

VISIONARY ART

The Art of Amy Koy

BY DEEANNA FRANKLIN

Associate Editor

Amy Koy started her long, arduous road to a college education with a lie. She answered “no” to a question on her application to Radcliffe College to hide the fact that she had been in therapy for anorexia.

That lie only compounded the pain and strife she says she went through with her family, who viewed her status as a psychiatric patient not only as a grave disappointment, but as a situation that brought shame on the family. No one outside of the immediate family was to know.

However, her illness—thought to be schizophrenia—caught up with her after she spent a semester at Radcliffe, and at age 18 she had to leave school. This experience was the beginning of a long journey through four more colleges. For many years—most spent without medication or knowledge of her true diagnosis—Ms. Koy tried to piece together a life independent of her parents. Finally, with the help of Fountain House and the Art Students League, she was able to fulfill her dream of living and studying art in New York. In 1999, at the age of 51, she received a bachelor’s degree in studio art from Hunter College in New York.

Ms. Koy has participated in several group shows in New York, notably a joint exhibition in February with Jonathan Glass at the Fountain Gallery. Several of her pieces have sold, but she still worries that she lacks the social skills necessary to attain true success in the art world. Still, her perseverance in pursuing her goal of studying art in New York hints at a fierce determination. ■



Model in a Pink Blouse, 2004.



Abstractions, 1995.

IMAGES COURTESY AMY KOY

The Artist’s Reflections

I’ve learned that knowing something about bones and muscles makes [art] more compelling and involving. I enjoy the challenge of getting the anatomy right. I’m using oils and painting models. It’s the academic model of learning representational drawing, which I know many people currently don’t think too highly of. But I’ve started in with anatomy and have stuck with it.

When I was a kid, I did every type of painting but not oils until late high school. I really love colors. I love putting colors next to one another, and certain color combinations really resonate with me. I love orange and purple next to each other—which is kind of a Matisse thing. I love aqua. I love salmon ... all kinds of Matisse-like colors. I like to get a painting to a place where it tells me what to do. My current teacher says that’s the high of painting—the painting tells you what it needs to develop. In class, I usually spend about 3 hours of painting each afternoon. It usually takes me about 15 hours of class time to complete a figure painting.

I had a very choppy educational history. As a child, I went to 11 schools in 11 years. My father was in the foreign service, so we lived overseas for various periods. It was extremely traumatic. You make friends, and not only will you never see them again, but they’re halfway around the world. Finally, I just stopped trying to make friends.

I was born in Shanghai, China, and my father was working for the United Nations in 1948. It was a very dramatic time. The communists were approaching Shanghai, and I was their first child. Then 3 weeks after I was born, they had to quickly leave Shanghai because of the political situation. My early grade school years were spent in New Delhi, India. And then during my junior high years, we lived for a 1½ years in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania. The rest of the time we lived in the Washington, D.C., area, in northern Virginia.

When I was 16, I developed anorexia, and I went from 127 pounds—and I’m 5’4” —to 98 pounds. I think it was a cry for help. I lost the weight, and I was quite underweight. I also started exercising compulsively. I was taken to the family physician and referred to a psychiatrist. He wouldn’t tell me my diagnosis. I was inquisitive and desperate to know, so I set up an insurance situation where he would have to fill out a form, and I would see it.

He wrote down ‘anxiety reaction.’ I’ve been told I have schizoaffective disorder, and now the latest diagnosis is paranoid schizophrenia. I’m on medication, and I’ve been on almost all of them. Thiorazine made me a zombie. Haldol made me pace continually. Risperdal made me feel like I was jumping out of my skin. I was on Seroquel. I’ve been on almost all of them except the two very latest ones: Geodon and Abilify. I’ve been on Clozaril for the last few years. It seems to be pretty good. I’m also on Prozac. I’m 56.

My mother was an art history major in college, and she mostly does crafts and visual things. My brother is a professional artist, and I just learned from my mother that he is supporting himself through art sales now. My sister was a successful businesswoman. She retired at age 50, and she’s

studying art now as well as various other things.

I came to New York in 1977, after living with my parents and on my own in a condo in D.C. I even slept for a while in Rock Creek Park. I was preparing myself for a move to New York City, and I did sleep outside my first 3 nights in New York City. I went there, walked around barefoot, went to Bellevue, saw a very nice social worker. He told me I would not be able to survive in New York City on the amount of money I would get from welfare. He called my father, and my father sent a no-refund ticket back to Washington. Even so, I stayed at a fleabag hotel, walked around another 2 days, then went home to Washington.

I was taken to this wonderful private hospital and had a wonderful psychiatrist and saw him for a year. He insisted I work, so I got a bunch of temp jobs. I still didn’t tell anyone about my goal to live in New York, not even in the hospital. I never told my psychiatrist. When I started with him, I was in a wheelchair, both physically and mentally. He restored enough self-esteem to get me to do what I always wanted to do. I came to New York a second time. I got a job at Bellevue, then went to the walk-in clinic as a patient, and that started several years of treatment at Bellevue. I was in the day program, vocational testing, volunteer jobs, and did training for a year as a typesetter. I got the first job I ever liked as a typesetter.

But then they took me off my medication. After a year, I lost the job, and ended up, again, as an inpatient at Bellevue. The symptoms returned. This was in 1983. I even went to the ER at NYU, and they just said, “You have to go back to your therapist.”

Fountain Gallery has really supported my art tremendously. I show at the Art Students League, also. I sold something at one of the Christmas shows. I’m really not interested in promoting myself, although I know it’s necessary. I know from my brother and the other artists at Fountain Gallery who are selling that part of it is making contacts. It’s not my forte, really.

My instructor at the Art Students League was kind enough to choose my work for the page in the catalog describing his class. I got almost straight A’s at NYU and Hunter in art and other things—not to brag or anything.

With my work, I’ve noticed increases in skill. I was away a few weeks, and when I came back I painted a painting that’s different from anything I’ve ever done. The instructor was positive. It was not so academic, with a little more use of thick color. Not so much details, but I think it kind of worked. I’ve had a zigzag type of progression. The slides [see art, left] are recent but not absolutely current. One slide was done in class—a profile of an African American woman with a turquoise background. It sold at the Christmas show. Then there are some abstracts. Estée Lauder, the cosmetic company, bought some paintings—thanks to Fountain Gallery. I do abstract and representational art. I like both, but I guess I prefer representational. People seem to especially like my self-portrait.

As told to Deeanna Franklin by Amy Koy.