

Francesca Borgatta – Biography fborgatta@puppetfigures.com

Francesca's father, Robert Borgatta was a painter and teacher of art. He taught his daughters to draw and to appreciate art history. Her mother, Isabel Borgatta, was a sculptor who taught art classes for the neighborhood in their backyard. Francesca learned to use clay and make papier mache'.

Francesca's father maintained strong ties with his Italian and Mexican families. He took his family to Europe to visit the museums and cathedrals, and the caves before they were closed. They travelled to the Yucatan when she was twelve. She was awed by the ballcourts and the stone-carvings and she observed the indigenous people. Cultural identity remains a strong theme in her work.

Francesca was sixteen she took some Native American poems and rituals and choreographed a dance drama with her friends. She continued this process at other schools where she was a student. Her artwork, mostly masks and set pieces, was made in service of the drama and discarded after the performance. She studied theater and poetry at Sarah Lawrence, but she left school to become a member of the Bread and Puppet Theater. The company made large puppets for anti-war demonstrations in New York. Peter Schumann's hieratic figures, with his animated choruses of animal and human characters, and simple pleas for survival remain a strong influence for her art.

Francesca went to London to join a commune, Inter-Action Trust, directed by Edward Berman. They made plays with teenagers on Adventure Playgrounds. This was her introduction to the process of collaborative art-making. She also learned to use re-cycled materials which remains an important element of her art. When she returned to the U.S., she began to teach art and drama in schools and community centers. She earned her M. A. from S. F. State University in 1982.

In 1984, she received a grant from the California Arts Council to develop an art and drama program at the S. F. Montessori School. She taught her students to build sets and develop characters. They worked together to make storyboards, and to develop scenarios for performance.

As Artist-in-Residence at the Washington Elementary School her project was to design art activities for the wooded area next to the school. She taught her students to find available materials for their artwork, gave them a few techniques. Then they would collaboratively to develop a project. The materials included plastercloth, found objects, upholstery foam, and textiles. She began to incorporate these materials into her own art.

At Longfellow School in Berkeley, she developed a multi-cultural arts curriculum, examining different societies in turn and using activities to enable teachers to incorporate art into the classroom. She initiated an outreach program for parents and community members, asking them to share their traditional skills (music, dance, and crafts) with the students. At the end of each year, the school would present an ethnic arts festival with students and community members.

Working for the East Bay Depot for Creative Re-use, she designed art workshops and events with re-cycled materials in hospitals, libraries, and festivals. She directed the construction of processional figures for public demonstrations with the Berkeley Ecology Center. Her own children were young and her artwork proceeded quietly during this period. Gradually, she began to offer her work for group shows. A higher degree of finish and durability was required for a gallery. She experimented with a tougher kind of papier

mache' using muslin and wire mesh with fabric and natural materials embedded into the layers.

In 2008, as Artist-in-Residence at St. Vincent de Paul in Oakland, she was given a studio space adjacent to the warehouse, with the stipulation that she should teach the staff to make art from materials found on the conveyor belts. At the end of the summer she presented an exhibit "Puppets from the Wastestream" at the S.V.d.P. Community Center. Each character was accompanied by a poem text that identified the figure. The audience was invited to manipulate the puppets with rods and try some dialogue.

In 2010 at the Skyline College Gallery, Francesca had a month-long residency to install an exhibit of sculpture- puppets, dioramas, and wall-hangings. She held workshops in puppet-making and manipulation. She taught students to improvise with a set of bird puppets, and she asked them to use a bird's eye view to navigate the gallery.

At Bridge Art Space, she presented a solo show "Travelers on a Pathway," in 2012. The audience was invited to try on masks to explore a set of installations. She asked the film-maker Richard Quinn to make a film using images from the exhibit combined with music and a spoken narrative. She began to experiment with video as a way to animate her puppets and show them in 3-d.

She tried new forms of display and called for audience involvement in a series of themed exhibits (Sidequest Gallery, The Reclaimed Room, The Orinda Library, and the McCune Library). In 2015, she was chosen as a Spotlight Artist for the Richmond Art Center.

In 2019, Francesca made a film with puppets and sets based on the Spectre's Bride, a cantata by Antonin Dvorak. The film won The "Story-tellers Award" at the Berkeley Film and Media Festival, and "Best Animation" award at the Prague Independent Filmmakers Festival. She is learning the techniques of video editing which provide a range of options for layering and transforming the image. Video integrates the elements of visual imagery and storytelling/drama in a way that is exciting to her. She continues to make her sculpture, and she is working to present a virtual exhibit. She is looking for projects to explore with other artists, and new places to show her art.