

NYC ARTS RADIO
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AM INTRO:

NYC Arts Radio covers stories about what is it to BE a visual artist.

This episode highlights an incredible story of collaboration between the well-known New York City based visual artist Ray Smith and the artists and co-founders of MANA Contemporary, Yigal Ozeri and Eugene Lemay.

Of Ray’s work New York Times writer Hilarie M. Sheets recently said it is a (quote) “contemporary blend of magical realism and modernism, reflecting his bicultural heritage of Mexico and the United States.”

The story you are about to hear is not so much about the pieces of art Ray makes, but about two types of communities which provide a very special and crucial role in building and maintaining artistic community.

I met up with Ray at his home, invited in like an old friend. The walls, bookcases, and shelves covered tastefully with art, mostly appearing of Mexican origin alongside other worldly objects.

Together, we walked to Cafe Select to have our conversation about the remarkable story that transpired between Ray and MANA after Hurricane Sandy, in which Ray lost his art studio.

AM:

We met at Antonio Murado’s house for that dinner party.

RS:

Yes, which was very sweet, actually. Had the storm already happened?

AM:

Yes.

RS:

Yes. So I was already wining about that.

RS:

I’m Ray Smith, I’m an artist and I’m a New Yorker.

AM VOICEOVER 1:

At that dinner I noticed Ray is adept at great conversation, whether in his native Spanish or English he is a force of nature. But what Ray does is make paintings; a great deal of them. They are often portraits and figures, painted with vibrant colors on oversized wooden panels or canvases and larger than life size wooden sculptures, which are made using layer upon layer of wood, thick heavy and bold.

AM:

I wanted to interview you mostly about that conversation that happened that night about your studio, and the destruction from Sandy. What was your studio like before?

RS:

I’ve owned that building now for about, I don’t know, about 13 years. But the studio really hadn’t been completely functioning there let’s say until probably 2005.

AM VOICEOVER 2:

I need to expand, Ray's studio is in the Gowanus area of Brooklyn, close to the Gowanus Canal. The single story building has a high ceiling, equipped with a disco ball, a half mezzanine and a yard outside. Besides using this space as his art making studio he also houses and supports many artists - for example, Jerry Otero and his organization Creative Youth Inc., which helps marginalized youths experience the possibilities of life through art. He also accommodates the whole Bruce High Quality Foundation collaborative.

RS:

And the reason, that was is because we had to renovate it and they had to do certain things to pass it over to us, so it took awhile for us to receive it . And then when we moved in there we, a lot of different projects began which it kinda like became a bit of a collaborative studio for a bit, meaning that I was using it definitely but, the Bruce High Quality was there also working on certain things and there was just you know there was just a lot of people going in and out all the time. And we did, we did a project with the Bruce High Quality called, called Smith-umenta, which was like their Brucennials, I guess. A lot of different artists showing up and just hanging their work on the walls . And it was a lot of fun. So the whole studio from the time that we moved into it had taken on this special kind of spirit about it and it was a combination between a studio a discotheque and a. So it was a very lively place. It just had a very particular type of energy to it.

AM VOICEOVER 3:

Studio collaboration and the general artist community occurring at Ray's studio before Hurricane Sandy was similar in function and philosophy to the goings on at MANA Contemporary: a million and a half square foot, well, I guess, let's call it - an artist guild for now - in Jersey City, NJ. Here's one if the Co-Founders, Yigal Ozeri, who is also an artist, actually I just saw his work in Madrid, at the renowned Museo Thyssen - Bornemisza.

YO:

I've known Ray from the end of the 8th year when I was in NY, he shows with Gagosian, with a lot of major gallery, Sperone. And I follow his art and he was like, always like really a little bit like an outsider - he came from Mexico,

RS:

Yes, first of all because I was born on the border of Mexico and the United States so, in a small, in a town called Brownsville, Texas. I grew up in Mexico City.

YO:

he was involved with a big group of the 80s, including Schnabel, Clemente, all of these artists. He was the youngest in that group.

AM VOICEOVER 4:

Before we get too far,... MANA is an old tobacco factory beside the Journal Square stop of the PATH train and is now what I like to call an artists island. Using Ray's words, (quote) "To define MANA is to institutionalize it." It is difficult to say everything about MANA Contemporary as its function changes daily. However, what can be said is that the space is filled with almost every artistic resource one could need. Yigal will explain a bit more and introduce fellow artist and Co-Founder, Eugene Lemay.

YO:

I met Eugene Lemay, two years ago, he invite me to this building and he said let's do something together and I knew all the history about MANA and Moishe

AM VOICEOVER 5:

This is the same man that owns Moishe Moving, the well known NYC moving and storage institution.

YO:

and I said the best idea is to let's build the center that will fulfill everything in the art world.

EL:

It's a community for artists many different variations of, what an artist would need in a community. We have here right now 70 artists, we have here exhibition spaces, right now 5. We have a foundry, gallery spaces, frame shops, 3D facilities.

YO:

we are a professional storage space - there is a lot of major gallery, museum and artist and individual collectors storage their work and their art here.

EL:

We have food. I really believe that people, over food, have conversations and it's not a lecture, and it's not one sided. By having food you sit and you pass on ideas and you talk and you get the small talk, while you get the great ideas.

AM VOICEOVER 6:

Food is a great informal opportunity meant to be shared, as you recall, this is how I met Ray. Here's the thing, MANA is always looking to improve on ways of creating community. Ray is a community leader. The two coming together on a project was inevitable.

OK, back to how Yigal met Ray..

YO:

Ysabel (Pinyol) that work for Eugene and me, she was an art dealer and she knew him personally and one day she invite us to a studio before what's happened in Sandy and we start to talk about what we can do - something together with him . Ray besides that he is an artist, he is a collector, he is a curator. But Ray always keep his connection with the young young generation and he always bring artists to his studio - this is what is fascinating - he create communities and that was our fascination with him.

AM VOICEOVER 7:

"A true artist is not one who is inspired, but one who inspires others." - Dalí
Here is how Eugene describes meeting Ray.....

EL:

See my view of Ray is a little bit different. I met Ray only, about a year and a half ago, ...Yigal knew him for many years. And for me, bringing people like Ray into MANA it's not, for me it has to fit into the group. I less look at the art. Even though I love Ray's art, but it's not an issue of his art. But there's many great artists out there, there really is - the world has too many artists in it - in a certain way. But Ray is an amazing artist, but that wasn't the main detail for me.

AM VOICEOVER 8:

Yes, art is the point here, but how does one make their selection in a city that is filled with so much talent and so many images.

RS:

Well, fuck I mean we are in NY, everybody works on images.

RS:

New York, which is the really cool part about New York and living here is that this city for some God forsaken reason is, and I don't know what it is, You know for the past 200 and some odd years has attracted some of the most talented people on the planet. And it's done it consistently, meaning that it didn't, it never stopped, they just

started coming and they kept coming they kept coming they kept coming. And still today every year they're springing out of the earth. And that, THAT, that's the talent. I mean that's the, you know, that's the you know the seductiveness of the City. And it's the one thing where I think your money should go.

RS:

Well, maybe, you know, I'm just a cowboy.

AM:

Yeah.

RS:

Yes.

AM VOICEOVER 9:

"Personality is everything in art and poetry." - Goethe

EL:

I went for Ray the man, I really believe in his view of the world, how he loves the artists around him, how he - you know a real artist, similar to Yigal - is artists is everything about them - it's what's all around them - the way they set their table, where they put the cup on the table. This is what Ray was about for me. And then I looked at him and I saw he was working with young people, how he's sharing, how he's giving and then - so that was the first phase of Ray. I wanted to do his show because of the man, not so much for the art, I was really interested in him.

RS:

MANA was kind of, it was really sort of like a bit of magic. I had been speaking to them about they had wanted me to do a show there.

AM VOICEOVER 10:

The idea to do an exhibition with Ray was on the minds of both Yigal and Eugene before the storm. They had seen within Ray's studio like-mindedness with their own thinking - as to how a studio should operate, and knew he would fit in. Nailing down the concept of the slated show would soon follow.

RS:

Well, they wanted me to do something there.

And we were trying to go over like who was going to curate it, how was it going to get curated, what was going to be the context of the show, what was going to be in it and what, how the whole thing was going to build itself.

And then the last time I saw anybody from MANA was Yigal who went out there. He loved being in the studio at that moment because there was a lot of things going on.

AM:

The walls were covered, the floor's covered with sculptures and stacked paintings and.

AM VOICEOVER 11:

...artists and assistants were there making work....

RS:

My daughter was going to do a fashion show there and there was a photo shoot for Bullet Magazine, it was kind of like everything was going on.

AM:

A fully functioning space.

RS:

Exactly. And it was all happening at one time and then what happened was is that Yigal came out there and saw the studio and saw the energy and he basically said, ok, I don't want to do like a retrospective show, I don't want to do anything like that, I want to move your studio to MANA. That's what he said.

AM:

He wanted the energy in the space.

RS:

He said I want this whole thing at MANA.

AM VOICEOVER 12:

In case you missed that, there it was, the work and the energy of Ray's space had captured Yigal and Eugene almost immediately.

They wanted to bring Ray's studio to MANA Contemporary.

RS:

Then that actually kind of like sort of worried me because I thought well now that's a maneuver but if he's so enthu..., anyway at that particular moment I began to feel a little, I thought, well now that's a good interesting context so now I really did start thinking, ok, well let's do this show at MANA. We'll move Ray Smith's studio out there for two months and we'll rock and roll.

YO:

Now, so when we came to his studio, we start to design a show, in the middle of that year, suddenly happened Sandy and the studio got really messed up.

RS:

Everything was on tables. Everything was raised you know over 4 feet.

But all of the paintings that were in the storage facilities, with the exception of a few, had all been raised. But the water didn't come in four feet, it came in 8 feet, you know and so.

AM:

8 feet!?

RS:

it just doubled the scale of what that was there.

Not only that, because it goes up that high, then everything that was up say that was raised was all now boats.

They are all floating around all over the place because everything is now gone to swimming.

AM:

Right right because who would assume that it would go so high to loft things up, to pull things off the walls.

RS:

So we got, yeah, we've got gigantic wooden sculptures floating around like, you know like...

AM:

Boueys

RS:

Like barges.

AM:

Like barges!

RS:

They are massive and so they were going around hitting things and they were hitting against the wall and crushing things, all the water entered, because of the level of the sea, or the river.

So now, it's got to drain via the drainage system of the studio.

Well it started getting clogged, yeah, but what it did also was that it, it brought everything to one point.

So it was all into the same thing, so that becomes like another damn.

AM:

This is so intense.

RS:

Yeah, so now you can't get rid of the water because it's all damned up inside the sewer system, so now you've got to pump it out.

AM:

Right

RS:

So by the time that we got in there, and mind you the water is chemicals from the Gowanus Canal, which is

AM:

just vile.

RS:

a superfund site.

RS:

Right and, sewage from the whole

AM:

Sewage from everywhere.

RS:

From the whole neighborhood. and all different types of stuff that's all over the place so you just, you're going in there and I can't even imagine you know, you just can't imagine, you know.

AM:

It's just toxic.

RS:

I mean because you are no longer in a studio or anything like that, you are now in a toxic dump of sorts and you're trying to save whatever it is you think. you can save. So, and that - you are trying to access at the moment. So it turns into kind of like a battlefield. And you're trying to - you're saying ok, send that over there, see if we can save that.

AM:

A triage unit of artwork, yeah

RS:

Exactly.

And then this, you just destroy it.

Throw all this away.

AM:

Did you have to destroy a lot of work?

RS:

Yeah, we had to destroy quite a bit, but it - the thing that we were destroying the most was obviously materials. So linens and canvases and all different types...

AM:

That can debilitate somebody. All your finances, yeah

RS:

It was very depressing.

AM VOICEOVER 13:

He had to leave his studio, there was no doubt about it. He was faced with the raw reality most had at that time - recovery, and most likely alone. Well, on the contrary. Ray and his studio were now the ones in need, and all the people who he had once given to, were certainly going to give back. 15 kids from Creative Youth Inc. showed up to help their generous friend. Then, Ray's friend who owns a local construction company, came with a team in hazmat suits carrying biocide to combat the blooming mold that was attaching itself to everything, especially fabrics. Marianna, Ray's daughter, was acting as head nurse in the battle to save as much work as possible, despite Ray's impulse to dump what he thought was not worth saving or could be redone.

- Works in progress were immediately dumped, about 20.
- Collapsed cardboard tubes holding numerous large paintings were destroyed.
- Basically, all studio contents had to be washed, dried AND treated with chemicals.
- Small and large canvases that were stretched on wooden supports had to be taken off, washed, treated and re-stretched, not an easy task with limited hands and limited space.

Also, the necessities of Ray's full recovery were not available considering the equipment and tools to remake the wooden structures were no longer functioning due to their own waterlogged demise. There was so much in the studio to tackle and most importantly to dry. Due to the quantity of the damaged work, restoring the studio and its contents seemed like an insurmountable obstacle.

AM:

So you had insurance. Did you have insurance?

RS:

We had but it wasn't it was irrelevant at the tail end of it because basically what they wanted to do was that they wanted to pay us to restore. If we came in and took pictures of everything then they would send a conservator even if we got somebody that sat there and said this is a total loss.

AM:

Right.

RS:

They would sit there and say no it's not. So then they'd say well we need to get it restored. And we are going to send it somewhere to get it restored and then we'd say well, and they'd say, well you're the best restorer, 'cause you're the guys that made it.

AM:

Right

RS:

So, we'll pay you to restore it! And I'd say, if we're restoring, then we're out of business then.

AM:

Right because you need to be making new work, not restoring the old.

RS:

Exactly. So we had to figure out how all of that was going to happen.

AM VOICEOVER 14:

Ray likened the whole process to “watching yourself bleed, and wondering when was it going to stop.” Making art is a slow process, the combined time of paintings lost and restoring others would amount to a back track of at least 3 years time. The storm hit and the studio was out of commission. The idea of moving the studio now appeared to be lost along with it. Perhaps 30 years of art history and future sales were on their way down the drain. However, while paintings and sculptures were taking unmanned pleasure cruises in the newly formed reservoir of Ray Smith's studio.....

EL:

We called him up to see what happened, are you ok, is everything ok? Actually, for me it was more like a courtesy call I didn't think for a moment that something - it was a disaster, I didn't think in those terms really. And he told me it was a disaster and whatever and I says ok, so let's go out and see. I was myself Yigal and Ysabel, we went out to see him and when I saw his studio and the disaster I knew there was no way an artist of with so many years working and so much work over so 30 years span that if we didn't pull him out of there he would go back to a normal life (as an artist). I mean, I would give up. If I was in his shoes I would give up. I'd say Fuck It this is not worth managing. So, I said to Ray “Let's take it as it is, what we see here and let's make a show out of it.”

AM VOICEOVER 15:

As you heard, before the storm the show was already in the works. The fact that the storm hit did not deter MANA, but gave them another opportunity to do something more than just have an exhibition...

EL:

First of all it would be a good show, second of all it will pull you out of all this chaos, it will be part of the process, which me and Yigal are always like preachers - the word process is like every second word we say. So for me it was about the process with Ray, Ray with his process outside of MANA and bringing it here and cleaning up the work, putting it on the walls and Ray pulling them out of this chaos. And that, of course, naturally went into has to do with the studio, and that's when the friendship started. And that's what I mean by choosing people that will fit into the organization, so that is what happened with Ray. It was very natural, I chose first of all the person then I go and see the second phase which is the art or what you can do or not do with them.

YO:

Eugene said, you know we going to rescue you let's do it, let's move, without anything, just send the truck. We put all his work, fix all the stuff, without that...first we take care for the artists, we take care of our family. You know like you save your family.

AM VOICEOVER 16:

and that's how you're rescued. MANA, the larger version of what Ray was already doing, swept in and aided Ray when he needed it most. It was a surprise and ultimately a relief for Ray that they were coming in the knick of time....

RS:

So I wasn't exactly thinking of prancing around trying to do a show for that matter. I mean I just knew that we had to do something to try and save our butts or whatever. But, basically at that point, it was figuring out how are we going to do that. And then MANA sent the trucks over. They said we want to help you and so they sent all the...We were already kind of going into that and so now they said ok we are just going to keep going with the idea

of the show and you're going to just send all the work over here because what's the difference. Well now we don't even have to think about the context of the show is, now the context of the show is literally try and save this shit.

AM VOICEOVER 17:

The hurricane solidified the original idea of moving Ray's studio to MANA. However, before the exhibition could be a glimmer there were the very present stages of the recovery process:

Stage 1. Get the work cleaned, dried and chemically treated. With Ray's extended community this stage was happening, but there was no room to put anything once it was cleaned.

Stage 2. Get the work out of the studio to be dried, assessed and accounted for.

MANA was crucial in Stage 2. Without them getting the work out of the studio space the whole process would have slowed down to a crawl, where speed was crucial. MANA used their abundant resources to remake the oversized wooden structures, dry the work and get the canvases back on stretchers, which due to their size can require multiple people. They used their space to make more space for Ray to restore work and battle the mold. MANA moved, backed, stored and framed a great deal more works than were in the exhibition, all at their own cost.

EL:

I think it was one of the most fun shows I have personally ever done here at MANA and it had to do with Ray as a person. Ray the Man. That was supposed to be the name of the show but somehow it got slipped.

YO:

The art world with every generation brings something else and when you saw his work in MANA, you feel so fresh, there's something that is so good you know and feel that you know and all the people feel that you know. And then now Eugene offer him to bring his whole community actually to here, all the young generation to work with him, and basically it's a free studio, just tables and they come and they work.

AM VOICEOVER 18:

The exhibition was a triumph beyond the typical show; ultimately the work was resurrected for the viewers and the coverage in the NYTimes was more than favorable. Not only did MANA clean Ray's work and exhibit it with great fanfare, Yigal and Eugene added another gem, they said, "Come, bring your operation here while you get back on your feet." It was an invitation for Ray and his community to occupy one of MANA's spaces until Ray was ready to return to his Gowanus studio. Ray too was thrilled about his overall experience with Yigal and Eugene.

RS:

Yeah and what I think is really sweet about MANA is that it's actually run by artists.

AM VOICEOVER 19:

Meaning, yes, clearly they empathized with Ray over his studio situation and loss, but also truly understood his needs as an artist as they too live it. MANA was founded upon their combined knowledge of the necessities of artists, like themselves.

RS:

This is in the air, it wasn't as though it's just like us. This is something that is happening and we're artists I guess are figuring that they can in a sense kind of invent the institution. We need that kind of like support to the degree that not everyone is sitting around there trying to scrounge off the next tube of Titanium White. They know what the process is and basically guess what MANA wanted? MANA kinda wanted what we were doing at the studio already anyway. It's a large collaborative space where artists would in essence be the guys that would have their space. Because the museums have their space. Right.

AM:

Yes

RS:

And all these other people have their space.

AM:

Everybody has their space

RS:

Except that we're the guys that are out on the street, you know.

AM:

Paying two rents.

RS:

Yeah, paying two rents.

There you go - you see, you know what your...

AM VOICEOVER 20:

This reciprocal relationship between artist and institution is not typical, but distinctive:

EL:

I think also more than usual in the art world we give a lot, but we also ask back a lot. And this is something very unique because usually it's all about money. I'll give you something that you need and you give me something that we need here, the center needs. And with Ray the same thing happened, we gave to him and he gave back. There is much more value in that in the end because usually in the art world it's just about taking, you know. The gallery tries to take from the artist, takes 50%, but what is he really giving. And the artist works like a slave just to make that show. So here it's just a little bit opposite - here I'll give you where you give back to me.

AM:

Are you going to get into the Gowanus space at some point?

RS:

Yeah, I think so, at some point, I mean obviously yes. My daughter in a sense is kind of going over there to try and rebuild the spirit of the place .

AM:

Oh great.

RS:

and that's really kind of more what's happening at this point, it's really not so much like ok, we just of sort of want to see what else we can do with it, you know. I think it will become more of a collaborative place. Where we'll probably have events and pop up shows and certainly I'll paint there and we'll spend, we'll do work there and all that kind of stuff, but I think that just now on a kind of sort of retrospect as to what had happened there and what the kind of spirit that it had and things like that I think that, and also the funny thing is that the studio in a kind of odd way was kind of going in sort of the same direction as MANA is sort of proposing as an art center.

AM VOICEOVER 21:

At this time MANA is providing Ray with a studio space large enough to make everything he needs to create. Ray still uses the Gowanus space to make enormous paintings that span the whole studio wall, to exhibit other artists works, and to have large gatherings. Marianna and Ray recently hosted an exhibition there thanking those who contributed to Ray Smith's Studio post Sandy while simultaneously congratulating the Bruce High Quality Foundation on their Brooklyn Museum show. With each event they are reviving the space back to life. Rebuilding

and joining these two extraordinary visions of community was an emotional experience for all involved. This newly formed greater community continues to grow and regenerate for the next generation of artists. Here, it wasn't the discussion of money, but improvisational use of blood and sweat equity to revive something that will keep giving.

AM:

Thank you and have a good day at the studio.

RS:

Thanks a lot.

CREDITS:

Thank you for listening to NYC Arts Radio.

You can stream this and other episodes for free on our website: NYCArtsRadio.com
There you can also submit your email, or follow us on Facebook, Twitter and Vine.

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