

Podcast Series: Holistic Nature of Us

Episode # 71: Meet: Susan Hoffman Fishman

<http://www.judithdreyer.com>

Hi I'm Judith Dreyer,

Thank you for joining me for this pod cast series "The Holistic Nature of Us".

I invite you to journey with me into a better understanding of the concepts behind our holistic nature and how that ties us directly to the natural world around us. My intention is to be your guide for this half hour as we begin seeing our world with fresh eyes, gaining more understanding and learning how can connect the dots in practical ways that we are nature and nature is in us.

I feature a broad range of guests deeply concerned about the environmental issues of our time and more, authors and educators, practitioners and others whose passion for this earth and for all species helps us create sustainable bridges of understanding. These folks are innovators, action oriented, creating solutions in a variety of ways that honor us, and the planet's holistic nature. I am honored to share their stories, their projects, and their passion with all of you.

And today the *Holistic Nature of Us* is going to go into a different direction. I'm introducing you to Susan Hoffman Fishman who is a public artist, painter, writer and educator whose work has been exhibited in numerous museums and galleries throughout the United States. All of her public art installations and mixed media painting concern current social and political issues. Susan's latest bodies of work focus on the threat of rising tide caused by climate change, the trillions of pieces of plastic in our oceans and the wars that are predicted to occur in the future over access to clean water. She is also the co-creator to ongoing socially engaged public art projects. The Wave, a national installation which addresses our mutual need for and interdependence on water and home which calls attention to homelessness and the ongoing need for affordable housing in our cities and towns. The Wave has been installed to date in twenty-four museums, galleries, parks, schools and festivals.

Susan, I just can't say again how delighted I am to have you here as a guest, and welcome!

SUSAN: Thank you and I'm delighted to be here.

JUDITH: Well, when I saw your website about art and climate change I was really intrigued and I would love you to talk more about yourself, your art and what got you to combine both.

SUSAN: Well you did a very good job introducing my art and what I do, so I'm going to focus on what got me interested in art and climate change. And I can tell you the exact date that I became interested.

JUDITH: Wow.

SUSAN: Yep, it was March 11, 2011. It was on a day that a magnitude nine earthquake centered in Japan hit Japan basically and triggered powerful tsunami waves that reached heights of up to 133 feet. It also shifted the earth on its axis. The tsunami eventually devastated the country and left people without homes, electricity, and clean water but it also triggered a nuclear meltdown in the Fukushima Daiichi nuclear power plant, if you recall. And the waves resulting from the tsunami traveled throughout the Pacific Ocean including our own coastal areas in California and Oregon and Washington, and even Western Alaska. That's the preview of how I got involved but really what happened is I started thinking about that wave and how visually, I mean I could see how that one wave impacted so many continents and ended up here on our own shore. And I started thinking about a project that would connect people just the same way that that wave did. My friend and I, Elena Kalman, came up with *The Wave*. And the purpose of *The Wave* is to call attention to water and to all of the things that are happening to water but also to demonstrate this early how we are all connected and how we are all responsible for protecting the water. We are also mutually affected by water events like this tsunami.

JUDITH: Well I think you bring up a very good point. We are all connected. Water is a part of our body as well as a part of the planet, and the two are inseparable because without water we all suffer. And we have not been good stewards of our water. And I like how you said that we're not just connected, we're responsible for protecting it. I don't feel we've really done a good job with that. I mean there's just one case after another of polluted water here, there and everywhere and it's like, how did we get

there, you know? I mean why are we choosing to not realize that everything we do affects our water in some way.

SUSAN: I think it's a lot about greed. In the same way that oil production is about greed. You know there are companies that bottle water that are taking it from our resources, our collective resources and shipping it all over the world.

JUDITH: I know, and that's another whole topic of discussion, isn't it?

SUSAN: Yes, it is.

JUDITH: So, you created this wave. You created a collection of work. It's not just one painting. You're talking about a collage of paintings, correct.

SUSAN: Well, *The Wave* is a project in and of itself. And I do this with my partner in art. We call each other our partners in art but I also do a lot of personal painting and drawings that are focused on water and climate change.

JUDITH: And you said that you've distributed those to many museums and galleries. What's the reaction?

SUSAN: Well most of theI guess I would say it's confrontational in the sense that the work is confrontational. I mean the response is not controversial, it's positive, but they're hard to look at. They're hard to deal with. On the surface they're beautiful. They're beautiful colors and all kinds of interesting materials but the message is confrontational.

JUDITH: Right and so that stirs something within us. We either walk away because we don't like being uncomfortable or we're impacted in such a way as you were with the Fukushima accident to do something.

SUSAN: Right.

JUDITH: And so, based on your gifts and talents you've decided, with your collaborator, to create a project based on what we're doing to water.

SUSAN: Yes, yes.

JUDITH: And is this a traveling show?

SUSAN: It is. It's gone, at this point to, let's see, well as you've said twenty-four sites but it's also over five states including Connecticut, Massachusetts, New York, Maryland and I'm forgetting one. Well that's it. I mean you can look it up but it's four or five states, yeah.

JUDITH: And so, they contract or invite you to display your project in their gallery or museum and it's opened its view to the public.

SUSAN: Well let me just stop you there because it's an interactive project. It's not something that we do. It's something that the community does at the sites where we go and that's what unites all of the people who participate. Because when they participate, the work that they do goes onto the next site, so it becomes a bigger and bigger installation. And when I say they participate, what they do is they take a piece of, it's about one foot by two foot piece of polycarbonate film and we ask them to cut what they think looks like a wave. And they work very hard on it. It's a very simple task but they take great pride in their project, you know, sample. And then we take them all, the individual waves, and we put them together in an installation and then all of a sudden, they can't find their individual piece, just as much as you can't see one drop of water in a wave.

JUDITH: Oh, how interesting!

SUSAN: And so, you know what happens is they begin to feel the connections between other people and among other sites that also have contributed to the wave.

JUDITH: Do you happen to have anything currently going on in one of these galleries or museums in our neck of the woods, which is New England?

SUSAN: We most recently had an installation up at the Benton Museum up at the University of Connecticut. The actual process, the installation process, that's over but there is a permanent installation there that the museum kept.

JUDITH: Well how exciting! So that's at UCONN, the University of Connecticut here in Storrs Connecticut so that's a place that people can look up: at their hours and go visit and see that particular installation, correct?

SUSAN: Correct. And we also have a permanent installation in Brooklyn at a, it's in a lobby of an apartment building that Elena designed.

JUDITH: Cool. Alright (so now your other project) you have *The Wave* going on and you have two locations right here for now, but you also have the one on bringing attention to homelessness. Tell us about that one.

SUSAN: Yeah that's one Elena and I also did together. She has a connection with a homeless shelter in Stamford Connecticut. We worked with them and we worked with the City of Stamford to create an installation and again an interactive installation that would show the public what homelessness was really about and how it felt viscerally. So what we did was we went to seven sites around Stamford Connecticut and we, including a homeless shelter, and including the library and a number of other sites, a housing project, and we asked each participant to take a piece of corrugated cardboard that was six inches by eighteen inches, something like that, and to either write or draw what home meant to them. And very interesting responses across the board ... that's a pun but unintended...but we had preconceived notions.

We thought that when people who are homeless would create the project that they would talk about homelessness and that sort of thing. Of if someone lived in a project, you know a low-income project, that that would become part of their statement. But what we found across the board is whoever created a board talked about family and talked about what family meant, you know, and what their home, whatever it was, brought them in terms of safety and security which was quite interesting. And they we took all of these boards that we created all over Stamford and we built a house out of the boards, including a roof, two by fours if you can picture a basic house structure, you know, with a peak. And then we took the boards, and the boards were the exterior of this house. It was installed in the lobby of the government center in Stamford so people who came to do business there, and a business could include anything from paying your taxes to entertainment projects. The senior center was located in this building. Anyone who came in for any reason stopped and looked at the structure, the installation and were very engaged with... you know they went very carefully around and looked at each individual's responses, and some of them were quite poignant, very poignant. And so, that project succeeded in getting people to really think about the nature of home and what it's like when you actually don't have one.

JUDITH: How interesting. Well you know in the holistic model if one part is weak, the whole system is weakened. Homelessness is an issue in our country that has so very much, and why it's still an issue and people are

starving and they're food insecure, etc. is beyond my comprehension but it is a fact and I can see where something like this in a, Stamford is quite a large town. I'm sure there's a lot of traffic in their government center to get other people thinking a little bit differently about what home means to them.

Susan, based on these two projects, do you have any other stories that are related to this outreach?

SUSAN: I think that wherever we go, either the institution site that creates programming that goes along with the topic of water. So, for instance, when we went to an elementary school in New Haven the kids learned about water conservation and they created posters that demonstrated how much, for instance, how much water a toilet uses when it flushes. You know how much a dishwasher uses when it washes a load of dishes, that kind of thing. So the kids themselves spent a lot of time before we got there learning these things and then the culmination was creating a piece of the wave and the installation itself stayed in the library for awhile so that the whole population of the school could see it. That's one example.

In Baltimore when we...we went there on World's Oceans Day and of course the science museum was full of activities that had to do with oceans and our project was outdoors right adjacent to the water of the harbor. We had; I think we have never had quite as many people participating as we did that day. It was a steady stream of the public of all ages, of all races, which is true for all of our installations. Of all economic households, you know, everyone was there. You know we had all nationalities because it was such a well-known spot to visit. The pictures that we have show really, really engaged people. It really is a program that draws people in because it's simple and it's beautiful. We use, you know, these extremely bright gorgeous colors for the materials that we give them, and the wave extended along the coast. Coast, it's a harbor, along the harbor. It was quite a big project.

JUDITH: That had to be exciting. Where could we see pictures of that?

SUSAN: Well we have a wave website. It's dedicated only to *The Wave* and it does have images from all of our installations and you can find it at www.make-a-wave.com

JUDITH: Oh good, that's great because I know my listeners like that kind of information. And we do a transcript for each podcast so that information will be available. So it's www.make-a-wave.com ?

SUSAN: Yes.

JUDITH: Cool. That sounds so interesting. I can't imagine what the harbor was like. It had to be buzzing with activity but then the day didn't end because you displayed this beautiful art piece that you created.

SUSAN: Yeah there's an image of the installation on the grass, you know, a couple of feet from the water and you can see a boat, the Chesapeake, very close to the installation. You can see people on the sidewalk, tons of them, you know doing what they do, like sitting on a bench and walking by. Then we have a lot of images of other people who had participated and that's another thing that we do. We take a picture, we try to, of every person with their wave and we call them our wave portraits. And eventually what we'd like to do is have an exhibition of these from all over the country.

JUDITH: Wow that sounds beautiful. A very ambitious project too because you're not talking about a large piece of artwork, you know a six foot by eight foot, you're talking about something much grander than that, right?

SUSAN: Yes, yeah.

JUDITH: Well Susan, before we sign off, I don't know if you have anything else to add, number one, but I always ask my guests if they could give three tips that my listeners can apply in everyday life based on their passion.

SUSAN: Well okay that's pretty easy for me.

JUDITH: Okay.

SUSAN: Number one **don't use plastic bottles**. Besides the fact that the bottling companies are drawing our water supplies for profit, the oceans and landfills and filled, filled with discarded plastic. Number two, **take shorter showers to conserve water** and number three, **become active in your local or regional water commission**.

I had to say that one of the places that we installed the wave was at the Connecticut State Capital and this was on the day that local community was

fighting the Metropolitan District Commission who in secret had voted to bring in a bottling company. This was without any input or public hearings of all of the towns that relied on that water. And there is no state policy for giving first preference to residents in terms of in times of drought. They're extracting a million gallons of water a day.

JUDITH: Oh, my goodness!

SUSAN: I would say get engaged, you know, in your local water commission and most importantly, vote.

JUDITH: Yes.

SUSAN: Vote for candidates who support protecting the environment and vote for candidates who are protecting, you know, our precious water supply.

JUDITH: Yeah and I don't think we can say enough about that. I know Friends of the Earth send petitions out a couple of times a week at the least. I try to sign every one of them. It's not just about water you know, it's about pollinators and it is about water it's also about the use of certain pesticides that we know are destroying and polluting water and soil, that kind of a thing. So, I can't say that enough for people to find their pet project and vote every week that they can, because that's the only way we're going to make a difference. We can't stay asleep at the wheel. This planet is precious.

SUSAN: No, and if you look at just that one example, it's a local water commission and they basically disregarded the public and without any input. And we have to be on our toes in order to learn about and do something about that kind of behavior. So, what we did is we took the wave and we made a reservoir, which is where they're taking the water from on the lawn of the State Capitol, so that people going in and out to vote in the legislature and also the general public would see it.

JUDITH: Wow, that's really again, taking a passion, it doesn't matter what it is and taking appropriate action and that's how the holistic structure if supported, so that we can become healthy and whole again. It's very discouraging to me to hear about the destruction of water. I featured Grandmother Andre, Nancy Andre was one of my guests a few months ago and she was instrumental in bringing the Algonquin Water Song to the

forefront of awareness. She had permission from the elders to share the song and it's a beautiful, beautiful song. And women in their tradition are the caretakers of the water. And you're care-taking the water from your passionate heart in your way and I applaud you for the work that you're doing.

SUSAN: Thank you. I also, in addition to my paintings which we didn't get a chance to talk about, I write a monthly column for this international blog called Artists and Climate Change and in it are artists from all over the world, of all disciplines; poets, dancers, play writes, fiction writers, visual artists of all kind who are addressing water and climate change in their work.

JUDITH: Wonderful. So how about if we do a recap of how folks can get in touch with you and your work?

SUSAN: Okay. Well my own personal website is www.susanhoffmanfishman.com and you can read my individual posts on www.artistsandclimatechange.com and if you want to see images of *The Wave* in greater detail than you'll find on my website, you can go to www.make-a-wave.

JUDITH: I'm so grateful that you were here today. Anything else you want to add before we close?

SUSAN: No, I'm really happy to share with you what we've been doing.

JUDITH: Wonderful. Well I can't thank you enough, again. You also gave us some very practical advice and I want to thank the listeners for joining us today.

This is Judith Dreyer. I'm the author of "At the Garden's Gate", book and blog. My book is available through my website www.judithdreyer.com as well as several distribution arms such as Amazon, Nook, Goodreads and more. And again, I want to remind all of you that a transcript is available for each podcast. Please like and share them. Let's get the word out and support each other.

And remember, **now** is the time for practical action and profound inner change so we value our world again.

Enjoy your day.