

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Lisa Segal: A Self Interview

Lisa Segal · Wednesday, February 27th, 2019

You’ve lived in Los Angeles over three decades. Do you have to make that *Chinatown* “my daughter/my sister” choice between being a poet/writer and an artist?

For me the boundaries are porous. It’s the same creative process whether I’m writing or in the studio. My poetry became part of my art one day as I was editing a poem, erasing lines. The lines that were left made a square! In the studio, I work with primary shapes. The moment I saw the poem as a square, not a poem, it opened new territory. It gave me a way to put my poems in my artwork. But more than that, my approach to both is the same. I aim to be open to whatever might happen. When I’m writing a first draft, I don’t interrupt myself to edit it. In the studio, it’s the same. I wait until I have enough of something to start refining it.



Basho’s Crow: Flower Street Negotiations, 2018, mixed media, 13”h x 56”w x 1 1/2”d

Writing and making art require time alone. Do you also work with others?

It’s a big world to discover all by myself. I found my poetry and art communities studying with two long-time L.A. teachers, the poet Jack Grapes and the artist Tom Wudl. It’s been over twelve years that I’ve been working with both of them.

How have they been helpful?

Their philosophies center around the creative process as organic and exploratory, where “not-knowing” is part of art making, not something an artist eventually outgrows—what John Keats calls “negative capability.” Both stress the mastery of technique as an ongoing endeavor and the importance of not editing yourself when you should be playing.

Jack Grapes’ Method Writing uses concepts that get a writer to the emotional realism of their deep voice, then builds on that with tonal dynamics and narrative techniques that use images in a cinematic manner.

Tom Wudl facilitates an artist's exploration into the lesser developed aspects of their nature and out of their comfort zones with the goal to free them to make the art they want to make.

What happens when you can't write? Or make art? How do you break through?

There's an important word left out of that universal question, the word "good." Nobody gets stuck making bad art. It's when they try to make "good" art that they get stuck. I never get stuck, because I'm not afraid of making bad art. It's only in the fearless process of making bad art that good art emerges. If every time I began a work of art, I thought to myself, "This better be good," I wouldn't put pen to paper or paintbrush to canvas. So, when I feel the slightest resistance to the process, I reset myself by practicing something specific. I might write using both high and low language, alternating writing as if I were talking to you with more "poetic" language. In the studio, I'll paint squares with the same red paint on ten different kinds of paper. I remember to trust the process, to play. Doing something leads to the next thing. Product might come, but I don't think about that when I start out. If you're afraid to make bad art, you'll never make good art.



Things as They Are, 2017, mixed media, 28 1/2" h x 13 1/2" w x 2 1/2" d

Good product and projects will come. A journal entry might be edited into a poem or short story, then become part of a book. My book *Metamorphosis: Who is the Maker? An Artist's Statement*, combines my writing and my artwork. I'm the recent past-chair of StudioEleven, a collective founded with other artists from Tom Wudl's DTLA studio to exhibit our work. We produced a series of shows at our own DTLA gallery. These days, we exhibit around L.A.. We're at the Colburn Music School through 2019 and last summer showed at Santa Monica College's Pete and Susan Barret Gallery.

What are you up to now?

I'm always writing new pieces and editing others towards finished work. In the studio, I'm working on paper assemblages made of straight lines, grids, squares, cubes, fragments of my poetry, pictures of my cubes, and sometimes crows.

Crows?

Crows became part of my artwork when I photographed, from underneath, a crow standing on my skylight dome. Crows in my poetry and art are an example of the intertwined and ongoing conversation that has gone on between poets and visual artists for centuries.

Can you elaborate on that?

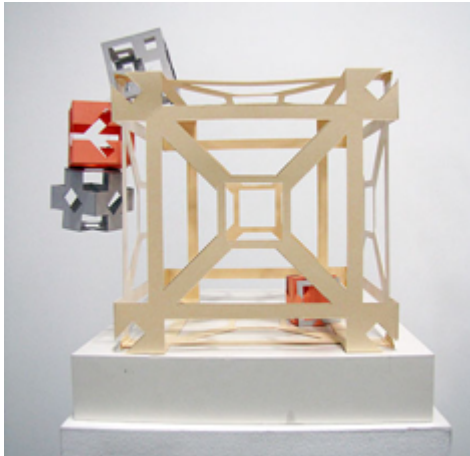
Ezra Pound influenced modern poetry with this 1914 poem:

In a Station of the Metro

The apparition of these faces in the crowd;
Petals on a wet, black bough.

Pound was influenced by the 17th c. Japanese poet Matsuo Bashō's poem that is credited with beginning modern haiku:

on a bare branch
a crow has stopped
autumn dusk



Bashō's poem was influenced by the Chinese art phrase "a chilly-looking crow on a bare tree" and by a painting by the 12th c. Chinese Zen monk Mu Ch'i. Bashō's crow haiku influenced Wallace Stevens' 1917 poem "13 Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" which has 13 haiku-styled stanzas and a blackbird in a tree. My poem "Thirteen Ways to Look at the Moon" was inspired by Stevens' poem. I think of the crows in my work as 'Bashō's crow.'

What's your idea of heaven?

A Spoonful of Kisses, 2016, paper, My art studio is heaven.
11?h x 9?d x 11?w

What's ahead in 2019?

Aside from the ongoing exhibit at the Colburn Music school, I have two poetry books forthcoming. I'm one of three poets in *Trips* which is scheduled for spring. My solo collection, *Kicking Toward the Deep End*, is slated for the end of this year. For the past five years, I've taught Method Writing, co-teaching with Jack Grapes. With Josh Grapes, I give a writing workshop, "Beyond the Frame in Space and Time," and teach a "Method Writing Brush Up" class that reinforces Method Writing's basic principles and techniques. Our book, *Method Writing: The Brush Up*, will be available this summer.

Today's News

Yesterday monsoons flooded Skunk Creek,
stopped interstate traffic.
No planes landed at Sky Harbor.

I grew up in Phoenix.
I've seen flash floods overflow the Salt River,
red-brown water pounding
under the Central Avenue Bridge,
tugging at the roads, the Sonoran desert scrub,
the chaparral, the cat's ear.

I've stood nearby and watched.

I've seen the earth after floods
rampaged through the riverbed,
the river reclaiming its ground,
absorbing what it could,

then,

like me,
offering new arms
to the sun—
waiting to be
renewed.

*

Hot Water Shimmering

Sun blister of hot cement, hot
water shimmering, hot bodies, hot blood
pounding long hours, hot density of hot
feelings, hot long promises
that my body would acquire
song, long hot complicated,

hibachi sparks,
hot coals, hot sweat,
hot thighs in cars. Asphalt mirages.
Hot women under crimson sunsets
herding sun-painted children,
dinner
crusting in skillets.
Ice cubes, cha-cha-cha,
pool-shoes slapping kitchen linoleum,
hot shish kabobs dripping fat
as if I were a shish kabob, hot glowing
against my sheets,

hot long wishing into tomorrow,
hot yesterday, hot now,
whispering in bed
to my sister.

(Author photo by Alexis Rhone Fancher)

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