

Converge Conversations
Deborah Sperry
The New York Years



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Converge Conversations - Welcome to Converge Conversations where we talk about art to artists. Let's get started. Today we're talking to Deb Sperry, who recently had an exhibit; *The New York Years; Painting and Drawing By Deborah Sperry*.

Hey, Deb, it's really great to have you here. Why don't you tell the audience a little bit about your background - where you came from, where you ended up? Let's talk about it a little bit.

Deborah Sperry - I think the first thing I would want the audience to know is that I grew up an army brat, my father was stationed in Europe and in Asia. And gosh, for almost the first decade of my life we were all over the world. So I saw a lot of pretty interesting things. We ended up in Denver when my father retired from the army, and I went to high school and college in Colorado. My second year of college, my parents divorced, and I was out on my own then college stopped. I started a job in downtown Denver at a restaurant called The Vault, which was actually in the basement of an old bank building. I worked there for a while, and I belonged to an artist co-op and had studio space there. I was thinking about what I wanted the rest of my life to be, I decided that the best place at that time was to be an artist was in New York City. So I made plans and saved up about \$500. With three other young women, we drove somebody else's car to Boston, and we shared expenses, the gas and

hotel rooms. We drove through multiple snowstorms in January to get to Boston. Once we got to Boston, I took a train from Boston to New York and arrived in the middle of the night. I took a cab down to the name and address of the people at my co-op had given me, this guy they knew who was willing to put me up for a while until I could kind of figure out what I was doing in New York. And he was very surprised, because it turned out it was a big joke that the people at the co-op had done on him and me.

CC - So when was that?

DS - That was in January 1970.

CC - What was the city like when you got there?

DS - It was a really unusual time in New York. The city was very rundown, there was a lot of garbage on the streets, there was social unrest, you know, the riots in Newark and other places across the country and happened just a few years before that. So it was a it was a difficult time for the city. It was kind of down on its heels, I would say.

CC - How, how long were you there before you actually started to work started to paint?

DS - So I was there a day or two and I called other friends that happened to live on 110th Street and Amsterdam. I slept on their couch for three months, until I think I strained their

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marriage. They helped find me a room in a women's boarding house on 88th Street and Riverside. That's when I really started doing artwork. I was able to finally find a waitress job. I found a job at a place called Friar Tuck, which was on Third Avenue. I got the lunchtime hour so it wasn't the prime evening stuff where they were really busy and made money. I was earning enough to get by. One of the people that I met while I was working there was Norman. He was a bartender and we became friends. Norman left shortly after I started and went to a new job as manager and head bartender at a place called Barney Google's.

CC - What was Barney Google's?

DS - Well, Barney, Google's was a nightclub bar/live entertainment disco. It had been a German beer garden in its previous life, and it still had some of the vestiges of that. It had the latticework decor on the walls and the feel of an outdoor cafe. In the back they had set it up in tiers



for viewing the stage. It was a sort of interesting place.

CC - What artists perform there?

DS - Well, a lot of during that time, Studio 54 was also opening. And they were on West 54th Street between 8th and Broadway and was a music venue for disco. So Barney Google's decided that their music focus would be on R&B and Latin music. So it was a very different crowd. On

Friday and Saturdays, they booked live acts like Sister Sledge, Sam and Dave; I even saw Tina Turner perform there.

CC - Wow. During those years, it must have been wild to see all that talent.

DS - Yeah, it was great.

CC - What did you do at Barney Goggle's.

DS - I was a cocktail waitress and spoiler alert. This was when feminism was on the rise. We were in a sort of uniform of a ballet leotard, fishnet stockings, high heeled shoes, and a little black apron that was tied in a bow in the back. It was really sexist.

CC - What was your process? I mean, you have sketches and drawings, then later paintings. How did you do that?

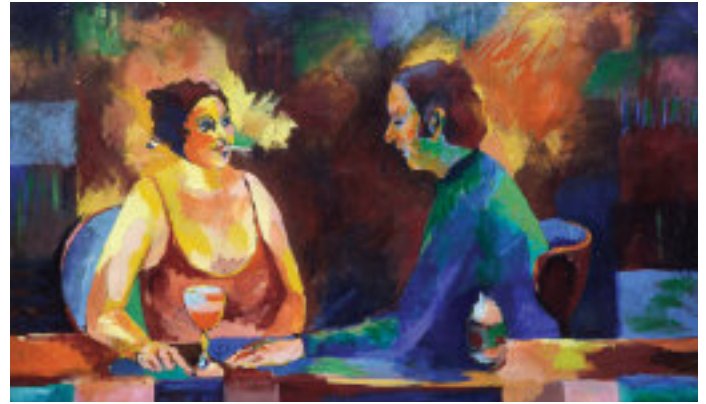
DS - Well, it was a nightclub, and things in a nightclub don't really get started until about 10 o'clock at night. The first show on weekends wasn't until, like 11 o'clock and then



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it was open until four o'clock in the morning. So, there was a lot of waiting around and during the waiting around times, I would do sketches in my little book to keep busy, I just didn't want to stand there doing nothing. I'd have the sketchbook with me and I would take the sketches to the back, and make notes about what I was seeing. I then took them back to my studio and I would start to work on compositions. The paintings are not one particular sketch, but they are composite of different days and different things that I saw. I was trying to capture the the atmosphere more than anything else. Barney Google's had theatrical lighting and mirror balls that were turning and sending shards of light everywhere. Everybody smoked and it was just a very night clubby. I tried to capture in my sketches, drawings and paintings. I wanted to capture the sense of the heat, the movement and the atmosphere of the place.

CC - Since CC often focuses on photography, we noticed there are two techniques that you used that are very photographic in their styles. One is the deep focus. And the other is flash drag. We see that a lot in these in your paintings and sketches. Why don't you tell us a little bit more about that?



DS - Well, I described the atmosphere it was kind of smoky and there was a lot of light moving around. The smoke would clear for a minute and you would see the other side of the room. Then you would see lights flashing and people moving. So as I'm putting these sketches to together in compositions, I would be thinking about how to give a sense of the feel of the place. In order to do that you just can't always have the one thing that's in front of you - you need to have the things in the distance and the things in in mid-range to give it a better feel for what it was actually like.

CC - A lot of these paintings are very dynamic, very colorful. There's a lot of motion. But there are a couple in there from the Barney Miller's series

DS - That's Barney Google's

CC - I'm sorry, Barney Googles series.

DS - Barney Miller was a TV show.

CC - Right, which I still miss it to this day, which was on about the same time as Barney Google's was going. But you have two paintings which are much more intimate. One is *The Look*. And the other is *The Pickup*. They are a big contrast compared to the paintings that have lively colorful movements. Why don't you talk a little bit about these paintings?

DS - Well, it's the bar scene, right? You're, you're in a bar that had a really large, big front bar, where, 50-60, people could be sitting on stools. And then there were all the people at the little tables with the little candles. People are there to be seen, to make friends to get a date and to do all the things people do in the bar scene. So while I'm waiting around waiting



for the action in the back and the show to begin, I saw people sitting there trying to pick each other up. So it's just another part of the scene that was there. It's just a closer look at the Barney Google's.

CC - Some of your works are portraits and self portraits. Also window shots from your apartment. Why don't you talk about the self portrait a little bit that opens up the show. (Cover Shot)

DS - That self portrait (cover photo) is sort of interesting. I would work during the day in my studio, and at night, usually I worked at Barney Google's. So on weekends, or whenever I had a day off at night, I would be painting at night. The my loft on 14th Street and Second Avenue had 12 foot ceilings and great big arching windows. And I could see right across 14th Street, and I would see a guy across the street playing his saxophone. I painted him into this painting. He actually saw me painting. and he worked around the corner. One evening he watched when I was going to work and he

introduced himself and we became pretty good friends.

CC - The other the other one I'd like you to talk a little bit a little bit about is the 14th Street window painting.

DS - That was a another painting out my studio window onto 14th Street. And you have to understand that from the moment I arrived in New York, I just fell in love with the place. It was my town my home. I never for a minute felt even though I was going through a lot of financial difficulties, this was the place I absolutely belonged. So the street and winter scenes and everything about the place intrigued me. I tried to do as many paintings of the streets as I could.

CC - How had New York changed in the time that you were there?

DS - Oh, it was going through a huge period of gentrification. Downtown Soho area became gentrified and in that time and many art

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galleries opened. The Broome Street Bar was where artists hung out. Then all the yuppies started moving in and the artists moved out. Further downtown into In Tribeca, where I had a loft, artists kept moving out to Brooklyn and to Jersey City. The gentrification followed, so it was on the upward tick.

CC - The final image I have a question about is the painting *The Wedding*. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that particular painting.

DS - *The Wedding* is kind of recording, of my first marriage to an Italian guy from an Italian family. The reception was in my loft on 14th Street and all of his Italian relatives showed up in mass. When they weren't talking to each other, they were running down stairs to place bets at the OTB and then running over to Little



Italy to buy pastries. They then came back to the party and this went on all day and half the night. So I wanted to memorialize that day.

CC - That was towards the end of your stay in New York, correct?

DS - Right. Within a within a year and a half, two years, we had moved out to New Jersey, where his family had a die casting business. I think I mourned the loss of my city for two or three years after moving to New Jersey and realizing that I probably would never get back there as a place to live.

CC - Well, Deborah Sperry, thank you very much.

DS - Oh, you're welcome. It was kind of fun talking about it.

CC - It was really interesting after originally seeing these paintings 30 years ago to now finally give them a place to be seen. I think they're beautiful.

DS - Thanks. I was really surprised when I found them in the basement. I had most of the paintings rolled up and I found a portfolio that was hiding behind something else. When I pulled them out and started looking at the drawings again and the paintings, I thought, you know, that that was really a very unique period of time . So I was I was pleased that I'd saved them.

CC - Thanks for sharing them.

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