

An Interview with Paul Narkiewicz

Megan Mi-Ai Lee is an interdisciplinary artist and curator who also works as the Education Manager at Greenwich House Pottery. Because of her deep and ongoing relationship with Paul Narkiewicz, she was able to not only facilitate the collection of his archival works to present in this viewing room, but also to interview him — not a small feat, since, as she says, he’s “a man of few words”.

ML: Paul, would you mind briefly sharing how you were introduced to art making, and what compelled you to pursue a career in the arts?

PN: There was no alternative.

ML: Interesting. So in your mind, nothing else stuck out to you as something you cared enough about to do as a career.

PN: I wasn't going to become a dentist.

ML: Hahaha, fair enough, fair enough. And at what age did you start making artwork?

PN: About 18.

ML: And was there anything in your schooling or your family history that led you to be interested?

PN: None whatsoever.

ML: Wow, so what do you think it was, did you see a work of art that compelled you to make something?

PN: There was nothing else to do.

ML: Amazing. I feel like that's a mark of true artistry. So at any point, did you consider yourself a professional artist?

PN: At some point I did, yes.

ML: At what point was that, and how did you define that?

PN: In the seventies or eighties I decided that.

ML: And that's at the point when you were running a print shop?

PN: Yes.

ML: Great, and [Black Ball Projects has] given us some hard-hitting questions and some very practical questions because a lot of the organizations grant recipients are under-recognized later and mid-career artists. So some of them are frankly very open and honest questions about finances and things like that. So, were you ever able to support your life with sales from your artwork?

PN: No, no, I was never able. I always had a day job.

ML: And for you that was being a master printer?

PN: That was one of them.

ML: And what were some of the other ones?

PN: I was a picture framer, I was a cabinet maker, and I can't remember the rest of them.

ML: And I know for a time you taught at Cooper Union, is that correct?

PN: I taught at Cooper Union, yeah.

ML: And what was it you taught?

PN: Printmaking.

ML: Litho[graphy]?

PN: Yes,

ML: Great. You know I worked in the print shop at Cooper.

PN: When?

ML: 2014, I can't say our paths crossed there, haha. But I was just a work study. And did you go to school for art and if yes, what was your experience?

PN: I went to the Philadelphia College of Art as a painter.

ML: Painter?

PN: Yeah.

ML: And you became a printmaker in school or what was your trajectory?

PN: I became a printmaker at that time, yeah.

ML: And I'm gonna keep asking this - why were you interested in printmaking?

PN: I don't remember.

ML: Well to be fair, what year was that?

PN: I don't remember.

ML: A long time ago, for the listener or reader.

PN: The previous century.

ML: And can you tell me a little bit about your experience teaching?

PN: I hated teaching.

ML: Why?

PN: Because the students were stupid.

ML: Well, you heard it here. Having been a student there, I can say that you're not entirely wrong, not to generalize. So, what galleries have you worked with or have you been represented by over the course of your career?

PN: Kornblee Gallery on 57th Street.

ML: That no longer exists?

PN: That no longer exists, nothing exists anymore. And I can't remember the rest of them.

ML: And you were represented by these galleries, or you showed with them?

PN: I showed with them and was represented by them.

ML: And how have those experiences been for you? Have you felt supported or not supported?

PN: Kornblee Gallery really supported me, yes.

ML: Great, so they sort of back to your work financially, and practically?

PN: All of that. They got me to Italy every summer.

ML: Really? So it's the gallery that funded that? Wow. Because I've often wondered, okay, he's an artist working on kind of a precarious budget - how is he getting his family to Italy? And so it's the gallery that was supporting you.

PN: It was cheap then.

ML: Yeah, now it's quite different. So why do you think — this is their question, not personal question — why do you think your career never took off into the stratosphere?

PN: It wasn't my turn.

ML: It wasn't your turn?

PN: Right.

ML: That's really interesting.

PN: I can't imagine why they gave me this grant.

ML: Well, it's about the quality of the work and the length of your career. But I would say, you're sort of working, in a lot of your paintings, alongside some pretty important movements. I would argue that some of the paintings are really ahead of their time. So when you say it wasn't my turn I think also because you are slightly out of step with what was happening in painting at the time.

PN: That could have been true.

ML: So what does your past work mean to you now looking back?

PN: It just seems like past work.

ML: Do you feel like it's resolved and like that body of work is now retired?

PN: Yeah, it's gone.

ML: And in some cases it's literally gone. Can you speak a little bit about what happened there?

PN: I can't speak to that.

ML: Really.

PN: It's not my problem.

ML: Your son shared with me that it was involved in a landlord dispute?

PN: It was with my wife who just died.

ML: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that.

PN: Yeah. I am too.

ML: Yeah. Most of the work that's highlighted in your application for the grant and the work that you can see online today is your ceramic work. Can you talk a little bit about your introduction to ceramics, how you ended up doing it, where you make the work now, etcetera?

PN: I started out at the Children's Welfare, which is gone, also gone.

ML: Around when was that?

PN: Ten years ago, and then they turned me on to this place.

ML: And what is this place for those who are not familiar?

PN: This place is falling apart.

ML: It's Greenwich house Pottery established 1904. Have you worked with any particular mentors, classmates, artists who've inspired you during your time here?

PN: Not during my time here, but I was mentored by Ray Metzger, a photographer.

ML: In your printmaking or your artistic practice?

PN: We were just friends, he gave me a room to live in.

ML: Wow, that's great. So, along your path, it's kind of been marked by having people looking out for you. So your gallery Kornblee, and I know you work pretty closely with Derek Weisberg here. Can you talk a little bit about him?

PN: He's the best, the best person here, I've had a lot of them and he's the best.

ML: What makes him the best teacher?

PN: It's hard to tell.

ML: My observation is that he sort of leads his class like an independent study or something. He sort of like let's the student set the pace and sort of determine themselves what they want to do. Is that your experience?

PN: Yes it is, that's my experience.

ML: And have you always made sculptures?

PL: No, I switched to sculpture from painting.

ML: Why?

PN: Because it's three-dimensional, painting is two dimensional.

ML: So, I can say that, because I also transition from painting to sculpture in my own work, and I think for me — and tell me of this resonates with you — for me sculpture presented a more interesting set of problems to solve, it felt more integrated into the world, and it felt like in order to show sculpture you had more to contend with, everything had to be more considered. And to me that was exciting because it was about a series of relationships and not just a square on the wall. Does that resonate with you at all?

PN: Mmm hmm, that resonates with me. I can't get the materials to paint anymore. They stopped making them.

ML: Oh really? What materials were you working with?

PN: Watercolor paper, watercolors. Just those two.

ML: Oh, so the really high quality pigments? Were you using gouache?

PN: I was using watercolor.

ML: Oh, so literally in a palette of dried watercolors?

PN: It came in a tube.

ML: Okay. So I guess the version of that that they offer today is gouache...

PN: Gouache is just watercolor with white in it.

ML: Oh, so there's a whole separate thing that's watercolors?

PN: Yes.

ML: Fascinating. Okay, also in some of your watercolors that were in the show here at the Jane Hartsook Gallery at Greenwich House, some of the works are so dense, the pigments are so rich, and there's even moments where they kind of shimmer. Is that a result of the watercolor?

PN: It's just the handling of the watercolor, yes.

ML: And so you right now in your practice make a series of figures. Can you talk about how you started making figures? There must have been a transition point. I know at some point you mentioned violins, making violins?

PN: They're just little babies.

ML: My experience of looking at them, they sort of feel like the experience of walking around the city. It's like all sorts of textures.

PN: I do walk around the city.

ML: I know you do, in all kinds of weather too. So it really does feel like you're seeing every type of person that you would see just walking around.

PN: Yes, exactly. Every type of person.

ML: And that's really a beautiful idea. Can you talk a little bit about the wooden violins? We don't have any images online.

PN: I've stopped making them, but I liked making them. They weren't real violins, they were just studies of violins.

ML: It's interesting to me because in the history of painting, the violin is a very important part of abstract painting, cubism, and so it's interesting how this violin form, from an outsider's perspective, seems to sort of be what moves you to the solo figure. It goes landscape, violin, that is kind of anthropomorphic, and then the ceramics. How do you feel about working in clay, do you like it? Do you hate it?

PN: Yes, I do, I like it very much.

ML: Can you talk about how you construct your figures?

PN: No.

ML: Is it a secret?

PN: No, it's not a secret. I'd just rather make them than talk about them.

ML: I totally respect that. [Black Ball Projects is] very curious about artists you've worked for or collaborated with over your career.

PN: I started out with Eugene Feldman, I think, in Philadelphia. I've printed for Alex Katz, for Red Grooms, for a whole bunch, I can't think of them all.

ML: Ellsworth Kelly is also a name that came up.

PN: Yes, I printed for him, yes.

ML: And what was your experience working with them? Were you involved with them or mostly their studios?

PN: It was just talk. He told me what to do and I did it.

ML: Well, that's what a master printer is supposed to do, right? And Red Grooms, I don't know if he's still around, but Alex Katz is still kicking, making work.

PN: Yes, Alex is still around.

ML: Do you have any hobbies or interests outside of your work?

PN: I used to be a hunter.

ML: A hunter? Whoah, I didn't know this about you. I'm learning this for the first time.

PN: I stopped hunting.

ML: Where would you go do that?

PN: In Pennsylvania.

ML: Where you grew up. Amazing. And at one point you've mentioned that you have keyboards in your house. Like musical keyboards, can you talk a little bit about that?

PN: I have a couple of electric pianos, a xylophone, a couple of harpsichords, and that's it.

ML: Harpsichords! Harpsichords are quite large, aren't they?

PN: They're as big as a piano, they're early pianos.

ML: You have a couple harpsichords in your apartment?

PN: No, not in my apartment, scattered out through my life.

ML: Interesting, and are you a musician? Have you ever had a practice as a musician?

PN: No, never.

ML: That's very nice. And so in your free time, do you play these instruments?

PN: I play chess in my free time.

ML: In the park?

PN: In the park.

ML: Amazing.

PN: [inaudible]

ML: Let's see, I'm trying to think if there's anything else. At what point did you shut down your print shop?

PN: There was a time when you would make one print and they would say there were 50 of them, I forget what it was called, but they blew me out of the water.

ML: Oh, so it was like competition.

PN: Not competition, it was a scam.

ML: Oh no.

PN: Yes

ML: That's terrible. And so your shop closed around that time?

PN: It closed, yes.

ML: And where was your shop located?

PN: In my house.

ML: And where was it? Where were you living?

PN: Twenty-nine Park Row.

ML: Oh! In the city?

PM: In the city.

ML: Wow, it must have looked very different then.

PN: The building is gone.

ML: Yeah, I'm sure. And it was in that loft situation where some of your paintings were lost?

PN: Yes.

ML: But luckily, you know that one of them is in the collection of the Ball State Museum?

PN: In the what?

ML: The Ball State Museum in Indiana.

PN: No, I didn't know that.

ML: Your work is in a Museum collection out there.

PN: No, I didn't know that.

ML: So know that there's one painting, a larger scale painting out there. I believe from the 70's. I don't know how it ended up there. I'm surprised you didn't know.

PN: I didn't know.

ML: Well, you learn something new every day.

PN: They don't let you know. And also Wayne State University has a bunch of them.

ML: Yes, they have a bunch of your paintings. You know, the Brooklyn Museum has work printed by you.

PN: Oh really?

ML: You're also mentioned in the Guggenheim archive, I think as a printer. How do you feel about being publicly visible as more of a craft [person] or with technically oriented language?

PN: I like craft. I think craft is a terrific idea.

ML: I know some artists feel conflicted being publicly known as like a fabricator but then also like making their own work, but you embrace that?

PN: Yes I do.

ML: Great. Do you have any other thoughts to share?

PN: None whatsoever.

ML: Well, thank you so much for sitting for this. We're wrapping up in record time.

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