

A

**Age of
Artists**

Interview

Sharon Molloy



The Interview was conducted by Dirk Dobiéy. (Age of Artists, AoA).

This text is licensed as Creative Commons BY-NC-SA 4.0
(creativecommons.org).

Introduction

Sharon Molloy was born in Preston, England. She graduated from Winchester School of Art in 1990 with a BFA and soon after travelled to India and Thailand. She then spent 2 years living and working in Tokyo before attending the San Francisco Art Institute for her MFA in 1995-97. After that her journey took her to many different places in the US and UK where she participated in various distinctive and interdisciplinary art projects. She is considered a pioneer relating to a new kind of art which is called *Networkism* and describes her work as a 'quest to reveal how everything is interconnected. From the atom to the cell, to the body and beyond into society and the cosmos, there are underlying processes, structures and rhythms that are mirrored all around and permeate reality'.

Interview

AoA: How did you get into art?

Sharon Molloy: It sounds a bit overconfident but I wanted to be an artist since I was a teenager. I grew up in a working-class town in Northern England and there were no artists at all. Nobody went to college really. It was my high school teacher for art who said I could go to college and be an artist. In school, I didn't do very well and was in with the trouble making group, but I always had my art, which gave me something to rely on. Once I realized that I could leave my hometown and travel the world, I did better at school because I really wanted to go to college and travel. After high school, I did a two-year foundation course in art where I met other students and our teachers who were professional artists. We studied graphics, drawings, painting and photography. It was a dream become true. So, there was no question of what I wanted to do. At 18 years old, I left the area where I grew up and went to an art school near London, Winchester School of Art. They sent us travelling all over the world, Spain, Russia, Italy and many other

places. That experience changed my view of the world and what was possible for me.

AoA: Please describe your path of becoming a professional artist?

Sharon Molloy: It's interesting because I feel it's not finished in terms of being a professional artist, and I am always questioning what that means. It's an ongoing process of redefining that for myself. I still experience new ways of being an artist and this informs my work on many levels. I couldn't make my work if I denied where I come from because it represents my long journey of development. Now my work is focused on the idea of interconnection, for example the internet has changed how we think of ourselves and our relationships, how are we all connected and how does that affect our actions?

Now I see in retrospective that leaving my home culture and going to different parts of the world to search for something made me the person I am. All the experiences of moving around and meeting people from all over the world and finding different ideas, philosophies and mixing them up in my head developed into the work I am doing now.

AoA: What did you find during your search?

Sharon Molloy: I think I was looking for a way to connect myself with others. To find maybe a sense of home. Travelling was a very life-enriching experience. Now I live alone, with animals in a house in the mountains and in some ways, I have found everything I have always been looking for! As I grew up it felt like I was at the wrong

place, somehow. I didn't have anything in common with these "weird people". I was looking for some kind of affiliation. Moving away and attending art school, helped me to feel more at home and more connected to others. Although I still felt somewhat disconnected because of my cultural baggage. I went off to India and then ended up in Japan for 2 years. Finally, I came to the United States to study. This where I got more interested in Buddhism and yogic philosophy during my Masters degree at San Francisco Art Institute. Ultimately now I realize the sense of connection I was always looking for wasn't outside. That's why I am so fascinated with certain kinds of images, ones that show both the macro and the micro worlds, from subatomic particles, the cosmos and everything in between. I make images that link internal and external worlds. It tells me something profound about how all this fits together, and it gives me a deep sense of connection.

AoA: Your search sounds a bit random. Was there any vision or objective while you were traveling or was it all serendipitous?

Sharon Molloy: I had some kind of inner drive to know something but I wasn't following a plan. In a way, it was like "The Hero's Journey" from Joseph Campbell. I also had the feeling that something is missing but I didn't know what it was and went on a journey. Now, over the years, I can speak about what I was looking for: it was my identity or connection but at 20 years old I didn't possess the ability to communicate in that way. It was an urge that I couldn't explain to anybody else. So, I never had a good answer when people asked me where I was going or what I was doing this at all for. So, when I moved to the United States and started

investigating these non-physical ideas and philosophies it all started to make more sense.

AoA: What motivated you and helped you to keep going? Why are you so passionate?

Sharon Molloy: I always felt that impelling curiosity. If I hear something new I want to know everything about it instantly. Probably I would have become a very good researcher because I am a digger. I want to get to the core of a subject, so I order ten books and read them all immediately. When I was growing up I wanted to know about things that other people are not interested in at all. They asked me why I am so interested in that or why I'm asking such questions. I am still like that now. If somebody brings up something or I see something new and interesting I become kind of obsessed and get really deep into it.

AoA: Do you analyze down to the deepest level of detail?

Sharon Molloy: I like to analyze topics. Since school I was interested in science and processes. Unfortunately, I had to decide between my art and my physics class. In many ways physics and art are similar because they have both in common the curiosity and the desire to know something, or the intuition that something is there. My interest in science and art are combined in many exhibitions that I have been involved in. Sometimes my work has been included in magazines that look at art and mathematics or art and science. There are moments I feel more like a scientist and my studio resembles an experimental workshop. A research objective of mine is to discover how tiny particles of paint interoperate

amongst themselves. I want to see what happens if I layer or merge things together within the paintings. At the moment, I'm working on a painting that looks like smashing atoms.

AoA: How do you structure your work from the first moment until you finish?

Sharon Molloy: What you're asking for is my work in all states but there are no finished states really. Those separated moments don't exist. It is characteristic that we humans think that something starts and ends so we can reuse the output. Answering the question honestly, my painting started 40 years ago and is not finished yet.

I love reading, especially about difficult topics like physics although I know that I won't understand all of this. It is almost like poetry, because there are often words in the technical language and ideas of visual complexity or infinity field that fascinate me. For example, I am trying to understand the Planck scale. When I think about my time in Japan I was interested in calligraphy. After some time, I started working in that spontaneous way and only had a vague idea of how the painting is going to be. Over the years I have learned a new vocabulary of marks that have come back again over and over. Also, I have a vague idea of the color that I want to use but when it comes to the final workflow, I always have the feeling that it is like an experiment. I have no idea what the painting is going to be. It just happens and I follow some kind of an intuitive non-thinking workflow.

AoA: Is there a subject defined at the beginning?

Sharon Molloy: My work is dynamic and stamped by interruptions that influence a subject I had in mind at the beginning or create a whole new idea. Currently I am working on a painting which is inspired by the many images of the internet. I'm trying to figure out, if it is even possible to make a painting that can encompass both a highly technical, digital image and something totally organic growing in nature.

What I love about painting so much is that I'm not thinking at the very moment. I just combine my impressions of beauty, complexity and mystery without overthinking it. In this time my work is not intellectual or conceptual but only an interpretation of my experience.

AoA: The size of your canvas is limited. When do you decide the size of your painting?

Sharon Molloy: Well, there is no limitation for my paintings but I often decide by what I have available. Recently I found a bunch of wood in the trash in Williamsburg; some circles, and I had ideas for my next paintings. Right now, they are quite small, I want a vast image on a small scale. Sometimes I have no clue what my picture is going to be but these aspects of my process I like the most. Whether I call it accident or an intuition, it is significant for my work. When I order things and they are delivered in the wrong size, I use them anyway. In a desperate moment in the past or a snowy day in the winter, I painted over some old paintings. I ended up with something I could never imagine.

AoA: Is the concept of bricolage suitable for your work?

Sharon Molloy: Yes, and I think a lot of artists work that way. I talked to a friend about that and she told me that she uses basically everything in her surroundings. Compared to her my work is kind of calculated. I have brushes in different sizes, studied and worked on my technique but in the end my paintings are in many ways a bunch of mistakes. I ask myself what will happen if I use this blue color and I am fascinated by the outcome. I do more of it. Therefore, I think of it as a science experiment and recently I often use a knife to filigree contours. If I only use brushes, it's boring. I'm using a sharp knife now, and sometimes chopsticks to create these new images.

AoA: Do you stop with a painting or destroy it?

Sharon Molloy: Most of my paintings right now are finished in one session. After I go back in them with smaller details. In many ways, my paintings are like calligraphy. I work on a wet surface so I have a limited working time. The next day it will be dry and then it's too late. Usually I plan one day for paintings because I have to do the whole process in one go.

Recently I read a document about algorithms, which was interesting. Before I didn't really know what algorithms are. Maybe I set myself some algorithms for my work. If I do this, then I do this, then I do this and so on.

AoA: How do you decide when it is finished?

Sharon Molloy: Once I start with the painting it has a life of its own. I hear that from other artists or novelists, too. The process takes

over and I add any idea that comes to my mind. If I don't know what else to add to the painting it is done. I am much more comfortable with not knowing how the painting will be and therefore I can't anticipate what elements I add. I couldn't repeat a painting in that way again because always it is a unique experience. Trying to repeat things never worked.

AoA: Your work sounds like a solitary task. Do you engage with others to get feedback or critique?

Sharon Molloy: Lately I had this one client, a female Dentist in New York City, who wanted to have her dental network association meeting at my recent exhibition. All these young dentists who usually have no point of contact with this kind of art were quite fascinated by my work. We had interesting conversations with them about interconnection and society and the idea of networks and their connectivity. Basically, they called themselves a network. It's in our common vernacular now.

These topics surround us on many levels and everywhere. Companies use the term in their commercials and create the image of the interconnected web because the internet is giving us this image of ourselves and our world. We didn't have a model before the internet came along and we had no way to imagine it. I'm aware that I want my work to appeal to everybody and not only the art world. I'm interested in creating an image that even everyday people understand and that is not only reserved for the society of artists.

AoA: What about critique and how do you deal with it?

Sharon Molloy: Most of the critique I get is from colleagues but I have to admit that over the years it's getting less. In art school or when I did my masters there was permanent feedback. But now I'm not engaged in that. Maybe I'm too separated from the art society. With people who know me the best and the longest I have more critique-like conversations. But even here it's not any precise feedback about my work.

AoA: What is an artistic attitude?

Sharon Molloy: When I think about an artistic attitude the first thing that comes to my mind is to be open. Not only as an artist but as a human I'm very open and interested in as many subjects and ideas. I do practice meditation daily. For the past ten years, I have evolved some practices in my yoga because I'm open-minded and playful. Curiosity makes me compassionate as an artist and for my life in general. When I am able to awaken the interest and interaction with non-artists, I couldn't wish for more.

AoA: There is a certain confidence the way you speak about your work. Do you have doubts about the outcome or a lost day?

Sharon Molloy: This doesn't happen that much because I have a certain kind of optimism. There I think about Alan Watts, a British philosopher who introduced Zen to the West and said that we separated play and work. Play has a positive connotation, but we make it the opposite when we think of play as an inefficient waste of time. In Alan Watts' opinion spontaneity, creativity and our

touch with nature help us to see ourselves within the universe and not separated from it. This leads to my sense of optimism.

When people start complaining about their job and how hard they are working I find myself trying to change the conversation. I used to do that! It ends in a justification that I'm also working hard and so on. I have the feeling we are disconnected from nature and ourselves. That is why art and science can help us to rediscover ourselves. Do flowers work hard when they do what they do? Can't our play, our experiments and our work be one and the same?

AoA: For you it is obviously the same. Is work-life balance an issue for you?

Sharon Molloy: It took my time to see that playing and trying out things is also a part of my work. Like I said the division from work and play seems arbitrary to me. In the book "No Boundary" from Ken Wilber this topic is explained perfectly. Every boundary and every division you can imagine are invented. They don't exist.

AoA: What do you think people in business can learn from you or from artists in general?

Sharon Molloy: I wrote an article about how males dominate the practice of science and how female scientists, female artists or even female chefs could be re-integrated into our social structures. We can see these boundaries between male/female, mind/body, individual/collective and other areas as well. All of them don't allow us to see the big picture and we separate these fields

although they are a circle and inter-related. You can start at one point and come to the opposite side but then the opposite side reconnects back. We should start to distinguish what really counts and stop dividing. We need more integration on all levels.

We focus on companies, the ecology or politics but don't see that they are linked. For example, now we search for feminine or masculine symbols and push them into extremes. By pushing them we create opposites. We adopt one of those two perspectives and act for the better outcome of that view. Now, I think the interconnected model of the world permeates our consciousness and we finally will stop acting from these separate points of view and reach for collective solutions. Sometimes I watch the business news and I ask myself why they only talk about profit. What is the point in making tons of money? Isn't there any other objective? What about customers, society or the environment? I think something is missing there. The view is limited to these financial objectives and that's called a successful business? We are so used to this idea of growth. Our objectives are just to make more, build more and higher and to become more successful. I think we need to get back to what's the point in all of this. We should be aware that everything we use or do as individuals has an impact in a much bigger context.

AoA: Please explain to me the cycle that connects both sides?

Sharon Molloy: It comes back to the function of art itself. While language has a tendency to separate things, art has the ability to bring things together. If I say male, we already have a concept and a list of attributes arises in our brain. So, we remove something

from the whole. With visual art, you can experience something which transcends language. You can express things that are separated and connected at the same time. You can see all the paradoxes.

We can experience feminine aspects of ourselves without getting rid of the other aspects. Humans try to continuously define things. Why can't it be both at the same time?

But we still keep trying to create our world with definitions and divide it. Obviously, it's not working very well. We are experiencing a lot of regional separation and even worse is this separation from nature. We have forgotten that living on this spinning planet in a vast universe is a privilege. The focus is on us to create benefits and improvements for all beings. In my opinion art and other disciplines can help to define us in a larger context as part of something bigger.

AoA: You don't seem to feel the tension you describe for yourself. How do you do that?

Sharon Molloy: Living in the mountains, in nature has taught me that very profoundly. I'm living here on my own, but at the same time in reality, totally connected with everybody and everything. I can imagine this through the internet and my experience within nature. Feeling my loneliness but also completely interconnected with the whole world is a sense I was always looking for.

AoA: Thank you very much.