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A Conversation with Artist Feldsott

“He has beyond the grad student’s level.” After a rigorous examination, it was this simple statement from a professor at the California College of the Arts that propelled artist Feldsott directly into the Master of Fine Arts program sans a baccalaureate degree. A true prodigy, but his path to notoriety was complex; there was no simple, laid-out plan to follow.

The 1970s proved highly successful for a young Feldsott when the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art took interest in him. As the list of exhibitions grew, so did his disenchantment with the business facets of being an artist at that time. By 1980, Feldsott found himself in the Amazon with anthropologist Louisa Paré and the surrounding indigenous people. Being removed from where he studied, and the art world in general, allowed him to find an existence focused on defining his artistic path and healing from a volatile childhood while learning the power of art as a dialogue. The decades he spent giving insentient objects and surfaces a soul and a story is why every piece he shares with the world resonates deeply within those who view them. We feel Feldsott’s mind exists on an intellectual plane that for us gets obscured by nonsense, a plane many of us fail to even reach. This is the very reason why we wanted to sit and speak with him about his perspectives on life and art—to have a glimpse into his experiences and fascinating history.

Our conversation opened by looking back in time to Feldsott’s youth, and the place where he spent hours absorbing the work and history of other prominent artists.

**Dredging up the past isn’t always the easiest, but you talk about a turbulent upbringing in a previous interview, was the Art Institute of Chicago the place where you found solace?**

Yes, for me, it was inspiring to be in this place. Well, back then if you went to the Chicago Art Institute you could sit in front of a painting all day and probably no one would move in front of you. These were quiet places where people went and were contemplative and spoke in low voices. I found the atmosphere of the place to be very restorative to my spirit at that time of my life. The language of painting and visual arts was something I really responded to. In other words, the way I’m wired, I really respond to visual things more easily than the spoken word or certain other ways of transmitting information. For me, it was like being in this deep

conversation with both people alive and dead that's participated in this particular kind of language. For me, it was like being with my own kind, another lineage of people who spoke and dealt in that language, and that was obviously their primary language as it felt like it was for me. I definitely hid out there, but I also spent a lot of days inspired in there.

**It's interesting because recently during a visit to a contemporary art museum in Los Angeles, we found that it was made more for social media, for quick taking photos, snapping pictures of oneself in front these displays and paintings. It leads us to wonder if people forget how to go into a museum and appreciate the pieces around them and the history of the artists on display. We forget what it took for many of these artists to even reach the heights they did or be courageous enough to open their work up to praise and criticism.**

Yes, yes, I was in Italy last year in Peggy Guggenheim's museum, and she has quite a collection assembled there. I went there, and there were these chairs that I was able to hang out on and look at some early Pollacks, and no one came into the gallery where these paintings were hanging. I spent two hours in the place by myself along with a guard. It was so wonderful and so delightful to be able to sit and be in some kind of conversation with these Pollacks and not having people cutting in front of me, and I was able to be carried off into this relationship with this painting in that time.

When I was younger I'd go find a particular painting that was interesting to me for whatever reason, and I would go into the museum to that painting and sit in front of that painting for an hour or two, and then leave so I could carry an imprint of that time with me. I realize of late; those times are gone for museums. It's impossible to have that experience, and it's so unfortunate.

**There's a perception being lost with art, there are moments when we mention Mark Rothko or Jackson Pollack or the era of Modern Art, and more often than not, we are met with confusion and blank stares. It's quite disheartening, isn't it?**

You know...you know that really also speaks to what's happening to people's consciousness these days. In other words, in order to stand in front of a Rothko and be able to experience it, you need to be able to get quiet, to stand still, and be able to absorb the painting and the field of colors into your consciousness. A consciousness that is defined by very short bursts of information and very rapid fire virtual messaging is not adapted to being able to really participate with a Rothko. There is something here that is going on that some people I'm sure are paying attention to, but there's a transformation of people's consciousness and capacity to not really [be able to] absorb these art experiences because it's being reprogrammed.

**How easy is it for young artists to become disillusioned by the business aspects of being an artist, especially now with digital technology and the hype of street art? Everything moves so quickly.**

You know it's so interesting, I'm pretty removed from those technological interfaces with the world. I purposely do that. I prefer to engage with the physical world around me, and the people around me in a physical way. That's kind of my journey and my path, and so this virtual technology that is replacing real relationships and engagements it's a little beyond me.

When I talk to young artists, I really challenge them to find their own truth. To cut out the noise and all the pressures that are coming to bear down on them to obtain something. Whether it's commercial success or produce something that is really...well, that is really tailor-made for the virtual world that is asking for those things, and asking themselves what's true and authentic to them. They need to believe in that, trust it, and follow it to see where it leads. Maybe it leads into commercial success, and maybe it doesn't, who knows, that's a very, very fickle thing—the pursuit of that. I'm always encouraging artists to find their voices, to be truthful and to be courageous and that's been my consistent message to young artists that are emerging or ones who cross my path and ask about my journey and life.

**You've spent time in the Amazon with the indigenous people away from being inundated with technology and politics, and you speak very fondly of them and the healing experience. How did your art continue there?**

I was there for prolonged periods of time, I would often carry down with me certain drawing utensils, sketch pads and paper and things easy to transportable, and I'd find myself in a village, and I would sit and draw. I would draw things I was looking at or occurred to me, and sure enough, the children in the village would often come around and see what I was doing, and people would come and comment. It was interesting because being in villages where even Spanish wasn't commonly spoken, just traditional dialects, so the ability to communicate through spoken or written language was minimal, yet people would comment and be excited and feel included. It was really interesting to see art in that kind of context become some universal language that transcended the limitations of peoples' spoken language.

**Has the time spent there carried into your current work?**

I think people in the early 70s would make comments and observations about my work having some kind of primordial, primitive aspect to it. So, when I went to the Amazon, there was a quality to my work that resonated with the traditional people. For me, I'm always kind of going

back to identifying that original DNA in myself that is “ancient.” It’s not acculturated, it’s not mimicking, it’s older than that. It’s something we all share, and we all have this lineage inside of us. You know Joseph Campbell talked about the mythic consciousness in all of us, so there is a place inside of us that has access to that imagery, to those ways of art making, image making and storytelling that’s old as old as can be. That has always been a very, very strong fiber that runs through my work, no matter what I might be investigating or exploring in any particular phase in my life. That fiber had remained consistent and has been consistent since the early 70s when my work first started to emerge.

**This primitive fiber you speak of that flows through your artwork and how it looks, it reminds us of a time when the famous poet and author James “Jim” Carroll mistook one of your sculptures for being an ancient artifact. When he had a difficult time believing it was your work, you brought him to your studio, and we wondered what his reaction was?**

It was quite a funny situation. Jim and I were neighbors in Bolinas in the years he lived there, and Bolinas at that time in the early 70s was a magnet for people from the Poetry Movement. It was a place where all these poets would hang out, and Jim was certainly part of that group. Back then, I would make this art in my studio, and in the middle of the night, I would go out and leave the art out around the wharf and the beach. The idea back then of making art and leaving it in random places for people to discover was not very common, to say the least.

So, Jim went out and would take his dog for a walk almost every day on a certain route along the wharf and beach, and that’s when he discovered one of these sculptures. It did look very ancient and like the fossilized remains of something. He actually dragged this thing home and gathered all these poets who were hanging out in Bolinas at the time to look at his discovery. He was quite excited. He felt he found something from pre-Columbian times or something. So, he’s got this wet, dripping, rock-like thing in the middle of his room covered in seaweed, and all these poets gathered around the room studying it for clues to determine what era it was from, what culture it was from, and what museum to give it to.

Finally, they think to themselves, “let’s go get Kenny, he’s an artist, he’ll know how to kind of identify it.” They come and get me, and drag me to the living room, and I start laughing because I told them I made that, and they looked at me in disbelief because they thought they found this extremely valuable artifact and they were thinking about what it meant and what it was worth. There was a bit of disbelief and shock, and they were still asking me to tell them what culture it was from. Finally, they wrapped their minds around the fact that I really did make this, and then it shifted from disbelief to quite a bit of good-natured bantering around the idea of some artist working in a studio at night and then depositing his artwork randomly in the environment, and

leaving it there for people to come across. We all got a good laugh about it, and I left the piece with Jim. I couldn't bear to take it back, "it's yours, you found it, it's yours," I told him.

**When we think about this story and the timing of it, this was a time where street art wasn't how we think of street art now, from the graffiti scene in the 90s to how it has evolved. In a way, you actually started this idea of leaving artwork accessible to the public, to everyone, and not in a museum or in a gallery, but out in the open.**

Yes, back then, when I was doing that, it wasn't a common thing. Now, it can be a vehicle towards becoming recognized or discovered in some way. Artists leave their marks all over their city or their environment until you realize that mark is for a certain artist. I wasn't doing it to be discovered. I didn't think it would lead back to myself. It was really just this idea of making this stuff and leaving it out in the world, and it had a life of its own, and to see what people make of it.

**To strike conversation and inspiration?**

Yes. Yes, to let it just be out there.

**Before we go, we are a bit curious, how has the famous art historian Peter Selz affected your life and perhaps your art?**

You know, Peter is just an enormous person in my life from the point of view of his friendship, his care, his love, and it's transcended our relationship beyond art. Art was the starting point where we met, but it grew beyond that. It is something I'll always cherish. When you meet Peter, and certainly when I met him, he's just extraordinary as a person, from not only the art historical point of view but [he] has this insatiable curiosity and excitement and ability to really see deeply into pieces of artwork.

He has a life of dedication to that language of art and has never lost his excitement for discovery. Even as Peter pushed into his nineties, he was always asking what's next and what I'm working on in the studio. He was an extraordinary force of nature. I've seldom encountered that in my life, and that was an inspiration. He came into my life with all of these stories and history and connections to the abstract and German expressionists—that art that emerged in the 50s, 60s, and 70s. He was so instrumental in bringing those artists into the attention of the public. Without him, I don't know what we would know about Rothko, so it's staggering to really understand his contribution to the whole story of Modern Art.

To have someone come into my life, someone who has lived as an outsider to the art world and followed my own path, it was amazing. It was transformational. Peter spent quite a bit of time coming here and to the studio. He always loved coming to the studio, and even when it was difficult for him to get around, he would insist that no visit to my house was complete without going into the studio and looking at the art to observe and comment. He and I had many amazing conversations, and for me, it was an amazing sort of cross-cultural experience to have this esteemed art historian and curator to be in these dialogues with me. I don't know if it really influenced my work, but it's more like having someone who was a real inspiration. I hope when I'm in my nineties, I'm just as enthralled with things like him and have that same curiosity.