



Art and Gratitude

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My earliest “art memory” is from 1950. My mommy told me that her friend Eve Ensin, from the FLJC sisterhood, had invited me to her basement to take an art class. Mom and I went to Woolworth’s and bought tiny tubes of oil paints, two brushes, a sketch pad, and a 12x18 stretched canvas.

I walked alone from our house, carrying my art supplies, to Miss Eve’s house. I was worried that I would see her son Eugene who was my big brother Eddie’s friend and a scary boy.

I rang the doorbell and Miss. Eve led me down the dark stairs to her finished basement. Each week we sketched pictures from a view of her backyard. Finally on the 4th week we began to paint. I painted a picture of my house; behind my house was a big tree, but from the front yard I could only see the branches sticking out from behind the roof. Miss Eve said” Frances, branches don’t grow out of the roof.... draw the tree next to the house!” I replied, the tree is not next to the house, it is behind the house, and that is all I can see from the front yard.”

Miss Eve told my mother that I was not good at following directions; I told my mom that I did not want to continue going to the class. I am grateful that my mother stuck up for me and told me to paint what I see.

Throughout my life, “Art” has been many things for me: a friend, a companion, an activity to do when I am bored or lonely, a way to express my feelings of joy, pain, sadness, or a way to escape from my housework.

I am so grateful to Covid for giving me the uninterrupted time to create. In the past, I used my large dining room table as a classroom space to teach English to Foreign Adult Students/ ESL. For the past two years, my dining room table has been my own, private art studio. I never have to clean it up or clear it off because no one



comes to visit me anymore. The table overflows with paints, brushes, colorful magazine pages, patterns from solicitation advertising mail, and recycled labels, wrapping paper, and greeting cards.

Although I have not created a schedule to work (it is never work, it is my means of self-expression), the materials are always there waiting for me to sit down and create.

When I was in elementary school, my mother did not know how to drive a car, but she took me by bus from New Jersey to New York City to the Metropolitan Museum of Art for every vacation: winter, spring, and summer recess. I distinctly remember seeing Salvador Dali's huge, luminous Crucifixion of Christ; I grabbed my mother's hand mesmerized.

When the Guggenheim opened in 1959, we took the bus and the subway to visit this architectural masterpiece and joked about skateboarding down the ramp. When my son was only one year old, I took him to the "Gugg." When he rented his first apartment, I sent him a check for a new sofa, he bought a Dali print instead and a used sofa!

I am so grateful that my mother, who grew up in Harlem, knew her way around NYC and introduced me to the world of art. I was blessed to have wonderful art teachers in high school and in college. My mother encouraged me to minor in art and take teaching classes so I would always have a job and not be a starving artist.

Creating art is nourishment for my soul. On a rainy day I can sit at my dining room table and do paper weaving, collage, and watercolors. I am no longer bored being alone at home; I do not feel isolated. I am inspired by my garden, the sky, the clouds, the trees, and the light. As the day proceeds, so the light changes. I can paint the same scene at different times of day.

When my children were young, I spent hours encouraging them to use crayons and paint. When we got a new refrigerator, we used the



large box to make a cozy house out on our back porch. In the wonderful days before computers, we made villages out of empty cereal boxes, we made "Joseph Cornell" shadow boxes out of empty shoe boxes. The children feel pride in their creations and enjoy visiting art museums and outdoor art shows. Art is always there for me on rainy days, if I am home and sick in bed, and when I need to express joy, pain, or grief.

I am grateful that I have been able to go to summer retreats at Kripalu to paint "En Plein Aire." One summer I studied book making at Bennington College; the other students were not very friendly (they had been there before and formed their own clique) so I was able to totally immerse myself in book making, binding, and design. Many evenings when I looked up from my work, everyone else had left the studio. I was so engrossed and absorbed in my artwork that I had lost all sense of time and place.

I am so grateful that I still have friends who live in New York City. Since I moved to Miami in 1981, I have returned to NYC every summer. I stay with one special friend who is a docent at the Whitney. We visit a different museum or gallery each day, discuss the latest exhibitions, and attend art lectures. This is something that I have missed greatly during Covid, however I have been able to visit museums on the internet and take virtual guided tours.

I have the freedom to hang art on all my walls. I have passed on my love of art to my two children and my three grandchildren. I have their creations taped to my kitchen cabinet doors; these images bring joy and happiness into my daily (at home now) life.

Another great influence in my art life was my mother-in-law. Her husband worked nights and weekends and my young husband was busy studying law. We had a weekly date for dinner and art making at Her dining room table. She had studied at the Art Students'



League in NYC and with Helen Frankenthaler. My mother-in-law taught me how to wet the paper and let the colors bleed (like Morris Louis.) On weekends we often drove to New Hope Pa. to tour artists' studios and craft fairs. My sister-in-law is also a gifted artist. (She attended Carnegie Mellon) I have shared many hours with her creating art, knitting, crocheting, and cooking.

For me, cooking is an Art. I always try to use a selection of colorful vegetables or fruit; I want each serving platter to look inviting; I carefully arrange fruit or vegetables in a creative way. The presentation is important and encourages young children to try new foods and tastes.

Recently my adult daughter came for winter recess. After our walk at Fairchild Tropical Gardens, we sat around my dining room art studio and wove paper; then we made watercolor pictures from the photographs we had taken at FTG. We rarely watch TV; we prefer to use our hands to create. I am surrounded by these creations, and they bring me joy. I cannot imagine a life without art. Some people get excited going shopping for clothes, I get excited choosing new tubes of paint; the color selection is endless.





Mel Bochner
Fran Ivy Ames

Of all the jobs that I have had, my most exciting dream job was at the Center for the Fine Arts. I started out as an intern and was promoted to Associate Editor in the public relations department. I had the opportunity to meet and work with many famous artists. One experience that wounded me to the core was early on when Mel Bochner came to create an artwork on the walls of the first-floor gallery.

He spent several days mapping out the design and then painting the connected geometric shapes that spanned about 56 feet, from one end of the gallery to the other. It was a vibrant, lyrical piece that danced across the wall Up, down curving low to high, reaching up, ending at the ceiling. I spent many hours thrilling to the movement in his work.

What I didn't think about at the time was that after three months the exhibition would end. The next morning the work crew came into the gallery with long poles with rollers at the end. They dipped the rollers into buckets of white paint and eradicated Mel Bochner's work! Couldn't it have been saved like the old frescoes that were moved from one building to another? No, it was a temporary installation! It was never meant to be permanent, however it is permanently engraved in my mind. It hurt me, pained me, to see it covered over with buckets of white paint! Within a week a new installation was created and after that another and another. I have not forgotten the lyrical flow of Bochner's work; it may have been erased, but it is still embedded inside me.

I am grateful for being part of the joy that he created in 1986.



"Senanque" 11'x56'