



Bio: **Pat Brentano** is the Merritt and Martha DeJo2ng Artist in Residence at the Evansville Museum of Arts and Sciences. Her one-person exhibition, entitled “We Don’t Own Nature. We Are Part of It,” will be on exhibit throughout the summer. She is a 2009 recipient of the Lillian Heller Curators Award from the Chesterwood Museum in Massachusetts. Pat Brentano has exhibited her “Endangered Bird Installation” throughout New England and New Jersey. Twelve pieces were included in the “Contemporary Sculpture at Chesterwood” exhibition. Fifty-two endangered birds were installed in August 2009 during an environmental artist residency at I-Park in East Haddam, Connecticut. Her work has also been exhibited in Albany, New York; the Shore Contemporary Museum, Long Branch, New Jersey; the Jersey City Museum, Jersey City, New Jersey; the Paul Robeson Gallery, Newark, New Jersey; the University of Baltimore, Baltimore, Maryland; Scottsdale, Arizona; and Appalachian State University in Boone, North Carolina. In 2008 Pat was the recipient of a Puffin Grant to assemble her “Missing Trees Installation” in Highland Park, New Jersey. She was awarded the New Jersey State Council on the Arts Individual Fellowship and a visiting Artist Grant from the Weir Farm Trust in Connecticut.

She has been teaching drawing and painting at Kean University in Union, New Jersey from 2002 to the present. Prior to moving to the Northeast, Pat was an Assistant Professor at the University of Wisconsin in Kenosha and Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Her work has been exhibited in the Drawing Center, Armstrong Gallery, Aaron Berman Gallery and Kathryn Markel Gallery all in New York City. Her work continues to focus on the environment and is meant to educate and inspire social change. More of Pat’s work can be seen on her website: Patbrentano.com.

An Interview with Patricia Brentano
Conducted by Leadership Scholar Alexandra Pacia
Edited by Alexandra Pacia

Alexandra Pacia: What were your aspirations when you were a young girl?

Pat Brentano: I wanted to either be a dancer or an artist. My parents believed that [our family] lived an artistic life; that art was part of your life.

AP: Were your parents teachers?

PB: No. My father was in advertising and my mother was a homemaker; but she was a patron of the arts. They were very involved in the symphony. My mother bought art and we had sculpture in our yard. They [even] gave scholarships to students at the university for art. So, for me it was just what you did.

AP: Did you have a favorite artist that you aspired to be?

PB: I used to try to paint like Cezanne when I was in high school; and I wanted to carve marble because of Michelangelo.

AP: Were you encouraged to follow your dreams?

PB: Actually, my mother said that you should not have a job because someone might need that job. You should further your aesthetics and take classes [instead]—and that’s why I took dancing up until a point. And then, at some point you had to make a decision because—dancing doesn’t last forever. So I decided to be an artist. We always took music classes, piano classes, flute, dancing, [etc.] My sister is an actress—and my other sister is a musician. We all picked an area. The arts were just part of our lives.

AP: It’s clear that nature is such a big part of your life. Was nature always as ever present to you? Were you as aware growing up versus how you are now?

PB: I grew up in southern Indiana [and] I lived on a river, [the] Ohio River. Nature was my playground and my temple. I played all the time outside and I also climbed trees for meditation. We lived in a city, but the country began right at the city limits. So, you would go into the country on a Sunday. We were always out in the country.

It was about the beauty – because it was untouched, it was more natural in those days. There were less people. I think it started out being just this great love and feeling of security and it was home. It was part of my life. So it was if you call it “true North” you go back to the country. You know, we would go home and I didn’t move back to the East until I was in graduate school. I never really got used to all the noise and the people. It’s a lot different.

I don’t think I was aware of how important it was, but I loved it. It was always about getting into the country or about climbing the tree or swimming in a natural pond. I have a house in the country in Pennsylvania. There’s a need to be with trees.

See I grew up in the Midwest and in the Midwest there was more space. There was less competition. There was less pollution. There was just less people. There were trees and there was nature. I had a river. I had cornfields, lakes. I mean it’s beautiful there.

I guess it was intuitive and then, of course, it was a part of my life because an activity would be “let’s all get in the car and drive to the country.” If you’re going to do that with your children then you’re going to think that’s what you do. That’s fun.

Every summer we would travel. We did the whole United States. [My dad] would choose an area and he would give us books to read and we would go—in the car. If you go in the car, part of

the fun of being in the car is looking out the window. I was in the back with my sister and we'd look out the window, and I would see. We did Wyoming, Colorado, South Dakota. We did the South. We did the Northeast. It was summer vacation.

Then he decided we would go to Europe. I went to Europe seven times before I was out of grad school. We went to Spain. We had to read Michener. We had to read Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* because it took place in Spain. We actually did his trip. It was fabulous. At the time I'm like, "Dad please, more reading?" But you know how valuable that was? I'll never forget it. I kept the whole journal. And we did it by car. We drove all through Spain. It was just part of me—and that was in nature too. It was in the Pyrenees, up and around. It wasn't really in the cities.

It was really cool and there's one more thing I'm going to tell you. I was very lucky to go to the Soviet Union when it was communist. It was an experience I only wish young people today could experience because you will never appreciate what you have here until you don't have it and you're over there.

It was grey. It was poor. Scary. You were being watched. There was no food. There was nothing on the streets. There was no commercialism or signs or advertisement. It was all about the government. They would have these booths where they would have these wilted lettuce and wilted vegetables and all these people, in schemata grey clothes, were in line to get food. It was scary. You went into the hotel. They took your passport. You were told what to do. You couldn't go here. You couldn't go there. [But] the guide took me on a bus to an underground art show of young artists. We got into a lot of trouble for that, but it was really exciting. But they couldn't do what I'm doing. They couldn't do what they wanted to do. And you don't really understand that unless you go and experience the lack of freedom of expression. That was an important event for me because I came back and said, "Get me out of here." I mean the Hermitage was a fabulous museum, but there was something very scary. Really you weren't free. [But] with freedom comes all this abuse. You have to balance that. That was a big time for me.

AP: As you grew up what were your long-term goals?

PB: Well in my twenties I was in graduate school. I was getting my MFA [Master's of Fine Arts] at Tyler School of Art and that was in Philadelphia. I was being exposed to the inner city and a whole different way of life. But I wanted to be an educator as well. I got an MFA [Master's of Fine Arts] in painting so I can teach painting and drawing. I wanted to be independent from my parents. I wanted to make my way. I always felt very strong and passionate about things. I wanted to get settled and get the education. So I did. I got a job in Wisconsin, at the University of Wisconsin and I taught there as a full time professor.

AP: Did you face any challenges while pursuing your art career?

PB: Being a woman was a challenge because it was a male dominated world in the seventies. And so I changed my name to Pat, from Patricia. Then when I would enter something they wouldn't know if I was a man or a woman. One time, the woman said, "Oh, you're not a man," or "Oh you're a woman," and I thought, "Bingo it's working." [That] was a challenge because the galleries, the shows [were all run by men]. It was difficult to make your way.

The other challenge for an artist is being a mother. The two most important events in my life were the birth of my children and the death of my parents. [They were important] for spiritual inspiration. Those two events formulated my philosophy about my life. [Being] a mother is one of the great tasks in the world and [it is] under appreciated, and certainly not paid. To try to keep a career going, raise two children, and not have people address you as a little homemaker is difficult and that was a challenge.

[Then] after I raised my children, I got my parents. One had Alzheimer's and the other had Parkinson's. I had to take care of them for ten years and that was a very important experience for me. I did a whole period of work on their "Death March," if you will, and it was the nurturing thing and that was very good. It was a gift, really, to be able to complete the cycle of life where I give birth – because women can only do that– then I nurtured them to the end of; their lives. I mean, it was sad. But it was also an inspiration. I got a lot out of that, an understanding of who we really are, what we're connected to and family and communion. It was a very heavy experience. That set me back a little bit [on my] career [but] it's another thing that women take on because women nurture and take care of the family and the community. So [care-work] falls on us. We are the responsible ones.

AP: Did you experience confrontational acts of sexism?

PB: Sometimes. I think the male professors were a little jealous or condescending and would make little remarks. I was young, so I didn't really understand what was happening. But I did feel it and I was determined to have this career. That just wasn't going to matter to me. I just persevered.

AP: Could you please explain your inspiration and creative process for your body of work in general? Specifically, the "Endangered Birds" series and the "Missing Trees."

PB: Okay, the "Missing Trees" came about because I moved into suburbia and I moved into a section called Indian Forest. So a neighbor comes in and he cuts down twenty-one mature trees to build an enormous house. Well I went berserk–because why are you moving into an area where there are trees and it's called "Indian Forest." We all live there because we love the trees and now you want to live on a golf course and you cut down [mature trees]. I was so angry I didn't know what to do with it and I thought, "Okay this is it. We're gonna do a piece about this because it's the only way I'm going to feel better." So I created the "Missing Trees" and what happened was I did ten panels. I sat outside in my car and I had to simplify the image because [the trees] were going to be cut so that they would be missing or gone forever because these were

mature trees that will never grow back. I created those pieces and I was having a one-person show at the Monmouth Museum [in New Jersey] at the time. I thought this would be a really good addition. The one-woman show was about “Re-greening” New Jersey with the entryways. Then that sort of evolved. [For example] I got a commission from the Reeves–Reed Arboretum in Summit [New Jersey] to create a very large piece for their year of the tree, based on the trees that they actually have. Those are a little different. They’re cut out and actually very specific trees.

They were at places like the Great Swamp, the Highlands, the Raptor Trust, the Trail Side Museum in Mountainside. Then also my front yard. I put them up for the show and then they traveled to Rutgers on the grounds of the Institute for Women’s Leadership right there on Ryder Lane. That was exciting. I was teaching a course at the time so it worked well. Then they went up to Albany for a public art exhibition [and] they were in Massachusetts.

The “Endangered Birds” came about because I received an environmental artist in residency [position] at a place called I-Park in East Haddam, Connecticut and I had to go up there and create a piece for the park that would stay a year. I did the fifty-one endangered birds of Connecticut. They were cut out of aluminum. They were more permanent. They hung up there and then that sort of morphed and they actually migrated. They migrated to Massachusetts. They’re now at the Scherman Hoffman Wildlife Sanctuary in Bernardsville, [New Jersey] and they were in a show in Philadelphia. They fly around. But they’re the same thing. Using nature as well. The ones that hang from the trees hang from the trees because that’s where they nest, and the ones on the ground are on the ground because that’s where they nest. I really tried to look at the specific species and where they put their nests, and the environment that they would hang out in. I wanted to cut them from that standpoint.

[Overall,] I’ve [created artwork of] the birds of New Jersey, Massachusetts, and Connecticut and now I’m having a show in Indiana.

Actually, I could kiss the man because that gave me the impetus to create this piece that really kind of took off.

AP: What made you choose birds?

PB: Because they lived in the trees. I mean when you destroy the trees you destroy their habitat. The habitat is what’s important to me because that’s what we’re doing. We are destroying the earth because we have too many people and we are not paying attention. That’s why the birds come out of the trees and when they tore down all those trees we lost our birds. We lost our shade. We lost our oxygen. We lost our birds. We lost our flow. They also [coordinate] the water as it flows through the underground water. We lost a lot of things when they destroyed all those trees.

[Also] after my parents died, the Cardinal, the state bird of Indiana, crashed into my door like the

very next day and died. And I just kind of felt like they were coming back as a bird. It comforted me. Then I would come out of the driveway and there was a Forsythia bush and the Cardinal would just stay in the bush. I kind of felt like it was Mom. The Cardinal stayed there a long time. There's been this connection, but you know birds are archetypes. They are spiritual in many areas. I mean, whether it's true or not it's a great thing to believe. They are very spiritual anyway and everyone wants to fly. I always liked that. Birds live in trees, you know. That's been going on for about eight years. Birds. So, I started drawing them.

AP: What reactions did you get from people for your artwork?

PB: Good ones. They liked them on many levels. They liked them because of the statement. But [they] also liked the pieces abstractly because I think of them as three-dimensional drawings, and the cut out [can] be a tree or the bird. The same thing is formed because of nature in the background so the color is coming through the negatives. I'm really painting with nature and then the surface color was very specific. It's not really white. It was chosen to reflect the light. So it becomes pink and blue and violet and it does things at different times of the day. Basically my painting is changing throughout the day and throughout the seasons. And when the sunlight hits the contour, you get a line. So, it's like one of my drawings. I really tried to work with nature as my palette on the "Missing Trees" and the "Endangered Birds."

AP: What do you think should be done with your artwork?

PB: Well, I think of myself as an educator. I want to make as many people as I can change the way they behave towards the environment before I die. It's about changing your behavior. Pay attention, educate yourself, and make responsible decisions about the environment. That's my goal. If I can do it as an artist, as a mother, and as a friend, and as an educator, that's my goal. Everyday. I sort of leave something behind then.

Public art is important to me because I think it reaches the wider community. When art is in a gallery it often only gets the small society of people who appreciate it. If you're there, you only rotate in every two years, but if you're out outside or in someone's yard everyone sees [art] for long periods of time. So, hopefully the message is more widely spread. That's the whole idea; to make a change you have to reach a lot of people.

The show I'm preparing for is at a museum. I have an entire gallery, so I have a lot of pieces going out. I would want it to travel and to reach as many people as possible. I have a lot of ideas; I would continue to work on them. I would like to be able to speak about it. I do include it in my courses.

I think we'd make better aesthetic decisions on what we purchased, on how we designed things. The way we take. The way we plan. They used to build houses according to the wind and the sunlight, and they would be placed for warmth.

You know, we don't think about those things anymore because we have air-conditioning and heating. I think aesthetically we'd fit in better. Frank Lloyd Wright, his architecture fits in with nature. We don't need to do that anymore. So we dropped it. So now you just plop things because I don't think they're aware of what's happening here.

I think if you had an education in aesthetics—and a real education in the visual language—you would say, “I understand this is beautiful.” But instead we go out there and say, “Oh I hate this. I have to have grass. Bring grass from the Northeast.” And they plant it, right? That doesn't make sense to me. That's education. Really. I'm not saying they're bad. It's just education. And we don't really spend time with education in the arts.

AP: Would you say that your journey is progressing and that you're reaching your smaller goals?

PB: Absolutely. Slowly, [with] a lot of hard work. I work like a dog and I think that's what you have to do to succeed. I tell my students most people do nothing. So get out there, show up, work and you will succeed. And I've never been wrong about that. I just want to live long enough. And I think that's a challenge for women in particular because of childrearing. You have to work around that, if you want a family.

AP: Before you started this art project did you ever see yourself as a leader?

PB: Well, I'm a pretty strong personality and I like to express my opinion. I didn't go out saying, “Oh I'm a leader,” but “I have an opinion and oh no you can't do that.” Things offend me so that you have to change that. So I would just tell you. I was always a strong character with a lot of passion.

AP: Do you believe that women have a different take on leadership?

PB: They have a different style—then men. They do. I mean, obviously they're different. You know, men and women are different in many ways. But I think women help each other. You need to find that community. I've always found that when I've reached out to a woman it gets done. I reach out to women because they're there for me. They're helpful, supportive and understand. They don't condescend and they don't think less of me because I was a mother because they understand. But they were always the ones who nurtured and gathered and, you know, kept the tribe together. I don't know, it's a hard challenge.

AP: If you could change one thing in your career what would it be?

PB: I would have stayed. I would have worked. I would have stayed in teaching instead of going home to raise my children full time, but I wanted to nurture them myself. That's the choice. It's a very hard choice. But I did work. I worked every morning. I had a studio in the dining room and I had a young person that I would meet at the nursery school or somewhere.

She would come over and play with them. I had maybe four hours a day to work. I tried to keep that going. I felt like I was in the water, right here, [gestures to neck] like this and I was hanging on and I would get through it. If I could keep my health I would get through it, and then I would gun it again. And I did.

AP: Do you have any specific advice that you'd give to young scholars, or your children, or the generation that's coming up?

PB: It's all about doing your homework. It's the scaffolding of your mission that's important. It's like building a house. If the house isn't strong on the scaffolding, then it's not going to last – you have to do your homework. You have to be prepared. There's no shortcut. You have to be willing to make that sacrifice.

[Also] you have to start paying attention, because it's not the way it used to be. And because everything is changing. We're destroying so much you're going to have to deal with it. You need to pay attention and educate yourself. Read the newspaper every single day. Pay close attention to what you are doing and vote accordingly. We need to get people out there in responsible positions that will address these issues. Paying attention is huge and being responsible environmentally and socially. And limit the population. No one wants to talk about that. We have too many people. We can't feed them. We're going to run out of food and water and there's going to be war. I mean, that's a little drastic. But this could happen, if you don't take care of the earth.

I really believe we are part of nature. We do not own it and we have acted like we own it for so long that we're destroying it. We need to get back to that philosophy, in being part of something bigger than we are and contribute.