

Robin Levy

During the 2018 Tricentennial year, curator Susan Tucker sat down with Robin and other artists who participated in the Panel Discussion to ask some additional questions about their work. The following comments were made in response to Susan's question about how New Orleans had influenced their art.

My family history and this environment have always informed my work, at different times in different ways. My parents had a business on Magazine Street starting when I was a toddler. Back when Magazine Street was mostly bar rooms, mom and pop repair shops and family run restaurants. And, although we put our heads down on the pillow at home on Catina Street, I feel like I was truly raised on Magazine Street. Mom and Dad started with a tiny little place called the "Attic Antiques" and years later opened "Stan Levy Imports."

Both my parents came from such modest means. But, together as partners, they built an incredibly successful business. They eventually imported antiques from England and France, Argentina, Italy. It evolved into something significant and they really built a legacy together. I got to see extraordinary things, and the cast of characters that would come through those doors! I mean, there were so many beautiful, crazy scenarios we would observe and learn from. My dad impacted the immediate neighborhood in his small way. He hired many people from the neighborhood. One man, who lived on Magazine Street his entire life, walked to work for almost forty years. Everyone there became our extended family. My dad came here alone in the 1950s from right outside of Boston. He grew up in Lowell, Massachusetts. And my mother, her sister and parents, all Holocaust survivors, came here, with a baby brother born after the war. Mom's father

became a cabinetmaker when they arrived and later opened an antique restoration business across from my parents', long after my parents started theirs.

I grew up in Lakeview with two sisters: Jewish family in a predominantly Catholic neighborhood. A few early memories are from the 60s: Family and friends going to Bourbon Street to walk around and listen to music spilling onto the street, and on Sundays driving to the French Market for produce. Picnics at the lakefront. We attended public schools, I took the public service bus for middle school—while everyone else was going to neighborhood parochial schools—there were multiple layers of information I was processing, but not necessarily intellectualizing. And I think just taking the public service bus from Catina Street to Canal Street, I was sort of absorbing the city streets.

One [of few] life-changing events, the most abrupt, was Katrina. Immediately after, it became clear I had to expand my studio practice. Once Katrina hit, it was like, "Okay, you know, the rug was pulled up" and, New Orleanians saw the same thing that people all around the world were seeing. I suddenly recognized systems I had been unaware of before, so many systems in place that are not [as they should be]: they're broken. Learning a deeper local history has significantly reframed a number of nostalgic childhood experiences. Katrina reminded me that my family had arrived in New Orleans as outsiders, and had eventually been accepted as insiders. On the other hand, many [black] people whose families were the foundation of our city's culture, quintessential insiders who were suddenly forced to... become outsiders. Now, in addition to my studio work I find ways to expand my practice, to directly engage the community and occasionally collaborate with other artists. The first significant collaboration [2008], created with artist and friend Sharon Jacques, was a Satellite Site project for Prospect.1 New Orleans. Together, we brought the

recorded voices of young children and ambient sounds of active schools to neighborhoods still coping with shuttered school buildings, filling a void that remained [long after Katrina]. The recordings played on a boombox from inside a mini-school bus with the windows down. Missing sounds that once punctuated the days of neighbors replaced stillness on the streets. And most recently, artist Willie Birch commissioned me to join him and four other artists in the latest phase of his “Old Prieur Street Project”—an artist-driven community garden, in the 7th Ward neighborhood where much of our world-renowned music, culture and architectural traditions come from. His philosophy is that art-driven projects are powerful tools for building community. My contribution is a neighborhood oral history project collecting ancestral homemade remedies that have been handed down for generations.

Also, post-Katrina, a cohort of artists created the St. Claude Art District in the Bywater. I’m so grateful to have been invited into the artist collective [and gallery] “Antenna,” part of Antenna’s non-profit incubator for visual art and literature, of which I’m now on the board [board chair]. This small place is continually putting out amazing, expansive programming, all community-based.

One [studio] project I’m currently working on is about relationships and disconnection—pivoting a bit from my usual visual language, using local source material directly from nature. The Tricentennial has informed this work. Themes of resilience, strength... and the residual signs of trauma—both human and environmental. What still remains, in varying degrees, held within our bodies and the environment.