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An Interview with the Artist

Germantown, New York, July 25th, 2015

The following is an abridged account of an interview with the artist Sally Hazelet Drummond (SHD) by the curator, Hillary Sullivan (HS) on July 25th at her residence in Germantown, New York.

HS: Sally Hazelet Drummond, considering the show is a celebration of your career and ties into your alma mater and relationship with Louisville, lets talk about your graduate school days in the 1950s. How did you get to Louisville?

SHD: My parents were living there. They moved there around 1951 I would say. I was getting a master's in painting. I took the required work for a master's and I went there because my parents were there.

HS: Did you like the program or was it just a matter of necessity of what was near?

SHD: It was more of a necessity.

HS: What were some of your influences in Louisville?

SHD: Mostly, I think the main influence were my teachers. When I had an interesting teacher, I was more interested. I loved Ulfert Wilke's work.

HS: You studied under Ulfert Wilke at the University of Louisville.

SHD: Well you see, I liked him so I liked his teaching. He was very much an artist. He was a good painter. He was very enthusiastic and was high energy. He was German and talked really fast as I remember.

HS: It was during this time that you started to move into abstraction—did he let you experiment and encourage this change?

SHD: Pretty much.

HS: And where did you paint when you were in Louisville? At your parents' house?

SHD: They had a house. A nice house called Microphylla by the previous owners. There was a studio there. It was charming because it had a fireplace.

HS: Did people like your art in Louisville?

SHD: Not particularly.

HS: Why do you think not?

SHD: Well I didn't know many people in Louisville and I didn't know hardly any artists, I might have known one or two. But it was not an art environment. Louisville is quite conservative.

HS: Okay. Now we're going to have a show in Louisville again and you haven't had one there since 1990—what do you want the show to demonstrate to the city and to the state that it didn't understand before?

SHD: Nothing. That's up to them.

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HS: Do you think reactions will be different?

SHD: Well they might be. They've lived different lives and I've lived different lives.

HS: What do you expect from you audience when they go and they look at one of your paintings?

SHD: I don't expect anything from them but I'm thrilled when they like it.

HS: After Louisville, you went to Italy on a Fulbright Scholarship.

SHD: Oh yes. That was wonderful. Just to be there, to see the wonderful works of art. It's just fabulous.

HS: And then you moved to New York?

SHD: I wanted to come to New York because that's where the action was. I lived on Tenth Street. I joined a gallery. It was a co-operative gallery.

HS: The Tanager, an artists-run gallery, a rather unconventional model at the time.

SHD: I guess so.

HS: What was it like being in that environment?

SHD: In New York, there was such an atmosphere. Friends and the atmosphere in New York was so different. It was sympathetic. I adored the arts. I loved New York. I still love New York. I do. I think it's wonderful. I feel alive there. And being in New York was a great stimulus. It is a wonderful place. I liked it a lot. I loved being in New York knowing artists but I love being in New York period.

HS: And what about in the Tanager and the Tenth Street Galleries?

SHD: Oh, and Tenth Street was very nice.

Laughter

HS: What was nice?

SHD: The artists. Serious artists lived and worked there on Tenth Street.

HS: Who were some of the most influential artists for you at the time?

SHD: Oh, De Kooning. De Kooning. De Kooning. De Kooning.

HS: Which De Kooning?

SHD: The man or the woman? Oh, the man, Mr. De Kooning. I liked De Kooning's work. I still like it.

HS: He was certainly better known at the time.

SHD: He's a better painter too.

HS: You met him, you knew him?

SHD: Well I met him. I also knew lousy artists.

HS: They were lousy because...

SHD: Never any talent and when I was living in New York, I went to quite a few artists' shows and Tenth Street was also lively in those days.

HS: I can imagine. That environment was really a crucible for American Abstract Expressionism.

SHD: It had good openings.

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HS: Well attended?

SHD: And cheap wine.

Laughter.

HS: Now this was one of the first times that you were able to make art unencumbered by the oversight of academia and you were in the stimulating environment of Tenth Street—did you experiment with your art making during this time.

SHD: I guess I could experiment.

HS: Did you?

SHD: No.

HS: No?

SHD: No.

Laughter.

HS: Why not?

SHD: I'm not an experimenter.

HS: You said that you're not an experimenter; you don't like to change much. But you've had a couple of major changes in your career. For one, in the very beginning, you were painting figuratively.

SHD: Yes.

HS: Subjects that looked exactly what there were supposed to be, that you could tell what it was. And then you started working in more abstract, cerebral terms. What do you think motivated that change?

SHD: Well I think it was seeing work that I thought was good. I always wanted to be good.

HS: Always wanted to be good. For whom?

SHD: Myself. I'm always seeking, I've always sought to be good. Of course, I wanted to be good and I liked good painting. But that was about all I could say on that subject.

HS: Did other artists think that you were good.

SHD: They ignored me. Often I was pretty much ignored.

HS: By male artists, critics and curators?

SHD: And female.

HS: Did that bother you?

SHD: Well prejudice in any form bother me.

HS: What was it like being a female artist in that scene in the early 50s-60s?

SHD: I never thought about it.

HS: You never thought about it?

SHD: I was interested in painting and the fact that I was a woman never occurred to me. Never did.

HS: Surely it occurred to others at the time.

SHD: I acknowledge that it was difficult being a woman and a painter. It's true, there is a prejudice against women.

HS: Do you personally remember any biases? You were in an environment where there were very few women at the time—especially in Abstract Expressionism.

SHD: Yes, I think it was there. But I never thought about it much.

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HS: Towards the end of the Tanager Gallery you got married to Wick Drummond from Louisville, Kentucky and had your son, Craig Drummond. What was it like caring for a baby while trying to break into the professional art scene?

SHD: Oh. Well it wasn't easy but it worked. Having a baby is difficult. I felt responsible for his bringing up. I looked after Wick too.

HS: The Tanager Gallery closed shortly after Craig was born in 1962 and you moved out of the city. First to Connecticut and later to Germantown, New York where you live now.

SHD: Yes.

HS: Then you received a Guggenheim Fellowship and opted to move to France for a year. How was that experience?

SHD: It wasn't easy, we had to find a place to live and paint and raise a family. I had a small studio. I painted.

HS: By the late 1950s and early 1960s you were painting the starburst-like images for which you are now known, can you talk about your process?

SHD: Well I cover with a base color all over and I put a little in the middle. One painting leads to another painting.

HS: You started in the middle.

SHD: The middle and work out.

HS: To the edge? Now how do you pick what color each of the dots is going to be?

SHD: One color leads to another.

HS: So you start with one color and then you start adding colors on top?

SHD: Yes.

HS: How would you pick which color to use?

SHD: The painting that went before usually dictates what comes afterwards.

HS: So you put the dots on—how do you apply the dots?

SHD: With a little brush. *Laughs.*

HS: Now your dots—it seems that they get smaller. In the earlier paintings, the dots are bigger and in the later paintings they're smaller and farther apart.

SHD: Well I think that's because I wanted an intensity.

HS: You wanted an intensity. With the smaller dots.

SHD: *Nods.*

HS: You've written elsewhere that you started using dots after seeing a retrospective of Georges Seurat in 1958 at the Museum of Modern Art. What attracted you to the use of dots?

SHD: Well, Seurat's had an energy to them.

HS: Do your dots have an energy?

SHD: I think the use of dots does.

HS: Your earlier works had a darker center and then you moved to painting light centers.

SHD: Yes, it's about separation because...actually Lois Dodd suggested I make them light in the center.

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HS: Lois Dodd, the only other woman in the Tanager Gallery, told you to make them light in the center?

SHD: Yes. I did and I liked what I saw. They're light around the edges and I like that. They seem to have a certain spirit.

HS: Is that spirit different than when the center is dark?

SHD: Yes, because with light in the center, there's a certain exuberance that they didn't have before.

HS: What kind of mood would you be in when you would sit down to paint?

SHD: It's just something I did. It wasn't a matter of taste. I just, I just, wanted to do it. And I was interested in it.

HS: Was it a chore?

SHD: No, no.

HS: But it was something you felt you had to do?

SHD: Yes. I had to do it. Well, I think it was a just and noble pursuit and there was a lot that I disapproved of. Lots, lots that I didn't really enjoy.

HS: In the art being made at the time?

SHD: Yes.

HS: So you made something that you enjoyed.

SHD: Yes. There wasn't any mission.

HS: What was different about the work that you were producing?

SHD: I was trying, I wasn't sure of anything then. I wasn't sure. I think I was always doubtful.

HS: About the art around you?

SHD: And my own work too.

HS: Is your art personal? When you paint is it about you?

SHD: No.

HS: Do you put yourself in it?

SHD: Well it's I that painted it—that says its mine. It's about me. It's personal in the sense that I made it.

HS: Can people, when they look at it, can they tell anything about you?

SHD: No. Well, I guess they could. But not anything very interesting.

Laughter.

HS: How do you describe your work?

SHD: Well, I'd say its contemplative.

HS: Contemplative.

SHD: Describes it pretty well.

HS: What do you expect people to contemplate when they look at it?

SHD: It has to mean something to them.

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HS: Many viewers have described your work as spiritual, now would you say that your art is spiritual?

SHD: Well, I don't see it as spiritual. It may have a spiritual quality to it. It doesn't seem to make sense but I think that it was a spiritual quality to it.

HS: What do you expect from your viewers when they look at your work?

SHD: I don't expect anything from them but I'm thrilled when they like it.

HS: You're thrilled when they like it. Why is that?

SHD: Oh, I think you always want to be liked.

Laughter.

HS: Speaking of being liked, you have a line in your thesis that discusses the over-abundance of art critics. At one point you jest that there are more art critics than actual artists.

Laughter.

HS: Basically lambasting art criticism. What is the role of art critics today? Or what is the role of art criticism in general?

SHD: I don't think there is a big role. People are going to like your work or not like your work. It makes no difference in the matter of what style it is.

HS: Is the amount or degree to which people like your art a measure of success for an artist?

SHD: A successful artist is an artist who sells his work. That makes success.

HS: That makes success?

SHD: I think so.

HS: Would you say you're successful? I would say you're successful.

SHD: Well, compared to whom? Compared to a lot of artists, I'm not successful. To some artists, a number, I am.

HS: I think for me, and where I'm getting at is that you talk about how you made artwork for yourself. I asked, 'when did you know it was good?' and you answered that you knew it was good when you like it.

SHD: *Laughs.* Okay.

HS: Most of your career, you've created for yourself more than you've made art for other people.

SHD: Yes.

HS: And the fact that you were able to stay true and to do what you wanted when everybody around you had an opinion...

SHD: Yes.

HS: I think that's a mark of success.

SHD: *Laughs.* Okay.

HS: What are your thoughts?

SHD: Well, that's not how I would define success. No, successful is sold.

HS: So the art market is what determines success for the arts?

SHD: Yes.

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HS: Okay. Now what has been your relationship and role within the art market?

SHD: *Laughs. Makes surprised face.*

Laughter

HS: So you weren't trying to be successful?

SHD: No. A., I wanted to paint and B., It was that kind of work. You are always influenced by somebody or something. At least that's been my experience. Everybody, every person, every family has a history. People should know that I had a lot of enthusiasms.

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