

Transcript of Interview of Chrystine Keener by Tory Schendel Cox

Interviewee: Chrystine Keener

Interviewer: Tory Schendel Cox

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Transcriber: Kathryn Jue

Abstract:

In response to COVID-19, the Evansville Museum of Arts, History and Science launched the mini-series, "Cultural Insights: Interviews in the Creative Sector," to highlight colleagues and professionals working in the same or similar field of museum professionals. Dr. Chrystine Keener, Assistant Professor, Art History, Liberal Arts Program, Ringling College of Art and Design shares her experiences here.

Tory Schendel Cox 00:01

Hi, my name is Tory Schendel Cox. I'm the Virginia G. Schroeder Curator of Art the Evansville Museum. Still recording from home but we have an excellent telecast with Dr. Chrystine Keener. Grateful for your time today and I'll turn it over to you.

Chrystine Keener 00:13

Thank you Tory. I'm thrilled to be here in cyberspace. I teach at Ringling College of Art and Design in Sarasota, Florida. And at the college, I am the Renaissance and Baroque scholar, and I'm also trained in Islamic arts. Although currently I'm developing a class in Islamic art for the my college, I'm currently not teaching a whole class in that right now. So right now, of course, all colleges and universities across the United States are online as well. So we're all learning this new technology together, at least for people my age. And I wanted to talk to you a little bit today about my research, and then how I incorporate my research into my classroom practices. So as I mentioned, I am a Renaissance and Baroque historian. And particularly in Italy, that's my main focus is those time periods in Italy, which is where my heart is, I love Italy. And some of the research that I have done in the past and will be continuing and then my newest project, entail, particular artists, working with the theology, the doctrine, the religion of their time. In particular, my dissertation looked at a group of artists that were working in the late 15th and early 16th century, and how their work was impacted, or in, depending on the artist by a Dominican monk known as Girolamo Savonarola. So we call that time period of of the Italian Renaissance, it was uh the Italian reformation, excuse me, it was when a lot of theologians, people working within the church were actually in Italy trying to change it from the inside. They didn't have much luck. Poor Girolamo Savonarola ended up being hanged and burned at the

same time. So we didn't have a lot of luck with changing the church, from the the universal Catholic side, until we have, of course, Martin Luther in around 1517. But that's kind of the the period that I studied intensely during my doctoral program, and I'm still working on some of those artists that I covered in my dissertation. But the last, probably almost two years, my research has also taken a different turn. And I am looking at what we call the Virgo Lactans, excuse me, which is the images of the Madonna or the Virgin Mary that are breastfeeding, the infant Christ. And I'm looking at the connection between those images and kind of going backwards goddesses from antiquity that were showing breastfeeding their children as well such as Venus and Cupid. This also ties into stories about how the universe kind of was formed, such as Juno and Heracles. Of course, the Milky Way was supposedly formed when Heracles, when Hercules excuse me a breastfed a little bit too ardently at his mother's breast and he was pulled away from the goddess's breast. And then the milk is supposed to have made the stars of the Milky Way. So we have all these delightful stories. And some of them were ways that we explained historical, scientific, you know, even other worldly events that we couldn't explain. These stories helped people to work through those ideas and concepts. And I think that it's still very important, even right now that we are using the arts to teach. And I would say actually, it's the most important time because when the world seems to turn a little chaotic. The arts allow us to reconnect with what makes us human. So supporting your music I'm supporting your local galleries and your local artists along with your local coffee shops when they reopen, or if they're allowing takeout or restaurants and stuff is all equally valid and very, very important for our world community and our economic community as well, because the arts really bring a lot of value to who we are as humans. I know right now, there's at least thirteen museums that are doing virtual tours right now. So you can go on and see high res images of their works. I'm incorporating some of that in my new online classes. So I still, you know, urge everybody right now to, to really keep supporting all aspects of our community as a whole. It's just so unbelievably important for for everybody. And that includes dance that includes music, I know that we've all probably seen the little video clips of you know, the Parisian ballet, still performing with nobody there, but having it filmed and then live streamed into par-, into people's houses. And this is really giving people a lot of comfort right now. And that's the strength of arts is that we, we challenge people, we give a different perspective to explain things of the world that we don't understand. And we add beauty and comfort as well. So it's a very important time right now. To add value, and to support the arts. Beyond that, returning to my research and how I incorporate that into my classroom. I've developed a couple of courses over the past few years, for where I teach. One of them deals with gender and sexuality and looking at marriage prep. Anything like that, that deals with gender roles during the time periods I study, which is, of course, we call it now the early modern period, because that encompasses Medieval and Renaissance. But so I've developed a couple of courses with that. And those have really spoken to the students because they can see where some of these stereotypes that we have for the genders such as a man doesn't cry, and women are, you know, child bearers, which of course we are, but you know, that we were a domesticated and we should be in the house and that sort of thing. We've seen a lot of really interesting subjects that they've been able to kind of get to how these stereotypes or how these identities is perhaps a better word, first came about, and that's taking my research and being able to incorporate it into the classroom. So that's been really wonderful to see. I've also taken my love of primary sources, and imported that into a class. This past fall, I taught a course that solely focused on Michelangelo Buonarroti, the artist who painted the Sistine Chapel ceiling and carved the Pieta and the David, which the David in Florence, of

course, in the Accademia di museum there. And so we looked specifically at this one artist the whole semester. And I think initially, people thought, Oh, that's gonna be super easy. You're just gonna look at one one artists the whole time. But what we did was we worked with about 200 of his letters that have been translated into English, since not all of my students can read Italian. So then we also I translated letters from Pietro Aretino and other sources for them, so that they were able to see what people wrote to Michelangelo, what he wrote to his family and friends. What he said about other artists, what other artists said about him. Pietro Arentino was very angry with Michelangelo, towards the end of their correspondence, because Michelangelo never sent him any free artwork. So it was interesting for the students to understand. And at first they really struggled because primary sources are difficult for any of us. And I should probably define what a primary source is. A primary source is something that is written by the artist by people who knew the artist, or people who observed the artist around his lifetime or her lifetime. It can also be a book that might have been somebody living in the Renaissance who's finding out about all these various artists such as Giorgio Vasari, and writing a book about them. And so that's what the students were limited to working with. At first, they really struggled because it's it's difficult to do first of all parse out what they say, they speak very formally in these letters. And, and then beyond that, to read between the lines and know what they were actually indicating, when they were actually being snarky in a letter, which comes off as very formal and very polite. But if you read between the lines, sometimes you can find a little bit of the personality of the writer. But I have to say that by the end of the class, I think that most students were on board with this concept and really enjoyed it. And the work that they turned in, I would put it up against the work of any historian that's out there working right now, because it was so amazingly strong, to see their ability level in understanding the time period and the artist, just jump exponentially from when they entered the class.

Tory Schendel Cox 11:08

Oh man, that speaks volumes to me as a professional as a curator, because that is, I think, the most important thing. You have to understand the time period that you're setting to understand the artwork, the artist and what was going on. Because again, they're tangible objects of a physical time capsule that was relevant to that artist, and those tangible objects or acquisitions have memories, and not use 21st century perspectives when you are looking at these documents, so I'm just so excited over here. [Laughter].

Chrystine Keener 11:43

Yeah, it was, um, it like I said, initially, it was, um, there was the students were not thrilled at the outset, I think they thought I was just going to stand up there and lecture every week about Michelangelo, and instead, we did a lot of in class parsing apart of these sources, and I tried to start them out nice and easy, you know, but what's easy for me is not always easy for my student body that I work with, but I couldn't be prouder of them. The work that they turned in, I'm actually using as examples now, to show what our students are actually capable of. And they're capable of a lot. So it was really, really pleased. And I'm now starting in my other classes to again, take my own research and, and techniques of research that any historian applies. And to import them into my courses, no matter what the content, a little, a little less heavy than the

Michelangelo course, because, say, for instance, in a survey class about the Renaissance, we need to be able to cover a lot of time. And so I give them smaller things like they are reading about what people thought of Martin Luther, there reading about what people thought of, of Albrecht Durer, that sort of thing. But unfortunately, I just can't spend so much time on the primary sources so that one class will always be in my wheelhouse, because it was so successful.

Tory Schendel Cox 13:21

Mmm-hmm. That makes sense. Because again, like you said, already, just framing that mindset. And that's such a unique undergraduate experience, because even most grad schools, they will focus on primary sources, but not that depth. So I think that's completely amazing what you're doing. And I hope that revolutionizes part of the field to of why it's important, and you don't have to wait for grad school, a PhD, you can give students and undergrad these opportunities, they can rise to the challenge, and they can and will succeed. And I just think it's important to conceptualize because there's just brilliant people who care and they come from all assets of assets. And this is important, it's important to give them this opportunity and given that exposure, because that's what's going to be expected of you moving forward in this field. And the earlier you can get that the better it is. And if I can go on one more tangent. That's why I was so grateful to have you as a professor. So for our audience, Dr. Christine Keener was one of my Art Historian and Art History professors as an undergrad and seeing her research her passion, and how witty she was with teaching this material on a Monday night, five o'clock to 8 pm. It was wonderful. That was my favorite class. And that's what really made me really realize that I wanted to be a profession in the art world. So thank you again, seriously, you really have made an impact even on me and somehow today.

Chrystine Keener 14:48

Thank you, Tory. I look on with great proudness to see all that you've achieved. I remember you as an undergraduate [Laughter] You definitely had me on my toes because you were smart, you were very intelligent, and I knew you were going to go places. And I really do think that in a lot of ways we underestimate what an undergrad student is capable of doing. And that's not necessary, because if you no matter where they are at with their writing, or their reading comprehension, we can introduce them to the tools of the trade of what we do, no matter what we teach, whether we're a mathematics professor, an art historian, you know, and whatever a physicist, we can really impart, first of all, our love of the discipline, what we do to our students, and I think that is one way to engage I think it's the best way to engage your students is that they know that you, A. care about them, you care about their learning, and then you care about your discipline you care what you've devoted your life to doing, because most people in the arts and most people that are college professors, and just teachers in general, are not in our professions for the money. [Laughter] We are. We are in it because we feel passionately that we add value to the world at large. And as a teacher, I feel that it is what I was called to do. Because I had a teacher that changed my life. It was actually an Art History professor in my first year in undergrad. Unfortunately, we've lost touch but yeah, I just think it's it's an unbelievable gift to be able to teach. I also love being a scholar and I love working on my articles and, and that sort of thing. But I think that for me, it all comes together, as they're the most rewarding thing I could

ever think of doing no matter how boring it might be, because it's just rewarding in a way that I can't really explain.

Tory Schendel Cox 17:07

It goes back to that human experience, human emotion, which is why the humanities matter.

Chrystine Keener 17:12

Exactly. Well said, well said.

Tory Schendel Cox 17:16

Well Chrystine, is there anything else you'd like to share with our viewers today?

Chrystine Keener 17:21

Um, no, just keep supporting your your local arts communities. I think that, you know, that's the best way we can support the arts is if we are financially, spiritually, physically supporting our artists that are local, as well as national and our museums. This is a time when we're all kind of suffering. And, you know, I know that a lot of us are going to take a hit in the in the pockets economically because of this, but it's a real time that the humanities are more important than ever. So thank you so much for this opportunity, Tory. I've greatly enjoyed it.

Tory Schendel Cox 17:58

Oh, absolutely. And again, this is a Evansville museum recording. We had Dr. Keener today and keep posted and thank you again for your time.

Chrystine Keener 18:06

My pleasure. Thank you.

Tory Schendel Cox 18:08

Mmm-hmm.