

On March 18, 2007, I interviewed Judy Halebsky, Sacramento Poetry Center Board Member, PhD Candidate in Performance Studies and Instructor in Asian Theater. We met at Rick's Dessert Diner in Midtown. —*Frank Graham*

FG: Thanks for taking time from grading papers to do this interview, Judy. What first drew your attention to poetry?

JH: I really did like poetry from a very young age and I guess I started writing mostly in the 4th grade, in the 9th or 10th grade I drafted poems and did visual poetry in high school.

FG: What is visual poetry? What attracted you to it?

JH: For me poetry relates to line quality and in the shape of words. The Visual sape on the page. So when you do life drawing, which is a visual art, one of the first things you learn is to draw the line you see, not the line you think you see. So when you draw a plant, you're focusing on the actual line of the thing you think you see—shadows and lines.

I think they are parallel arts, drawing and poetry. Examples are Basquait, Cy Trombley. Ilya Kazlowsky—similar examples origins of words, the gaps between how they are actually used and the concrete formal aspects of words. In particular with knowledge, the word is a euphemism in itself. So it's drawing attention to the signs and systems.

FG: What direction do you find yourself going in, or find yourself in currently, with respect to poetry?

JH: It'd be superstitious to think about what I'm planning to do—but I'm planning to move to Tokyo and I'm looking to translate. If I had the space (and ...) to do more visual art I'd do it, but for now I'm concentrating on the page.

FG: I saw you perform with some intensity, with instrumentation accompaniment, at the poetry center. Can you explain the technique you used?

JH: That form is San Francisco born, a lineage.

FG: Like spoken word?

JH: It's in the tradition of John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Rauschenberg early on.... The first form of zen practice in creative work—a collaboration; first thought, best thought, sort of thing. It was about your creative state, being focused on the process. Collaboration work is about being in a creative space together—people call it experimental because we don't have a name for it. We can only liken it to the other thing (for which) we have a name.

FG: Is this like Renga—a form you brought to the Tuesday Night Poetry Group meeting at the Hart Center?

JH: Through history, there are different examples we can find—where I don't think that would relate directly, but one example would



be the poet Adoha—where you spontaneously recite poetry—which is closer to the art happening in the seventies. It's calm, tranquil.

I studied with June Wantanabe at Mills (College). This recent performance was with Dylan Bolles and Edward Schocker. (Watanabe) works with the idea of being in the moment.

FG: Who are your favorite poets at the moment? Who are you reading?

JH: (Thinking, long pause) Lee Yung Li and Ilya Kominsky... Robert Hass.

FG: Is poetry an escape for you, a diversion, or is it more of a requirement of something you are, part of your being?

JH: Not an escape. More of a grounding. I can fall into poetry. It doesn't shut out the rest of the world. It's not hiding from anything. My friend just had this discouraging experience—and it was the story of being challenged, when people are challenged...

It's like when Buddha put his hand on the ground and he said "the ground knows".

FG: How do poems come to you? At they spontaneously generated in your mind or are you working on them for days or weeks?

JH: The general shape happens spontaneously, maybe and then maybe I mean the poem is there—but I'm still writing it, editing. I might start to write a surface—narrative, in a reading voice, rather than closer to whole sentences. I keep going layers under until the poem is complete.

FG: You've attended Squaw Valley and now you're off to New Hampshire for McDowell (Writer's Colony)—how do these colonies influence your style and skills— contribute to your poetry?

JH: Squaw Valley was very inspiring—because it was the most fantastic, it was invigorating and affirming being with people to share poetry. Last summer I did Kominsky's workshop – it was like a poetry revival coming back to the soul of poetry. Many think of poetry as being done in "this room somewhere". But poetry is a challenge and a conversation. It is the work of a community, that's why workshops, and being with poets is so important.

FG: You always seem to be in a good mood, while many think of "the brooding poet"—is there something you're not telling?

JH: We have this idea that poetry comes from depression and struggle. But I don't think so—I think our past individually comes from when we are at our best – I know there is a long history of depression associated with poets but it (the concept) is more like a creative life is an unconventional life. William Carlos Williams was a medical doctor. Ted Kooser worked at insurance full-time.