

The Interior Beauty Salon

Be My Guest



The Salon hosts one guest per month, whose praxis exists at the very boundaries where art and healing might overlap, infuse each other, or simply become one. The online guests' sojourns at our website take the shape of Q&As, essays, or visual narratives that we invite you to peruse on your own.

Linda Carmella Sibio



Nicolás Dumit Estévez Raful Espejo: Linda, what a welcome opportunity to converse with you. I encountered your work in New York City at a performance you had at [Andrew Edlin Gallery](#). Can you talk about the writing workshop that you taught there? I think this would take us right into some of your main ideas.

Linda Carmella Sibio: The writing class at [Andrew Edlin Gallery](#), done in 2019, was called *The Insanity Principle*. It was based on a graph I call "schizophrenic thinking." I have broken down what is called "word salad," in psychiatric terms, and have explained it in terms of experimental writing, performance, and visual art. In schizophrenia (I am schizophrenic) the brain works in waves of fragmentation in a non-linear abstracted way. The chart I use for writing purposes is filled with numbers to which I assign meanings. This layout includes both linear and non-linear thought as a comparable model. In it is writing from different states such as hallucinations (dreams, nightmare, non-lucid thinking), hearing voices (aware of sound that includes commands—could be a musical awareness), delusions (thoughts that are different to you and don't have a shared meaning with society), disassociation (times when your body and mind are separated) and times of emotional distress (which changes thinking patterns). We take these disparate things and write abstracted stories from them. It is as much about culture and language of the insane as it about writing.

NDERE: You talk about fragmentation in relation to schizophrenia. You also talk about this in connection to contemporary society and how distracted most of us are all the time. Does this

fragmentation that you point to give some of us a glimpse into mental differences? Can the two be equated, generally speaking?

LCS: Fragmentation is a quick changing of thoughts that are seemingly unrelated. I once wrote a text and turned on six devices that were saying different texts. In this writing I was forced to think in a fragmented way. I found it led me to deeper thoughts and if I stuck to my main idea the fragmentation of the idea was more interesting than what I started with. As an artist using fragmentation as a tool I go beyond the clinical use of the word. I am exploring something that began as referencing a mental challenge and bringing it into the level of creativity.

In our contemporary society our thoughts are interrupted and fragmented everyday through the use of cell phones, apps like Instagram and Twitter, television, radio, internet, and other modern technologies. Younger people no longer think linearly as they bounce from platform to platform. This isn't necessarily "bad" but it is a new way of thinking—the fragmented way.

NDERE: Can you discuss fragmentation as it pertains to your own struggles with mental challenges and your art practice? Your art and life seem to be so seamlessly melded. Where do you go to catch a breath, to recharge?

LCS: Throughout my life I have had trouble working in traditional jobs, thus I have lived my entire life below the poverty line. Due to fragmentation I could never sit still and have a linear conversation with someone. In an interaction I always changed subjects without warning and tended to talk about subjects no one else was interested in. I have never belonged to a "group" and have hardly ever gone to group meetings or parties. I missed out on mass culture such as going to concerts or doing anything where one had to be in a crowd. Watching TV was difficult so I do not share past memories with others.

In 1985 I vowed never to work a regular job again. This was the year when I taught homeless and mentally challenged persons. When I did that I suddenly found something I did well that could help me with survival in some way. I started teaching "Operation Hammer," which was a group of mentally unusual persons who lived on the streets.

I collaborated with them on visual and performance exhibitions while also doing my solo work. I want to point out, here, that fragmentation is an asset in the creative world. The more fragmented I am the better work I do.

In 2001 I started a non-profit called "[Bezerk Productions](#)," which was designed to help mentally challenged artists operate in the complicated art world. We did a program called Cracked Eggs from 2001-2008 where artists who are neurodiverse met and created art together under my guidance. Recently, I received a contract from San Bernardino County Department of Mental Health and Innovation Division to do Cracked Eggs as a model that mental health could use as a part of their curriculum. If successful, my program will be in every county in California. Through this contract I will get paid \$30,000 a year for a part-time job, for five years. They are also paying for an office/studio, a vehicle, and all the supplies necessary to do four exhibits per year. I am thrilled!

So the moral of being "different" mentally is to reach out to areas and jobs where it actually benefits your use of different mental modalities and teach that to others as a new culture and language.

NDERE: I am interested not so much in comparing but in looking at fragmentation and wholeness in regards to healing. The path to healing is usually articulated as a road to wholeness. But, at the same time, fragmentation in some cases involving trauma or mental differences can lead to awakenings, major insights into deeper realities. What can you say about this?

LCS: Yes, the traditional idea of "wholeness" is different in my fragmented world. I once said, "You have to fragment in order to be whole again." By this I am referring to the face of healing with people who have severe trauma and chronic mental challenges. The process of this journey to an outsider will look violent and be filled with pain and horror. But to heal we must gently go through the traumas to gain control of its internal roots. In these exercises students are told that all emotions are equal and that there is no such thing as "negative" emotions. Each emotion must be balanced in the body in order to achieve a state of wellbeing. My teaching takes elements from symptoms of each "illness" from which I have created exercises which help the individual understand how these symptoms control their life. Without intervention many seriously challenged individuals are at risk for suicide, prison life, homelessness, and living in extreme poverty conditions.

I teach access to the subconscious and inner self where fragmentation becomes a holy guide through obstacles which hold the individual back through society's stigma against them and the non-acceptance of the seriousness of their state.

NDERE: I still remember the time in the Dominican Republic, where I was born, when people with mental differences were part of the day-to-day of the city. There was Miss Universe, a former schoolteacher who at some point swapped her two-piece suit and put on hot pants and Sofia Loren glasses to parade around the streets of Santiago. What are some of the shifts that you may have seen in how society treats those who see, experience, and respond to life differently as a result of mental challenges?

LCS: Teaching the mentally challenged has been like a surreal circus. People see them as dangerous and threatening, as the media perpetuates that they are murderers, steal, and do subversive things. When I did "Operation Hammer" I had a severely schizophrenic student who was an amazing performer. He did things like taking a toothbrush and cleaning the streets of Skid Row in Los Angeles. Simple yet complicated, he wrote the President of the U.S. that individuals on the Row were in need of toothbrushes. We got our costumes donated from the [Mark Taper Forum](#) costume shop. As we were looking for costumes he started talking to a mannequin. The woman in the shop asked, "What is he doing?" I responded, "He is having a conversation with the mannequin." After I said that everything seemed to be okay.

I think the more a person with a mental health challenge does creative things with their challenge, the more they will be accepted by society members. If they can be taught to talk intellectually about their condition they will gain respect from the communities in which they live. All my students have been interviewed by the press and looked at as cool because they are different; they are insane.

NDERE: We often tend to see mental disability as a binary with mental wellness. The reality is that in some cases, for some of us, including myself, we go back and forth any boundaries between these two. Can you expand on this?

LCS: I'm not totally clear on the question but I can expand on my reactions to the words "mental disability" and "mental wellness." First, terminology in the mental health world needs to change. The language describes a whole population as "ill" from the get go. Other words such as consumers, mental illness, and any term that draws a negative picture of the mentally challenged (I do not necessarily like this phrase either) person, thus society thinks each person is sick despite their personality, or worldly success. It causes individuals to lose self-confidence and sets them apart from society as a whole. I am pushing in the work I do to come up with positive words to describe the "mentally ill."

Mental wellness is also misleading. They give people with schizophrenia, bi-polar disorder, and schizoaffective disorder lots of wholesome medication. Does this lead to a state of wellness? I think not. One must work on the whole person and reduce medications so symptoms are clearer. Then and only then can we take a step toward wellness.

The fight toward wellness is innately inside every person with a mental difference. They laugh when something is funny, relax when they are safe, and want to do their best in this world. But the affliction of being "normal," forgetting their own language, and "fitting in" keeps them from being well.

NDERE: I'm curious about the reverse of seeing mental challenges as a handicap as opposed to an insight into a valuable perspective into this world, and perhaps others. I am talking about the image of the seer.

LCS: People who had visions, hallucinated, heard voices were often tribal medicine people, seers, spiritual advisors and important members of society. It was only around when the industrial age appeared that this important place in society was dismissed to studying these same people in the clinic. When Freud arrived he insisted that there was something "wrong with these holy tribes." Then the fix arrived. Lobotomies, electric shock treatments, medications, and the despair of these once holy people began. They were ostracized by society and considered "ill."

Now we must rebuild the positive model. Looking at these people with the right perceptions: compassion, love, sensitivity, and realize that parts of the so-called "illness" is just a new way of seeing and speaking.

NDERE: At a time of such upheaval and demands for justice and equality, can you share, even if briefly, about your work with Los Angeles Poverty Department, and with Cracked Eggs?

LCS: I was in the Los Angeles Welfare Department when I met a man who was doing an art project on Skid Row with the homeless. He was doing a survey on the types of people who apply for welfare—I was applying for Medi-Cal. I told him I worked for Rachel Rosenthal, whom he happened to know. Several weeks went by then John called, told me about his idea of having performance classes in Skid Row and asked if I would like a job (\$5 an hour) helping with the project. I immediately accepted as I was writing a play called *Encased in Mud*, about my brother who was homeless somewhere in the L.A. area. I had a moped and drove to Skid Row at Inner City Law Center on it. When I drove up a lot of the residents of the Row greeted me.

Inside, the director was having a performance class but the people weren't following directions. I grew up in an orphanage and had some street smarts. I yelled really loud introducing myself. My introduction was followed by stating the rules of the workshop and said if there was anyone who could not follow those rules could leave.

People stayed. The next memory I have of the performance meetings with Los Angeles Poverty Department was when we were doing an exercise where you pretend you are a famous person and do a monologue. One man came in, sat in the chair, and did a soliloquy as Richard Burton. He was elegant, talked in a different language, and for me was the highlight of the day.

Afterwards John and I had a discussion about awareness and art. John's viewpoint is that art takes personal awareness in order to be art. I challenged that the man was aware but was thinking in an abstracted way. He was operating out of a different consciousness, speaking a deconstructed language but in that state he was fully aware of his intent.

A week later the same man came back and did the same soliloquy and had the same words almost verbatim. I had written his first monologue down. From that point forward I became passionately interested in the word salad and the beauty that comes from the language of the insane.

I left the Los Angeles Poverty Department (mainly a political theatre group) and sought to teach my interdisciplinary classes somewhere. I found LAMP in Skid Row run by Molly, who was a social activist and had three buildings in Skid Row for the mentally different in the Skid Row area. I worked with her for two years. After that I started Operation Hammer (a group of mentally challenged persons in Skid Row with whom I developed my first version of therapeutic and creative exercises. This group inspired me and we did important creative work together. We were written up in different papers including Utne Reader and High Performance Magazine. In 1996 I had a severe mental breakdown and had to leave Los Angeles. Operation Hammer time was filled with excitement and discoveries. I did this project from 1990-1996.

After doing a painting series called *Insanity Principle* I learned a different way of thinking. I began to long for the work I did in Los Angeles and wrote and got the California Arts Council grant to do a workshop at Morongo Basin Mental Health for the mentally challenged. I spent a year working with three people. Word got around and I ended up with about 20 people eager to learn.

In 2001 I started both the Cracked Eggs and Bezerk Productions. During the course of this class I developed exercises that consistently worked with the clients. Our first show was called *Manic Wisteria*. Our last show was called *Prophet of Doom in the Banana Republic* (see picture). Both these shows had an original vision and were fresh and new. We were thoroughly covered by local newspapers and became a community hit. Our last show got a write up under "GO" in the *L.A. Weekly*, which was written by Ron Athey. Doing the classes and shows was a life changing event for the participants. Stigma in the community was reduced and inter-social activities helped clients to have self-esteem. It is these exercises that allowed me to create the set of exercises called Cracked Eggs. Exercises I developed during this time are physical and emotional, using the body, intellect, and developing perception within the interdisciplinary model of exploration (integrating creatively performance, writing, visual art). All exercises stem from symptoms of mental "illness" and allow the individual to understand their own process of thinking and use "negative" challenges and change them into positive

attributes which help them be able to do jobs such as art teachers, peer advocates, and artists. They fit into the Art Brut movement and already have two galleries interested in representing them.

NDERE: Tell us about your healing tool kit, and what might be in it.

LCS: My tool kit is a bright pink bag with compartments for all emotions including anger, sadness, happiness and fear. In this bag there are no "negative" emotions, just different kinds. It is important to balance these emotions in my body, mind, physical body, perceptions and spirituality. I reach for my personal archetypes so that all of me is involved in this journey of deconstructing the mind and reinventing a language I can fully understand. When I wake I physically go through the bag and spend my day doing exercises that I developed since 1985. These simple but healing exercises keep me organized enough to be able to interact socially with my peers, be creative using visual, performance, and writing as my creative tools. My philosophy is to approach the negative in a productive manner thus eliminating demeaning words used to describe my schizophrenic mind.

NDERE: Thank you so much for allowing us to learn more about what you do. I hope to take another one of your writing workshops again. I'll let you close this Q&I with whatever you want to say.

LCS: *Thinking* by Linda Carmella Sibio

I read about my brain function

Amidst pains in my chest,

Is this the moment I shall die?

Now that I know I can

Think in disorganized patterns

With fragmented and broken thoughts

I walk in the sand with my toes

Amidst bones from the ancient past

Tortoises are an endangered species

Is the "I" in me to be buried in the pandemic?

With my gray mattered splattered

On a white bone rock

I feel electricity throughout

my delicate brain.

Dot...Dot...dot etcetera

I fall into my visual cortex

And worlds with realities

That is made accurate

Through my ever probing mind

I cry tears which paddle me through

The neurons and dendrites of thought

Allowing the charged ions to rush

"Across my membrane in both directions" *

Etcetera the endless dot

A pattern, a point, a design

My perception is excited

By the sand and cacti found

In the jar that feeds the humming bird.

Go deeper; make a sound from your gut

Sense your memories that are

Conjured from the past against

Digital symbols floating on my skull

Slowly falling in the folds of matter

That will one day produce,

A single sentence in a broken thought.

* Excerpt from *The Disordered Mind*, by Eric R. Kandel

Linda Carmella Sibio began her career in 1975 while having a loft in Manhattan where she maintained her studio. Notable moments include working in Andy Warhol's Silkscreen Factory and having prestigious artists such as Al Loving visit her studio for a critique. Sibio made friends with David Diah and went to small gatherings where Frank Stella spoke about his work. During this time she was in several small group shows and was interviewed by the editor of *Art Forum* magazine. Sibio created many large-scale paintings and drawings where the themes were monsters and garbage (or found objects).

In 1985, Sibio took the bus to Hollywood without a penny in her pocket. From there she worked with such prestigious teachers and artists as Eric Morris, Rachel Rosenthal and John Malpede. At one point she was teaching a workshop in Skid Row called "Los Angeles Poverty Department" (homeless ensemble) and studying and performing with Tim Robbins and his group The Actor's Gang. A large achievement during this time was an interdisciplinary work called *Condo at Thieves corner*, which attracted an audience of 2,000 homeless and art seekers.

During the nineties she did solo interdisciplinary works shown at Walker Art Center, with Creative Time and Franklin Furnace, at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions and other venues. She also began getting large grants including several Cultural Affairs grants, The Rockefeller MAP award, and The Lannan Foundation Award. Her pieces were entitled *W.Va.*, *Schizophrenic Blues*, *Azalea Trash*, *Apartment 409*, *Hallelujah I'm Dead!*, *Suicidal Particles* and *'Energy and Light' and Their Relationship to Suicide*. During this period she directed the project "Operation Hammer" and did interdisciplinary works with mentally challenged persons from Skid Row. The issues dealt with included homelessness, mental disparity, prostitution, gang violence, serial homicides and suicide.

From 1997-2001 Sibio started her painting series *The Insanity Principle*. She moved to the Hi-Desert area of California and performed and directed with a group she developed called The Cracked Eggs. California Arts Council awarded her twice once for her community workshops with the mentally different. Her series the *Insanity Principle* has toured at the following venues: Andrew Edlin Gallery (representative), The United Nations, The Kennedy Center, The Armory, Track 16, Scope LA, Brussels Art Fair and others. In 2008 she received the international award for the visual arts called *Wynn Newhouse Award*. Later that same year she had to discontinue The Cracked Eggs project due to the diagnosis of a serious chronic physical illness. It was during the worst period of this illness when she was near death that Sibio designed a show called *The Economics of Suffering*. This show is about how the economic decline affected the oppressed population and presented at her gallery, Andrew Edlin, in 2019.

In 2015 Sibio received the Emergency Grant from Foundation for Contemporary Arts for her evening that included *Human-Pig Hybrid* (a performance), and *Schizophrenic Brain Trust* (visual art show which lasted one month from Jan. 15 – Feb. 15).

Of some note: Sibio received a government grant (from 2010-present) to open an "art business." Her business is around fashion/textile design. Sibio also does continuing educational workshops on the issues of madness and creativity.

Linda Carmella Sibio related links: [website](#) / [Andrew Edlin Gallery](#) / [Instagram](#) / [Facebook](#)

UPCOMING: *Economics of Suffering Part IV*, exhibit at [Craft Contemporary Museum](#), Los Angeles, CA, 2023