File Name: IND_102123_ART2
Event Date: October 21st, 2023
Location: Indianapolis, IN, USA
Participants:
WALTON MUYUMBA
JOSHUA A-M ROSS
RHONDA GREENE
JOHNSON SIMON
REBECCA ROBINSON
Length: 01:04:22

Preface

The following conversation was hosted at the Crispus Attucks Museum, facilitated by Aja Scarlato and keondra bills freemyn. Consent was given by the participants to have their conversation recorded and transcribed.

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START OF RECORDING

AJA SCARLATO: This is table two. Aja speaking. Date, October 21st, 2023 at the Crispus Attucks Museum. And you're all set to go.

WALTON MUYUMBA: I just shuffled the cards–

JOHNSON SIMON: Mhmm.

WM: And um, [Pause] Why don't we go like this?

JS: Yeah.

WM: So [thump] pick a card.

[Pause]

[Laughter]

REBECCA ROBINSON: Okay. *What type of public art has had the biggest impact in Indianapolis?* [Pause] Am I supposed to answer it?

[Crosstalk]

WM: We'll all answer it.

RR: We're all a, will…oh.

WM: But, introduce yourself too.

[Crosstalk Ends]

RR: Oh, okay. Uh, my name is Rebecca Robinson. I'm a mixed media artist. Um, I am an activist, a mentor, and um, I'm also heavily involved in the community of Indianapolis and building art and culture in our city. So yeah. *What type of public art has had the biggest impact in Indianapolis?*

JS: Hmm.

RR: I might be a little biased, so I'll let you guys…[Laughs].

WM: I'm gonna toss out the murals.

RHONDA GREENE: Yeah.

RR: Yeah.

WM: I think the murals have been um, really great, uh, talking points. Especially, uh, the Mari Evans and the Etheridge Knight, which is I think the newest of the murals downtown. Um, and it's uh, as-as someone who isn't born and raised in the city, but from the state, um, it's a way of like, placing um Black history physically in Indianapolis. And you know, they're also strategically located the murals, so it's also connecting individuals with specific spots and specific histories in the state. By the way, this is

Walton Muyumba. I teach literature and creative writing at Indiana University Bloomington, um, and I write creative nonfiction and, uh, cultural criticism.

[Pause]

JOSHUA ROSS: Okay. Um, I'm Joshua Ross, a visual artist. Um, I practice photography and drawing. Um, I'm from Indianapolis and my family, for a couple of generations, has been raised on the street called Holmes off of Tenth Street. Um, and on Holmes, there are a couple sort of neighborhood stores. Like, there's a restaurant that I was talking about with someone earlier, uh, named John's Fish Market, that, you know, we would always sorta visit. But, sorta adjacent to that sorta restaurant, is a barbershop that has always had like, a painting on the wall that um, that I just remember seein', and um, I photographed with a friend walkin' through the neighborhood. And uh, it wasn't the barbershop that I got my hair cut up-cut at grownin' up, but it's the only sort of representation of art that I remember always seeing, and always kinda recognizing as sorta, representin' you know, something that felt important. And I'm describing the way that I kind of felt about it. [Laughs]

RR: Mhmm.

JR: Where I was like, 'Oh that's nice.' You know? But I didn-I didn't, I don't know if it was a portrait of the owner, or I think the way or the style that it was painted in, kind of flattened a need for it to reflect the specific enper-person. And more so just kinda was like, a icon or sorta a figure that you would revere. Like it was painted in a–it has like blue, which felt like the sorta skies, the background. And the people's sorta face was circled. So, it just, it was something you could recognize as important, you know? Um, but, so I guess murals, I second that. [Laughs]

RR: [Chuckles]

JR: And then uh, and um, yeah. For me, it was one on the side of a building.

[Pause]

RG: Rhonda Greene, uh, photographer based out of Indianapolis, born and raised from Indiana-in Indianapolis. Um, I'm going to have to say with The Eighteen Collective [The Eighteen Art Collective LLC]–

[Speakers intermittently agree]

RG: It just, for me it was an introduction. Like I said, it's been a couple of years, although I've been shooting photography, just trying to connect with Indianapolis art scene. And so that was my, really like my first visual. Like, 'Okay, people are doing it out here.' You know? Like this is–there's more, um, I was hopeful of the growth. It-it, and so for me it's a personal thing. It was just the ability to see, like I said, the growth. Because I travel other places and it's like, 'Why isn't Indianapolis standing out?' We stood out. And now look where we are. So for me, you don't have to be biased.

RR: Right. [Chuckles]

RG: I'm going to go with that. [Laughs] And again murals, I think it's, it's a reflection. It's almost a quilt of so many things that happen in, you know, that can occur in the city or part of someone's life, their emotional patterns [inaudible 00:06:06-0:06:09] [Laughs]

[Speakers intermittently agree]

RR: Okay. Um, I'm-comment on…Rebecca Robinson, mixed media artist. As far as the murals, um even before the Black Lives Matter mural, there were murals for racial justice. And that came a couple months before. And you know, during the

pandemic and people were under you know lockdown, quarantine. So when everything happened, you know, surrounding George Floyd, everybody was, you know, protesting. And you know, when I physically went downtown Indianapolis and saw what happened, I was really, really saddened. And I just remember getting, uh, contact, you know, contacted by the Arts Council about creating something in support of the protest. And I ended up doing–and, and we didn't have a lot of time. So, I did a mural titled “New Nation.” And it was to represent what I thought, you know, what this world could really look like, you know, just not in our city, just everyone, uniting and protesting for a purpose. And it was a powerful piece. And I-I did a huge mural out of, you know, my preferred medium, concrete, and tar. And it was a-a kneeling figure holding a flag. And the flag was all in black of the United States, of everyone coming together, you know, to symbolize that unity. And, you know, that-that was really significant for me. And one thing that I noticed that the murals allowed people to have conversation and dialogue and ask questions. And y’know, everybody was tense during that time. But I believe the artwork–and I always say artwork. I say this a lot–artwork is a universal language. So, I felt like the murals opened doors for more conversation and more artists that never even had a platform. And so kind of leading into the Black Lives Matter mural, that just, you know, took it to a whole ‘nother level as well. Because that was seventeen other people–that I knew a few of them. And I was very close. And there were some artists I'd never met before. But I was like, ‘Wow.’ You know, there's so many talented, you know, people here in Indianapolis. And, you know, Black folks specifically that didn't have opportunities for a voice. And that one moment allowed an artist to express how they

felt about what was going on, you know, in our city and around the world. So I think the murals definitely are significant.

[Speakers intermittently agree]

JS: Hi. My name is Johnson Simon. I have a studio at the Harrison Center. I'm from Florida, and I'm also Haitian. Um, the first art that catches my eye, um—I'm not from Indianapolis, but there was the mural of of Reggie Miller on the wall. As an African American, seeing that image on that wall, and as an artist, I'm like, 'Oh, you know what? This city appreciates who I am.' Even as someone with a disability, there is hope that I could establish myself here. So seeing that image on that wall really give me some type of [Inaudible - 00:10:08]. 'Cause, uh you could go around the city, you can see a lot of monuments, a whole bunch of patriots, you know, from all people that were in the war, but you don't see no African American sculpture. The only thing you can see is the one of Martin Luther King on the, on Twentieth and College. But you don't see–but I think that-that-that mural of Reggie Miller, that was so big on the wall, it was like a bold statement that people like me have a place in this city.

RR: I agree. Yeah.

RG: Mhmm, mhmm.

JS: Yeah.

RR: Cool. So, should we move on to the next card? Someone else wanna—You wanna pass it to you? [Inaudible - 00:11:09].

JR: [Clears throat]

JS: Can you read it out loud for us?

RR: Okay.

JS: I’m gonna pick it, and you read for us.

RR: Okay.

JS: I’ll pick that one.

RR: All right. *What forms of self-segregation exist today?*

[Pause]

JS: Hmm.

JR: Will you repeat the question? Or, *What forms of self…*

RR: *Self-segregation.*

JS: [Laughs]

[Crosstalk]

RR: *Self-segregation–*

JS: Wow

RG: Could mean many things.

RR: What–I never heard about that.

RG: [Sounds of reading to oneself]

[Crosstalk Ends]

RR: *What forms of self-segregation exist…?*

[Speakers intermittently agree]

WM: Well I-I’m, I’m-I know I'm of a particular experience in this state, ‘cause I, y’know, I grew up in Terre Haute and went to school at, at IU [Indiana University]. Um, I've lived in Virginia and Texas also. Um, [Pause] I’d-I ne-I didn't think that I would come into my mid-the long middle decades, let's call them, uh self-segregating, but I noticed

that I do it. And-and largely because [Chuckles] I-I just don't want to deal with stuff, right? Like, I know-I know my spots. You know, basketball players talk about where they go to get their points, right? I know my spots on the floor, where I know I can get sustenance, where I'm going to have conversation, see art, gain. But then I retreat, because there [are] other spaces I don't want. I already have a sense. Like, if I go there, it's going to cause consternation at the least. So um, I probably have lived in Indianapolis now since 2016. Um, I bought a house, um, basically, like, Meridian-Kessler, near Watson Park, just like, thirty-eighth and and Ruckle, thirty-eighth and College. And, um, especially during the pandemic that, while, while everyone else was like, 'Oh,' you know, 'I'm suffering being at home,' I was like, 'This is great.' Uh, especially after, um, Memorial Day of 2020 [Laughs]. I was like, 'okay. Safe zone. I'm just gonna stay inside, um, this personal bubble.' It, it's changed a little bit subsequent, you know, vaccination, but I do notice that, um, I wanna have art experiences, writing experiences, that don't, um, remind me of what is already ever present, which is a, kind of physical and existential dangers of being in a Black body and trying to be mobile. So, I find myself resisting engaging in certain spaces where I know already, like, this is putting me, um, a-a-at some kind of risk.

[Intermittent agreement]

RR: I can piggy-back on that. Um, Rebecca Robinson, mixed-media artist. So, I was thinking, like, on the, the artist side of it and self-segregation, it's like, you fight so much to get into certain spaces, and then, you know, once you get in, it's like, maybe you kinda go back to trying to keep [Laughter] what's yours. So, it's, it's like this double-edged sword. Like, please, please, please, you know, allow us to shine. Allow us

to have a platform. Allow us to have, you know be in these spaces. And then, after you get it, I, my personal experience is in exploitation. Um, are you using because you're gonna get a little more money, or kickback, or you get to check that box. So then, I think, um, you start feeling some kind of way. Like, 'wow. Are you really welcoming? So then, the self-segregation comes where, you know, certain artists, or African American artists get together and then say, 'Hey, you know, maybe we need to lean back into, you know, our own again.' But we just made a point. So it's always like, making the point. We deserve to be in these spaces, we deserve to be able to have these opportunities. But then, we still need to have our own. [inaudible 00:15:54]

[Intermittent agreement]

JR: Yeah. Um, I'm Joshua Ross, um, photographer and drawer. Um, when I'm listening to y'all, I was trying to also define, or figure out what self-segregation is, or, why would you self-segregate, so I think I'm kinda falling in like, suit with um, some of what y'all are saying, and I kinda, I guess I also kinda formed a question and a couple in terms of, like, what spaces are available to me. Um, and why would sorta, uh, sorta, involve myself, or keep myself sorta in, sort of, uh, sorta space for self. And, um, I guess I think about safety. You know, for me, like, when I think about what spaces are available, when I go to a space, it's important that I feel safe. Um, and I when in Indianapolis, I think there's a sorta, a limit, or in spaces for creative people, uh, they're really cultivating the environment where you have the opportunity to exchange and feel different and be sorta in different places while sorta sharing the same physical space. Um, and…you know, I really love that I'm from Indianapolis, um, because I love my family. And I love that I do feel connected. Like, I know what's going on in the city. Um,

but I also feel that, you know, when I feel like in certain spaces I'm able to more comfortably espress-express my, the fullness of who I am and there are other spaces when that's expressed, uh, I feel available to harm due to sorta the different values that people might have. Um, and maybe how I perceive, like being received or not being received. And so I always feel like, when I go out, if I don't have that armor on, I get hurt. And, so, and when I do have the armor on, I'm not actually expressing myself in a way that I do when I'm within sorta a more, sorta private community of friends that's smaller and more segregated in terms of like, believes that, and values. Uh, and, yeah. So, *what forms of self-segregation exist today?* Um, I guess that I feel like self-segregation to feel safe [Laughs] You know, it's like–

RR: That's a good point, though. Definitely good point.

JR: And it makes me think about like, you know, like the original, sorta pro-of like, that we all respond to like murals and in those murals there are always kinda historic figures.

JS: Mhmm.

JR: Uh, and I think that in this place, like there is a relationship to time and values that are, I feel, are kinda dated. Um, and I think that when I'm not sorta in this sorta form of self-segregation, it's because of my relationship to time. Um, and having more progressive values.

JS: Mhmm.

JR: Um, yeah, so.

JS: That's cool.

JR: Progressive in like, gender expression or being queer, or um, not necessarily being religious, um, in a very sorta religious state. And conservative state, um.

[Intermittent agreement]

RG: I'd like, okay. Rhonda Greene [Laughs], photographer. I'd like to piggy back off of what [clears throat] Joshua said. Pardon me. Um, about feeling safe. Um, especially for me, like I said, just kind of stepping out, um exposing myself, looking for, as I mentioned, the welcoming committee. You know who, where's, where's the safe space? And, I mean, I'm still kind of looking forward to you know today. Um, I have this thing with discernment. You know, I want to walk into a room and, if, if we're not vibing [laughs], you know, I know how to step over to the side and chill and still be, you know, personable, but, you know? And sometimes I'll walk away disappointed because my expectations were more, you know, I'm thinking they're gonna embrace me or this situation, and it's like, okay, feel like I'm in a room of competition. And I'm just kind of wanting to be amongst artists, creatives, you know? Free thinkers in whatever way you think. You know? Um, and so it's not always available. And so, yeah. I'll pull back. And I don't wanna always have to do that, but it is a protection, yeah.

JS: Johnson Simon, I wanted to piggy-back something that Rebecca said about um, being a checkbox. Um, as someone with a disability, and also and artist, is also a African American, sometimes I'll get opportunities, I also want to see what is their motive. Because I have been in situations where it's, it's for their gain to be like, 'See? He has a disability.' I gotta be like, 'Are you picking me based on my talent or are you picking me because I'm a checkbox.' So, I always gotta be self-aware and be like, is it worth my time? So I'm always keeping my art, 'cause I want you to appreciate what I

have to offer and not just a checkbox. Or ‘he got a disability and he’s, you know, it’s not fair.’ I want you to, to involve me for who I am and for the gift and the potential that, that I have.

WM: Ho-how do you feel, Johnson–this is Walton Muyumba–how do you feel about, um, safety? ‘Cause y–of all of us at the table, you’re ta-you take the most risk daily, right? To, to, whether it’s like making your work, or even coming to an event like this–do you feel like the city is open to you? Do you feel, um, do you feel like you have specific spots that you go to regularly where you’re gonna be sustained?

[Intermittent agreement]

JS: That’s a good question. As someone who is from the, the south, where you see it, it could be very racist sometimes and not as welcoming. It’s like a competition. Everybody is focused on themself. From someone that comes from the south and when I moved to the midwest on my own, oh my goodness, you’re gonna open the door for me? Oh, you, um, people say ‘oh, southern hospitality,’ but to me when I was in the south I have a whole different point of view ‘cause I feel like it’s different when I did move to the midwest. So, one thing that I’m aware of is, is, um, seeing, seeing the opportunities that I haven’t felt and also making it so it’s [inaudible 00:24:44-00:24:48] All I got, I only have to ask the people that know me, the people that invited me opinion, ‘hey do you think this is a good move for me.’ So I try to get feedback before I take something on and talk to make sure it’s the right move to do.

RR: Oh, and Rhonda, I–this is Rebecca Robinson, mixed media artist–and I wanted to pose a question to you, Rhonda. And you mentioned something about discernment and, you know, just how you want to feel um, around other creatives or feel

welcome. Can you give an example of what that would look like if, it, for you, where you would feel comfortable or you felt like you were welcomed.

RG: Um, today. This is Rhonda Greene, photographer.

RR: Yay! [Laughs]

JS: Hm.

[Intermittent agreement]

RG: Today. I honestly do. I mean, I think we all have our own way of [clears throat] thinking. I mean, I, I just, I feel like there's a respect. I mean, I'm like 'I followed you,' I'm like okay, these people are really are really important people. You know, these are established artists here in Indianapolis and you've made me feel welcome. I don't feel–and so I appreciate that. So, I would have to say today is a, um, I just felt like I had the opportunity to be myself.

RR: I love that

RG: Yeah [Laughs]

JS: Mhmm.

[Intermittent agreement]

RR: And I think that's so important to make people feel welcome, where they can have, um, an opportunity to just, you know, um, be, like you say, in a safe space, feel valued. Um, so, let's say, you know, if you're new, um, even if you're around someone who's established or, you know, someone that's new to the game. It's just, we're all in the same thing together. And, you just want to build relationships. I think that is so important to just build relationships and when you leave here [laughter] then everyone

needs to keep in contact. Or follow one another, and like I said, be a resource. And I mean that. You follow me, I will pass on whatever opportunities. I'll get to know what your goals are. What your ambitions are. The right people you need to meet and network with. Even just being in the same spaces. I always tell all cre–not just artists–creative people, I say, 'Yeah, you may have a goal for your own art and um, what you want to accomplish, but support other artists. Show up. Find out who these people are. Recognize the person across the room. When I came in today, there's all kinds of people that, I, I know. And you smile and you laugh and you talk and you just happy to see a familiar face. So, when I, you know, invite you to somewhere, I'mma say, "Hey, Rhonda."

RG: [Laughs] Okay.

RR: Okay?

RG: Yes.

RR: So. Yeah.

RG: Yes.

RR: Mhmm.

RG: I appreciate this, I do.

RR: You're welcome, you're welcome.

RG: Much respect [laughs].

RR: Cool.

JR: Yeah.

RR: Alright.

[Intermittent agreement]

JR: One thing I want–I'm Joshua Ross, the photographer and drawer–um, one thing I also, that's always in my mind in terms of like, showing up is like, you know. The way I survive here is different from the way I've survived in other places. And so, I have a really per-like, odd work schedule. Like, 'cause I work a second-shift job and so during the day, it's like, I have my mornings, which just worked out, and then my day, I'm like working. And then my studio hours are like really late and so, you know, I'm always curious in, not to know, but I'm just more curious how–because I know we all navigate living and then being artists in different ways and I think that we can sometimes be impacted in ways that people may never get awareness of. You know? And I think that that's something that I'm personally, like I'm aware of for other people, but I feel like, like, in my own personal life, I'm like, 'well I don't want to tell everybody I'm always working.' You know? It's like I actually just want to go to work and like, you know? And not have people have to even think about that. You know? Um, but then it's like a real thing that impacts my ability to form relations-ships with people, um, and you know, and it's never, you know, and I mean it's a case by case basis. Because, of course, like, you know, I would communicate, but, but I just, just to reel it back in, I do really appreciate today. And I think that, you know, like how we are able to kinda sit at a table, it's different. 'Cause you get, it's more intimate, we're closer, and it's like, we, you know, we're able to like nourish ourselves with one another. And, like I said, like, it's not always–like I'm always like 'what spaces exist for us to be in communion. You know? Um, it–that's my leg streaking the chair [Laughs] But–

[Crosstalk]

[Laughter]

RR: I was about to say something too. I was like, ‘I swear, I didn’t,’ it wasn’t, I didn’t [Laughs].

JR: [Laughs] Can I be that comfortable? No, I’m just [laughs] um, but.

JS: [Laughs]

RR: Good old Jamaican food.

JR: Uh, no, it’s my leg.

[Laughter]

[Intermittent agreement]

JR: But, um, but no, it’s always, you know, I’m always thinking about how do artists get together and like, ha-share in an intimate way. You know? Um, and not just a professional way. Like, in a real, like, we and, you know, we, you know, we’re having a drink or whatever. Or having coffee. I feel like it just, it’s more fertile for like, you know, something to grow, you know? Um, yeah.

RG: Great

RR: And, um, you know, uh–mixed media artist Rebecca Robinson–um, a lot of artists, you go to a lot of art-related things and you talk about art, art, art. But there’s so many other things that you do. Or you’re interest–

JS: Yes, yeah

RR: You know what I mean? I’m like, sometimes I don’t wanna talk about painting all the time.

JS: Right. You don’t.

RR: I like doing other things.

JS: Thank you.

[Intermittent agreement]

RR: There's more to me, there's more layers, and I think that's really interesting, um, and that's what makes creative people who they are. It's not just because you create beautiful artwork, or photography, or you write a beautiful piece. I'm pretty sure–okay so, what's something about you that no one else–yeah, we should ask everybody. Let's make up our own questions.

JR: Uh oh

[Laughter]

RR: What's something about you that no one knows. 'Cause you said you write.

WM: This is Walton. Um, my family's from Congo. Kinshasa.

RG: Oh

JS: Mhmm. Wow.

RR: Beautiful. Beautiful.

WM: No, you wouldn't know that unless I said it, right?

RR: See?

JS: Yeah.

RR: Alright, Rhonda. What about you? What's something about you? You do photography, but what else?

RG: Oh my gosh. You really put me on the spot.

JS: [Laughs]

RG: Um, something that no one knows about me. Um, okay. I think it's kinda crazy but I know, um, Chinese calligraphy. [Laughs]

JS: Hmm.

RG: Learned it at the Children's Museum as a volunteer.

RR: Mhmm.

RG: Like, and so, that, and, uh, Chinese medicine. So, yeah [Laughs].

JS: Hmm.

RR: Joshua.

RG: [Laughs]

RR: Take your time. I know it's something.

JR: Hmm.

JS: Good question.

RG: No judgement zone [Laughs].

JR: No, I'm not afraid of being judged–

[Laughter]

JR: I just think it's hard because I'm an open book, but I also don't just openly share, like, all the time because I'm quiet. Um, so I'm like, there's a lot that people don't know. But, my, hmm. Oh! Well, this is fine. Um, my first job was, I was employed by my social studies teacher, um, who had a Doc Henderson's fish market. And I would work at the hot dog stand on the circle, uh, downtown and then on the weekends I would work in his fish market. [Table thump] I don't know, I was like–

[Laughter]

JR: That was my first job.

RR: That's something!

RG: Yeah.

JR: You know?

RR: I like it. Johnson, what about you?

JS: That's a good question.

RR: Thank you.

JS: 'Cause I'm like an open book.

[Laughter]

JS: But, um, one thing that people might not know, um, I think I do tell people I'm Haitian, but they don't really think I'm bilingual until I start–if my mom call me, you know I start speaking Creole, they're, 'Huh? What? You speak Creole?' I'm like, 'Yeah. I'm Haitian.' [Laughs]

RR: I love it. See, I wouldn't have even known that.

RG: Yeah

JS: Um, I speak Creole fluently. It's my first language, so when I start speaking Creole, they're [gasp] 'Are you okay?' I'm like, 'I'm speaking Creole.'

[Laughter]

RR: Uh, let's see. So, one thing people might not know about me. I did mention that I ride a motorcycle, so a lot of people don't think I did that. But, I'm really mischievous. Like, I've always been a mischievous kid.

WM: Oh, I could see that though.

RG: [Laughs]

WM: I could see that.

RR: I'm like this–

JS: What do you mean by that?

RR: Well, let's see. Well, I went to Montessori school from the age of like two or three to twelve. And they want you to be individuals and free spirits and all that. I'm the same person as I was at the age of two, four, six, eight, ten–

[Laughter]

RR: The same person. I've always just been kinda bad. In a sarcastic fun way. But, you know, I have some sense. But I like to get into a little something-something.

WM: Play! Yeah.

RR: Yeah, I like to play.

RG: Yeah, that's cool. Yeah.

RR: Yeah.

[Intermittent agreement]

WM: I, I was looking up–this is Walton again–uh, I was looking up, um, this quotation from Adrian Piper that, that goes to what you were saying, Joshua, about, um, trying to, the work that I think artists do to try to explain themselves, um, and she says here that artists ought to be writing about what they do, what kinds of procedures they go through to realize a work, what their presuppositions in making the work are and related things. If artists intentions and ideas were more accessible to the general public, I think it might break down some of the barriers of misunderstanding between the art

world and artists and the general public. I think what would be come clear, the extent to which artists are just as much a product of their society as anyone else, as in, any other kinds of vocation. And, um, I think part of what's built into that is also, like, in fact, talking to people about h-like, what your life actually entails to make the work. Um, because I think that's also, um, invisible, right? Not everyone can snap a, a photo and make it into art. [Laughs] Not everyone can, um, you know, sketch, um, or see a natural material and manipulate it into something that is meaningful, right? Um, and you know, I think [Laughs] when, when students ask me, 'Well, you know, I'm, I have this vision of wanting to, you know, have a life as an artist, but I really don't wanna have to like, labor at it.' I'm like, 'Well, you're in trouble.'

JS: [Laughs]

RR: Right.

RG: [Laughs]

WM: Right?

[Laughter]

[Intermittent agreement]

WM: It's like, you know this, the, the, all of it is work. Right? Um, even, even like, yeah, I, I have a second shift job so that I make time to make art. Like, that doesn't occur to most people as like the, the, the route to, um, having an artist life. Um, so, I think that that's, that, that's one of the things I've learned about my own work is, is also that not just to talk about what I'm doing, or trying to do, but also to ask a lot of questions about how to do it. Um, even when I'm thinking about like, shaping out an essay, I'm always thinking about form. So I'm asking questions to, to writers and

non-writers and to other kinds of artists, like, you know, ‘How, how do you imagine the narrative of yourself? What’s the shape? Could you describe the shape in a manner that is recognizeable to someone else. Or that, you know, you’re trying to like, communicate why you’re making the choices you’re making. You know? What’s that form, right? But that, the response is always then, filter into the thing that I’m trying to, to do. And, um, I, I, I just see that as part of that, um, that motion. I mean began by talking about segregation, or self-segregation, and what, what I find interesting about the question is it doesn’t really have space for um, what self-segregation actually might do that is powerful. Right? Because you can segregate into particular communities, your spots, again, whe’re you’re, you’re fed so richly that you don’t wanna engage in other kinds of things, right? Um, and there, there’s the, I guess there’s always going to be some necessary retreat to make. Right? Uh, you can’t be, you know, hanging out with your people, uh, if you, if you have deadlines to meet, you know?

[Laughter]

RR: Alright, well, you wanna pass it down and [shuffling noises]

JR: Okay. [Shuffling cards]

RR: Well, somebody plays cards [Shuffling cards]

RG: Haha right

JR: I love cards! [Shuffling cards]

[Laughter]

RR: I can play the game of Uno, that’s about it.

[Laughter]

[Shuffling cards]

JR: I get really competitive about Uno.

RR: So Go Fish! [Laughs]

RG: I'm Uno, I'm Uno. Maybe War.

JR: Let me see, alright. Let's see what we draw. Okay. Okay, I'm Joshua, um, Ross, [clears throat] um, uh, photographer and drawer. Um, and the card I pulled asks, um, *How can we engage with the historical artwork displayed in this exhibit without perpetuating the spectacle of lynching?* Um.

RR: What? I don't understand.

WM: This is, this is the Dana Schutz question.

RG: Shhhhh.

RR: *Perpetuating the spectacle of lynching*. Hmm.

JS: Hmm.

RR: [Laughs]

WM: Well, I mean I, I think about this question a lot, right? Because, um, this is Walton, uh, so, so Dana Schutz–I, I went to the Whitney Bi-ennial when Dana Schutz's rendering of Emmitt Till was in the show. Um, I'm actually writing an essay about it, um, because, in fact, I went to that show twice. Maybe three times, actually. Went all the way through and I never saw that painting. I was so excited by many of the other pieces that were up. Henry Taylor, Deana Lawson, um, uh, Lyle Ashton Harris, I mean, there was just like, an ab-over an abundance of, of really brilliant work. So when the controversy about that painting came up, um, and, and Schutz attempted to use abstract techniques

to render Till um, and it's, you know, she's trying to like, um, reference the Jet magazine photograph of his face. And, um, it looks like a kind of swirl of color, smear of color and, um, I'm not sure that, that the image itself was successful. Um, but many Black artists felt that Schutz, who happens to be white had not only overstepped in trying to take on the material, but because the rendering did not do the work they imagined of humanizing Till, um, and essentially ma-you know, maintaining the kind of sacredness of um, not simply the photographs of Till, but the whole event of his killing and the sacrifice his mother made to um, make sure that the world saw what they did to, to, to her son. Um, like, I, I, get, I, I got the protest and I understood why they may want that piece to have been withdrawn. Um, but what's interesting is that there 's a whole tra-tradition of African American art making, engaging not simply with Till, but with lynching, generally. Either um, absolute realist, um, or highly metaphorical. In fact, there's a, you know, a rendering, um, in this exhibition of um, why is his name escaping me. I can totally see his face. Jacob Lawrence. Um, and that's metaphorical, right? You, you see a noose hanging from the branch, see the back of a figure. There is an immediate connection between the figure and the noose as such, although there is a mournful quality present. And then, which is one kind of version of engaging it. Another kind is what Carol Walker has been doing in her silhouettes. Um, for umpteen years and then, even grander exhibitions like the, the Sugar Sphinx that she did in the Domino Sugar Factory in, in New York City. And, um, I think we cannot limit ourselves as artists or other artists in how they wanna approach the subject matter. And it is, I think, necessarily going to be painful, right? Because that history is, is not a history we're trained socially and culturally to, um, reckon with in a manner that is, that has been healthy historically,

right? So, um, I'm not sure we can avoid, um, a certain amount of perpetuation of pain. But I think the difference, say, between Schutz and Lawrence and Walker is that, what Lawrence and Walker are doing, as members of the [Laughs] of the, the large Black family, if you will. What they're trying to do is, um, I think dwell on the deep human um, realities built into that. Um, and always humanizing the Black subjects in their work. Um, and even in terms of, you know, what Walker does with, say, satire or, um, the grotesque. It's super important because no one escapes the scope of her, um, ironic gestures. Right? So, just as if you, if you imagine that you're somehow outside of that field, I'm always struck, there, there's always some child figure, especially in their silhouettes, who's cutting someone's head off. Right? Like no one is innocent in this, like, violence begets violence. So, um, I'm not sure that we can escape it. I think we ought to engage it, um and deal with what it means to, like, bring that history, that painful history and put it in the public. Um, but it's, it's a necessary act.

RR: I agree. That's a pretty deep question [Laughs].

JS: That's deep, yeah. That's heavy [Laughs]

[Intermittent agreement]

JR: I would love to jump into this because, this is, I think this question is at the core of like, my sort of drive as an artist. Like, um, so I'm Joshua Ross, um, photographer, drawer. I think I definitely want to mention, like, sort of, like, this, this, like, specific spectacle of lynching. I just wanna mention it. Um, and then, um, I definitely want to talk about this sort of recent, sorta, incident, um, of violence, um, that's on display. Like, that was traumatic to a large number of people. Um, and how, like, it's a recurring sort of, you know, it's perpetuated. Like, across history and time. You know,

violence against Black people. Um, well, my phone is vibrating so it's distracting me from thinking. But um, okay. Um, one thing that I'm, like I really love that you mentioned all of these people that we coulda focused on in this moment. Um, and I also think that, like, so I was thinking about, like recognizing like, historic violence for what and when it was, what it is, when it was, who did it, what their sort of relationship was to the violence. Um, and then I also think like, in sorta the presence of an event like this, it's important to say everything that is happening and taking place. Um, what I think was really frustrating for me, personally, is that the distribution of sorta importance became focused on Dana Schutz, when it was not about Dana Schutz at all. And so, I really appreciate the words you used to describe how she painted the work. And one word that stood out to me was that she smeared. Like, it was smeared. So I think that, I think that, uh, these are opportunities for our writers, our thinkers, to really talk about the actions that are happening. And not necessarily sort of become so triggered by the event that we forget to write it into history the way it occurs. Because it's like, we could talk about all of what–I didn't see the show in person. I have memory of the artists who were involved. I wish I had the opportunity to go. But, for me, yes, I would want to talk about Dana Schutz and that she decided to, to this day, smear a Black face. Um, and then there's the sassy part of me that responds, and I'm like, 'Ignore the abstraction.' You know? And so, I think there are ways that we can sort of mark her in relationship to all of these other people in the way that she decided to show up in the space, uh, which is in the manner of her, you know, like, she, she kept in line with her practice of, sort of, I mean, I'm not even versed in her work, but, let's just say, her smearing technique, and she thought it was appropriate to render like a historic subject that was mutilated, in the,

in the manner, like, that perpetuates like, the violence. And when you are versed in sort of, material approaches to utilize a material, then I think it's our responsibility to understand how that material is sort of, exists within, um, a visual lexicon. You know? And it's like, I just think there's so much more power we have in sorta, like, not just 'she did this thing,' but like, let's just talk about, in a more frank way, what she did and move along. Because it should not be the sort of, it shouldn't, I, I hate that it's the memory of like, a moment that was bigger than her. Um, and I also really, I, I guess I get a little sorta perverse pleasure in knowing that this is still what you chose to do. Like, and, that's how I'm willing to recognize your relationship to me, and that means that we still have more work to do, but like, my focus is not on her. Like, you know, it's like, I'm glad to know that everything is not allotted. I'm telling myself that you could still dehumanize as well. But you still don't find any urgency within yourself to sort of relate to the subject in a different manner. Um, I don't know. I just I get frustrated that we don't really take the power that we have in moments like this and real empowering that like, we–I hated to see like, bodies, like in front of that like in sort of resistance because it just felt like it, it was an opportunity for us to celebrate. And so, it just felt like, for me, that was a form of lynching, that people were sti-bodies were still controlled by a controversial act done by a white body. Um, so that was the violence to me. And that is how I felt lynching was perpetuated that I had to watch Black bodies resist a painting. Like, so I'm like, wow. Like we have this object has so much power over us–

WM: Mhmm, mhmm

JS: That's, that's powerful

RR: That's pretty, yeah

[Intermittent agreement]

WM: The the, real quick, and I'll get out of the way. This is, this is Walton again. I think the thing that you're pointing to, which is really crucial, is that there were not Black, there were not people of color, 'cause I actually think that, um, when people of color are present within institutions, or within the critical system, that they halt some of that, right? So, the the curators from the Whitney who went to Schutz's gallery, or, not gallery, but, but studio to look at work, um, and saw that piece, did not say 'no.' They said, 'Oh, oh, yeah, sure,' right? But I, I, I bet that had there been among the curators an indigenous person, uh, a Mexican American, an Asian American, they woulda said, 'wait a second.' Right? And the f-the, and so, this is one of those places where representation is crucial. But then, in the critical community, right? All the people who went to go see the previews of that show, there weren't really Black critics or critics of color present to be like, 'wait a second.' How are you gonna put this up here and then around the corner is, um, Times Ain't Changing Fast Enough ("The Times Thay Ain't a Changing, Fast Enough") by Henry Taylor, right? Right around the corner. I mean, the, the, the, the brilliance of the Taylor painting is that it's all about humanizing Philando Castille. Right? It's at the m-it's at the moment of intense traumatization and yet the, the pose of the body is about the simultaneous resistance and strength. You put that against the Schutz painting and it's like, any critic, and I'm totally untrained [Laughs]. You know, I don't have the deep art historical background to walk in. But any critic can walk into that space, who has a background as an ethnic-American person and be like, 'There's a problem there.' Right? And so, I, I think that what you're saying is just, is so deep and

rich, given this question because, it points out, again, we need to be present in certain spaces. But it's all, it's at risk. Right?

[Intermittent agreement]

RR: Right. And I'm glad you mentioned being present because a couple of years ago, I was asked to sit on–Rebecca Robinson–uh, I was asked to sit on the planning committee for the Emmett Till traveling exhibit for the children's museum. And I was, um, I was really happy to be a part of that, to see exactly how it was gonna be executed, uh, what the intent was, the look of the, you know. So it even got to the point where, um, before they even opened the doors to the public, I'm out, myself and several of us you know, got to walk through, and, um there was one section, there was a video, kinda like a mini-documentary. And I kinda sat in the back, and they had a, I think it was a few young kids. I think the exhibit, you had to be ten and up. Um, and I sat there and I watched, and I was just in tears. And, one of the other coordinators walked up to me and they were like, "Rebecca are you okay?" and I was just like, "It was just really, really difficult to watch." Um, and I said, "I'm really concerned about, you know, this is the Children's Museum." These are parents bringing their children to see this thing. Is there a certain age, is there a certain time, to show this type of content. If, if it made me feel that way. And I think there was a kid sitting in front of me, he looked to be about twelve, and he was, he was asking significant questions and it made me feel a little better. That he was aware. He paid attention to what he was watching. And I believe, I'm, I'm not sure, but I think the children's museum had it where when you left, you had a little bit of support. Um, maybe you could talk to someone or ask more questions and things like that. But I think being uncomfortable allows vulnerability. And when you're vulnerable,

you're a little more open, and maybe that will allow you to understand. So, I don't think there's any way to avoid it. There's no way to avoid it. So, even something, even when it's, um, controversial, or, or, or, triggering, so what? At this point it is what it is and someone, like you said, you need to be in the room, you, you, you, myself. And it, it needs to be a balance there. You know what I mean? You can't have other people telling our history, or explaining. You know, you can read all you want. You could be the biggest researcher and, and you've done all your, you know, you traveled here and there. But the people who live it every day. And lynching, sometimes people just equate that with, oh, someone being hanged and things like that. Lynching is across the board. It's so, it's so diverse when it comes to what lynching–what is the devi-definition of lynching? What is that?

[Intermittent agreement]

WM: We, we were talking about this earlier that–um, this is Walton–um, the, the history of lynching in the US is fascinating because at least one work that I've read presents it as the beginning of modern twentieth century America. That sometimes, there wouldn't even be a victim. They would s-they would s-start announcing the gathering via radio or telegraph or telephone to gather people together and then they would f-they would figure out who they were going to kill, right? And, and, I, I, I just was watching the new documentary by um, the Haitian, uh, filmmaker, uh Raoul Peck. Uh, about, um, it's called Silver Dollar Road, it's on, um, on Amazon. I just saw it last weekend in Chicago at the, uh, uh, at the film festival up there. And, it's, it's a, it's a brilliant piece about a, a family trying to maintain control of uh, oh a piece of land of theirs in, in, uh, I believe North Carolina. Um, but the contemporary problem is

connected to the history of African American land ownership and all the the layers of trickery and, um, terrorism that post-reconstruction white citizens in the south used to, like, steal land from Black farmers and, and, um, land owners. And, um, one of the things that Peck does is he has a sequence where he's presenting, um, basically, news clippings from papers, including one–I had to stop the movie, watching it for the second time last night, because one of the news clippings say "Fifteen thousand show up for lynching." Right? That's, that's like, fifteen thousand people go to see a basketball game. Right? So that was Saturday night entertainment. Right? That's not like, oh, somebody did something, we had to go get him. That's like, we, they're planning s-like, social events around maiming and killing people. Right? So, there is no escaping the pain, right? And then also, there's there must be a realization that this isn't irrational mob violence. This is planned social events with violence at the center, right? A way of, like, perpetuating and maintaining specific forms of empowerment–

JS: Control

[Intermittent agreement]

WM: And control, right? So, I think that's also embedded in it, right? And, and, and I think a twelve year old, a smart twelve year old is sitting watching that and saying, 'That's not happening accidentally.' And putting things together and saying, 'Okay, someone explain how this is go-had this went on so long and nobody in most cases were being arrested for it.'

[Intermittent agreement]

RR: I would love to talk to that twelve year old today. Like how they recall what they saw, you know, on, on that screen. I mean, I was back there boo [Laughs]

boo-hooing and they even asked, “Do you think it’s a little too much, or do you think we need to change this or [inaudible 01:01:56]?” Leave it as it is at this point. This is just how it affected me, but, um, I don’t know, I don’t know. [Pause] I, I don’t think I, I don’t if I even went back to see–I, I, I’d seen enough, so I didn’t need the exhibit, personally. Um, I think it’s great that, that the Children’s Museum did that and it became, you know, this traveling exhibit. For me, I got to see what I needed to see and I was done with that, you know?

WM: Back to self-segregation, right? [Laughs]

RR: Right. Pr-you gotta protect yourself.

RG: Yeah, mhmm, mhmm.

WM: Yes, absolutely.

RR: That’s, that’s, that’s, that’s, that’s hard, that’s difficult, that’s a challenge. And having to deal with it every day, not just a, a corner, you know, where you have a, a display, a gallery of a museum. But every day, you’re dealing with, you know, these issues, or answering questions, or, trying to explain something, or microaggressions, and you get accustomed, which is horrible. That’s horrible that you get, I guess, immune to it. And you shouldn’t have to live like that. [Pause] Well, I guess our time is wrapping up, so, this was great, I enjoyed it.

RG: Yes, definitely.

RR: I’m glad I decided to sit at table two.

RG: Yes.

RR: [Laughs]

JS: My mind says, ‘keep going and going.’

RR: Keep going, yeah.

RG: [Laughs]

JS: I’m thinking about so many other things.

RR: Now you can finish eating that Jamaican food.

JR: I’m gonna keep eating it, I’ll have it, I’m not gonna, yeah

RR: That’s a lot, this is a lot, man.

RG: [Laughs]

JR: I was, yeah. I mean that was a lot. I feel like there’s so much to be said. Like–

RG: Just wanna see the questions.

RR: Oh yeah.

JR: So much stuff keeps comin’ up.

RG: This would’ve been a really good one: *Discuss support systems for your art practice.*

RR: Oh yep. See? We did.

JS: Thank you.

RG: Awesome, yes.

KEONDRA BILLS FREEMYN: Oh great [Laughs] Sorry to interrupt, but I think I gotcha on a good transition, is that okay?

RR: See? It was meant for me to sit here. I enjoyed this.

[Laughter]

KBF: Great. I'm so happy to hear that. Um, so I'm just gonna stop your recording really quickly–

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by C. BAY MILIN and AJA SCARLATO 04/01/2024

To be copyedited.