

Sherlin Hendrick on How to Find Your Artistic Voice
Down2Art Podcast with Kristy Gordon

Hello and welcome. I'm your host Kristy Gordon, and today I'm joined by the amazing sculptor Sherlin Hendrick, to talk about how she found her artistic voice. And Sher's work has been shown in museums and galleries across Canada and the United States. And she's been the recipient of several major awards, including the Phoenix Gallery's Solo Competition Award, curated by Lisa Dennison, the chief curator of the Guggenheim Museum.

So welcome. She, it's so good to have you. Well, thank you for having me. Yeah, it's so good to see you again. So I know we both first met in my hometown of Nelson, and it was really surprising to me because as we talked more, we discovered that we had actually both graduated from the New York Academy of Art,

and we both had that history and, and you know, and then I found that you've really found your voice and you have this like really distinctive, unique voice. And so I was curious, looking back at the work you were doing at the academy in 1997, what can you see, like what sort of things were you working with back then and how has your work evolved?

Hmm. Well, back then I was actually went to the school because I was interested in figurative art and I, I earned, my career was as a physical therapist, so it was sort of a natural, you know, leaning towards something figurative. And so that's why I chose that school. And I was someone who, I was always a kid who kind of,

you know, drew did art things, always doing something creative. And when I was 13, I was in a little art arts class in school and I did this head of a, of a kid in class. It was only tiny, maybe four inches tall. It was in clay. And in that moment it was like, I'm, I had this sense I'm gonna do sculpture,

I can do this. It, it took me till I was around 39 or 40 to actually do something in art, which was, I saw a class in Berkeley, it was called The Way of the Doll. And it was about making, it wasn't make, like making Betsy Wesley's, it was, it was about making you would take porcelain. It was a year long process class.

And in that class you would make one, one doll. And it was made out of, the first one I did was life size. It was made out of, had big horns. It sat in, in Armo. It was for the fabric and porcelain. And, you know, it, it was, you know, that was my first project,

but I started right in doing sculpture. So I wasn't, didn't actually make dolls. And I'm mentioning that to say that when I, I had moved to New York because I married somebody from New York who was living in New York at the time. That's how I ended up there. And he just suggested, why don't you apply to a master's program? And I applied to the New York Academy of Art based on five pieces that I made.

And that's how I started. That's interesting. And it's interesting to hear about the, like the doll class that you took and that it had actually had horns. 'cause now you're working a lot with animals and that almost seems like maybe, maybe there was some thread of interest that like was even coming through back then. I wonder. You know, that's an interesting point.

I've never thought about that. Yeah, but you probably, you're probably right, you know, in, in the, in back in the eighties in that time period, you know, I was interested in a lot of things like shamanism, I went to Peru with the shaman and traveled through Peru with him. You know, I studied, you know,

alter states of consciousness. I did, I worked with a research scientist in uc who was from U C L A Irving in past life explorations. So I think there was, you know, sort of an influence that's probably somewhere where that animal influence comes from. I was interested in what power animals were, you know, that kind of thing. So that's Probably why I relate to your work so much.

I I really do. And, and I have similar interests, so, and I didn't know that about you. That's really cool. Yeah. Well, you're kind of touching on a bit about how your background, like you, you kind of ties into your voice, like you've mentioned that you were a physical therapist and then your experience with shamanism and in Peru.

What other, are there any other aspects that you can think of? Or do you wanna talk a bit more about that? About how your background influenced your voice? Well, I think in all that, just in my own kind of personal growth, I got interested in the psychological aspects of things. And I'm interested, I mean, reason why I went into SHA was interested in shamanism.

It was basically as a method of heal self-healing. And I was also interested in aspects of healing as regards to physical therapy clients that I had. So I studied also with a, a woman in, in Berkeley, her name was Marian Rosen. And she was a physical therapist who escaped from Germany during World War ii. And she developed a whole technique of working on the body that involved verbal emotional work while you are actually touching a body with the idea of releasing emotions through the verbal and hands-on technique.

So, so that, that also influences, you know, where I went with sculpture because in the last body of work I did, which was a series called Caged, it was about the, about it was a bestiary that where the animals in this group of sculptures portrayed human emotions. And so that also influences where, where I went with the sculptures.

Ooh, that's interesting. And how was the process like, as you sort of honed your voice and sort of refined it? And I feel like it has become really distinctive and sort of different from the work you were doing, like originally, which looks more traditional, but really amazing and skilled. But now it just seems even more distinctive with the bright colors and the, you know, and the animals and the kind of mystical feel. What was the process like for you? Like how did that start to happen? What were the signs that it was starting to come out? Okay, well, the circumstances of my life, you know, all that, what I've just mentioned, but the circumstances of finances also dictated where I went.

So I couldn't afford to do bronze sculptures, period. So I said, okay, well I'll, I'll learn to work in clay. So when I moved to Canada, I, you know, so said, well, let me figure out how to do this. So I started, first of all, I, I started working with a coil technique, which for people who don't know, it's where you roll out tubes of clay and then you put one, one roll on top of another or coil and you, and from the bottom up, I would make a sculpture. So that, that in itself added some limits. You couldn't, you know, it was, you, you can't, you know, be as free flowing with how an arm goes out in space, let's say. Or you know, a tail goes out and, you know, because in that process of building up the clay, it has to dry to a certain degree as you're adding on layers. So if a sculpture takes three months to make, during that whole time, you're controlling the weight of the clay, how wet the clay is, and how, you know, and the drying processes. So part of it isn't drying out while you're adding new wet clay. So, so you know, it, this, this, these animals became, as a result, I said, well, I'm not gonna be able to do the kind of human figure I wanna do.

'cause I can't build it up as much, but I can do it with animals and also also animals. You could be really, you could really mess around with their proportions. And it doesn't have to be realistic.

It, you know, sometimes if you're doing like a humanistic, say you were doing a realistic human figure. If it's a little off the viewer kind of knows it's off.

They may not know why, but it bothers them with an animal you can do anything and it's not gonna bother anybody, you know? So it's sort of evolved. That's how the animals started in a way, wasn't, and also it's, yeah, that's basically how it started. Wow. It was to develop a whole nother technique that I could afford to do.

Oh, that's so cool. 'cause in some ways the limitations then the limitations of the medium and the way that you're working. 'cause I, you showed me before the coils and it's actually very difficult, but it, it, I, that I can totally understand how it sort of led to this like new direction. And what about the colors? 'cause you started to paint onto the sculptures too.

Oh, well that was, that was also as a result of materials. So, so early on I experi with raccoon firing, I experimented with smoke firing, which was, you know, make a rabbit, put it in a barrel with sawdust and all kinds of other materials to make it, make it have a color on it. And then, you know,

letting it burn in a fire for, you know, a day. So I, I experimented with everything. I tried pastels on clay, I tried oil on clay, I tried acrylic on clay. I didn't like any of the surfaces that I came up with. And so I was trying also to find colors that I felt like went with the emotion of the sculpture.

So I mean, we're, we're talking a lot of experiment. I had experimented on painting on fired clay, made all kinds of little chips, you know, anyway, the long and the short of it was, I am admirer of Judy Fox's work, she's a figurative sculptor. And I, I emailed her and I said, what are you using?

And she said, casing paint. And I said, really? What's casing paint? I mean, that's how it started. So I started with my experimentation all over. 'cause it's a difficult paint to use. The reason because it's opaque and I wanted some translucency, it dries to a different color than a, than what you put on. You can only put one or two coats a day,

otherwise it doesn't really set up right layer on layer. So that's how I got into casing paint. And what I like about casing paint, unlike putting oil or acrylic on, for instance, on a clay, is that it has a feeling of almost being part of the clay. Like more like a glaze. And I didn't, I, you know, I didn't do glaze on sculptures, although I love other artists who do do that kind of work because with glazing you could spend three months making the clay part of the sculpture and then the glaze could ruin the sculpture, see, you know, in one firing. So I wanted something that would, you know, the clay's done, the clay's fired it,

made it through the firing. Now I want something that's gonna, you know, work and not be another Oh, big problem or potential big problem. Oh man. Yeah, no doubt. Well, what's interesting about that is that you're almost touching on this other idea that I've kind of noticed for myself was an important part of my finding my voice. This knowing your world piece.

Like, 'cause you talked about that you like knew that you really liked Judy Fox and that she like used certain paints like within hers. And you even like understand that there's other artists that are doing glazing. But that part of the problems involved in that. What is your sort of, what was your process even back then or has been in your practice for kind of knowing all that's happening that you need to know?

Like in the art world, sort of researching what other artists are doing and just making sure that you're kind of current, like with what you know would be inspiring to your practice. Like do you certain magazines or do you Yeah. Just what, how do you, you know, You know what I, what I've, what I'm most inspired by. I think I,

I take classes. Like I took your portrait painting classes. Right. Every, you know, everything is like really helpful that, besides helping me with painting a portrait, it also really helped me with looking at color better. And you know, like what colors I like. Oh yeah. So, so I take classes and I, I research YouTube a lot.

I see something that looks interesting like jelly printing or something, and then I go research it. So since, since I was at the academy and then here on in Nelson, kind of on, on my own because there's no, you know, there, there are artists here, but it's not like I have access to big museums or anything. It's been pretty much,

I've been doing my own little art class art study. And, and that's, that's, you know, I have, I have done, you know, subscribe to things like Acrylic magazine or something like that. But basically that's, that's how I get inspired. And when I travel or get to go to the San Francisco Bay area to see family, then I try to get to the,

all the museums that I can. Yeah, totally. I love that. I love taking classes actually. I think it is such a great way. It's like, I wanna do it forever. Yeah. I could do like, oh, gotta be perpetual art student. Sure, yeah. The best. Yeah. And then how do you brainstorm ideas for like a new piece? Like do you have any kind of process for brainstorming, whether it's like small sketches or little maquettes with the sculpture? Well, when I was doing the, when I was doing this last series, so like the in, in the background behind me, that piece is called Jacqueline Jacqueline Hyde. And it's a play on the story of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

And it references in my mind the an abusive relationship. You know, there's the orange jackal you can't quite see, but he is ready to, if I scoot to the side, he is ready to, you know, pounce. He's, you know, the abuser and the, the, the yellow jackal behind him is the, you know, he's angry,

but he is also frightened. So I was trying to portray that kind of, you know, relationship that people have. But that sculpture actually started from a book I read that was actually called Jacqueline Hyde, written by a therapist on, on a verbally abusive relationships. And, and it was inspired actually just by the title. I went Jacqueline Hyde. And then I went, oh, jackals jackal, jackals hy. You know what I mean? I always kept playing with the words. So it, that's how that one started. Sometimes like rabbits, I've always kind of related to rabbits so that, you know, I've made like an anxiety rabbit. I've made a passive aggressive rabbit, you know, that it's inspired by just that.

I like that that animal seems to speak to me in some way. But when I did this last body of work, my intuitive process was, and, and it was actually a game. The game was, I, I don't know what animal's gonna pop up next, but I have to follow it. And so hence, hence, you know, it would start,

you know, it's, it started with I think the anxiety rabbit was probably the first one, and then it went from there. So, and it surprised me sometimes what popped up. But that was the game. And I decided over the five or six years that I created all those sculptures, that I was gonna stay true to that intuitive process. So That's,

I actually love that the game that you have to follow it, you hear a thought and you have to follow it. That's like, I really love that I'm gonna use that. It, it Was really, it was really strong and it a strong rule that seemed to came up, come up. And I used to do rules, but, and it was, and I said, well, and it, and it kept working. So I said, well, well, you know, totally, let's see what happens. Yeah, totally. I also, I also kept making these sculptures and I didn't really know until I was getting more into the last four or so of them what this was about. I just knew that they,

they kept popping up and I decided to just keep following it. Oh, for sure. I think a lot of the time we like figure out what it's about later, like something's coming into it. Like yeah, we just get these ideas and we just have to follow it, but we kind of, yeah, we figure out what it's about later and write the artist statement.

Exactly. I'm so glad you said that. I'm glad, I think good this is, you know, like, you know, other people do the same thing. Totally. And so, but how do you come up with the poses? Are you literally just stacking the coils and you're just like, I hope this turns into a pose? Oh. Or do you have like some sketches and stuff beforehand With the, with the, some of the, the more simplified pieces. Sometimes I, I just start, I'm making a rabbit. There you go. But the more complicated ones, like the ones behind me, I made two little maquettes for those and I kept playing in clay and they were only about, oh, maybe you know, this big tiny, and, and those maquettes, I keep, I play with them until, and again, I try not to think at all, try not to think. So I play with the maquette until it kind of has a postural feeling that I like. And it has kind of a, you know, at least in its, its little form. It's, it's, you know, it's looking a little evil, you know, and I may exaggerate a few things and what actually surprised me in doing maquettes is they actually, I've actually got it, got the expression in a tiny little maquette and I found, I've taken out my calipers and go, you know, that was just the right amount when I extrapolated into like something behind me.

And those dogs, those behind me, those jackals are, are like a large sized dog, you know, they're not tiny sculptures. Yeah, yeah. Oh, but I totally know what you mean. I'm so glad you mentioned that. It's almost like there's an emotional quality that comes out when we're doing these, like little studies or little like maquettes, like we're just putting our emotions into it and it just comes out physically. And I, because I sometimes will do sketches or studies, but it'll have this emotional quality that Yeah, just try to just blow it up. Like, I'm like, whoa, that really nailed it. Like, like maybe there'll be tweaks to be done. But it's interesting.

The Other thing I do in making these sculptures is as I researched the internet, like I go, what did jackal's look like? And then I, yeah. And then I, I bet you I had 50, 60 pictures of every jack I could find trying to find every view possible. Yeah. And then, and then I, but then I don't try to make it really look like a jackal.

Yeah. It really then goes back to the, the maquette. You know, like I said, you know, that's more the expression that I wanted. I'm, again, I'm not really not really into doing something realistic. I have a lot more fun, you know, playing with what comes out than trying to make it look like something. Yeah.

And that word fun is important. I think that ties into the intuitive process and finding our voice. 'cause it's like letting play come in and just follow like our thread of an enjoyment. And maybe we're dealing with something, whatever the themes you're dealing with, maybe it's a hard theme or maybe it's not, but there's still a certain level of play and fun involved in just like following these impulses.

I like that you mentioned And that, and that's what I wanted in this actually this collection. What I wanted was, 'cause I was dealing with, you know, abuse is not an easy emotion that people, when they, they wanna deal with when they come in a show. So I wanted to do some of them that had humor. And I think animals,

because we are anthropomorphize them, they, you know, they're, it's easier to, to see something or get something from an animal, you know, portrayal than a human portrayal of abuse, let's say.

You know? Totally. And I think that there's something about the like, beautiful quality of the sculptures and the colors that still like, pulls you in and kind of entices you and then you can handle,

you know, dealing with these things like yeah. Like abuse and, you know, but it's, it's still really enticing to kind of pulls you in visually. It's a nice, like an interesting contrast And, you know, intuitively too, or, or, or maybe feeling wise when I was trying to figure out the color for each of these animals,

'cause there's some pretty bright colors. Some, some of them, what I was, what I would do is I would go, I would go in and kind of try to go meditative state and go, what does that feel like? Like what does that emotion of that, you know, that anger and feel like? And then, and then I'd put all the an all the animals that were done so far in a room.

And then I'd go and as a whole does this work as a palette? You know, I was trying to not only individual eventually, but sort of make it work as a whole. Yeah. Oh, I like love that. The idea of kind of closing your eyes and Yeah. Letting your feelings, trying to feel what you're trying to express. And then the idea of working as a whole,

that actually kind of like touches on like when we're starting to kind of find our voice, a lot of it ends up visually looking like what are the components of our voice? Like are there certain colors? Are there, you know, certain edge quality for me as a painter? Or is there, you know, a certain arrangement, is there a certain composition for a painter?

Or for you it could be a composition in terms of like the stacking of the, whether it's two objects and how they relate or whether it's just like one. But anyways, you were kind of touching on color there and, and palette and I don't know, do you have any more thoughts about this idea about finding the colors that work? Like I kind of like what you were touching on colors you like and colors that work well together,

but do you have any more thoughts about that? I do actually. I, 'cause I recently did Nicholas Wilton's class, I don't know if you're familiar with him. Yeah. Anyway, he, he has this ear early exercise in, in, in the program of you make a artist inspiration board. And I had an interesting experience with that because, you know,

since I took your classes the last three years I've really been working on color. Yeah. And so what I had done is I had done lots of paint chips, you know, four by four paint chips of mixing all kinds of combinations of y one kind of yellow with another kind of blue with another kind.

And then, you know, changing the yellow out,

if that makes sense. Anyway, so what I did is I took all, you know, all these squares and I went through all of them and I, and I just took a one inch chip of every color that emotionally moved me and I pasted 'em on a board. And then I also had had xeroxed off the internet artists paintings and sculptures that I liked.

Yeah. And when I put 'em up on the board, I realized that the colors I had chosen were exactly in those artists' paintings. Wow. And it kind of, that, that surprised me. Yeah. That really surprised me because I go, well obviously that's the colors I like, you know what I mean? It was just, you know,

and so that was an interesting awareness for me. So now I have a color palette to play with right now. I Actually love these like, logical processes that we can use. 'cause like sometimes we kind of like are so used to like not trusting ourselves in the real life that we have a thought and then we're like, nah, it couldn't be.

But then when we really look at it, it's like, oh yeah, that's true. I do like these colors and I do like yeah. This type of technique that these artists are using. I really love that. The next thing I

was wondering about is what your studio practice is like. Like do you work every day or do you like, it must be a little bit more difficult as a sculptor 'cause it's kind of a big production.

Well, and, and in doing the, that this kind of work, I do try, I do try to, you know, like work like a regular business kind of day. You know, I work best in the morning. So, so the discipline for me is no, I'm not making doctor's appointments saying you're not doing anything in the morning. 'cause then, then, you know, that's when I have the most energy. So I try to, I try to work in the morning with sculptures, you know, I have to plan vacations, you know, around the sculpture because if it, and you know, I luckily for me, I do have people in town who are, you know, are potters and they can manage the clay for me. But I have, I do try to time my vacation where it will be at a stage where I can leave a sculpture even if it isn't fired. So that's, that affects what I do. I've had a poor friend of mine who was, who was, I think it was actually on, on one of the jackals.

And there I had, I had gone on vacation and she was supposed to be monitoring the clay and she came in and she had over wedded and the head had fallen off and landed on the floor. And I can't, Oh my God. She was Married, distraught. And she could imagine. Right. So, And because what you're talking about for anyone who doesn't understand, 'cause what you explained to me before, it's like the clay will over dry. Right? And so you have to be kind of spraying it every day to keep it moist leading up to that time that you're firing. And so, right. So that's what you're like kind of talking about. But she had over watered it. Oh my gosh. But you got the head back on.

Well, I just did the head again, but, but It just, I've done it to myself. So, So, but actually that's kind of interesting. That need, that sculpture has to have you doing a little something to it every day to keep it Okay. Almost encourages just doing a little something every day. Like That's true because, because I know for me,

like I had, you know, really bad artist block for quite a long time and just, there was so much self-doubt, it was like getting harder and harder to paint. And I started to do 25 minutes every single day and it completely like transformed my process. And I can imagine that it, like, it sounds like you work probably more than that,

but if you're just sort of spraying and doing a little bit, maybe you end up doing a little here and there while you're at it, like every day. Yeah. You're probably, you're probably right. You don't wanna do it. Right. Then you go and then you like take the, take all the towels off and all the plant and you go,

Hmm, maybe I should do a little something right there, probably. Right. That's good. Yeah. So then I guess you've probably always done that. I don't know, was there ever a time that you weren't working every day and like, can you see the difference between then and like the fact that you do now work pretty much every day For some reason in sculpture?

I never had that problem. Yeah. You know, I Didn't even Have the problem of, of I didn't have even have the problem of the block, you know? Yeah. But I, I think it's, now that I've been playing with the, you know, experimenting with painting actually for the last three years, I could see, you know,

it's like in some ways like starting over and, and I could see this tendency of a block to come in. Oh yeah, Yeah, Yeah. So I have to remember your 25 minutes, you know? Yeah. It's a really good one. Yeah. And I swear there's something weird about time, like 25 minutes doesn't sound that long, but it's like,

it expands. I don't know, it's like all of a sudden you can get way more than you ever would've thought done in 25 minutes. Okay. Yeah. Oh, well it's been so amazing to talk to you. Where can

people find out more about your work if they wanna see your work? Well, I am, my website is called sherlinhendrick.com under my name and also my Instagram handles the same Sherlin Hendrick. So, and I'll Definitely include a link to both of those in the description. That's awesome. Oh, well thank you so much for joining us Shely. It was so great. Thank you to talk to you. Thank you for inviting me. I'll talk to you soon. Okay. Thanks for making it easy on me. My pleasure. Okay, Bye Kristy. Bye. I hope you enjoyed this episode of Down To Art. Thank you so much for joining us.