

INTERVIEW: Toni Ross On The Continuation Of "Women Artists: Reshaping The Conversation"

Nicole Barylski



Toni Ross founded the series in 2017. (Photo: Aurora Rose/PMC)

Last year, artist and Nick & Toni's co-owner Toni Ross launched a timely and incredibly well received series, *Women Artists: Reshaping The Conversation*, that features captivating panel discussions with artists. We caught up with Ross to learn more about the series, which will continue this spring and summer.

The series began last year. What inspired its creation?

TR: I have always felt that conversations are different between women when men are not in the room and that there needed to be more places for women to have safe conversations. I think that really was the impetus for it. I just hadn't anticipated how necessary they were. They were free and open to the public and at every one we had no more chairs available. We figured 40 people per and it was over 100. The artists were so wonderful saying yes to do it and it was a nice mix - many of whom I did know and a number of whom I did not know. For me, it was also an opportunity to get to know new artists, which was really great.

In regards to attendance, did you find there were more women than men?

TR: Oh yeah. At first, I was thinking that's unfortunate and thinking of more ways to get more men to come, but I think it is what it is. Unfortunately men don't think women's conversations are for them. There were some men there and maybe that will change. It's true about a lot of things. When films are about women, there's more women that go than men.

Could you tell me a little bit about the format?

TR: There's one moderator and usually three, maybe four panelists. Really the discuss is up to them. I don't direct it in any way expect to say that the title is "Women Artists: Reshaping the Conversation." For me, that simply means women in conversation, the conversation is different than were men in the conversation as well. They can really do whatever they want with that. There could be no discussion about being a woman in the art world or it could be

completely centered around that. It's really changed according to the character of each of the groups and what they feel is interesting to discuss. Often there is, for each artist, a conversation about their process, their studio practice - but the conversations have been remarkably honest and intimate and open. I think part of that is the experience of being outdoors at LongHouse. Last year it was at my installation there - which was called "Sanctuary Entwined." There was just something very safe feeling about being there and it's very different than being in an academic environment or being on a stage with that formal setting. In that way, they were very different and really successful.

We've been having a few of them at Nick & Toni's to try and do a spring series and that venue is a lot smaller and it's indoors and we've only done one so far - we've got the next on Sunday - but that one really turned into a conversation with the panelists and the audience, which was really nice. I think a lot of that has to do with the venue.

What do you hope to accomplish through the series?

TR: A number of things. One is having this safe place to have conversations and explore ideas. Another is to connect these artists with each other and an audience of collectors and other artists. Those are really the two main things because you really get a lot through having conversations with someone who is experiencing the same things as you are in your practice, in your life, and some of those things don't get talked about on a more general conversation - whether it's about how you manage your practice and having children or the way that being female influences your work. It's nothing I ever think about, but in fact I am a woman and I am an artist. I think it's already achieved that for many people and the reason I'm doing it again this summer is there was a real demand for it. People came to me, wrote to me saying please do this again. This was all prior to the whole #MeToo Movement exploding, which is sort of interesting. I think there's even more awareness and interest in having these conversations.

As a female business owner, have you noticed a big gender disparity in the Hamptons?

TR: I think there's just a gender disparity period. I don't know that it's particular to the Hamptons. But, I know certainly early on at Nick & Toni's it was occasionally assumed that I was the coat check girl and in rejecting a \$1 tip, there'd be this bizarre exchange of: "Oh, no. Really, don't tip me." And then finally, "Well, what are you the owner or something?" And I'd say, "Well, actually I am." And they'd be like, "Oh, okay." So I don't think it's particular to here.

Is there anything new with the series this year?

TR: It's going to be the same format and took place around approximately the same time last year. We're doing two in August and one in September, and shockingly the September one had over 100 attendees.

Wow, that's amazing! It just goes to show that this is a topic that people are interested in and so relevant right now.

TR: And so needed. I think it's only recently that many of us feel like we can demand these types of conversations and not be stigmatized for it.

Why did you feel it was important to make admission free?

TR: I'm very much in favor of supporting community and welcoming people in so I have put a lot of effort into raising sponsors to underwrite the cost of transportation and advertising and housing for these artists to come. It's a great mix of local and non-local that people wouldn't normally get to hear speak. I think any amount of money that keeps people from coming is a problem. We're able to provide the funding for this so I think people should just come. It's a community event.

In terms of feedback from the audience is there a Q&A?

TR: There is a Q&A. I am not a big fan of Q&As in general because sometimes they get bogged down in things that are not oh so relevant, but these Q&As have been fantastic. It's an incredibly informed, sincere audience and the whole program lasts a little over an hour, including a 15-minute Q&A. There then is some time following the panel for a little bit of individual discussion.

Is there series or panelist that you're particularly excited about?

TR: No there's not one thing that excites me over the other, but... LongHouse will be taking care of the catering. In

fact, Nick & Toni's was too busy to cater my event, which was pretty funny. So I am quite thrilled about that. I'm so moved that people were so wanting this and that they wanted it to happen again. That being said, it's a lot of time and effort to put this together, but it's so worth it. The first one at Nick & Toni's, it was just fantastic the way that everyone participated and the level of conversation. I actually didn't know any of the panelists, so Amei Wallach, who I've always respected, actually answered a cold request - which is really unusual - so I was thrilled to meet her, and Ellen Phelan - who I had wanted to meet and didn't have a chance - and Agathe Snow - who was just fantastic on the panel and she's from the North Fork. I just find the whole thing very moving, and at a level of conversation that is very erudite and accessible at the same time.

The series will continue at Nick & Toni's on Sunday, May 20 with Lisa Dennison, Sally Gall, Sondra Gilman, and Laurie Lambrecht, and Sunday, June 3 with Pernilla Holmes. *Women Artists: Reshaping The Conversation* will move to LongHouse Reserve on Saturday, August 11 for a discussion with Parrish Art Museum's Terrie Sultan. The series will continue on Saturday, August 25 and wrap up on Saturday, September 22 with Barbara Toll. Additional panelists are still being determined.