

Rebecca Brown

Interviewed by Julianna Spallholz

JS: You have been extremely active in collaborating with artists who work in disciplines other than writing. I know you've been working on a libretto, which will be performed by the BetterBiscuitDance Company this year. Also this year, your first two-act play *The Toaster* will be performed by the New City Theater in Seattle. The Los Angeles New Short Fiction Series adapted four pieces from your book *The End of Youth* for a performance in 2003. And these are just a few of the collaborative projects you've been involved with. Is *Woman in Ill-Fitting Wig* your first collaboration with a visual artist?

RB: I have written about the work of visual artist friends before, but this project with Nancy has certainly been bigger than any other work I have done with visual artists. The first even vaguely collaborative thing I did with a visual artist was to write some texts and an essay to accompany a show of painting by Randy James that went up at the Nordic Heritage Museum here in Seattle last spring. I had met Randy through our mutual friend, the beloved and late and very much missed Wes Wehr, a guy who was a painter, a writer, a paleontologist, a letter writer, and an all around tremendous human being. The first time I went out with him for coffee when was when I was interviewing him for an newspaper article I was going to write, someone in the coffee shop asked me, "is that your father?" I think because we are both really WASPy looking, light hair and skin and all and both fairly scruffy in the fashion department. Anyway, I was completely and utterly thrilled that someone would associate me with Wes in that way but in some way he became kind of a mentor, or artistic father figure or hero to me. Really inspired me to be open to all sorts of experiences in the arts. He worked in all sorts of disciplines and was always learning, always exploring up through his 70s, and that just really inspired me.

Anyway, I met Randy through Wes and when Randy told me he had a show going up, I said, "Hey, can I write about it?" and he said, "Sure." We didn't know what shape that would take, but I went over to his apartment to look at his

work and I lived with some of his images for a while then wrote a series of prose-poemy type things, a kind of loose narrative about several of his images. Then I also wrote a short essay talking about the collaboration that Andre Breton and Juan Miro did, which I learned about in the City Lights book *Constellations of Miro Breton*, which placed Randy's and my conversation into a kind of context. Randy is great with computers so he made this little booklet of my essay and prose poems and his work and also included some of his photographs and an essay by Wes. Really a project among friends. I liked the process, and Randy gave me one of his prints!

So I thought about who else's work I could engage with in that way. And I thought of Nancy Kiefer, who I had met years ago through friends and whose work I had followed and always found utterly intense. I called Nancy and asked if I could write about her work and kind of the same thing happened. I went and looked at some of her stuff and made a bunch of color Xeroxes and Polaroids of it and lived with it a while and just thought about it and didn't think about it. We talked several times and when I started writing things I read them to her and we talked and had this great ongoing conversation about what we were both up to. We didn't really have a plan, but then we ended up doing this book together. And Nancy has a show going up at Hugo House [in Seattle] for a month where we will do a couple of events around the work.

I have also recently written a text for a catalogue of painting by Barbara Thomas, another painter who lives in Seattle. She has a book called *Storm Watch*. I told Barbara, as it had been clear to Randy and Nancy, that I was not talking about doing a catalogue essay, but some kind of creative text that engaged with the work. Barbara's work pushed me into new territory too.

JS: What was the process of making this book? Did Nancy's images exist prior to your writing? Or did her images and your writing emerge alongside one another?

RB: All of the images in the book existed before the texts. The stuff I wrote came

directly from looking at Nancy's images. There is no way I would have written that stuff without her images. The style of the brush strokes, the daring weirdness of some of the colors, the darkness and humor and intensity I see in them. And of course, Nancy herself is so amazing. Really smart and well read and articulate, so it was great to do this project so we could hang out and get to know each other. She has read and studied lit and is a literate thinker and painter. So there are ways she made it really easy for me. Also, I understand from her that some of her new paintings have been in some kind of dialogue with the texts I wrote for *Woman In Ill-Fitting Wig*. I can't wait to see them.

JS: Moving through this collection of Nancy's images feels almost like moving through an album, a series of very intimate portraits. The images in this group are done in unapologetic close-up of their subjects, and with that intense color and those thick, heavy brush strokes you mentioned. In what ways did these and other qualities of her art feed the creation of the writing?

RB: Intense is right. I really got caught up in these portraits. There was something about these portraits that really lent itself to becoming voiced. I sort of think of my texts, some of them, as monologues. Not so much in the voice of the person in the painting, but a voice telling the story of the person in the painting. And in my work I was led by some of Nancy's expressionism – the way she's got these slashes of "unreal" color in places, the way there looks like there was a kind of violence or breathlessness in some of the application of paint, which I tried to respond to or imitate in my words. I used a lot of broken sentences, run-ons, weird rhythms and repetitions. A lot of colorful abstractions, disturbing juxtapositions, and even some specific references to literary history – like fairy-tale references – the way she quotes from art history. I really wanted to get some of her intensity.

JS: There is to me an astounding contrast of movement in so many of the text /image pieces in the book. Nancy's work often seems to embody a sort of weighted stillness, while much of your writing moves with a sometimes almost violent ferocity. For example, in *Cabin*:

It would have turned into a pumpkin at midnight, a frog in the light of the day, the old witch's house with the big fat boiling oven she threw the children into. She would have thrown us into it then eaten us or part of us and spit out the other parts and the dogs around her house, the curs and the mutts and the mangy things that snarled around outside at her feet the bitches she kicked at and poked with the fire irons would have snapped at whatever remained of us, the gristle and fat and bone, and crunched us in their teeth and sucked the marrow. They would have fought over us and tugged the bits of us between them in their slobbery spitty yellow stinking teeth.

How do you feel that movement affects the conversation between the writing and the images?

RB: I do feel like there was a conversation between Nancy's work and mine. Having her work to look at, knowing that her work exists, allowed or invited or taught me to run with some rhythms and concepts that I think I would not have known how to approach if I hadn't had these images. Violent ferocity. Yup.

For example, that *Cabin* story. That is material I have had kicking around in me for years but never knew how to approach it. But when I had her portrait – like an externalized, “other-ized” image of myself/my character – I could approach the material. It was like, because her images were there, my voices had something to hold on to, to grab for. I do hope I have finally exorcised that material. But I am afraid it is still in me. As the poet David McAleavey says, “unrepeatable events inhere in us.” Yup.

JS: The narrative point of view changes from piece to piece in your work, moving from first to second to third person. What was your process of deciding what point of view to employ for each piece?

RB: There was no conscious decision. I just wrote and rewrote everything. But I don't have any set scheme as far as why some are in 1st and some in 3rd. My "process" about that was utterly unconscious.

JS: The dynamic between the text and the images in the book causes me to think a lot about context. I wonder how I would read the writing if it was not in the company of the images, and how I would see the images if they were not in the company of the text. Will you comment about the possible autonomy of the text and of the images in the book versus the possible dependency between the two?

RB: I so much think of these texts as going with Nancy's images that it is hard to think of them separately. Having said that, I have a pal who wants to publish one or two of them in her small mag but can't do images, so probably will just use the text. I also think that having the images is essential for the whole book as a book. I mean, just reading these fifteen pieces would get tedious in a way I don't want, if you read them straight through. Whereas having the images, looking at the images, gives a different part of your brain a chance to engage, gives the reader a different rhythm for absorbing what is being said in both paint and word.

JS: Will you comment on what you believe to be the importance of or implications of artistic collaboration in general?

RB: Jeez. The importance to me is that it gets me to make work I never would make on my own, never could make on my own. In some of these cases it has just been a kind of selfish way for me to indulge in my pleasure in someone's work. What better way to spend time with someone's work than to say, "I need to be this around enough so that it will make me write." Plus, just the company. I mean, when I am working on my own, I don't get to have coffee with someone and talk about what I am up to. But working with Nancy I just had all these great conversations about art and art making. Ditto working with the dancers. I have learned so much and been exposed to really cool thinkers and artists.

And you also can't get away from it. There are some things that one medium can do that the other can't. Like, I will always remember the first time I heard someone sing one of my "songs." The singer for *The Onion Twins* just belted out her voice and I was like, Oh My God, that's beautiful. The way it added a kind of gravitas and passion that I could only ever have imagined. On the most basic level, of course, I am just very aware how few people in this country read literature or attend dance or really look at art. So it's like we have to engage with each other because unless we do, no one will look at our work. And besides, it's all about trying to figure out who we are and how we can live with ourselves with each other. So collaboration is one really direct way of doing that, of asking, How can we converse with each other?