

Cynthia Hawkins in her studio, Rochester, New York, 2024. Photo by Todd Fleming.



An Oral History Excerpt with Cynthia Hawkins

by Julia Trotta

The Oral History Project's expansion to Chicago and New Orleans is made possible by The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. Additional support for New York is provided by the Dedalus Foundation, Toni L. Ross, and public funds from the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs in partnership with the City Council.

The complete interview with Cynthia Hawkins will be published this spring at bombmagazine.org

Dr. Cynthia Hawkins is a Rochester, New York–based artist, academic, and curator who has been painting for over fifty years. I met her in 2021 after reaching out with a proposal to present an exhibition of her work at STARS Gallery in Los Angeles. Taking a leap of faith, Cynthia invited me to visit her studio, and I booked my first post-Covid flight to meet her. The exhibition came together quickly, but our friendship had only just begun. In this interview, we cover a lot of ground, from Cynthia's early art education to the breakthrough moment when she discovered geometric abstraction, which would become a lifelong investigation. Beyond Cynthia's enduring commitment to painting, her ability to simultaneously juggle a career as an academic—receiving both a master's degree in museum studies and a doctorate in American history—and remain consistently present for her family is an inspiration.

—Julia Trotta, OHP Interviewer

CYNTHIA HAWKINS: My dad used to make these funny drawings of Mickey Mouse, and periodically I asked him to show me how to do that. The drawing was so simple, but it was a big deal to me. I continued to draw but I wasn't overly artistic—I preferred to read. My family was very much into the library. I liked reading art history and historical fiction. I used to take the same *Gardner's Art Through the Ages* out of the library, trying to read it from cover to cover but only ever getting through the prehistoric era. It really cemented an interest in the ancient world for me.

I used to think about art problems; I'd investigate a perspective problem and try to figure out how to draw it. Occasionally, I'd make a watercolor for someone. A friend was sick, so I made a nice watercolor for her. I was never attached to any of it, so I didn't mind giving it away. I wanted to do other things; I wanted to be a scientist, a playwright, and then a nurse. I had a list of things I wanted to do. Then I decided to study history, which I pursued at Queens College. I was the first person in my family to attend college. It was my goal, it was what I wanted. I had no

idea how I could do that. The simple answer: I grew up across the street from Queens College, and as a young child I saw many students coming and going, and they were predominately white. A public higher educational institution across the street... that was the easy solution. My first two years, I attended part-time in the evening while I worked at New York Life Insurance Company. Then, one night, I passed through the art department, and in the basement, I saw the ceramics studio, and that was it, I was sold. I had never taken any ceramics courses, but it was enough to spark my interest. To become an art major, you had to take certain preliminary classes, so I did that. I remember staying up all night, working on my portfolio before the big critique. You submitted your portfolio and faculty committee members discussed the work with each student, one by one. We were all lined up in the hall, and quite a few people came out of the studio crying. You needed the committee members' permission to be an art major. When I went in, they looked and said, "What are you going to do if we say you can't be an art major?" I said, "I'll do it anyway. I don't

need anybody's permission." They said, "Okay." (*laughter*) So then I became an art major. I loved it. I stayed in college an extra year just because it afforded me studio space.

JT: Were your parents supportive of that path?

CH: Not entirely, but my mother was. She studied opera for quite a few years. She had a very beautiful voice. And of course, with five kids, what was she doing taking opera lessons? She was expected to stay home. One of us used to go with her when she did recitals. Because of her, I think "Un bel dì, vedremo," from *Madama Butterfly*, is the best song in the world. I still hear it and cry because it's so amazing. She stopped taking lessons, which was too bad, but her determination is one of the reasons why I am so determined. She was a force. I went home once and told her I had to go to the museum because I had a project to do for school. She dressed everybody up, and we all took the subway into Manhattan from Flushing to the Metropolitan Museum of Art. That trip is another anchor that cemented my interest.

JT: Are there any works in particular that you remember seeing during that trip?

CH: I have this idea that we probably never got past the first floor. Even now, for instance, when I go to the Louvre, I enter through the basement and see all the ancient statuary. I can't stop myself from looking at as much of that work as possible. The nineteenth century is really tough because I always start at the beginning. (*laughter*)

JT: Were you enrolled at Queens College and the Brooklyn Museum Art School at the same time? Were you involved in any other programs?

CH: I was at Queens College from 1972 to 1977, but while I was there, I was finding other places to take classes, and I got a scholarship to take a class at the Brooklyn Museum Art School. I also went to the Art Students League of New York on the weekends for about a year. I still remember my drawing teacher, Anthony Palumbo, a figure painter, and can still see his face. I would have liked to have been enrolled at the League full-time, but I couldn't figure that out. I feel I had a great experience at Queens College. I met all kinds of faculty, whether they really did or did not like my work. It didn't bother me that they were different. So many of them were figurative painters: Lois Dodd—I still hold her in high esteem in my memory, she was wonderful—and Rosemarie Beck, Mary Frank, and Robert Bermelin, they were all lovely. Harry Kramer said he recalls that I was very excited about it all, even though I don't think he was ever my teacher. I used to go to 55 Mercer Street Gallery every week. I loved that place. It was a three-floor walkup. It was awful, but we were young, and it was a great place to see wonderful abstract painting and sculpture.

JT: You mentioned the watercolors that you made for friends. Do you remember your earlier work or your earliest painting?

CH: My earliest painting, or the first one I considered a serious painting, was my last figurative painting of gymnasts using a balance beam,

parallel bars, and other equipment. I worked on it for what seemed like a long time. I finally sort of finished it and I looked at it and thought, This is actually a terrible figurative painting. It was very stiff. I realized it wasn't about the figure at all, but about direction and structure and formal things like that. I was already beginning to look at Hans Hoffman, having read his book, *Search for the Real and Other Essays*, many times. And I was always looking at other artists, especially Piet Mondrian and Johannes Vermeer, whose work was very structured.

JT: Do you still have that painting, or an image of it?

CH: Yes, I do.

JT: Was it based on a found image? Or was it invented?

CH: It was invented. After that painting, I realized figuration wasn't what I wanted. Even before that, my first goal was to be a landscape painter like Charles E. Burchfield. What intrigued me about him was the way he made everything vibrate. He was into the sound of nature, and he found a way to present that visually, which I found incredible. I wanted to do that.

JT: When did you commit to abstraction?

CH: Well, it evolved. After the gymnasts painting, I wondered what to do. I decided to make charcoal drawings of the equipment. I sat in the workout room at Queens College and just made compositions out of the equipment, over and over and over and over, lots and lots of drawings. Then, I started adding color. They evolved into this geometric abstraction. It took a couple of years and quite a number of pieces. You can see the linear progression early on. There's a remnant of a form that is completely from the gym. Everything is perpendicular, squares and rectangles, and then there's this one diagonal rectangle that's left over from the gym equipment. So yes, geometric abstraction derived from the gym equipment. I began the charcoal drawings in 1973, while still in school, but this work was not coursework, no.

By the fall of 1973, I was using pastels to create my first geometric abstract drawings, and then by January 1974, I was producing oil paintings. I moved on in late '74 to make drawings with intersecting lines going around and around these chairs, layering one side over the other. This evolved into drawings I called *Hierog Marks*. They became quite complex. They are graphite as well. I wanted to add color, so I put plastic over the drawing in case I screwed it up and then put the color on the plastic. I'm still stuck with these drawings today, I don't know what to do with them. I started looking at abstract expressionist work that used this sort of invented text from hieroglyphic marks, which, to me, totally makes sense to move the eye around the painting. I carried the mark-making in the graphite *Hierog* drawings over to pastel drawings around 1975, and the mark-making became much looser and more gestural. I did that with a lot of pastel drawings. And then, in the summer of '75, those pastels evolved into large oil paintings on paper and then canvas.

When I look back, I can see that it's all a progressive and evolving project. I am grateful for allowing myself that and insisting on an evolutionary path. I was always concerned about having a canvas and not knowing what to do with it. I never want to say, "I don't know what to do" or "I'm blocked." Instead, one thing feeds the other, and it doesn't matter what I put on the canvas or paper at first. I don't have to have a specific project or idea. This is still the way I work. For years everything was untitled, and people have asked me about my work, but I can't always figure out which work they're talking about because of that. But then I started to use a title as a sort of armature, which is fine, but I don't really think about it. I consider a thing a title might allude to, and I know I don't have to stick with it. I just allow myself to read and respond to the work at will.

JT: In other conversations we've had, you highlighted a few art historical references: the critic Robert Pincus-Witten and the art historians Hanna Deinhard and Ellen Davis. Did you take any art history courses at Queens College?

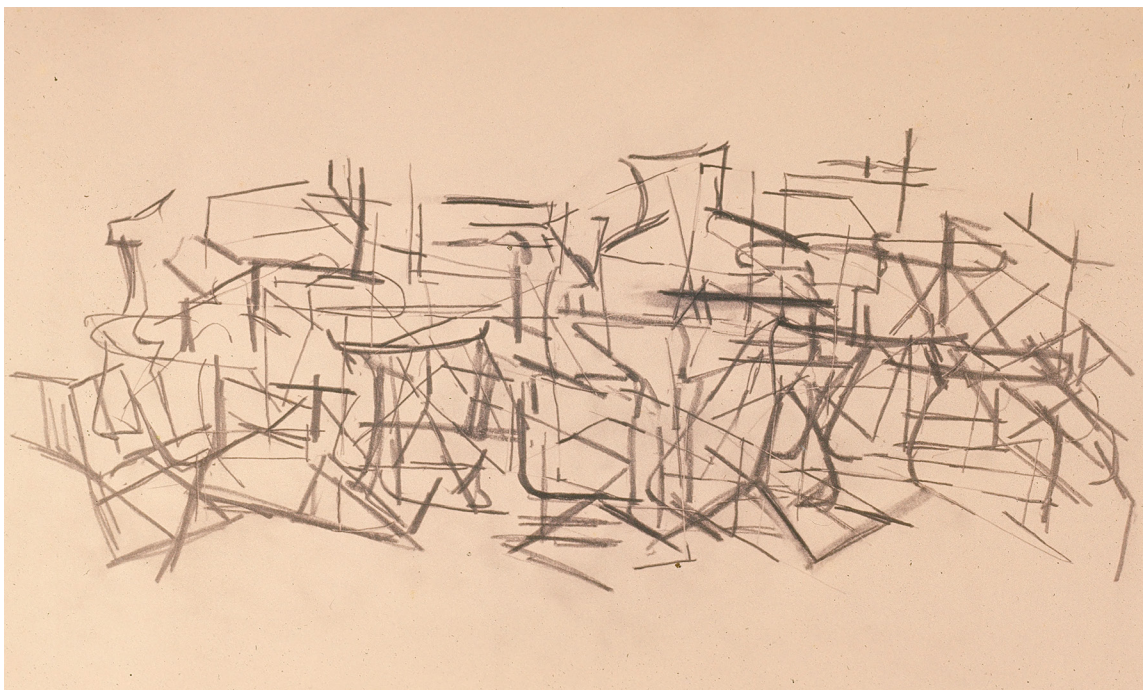
*Northern Peaks, at Secrets
There*, acrylic on wood,
6.2 × 3 × 4 feet, 1984. Images
courtesy of the artist.



Vivian Brown and Cynthia
Hawkins at Just Above
Midtown (JAM), New York
City, January 10, 1981.



Untitled, ca. 1973, graphite on
paper, 11 × 14 inches.



Signs of Civilization, #5,
2007–10, mixed media on
paper, 29 × 41 inches.
Photo by Todd Fleming.



Piscorpi in the Dark, 2004,
acrylic on canvas, 50 × 40
inches.

Ici, ici, 2020, acrylic on
canvas, 60 × 48 inches.



CH: Well, they were my art history professors. I liked being in Pincus-Witten's class because he presented images in 360-degrees, making sure we understood architecture especially from all vantage points. I took one class with Hanna Deinhard. She was very intellectual, very theoretical, and I liked that. Her theoretical analysis of works of art piqued my interest. In Ellen Davis's course on ancient Greek art, I wrote a paper on Cycladic figurines. I loved writing this paper. They had just unearthed some new ones, and I went to the Metropolitan Museum's research library to see the images in the journal the figurines appeared in.

JT: You were a good student. Can you tell me about Irene Wheeler? Who was she, and what was your relationship to her?

CH: Irene was pretty important to me in those middle years at Queens College, and actually, we remained close friends until she passed. I was still in my twenties when I met her in a class George Sugarman taught while he was a visiting professor—he was terrific. I don't know how it started, but we used to talk a lot about our work. She was in the ceramics department. Back then, at first, it was she and I; we were a group of two. But Irene knew Audrey Hirsch, a sculptor who was also a student in the art department at Queens College. We started this Ten Women Group. I can only call it Ten Women because at one point, there were ten. This was during the height of the women's movement in the 1970s, and we all recognized that there were so few women in galleries, so few women artists in history being discussed. We met at least twice a month at somebody's studio or apartment, and whoever was holding the meeting was the one whose work we discussed. It was extremely helpful. This community of women helped us develop a sense of seriousness about our work, particularly how to discuss your work with peers and get feedback. Granted, some people weren't as committed as others, but that's what happens when you make groups.

Jumping ahead, Corrine Jennings, one of the founders of Kenkeleba House, and I met in the late 1970s, and we

continued our friendship after graduating from Queens College. I found out later that Corrine taught English in the SEEK program. I was working on my *Cluster* series when she called in November 2003 to offer me this exhibition. Of course I accepted. I remember the day of my opening in 2004 in the Wilmer Jennings Gallery at Kenkeleba House on East Second Street. My family and I were living in Tannersville, Pennsylvania, and we—my husband John, my daughter Ianna, and my son Zachary—were always late for everything because we lived two hours west of Manhattan. We had to stop at Irene's house because her friends had organized a birthday celebration for her—she had just turned eighty-three. I felt it was important that we stop there before we went down to the gallery.

JT: You were very involved or had relationships with other Black galleries in New York City. One of your first solo shows was at Linda Goode Bryant's Just Above Midtown (JAM). How did that come about?

CH: First, I was in the 1978 group show *Summer Show: It's a Crowd!* at Just Above Midtown. It was a fluke. I used to go to the 57th Street galleries every Saturday, making my way west on 57th Street across 5th Avenue and to the east side. But one day, I went into one of these galleries and I saw this Black woman at the desk in the back. I thought, What is this place? And whose place is this? I can't believe I was so outgoing because I was so shy when I was young. Oh, my god. So shy. I just asked her if I could be in a show. I didn't have any slides or anything. And I remember David Hammons was in the gallery proper, and she looked at him and he nodded his head. Yes. So she said, "All right, you can be in the summer show."

JT: Sight unseen, without knowing any of your work?

CH: I mean, maybe she had heard about me. I don't know. I did meet many people at Kenkeleba early on. David Hammons is related to Joe Overstreet, one of Kenkeleba's founders along with Corrine Jennings, and he was down there a lot. Plus, David was

on the board of Kenkeleba for quite a while. Kenkeleba House was an artist-run organization, and the board members were artists. A couple of years later, after JAM moved downtown to SoHo, Linda Goode Bryant gave me that solo exhibition opportunity. It was great, and I kept a sort of diary. Initially, I didn't know that I was keeping it for any reason other than for myself. I kept track of what I was doing, the women's group, some of the people in it, and some people who worked at JAM. When Linda Goode Bryant instituted a fantastic program for artists through JAM called the "Business of Being an Artist," I went often to hear different writers, critics, and artists talk about their processes and their work and how to manage oneself. That's how I ended up with the show down there. I went to all the openings. And by then, of course, Linda knew what kind of work I did. I think the work for the JAM 1981 solo show was really unexpected because it wasn't a painting exhibit per se, it was relief sculpture, made with Masonite and wire, and there was very little color in it. That was the process. It's part of the evolution.

By 1982, '83, I began combining the mark-marking with organic geometry and an expressionistic touch. I went from very little color in the relief work to lots of color. Then I started looking at more science-related things in books and for ideas about space and black holes and astronomy. That's when I started making constructions, or better, three-dimensional painted objects. I began by drawing trapezoidal shapes with marks on them, but more structured, with the idea that these things were spinning in space. Then, I took them off the paper and made three-dimensional wall sculptures, and then one big freestanding one. This was probably late 1984. Next, I went back into painting again. The sculptures were life-size, six by three by four feet. I couldn't figure out where to put these things, so that's why I stopped making them. I liked making sculpture, even though I never did it when I was in school. I had no desire whatsoever to handle clay when I was making the wood relief-sculpture. I used my own devices, out of my own head. Sure, I'll try anything.