

# Shelby Studies, Teaches Art and Society

## Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. *College Talk*

“It was during my first year of college, in a class entitled ‘Women artists since 1945,’ that I saw how amazing visual culture is, how objects made by people endure to tell us about thoughts and issues that communities and individuals deal with around the globe.” This is how Dr. Karen Shelby explains why she became an art historian.

Shelby is a native of Taft, a small oil town in southern California. She got her master’s from the Ohio State University and her doctorate from the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. Today she is an associate professor in the Department of Fine and Performing Arts at the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences.

In reading her biography, one wonders whether the experience of having gone from a small town to a big city has had any impact on her career. “I don’t think very much, because I think of my classes as small towns, as small groups of people who work together. One of the things that I really liked about growing up in a small town was the sense of community and collaboration, and we can foster that sense in these very diverse classrooms. The best part, though, is that we have at our disposal all these arts institutions. In Ohio we had Oberlin College, which was amazing; the Cleveland Museum of Art; and the Columbus Museum of Art. But here, within a stone’s throw, you’ve got cultural institutions you can take your classes to no matter whether the field is art, dance, theater, or music,” says she.

Emphasis on pedagogy is in Shelby’s veins. “I think it is our role as educators to make our students interested in what we teach. I call my survey courses my reluctant learners, because they are in my courses mainly to get a good GPA so they can get into the business school, and I want them to understand how they fit into the history I teach. I want them to be excited about what they are looking at and to see themselves in those vast cultures. It’s kind of that I feel like my field is a window through which they can see themselves as well.”



Dr. Shelby with her students.

Photo by Shoval Tshuva

As a professor she loves to take students on field trips. “You can create projects that are very directive and still immersive, engaging their critical thinking in that space. You send them to The Metropolitan Museum of Art, pick an image you like, and formally analyze it, and they can analyze the actual museum itself. How is information conveyed to you as a visitor? Is The Met welcoming as you walk up those stairs to a Greco-Roman facade? How do you feel when you go to The Museum of Modern Art, with that glass and steel facade? I think that helps them engage in how art institutions also convey information to us, in addition to the collection.”

Shelby’s scholarly work has included representations of war in art, but how realistic can they be? “I think it’s almost impossible to really capture the horror of war. I think the artist who comes closest is Otto Dix. He was a German artist who served in Flanders, and well after the

war was over, he created a print series called ‘The War.’ He really shows the graphic nature of what it was to be sitting in a very cold trench with the decomposing body of your friend. In World War I they put groups of friends together in the same outfits, which changed, as we saw in ‘Saving Private Ryan,’ leading up to the Second World War. So, there was the horror of the physical situation, but the emotional connection was there as well,” says Shelby.

She has also looked into art and race in the U.S. “I find it really interesting how, across cultures, we create something at a very particular place and time. In the 1920s and 30s, we had a holdover of this benevolent house-servant, house-slave, or nanny who took care of the children, and in white culture that was still a comforting image. We were able to take that image of Aunt Jemima with the kerchief on her head, put her visage on pancake mix and syrup

as a marketing tool, and use it to sell comfort, joy, and care to a white American. But even after we moved away from that time and have gone through the 1960s and now the time of Black Lives Matter, we still don’t notice the use of black bodies as commodities.”

Shelby has also been very interested in using the latest technology as a pedagogical tool. “One of the things that I have always been really excited about in New York is how we can go to places. We can go to The Met, the Museum of Harlem; we can go down to the Veterans Memorial in Lower Manhattan. We can see these sites and understand their context. But we can’t visit sites outside of the U.S. as a class. So, I got the idea of using virtual reality images that can be viewed with cell phones, so that students can be immersed in an environment like St. Peter’s Basilica, for example. They have that exact same feeling of walking into the building and looking up, instead of me pointing to a flat screen and saying, ‘Here you walk in, and this is what you see when you look up.’ We don’t use virtual reality every day in class—there is other information that has to be conveyed too—but if we create a space like an Indian Stupa (a dome-shaped structure erected as a Buddhist shrine) that students can actually walk into and circumbulate, it helps them to understand the physical way in which the practitioners engage with that space.”

But, at the end of the day, what is Shelby trying to achieve in her classes? “I want students to leave my class and remember it later when they are having a business meeting in Tokyo, to understand the ramifications of the 17th century Edo period in Japan when they are meeting businesspeople for lunch. I think that’s really the goal of the humanities, to reflect our past into our present.”

*Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the Weissman School of Arts and Sciences at Baruch College of the City University of New York. The radio show on which these articles are based can be watched at: <https://vimeo.com/289108204>. He can be contacted via [Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu](mailto:Aldemaro.Romero@baruch.cuny.edu)*