

Following are excerpts from two conversations Rue Harrison and Richard Whittaker had with artist and teacher Jane Rosen

April, 1994 On Art:

SRCA: Who and what does your art address?

JR: I want to make work that you don't have to have a Master's degree in Art History to understand. When I lived in St. Martin there was something about the quiet and the water. I became interested in fishing and met an elegant old black man, Mr. Anstley Yarde, who was very tall and thin and had a great presence. He taught me how to fish. You use a can and string. He'd get me at six o'clock in the morning and we'd get these snails. We'd sit on a rock and drop soda-can lines and just sit there. I never caught a fish but he'd catch them. He'd hear them...and I thought, this man has knowledge. And one day, we're sitting on the rock and he asked me what kind of art I made. I knew Mr. Anstley Yarde would not understand the art I was making at that time, and I realized I wanted him to understand it. It raised that question: who and what does my art address? Who did I want to talk to and what did I want to talk about?

SRCA: This seems such a right direction. What do you make of the hard-nosed academic dismissal of the value of the artist's intention and the deconstruction of the simple idea of communication?

JR: If you say there is no possibility of communication, you still have to wake up the next morning, make your coffee, and function. Now what can guide you through that? A critical theorist who is very involved in deconstruction was at a dinner party along with a friend of mine, a sculptor, and as they were leaving the dinner the theorist left in my sculptor friend's coat. She did not know until she got home and looked in the mirror and noticed that her dress no longer hung out of the coat that she was in someone else's coat. Whereas the sculptor immediately knew that the remaining coat wasn't hers. She didn't even have to put it on to know it. I don't know if this story is useful, but I know that people now-more than they have in many many years-desperately need something that is a direction toward rather than nihilism. My interest in art is not about telling us what the bad news is-we know what the bad news is. My question, and the question that my art addresses, is "What is the possibility of the good news?" Not that the art has to be uplifting, but that it address questions about other possible states of awareness that could lead us toward that which could be a help.

Theorists will start talking and I'll start thinking, "O God. I'm illiterate!" But in actual fact, I'm literate about another range of experience, a range they are not connected to. It's simply not an issue for them! And so I have no problem with what they are doing. What I'm saying is, "You still have to get up in the morning and live life." And the moment you realize you're mortal, that you are only here for a certain amount of time, that your body is a machine, and it's parts-just like my Volvo- are going one by one, the question becomes, "What is it?"

This is why I say, art is the language of the body and feeling trying to make a relationship between what the disconnected part of my mind is desperately trying to understand. And that, as a possibility, is what art does. It's informing and transforming another part of myself and

showing me what's really going on. I think of this as my "underwater life." It has to do with the difference between sitting in a boat on the surface of the water versus diving under the water and snorkeling, which is a much more three dimensional experience. My mind is sort of above the water. This underwater life constantly registers all of these impressions which aren't being heard or received.

SRCA: By your mind?

JR: By a certain part of my mind. And right now there is so much talk about the mind-body connection. And although I'm interested in esoteric things and always interested in the question of philosophy or spirituality, I feel like some construction worker who's seen God and didn't want to! I had the experience and then had to understand what the hell it was! This underwater life is going on all the time. Now art for me-when I see a shell, or I see a horse, when I see two weather systems meeting-I don't understand it with words. I feel something. I experience something. I am aware of it, but I can't say what it is. When I try to understand it with my hands, something in the alchemy-the process of working -engages a kind of listening, The underwater life connects. It registers something and begins to lead me. And so rather than impose, I follow. For me that is the art process.

To make art about the bad news, or the negative aspects of our existence, of which there are many-and God knows, after living in New York for twenty years I think I've hit most of them-is not my interest. The question is, "What is my possibility? " and How can art direct us toward our possibilities? Toward a finer quality of existence so that the relationship between nature and the culture I find myself in can be reconciled. So a balance can be brought. So I can understand. That is what interests me.

The art world in a way is both a help and an obstacle because it exposes my ego and my inadequacy. It asks for newness, a kind of brilliance, and fast food. It's got to be quick. However, I'm slow and have a range of experience from the extraordinary to the mundane. How to reconcile those things is not something that can be easily digested by the art world. It's a slow hit. My original dealer, Ed Thorpe, is someone who took on people who were slow like that. Chris Brown is with him now.

SRCA: Earlier you described what you call the underwater life, the experiences and processes that go on in the body, and being in touch with that experience, or one might say, with the intelligence of the body.

JR: Well, the Egyptians spoke about the intelligence of the heart and the intelligence of the body. What I mean by that is- let's talk about animals again. For me animal nature is a very important key to understanding our own nature. Watch a cat waiting for a mouse. There is an attention in his body that is extraordinary. There are no distractions, no thought about what he is going to do later or whether maybe there's another mouse that might be bigger. The cat, is completely there. There are times when I am working where there's a state like that. When I'm working there are times when I can hear my blood and my heartbeat in tune with the movement of the material. It's about being in your body. I think athletes experience this, and people who are alone in nature for long periods of time-like farmers. They have a kind of intelligence. You can see them looking at you. They don't say much. But there is an intelligence, an instinct just like the

cat. I think it's the knowledge that American Indians have, that more ancient cultures have. The Eskimos understand. For the Egyptians, art was a by-product. It wasn't the point. It wasn't the point! It was the by-product of an investigation.

When I am working in the studio, I come up against all these difficulties. I start. Something comes. It's given. I look at it. My ego says, "What a good girl am I!" And then this ego goes in and takes over. The beauty is that this mistake becomes visible, like the registration of a sewing line. You see where you were not paying attention. Your marks are a registration of the state you're in. You see when you've just destroyed something that was given in a moment after really struggling through an obstacle. And that's what I mean by an accumulation of different experiences that get registered on this wood, on this canvas, this paper, this stone. There you are outside of yourself being informed as to how you are. You become humble and go back and try to listen. And I think that my having synesthesia-that is, actually hearing forms-if I look at a wing I don't see the shape of a wing, I hear the sound. So, if I am hearing this sound as a form or movement and am following that sound, the wing appears. I don't make the wing. If I try to make a picture of that wing I draw very badly. I don't draw well.

It occurs to me that in this act, this effort, that I openly engage in the possibility of becoming more alive. You have to be more alive. You become more aware of what is going on. That awareness can be felt by the viewer and they can experience that in themselves. It is rare that this fortunate event occurs. Most of the time it doesn't. That for me is a language that can be communicated.

SRCA: The possibility of becoming more alive. Could you say anything more about that?

JR: Most of the time we are not able to be in that state. For instance, I'm usually more interested in watching videos or talking, and I am not really feeling fully alive. What I become very interested in-and this is why I speak about the relation between nature and culture -is how there could be a finer quality of awareness (which is given me in nature), when I'm in the face of "human nature". How to be able to be in a room with people, to be in the face of difficulties, to be in the world and to be more alive? And some questions this brings are: How am I with students? How are people with each other? What does it mean to be on the forward roll of the wave in a more aggressive state or in the backward roll in a more passive state? or What does it mean to be in a better or worse position in the art world, or in society, or in my own work- how is it possible to bring this intelligence to that?

When we were small children my brother and I were told by my father over and over again, "This above all, to thine own self be true." He would say this. I would ask him, "Should I go to the prom with Jimmy?" and he would say, "This above all, to thine own self be true." It wasn't a big help at the time. (laughs)

When I look at students' work and they are covering things with bees' wax and brassieres, these images of fear about gender, fear about race, fear about inequalities, fear about the environment-well, I'm afraid of those things too in a certain state, but in another state those things are simply not issues. This kind of fear and questioning of these things like let's say feminism I've lived the life of a feminist! And yet my art

doesn't address it directly. It doesn't mean I'm not interested in that. It doesn't mean I don't fight for every woman student and every other woman artist. I do. The contribution would be to struggle with relating the finer to the coarser, or the coarser to the finer. To make a relationship to these two things.

SRCA: I was looking at some Rothko paintings and I remembered a quote I read somewhere to the effect that the Abstract Expressionist painters were the last generation of American painters who could believe that art was a noble calling. This is not the experience I have when talking to you or to many other artists I've talked to. There is still a feeling that could be described on that level somehow.

JR: You know, and I don't mean to put anybody down-but for something to be really art, not social commentary, it has to engage more of the viewer. It has to activate what can be felt, what can be sensed, and what can be thought. It has to activate that. And Rothko, when you look at a Rothko, here's a man who prayed on canvas. He prayed with his mind to understand the nature of light. He prayed with his heart to feel the space within. And he prayed with his body to be in relation to the material.

And this prayer is perhaps a question that takes many forms, but speaks of what our better nature might be. For me, this is art.

On Teaching: From a conversation in March 1994

SRCA: Does your passion for teaching relate to the importance art-making has for you?

JR: They're feeding each other. There is a kind of research here's an example: I was trying to understand how to talk about painting issues with an advanced drawing class at Stanford. My friend sent me this little quote from Leonardo Da Vinci.. "Painting is concerned with the ten things you can see: these are brightness and darkness, substance and color, form and place, remoteness and nearness, movement and rest"...and there was something about thinking about painting in that way that was so extraordinary. Around students or around questions like this, something else comes up in me that's just not there normally.

I have a sensitivity to the students. I've noticed that, if they like you, and they see that you're lying, they put their heads down like this (Rosen lowers her head and eyes to demonstrate). They get embarrassed for you. They show you that you're not telling the truth. They're embarrassed for you because they like you. If they don't like you (she demonstrates a look of disdain). I can read that. I can sometimes feel them like a moving mass of energy. But the point of the Leonardo quote is that it started to feed me. I mean, why form and place? Why substance and color? So it's like the laws of polarity. You don't know hot unless you know cold, soft unless you know hard.

What happens is I'll be in my studio and I'll start thinking, what does that really mean? I'll be researching it for all of us. Then they come with what they've found. I come with what I've found, and there's an exchange. Now, to me, that's sacred. Also, to watch them the first time they make a connection between the sensation of touching something and what their eyes see- a relationship- it's an extraordinary experience for them, and it's one they've had in nature. It's one they've never had a name for

and which has never been educated. And drawing educates that. So I work a lot with students on these and other relationships that they have.

SRCA: What relationships are you referring to?

JR: The difference between walking in nature and reading a book about it. Yesterday, I took 60 of my students from U.C. Berkeley on a field trip. First we met at the beach and it was just extraordinary because the fog came in. But there was a line of light along the horizon that was very beautiful. And the cliffs have a scale that does this to you (indicates a vertical axis with a movement of her hand) You immediately I think it's almost a law. It doesn't matter what state you're in. I mean, just visualizing the cliffs it happens to me. So I just watched them walk down the beach-each one of them-like bells being struck the moment they had these perceptions

As you stand there looking at one cliff-it's just a sand cliff, a drop off from the erosion of the water-in the middle you see a boat. There's a boat that obviously many years ago got blown in and covered by sand, and the erosion exposed it. So the front of this boat is sticking out from the sand cliff, and above it is my favorite image probably in the world. It's a half circle of these monk-like shapes, six men in robes. The image of these two things is so strong that I just knew if they could see that

Anyway, after that, we drove to the Rodin sculpture garden at Stanford. Rodin was amazing and the students could sense the relation between the movement of the mass of the cliffs and the feeling for the movement of the mass of the human form that Rodin had. Finally we went to hear Kiki Smith speak and the Berkeley students, who are very bright, could see the contradictions brought by these three very different events.

SRCA: So you see a possible role in the process of drawing that might reconnect us to the natural world?

JR: Without a doubt. Let me show you something. (she leaves the room and returns with a complex and beautiful bivalve shell which she hands to me)

SRCA: It's beautiful.

JR: Does that have a way of connecting us? I mean, the experience of trying to understand it with your hands. If you sit down and try to draw that, it brings up without a shadow of doubt, the connections of everything. Open and close. Breathe in, breathe out.

SRCA: Nature is very important to you. I mean, here in your house you have pieces of nature you've collected all around you.

JR: They make me remember. Re-member. It doesn't matter what state I am in. I just think there is this extraordinary miracle and I've felt it since I was a little kid. One of the reasons for making art is to express that for which there are no words. We got this house on Long Island, a hour out of Manhattan where I was living. It was on a bird preserve and the only way to get there was by small boat. There were cranes and herons and ibises and hawks and harriers and osprey and kingfishers and ducks and sparrows and cardinals.-a world of birds. I could understand their

language. What I found is that animal nature is a key for us to understand our own nature. The relationship of their nature to the forces of nature all comes down to a kind of sacred map. The kind of laws that govern nature begin to become visible in the interactions between these various species. You can see that in the shape of an oyster-catcher's bill. It opens laterally, so that it can eat clams and oysters. Not only that, but a law appears in its relationship to others...there's a pecking order..

There are these elemental laws. There are only a few of them. I keep coming upon them each time I draw these forms. As you reduce it to the essential form, the essence of the form, there are very few movements. So that the forward roll of the wave, the forward roll of the spiral, gives you the hawk. The returning, or the receiving gives you the sparrow. The wolf. The lamb. (Rosen makes gestures for all these). Depending on where it is on that spiral movement. And then not only that, but you start to see the pine cone, which is a double spiral moving in two directions at once: five rotations one way, eight the other. That's the Fibonacci curve.

There is some way in which I'm never going to get at this relatedness I feel by the actual math in that way. But the feeling tells me what the laws are. I can show you the relationships but I can't tell you their names because I think they don't have names like that. I feel, like Richard Dryfuss in Close Encounters of the Third Kind... you know, with the mud in the kitchen... (gesticulates wildly, laughs) oh-oh, it's getting closerrr!! It's just so much like that. It's a really big thing, and it's a taste that I can taste sometimes with everything in me.

I moved from this loft in Manhattan to come look at this stuff. Because from Oak Island and from reading The Conference of the Birds I'd sit and watch a blue jay and I'd notice that the guy in the Price Club would have the exact same expression as that blue jay, fighting with that woodpecker. And I'm thinking to myself, "What's that?" It's absolutely a key when I look at students' faces. They're each a different bird, each a different animal.

There are big questions that the kids have to face, for example, you're driving on 280 at night and you see a crescent moon and you feel, "I want to be that." and then you look and you see an endless stream of red tail-lights which, if you didn't know what they were, would be equally beautiful and mystifying. And, in fact, I am part of the endless stream of red tail-lights. So what is my relationship to the moon, and to this line of cars ahead of me, and how do I contend with and reconcile both? And what are the laws governing these things that can help me and those around me to understand my proper place?

Jane Rosen lived, worked, and exhibited in NY for twenty years. Since 1989 she has lived on a horse ranch in San Gregorio, CA. Since 1978 Rosen has taught art at a number of colleges and universities including The School of Visual Arts in Manhattan, the University of California at Davis, Stanford, and the University of California at Berkeley, where she currently teaches.