



JRB ART
AT THE ELMS
Pasco Arts District

DO ARTISTS EVER REALLY DIE?

By Joy Reed Belt



Michi Susan (1925-2020)

Somewhere I read that when an artist dies they leave behind two bodies: a physical body and a body of work. When Michi Susan died last week, she left a third body. A third body comprised of scores of artists, patrons, and at least one gallery owner, whose lives she supported, enriched and changed. My friendship with Michi began a little over 20 years ago when John purchased The Elms, the former studio, home and gallery of Nan Sheets. It had become a run down day care center and John spent several months restoring the center portion of the venerable structure before leasing it as a Gallery to a husband and wife who were both artists. When they decided to close their Gallery, I asked John if he would lease the The Elms to me. He was incredulous and said "No! You already have a career and a business and work more hours than a reasonable human should." Furthermore, he said that although he had given me painting lessons "to relax," I didn't have any real knowledge or experience in managing a proper gallery.



He was right and it was his building. But I just couldn't give up the idea. I literally began dreaming about creating a gallery. Dreams so symbolic and vivid that I visited with a psychologist/dream analyst a few times to help me interpret those dreams. I also started researching different aspects of the gallery business. A few weeks later, I sat down and wrote a white paper about my life's journey and my hopes and dreams for the future, which now included owning an art gallery. I also developed a mini business plan with very optimistic financial projections, illustrated with charts and graphs, that may or may not have been accurate and asked my assistant to design a cover sheet using my hastily crafted logo. I took the documents to Kinko's and had them bound and dropped them off at John's office. About three hours later he called and said, "Joy, a good lawyer and a good husband know when to settle and I like to think I'm both. If you will buy my dinner tonight we will talk about this preposterous idea of your starting an art gallery." We met at Flip's and began to discuss how to successfully make my dream of owning an art gallery a reality.



Michi Susan, "Birdsong 307-09," 2009, Mixed Media, 30 x 30in.



Michi Susan, "Birdsong 407-09," 2009, Mixed Media, 40 x 30 in.

At that time, Michi's art studio was on the second floor of the Avalon Building on Paseo Drive. Frida's was not yet built so Michi's window looked out over The Elms. She had talked to John several times during the initial phase of the renovation and was very interested in the process. When she saw me out in the yard supervising the planting of trees and shrubs, she came over and asked me what I was doing. I told her I was going to start an art gallery and would be her neighbor. She seemed surprised and asked if I was an artist, studied art or ever worked in a gallery. I told her that other than taking some art history and appreciation courses in college, I didn't know very much academically about art but that I loved it and had purchased a lot art over the years including a couple of her paintings. I also relayed that I had experience starting and operating small businesses and thought those skills might be transferable. But more importantly, I talked about the dreams I had been having about starting a gallery.



Michi Susan, "Poem 114-05," 2005, Mixed Media, 12 x 12 in.



Michi Susan, "Poem 116-05," 2005, Mixed Media, 12 x 12 in.

Michi listened and seemed to be intrigued by my dreams. She began to walk over and talk

to me every time she saw my car parked in front of the gallery. Gradually she began to take me under her wing. She was an old soul, wise, a good strategist, and very knowledgeable about art. She understood both the business and artistic side of gallery management. She talked to me about contracts, commissions, and other operational issues. When the gallery opened, she was a regular visitor and began to bring other people with her. A few months later, I decided it was time to have a "Grand Opening." When I mentioned it to Michi, she asked what artist I was going to feature. I told her I thought it would be good to have a group show of some of the artists with whom I was acquainted. She didn't like that idea. When I persisted in telling her why I thought it was a good idea she stomped her tiny foot and said, "No! You have Lafon for first show!" I told Michi that although I did not know him, I had heard he was difficult and didn't particularly like gallery owners. Michi said, "I take care of it." About three days later she came to the gallery with a scrap of paper with Lafon's phone number and told me she had been to Norman and talked with him and he wanted me to call. That's how I came to represent D.J. Lafon. From time to time, Michi would suggest other artists and continued to mentor me. Several months later she came in and said, "I ready to be a JRB artist." And asked when she could have her show. I cannot tell you what that meant to me. Nor, can I tell you how much it still means to me.



Michi Susan, "Poem Kabuki 127-07," 2007, Mixed Media, 12 x 12 in.



Michi Susan, "Poem Kabuki 117-07," 2007, Mixed Media, 12 x 12 in.

For twenty years I was enriched by Michi as an artist, a friend and a mentor. She delivered handmade birthday and Christmas cards, invited me to her "Pink" parties on the 4th of July, as well as, to Artist Potluck Dinners she hosted at Thanksgiving and Christmas for any artist who wanted to attend. She was spirited and fun, and absolutely one of the most joyful people I have ever known. When I first met Michi, I owned a little dog, a Shih Tzu/Poodle mix named Coco. Michi promptly renamed her Kokosan and insisted on keeping her when I was out of town. She was determined that KoKo would be friends with her cat, KiKi. Sure enough, they became friends. Michi generosity of spirit did not just extend to me. She was a caring and supportive friend to everyone in her life. But Michi had a special love for fellow artists. She went to their openings, sometimes more than one a night. Michi encouraged, mentored, and purchased their art. She provided generous financial support to arts organizations and donated her art as well as the art of other artists. A lot of those things she did anonymously. In recognition of her substantial tangible and intangible support to artists, the Paseo Arts Association not only presented her an award, they created a Michi Susan Award to be given annually to an artist who mentors and supports other artists.



Michi Susan, "Wildflower 405-06," 2006, Mixed Media, 48 x 36 in.



Michi Susan, "Wildflower 420-05," 2005, Mixed Media, 30 x 40 in.

Michi was a wonderfully talented and productive artist. The magnitude and variety of her creative output year after year was amazing. She expertly blended the sensibilities of the East and West in every thing she did. Whether it was her "Kimono," "Wildflower," "Windsong," "Poem," or "Through the Window," series, her work was fresh, original and impactful and truly a reflection of the complexity of her indomitable spirit. Michi continues to live on through her work and in the hearts and minds of all of us who were graced with her friendship.

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