



Our Hen House Podcast: Transcript for Episode 706, Interview with Jane O'Hara

Jasmin Singer: Welcome to Our Hen House, Jane.

Jane O'Hara: Hi. I'm glad to be here.

Jasmin Singer: So, so happy to chat with you. I was just telling you I love talking to artists, and it's funny because you're a visual artist, and that can actually be challenging for an audio podcast, but I think that there's something extra magical about it because at the end after people listen to your story and your perspective a bit, maybe then they would go look at your work and it would give them a whole different vantage point. Do you find that doing like audio interviews is strange for a visual person?

Jane O'Hara: Well, just as you said, I think it works that way. Hopefully, people will be curious to look and actually see what I'm painting.

Jasmin Singer: Totally, totally. So let's start with discussing *State of the Union*. Can you give us an overview of what people would see when they go to view this work?

Jane O'Hara: What I've done is in the background of each painting, I have sort of the kitschy kind of appealing thing about that state. What that state would like to project about themselves, including the state animals, state flags, state flower sites, some quirky/funny things about the state. And then in bubbles, I have approximately five bubbles for most paintings, I put things that go on with animals in that state behind the scenes in either entertainment, food, science, business.

Jasmin Singer: Yeah. Well, it's really unbelievably powerful, and you are doing a good job at explaining it, but I encourage people to go look at it.

Where can people see it, and when?

Jane O'Hara: Right now, at the New Bedford Art Museum in New Bedford, Massachusetts, I have 51 paintings, the 50 states, and then the title piece, which is *USA State of the Union*. And it's going to be up at the museum until August 20th.

Jasmin Singer: That's exciting. Congratulations, by the way.

Jane O'Hara: Thank you. Thank you. It's an exhibition that was put in the books three years ago at the museum. So, it's been a long time coming.

Jasmin Singer: Wow. Okay. I thought that writing books was the slowest industry because it's like two years from getting a book deal to the book being published. And, of course, that doesn't even count all of the work before it to try and get the book deal.

But it sounds like you're in a similarly slow industry in a way, although I guess it's not all about having art viewed by others. I guess art, for art's sake, for the process of making it. Okay, that's a very strange question, but I'm actually curious your perspective on it. Do you feel like you are an artist for others or for yourself?

Explain a little bit more about what that's like.

Jane O'Hara: Yeah, it's an interesting point you bring up because artists approach art very differently, and I definitely do it for myself. But for me, my artwork is a form of communication, and so in that light, I do want others to see it. That is my goal.

And my goal, which was met at this point with New Bedford Art Museum, is to get it out in front of an audience of regular old folks, people that are not vegan, that might be questioning some of their beliefs or some of their worldview.

Jasmin Singer: Yeah, I actually can relate to that. As a writer, I will say that I really respect people who just write for themselves or, like, they need to do it, and it's okay if it's never read. And maybe it's because we're activists. And so we feel like, like, what's the point of it being so insular? I'm not sure, but let's go back to *State of the Union*.

What was your decision-making process regarding which images to pick for each state?

Jane O'Hara: The first painting I did was *Florida, State of the Union*. Jane Velez Mitchell, *Jane Unchained*...I had been learning some things about Florida specifically that were going on. The Red Tide that had killed...had big fish die-offs, and manatees were dying.

And there was Larson's Dairy, where there was abuse within the dairy, which is already abusive. And then there were the dolphins in entertainment, and Primate Breeding Company, where they breed primates for testing. And then there was a bear hunt there too, an unnecessary bear hunt, where something like 600 cubs were left parentless.

So anyway, I had that information, and I was just struck as I was in Florida, the contrast of that information with this sunny, fun... This was before DeSantis, anyway, my awareness of him. But anyway, the sunny, fun vacation-land view of Florida and then the contrast to what was going on behind the scenes or in plain sight in some cases without any awareness.

So I just had this idea. I've used the bubble as a metaphor in other work that I've done. It's a way of kind of showing a separate yet unequal existence floating by in time, unaware of each other necessarily. And so I had this idea to do this painting and then also using the kind of kitschy postcard spelling of the word Florida, wish you were here type thing.

As you probably gathered, looking through my website, I enjoy the kind of contrast, and I like luring people in with sort of playful images, and then you can see darker things going on.

Jasmin Singer: Side note, Florida, what the heck? I mean, I remember growing up, my grandma was like a snowbird, and so I went down to West Palm Beach area every summer, and I just...it's like another planet now. I just don't know. Okay, that's not for this podcast, but I don't understand.

So you sort of just did this, but can you pick another state as an example and tell us what you included in more detail?

Jane O'Hara: Well, California, in the background, I had Minnie Mouse holding the state flag, and there were a lot of different things that I was learning that were going on there.

There's the Santa Anita Raceway, where horses are mistreated and die. And UC Davis and the death with animal experimentation. I also featured these women that were protesting, and they were trying to save a downed calf, and they were

arrested for grand larceny. And then, of course, the slaughterhouse, which is all painted up with this fanciful imagery. In the background, I have the state flag, which has the bear, and then in the background, I have the Hollywood sign, and I have the bear walking, which is the state animal.

Jasmin Singer: So, the work is accompanied by a narration. So explain that a bit. What was your goal with it?

Jane O'Hara: Because my work brings up...Just from experience, as I rolled these out and show them to people over the years that I've been working on, there'd be a lot of questions, and so I decided to have some text that would very briefly, in a prose kind of a way, just spell that out, some of those things.

Jasmin Singer: Some people are reached by audio, some people by visual and some people by a mix. So I think that's powerful. I'm sure it's very powerful. There is factory farming everywhere, however, and for many of us, that overwhelms our thought processes of all the other harms that animals endure. How do you deal with the ubiquity of that particular form of abuse?

Jane O'Hara: A lot of the paintings do have something about industrial farming. Vermont, where I have basically the story of dairy. There's a calf being taken away in the hut. And then it goes to the point of having polluted waterways, the spray going over the fields, of the manure-toxic spray, and then the dumping of milk because of COVID. So, in that case.

And in another case, I might just have a calf, just the head of the calf in its hut with its big tags hanging off of it. So I approached it differently.

Jasmin Singer: Who is Nellie, and what is her role?

Jane O'Hara: So Nellie is my deceased cat, and I don't know, seven or eight paintings in, I just had this idea based on seeing some artwork somewhere, and I was like, "Oh."

It was actually a graphic novel, and I just had this idea of Nelly being a way to kind of be a link between all the paintings, maybe add a sense of humor, but also as a commentary of all of these different treatments and ways in which animals are in our world. And so, as a companion animal, she's free to kind of cruise around and have a reaction or maybe just take a nap or not react at all.

And I just also feel like on a deeper level, that's what every animal wants, that freedom to just live. And so there's the other extreme, which I didn't really get

into with the companion animal, but how people pamper their pets or their animal companions to the point of really almost becoming surrogate family in the sense of dressing them up and extensions of their ego and whatever.

It can get really extreme on that level as well. So all those things interest me.

Jasmin Singer: Yeah. And also, it adds a relatable element, I think, for people because it's like having a companion animal in there is almost like an anchor for your average passerby who has never thought about cows before, but they have a cat who is their whole life.

That's wonderful. And I would say it's a way to keep Nelly alive in a way, too. It's really beautiful.

So State of the Union is, it's just your latest work that involves animals. Can you tell us the story of how your art became so intertwined with your attitudes toward animals?

Jane O'Hara: Well, animals entered my artwork quite a while ago.

I hadn't been painting for a while, I majored in college for painting, but I then didn't do much for a lot of years. And so I started painting again with my now husband. And we went out painting plein air or whatever, painting landscapes, and I got really bored with that. So I started bringing pictures of animals in.

So the beginning of it was sort of celebrating their humor and the beauty of animals. But I had this pivotal moment where I was starting to learn some of the things that went on. I'd read *Diet for a New America* by John Robbins, and I didn't feel like I could become vegan, but I was sobbing reading it, and that's how it was for me.

It was a slow, information seeping in and not being able to get rid of it. Even though I really wasn't looking to be an activist, really wasn't looking to be controversial or any of those things. So, I went to this exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and it was the Byzantium exhibition, and it had all these Saints that had sacrificed their lives to powers greater than themselves. To God.

And I just had this idea of animals sacrificing their lives to greater powers. And in their case, it would be institutions, factory farms and universities, circuses. So I had the animals with the vestments like what I was seeing in this exhibition.

This idea just came to me, and I tried to push it away. I didn't want to do it because I didn't know what I was going to do with that. But it wouldn't stop nagging me. For many months I tried to not do it and then finally, I'm like, I'm just going to do it.

And during the process of doing it, I started to learn even more about what goes on. And so, it was really a turning point where I started to integrate that information into my artwork.

Jasmin Singer: The basis of Our Hen House when we started it like a billion years ago was basically like people should take what they're already interested in and what they're already doing and what they're already skillful at and incorporate animals.

And I think sometimes it just happens that way, even if we don't choose to make it so. As a fellow BFA person, I can tell you that being a creative who is working in the world of animal rights and in the arts it's scary because, well, in your case, literally a blank canvas. I was going to use it metaphorically for me because my BFA was in acting...But it's like, "Oh, okay, well, this is how I change the world, this canvas."

And it can be overwhelming, but it's also such a beautiful way of expressing something that is so dark. And so I just want to say thank you for doing that because it is reaching people.

I have this sort of theory. I'm curious what you think about this. When people are taking in the arts or art of any kind, really, but we'll say visual, since you're a visual artist, they have their defenses down more so than if they were being handed a brochure or if they came across a documentary. Partly because when you take art in, there is a vulnerability that the artist brings, but there's also a vulnerability that the viewer brings, and there's some kind of magical connection in that connection between the viewer and the artist.

What do you think about this? Am I being like weird and woo here?

Jane O'Hara: No, not at all. I totally agree. And I think that the thing about visual art is it's entered you before you know what's happened. That's almost subliminal. Whereas, as you put it, someone hands you a brochure, you can be like, "Oh, no, no, no, I can't do that."

And people are catching on with my work that they might see something they don't want to see. I think that the arts are very powerful in that way.

Jasmin Singer: Absolutely. And your work has been said to encompass an interplay of humor and irony. How did those elements combine with the tragedy that you are so often dealing with in your work?

Jane O'Hara: Well, I want to have joy and laughter in my life. So having had some of my own dark history, dysfunctional family stuff, my response always was laughter and humor and dark humor.

So I imagine it's born out of that. I just find the dark humor in things. And yet, doing these paintings was very painful, even before doing the paintings, just to learn and know what goes on. It's not that I don't feel it, I do.

I do think that humor, just like we were saying about visual arts, I think humor can be disarming, and it can also be a way to lower people's resistance.

Jasmin Singer: Definitely. Ah, yes. I am very familiar with the dotted line from dysfunctional family to the arts to activism.

And what is Compassion Arts?

Jane O'Hara: Compassion Arts is a group founded by Elie Saartje. It's a group that brings together all the different arts as the compassionate use of the arts to get the message of compassion for animals out.

And so there's been a festival every year. Right now, it's going through some restructuring, but there's been a festival, and there's been other events. And Ellie found me, I think it was seven years ago or so, and I was able to give a talk at the Worcester Art Museum showing slides of my work and talking about basically my story of how I became more compassionate to animals and used my artwork as a way to do that.

So Compassion Arts has been co-curating an exhibition called *The Fifth Trust*, which was based on the Ten Trusts by Mark Bekoff and Jane Goodall's book. And so we did *The Fifth Trust*, and all the trusts were done by different forms of art and different artists. So it's kind of hard to put it all in a nutshell, but it's a very broad venue to explore these things with a lot of great ideas coming in the future as well.

Jasmin Singer: I understand that Compassion Arts takes the concept of volunteer very seriously. Can you explain your ethos and practices around how it functions?

Jane O'Hara: Yeah, it's volunteer-run, and there is some restructuring going on, so things may change as it moves forward to become a nonprofit. It's not the end of things that I'm involved with, but people like you and me and all of us artists that are passionate really seem to enjoy volunteering to get the message out in these different ways. And it's kind of a beautiful way to do it through the festival or other events.

Jasmin Singer: What can artists whose work revolves around animals gain from being part of this collective?

Jane O'Hara: Well, for me, it has been a way to have my work seen, to get it out there, to reach people that are vegan or vegan-curious, or just animal-loving curious. And it is just like with my own work, Compassion Arts aims to reach people who are pre-gans.

Jasmin Singer: Pregans, yeah.

Jane O'Hara: You know, I think that the people who have been involved have had a very rich experience as far as giving talks at a veg fest or Zoom things since COVID. And I remember seeing you at the Culture and Animals and Compassion Arts festival and the play...

What was that play?

Jasmin Singer: Oh, right! Yeah. Yeah. *Sanctuary* by John Yunker.

Jane O'Hara: Yeah! So I had given a presentation at that, and I also did a pop-up exhibition of *Beasts of Burden* in the Upper East Side. And then, I gave a presentation at the symphony space.

Jasmin Singer: Yes. It's all coming back to me now! There, there was this fuzzy thing in my head, and thank you for contextualizing it because it's like coming into focus.

Tell us about the *Beasts of Burden* series and how they differ.

Jane O'Hara: Okay. So *Beasts of Burden* I curated, I got a curatorial award years back, and I curated these suburban, which at that point included, I think it was 13 artists and not vegan, but just people who used animals as their muse in all different ways.

And my ultimate goal was to show how animals are integrated into our lives in every way, whether it's psychologically or from everything from political stand-ins to humor, all these different ways. So I had these 13 great artists, and then I did the exhibition in New York, which was mostly the same artists, a few new ones.

And I also got a grant from Culture and Animals Foundation to do a book. So I have a book that catalogs that particular *Beasts of Burden* exhibition, 2017.

Jasmin Singer: That is so, so cool. How can people get the *Beasts of Burden* book?

Jane O'Hara: On my website, janeoharaprojects.org.

Jasmin Singer: Amazing. I actually already sent your website to a friend of mine right before we hopped on here because are you based in Providence?

Jane O'Hara: I am.

Jasmin Singer: Yeah. So my friend, like, half-lives in Providence, and I was like, yeah, so beautiful. So it really is.

And just so that our listeners know, especially the listeners who are driving or on the treadmill, do not stop, do not pull over. We're going to link to Jane's website in the show notes.

Now, Jane, I won't ask you for favorites. But can you mention a few artists working now whose work might be of interest to our listeners and give us a little bit more detail about their work and why it resonates with you?

Jane O'Hara: Hmm. Well, I can say that Sue Coe is an artist that really affected me very strongly when I saw a show of her work.

I was not vegan yet. I was leaning that way. I'd probably already read the book I mentioned, and I honestly did not know that's what went on. Even though I'd read the book, just seeing the visuals in factory farms. So that's powerful. She obviously doesn't really use the humor aspect. *laughs*

Jasmin Singer: Right. Well, I think that, like Sue, it's funny because she is very funny in this very witty, dry way.

But yeah, I totally agree. I mean, her work is otherworldly.

There is such an enormous chasm between the way we think we should treat animals and the way the world treats animals. How would you describe the ways in which the arts can bridge that chasm? And I know we talked about it a little bit before, but this is one of my favorite questions.

And so I love just continuing to dissect it a bit...much better than dissecting animals, by the way, is dissecting questions about the arts. What do you think? How can we better use the arts as a way to move the message?

Jane O'Hara: Well, I mean, there's so many ways up the mountain, and that's what I love about the arts.

Everybody's got a different approach. Sue Coe has a very different approach than other people, but I just think that we all have our own journey. And for me, I mean...some people, the second they hear what goes on, they're like, "I'm vegan. That's it." And it wasn't like that for me. I had a lot of denial. I had a lot of things that I just felt like I couldn't.

And the arts have played a strong part for me as far as opening my eyes. And sometimes it comes in sideways, like that Metropolitan exhibition about the Saints who had sacrificed their lives.

Jasmin Singer: So I do want to chat with you a little bit more about your life. Going to save some of it for our bonus content...

So if you're a flock member, then definitely check that out. But would you mind telling me a little bit about like how your art takes up space in your day to day? What is your process?

Jane O'Hara: I'm not a very scheduled type person. *laughs*

Jasmin Singer: Lucky you.

Jane O'Hara: And unfortunately, I work under pressure. So as the exhibition started to get closer and closer, I was in the studio around the clock, but I can go days without being in the studio.

I sometimes paint outside. I sometimes integrate it into a vacation-y kind of day. Other times I'm in my studio. So there is an art group in the town I used to live in, Little Compton, Rhode Island, that I go down to just for the camaraderie and also, I always paint there. I'm a quick painter, so I can get a lot of satisfaction just sort of dropping in.

The State of the Union series, in particular, took a lot of research. So that was a lot of what was involved with each painting. And so, at some point, I'd just get inspired to just dig in with it. I started creating all these folders with information for each state. I had 50 state folders with all the different types of information. And then, the actual just painting, I do get lost in time once I get into it, but I can be very guilty of procrastination when I'm not *laughs* involved in something, and the next thing's coming is just like I keep pushing it off until...

I don't know what that is, and I never will, but it's just part of this thing that goes on with me.

Jasmin Singer: Is procrastination painful for you, or are you like whatever about it?

Jane O'Hara: I'm a little more whatever about it. At my age, just knowing that this is what happens with me and I will get past it. I spent about 25 years along with my own artwork, but really predominant, for many of those years, having a decorative painting business where I did murals and wall glazes and things like that.

And I worked with interior designers, and that was obviously very structured and deadlines and all that kind of thing. And I know especially working with the murals, that I could really see what happens with me. I get started the first day. I'm like, "Wow, I'm a genius! This is great!" The second or third day, I think, "This is horrible. It's never going to be anything." And I just like... I saw some comic on Facebook about this...but I just know that these are the swings that I go through.

And then, before I know it, it's like, "Oh, I'm almost done. How did that happen?"

Jasmin Singer: That's so funny. I don't have the same process as that.

However, when I'm in my version of the lull, like my version of the procrastination part, even though that is also part of my process, it freaks me out. It scares me. I don't know if I'm going to get through it each and every time, every single time. And I hate it. It's so uncomfortable. I'm like, maybe it's like a block, like a writer's block, but I have to get something done for whatever reason. I'm like, "I'm never going to get through this. It's over."

Like, it's so dramatic. I'm so dramatic about it. So I appreciate your self-awareness.

Jane O'Hara: Well, I think it's the artist's condition. I just think that it's like the vulture has less of a pull than it used to, but the dynamics are still there.

They still happen. Questioning, “Am I an artist?” It doesn't matter what you have behind you. I realize that's just going to be something that comes up sometimes. *laughs*

Jasmin Singer: As we wind down, is there something that you haven't done that you really want to? And the sky's the limit here. Just curious, can you just sort of put it out there?

Because I'm curious about your plans, like your bigger plans or your bigger dreams.

Jane O'Hara: Well, one plan I have, which is very real, is to travel this show, and I want to find small museums or university galleries. It's not a commercial gallery type of thing. And the book that I'm going to have made of the show, I'm having, in the process, will help that.

And basically, that's the overarching goal I have, just trying to reach people. And also, it's a very cold reality part of that dream, is I would really love to be paid *laughs* some money.

Jasmin Singer: I would really love it if you were paid some money too.

Jane O'Hara: There's a gallery I'm a part of in Provincetown, William Scott Gallery, and I do sell paintings.

But as far as this work, the *State of the Union* work, *Beasts of Burden*, I have some new artists, including Sue Coe in the next *Beasts of Burden*, when and if... and everything's been out of pocket for these things. I mean, the museum, New Bedford Art Museum, obviously, it's their space they're paying for, but everything else has been out of pocket, any publicity, whatever.

So anyway, it's not sustainable. I know at a certain point with artists. At a certain point, people start wanting you, and the balance shifts, and they'll pay at least for shipping or something like that.

Jasmin Singer: Mm hmm. Mm-hmm. So regarding wanting to be at smaller museums, is there a way that our listeners can support you in those efforts?

Perhaps they are connected to some kind of art outlet. I don't know why I'm saying art outlet. That's a very strange way of putting it. But, like, perhaps people can help you to get your work out there in their areas.

Jane O'Hara: Oh, absolutely. Yeah. I would be very happy to have any help that anyone might have if they have a connection to a gallery they think might be interested.

You know, you can reach me through my website. If you want to communicate with me, then that would be awesome!

Jasmin Singer: It's amazing. And we'll link to that in the show notes, and Jane, thank you so much for putting all of this out there. We need you so much. And I definitely think that shift you were talking about is imminent because your work is really profound and powerful.

I'm so, so excited that you're on Our Hen House because I know that our art-loving listeners are going to be very excited, if they're not already familiar with your work, to become familiar with it.

Jane O'Hara: That's great.

Jasmin Singer: Thank you so much. Thank you for joining us on Our Hen House!

Jane O'Hara: Thank you.