

JET REFLECTIONS: ART HISTORY AND ADVOCACY TRANSCRIPTION

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Zayra: Dear listeners, I am so honored to share this first conversation in the JET reflection series with

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acting President Kym Pinder.

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Zayra: The JET reflection series is this new opportunity for the JET Office to share the conversations that we've been having since the office opened almost two years ago.

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Zayra: I think the beauty about serving the community is that we're always in touch with everybody

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and that's why I'm so excited that we get to have our first conversation with Kym who is not only

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the Interim President of MassArt but she's an art historian and curator and offers incredible

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perspectives from so many different areas. Zayra: Our hope as an office is that the JET reflection series can

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thoughtfully engage the moment that we live in so that we may serve our community not reactively

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but compassionately.

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Zayra: Now without further ado I invite you to listen to Kym and I discuss the role of advocacy in the study and exploration of art history.

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Kym: So when I was looking at these questions, so when you said what is the role of art history historically been at art institutions and

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I'm thinking more about you know being for 16 years at the school Art Institute of Chicago

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in the art history theory and criticism department it was presented to us, which I think is slightly

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different with MassArt, but the art school that I feel that I was raised in I was there for so long

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and I was hired there that the art history department, art history theory and criticism

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was there to provide this overall context for art makers you know that it was really there we

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thought of ourselves 100 percent as a service department to every single department, studio department

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in the school and we felt definitely and this is one of the people they wouldn't think that um but

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at school there at institute we didn't think of ourselves as less of scholars um being

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in a service department, we thought of it as like really important and integral to an art school.

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Kym: As opposed to for instance for some of us being in a traditional liberal arts school or at a university

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um where you were actually the art history department would have been much less important.

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Kym: You know we thought of ourselves as we were the largest department for a while.

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Kym: I just heard I was just in touch with a couple of my friends that are still there at SAIC, it's gotten even larger

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and it was because and we were so important we were like in the center of the art school

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world in many ways, like we were the center with this history with our spokes out supportive spokes

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to all of the different studio areas and when sculpture for instance kept saying there weren't

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enough history of sculpture classes we were like, "you got it! we are going to make sure that you have more."

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Kym: It wasn't, it wasn't at all a conflict you know it was like right we need to have a printmaking history printmaking and all this stuff.

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Kym: And one of the things that I was really proud to be a part

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of and I actually don't know if it still exists is that I was asked like so many people to re-think

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the survey. And how do you rethink the survey at an art school, especially it was the modern

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survey the second half of it and you know as you know most of it was being taught by adjuncts like

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no full-time people had any skin in the game but when I was chair of the art history department

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they would come to me and say "I can't believe I had a student in my senior seminar who

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had never heard of Duchamp, you know?" Kym: And I was like you know "put your money where your mouth is get up

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there and teach them."

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Kym: And so as chair of art history I was tasked with reconfiguring the second half of the survey, which I did with a big group of people who were teaching it

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and we decided that it would be by medium so there would be the modern, the history of modern

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sculpture, the history of modern photography, the history of modern painting, the history of modern performance.

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Kym: It was broken up into these smaller surveys that were very media-specific

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again this idea of serving the students who were making that art.

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Kym: Then it didn't become just like this required thing that they had to take but the photography majors were like

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"oh great I'm going to get my survey credit by actually learning about the history of my medium."

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and they could also take other mediums you know like a photography major could definitely take the

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history of sculpture and still get that credit. Kym: And the way that we did that is that I just

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asked the people teaching it come to this meeting with seven things that you think should be in a

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modern survey yeah certain topics and as you can imagine they came and they pretty much had

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the same topics you know like general themes like the, you know, the role of technology you know in

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modern art so every single medium has that right it was such a great conversation that we had for

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I'd say about a semester, and we reconfigured all those we created 101, 102, 103 it went all the way

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by the time I left, we were at 111 so there were 11 different um modern surveys that students

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could take and then as chair I required um all of the full-time tenure-track and tenured people

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to teach a range of classes so they are required over their course load of a year that they had

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to teach at least one 200 level class, at least one 100 level class um and i was just trying to

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say you can't just as we know just teach senior seminars graduate seminars so it's funny that

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we're talking about this because I just connected with James Elkins who I'm sure you may know him as a

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a critic and scholar who was he still is at SAIC and he just was telling me on Monday

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that he was in charge of the survey that's um like the David Nolta's survey. Kym: He was in

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charge of completely reconfiguring that to be fully integrated with the studio foundation year

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which is something that he and I talked about forever. Kym: He'd always wanted to do it as long as

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he was there he's finally doing it this year and I think it has a little bit to do with the pandemic

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because his goal is to you know you have a lecture and then he goes into a studio foundation class

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and there's like a part two studio-based aspect of the lecture. Awesome, right? Zayra: I had that in

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high school, believe it or not like it was my first my freshman year, it was art appreciation class but

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like very general art history but we'd learn about a movement we'd make work in response to it and

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we were taught as artists that we're not outside this like this history and that we're constantly

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responding to what is happening historically, and you know visually so I think that really

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like that really connected everybody and made everybody appreciate this history so much more

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and that they weren't disconnected from it which I feel like, this is just I'm speaking for personal

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experience here, but it always felt a little bit like that at Massart that some people just didn't

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you know they really wouldn't invest so much in their history classes because they're like "what

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does this have to do with me?" You know? Zayra: Yeah so that's incredible to hear that. I haven't seen

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that model in so long, yeah. Kym: And he is so excited about it he's been at SAIC, oh my god since '85,

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early 80s and this is something because he has an MFA and a Ph.D. and he, I remember when I first

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came there he said well when I was interviewed in the 80s I was asked to do this and I still

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haven't done it so he was so excited to talk to me about it on Monday that he was finally doing

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this thing that he felt he was hired to do decades ago um and had been wanting to do and a lot of his

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scholarship is about creating a sort of, a type of art history that's conversational

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and interesting for artists. Kym: Yeah so you know if you just look at all the books that he's published

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they are really you know what painting is, is one and it's all about questioning and asking how have

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artists discussed painting and thought of painting through the history of art you know? Kym: He had felt

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that's what he was supposed to be doing at SAIC his entire life and he has been doing that

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um to finally do it on the first-year level he's so excited. Kym: When art students would ask me you know

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what's the point of this and when I'm telling a great lecture about an interpretation of a work of

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art or something and they inevitably because I was teaching artists they would say "what if the artist

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wasn't thinking about anything when they did this?"

Kym: yeah and in all this history, yeah you know it's

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not real like you're just making it up and my answer would always be to them i always like to

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give the artist the benefit of the doubt that they have thoughts in their heads when they're making art.

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Zayra: Who would have thought, right?

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Kym: It's important for those thoughts whatever they are to be discussed or to be you know for us to be privy to them

um hopefully so this is a model for all of you

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to think deeply about why you make art and what thoughts are in your head when you're making it.

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Zayra: I think like the beauty of it is that we have so much room to like engage with the work, I mean

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although the artists if they had intentions or not of being what the interpretation is either

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way the art exists in that in that level, you know? If they put it out there in the world they knew

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that there was going to be room for people to connect with it in their own through their own

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personal experiences and put their own thoughts and ideas behind it, so a part of it is kind

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of accepting that that's part of your... that's
part of your track, or your practice

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Kym: You know, I would also, I think it's
really again this is going on to the next question

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about art and art history and activism and you know that those programming that
programming

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that I feel that you're going to be a part of and Lyssa is doing like to really help artists I don't

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say help them be activists but just to support them in activism and that relates to the history

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of art history like knowing other artists and how they were able to make transformational art
that

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actually made a difference. Kym: knowing about artists that dropped being artists when they

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had to be activists you know like that are all
these options for you as an artist who cares about

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social practice and history and wanting to make a difference and there's so many wonderful, I
mean

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for me because I have focused on African-American art history in a lot of my endeavors with um
art

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activism and my scholarship, you know it's just great to offer that range, you know? Kym: And I'm often

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mentioning for instance Norman Lewis who was part of that group of artists that Romare Bearden

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was in and they were trying to do um the spiral group which was an attempt to deal with racial

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topics and there's great transcripts about how they were talking about, look we are all these black

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artists how do we come together and try and engage in 1966 or seven whenever they started,

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this movement that's happening that we all care about and they only had one show and it

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was a black and white show so that was a way for them to um include representational black artists

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abstract black artists by just having a show that the palette no matter what it was

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the palette of the work was black and white and then they had you know described that, that was

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how they were dealing with this. Kym: But even that having to come to that conclusion reflects

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how do you engage a diverse range of art making when everyone is feeling the same thing, right?

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Kym: So it's such a great example and then you have this wonderful quotation from Norman Lewis

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who started off being a social realist and then went very abstract but not abstract enough because

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his work had content so when he was trying to be a part of the abstract expressionists they were

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just like you know you have titles like "Harlem Courtyard" number, you know it should be like number 45

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and again fantastic quotations by him that are in Ann Gibson's book on

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abstract expressionism and diversity and difference where he was like, you know, "I can't

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extract myself from what's going on, so I have to have titles." Kym: And then he has a great quote where

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he said because there were wonderful images of him like marching with "I am a man" you know, poster

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billboard and he said, "I can't just paint pictures of black fists I actually have to go out and

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protest." Kym: And so again their dialogue that has since been published it was one of the things I really

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wanted to publish about 20 years ago was them coming together at the Metropolitan museum of art

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I think 69 around that "Harlem on My Mind" show had this wonderful round table that

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someone has published recently.

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Zayra: It's called "Whitewalling."

Kym: Is that it?

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Zayra: Yeah! It includes the Whitney and all those others, yeah, yeah.

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Kym: that's the kind of stuff that I hope when we're trying to pull people together with I don't want to say like educating them on how to be activists but just giving them a context. Kym: They're not alone, they're not the first people to do this, they're

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good ways and less successful ways and that you have a range of history that's accessible that

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you can pull from and do your own thing, you know?

Kym: But just to know that there are success stories,

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you know? Kym: And their failed stories too failure stories. Kym: Yes so that's the activism

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part of it oh "How do you see art history and activism as a practice?" That was your question

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so but no I think that perfectly I think answers it because I think right now in our time we're all

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learning to be activists in so many different ways it's an urge it's a movement within

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yourself that you have to go out there and make those choices and so just presenting these things

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in its history is so impactful because there are different ways to inspire and teach too so that

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I think that perfectly answers the question so now I've like pulled out some art especially for

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my poor son who's gonna start college here inside his house in a couple of weeks, next week so

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that is actually part of a mural project
that I did so talk about art activ- art history

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as activism. Kym: So as you know I taught mural classes and history of mural class and then it transformed

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when a school that my kids went to a Montessori school, public school one of the few that started

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in Chicago as an experiment public Montessori, they asked me to, you know, they were in a completely

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kind of abandoned old school all white walls and they said, "Hey can you do some murals?"
Kym: So that

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started a transformation in my class that was a history of mural class that became history through

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practice and I ended up doing maybe four or five versions of that class in which it resulted in

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a mural the last one I did was actually in
Albuquerque that I think you do know about

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or you can google it and see this amazing mural that the classmate on the outside of a
healthcare

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for the homeless facility in collaboration
with the public art program in Albuquerque.

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Kym: And so that was kind of the last one I did and actually then the last time I actually taught

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the class it became directed very specifically in examining a racist mural on the UNM campus

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and entire class was kind of like a series of guest speakers that were kind of curated by me

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and a couple of other people who were co-teaching the class and the results for that using the

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model of the mural proposals that I always had in the other classes was that they all the different

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groups of students created proposals that I was just looking at last night because I was looking

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through murals on my desktop trying to find some things and it was I think nine groups and

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they each created proposals on what to do with the racist mural. Kym: Yeah and so that was I feel another

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example, that's another one of my favorite examples of how art history can be activists right and the

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students absolutely just felt it was one of the best experiences they ever had they were taking an

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art history class but actually we made sure that it cross-listed with eight different disciplines

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so Native American studies. Kym: The number American studies had a number studio art had a number

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sociology had the number again there were eight different cross-listings so then we got all of

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these interdisciplinary people to come together which I felt was my little experiment on what I

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think the future of university education should be um and then we curated the group so they all had

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a mix of different disciplines and different levels of seniors to freshmen there was also

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this kind of mentoring aspect of it which was really amazing because there was definitely a

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leader, you know like a couple of leaders that helped the groups come together and the students

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felt that you know they were taking a class that actually had this real result that they were they

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knew from the beginning that they were going to become experts on what this mural meant, yeah,

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and its history, what histories it was referencing, and that their proposals were going to be presented to

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the President of the university to choose from and to consider on how to address this mural so

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that's another example of how art history actually can have a very active activist component

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I think that it's transformed quite a bit and as you write in my decolonizing piece

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a lot of that transformation I feel has to do with the importance of public art really

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coming into its own as a real work type of work of art to be studied the history as a practice

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the same as graffiti which I feel is coming
into its own um has been in the last 10 years

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and um actually that was one of those classes that I started as the chair of the department

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so I like the chair and this again this
is I feel like kind of inching through

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as an administrator and using those points
of power to help art history be what I think it

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should be so one of the things that I did when I was chair of the department is that I actually

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created a history of graffiti class
because I knew a former student who I had followed

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he had first taken my history of mural class which is murals to graffiti and he's an amazing
person

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who has created he came back to SAIC and got an Art Ed Masters in graffiti making, and he's
been

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doing it in the schools he created a gallery for graffiti artists, he created-- goes into the schools

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in Chicago and started over 15 years ago a shoe design uh sort of entrepreneurial class in high

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schools in Pilsen in other areas that he lives in and he's just my favorite person about

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graffiti so I was so happy when I was chair and enough books had really come out so you can
have

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some good textbooks at this point. Kym: This show had just come out that was in L.A. are the streets

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and I knew one person who would be perfect to teach it and so I don't know if he's still

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teaching but he taught it for a long time at SAIC after I put it on the books so I feel incredible

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yeah and you know and he's just an activist
artist too so of course so much of graffiti is

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about that. Zayra: Of course yeah, I personally have gotten so much out of this conversation

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so I'm really happy, but thank you so much for talking to me about you know art history and its

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role in activism. Zayra: So I think this is going to be helpful for even students and faculty to think

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about art history at MassArt as well and you know how it can be integrated so much more
especially

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in this new political climate and pandemic climate and stuff like that, so yeah.

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Kym: Yeah, I hope so!