



Jody Lee
Upright Ward, 2005
Gouache and watercolor on paper
30 x 22 inches



Jody Lee
Endless Column, 2007
Pigment and varnish on paper
16 x 14 inches



Jody Lee
Down Under and At Large, 2006
Gouache on paper
12 x 9 inches

Several years ago, one of my former students sent me an email saying I had to meet Jody Lee. She was impressed that Jody had been able to raise money for her projects from a number of patrons and that I should check her out. Always interested in artists that find a variety of support structures, I called Jody and visited her studio. Not only did I enjoy Jody's work, but I loved hearing about her personal fundraising experience. Jody's story is a good reminder that there are many ways us artists can look for support from within our personal network of relationships. This is an interview with Jody Lee on February 11th, 2008.

JACKIE: Jody, one of the reasons I wanted to interview you is because I'm impressed with the way you have been able to raise money from individuals to support your project. Why do you think it's so hard? When I talk to artists about how they can also be looking to individuals for funding for their projects, they kind of immediately say, "I could never ask anybody for money!"

JODY LEE: I think it is very tough. I guess what I put between myself and the person that I'm approaching for support is the work itself. You have to ask yourself something other than, "Who would give me money straight up?" You have to think, "Who really believes in me?" and "Who really knows me?" Preferably, it's someone you've known for five to ten years at least who also owns your work and has had a long term interest in your accomplishments.

JACKIE: So, the people you contacted were ones with whom you have a significant relationship already. You're not asking for money from just anybody.

JODY LEE: Right. These are core supporters. However, they may or may not have been to my studio. One person was someone I worked for twenty or fifteen years ago as his assistant. And one tangential point from that is to keep in touch with everybody, especially

people who you really connect with or who have known you from different parts of your life. That was one thing all the people who became part of my program had in common.

They ranged from someone who was purely a collector but a most respectful studio visitors I've ever had where I just felt, "I know why you buy work and it has absolutely nothing to do with buying or ownership." So, one person was on that side of the spectrum who was an art collector. And then, there was somebody I had gone to Reed [College] with who had known me long before I started making work. You want to think about people who know your back story and support it.

What I was asking of them was to support the whole endeavor of the studio in a wider sense than purchasing individual pieces from shows. That shift was very important to me and it meant bringing the structure of art-market commerce closer to the energy of art production. That idea was a mainstay of this program. I needed money, but the thinking behind the Partisans project went well beyond that.

JACKIE: They were interested in the whole person.

JODY LEE: Right. The whole person.

JACKIE: And you called them "Partisans."

JODY LEE: I called them "Partisans of the Studio."

JACKIE: That's a great term. Did you start with something specific that you wanted to raise money for?

JODY LEE: I did. I wanted to move my studio out of my home. And that was just prohibitive in Manhattan where I was living, where I'm still living, and I couldn't figure out any other way to do it. I had just read a book by Rudolf Wittkower called, Born Under Saturn, about artists' temperament, how artists have been seen sociologically, the whole history of how artists have been supported, who has supported them, how much they've drunk, what kind of pills they have taken...it ends before the 20th century begins.

JACKIE: So are we all crazy?

JODY LEE: Well, the thing is, there is a huge diversity in the way artists have been supported. I guess that kind of freed me up. It gave me perspective to realize if I had lived so many hundred years ago, I would have been part of a guild. Would that have been better? In some ways, that would have been better and in a lot of ways it would have been worse. I think a lot that the autonomy artists have now also puts us in a financial position that hampers our work terribly. It helps to remember artists have stood differently in society throughout history and that the art market has had a very different shape. There have been some very unenviable moments. The Greeks, for example, had art-making to be beneath most other professions.

JACKIE: Yes, they were considered only craftsmen. There was a large discrepancy between literary and theatrical arts vs. the artists that worked with their hands.

JODY LEE: The crude, crude arts.

JACKIE: So, when you started with the idea of raising funds, you gave it a name. You envisioned these individuals as "Partisans of the Studio".

JODY LEE: Yes, because "Partisans" has political connotations, and I believe that the support of artists is political. I mean, my work is political though not overtly so. The fact that the Partisans would support me outside of any system and take on that risk, brought to mind the partisans in Spain, so that's how I got to "Partisans of the Studio".

JACKIE: How many people did you identify with whom you felt comfortable approaching?

JODY LEE: Two couples and three individuals.

JACKIE: So, this wasn't a large number of people.

JODY LEE: Not at all. And I didn't expect to get the whole rent paid. I thought their help would offset the rent and make moving my studio out of my home possible. I thought that this would be a really interesting way to get the work to people. That turned out to be one of the best parts.

JACKIE: You conceived of it as a way to help to pay the rent? What was your approach to them?

JODY LEE: Well, I felt like it had to be visual and it had to come across as very reliable and already in existence. I didn't want them to feel like I was just re helping bring something about so much as support something that is already fully there and would be taken further with their support. For years I've taken pictures in the studio while I work. So I made a booklet out of those studio photographs, printed them on Shutterfly, and put that in a portfolio where I included my pitch letter. I wrote many drafts of that letter, and included whatever press I had and my c.v.

JACKIE: You didn't approach them personally? You just sent them a package?

JODY LEE: I let everyone know about the idea, asked if they would be interested in looking at it, and asked them if I could send them a package.

JACKIE: You called them up?

JODY LEE: I called them up. Only one of them lived in New York.

JACKIE: How hard was it to make that phone call?

JODY LEE: It was hard, and yet I thought all of them would appreciate the idea and I thought all of them would want me to have that space where I could show up to make my work. They all valued my work and I knew that.

JACKIE: You had found a studio, knew what it was going to cost, and you were poised to sign the lease?

JODY LEE: That's right. Mail the "Partisans" portfolios today!

JACKIE: You had your materials ready, had worked for weeks on the pitch letter and put together this package of information for them. You had identified who might be possible, and would have been satisfied if you had gotten some of them to say "yes".

JODY LEE: I would have been happy to get just some of them. My idea was to ask them to parcel out their support by sending me money either quarterly or bi-annually, so it wasn't just, "I'm so deserving, send me your money." It was really like, let's make this alternative arrangement supporting the studio in its entirety as a field of inquiry.

I didn't like the idea of doing an editioned piece for them. I wanted them each to have original work. So, all Partisans received either two pieces or four pieces over a two year span of time, depending on the level of support.

JACKIE: And these were works on paper?

JODY LEE: These were all works on paper. I would send them a disk, and they would choose the work. And some of them paid all up front for the two years and some paid quarterly.

JACKIE: So, basically, you offered them the opportunity to buy some of your work with the purpose being that the purchase of this work would support your studio rent?

JODY LEE: It's more that I gave them the opportunity to literally be invested in the studio and part of it. I could sense they were happy to be a part of it, because they were included in that process like important investors, which they were. Artists don't realize how valuable it is to people who are not artists to get close to the process.

JACKIE: What's valuable about it?

JODY LEE: I sensed that people were proud to be something like the chorus in a Greek play. They are interested and proud to be right there next to the action. There wasn't a sense of entitlement or ownership on their side. It wasn't like that. It was kind of, "I am part of this whole endeavor that I really believe in that I think is great and now it touches me and moves on through me."

JACKIE: So, in a sense, they became silent partners.

JODY LEE: They did.

JACKIE: I talk about the importance of relationships a lot in my book and how anytime you are connecting with people, whether it is a presenter, a gallerist, a curator, or a collector, there is this partnership.

JODY LEE: Yes. I think that people already have others who believe in them and who may or may not have anything to do with the art world. Those people can be approached too. All of us have at least a couple of people who really support us.

JACKIE: And if they own your work it may be not because they are art collectors, but because they want to own something made by someone they know who they see as talented even if they don't exactly understand everything about the art.

JODY LEE: Right. And part of it can be, "I know this person in this other context and this stuff comes out of her? How weird is that?"

JACKIE: Nice.

JODY LEE: Give them something to shake their head at.

JACKIE: Do you feel comfortable telling me how much money you raised?

JODY LEE: I raised about \$400 a month. My rent was a little more than twice that, but I had a studio mate, so it worked out. I envisioned it as a two year program and after that it would wind down. I never felt that this was something that could go on and on. I didn't assume that anybody had an inexhaustible appetite for my work.

JACKIE: Because they aren't your parents and it's not a trust fund.

JODY LEE: That's right. And what you said about the importance of relationships is very important. The Partisans project taught me that as well. I learned a great deal from doing the project.

JACKIE: So, you raised nearly \$10,000 this way.

JODY LEE: I guess so.

JACKIE: Did you ever add it up?

JODY LEE: No. I didn't, but I did things like try to figure out how it could be expanded. I am going to have to think of a new idea rather than expand this one because of the

proximity of those people to me. There's too great a gap between the Partisans and strangers. It's not something that I can easily just t to the public, so I am going to have to come up with something else. But, if you do this, you have to bear in mind that if your prices go up during—like I told them, this size work is \$450 unframed. By the time the two years were up, I think those pieces had gone up a couple hundred dollars. So, you want to bear in mind that they are getting your work at a huge discount. That is not something that was appropriate to bring to the Partisans' attention, but if I did it again I might figure in an increase in value of the work. I asked for the same nt from all Partisans regardless of their resources.

JACKIE: They were each buying shares in your studio. Well, that's a great model. And I really believe that if we sat down and thought about the people who have been supportive of us in various ways that we could figure out how to let them enter into our practice in a way that's beneficial for everybody.

JODY LEE: Right. And if you did it really completely, which I could have done but didn't quite do, at the end of that program, you could send them something to give to other people they know who might be in their space or in their office at work. You never know. It could lead to one person contacting you.

JACKIE: Did your gallery mind that you were sending these people work?

JODY LEE: No. My dealer loved the idea. She was very supportive. But I don't think every dealer would feel that way. And also, we weren't in th e city, so maybe she would have felt differently if she was up here.

JACKIE: Right, because you weren't infringing on her t tory.

JODY LEE: Right.

JACKIE: We were also talking about the emotional issues that artists feel when promoting themselves and it seemed to me that you thought that wasn't so hard a task for you.

JODY LEE: Yes. I like the business side of art. I just do. It's almost like the difference between swimming around in the ocean or a lake and swimming laps in an indoor pool where it's really tight and there is traffic and narrow straits. It's just like this kind of energy that gets really focused. It's a kind of pleasure. Going back to Born Under Saturn, a lot of artists were great business people. Reubens was a very astute businessman as I understand it.

JACKIE: Yes. He was.

JODY LEE: And I've known artists like that and there's nothing wrong with taking pleasure in it.

JACKIE: Andy Warhol was a good businessman. I heard a story once, I think it was Tiepolo, which was amazing.

JODY LEE: Really?

JACKIE: Is he in Born Under Saturn? Tiepolo would go to somebody who was building a villa and say, "This place is so incredible. I'll paint the ceiling for free. I'm inspired." Well, while he was there painting the ceiling, he got to know everybody. By the time he finished the ceiling, he had contracts for all the walls. Believe me, in the end the ceiling did not come for free.

JODY LEE: And I'm so glad you told that story, because it's the same lesson that I felt like I learned, which is give something first. Give, make it visual, and you will always delight people. People find it very hard to fight against their own delight.

JACKIE: Why would they? That's why we eat so much chocolate every year. So, you find promoting your work isn't so hard because you enjoy that aspect of it?

JODY LEE: I enjoy it and I believe in the work.

JACKIE: Yes, that's your passion. I think that some artists do find it hard to get started talking about their work.

JODY LEE: Well, I never really talked about the work. I never really had too. If you do feel that way and you are an artist, bear in mind that this was all done through the mail, except for the one person who lived in New York, and these people already know you.

JACKIE: But it did take that phone call.

JODY LEE: Yeah, it did. But during that phone call, you can contextualize the project by saying, "I have this idea." The Partisans program didn't feel all that different to me from ideas I have every day in the studio, not that those are usually about money. Although, sometimes I do daydream about money... In any event, I tried to make it as pain-free as I could for the person receiving the call. I didn't ask for an answer on the phone, obviously. The initial call is to ask if you can send the materials to them. You do it all in steps.

JACKIE: One of the questions I love to ask in all my interviews is: If an artist came to you who was just starting out, what three pieces of advice would you give them?

JODY LEE: Work like hell, don't look up, and install well.

JACKIE: That's great!

Jody Lee is an artist and writer based in New York. She received Phi Beta Kappa with a B.A. in German Literature from Reed College, spending one year at the Universität Tübingen in Germany. She received a post-baccalaureate B.F.A. from the University of Washington at Seattle, and her M.F.A. from Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. The web site for Jody's work including exhibition record, press and collections is at www.jodyleestudio.com