

# INTERVIEW WITH ROBERTA MARKS

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I wander around Roberta Marks' high-ceilinged spacious studio at the very edge of the island, invited to 'look around.' It is a workshop, with deep shelves and hundreds of plastic boxes containing the things of which she makes art: photographs, babies' shoes, bones, stamps, French legal documents, old books – and on, and on. She tells me she's always been tidy, and her parents were too. This is far from the chaotic jumble of the cliché 'artist's studio' beloved by movies: it speaks of order, purpose, clarity of thought, and exact knowledge of what is needed. A new canvas, made of a painter's drop-sheet, stands at the entry, with a few objects suggestive of past wars fixed to it: it will become part of her upcoming exhibition at The Studios of Key West.

Her assistant, Tyler Buckheim-Trossett, who has worked with her for 14 years, has just had a baby, so she is awaiting her return. "For the last 9 months we have been three at work in the studio."

We sit behind white blinds that cut out the dazzle of the Atlantic Ocean immediately below us. She tells me of when she first encountered Buddhism, in the Himalayas, how she found a book by Thich Nhat Hanh in a bookshop in Berne, when she lived in Switzerland, how she heard him speak in Zurich. How she eventually became ordained, and facilitated retreats in Vietnam and Israel, at one time taking over from Thich Nhat Hanh, to help people with their anger and fear.

Roberta Marks' Buddhism is now so much a part of her that she speaks of it with calm and certainty and I feel myself slow down and take in this remarkable woman's effect. "My work comes from the inside, out," she tells me, "Like the baby." So, the exhibition will be about that movement – from the inner self out into the world. "My problems are the problems of the world." And that, inevitably, involves the current conflicts in Ukraine and Israel/Palestine and the painful subject of war. She explains the Buddhist concept of suffering to me, and the four Noble Truths: the truth of suffering, the cause of suffering, the end of suffering, and the truth of the path that leads to the end of suffering. Rather mischievously, she adds a fifth, "that suffering comes back."

"Everything in my life is recorded in my body, so when I need to tap into something, it automatically comes up," she says. This includes, of course, her childhood, youth, travels, the events of a long life – and also, the moment when she came to Key West and found herself in charge of a motel and bar where drug-running went on day and night. "I was so innocent, I had no idea." She is also, to my slight surprise, writing a novel, set in France.

On my way out, I pause before the last unfinished piece. The tatters of war, relics of human conflict, the debris we leave behind us – already strung there as a way of facing what we all find hard to face, and awaiting the artist's touch, the 'inside' that will emerge and complete it. It's been an hour of intense yet relaxed engagement, with Marks' little dog, Assia, scampering between us. I feel as if I've wanted this encounter for a long time – I've known Roberta Marks for years without us ever spending more than a few minutes together - and that as well as the beautiful book she gives me 'Roberta Marks, Works and Words', I have been given the gift on a Monday morning of a needed serenity.