

Susan Caperna Lloyd:
An Artist Across Media, a Life Across Continents

An Interview by Elisabetta Marino
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Born in California, and currently based in Oregon, Susan Caperna Lloyd has developed a multifaceted career, distinguishing herself as a filmmaker and documentarian, photographer, and author of narratives across genres, blending travel writing and memoir. Her life experiences have taken her across diverse cultures and continents, from the Philippines to Italy, Spain, India, Mexico, and Japan. In 2021, her archive – comprising more than 18,000 items – was acquired by the American Folklife Center at the Library of Congress in Washington, DC, an honor that attests to her outstanding and widely recognized talent.



Susan Caperna Lloyd in Gujarat (India).

EM: When did you feel your first calling toward art?

SCL: My mother was a painter and had art materials around for us kids all the time. When I was about 12 years old and growing up with western U.S. history around me, I made an oil painting of a girl in a long pioneer dress. I accidentally spilled turpentine all over it and the painting was completely distorted. I was upset and wanted to abandon it, but Mom said, “No. Go with it, see where the streaks take you”. I did. The girl, now blurry, fuzzy, and mysterious, became the painting’s title: *Blue Girl from a Dream*. I then won 1st Place at the Oregon State Fair for it. That’s when I learned to let the paint (or a photograph, or any art form) take you where it wants to. An important lesson from Mother. I learned that, in making real art, I needed to observe the materials and even the ideas and see where they might lead me.

EM: When did you first begin exploring your own roots and feel the urge to delve more deeply into them?

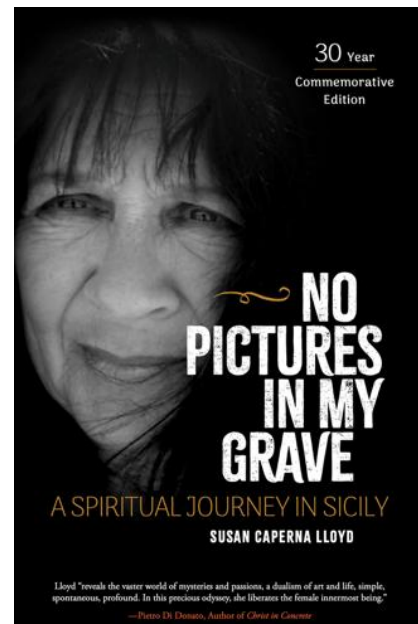
SCL: The first exploration of my roots was probably through my grandmother, Carolina Caperna, who’d emigrated to the U.S. with my father and his siblings in 1922. She came to visit us in Oregon from New Jersey every few years. It was a difficult trip for her by train because she was afraid of flying. She was a big, strong woman, 6 feet tall. I was taken with her *tarantella* dancing, the Italian food she made, Italian string games she taught us. There was something unique and exciting about her. I loved to hear her speak Italian with my father. I had grown up in a Norwegian-populated fishing town on the Oregon coast. We were Catholics and there were no Italians in town. I always felt out of place. I then delved more deeply into my Italian heritage when I visited Italy for the first time in 1979. Going to Sicily for Holy Week and encountering the Madonna of Sorrows in the Procession of the Mysteries in Trapani, I connected deeply to this ritual. Here was a

mournful Madonna who was ‘searching’ for her son on Good Friday. I related this Madonna’s quest to my own search for where I belonged. This led to my many long-term trips to Sicily through the years and participation in the procession. I call Trapani my ancestral home.

EM: Can you tell us more about your grandmother, who was one of the sources of inspiration behind *No Pictures in My Grave: A Spiritual Journey in Sicily* (1992), your celebrated travel memoir?

SCL: In Sicily I identified the Madonna with my grandmother, Carolina. Carolina was always sad and I’d see her holding back tears when she visited us in Oregon, especially when she had to leave. She felt cut off from family, both from us in Oregon and her left-behind family in Italy. I thought of my father’s story about her last words in New Jersey when she died: “Mother, I am coming home”. She’d always wanted to return home but never did. I knew that she hadn’t wanted to go to the U.S., an adventure her husband Tony wanted to take. Even my father, on the boat arriving at Ellis Island, tried to throw his family’s bag of luggage into the water. Did he, too, not want to leave Italy behind?

With Grandmother Carolina’s emigration to the U.S., I thought about how women often sacrificed themselves and were not in decision-making roles. Carolina’s strength in making the journey to the U.S. did inspire me – yet I did not want to suffer like she did – I wanted to lead and make decisions for myself.





EM: That leads us to female empowerment and ancestral mothers, which are recurring themes in your work. Could you expand on their significance?

SCL: While in Sicily at the Procession of the Mysteries, I realized why I felt so strongly about the relationship between my grandmother and the Madonna. It was the ‘search’ the Madonna made in the procession; it was as if she searched for ‘home’ in this yearning for reunification with her son – a lot like my grandmother who had to leave her mother behind in Italy. It was the search I was also making. The Madonna was empowered: carried last in the procession, she was victorious because she held up the procession at its end. She went through the night, alone. Like her, I wanted to be strong and independent and not follow behind like the mourning women who walked behind the Madonna. I wanted to be like the Madonna in my own journey and *help carry* her statue in the procession until the end. Women weren’t allowed to do this. But I persevered and carried the Madonna, the first outside woman to do so, and joined the world of men, dancing in camaraderie and companionship. They were symbolic brothers. A family. In doing so, I felt I had come ‘home’. I was strong, like the ancient Greek deity on Sicily, Demeter – a Black Goddess symbolic of the underworld journey– who went into the unknown to search and find her daughter, Persephone.

I have always ended up with strong women around me. In India I was inspired by the Hindu deity, Kali, at her annual *puja* in Kolkata. I related to this angry goddess because of my own anger after my sister’s untimely and tragic death. Kali’s powerful expression of anger validated my own and that which many women feel but repress. Also in India, I studied and learned to dance with the famed cobra dancer, Gulabo Sapera, who was buried alive when she was born as newborn girls were not welcome among her ethnic tribespeople. Yet she survived (her father dug her up!) to become India’s national treasure. She taught me to dance the power of the cobra. As well, in Saintes Maries de la



Mere, France, I was energized by the Dark Goddess, Sara la Kali, who is carried out of her subterranean grotto beneath the church every year, triumphantly restoring Roma belief that she is the daughter of Christ! I tell the story of these powerful women in my newest book, *Dance It Up! A Journey to Find the End of Grief* (Ovunque Siamo Press, 2026). Another strong role model is my friend, Jean Houston (of Sicilian ancestry who recently died in May 2026), and is the founder of the Human Potential Movement. Jean was a renowned global leader in helping others find their power, to believe in oneself, and to find pathways to self-realization through mythology, Eastern religions, and connections to ancient and indigenous cultures.

Perhaps my most unusual example of female empowerment is Lucy Reyes, a folk-Catholic healer in the Philippines who, for 15 years, was nailed to a cross on Good Friday in Bulacan. The nails into her hands and feet drew no blood and she became somewhat of a saint figure. I spent weeks with her in the 1980's and saw her heal her



Susan Caperna Lloyd, *Lucy Reyes on Cross*.

villagers with her hands when I documented her last nailing. She is a powerful matriarch in rituals usually enacted by men and is the subject of my 2nd book, *The Crucifixion of Lucy Reyes: Holy Week Folk Rituals of Sacrifice, Fertility and Power* (Ovunque Siamo Press, 2024). Lucy performed this ritual to renew her power to heal, personifying the sacrifice of Christ who, in the form of the Christ Child, healed her of a life-threatening illness when she was young. Her strength to undergo this ritual and defy tradition impressed me. If I were to become sick, I would go to her myself.



My biggest example of female empowerment is my mother, Gail Caperna, who always did things her own way and taught me what art is and can be, and to think outside the box.

EM: In *Dance It Up! A Journey to Find the End of Grief*, dance plays a pivotal role, starting with the title itself. Could you tell us more about its significance?

SCL: The title comes from a lama's words to me in Darjeeling, India, where I'd traveled to process my sister's tragic death. Prior to this, I'd entered the world of dance in Spain. There I'd studied flamenco dance, fulfilling a promise I'd made to my sister before she died and where we planned to go together. Angela was a dancer, but I was not. But I'd agreed to try. Going alone to Spain in her memory had been cathartic: flamenco, with its fierce rhythms and the singers' anguished cries, was a way to express my anger, grief, and guilt over her death when therapy and constant talking back home had not alleviated my pain. But flamenco dance, as taught to foreigners, was difficult with its prescribed forms and counting – yet a *natural* expression of the marginalized Gitanos' *own* history of anger, sadness and grief. I wanted to find another way to dance my anger out that was free and more organic. Propelled by shocking details discovered after Angela's death, I traveled to India and met the lama who told me I must *Dance It Up!*

This was a different way of looking at dance. He said I must awaken the *kundalini* to express my sorrow, guilt, and anger. It came from the spine. From something deep within. I learned that expressing these emotions was something much like Kali, who I'd seen in Kolkata, was propelled by Shiva's cobra entangling them in dance.

Following the lama's edict, I met the cobra dancer, Gulabo Sapera, in Rajasthan. With her I learned to truly *dance*. To move without rules or prescribed forms. To awaken the kundalini. Just as the cobra uncoils and strikes with immense transformative power,



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he moves his energy *up* – from the spine and through the *chakras*. To dance *as a cobra* gave physical form to my anger. Of striking, but then retreating, and yet to return – the symbol of the ouroboros.



Susan Caperna Lloyd, *Gulabo Sopera*.

EM: You have a remarkable ability to connect cultures and explore new avenues of communication. This is even more evident in *Dance It Up*. Could you tell us more about this aspect of your work?

SCL: I think that connecting anything might have to do with my photography work when, early on, I wondered and worked with ideas of what happened *between* the frames of analog film. What happened in the interim, before I took the next shot? Why did I choose to take another photograph and snap the shutter again? What is the backstory? The connections. The in between story?

Connecting cultures probably also has to do with my curiosity. If I meet someone, I want to know all about their life. My mother was like this. But I was often annoyed with her. In Cuautla, Mexico one time with my mother at a commemorative celebration for the



folk hero Emiliano Zapata, I saw her talking with an elderly woman afterwards. I thought, “Oh no, there she goes again”. It turned out that the woman was Ana Maria Zapata, daughter of Zapata, which led to my making a documentary film, *The Last Zapatista* (1995). Since then, I have become a great ‘talker’ no matter where I am.

As well, and because of heavy reading – another habit from Mother – I could not, say, embark on my film about Zapata before reading about sugar cane. Or find out if he was related to the Aztecs. Or his relationship to other folk heroes like Che Guevara. My motivation is to know as much as I can, and tell a *full* story and that people, events, or cultures don’t exist in vacuums. I have been fortunate to travel a lot and remember Mother’s many trips to see Indian ruins in the U.S. west while bringing us kids along. Then, with my husband, Tom, and throughout our marriage with his addiction to travel like mine, I have met many fascinating people and seen much of the world.

EM: Could you tell us about your most recent projects and what you are currently working on?

SCL: With my younger son in the Foreign Service, I’ve visited him for long periods of time in the last few years and explored both the Balkans and Indonesia. A memoir is now evolving about my experiences in the Balkans, especially centering around Ismail Kadare’s book, *The General of the Dead Army*. This travel brought me back to my Italian roots when I found an Italian WW2 Army helmet among a street seller’s wares in Northern Macedonia. With helmet in hand, and in my memoir, I follow and narrate the quest of the book’s general (based on fact), and my own quest in search of the graves of Italian soldiers killed in Albania during WW2. This saga is an enlightening piece of Italian history which I hadn’t known about. The general could not identify (nor could I) the Italian soldiers’ graves and remains which are mixed in with German or even Greek

soldiers. Many remains were not returned to Italy and still lie somewhere in Albania. It is a story of *home* – or not returning to it – which much of my work has been about.

Other current projects relate to my recent trip to Indonesia to visit our younger son in Jakarta. I documented many indigenous, animist cultures on various islands on the archipelago. The Marapu culture on Sumba has elements of fertility rites with the annual gathering of *nyale* worms which come in from the sea to bring fortune to the rice planting season and has similarities to aspects in pre-Christian Holy Week rites I've documented in *The Crucifixion of Lucy Reyes*. I am fascinated by the Sumba family tombs, sitting right in front of their thatched homes as they strive to keep their deceased close to them.

The animist Toraja culture on Sulawesi stands out regarding their death and funeral traditions. Their customs of delaying funerals until family can join, the sacrifice of buffalo so their souls can guide the dead to Toraja 'heaven' then placing the tombs in rock-cut cliffs so the deceased can be taken out and 'visited' once a year, are intriguing. I plan a follow-up trip to Sumba and Tana Toraja to continue my research. Again, with the Sumbanese and the Torajans, the theme is familiar: a search for the meaning of family and home.

EM: What advice would you give to budding artists and to the younger generation in general?

SCL: I'd tell a budding artist to find a master or mentor to work with. Not a master of only painting, photography, film or other media, but also a master of *ideas*. This could be anyone – someone who can recommend books to read: history, anthropology, religion, literature, poetry, science. Ideally, a master would have knowledge of *many* of the arts



including music, architecture or even dance, and how they are interrelated. For example, in a Color class in school, it was exciting to learn Scriabin's Theory, that specific musical keys were associated with particular colors. I then began hearing music in the colors of my subjects and became aware of sounds which led me to photographic ideas.

No matter the medium, study *light*. Especially natural light, as it reveals subject. Go out and simply look at light. Early morning or late afternoon light creates shadows on subjects which creates form. Study Caravaggio. Or the interplay of light on architect, Frank Gehry's, Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain. Edward Weston's black and white photographs of a green pepper. Without light, we have nothing.

Aspiring artists should always question what they are trying to *say*. Beware of praise. Graduate school seminars were good for me in this way – constantly defending why I took a photograph. How did I feel when I took it and what did it *mean*? Was I copying someone else's work? Did I study the subject long enough to *know* it and then achieve the maximum the camera and film allowed? A photographer, or any artist, must thoroughly know the materials they are working with and why they are making art.

I worry about AI and that budding artists will rely on technology to edit, improve, or even create 'art' for them. How could this be called original? If you want to paint and call a painting your own, why would you want a machine to do it for you?

My last advice would be to develop good working habits. Work every day if only for a few devoted hours. Even if you're tired!

EM: Thank you so much, Susan! We look forward to your next artistic ventures!



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Susan Caperna Lloyd, *Brahmin*.

Bio-bibliographical notes

Susan Caperna Lloyd has a B.S. degree in Art Education and English, and a Master of Fine Arts, both from the University of Oregon. She devotes most of her time to writing, research traveling, and producing documentary films. Her work has appeared in many magazines, journals, and international exhibits, with her 30-year collection (photography, film, and writing) recently purchased by the Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Her documentary films have won numerous awards, including Blue Ribbons at the American Film Festival, the National Educational Video Festival, and Best of Festival at the UCLA Vitas Film Festival. Her numerous, cross-cultural documentaries range from *Processione: A Sicilian Easter*, to *Between Two Worlds: A Japanese Pilgrimage*, and *The Last Zapatista*, a study of the Mexican revolutionary hero, Emiliano Zapata. Along with *The Crucifixion of Lucy Reyes: Holy Week Folk Rituals of Sacrifice, Fertility and Power*, a photographic study from Spain to the Philippines, and her memoir about family loss, *Dance It Up! Travels from Spain to India to Find the End of Grief*, she is currently working on a book about Italy's invasion of Albania and Greece during WWII. Susan, a wanderer by nature, splits her time between Oregon, the U.S. East Coast, and many global destinations.

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Elisabetta Marino is Full Professor of English Literature at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. She is the author of four monographs: a volume on the figure of Tamerlane in British and American literature (2000); an introduction to British Bangladeshi literature (2005); a study on the relationship between Mary Shelley and Italy (2011); an analysis of the Romantic dramas on a mythological subject (2016). In 2006 she published the first Italian translation of poems by Maria Mazziotti Gillan. Between 2001 and 2023 she edited/co-edited fifteen collections of essays and a Special Forum of *Journal of Transnational American Studies* (2012). She co-edited two special issues of *De-Genere. Journal of Postcolonial, Literary and Gender Studies* (2022; 2026), and she acted as guest editor for a special issue of *Journal of American Studies of Turkey (JAST)* focused on Italian American material culture (released in 2023). She has translated *Parkwater* by Ellen Wood, for the first time in Italy.

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