

Phoenix Artist Christine Cassano on Making Art with Her Hair and Avoiding Creative Collaboration

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BY LYNN TRIMBLE

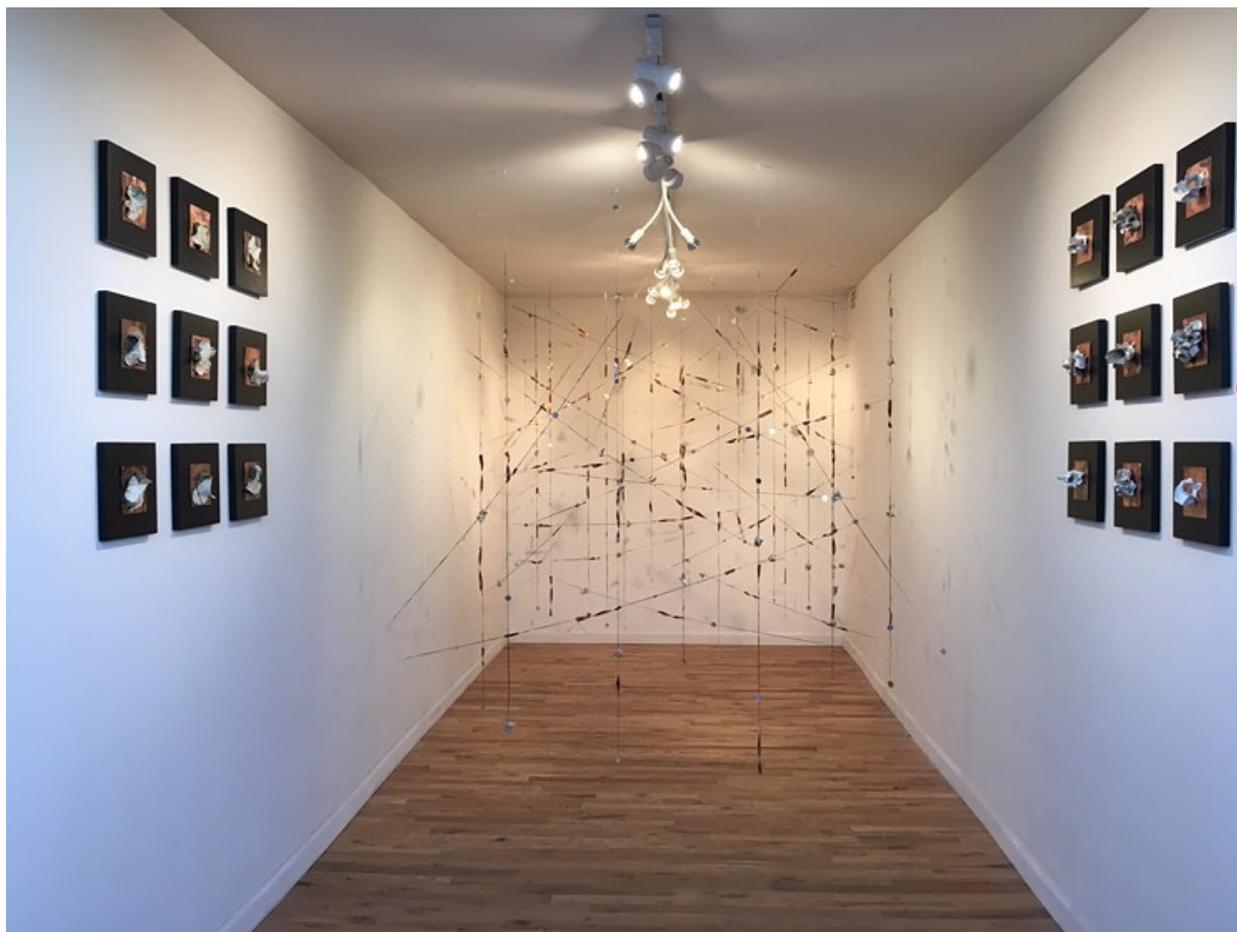


Christine Cassano seated at a small desk area in her Phoenix studio.

What happens in the studio shouldn't always stay in the studio. Studio Visit is a monthly series that profiles artists in their studios. We ask them questions, they provide answers, and then we have a nice discussion about their work. This month: Christine Cassano, whose most recent exhibition featured 330 feet of her own hair.

"It's a difficult, vulnerable topic," Phoenix artist Christine Cassano says of her own hair, even as she runs a hand through the thick and slightly wavy dark brown locks that run past her shoulder blades. That's because hair loss is one of many health-related challenges that have influenced her art practice.

She worries that talking about assorted health issues, from needing a hip replacement after a hiking fall to losing her hair while battling a thyroid disorder, will make people think she's a downer or just plain self-centered. But it's impossible to fully appreciate her work without knowing how medical issues have influenced her choice of materials and the ways she manipulates them.



Christine Cassano's "Threading Conjecture" for Phoenix Institute of Contemporary Art.

Cassano's most recent exhibition, titled "Threading Conjecture," included 330 feet of her own hair, woven into more than 60 sealed strands — plus more than 300 copper and porcelain

pieces, and more than 250 small mirrors. Cassano interwove the materials to create a geometric maze inside a shipping container gallery in Roosevelt Row.

When thyroid disease made her hair fall out, Cassano collected and saved the hair, not knowing at the time how she'd end up using it as an art medium. Cassano grabbed a clump of hair from her stash the day *New Times* made a studio visit, demonstrating how she separated out the pieces and then worked them into long, woven yarn-like strands.

While she readied them for her exhibition, strands hung suspended in two rows from the ceiling of her studio. Nearby, various surfaces and containers were lined with other materials that made their way into the installation. In addition to the geometric installation, "Threading Conjecture" included several small plaques layered with vertebrae hand-formed with porcelain and other elements such as bits of moss or hair.

The exhibition was organized by Phoenix Institute of Contemporary Art, which recently published a catalogue of Cassano's work showing the evolution of her mixed media art practice over time. Pieces shown in the March 2015 "Feminism Today" exhibition at monOrchid seem timid compared to the piece featured in last fall's "Green and Grey" exhibition at The Gallery at Tempe Center for the Arts. It's more elaborate conceptually and features more complex use of materials.



Detail of Christine Cassano piece featured in "Green and Grey" at The Gallery at TCA last year.

There's a reason for that, Cassano says. But she's not yet ready to share it with the world. More health issues — and surgery — happened during the summer of 2015. And it seems to have

pushed her art practice to a whole new level — resulting in the TCA piece that helped to make “Green and Grey” one of the best exhibitions in metro Phoenix last year.

“Today I’m healthy and happy,” Cassano says. “I feel like I have all the tools that I need.” It’s a reference to the state of her physical and emotional well-being, not the multitude of tools strewn around the workspace she shares with Mitch Fry and Mary Shindell, although having plenty of saws and other gadgets has its advantages.

“I’ve learned to let go,” Cassano says. “I really just feel like I have the physical environment, friends, and emotional support, life experience, and confidence to know that I can make happen what I need to happen.”



Exterior of the Phoenix studio space Cassano shares with Mitch Fry and Mary Shindell.

She’s making it all happen in a relatively new work space, located at Jackson and 18th streets in Phoenix. In February of 2015, Cassano learned she’d need to vacate the studio she’d rented for about three and a half years. Located in a little garage space at Seventh Avenue and Camelback Road, it was the first studio she ever had separate from where she lived, but it was slated for demolition to make way for new condos.

Now, she works inside a building that's been Mitch Fry's studio for many years. Mary Shindell has a small studio space there as well, and suggested that Cassano come on board after discovering on Facebook that Cassano was losing her other space. "We might have room for one more messmaker," Cassano recalls Fry saying.



A portion of the working space Cassano shares with Mitch Fry and Mary Shindell.

Cassano's brother flew out from Denver to help her build out the new studio space, which has about 500 square feet, over the course of two weekends last March. She also moved that month to a new home located near the studio, at 10th and McDowell streets. By August, Cassano had her new work space up and running. It's divided into two rooms, one used primarily for fabrication and one that serves as an office.

The studio is filled with shelves, which are dotted with assorted parts, small bits of art that'll go into larger works, and objects that serve as inspiration. On a wipe-off board over her desk, Cassano has written a series of phrases that caught her eye for various reasons.

It's a handy combination, considering the ways Cassano typically spends her time. One-third gets spent on fabrication, she says, and another third on art. The final third is spent doing graphic design for clients with legal, automotive, fitness, and other businesses. Some of that, she says, gets done at home.



Christine Cassano looks over boxes containing elements created for her "Threading Conjecture" exhibition.

Most days, she hits the studio at 10 a.m. "Sometimes I'm here for two hours, and sometimes I'm here until two in the morning," she says. "It all depends on my deadlines." While she's happy to have the space, it's clear that she considers it much more than a work area. "There's such a great energy with all of us being here," she says. "It has everything I need."

Tell us about your work in haiku format.

Nights ephemeral.

Head to hands shape bio forms.

Assemble clusters.



Detail of "Threading Conjecture" exhibition featuring artist Christine Cassano's own hair.

What artist (s) are you really into right now?

I seem to be into artists I've followed for some time. I simply enjoy their exploration of ideas as much as I do their use of materials: Mona Hatoum, Tara Donovan, Damien Ortega, Teresita Fernandez

What are you reading?

Gawd, it's been a hellish schedule these past few months ... What am I reading? Recently, to be honest, mostly e-mails and texts ... and I read how to write a haiku. *awkward laughter*

What's the last TV show, film or video you watched?

The film *Snowpiercer*. It's futuristic fiction complete with pretty brutal scenes, but has this

storyline that offers intense metaphors and overtones of our current political, economic, and class-system state of affairs. For me, one of those films that sticks with ya and pops in your head while driving.



One of two posters filled with Cassano works that hang in her studio space.

If you could collaborate with any artist, alive or dead, who would it be? And why?

I've gotta say, I've learned I'm not really interested in collaborating with my own art-making process. Other arenas, sure, and all day long — I really enjoy shared connections — but for my own art-making process, I feel collaborations seem to miss the mark or feel cumbersome. Collaborating with another artist on curating a space or even planning a themed exhibit, sure, but for me the actual art-making process is truly my own song ... and I guess in that case I'm a one-woman band.

What was the last exhibition you saw and what did you think of it?

Sandra Ramos's "WATERTIGHT" exhibit at ASU Art Museum. I attended her talk and was able to learn a lot more about the large body of work she's produced and wide range of materials she's chosen. I think the exhibit (up through May 2016) is really powerful as it explores the complex historic and current relationship between Cuba and the US. She has some fascinating physical pieces, but has also gone beyond materials and incorporated digital media and illustration as she combines narratives that explore provocative issues of immigration and international borders, containment and power structures, illusions and lost utopias.

Jeff Koons or Marina Abramovic? And why?

Marina. Koons, for me, is too slick and now seems fairly formulaic. Many of the tensions created in Abramovic's work regarding performer/audience along with her exploration regarding body really resonate with me.

What's the best advice you ever received?

It's not where you look, it's what you see.

What are you currently working on?

Currently I am preparing for an upcoming artist residency at the University of West Georgia. I'll be there mid-March through mid-April – a solid month of uninterrupted studio practice in a whole new environment. Recently I've been spending some time writing and exploring ideas for the work and looking forward to stepping outside comfort zones as I navigate these new approaches without the conveniences of fabrication resources I have here in my Phoenix studio. I'm really excited, grateful for the opportunity and curious as to how the work will evolve.

What's your most valuable tool as an artist?

Resourcefulness.

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