



# BETH KRENSKY

## Learning to Fly

*by Maddison Blonquist*

A photograph shows a little girl standing in front of an easel painting; she seems delighted to have been caught in the act of creation. Now grown, Beth Krensky reflects that this moment captured on camera typifies her childhood affinities and early interest in art. “While other children were out doing whatever, I would stand there and paint for hours and hours,” she recalls. The artist has since added wings to the image in a gesture of reverence for the child she once was and the young people to whom she has dedicated her life’s work.

Several people encouraged the young artist. Krensky remembers traveling from Connecticut to New York City each weekend to visit The Metropolitan Museum of Art. “My parents knew I loved that,” she says. What they may not have known was that their daughter, so intrigued by the art world she was exposed to, would pick up bits of trash from the streets in the city and shove them in her pockets.

While she admits that is something she wouldn’t let her own 4-year-old do, she feels her parents’ hands-off approach allowed her to develop a very strong inner life. “I would come home and build these little sculptures with what I had found. I wasn’t identifying anything as that per se, but it was truly the center of my life — just imagining and creating.” Eventually, she was provided with art supplies and began to explore painting. A close family friend also encouraged her young efforts. “I would bring all my paintings and drawings to him and he created in the basement of their house a gallery. So I would walk in, even as a 5-year-old, and just sit and look at all of my work everywhere and it made me so happy.”

When she was 6, Krensky’s family moved to Utah, where she continued to be encouraged at school. Her teachers would hang up her paintings all over the walls so she could walk around and look at them, an extremely





"Make Me A Sanctuary," 2018, performance, shores of Great Salt Lake, photo by Josh Blumental

validating experience for a shy child for whom art served as both a front and a friend. "I had the imagination to create my world around me as I wanted it to be regardless of some of the stuff that was going on in my life," she states. "It was my refuge, I guess."

Since Krensky also demonstrated an aptitude for physics as a student, some people would remark, "Why do you want to be an artist? You're so smart." She resolved this question internally: "At a certain point I just had to get very honest with myself about what makes me happy and what

do I want to do despite this desire that others have to have prestige ... I loved being an artist and knew that if I didn't make art I would probably not thrive in life psychologically. So I chose that path based on listening to my own true north, regardless of what anyone else said. And I've pretty much done that my entire life."

That true north has guided her to a career as a professional artist that has been widely praised and recognized internationally. Benjamin Coleman, associate curator of American Art at the Detroit Institute of Art has

written, “With open-ended guidelines and a light footprint, Krensky offers a model for artist-driven environmental activism in the realm of lived practice.... [she] highlights the way that meditative practice can transform humble objects and anonymous spaces into meaningful places.” Krensky thinks of herself principally as a sculptor. She works frequently, but not always in bronze, creating eclectic art objects — keys, scepters, bowls, reliquaries — with ceremonial or religious connotations, drawn from her own Jewish heritage, but many other traditions as well. The materials and techniques are well researched and become part of the works’ meaning, which often address contemporary societal issues and highlight areas of conflict.

The ritualistic traditions that inform these objects also infuse the performances she uses them in, the objects then displayed in exhibition settings as relics of the event. “I’m a sculptor and I’m performing my objects.” In recent years, she has bravely reinserted herself into her ritualistic practices in order to better connect with her audiences. This is not always an easy process, as she discovered in an early performative work, “We Make the Road by Walking,” a collaborative piece with artist Sama Alshaibi addressing the plight of women and children in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. During a Jewish-Muslim dialogue panel that followed a performance of the work, an audience member asked, “What gives you the right to comment on this? You’re not Israeli.” Krensky remembers this critical moment as an out-of-body experience where she could see herself stand up and boldly say, “Sir, I hold the authority in my bones.”

From this moment forward she was no longer afraid to be seen embodying the performance as an act. This has been critical in recent works such as “Float Away,” “When I Was Younger I Could Fly,” “Make Me a Sanctuary,” “Metaphysical Handcart,” and “Skirt of Sorrow and Forgiveness.” The viewer’s experience watching Krensky’s

documentation of her performances — often done in the open spaces of Utah’s West Desert — and viewing the objects as relics in a space, have a cathartic effect. Even though the work is deeply personal, at the end of the day it really has nothing to do with her personally — exactly what she strives to remember when creating an authentic and raw opening for people to engage in dialogue and ultimately heal. “All my performance pieces I think are just going to be so beautiful,” she says, “and none of them ever are. They are always very difficult and in the middle of the performance — after usually I’ve said under my breath, ‘Ugh, I’ve got to do this again, it’s not working!’ — I realize ‘Oh ... that is the point.’” Watching her undertake her own metaphysical journey with such difficulty is what makes the work beautiful and richly symbolic.

This process of discovery, the hard work of finding out what a work is, what it can do, emerges in Krensky’s work as a teacher. Because of the support she received as a young artist, and her inclination toward collaboration and the distribution of knowledge, Krensky was naturally drawn to education as a profession. Whether working with elementary age or university students, she approaches the opportunity as a collaborative work, as an opportunity to learn, grow and create together. “My greatest teachers in my life have been the youth that I have worked with who really, against all odds, have maintained hope — have created hope and then maintained it — and acted upon their world to make it a better place.”

In 1991, during her coursework at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Krensky and her classmate Carole MacNeil were part of a class making policy recommendations to the U.S. Department of Education about restructuring Indian education on reservations. As she prepared questions and recommendations for their meeting, Krensky was struck by the lack of youth voices in legislation



that would directly affect them. “I kept flipping through this large document until 3:00 in the morning. I get through the stack — nothing about what the young people had said.” Krensky found this absurd, so with MacNeil co-founded a pilot project — a fully youth-centered project — rooted in critical pedagogy and with the purpose of allowing youth to speak about what is most important to them. She attributes this consideration to her time as a youth representative for the state of Utah under Gov. Scott Matheson, whose approach of deep respect and determination to listen to the people who were impacted the most before creating policy influenced Krensky. This pilot program turned into the award-winning Project YES (Youth Envisioning Social Change), for which Krensky served as artistic director for a decade.

Krensky is full of stories that repeatedly emphasize the importance of the arts and voices of youth in creating real change. Another program she was involved with while in Boston worked specifically with children who were living at or below the poverty level in a community that had the largest unsolved murder rate in the United States. She remembers that one weekend, “there was a murder in the community, and the kids, in order to process it, wanted to create a book about themselves and their community so that they could speak about it in their own words but also talk about their hopes and dreams for their own futures.” They set to work as collaborators with the children. Children’s aunts went door to door in the projects and donated the change and small bills they collected. A brother and sister, living in a trailer home with another family, showed up with 40 dollars they earned cutting lawns. When the book was published, “there was sort of a rupture in the pattern of violence in that community, started by the young people, supported by the mothers and priests, and things started to change,” she says. “It was just day by day by day, just

experiencing joy with these young people and envisioning together has always been quite wonderful for me and making art together.”

Her work in art education led to a Ph.D. in Education from the University of Colorado at Boulder and the publication of *Engaging Classrooms and Communities Through Art: A Guide to Designing and Implementing Community-Based Art Education*, co-authored with Seana Lowe Steffen and published by Altamira Press (2009). The text is cited and used by scholars, universities, and communities and has had far-reaching effects on communities of educators across the globe. “There are seriously no better people to hang out with on the planet than young people,” Krensky says. “Young people are at the beginning looking forward so I think automatically they are inclined to have hope and vision simply by where they are on that continuum.” Krensky provides what educational philosopher Maxine Greene calls “a free space ... where there are no boundaries that exist in the human-made world.” In that open space, Greene says, “there are no hardships” and one can “imagine another’s reality.”

As a professor at the University of Utah, where she has taught for the past 15 years and is currently Area Head of Art Teaching, Krensky continues to influence children by training the young teachers who will go into their communities to make change. In the classroom, Krensky thinks of herself as a collaborator with the students. “Her ability to teach, connect and inspire young people is out of this world,” says Nicole Lavelly, a former student who is now a teacher at Taylorsville High School. “She facilitates an experience that positions students and educators as equal partners in learning and teaching.” Josh Graham, a current MFA candidate in the U’s Community Based Art Education program, chose the school in order to study with Krensky. “It has been almost two years since our first meeting and I

wish I had two more years to study with her," he says. "She is a phenomenal artist, a remarkable educator, and a dedicated scholar. She does not attempt to compartmentalize these aspects of her life; they all coexist as part of her broad and ever-expanding art practice. It has been empowering for me to experience this, and reconsider my own teaching in relation to the artwork I create."

Not everyone will have a neighbor who will hang their young experiments in an ad hoc gallery in their home, and not everyone is destined to become a professional artist, but Krensky believes if everyone has the opportunity to have a very strong arts education, and in particular participate in a collaborative art project, the world can be changed: in this environment she believes the incivility that has become so prevalent in our contemporary society would be little to nothing. "My work is about raising important questions and healing and dialogue," she says. "And much of my work and process is very ritualized but that's the same for me in terms of this idea that we call education."

Krensky envisions settings where pedagogy is experimental and living, where, as one of her more recent performances suggests, people learn to fly. For her, both education and art are "always moving, in that they're always flexible and can grow and ebb and flow as needed." As far as how this relates to her art practice, they are inseparably intertwined: "I just feel like I don't really see a difference in my own making in my studio versus the processes or the projects I facilitate. Big picture, it is for me the same thing."



"When I Was Younger I Could Fly," 2018, performance, shores of Great Salt Lake, photo by Josh Blumental