THE
CLARK
ART
INSTITUTE

Williamstown
Massachusetts 01267
413 458 2303
clarkart.edu

IN THE FOREGROUND:
CONVERSATIONS ON ART & WRITING

A podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP)

"'OTHERS' OF VARIOUS KINDS": J. VANESSA LYON ON INTERSECTIONALITY AS AN EARLY MODERN SCHOLAR

Season 2, Episode 12
Recording date: November 12, 2020
Release date: May 4, 2021

Transcript

THE
CLARK
ART
INSTITUTE

Caro Fowler
Welcome to *In the Foreground: Conversations on Art & Writing*. I am Caro Fowler, your host and Director of the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute in Williamstown, Massachusetts. In this series of conversations, I talk with art historians and artists, about what it means to write history and make art and the ways in which making informs how we create not only our world, but also ourselves.

In this episode, I speak with J. Vanessa Lyon, who's on the faculty at Bennington College. Vanessa speaks about the influence for graduate studies in theology, her experiences as a queer woman of color working on old masters like Rubens, reverberations between early modern and contemporary art, particularly for artists of color, and how she views teaching as a politics of care.

Vanessa Lyon
My intervention, in my own mind, was to queer early modern painting. In Rubens, it's until you acknowledge what whiteness means from Rubens, it's totally possible to go through a lot of work without encountering what would seem to be the presence of others of various kinds. Once you start looking, they are there.

Caro Fowler
Well, thank you so much for joining me today, Vanessa. It's really lovely to have you here and I'm glad we have an opportunity to talk. Even though we're at neighboring institutions - especially now, but even before COVID - we were often in ships passing at lectures or various events. So it's really nice to be able to talk to you.

Vanessa Lyon
Indeed, it's great to talk to you, too. Great to be here.

Caro Fowler

So usually, these interviews, we kind of begin or warm up with asking about what inspired you to pursue a PhD in art history, or if there were any formative teachers or influences that occurred in your life that made you think, wow, this is what I want to do, I want to pursue a PhD in art history and teach.

Vanessa Lyon
Well, it's funny in a way, because I was pretty set on majoring in art history, even before I went to college. And I had funny - as many undergrads do - I had funny criteria for choosing schools, but the main one was that it would be a school that was close to, but not in the same city as a major art museum. And that led me ultimately to Lake Forest College, which is about 45 minutes from Chicago, and the Art Institute of Chicago. And that was really a formative museum for me, aside from the Denver Art Museum, which is my hometown art museum. So, at Lake Forest, I had somebody as my advisor, who I didn't realize at the time, who he was. And that was Franz Schulze, the great architectural historian. And my first class with him, or for that first class, I wrote a paper, a kind of ridiculous paper, I think, on Palladio, but that was the beginning of a love affair with the Renaissance, and especially with Venice. And so I think actually that class with Franz Schulze was really formative for me. And another funny thing that comes to mind when I think of him as I was at Berkeley, where I did end up doing the PhD, there was this kind of closet at the end of our main hallway and it's where kept all the bound copies of everybody's masters and in some cases thesis, dissertation actually, just bound on shelves. It's very Berkeley to just have them all sitting there. [Both laugh]. And they decided to make that into our student lounge, which is also very Berkeley. It was really a closet that was made into our lounge. [Both laugh]. So we would go loiter at the terrible food encrusted sofa and people would hang out there and read between classes. And I was sitting there one time, and I looked up and I saw the name of the person who ended up being my painting advisor at Lake Forest, Lynne Pudles, and she had gone to Berkeley and so it's funny the way one thing leads to another without knowing it. But another person who really shaped my love for art history at Lake Forest was a 19th centuriest named Lynne Pudles. But then I graduated, I worked for an auction house in Chicago, which was super interesting and crucial, I think, for me

and went on to do other kinds of work for about 10 years and then went to seminary actually, and there, a school of theology, actually. I studied with a woman named Ann Graham Brock, who is a student of a theologian named Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a a major feminist biblical studies person. And that really for me was crucial. I think I realized that someone could challenge even the Bible, through the lens of feminism and that it made sense, and that this kind of revisionist project was something that I could think about doing. And so I really think that actually for art history, that class with Ann Brock, a couple classes I did with her, was really crucial for my subsequent study.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. And what drew you to theology initially?

Vanessa Lyon
Oh, that's a tough question. That's, you know... [laughs].

Caro Fowler
Did you want to teach? What were your goals?

Vanessa Lyon
Yeah, exactly. Well, you have teaching and preaching [both laughing]. There's a long, long response to that. But as a queer woman of color in Colorado, I was deeply and I am, I have a great love for the Episcopal Church, and I was deeply involved with the Episcopal Church. Between you and me, and whoever's listening, you know, I really sort of saw and it seemed as if I might go into the church, but it was not the time when that was really possible [inaudible]. So I definitely had thoughts about that while I was studying theology, certainly. But then I studied historical theology, and there, I had discovered Margaret Miles both in print and actually in person at that point. And so I was really working on the Spanish Netherlands and English nuns who went to the Spanish Netherlands to try to be Catholic, because they were very persecuted inside of their own country. So why I went? That's complicated. But what I loved about being in a school of theology was the social-, it was a very liberal place, a progressive place

where I was in this sort of feeling of social justice embedded in the academic and intellectual projects and spiritual projects that we were pursuing. Yeah.

Caro Fowler
Is that something you still carry with you? I mean, is that is that relationship to faith and spirit something that's still part of your life?

Vanessa Lyon
It is. You know, as I've moved from one small town to the next small town in my teaching career, I found it's harder and harder to find a sort of community in which to exist in terms of the church life. But I would just say, I think when I'm at my best in teaching - I had a spiritual director, as we call them, who oversees potential entry into the life of the church - and she at one point said, you know, for you, it's between teaching and preaching, and you just need to figure out where you should be. And I think what happened was, at my best, I think I do bring a pastoral dimension into my teaching on some level. And so I'm always connected with that that feeling, that it's a praxis of care. It's a really formative and hugely-, I mean, I know a lot of people who've been speaking with you are at such a high, if not elite, definitely a research level in their art historical careers, are major Ivy League level teaching where they're not in contact with students as much as those of us in liberal arts colleges are. But for me, that's always been the thing, is that direct impact that we can have on students and that they have on us. So I do think I've taken it into my teaching when I'm at my best, anyway.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, no, I think that's really true. I think it's very apt to describe teaching, especially at the undergraduate level, as a pastoral form of care. And there are things that are so often absent from the discourse of so many academics at the R1 institutions that you mentioned. Or, I mean, as an early modernist, these kind of questions of faith, I feel like they're often posed historically within art history, but they're rarely actually taken at face value, if that has any meaning?

Vanessa Lyon

Absolutely. I mean, I think for me, I did the master's in historical theology, essentially. And then I continued on a couple years towards a PhD. And there was just a moment where I thought, oh, I miss the visual desperately. I mean, I had been an art history major, I had been at a school where basically, there were no requirements, so I had taken a lot of art history. And here I was in grad school, but not really thinking about images. And I just had to go back. And so I left that world, but I went pretty much immediately to Berkeley, and everything you're saying is maybe doubly true in a sense in going from a school of theology, a seminary, to this bastion of secularism that is Berkeley - although, the Graduate Theological Union, interestingly, is just over the hill there. So you have [inaudible] surrounded by all these seminaries, and that's how [inaudible] and I came to work together. But yeah, I mean, this feeling of going from somewhere where actually-, it's not even a question of what's your confessional, what are confessional beliefs, who is God to you? But just sort of like, religion is real, you know, religion is a thing is. People do have true authentic feelings about faith, and then going to a place where it was sort of like, well, of course, no one was thinking about that in 1819. Or, no one was thinking about that in any way that we can really recognize.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. So just to back up a little bit. So before you went to graduate school, you said you lived in Chicago for 10 years, and you worked as an appraiser in decorative arts. Is that correct?

Vanessa Lyon
That is correct.

Caro Fowler
What interested you in that line of work?

Vanessa Lyon
Well I, I did sort of always think I wanted to work in an auction house. And that was a different - as we can often say about everything - that was a different

time, but it was before eBay. And auction houses had this allure, but also a real presence in the art world. I think that's coming back, actually. But that was a time when it was this combination of getting to be around art and think about art and get into these collections, these estates. Which in Chicago, there were some phenomenal robber baron industrial era fortunes in some phenomenal estates, and to get to look at these objects and catalog them, it was just all very exciting. And then to stand next to the-, for while I was the spotter, so I would stand next to the auctioneer and point at the people who are bidding and it just seemed - and it was - very glamorous and exciting. So I loved that, the showy-ness, which is maybe why I'm a Baroquest.

Caro Fowler
[Laughs].

Vanessa Lyon
I loved the connoisseurial side to it, which anybody who's worked in an auction house knows, there is no real intellectual part of it for most of us who worked there. You're just seeing stuff, quickly figuring out what it is, assigning a value to it, and moving on. But you see so much that you develop an eye, you develop a feel for... and I love that. So that led me also to some of our shared interests in the materiality of art and the art history, how art history can think about that.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. So how did you end up going to Berkeley to study Dutch and Flemish painting with Elizabeth Honig? Was she who you wanted to go to Berkeley to work with, or did you just -

Vanessa Lyon
She was just such an incredible stylist for one. I'm always telling students, you really have to be good at writing to be a good art historian, because the writing process is so important and also you're going to read some of the best writing in the humanities in art history, I think. And I was really drawn to Elizabeth in part by just what a beautiful writer she is. And I was working on the Spanish

Netherlands then in the theological context, so it made sense to be thinking of working with somebody who was doing Flemish painting. And I think it was one of the best things to happen to me as a scholar, was having the privilege of working with Elizabeth. She's so incredibly knowledgeable and then she's one of the most unrecognized Rubens experts in the world, I think. She teaches students, she gets everybody excited about Rubens, but she doesn't write a lot about Rubens.

Caro Fowler
Yeah.

Vanessa Lyon
But when I told her I wanted to do a Reubens dissertation, she goes, oh, that's a good idea, I don't think I'm ready to do that yet. I'm definitely not ready and I probably wasn't ready, but I did it anyway.

Caro Fowler
So how did she get excited about Rubens? Because I think you're right. I mean, Rubens is kind of like the... I don't know, I think sometimes-, I mean, everyone acknowledges he's a virtuoso painter, but I think he can be difficult sometimes for some people to swallow. What was it about Rubens that she conveyed to you that made you excited?

Vanessa Lyon
Well, she taught an intro survey Rubens, which was unusual then and I think it's even more unusual now. Just Rubens, all the time Rubens for undergrads. It was one of those biggish classes and the grad students would go. We had Darcy Grigsby and TJ Clark and Anne Wagner and we would often just go, as people do in grad school, to listen to these lectures. And I went to listen to that one, to all of them. And by the end, I thought, this is the guy. I think I still sometimes if people say, you know, which Reubens would you want to own? I say, well, I'd really rather awn a van der Weyden. I don't always love him the most, frankly. [Both laugh]. I think he's a phenomenal painter and I love the oil sketches -

Vanessa Lyon
Yeah, those are good.

Vanessa Lyon
- but, it's him. And I think she was so great at getting so many of us excited about this international, erudite, cosmopolitan, deep thinking diplomat who had a really actually complicated life. It wasn't a perfect life, though it doesn't seem necessarily that he had the giant ups and downs. Of course he did, because he's living through the Thirty Years' War.

Caro Fowler
And so, what were the ways in which you found in your work on Reubens that you were able to call on and integrate your own interest in gender studies and theology? I mean, I think it's obvious from the book that you ended up writing, but how did you approach or kind of start thinking about shaping this interdisciplinary project?

Vanessa Lyon
Um, well, for me, I've always been interested in genealogies, intellectual genealogies and institutional genealogies. And it has been said that the tradition of Northern scholarship coming out of Berkeley, which Svetlana Alpers, absolutely, is at the top of that, and the earliest, I believe, if I'm getting it right. So [name] was Alpers's student and Elizabeth Honig was [name's] student. So central Bourbons as sort of longstanding Berkeley interest. And I was very making [inaudible] this a super formative for me. It was another one of those, wow, you can do this, one can write [inaudible]. One can write this idiosyncratic, iconoclastic really, treatment of an old master and it inspired me. But like with Pat Simons, absolutely, who I know but didn't study with, queering the Renaissance with her work on Diana imagery. Still, [inaudible] for people writing about same sex desire in the Renaissance and in art history, it's very hard to find somebody, period. And definitely somebody who does it with this intuition and insight on queerness like Pat Simons does, she's such a pathway for today. And

then I had the wonderful opportunity to study a little with Judith Butler, and I read Fanon with Butler and Shannon Jackson. And although I am not seeing it until now, in some ways, I read a weird Fanon paper looking at a Gentileschi painting, and it is a weird paper, but it was useful.

Caro Fowler
[Laughs]. So obviously, you've taken those lessons forward into your teaching, and you very much integrate, from what I understand, these questions about gender and race into early modern art and make them central to the narratives of early modern art that you teach. And I guess I would be curious, in kind of two questions. I mean, one: How do you see the field of early modern art? How do you see its openness to truly integrate these questions into it scholarship? I mean, for example, I think about a lot of the studies that come out that talk about, for example, the figural presence of Black people in early modern painting, and Black figures in early modern painting, and there's always something about that scholarship to me that while it's important and I recognize the importance of that recognition, and trying to excavate that, that there's always something about it that always reads a little superficial to me as well, in some ways, that always seems as though it's taking it at face or figural value, these questions, without looking deeper, if that makes any sense. And I would say same with gender, sometimes. I mean, I find sometimes in Rembrandt studies of women, the ways in which the women are discussed, I still often feel like it's this very continuing male gaze and breaking down the bodies that Rembrandt and Rubens depict of women and continually using the same kind of derogatory language around their body types. And so I would just be curious what your own experience has been in trying to integrate these questions into both your scholarship and your teaching.

Vanessa Lyon
That's such an important question. And I like the way you put it, this kind of - I mean, you didn't say disconnect - but for me, it's a profound disconnect. I mean, first I think our field of early modern just didn't think about race for quite a long time, and still basically doesn't, I think, think about race in any kind of an

adequate way. But then, with the with the images of "Black in Western Art" series, in particular, as sort of, okay, let's talk about the Blacks. So then it's a kind of the Black body, the Black body. And still often, as you say, with what is just a thinly veiled-, I think of Hortense Spillers, writing about the Black woman at the podium who becomes a jezebel, who becomes Sapphire, who becomes-, I mean, the portrait into stereotypes in describing the bodies, particularly of Black women, in our history, is just horrifying, honestly, I think. Even supposedly progressive liberal minded "now we're finally going to deal with this" sort of context. So I find it does more harm than good, more often than not, I think. I think the Black body is in itself, you know, there's no personhood implied there. There's no subjectivity implied there. I could go on about my own experiences as being a woman of color in a straight white department, basically - you know, straight white women and queer men - and really feeling many of the same modes of gaze, and apprehension or lack of apprehension, taking up space in a certain way as a certain kind of body. And seeing that borne out in my actual experience in grad school, and I think several of your previous visitors who are people of color who are art historians have told similar kinds of stories. Like, they didn't get what we were doing. And if you're a person of color in art history, it is still assumed that we're going to work on race.

Caro Fowler
Yeah.

Vanessa Lyon
And that's what you're there to do. I came to Berkeley thinking I'm going to do early modern painting. And after that first year or so, there was the great oil sketch exhibition at the Berkeley Art Museum that Marjorie Wieseman and Peter Sutton curated, and that sealed the deal for me, and I thought I'm going to I'm going to be Reubens person. And I naively really thought I could be a woman of color, who specialized in an old master and live in that world alongside everybody else. And it has not proven at all to be the case, I think. I was just reading Adrian Piper the other day, who wrote at some point, you know, I didn't know that I was marginalized. She had this moment when she got out of Kant-

land for a while and thought, oh, no one's taking me seriously or thinking about what I'm doing in the way that I'm thinking about what I'm doing. So I think the short answer is, I think, really modern art history has a tremendous way to go to meet the idea of race, racialization, white supremacy on its own terms, and part of our failure to do that, as far as I'm concerned, is that you still read studies of Black figures and paintings, women of color and paintings or, Rembrandt's white negress, so called, etc. But there's never any recourse to say Black feminism. There's never any recourse to people writing about the subjectivity and personhood of Black people to think that they might have something to add. And that's where I think we're really failing right now. People are now starting to say, I'm going to write about this kind of person, I'm gonna write about that kind of person in paintings. But the world of critical race studies seems completely unknown to these writers, often.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, I think that's true. I think that's an accurate assessment. And so, when you discuss kind of what you see now in retrospect as a naivete in thinking you could be a woman of color who studied old master paintings, was it just a consistent series of microaggressions and rejection of your scholarship that ultimately left you frustrated and feeling as though the discipline was unwilling to accept that point of view?

Vanessa Lyon
Well, I think-, I mean, to be fair, I was pretty unwoke in certain ways when I got to Berkeley. My intervention, in my own mind, was to queer early modern painting. And I was really not thinking about-, in Rubens, it's not until you acknowledge what whiteness means for Rubens, it's totally possible to go through a lot of work without encountering what would seem to be the presence of others of various kinds. Once you start looking, they are there. But I was sort of seizing on what I saw was his - recurring, actually - pairing of women in very affectionate poses, and thinking about like, what would it mean to actually take those... Not to project onto them - even I'm not against this now - but at the time, I was very much against this sort of, like, we cannot project, cannot use

cannot use, say gender studies from now, necessarily, you can't use Butler to explain what's happening in the 17th century. I don't believe that now, but at the time I did. But I think I was all about queering things, and I wasn't thinking about race myself. And that alone was enough to really, essentially, get me shut down. And to the degree of having real aggressive questioning of my ability to be an art historian, questioning of what I did as art history, I had a very difficult time passing my what for Berkeley is sort of the thesis level. And I had to switch projects. And luckily, I mean, it was one of those sort of crossroads moments where certain gray eminences rejected one project. And my advisor said, let's switch gears, let's do a different project. And I did that. And then after that was done, she said, send it to "Word & Image," and see what happens. And it was accepted without any editorial corrections or anything. And at the point it was impossible for them to say like, you shouldn't be doing art history. Under an anonymous review, I was fine. Yeah. so that hadn't happened. I'm not really sure. I'm not sure what my future would have been.

Caro Fowler
What is whiteness for Rubens at this period? Because that is one of the debates that I often read about in 17th-century scholarship, is a lot of people defend, oh, you know, race wasn't a category yet. Or I was even at a conference once and someone who's very, very prominent in the field, basically said explicitly, well, we can't hold 17th-century people to the same standards, because they just didn't know. So what do you think was whiteness for Reubens?

Vanessa Lyon
I mean, I have no idea. [Both laugh]. I think it's safe to say he wasn't thinking-, you know, we can turn it back on people like that. He wasn't thinking about what whiteness was for himself, I don't think.

Caro Fowler
Yeah.

Vanessa Lyon

He thinking always about like, what the best white would be.

Caro Fowler
Yeah, I mean, pigment... [inaudible].

Vanessa Lyon
And white is an important pigment for him, certainly. It's how when he came in so often to do these finishing touches to paintings that the studio had largely produced, it was often with highlights. So, I'm not answering your question the way you probably want me to, but I think-

Caro Fowler
No, it's, yeah.

Vanessa Lyon
-I think he thought a lot about color. And I do think that color - I mean, to be a little less flippant - I think that because he worked with Aguilonius, the great Jesuit color theorist who produces this, like, basically discovery of what complementary colors are and he's credited with that usually around 1609, 1613, somewhere in there. He's [inaudible] with that, but he's working closely with Rubens as an illustrator and I think, as I think Martin Kemp maybe suggested but I think it's likely, that he's getting what he thinks about color from Rubens. And Rubens is very smart about color and he's also very aware, as Aguilonius was, of the valences, the moral valences of color coming out of the Bible, coming out of philosophy. And so, what I can say is, I think that in general, whiteness was good for Rubens, as it was for most, and it still is for many. Whiteness was fair, fairness was positive and enlightened, and darkness was dangerous and hidden. And you know, all the things that have come, the sort of humoral and other errors, Aristotelian binaries, I think he was definitely operating out of those. And [name], of course, has major, important work and thinking about the gendering of these these hot/wet, cold/dry binaries. And I think he did subscribe to that.

Caro Fowler
Yeah. And so, how in your teaching then, do you think about - I mean, as someone who works in the early modern period, it's obvious, I think probably to us - but I would be curious about how, for your students, you make the fields of Dutch and Flemish painting still relevant today? What would you seek to convey to them about our world through the fields of Dutch and Flemish painting?

Vanessa Lyon
Well, I think what is wonderful about Dutch and Flemish painting, and interesting to think - many things are wonderful - but it's interesting to think whether this has changed, but I find more often than not, I put up with a Vermeer, I put up a Rogier van der Weyden, I put up Holbein, and they just are transfixed by the works themselves. I mean, we do a little formal analysis, we think about how complex they are. They're not tough to sell.

Vanessa Lyon
Northern art is not tough to sell. I think actually, interestingly, Italian Renaissance art is a little harder for them to get a handle on for various reasons. But the relevance part - I don't know that I try to make the art seem relevant. I try to make art history seem relevant. How want to make the practice of looking closely, and understanding the visual rhetorics of what we're seeing, the sort of implications of certain artistic choices and the ways that they're in dialogue or conversation with culture and historical context that the students might not immediately know. That the magic, I think, of talking about Flemish or Northern painting. But I think in terms of how it relates to contemporary art, say, I mean, one thing that I have loved about - I'm currently at Bennington College, where I was brought in, basically, to start art history over. We hadn't had a full time art historian for 30 years here. And I had this remarkable opportunity that is so rare to sort of think about how I want to do art history as the single art historian gets. [Both laugh]. It's been great.

Caro Fowler
[Laughs].

Caro Fowler
Especially in a great studio art department, as well. I mean, it has such a great history of doing studio art. I would think it'd be so much fun to teach in that environment, art history.

Vanessa Lyon
It's great. I mean, we have 20 studio faculty. So it's astounding that this tiny school has such a great visual arts faculty. But the thing is, I think one thing that I've gotten to do in that capacity is really break out of the kind of I'm not an early modernist anymore, I'm a generalist. And so I work with contemporary art a lot. And I think about contemporary art in ways that I just didn't when I was being the early modernist at another department. People like Mickalene Thomas, people like Njideka Akunyili Crosby. I mean, portraiture, first of all, has really come into its own in the past 5 or 10 years, I think, but particularly Black portraiture, particularly diasporic artists working in the genre of portraiture. And that, for me, always has-, it's very easy to connect that to the Northern traditions of portraiture. And for them to see how sometimes implicitly, but often explicitly, these artists are looking at old masters, are looking at Flemish and Dutch painters. And so that part is easy. And then there's someone like Romare burden, great mid-century modernist and post modernist, ultimately, who studied Northern painting, de Hooch and Vermeer, and who did versions of that as somebody working at the Art Students League in the '50s. It's not at all difficult, actually, to say this stuff matters just because it's amazing, but it also matters to people who are some of our biggest, most interesting contemporary, in many cases, artists of color. They're looking at this stuff. It's an avenue for bringing these these two seemingly disparate purviews together, definitely.

Caro Fowler
So are these the kind of questions that your current book project is engaged with? Because from what I understand from your biography, it is a contemporary art project.

Vanessa Lyon
I mean, I think it will end actually with Rauschenberg. So not quite.

Caro Fowler
Oh, okay. So not quite. [Laughs].

Vanessa Lyon
Or not at all, he might say. But that said, I mean, that's kind of, in terms of the major artistic, the major artist presence at the end is Rauschenberg, but I think I will bring in various contemporary artists more in a passing but interesting way, along the way. But really, it's sort of Rembrandt to Rauschenberg, is the kind of big sweep.

Caro Fowler
Oh, wow. So then so what is the focus of the project? I like Rembrandt to Rauschenberg, I think that should be a new general art history survey.

Vanessa Lyon
That's the kind of thing I teach here. You know, it's [inaudible] there. We can do this all day long over here. So I think that the notion right now - and really, I've worked the most on the final chapter, so that's the dumbest part - but the notion is to think about ways in which Blackness and race are abstracted primarily by white artists, largely in the tradition of painting from about the time of Rembrandt. But also in his case, beginning, really, with etching. So thinking about the so-called "Negress Lyring Down," and the so-called "White Negress." Ways in which those are continually still debated. What is he showing? What is the race of this person? If the paper is not heavily inscribed and hatch marked and darkened, can this be a negro? And what did it mean to be a negress? Or negro in that period? And what did it mean to be an albino in that period, or someone who has hyperpigmentation? So starting to think about - actually with the figural, even the way that abstraction and race come together - but then getting pretty quickly into figures like Br'er Rabbit and actually the Crow behind Jim Crow, and the animal abstractions of race. So a figural, but animal. And then

also toe boy, like the Harlequin, which I think many people know often was racialized Black in terms of blackface or wearing a black mask. But what do we do with that figure when we think about it as a kind of abstracted Black figure? So it's a kind of Morrisonian, I would say, inflected project in that I think a lot of phenomenal writing has been done about Blackness and abstraction and works by Black artists. Kobena Mercer, is a huge, huge inspiration. I didn't have the pleasure of working with him, but I read him, and he's a huge influence. And I think, you know, Huey Copeland, etc., have done phenomenal art history about Black artists. But I'm interested in this project and thinking thinking through Toni Morrison's "Playing in the Dark" as it would apply to white artists and thinking about what is the presence of Blackness in these works by white artists? And how can we think about that and not just assume that it's not there because they're white or that they aren't actually heavily dependent on ideas of Blackness for doing the work that they're doing?

Caro Fowler
Yeah. Well it sounds like a really important project. I hope I'll be able to see it in various manifestations before it is published.

Vanessa Lyon
You and me both, but thank you. [Both laugh].

Caro Fowler
Well, thank you so much for talking to me today, Vanessa. I really appreciated it, and I really enjoyed it.

Vanessa Lyon
Likewise, it's a huge pleasure. Thanks, Caro.

Caro Fowler
Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground Conversations on Art & Writing*. For more information on this episode and links to the books, articles and artworks discussed, please consult clark.edu/rap/podcast. This program was produced by

Caitlin Woolsey, Samantha Page, and myself, with music by lightchaser, editing by John Buteyn, and additional support provided by Jessie Sentivan and Alice Matthews.