

The logo for 'JUST 3' features the word 'JUST' in a yellow, sans-serif font, stacked vertically above a large, bold yellow number '3'. Below the text is a horizontal bar composed of three segments in shades of blue and grey. The entire logo is set against a dark blue background.

JUST 3

JUST THREE Podcast: A Conversation with Jen Lewis

Episode 8

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Host: Catherine LaSota

Total Length: 23:31

[*Music*]

[00:06] **Catherine LaSota:** Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast, a project of the [Center for the Study of Social Difference](#) at Columbia University. I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. On the JUST THREE podcast, we talk with artists, activists, and other scholars who are deeply engaged with issues of social justice.

On each episode of our podcast, we have one guest, someone who's connected to one of the many working groups here at the center. And on each episode, I ask the same three questions: one, how does your work engage with issues of social justice? Two, what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time? And three, how can we foster ethical and progressive social change? I hope you enjoy this episode of the JUST THREE podcast.

[*Music*]

[0:58] **Jen Lewis:** And with menstruation, it's so big and so broad because it's so invisible.

[1:04] **Catherine:** Today on the JUST THREE podcast, I have the pleasure of talking with Jen Lewis. Jen Lewis is the conceptual artist and menstrual designer behind [Beauty in Blood](#), a bold, transformative macrophotography and video art project that confronts social taboos pertaining to menstruation and the female body. She received her BA in the History of Art from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor in 2001. Her work has been displayed in group exhibitions, internationally, and can also be seen in the [Vagina Dispatches](#) video series produced by The Guardian. Jen also curated a special theme exhibit for the Joint Conference of the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research, and the Center for Women's Health and Human Rights entitled, Widening the Cycle, a menstrual cycle and reproductive justice art show in June 2015. Jen calls the Ann Arbor, Michigan area home and her exhibition Widening the Cycle also led to her contribution to the [Palgrave Handbook of Critical Menstruation Studies](#) in a section

titled [“To Widen the Cycle: Artists Engage the Menstrual Cycle and Reproductive Justice.”](#) That handbook was developed by our working group here at the Center for the Study of Social Difference called [Menstrual Health and Gender Justice](#). And Jen Lewis also contributed the cover art for that handbook. Our conversation took place on February 25, 2021.

[*Music*]


Welcome to the JUST THREE podcast. I'm here today with Jen Lewis. Jen, before we get started, I would like to just ask you, if you could share with us where you are right now and how you're doing?

[2:58] **Jen:** Yeah, I'm doing pretty good considering the pandemic going on. I've been in a really nice little bubble here in Ypsilanti, Michigan with my husband and collaborator and we've just sort of been sheltering in place and, you know, somehow we've managed to not be touched too painfully by the Coronavirus. I feel like I've been having a very unusual experience during it.

[3:22] **Catherine:** I'm glad to hear that you're doing well. We're going to dive into these three questions of the JUST THREE podcast, which are very big questions, so I invite you to answer them however you would like from your own perspective as broadly or as specifically as you would like. And the first question of the JUST THREE podcast will hopefully get us knowing you and your work a little bit better. And that question is: how does your work engage with issues of social justice?

[3:50] **Jen:** So I think the best way to think about Beauty in Blood and how it engages with social issues is to actually go all the way back to the beginning and talk a little bit about what is the art project and how did it actually come to be. So for people who haven't actually seen the artwork, in the most simplest description, Beauty in Blood is macro photography of menstrual fluid. So, for the listener to get an image in their mind, I would recommend, you know, close your eyes and sort of think about how the clouds in the sky move and then change the blue of the sky to like the clear color of water and like maybe the most pristine toilet bowl and like white porcelain you've ever seen. And then think of the most brilliant crimson reds and swap out the white clouds with red. So those are the images when I look at my artwork, that's what I see. I see this very fluid, red and white, a lot of play. And I don't see like these big gory images. And so a lot of times when I tell people I make period art, they have these like, just crazy ideas that come into their head. So for the viewer, you know, as we're talking about this, just imagine, you know, like, soft, bloody clouds floating through the air [laughs], or a water tank or something.


And so that's really what Beauty in Blood is. It's photos. I'm taking real photos—well, my husband takes the photos—but they're actual photographs of menstrual fluid, and it's primarily my menstrual fluid. And so, you know, how do we capture that? It's with a very specialized lens that gets really up-close magnified images of the blood, and then we use a water tank or like a little fish tank, and we use a saltwater solution. And so the saltwater mixture actually slows the blood down. And that's how we're able to sort of pause the blood in motion and get those photos.



And so a lot of times people are like, well, how did you ever think to take pictures of periods? Like, what is this? How does this happen? So thinking about that is where we start to touch on social justice issues and socialization. So for me, I had this really unusual experience at the end of a menstrual cycle, where I forgot to remove the last tampon I'd used. And several days had passed before I sort of realized this is what happened. And I was really freaked out about it. And I was so embarrassed and so ashamed, like, I didn't even really want to, like, acknowledge it within myself, like, that's how, like, *[gasps]* I just, this is so gross, I don't want to talk about it, you know. And that was one of the first things that sort of started moving me towards the art project.

And I eventually called my physician and I had a checkup, and everything was fine. And she had suggested that this is probably a good time to stop using tampons, and to switch to something that's a little bit safer. And so she had suggested a menstrual cup. And so I took her advice, and I switched to the menstrual cup and, for anyone who uses a cup, or who, you know, have maybe been hesitant about using a cup, the thing that's nice, and the thing that takes a little bit getting used to is that it's a very hands on experience. You know, I think we've been socialized to want to push our menstruation away from us. And so the idea of using pads and tampons that like keeps your fingers clean, you don't have to touch anything, you also don't have to touch yourself...and the menstrual cup, that's just not how that works. You know, it's like, you need to know your vulva, you need to know your lips, you need to be able to get in there, and you need to know what you're working with. And you are going to get blood on your fingers.

And so through the act of switching menstrual products, I started to change my own relationship with my body and my period. And so there was one day when I was at work, and I'd emptied my cup, and I actually had blood on my fingers. And I just, I can remember being in the bathroom and sort of, you know, just rubbing my fingers together and starting to wonder like, why am I so grossed out by my own body? Like, of course, people always want to run to like, well, you wouldn't do it with poop. And it's like, well, no, but, you know, there's just something different about it. And I feel like the way we're socialized about menstruation and, specifically, as somebody who menstruates, we've a lot of internalized baggage that's being put on us by other people. And so, at the time, my work environment, I was working in an infectious diseases laboratory in an academic research center. So my entire visual field was the body, you know, it's still the body through the male gaze, because medicine is patriarchal. But what I was seeing was different fractions of the body and different parts of the body and on display in a different way. And so I was in this environment where the body, like, as an object, as something to be looked at and studied closely was normal. And so having this, you know, switching to the menstrual cup and having this blood, it just didn't seem weird. And then, through the act of actually emptying the cup, you know, I had this awareness for, you know, what I was seeing below me, but also the physical act as, you know, you mentioned at the beginning that my Bachelor's degree is in the History of Art, I'm very familiar with abstract expressionism and Jackson Pollock. And so this act of pouring the cup into the toilet felt very Pollock-esque to me. And so I started thinking about dripping and dropping and the way he sort of threw paint around on the floor and how he worked over a canvas.



So I'm having all of these things that were like bubbling up in my head, that just came randomly. And so that was how the art project really came to be. And, like I had to reach out to somebody to help me with the photos, but I just had this thought and this feeling. If I could capture on film what I was seeing in the toilet, maybe we could change the way people actually think, feel, and react to menstruation. So the whole idea behind Beauty in Blood is to literally transform the way people are thinking about menstruation. And so from there, it just all sort of took off. I started very intentionally looking for potential collaborators and opportunities to show the artwork. And, because it deals with the body and female bodies in particular, it's very easy to get narrowly pinned into specific places. And so I found a lot of synergy through the Feminist Art Conference and the Society for Menstrual Cycle Research. And it's at this point, when I start interacting with all of these people, it really starts to dawn on me how many social issues there are related to menstruation.

So I start this art project with just a little tiny idea with all of this personal intersection. And I think a lot of artists do that, you know, it's like, you have something personal that you need to get out and you want to talk about, but it doesn't really take the fullness of what you're doing until you're engaging with other people, and you start to understand their experiences. And with menstruation, it's so big and so broad because it's so invisible. And so, you know, I only know my personal menstrual experience and, for the most part, it was always indifferent. You know, I never really had to think about it, you know, it comes it goes, it comes and goes, I'm blessed with an easy period, I don't have bad cramps, but through the interaction with other people who are studying it, the scholars, the psychologists, the physicians, all of these people, I start learning about what's period poverty, what's it like to menstruate when you don't identify with your gender? What's it like to menstruate in another country? What's it like to menstruate in prison? And so really, it's through this act of like conversation that the art project Beauty in Blood interacts and engages with social issues.

And so currently, the project is in sort of an archival phase, and I primarily am doing interviews with individuals like you. And also, I talk to a lot of graduate students, I do a lot of interviews for master's and doctoral—dissertations with thesis. And so really, Beauty in Blood has become a visual image that can accompany any slice of social justice regarding reproductive health and menstrual health.

[12:15] **Catherine:** Wow, Jen, that's great. I really loved hearing about the whole process of how the artwork is created. That was really fascinating to hear. Thank you for that. And then this, this process of a very personal experience, creating your artwork, and then through conversations and working with other people, it ties into these bigger social issues. So I think that was...that was really interesting for our listeners to hear. I know it was for me, thank you for that.

Alright, so let's move on to our second question, which is a very big question. And I can't wait to hear how you answer it. The second question of the JUST THREE podcast is: what do you see as the biggest social justice challenge of our current time?



[13:01] **Jen:** So, I mentioned a little bit when we were going back and forth. I did a full cram session, I started listening to all of your episodes and I love this question. And I was a little bit intimidated at first, because it's so big, it was like, I think this is something for like an expert, I don't know that I have much to add. And listening to everybody I kept thinking about, like, what's the commonality, like, we've all sort of recognized that the big issue is that there's too many issues. I can't remember if it was Deepthi, or who it was. Somebody was talking about the sheer volume—maybe it was Işın—talking about the volume of issues and how it's really hard to care deeply or work...meaningfully, when there's so many things.


And so my approach in thinking about the question is, you know, what's feeding into all of these systems and all these power dynamics. And I really think it comes back to a few things. And the biggest—some of the biggest challenges we have is that we're now in a culture that I feel like is all in on profits over people, which is the big problem. And I think we also have a real challenge with inflexibility of mind, and sort of like the arrogance of man and mankind and sort of, like a general ignorance. And I think I'm thinking of this in more terms of Buddhism and the fact that, you know, in order to...learn and grow, and really blossom, you have to recognize that you're not the expert, and you don't know. And I feel like we're living in a time where everybody is so certain that they are right, that we're not able to actually start penetrating these problem areas because of this, real inflexibility of mind coupled with a focus on greed, you know, and this idea that it's all about getting these people at the top all the money and you can't make a systemic change if you can't keep the profit model stable. And so I really think money—money and inflexibility of mind are going to be our two biggest issues in changing anything whether we're looking at menstrual health, reproductive health, natural resources, climate change...any number of issues. And so that was the common thing that I sort of came back to.

[15:10] **Catherine:** I always love hearing how people answer this question when they at first think, "I don't have an answer to this question," and then they very much do. I think that was a great answer to the question. And this idea that people believe that they themselves are the experts on things are inflexible, it'd be fascinating to have a whole other show where we could talk about why that is true, and how that happens. So thank you for bringing those issues to light for us.

[15:37] **Jen:** Yeah. And you know, I think, even just thinking about the arts in general, and the way the money is strangled around people who don't understand contemporary art making decisions about what art projects get funded, you know. There's just this real stranglehold. And I yeah, I don't know how we really begin to push that over but it seems like we're really hung up there.

[16:02] **Catherine:** Well, let's move into talking a little bit about how we might be able to push through, or begin to think about it with our third question. And the third question of the JUST THREE podcast is: how can we foster ethical and progressive social change?

[16:19] **Jen:** So I think through my experience with Beauty in Blood and understanding how much I didn't know until I actually started talking with other people, I think one of the first things



that we need to do is have more conversations, have deeper conversations, and continue to confront stigmas and taboos as they come up. I think it's real easy to want to shy away from things and I don't, you know, I don't self-define as like a real bold, you know, fighty kind of person. And so I sort of found something small that I could do that was comfortable for me. And so I think part of continuing the conversation and pushing on these things is also allowing people to work within the space that's comfortable to them.

You know, I think it's really great that we want to force everybody out of their comfort zones. But I think that's also really unrealistic and I think it ends up silencing people and sort of pushing people to the margins in ways if they can't see where they fit into a movement, or how they can interact with it, or if they're being asked to act outside of who they are, you know. And so I think like giving people the space, and if that's a matter of, you know, letting somebody just have personal intimate conversations with their friend group, that's enough. But if that also is not enough for somebody, and they want to go and like storm, not storm the Capitol, that is no longer a good joke, I was thinking more of like policy changing, you know, and people who really want to go and protest and get involved in policy and regulation change, like, that's great. But that's uncomfortable for some people, and it's not going to be an option. And so I think, dialogue, storytelling, experience sharing, you know, as sort of the lens is lifted or put in front of you, you start seeing the world in a different way. And I think that's sort of the first step in coming to any type of meaningful change is just understanding the breadth of experiences and what you're experiencing isn't true for everybody. So that was one of the things.

And I think that's been a common thread in listening to other people is that there are these subjects that are just so taboo, and we're so closed off around them and that the more closed off we are, the less you can see of what the actual issue is. And so it's really this need to break it open, to begin to see all of the—all of the parts that need to be addressed and changed and what it's like. And something you know, as singular as menstruation, it's changing policy for access for prisoners, it's, you know, if you don't talk to somebody who has an interest or a loved one in the prison system, you'd probably never think about what conditions those menstruators are living in.

And then, I think the other side, which is kind of funny to say in relation to my previous answer for number two is that we need more consistent funding for topics that haven't had it. Someone had mentioned, if there aren't people at the table who bleed and live this life, it's clearly not going to be a priority for them. And so I think it's more voices at the table, which has come up in other conversations and seems like it's really common knowledge at this point. But I think that would help.

And then the other thing would be as conversation partners to be less defensive, you know, when things come up that feel sticky or uncomfortable and really sort of assuming positive intent or trying to just be less defensive when you're having conversations in order to have a growing experience or a learning experience. You know, I think we're living through a time where people are more concerned about how they're going to respond to what's being said than what's

actually being said. And so I think for ethical, progressive change to happen, we need to do a better job of listening and being listening partners in conversations.

So those were a few of the things that really like bubbled up for me, and then seemed to be on the radar for a lot of the other activists and human rights individuals that you've spoke to.

[20:47] **Catherine:** Definitely, Jen. And I think, yeah, I remember specifically that even in our conversation with Musu here on the podcast, that was a theme that came up as well and throughout different episodes, you're right. And I appreciate you bringing up the idea of dialogue, and also the specific ideas about bringing your own interest and your own expertise while also being humble and truly listening to each other. Because there's a lot of ways to think about being in conversation but, how exactly are we in conversation with each other is the thing to consider.

[21:19] **Jen:** Right. You know, I was, I was listening to a different podcast and the host, it was like, before, they could even begin to have any type of meaningful discussion they felt so sort of, like, accused and indicted about just the topic coming up at all. And it was like, well, now we're never going to get anywhere because you're so entrenched and you feel so attacked, like you can't grow from that space. And you can't learn there either. And so, yeah, that just really this week jumped out at me at what, what a problem, I think that's going to be for us as we begin to try and grow and push into new directions with social change.

[22:02] **Catherine:** Well, thank you, I appreciate you coming and talking with us about where you're coming from, and with Beauty in Blood and giving us an opportunity to listen to you because this has been so wonderful, so helpful for us and, Jen Lewis, I just want to thank you so much for being a guest here on the JUST THREE podcast.

[22:21] **Jen:** Catherine, thank you so much. And thank you for creating this format. I think it's, it's a really great way to learn and think about big topics in small bites and I think that's going to be really helpful in moving the needle on a lot of different things.

[22:35] **Catherine:** Thanks so much, Jen.

[22:37] **Jen:** Thank you.

[Music]

[22:41] **Catherine:** Thanks for listening to the JUST THREE podcast. To find out more about our guests, please visit the show notes. To find out more about the Center for the Study of Social Difference, go to www.socialdifferencecolumbia.edu.

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I'm your host, Catherine LaSota. Thank you and catch you next time on the JUST THREE podcast.

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