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Humboldt in Time of Covid: Megan Atherton

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Humboldt in Time of Covid: Interview with Megan Atherton

Michelle Stone: Okay I think it's going. Um today is October 20th, 2020, um Thursday! It's 11:34 am and my name is Michelle Stone and I am interviewing Megan Atherton for the Humboldt in Time of Covid project. Um, how-how are you doing today? (laughing)

Megan Atherton: Oh pretty good, yeah.

MS: Um, could you tell me about like how you got interested in art, like how did you get started in-in that endeavor?

MA: Let's see. I started seriously being interested in art. I mean, I guess all through my childhood. I was not seriously interested or didn't necessarily think that that was something that I wanted to pursue. But when I was in high school, my last year in high school I-I was, required to take extra electives. (laughing) Because I had taken summer school P.E. for many, many summers in my-in high school from junior high, until my last year in high school. And so by the time I got to my senior year in high school. They uhh - my advisors - told me well you, you-you need, you need more classes to fill up the first part of your, your day. And then the last part of the day I um, after lunch I got to go home. So, so I choose an art class. I think I choose physics and then art and art just stayed. It was like something that was a real revelation to me, I had never had really considered it and never really found any - you know, I hadn't found it before and taking that art class in high school really, um, solidified that there was something, or-or it, it started, it ignited a interest for me in art and so then I kept going with that and came to Humboldt State for my undergrad and kind of on a whim choose art as my major. And, just 'cause it was the only thing that I really felt any interest in -

MS: Hmhm.

MA: - and it was more than an interest, it was something that I was really passionate about. Though I hid it from my family -

MS: (laughing)

MA: - and I didn't show them any art that I ever did. I would like hide drawings and paintings from them. But anyway, so I came to Humboldt State and just really found myself in the painting lab and as a painter, I just continued. And I never stopped, I always wanted to have um wanted to have that in my life. So once I graduated I, I uh, I made sure that any job that I got could accommodate time for making art. So that often meant finding part time work just to pay the bills. And then having time enough to make art, on the side.

MS: I know that you kinda did touch on this but uhm you specialize in like painting and drawing, like well, why did you decide on that specific mediums?

MA: Yeah, painting and drawing. Those were the first mediums that I ever worked with. And I just really found a love for those two mediums. Uh there was a time in in undergrad, where I was really um at a crossroads between painting and ceramics. There was a point where I was really infatuated with making forms, making 3D forms in the ceramics studio but, and both painting and ceramics are really time consuming. So at that point I really kind of had to make a decision, make a choice between the two because I couldn't do both to the full extent that I wanted to do. And so I just kept going with those I looked uh I worked with photography and and art history and I never got into jewelry but, or digital art but and then when I was in grad school, there were several instances that were kind of moments of clarity for me in terms of wanting to continue pursuing painting where in grad school there was a lot of discussion about questions about why I was painting and. And not doing some other conceptual art or -

MS: Hmhmm.

MA: - something that I could maybe more easily portray the ideas that I was investigating in my work and just nothing else really felt like it fit for me. Um, although, you know, you could probably argue that I could probably get these ideas or whatever I was working with across a little bit more clearly across with a different discipline but painting always felt like it was part of the idea and so, you know, and making and spending the time making always felt like part of the concept within the work that I was working with so I, I just continued with that. And these days I spend more time drawing and working with paint on paper and watercolor and less oil and acrylic that I used to primarily and exclusively work with oil and that kind of expanded into acrylic and now I do more watercolor. Although I started with watercolor, my first, my very first painting was watercolor when I started in high school, but anyway.

MS: Nice, um, are there any projects that you're currently working on that you'd like to tell me about? I see, I do see some stuff in like the background.

MA: Ooh yeah this is, this is my studio that is also my classroom. (Laughing)

MS: Oooh. (Laughing.)

MA: So those things on the board back there. That's. Those are what my students are working on 'cause when I have meetings with them, I like to post the-the thing that we're working on for that week behind me so um so if I need to show them the like example or whatever I can pull it down really easy and jump over to my drafting table and work over there, my camera and all that set up. But the, the things that I am working on outside of my teaching practice -

MS: Hmhmm.

MA: - are drawings and watercolors that's. Um. There - many of them are collaborations between my son and myself.

MS: Aww, that's cute.

MA: And primarily because, you know, during, during the quarantine, during this time where um, y'know, he doesn't have as many opportunities to be with other people and nor do I. Uh we, I have found especially during the first part of this quarantine, I found that-that I don't want to be quarantining myself even further away from my family in my studio and [being] alone and all that stuff. So I um, I've been working in our living room and in our shared spaces and my son who's two and a half, almost two and a half, he's um really eager to participate and work with me and draw also. He wants to you know, he wants to be involved and I want him to be involved also. So um, so I, we both draw on my drawings and then I will add in pictures of him, or images of him within the abstract space that he draws -

MS: Hmhmm.

MA: - and then some other things that are mainly like, fears of mine about the future? And specifically like things that are going to affect him in the long term, you know, like climate change, fear or uh climate catastrophes, or pictures of climate catastrophes that are a result of our um changing climate. And then during covid, you know, kind of images of horrors that have been brought on from that and then in combination with these sweet pictures of him that, you know, he's so innocent and has no understanding, nor should he, about these things that are going to be deeply affecting his future and hopefully he has a really long life but, you know, the projection for our world and our climate in-in the time that he's going to be alive is really scary and really grim. So um. So this is kind of a way to, for me to kinda of project those anxieties into a space other than uh, in, onto him, you know? (Laughing)

MS: Yeah.

MA: So I have some of those that I have in the works. And then um. (Pause) Uh. That's - those, I have several of those that I have in the, in the works.

MS: (Laughing)

MA: Some of them are done and some of them that are on my website that you can check out if you'd like. There's one that's [also] at the Morris Graves Museum of Art right now that is part of the uh Art in Place. Um. Exhibition. That's, I think it's up through November 15th and it's also uh it's uh an in person exhibition but also a digital, so you can see their exhibition online.

MS: Okay uh, I'm going to write that down.

MA: I'll send you a link here, 'cause I think that I can pull it up really fast.

MS: That would be awesome.

MA: (quietly) Let's see.

MS: Um. Let's see. I guess while you're doing that is it okay if I ask you another question?

MA: Yeah, go ahead!

MS: Um. How did you end up working at, specifically, Humboldt State University? Did you work at other, like, universities, prior to Humboldt teaching art or was that your first foray into teaching, like... art? (Laughing)

MA: Yeah! I, so I graduated from California College of the Arts for my Master's degree in 2014, and while I was at C.C.A., I was a teaching assistant for a [colorer] and design class. And then, coming out of C.C.A., with my graduate degree, I was a recipient of their um painting fellowship. Teaching painting fellowship -

MS: Hmhm.

MA: - where they, one of the awards was, a class essentially and getting to teach a class upon coming out of the program. So I taught a painting class and also was their um program director or something like that, I can't remember what my title was, for their visiting lecturer series. So I taught painting that following semester that I graduated from C.C.A. in 2014, and then, and then um, came up here shortly after, in the spring of 2015 for uh sabbatical replacement for Teresa Stanley [spelling?], who was going on sabbatical. So I taught painting that semester, and then-and then, got in with C.R., College of the Redwoods. So I taught at College of the Redwoods the semester after that and then got a couple more classes teaching at Humboldt State. And was teaching at both College of the Redwoods and at Humboldt State for a little while, and then-and then, I think I had so many classes (laughing) that I couldn't teach at C.R. anymore, so I just continued with Humboldt State at that point.

MS: Uh - you kinda - okay [um] you kind of touched on the next question I had, which was like asking about what kind of classes have you, are you currently teaching or have you taught in the past?

MA: Yeah, when I first started teaching I taught a gamut. I really uh, I've taught several different painting courses, and color and design, and then several different drawing classes. Um, like now, now these days, I primarily teach life drawing. Life drawing one and life drawing two. And then fundamentals of drawing.

MS: Um. What were your classes like - uh I'm kind of getting into the heavy stuff, just maybe a forewarning like, what were they like before the pandemic? Like maybe give me a general overview of how many students, like what was the subject matter, maybe like what kind of assignments?

MA: Yeah. Yeah before, pre-pandemic, the classes were really great. Typically, pretty full and I-I don't, I'm not saying great in comparison to after. Um.

MS: (Laughing)

MA: They were really great! I'll talk more about them after, I'm sure you have a question about that.

MS: Yeah.

MA: Um, they were really great. I always had really wonderful students and. Usually, pretty full classes - especially the fundamentals classes. They [were] are very popular because they fulfill an Area C of Arts and Humanities, uh for G.E. [General Education]. I have a lot of students who are not art majors. Like almost two-thirds of the classes typically, and there's typically a really long waitlist, and students are trying to get in weeks after the courses have opened up. And I had to turn people away eventually, but usually I can get in a couple of people, y'know, cause some people drop or whatever. They don't wanna -

MS: (Laughing)

MA: - pick up the materials or get up at eight or whatever the thing is. And uh so those fundamental classes are, they are um, really, very full and I have wonderful students and students from other disciplines are always really wonderful also. And bring a lot of knowledge to the table which is really fun, [like] I always learn things from them about their disciplines which is really fun. And the assignments were pretty straightforward for fundamental classes. You know things about lines [and] value and composition and then. And um I would always have a master copy project which - I have - I am not doing this semester and I'm very thankful that -

MS: (Laughing)

MA: - like I've taken out the big projects post-pandemic but um, you know it's um. It's a little more easily digestible but the uh pre-pandemic was. It was like you know, lecture demo and then I'd walk around and I'd help students one-on-one, everyday. And I'd get to know the students that way being, you know, at their desks, working with them, drawing whatever they're drawing, and kind of helping them navigate through their drawings. And same with the life drawing classes. The life drawing classes were not always as full just because they were not, general ed. classes. Nor are they required for an art major but they are a studio elective. So the life one class I teach every semester, and you've taken that one -

MS: Yeah.

MA: - I really enjoy that one. I find that it's an opportunity for students to kinda, really practice, and practice and practice and you know, um I'm not - in those classes I never expect that the students come out with a - any kind of perfect drawing, whatever that might be, because it's really about the dedication to the practice and coming in everyday and drawing what's in front of them, this model, the nude model who's only there for x amount of time and there's time poses and once that pose is done, move on to another drawing and don't worry about that last one. Take what you learned from that one and apply it to the next one. So that's one of the great things about that class, is that you know, it's, you know, just move on, don't-don't worry about it

we're just moving through these and-and I think that, that's hard for a lot of students to grapple with. It's hard for me to grapple with, it's also like what are the things that didn't work in that one. Taking that and containing that information about that that didn't work and trying to assess why it didn't work and apply that to the next one. But don't worry about the things that have come before, 'cause y'know that's all building towards things that are going to come and um, that's one of the big, kind of learning outcomes from that class I think. I think, you know, engaging in that practice and I, I love that class, um, a lot for that reason. And-and I get to work with, we have the nude model and we have a real skeleton and-and those are all really great things so. And then the life two is a little bit more, uh, project based, if you will, where they'll have the nude model also but now fitting the nude model into a uh larger project overview that is sort of topical, that, you know, might have to do with plotting figures in space or um movement or um or uh I had one project I think in that class that was called 'the Dance Macabre' where students are supposed to add a skeleton dancing with one of the models. And you know there's like the dance macabre going on and they have to plot the figures in space and then we get into abstraction and that's really fun also. But the same kind of format, where I walk around and talk to the students and get to know them and get to know their work and get to know what might help them, get to a better place with their work and improve their work and I always, in those classes I always see a lot of improvement. In all the classes, I see the students just improving so much throughout the semester and that's always really, really wonderful.

MS: Yeah that must be really cool to kind of see that like, development. But like um-

MA: Yeah.

MS: -kind of going off the like, how are classes going, what have they - how have they like, after the pandemic has started? 'Cause I know we had that sort of sudden shift to online last semester and we've been partially virtual, partially online this semester and how has that been going for you?

MA: Yeah, I mean it's definitely a tough transition, for a lot of reasons and just the differences in the format of the class. You know there's a lot less opportunity to work with the students one-on-one. Just in terms of like, actually being, there's no opportunity to actually be with the student and draw right next to them, which is really a lot different and a lot more challenging in this, in this format. So last, last semester, you know we did the best we could um and I don't even know what happened I uh (laughing) I mean no, I do but, it's like, things are better this semester I think just in terms of the way [that it is]. I think students are learning hopefully a similar amount to last semester and, and in different ways and there are some things that are better, you know. There are some things that I think are um a little clearer like maybe my students can see the demos a little bit easier 'cause I have a camera like right over my drawing-

MS: Hmhm.

MA: -And so hopefully they can, you know, whereas in the face to face class, you know there's a big crowd kinda behind me and whether they can see what I'm drawing or not was,

[something] I was kinda working to overcome. But uh so so, maybe they can see my demos a little bit easier. The students now are responsible for getting sources for themselves to draw like in the fundamentals classes, I am not setting up still lifes for them. I am telling them "okay this is what is going to make a good still life for this assignment so try and find things that meet this criteria. And set them up with this type of lighting and you know, then you'll have a good set up." So I think that has maybe been a little bit liberating for the students 'cause they dictate a little more - specifically what they're drawing rather than you know, draw the things that are in class.

MS: Yeah.

MA: So, I think for that reason, students seem excited and I've seen a lot of really interesting drawings come out of that. Um I just had, my students in fundamentals just had their critique - one part of their critique yesterday and there were some really amazing portrait drawings that, they were drawing people that are part of their households or people that they were really interested in and not the casts, from class. That are great for light and shadow and all that development but you know, it gave the students just a little bit more, inspiration perhaps and maybe they're a little bit more excited about what they're drawing perhaps, I don't know.
(Laughing)

MS: Hmhmm. (Laughing)

MA: But then the, the you know, there's no opportunity for me to like walk around the class and check on them and help them with their drawings. It's more uh it's more put on the students to uh come to me for help. I have feedback days so on days where I would have a face to face class, we'd be working on the drawings-

MS: Hmhmm.

MA: -those days, I'm on Zoom and I'm there to help any student who hops into Zoom and says "hey can you help me with this drawing" and then we talk about our drawings, we look at 'em, I kinda um on the computer I point to things that they could change and describe it as best as I can. And then I go over to my camera set up and I show them through the camera, how you might do it or approach it differently or whatever. But it's definitely not as easy in that regard because you know, they can't see how my pencil is touching the paper, at what specific angle is it touching the paper, you know, all those things that do matter. Um and you know I can't see how they're holding their pencil or how they're pressing down or not or whatever. And sometimes they can't, they don't even have a camera or don't even have a microphone so we're communicating via chat, the chat window on Zoom or whatever and so that's a lot harder but, but I'm hopeful you know, and it seems like students are, are excited about the things that they are making improvements on and there's been some students that, they couldn't, you know, they're having a hard time with kinda keeping their own structure, their own uhm schedule.

MS: Yeah. (Laughing)

MA: Yeah and uh I think that's a huge hurdle for everyone, it's like okay you don't have to report to this one spot on campus but you have to come to your computer and engage in that way. I think that's really hard on a lot of people.

MS: How do critiques work, do people just like hold up their work to the camera?

MA: No actually, they, what I've had my students all do is turn in their works via VoiceThread, which is an app that is uh it is designed for kind of slide sharing. So it's like, you can put all of your images - that students know how to take photos of their art, we went over that in the very beginning of the semester - so they take photographs of their work and they have to take as good of a photograph as possible and um in all the ways that you can take photos of your work and then they make a, they put them into this VoiceThread, which is you know like a slideshow. And VoiceThread is kind of cool because uh not only can you share, everyone can see it but also, you can record over the slides -

MS: Hmhmm.

MA: -so I can talk while looking at the slides and that's recorded and then I can draw on it also or other students can draw on it. And then you can also make comments that are typed about each one, there are various ways of communicating on VoiceThread which is pretty nice. And so, what I had my students do for the critique that started yesterday, is-is I split the class into two groups so one group was critiquing yesterday and only those people needed to come to that critique and then tomorrow I have another group, the second group that's going to be critiqued and so it's. I was trying to run it as carefully, or as closely to face to face as possible so I had the students present their own VoiceThread so they shared their screen and so everyone -

MS: Ooh.

MA: - can be shown their VoiceThread and then the student can click through and talk about their work and the things that they wanted feedback about and things they were struggling with and things that want some tips about and things that they were happy with and proud of, you know.

MS: Hmhmm.

MA: And then um, and then all the other students were supposed to give feedback, you know on things that the student was asking about and other things that they thought were working well or needed, you know, to be changed and how and all that stuff.

MS: That's really cool I've never heard of that application before.

MA: Yeah I think, it's, there's some technical glitches, like some students aren't able to get it to like work quite right but I think we're kind of over the hump of the learning curve (laughing)

MS: (Laughing)

MA: Now finally, in the middle of the semester but, but yeah it seems pretty cool because of those aspects to be able to, you know, communicate while looking and draw on it. I like that about it. But it, but the drawings are all really clunky because they're with my finger on my mousepad (laughing).

MS: (Yawning). Sorry. Um. Yeah, okay. Um, I'm looking at my questions here, 'cause you kinda hit uh, answers to questions that I was going to ask. So I don't feel like I should ask them because we've already kinda covered it. Um. What about like the art department, has the like art department as a whole changed 'cause of the pandemic? Like, how does staff meetings work? Um.

MA: Yeah. Yeah, uh the meetings are all virtual. Just, all the faculty get together on Zoom.

MS: Hmhmm.

MA: Um. At the same time that we normally would have had a meeting and you know it's just a Zoom meeting, there, it's kind of pretty much the same except for that, there's no coffee. (Laughing).

MS: (Laughing).

MA: Coffee provided, I have to make my own. (Laughing)

MS: Yeah.

MA: And uh you know, it's, there's, it's tough because we're trying to all navigate through how to best support students and help students 'cause there's so many challenges that all the students are facing and there's different challenges than there ever were there before and it's - it's, you know, hopefully that's all going to be figured out and all that. But you know, it's tough. And then you know, it's lonelier, it's like I don't get to see all my faculty buddies that I used to like to say "hi" to on a regular basis on campus. Um. There's uh um a person who is uh helping out with uh with uh helping any students with any problems. I don't know if you uh know about this but the uh peer mentor, the art department peer mentor?

MS: Yeah.

MA: Um, yeah so. They are really helping out with, you know, kinda helping any students navigate things that, you know, might be challenging and that's a really great resource for the department so um, spread the word.

MS: (Laughing). What about things that have like, stayed the same, during, like, the art department? Like how has, maybe running it, like I don't know? (Laughing).

MA: Yeah. Uhh, gosh. I know there are some classes that are operating in face to face, but they're different of course but not all too sure about the specificity of how those are the same. But, you know, class sizes are smaller and they have to do all sorts of cleaning and all that stuff, and but. Let's see, what's the same? (Pause). Hopefully, the classes will be the same (laughing). We'll see, I don't know. I don't really know how to, uh, answer that. I don't really do too much management in the department, you know, um. Advising is going to be the same, there's going to be advising night that will, there's an advising night coming up. Or maybe -

MS: (Laughing). Yeah I signed up for that.

MA: Yeah, yeah. And your advisor's - all the advisors - are still there to help and you know, everything's the same in the support that any faculty is here to give, for any student. It's just all virtual so it's a little harder because, students can't like pop in and see that person, and talk to that person. They have to like kinda figure out how to contact that person.

MS: Yeah.

MA: So that's definitely more challenging and I, I think that's a big hurdle for a lot of students.

MS: Do you think that like, these uh, I guess like the precedents with the virtual things or the different classes, that like, some are in person, some are online, do you think that will like have a long lasting effect on how the art department functions and maybe the like, Humboldt as a university as like a whole? Like, do you think that, people will be more conscious of cleanliness and all that sorta thing? Like, what do you think about that for the future?

MA: Oh I'm sure, yeah. I think that, that this covid is going to change our lives forever, I think everybody is going to be, well, everybody who believes in it (laughing).

MS: (Laughing).

MA: -Is going to be much more cautious and conscious and uh, hopefully anyway, about these things that could have really detrimental effects to you know, a certain population or anybody, who knows, who they, they could really affect negatively. I mean I think all of us, but uh I think there's going to be a lot more consciousness but I don't really know.

MS: That's okay, I'm kind of asking these big kinda like questions. Uh.

MA: I guess that I've heard there's like on N.P.R., how much our future is going to be changed because of this, based on those things like cleanliness, like we're all going to be more aware about things. We're probably going to, the like mask wearing is probably going to be a long, long haul thing. Like we're all going to be wearing masks for a long time.

MS: Yeah.

MA: Even with the vaccine, I've heard that something about the, even with the vaccine, that's even as good as wearing a mask. Or that's a projection that they're not, that it's not going to be as sure fire as wearing a mask so even there, once the vaccine is out, you know and depending on, depending on how soon everybody gets it, it's going to be a long time before everybody gets it.

MS: Yeah.

MA: 'Cause, it's like yeah think about it, vaccinating the whole world? What?!

MS: (Laughing).

MA: That's crazy, that's going to take a long time. So.

MS: What do you think about like H.S.U. though, do you think they'll still require like, masks on campus or like social distancing on campus like what, maybe-

MA: Yeah.

MS: How do you think like classes in the future will be affected by this, even if, like when the pandemic's over?

MA: Yeah, yeah I think that H.S.U. and Californian institutions as a whole are really smart and really are cautious and are um taking as much precaution as possible. And, and as a whole I really, uh I really respect the approach of the C.S.U. system as a whole and in, kinda saying this is the mandate for all of California and not being like "well this college can do this and this college can [do that]" because there's much more grey area with that whereas when they came out and were like "this is what we're all doing", that just gives this kind of confidence I think for all of the C.S.U. campuses that everybody is doing this and it's alright, we're going to make it through this. This is going to happen and there might be online classes for quite a while until who knows when everyone can get vaccinated and the you know, I think that the uh the classes that are part virtual and part face to face, I think those ones and however long that lasts are going to continue to have the social distancing and face covering requirements and I think that uh I think that community responsibility uh pledge that everyone took at H.S.U. is going to be something that kind of holds steady until far after this pandemic is over. Like I think that's it's just a responsibility that everybody needs to take. And I think that H.S.U. and all these other C.S.U. campuses are really taking that responsibility and that requirement for responsibility really seriously.

MS: Okay cool, awesome. Um. I'm kinda at the end of my list of questions. Um. But is there anything else that you wanted to share with me, that you'd like to have recorded with this transcript that we haven't talked about yet? It could be like your relationship with art and how that's changed or generally like, this is, I don't know, kinda like the book end to the interview.

MA: Hmm yeah um. Gosh I don't know um.

MS: It's okay too if you don't have anything, it's like.

MA: Yeah. I mean uh, I-I think that there's an enormous capacity for uh creative solutions and creativity when there's, when there's really challenging times. And I think and I hope that a lot of people who are experiencing this will, will um embrace those creative opportunities and take that as a chance to grow as a human being and as an artist for anybody who's an artist and anybody who's not an artist. Kind of lean in towards that, towards making and towards expressing one's self and that, that context.

MS: Okay cool. I'm going to end the recording then because that's all my questions.

MA: [Okay].

MS: Let's see how do I do this (Laughing). I've never had to record a Zoom meeting before I'm very sorry about this.

MA: It should have somewhere that says "stop recording".