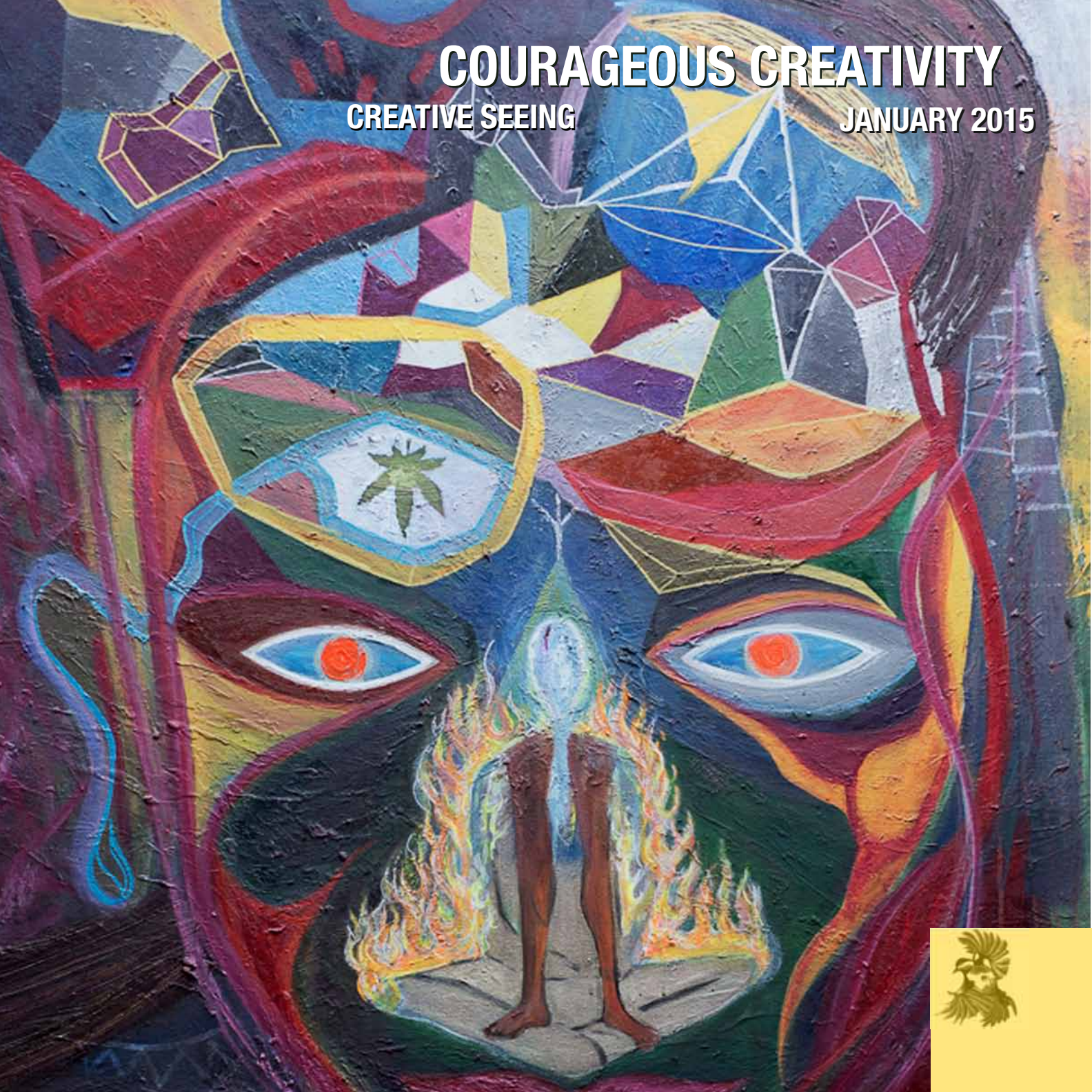


COURAGEOUS CREATIVITY

CREATIVE SEEING

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“I THINK THE MOTIVATION COMES FROM, ABOVE ALL, A NEED INSIDE ME. PERHAPS IT HAS SOMETHING TO DO WITH HEALING. NOT HEALING LIKE CLOSING UP A WOUND, BUT BECOMING SOUND, BY TOUCHING THE WHOLE PICTURE.”



IN DIALOGUE WITH PAULA METALLO

Paula was born in Syracuse, New York. After getting her B.F.A. in Painting from the State University of New York she continued her studies at the Accademia delle Belle Arti in Urbino, Italy. In 1980 she returned to the San Francisco Bay Area, where she won the New Langton Arts/Swig Watkins Award, then moved back to Italy in 1993. There she co-founded the Geological Observatory of Coldigioco. Paula's work has been displayed in several exhibitions in the United States and Europe. Her new work is in an exhibition collaborating with a 12 week course of environmental studies with the Association of Midwestern Colleges from the U.S.A., titled *Take and Give*, and a pivotal time in man's rapport with the Earth. See more: <http://www.paulametallo.com>



Image this page: Paula's Art: *Making Apples* (see discussion on p. 39)



PAULA METALLO

Sharmishtha – Thank you Paula for agreeing to do this interview for *Courageous Creativity*. I have been inspired by your work when visiting your studio over the years and I really cherish the opportunity to ask you more about it today.

Paula – Well, it is really wonderful for me to have people visit my studio, especially intermittently over the years. It's great for me to get their reaction, their feedback. And I am happy to talk to you about my work today!

Sharmishtha – That brings me to my first question. I am guessing you spend many lonely moments in your studio in the tiny remote village of Coldigioco. Where do you get the inspiration and motivation to do your work?

Paula – I think the motivation comes from, above all, a need inside me. Perhaps it has something to do with healing. Not healing like closing up a wound, but becoming sound, by touching the whole picture.

It's a creative need that I can remember from as far back as a small child. I remember as an eight-year-old, sitting on top of the steps at my house, being captivated by the pattern on the curtains. I had such a strong need to draw that pattern! I think that's when I realized that having a devoted attention to what was around me and representing it through my art was important to me.

Sharmishtha – Please tell me some more about the healing aspect that you just brought up...

Paula – I believe there's always a reason for anything someone does with a passion. I think this passion comes from a deep need. For me, for example, my art fulfilled my need for finding my own space in a very large family. I set up my studio in the cellar and would go find my quiet moments there when everyone else was watching TV.

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I also used the word healing because I witness that when I do art therapy with a variety of people, including children with Down's syndrome, or adults with schizophrenia or depression. When I asked them why they are there, they said things like - "This place feels like a family to me" or "Here I do things I like to do". When they asked me why I am there I said, "Because it helps me with the rest of my life. It puts into perspective those things that seem like problems but are not". Once again it allows me to consider things in a wholesome way.

It's amazing for me to see the effects of art therapy on the people I have worked with over a period of 19 years. We've done some incredible things together. We're now doing our second play "Felice di Stare Quaggiù", which means "Happy to be down here", a spin-off from a line from an Italian song, Volare, that speaks about flying. We made everything for the play, the costumes, the scenery, over a period of two-and-a-half years! The play was about evolution and every Tuesday, we would capture one piece of evolution. I had to find creative ways to bring across complex concepts to them. For example, we started off with the Big Bang, where we made party hats and I filmed them popping a balloon. Some of them were really afraid to pop the balloon...it was wonderful to watch their expressions in the film later!

When we came to the evolution of humans, we started talking about inventiveness, which I told them was like flying in your mind! This topic, how man's urge towards inventiveness can also result in tragedy, was coincidentally the theme I was exploring at the time in my studio.

Sharmishtha – Would you say coincidences are important for you?

Paula – Well, what I see in a lot of creative people, especially those who do scientific research around Coldigioco, is that they pay close attention to coincidences.

Sharmishtha – I had read in an article about Coldigioco that the foundation of it involved a big coincidence. Can you please tell me more?

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Paula – Yes, it's true. When (my husband) Sandro and I came back from the US to Coldigioco and saw the house we now live in, it was in complete shambles, with trees and shrubs growing everywhere. But soon after entering the house, Sandro told me he had the sense he had been there before!

I thought he was just saying so because he wanted to live there, but it turned out the house had been a special school and the school Sandro studied at in Ancona (a big city not far from Coldigioco), was its sister school, where they each had pen pals. It is with the new teaching methods that he learned an open-minded way of thinking, which is what drew him to start Coldigioco.

Sharmishtha – How about you? How was it for you to move from the US to a ruin in the middle of nowhere in Italy to start a life from scratch?

Paula – The first few years were very difficult for me and brought me close to a nervous breakdown. It was unknown territory and I preferred to drag my feet in the familiar, in Berkeley, where I felt secure and comfortable. But the big change that we made together in the end brought me even closer to Sandro. I think sometimes big bold life changes speed up transformations in relationships that need to happen.

Sharmishtha – How did coming through these really difficult times influence your art?

Paula – Good question! I've thought about this often... I think it influenced my art in two major ways. When I left Berkeley, I won an important award for my work. So it was hard for me to leave and I was afraid it might be a bad career move. But now I realize that coming to Coldigioco really helped me to continuously evolve in my work. I have to work really hard to get shows, but I have the freedom to do the work I want to.

When I left Berkeley, I was working with circles, including elements of American folk art. When I came here, I realized that a circle with nothing in it is a hole, and that's the way I felt at the time. So that led me to an interesting concept

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IN DIALOGUE WITH...

in my work: the comparison between HOLE and WHOLE, which are two sides of the same thing, empty or full.

And then a strange coincidence happened! While cleaning up one of the rooms in Coldigioco where we were housing students, I found a package of Hygenic toilet seat covers that someone had left behind. They were hole covers and made of a thin plastic I really liked! I brought them back to the studio and started fervently painting on them, and this went on to be my first important show in Italy. I called the show “On the Hole” or in Italian “Tutto sommato”, which means “everything considered”. This project turned out to be my remedy. One might say I filled my hole.

Sharmishtha – As far as I know, the word healing literally means to become whole again. So it’s fascinating that your healing came from working on “On the hole”!

Paula – Wow, that’s fascinating! Another coincidence! Weird, huh?

Sharmishtha – So tell me more about the projects you are working on now...

Paula – I have been working on the concept of Give and Take, where I have researched environmental issues and that is what touches me most at the moment. I want to “put back something that we have lost”, in the holes left behind on Earth and in human societies. We have taken so much from the place we live in, and in a naïve way, I want to give back some of it symbolically through my art.

In relation with this, I have become very interested in Native American culture. Their land was so strongly connected with their spirituality, the way they lived, the way they thought. This land was taken away and changed drastically, so it can never be “given back” in the true sense. So what I am trying to do through my art is to “give

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back”. One example is my collage of Mt. Rushmore where I put back the rocks that were blasted off of it.

I’ve also been making collages of slow, handmade contrasted with fast change. For example, the Tower of Babylon next to a hand-woven basket. I am interested in collages because they fit in with the concept of give and take; you cut something out and put something else in.

And, I find it intriguing that after all, Frankenstein is actually a collage. Mary Shelley, the author, examines the imagination’s monstrous possibilities and man’s over reaching. I made some stitched collages that speak about drastic change.

Sharmishtha – The last time I visited your studio, I saw your project “Making Apples”, which intrigued me. Can you tell me more about that?

Paula – I am interested in working with different materials, especially using everyday things. I always wanted to make apple heads, which is a method I learned about in a book about making American Folk dolls. When I was researching Native American history, I found out that one of the laws for assimilation was called Making Apples, which meant, to “let the native children remain red on the outside but change them to become white on the inside”.

My first reaction was one of horror and disgust. But then I realized that the men making these laws had no idea of how to rear children, let alone children from a different culture. I made heads made of apples representing Native Americans, adding collage elements to them, and took time-lapse pictures as the apples matured naturally. It was fascinating to see what happened to the apples over time and how they visually represent the concept that forced assimilation can be like withering. This was one of those ‘Wow’ moments for me in the studio.

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IN DIALOGUE WITH...

Sharmishtha – I see that you love your time in your studio! What is important for you when you display your art?

Paula – For me a room where my art is arranged is a canvas in itself- it becomes another piece of art. Arranging art for shows is often a process of give and take, especially while sharing the space with other artists. Sometimes I have to give up one of my favorite pieces of work because it doesn't fit in harmoniously into the space.

Then there is the part of having people see the art. I think as artists we have a similar impulse to share as actors do. However, an artist doesn't have to be there personally during the show and also doesn't get applause. Whereas for an actor the applause may be the climax of their work, for me the climax is being in the studio.

It's those moments in the studio, like discovering a use for the apples that keep me going. These are Solo moments and I can't really share the feeling with others. But there is a second kind of applause. I like being around the people looking at my art. Sometimes I ask myself why I show my art to others when the work in the studio is what satisfies me the most. I think it goes back to a basic need. I've always known that there are two sides to everything and I like to share this wholeheartedly with others.

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On the Hole or *Tutto sommato* (Italian), Art on Toilet Plastic Covers, Series (See discussion on pp. 37-38)