

Manhattan Arts

MARCH – APRIL 2000

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ELENA FLEROVA, *Mary Stuart*, tempera on masonite, 36" X 29". Cover Award Winner of the *Manhattan Arts International* "Herstory" Competition.

Interview with Maxine Greene by Donna Cameron

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Maxine Greene

Author, Arts Educator, Social Reformer

Maxine Greene, one of the 20th century's most innovative, influential educators has invited me to lunch in her home on Fifth Avenue. She is pointing to a plate of homemade spaghetti, which she has just placed on the table in front of me.

"Is it warm?" she asks, peering anxiously over the rim of her glasses. "I made it myself. It's intended to warm your insides..."

Outside, there's a wind-chill factor of ten below zero. Across the avenue, the trees of Central Park blow wildly – a black, cryptic message.

She says, "...I took this place because I loved the calligraphy of those trees..."

Maxine Greene, who, at age 80-something, has more zip than a co-ed, is currently the Professor Emeritus at Teachers College, Columbia University. She has held the William F. Russell Chair in the Foundations of Education there since 1975, dedicating a lifetime to the education of educators in the Arts. Although she is supposed to be retired, by popular demand she continues to teach a course in Aesthetics of Education, The Arts and Social Change each semester. She has received numerous academic awards, including the Delta Gamma Kappa Award for the Educational Book of the Year for *Teacher as Stranger* (1974). She is also the author of *Landscapes of Learning* (1878), *The Dialectic of Freedom* (1988), and *Releasing the Imagination: Essays on Education, the Arts, and Social Change* (1995) – all landmark books in the fields of philosophy and education.

Art, she maintains, has the unique potential to develop and release the imagination of each individual, and thus effect a collective societal change. Her work has always endeavored to rejoin the individual mind and body. At the same time, she is critical of our educational system's emphasis on logic and rational thought, on an often too-'scientific' approach to teaching that relies upon a mind and body ("body" of course suggesting emotions and senses) split.

Maxine Greene has also worked for many years with the Lincoln Center Project that involves the Arts education of inner city youth. She values the potential of its impact.

In this exclusive interview, Maxine Greene addresses her concerns as an arts educator and social reformer on a person-to-person basis.

DC: What's your work about, primarily?

MG: I write about imagination... you know they talk about imagination as release. One day, I suddenly realized that for so many kids, imagination is controlled. It doesn't go free. Take, for example, "Fantasia 2000" – how Uncle Walt manipulates it

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and insists on what you see so that you can't play with it. Maybe you listen to Respighi and you listen to Bach – but he shows you the whale with eyelashes.

DC: With film, like painting, it's important for children to get these materials in their hands – to touch and know what film is in the same way that they can hold a piece of canvas and some paint and "know" what a painting is..."

MG: Kids look at television, for example, as a window on the world instead of realizing that it's a created reality...and it's so constructed. I keep hoping to find a way to help children understand: Yes, this is or isn't authentic. And, although you can't be totally free of influences in the world, they have to try to understand what is working on them.

DC: And why.

MG: I tell my students how blind I was as a kid. Blind to racist images in the movies...I think it's important to uncover the blindness. My idea at Lincoln Center – of course it isn't entirely mine, it takes a bureaucracy to achieve that – is this: I believe in education in the Arts for the sake of having art experiences, as well as putting your imprint on the world.

DC: A record of your spiritual evolution. Once you make that artwork it's an emptied marker – like a shell you crawl out of.

MG: I always wonder if what children do should be called art. For example, you're an artist because you exist in an art world. What children do is eminently valuable if it's authentic. It has to be cherished and prized. But I would like to reserve the word art to the work of people who are aware of what they do.

DC: Yes...like the recent "Sensations" show at the Brooklyn Museum. How did you feel about that, as an educator?

MG: Parts of it were very good and parts of it were very boring. The only piece that bothered or shocked me was the picture of the murderer with the baby's hands over it. It didn't shock me aesthetically. I just couldn't get beyond the horrible subject matter to view it as art.

You know, in that show you were kind of pulled both ways. Maybe it sounds fancy, but if something is art, I want to see it as art. My seeing it as art has to exclude for a little while my experience of it as social commentary. I sort of bracket that out for a while, and then try and see the two elements as one, together. I say this to my students: If art is to make a commentary on something in the world, you have to first be able to experience it as a work of art.

One example I have is that of Manet's painting *The Execution of the Emperor Macmillan*. It's so beautiful. You know, the line of the soldiers and the dark blue and the white...but then after the initial good experience one thinks, "Oh my God, to depersonalize, to aestheticise the execution is appalling!" But if I didn't first resonate to it as an image, I don't think that

I would feel what I felt later. It's so important to be open to something as a work of art and then let it transform you.

In Lincoln Center, what we are trying to do is to learn about attending. Every summer for three weeks we work with teachers. They attend workshops with professional artists. They learn something about improvisation, something about dialogue, something about different modes of interpretation – that's what I mean by doing and attending. One should feed into the other. And I'm the talking head. I give about three or four lectures on imagination and perception.

In the last 10 years I've been giving a workshop "Literature as Art." Literature isn't thought about as art. It's thought about as reading in the schools. But it's susceptible to the same questions as painting and the rest of the visual arts. The visual art part is usually done in association with MoMA. They do silhouettes, they do cut-outs, they do color...

DC: You have to experience the thing's presence for it to penetrate your memory. And when it enters your memory that way, you experience the person who made it.

MG: Yes, and that's so much a part of teaching also. I've always been interested in the use of art and imagination in telling other stories. Like the story of American education in American culture. I wrote a book called *The Public School and the Private Vision*. I still teach a class based on it. It's thinking about education compared with or in relation to imaginative writers and painters – like Hawthorne and Horace Mann. Hawthorne had a strange and almost tragic view of life. Ameri-

can educators never did. They think about money, success, the American dream...writers like Mark Twain, or Hawthorne or Fitzgerald know what happened to American culture when, as they say, the locomotive went into the garden... I want teachers to think about what to do. What gives us the right to interfere in other people's lives? After that I wrote a book called, *Teacher as Stranger*. After that, I wrote *The Dialectic of Freedom*.

DC: And your last book, *Releasing the Imagination*?

MG: Part of it is about art and part of it is about discouragement of the Arts and the centrality of imagination...As John Dewey says, facts are maimed things, unless imagination thinks about possibilities...so much conversation and discussion is thin and superficial, unless it is in touch with the deeper order, represented by the Arts. Desire informs thought, and then it becomes something more important than trivial chatter, touching a deeper spring. It's partly that. And it's because of the technical, the measurable and the predictable that sort of horrifies me.

I don't see myself as an art educator. I talk about aesthetic education, meaning making it possible for people to bring something into the world as a work of art, as an object of their experience... And it comes into being in a space between you and the wall – not on your head and not on the wall but in some other kind of place."

Donna Cameron is a NY based artist, writer and educator. Her films and videos are included in the permanent collection of the MoMA Film Archive and are distributed by the MoMA Circulating Film & Video Library.



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