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Jackie Ruttinger: Running the Galleries and Her Best Studio Yet

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Previous WMU Director of Exhibitions Jacquelyn Ruttinger

Wednesday, March 1, 2023 at 3:30 PM

Virtual Meeting via Zoom

Cassie: Okay, so we are recording now, so go ahead and introduce yourself. I'll have you spell your name, too, so that we make sure to get the spelling right, and then we'll talk about your connection to WMU.

Jackie: Okay, well, my name is Jacquelyn Ruttinger, but I've always gone by my nickname Jackie. When I was at WMU, I started there in 1986, and I retired in 2006, I was director of exhibitions and visiting artist programs for the, first of all, the Department of Art and then later it became the School of Art. During my tenure, I had galleries in Sangren Hall.

When we got East Hall, there was a student gallery in the rotunda at the south end of East Hall. I also did shows in the multimedia room of the Dalton Center about... at least one or two each semester. And as time went along, some other gallery directors retired.

And now what was called Space Gallery, when Marie Combs used to run Space Gallery and when she retired, it became part of the package. And then, of course, there was always Gallery Two in Sangren Hall when I first got there. And so it was mainly a program meant to support the curriculum in the School of Art.

So faculty members would submit requests for shows that were going to support their programming and visiting artists that they could bring in that would expand on what they wanted the students to be learning. So it was geared toward the teaching. And I had a faculty committee that I worked with that helped me put together the schedule and select the artists and so it wasn't just me making decisions.

In order to run all these galleries at once, I had at least one grad assistant and about ten or more student workers. I also would have gallery interns that I would be teaching. But those student workers were just gold. They would not only help with the gallery guarding, but they learned how to do installations.

They took over a large portion of the office work scheduling, and we had labels. It was a really monstrous job because we had not only annual... well, we had flyers that we printed and did mailings, regular mailings, and depended well, anyway, I won't go into the length of that story. We really want to talk about East Hall.

And I'm also, besides running the galleries well, I will say first and foremost, I'm an artist. That was one of the things they liked about me when I came there was they liked my painting, they liked the direction, and they were glad to have another practicing artist in the department.

And as a consequence, I was given up a studio at that time in Walwood, and that's where all the art faculty studios had been moved to. Prior to that, the art faculty had studios in some of those little houses that belonged to the university, but they hadn't gone down yet.

Cassie: Were they near Walwood too?

Jackie: What?

Cassie: Were they near Walwood, those houses?

Jackie: No, I think they were over on the other side of campus, on the west side. It was before they started all that building of the West Campus, that property. The university bought it up, but they still had all these little houses. They hadn't begun like some of the major building projects yet, like the School of Business.

But anyway, the chair at the time that hired me was Mel Strawn, and he was the one that gave me studio space in Walwood because I really needed a space to work. I didn't have any place to work.

And then when East Hall became available and they wanted to remodel Walwood, so we were transferred out of Walwood into East Hall, and all the faculty got to pick their studios, but there happened to be one left over, so I got the one and it was a wonderful studio.

I got the third-grade classroom on the main floor, just outside where the gallery was, so that in a way, I could keep an eye on what was happening in the gallery while I was there because students were in there working day and night in that gallery.

And we also had a storage room for their equipment and pedestals and everything. So it was convenient that I could keep an eye on what was happening at the same time and be readily available to them if they needed something from me. But this was the best studio I ever had in my life.

It was absolutely fabulous. It was one of those very large classrooms that they used to have in that school. And behind the classroom were two large rooms, which were probably originally offices for the teachers, and then there was a cloakroom, and then there was an additional closet.

Cassie: Wow.

Jackie: So I used one of those offices as a kind of a lounge area where I'd had a couch, a microwave, and a little refrigerator, apartment size, whatever little refrigerator. And then the other room, I used for storage of cardboard and really big things. But also my friend, another apart time faculty, actually, later she became associate professor, Eve Reed needed a studio space, and so we talked to Phil.

I said I wouldn't mind having her share that space, have that space for her studio. So she took one of those other office spaces for her studio, and it meant she walked through mine, but I didn't care. She was a best friend, so we felt comfortable sharing with each other.

And the thing that made the studio so great for me was that I was working with a lot of chemicals, and they're very dangerous, very hazardous chemicals and because they just pumped the heat into East Hall as hard as they pump it and it sometimes really got overheated, at least on our end, was never cold, it was always very hot, I could open those big windows and put a window fan in the windows. So when I was working with chemicals, I could open up two of those great big huge windows and put two window fans in the windows, and then put a fan in my door so that when I had fumes, I could exhaust them right out of the room.

And that enabled me to do painting that I haven't been able to do since I retired, because the studio that I remodeled here at home is just not big enough to be able to ventilate like that. If I open up the doors to ventilate it, then that's all the heat. I freeze the death, right? There's no way to really ventilate it like that anyway.

So the studio was like for me, it was really an artist's dream studio to have that. And I don't recall when the art department moved into East Hall, was it about 1990, something like that?

Cassie: Yes, it was early 90s.

Jackie: Early 90s, and then I retired in 2006, so I had it all those years.

Cassie: Wow.

Jackie: And it was wonderful because the things that I enjoyed about it were all those big windows let in all that sunlight. And it also enabled me to paint very large paintings, 4 by 6 was a pretty standard size for me.

But at one time I knew I was getting ready to retire in a couple of years, and I decided that I'd always wanted to paint a really big painting. And by then, of course, the chair of the department was Phil Vanderweg, and his studio was kind of opposite mine, kind of on a diagonal.

And this one day he came by, wanted to talk to me about something, and I'd begun this painting that was four panels, 4ft by 4ft. So it would make a 16-foot painting composition, a 16-foot composition with all four of them together. And I was designing it so that each panel could be a standalone painting if it ever got divided up.

Cassie: Wow. Okay.

Jackie: Each one would be a painting in and of itself, but it was really intended to be altogether because who knows? You paint a painting that big, you think, this is never going

to sell, right? It's like 16ft, who's gonna want a 16-foot painting? But, he came to the door, and he stepped in, and he was like, "whoa!"

I had this big red. I started out with red, I always start with a really strong, my strongest colors. And here it was like caring all the way through all these paintings, and it just kind of shocked him. It was a shock. But anyway, as I say, those were wonderful spaces for all of us who had them.

Cassie: Yeah.

Jackie: You mentioned, what do I remember about East Hall? And one of the things I liked very much about East Hall was originally when we moved there, there was a beautiful smoke tree that was on the south kind of east of the drive that goes up the hill to East Hall.

And it was just beautiful in the spring. It was just like I've never seen a tree like that before. It was so gorgeous and unusual. And then one day I came to East Hall, and I think it was after they were remodeling and redoing the parking area for Walwood, the smoke tree was gone.

Cassie: Oh no!

Jackie: I know, I was like, "no, that smoke tree!" And they planted some evergreens in its place, and I'm like, "No. How could happen? Why didn't I put in a vote for that smoke tree before this?" But anyway, some of the other things I remember about East Hall was it's a wonderful place to see the northern lights.

Cassie: Really?

Jackie: Go around to the northwest and sit on those stairs. We used to do that, sit on the stairs and see the northern lights from there. It's a beautiful spot to see them if they ever... Just to remember sometime, if you hear that, they're going to be visible.

Cassie: Wow. The Northern lights that you could see them from there, that's pretty amazing.

Jackie: Yeah, well, when they're visible, is like when you hear on the Weather Channel that they're going to be... that you can see them from here. I think the students really enjoyed that gallery a lot.

Cassie: Right, yeah.

Jackie: They could be very inventive and with it and do all kinds of unusual things in that gallery. And it wasn't it wasn't just used like I don't know, it was always exciting. Their shows were always very exciting and interesting and imaginative.

Cassie: Right. Yeah, I was going to ask about that too, cuz it was in the rotunda, right?

Jackie: Right.

Cassie: The gallery, so how was that set up? And do you remember any exhibits that were in there that stood out to you?

Jackie: I don't know about any in particular. It was, what they did was It was- From the balcony above, they dropped four walls, and then with gaps in between, not of equal size, I don't think, but there were spaces in between each one, each set for people to walk through and carry the pedestals through and everything.

But they were four long walls, I think, at least. I don't know, 12 to 15ft long, each one of them. And then there was a wall that was prepared as a hanging surface. On the back of there was a large room on the South end of East Hall.

And I don't remember what that was used for, if that was someone's studio or what the purpose was for that room now offhand, but the back of that wall that faced into the rotunda was also used as a hanging space.

Cassie: Wow.

Jackie: So they had lots of wall space, and they used to do solo shows or two-person shows when they graduate.

Cassie: Okay.

Jackie: So and sometimes group shows, I mean, whatever they however they wanted to use it, it was pretty much up to the students and their faculty advisors how they used the spaces.

Cassie: Wow. Yeah. And do you remember what... so you were there when you moved when the School of Art at some point went from a department to the school?

So you were there when the School of Art went into East Hall. Do you remember what it felt like moving in there and having everybody's studios in there? Was it sort of like a community? I know you said that somebody else had their studio sort of in yours too. Was it always that tight-knit and sort of close like that?

Jackie: No (laughs). If you're going to make art, it's kind of a solitary kind of thing. And only occasionally did another artist invite me to their studio, but usually the faculty we're working there on their days off from teaching during the daytime.

And since I worked all day Monday through Friday, I used my studio at night and on the weekends mainly. So we weren't really crossing paths very often, except Phil, he would be there a lot on the weekends, but I don't recall that many of them working weekends, and that's when I mainly worked, was weekends.

And then in my summer vacation, sometimes I spent some of my summer vacation and winter break, when I'd have a break, I'd go there during the breaks. And you see, other people don't use their free time that way (Both chuckle).

Cassie: Right, yeah.

Jackie: They want their free time for something else other than spending all their time in their studio.

Cassie: Right. So was East Hall always open? Or did you have, each faculty and yourself have, keys to East Hall?

Jackie: I was thinking about that earlier, and I think that- I think the doors were open for a while in the evening, and then they would come and lock the building.

And so, yes, we had keys to the outside doors, and then I don't think it was open necessarily on the weekends. I don't recall, maybe Saturdays, because the archives were in the South end of the building.

So when the archives was open on Saturdays, it would be open during their open hours so people could from the community could get in.

But otherwise, the doors were locked. And although when the students were putting their shows together and doing their installations, which was Sunday, and taking them down on Saturdays, the doors would be propped open so they could haul all their art and equipment in and out of the building easily.

There were times when it did feel a little uncomfortable, you might say, because strangers could come in and wander the halls a bit, but I think, I didn't really worry about that.

Cassie: Did it ever happen or was it just something that could have happened?

Jackie: I don't recall anything serious really happening.

Cassie: Gotcha.

Jackie: I just don't have a memory of anything. Maybe somebody would come in and I just question them as to who they were and what they were doing in there. That was enough to scare them off. (Both laugh) If they didn't belong there.

But the restrooms were down in the rotunda. So people who were at the archives would walk all the way down to the rotunda just to use the restrooms.

Cassie: Wow.

Jackie: So you just pretty much ignored that. There wasn't really any trouble. I don't remember any anyway.

Cassie: Well, it sounds like it was a bit quirky of a building, but all in all, a beautiful studio space and gallery as well that was unique, it sounds like.

Jackie: Yes. It was a perk that just is not that readily available for most faculty. I've never heard of any faculty artists at universities getting such wonderful space as we had there. Large, so much space.

Cassie: Right. Well, we're coming to the end of our time now. We have a few minutes left, so I thought I'd ask, were there any last memories or stories you wanted to share? Were there any topics that we didn't touch on that you wanted to conclude with?

Jackie: Well, we used to do an annual open house at our studios in East Hall. So we'd have our studios open and available for people to walk through and see our work. That was a major benefit to me because a couple came through one of those early open houses.

Ahmed Issa and his wife Dulce, and he's passed now, but he was a professor of finance, and they were very interested. They were art collectors. And they took a shine for my work and subsequently collected a large body of my work. They helped me with managing my retirement accounts and made a major difference not only in my ability to be able to retire and be comfortable, but also their encouragement and support kept me working hard and painting.

And now a number of their paintings from their collection have been added to the university's permanent art collection.

Cassie: Wow, that's amazing. So you met them through one of the annual open houses in East Hall?

Jackie: Right.

Cassie: Wow. And they were in finance. But did you say that he was a professor of finance at WMU, too?

Jackie: Yes. And he managed, I believe, the accounts for AAUP and a number of others. He was very influential and they both were. They were benefactors of a number of organizations and a number of students. So I wasn't the only one that benefited from knowing them by any stretch of the imagination, because they were just very generous.

Cassie: Yeah, it sounds like it. And it sounds like an amazing connection for you and your career as well.

Jackie: Right. So I don't know what else to tell you.

Cassie: No, no, that was good. Thank you so much for sharing and meeting with me today and telling me some of the stories and memories that you have. I really appreciate it.

Jackie: You're welcome.

Cassie: Yeah. So I'll make sure to email you then with an update on the project website. So feel free to check out other stories as well. I know that I did interview Phil as well, who you mentioned, and a few other people who had studios in the hall. So those should be interesting to check out. And if you have any photos, as I said, feel free to send them over, but don't feel like you have to.

Jackie: I have some photos of my studio.

Cassie: Yeah, that would be great. I think that Phil shared some of his too and some works that he had in the studio too.

Jackie: Yeah, great.

Cassie: Yes, feel free to send those over, and I'll make sure to send that consent form that I mentioned over to your email as well.

Jackie: Okay, thank you.

Cassie: Thank you. Have a great rest of your day, and hopefully the sunshine stays (Both laugh).

Jackie: Okay, well, good luck finishing your project. Bye.

Cassie: Thank you. Bye.