

Conversations with Crosby: Jane Chu on How Arts and Humanities Unite Us  
Transcript  
Thursday, May 20, 2021

0:01

Thank you, Katherine. And welcome to our latest conversation. This is a series of conversations on the arts and humanities and libraries and museums. We've already had a conversation with Andrew Roberts from the National Churchill Museum on the 75th anniversary of the Iron Curtain Speech, and the great film critic, David Thompson.

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And upcoming conversations will be with Lonnie Bunch, the Director of the Smithsonian, Francine Prose, the great novelist, John Palfrey of the MacArthur Foundation, Julián Zugazagoitia, the Director of the Nelson Museum in Kansas City, Carol Anderson, Robert Putnam, Marianne Wolf. Should be a great lineup, but we have a star with us today.

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Jane Chu, who is, I think was the 11th Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts. Longtime friend, fellow Kansas Citian, and I want to start, Jane, by asking a crucial question.

1:07

Who is Jane Chu?

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You have this remarkable background. And I've heard you before and watched some of your interviews, talking about your parents and their journey to the United States, and where you grew up. Tell us a little bit about your parents and their journey to the United States.

1:29

Oh well, first of all, thank you so much for letting me join you. If I had to characterize my life it really would be sort of a juxtaposition of two different orbits that don't usually seem like they would interact with each other. But, yes, my parents were both from China, though, they met in Chicago. And I was born in Oklahoma, and grew up in Arkansas. So...

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Arkadelphia, Arkansas, what a great name it is.

2:00

It was named, it's about a town of um, 10,000. But it's got two universities. And I think it was named after, similar to Philadelphia, would be the arc of brotherly love.

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In the university, which is very important in your childhood, and through on, through college, Ouachita, did is that I pronounce it correctly?

2:19

Ouachita

2:20

Sorry, Ouachita.

2:24

Ouachita Baptist University. And so my father was an economics professor there where I grew up and it really was about my life being a combination of bok choy and corn dog.

2:37

So I love bok choy and corn dogs. Bok choy at home and corn dogs in school with your friends, no doubt and speaking Chinese at home?

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My parents, I regret that my parents, that I wasn't speaking to them actively in Chinese, because they really wanted me to assimilate and when I was growing up, nobody was Chinese in Arkansas. It really felt like, I don't think even there were Chinese restaurants. So it really was assimilating, but certainly, I heard Chinese and now regret it, but I'm taking lessons, again

3:21

Which is interesting and I'll be interested to talk to you a little bit later on when we look at some of your own art I want to talk to you about your immersion in Chinese language and culture. You're one of the few, if not the only, Chinese family. And you're of course born in Oklahoma, so you're Chinese-American, but in Ouachita College and in Arkadelphia, I assume. So, that must have been alienating or, concerning in any way, growing up? Or, was it easy to make friends?

3:59

I had a lot of friends. And so, but I didn't see myself in anybody I interacted with. And so, it really was a combination of, it really wasn't until I was an adult, and I visited other cities, including Washington, DC, that I saw more international flavor by just looking around. And I do remember, the first time I saw many, a whole group of Chinese. And I almost fainted, because I had not grown up by seeing anybody else who looked like me other than my mom and dad

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And your father died when you were very young and so...

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He was ill with cancer, and then died when I was nine.

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You talked about how your introduction to the arts in way, at that point, the piano was very important to you - that it was something you were able to use in those terrible circumstances.

5:04

It really was one of the ways that I have learned the importance of the arts, because my parents spoke another language that was native to them, and I spoke English. As a nine year old, I didn't have enough words for vocabulary to express my own grief over the loss of my parent. And maybe many nine year olds don't. But I really didn't because, my parents both spoke Chinese and I spoke English. So, I found out that those piano lessons that I was being forced to take at 8 and 9, and I was taking drawing lessons - they were a vocabulary for me, and that I could actually have the arts, as a way of expressing myself way beyond just everyday conversational linear, everyday use of words. I could feel like I was more holistically expressing myself through my vocabulary of the arts. So, I saw a very important link of how arts can do that for people.

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It seems to me, and I think we'll talk a little bit more about this as we get to the future of libraries and museums and the future of the arts and humanities, that the arts really are a language and a language that can be a language of self development for people coming from many, or any background.

6:28

But, I do want to ask you another couple of questions about your childhood, because I think this is interesting and important. Your mother took a job at Ouachita College, and you lived in a dorm where she was sort of the dorm Mom - known as "Mom Chu." But you showed your entrepreneurial instincts, which I think defines you. Tell us the story about how you made some money off of "Mom Chu" and her position.

6:57

Uh oh. I'm trying to think back about ways I've done that.

7:01

You got a nickel? The story I've heard you've told before is that you charged a nickel for

7:08

Oh, well, one of the things I probably did that, no doubt, I probably did that.

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Your mother did inspections of the dorm.

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Right. And then I turned around and charged nickel to...

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You charged a nickel to let people know in advance that she was coming around.

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Well, I would not put that pass me.

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And see, having known you as the CEO of the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts and Chair of the National Endowment, I recognize that entrepreneurial instinct.

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I thought you were talking about the way I would, I had a ready audience by being able to go around and sell Girl Scout cookies to every room, so that was another option.

7:46

There you go. Exactly, my point. Yeah, and I do, and I do want to reveal this because it's another form of art, you know? It's a style - art and style. You went to college at Ouachita too and graduated from Ouachita. And you were the homecoming queen.

8:08

I was.

8:10

This is on the website - I found this on the website of Ouachita. Where they do, they have a big section of the website of Ouachita College is about you and you were the homecoming

queen. So, I just want everyone to know that. We have the homecoming queen of Ouachita College here. So I'm going skip over another major part of your resume, your history, which is the many degrees in the arts and professions. Your MBAs and PHDs, and whatnot. It's a given that you have these, not to mention honorary degrees as well, which are also earned degrees in their in their own way.

8:46

But you became the eventually CEO of the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts in Kansas City. This is a really important moment in Kansas City's cultural history, maybe many ways, maybe the most important moment in Kansas City's cultural history. And is it an extraordinary uplifting of the spirit of the city, and you were involved in that.

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But one of the things I want you to talk a little bit about because it's something that that I relate to in a very personal way. My mother was the founder of the original Performing Arts Foundation in Kansas City and brought Evelyn Lear in to do Handel's Julius Caesar and his in celebration for Virgil Thompson and whatnot. And so I like to think that it's you and the Performing Arts Center or sort of her millennial descendants.

9:36

But, also what I really want you to talk about though, is the importance of women as the creators of this cultural moment in Kansas City. So it's you, as the CEO of the Kauffman Center, Julia Irene Kauffman, who organized as a tribute to her mother and her mother's interest in the arts, the funding, and the organization of this. Adele Hall, Hallmark Cards family. And Shirley Helzberg, who you and I were talking about earlier, a friend. Who really, four women, you four women, got together and did this over objections and resistance from the civic community that was really pretty substantial, and one must say, nearly all male, nearly all white, male, civic institutions. Tell us a little bit about how that happened and your view of women in the arts.

10:32

Well, I was really proud to be part of that wonderful project. And I, there were so many people as you have named and so many women leaders. I'd also throw in Jan Kramer from the greater foundation, but all of them have played significant roles in creating an environment where the arts can thrive, the arts and the humanities.

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And so, I came on board when there was groundbreaking, so I had hard hat hair for five years before we opened. But the ways that all of the people that you've named contributed to creating that environment. They just, they just stood in there and even if there was some hesitancy of other people wondering if there should even be a Performing Arts Center, this really is something that Muriel Kauffman really wanted. And so, Julia Irene Kaufman, gets the credit for sticking to her resolve to have this.

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But I was, I remember a decade earlier, long before I ever thought I would be the CEO of the Kauffman Center, I remember reading the market surveys about how they wanted to plan for this. And so all along the way, you can see various phases, of how these women contributed to making it from a dream, which was really a drawing on a napkin, all the way to opening in 2011, and it's thriving.

12:02

And you know, Julia, Irene, and you had a devotion to excellence. So she, she got Moshe Safdie, you got Moshe Safdie to be the architect and it's a stunning design.

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You know, one of the things that's interesting and that is a tribute to the importance of the arts and we'll talk a little bit about the arts in the pandemic and post pandemic in a minute. But we keep building these great monuments to the arts. This has happened in the library world as well, where we built these great, we're renovating these great central libraries. We're building these performing arts centers, the Great Halls, get somebody like Moshe Safdie to design a signature building. And it's almost like these have become the cathedrals of our civil religion, if you will.

12:47

And sometimes people, in addition to maybe a cathedral or some kind of a monument, I know one of the things Julia Kaufman wanted is for this building to be so accessible and so comfortable to all walks of life. And so that was the mantra that we followed. And so, if you think of a venue like that as being a place for the community, I don't necessarily mean that it is a community center, but I do mean, how do you make sure that people from all walks of life feel like they belong in there. And there's multiple ways to do it, but it really had to be that way. And I think this is one of the best opportunities for the arts and the humanities, museums, libraries to be that place where somebody can say similar to the author - is it Ray Oldenburg who wrote that book, about the third place? Where if your first place might be home and your second place might be work, where's that third place where you feel like you belong? The arts and humanities, have an opportunity to create those places where all can feel like they belong each in their own way.

14:02

Right, our friend, our mutual friend, Julián Zugazagoitia, got Lonnie Bunch in a conversation a couple of nights ago that I was able to watch. And, this is sort of a theme of their conversation. Julian asked this question of Lonnie, Are art centers, museums in particular, are they community centers and Lonnie said, "no, they're not community centers. But they should be centers of the community." And it's essentially what you just said. It's something where everybody's welcome. it's a place where people gather from all parts of the community.

14:45

And I think in the case of the Kauffman Center, which is such a good example of this, because Safdie's design is wonderful. It's really open to the community, it's just wonderful views of the downtown, the Crossroads, and you see a lot of Kansas City: Union Station, Liberty Memorial, the World War One Museum, etc.... And it is a focus, it's something to be proud of. I mean, even if you don't go to the opera or the ballet, or the symphony, it's something to be proud for your city. And then what you did for the opera, the ballet, and the symphony raised all of them up.

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I can remember the New York Times reviews of the first performances, which, you know, put Kansas City on a cultural map and lifted the aspirations. I think of all those, and, of course, speak with some prejudice about the opera, my wife being the director of the opera, the general direction of the opera. But I think they've all reached an extraordinary level. And it had something to do with the aspiration that you put into it.

15:47

It also has something to do with something that I have learned just from my bok choy corn dog lifestyle. And that is - it's not a time to force fit everybody to have to like the same thing. This is a time to celebrate different identities, different life, different perspectives. And I learned a lot of practical steps, even at the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, on how do you embrace. Because, you know, if I put my business hat on, I might say something like, "Let's figure out the one program that everybody will like," and that's just not realistic. People like different things. It's like different restaurants, people like different kinds of food. But if you can find a menu of options that reaches out to a different set of perspectives, and honor, the different ways of the different likes, and the different dislikes, and the different identities, perspectives. That's the way a venue like that can be there for the community.

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Well, and, and so that leads me to my next question. And the Kauffman Center is a good example of that. What you did at the NEA, I think, is also important in this regard and so your views are important to me on this subject. The former Secretary of State or last Secretary of State, before our current Secretary of State, on exiting the State Department said, "We are not a multicultural nation," and I sort of fell out of my chair.

17:32

Thinking about how I grew up in Kansas City, which is probably not the most multicultural place in America or the world, but where I grew up with the Nelson and, you know, the great Chinese collection and the Chinese exhibit and the Great Native American collection and the Great Native American Exhibit Sacred Circle. So, that they did, and then, you know what you've done it at the Center for the Performing Arts, but, art, we at multicultural nation? Or are we not a multicultural nation?

18:03

There is a wonderful article that Harvard's sociologist, Nathan Glazer, wrote a few years before he passed. And the subheading was intriguing but pretty much said: Are we a melting pot in America, or are we a nation of nations?

18:23

And when I grew up as a little kid, melting pot was a common term used because it represented, say all the ingredients that go into a stew, and a lot of the ingredients will be different from each other. But right now, we are a nation of nations and having grown up again in my bok choy corn dog lifestyle, It is totally possible to have both one perspective and the other. It doesn't have to be either this versus that. It can be both this and that, and I find that in my own creativity, and I certainly see that in the creation, and the arts, and the humanities, that when you create, for at least a moment, you have to suspend your judgement on what, how things are supposed to be. And venture into that world of ambiguity and venture into the world of, uh, where you suspend your judgement and you say, How do I create? I just, I've just been given a blank canvas And it's totally possible to have both this and that, as opposed to you win and I lose or vice versa. So I would say a multicultural nation.

19:44

Yeah, you've used that phrase before. That I win doesn't have to mean you lose, Maybe we both win, which, I think, is a great thing.

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There's a larger cultural language that we all, almost all of us speak at some time or another, but we need to maybe learn to speak it more often, which is about curiosity among other things. It's about imagination and, and we should be interested, it seems to me, in the various communities that go up - you call them nations. And I think that's true, I think of them as the communities within the community that go to make up the larger community.

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And I want to know about, you when I became a librarian in Kansas City, I found out we had we have a reasonably significant Filipino community in Kansas City. We had the second largest Croatian American community in the United States, neither, which I knew before I became a librarian, and which, I thought was wonderful - we should celebrate, and we did. And they had fun, the individual communities. The rest of the community had fun, finding out about this, you know, getting the provitica bread. Or learning about the Philippines relationship to the United States over the last 50 years. You know? I think it seems to be a great thing and it enriches us to be a multicultural nation.

21:05

Yes, and one of the reasons I think, that there's never been a better time for the arts and the humanities to be able to be those centers in the community. Is because we already live that suspension of judgement when we're creating. We already know what it's like to get very energized by having somebody give us a blank canvas. When other people are saying, "this has never been done before. So we don't know what to do," we don't typically, we're an environment where we don't get stuck at that kind of thing. So instead of feeling like there's any kind of a scarcity, well, I don't want to give you that because I'll those this, it's the opposite. More is more is better. And more begets more. because, when you create, you start expanding your imagination and you start dreaming. And then you can turn it into reality.

21:58

And so, when you became the chair of the NEA, obviously this is a kind of thing that you needed to be thinking about. It's the kind of thing, I think, about every day, the diversity of the country, the multicultural nature of the country, and some people whose stories have been left out of our story. And, you know, as a Chinese American to immigrant parents, you know something about that - the Chinese and the Japanese American stories, which are very important stories going back to the 19th century and before. But certainly the 19th century haven't been well told until very recently when we were starting to hear about them. And, you know, can the NEA and the NEH, the IMLS. Can we play a role in in telling those stories and making them part of the larger story?

22:49

Absolutely. And you already are asking the right questions. How do we tell the stories? And stories, at the heart of stories, is a really wonderful avenue to highlight all the different perspectives, all the different identities, and all the different ways to belong. And another way is just a very simple one relationship at a time.

23:11

I learned that when I was at the NEA and we traveled to all the states, and we could see that the arts in that particular case, in one state would be different from the arts in another state. And so, if I had come in expecting every state to handle and express themselves through the arts in a certain way, and I wouldn't, it just wouldn't have worked, because that isn't the way. Everybody

was able to honor the arts in each state, each, in their own ways. And yet, everyone was dedicated to making sure that the arts could thrive each in their own ways.

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That's really very key to not feel like we would have to go to scale and have everybody force fit into the same mold. It is not at all threatening to celebrate the different types of ways of expressing ourselves and creating. In fact, it's a both and. And you can have it all when it comes to the arts and humanities.

24:19

Well, I feel that you know, in Missouri, we can claim pretty much to be the center of culture in the world, because we have of course, Mark Twain, and TS Eliot perhaps our greatest poet. and greatest writer, generally, we have Langston Hughes and Aaron Douglas who served, between the two of them they created the Harlem Renaissance, Black Elk Speaks was actually written by John Neihardt, and at the University of Missouri. I can go on with this. But I was thinking recently, I was thinking of a story that relates to Missouri, and you might know one of the two people, Gyo Obata.

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Do you know Gyo Obata at all? No

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He's the O in HOK, the great architect. Well his father, Chiura Obata, who was interned during the Second World War, was a Japanese immigrant in 1903, taught at Berkeley from 1933 to 1954, was interned during the war. And an Gyo went to Washington University, to prevent from being interned, became a great architect. And recently, Chiura Obata's painting, he was a wonderful painter, was shown at the Smithsonian Museum of American Art. It was the last exhibit before the pandemic, actually. And I was thinking about it. Gyo designed this Air and Space Museum of the Smithsonian. And, you know, there is no more American museum than the Air and Space Museum. And his father, who does these wonderful delicate sort of combinations of modernist, twenties, and thirties, painting influenced by various American and European artists, but also very much related to his Japanese heritage, these elegant paintings of Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada's could be a 19th century Japanese print. And I'm thinking the juxtaposition of Chiura Obata's beautiful paintings and the Air and Space Museum a few blocks away, are created by a now, Missouri native, Gyo Obata. I thought, it was a tremendous example of our multicultural heritage, which is also very American story, and a very American heritage.

26:29

Very much so. And your ability to point that out is a very important thing. That's how we will tell those stories.

26:66

Yeah. So, at the NEA, you sort of mentioned this in passing, but I think, you know, I want to highlight it. One of your signature accomplishments is that you hit all 50 states. Very few federal bureaucrats, can do what you did. I know now, as being a similar federal bureaucrat - of course, I have the pandemic, which is a little bit of an anchor on travel. But you visited 400 sites, is that right?

27:05



I did. Now, you know I'm sitting here regretting that I did not get to go to some of these jurisdictions. I so wanted to go to Puerto Rico and Guam and a few other places, but I did hit the States and traveled from one place to the other. I'm pretty confident, I know, I've been to every major airport and know where all the vegan sandwiches are since I eat vegan.

27:25

But no, it really was fly away from one state and fly to the next, and make sure that mindset I was ready to embrace what I was going to be engaged in going forward, as opposed to trying to compare one state to the previous state.

27:45

Well, I think it's a very impressive thing if you're a federal agency and you're making choices the way the NEA, and the NEH, and the IMLS are required to do. It's what we do. We make grants based on quality, standards, some standards set by Congress or the administration, various external things. And to try and be fair to the 330 or 40 million American taxpayers and citizens, it's very, very difficult. And the effort that you made, I think, is really pretty extraordinary.

28:26

Yeah. So some of your other accomplishments. I mean, you had some signature programs, the Creativity Connects Program. Creativity has been a very important word to you, Creative Forces. Talk about that a little.

28:40

Well the Creativity Connects really stemmed from the fact that we were recognizing that or noticing that many people were going through a transition in the arts. And especially because of the presence of the internet - where arts - different disciplines and categories - would be separate from each other. We're all starting to have a giant mash up and the same say musicians in one area might also be doing gigs in another area that seemed like they didn't match up.

29:14

Or sometimes, museums would have some type of an exhibition that included a music portion. And it wasn't just a musical accompaniment to the Visual Arts, it was the type of integrated exhibition where if someone took, extracted the musical part, the whole exhibition would go away. So, this giant mash up was coming together, and that Creativity Connects was a celebration of how we all work together, How we come together in a mash up. So we gave a few grants out related to those who are innovating by bringing arts together, either with other arts, or maybe it was arts and science. And maybe it was other things like that.

30:01

In terms of Creative Forces, that was a recognition of how the arts played such a key role in our service members who were affected by combat induced psychological, health conditions: TBI, PTS.... And the medical professionals were saying that, when art therapy from visual arts to music and dance, and all kinds of other ways, it seemed like, our service members who are affected with those conditions seemed to be able to manage their pain, more. Relationships started getting better again with their families. And so the Creative Forces Program is about expanding to reach all of our veterans, as well as military service members who had undergone such trauma.

30:56

So we hear about the healing arts, but really the arts themselves have become to a significant, extent about healing, and I wonder what your feeling is? We've gone through a period where the racial protests last year, and, of course, they continue. But the significance is a kind of racial turning point in American history, which now includes Asian Pacific members of our community, with the outbreak of some violence there. And, talk a little bit about the place of the arts, in the various divides that we have in the country: the racial divides, the political divides, the economic divides. Can the arts play healing role?

31:46

Well, they absolutely can. I think of an old fable, and I don't know who created this story, a long time ago, but if you ever find out, I'd love to attribute it to whomever. But there's the story about how somebody's walking alongside the riverbank. And they turn and look at the river, and there is a body floating down the river. So the person jumps in the river, and pulls the body out, and saves that person. And so the person continues to walk along the riverbank and notices there's another body floating down the river, jumps in, saves it. Pretty soon, there's all kinds of bodies floating down the river. And all kinds of people are jumping into the river to try to save these bodies. And then finally, somebody asked the question, "Why are there so many bodies floating down the river?" "Well, there's upstream," somebody else says, "there is a bridge that has a hole in it, and people don't recognize that or they don't see the hole, and they fall through. And somebody needs to fix that bridge."

32:50

So when you ask these questions about how can the arts and humanities, museums, libraries, and the like, play a role in recognizing different identities, well, what they can do so well is, they can be there to help create an environment where not only people can thrive, but they can notice that they're part of the environment that can say, wait a minute, that bridge is broken, or it's at least rickety and we need to be there to help shore it up, so that people feel safe by walking across the bridge and know that they're not going to be harmed.

33:24

And so there's something about the presence of the arts and humanities, museums, and libraries that creates an environment, a presence that says, wait a minute. I think this place is thriving because it's recognizing that we're creating a place where it is not only safe, but energizing, I feel like I belong. That's where the arts and humanities, play a better role right now than probably anybody, because they know that they are not stuck, they're in this creativity mode, where they can say: we can help - it doesn't have to be stuck, and it's never been done this way before, so now we get to, because we know how to create something out of nothing.

34:04

Well, it seems to me that the bridge is a great metaphor in and of itself connecting communities. And, you know, the view from the middle of the bridge, if you get a chance to slow down and get out of your car and take a look. You can see both sides of the river and you can see up and down the river, and it's a pretty spectacular view. It's a better view than the view from just one side.

34:28

Well, I'm sure, as much as we love the arts and humanities, or we would not have been involved the way we've been, I sure want to recognize that they play such a huge role, not only in the development of their own art form, or their own writing's, history. Not only that, is in itself, so

important, but that they play a huge role in just the presence of the community, more than they could probably articulate themselves, by creating that environment where people feel like they belong.

35:07

Yeah, and, you know, Horace says in the *Ars Poetica* that the poet tries to create something useful, and also something that delights, and the truth about the arts and in the humanities is that there's delight in what we do. The world of art, the world of music, the world of literature is so full of delights that we should all share and we should be so happy to share what we know about something with someone else and to invite them to share with us, as well. It seems to be something we do with the arts and the humanities and that we're not doing enough in this country with each other.

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Well, I would absolutely agree that there are so many opportunities for the arts and humanities not only to recognize, but to be that glue that can bring us together.

36:06

And so, the other thing I wanted to ask you about, and this has become a huge part of our discussion about the various divides, is the question of Equity, and how we make up for the lack of serving certain parts of our community through our history, the under-resourced parts of our community. If you will, in many cases, deliberately.

36:38

So, what in grantmaking institutions, like the NEA, or the IMLS, can we do something about that? Can we include socio economic statistics? Can we can we think, in terms of long term justice? I mean, equity really means justice. It's certainly focus of the Biden Administration. Are there ways for us to work on that?

37:05

Certainly, there are. And there, you have made some good ones, because, just by saying things like, recognizing even the data on it, is an opportunity you have at your fingertips. So many wonderful agencies in the federal government that do have access to figuring out where there isn't equity.

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But I think right now, sharing stories is a wonderful place to start. However, through your art or humanities form, that you do a story, or calling attention to something, just like you just did with the Air and Space Museum that people didn't know before, is a really tangible, practical, first step. There's something about telling stories. And you see plenty of them out there that need to be highlighted, so that the people do understand. There's some great things going on out there, and some of them have been marginalized in the past, but now's the time to really point attention to them.

38:10

When I started the library, one of the first stories, I tell this, particularly in museum groups. One of our branch managers said she was taking a group to the Nelson Atkins Art Museum. And one of her patrons in the library came up to her and said, "I can't go." And she said, "Why can't you go?" And he said, "I don't own a tie."

38:32

And, you know, that represents, one of our problems with high culture in this country, is that there is a sense that it's for the elite and, and it doesn't include everybody. And, you know, I know that your view is the opposite of that, but how do we work on that? How do we make sure that we invite everybody in?

38:54

Well you can do it probably in several ways, and one of them is to stay in communication with the communities all along the way. Some of this “wearing a tie” stuff also has something to do with not having an ongoing community relationship with each other and bringing people along and helping them to know that they belong. So, I'd certainly start there. It's an ongoing relationship, not a one time, one trick pony.

39:25

I took a group of kids from Gladstone Elementary School in the Kansas City School District to the Kemper Museum, and there was this fabulous docent there. And the museum had a portrait exhibit from the National Portrait Gallery from the Smithsonian including Amy Sherald and various well-known artists.

39:48

And she did a great job. She said, she told the kids, after explaining what the exhibit was about, and showing them around. She said, “pick your favorite painting and your least favorite painting.” So they all went around and did that. Then, she said, “now, explain why.” And she took all of them seriously. And at the end of this little exercise, they all felt some ownership of the exhibit, which, I thought was really fascinating. And those kids will come back to a museum feeling some sense of ownership of the museum, they'll feel that they belong there.

40:25

That's right. That's exactly right.

41:07

And not only because the museum had wonderful objects to offer, but because they recognize, without judgement. You know, you reminded me when you said that of a comment that Julia Irene Kauffman, the Chair of the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts, was saying, as we were all getting wrapped up and opening, and she really felt like the building was a place for the next generation.

40:52

And so we would bring in thousands of kids, but she kept saying, you know, I really don't care if they even fall asleep, if they're engaged in some performance that they're watching. I just want them to feel like they belong in this building, because this will be the building for them.

41:14

Sometimes it's the expectation of are we sitting up straight. No, I just want you to feel like you belong here. That's a great first step.

41:21

You are so right. So, now I want to shift gears a little bit and I want, I think we have some of your own art. After segwaying out of the NEA and some consulting work you did for PBS on

this idea of collaborations at the local level, you're doing your own artwork and we're showing some of it now.

41:40

And I want you to talk a little bit about it and I'm particularly interested in the fact that this seems to be part of the same kind of culinary stew that you grew up with, the bok choy plus corn dog idea. There seems to be some very Chinese aspects to this, the dim sum, the snake, which is, of course is the shape shifter in Chinese mythology. So what's your shape shifting to here?

42:10

Well, in the big picture, I just love drawing.

42:52

I've drawn since I was 15 and I really felt like this is an opportunity to dive into what I so love and what time stands still for me when I draw. So pen and ink drawings are a lot of fun for me.

42:25

But these objects, so I drawn that, you can see the black and white areas are places that I've drawn. And the ones you're looking at for the most part at least on the top line are from Kawloon and, I take pictures wherever I go. So it is, I mean I'm using my own reference - photos, but also picking out objects to draw on top of them. And it really is exactly what you just said, Crosby.

42:52

It's a juxtaposition of dropping one object on top of one object, which I've drawn on top of another place that I've drawn, because that's sort of how I feel like I have grown up - juxtaposing two types of ways of looking at things in one package. So you see these: I chose I went to Chinatowns and I bought various objects and you see them how I've drawn them on top of places in Kawloon.

43:20

At the bottom, you can see a couple of flags and those are ones where I had - I think that flag in the next to last to the right is actually inside the White House. And the flag at the end with the "I Voted/You Vote" sticker is just outside the White House. I snapped that shot when I walked out one day in a ceremony.

43:44

So, it really is about - can you juxtapose, can I juxtapose me in several different ways if I am feeling like I'm several different perspectives all in one package.

44:42

Yeah, it's so interesting, you know, the beautiful slippers and then the sort of Kawloon background that you've got. Or I like to say, you've gone from bok choy and corn dogs to dim sum and there's a McDonald's.

44:18

You know, those lotus slippers that you see the third, on the bottom row with the third drawing in the middle, is really representative of my mother, because she grew up at first in a conventional Chinese life before she came to America. And her father took a bold step, instead of having - his wife had bound feet, his mother had bound feet, and he had four daughters. But - and bound feet came with in China a tradition of breaking bones in your foot and bending it backwards so that they would grow to be very tiny stubs.

44:55

Oh, God.

44:56

Little lotus, shoes. So, the purpose of it, on one hand, was to make sure that tiny feet, for some reason, that was the culture, thought it was beautiful. And then, on another level, it was so that women could not run away and become independent.

45:12

And so those lotus shoes, when my mother's father said, you know, my daughters are not going to do that, he really went up against the traditional custom. So my mother escaped having bound feet, but at the same time, the neighbors said across the street, I'm told by my mother in China, "Oh, my goodness. That family's daughters. They're never going to find a man to marry because their feet are so big." So bucking the system sometimes comes with comments from the neighbors.

45:40

Right, exactly. But, you know, extraordinary what she did, and how extraordinary what you've done with her inspiration. Katherine, are there some questions from our audience that we might have.

45:57

Yes, there are. I want to make sure, I know there's another slide, do you want to keep talking about that?

46:04

Oh yes, please. Oh yeah.

46:10

More of various places. The one on the top left is a wonderful Alaska native totem pole in Juneau. And it just goes from place to place. Next to it is looking outside of the Opera House in Dallas, there Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta, Georgia for Dr. Martin Luther King. I believe John Lewis had his service there. Yale Rep, the Kauffman Center for the Performing Arts. These are just drawings that are snapshots of locations. Recognized Seattle. Yup, yeah. Markets, There's dancing in California. I believe it's in Sacramento. And I just love the ruffles on the costumes. So that's why I drew it. And then there's the Woolworth lunch counter in Greensboro, North Carolina. .

47:08

So very famous in our history, but also could represent the great American art form too - the art of shopping.

47:17

That's a good point. I did grow up with Woolworth's.

47:24

Well, bad joke. Well, not for all of us. So, Katherine, can we go to questions now, if there are some questions from the audience?

47:37

Yes. All right. Let me read this first one out. Question for both of you, I guess. Can you talk a bit about statues. This is about tearing down statues due to political unrest, considering that this is, these are artistic works, right? By people, some of them, potentially, You know, women and people of color that are being removed. And then sort of on the flip side about putting up statues as a jumping off point to start conversation.

48:02

Jane, you want to take first crack at that?

48:09

Let's see. I wish there were more statues of people who were emotional, who we recognize as being emotionally intelligent, because today, we need leaders who can synthesize and have the emotional intelligence to be able to bring together different perspectives without shrinking back in the middle of ambiguity. And so, I dream of statues, if we're going to have statues, I dream of having ones that are recognized for bringing people together and having a level of emotional intelligence that sometimes is very difficult to see in a tangible way, but it is so present and those are the leaders I want to pay attention to. In terms of... Crosby....

48:55

I was just going to say, I agree. I think what we ought to focus on is who we really would like to build statues to and who represent who we are today. I think tearing things down without conversation in the community is not a good idea. Some know, if anybody wants to enlist me in tearing down a statue of Nathan Bedford Forrest, I'll do it. But I think there ought to be conversation about it. And Lonnie Bunch is really good on this subject. And Elizabeth Alexander had a great conversation with David Blight and Natasha Trethewey about this, as well recently. Interpretation is really important. There's some things that we shouldn't tear down. We should interpret or add to.

49:41

The statue of Lincoln with the kneeling, formerly enslaved man in in Washington, DC. is an example, it needs to be interpreted, and it was interpreted by Frederick Douglass when it actually was put up.

49:57

And then the other thing I want to say is, I think the IMLS has a role, and maybe the NEA and the NEH would join with us in this. And the Mellon Foundation has been working on this in creating some movement as we go towards America 250 the 250th anniversary of the Declaration that we'll be celebrating at a national level in five years.

50:19

As we move towards that, maybe we can bring people together, individual communities, to do exactly what Jane's talking about, which is to build monuments to people who bring us together, people who create empathy in the community. And who represent, I think, also represent people who have been left out. Why are there no more statues to Harriet Tubman? I mean, there ought to be a lot of statues to Frederick Douglass, and to Harriet Tubman whose lives are incredible lives, incredible lives and are about liberation of an entire people. And then there are lots more. And more statues to people in the arts who did things as Jane points out that are healing to the community.

51:07

Some good questions for Jane here. So one, your beautiful art is evocative and has many embedded symbols. Can you talk more about the process of making your art and intellectual process behind it?

51:21

Sure. In terms of the main piece, as I mentioned before, it's really a juxtaposition of several different ways to look all in one package. The joy that I get of doing pen and ink art is highly detailed. I'm trained in, you know, drawing people and painting and things like that. But for me, it seems like the pen and ink medium is the most fun for me.

51:54

So I do a lot of looking at my own reference photos, I would never pull any photos from anyplace else. Certainly not the internet, but I only take reference photos of places I've gone. So everything's very direct, but then from there, it may be kind of intuitive. One of the things that I really love, even though I have drawn people before, and was trying to draw all kinds of, you know, nudes in school and things like that. But there's something to me that is so energizing about drawing objects. And the reason is - it's not a person, and yet an object can evoke a story of humanity. Just, you know, we could, we may all have keepsakes that we like. And they may be, even if we compared them, they may be even the same keepsake, but we have different stories that emanate out of the object.

52:46

So, we'll see my drawing a lot of objects, certainly the ones you see today are placed in context, various places and settings, but those objects could unfold a whole person's life. So, that's why I'm energized by drawing objects instead of the person. You'd think that if I was this interested in drawing and humanity, which I am, drawing people, and the humanity of us all, you'd think I'd be drawing people. But, instead, it's objects. That's probably where I'm focused right now.

53:22

Very cool. One more for you, specifically, Jane. How has place influenced your sense of culture?

53:33

For me?

53:35

Yes, that's for you.

53:37

Well, it absolutely. I learned, especially growing up, in Oklahoma and Arkansas, where there were no Chinese at the time, that did influence me. But, one thing I noticed as an adult is, I did not realize how much it had, how comfortable I was, because I am multiple cultures, at the same time. I didn't realize how comfortable I was standing in the middle of that kind of ambiguity, until I saw other people who were not comfortable.

54:09

And so, there's something about my message that I wish I could say, even just through my own actions, which would be, it's totally possible to be in multiple perspectives at the same time without shrinking back. It's totally possible to have both this and that, and instead of, you win I lose, or either this or that. And because I have grown up and lived at, that is, and I've seen



different places, and I've seen people respond in different ways. I just want to send out the message, it is totally possible to embrace it all.

54:55

Can I ask you one question about your art and its relationship to your musical training? Do you still play the piano and do you feel any relationship between your drawing, your art, your plastic art, and your musical art?

55:09

I don't play the piano anymore. I loved it. And I think it was my social life and you know, my band life in high school and I just loved all of it and I majored in music in college. But, I love, so I don't discount it at all, but there's something about expressing myself through visual arts that is at least where I'm focused right now.

55:34

Different things at different moments in your life.

55:37

That's right. Everybody has different phases. The drawings you saw, you know, like Picasso has his rose period and his blue period. And I had my, those are the drawings from my pandemic period. But no, that is what I'm focused on at the moment.

55:55

Katherine, another question?

55:57

Yeah, we've got a couple more minutes. This is sort of a biggie, but I think you guys might want to dig into this a little bit. How do you think the museum world will forever be changed by this pandemic? I know Crosby thinks about this a lot, so have at it.

56:13

Well, I'll say a couple of things about it, and then I'd love to hear Jane's view of this. It's really one of the points of this conversation.

56:24

But I think a couple of things are true, obviously true. The virtual is going to continue to be a big part of the life of museums and libraries. It's going to be a big part of education, It's going to be a big part of healthcare, workforce development. And so all of that's going to be true. It will affect libraries and museums. They need to be digitally enabled and if they're not you need to expand and be more creative and imaginative. But the second thing that's true post pandemic and this is still a question. I'll say this is a question that everybody's going to want to answer. And that is the thing we know that museums and libraries are so important in the arts, the performing arts are so important to us, because that's what we missed the most during the pandemic.

57:12

And so, how are we going to get that back? And it's going to be a little different because not everybody is going to feel as comfortable as they did before about mixing in big crowds and that sort of thing, but museums will figure it out and performing arts will figure it out. And we are going to come back together because that's what we missed the most. We need that.

57:34

I'd build on your comments, Crosby, because one of them, actually, as you talked about, digital, is not only connecting digital with each other where museums can do that and are doing that. But we're in this world now where, instead of digitizing an object in the museum, the digitized object is the artwork itself. How do you make sure you've put in storage? How do you conserve those new types of objects and artifacts that are - they start digitally?

58:14

That will be something that I'm confident everybody's been thinking about already, but probably even more so.

58:19

Plus people are paying millions of dollars for digital artworks. I guarantee you. There's a lot of people thinking about that.

58:29

That's right. Another one is that I am saying museums doing more and more and so heartening. Is really paying attention to when we create the context of an exhibition, are we telling everybody's story who needs to? Are we just telling one person, one side of it, and not paying attention to all the other ways that has that have affected people? So, museums are getting better and better at, many of them are really paying attention to, well, we can't just tell one story without telling how many other people are either part or included in the big story. But we didn't include them before. So I'm really heartened by that.

59:13

And then, again, the presence of the community to really be so proud that you can be one of those entities that brings people together each in their own ways without force fitting everybody to be exactly alike. Like you said, Crosby, they'll figure it out. And the reason they can figure it out, is because, you know, has suspend and create. You know how to suspend judgement and create something out of nothing. And that's what's missing in so many other settings where people don't know how to do that and they're stuck. You know how to do it. So, I'm excited about what can be done.

59:49

And the NEA and the NEH and the IMLS will help them. That's our determination as I know Jane had that determination when she was at the helm of the of the National Endowment for the Arts.

1:00:05

It's been a great conversation, Jane. I really, really appreciate it. Kathryn, can we go on with questions, or I know we've reached....

1:00:12

I think, yeah. We are out of time, I'm afraid. Thank you to everyone who sent in questions and thank you to Jane for joining us today and to everybody for joining us. So this is going to conclude our broadcast, and this recording is going to be made available on our website at IMLS.gov.