

ARTBOOKGUY INTERVIEW:

MICHAEL K. CORBIN - MARLENE SARROFF 2012

(Hard Copy from ARTBOOKGUY website)

I met Marlene Sarroff through social media. I saw her work www.marlenesarroff.com, was intrigued by it and decided to contact her seeking an interview. While her work appears to be very pure and simple, there's a lot of conceptualization behind it. Don't let that frighten you. Marlene is a lovely woman to chat with as you'll see in our cool interview.

MICHAEL: Hello Marlene. Your work is very cool. You seem to be working mainly with material like thread, yarn and cloth right now. What's your inspiration?

MARLENE: Thank you Michael. Materials are very important in my work and they usually dictate what I make. Industrial, mass-produced materials, such as bubble wrap, corrugated cardboard, builders paper, roofing insulation and foil all have been used extensively over the years. One of my shows was inspired by elastic. The materials just seem to turn up; either I find them accidentally or artist friends give me materials they have hanging around. It is fortunate I live in an area where the local council has a depot called 'Reverse Garbage'. This is an amazing resource for me and many other artists. It's a place where industry can dump excess materials instead of in landfills. One never knows what you might find each time you visit.

MICHAEL: That sounds great. What else have you found there?

MARLENE: This is where I stumbled onto elastic. A factory had dumped boxes of elastic as they were moving their business off shore. When I saw the elastic I knew instantly I had to have it, but not having any idea at the time what I would do with it. I don't go searching for a particular thing, it seems to arrive. Serendipity is the word that often comes to mind. I like to use ordinary materials and then a process is devised, governed by the type of material with folding, stretching, wrapping. The mass-produced quality is important as I usually require a large quantity of material, so if possible, I buy it in bulk. I am not interested in recycled or used materials. The process

does not impinge on the material's original qualities, it retains its essence. So what takes place is a transformation, where something ordinary becomes something extraordinary. I see this transformation as a metaphor for life.

MICHAEL: Absolutely. Isn't it great to recreate something for another purpose? It says that we don't have to be ONE thing in life. However, people like to pigeonhole other people.

MARLENE: Yes that is so true Michael. I would like to think we are continually recreating our life. The idea that nothing stays the same and everything is in flux has been a theme not only in my life, but also my work. Chaos and order are always occurring as in Quantum Physics there is always order within the chaos. Studying and trying to understand Quantum Physics, in very much layman terms has been an interest of mine for many years. Although not a follower of anything, I have always been drawn to Buddhist philosophies. Buddhism and Quantum Physics are very closely aligned along the same ideas. This was a great revelation to me a few years ago and although not studying for any other reason, but to enlighten me in finding a way to live a fulfilling life. These ideas kept coming into my work and I now accept that my work and life are one.

MICHAEL: Aren't you in Australia? As I'm sure you know, many Americans see Australia as this magical, fairy tale-like place. What's life like there for you? How do your surroundings influence your work?

MARLENE: Yes, Michael I have lived all my life in Australia. Although brought up in the country, I am very much a city person. I love cities and have lived and worked in the inner city of Sydney for many years. Sydney is visually a beautiful city with a spectacular harbor, many waterways and surrounding bush land. However, I tend to gravitate to the more urbanized environment where I love the street life, cafes, and in particular architecture, shapes, colors, advertising signage and anything that is associated with urban living. I also like to have ready access to industrial areas, as they are a source for materials. An artist's mind I think is like an antenna and is constantly looking and being aware of everyday surroundings. Working as I do in an intuitive way, I don't start work with an idea, so I am forever surprised when I have finished a body of work and realize it has somehow subliminally been influenced by something that had not been at the forefront of my mind and had not registered as something I would be using as a source for my work. For example, my last exhibition (as of this writing), 'Revelation through Concealment' completely surprised me when I discovered the influences could be partly attributed to my experiencing an impressive exhibition combining sculpture and fashion that I saw in a gallery in Paris a few months ago. No one else would recognize this, as it is only obvious to me. It is quite personal and I don't usually elaborate on these insights. Another exhibition, 'My Imaginary Universe' was a complete surprise as I realized on completion

that the influence came from several months I had spent in India; several years previously as India had left a very strong impression. So when talking of influences, I can't predict what might influence me next. Certainly my interests, my reading, and my environment, whether home or traveling, can be a source. I work and live in a warehouse. This is very suitable to me as there are no distractions, no windows, only beautiful light coming from the ceiling and living with my work is most conducive to my work and lifestyle.

MICHAEL: You just said that as an artist, there are things in your work that are only obvious to you. That clearly makes sense; you're the artist. But is it important that other people know your influences? Is it okay for them to see your work and see something different?

MARLENE: It may have been a little misleading of me to suggest that my influences are only obvious to me. This is not necessarily or intentionally so. My work is situated in a framework of reductive art, where it is sometimes referred to as Non-Objective or in Europe it is called Concrete Art and sometimes Minimalism or Neo-Minimalism. This is the area that influences me the most, and I participate quite often in exhibitions that show this type of work and communicate and exhibit with many artists at home and internationally who are also working within the same framework. So while making work that has a foundation within a non-objective framework, my surprise comes when subliminally I have obtained other influences, not apparent at the time and it is not until much later that I can see an additional influences in the work quite often after the work is completed and already exhibited. Each body of work can have a totally different subliminal influence. It probably shouldn't be such a surprise because while working reductively, I also work very intuitively. The viewers will hopefully take something from the work that is experiential, and to be able to broaden their thought. With this expectation, I would prefer not to overload the viewer with too much information, but I like to give a lot of emphasis on the titles, also a short catalogue essay to subtly give a lead into the work. If people don't take the hint and see something totally different in the work, that is certainly okay with me also.

MICHAEL: From my perspective, I don't see much difference when examining the talent of male vs. female artists. However, many female artists do cite sexism in the art world. What has your experience been?

MARLENE: Personally, I tend not to focus on the sexism issue myself. That does not mean that it doesn't exist, but it certainly is much better today for women artists. Women, up until the 1960s, found it difficult to enter into what was then mainly a male domain. In my mind, what has changed drastically for women is when painting and sculpture were no longer the only form of making art and other disciplines emerged. The coming of the postmodern era disseminated a lot of preconceived ideas, about what art was, and what

developed was a more open and free artistic environment for women artists, i.e., photography, installation, and performance. Women no longer needed to compete within the traditional male dominated areas of painting and sculpture. Of course, women still have to be vigilant, I find myself quite often questioning, why we don't have more women in contemporary museum collections, frequently checking if women are being equally considered in art prizes and questioning who are the judges, critics, curators etc. I do think women in Australia have been better off as far as discrimination goes. I remember a few years ago the Guerrilla Girls, who I admire greatly, came to Australia for a tour and it was interesting to watch how they were assuming Australian women artists had the same issues as US women artists and their message appeared to me, quite irrelevant to our situation here.

MICHAEL: Why do you think there's always so much focus on finding the next hot young thing in the art world? I find that the work of most young artists comes nowhere close to rivalling the work of mid-career artists.

MARLENE: Yes, it is an interesting question that mid-career artists do ask. I think there is a multiple array of reasons for this. Firstly, if the gallery owner detects the young artist has a lot of talent, they will want to snap that artist up before some other gallery does. Possibly the fact that they are hopeful that the young artist will have many years of production and the gallery will be able to control their career, hoping they make money down the track. That might be a little cynical as there are genuine dealers that have the artist's best interest at heart too, not just the money. To be fair to young artists, they do capture and are able to interpret the culture of youth, the zeitgeist, like no-one else can. I find it invigorating to see a young artist develop when their art is good. However, not all young artists have the capacity to retain focus or have tenacity to last for a full-time career. It is here that the mid career artist has got a proven track record. They are still making work and exhibiting, they are solid, and usually their circumstances can be more directed to focusing on a career. However not to forget, we are living in a time where the culture of youth is celebrated. To be a celebrity or to be famous has become the norm and many young artists (not all) aspire to it. It's almost a part of the package that top commercial galleries want. It also helps if the young artist is good looking and articulate (of course this is also relevant in the publishing industry). Now this discussion is not black and white. I have known quite prominent galleries only taking on artists who are older and have a career behind them, owing to the fact they do not want to upset their important artists by taking on a young unknown. Also, the prices will differ from a very large figure sum to a more modest amount. So here we are again getting back to money, but this time favouring the mid-career artist. My artistic career started as a mature adult and I have tended toward showing in non-for-profit spaces for the sole reason to be free of the money market and not have the pressure to worry about sales, so as I can

concentrate on my work and be totally free to create what is truly me. I do sell work through contacts and out of my studio. The frivolity of the art world is not a concern to me as I have always thought 'art reflects society' so I am only amused by it. To conclude, I think we are in this celebrity, fame era and it will be around for some time, in the end I think any artist young or old will just need to keep doing the work and with the internet and world becoming smaller, many new opportunities are arising for artists. I don't think the next hot thing is going to carry much weight except to be seen as shallow and narcissistic eventually.

MICHAEL: Given what you've just said about youth and the style of your work, do you think minimalism is a function of age? As I get older, I seem to want less and less "things" and fake people and more authenticity.

MARLENE: Not at all Michael. When I was talking about young artists, I was referring more to the digital age and how the younger artist has a closer connection or affinity with the latest technology, owing to the fact that they have grown up with it. They have not known a world without mobile phones, computers, videos, etc. The ever-expanding developments and opportunities to explore through experimentation with the many facets of the digital world is extraordinary. For example, videos, games, installation, animation, interactive works, light installation events and sound. I think this coming decade will be defined by the technological explosion in the arts even more so than the past few years. Now of course this will include all age groups, but the younger artists are more likely to take up the opportunities the New Media provides at a much faster rate.

MICHAEL: That's for sure and it's happening right now.

MARLENE: Minimalism is a generic term these days. Many things can be referred to as minimalist. Yes, it usually does involve paring back or simplifying, however that could be referring to, the latest fashion item, furniture, a light fitting and I think minimalism in art is not just one stationary movement, doing exactly the same thing, there are variations. I definitely wouldn't describe minimalism as being a function of age. My work is minimalist, yes, but operating out of a very strong tradition, often referred to as 'reductive', concept-driven abstraction. There is an amazing network of artists and galleries operating internationally, exchanging ideas, creating exhibition opportunities. The galleries are mainly non-for-profit or artist run. As a committee member of Factory 49, an exhibition space in Sydney, our program shows artists of all ages; from student graduates, to mature career artists, male and female. If I may include the following statement from Minus Space, a Brooklyn Gallery, and an important part of this world wide network sums it up perfectly.

"Reductive art is generally characterized by the use of plain spoken materials, monochromatic or limited color, geometry, and pattern, repetition

and seriality, precise craftsmanship and intellectual rigor. Reductive art is inclusive and pluralistic in its approach including geographic location, age, gender, medium, artistic strategy and content of work.”

Although there is a narrow set of rules, it is extraordinary how the artists can come up with very individual works, irrespective of their age or gender.

MICHAEL: Finally Marlene, What do you want your body of work thus far to say about you? What's your overall message for people?

MARLENE: This is a really thought provoking question, Michael. I am really having to think hard here. It is enough for me to just do the work and put it out there and I very rarely worry or think about how it is received, or how I am perceived. But on second thought, of course there has to be an overall message and because the work comes from a very personal space, working intuitively, forever evolving with ideas and aesthetic concerns, my work up until now has been predominately concerned with the idea of transformation, although there is no narrative, only the materials and process. However I see my work as being metaphor for life itself, flux, chaos and randomness. Using industrial, mass-produced materials to reveal something extremely humble and ordinary being transformed into something extraordinary, without changing the inherent properties of the material, retaining the essence. Hopefully, through various processes of working, the work conveys not only a thought provoking experience, but an experience through sensations, that operates on a subtle level, more of a gradual unloading of information than a sudden jolt. It is here I will bring in my interest in phenomenology, as proposed by Merleau Ponty, where perception starts with the preconscious moment the external comes into contact with the body. So basically I am interested in making work, that will be experienced through sensations, more than a direct idea, where the viewer is encouraged to suspend all judgments and the fundamental contact with things arise from a practical synthesis, from simply looking.

Although on the other hand, I have thought a lot about the role of art in society and the role of the artist. For me personally, art that is always appealing and popular, is not what I seek to do. It would be satisfying if I can make a difference with ideas, particularly about life and the world we live in, however those ideas are never completely apparent until the work is completed, so even the artist receives an element of surprise. There is a paradox here, for some reason I always have this quote in the back of my mind, “If fifty percent of people love your work, and fifty percent didn't then that is about right”. I do feel that is about right for me too. A couple of years ago, I had an exhibition that was all black and it did have a very powerful effect, and in a quiet way, it was unsettling for some of the audience. I did feel very pleased with that. So one part of me likes it when people have a good positive experience and loves the work and it makes them feel good,

usually in a meditative way, but there is another part that wants to shock a little bit, not for the sake of shocking, but to express something that produces stronger sensations in a more dynamic way.

So when considering my body of work, I would hope the viewing public would see my art practice as a continual exploration of thinking, feeling, and relating. That my practice is coming from a seriousness of purpose, one that is always striving for that extra something, the journey of discovery, the unexpected, having courage for bold experimentation. It is also important to me that as an artist I am always fully-engaged with my work and life, so as to provide a space for a connection with others, in creating a thoughtful dialogue concerning our inter-connectedness with the world around us.

MICHAEL: That's exactly why I wanted to chat with you Marlene. Thanks. This has been great.