

Career Narrative
Anne Pollard James

I wasn't an artist until I became one.

I built my life to be something completely different, but at 47 I discovered that I was an artist. It wasn't by accident but was absolutely unexpected.

I founded a real estate brokerage, specializing in historic preservation projects in downtown Tulsa, a career I was incredibly proud of and one that had given me endless gifts and countless challenges. My identity was woven into this career and I worked daily like I had something to prove. Because as a strong woman in Oklahoma, I did.

Working "as female," in Oklahoma, in industries predominantly and very happily male, gave me opportunities daily to demand something different. Whether I was in a boardroom or mechanical room, this world of men required daily costume changes. I was fluent in *costume*. Women are fluent in *costume*. Because we have to be.

Finding art in 2020, specifically painting, transformed me. I didn't grow up doing art, didn't doodle, paint, or draw, but suddenly, I had this language I'd spent my entire life not knowing I needed. For 47 years, I didn't have a way to speak to those embodied experiences. Finding painting was like discovering an internal Rosetta Stone. Every experience to then—the way I navigated as a woman in this business that I'd built, in rooms that were never made for me, and in spaces that didn't always want powerful women—felt like Tetris pieces falling into place. The Pandemic gave me the time and space to learn, practice, and paint. The internet was my teacher. In October 2021, I found a studio space, and once I started painting, I didn't stop.

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anne@annepollardjames.com

Becoming an artist at midlife was powerful in ways it never could've been had I been an artist my whole life. I certainly wouldn't have had as much to say and I definitely wouldn't have had the confidence of my voice to say it. It took middle age, menopause, the shift in capacity, and the pandemic, to create the most chaotic perfect storm. Painting gave voice to all of that.

In April 2022, I left preservation and real estate altogether to paint full-time. That September, I had my first solo show *Surfacing* and I turned 50. There was before painting and after painting.

At 52, my voice is strong, unapologetic, loud, and absolutely fearless. Had I had art before, perhaps I wouldn't have needed or been able to paint it quite so loudly.

I'm a feminist painter and my work is joyful reclamation. It is loud, hard, soft, sweet, and sharp, and always through the lens of the spectacular strength of women.

In the five years since I began, I've completed over 200 oil paintings exploring this strength, from intimate figures and provocative imagery to vivid floral compositions. My work ranges from small, personal pieces to large-scale, commissioned projects. I exhibit in Oklahoma and New York, having been in numerous group shows in both, as well as solo shows at Frank Lloyd Wright's Price Tower, Bartlesville (2023), and Positive Space Gallery, Tulsa (2022). Just this week I shipped a painting to California for inclusion in my first group museum show. 'She Moves in Blue' will hang in the Sasse Museum of Art for the month of January, 2026.

My painting *Pretty Mouth* is the cover of Nicole Callahan's book *This Strange Garment* (Terrapin Press, 2023). My painting *Beachball* lives on a national vodka label, and soon-to-be-released tequila bottle (Beachball Spirits, Inc.)". My painting *Ophelia, Who?* was awarded Best in Show

during Upstate Art Weekend this August, and my painting *Boy Tears* has become a kind of Tulsa anthem for *sororitas* (N. Latin).

Additionally, I was fortunate to be included in the photographic retrospective as the artist from Oklahoma by Stephen Kennedy, invited and proudly joined the National Association of Women Artists (NAWA f.1889), and was even invited to teach high school art! In my era of saying yes (an era which I'm still in), I did it for 18 months. I didn't go to art school, and I haven't been a teacher, but I said yes!

In 2023 I founded Carson House Tulsa, transforming the space into a contemporary gallery, working studio, and artist residency, centering unapologetically to women while welcoming all. It's what I wished I'd had when I started painting. Programming includes weekly life drawing and workshops for painting, poetry, writing, and peri/menopausal women's health, all designed to foster intergenerational connections and broaden access to the arts. Carson House is a social and creative force where space itself is a medium for empowerment.

In five years, painting has redefined my life and my work.

I look back at the path to now and it's dotted with ridiculous moments of audacity. It was audacious to walk away from a career that I'd worked so hard to build to "go make art." It was audacious to think I could just "go teach high school art." Most recently, it was audacious to apply and go to a writer's workshop where all of the women were authors and many were poet laureates. But I did them anyway.

Most recently, it was audacious of me to apply for a Guggenheim Fellowship as a 52-year-old who's only been painting for five years, but I did it. I'm so hungry to continue exploring this

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creative practice of mine, and it drives me to believe in big experiences, like completing *The Delight Project*. The only way that I'm definitely not going to get opportunities like a Guggenheim Fellowship, is if I don't apply.

My life has been marked by these big moments of exceptional possibilities and I'm here for it. Regardless of the outcome, simply applying for a Guggenheim Fellowship gave me the time and focus to really dig into the how/what/why of my current projects at their highest level. In fact, I believe in these projects so much that I've bought the monumentally scaled canvases, have completed 1/10 of the works and am in the process of bridging the archival interviews and photographs into a monumental body of work, fully actualized and ready to stand in exhibition in Winter 2026.

With deep appreciation,

Anne Pollard James