

Oral History Interview
with
Angelika Sowka

Interview Conducted by
Julie Pearson-Little Thunder
March 13, 2021

Oklahoma's Immigrant Women Artists
Occupational Folklife
Oral History Project

Oklahoma Oral History Research Program
Edmon Low Library • Oklahoma State University
© 2021

Oklahoma's Immigrant Women Artists

Occupational Folklife Oral History Project

Interview History

Interviewer: Julie Pearson-Little Thunder
Editors: Jensen Bridges, Micki White

Automatic transcripts generated by the Zoom Video Communications platform.

The recording and transcript of this interview were processed at the Oklahoma State University Library in Stillwater, Oklahoma.

Project Detail

This project is supported by the Archie Green Fellowship of the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress.

The purpose of the *Immigrant Women Artists* Oral History Project is to examine the occupational folklife of first-generation immigrant women artists living in Oklahoma and the networks of support that allow them to pursue their vocations in a new environment. This series of interviews examines not only the cultural and occupational traditions that these artists nurture in straddling multiple cultural identities, but also the translation of an artist's occupational life between multiple cultural and physical spaces.

Legal Status

Scholarly use of the recordings and transcripts of the interview with Angelika Sowka is unrestricted. The interview agreement was signed on March 13, 2021.

Oklahoma's Immigrant Women Artists

Occupational Folklife Oral History Project

About Angelika Sowka...

Multimedia artist Angelika Sowka was born and raised in a small town in Poland, and she was inspired artistically by her mother and her older sister. At fifteen, she moved to the city of Nowy Wiśnicz to study art, and then she attended Pedagogical University of Kraków after high school. She always loved the use of light and shadow in photography, especially with the human figure and the abstract perspectives that could be captured, but she focused her university studies on painting, graphic design, and printmaking, with a specific passion for lithography. She earned her bachelor's and master's degrees, and then moved to Oklahoma with her husband. In 2020, ARTSPACE at Untitled in Oklahoma City accepted her for its Artist in Residence program, and the residency proved to be an eye-opening experience for Angelika. There, she learned new techniques of printmaking that influenced and developed her methods, and she began to use color in her prints, whereas prior to this, her color palette had been primarily black and white and monochromatic.

After ARTSPACE, Angelika continued living and working in Oklahoma City. Through her printmaking, drawing, painting, and photography, she interprets her feelings and experiences, and she portrays abstract views of the human body and human relationships. In this interview, she described differences between art she studied and produced in Poland as opposed to the art she has observed in America. She shared some highs and lows of her art career, and she detailed her hopes and plans for the future.

Oklahoma's Immigrant Women Artists

Occupational Folklife Oral History Project

Angelika Sowka

Oral History Interview

Interviewed by Julie Pearson-Little Thunder

March 13, 2021

Zoom Interview



[00:00:00]

Little Thunder *All right, this is Julie Pearson-Little Thunder with the Oklahoma Oral History Research Program at Oklahoma State University. Today is March 13, 2021, and this is a remote interview with Angelika Sowka for the Library of Congress' Occupational Folklife Project funded by the Archie Green Fellowship. I'm in Tulsa, and, Angelika, you're in Oklahoma City where you're a multimedia artist working in painting, photography, and printmaking. I'm looking forward to learning more about you and your work. Where were you born, and where did you grow up?*

Sowka *I was born in a small city in Poland, and I grew up actually there with my family. When I was fifteen, I moved to the other city to start my art [high] school.*

Little Thunder *Was it in Kraków? Excuse me.*

Sowka *It was in Nowy Wiśnicz, the city close to the Kraków. After high school, I was studying in Kraków.*

Little Thunder *So it sounds like you were interested in art early on, very early in your life.*

Sowka *Yes, I was.*

Little Thunder *Were you interested in art?*

Sowka *I wasn't doing art before I started high school, so it was the first time when I started [making] art. I was interested in because my mom was amateur painter and my big sister was also attending to the art high school, and it was kind of like because of them.*

Little Thunder *They were an inspiration.*

Sowka Yes.

Little Thunder *Yes, I was going to ask what your mother and father did for a living.*

Sowka So my mom is a nurse.

[00:02:19]

Little Thunder *So what was your first art experience, maybe, in high school or earlier that made you think you might want to explore art? Was it seeing your mom's paintings, or what was your first sort of attraction?*

Sowka So I think first thing was actually in high school when I met everything like different subjects, like different mediums. I think that photography was the most important to me in that time, and it developed me to studying the...to study graphic design and printmaking, yeah.

Little Thunder *What did you like about photography?*

Sowka I like the play with the lights, like with the lights and shadow. I like to photograph human body, so it was, like, interesting to me. With the photography, you can express yourself and show the human body in a different way, like some kind of the abstract way. I very like abstract art. I love to use this also in photography. I don't like to photograph the portraits or something like this. I like the whole body and show it in the abstract way.

Little Thunder *Yes, I love your photographs. They're really interesting.*

Sowka Thank you.

[00:04:16]

Little Thunder *So when you got to college, what did you study exactly?*

Sowka I did like double degree, so I studied painting. It was like I studied for five years painting, and I had there different media, different subject, different courses like the photography, illustration, painting, drawing, and even more. In the same time, I was studying printmaking and graphic design. It was like together. I did like the—I finished this one in a bachelor's degree, so it was like for three years.

Little Thunder *A very, very deep background in all those media, and you got your master's degree, also, there.*

Sowka Yes.

Little Thunder *You specialized in printmaking. Why did you decide on that?*

Sowka Okay, so I like kind of, if I can say that, I fell in love in lithography. Like it was the first printmaking technique that I learned. It was something that I liked and I like still. This was the first printmaking technique. I also did my diploma there in...lithography studio at the university. I feel like this project was the best one, if I can say that. (Laughs) I like it very much.

[00:06:30]

Little Thunder *Can you explain a little bit what lithography is for us, just the simplest....*

Sowka Okay, so lithography is the printmaking technique that for the matrix you use the flat stone, and this technique is a flat technique, which means that you don't have on your matrix any differences between the high, like on the surrounding. You need to use the acid to change the environment on the stone to print from the stone. Yeah, I think this was the simplest way that I could explain this.

Little Thunder *Good job. How did you end up in Oklahoma?*

Sowka I moved here with my husband. He got internship here, and we moved together. He's biotechnologist and, yeah, that's why.

Little Thunder *What were your first impressions of Oklahoma when you got here?*

Sowka So the first impression were people, actually, because everyone is really kind. Here is like the hospitality, and I feel very good here. I hear a lot of compliments on the streets like, "Oh, I like your glasses," "I like your shoes," or something like this. This was pretty different. Yeah, it is this.

Little Thunder *How about your first impressions of the Oklahoma art scene? What were they?*

Sowka Okay, so I started from Paseo, and so this was the first place where I was seeing art here.

Little Thunder *I'm going to just add that Paseo is one of the, like, shopping areas in Oklahoma City, arts district.*

Sowka I noticed that Oklahoma art is different because here, Oklahoma artists use a lot of colors. It was like...it was different, yeah. I noticed that, also, Oklahoma artists use the topics like connected to the United States, to the country, to the Oklahoma, to the city. ...

[00:10:05]

Little Thunder *So really sort of specific themes that were...local themes, sort of. How did you get involved with the residency at [ARTSPACE at] Untitled? You have a residency there.*

Sowka I was looking for something for me to do here because in the beginning, I couldn't work or I couldn't even drive. I applied for every document I needed, and during that I was waiting, I started looking for something else. I found this on the internet, the opportunity to apply there, and I applied. Then I got this. It was pretty like, I applied and they chose me. I started there in January 2020. I learned there a lot. I learned how to do screen printing like I have never done this before, so this was like the first time. I did my whole project in this printmaking technique.

Little Thunder *What were the requirements for the residency? What are, kind of, the rules that you have to.... Are you free to do whatever you want, or how does it work?*

Sowka I needed to do a set of prints...and I needed to share them with ARTSPACE. It was like forty prints, and twenty was for me and twenty for [them].

Little Thunder *I see.*

Sowka Yeah, and I did something different because I could do everything what I wanted. I have created prints from the same two matrices, but each print was in different colors. It was the set from the different colors printed from the same matrix. It was something unusual here because usually artists...here should do the prints from the same color, like the same set of prints, [the same colors for each copy].

[00:13:40]

Little Thunder *... Cool, yes, I've seen pictures of that series. What do you like about working in a series?*

Sowka I like my ideas. I always have some idea in the beginning, and I do sketches. I like the series because like my idea develops. That's why I do series, because I have something, and then I want to do, like, more of this and continue this first idea. That's why.

Little Thunder *Continue exploring. Is that also true for your photography and your painting, or are they more independent units when you create them?*

Sowka In photography, I also like to do series. This is also because I like to have my project done in the way that I could display it in the gallery as my own exhibit.

Little Thunder *With a certain number of photographs.*

Sowka Yeah.

Little Thunder *Well, I love your photographs, and, like you said...often it's an angle, a nude body shot at a certain angle that makes it look very abstract, posed in these unusual poses. A lot of times, I noticed you sort of focus on hands, people's hands, and I wonder what's interesting to you about hands.*

Sowka ... This one was created for the exhibition, and it was the theme gestures. I'm not sure if this is the word, like what you can do with your hand.

Little Thunder *Gestures, yes.*

Sowka Gestures, oh, thank you so much.

Little Thunder *Yes, you're right. Yeah, oh!*

Sowka Yeah, it was something that inspired me, like what kind of gesture you can do and what this expressed.

[00:16:38]

Little Thunder *In one of your artist statements, you talk about emotion being the source of a lot of your imagery. What are some ways that you try to make sure the viewer feels a strong emotion when they're looking at your work?*

Sowka In my art, I want to like maybe (I don't know if this is the word) make people to see what I am like inside me. I want them to feel what I feel. Those emotions in my art are inspired by my past and my future, also, like what I think about something or something like this, and about the present. This is always something from my life. Yeah, I think about the topic, and I think about how this is connected with me.

Little Thunder *Cool. You've also done illustrations. I really like your illustrations. They feel completely different. They're more whimsical, more light, you know, and feeling. I wondered what projects you have done illustrations for.*

Sowka What do you mean? What kind of illustration?

Little Thunder *Well, they're on your website, yes.*

Sowka Okay, because I have, like, few there. I have illustrations for the book I did, and I have also the illustrations like the person inside the room or something like this. I'm not sure what you are talking about.

Little Thunder *So you did a book.*

Sowka It was the university project, so it wasn't published or anything. It was a book about Buddhism. I illustrated those illustrations, and I created all book like I set up this in InDesign application.

[00:19:30]

Little Thunder *They're great. I think you should do more. So when the pandemic started in 2020, you shared with me that a few months into the shutdown, you took advantage of that to really work on your English. How did you go about that?*

Sowka Okay, so I can say that my English was very bad in the beginning when I moved here. I had English at school, but it was different here, the different accent and people also talk pretty fast. I was like, "Okay, I cannot understand anything." I started studying, and my husband helped me because his English is very good. He helped me with grammar, and actually he helped me study. We were, like, reading together. I was reading out loud. He was correcting me, and actually this was the best way to improve my English, to read out loud. After the pandemic—yeah, we have still pandemic. After the first lockdown we had here in Oklahoma City, I was back in ARTSPACE or in my work, and I was more comfortable to speak to people. It helped me a lot.

Little Thunder *You took great advantage of that time. What's been the reception for your work so far? How have people taken to your work so far?*

Sowka Like what do you mean?

Little Thunder *Maybe some compliments that you've gotten on your work or some reactions that you've gotten to your work.*

Sowka I heard that my art from the website and mostly the lithography, that this is pretty dark art and what I have inside that I did something like this. Besides this, I heard pretty good comments about my art. People like it. Mostly this colorful project from ARTSPACE from my residency, I had exhibition here at the ARTSPACE, and a lot of people was there to see this. I heard that this was good one. So, yeah, mostly like the positive comments.

Little Thunder *I like your black-and-whites, personally. I think they're very dramatic and very emotional.*

Sowka Thank you.

[00:22:55]

Little Thunder *What ties, or are there any ties that you have with the.... There's a Polish American community, of course, in Oklahoma, like everywhere else. I don't know if you've met people from that community. What ties do you have?*

Sowka I have met some Polish people here in Oklahoma City, and they are mostly people from the internship that my husband is on, like scientists mostly. We hang out sometimes. Maybe not now because of the pandemic, but before the pandemic, we were meeting.... Oh, I forgot the word.

Little Thunder *Pretty regularly.*

Sowka Yeah, yes, this is the word. Thank you. (Laughter)

Little Thunder *How much have you networked with other immigrant women artists?*

Sowka I think I don't have any. I know artists from ARTSPACE, from my work in Oklahoma Contemporary Arts Center. There is a few artists, but I don't know any immigrants artists here.

Little Thunder *Immigrant artists here. How important are galleries to you right now in marketing your work? How important are they?*

Sowka Like the...I don't know....

Little Thunder *Galleries. Are you using art galleries very much, or are you mostly working at ARTSPACE?*

Sowka Yeah, so I mostly work in ARTSPACE. I'm a member now there, so I can use a studio anytime I need. I mostly work there.

Little Thunder *Is it a cooperative, Angelika? Is it a co-op where people take turns running it? Do the artists take turns working at ARTSPACE to keep it running, or is it....*

Sowka I don't actually understand. What do you mean?

Little Thunder *That's all right. I imagine it's either the artists who run the space or it has a manager. It has a gallery owner.*

Sowka Oh, yeah, yeah, so there [are] artists that lead the classes there because there are classes for students, or open art studios. Some artists also lead classes,

like the member artists. For example, I could lead the class there, but I don't know. I don't feel like I want to.

Little Thunder *Go there yet.*

Sowka Yeah. For now, I just want to use the space to create my own art.

Little Thunder *And you had at least one opening during the pandemic, right? I saw you kind of in front of your work with a mask. I don't know....*

Sowka Oh, yeah, so it was in December, and this is the project that I have created for Artist in Residence. This is the project, and I had the exhibit there.

[00:27:10]

Little Thunder *With the color series. You're also an artist in residence at [Cristo Rey Catholic High School] in Oklahoma City. When did you start that?*

Sowka Yeah, so I also start in January 2020. I was teaching photography there for a few months, and it was after class classes. Now I'm back there because I had a break there and now I'm back there. I teach media art in high school.

Little Thunder *But you're teaching virtually, correct?*

Sowka Yes, I was teaching virtually, and now we have, like, hybrid.

Little Thunder *Okay.*

Sowka We have a few hours in school and a few online.

Little Thunder *What were the challenges of teaching photography virtually? What were the challenges? What was hard about it?*

Sowka It was mostly to keep students attending to this course. Actually, also the teaching via Zoom, it was hard because we couldn't, like, use the studio. We couldn't take a photo together in a class. Yeah, it was hard. I was mostly saying about theory, right? They needed to practice by themselves.

Little Thunder *Right, you were talking about theory and, yeah, letting them practice. What's been the hardest art project you've done since you got to Oklahoma, the hardest one?*

Sowka I don't know. I think if I have to compare it to my being in Poland, and so there I did the hardest project that, I think, ever. Yeah, nothing was that hard here, for now. (Laughter)

Little Thunder *And what one was that, again? Was that the....*

Sowka It was my lithography.

Little Thunder *Lithography.*

Sowka Yeah, it was hard because I was printed on the large fabric and it was, like, ten meters. It was very large, and it was very hard to keep it clean on the press and everything.

[00:30:44]

Little Thunder *You have your hard stuff behind you. Well, what's been a highlight of your artwork here in Oklahoma so far? What's been a high point?*

Sowka So I think the time that I was in the Artist in Residency program, it was the very good time. I think it was the one step to me to open to art here and to the people, so this one.

Little Thunder *And how about, like, a really low point, a difficult time here?*

Sowka So the low point, I think time to time I have the low points for some time because, like, I don't have any ideas or I'm sad or something like this, so I don't want to create anything. I think this is because I miss my family and friends. Sometimes I feel pretty bad, and I don't want to do anything, yeah, but nothing specific I can say.

Little Thunder *How often do you communicate with your family and friends?*

Sowka Every day. (Laughs) I talk with my sisters. We have the online chat together. We, like, text every day.

Little Thunder *That's great. I understand you and your husband are moving to Montreal in July. How did that come about, and what are you looking forward to?*

Sowka Okay, so we are moving to Montreal in September, but in July we're moving from here. We're going to Poland for a summer, and in September we're moving to Montreal.

Little Thunder *Okay.*

Sowka I would like to develop my career as an artist there. Also, I would like to develop my graphic design skills and work in the graphic design industry. Like, I would like to design websites.

Little Thunder *Okay, yeah, well, it's a wonderful city. I know you'll enjoy it there.*

Sowka Yeah, I really like that we are going to move to Montreal because this is like more European city, so this is pretty good.

[00:33:52]

Little Thunder *Yes, you hear a lot of languages up there, and it's wonderful, all the different peoples that live up there. Is there anything we forgot to talk about or anything you'd like to add about your art journey so far?*

Sowka Sure. I think I said mostly everything. I look forward to move to Montreal. I will have good memories from Oklahoma City. I'm very glad that we end up here because it was good experience and it still is.

Little Thunder *Well, I'm glad. I'm glad to hear that. Thank you for your time today, Angelika, and I look forward to keeping track of your future creations.*

Sowka Thank you so much. Thank you for inviting me for this interview.

Little Thunder *I enjoyed it.*

----- *End of interview* -----