

@Risk - Risk for Art's and America's Sake

[Music]

Jodi: Hey, I'm Jodi Butts. Welcome to @Risk, brought to you by Interac.

Art has forever been a risky endeavor. The artist can never control how the audience receives their work. Eric Fischl understands this profoundly.

Eric is an internationally acclaimed American painter and sculptor. He is the artist behind the sculpture *Tumbling Woman*, inspired by the events of 9/11. *Tumbling Woman* generated a public outcry in October 2002 after a bronze version of her was placed in Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan. The outcry was so acute that she was covered up and removed almost immediately.

Former ambassador Bruce Heyman and cultural envoy Vicki Heyman later brought her to Canada in 2015 in an acrylic form, and she was displayed in the US Embassy in Ottawa and at the National Gallery of Canada.

Today I'm joined by Eric on the eve of the US Presidential election to discuss what reactions to *Tumbling Woman* over the course of her existence might reveal about the turbulent Trumpian times we are living in and a better path forward.

Well, thank you for joining me Eric and welcome to @Risk.

Eric: Thank you for having me. It's good to be had.

Jodi: So let's start off with what is the role of the artist in a time of crisis and following a crisis?

Eric: The gift of the artist is that they are able to put into a controllable form, a digestible form, order made from chaos. And so when there is a crisis, a crisis is by definition chaos. And what the artist can bring to that is a way to understand what is happening, what has happened. That becomes a shared experience that can, I think, help either heal wounds or give us a sense of how to move forward. Or certainly give us a space to reflect in.

Jodi: I was reading an interview that you did and you had said, and this was speaking of the period after 9/11, you said if artists were ever needed now would be the time. And that struck me as beautiful and suggesting that the artist has a role in healing.

Eric: I believe that I believe it does. I'm not necessarily in the majority of that among contemporary artists, but I certainly believe that that's one of the functions that art has. The thing about grief, the thing about fear, the thing about anxiety is it immediately throws you into a sense of isolation and a sense of helplessness. And if you can create an experience or recreate experiences in which, through art, in which people can see

themselves, then they at the very least realize they're not alone. And so it alleviates some of that that stress, some of that terror, some of that anxiety.

And as I said before, I think also art can go a long way in giving us a foothold, giving us a hand hold, giving us a language by which we can all connect to each other and communicate with each other which brings us together and sort of re-weaves the gaping hole that was created by the crisis that is being experienced.

Jodi: Is that what you took away from the initial furor that the bronze version of Tumbling Woman at Rockefeller Plaza in Manhattan caused? Or were your learnings from that experience something different?

Eric: Let me be clear, are we talking about the creating the sculpture Tumbling Woman or are we talking about the way it was received?

Jodi: I was asking about how it was received, but I'm definitely interested in both.

Eric: Well, how it was conceived, how was created came from the experience... I, like most of the world, watched the tragedy unfold on television. I was not in the city the day it happened. And so I'm sitting there watching the this nightmare unfold all day long and feeling this wash, and just feeling myself spin out of control with all, you know, the mind going crazy, the emotions going crazy with all of the feelings that were being caused by this terrifying thing.

And so it was in that moment of feeling myself spin out of control that I knew that the only way back would be to create something that created a kind of solid anchoring construct, something that would articulate the feelings that would try to reconnect me to it.

And so within that moment I tried to begin to think of how to articulate this nightmare. And one of the things that happened very quickly in the United States was that they censored any images of people falling or jumping. But anyone who saw that, whether it was just for an instant or not, knew immediately that that was the penultimate expression of exactly how horrible that experience was. That thing of being caught between two choices of your own death. And it just was... It's like your worst nightmare.

So I knew that in trying to articulate how to sort of honor the dead, how to grapple with what became very clear very quickly was feeling the whole country spinning out of control and getting off its own center, its own axis. And so part of the desire to create something had to do with trying to find a way to articulate the imbalance as well as the physical destruction.

I didn't want it to be graphic in the sense of bodies crashing into and splattering on the ground kind of thing, I wasn't interested in that. I wasn't interested in recreating that horror for people. So the thing of tumbling came to mind. Tumbling is something that

moves laterally, not vertically. And so it wasn't about crashing down, it was about rolling along.

And it was something that I was thinking of, sagebrush or something, where you're unanchored, you're blowing along, the wind is taking you wherever. Occasionally you hit something that stops your forward motion, and then the wind catches again and you keep on rolling. And so that was kind of the things I was thinking about around the image of this woman, larger than life tumbling with her legs akimbo, one arm outstretched.

And I wanted to have the outstretched arm because I was hoping that people when they were standing around the sculpture would reach out and grab the person and just hold her hand. And maybe even imagine that being something that would slow the tumbling down.

Anyway that was the spirit in which I made it, and I felt that it was it should be public, not a just something that would go into an art gallery as my art making practice, but something that was made for the public. So we found a place in Rockefeller Center to display it beginning on the first anniversary of 9/11. And it absolutely hit the wrong cord. I had, I think, completely underestimated the public in terms of what they were willing to open themselves up to. And there was a lot of horror and anger and horrible accusations that I was sort of doing this on the pain of others' suffering.

And it was a very weird, very saddening experience for me. Because frankly the worst thing for an artist is to be misunderstood because the whole practice of making art is about clarity. And this was something where everything was turned upside down in terms of my intentions. And the piece was removed within three days of it being put up there, it was... The outcry was so great that the people at Rockefeller Center felt they needed to take it away. And so it was covered up and removed.

Jodi: Do you think she was too political?

Eric: No, I don't think she was political at all. I think it was a very human experience. What I was set on doing was bringing the body back into the mourning process. What happened very quickly, because there were no bodies, they were pulverized. 3,000 people died but there were no bodies. So how do you deal with the grief, how do you deal with the mourning process when you can't make that closure, you can't see the dead?

And what happened was the language of mourning turned very quickly to architecture. And people started to grieve the loss of the buildings as though the buildings represented the human tragedy. Which of course it didn't.

So it was very important to me to bring the body back into the to the awareness and to the process, and that's not a political gesture. That's a humanist one. What I think was became clear was how art just wasn't at the center of our culture anymore. People

didn't know why you would in times like this reach out to an artist. You didn't know how to approach an object created as a memorial as an experience.

And, you know, they reached out to world famous architects to create models of what could be rebuilt, but no government, no church, no community, no social group whatever reached out to poets, playwrights, musicians, filmmakers, artists to say help us figure this thing out. Give us something to work with here.

And that was so disappointing. That was so revelatory and disappointing at exactly how far removed art is from the center of our lives that I thought we have to fix this somehow. We have to find a way to bring art closer to what its real purpose is.

Jodi: One of the things reading about *Tumbling Woman* has challenged me to think about is in some ways our culture is so voyeuristic. Everything is videoed and we can watch people dying on videos. We can watch sex. We can watch people getting dressed in their birthday parties. There's not a moment that isn't captured on video.

Eric: Yeah, we can even watch people dying having sex.

Jodi: And yet this is also a period in history, in Canada and in the United States that is really marked by looking away as well. And I was asking myself, and I would love to hear your thoughts, did the reaction to *Tumbling Woman* in some ways portend this period of looking away?

Eric: That's so interesting, I never thought of it in those terms. And by looking away are you talking about denial, or are you talking about aversion?

Jodi: It's a little bit of all those things. It's children in cages in immigration detention centers. It's the disparities created by COVID and its inequitable health impacts. It's all these things.

Eric: Yeah, I've always thought that Trump is the embodiment of the fear, anger, confusion that was sparked by 9/11. There was something building in this country before 9/11. 9/11 crystallized it and we became so tribalized. You could see on a day-to-day basis after 9/11 the United States shrinking into smaller and smaller groups of like-minded, like-feeling, like-acting pods. We, as I say, we became very tribal that way.

And it didn't assuage our fear and it didn't assuage our anger. It just kept building. And I think what Trump is, literally, is the Id unleashed. It's a non-socializing instability. It's pure will, pure force. It has nothing to do with any of the things that we need to do, the self-sacrifices we need to make in order to build a solid society, that level of selfishness.

And he's speaking and appealing to those people who only are... Well, they're basically in the same place. They only understand the world in that way. And so I would say yes where we're at today has everything to do with 9/11.

Jodi: Now Bruce and Vicki Heyman brought *Tumbling Woman* in acrylic form I believe to Canada. And Bruce installed her in the foyer of the US Embassy and the initial reaction was very strong and people were opposed to replacement there.

But Bruce had conversations with people, and in particular a woman who had lost her brother in 9/11. And through that discussion she became a champion of *Tumbling Woman* being installed...

Eric: Oh, it's nice to hear.

Jodi: Yeah, being installed at the Embassy. And similarly, she was displayed at the National Art Gallery of Canada. And Vicki in their book, *The Art of Diplomacy*, wrote that the audience heard you and you heard the audience.

And that made me ask myself how important is conversation to America's way forward during these turbulent times? And are artists doing enough today to help with that, in your view, to supporting these conversations, sparking these conversations?

Eric: I wish I could be more optimistic. There's certainly a lot of artists that are working today that are working with a of a deeply rooted social and political sense of purpose about their work. There's probably a larger number of artists that are making objects for sale and that are moving them through an economic system which is a system that's dominated the art world since the mid-80s, and actually has become the sole force of the art world since the mid-90s.

So we'll see whether with the COVID moment, which has basically unhinged all of that structure from itself because of no mass gatherings and no travel. So there's no art fairs, everything's moving virtually, et cetera et cetera. Galleries are... I just opened a show in New York myself and if 10 people see it, I'll be surprised.

So I don't know what the art world is going to look like after we get past this particular moment, but it does seem like it's offering an opportunity to us to start to try to find ways to slow it down and to sort of rethink how to bring art back into a place of importance to a community rather than to a economic strata. And I think a lot of that hinges on an artist's commitment to local, to making art where they live and letting it grow out of that if it needs to or deserves to grow out of that. But I think becoming an important artist to your community is more important than becoming an important artist.

Jodi: Yeah, it's an intensely local time. And I do, despite all the challenges and tragedy of this period, the drive towards local is positive. But I do worry about all the literal and metaphorical border walls that are that are being erected at least in part in response to the disease. And I wonder how we build bridges over these real and imagined walls.

Eric: Yeah, I don't think I have an answer to that. I mean I'm not, certainly, when I think of local, I'm not thinking of a pen. I'm not thinking of a corral. But I am thinking about,

you know, I think what happened with the speed at which globalization seized our lives. We had the false feeling that we actually were bigger than we are individually. That we can speak to tens of thousands of people instantaneously through Twitter and Instagram and Facebook and stuff like that, that we belong to a family of people that are diverse and yet we've never met anybody.

And the illusion that we're more than we are, it takes a toll. Because you ultimately can't experience it. You can't experience the community that you think you're valuable to. And so the thing that I feel about local is that not only is it healthy for the community that you're a part of to use your artwork for their sense of identity and for their conversations and their celebrations and stuff. But also, it's for you the artist to feel an immediate and an authentic response to what you're doing that I think ultimately is healthy.

And again as I say, the things will transcend its limitations. It'll transcend its boundaries, its borders if it's deserved on that scale. And historically there are very few works of art, there are very few artists that actually transcend those borders. Which doesn't devalue those who were very much a part of their community. So one you have more control over than the other I guess is what I'm saying.

Jodi: Very fair. Ben Rhodes, he worked in the Obama White House and he wrote a really beautiful piece in the Atlantic. And I'm just gonna read you one sentence out of it. He said, "Now as COVID-19 has transformed the way that Americans live and threatens to claim exponentially more lives than any terrorist has, it is time to finally end the chapter of our history that began on September 11th, 2001."

I wanted to ask you, do you think the outstretched hand of Tumbling Woman means something new in this time of Trump? Do you think the meaning of Tumbling Woman has changed by the events that have surrounded her?

Eric: No, I don't. I think the tumbling, I mean the outstretched hand, any outstretched hand is asking to make a connection. I think the need to connect now is absolutely important. Is it more important than it was in 9/11? It's hard to say, but the significance of the outstretched hand, I think, remains the same which is the need to connect.

Jodi: Eric, thank you so much for speaking with me. Thank you for sharing your insights about what's happening in your home country with us Canadians. And thank you for sharing Tumbling Woman with Canada and the world.

Eric: Yeah, I'd like to apologize for the tone of my voice. But I'm in a... We're in a state... I am personally in a state of such anxiety about the next four days and the result of our election. And the trepidation, the fear of what will happen if it doesn't go right. And for me, going right means we have to get rid of our President. And I'm in a state of such anxiety that I'm sure it comes through as a kind of deadening sadness

almost. And I apologize to your viewers, your listeners, I should say, for having to suffer through that.

Jodi: No, not at all. And I think as Canadians, obviously it's not the same. Trump is not our President, but he has been leading our neighbor, our beloved neighbor...

Eric: Sometimes anyway.

Jodi: I think there are a lot of Canadians, and not every Canadian feels the same way, but I think there are a lot of Canadians that would welcome a change in the President and a change, if nothing else, a change in in the tone of the Canada-US relationship.

Eric: Yeah, the only way that'll change is if he is voted out of office. Because he lives off of division, he lives off of antagonism, and et cetera. So if you're longing to get back to a civility, it's not going to come from him if he's re-elected.

Jodi: I tend to agree. Anyway, thank you for having me.

Eric: Well, thank you for joining me. I appreciate it.