

NYFAI-

Interview: Susan Brownell interviewed by Flavia Rando

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F.R. So Susan, I'll ask a couple of questions but please feel free to make any connection that it makes in your mind, that's really what we want to hear.

S.B. O.k.

F.R. So, can you tell me when you first became involved with NYFAI?

S.B. Well it must have been 1990 when I started the program, which must have been the core of the program, but I applied . . .

F.R. Do really mean 1980?

S.B. Yes, it was 1980, thank you.

F.R. And you were in the core program. . . this is the first I heard of a core program. Could you describe that?

S.B. Well it was a yearlong course where you could elect to take various instructors and put together what you wanted to follow and study with the arts. But it was divided into two semesters so to speak, in the fall and in the spring. But you had to be accepted. So I had moved to New York, I guess it must have been the fall of 1980, and I saw the flier at this alternative film space in the village in the spring of 1980. But you had to apply, you had to be accepted, you had to show them a body of work and I remember being terrified of that. But, since moving to New York 6 months prior, I had been working away in my little upper west side studio. . . there were works on paper, or collage, the New York Times, I was very impressed at the time having that as my paper. So I went down and they made an interview and I was very intimidated. I think it was Nancy and Linda Hill who interviewed on Spring Street in their office and I presented this roll of work I did. They were enthusiastic and I got accepted and I was really excited.

F.R. Oh, very good.

S.B. But it didn't start until the next fall, in a couple months. So then we just started in the fall with this nice group. The first year I was just a student, after that I was still a student a second year, but I started working in the office, which became really fun for me too. I'd never really had a responsible, interesting job before. I think I was 27 and I'd had jobs but not something I was really involved in. You know, it mattered to me a lot.

It was a formative experience for me both working in the office and being a student because it really helped me mature.

F.R. What did you do in the office. . . what was it like working in the office?

S.B. First Lisa Falls

F.R. I haven't heard her name before either.

S.B. Really, she was from California. I believe she's still in New York because years ago when I came back to New York in '94 we got together and had lunch. I saw some of her work. . . she brought her work. But she had been working in the office but something happened and they needed somebody. I didn't want a 5 day a week job because I was really involved in the arts so I thought, oh, this will be great, it was Monday, Wednesday, Friday. I guess when it began, the responsibilities they gave me at first were answering the phone, making . . . and keeping track of the phone calls, But it really grew over the years. I think I worked there for five years.

F.R. Really?

S.B. Well, Nancy and I got along and Darla. And they could see that I liked the responsibility. And I had the quality of taking control . . . so I started to get much more involved in everything the office did. . and eventually Nancy trusted me with more and more. You know I was still just the office worker, but I did a lot of stuff.

F.R. Could you describe some of the things you did?

S.B. Well a lot of it was organizing the classes, speaking with the instructors, first going over with them before I met with Nancy about what their course content would be, writing up a course description, getting hints from the class about what their feedback was. . . were they really into Elke's drawing class, for example, keeping the books. . .which turned out to be fun for me too. I discovered different aspects of myself. And keeping the classrooms straight, even working with the janitors, interfacing with him. I really liked him, Gerardo Roebles who was from Puerto Rico. His whole story was fascinating. He had a daughter who was a little disabled, so his wife really wanted to stay for the benefits because in Puerto Rico there was nothing for her. So it was sort of tragic because he was very home sick, a tall very interesting man. You can imagine he'd go in and we'd have been making these art projects about our heart and our soul, and they'd be plastered all over the walls, and here's this man from Puerto Rico, and he would come

and talk to me and say . . . well, I saw the project on the students' roots, and then he would tell me about his roots in Puerto Rico, and he still had his house there. . . . So anyway there were all these aspects to the job. I had grown up in sort of a, how would you say it, well you know we have China town in Seattle and all, but it's very Scandinavian. So it was pretty homogenized and especially where I lived, Bainbridge Island, it was just a little town basically when I grew up, it's different now, but for me, it was just so exciting to be talking to all of these different kinds of people from different places and New Yorkers. I'll never forget Ronda Schaller, I forget but I think she was bookkeeper at the MOMA and she took a lot of classes with us. And she said one day, it blew me away, she said. . . .you know before I started working at the MOMA, I never met somebody who wasn't from New York, so she had the opposite perspective. She was so New York that she hadn't met anyone who wasn't from New York.

F.R. I think you can't say that anymore today. I think you can't live in New York that way anymore.

S.B. I think that's probably true. And I was floored because everyone I had met in New York, well yeah, they were from New York, but most were from lots of places. Anyway, it was just such a wonderful exposure time for me and I feel that I really got my feet on the ground. When I returned to Seattle, believe me, I was not the same person after nine years in New York. And I think my family was a little floored because they expected little Susi to come back. I was little Susi anymore. Not that I was docile, but a lot of people were shocked. . . . they were like. . . .well, how could you make sense of New York? I said I don't know, I just liked it the moment I got there. And my mother would call and say . . . well, aren't you lonesome? . . . when I first moved there, because I didn't really know anybody. And I had grown up so much identified with this small town. . . . the small town atmosphere is . . . you're from your family and that's what you are. So here I could find my identity of me. I really enjoyed that. I don't think my mom ever understood that. And then she made up this story. . . . I did have one high-school friend who moved here. . . . she was older by a couple of years. . . . and then she made up this story for herself that. . . .well you know, Karen's really the one that made you feel at home in New York.

F.R. Right, it wasn't you. Mother's have that knack.

S.B. They really do. I was like what?! And Karen was a good buddy but we never once talked about Seattle while we were here. We talked about New York because we were here for a reason, and that was to experience life here. And Seattle did not have anything interesting to talk about. So anyway, I just loved New York from the moment it started for me, but I did not move here intending to move here. I just came with one suitcase. I had a friend who couldn't afford her apartment, and I had just gotten out of college, so I said. . "Well, I'll pay for rent for a month." And she went off somewhere, she was a dancer or something. After the month was over I just called my dad and told him to send my stuff because I was going to stay. He's conservative and he had these daughters and it didn't really thrill him. And actually years later when I returned he threw a fit. . ."Well you went off to New York. . and. . .how could you have done that!" It was too dangerous for him. And of course now as a parent, I relate. I don't want my daughter in New York when she's twenty years old.

F.R. But she may decide to follow in your footsteps.

S.B. Yeah. Anyway the whole thing about NYFAI was that I was around people who were so involved in the arts and I had never had that kind of exposure. I was from an academic family. . . certainly my parents went to music, the opera and stuff. . .and we had art books around and my mother had gotten me art classes when I was young but no one around was an artist.

F.R. So were you always interested in the arts?

S.B. Yes.

S.B. I had taken art classes starting probably as a young teen, when I was thirteen. . . Michelle Laboda, French-Canadian, and she taught drawing to me. And it was wonderful, it was an eye opener too. She had a live model, not nude, but still a live model for us and it was wonderful. So it started there. But the reason my mom did that was because I started drawing from the covers of books, the decorations, I started copying them. And then in high school, I went to a girl's school. . a couple of girl's schools. But the art programs were good. And the art teachers were supportive of my work and took me aside and said . . you know you really should do more. So I got some attention for it there. But then when I got out, I didn't go to college at first, I went to the San Francisco Art Institute for a year and took painting and drawing.

F.R. And how did your experience at NYFAI compare to the San Francisco Art Institute?

S.B. There you go, that's a classic line-up, which just explains my involvement in art. In terms of school, the San Francisco Art Institute had a big set-up, it had a whole campus, it had a restaurant that went with it, and some famous teachers. . . but, it was flavorless. And you never looked inside yourself for a moment. The best experience you could get was painting from a model because it was live, and the guy would come around and comment on your painting. But that was about the paint and NYFAI was about you, which of course is a critical difference. Which is why I was involved in it so long. So that's why I left the San Francisco Art Institute. I went for a year, and then I went for another semester the next fall. I found that what I started doing. . . they also had a range of art-related classes like literature in the arts. . . I found what I started doing was taking these other classes that weren't studio classes, because I wanted some kind of depth. And I started feeling stupid because it was just paint; which was being addressed in class. I never felt stupid at NYFAI because it was everything, your whole self. But I started feeling stupid so I thought. . . you know, I'm so into art but I guess I'll go to college. In a way the San Francisco Art Institute turned me off to art and sent me off to college, which was fine, I got my degree in English literature from the University of Washington. And I did well, I did very well in English, and I went back after years in New York and got my master's in psychology, but it makes total sense it's such a progression because when I was interviewed for my master's program to be accepted the man said . . ."Well now you have an undergraduate degree in English lit., (we weren't talking about the intervening years in New York with art) how do you get here, wanting a master's in psychology after your English lit. degree? And I said, "Well that's simple, every story and every book is about the psychology of everybody." And he had to admit that was true. But if you look at it through the NYFAI lens, The progression was. . . first, I was madly involved with art, but traditional art school was so surface that then I went to college and got very involved in literature because of the depth of the stories and the psychology of the people in the stories. And my family had been comfortable but there was a lot of psychology that went on in it. I had lost a sibling, my parents had divorced, it hadn't been a simple road. So all of these stories were very important to me to find my own road through what

had happened. So from there, I went to NYFAI which went to the depths of psychology, in no formal way, it wasn't ever called psychology, obviously it wasn't presented that way, it was presented as art, but it was still psychology. You know, visual diaries, that was the most basic class you could take at NYFAI and it was all about looking inside yourself, following your emotions, finding the images that go with your emotion. That's what was missing at the San Francisco Art Institute. I remember a teacher there saying. . . it's too pretty here, I had this beautiful surface. . . but nothing else, and after awhile I just thought. . . you know, this is just non-sensical. So I went deeply into the psychology at NYFAI. And what started to happen was I started to go to 38th street - I'd love to get back there - the Carl Jung Institute. It's beautiful, it's in this old brownstone that has a library. It's small but incredible. So I would bike up there from the East Village and just spend the day in that library with the glass encased books all about Carl Jung. . . just reading. Do you see?

F.R. Yeah, it's a clear connection.

S.B. It was an opening up. And then I worked at this organization called Women In Need with the homeless women on east 43rd street.

F.R. At the same time?

S.B. Yeah I think at the same time. I worked in the office for five years and then I think I went to work up at the Met Sculpture shop. I told Nancy I needed to branch out. They had just moved down here. But I was always there at Spring Street. And when they moved here, I decided I'd better go branch out. But then I started working at Women in Need too. So the branching out, I see now, wasn't so much diverging but just going more deeply into what they had exposed me to which was psychology really and service. . . the healing arts. So then I wanted to go get my masters in psychology because I couldn't really help the women in need, I mean I could be there and all that, but I didn't have any credentials to really help them. So that's when I thought, well, I've got to get a master's in psychology which of course was intimidating because some tests you were supposed to take. . . oh, it was god awful. But Antioch University was wonderful. First of all, they allowed you to get an advanced degree that wasn't the same as your undergrad degree. Second of all, you didn't have to take those tests. So I drove out to Ohio and was interviewed out there, and accepted to their program. I was going to do what was called

the off-campus program, which was, live in New York, and somehow accomplish this. And then I looked at the line-up of what that would mean. . . finding people to work with me for nothing in New York, and the expertise to really be able to teach me anything. So then I decided, I'd just apply to the campus in Seattle. I can make my way in Seattle easily enough, because it was my hometown, to get my degree.

So you see how NYFAI was the critical element of saving me from the traditional art school which led to nothing and a traditional college degree in English Literature which also led to nothing. . .you know what I'm saying?

F.R. Yes I do, I do. In traditional art school . . . were you a feminist at that time?

S.B. Well, I remember one comment, of course my mother was a very traditional mousey housewife who, oddly enough, eventually left my dad. So she always said she had four surviving daughters and why were they all so outspoken when she had been such a sweet wifey. She said, I always role-modeled that. Well, that's what she thought she was role-modeling but what we saw instead was this. . . you know my dad was controlling and extremely bright, my mother was bright too but she submitted to him. So what we saw was this horrible theme you would never want. I know underneath that's the reason I'm not married today and never was. Well, my sisters have gotten married but. . .and divorced and all sorts of things. But the point here is. . .where was I with feminism? I remember the San Francisco Art Institute had this big drawing class all drawing this model. And this boy who was my age, quite a good drawer, and the teacher was a woman, a woman probably thirty-five or something, a real earthy Californian woman. And I don't remember her saying much but I remember this boy raising his hand and saying. . . you know, I don't understand this woman thing . Why do women need this raising consciousness thing, I don't think it's raising consciousness. . . or something like that. And she just looked at him and she didn't say one word and just nodded her head like they really need it. And she just put her mouth together and said nothing. And that made a big impression on me, she couldn't even explain it to the guy. Some friends, people I grew up with who really are old buddies, they'll talk about my feminist summer when I was reading . . .oh, that big red book, what was it . . .with the red hand on it. Oh what was it, I can see it but I can't think of the name and the author. Must have been Betty Friedan, no it's another one maybe. Anyway. . . "Sisterhood is Powerful!"

F.R. Oh yeah, that first collection.

S.B. It's a collection that's right. "Sisterhood is Powerful" It had the red hand on it. Sisterhood is Powerful. . . and all summer long I'd be reading that. Everyone else would be jumping around on the beach, I'd be reading my "Sisterhood is Powerful!" John, an old buddy of mine still talks about that. But I was known as not docile, as wanting to go my own way. You know, sure I was interested in boys but I wasn't headed for the alter obviously if you know what I'm saying.

F.R. Yes I do.

S.B. And then I took off to San Francisco to art school and then I did go to the University of Washington. But then, as soon as I was out of college, I really headed straight for New York.

F.R. At NYFAI, I'm just going to get back to your work in the office for a moment.

S.B. Yes, yes.

F.R. So it sounded like you pretty much organized your work in the way that you wished to.

S.B. Yeah, well, Nancy would call every morning and say. . ."This is what needs to get done." . . but she wasn't there standing over my shoulder or anything. And her confidence in me grew as skills grew. And they were great to work for. She respected me, she thought I was intelligent and I was I discovered, much to my surprise, that I had some real organizational skill. See I'm the third girl in my family. My older sister was the leader who was valued as miss organization, you know, the first child. So it was a shock that this art girl, I was the third one, "art girl", I had the same quality behind a very different affect. One day I got off the train from New York, and she was there and she handed me a list, "Look Susan, this is what I need to get done." And she was amazed because I just took it and prioritized it for her. And it was finally a role reversal, a sort of coming of age of my own identity. . . empowerment really. I was going to this therapist, Bernice Goodman.

F.R. Oh, I knew, I didn't know her, but I knew of her.

S.B. She was on East Third, down from the men's shelter. And that friend of mine had lined her up for me. But the friend of mine had been to NYFAI but had never liked Nancy. And she thought that I was being subverted off into the office and oppressed by

Nancy and used by Nancy and poor Susan and. . . if you go to Bernice. . . She didn't actually say that but was sort of between the lines. After going to Bernice awhile, I realized Bernice would be asking these leading questions like. . . "Well, how do you feel in the office?" And finally I think she said well, isn't Nancy taking you and oppressing you... or something along those lines, not exactly that. And I said to her, you know, I take great empowerment from working in that office. I feel like I'm self-employed more than that I'm an employee. That set her back on her heels. But as a good therapist she listened and she believed me because it was the truth. And her whole tone changed after that. And it was like being self-employed in that Nancy was very good leading but she wanted to be at home art making. And eventually she made that clear to me. . . that the more I could take on the better. And here she had this kid who was thirsty to prove herself, just for herself and it was fun. It was really fun. And I did keep it really organized. . .the classes and the students. And it was good in that I had been in the Core program so I was close to the students, and I was close with Nancy and Darla. They used to say I wore many hats.

F.R. Right, who were some of the other instructors that you worked with.

S.B. Let's see. . . well Elke Solomon of course. She was my big favorite. Nancy first, her Visual Diaries was just critical, but Elke Solomon, she was the one who took hold of my drawing and realized that because I was. . . I think this now, because I was from the country, I had a certain way of drawing. . .these are Elke's words "referenced to the horizon". See in the city it's always like this – vertical.

F.R. You always have to look up to know what you're doing.

S.B. So she was just fascinated. She watched me and watched me. . . and she said I had this pattern in my drawing. I'll never forget the moment when she said this because it was earth shattering to me to have my whole visual paradigm just taken apart. She said "it's taken me awhile to get it, but you are reference to the horizon". Whoa! She's right, and after that my drawing didn't stay on that thing. Everything I did was sort of organized around this. After that it wasn't necessarily abstract but it might as well have been abstract. She's the one who brought modern art to me. Elke really was. She's the one who made modern art make total sense to me. And it was just the way she was. . . the way she walked around the room, the way she gestured, her own struggle with art.

Over the years I came to realize she hadn't at that time been able to make art. But she did during the time I knew her. . . of course wonderful, wonderful art. But she had major, major blocks. And she took us as a class into her studio, and she showed us how she struggled and. . .

F.R. That was very generous.

S.B. Yes, very and I needed that. See in the traditional setting, they had all the funding and all the set up but you didn't see them in their real life encounter in art. In their struggles, in their studios. Whereas Nancy was living and breathing her art, as all of the artists were. And so you saw their process so much which was far more instructive than. . . here we are in this well lit, well set up art studio thing, which San Francisco Art Institute certainly had, it's been there a hundred years. . . I mean I don't know how long it's been there but it's been there a long time, very well established; whereas, NYFAI just had some rooms in the Port Authority's old terminal building. But I had the best time over in that building because. . . all the wharfs were outside that building, all the shipping, the container trucks. . .to me, they were vastly scenic, you could see the whole Hudson River outside the window. I thought it was fantastic and just impressive. The scale of the view was really great. . .it was commercial New York, not Mid-Town, I was never in Mid-Town. Our building was kind of gritty. It wasn't glamour New York, it was nuts and bolts, it was representative of commerce, and real commerce happening. And then Nancy of course, being a New Yorker that was great. And Elke of course was not a New Yorker from New York, she was from Detroit and that counted. She'd been all over, and she'd been at the Whitney and all that. . . so Elke was very important to me. . . and Nancy. . .and. . . I can see her but I can't think of her name . . . the painting teacher with the short hair.

F.R. Louise Fishman?

S.B. No, she moved to . . .

F.R. Harmony Hammond?

S.B. Harmony Hammond, thank you. She moved to Nevada or something?

F.R. New Mexico.

S.B. Is she still there?

F.R. Yes, in fact, I have a house there, and she and I are friends.

S.B. Are you serious? It's wonderful there isn't it, I've never been?

F.R. It's beautiful.

S.B. Is it great?

F.R. I think so.

S.B. Well you must if you have a house. Harmony was a great teacher. She really was a great teacher. She had sort of a program that she'd go through with you. First she'd paint in just whites but in different directions. . . so she really got you to see how the paint looked differently even in one color. It was wonderful, I remember that so well. She was heavy handed, that is, she was very didactic and emphatic but she did not one bit of interference with "you", not one bit of dictating "you". It was all about what the paint could do. She was a wonderful teacher in that way. She kept it very separate. You know I could go more into Elke because I don't know what it was she was doing, because she was so amazing. Her intellectual exercises with paper and charcoal. They were totally interchangeable, nothing was fixed. The intellectual exercise. . . I would wait for that class every week because it was so fascinating. . . very, very stimulating. She was so turned on to art. Well, the curator thing at the Whitney, not that I looked at her and thought curator of the Whitney but what you realized was that she had this intense relationship with all these drawings, more than paintings. So she was just the most fabulous drawing teacher. And Harmony was great for the paint, and then Nancy was great for the psychology of it all. I can't put it any other way except that I've read her book now "Spirit Taking Form" and that put into words what I didn't really have a finger on before I read that last year which was: the meditation quality. I was just steeped in this stuff year after year. Five years at that school, I mean in various capacities.

F.R. Did you keep taking classes for the whole time while you were there?

S.B. Not the whole time but I was around all the students who were taking them and I was seeing their work and I was setting up the group show every couple months and organizing that whole thing. And Linda Hill, she was another core leader. She was a good example of someone who wasn't making art and how she didn't take a hold of you in the same manner because she wasn't involved in art.

F.R. What was she doing?

S.B. She was one of the Core Instructors.

F.R. What did she instruct?

S.B. More the group process, she instructed the group process.

F.R. Oh really, this is the first I've heard of this. Tell me a little about that.

S.B. Well how you reached group consensus and she I think she led group meditations. But she was a weak player, let's put it that way because you could sense that she wasn't there herself. And she didn't have that much to contribute. But then on the other hand, there was a split, those who followed Linda, and those who followed Nancy. When I started working in the office and I started knowing Nancy more and more and probably I was just more in her camp. Although I was never really against Linda, she just didn't have the depth of experience. She hadn't struggled to make that art. And Darla was a doctor and she was struggling to make art. It wasn't easy for her and I respected that. I realize now, in hindsight, that the steeping in the real life of artists was invaluable. That's why when people are going to art school in Seattle and all, I think it's fine. And of course there's nice art in Seattle, good art in Seattle, but I really believe that if you want to really get into it, New York is the center. It's just the art center. Not just visual, I mean in many, many ways obviously.

F.R. Let me ask you, you mentioned setting up the shows every couple of months. . . what were you referring to exactly?

S.B. We would have these group shows, school exhibits. . . each class would put up things, each person. It was sort of a fascinating range of expression. And the personalized versions of expression were really fascinating. In the Core group we had this woman Vikki Felder who did these very colorful, pastel-ey, sort of child-like things and then we had Rose-Mary Starace, I think she had the greatest touch, she was somewhat like Susan Rothenberg with the horses. . . she had that light wiggly touch. She was a beautiful painter, and beautiful composer, she was great. She loved Elke too. And then there was me who came out with the deep, dark, intense colorations and things. And then there was that girl from the German background, that woman, she was older. . . she was great too though very somber, very serious about it, Leslie Strickland.

S.B. Leslie Strickland was a professor at Columbia. And she was sort of on the Darla line because she was struggling to get hold of her intuitive self. And she valued NYFAI

so highly because she had been in the other places. Europe, especially Germany and she knew the limits of intellectualism and was turning to intuition.

F.R. Did you ever take a part in other things at NYFAI, you must have liked the open houses. . . were you instrumental in organizing those as well?

S.B. Oh yeah, getting everybody, rallying them around. And then doing the press release thing. Phyllis Rosser always wrote the press release, but making sure that it was sent out to everyone like the Village Voice and all that. And having the flyers distributed in interesting places where we'd find interesting people, which was how I found out about NYFAI at that alternative film place which was some place in Soho probably. I just saw a flyer and it said "applications being accepted to: New York Feminist Art Institute", with some wonderful drawing on this little banner. And I thought it was so intriguing that's why I called. That's how it happened. And I was living on the Upper West Side.

F.R. Did you ever take part in Ceres Gallery?

S.B. No, they were forming it when we first moved to Franklin Street, and I did work for some of that year but I didn't get involved with it mostly because I had this friend Peter who had this Free Lunch Gallery . . . and it wasn't a big formal gallery . . . but he was a sculptor and he was also a contractor. So in his Easter Street building that they had reclaimed he constructed this nice gallery space because he could do it himself. And he invited me to be one of the first artists there. And it was really, really fun for me. And it was a neat show. So mostly because I was working with Peter a little, but I believe if I had stayed with the school, I would have joined. Rose-Mary Starace was in Ceres.

F.R. Yes, I'm making notes to sort of follow up on some of this.

S.B. And Mary Alcantara, she didn't really follow through but she was an interesting person. She was a good buddy of Linda Hill.

F.R. Do you think that NYFAI strengthened your interest in feminism?

S.B. Oh yeah, but it also demystified it. It became very. . . I mean it's so fundamental to the way I am. I mean when I was in my grad. program in psychology, we had a meeting once a week with this guy who was supposedly more an authority. . . and after awhile this fellow woman student said to me. . . "you realize what he thinks of you. . ." and I said "what?" and she goes, "well he just knows that you're a raving feminist". . .and I said "I have never said a word". . . and she said "you don't say anything, it's just the way you

are.” Which means I didn’t sit and ask him “Well, do you think this is right? . . . I really felt my own feeling of what was right.”

F.R. It was really amazing what they expected of women at that time.

S.B. It really was at that time that you would follow. First of all that wasn’t my temperament and second of all I had a terrible example in my parents’ marriage. If my mother hadn’t followed my dad, it would have been different. So, I believe NYFAI just solidified my feminism, but it also authenticated it. . . . took it to a level where it was just taken for granted for me. . . .

F.R. It became really part of you.

S.B. Yeah, my foundation to where sometimes I really couldn’t understand my sisters’ choices in life.

F.R. In a given year or semester about how many women were studying at NYFAI, how many classes were running?

S.B. Oh, we would have usually 8 to a dozen classes. We had various aspects, we had the writing journal thing which I think was Julia Cameron and then we had the Elke and the painting and on the sculpture, Nancy and the visual diaries, Nancy rather, she never really taught sculpture. And then we’d have guest people like . . . Lee Krasner, Elizabeth Straton would run these special classes. They’d run these special workshops so we’d have a list of the classes and then you’d also have the workshops.

F.R. I see, and the workshops were on the weekends, or one-time deals?

S.B. Pretty much or maybe we’d make them three sessions or something. So you organized the workshops too which was fun because you’d have different women coming in to teach.

F.R. Faith Ringgold.

S.B. Sarah Draney. She would teach faithfully. . . . papermaking wasn’t that hers? Yeah, and she was wonderful. She was the whimsy, just the invention of things. So we’d have at least ten things that we’d have happening in that time period that we published once in the Spring and once in the Fall. And maybe they did the summer too. I didn’t feel bored with it, put it that way, even though five instructors were always the same pretty much.

F.R. And that was . . .

S.B. That would be Nancy and Elke and Harmony (for a long time) and Sarah and the journal writing . . . Julia Cameron, I thought it was her. That was different from visual diaries. That was really about writing a daily journal. I had been an English Lit. major, I never took that because I had written journals for a long time. There was a lot going on with the workshops. Then we'd have the open houses and to me it was a rich environment and a real learning environment. I think most people felt that way. But it didn't grow in popularity that was the problem.

F.R. How do you account for that?

S.B. Feminism . . . even the guys downstairs, Tom Solomon, who ran White Columns, they were buddies of mine, and his mother was Holly Solomon. It was Josh Bauer also ran White Columns. We invited Holly Solomon (she had Solomon Gallery, which was much more mainstream) to speak once and she did, but her basic thing was . . . "What are you doing this for you feminists. . . you don't need to band together, feminism is over. You should just give up this program." She was really anti-feminist.

F.R. So she came and spoke and told you to give it up? (laughter)

S.B. I wasn't there actually, but Nancy told me. So no understanding of the link between the depths and the feminism and how women are taught to stay away from themselves and how it was linked into finding yourself and your creativity. Men got to be creative and messy and all of that but we weren't supposed to be. . . you know, that whole thing. She never quite followed that at all. But I really believe that it was a victim of fashion. When I first started working there, I guess it was 1980, feminism was still on the rise.

F.R. Seventies and eighties, it was a shift in government also.

S.B. I guess so, here we are at a real peak here.

F.R. Yeah, aren't we.

S.B. Anyway by '89 when I left the city, it was like it was a popularity thing.

F.R. What was the age of the students. . . were they all mostly in their twenties or was there a great variety of. . . speaking of popularity and style.

S.B. Leslie Strickland was a little older, she was a professor. . . and of course Helen Stockton took a lot of classes. . . Phyllis Rosser didn't she take a lot of classes? I think it was sort of a mix between us. The core people tended to be more in their twenties and some of them were from different states. But the people who kept on taking classes other

than the Core people, I think there was a real mix. And a lot of women were in their forties and they were trying to, well I know what they were doing now that I'm fifty-two, they were in the throes of not wasting any more time. They had that feeling that they wanted to really support themselves with something. Some of them were out there on Long Island and would come in, Harriet Rothauser, she was pretty staunch and she was in a very traditional circumstance and she was dealing with it. And I think that the Feminist Art Institute was her therapy almost. But for those of us in the Core who tended to be more in our twenties, it wasn't therapy because we hadn't compromised ourselves at that point in our lives at all. We were the young kids that never had to do it because we were young enough to come into the women's lib. thing. You guys had already helped us.

F.R. You're still making art?

S.B. A little, and I do have an art studio at my house. I did continue to make art for years but when I had my daughter. . .

F.R. How old is she?

S.B. She's eight. Third grade, so I really have to let go and just get into my process again. I feel the frustration of not having done that for so long. And it's frightening to let go of being a mother somewhat, and go back into . . . I mean art making is a challenge. . . it is frightening, but I have so much to lose, I can't not do it. I didn't have my daughter until I was forty-three and I had spent so much time on myself by then that I just plunged into being a mother like it was the last thing to be done. It's just that now she's in third grade, she's at school every day and she needs to let go and be more and more involved in her own life. And I can see that and now I'm like. . . "o.k. lady what are you going to do now. . . I guess it's back to you anyway."

F.R. I guess if you just go up to the studio and sit there for a while and allow yourself, have you tried that?

S.B. Well it's very interesting you say that because I also have masters in counseling, in psychology, and I had moved my office back from Seattle when I had my daughter because I live on this island and I wanted to be on this island so I put my office in my studio. I had gotten a carpet on my studio floor, set up furniture for counseling. But, I have this whole big wall that I had surfaced so that I could paint again and I never changed that. So now I'm at this point that I have not the need to be a therapist as much

anymore, the financial need. So I pushed the chairs back and I'm going to throw a tarp down on that carpet which wasn't costly or anything but still it's a carpet, and start to paint again.

F.R. Well you could throw a tarp or even, I have a friend who had that similar situation, she put down a roll of brown wrapping paper.

S.B. Oh yeah, that would work too, because then you could change it.

F.R. Right, it's sort of a better surface to stand on.

S.B. So, I'm this point of claiming my studio back, which sounds sort of bizarre.

F.R. No, not at all, it sounds very familiar actually.

S.B. Really? But I think because of my older age having my daughter, being a mother was something I hadn't done, and I had had twenty years of doing everything I wanted and so it wasn't hard for me to put myself aside. But it's going to be counter productive for me to just live for my daughter because it will ruin her.

F.R. Probably not the best idea. What kind of art did you continue to make?

S.B. Well, in New York, I had begun with large pieces of paper with oil stick and I had really totally developed that a lot and was very into it but then I sort of transferred over to these un-stretched but very large canvases. . . you know, the New York thing, the big thing. . . and was really influenced by the East Village thing of that time by Expressionism. It wasn't strictly figurative but it was sort of expressionistic figurative. . painterly. And I was still painting and then moved to Long Island and was still painting that way for the last two years in New York. And then when I moved to Seattle and entered my Master's program, the painting fell off. But I continued to work in my sketchbooks. Not sketching scenes or anything, but just working. So, I was really very involved in art still until I had my daughter. And then the smell of paint thinner. . . I haven't sat in my office studio except with clients in the recent years. And I love the space, it's detached from the house, it is down a porch and off in the trees and I haven't even been there I feel like in years, except as a therapist. Which is o.k. but it's not the same thing. So I would say in the past eight years, which sounds tremendously long, I have not been involved in my art. But, I haven't left it behind. I have a very high-ceilinged bedroom and I have paintings all over, all my New York art pieces. So I've meditated on it a lot. Like putting my daughter to bed, that whole thing with children, I'll

be staring at my art thinking about. . God, remember when I made that that way, and then it changed over to that.

F.R. So it sounds like you have prepared yourself to go back.

S.B. And then I come to New York for these jaunts and Nancy gives me these pep talks and it really helps. Yes, I'm ready to go back. And plus, as I'm talking to you I realize I really have a very strong foundation in it, in terms of the experiences I've been through with art.

F.R. Experiences and length of your commitment.

S.B. And when I was in New York it was total. That's what I did. I lived and breathed that art paint in my little East Village studio apartment.

F.R. Is your daughter interested in visual arts?

S.B. Of course I've gotten her big rolls of paper. And frankly, obviously, I'm into the art supplies. And she likes it but the truth is she's more musical. She's into her piano.

F.R. Not too bad.

S.B. No, but it's one of those classic stories of the mother's more into the art than the child.

F.R. So I guess I was sort of thinking about this question. . . what would you describe as the legacy of NYFAI and what would you share with the younger generation of your experience?

S.B. I understand what you mean. Well, I can give you some good examples. She's in her public school on this island and they have an art docent program, which means a mother coming into the class and presenting art. And I have had meetings with the principal over the content of these things. I said, you cannot have these children copying. Do you understand that artists are ruined, and they try to train themselves back from all the copying they had to do which they were told art was.

F.R. They're still making children do that?

S.B. And you hear these little girls. . ."it doesn't look like the picture, I can't make the whale", and then they give up. And they're in kindergarten and first grade

F.R. That's terrible.

S.B. And you know what they have. . . they have tracing machines, not in the school, but the parents will get them the tracing machines that put down this image on the paper

and then they trace it and they think they made art. It just destroys everything. The big example for me, is -- I'm known as this crank being against the art docent program -- where they'll bring in the little Van Gogh and have all the kids make their Van Gogh's. Oh, the art docent, I thought, this will be exciting. I went to the trainings and my heart sank. By the end I just left silently. And then I was art docent for kindergarten and I did all these things like: (I brought in this little camera), art is not about photographing reality anymore because now we have the camera. Art is about something else. And I'd show them pictures from the old days and the new days. Then I'd have them paint all over these huge rolls. I was known as the one who got paint on the floor, ridiculous parent. And then I realized that the other classes were putting out their nice little things of Van Gogh "Sunflowers", that the kids had made. The kindergarten teacher was going crazy because she had no little things to put out in the hall because we were about process not product. So I mean, that's a good example of how I'm so different in my community. And my daughter knows, though. Well Ms. Rushka, I don't know if she's from the east or not. . . you'd think she'd have a nice grounding of this stuff. She'll tell them, "you make your tulip like this. Now make your spring flowers all like this with three points on the tulip. Never change direction while you are using your crayon because that makes it too scribbly." I mean all this stuff!

F.R. I can't believe they're still doing this.

S.B. That's what I mean! So I have these long meetings with the Principal and finally I just said, "well how do you affect change in this?" And he said "Well every seven years we have a curriculum meeting." . . . oh good my daughter will be fifteen and I'll be so involved! So the legacy I think is knowing the way to make art is personal. There is not a formula. Kids should never be copying. I keep telling the school and the principal will tell me. . . "Well, when they're in high-school they can elect to do it and they have a whole different thing." But in high school they've stopped because they feel like failures as artists. You go into artist studios and they're all struggling with this judgment thing, which is all hammered into them in grade school. "Art is like this, only artists to do this." Artist is this big category of impressive people that you could never be. All personalization of art is taken away from these children. And my daughter knows all about it now. She tell me. . . "well, I told Ms. Rushka this is not abstract art." And Ms.

Rushka would just glare at me. But I couldn't believe it, that day I was in the class, and she was telling them how to make tulips. And you put your spring flowers all in a row, and then Francine will say to me. . . "Ms. Rushka really likes flowers. Mom." I'm like uh-huh.

F.R. She likes things in a row is what she likes. So you're sort of an art activist over there for your

S.B. In my little backwater conservative place I guess. Which is supposed to be one of the leading places in Washington State. Which gives you an idea about Washington. (laughter) The principal would just say to me. . . "well, we're lucky enough to have an art program, some schools don't even have an art program."

F.R. Well, in New York there are a lot of them.

S.B. Well, yeah, and you walk down the street and see real art. So that's my legacy is what NYFAI had to teach is what the kids need to know. I'll even use the example, In New York what people will do when they want to reach their childhood freshness again, which you're ironing out of them, is they'll switch hands, dominant hands. And, they all looked at me like I'm totally nuts. But I just wrote this critique of it. They handed out this survey. . . In my mind as it stands now, the Blakely Art Program is destructive of the children's creativity. You cannot have copying, you cannot have heavy judgment of whether they're doing the technique, you shouldn't even really be telling them the technique that much. They should be experimenting with how they use materials. It just goes on and on like that.

F.R. So you've talked about the making of art, have you found that you are able to carry over NYFAI's legacy of feminism?

S.B. With my daughter?

F.R. With your daughter or in your life. . . however you'd like to address that. . . in your counseling work. . .

S.B. Oh yeah, in my counseling work for sure. I've helped a lot of women, I've helped a lot of couples, I've helped a lot of men. "Find your feelings. . . what are they. . ." Men are, well you know how men are, they're railroaded away from their feelings. But in terms of the feminism, yes, I've helped many women in my office. I feel very sure saying that. My daughter is very grounded in that she sees me being a fulfilled woman

on her own. But the women in the community, all the married matrons. . .you read the class list, there's maybe one other single mom. Most parents both work to the ends of the earth all day long, so their children can have lots of things. But they're not going to have the company of the family. When they first approach you, they're like. . oh, this poor single mom, and you get all these slams on you. Now they realize I'm a fulfilled single mom, that I'm actually happy, that my daughter has good times. We're having a lot of fun. And I have more time to give her attention because I'm not working to the ends of the earth to support everybody. And I don't have a husband to tend on. I still get these slams. I would say that I'm a minority now in this circumstance, which has been insulting to me. Normally I don't care, but because of this kind of flack, I've gotten into this kind of position of being blatantly fulfilled. You know, display it in their faces because the minority thing angers me so much. Normally I'm not the type of person who tunes in much to the feedback. . . or are people impressed or not, but in this situation, I've become this way because I want them to see that we are perfectly happy. We're not wretches roaming the earth, without men, we are happy. Now in New York, this would never be an issue, but it is on little Bainbridge Island. And then you get the mothers where everything is perfect, and they're just staring at you.

F.R. So you find a lot of women still live very traditional lives?

S.B. Put it this way, Francine is staying at another family's house and my sister's since I've been gone in New York. In this family, Carl, the dad, he's an outdoors guy, which I like. . . , but Francine has watched him yell at Pam, his wife. Pam, who is an American Express Executive, who bought the house for Carl, and now she has to be yelled at by her husband? And Kayla, their little girl who is Francine's friend, will say things in the car such as. . .I don't know, something will happen and then Kayla will say something like. . . "well you need a man to do that." Because she's heard her mother say that and her grandmother say that. . . the grandma lives with them and has been married and divorced four times. She's sort of the bubblehead ditzy one looking for the next husband. "Well you need a man to do that" Kayla will say. . . she's this little red-haired girl who's very rambunctious herself. And then she'll just giggle, because she knows in our context. . . she'll just giggle and say "Oh, I'm just kidding". . . but she's almost confused because she's in between us and her family a lot. And she can see that Francine gets more quality

time than she ever gets. She'll say to me. . . "Look, I made lasagna with my mother. . . see Susan, mother-daughter time." Whereas with us, our whole lives are mother-daughter time. And then she's got my sister, who's she's staying with now. My sister is a professor and she's gay. Francine doesn't know she's gay, but she sees this woman in her house with this professor job and it's impressive.

F.R. What does she teach, what's her field?

S.B. American History. So I feel glad that my daughter is witnessing women who feel happy. And I do have a male friend Jacques but we're not married or anything and I keep him sort of regulated. She'll laugh. . . well don't call Jacques because you'll talk for three hours. He's a man that is chattier than a woman. You'll never find it, but he is. He can go on and on for five hours. I'll say. . . "Jacques, I have to get off the phone." So she's seeing different things, but most of all I think that she's happy and that's what's important to me. And she sees that women can be perfectly happy no matter what their gender choice, they make their way. And then you've got Pam, Kayla's mother over there who keeps teetering on her heels. And she says "Well Susan, aren't you going to get married to Jacques?" She keeps teetering over that. And, she says . . . "my mother is getting married November 17th and she's just met him and only known him for three weeks." I'm like o.k. But in the hinterlands, it's hard to believe, but it really still is the model. In those places where I am anyway. And Pam is a leading executive. . .

F.R. I teach Women's Studies and I find it fascinating that no matter what position they've gained, when they're at home,

S.B. She bought they house, Carl couldn't buy it. . . and he yells at her. "Well, Pam, why don't you do this!" And she's running all the books, she's doing his business for him. She's not even Catholic or anything, the long-suffering Catholic woman. Well, thank you.

F.R. Is there anything else that you'd like to add that we haven't?

S.B. No, just that I had a great time at NYFAI.

F.R. Thank you very much.