



Episode Transcription: "Neon Talks with Jenna: She Bends"

Jenna Canals:

From Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, this *Frit City*. I'm Jenna Canals. Museum of Glass is presenting *She Bends: Redefining Neon Legacy* now through October of this year. The museum is so excited to host this exhibition, which highlights the dynamic work of women and gender-expansive neon benders creating work today. For decades, neon signage has been used to send messages out into the world. This podcast will dive into how neon is evolving and how artists who are using this traditionally functional medium are pushing boundaries and speaking a new language within the art world. And today, we have two incredible guests joining us in conjunction with *She Bends: Redefining Neon Legacy*, Kelsey Issel and Jude Abu Zaineh. These two talented women comprise one half of the curatorial team of *Redefining Neon Legacy* and one 9th of the exhibiting artists in the exhibition. Thank you so much for both being here.

Kelsey Issel:

We're happy to be here.

Jude Abu Zaineh:

Thanks for having us.

Jenna Canals:

I know it's been a wild weekend through install openings, all the demos you guys have had in the Hot shop, but I want to start kind of from the beginning here. What is She Bends? How did all this get started? What's the creation story? What's everything about?

Kelsey Issel:

Yeah. She Bends was started by my partner in She Bends, Meryl Pataky, who founded She Bends in 2017. And it started, really, as a need for support for women in the neon trade. And it started as a survey exhibition at the Museum of Neon Art in LA, just highlighting women artists who are working in neon who are making the work themselves. And from there, it really expanded. It came up to a gallery that I was running at the time in San Francisco, and Meryl and I worked together to add public education programming, and then we started doing artist resources. And throughout the last – what has it been, five years? – we've been able to do really cool stuff like artist residencies, we've done more exhibitions. We've been able to really home in more on curatorial concepts that we're really interested in, like the one at the Museum of Glass. This has been a real privilege for us. And yeah, really stretch our limbs and dedicate ourselves to the progress of neon as a process-driven fine art form and be able to give access to more voices in the neon medium.





Jenna Canals:

Right. So, She Bends puts a high importance on community involvement and outreach. Can you talk about some of your programs and their impact?

Kelsey Issel:

Yeah. Public education is a really big part of what we do because neon is pretty ubiquitous in the human landscape. We see it at our local corner store in a beer sign. We see it on a cinema marquee. We see it as art. But not a lot of people know how it's made. And neon is made the same way it was made 110 years ago, 112 years ago. It's made by hand, bend by bend, by a craftsman. And so, a lot of the public education we do is always bringing neon demos to our exhibitions, or just doing neon demos in public spaces or educational spaces, and teaching people, and showing people how it's made. Teaching people about the colors, the history of the craft, and getting people excited about this medium that's really kind of having a resurgence right now. Speaker 2 ([04:13](#))

Jenna Canals:

Yeah, it really is, honestly. But I really just want to talk about the incredible roster and community of women working in neon that you've been able to build through She Bends. You've got international artists, they're in various stages of their careers. So, I was wondering: what makes a She Bends artist? Is there criteria, an application, or is it just a particular essence?

Kelsey Issel:

Well, a She Bends artist is someone who's worked with us before. They've either been exhibited in one of our exhibitions or they've been part of one of our programs. And, yeah, we try to be as inclusive as possible. We are curating based on a particular concept or we're curating based on a particular region or a particular space. So, that's kind of how we bring people into the fold. But, for the most part, like Jude, who's with us, she's an amazing artist in her own right and her own very mixed medias, and she was really interested in exploring neon, and so she reached out to us and especially to Meryl. And Meryl invited her into her space and brought her through a mentorship residency and actually produced the work *tend to grow*, which is the work you see when you first walk into the gallery, during a residency with She Bends.

Jenna Canals:

Jude, I do want to ask you what your journey in neon has been like. I do know that you are a multimedia/mixed media artist and have really come into this fold here in neon, but I just wanted to talk about that journey coming into the neon community, especially through She Bends.

Jude Abu Zaineh:

For me, I've always been an interdisciplinary artist. Before my foray into neon, a lot of my work





was based in video installations, sculptures, and bio-art. And bio-art is the intersection of art, science, and technology. And so, for me, as someone who's always had this affinity and curiosity around the sciences – and I say this anywhere you hear me speaking on a panel, or artist talk, or whatever – I am an artist first and foremost, not a scientist, but I'm very driven by my curiosities in the sciences. And so, that was one of the kind of attractive things for me when I was looking into Neon as an extension of my very multimedia and interdisciplinary studio practice. Also, a lot of the work that I do, conceptually, is rooted in identity politics, place-making, and belonging as a person of color, someone who's moved around very much in their upbringing and had somewhat of, like, a transient lifestyle. And so, for someone who is part of this cultural diaspora, a lot of my works conceptually grapple with identity politics and place-making and all of these, kind of, very vulnerable and intimate experiences. And when I was thinking about the next phase of artworks and this series of works that I wanted to make, it was very... Initially, it was rooted in text, and it just made sense for me to dive into neon to kind of materialize all of these thoughts and artistic endeavors that I wanted to go after. And for me, it was also important to have my hand very present in the work, as opposed to coming up with this idea or design and passing off the design to someone else to fabricate. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that; every artist and creative works in different ways. But for me, I'm very process driven, so it's very important for me to truly have my hand present in as much of the work, or as many parts of the work, as I possibly can. Also, keeping in mind that I'm only human, I can only learn so many things in one lifetime. So, when I first wanted to enter into the world of neon, naturally the next step would be to try and source out different neon studios or neon shops. At the time, I was based in Canada, and, in this small town that I was in, I think there was only, like, two or three different vendors that I was aware of. And so, I had reached out to these different studio shops, and I was turned away because I was a visibly, quote unquote, younger woman, I wasn't really taken seriously. And me being the stubborn, persistent person that I am, I just couldn't sit, like, I could not take no for an answer. And I'm glad I didn't take no for an answer, because after being turned away and essentially kind of, like, not being taken seriously through the power of social media, I found Meryl and I connected with her. And I think at the time, She Bends was kind of, like, still in its infancy. I think She Bends had only been around for about a year or so. And so, it was, like, really exciting to be able to tap into this space and be taken under the wing of Meryl and her mentorship. She was very generous to invite me into her studio in San Francisco, so I made the trek all the way to the West Coast. So, it was quite an investment of time, money, energy, and it's been a labor of love. And I've since really kind of taken off with the neon as part of my studio practice and kind of, like, diving in headfirst with it. So, I'm glad I didn't take no for an answer, but it kind of sucked to hear no.

Jenna Canals:

Definitely. I think that – I mean, we can talk about this more and we definitely will – but no is a word that a lot of women hear generally, but definitely inside of the art world and in male-driven





media, particularly. And so, I do want to come back to your work, but maybe we can just talk for our listeners about the general history of neon. So, historically, how do we feel neon benders fit into this neon world? Or do you see this as new territory that's being explored?

Kelsey Issel:

Oh, it's definitely new territory. I mean, this is a pretty crude history of neon, but neon came into existence kind of as this scientific wonder in the early 1900s. It was brought to all the world's fairs and kind of, like, rose into its glory in the kind of slumped during the Depression – this is a very US-based history – and in the fifties, it kind of rose again with capitalism. And in the seventies, it was associated with urban blight, so it was taken down from a lot of storefronts and cities. It was associated with kind of the seedy areas of town. And then kind of came up again in the eighties that, you know, you got that neon aesthetic in the eighties. In the nineties, it was almost wiped out again because of the advent of LED sign making, so neon wasn't used as much as a commercial trade. Now, we're seeing this kind of resurgence of the craft more as a fine art form because it's not needed as a commercial medium as much anymore. But the craftspeople who really take it seriously as a form to be preserved and as a fine art form are stewarding this craft and making sure that it survives and passing it off more intentionally. And again, that's really what this show at the Museum of Glass is all about, is seeing how the teaching methodologies over the past, really, two decades have been shifting what concepts are being discovered and tackled in the neon medium. And historically, when a lot of people think of neon art, they think of artists, like, in the Pop Art movement, like Bruce Nauman and then later Tracey Emin or Patrick Martinez. And these artists, who made incredibly important work, were making work largely in response to neon's commercial and advertising history, and they were making work that was fabricated by commercial shops. And so, we're able to kind of stand on their shoulders now and explore further into artists who are making the work themselves, who are from more diverse backgrounds and therefore putting forth more diverse narratives and bringing different thoughts, processes, and concepts to the craft itself.

Jenna Canals:

So, I understand that one of the main portions of She Bends is transforming this historically industrial medium into an artistic medium that's used to convey and sometimes enhance the conceptual aspects of a work. Jude, I just want to talk with you about that specifically. Is there anything that neon, you feel, does for your work? Why did you want to go towards this medium? I know that you said you're driven by science and art, and so much of neon and glass making is chemistry, but I just want to hear kind of from you. Why neon? Why this medium? And how does it enhance your work?

Jude Abu Zaineh:

Yeah, outside of my, like I said, my, just, deep curiosities in the sciences and trying to bridge the





gap between the sciences and contemporary fine art, neon just made sense for a large portion of my work because of these, kind of, very internalized and vulnerable experiences and feelings I was trying to convey more outwardly into the world. And so, it made sense to use a medium like neon that, historically, the way most people tend to experience it is very public-facing and kind of outwardly into the world, and I wanted to take this medium in its most, I guess, expected notion and kind of flip it on its head and use it to express these internalized, personal, and vulnerable feelings and experiences in this very, I guess, loud and evocative way. And so, outside of some of the text-based pieces that I've made, and make, I've also been doing a lot of text-based works both in English and in Arabic. And that's one way that I think it really just pushes the medium forward more conceptually in terms of being more inclusive with cultural narratives, identity politics, and pushing the medium beyond what we tend to experience it as just kind of this flat, commercial, capitalist signage.

Jenna Canals:

Yeah, I think that definitely, for a moment there, neon, especially in the American realm, is very much related to capitalism and consumerism. But thank you, Jude. We love a subversive moment. We need this. Do you want to talk a little more specifically about those concepts that are being exhibited or conveyed through *tend to grow*, which is the piece that you have in *She Bends: Redefining Neon Legacy*?

Jude Abu Zaineh:

tend to grow is a series of neon watermelons. It's a large-scale installation comprised of a number of individual watermelons. All were made lovingly during a residency at Meryl's studio in San Francisco. And correct me if I'm wrong, Kelsey, but I believe this was the first She Bend's residency that you guys hosted.

Kelsey Issel:

It was. We'd had a couple informal ones, and, yeah, that was the first one that we really put public. Yeah, that really got us going, for sure.

Jude Abu Zaineh:

So, I was able to make those pieces during my time in Meryl's studio out on the West Coast. And it was a really meaningful piece to make at a time where political tensions and more difficult conversations were coming more and more to the public forefront. I think it was made a year ago, a year or two ago, yeah. And it was at the height of... We had this global pandemic. The world had completely shut down in so many different ways. We had the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement with the unfortunate and violent and tragic death of George Floyd. The ongoing struggle for basic human rights and freedom in Palestine. And at the time, the Palestinian flag had just been decreed as illegal and people couldn't fly it, or wave it, or have it hung anywhere in





Palestine, as a form of protest, as a sign of liberation, of human rights, injustices, and that sort of thing. And so, it just made sense to be able to capture everything that was happening through the imagery of a watermelon. And the watermelon is very important for us Palestinians, because over the years of this occupation, through colonial forces in Palestine, the flag, a number of times, has been made illegal. And so, the watermelon becomes a stand in for Palestinians for the flag during these times, because the watermelon resembles, or mirrors, the same colors of the flag: red, green, white and black. And so, it made sense for me to reproduce the watermelon in this way, through neon, and to be able to capture the light in these dark moments, quite literally and quite figuratively. And it was just, outside of that, I think aesthetically, it's just a really beautiful piece. And of course I'm biased. It's my own artwork. Of course I love the things that I make. I have to love them. Otherwise, what's the point? But it is a very attractive piece. It's very alluring, it's really large. It feels very happy and bright and welcoming. And I tend to create a lot of my pieces this way, where it provides this aesthetic value no matter what medium I'm working with. But then the more time you spend with it, the more it starts to reveal. Maybe you read the wall text and you get to hear and understand what this piece is about, and it reveals these deeper, more important layers beyond just the aesthetic value. And so, that's all of the things that I'm hoping to capture with this watermelon piece, *tend to grow*.

Jenna Canals:

That is incredible, beautiful, powerful. You are a fan of your own work, but I can say I've been in the exhibition space, and it is really, really an impactful and installation driven piece. It has quite an effect, I will say. [As an aside to the audience] You guys should come and see it. Please do.

Jude Abu Zaineh:

Thank you.

Jenna Canals:

I know that some of your work, though, also focuses on food and genealogy and how that kind of relates back to diaspora. Is there something else with the watermelons that's maybe present in your culture? Or is it truly that stand in for the flag?

Jude Abu Zaineh:

It's a stand in for the flag, but also, I think... Palestine's other moniker, many monikers, is "the Land of Milk and Honey" because of its very fertile soil and the agriculture that just so easily grows there. And watermelon is one of those staple foods that's grown in Palestine. So, it also made that connection very easy and very seamless in terms of the concepts that I was trying to work with. Outside of the work that I do in neon, one of the many different disciplines that I fall under is social practice and pre-COVID, pre-pandemic, much of the work that I was doing was based in hosting food gatherings. I would create a spread of traditional Palestinian foods, invite people to





participate, and quite literally break bread and share in these foods together. And the conversations would be very much part of the installation and the performance. The leftovers would then be gathered from everyone's plates, and I use them as part of my bio-art practice. So, I'm usually growing different foods and bacteria and things in petri dishes, and the documentation then makes its way into the video installations and these other large-scale sculptures that I make. So, it is quite cyclical, I think, the way that I work. And so, I don't think it's an accident that, somehow, I ended up making kind of this illustration of a food in the neon that I'm also making. It feels very much in conversation with some of the other ways that I work in food in my practice.

Jenna Canals:

Yeah, there's a cohesion there. You're continuing your story.

Jude Abu Zaineh:

But also, I love food, so I think it's really easy and fun.

Jenna Canals:

Yeah. So, these are some deep concepts, and with accessibility in the field, with how it can be so gendered, you speak about how you reached out to Meryl. Did you feel like working with a woman particularly allowed you to have a safer space to kind of work with these concepts and elaborate on them?

Jude Abu Zaineh:

Absolutely. I think one of the things that I am so appreciative of the work that She Bends as an organization does, like through the work that Kelsey and Meryl so lovingly do, is that they've done an incredible job at building this network of generally underrepresented people in this industry. It is a very white, male-dominated industry. There're no ifs, ands, or buts about it, it's just the way that it is. And that's fine, but there's also time for change. And they've done such an incredible job of formulating this network and group of people to make all of these resources accessible to one another. Even something as simple as being able to connect with the other people in the She Bends organization has been instrumental. Outside of the one on one that I've had directly with Meryl and spending time in her studio, that's been instrumental in my journey as a neon bender and someone who's really taken on neon headfirst. It's also been just as important to have these touchpoints through social media and the network that they've built to be able to just talk and see *What's up?* and *What are the latest and greatest things you're working on?* and *I'm really messing up this bend. What am I doing wrong?* How can I tap into these other brilliant minds and incredible artists as well? So, I think that's another really great piece of it, is that neon requires this mentor/mentee relationship. It's not something that you can just go out into a craft store or an art store and pick up the materials and just go into your... hole up into your bedroom for the



weekend and just play and come up with something. It's not as accessible as buying paints from the Dollar Store or something like that. You need to be able to have access to someone. If you're new in the game and wanting to start from ground zero, you have to work with someone that already has the tools, has the equipment, and most importantly, has the knowledge and is willing to share that with you. And She Bends has been just pioneering in that, in my opinion.

Jenna Canals:

Yeah, I know that one of the major portions of the exhibition, *She Bends: Redefining Neon Legacy*, is a focus on women benders who have been taught and mentored by women. We know that, in neon, it's very much this mentor/mentee, apprentice trade. But how is this relationship different from other mixes of gendered relationships? How does this change, or paving this path really affect, neon?

Kelsey Issel:

Yeah, I mean, most of the artists that we have worked with were taught by men. That's just how it's been for a really long time, and we owe a lot to them. But it is a different culture. Some people have had really horrible experiences in male-dominated sign shops. And I think that's why there's such a desire for these women to pass off the trade in a way that's accessible and inclusive, and not just use those words, but actually be inclusive, be welcoming, answer questions and not make you feel like you can't do it or you're stupid. Create a space where people can experiment and play. You don't have to do it perfectly. I think that's why it's so important to have teachers who are also artists. They understand that it doesn't have to be a perfect bend, that it's about the artist's hand. And yeah, it really affects the trade. I mean, we see it we see it with the amazing work that artists like Jude are making, that they have the space to experiment. They have the mentorship of someone who really wants them to make great artwork and great conceptual artwork. It doesn't have to be the most perfect thing. Both for Jude and for Meryl, seeing the artist's hand in neon is really important, and the artist's hand is often taken out of neon. Everything wants to look the same. That's how, commercially, it's done. And so, I think it's a huge step forward to have spaces that are safe for women and generally underrepresented people in neon to learn and also be fun spaces to experiment, to create, to play.

Jenna Canals:

We can see in the exhibition that there are a lot of concepts being explored. You can truly see so many different voices and avenues for people to kind of grapple with what's happening today, tomorrow, and many years before with themselves. But I was wondering what that selection process for the pieces in the show was like. So, we've got the one criterion, she's with She Bends, and then she's also been taught or mentored by a woman bender. But in choosing these specific pieces, how did we come to the collection that we've got today in the museum?





Kelsey Issel:

Well, the show exhibits five neon bender artists and their four teachers. And actually, some of those students are actually teachers themselves, which is amazing. And so, we really looked to the teachers first. We've been aware of those artists for a long time. We've worked with them since the beginning. Sarah Blood has been a professor at Alfred University for a decade now. She's, I think, the only tenured woman neon professor. And so, she's done incredible things for our field in creating an amazing, creative, safe space for artists to learn neon as an art form. Meryl, obviously, has been an educator for, again, a decade. Stephanie Sarah Lifshutz, based out of Brooklyn, is an amazing sign maker and an amazing artist. She's one of the most talented small text artists that we've seen. And Kacie Lees has been teaching at School of the Art Institute of Chicago. And they all have this really creative way of thinking about how they pass off the trade. They're not just teaching neon. They think about the pedagogy really intricately, and they pass their torch very intentionally. And that's why we wanted to start the exhibition... When you walk into the exhibition, right before Jude's piece is Kacie Lees'. She has a series of three pieces, and the middle one is her process of making *Neon Primer*, which is a handbook on light construction. And it's a really amazing resource that dives into the physics of light, and the chemistry of neon, and the history of light art, and the sciences that come into neon. And she's an incredibly artistic teacher. Another one of her pieces there is Hanging Neon in Space. It's on a nineties-looking TV. And that started by her wanting to make a video for her class of how to hang neon. But then she got really into it and put it on a green screen and made it in space. And it's like, no one else would do that. You have to be a teacher and an artist to be able to think to do something like that and create a resource for your students that's so accessible and so creative. So, yeah, we looked to our teachers who have been exhibiting with us for a long time and the compelling work that their students were making. And so, yeah, the show came together, and the pieces came together, with a lot of thought, but it was also a really natural selection for us.

Jenna Canals:

So could we talk a little bit about the barrier of entry that a woman might have, or a gender expansive artist who might have, if they see the show and they're like, *wow, I want to become a neon artist*, what barriers are they going to face? What are, maybe, some strategies they could use to kind of overcome those impediments?

Kelsey Issel:

Yeah, I mean, unfortunately, Jude's experience that she was talking about in the beginning of the show is not uncommon. And neon isn't a huge craft anymore. There aren't that many shops left, and so there aren't that many trade schools left, just a lot of independent commercial shops. And, unfortunately, we don't have any neon classes in any schools in California anymore. Alfred and Chicago are some of the last. So, there is a real barrier to entry, and we encourage all of the artists that we work with to teach. That is the trajectory, the desired trajectory, so that the skill



can be passed on. But, yeah, we do it all the time. People email us, they want to know how they can learn, and we do our best to put them in touch with a person in their area that we think can be a safe space for them to learn. Sarah Blood is always guiding her past students, and the community of her past students, to kind of guide them through the community responsibly. So, there is an access issue, and we're constantly trying to solve that. One thing that Meryl and I are really excited about is coming up in 2024. We have an exhibition with the Museum of Craft and Design in San Francisco, and we're really concentrating on that, on access. Because we have this, of course, this whole part of our mission is progressing neon into a fine art form. But we also have this other side of really believing that manual competency is a way to creative problem solving, to critical thinking. And we don't have shop class anymore, or there isn't a lot of vocational training. And neon is a great way to learn physics, chemistry, how gravity works. You have to be incredibly competent with your hands. You learn about all of these different things. And so, what we're concentrating on in that show is providing workshops for grade school kids. And so, yeah, I mean, we're all trying to do our work, trying to keep neon alive and provide access to more and more people.

Jenna Canals:

I personally had some access to art training or workshops in my youth, and it was really influential in driving me into the art field. So to have women doing it thoughtfully and improving that process even more is incredible.

Kelsey Issel:

Yeah, I will say, too, since we're in Tacoma now, people can listen to this all over the world. But if you're in Tacoma, there are amazing resources here. Gas Filling Tube Suckers is an amazing neon collective. Dani Kaes is part of it, but Galen [Turner] and Jacob [Willcox] are also amazing resources. Megan Stelljes is based in the Seattle/Tacoma area. She's a glassblower and a neon artist. She's amazing. And Alleson Buchanan has a shop here. It's women-owned and operated. She just brought on another woman bender and she's giving workshops. So, yeah, there are great resources right here.

Jenna Canals:

I will say that at the exhibition opening, I had pleasure of meeting Alleson –

Kelsey Issel:

In her glittery dress!

Jenna Canals:





Yes! And not only did she give me a beautiful glittery matchbook – which I am trying to collect, it is a dying art – but she gave me some information about taking some classes. So, who knows? Guys, look out for me.

Kelsey Issel:

Yeah. And Alleson is actually a great example because, I can't remember the year, but Alleson didn't start a neon that long ago, and she learned really quickly, and she has always been super community-oriented, and she started to pay it forward really early in her career. So, we love to see that. It's a really amazing thing.

Jenna Canals:

So, we're seeing that movement here in our Pacific Northwest community. We've heard a little bit about our vision and future for She Bends. Jude, I just want to touch base with you. Do you have anything in the works? What's the vision for you moving forward as a neon artist? An artist in general?

Jude Abu Zaineh:

Lots of things happening as an artist in general, but neon-specific, I'm slowly trying to collect the tools and fires and equipment that I need to set up my own personal hot shop and studio space so that I can more holistically be able to create and produce all the neon works that I conceive from up here in my head, in my mind, out into reality. And then once that's up and running – I don't know when, because it's kind of difficult to source all the materials that are needed – but once that's up and running and I'm kind of more comfortable in that space, it's really important for me to pay it forward too, and try and extend as much knowledge as I can give to anyone else that is interested and wants to learn.

Kelsey Issel:

Yeah. Love to hear that.

Jenna Canals:

That that's the end goal, I'm feeling. Well, I want to thank you both so much for being here. Thank you and for expressing all these incredible comments and stories about She Bends, the community that you're building, the work that you're creating, and how you are transforming the art world, really one woman at a time.

Kelsey Issel:

So great to be with you, Jenna.

Jude Abu Zaineh:





Thanks for having us.

Jenna Canals:

My pleasure. Thank you for listening to "Neon Talks with Jenna." This has been a production of Museum of Glass in celebration of the exhibition *She Bends: Redefining Neon Legacy*, curated by Meryl Pataky and Kelsey Issel. Hosted by Jenna Canals. Produced by Susan Warner, Elisabeth Emerson, and Jabari Owens-Bailey. Original music composed by Quinton Merada. Copyright 2023.