Talking With: Connie Fox Discusses Elaine de Kooning, Sammy's Beach & Working within a Triangle

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by Janet Goleas

The American artist Connie Fox (born 1925) grew up in Colorado along a stretch of prairie that stared out at the distant Rocky Mountains. A student during World War II, she studied in Colorado and at the Art Center School in Los Angeles before zigzagging across post-war Europe on her bicycle.

On her return in 1952 she migrated to Albuquerque where she received her master's degree at the University of New Mexico. There she studied with some of the country's most admired abstractionists, among them Adja Yunkers and Elaine de Kooning, with whom she would share a lifelong friendship.

At the urging of Elaine de Kooning (1918-1989) and the artist, writer and gardener Robert Dash (1931-2013), Connie Fox relocated in 1979 to East Hampton, where she continues to live today. The following year she met the sculptor William King (1925-2015) forging a lifelong relationship with him through their art as well as their shared political views, musical aspirations and devotion to community and family. They played music (Fox and King both played the fiddle in Audrey Flack's bluegrass band), helped to found LTV, East Hampton's local access television station, and exhibited their art in venues across the country.

Art critic for The Nation Barry Schwabsky discussed the unique qualities in works by Fox, citing their complexity and comparing them to a Proustian sentence. In a 2001 essay on the complexities of her oeuvre, he wrote:

"A complex painting would be one capable of including many spaces … many qualities of light, of texture, of facture, a wide gamut of colors; it would allow for descriptive representation, schematic or symbolic representation, for geometric and gestural abstraction; and these would not simply coexist, but would somehow be coordinating … and out of multiplicity would arise the work's sense of meaning."

Connie Fox, a descendant of America's abstract traditions, has exhibited her work in museums and galleries across the country, among them the Parrish Art Museum in Water Mill, NY; the American Academy of Arts and Letters, NY; Weatherspoon Gallery at the University of North Carolina in Greensboro; the University of Florida in Gainsville and at numerous other venues.

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Portrait of Connie Fox by Richard Foulser.

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Janet Goleas: We're here on this December morning [2015] with the artist Connie Fox in her East Hampton studio to talk about her process, her painting and her life. We're surrounded by your "Sammy's Beach" series. Did the series begin when you first moved to East Hampton in 1977?

Connie Fox: No – which is curious because Sammy's Beach is about three, four miles from here and it usually doesn't have many people — it really hasn't been discovered in all these years. I pretty much had the place to myself, more or less, and I just fell in love with it. I would go there every day and walk to the cut, Three-Mile Harbor, where all the boats come out and go into the ocean. Sammy's is a tidal bay beach, so it goes in and out. My swimming there was very much a part of my life. And it got into the paintings in mysterious ways.

JG: How so?

CF: Early on I had absolutely no interest in doing any paintings that were based on Sammy's — my paintings don't grow out of a landscape, certainly. So it didn't even occur to me. It was my experience there that, over time, affected me. So it was a surprise after about 30 years that I suddenly thought, "Gee, I'd like to do some paintings on Sammy's, about Sammy's Beach."

JG: Interesting.

CF: And so I started out – (pointing to the painting *Sammy's Beach I*, which hangs on the north wall of her studio) – this large painting is kind of a precursor. It's lighter and has more of a grid that you can see, but this is the first – this is *Sammy's Beach I.*

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"Sammy's Beach I" by Connie Fox, 2007. Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 88 inches.

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JG: It's a very explosive painting. I think of swimming in a body of water – as opposed to a swimming pool – as being very visceral and meditative. And I'm sure there are fish swimming by and the tides that go up and down. Here I see the waves and the rush of water (pointing to the painting).

CF: Yes, sometimes the water is quite rough and I would definitely get the feeling of rushing water. Because it's a tidal bay beach, there are sometimes waves there when the wind is blowing.

JG: You must be a great swimmer.

CF: Thank you, but no – I grew up in the desert. I only began swimming here, in East Hampton, and I'm very careful – I stay very close to the shore.

JG: But there is a ferociousness in many of these Sammy's Beach paintings.

CF: There is, and that just comes from me.

JG: A friend of mine, who lives at Lazy Point, has said to me that sometimes when he's swimming in the bay there, a sea lion will bump into him. Personally, I can't imagine anything more terrifying, but he was thrilled by it. Swimming in the bay is an encounter with the natural world.

CF: Well, I always went swimming in spite of the jellyfish, but one time I was swimming along – I usually watch out for them, but I didn't see this one coming. Suddenly here was this big jellyfish – my face was in the jellyfish's face – if they even have a face. I was so close to it that it couldn't get its tentacles out and sting me. This was one of my primary experiences down there – looking right into the center of this big thing.

JG: On that note, I find there's a very robust sense of memory in your paintings and New York critic Barry Schwabsky has compared your paintings to a Proustian sentence, which we know is filled with memory! I know you're an avid reader and know the work of Proust well. Can you discuss this sense of memory? I feel you're not observing nature in your paintings; it's inside of you and you're experiencing it on your canvas.

CF: That's exactly right.

JG: Can you talk about that — for instance, in *Sammy's Beach III*, there are clouds of black that may come from winter vegetation or dried seaweed. Or they may express this roiling sense of memory – like the skies during the Dust Bowl that you grew up in.

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"Sammy's Beach III" by Connie Fox, 2009. Acrylic on canvas, 80 x 72 inches.

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CF: I'm not conscious of memory directing, or creeping into my painting. Recently Joyce Beckenstein visited my studio for a piece she was writing. Instead of saying "what are you doing," she said "what, what are you doing here?" And I said, "Well, I'm trying to see what I can do in a rectangle." It sounds simple but that's how I approach my paintings. The first thing I do is look at the size of the canvas; I look at the dimensions in terms of how close they are to a vertical or to a square and decide if I'll approach the painting horizontally or vertically. Then a lot of stuff begins to fall into place. Sometimes there's just a touch of the grid in there, other times it's the driving force.

Eventually the painting begins to dominate, and my ideas emerge. For the most part I trust them.

JG: It's always seemed to me that you're trying to avenge the grid – that it anchors your original vision, but you then work in the push/pull of painting to overcome it.

CF: Exactly right — I'll put in something and then find something that works against it. The energy is contained within the rectangle.

JG: It's temporal.

CF: Well, it's temporal, but also there's a kind of magic to making a world within a flat rectangle that has limits on the sides. I could never have been a sculptor.

JG: Well, not being a sculptor was probably very good for your marriage, wouldn't you say?

CF: Yes, for sure! And Bill and I never critiqued each other's work, really. We appreciated the other's work, but didn't get involved in critiquing it.

JG: Another aid to marriage! In your charcoal drawings you may still be working off the concept of the grid, but there's such a sense of open space and that tenacious Connie Fox energy. Can you discuss how your drawings and your paintings are related?

CF: Well, the fact that I'm usually working in a smaller format and also in black and white makes a difference.

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"Weeds 9" by Connie Fox, 2010. Charcoal, ink, acrylic on paper, 30 1/4 x 44 inches.

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JG: There is the sense of implied narration in your work, and you pull us in through the abstraction to a sense that there's a story happening in your paintings.

CF: I like that! Glad to hear it. I would say that I can directly relate these to actually looking down at the seaweed as the water comes in.

JG: So you came here in 1977.

CF: Yes — I moved here with my dog and here – on this land — I was really out in the middle of nowhere. I guess I was kind of used to that, anyway.

JG: And it was Elaine de Kooning who encouraged you to move to East Hampton?

CF: And Bob Dash. I had met both of them in New Mexico early on when I was still a graduate student. Elaine came to teach and Bob was going to school there. I was good friends with both of them, and they both ended up out here by some crazy coincidence.

JG: So surely back then, once summer was over, the whole East End was open.

CF: Yeah, (laughs) there's nothing out here! Of course Elaine had a studio in the city so she wouldn't necessarily be here, even though she was here a lot of the time. Bob was here all the time. I flirted with the idea of moving to New York before coming here, but I thought it would be impossible to take care of my children in the city. I just wouldn't know how to negotiate it, nor would I feel comfortable. So for some time I stayed where I was, which was in Sewickley, Pennsylvania, of all places. And then when my youngest child went off to college I was free to go wherever I wanted to, and it was about the same time that Bob Dash and Elaine were insisting that I come out here.

So I came out to visit Elaine thinking, you know, I'm just visiting her, and she said, "Well, let's drive around the neighborhood." And we'd driven about three minutes, came through here, and there was a for sale sign on this house. She said, "Well, let's just walk in."

So we did. The couple that owned the house was in a bitter divorce and wanted to unload the place, so I got a pretty good deal. No banks, nothing. I just assumed the mortgage. And I've been here ever since.

JG: That's an amazing story.

CF: I said to Elaine, "Well, what am I gonna do here…where will I work?" She said, with her characteristic gestures, "Don't worry about it, the whole house will just be your studio." So, I was convinced.

JG: It ends up that Elaine had a huge impact on your life — you have said that when she came to the University of New Mexico at Albuquerque that "She blew the top off."

CF: (laughs) Yeah!

JG: What did Elaine bring to that community? Was it the New York school? Was it the abstract expressionist aesthetic? Was it New York itself? What was it?

CF: Well, because she was teaching, in her teaching she brought abstraction and at that time it was so fresh and new.

JG: In 1960 Elaine curated a show at Greg Jones Gallery in New York City.

CF: Oh, yes!

JG: And you were in that show with several other artists working in Albuquerque. She wrote a catalog and worked hard to make sure the show was covered in the media. Of Albuquerque she said in Art in America that "New Mexico has a landscape so overwhelming that painters have to look inside. Here is a strongly introspective art, stubbornly original and personal, yet not eccentric."

CF: That is really nice, I didn't remember any of this.

JG: She went on to say, "Albuquerque, impersonal and uningratiating as a gasoline station is nestled in the Rockies under a sun 40% brighter than New York's."

CF: That's wonderful! I didn't remember that. The description is just right on.

JG: So in between the early 1960's and 1977 from the University of New Mexico, you went to California, correct?

CF: I went to the Art Center School for two years. It's four-year art school, and the last two years you end up learning a lot about how to be, how to work in design or work in more commercial aspects of the art. And I think about that. I'm so grateful I went there, I got the most rigorous kind of academic art training. Here's an example: they set up a baseball player – a batter – who is in batting stance, in a baseball uniform. We had to draw him nude first, and later they put the clothes on. We really had to draw that. And believe me, by the time you got to drawing his uniform on, it looked like it was a real person.

JG: I think it was in Albuquerque that on occasion you would go south to watch the bull fights.

CF: Yes, Elaine and I would, and Elaine did some marvelous paintings based on that. I deviated a lot from the abstract expressionism, because to me it wasn't enough. It didn't have enough content — it had all that energy and the freedom, but I didn't feel like it was a place to stop for too long. Elaine was an influence in this way, too.

JG: Well, Willem de Kooning famously said, speaking of painting, "It's only American artists that think painting comes from nothing."

JG: So, where do you find content? Is it in the action of painting? Is it in the poetry that you're surrounded by, in the books that you read? Or is it just something completely internal?

CF: It's just something that kind of appears out of the blue. And there's a lot of it — almost more than I can handle sometimes. I've never had to search around for ideas, because I had so many. It was more about corralling the energy so that I could get a coherent bunch of paintings. And over the decades I tried out a lot of different things.

JG: Was surrealism one of them?

CF: I was moved by the surrealist's imagery — they bridged that gap between the real and the imagined. And, I loved Marcel Duchamp.

JG: So tell us about when you cycled with two of your girlfriends through post-war Europe right after World War II.

CF: I went with two fellow students from Art Center. One was a big, tall blonde Norwegian and the other was a short, fat Italian. I was somewhere in between. Anyway, along the way, the tall one decided to stay in Norway and the Italian went home to Bari, in Italy. I was on my own after that, biking through post-war Europe. There were youth hostels everywhere – everywhere except Germany.

JG: Were you aware of the New York School at that time?

CF: I saw a show of Willem de Kooning's in New York on my way there – one of his first shows. It stayed with me.

JG: In my research I found pictures of Fowler, Colorado, where you grew up. Early pictures, perhaps similar to the way it was when you lived there.

CF: Nothing there, right? It was out on the prairie. You could see the Rocky Mountains in the distance, but it had to a real clear day.

JG: On top of that, you grew up in the Dust Bowl era of the 1930's in a prairie/desert that stretched out as far as you could see. It's hard to imagine a child growing up in that environment that wouldn't develop a kind of apocalyptic view of the earth.

CF: Absolutely! The sky would be filled with dust and the little old ladies would talk about the end of the world. My school was only a half block away but I couldn't see if from my house. I had to wear goggles – we all did. The farmers couldn't farm, and they were losing their farms, so there was a sense of things disappearing.

JG: Amei Wallach talked about an aspect of "primal memory" in your painting.

CF: Well, yes, it was impactful – primal, maybe. As far as the early days when I was a child, a couple of things happened and any, almost any child who had any kind of an artistic vent that went through what I went through would probably end up being an artist. I got pneumonia and they had no way of treating it I just stayed in bed – I missed the whole 1st grade. The only thing I had – it just was wonderful – was a burning tool that I could plug into the wall and it would burn images on to wood.

JG: Was that the beginning; your first aesthetic experience?

CF: Well, I loved to make things. They gave me this tricycle when I was small and I took it apart. I removed the top that goes down to the front wheel and turned it over and put it back on. It worked, you know! The seat went down, so I was low to the ground – so I had a racing tricycle. It would go really fast! I really enjoyed inventing things – that was one of the first.

JG: What a pleasure to talk with you, Connie. Let's do it again.

CF: I'd like that.
