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**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

**University of Houston**  
**Oral History of Houston Project**  
***Houston History***

Interviewee: Kelyne Reis

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Place: Galeria Regina, Houston, Texas

Interviewer: Nimra Haroon

Transcriber: Michelle Kokes

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**Abstract:**

In part 1 of the recordings, contemporary artist Kelyne Reis discusses her artistic career in Houston from 2009 onward. While Reis touches on her days in Germany, she primarily discusses her career in Houston and how graffiti has affected her life. She first explains that her initial impressions of graffiti and graffiti artists were incorrect after she met Gonzo. Reis explains how she learned the transience of graffiti. Reis recalled her days at the Wall of Fame in Houston, where she first practiced her spray-painting skills, and was exposed to the brevity of claiming a piece of wall, until someone took over it. Reis recalled her first assignment from Gonzo as having to create an alphabet that would be incorporated into her style. After recommending going to see the parking garage at the Houston Public Library, Reis speaks about Banksy as the most prominent graffiti artist, and the transition of graffiti's acceptance. In part 2 of the recordings, Reis explains the incorporation of her figure into her paintings, and the opposition of words and illustrations she utilizes. Reis shows the Petite Embrace series she painted, and then spends time discussing the importance of color brightness. Reis explains how she paints her colors and the time it takes in painting. Reis tells about her piece hanging in the Houston Independent School District office and then touches on her requests for private lessons from Gonzo when she first arrived to Houston. In part 3 of the recordings, Reis discusses the difference between art and tagging. After speaking about a German subway station that showcased graffiti, Reis concludes by telling her ultimate goals.

**UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON**  
**ORAL HISTORY OF HOUSTON PROJECT**

**Kelyne Reis**

**Interviewed by:** **Nimra Haroon**  
**Date:** **February 28, 2014**  
**Transcribed by:** **Michelle Kokes**  
**Location:** **Galeria Regina**

NH: So I mean what are some things that you learned whenever you met Gonzo for example?

KR: What I learned? First I learned that everything I thought about graffiti artists was wrong because I thought a graffiti artist they just listened hip hop. And after the second time we met I started to pay attention to what kind of music we had in the background and it was at that time NPR was not divided so the classic music was NPR and he was listened to that and, "That's classic" he said, "Yeah?" "But you are a graffiti guy so no hip hop?" "No I go crazy!" "To work I need these." So I said, "Okay." Then again, I learned that I thought, "Okay graffiti artist they live somewhere very different or very how to say– not normal like everybody. Then I thought maybe he lived there around where he has his studio his downtown." No. He lives close to Rice University. "You are not what I thought." "Yeah we are normal people." I learned one thing that is completely different than the normal visual art is that graffiti is not something that you do forever. So I understood that from the moment that you have a piece on a wall that's it. The other guy can come and start painting something else. That was your goal. It was not like my goal. My goal was to have something if possible forever. With graffiti I learned a very hard way. There is a place in Houston the name is Wall of Fame so graffiti artist they can go there and play a little bit. So I went there so first I chose a piece of wall with it was huge and painted everything in white because I wanted to make my graffiti.

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne****Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

NH: Right.

KR: And spent hours and hours with this wall there and I just did a little bit with spray painting because I was going to come back. So two days later I went back and there was something there but it was not mine. "Where's my wall? I spent hours." And when I was talking to Gonzo and he said, "Well that's it. So it's from the moment that you put the things there that's it and then you move on and do something else. Then somebody else can come and use this piece of wall." I didn't know that. I just spent a day painting this wall in white. And when I came back to do my art work. So there was not a small space available. That's it. It's different. And with this arrows and he taught me. Why the alphabets, they have just arrows because it's like a battle because people are fighting to have space and you have to defend yourself and you have to attack the other one so you have the arrows and it's a war and being a war being a soldier you have to protect yourself, your knees, your elbows and therefore you have the small piece and why you have your... the reason that you have your alphabet is to be recognizable. So if you put your alphabet there, people you know that was you, you do that. So each artist, the real graffiti artist has his alphabet. So I created mine. It was the first assignment was to create an alphabet and then, yeah it was funny, because he kept asking me why I was there. He was not I think used to have an artist coming with all the background and say, "no I just want to do that" and I already had my figure this one line figure that I want to incorporate with my alphabet so I did I think eleven of them. And say "yeah amazing, amazing, amazing." And that's it. And then I started doing my things and so canvas things but incorporating my graffiti what I learned going there, talking to him into my style, and that's what I do.

NH: You know whenever you were saying that, "I don't think I'm suited for your article or etc." I find it so interesting because even though you're not a "graffiti artist" right you consider

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

yourself a contemporary artist you know working you still incorporate graffiti elements and then you also consider yourself a Houstonian.

KR: Yeah.

NH: So you know I find that interesting because it used to not be a respected form of art graffiti you know, it's just vandalism. That's how it was perceived you know it's not caused it's not Monet, it's not any of that its vandalism and its ghetto and that's what people's perceptions are. However, now you guys were asked to do the GreenStreet mural and Gonzo did the Market Square the "Houston Is" and now...

KR: And the Garage for the bibliotech... for the library.

NH: Really?

KR: Have you been there?

NH: No.

KR: You have to it's amazing! Go to the garage and all the walls with...

NH: All of you guys did that?

KR: Gonzo.

NH: Gonzo did that?

KR: Amazing.

NH: And you know now The Houston Convention and Visitor Bureau they are using for example Gonzo to design these things and then they use that to market and promote the City of Houston. So now graffiti is even being used for marketing promotional materials whereas at first it was just regarded as vandalism, you know? So I find it so interesting that I don't know where the turn happened. Is it with the 21<sup>st</sup> century whenever 2000 hit people started appreciating like

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

lesser forms of art or just not “the classicals”? I don’t know what, where it happened that now it’s being a respected form of art.

KR: We talk a lot about that, Gonzo and I. One point is that okay we know that I thought that graffiti started in New York. He said, “No it was not in New York.” You’re gonna ask him he’ll tell you. But in London. Especially Banksy. Banksy, have you heard about him? Banksy is “the” graffiti artist. The most famed graffiti artist in this world.

NH: Wow.

KR: He sells for millions.

NH: Really?

KR: And there’s a movie about him – “Exit Through the Back Door” (Editor’s Note: correct name of film is “Exit Through the Gift Shop”) is the name, very interesting and so Banksy and nobody knows who Banksy is. He was never seen. He gives interviews but nobody...

NH: Really?

KR: That’s part of is his marketing campaign. So with Banksy in Europe. So I think graffiti started to have a different kind of acceptance. When people start buying a small piece of wall for 100,000 euros, all of a sudden everybody started looking why somebody started spending so much money buying a piece of wall. I think it was one of the reasons why graffiti (especially his graffiti) especially they are very, very special and completely different than everything else. He used piece of the walls. He incorporates his graffiti in the walls so sometimes you walk by in London and you don’t realize that it’s a graffiti. Somebody stained it, but no it’s a graffiti. I think that’s one of the reasons that this movement started in Europe, so much more earlier than here and then came in this direction too.

NH: Right.

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

KR: So maybe that's one of the reasons. So take a look about Banksy, Banksy is the...

NH: So okay you talked a little bit about your story in coming here so right now what inspires you in your artwork?

KR: What keeps inspiring me and was from the beginning– is life. Life, lights, colors, people. And that's one reason that I'm moving out from this space even though I love it here. I don't have contact with nobody. I work all day by myself and I need to have people around me to get this motivation to do something. Even though my works are very plain there are a lot of things behind that. That's my inspiration and I love one thing that I love in Houston is the sky. So I keep taking pictures from the colors there because I work with colors and I need that so almost every day I take pictures it's a wonderful sky in the city and right now my inspiration for my colors is the sky. Houston's sky.

NH: That's wonderful.

KR: It's a great city, it's a great city. Yeah but like I said before... so actually I'm a contemporary artist– a visual artist and with a huge love for graffiti but I also realized that I am too old to start using spray paint. And it was real fun that day that I started painting white and I tried a little bit. So it's like I sprayed for about two hours and two or three weeks later I still could not move my finger and my arm was hurting and Gonzo said, "Yeah you have to build up this muscle." I said, "Yeah I'll be 50 very soon. So I don't have time to build up muscle and then start spraying." Therefore this mural at GreenStreet I paint it. It took me three days to paint that with help because it was fresh I just had surgery and I should not go out and I was painting and the guys came and sprayed and a couple of hours later they were gone and I was still there painting this wall with three or four people helping. Because you have to know how to use spray paint if you don't know, forget about it. And from the beginning I didn't want to spray I just

wanted to incorporate the things from graffiti in my style. But it was very funny to know that if you don't start when you are very young, forget it. No chance.

End of Part 1

KR: How people would react to this and the first one I painted I did my alphabet and that's my name.

NH: Yeah I can see that.

KR: And I've been working with figure this one line person for years and years.

NH: Oh that's so unique, wow! Do you incorporate that into all of?

KR: Yes.

NH: That's wonderful!

KR: That's this up there it's the one at the GreenStreet. The mural that I painted there. Is also with my figure with the GreenStreet in funky. So my idea was to use this figure with the alphabet with words but not just write things to make the words look like art together with the figure. This one, the first one that I painted and a lot of people when was painting and I told them I used orange and purple and green and he said, "Oh God 70s", but when they saw it they were completely different. Then I'm coming it's my portrait so I'm just coming, arriving here in Houston. And this is like I said I had eleven and this one is alone for myself and the other ones they come in pairs and it's like a game that what the figure represents. So the word is the opposite of the representation.

NH: Okay.

KR: So to understand the word so look for the opposite try to understand the figure and then look for the opposite or look both together because in this here for example I have a small kid

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

there and then a kid here if you draw like a kid the proportions are different like a big head, belly, short legs so that's the representation of the kid and here it's an old person. So again very fragile and going down and so. So then the words they are in the wrong place. So if I have a small kid there so the word has to do with this guy here and this guy is carrying and it's very heavy and the word represents from there so I have the young and I have the old but it's the young guy there and the old guy here. The combination of both. Then we have the one about dance or music and the same. I think this figure is the easiest to understand what she or he is doing. It's a ballet dancer. So it's like the movement the ballet dancer but the ballet is here.

NH: Right.

KR: This guy is a very cool guy and normally he sings but he talks and he does hip hop and the hip hop is then with the ballerina.

NH: Right.

KR: So the series goes further like this. So I have the shy with the extrovert.

NH: I love that. Juxtaposition of word and image.

KR: That's it. For...there was a project from Gonzo and the name was "Blowing up Your City" and it should be like a road exhibition and the first show was in L.A. and we could have a doll in painting of the doll I did the Bombi and Bombi got lost before I came back from L.A. and that's it. That's the Bombi and that's a hand grenade. And this painting this introduced Bombi.

NH: Oh wow I like that.

KR: I get my figure and the Bombi. This one.

NH: The same figure it.

KR: Yeah the same figure is there. And also the same figure is here. That's one that I just had that event last Friday and the name of this is Petite Embrace. Why? See the hands?

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

NH: Yeah.

KR: The two hands come together so if they embrace you they do like this. And they is like this so I have embrace.

NH: Right.

KR: And see we have one arm with the color the other one that is like the background.

NH: Right.

KR: It's the same and I did 50 of them. I did 50 so I worked one year. And that's and I do variations of these figures these one line figures but I was there. Sometimes you can not see that and sometimes I put the words and sometimes I don't put the words but yeah the colors and the structures so it's also very plain like if you use the spray paint it wouldn't be the same.

NH: I find this neat because you paint this. So even though it has some street art elements to it it's not done in a typical street art way which would be spray paint. You do it in such a like a fresh way.

KR: You could not believe how long I need to paint that because I paint in layers and every time I make for a new layer I mix my color again and most of them they have like eight, nine, ten layers.

NH: Of the same color.

KR: Yes.

NH: Is it to get the brightness of the color?

KR: Yes. Because in each layer for example here the green each needs a different green. So if something happens here I have to repaint everything I cannot just go there. I cannot mix this green again. Every layer from the paint layers it's another green.

NH: It's a different color.

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

KR: And why I do that because I just work with colors and I need to have that depth you say and if I have a lot of layers with different shades of the same color. So the light goes through all the layers and comes back reflecting all of them and then I have that. If I do just one layer I don't have the same. It takes a lot. It takes me one week to paint a small one. It's just five by five inches and that's it so spraying would be much easier. But like I say I don't have the muscles.

NH: The muscles.

KR: And here everything it was so terrible my gosh! I realize that's me I should be myself in everything else.

NH: Wow.

KR: And I have the link I sent to you about these a huge painting hangs right now in the Houston Independent School District the field office it's was so I brought that from Germany but the background was like ten feet by eight feet and with the figures and the five painters hang from the ceiling and also with the figures with the alphabet without words but the same thing. You could see something like graffiti there and I painted that I don't know 15 years ago. I loved it okay, I've been doing that for years and years and the graffiti came three and a half years ago to join my style.

NH: So you starting incorporating the graffiti elements three and a half years ago?

KR: When I came here and the next year.

NH: So you came here in 2011?

KR: No in 2009.

NH: 2009.

KR: So April 2009 and so the beginning was, "Oh we are just going to stay for just one year" so I didn't do anything but when I saw that we are going to stay for at least two years so I went University of Houston

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne****Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

out and looked for Gonzo for example. Until that time so I didn't have this alphabet I didn't have the words. My things we would practice.

NH: Right and you first met Gonzo at the Wall of Fame that you were talking about?

KR: No I found him online. I sent him so I called him and I sent him an email I don't remember asking him if he would be willing to teach me about graffiti. "Oh yeah we do that. We have workshops." I said, "The point is I don't want to be part of a class with 17 year olds and things like this." So I had private class with him. So one day I had him for one hour. We talked about the world. Another thing I was very surprised (positive surprised) he knows a lot about art and he said that we talked a lot he missed that a little bit because people they have this wrong idea about graffiti like I'm a dumb guy and I go there and spray and make everything mess.

NH: Mess up.

KR: And it's not like this. We talked about a lot about art about styles, about impressionist, about exhibitions because I love art it's my life and I keep going everywhere. Last weekend we went to New York we went to Guggenheim to MoMA and I'm always doing things like this. It's was interesting to talk to him and so put this idea away because I also thought they go there and do the spray but it's very interesting, very interesting. I learned a lot.

End of Part 2

NH: Quickly you mentioned that tagging is not art. You know, Graffiti is different and I think that people like Gonzo and people like Daniel Anguilu are muralist I think they don't want to be known as just taggers or you know stuff like that because vandalism is tagging you know. Can you just elaborate on that a little bit?

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

KR: Yeah that's something that what I didn't know before. Also even graffiti artist they make this difference. They want to be put in another place; not together with the ones that go there and just make everything a messy place. I think that's very important because normal people when they see tagging they don't see the difference they just see on it's just everything is messed up and looks horrible and there are a lot of place that you walk by or you drive by you just see that's dirty you don't see anything. That's not art; that's not graffiti; that's tagging people; they that's they just want to go there and do something to destroy a property. They are not putting anything beautiful out there. They are just destroying properties. This difference has to be out there.

People they have to understand no they are not artists they are just thinking they are having fun in the moment that they are go and destroy something and they are costing a lot of money to paint to repaint or to repair that. This is very important. There are so many good graffiti or street artists here in Houston and they go everywhere. Daniel is doing amazing job. And he came from outside/inside to have a show in a gallery and he sold a lot. So every time he has a show he sells almost everything. So people buy small pieces of his work. So and if you go back in the history of a couple of years ago a gallery would never invite a street artist to come and do something, never. But it's not tagging. Tagging is just a horrible dirty things that people go out there and normally during the night and they do that. I live in Hanover, I lived in Hanover it's the north part of Germany and one of the subway stations in our city everything is graffiti so the city paid, invited artists from New York and London to do this station. It's an amazing thing and that happened around so I would say 20 years ago. A lot of people were shocked, like "What's this?" We have this station with graffiti but it a lot of people came from outside the country to see this station.

NH: Wow.

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

KR: Yeah so it's a subway station everything's graffiti but art is not tagging art! We have a lot of wonderful paintings there but they were made as graffiti so it is a great painting.

NH: So as an artist right now what are your five year plans? Where do you want to see yourself in five, maybe ten years?

KR: Actually I think I am already living my plans. Okay right now I am moving into a new studio. When I go back when I came here I didn't know anybody, anybody! I came without knowing a person in this city. Just to give you an example. I had this event here last Friday and we had about 200 people coming and I knew maybe 190 of them. So they came because I invited them and they know me. I know them. It was not because I put that on Facebook and people saw it and came. I was so surprised, "My gosh!" I actually started to get involved here three and a half years ago and all of the sudden I know 200 people. I think I am already at least with one foot out there in my five year plan. So move into this new studio and seeing that I know a lot of people I am having my paintings not around the city but there are a lot of collectors already and in public places like in the Houston Independent School District I had two wonderful pieces in the exhibition invested of Texas in Tyler and so things are happening. And Houston is a great city but there are there are a lot of very good artist here and so it's not easy to go somewhere. I'm the best one to look at me it not like this but I cannot complain. I am very happy here in the city. People are very friendly, very open and the artist they help not like the artist in New York. It's not like in Europe. I think being almost there where I want to be out there. I want to bring happiness to people. For sure I would like to sell too, to be recognized. Okay I can tell you something. Sometimes it happens that there is somebody says, I bought a painting by I don't know let's say "Mary" it's completely different if you say I have a "Mary at home." Can you understand what I mean?

**Interviewee: Reis, Kelyne**

**Interview Date: February 28, 2014**

NH: Uh huh. (in the affirmative.)

KR: And that's what I want to be. Or where I want to be. So I don't want people say, "I have a piece by Kelyne." "I have a Kelyne." That's it. That's what I want. Where I want to be in five years people saying, "I have a piece Kelyne in my living room or in my office."

NH: Wow. You'll get there.

KR: I hope so.

End of Part 3

End of interview

