

Jagged Path Interview with Jenny Pickens conducted by Willard Watson over ZOOM.

BRAHM: So to begin, if you could, please give your, your name, your age and where you're from.

JP: My name is Jenny Pickens. I am 52 years old and I am born and raised in Asheville, North Carolina.

BRAHM: Wonderful. How long have you been making art?

JP: I have been making art pretty much all my life since I first started about five, four or five years old. I started doing art.

BRAHM: That's good. It's a lifelong passion of yours. Do you have any artists in your family?

JP: Well, growing up, I had an uncle, he's passed away now, but he used to pick up, he was very talented. I would watch him draw, that's probably why I was inspired. I was so young, but he would get, like, I remember one time he picked a stick up on his way home and he sat, he would come to my grandma's house every day when his lunch break. And he eventually carved it into a cane, but he carved Elijah Muhammad's face into the cane. And he was just so talented. And so I think, I know of him being the only artist.

BRAHM: Yeah. That's wonderful. Seeing someone that they're related to as an inspiration. Did you have any teachers growing up that kind of influenced you as an artist?

JP: Yes, my very first art teacher in kindergarten, her name was Miss Portia Mapp Leverette at the time. And, that lady would come in our classroom and I always had this smile on her face and she watched me draw, or I think I was painting something, some watercolor. I was painting a house with some flowers and she'd say, "You know what? You're such a great artist." And I just love hearing her say something just inspire me all every time she came and, that she was the one that really paved the way for me. And I had her from kindergarten to fifth grade.

BRAHM: So what is your preferred, medium to use in your art?

JP: Now? I do several mediums, but now I think acrylics, when I paint with acrylics is probably my favorite thing to. It's real user friendly, cleans up easy and I don't need a big space to use it.

BRAHM: That's definitely great. And, what about your favorite thing to make?

JP: Probably my dolls. I make 'em out of new, used and repurpose fabrics or sentimental fabrics, and it's kind of my own little design I came up with and I enjoyed dressing them up and putting hair on them, like I'm styling the hair. So it's probably my favorite thing I got going on right now.

BRAHM: So how do you choose what materials to use? You said some are repurposed and some are sentimental?

JP: Yeah. Or new fabrics. Yeah, it just depends. I usually make mine with new fabrics, but if someone has an old shirt that someone once had or whatever, they'll commission me to do, make something with that, just so they can have something of that person. That's something tangible. So, but yeah, but I prefer myself as, buy new fabrics, just cuz I like fabric and paper.

BRAHM: Oh yeah. Yeah. And it's just, there's so much variety there as well. and that, that's nice that you also do make things for people as a kind of like a memory piece. So do you remember when you decided that you wanted to make art all the time?

JP: Yeah. I've always done art. I had to work other jobs, but when I, you know, always had time to do my art, in between, but just like maybe a few years ago, I decided, you know, I couldn't work for anybody else anymore and I love what I'm doing. And I just had to take a leap of faith and think, you know, my art is good enough and I can do it. So I just, I decided, you know what, I'm just gonna work for myself. And, I've been lucky so far, so it's worked out.

BRAHM: That's wonderful now. So how did that, you know, kind of that transition, occurred? And I'm seeing, so do you have your studio space? Do you work out of your home primarily, or do you rent a studio space?

JP: I work out of my home. I have an extra room and I just turn into my studio space. So I have sew machine set up in there, tables for painting. just whatever. Even clay in there. But yeah. And so it's kind of like, I made this, I had this interview some years ago and a lady asked and said, well, were do you see yourself in five years? I said, well, you know what? I like to be, working in my, going to work in my pajamas. And so basically I can now. So I just put in existence and stuff right now. Yeah.

BRAHM: Oh yeah. You have to believe it to achieve it. that's really great. And I'm just looking at your paintings and they're just so vibrant. It's really just beautiful subject matter. And so how do you decide what you want to paint?

JP: Sometimes I just get. I look at a blank canvas and something just comes in my head out of nowhere. I don't really know. And then later on like a year or so, maybe down the line, I look at it, oh, well, that's what I was going through something. And that's what that was, or that reflected from something from my past. Or I can look at some of my friends or images I find on social media or even magazines. And it's something about the eyes to me that kinda tell the story. So I'll actually try to recreate that, but add my own little spin to it. So that's how they start. And I always, I love bright colors, so I love acrylics cuz the colors are so bright and vibrant.

BRAHM: Yes. Yeah. Very, very vibrant. And, yeah, and they just pop and I'm just seeing like the subject matter. You've got some things like portraits of well-known people or popular scenes, but then a lot of original work. And, one piece that I'm attracted to is *Zola's Embrace*.

JP: Oh yes. That actually was, that idea came about, there was the owners of the Pink Dog Creative, which is Hedy Fisher and Randy Shull, they asked me to come up with, do a painting on a train container. They had in front of the studio on River Arts District. And so I was thinking about what was going on in the world at the time. This was like in 2017, I thought, okay. All the stuff is going on. So I came up with the name, so Swahili name, Zola. So I looked up Zola and thought of it as a peaceful earth is what the name of, so it's Mother Earth upset about the way the world's going. So she is the heart is actually thread. And she's sewing, putting love back into the earth and the quilt of the earth. So she's putting love back into it. And I actually, that stayed up for about a year and I wind up doing a painting cuz I loved it so much and it connected me with a lot of people. So I wind up doing the painting itself. And I actually just sold the painting to, Samantha Brown from *Samantha Brown's Places to Love*. She got that from me.

BRAHM: Yeah, that's wonderful. And that, I mean, it's such a powerful piece, so, that's cool that Samantha Brown got it, you know, and her work is really great too, it's encouraging love for people around the world. Now, how do you decide what you make for your dolls?

JP: You know what, it actually depends on the fabric. It's like, I would like, I've been making some here recently and it's the fabric. I bought a bunch of, cuz black history month had a lot of black fabric, African, you can't really find that black history fabric until around this time of year. And so every time I, if I'm going through it, then I can see, okay, I know what I'm gonna make out of it. So it's just nothing that I'm thinking about ahead of time. It's just the fabrics. They speak to me.

BRAHM: Mm-hmm, now, a lot of the, like subject matter, it seems like for your paintings, like I get this like a deep connection, at least for me. I see a lot of spirituality in it. So is making art part of your spiritual practice at all?

JP: Well, it was to me, it is more of healing. It's not so much as a spiritual, well, I guess it is spiritual as well for me personally, but it's healing for me. It has to do with, not having my parents when I was young, young child being the youngest of four and living with my grandparents. And so my outlet was to be creative. So that's why I started. So young's like, I would take shoe boxes or soda containers, things like that boxes and just make things like doll houses. And it all started from that. So as I got older, I realized here recently, that's why I was doing it. It was my way of dealing with, you know, emotional stuff and make a safe place for me.

BRAHM: Oh, yeah, that hits me in the heart. Definitely. And that can be a way for you to interpret the world and make sense of it, especially as a child. That's definitely. So, do you

teach anyone, have you taught anyone like anybody in your family or, taught classes or anything like that?

JP: Yeah, I'm actually labeled as a teaching artist. I work with a program called TAPAAS, which is a program through the city schools. and I also do a program called In Real Life (IRL), and also YTL (Youth Transformed for Life). So I just do, I work with school-aged kids. Sometimes I do adults depending on if they reach out to me and say, they wanna learn how to paint something. And I just do, just come up with an art activity. And like I said, I don't have a degree in it, but art is it, it's just a way of reaching people. It's a good way of reaching them. And people who normally think they can't draw or not an artist realize that they, they can do anything, just encourages them. So I've loved doing that.

BRAHM: Mm-hmm, yeah, that's wonderful. And it's great that connecting with youth through that. And, you know, being able to kind of foster that creativity in young people as well. And, then cuz you know, a lot of folks like artists that I've talked to, with this exhibit, especially said that when they were grown up, they didn't even know they could be an artist. I was just speaking with Viola Spells, another Asheville native and artist. And she just said she didn't even know being an artist was an option when she was a child. And it wasn't until she got older that she saw that possibility. So that's great that you're like given back, and helping the youth see that.

JP: Yeah. And that's why I stayed around here. People always tell me, why are you still in Asheville you need to leave? I'm like, well, if I can't make it in my hometown, then I can't make it, why go anywhere else? And then I wanna also let, because there was a teacher that was there for me when I was young, I wanna be that type of person for them. So they don't really have to leave and they can make a career out of this, you know? Cause you're always taught that you have to be dead to sell some paintings. So I wanna enjoy it while I'm here.

BRAHM: Mm-hmm, definitely. And yeah, Asheville promotes itself as an arts community, right? With the River Arts District and everything. And it should be people that are from there being able to engage in that economy and not just folks that move from outside of the city and set up a studio.

JP: Exactly. I agree with you.

BRAHM: What type of tools do you use, like for your paintings and then for your dolls?

JP: Well, I just used traditionally canvas, with some paint, brushes and paint. Sometimes I'll incorporate like glass or fabric or something to kind of make it mixed media. Just depends on what the painting is. I just finished a painting of a black man with, and I put, I don't know, just the picture or the image I used. I kind of put my spin on it, but I added cotton balls with pods, cotton pods, and it just like the painting. It needed those. So just things like that with my dolls, yarn, fabrics. And I sometimes will put strings some paper beads, or some jewelry to attached, to like

some wires or something to add like a little adornment and stuff for the jewelry and do things like that. I kinda like look around the room and find things I can repurpose. So I'm big on repurposing things.

BRAHM: Yeah. And you kind of give new life to that item and then it might add its own story to the piece. I mean, incorporating cotton pods into, a black man's hair in a painting, like that's got a lot of history to it, a lot of story to it. And it conveys that meaning without you actually having to sit there and talk to somebody about what it means, right?

JP: Exactly. That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

BRAHM: Now what I think is cool too, is looking at your art and, like things on your Facebook page that you also have done some like more kind of community pieces. Like if there's the free pantry that you painted.

JP: Oh yeah. The food pantry. Yeah. Someone reached out to me about putting. painting that, they just covered it up and I just went there. And the idea was, it was an honor to, I'm not sure. I didn't know the lady who it was in honor of, I didn't really know her, but it was, she had passed away, but she did a lot for the church and said they wanna do something to honor her. Cuz she made sure people were fed at the church. So I put her face on the front and then I thought about her passing away. So I putting wings for his angel, cause she was, you know, like an angel to them. And in the back of it, I put the mountain scene with a bowl, with someone holding a bowl to be fed. So, that's what inspired me to do that.

BRAHM: Yeah. It is a beautiful piece and that's great that, you know, you're incorporating the story of that person into the piece and into the art. And then, so have you also, it looks like you've done some murals as well? Now, your approach for is your approach, like for making a mural any different than, your approach for like painting a canvas?

JP: Well, yeah, the thing with the murals, it's like, if someone reaches out to me about a mural, I wanna have that conversation. So tell me what you're looking for, because I wanna make sure I'm the person to do it for 'em. I have them to look at the type of painting I do, cuz they're everybody, does murals have a different style? I'm old school. I'm still with, I need to touch the surface with the brush kind of person. So, once they have the discussion, tell me what they're looking for. I'll make a few sketches and then we'll go from there then if, tell me what color and I like to have free range of being creative, not like controlled. Oh, well, I don't want that. Once I'm started, just let me free wheel and do it. And then usually it turns out what they wanted or even better.

BRAHM: Mm-hmm, yeah. And that's great. I mean definitely that you're like, you wanna touch the surface and make sure like, cuz you're incorporating that texture into the work as well. Now let's see. So do you have a place where you sell or exhibit your work in public?

JP: Yeah, actually, I just, about a year ago, Noir Collective AVL, which is a black owned gallery downtown and located in a historical, used to be a historical district of black. It's part of the YMI building, but it's in a historical part of business, part of, Asheville that was all predominantly black owned. So these two, a lady and her daughter came and decided to open something cuz we needed a space for us and it's over 13 local artists, all of color. And it's a place where they sell the artwork, these incenses, the handmaid soaps candles, and all that. So my paintings are up on the walls there. And as well as I also kind of put art on candles, I call art candles. The candles don't have a scent or anything, but I just put the artwork on them. Just another way of people can get the art.

BRAHM: Well, yeah, and I mean, those style of candles reminds me of the like Catholic tradition, you know, they have like the candles with the saints on it and everything.

JP: Yes. That's exactly right. That's exactly right.

BRAHM: And you know, and then you're like, in a sense, you know, I feel like that's just like elevating your work to the sacred, right? And the subject matter. And showing that the subject matter is also sacred, that you're painting. And then just like that is very powerful on its own. And that's incredible that the Noir Collective opened in the YMI building, I'm familiar with the history around the YMI and like how important it was to the black community in Asheville historically. And so that's great that now that building is able to, you know, foster the future right as well.

JP: Right, right. Yeah. Much needed.

BRAHM: What part of Asheville did you grow up?

JP: I grew up in basically the Montford area, which is a historical place now. We had a home over there. I also started out, well, I started out in Clingman Avenue, but it's all still in the same area, Montford area.

BRAHM: Yeah, it's a beautiful part over there in north Asheville. And that's great that, you know, be so connected with like this historic part of the city. And then now it's like, you're showing your work and this historic building. That's also really connected to the history of the community there too. I think that's really cool.

JP: Exactly.

BRAHM: With your dolls, how do you make those? What type of tools do you use with those?

JP: Just fabric. I actually, when I first started doing those years ago, I would use men's socks. So I'd be calling up people like you got some socks. And I would take my daughter, when she was talking about this not too long ago, but she's like, I would drag her to the store just to buy men's trouser

socks. So I would put Styrofoam balls in there in the heads, but after I put the hair on it, they would fall over. I was like, okay, this is not working. So I had to come up with a different way. So I decided to sketch up. I used to work with senior citizen. And I remember a lady telling me, she's like, when you're making something, you always need to make a paper pattern. She said you may forget what you did. So anyway, I started out making this little paper pattern and that's how I made them I would have like a bag of heads, a bag of legs, a bag of arms. And so when someone gets a doll, I can just piece it together and add the clothes on it. So, that's how they started.

BRAHM: Mm-hmm, that's fun. Started just getting socks from friends and everything, but yeah, and trial and error, you know, and you figure out what works and, yeah. And I just love the way your dolls look. I mean the clothing on it's so nice and everything and it's just beautiful. And one I was really attracted to is your mermaids. Yeah. So, you know, I think it's, you don't always see mermaids that have melanated skin, right? And so how'd you get on the topic of wanting to make mermaids?

JP: Well, and like you say, you don't see it. Well my granddaughter, like goes into a store and there's no black mermaids. So my dolls are actually not only mermaids, but ballerinas. And I do, the ones that stand up as well, but I also, and the ones that's wrapped in blankets, my thing was to get all different skin tones. So when I'm buying fabric, the felt or whatever I'm using, I'm making sure that they're in all different tones. And that's why I notice that attracts people to my booth when I'm doing the Big Crafty, that's usually where I sell the dolls. People are looking for that, cuz you know, you got more people now with biracial children or grandkids. And so there's like, it's hard to find the doll that looks like me or looks like them. So, I said, okay, well I'll do some mermaids. And then I came with a pattern for that and yeah, just evolved just and who knows what I'll be doing next. Every time each year, something else comes to mind to make.

BRAHM: Yeah. And you know, I mean, that's just so powerful that, you know, you're saying it's like, you don't see that, right? So you wanted to fill that void. And then just to, I mean, growing up, you know, I can only imagine it's like, if you wanna be a ballerina growing up right. And your skin's brown, but everything you see are just these pale ballerinas, you know? And it's like, why can't I be that too, right? So you're kind of like nurturing that possibility for people as well. Now, do you have a preferred fabric? Is it like, do you prefer, like you mentioned felt or, you know, the socks or is there like a, do you like acrylics or wools or natural fabrics?

JP: My preference is quilting fabric, which is made of cotton. When I do certain bodies like the mermaids or the ones that's wrapped in the blankets they're made from felt, because to me, it feels like that needs to be a softer material, but the other ones are basically cotton. I go to the quilting section for that type of fabric, cause I know it's stronger and lasts a little longer.

BRAHM: And that's just cool, you know, connecting again with this history of people where it's like a lot of the textile arts that people would make historically, it's like you

make quilts or, afghans or something, and you're making it to keep your family warm. It's like a utility, but you know, it might also be beautiful.

JP: Right. I grew up with my grandmother and that's why I started sewing, I was hand sewing. I never didn't know how to use a sewing machine, but a hand sew and she would take old clothes and make us quilt out of it. And I would have thread to needle. So that's how I learned by watching her. But it wasn't until I got older and started working for Senior Opportunity Center that I learned how to use machine, but the crazy thing, and I first threaded the machine, it was natural. It's like, I'd always use the machine. So, but yeah, and I actually teach, last year I worked with the PAGE Program in Madison County, and I worked at the, it was actually at Rosenwald School, but it was Mars Hill School for Colored People, what it was called. And I did, they researched the elders there and the alumni who used to attend the school and came up with some stories and I told them, showed them how to make quilt squares. So that was fun. Teaching them that, and then learning the history of that.

BRAHM: Oh yeah. That's so powerful. You're sharing this tradition that you learned from your grandmother with these older folks and then the power of a story quilt too. So like each square in that quilt, like told part of their community's history.

JP: Yeah, it actually was the students, I think it was only one black student, but the rest of 'em were white, but the programs are called PAGE girls, Partnership for Appalachians and Girls Education. And they all lived in Madison County, and it was the first time, some of 'em even sewed anything or put anything together, but the fact how they would take a story from one of the elders or alumni, and then they put it into a quilt. And you look at the block and you knew what that story told. It was just beautiful. So they really had a good time doing that. And I enjoyed doing that too. And what they made, I pieced them together. So it was like two squares. And so what they're gonna do, cuz they wanted to make the school cuz they remodeled the school and they want it to look like how it looked in the old picture. So they're gonna make curtains out of them and some parts are gonna be traveling, but the other one part is gonna hang up in the windows like they did when they were in school, cause they didn't have, they didn't have light, electricity. So the light was from the windows. So quilting is, I just think it's amazing.

BRAHM: Mm-hmm and that's wonderful that, you know, you got to be part of that community telling their story and connecting with their history. And it's be something beautiful that people will see when they come through there. and I just think that's so cool. That's like, so you learned how to quilt by watching your grandmother and helping her thread, the needle, you know, and then now you're carrying those threads on through your work. And so with your standing dolls, do you construct, is there a frame inside of the doll that makes 'em stand up or?

JP: No, my trick was, I started out with marbles. So I had to get something, they wouldn't stand all the way up, so I had to figure out, okay, what can I use? So I was just thinking of different. I happened to have some marbles, so I tried the marbles on them, but, the marbles worked. But so

much, but I had to find another way I could do 'em that didn't cost as much money. So I used rocks, like little river rocks from, you can buy real cheap in the store. So, but yeah, just like trial and error. I know some people use sand, but that's too messy. So I had to think, okay, what could I use that doesn't cost me a lot of money.

BRAHM: And so then for the hair, do you primarily use yarn for the hair?

JP: Yeah. Any store I go to, if they got an art department, like a little crafting section. I go see kind of yarn they have in there. And then I imagine what the hair would look. So, if it's the chunky kinda yarn that makes good, like dreadlocks or, braids or something. So I'll take the hair and just braid it up or, you know, style it up into a little bun. So yeah, I just look for like different colors of what somebody's hair would look like.

BRAHM: What does your art like mean to you? What does making art mean to you?

JP: Art to me is a way of sharing love. I also enjoy making things and giving 'em away to friends. If I'm inspired to do maybe their portrait or something in an exhibit I got after a while, I'm like, okay, I got something for you and I'll gift them with it. Same way with my dolls. Somebody can do something like a kind gesture and it's the way of me sharing the love of the art. Cause it makes me feel good. Any piece I do now, there's some pieces I do that I don't wanna part from, but then it's also good to share it, you know, out of love. And I also want to give it to somebody that's gonna take care of it or honor it, or either can pass it on to someone else.

BRAHM: Mm-hmm, yeah, that's great. And just a way to, you know, it brings you joy, it's your way of expressing love and being able to put that out in the world, you know, that's so powerful. So how did you meet Marie Cochran?

JP: Um, Black Lives Matter mural. we got together. I didn't know who she was, and it was the first time the three of us had even had a conversation with each other. So, yeah. That's how I met her through that. Yeah. And it's amazing how you have a connection with people. That's got the same cause, but we're all doing different parts of the cause, you know, and it's still art and it's different ways of how we are forming art.

BRAHM: So you were one of the artists on the Black Lives Matter mural?

JP: I was supporting, yeah, one of the lead artists and I had like five supporting artists with me. Yeah.

BRAHM: Could you tell me a little bit about that? So which word did you have?

JP: I was of the word LIVES. So yeah, I wasn't even gonna apply for it. Cause I thought, well, I'm really not a muralist, you know? I mean, I've done murals, but I'm not a, not consider myself a muralist. And I thought it would be, look had to be something a little more technical or whatever.

And so a friend called me, she's like, "You know what? You need go ahead and apply for that." I'm like, nah, I'm not gonna. I said, okay, I'll do it. So the night before it was due, I applied for it and got the notification. I was like, wow, outta all those people. But you know, that was great.

BRAHM: Yeah. So, then how did you select the people that you were working with and then did you design each of the letters or give them a concept?

JP: Yeah, what I did is I sketched out the idea I wanted to have each letter to represent. And also the artists I reached out to were people who just like I was, nobody knew who you were, but they were talented. So I picked people and also had my son. My son's an artist, but he doesn't do art like I do. He, but they're, you know, they have that talent. So I picked all of them. Just so they can get some exposure and people can know who they are then that way they can launch from that. I gave them the sketch of what I wanted and I wanted them to put their spin to it. Cuz I didn't want to have them have the limits on what they could do. Mm-hmm so basically this is my idea. Then it came up with what they wanted to do.

BRAHM: Yeah, that wonderful. And that's just so cool that you're able to bring your son into it as well. And yeah, and there's really powerful stuff, looking at the images for the letters and, like the "V" you know, the young man with his hands up and the angel wings, you know, that's very powerful. So then how was the experience of actually like making that mural? Like, you know, when you've got the artist together, you've got the concepts down, right? But then you're actually going out to pack square right to this place. That's got a lot of weight to it, right? And, significance with like the Vance monument and then the Dixie Highway going through there, you know? So how was it when you were actually like painting it there?

JP: Well, I'm always about positive energy. So I got up that morning, my son and we had the same kind of T-shirt on. And we went with this outlook, like, this is gonna be great. I want him to be like, this is a historical moment. I want you to be part of this. It's a place where I was born, my grandmother and her first husband used to perform up there. She would dance, he played a guitar. So it was just so many things why I needed to be there next space. And it was to me, my personal experience, my son and I talked about this a while ago, it was a good feeling for me. We were enough distance from the public, you know, where they could come up. I got no negative energy while I was there. It started thundering and one of my artists was like, "Oh, here come the rain." I said, "Un-uh nope, we don't call. We're not calling that, our ancestors looking out for us today." It rained all around us, but it didn't rain on us. Which was so I knew, I said, yeah, we're supposed to be here doing this. So it was that whole experience. I can't put in enough words. It was just amazing.

BRAHM: Oh, I mean, I'm just getting chills. you know, you're talking about like the connection with your grandmother and grandfather performing in that space. And then you being able to share that experience with your son and then create that, you know, to

be able to like, yeah, like spread love and bring power and, you know, reclaim that space there. Like that is really cool.

JP: Yeah. That was, it was just amazing. That's all I can say is, yeah.