

Conversation with Lucy Puls

By Mary Jo Matsumoto

April 12, 2022



[Lucy Puls](#) works with images and objects to explore our human relationship to material possessions. Awarded a Joan Mitchell Foundation Painters & Sculptors Grant in 2017, Puls is a Professor Emeritus of Art at the University of California, Davis. She has completed residencies at Yaddo, MacDowell Colony, Pilchuck, and the Kala Art Institute and has participated in numerous solo and group exhibitions nationally and internationally. Represented by [Nicelle Beauchene Gallery](#), New York, NY, her work is in many private and public collections in California, including the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, the Oakland Museum, The Berkeley Art Museum, the Achenbach Foundation for Graphic Arts, The Crocker Art Museum, the Jan Shrem and Maria Manetti Shrem Museum of Art, the di Rosa Center for Contemporary Art, as well as the Honolulu Museum of Art in Honolulu and the Jewish Museum in New York, among others. I thoroughly enjoyed learning more about her work and process. Her wise advice for artists, especially women, makes this worth a read for anyone pursuing a life in art.



Delapous (Linoleum Floor x 2), 82x 48 x 20 inches, pigment ink on paper, aluminum wire, epoxy, steel powder, 2019

MJM: What kind of work you were doing when you were in college or getting your MFA at RISD? At what point did it become clear to you that sculpture was what you wanted to do?

Lucy Puls: My head-slapping moment was senior year. Until then Art was Art. The differences between disciplines seemed unimportant. Now I realized I'd been mistaken. The secret life of my just completed silver and copper tea strainer was all in my head. It was not monumental sculpture. No amount of eye-level gazing, imagining tiny people walking underneath could make it so.

Back then, the art world had a clear, rigid hierarchy. Painting and sculpture were tops. Crafts or the craft-like were dismissed as not important. Even professors in those areas appeared accepting of/resigned to an underdog status. Weaving and Textiles, so very hot today, was not even in the Art Department but across campus in Home Economics.

By the time my understanding of the concerns and arguments about the differences between fine art and crafts become clear, I was already on my way across the country to begin a graduate Metalsmithing program.

So, I'd never studied Sculpture per se. Lest you forget, back then, sculpture was energetically gate-kept by professors and students who believed it occupied a strictly masculine domain. I was exploding with curiosity but didn't have the resources to negotiate and/or fend off the aggressions aimed at women who ventured into that area. Stories and rumors circulated about female students and male professors. I understood it as the price paid for trespassing and kept my distance.



Delapaus (View from Family Room), 130 x 112 x 35in, pigment ink on paper, metal table frame, reflective glass beads, binder, 2021

MJ: Do you have a studio at home or do you do your work in another location?

Lucy Puls: My studio is five feet from my house. I get there by taking several big steps. Twenty-five years ago, this was a necessity; I had a young child and taught full-time an hour away. It's a joy to be so close to my studio. No driving. I can work long and late hours, maximizing work time. When I was teaching, carving out available studio time was difficult. Whatever amount of studio time I did have none of it was wasted commuting.

If possible, I make work in parts. I build then unbuild then rebuild to ensure a piece can be reliably disassembled and reassembled. This helps make storage and shipping less of a nightmare. But still, like most artists who've been working awhile I rent outside storage.



Delapsus (Living Room w/Cable), 143 x 84 x 62in, pigment ink on paper, found chandelier, cotton piping, ink, mica, reflective glass, magnets, metal hardware, 2020

MJ: Can you talk a little about your process, if there's an order or way that you develop an idea? How you decide to use the materials that you work with?

Lucy Puls: I have long been interested in ideas of capitalism, and desire, and discards. How those things affect the way we see ourselves. I start with found objects that are currently dismissed as outdated and/or trash. Things having little value. Stuff that almost causes one to cringe over its un-coolness. I find there is a connection between the physical objects that are discarded and an idea in culture reinforcing the discarding.

MJ: I know you've said that being a woman in sculpture, especially the kind of sculpture you make, just wasn't done much when you started. What are the things you think have changed for women in sculpture and what are the things you think have not changed and you would like to see change?

Lucy Puls: In the late 80's female sculptors suddenly began to be noticed and appreciated to a larger degree. Some of the most interesting sculpture was being done by women. For the longest time it was just the two Louise's (Nevelson and Bourgeois), and Eva Hesse. Of course, I know now, in retrospect, that there were many more women creating sculpture using nontraditional materials and techniques than I was aware of. Students like me were reliant on monographs and exhibition catalogs from the school library or by (feverishly) reading monthly art publications. This was before the internet. Artists not found in those publications were difficult to learn about. Nevertheless, during that time in the 1980's a thaw began in several areas that changed attitudes. The hierarchy of materials and techniques lessened. There was a growing acceptance of sculpture as rightfully being anything three-dimensional. There was a greater cognizance that art made by women did not make it lessor. The bullying requirement that artists master and commit to one discipline was being abandoned.



Delapsus (Carpet Adjoining Vinyl Marble Tile Floor), 130 x 76 x 69in, pigments ink on paper, various silver-plated serving items, reflective glass beads, binder, hardware, 2021

Other helpful things happening at that time was the hiring of more women on teaching faculty, especially in sculpture. And significant energy from art writers and activist groups like the Guerrilla Girls was directed at pointing out gender inequities in the art world.

It was considered going rogue when I did both sculpture and photography while a metalsmithing grad at RISD. Today it's common. Artists and art students can work in several disciplines concurrently without anyone flaring their nostrils. [Marsha Tucker's Bad Painting exhibition](#) at the New Museum in 1978 made the argument that artists did not have to roll out bona fides or stay in prescribed lanes of content/imagery to be considered legitimate. The art world was loosening up, becoming more generous with its idea of what art could be and who could make it.

What has not changed? Museum exhibitions, collections, and prices do not reflect the population of artists working. The art world clearly does not reflect the population at large. During decades of teaching, female students always outnumbered the males. Yet, graduated female students seem to vanish. A lack of opportunities and the way in which our culture is structured is a major factor. Even today female artists are not sufficiently supported. Things are better but not *all* better.

MJ: Who are the people/artists/teachers who have influenced you?

Lucy Puls: When I was young the influence of others was incredibly meaningful. Looking back, I'm surprised to include two people I never met and a grumpy professor.



Delapsus (Bedroom, Mirrored Closet Door, Mini Blinds, Movie Poster), 130 x 85 x 84in, pigment ink on paper, floor standing lamp, metal folding chair, DVD movie, stickers, reflective glass beads, binder, steel hardware, 2021

1. Joni Mitchell was a huge inspiration. As a teenager I carefully studied album covers inside and out, gleefully discovering Joni Mitchell was a real flesh and blood person. Just like me! She was not from another era. Joni was on the earth. I was on the earth. How amazing! (Reflecting on it now, I'm surprised by my surprise. Did I assume she was made-up? Something from fiction?) I imagined Joni eating and writing and singing and laughing as I went about my day. When walking home from school I'd think to myself "in this exact moment Joni Mitchell might be having a smoke and writing lyrics for a new song". The Blue album became my young life's soundtrack. With the record player arm set to the right, one side of the album could be repeated. Over and over and day after day. Ad nauseam to everyone else in my home. The brilliance of Blue, wrestled from a lived life, provided the big courage I needed to move forward from a difficult family situation. I was sixteen. I dreamed of being an artist. Joni Mitchell was my first role-model.

2. Professor [Fred Fenster](#) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison taught Metalsmithing and Jewelry. He was important to the 19-year-old me because of his consistency towards students. He assumed the best; he didn't doubt our abilities. This casual conviction was outsized in its effect. He didn't question my or anybody else's ability to learn or take up space. FYI, this professor was not a warm and fuzzy person; his countenance was no-nonsense and direct but his trust and belief in us was genuine. Little did he know how crucial that was.

3. In the hundreds of pages of my big fat Art History textbook there wasn't a single profile of a female artist. Prehistoric to Renaissance to Modern. Thousands of years of history. Plenty of Virgin Mary though. What made me think I could do this? A few years later, at MOMA's bookstore, I spotted [Lucy Lippard's monograph on Eva Hesse](#). It flashed by on the spinning wire display stand. Who is this Eva Hesse? It was 1978; I was 23. My life forever changed. Imprinted.

MJ: What is your best advice for artists first starting their journey? Do you think it's important to focus on showing work while developing a body of work? Do you recommend being very methodical about applying to shows or do you think it's more important to concentrate on working and then start looking for the best fit?

Lucy Puls: Advice is tricky. As you would expect, this advice is based on my experiences and values, and what I see as important. So, with that proviso in mind, let's begin with what is most essential, without which there is really no point.

1. You must feel you cannot bear to be doing anything else. With your life, time, resources. Even as belief in the work and by extension yourself will certainly wax and wane over time, it will be impossible to turn off the drive to make art. Or to stop thinking about art. Or seeing things in your daily life that inspire artmaking. It's best to have no choice in the matter.

2. Give yourself time to develop your work. This may take years.

3. Once you have finished work, be ready. This is the non-artmaking part. Document the work, carefully store it, keep an inventory list, keep your resume and website updated, post a bit to IG, etc. Stuff like that. If this stuff is in order, then applying for grants, residencies, exhibitions, and competitions of any sort will be easier to complete.

4. Take advantage of interesting opportunities as they present. Try not to let fear or uncertainty be the reason for turning things down.



Delapsus (Kichen Cabines, Ceiling, Door to Garage), 130 x 84 x 54in, pigments ink on paper, various silver-plated serving items, epoxy resin, shredded sive powder, black magnum, magnets, reflective glass beads, binder, steel hardware, 2021

J: Do you have any particular advice for women artists?

Lucy Puls: Remember you live in a patriarchy. It is so ubiquitous it can sometimes be hard to see. Like that story of the fish not noticing the water. You may find quicker rewards for doing work that is not in your best interest as a woman. This is especially true if it reinforces patriarchy in some way. You may find that advice given in general to artists just doesn't seem to work for you. None of this is a conspiracy, it's everyday life in a system not optimized for you. Keep this in mind. Be true to yourself.

MJ: What was your fox and bunny moment?

Lucy Puls: I became aware of the predator-prey relationship (Fox and Bunny) when I was just starting out; but frankly it's an ongoing threat. My thinking: if the fox is a metaphor for the patriarchal system, then it's still nipping at my heels. But rather than a bunny fleeing, how about an alternate metaphor? Something that symbolizes persistence.

In Appalachia the ticks were frightening. So large! I'm sure I'd never seen an actual tick before moving to North Carolina. One evening I spotted a bug traveling across the living room floor. Without thinking I stepped on it. Pulling my shoe away it looked thoroughly flattened. Journey interrupted—so, I thought! In the time it took to fetch a paper towel the bug came back to life and resumed its trek. Several times more I stepped on it. This bug (a tick, I discovered later) was unstoppable. Just like the military tanks in WWII movies seen on TV when I was a child.

As a freshman I was called into the Chair's office. Eighteen years old and completely naive to the ways of my new environment, I felt like an oddball. How could it be that I was the only one baffled by the sight of an old woman in the hallway wearing nothing but a bathrobe and pair of flip-flops? Some students said hello to her by name as they passed by. It was bizarre. This was my state, unsophisticated and unaware of Figure Drawing class.

The Department Chair wanted to have a conversation with me about switching to a more practical major, specifically Education. With that degree, jobs would be plentiful with "summers off with the kids". He believed it was quite unlikely I'd have a future as an artist. This was delivered with a pretense of care and concern. Already I'd heard the comments, here and there, that claimed women were not/could not be real artists. It was supposed the best we could hope for was to marry an artist (while helping support our family as schoolteachers). The department was set up to meet the needs of male students. They were given exclusive access to studios after hours. They had keys. Being on that campus, in that office, felt like a shoe bearing down on me. In that very moment I decided to transfer to a bigger, more intimidating campus where I hoped to be less conspicuous. I wanted nothing more than to be left alone to continue my journey. Fox and Bunny moment? Yes. But also, Fox and Tick.



Delapini (Floor with Carpet Tack), 130 x 82 x 58in, pigments ink on paper, epoxy resin, glass punchbowl and cups, metal hardware, 2021

*This interview by Mary Jo Matsumoto was first published on the Fox and Bunny website.
The Fox and Bunny site closed permanently on January 2023*