

## Wilderness House Literary Review 8/2

*Pam Rosenblatt*  
**Celine Browning Interview**

On a crisp December 9, 2012 afternoon, Wilderness House Literary Review arts editor Pam Rosenblatt and Somerville artist **Celine Browning** entered a café in Davis Square and headed for an empty, round table. Celine and Pam sat down and began a 30 minute interview that focused on Celine's artwork and life. The following is an account of that productive day's interview.

*WHLR: Today is Sunday, December 9, 2012. And Wilderness House Literary Review is interviewing Celine Browning for WHLR's art section's spring issue 2013. How long have you lived in Somerville? And where are you from originally?*

**CB:** I've lived in Somerville for about a year and a half. I'm originally from Chicago. My fiancé is currently a graduate student here, so after I finished with my graduate program, I moved out here. And he had already chosen Somerville. And I've really liked it. We found that it's a really nice place to live. There are a lot of artists so it's got some good community.

*WHLR: What are you doing now?*

**CB:** I work as an office coordinator at the New England School of Art and Design, which is a part of Suffolk University. And then I do my work on the side. I see myself primarily as an artist but I have a day job.

*WHLR: What college did you attend?*

**CB:** I completed my B.F.A. in 2008 and my M.F.A., my Masters of Fine Arts, in 2011 at SUNY New Paltz, which is a state university in New York. It's in a small town called New Paltz. It's in the Hudson River Valley.

*WHLR: Have you always been interested in a career in art?*

**CB:** Yes. Actually, I was raised with it. My parents are both artists. They're art professors. They were sculptors and video artists. And then, in the last 20 years, they moved into electronic art and interactive media. So I've always been interested in art. I'm less on the technology side although I'm moving into that. It has been a lot of fun. We gotten the chance to collaborate on a lot of the projects, which has been great.



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WHLR: When you say "technology" what do you mean? With computers?

CB: Yes.

WHLR: Graphic art?

CB: Interactive and three dimensional visualizations. Art. Programming physical input that is manipulated by a computer and affects an output. For example, you could track someone's heart-beat and that would effect a visualization on screen which would trigger a motor.



WHLR: So you could use something like x-rays to trigger something?

CB: Yes. There are a lot of possibilities.

WHLR: Did you always want to be an artist because your parents are artists?

CB: Not really. Art was always a big part of my life. As a high school student, I started making jewelry. I had my own jewelry company for several years. I went to school for metalsmithing. And as I was studying metals and jewelry, I started making work that was bigger and bigger. Eventually, I ended up making sculpture, which is a large part of my practice now. I've also expanded into drawing which has been a lot of fun. There's been a lot of two dimensionality in my work lately, which has been really unexpected and kind of surprising.

WHLR: What other artistic mediums do you work with? Photography? Drawing? Painting?

CB: What I work with is primarily effected by what kind of space I have. When I had a large studio, I made large work. Now that my fiancé and I are living in a two bedroom apartment – one bedroom of which is my studio – my work has gotten decidedly smaller. Also, the location of [the studio] has changed. The sculptures that I make are site specific and based in the community. The things that I make in my studio are primarily two dimensional and, I think, are longing for a larger, three dimensional space. But moving into a smaller space has actually been incredibly productive in a way that I didn't expect. That has forced me to discover new avenues in my work that I don't think I would have otherwise.

WHLR: Do you get commissioned to do these site specific installations?

CB: No. No commissions.

WHLR: So you take photos of, say, construction cones that you see outside. Aimlessly, randomly there. And you make drawings of them?

CB: Actually, what I do is I take the cones – and I think that the work you're referring to is "Pylons on Parade" series?

WHLR: Yes.

CB: Those are actually physical objects that I have taken into my stu-

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dio, manipulated and then deployed into the environment. So I take something, I'll take a cone. I'll cut it or I'll manipulate it in some physical way and then I'll put it back in the site where it originally was.

*WHLR: On your website, you have the five categories: "Pylons on Parade"; "Keeping Out, Holding In"; "In Lieu of Flowers"; "Potential Difference"; "Penetration". Some are photos; some are drawings; some are paintings. Why did you make these five categories? What is the purpose or significance of each of the works? And where did you get the ideas from? Please discuss four out of five of these artworks.*

CB: That's a lot of questions. I'll just talk about [the works] and then just ask me to fill in the gaps, if there are any. So each section is just a body of work. It's a distinctive body of work. The way that I function in my studio is I generally work on several bodies of work at the same time. They develop in concurrence with each other. And they play off each other and inform one another. "Potential Difference" was my thesis work. That was work that was centered on exploring the gallery space and exploring the potential for change within a gallery space. Specifically, that work was exploring outlets and electricity. The work that I did after that was all work that was completed in the last year and a half.

"In Lieu of Flowers" is something that's ongoing. Every Wednesday I sit down with the Wednesday edition *The Boston Globe*. I take the obituaries. I read them. And then I cover them over with white house paint, just leaving the eyes. I see that as a system of discovering. Originally, [when I first moved here], I felt like I was offered this chance to really discover a place in a way that I hadn't in quite a while.

*WHLR: So you take the obituary. You paint the article white, and you just leave the eyes.*

CB: Yes.

*WHLR: So is this so that the spirits can see just through the eyes?*

CB: Yes. That's part of it. And it's also, I think, an act of renewal. In some cultures, white is the color of death. But in our culture it's also a color about washing, renewing, and cleansing. I think it's also an act of forgetting as well as an act of rebirth.

*WHLR: So do you think you're helping these people out in some way?*

CB: No. I wouldn't say that. I think it's more trying to understand a place in terms of loss. So trying to understand the city by reading about people who have died and whom I would never have a chance to meet.

*WHLR: What do you plan on doing with these?*

CB: Well, I've shown them at Suffolk University as an installation. And I think that what will happen with them will largely depend on what opportunities I can find with the piece. Right now it's in archives. That's something I do every week, something that I build up and as I identify opportunities to display the piece, I think that it will continue to evolve.

*WHLR: Now "Keeping Out, Holding In" – What's the purpose of that work?*

CB: The original purpose of that – or original impetus for it – was moving to a new place and feeling very excluded and trying to find a sense of

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belonging in a place where I had no roots and feeling a sense of culture shock. I'm originally from the midwest. The east coast is very different. I didn't expect to see this difference. So it was my way of dealing with the fact that I felt out of place. What I did was I went out and [photographed] special boundaries in public space. So there's a photographic basis for the drawing. I would then take the photographs, print them out, cut out the boundaries and these ground stakes, and arrange them in a pattern that erased their original purpose. So their original purpose is to delineate spaces, to keep you out of a space. But when you remove the context for that, when you only have the barriers and you don't have the ground, you don't have the setting, you can't see what you're being kept from. They sort of lose their sense of purpose and become something else. So that's an ongoing series, as well.



*WHLR: And that's similar to the whiteness theme. A lot of ["Keeping Out, Holding In"] has whiteness. You have white space and you have the black ground stakes.*

*Now what's "Potential Difference" about?*

CB: "Potential Difference" is a series of work that was originally sworn out of a desire to learn more about the potential for change within the gallery space. So when you think of the art world, you think of a white cube. You think of white walls that are meant to keep out the world and allow you this pristine space in which you can consider the work without the distractions of the outside world. My goal with that work was to bring the gallery space into the work, to activate the actual gallery as a living, breathing space. I created works that were fictionalized versions of the existing outlets in that space so they all played electricity in some way.

*WHLR: Like a ball of electricity, right? The work I'm referring to looked like a ball as a whole bunch of artificial outlets were connected together in a large circle.*

CB: That one was a funny one. That was a site related piece that was responding to a spot in that gallery where an outlet had been removed and plastered over. So in the space, there was this sort of scare on the white wall of gallery. I took plaster copies of the outlets and created molds of the outlets. So I took the actual plaster, or the physical plastic outlets coverings, broke them up and inserted them into the mold that had been made of them, inserted the plaster. While the plaster was still wet, I removed the plastic. Basically, you had a representation of the negative space that was behind those outlets.

*WHLR: Because the plaster was pushed against the plastic outlets' coverings and then they fall out.*

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CB: Right.

WHLR: *What's the creative process that you go through with the photography, drawings, sculptures, and paintings? Are there uniform steps that you go through with each medium? Or is the process a unique one for each different medium?*

CB: I'd say the process varies according to the pieces. Generally, I don't start out with an idea that's a drawing or a sculpture. I start up with an idea and I work through that sometimes over a period of days or months or even years. The biggest way I do this is by keeping a sketchbook. I'll write down quotes. I'll pick up things off the streets and take them in. It really depends. I also take a lot of pictures on my cell phone and I'll print those out later and then insert them into my sketchbook.

I think the first and most important step in my process is trolling the World for ideas – snippets that could later blossom into a piece – and Not put boundary on myself as to a medium or specific outcome.

And then, generally speaking, when I'm thinking and when I'm drawing is when it happens the most. The idea will reveal itself to me in a form just through thinking about what I want to say, what I want my audience to get from the work and then what's the best way to communicate that.

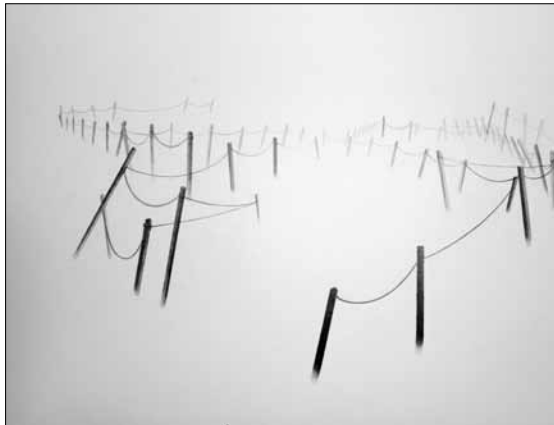
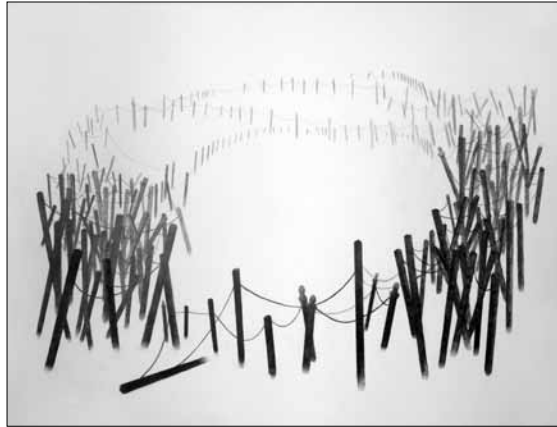
WHLR: *Your artwork is unique. The construction barrels, for example. How you painted them on different lines. What was the purpose of that?*

CB: That's an interesting piece. That works better as a body of work rather than as a stand-alone piece. I was trying to think of other barriers besides just the ground stakes or the pylons that are really ubiquitous and that have a strong symbolic language that are understood from afar. And, again, removing them from their original context and how this removing a symbol from its original context changed the meaning of that symbol. I mean, it's that symbol that's designed to help us understand the physical

relationships to things, to identify dangerous spots, and to show us where to walk, where to go.

WHLR: *Why pick these objects? Some untrained person would go by this and say, "Oh, that's just a barrel..." You seem to care about these items enough to draw them, to photograph them, etc. Why?*

CB: Part of what I try to do when I walk through a new space or just in my daily life is I try to pay attention to small things that





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I don't normally see. I try to very conscientiously look around me. I'm a very visual person so the way I understand the world is just very visual. I try to look at things in my environment and really see them. I think we have a tendency to shut down once we get used to a place or once we get used to a way of doing things. We only see what we need to. We only see what we have to or what's relevant to us. And so I've been consciously expanding my view.

Also I was identifying specifically those kinds of objects as a metaphors for what I was feeling for in my own life at the time about a year ago when I first moved here. Again, I was very frustrated. I felt like there were a lot of cultural mores that I was unfamiliar with. I was feeling very alone and very left out. So these kinds of things became the strong metaphor for a sense of exclusion, a sense of being kept out of a world that I wanted to be a part of.



*WHLR: How come you draw them so realistically? Why not be more abstract?*

CB: I would say every artist seems to have their own style, their own areas of comfort. And I've never really veered toward abstraction. I've always had a strong grounding in realism for better or worse. I'm certainly not against abstract art. It's not a language that I've been very comfortable with in my own work. There are certain assumptions when you are making a work. There are certain assumptions that you start with. One of my assumptions tends to be realism. In the future, I think it would be great if I could expand. But I think for this particular series of work, I really wanted people to be able to identify them at a distance and immediately. I wanted people to know what they were. I didn't want there to be a whole lot of guessing.

*WHLR: What is art to you? What does it mean?*

CB: For me, I'm not as interested in what art is so much as what art can be. The importance of art to me – and I think the importance of art to the larger society – is almost like the importance of our ability to dream. We need dreamers in our society and by that I don't mean people who are able to think big. People who are able to and willing to do things that don't have an immediate application. I think that there's a real sense that people who aren't doctors or lawyers, accountants, people who don't have an output to their work, [people] who don't have a very immediate purpose, that that work is not as necessary. Artwork is very necessary to a society in the same way that it's necessary for a person to dream. It's during our dreams that we are able to go through different scenarios and work out what is possible and what the best solutions are and play. And it's through play and dreams that we are really able to open up and discover possibilities. There are real benefits to that.

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WHLR: *What are the benefits?*

CB: The benefits are the ability to think outside the box, an ability to see connections in the world around you, an ability to synthesize information and really to define your own perimeters and find your context.

WHLR: *Do you have any mentors or artists whose careers have had an impact on your career? Are your parents a major impact?*

CB: Yes, I would say so. They work as a collaborative team a lot. Their work has had a really strong impact on mine. Some of my favorite artists or someone whose work has had a huge impact on mine are Robert Mapplethorpe and Lee Bontecou. I saw an exhibition of [Bontecou] sculptures from the sixties in 2004 at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago. Then there are these large imposing wall projections made with canvas and wire. They use sewing which is traditionally a woman's work. There are these gapping orifices and threatening, frightening spaces of darkness that you can't really see what's going on with them. There's a lot of abstraction and ambiguity. That had a strong impact on me. I saw that when I was 18 or 19.

I also love the work of Eva Hesse. That's someone whom I return to a lot in my own studio practice. Really impacted by the minimalism and post-minimalism. And a lot of feminist work. I've read a lot of feminist theory, and I also look at a lot of feminist works of the '70s and '80s.

WHLR: *Which feminist artists do you appreciate?*

CB: I would say people who were working during the feminist revolution of the '60s and the '70s. Carolee Schneemann could be an obvious one. Ana Menietta. People who use their bodies in their work, who were reclaiming women's bodies not just as objects but as sites for the intense visual exploration.

WHLR: *Why do you use little color in your works?*

CB: I'm a little chromo phobic at this point. I'm not really sure why. I'm definitely afraid of color in my work. It's something that I'm working which is strange because my work is increasingly severe, and I think that's part of the reason why I don't use colors – because I see the severity in my work. And I want to push that. Using very few colors has the most visual impact. I'd love to use more colors in the future. That's something that will come with time, that I have to work on.

WHLR: *In closing what words of advice do you have for fellow artists who are starting their careers?*

CB: I would say, "Don't be afraid to fail spectacularly. I think to make good work you have to be willing to fail and you should fail. If you are not failing, then you're not doing it right."

WHLR: *Thank you for the interview.*

CB: This has been a lot of fun!

late Barry Ehrenson, loving her to Laura Woodbury of Hampshire, Robert White (Barry Kimball), both from Hull, Ernie White of Weymouth, of the late Arvid J. Lundberg Henrietta (Myers) White, he is survived by 11 grandchildren, 2 great grandchildren and by nieces, nephews, cousins other family and friends. He is owner of Northeast Builders Sport and Edit, transportation and repair, in Amesbury, MA. For many years, Arvid was an avid race-enthusiast and a race caller. He also enjoyed traveling spending time with his family. The funeral service will be held on Sunday, May 14, 10:00 AM at the Sunnyside Funeral Home, 21 Enterprise Street, HINGHAM, MA. A Celebration of Life Service will be held in funeral home at 2:00 PM on Friday morning prior to his funeral Mass in St. Mary's Parish in Hull's Church on Saturday at 10:00 AM in the Hull Village Cemetery. Donations in memory of Arvid may be made to the American Cancer Society, 140 Brookline Plaza, 4th Fl., Boston, MA 02445. www.kenel.com for call 1-800-445-1344 for directions and condolences.

at Lanes Station from 11:00 AM prior to service. Donations may be made to the Bay Pines VAHC Hospice Unit, Ward 48, P.O. Box 5005, Bay Pines, FL 33724. I have an online message of sympathy or for directions please visit www.kenel.com

**MINER, J. Jeanne Roberts** in Concord, NH, formerly of Hingham, MA and Weymouth, MA. Wife of the late Dr. Robert C. Miner. Mother of Dr. Matthew and wife of Dr. Miner of Decharm; three daughters, Dean and her husband, Pomeroy of Simsbury, CT, and her husband Bill Channon of Franconia, NH. Also survived by four grandchildren and two nieces, Rosemary and Brenda. Visitation hours: Thursday, November 2, 2-7 PM at Ellison & Sons, North, 25 Concord St., Bedford, NH 03110, www.ellisonandsons.com. Memorial gifts may be made to the Alzheimer's Association, 100 Bedford Farms Dr., Suite 201, Bedford, NH 03110, Hospice, P.O. Box 496, Peterborough, NH 03458.

**CONE, Perquinia** BARNETT, Oct. 30, 1909-94. Husband of George B. Cone. She is survived by three children, two grandchildren and one great-grandchild.

**MUGFORD, Calvin** Of Sun City, Arizona formerly of Concord, NH. He is survived by three children, one grandchild and one great-grandchild.