were happening. I think the first class I took was the Diary class that she gave. It sounded interesting to me at the time so I decided to take that class.

D.M. So you were more drawn to the art side of it than the feminist side of it?

S.L. Probably more to the art side than the feminist, yes.

D.M. The first flyer you saw, you were drawn to the studio course.

S.L. Well, the studio course that Nancy gave. I wanted to do the carving, so I carved with her for awhile.

D.M. Did the flyer make it clear that it was also a Feminist project?

S.L. No, that was Nancy's individual classes. It was not at NYFAI. Those were classes at her studio that she ran. She introduced me to NYFAI.

D.M. So once you took the class she talked to you about NYFAI.

S.L. Yes, and then I took some classes.

D.M. How long were you involved?

S.L. A number of years actually . . . I took classes on and off for three or four years as my time permitted.

D.M. Were you mainly a student in the school or did you also do administrative things or volunteer?

S.L. I was just a student.

D.M. Were there other activities you were involved in outside of the courses? I know there were some large exhibitions.

S.L. I was involved in one of the exhibitions. It was downstairs in the gallery at the time. I had a sculpture piece in that.

D.M. Was it Ceres Gallery at that point or was it before Ceres was founded?

S.L. I think it was Ceres.

D.M. What would you describe as your relationship to art at that time? Were you an actively working artist or were you just beginning to learn about art making?

S.L. Just beginning to learn about art making. I had had an interest since I was a child but I only did stuff on my own, I never took any formal classes or training. I had to work and there was just no time for anything else. I really didn't think of it as a career move at the time. When I saw Nancy's class and then I started taking classes at NYFAI, that kind of awakened my interest in art making.

D.M. Was Nancy's class the first formal studio course that you took?

S.L. Yes it was.

D.M. And you were already working in three dimensions at that time? You were already sculpting?

S.L. As a beginning person I did everything in three dimensions. I never drew. It took me a long time to learn how to draw and I've only done that recently. In the "Diary" class we did a little drawing and painting but I wouldn't say it was formal in a way that I was being instructed in how to draw. You were just allowed to express yourself as it came out. My drawing experience wasn't formalized.

D.M. Are there any projects out of the "Visual Diaries" class that you remember specifically?

S.L. There was one where we had to lay out cloth on the ground and then draw your outline and then create yourself or who you think you are and how people see you. There was a split down the middle and you had your two personalities.

D.M. An outline of your own body life size?

S.L. Yes, life size. I liked that a lot. Then there was another one where you did a mediation about where you would go if you went to a religious area or some area where you had to discover yourself – or temple-like area. That was very good. Actually the Visual Diary itself, just making that whole book, was very engaging.

D.M. Would you say that looking at spirituality was one of the underpinnings of NYFAI courses in general?

S.L. Yes, I think so. It wasn't always as strong as in the Visual Diary, but the connection was definitely there. – Spirituality, art making, yourself as a being, yourself as an artist and discovering what fuels the art.

D.M. What would you say your relationship with feminism was at the time?

S.L. I was pretty active in a lot of different political movements at the time. I did a lot of marches. I wasn't in an organized feminist group, but at the time I was working in a union and I was one of the few women in a non-traditional job.

D.M. What was that job?

S.L. I was a craftsperson for Verizon – at the time it was New York Tel. I was a switch person – well, they called it a "switchman" at the time. Out of the entire company here in New York there were only two hundred women that were in non-traditional labor and I was one of the ones that was hired. I was hired in '73. So I did a lot of union work. About the same time that I was doing the art stuff I became a steward . . . I represented people and myself. That was where a lot of my political action went. Just being a woman in a male union was a pretty big deal.

D.M. Definitely galvanizing for your feminism, right?

S.L. Yes it was.

D.M. Would you say your involvement at NYFAI helped clarify your feminism? How did your feminism develop in the time that you were at NYFAI?

S.L. I think I would have to say that it softened my feminism because working in a craft position with all men, in order to be seen and heard, you have to rise to their level or whichever way you want to put it.

D.M. Elbow in . . .

S.L. Yeah, definitely elbow in . . . make yourself room, make yourself heard. They're not going to hear a gentle voice. I was pretty rough and tumble at the time.

D.M. That's very interesting. The other people I've interviewed have said the opposite. Having the experience in the classroom and with the other women who were part of NYFAI being something that brought their feminism into a more present, vocal, forward place.

S.L. It is interesting because I think that even here I think I stood out as one of the odd-er ones – not quite in the same mold as the rest of the women that were here. But, it was very helpful to me. To be in an environment where you could be heard by just speaking as opposed to having to shout, or be vulgar, or be loud, or be pushy. That was different for me.

D.M. That they took time to listen to each person, and that was part of the classroom strategy . . . to slow down.

S.L. Right. It also gave me a bar to measure myself by. I think the reason I was drawn to carving was because you could be very active and physical and slam things around – so there was an outlet. But when you are all of a sudden at a table and trying to do a Visual Diary, and it's just paper and a book and it's quiet work. It was definitely an eye-opener. It definitely gave me a different view of myself and how I can express myself through art.

D.M. Did you find that you have friendships that started at NYFAI and are last friendships in your life?

S.L. I would say my friendship with Nancy and Darla, yes.

D.M. Originated with NYFAI?

S.L. Yes – originated with NYFAI. And that's continued since that time.

D.M. I know that's one thing that we've talked about in some of the other interviews and I know Nancy was interested in getting peoples' feedback on how the structure of the school was set up on that sense of openness and camaraderie, and that friendships developed out of it.

S.L. Yes, there were friendships that developed out of it. Probably not mine as much because the area where I moved and breathed was very different than what the other women were doing. Because I was involved in the union in a major way, and I was moving up in the union ranks, there was a point where I couldn't continue classes because the work overflowed to outside of the workplace. That took me away from art making and the whole process. My life went in another direction.

D.M. I can imagine that would be really consuming.

S.L. Yes, it was consuming.

D.M. You already talked about some of the specific projects in the classroom, but how would you say that those projects changed the way that you made work. You talked about it changing the way that you expressed yourself, or the way that you thought about yourself, did it also change the way that you were making work?

S.L. Because of my 8-5, 8-+ whatever work . . . once I left the school I didn't continue doing any work. What it enabled me to see was that I could use materials other than three dimensional materials for self-expression. I think that was probably one of the bigger things although I didn't continue to use that until later. It sparked my interest in making art and considering myself an artist and being an artist that that idea stayed with me for years and years . . . .until recently.

D.M. Did you take any of the courses that were not art making courses? Critical thinking or . . .

S.L. I did take some. There were some directed meditation courses, I took a couple of those. There were a couple of two-day courses I took where you could come for the weekend and do directed meditation. There were some meditations on health. I took at least three of them over a period of time.

D.M. Did you find that helpful to the studio side of things as well? I heard people explain that there was also fundamentally a different philosophy around teaching art making that tied in those aspects . . . creative thinking, meditation, spirituality, and that it was to enhance openness, creativity, access to the imagination. Did you find those useful courses?

S.L. They were useful at the moment. I didn't find that I applied them.

D.M. But they were good experience outside of the studio class.

S.L. Yeah, they were a good experience.

D.M. How would you say that your experiences at NYFAI continue to affect your art making today?

S.L. Well, it was my first formal training. It left me for wanting more. Years later I did start – 2001 I started taking formal training, working with an artist in Brooklyn. I started with drawing. I couldn't continue straight through the classes (he has 15 week classes in his studio) so I started drawing and then I'd leave and come back and leave and come back and leave and come back. Now I'm painting in oils, so that was a big leap for me. To learn that I could actually draw people and then I could actually translate that into a painting and work on that. That permission to give myself the ability to sit and draw and say yes, you can do this if this is where you want to go. It started with my experiences at NYFAI and with Nancy.

D.M. On the feminism and activism side of things - - - would you say that you're experience at NYFAI is something that you continue to apply at union work?

S.L. It has been useful. I think that it's something that has been incorporated in my life. I went from being in a union position to taking a management position, and my attitude has always been more about equality as opposed to toting the line. I think it just enhanced what I already believed. You know the expression, being able to express feminism and have support for it in this arena. I think it just enhanced the way I move through life and the way I experience other people and speak to other people - - even to my nieces and nephews. They've all grown up with my being kind of out there, and political, and public. That's been something the children have experienced along with me.

D.M. Good for them.

S.L. Yeah. They're great kids.

D.M. There is so much conversation in feminism right now about whether women and men are aware of the value of feminism or the changes that the world has gone through – the necessity to continue to have a feminist orientation. Is there anything that would be a lesson from NYFAI that you would like younger people today to know? Since you brought up your nieces and nephews it made me think of this question.

S.L. I think that they had been feminized in some way without knowing what the feminist movement is about. I think that's what movements should be about. When it

becomes a part of the everyday living then you know you've made an impact. When I look at my nieces and nephews, we talk about all kinds of things. They're very open with me because I'm the odd aunt. I don't have children of my own. It's o.k. for them to talk to me in ways they can't talk to their parents.

D.M. What fun.

S.L. It is fun. I'm very lucky. I see that the questions that they ask and the way we process – we process as though we're equals – that I think that they benefit from my experiences here and the experiences that I've had over the years. I benefit from how new they are and how some things that we had to fight for they just consider. There is no consideration anymore about what a woman wants to be, whatever she wants to be she can be, but that wasn't the case when NYFAI was around, when I started working. You didn't see women in non-traditional labor, you didn't see too many women doctors, you didn't see women artists out there. There's a whole list of people that you never saw, and they don't feel hindered by that anymore, which I'm very happy about. I see it in my nephews too. They look for their equals in the girls that they date. I think that's great. I think that's really great. And, I think that's one of the subtle changes that feminism has created, that there's not that imbalance in a male's role and a female's role. There's more of an equality that was created by feminism.

D.M. Maybe more of the historical details since we're trying to document peoples' recollection of the project. You said the first you heard of NYFAI was through Nancy, through the classes, you hadn't heard anything in the local news, or art news about it? Their gala founding?

S.L. No.

D.M. Were you involved in the school when it closed?

S.L. No. By then I was too involved in union work to be involved in the school anymore.

D.M. O.k., because I know there has been some interesting conversation around the reasons that the school closed. You talked a minute ago about the changes that the women's movement has made in the world and there's a question of whether an institution like this closes because the need for it is over, or passing. There were also questions around being scrutinized by the IRS, financial questions that people feel like it was even more necessary and was being scrutinized. Maybe the question is generally

about how you feel about that time in the late 80s into the 90s when the school closed. I experience what you're describing about there being more gender equity than there was, people are much more free to participate in the activities in their daily life that they are drawn to naturally, not necessarily subscribed by gender. But, that was a tricky time, the late 80's to early 90s. There was a question of whether we were back-sliding or moving forward and why the school closed. Do you remember anything about that time frame?

S.L. I don't remember why the school closed. I don't remember that period of the school closing. I do remember making the choice of deciding to come to a school where there's women involved because I felt insecure about my artistic abilities. I felt that if I went to a regular art school or took classes where there was always men involved; it felt too exposing to me. To be able to be in a class and not know whether I could do whatever was required, or that there were guidelines that had to be met, and I think that the school was organized so that everyone was encouraged to do what they could do. There wasn't a "no, no, you don't draw a line like that, you draw it like this." That wasn't part of the education. That was definitely way better for me. I don't think that I would have been able to express myself or even take the chance on doing it if there wasn't NYFAI, if that structure didn't exist. I may not have ever decided to pursue any art.

D.M. The non-traditional structure and the non-traditional curriculum made it safer.

S.L. Made it safer and accessible to me.

D.M. I've heard people talk about trying to apply feminist principles to the classroom environment, that there was also less of a hierarchy between teacher and student. That was also something intended to make the classroom more comfortable for new students. Did you find that?

S.L. I didn't notice that because I think I was coming from a union environment where . .

D.M. Lot's of hierarchies.

S.L. Well, my approach to the gang that I was responsible for was not to have a hierarchy.

D.M. That's pretty radical in the union movement isn't it?

S.L. Yes, it was pretty radical. The more women that were involved in it, the more that occurred. I don't think that's happening now again, I think there's a reversal now. There definitely was a hierarchy but we were moving up towards it and we were doing it as a

team kind of effort. Even though we weren't aware we were doing that, but that's what we were doing. Coming into New York Feminist Art Institute, I don't think I was even aware that there should have been a hierarchy, so maybe other people felt it more because of their backgrounds.

D.M. Right like you were saying because you hadn't had any formal studio art training before that and this was your first experience with it, it would have been the opposite experience of someone who had started a B.F.A. somewhere and came to this school.

S.L. Yeah, so it was weird to me. It wasn't weird or strange. It just felt that this was the way it should be. You know, somebody's showing you how to do something or instructing you and this is how it should be. Even when working with Nancy – on an individual basis – she had a class of maybe 3 or 4 students, she would come around and say "do it like this", or "hold it like this" if just felt natural to have the instruction like that.

D.M. Do you have any sense in the years that you were involved of the name recognition of artists and whether that was an issue or not – Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro, people like that?

S.L. No, I guess I don't . . .

D.M. It's sort of a sensitive question I'm just curious about all of the issues around hierarchy and the women's movement. There's always this discussion about removing hierarchy from the interactions but it's so in our nature, especially when we're raised in an environment that constantly encourages that, you can espouse a value system, but then to actually embody it is so much more complicated. So, I think what we're looking for in this project too is all sides of the story and peoples' experiences with the things that were complicated about the project as well. So, I was just wondering if there were any hierarchies around.

S.L. Probably because in some way I remained an outsider that none of that affected me. I wouldn't have even known who they were. If somebody had said "this is so and so?"., "Ah, o.k.."

D.M. Also an interesting place to be in when the world seems to be so focused on that. It seems to me to be the biggest challenges for feminism within the art world is that the art world is so focused on name recognition, individual achievement and the hierarchy. In

that setting for women artists to become important in the popular culture and the art historical record, there is something that is counter to feminism and that process and it is always a struggle to put those two pieces together.

S.L. Yeah, I think it is. It probably echoes in the other arenas too. Even in the union to get recognized you had to have name recognition, face recognition; but it depends on what you did with it. I think a lot of it depends on the individual person, like whether they embody it as themselves, or just as a function of this environment as opposed to "oh yeah, I'm a really big cheese." . . . as "I'm just another cog in the wheel. You recognize me right now, somebody else could do this, but I'm doing it right now." I think that those are two counter ways of approaching stuff and I'm just a cog in the wheel. "Here's a job that has to be done", "Oh, I can do that. Let me do that job and then . . . move onto the next task." It's probably a little different with the name recognition stuff. I've never been . . . the only one that really wowed me was Cuomo, when I saw him in person once. I was really like "Ahh!" I think that for some reason it just didn't affect me.

D.M. It sounds like your goals as an artist were much more in line with NYFAI's philosophy where it was really about getting to know yourself better, and learning the materials, and developing skills.

S.L. Yeah, definitely developing your skills.

D.M. Did the school ever have any courses about marketing your work?

S.L. I don't remember. I would never have gone to something like that at that point. I wouldn't have even thought that I could market any work. I don't recall if they did. They may have, there were a lot of competent artists working at the time. I don't know. Good

D.M. Did you invite anybody else to courses at the school?

S.L. I did but nobody came.

D.M. Why do you think that was?

S.L. I think because they were feminist courses. I think that most of the people I spoke to were so used to being at schools with the other kind of stuff that you're talking about . . . recognition, grades, things attached to it . . . they're already going in a different directions. Honestly I think they discounted the school as a serious place to make art.

D.M. There weren't grades?

S.L. No. There wasn't anything that said you passed or you didn't pass.

D.M. Everyone passed.

S.L. Everybody did. It wasn't even a matter of are we going to grade you. All right we're going to work on this so you can bring your work to completion for this part of the class . . . or your idea can be completed. That's what it was more about.

D.M. Were there student critiques?

S.L. Yeah, we did critique. There were critiques made. That was rough. I thought critiques were really hard – that's purely personal – it's not that people were harsh or unkind, they weren't. It's just purely the first step of showing something that you've done and then having someone look at it and say "oh, but it should be this way and that way", learning how not to close down. It was a very interesting process. I've never had my work looked at or somebody critique it, and everybody was really very kind about what they said and for me I just had to learn to keep an open ear, not to feel bad or super elated that it was so great.

D.M. Did they ask you to critique each others' work?

S.L. Yeah, they asked us to critique each others' work. Somebody would present and then you would look at it and critique the final process and how it looked.

D.M. And, of course instructor critiques, was that treated differently?

S.L. No, the same.

D.M. The instructors were part of the conversation?

S.L. Yeah, part of the conversation. And that's exactly what it was. It was conversation as opposed to an attack. It definitely wasn't in that arena at all. It was conversation and saying "this or this and how that works . . . "

D.M. So it also wasn't degree oriented study either.

S.L. No.

D.M. You weren't taking courses towards the goal of achieving a degree. It was really based on gaining skills and knowledge.

S.L. Right.

D.M. Is there anything else that was important to you about the experience, or your own memories that you feel should be recorded for posterity? You already talked about the two courses that were the most interesting. . . . do you still have any of the pieces that you made in your classes? They're in your life, in your home?

S.L. Yeah. Well they're not up but I have them. When I go through them, I see them every now and I look at it and I laugh . . . or I think "Oh yeah, I forgot I did that piece." Sometimes the self-discovery is similar to what happened in the classroom which I thought was pretty interesting. You haven't seen something for a long time and then you take it out and you look at it and you're like "Oh, I did think like that" or "Oh yeah, that did really affect me emotionally." There was a lot of emotional connection to a lot of the art. That's probably what I think, for me, was the biggest piece, was that there was emotional connection to the art making which I think was important. I think about that in terms of feminism also. There is more than just a head connection to what you're doing. It's not just rules and regulations like "O.k., it's supposed to go like this, and it's supposed to go like that . . . " Intellectual art doesn't really interest me. I like to see art where somebody has brought something of themselves into it, or some angst or something that has been expressed through art. I think that the Feminist Art Institute was a safe place to be able to express those things. And, I think that that's probably the biggest part for me of the institute. I was able to come with no art knowledge, just a desire, and was able to work and express myself and have the ability and freedom to do that and not have to monitor myself at all. I think that was the best.