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Participants:
JAMES MCKISSIC
CHRISTIAN COLLIER
JODY HARRIS
ERIKA ROBERTS
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Preface

The following conversation was hosted at Stove Works, facilitated by Aja Scarlato. Consent was given by the participants to have their conversation recorded and transcribed.

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START OF RECORDING

JAMES MCKISSIC: Hey Jody, how are you doing?

JODY HARRIS: How you doing? How you doing?

JM: Good to see you

JH: How you doing?

[Chairs moving]

CHRISTIAN COLLIER: Is this it?

ERIKA ROBERTS : Yeah, those are the, um, prompt cards

JM: I think so

CC: It doesn't look that bad, then

ER: Yeah, yeah

CC: I thought there would be more

ER: [Laughs] So, I figure, maybe we should...what, pull one each? What do you think?

CC: I don't think it really matters

ER: Yeah. I mean, she gave, she was like five different choices, so.

JM: Oh, yeah that's fine

ER: Yeah, of how to do it. Either deal them out, she said, or just pull of the top. Or each one pull. So

JM: I'll go ahead and pull

CC: Yeah, it doesn't matter

JM: Or I'll go

CC: We can alternate

ER: Yeah

CC: We're closest to it

JM: Ladie's first

ER: Okay

JM: [Laughs]

ER: Okay. [Laughs]

JM: Oh

CC: Nice, the goo—

JM: Does that mean you can make it whatever you want?

ER: I don't know, but, I don't know

JM: Mine is blank, too

ER: Now see, there's some on the bott—I saw that. No, they're not

CC: Oh, okay.

JM: Maybe we need to shuffle

ER: Maybe these are, like, free-for-alls.

JM: Oh

CC: Gotta cheat a little bit. I'm just gonna move to the ones with the text.

ER: Maybe these are the ones you like, you get to pick like, what you wanted

JM: Whatever, yeah.

CC: Well, there are only four of those. So, maybe we should just start with the ones with text on them

ER: That's cool

JM: Yeah, I'm fine with that.

CC: Okay

JH: Mhmm

JM: This is a blank one

ER: Yeah

CC: Those are as well. Sweet.

ER: Y-all these are blank?

CC: Yep

ER: Okay

CC: Alright, Erika, set it off.

ER: [inaudible 00:01:37] Oh. Okay. Does a sense of civic responsibility affect formal decisions made in your studio? Civic responsibilities affect formal decisions made in your studio. That's a heavy question. Hmm. I think it can. Um—

CC: How so?

ER: Um, well, I can say that there's a lot of responsi—lot of things outside, public-wise, that can affect certain decisions that I've made. I don't have a studio in that respect.

JM: But like our practice

CC: Once in a while I think it's, it's the ear- [inaudible 00:02:34-00:02:36] extends to your practice

JM: Yeah

ER: Yeah. Um, where it's made it where I, I won't perform at certain spots or, choose, um, how I respond. Um, and the responsibility I feel like I have is, not necessarily always civic, but sometimes it's artistically an artistic responsibility. Like, making sure the art stays true regardless of what the world may say. Some plac—some places will ask me to come commission a piece and then they...want me to do the fluffy part. Don't tell the bad part. Just tell the good part. And I'm one to do the research in order to inform the artistic practice. And the art's not gonna lie, so sometimes at the responsibility, it doesn't even have the civic in part of it. It's just artistic responsibility.

JM: Do you share it with them before and then, they, some of them try to hit you with an editor, or-

ER: Sometimes but then, usually, I know which part they may, I suspect which part they may have a question about, and I'll usually have history to back it up.

JM: Hmm

ER: So based on what you shared with me historically, this is what I saw, saw, saw. And this is where this line fits in with that. Even though it may not, it's poetry, so it's not gonna be like, a story telling. You know what I'm saying? But, this is where the two meet. And a lot of them are like, some of them made me change their whole perspective and they're like, 'Oh, I get it.' You know, maybe we were wrong about trying to impress upon you to do just the pretty stuff or the cloudy, you know, the, cloud-free stuff. But I'm like, the whole story's gotta be told and art's not gonna lie, so. Yeah, okay, anybody else wanna try?

JM: I mean, I've been, I can speak to that too, and I would, I would have to divide it into two thing, two, two buckets.

CC: Do it.

JM: [Laughs] So, I think, for myself as like an arts administrator, yes I do feel a civic responsibility. Um, because I do want to make sure that I'm making pathways for our people to get access

ER: Right, right.

JM: I also realized too that in many situations, like when I was growing up, I had no concept of that that there was a future doing what I'm doing now. That just, I never even heard of that job. You know,

ER: Mhmm

JM: Um, and then, I also acknowledge that for almost fifty years the organization that I'm at never had any Black leadership. So, there's a lot of people that could never conceive of that, you know. In fact, when, um, when I was interviewing, somebody said, "do you think they'll, uh, they'll accept you." I said, "Well, I am different from the archetype of like the arts administrator in Chattanooga." And they said, "What's the archetype?" And I said, "Oh, like a white lady with dangly earrings [group members laugh], wearing Eileen Fisher

ER: Word

JM: [Laughs]

JD: [Laughs]

ER: Word

JM: Yeah. [Laughs] And they were like, "Okay, I know exactly what you're talking about, so." That's how I would say in that category, like, I do feel a civic responsibility. As an artist, though, like, I don't really feel that responsibility. I think young, as a younger person I felt like I had to show or express Blackness in my work. And then I think as, the older I got, I, um, got exposed to more like, Black abstractionist, and studied and, you know, moved into fabric art and whatnot. So I really don't feel that, even though a lot of times, my work will be triggered by something that happens. The police execution, or poverty, something I've seen or heard in the news. Um, but it, I don't feel like the responsibility to make that anymore. Like, I'm free from it 'cause I'm not, I'm not gonna take on that burden in the the one thing that kinda brings me joy.

ER: Mhmm.

CC: Yeah

ER: I feel you.

CC: I, uh, I-I identify with the, a lot of that. I think, uh, for me, I think I, I do feel, uh, a responsibility. I-I always try to make myself available for, uh, schools and like book clubs and things like that because I think that, uh, being a living example of the craft that I have devoted my life to, um, is important because like you said, there's, if you rew-rewind the clock, if you're like, who is a working poet in Chattanooga, you get only a few images come to mind. But if specifically if you're like, who is a male working poet in Chattanooga, who is a Black male working poet in Chattanooga, you'll get some, you know, e-even, uh, smaller. So, being able to, uh, let people know that, you know, if you have this interest, we have these different avenues that you can go down. Uh, here are things that I can recommend. If you have any questions after this, reach out to me. So, being able to kind of be a, a mentor aside from being, uh, you know, just a practitioner of the craft, I-I think that's important. Um, so, I-I do, uh, I don't know. I just, I feel, I feel like, uh, calling is such like a charged kind of, you know, word, uh, but no, I think that if-if I do lean into that, I do feel like it's one of my callings. Um, because I think that, in my life I've been so fortunate, uh, to have been guided by people that I've met, some of which I, I will never directly meet. You know, so those people aren't even here. Um, so I-I owe it to, at least I feel like I owe it to myself and the people that I can impact, uh, to step up and extend that courtesy.

ER: I can see that.

CC: Jody, round us out. [Claps] Civic responsibility.

JH: I, I, I think it is, uh, civic responsibility, and I do feel, uh, [smacks cheeks] W. E. B. Du Bois, uh, wrote a, uh, piece about the Talented Tenth, and we are the Talented Tenth. And by that, default alone, we're obligated to, whether we want to or not, fulfill those requirements of being part of the Talented Tenth. Because we are the recorders of history. We are the, um, [smacks cheeks] [pause] uh, well, how can I put it. The, the, the poets, the writers, the artists, the dancers, the renaissance people, I guess you would say, we are that Talented Tenth. So by that, we have a responsibility to convey messages for our people, our community, our causes. Whether we want to or not.

CC: Right.

JH: So, I feel, in that regard, when you apply the Talented Tenth rule, then, yeah, civic, civic, uh, you know, it's a part of it--

ER: But then I wonder, too, though--

JH: It's a part whether—

ER: It says here how does it affect your formal decisions, so, so like, for me, it doesn't, I don't know that it affects my—I am what I am. So if I'm gonna be an artist and a school does ask me to come, then I'm do—I'm gonna do it. But does it, does it change anything that I've done in my practice? No. And that's like, that's the other caveat of the question. It's like, it doesn't change my, my per—my, the way I've been doing my practice. There's nothing outside that's gonna change my process. Or affect any decisions inside of my studio journal.

JH: For me, it changes it. It—because it's sitting there. It's the elephant sitting there. Like the ancestors like, W. E. B. Du Bois, and all them sitting there like, 'Hey, you got a civic responsibility to—

ER: I feel you

JH: Convey something.' What-whatever it is, writing poetry, whatever. So it does, for me it affects me that way, uh, 'cause everything I do and create, that's sitting there first, and then whatever comes to me, comes to me.

JM: I feel you. I—I'm with you [clears throat] but I feel, too, like, as, like, me, as a Black, queer man, large. When I sit down my loom, that's representation enough. Like, if somebody sees me doing that, working in fabric, or, you know? That's just, I'm not looking to take on that responsibility. I'm gonna be, and live, and make what I want to make. And just the fact that I'm doing those things, like you're doing what you're doing, you're doing what you're doing, is mind-blowing to people that see it. Because, we, in some ways have, have, like, because of our ancestors and work that they doing what we've done, we're leaning into the ability to be free. And to, to, to use the arts as an expressive, um, tool for our communities, but also for ourselves. And I, I feel like a lot of what I do in my practice as an artist is, is really only for myself. It's not only—what quiet room that I have is to go there and do that. 'Cause I—so I'm [inaudible 00:12:15] everything else is given to other people. So, no, they can't have that, too. They can't control that, too.

ER: Mhmm. Agree.

CC: Well, I, I have a question, though. So, do you feel like if, if you see yourself as being like, uh, kind of er, uh, a representation, right? Uh, Black, queer, uh, abstract painter and lineage of, you know, Black abstract painters. Um, if you see yourself in your work, and conversation, say like, uh Sam Gilliam, alright? Does that affect your

practice at [inaudible 00:12:57-00:12:58] You're like, well this is a representation and it's also kind of continuing the dialogue of

JM: You know, I think it doe-it might do that. You know? 'Cause a lot of my pieces would be in response to things that happen. Um, societal issues, here in Chattanooga

CC: Right

JM: Um, but it's, it's the way that I meditate and work through those things. Like if, when, like if Trayvon is murdered, I c-because of the role that I play [JM and group members laugh] I can't show up at places, saying 'fuck all of all.' I mean, I just can't. So, my practice is where I wor-work through those things. See what I'm saying? Yeah.

ER: I think it's a different dichotomy when you have to work through, when you're, what, administrative and an artist. Right? 'Cause

JM: Yeah, just last night I was at the Houston Museum, and I saw them coming around the corner. It was some politicians and their wives who had like voted for the anti-drag stuff, anti-CRT, and my first inclination was I should take one of these bowls and bust them in the head

ER: But the other thought was like, hmm

JM: I-I have bills, I need a job, this is gonna be a headline tomorrow

JH: Be on the news, yeah

JM: So I just spoke to them and kept it moving. So, you know, tho-it's, there's like a public James and a private James. And my wo-art work is, is more private for me. Yeah.

ER: Yeah

CC: I, see, it, it does. Uh, it does affect the formal decisions that I make. In, in different ways, right? Because, if, if somebody asked me uh, Christian, I want you to come to a workshop. Um, and talk about some aspect of craft, then I'm like, this is a great opportunity. Let me show them a) what I've got, what I've got in my bag, b) let me e-uh, expand possibly their, uh, understanding of what I do, um, and let me also bring in some different examples, right? So this is another thing of like bringing in, like, uh, another part of the culture, right? So it's like, if I'm doing a, a workshop on (), let me not only show you how people have done interesting things with the, the, the form. Let me show you a like contemporary Black writers who are doing interesting things with form, right? So now, I'm expanding their, their living understanding of it, uh, you have a, a living understanding uh, of artists who are out there doing work, and uh, it's just, it's continuing like the, the dialogue. And, but I, I think about that often. Um, like if I'm reading, uh, John Murillo's, uh, Kontemporary Amerikan Poetry, and uh, he has, uh, sonnets that were talking about, the uh, the LA uprising. But they're also like, metrically and formally sound sonnetts. So I'm like, 'oh, you can totally bring in, you know, Black and American culture, and all these different things into a form that when this thing arrived, did not have us in mind. Right?

JM: Mhmm, yeah

CC: So, I, I take on that responsibility too. And it's like, well, how can I bring more of myself, my community, my peoples into my practice in a way that is going to do all these other things, and, and also at the root of it, pay homage to the people who have laid the foundation too, right? So, that's always something that I'm, I'm aware of. Um, and I, I guess it's, it's a blessing and a burden to also carry with you. And I, I think, I'm

not sure if I'm, we're supposed to like, kind of chop off these things in this way. But I'm wondering—I guess maybe, real fast, we'll, we'll do it that way. Uh, do you think other people, other groups carry that responsibility with them?

ER: Other groups like

JM: Other racial and ethnic groups?

CC: Sure, yeah. Other people who don't look like the, the people in this room.

JM: That weight?

ER: No. Not that weight

JH: No, no

ER: No they move, they m- it, it move a little easy

JH: [Laughs] yeah

ER: [Laughs] It's a little different

JM: Yeah, are you talking about, like, almost like, not respectability politics but like the, the weight of like, carrying everything forward

JH: Sure

JM: Is that what [inaudible 00:17:16]

CC: Yeah, I think like, if, I don't know, uh, like I wonder if somebody like, uh, if, if, Lon Eldridge sits down with his guitar, and is like I'm gonna do a blues song, not to say that he hasn't like earned his stripes in the blues or he hasn't been taught or whatever whatever, but I'm wondering of how much of this is like, let me bring in

ER: Somebody else

CC: This person or whatever, whatever, into this thing. Like, I wonder if that's like something he'd been consciously aware of

JM: I don't think they do that, no.

JH: No, I think it's just us

ER: Not generally, no. You might, there might be a couple that you run across that recognize, you know, I mean, for instance, I mean this particular project with the oracle, it, it, it was specifically made where it, it needed to be all Black bodies on it. The group that was asked was a mixed group. The person that's over that group immediately reached out to a Black person that could help with that part. And then, the people, all of us that performed at that space, we were all Black. So, there are some o-there are some times where it happens. But the—

JM: What I'm [inaudible 00:18:34-00:18:36]

ER: But more times than not.

JM: But this is what I'm waiting to see happen. When the group gets called that's not a Black group

ER: Absolutely

JM: That they say, no but I would, I think it's better if I tell you some Black dance groups that could do a great job and you reach out to them. And that's the step that I don't ever see happen.

CC: Right

ER: Yeah, yeah. That's a good point.

JM: Um, I see, I'm still gonna, I'm still gonna suck up the resources and then let me get some Black people to do things, you know, in my arena. That's what I usually see.

CC: Sure

ER: And I, and I feel, I feel you on that

JM: And I don't know if y'all do too.

JH: Mhmm

JM: 'Cause there's Black dance groups out here too.

ER: I feel you on that

JM: There's Black everything in Chattanooga. And that's not about them. It's just like I see it happen every time.

ER: It happens a lot. I agree. It does happen

JM: Yeah. But somebody emailed, called me yesterday and said, "Do you, would you like to be on this particular board." And I said, "No," and they got real quiet. And I said, "But what I would love to do is tell you some other people that you could reach out to," um, and I said, "Because I'm at a point in my career where I've done those things," I've, I've gotten, extracted the opportunities from being on boards and, I always want to make room for younger Black people. And then I just email them and send them the information as a follow-up, but we don't see that happen

ER: No. Not like, not in that way

CC: Well the, the other part is that, it's like, you do that, and then there's no follow up. They're, they're like—

JM: There's and they're probably

CC: No, we wanted, we wanted you. [laughs] You know what I mean?

JM: Yeah. 'Cause you, 'cause you're the only one that we know.

CC: Sure

JM: Yeah

ER: We're comfortable with you

JM: Yeah. And we don't know how to build relationships.

ER: Yeah

JM: I hope they don't put this public 'cause

CC: [Laughs]

ER: It's gonna be all over the place

JM: I know but, lemme start getting my resume together

CC: You're like those, uh, [inaudible 00:20:28] There's like Master Voice

JM: [laughs] They can just make it real deep

ER: It's gone be everywhere

CC: [Laughs] What's the question, uh, what's on your card?

JM: Mine says, Is it possible, oh my goodness, Is it possible to make artwork
that's not tied to notions of identity or legacy.

CC: Uh, is it possible, yes. Uh--

ER: Do I want to do it? No.

CC: for Black artists, I think the answer is no. And I'll, and I'll tell you why. Because even if you're like, here's this, uh, uh, landscape painting that's not about race, automatically for somebody, you as a Black artist doing this landscape, it's like, it becomes about, 'well the absence of races,' so automatically it comes back in some way, shape, or form to identity, and uh, your rejection of it is still putting you in the arena of, of the, the identity and, and race. If you lean directly into it, obviously it's like, on the nose in the exploration of the thing, right? So, it's one of those things where regardless of, of how, it's the Catch-22 effect. And, uh, I think that always and it goes back to what shape, uh, what way shape or form to it. Because there's a relationship between you as the artist, and then you as like, the audience, right? And you're, you're, you're constantly in this, this dance together, where you're like, "I didn't intend for this thing to happen, I made a conscious decision [inaudible 00:21:56-00:21:58] and then somebody's gonna be like, "Well, to me, the racial overtones," you're like, drag me back into it

[ER intermittently agrees]

JM: Wouldn't it even be harder for y'all? 'Cause like you show up to speak the words and your identity is like right there in the forefront.

CC: I think, well, I mean, I don't, 'cause I do-I don't also necessarily think it's a bad thing.

JM: Yeah

CC: Right? Because I think, with, with, uh, with, with poetry, um. So, f-for those of you who are listening to this, this recording. Here's the way that poetry works. Uh,

poems are about three things. Love, death, and desire. And everything in one way, shape or form, comes back to family. Or, or--

JM: You said, love, death and d--

[ER intermittently agrees]

CC: Love, death, and desire, and everything in one way, shape or form comes back to, to family or familial relationships, right? And, inherent in that, is identity. But also in, in poetry we, we work with, uh, a quote unquote "I". Your, your central "I", your speaker, right? So, if you're utilizing active "I," you are, in one way, shape or form also letting into identity.

ER: Tell yourself

CC: So

ER: Yeah

CC: But, you know, as a caveat to that, our, our superpower is that you, as the audience, you're never supposed to assume that the "I" -- I could say, I, Christian J. Collier, whatever, you're not supposed to think that that's me, the person. That's like, a different me. Right? Now, how much of that actually translates to somebody else, like, you know? 'Cause a lot of people are just like, 'Oh wow, it's it's that's you to a T.' It's like, 'Oh no. It was rooted in something truthful and I went a different direction with it.' Right? But they're so like, 'Oh, it's, it's you. It's just you.' [Laughs] You be like, 'oh.'

JM: As writers, do y'all ever feel like at liberty to write and embody somebody else? Like another identity? 'Cause white writers do that all the time.

CC: Sure. Yeah, one hundred percent.

ER: Mhmm. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

CC: I don't want to like, talk at length over. You guys jump in first.

ER: Yeah

JM: [inaudible 00:23:59-00:24:01] I'm just thinking, you can talk about it Jody
[laughs] I don't know.

CC: [Laughs]

JH: The um, well funny, I, I posted a picture of, j-uh, I just did some big pieces of
some Jetsons and I got a message from a friend a fellow artist why I didn't paint them
Black. And I'm, uh

ER: Oh, they asked Toni Morrison. Right? When they asked her why didn't she
write

CC: Yeah

ER: Stories about [laughs] Would she ever write stories about, uh, white people.
She was like, what? [laughs] You know? Like, yeah.

JH: I think it's, it's something we can't, like you said, we

ER: Can't escape it.

JH: Blacks can't get away from

ER: You can't escape that part.

[CC and ER intermittently agree]

JH: Black, uh, it's gone show up some kind of way, uh like you said, if you do the,
the landscape painting, you know, it's gone draw s-you know, come back to identity
some kind of way, so no I don't think we can get away from it, unfortunately.

ER: What happens when we try? It's like the art suffers

JH: I, I was finna say that. Uh, the art suffers

CC: Oh, I don't see

JM: Really? Oh.

CC: I disa-I disagree with that though.

JM: 'Cause like

CC: 'Cause, I think um, because, you know, you still have each of us as artists, we're guided by our obsessions. Right? Like, this is how we get to, like books being made, this is how you like get to, like or just like, if we're doing visual media, and your like, your series, and you're chasing an obsession. And, I don't think that that necessarily, like, is so rooted to, like, your identity or the perception there of that it hinders the way that your, your work is executed or received. Um, I think it maybe can enter into the, you know, enter into the, the process at some point in time. And, and, but I think that's still like, you, it's relied upon the artist. Um. Like, I don't think uh, there's somebody looks at like a, a Mark Bradford and, uh, I don't think that that really affects the way that that the the piece shakes out. Because, Mark has a, a knowledge base and a skill set, right? And and, and a proven ethic of practice that he's gonna rely on to make sure that this thing meets his standard. Um, and what he's been like, trained to do, before anybody even actually see. Right? So, if the thing comes out trash, well, maybe it doesn't leave, like the, the workshop of the warehouse. You know, like, but you, I think that if it actually is, you know, your, you're inviting other people to see it, or whatever, whatever. Um, I think that it, you have to, acknowledge, well this and that, the

artist who made it. It met their standard. So maybe the conversation becomes about like, well, why did you make xyz choice? But, yeah, I don't know.

JM: That's what I wa-I was thinking along the lines of like, just the technical aspect can be separate from the identity. Like, you, you can just sit down and write a haiku or a sonnet or something. Like, we, we could draw or paint a flower, like where we're exhibiting more of the technical without so much of the soul or identity attached to it. That's just my opinion. I don't know. But it's when you start to add identity into the mix a lot of the fire and the energy happens.

CC: Yeah

ER: Hm.

CC: And I think though, like, that's [pause] that speaks, I think to the the visibility of the artist. Because if we just look at like, going back to like the landscape painting. If we just see the landscape painting, but we don't know anything about the artist, then I think it's a little bit different. Right? Or like, if I just, if I submit the poem and I take out of my bio that, you know, I'm a Black, Southern writer, it, it changes, it changes the way that somebody comes into the, the work. Uh, but, that requires a certain, uh, eschewing of my face, uh, my identifying markers, all those things being in the, in the mix. And, you know? I, I think that that's also the interesting, you know, just thing you can kind of wrestle with.

ER: I think when you try and fight, though, with it, with it, you know it's trying to strip the identity away. I think it messes with the process. I think it can mess with the process. And that's what I mean, like, the, the art seems to suffer because you, your, your process is different now when you're trying to remove something. Um, it's no

longer the same thing and then are you representing, are you truly representing, um, I've shown up in spaces where the space was all white, and I knew that the poem that I was about to deliver is gonna be Blackity-Black-Black-Black-Black-Black.

JM: [Laughs]

ER: Black-Black. And, and I knew that the audience was gonna be that. And this is true, I wrote two poems specifically because I knew. And the one that I wrote that was Windexed, that was super sparkly, you know? Very, I didn't feel it. It wasn't, it d-even once I got there. I had the choice. I knew, 'okay so you have these two. You,' and I do that a lot, where I'll write two for the same event. Sometimes just, I get there and I don't know what I'm feeling, which one's gonna vibe out. And I chose the Blackity-Black one and despite the silence [laughs], I mean later it was conversation, but despite the audience silence, I felt true. More true than I would have felt, had I did the more

JM: Sanitized, yeah.

ER: Palatable one, yeah.

JH: Mhmm

ER: The, the more palatable one felt like it, I mean--

JM: Do y'all feel like, when you show up though, and you are Black, but you do something that does not let you get into identity that people get, feel like they be, have been down?

ER: Yeah

CC: I, I don't.

JM: You don't?

CC: Oh, I don't think about it. I've, I don't think, there's only so much, I'm only concerned about like, the audience so much. Um, and, I love, I love working, uh, with and against expectation. Um, because that gives that gives me wiggle room. Right? And I think that, um, if I get up there and I'm wearing like my Biggie Smalls shirt and I got my hat backwards, I automatically know there's a certain expectation of what I'm supposed to do, right?

ER: Right, right

CC: So that gives me a whole lot of field to play with to, uh, subvert their expectations. Um, I, I do that a lot. I do that in my work on the page, I do that when it, it's, and, um, because I think that, that ability to surprise is a super-power that, that we have, right? And, um, 'cause if, if, if, if I do it the other way, and I'm just playing exactly into like the expectation, the needle doesn't necessarily change at all. They're just like, 'oh, I just heard this thing that I'm gonna forget about.' But, if somebody's like, 'man, I know where this guy's going with this,' and then you take a hard left, and they're like, 'oh wow.' Then, I got 'em. Right? Um, and they may not remember exactly what I say, but they remember that effect. And if they remember that, that effect enough, maybe then they become like, well let me see what else this guy's got in his bag. Let me, right? So, God, I, I love that. I love because it, it, to me it makes my job easier. Um, like, I remember I, uh, years ago, I got, I got booked on a thing where it's like all about, uh, Southern artists. And when they introduced me, they were like, yeah well, this is like a little bit different from most of this. And I was like, "Oh man. [Claps once] Thank you so much. Thank you so much for setting it off that way. 'Cause I'ma show you how it connects, right?" And, um, it, it was like an alley-oop. They gave me the alley-oop to just

like, do, do my poem. And then people were like, 'Wow.' Expectations. [Pause] Are we ready for another card? Oh go ahead.

JH: With, with this I wanna ask, with everything that's going on right now with our history, I feel, trying to be erased and swept under the rug. On the flip side, do y'all feel it's important that we do a-show some identity?

ER: Mhmm

CC: Well

JH: For future generations? Because with the way, if the Republicans got they way, they'd erase everything.

CC: Sure

JH: And fifty years from now, we, you know, everything would be totally different. So, is it our responsibility to still identify, show some identity.

CC: Well

JH: With what we create for futures?

CC: I think, well one, that's nothing new. That's always been. Black erasure has always been, been the case, right? 'Cause if you, you know, again, like, going back to like, a-uh, abstraction, you know, uh, abstract art-

JM: They all [inaudible 00:33:51]

CC: There's a lot of er-Black erasure in, in that equation. And you can look at any art form that's the case, right? But, I think the fact that we exist is really in a, in a way, enough. Right? Because inherently, by us existing and making things, we're already satisfying like a l-a lot of that, right?

JH: Mhmm

CC: Um, because the history of, of, of Black people in this country, you know, that, and that loops in Black artists. A lot of our history here is a story of 'in spite of.' Right?

JH: Yeah

CC: If you look at the, the blues, and gospel, uh, which are both really supernatural forms, right? Because if you look at gospel, obviously you're speaking to some sort of like, divine being. With the blues, you're like, 'Yeah, I was, uh, I was plowing this field and then like the Devil jumped out.' Right?

JH: [Laughs]

CC: Both of those are really supernatural things, right?

JM: Love it, man

JH: Yeah [laughs]

CC: But even if, if you weigh them both together, they're both the story of 'in spite of.' Like, this sucks, but maybe one day it's gonna get better. Right? Or maybe I gotta get some moonshine and have a good time 'in spite of' this, this horrible thing. On this side of the coin, it sucks, but I know one day, my Grand Redeemer is gonna come and it's not gonna be, be horrible, right? You could trace that lineage all the way up through like, something like house music, where you're just like, you know, the, the biggest example of, like a house trap now would be like Break My Soul. You won't break my soul. It's the story still of 'in spite of.'

JH: Mhmm

CC: In all of our art forms, you find that thing. Right? Uh, being with the artists—I am in a, a, uh, largely white space doing an art form that has largely been dominated by, by white or European like standards, whatever. And I exist ‘in spite of,’ right? So, that’s a part of the legacy. So the fact that we exist and ‘in spite of’ that, we still make art. That’s part of the lineage. Mhmm

JM: I would say, too, though, like it’s about era-an erasure, too? Like even, when you talk about abstraction and stuff, like we created it. If you go

CC: Yeah

JM: Look in caves, you know in the Motherland, that’s abstraction. That’s taking what you see and like making it into like the simplest forms to communicate to other people. Um, but I think you, you’re on point, like we’ve always, like, everything that we do is in resistance to erasure and to, to people trying to do right with what we do.

CC: Rock, rock and roll, uh, techno music, right? Electro, all of that? Where did it come from?

ER: Yeah. I do believe we have, I do believe we have a responsibility though, to tell the story, though. The story of the erasure. The story of, I think we, Nina Simone said, that an artist’s responsibility is to reflect the times. So I think it’s important that we do tell that story without question. Um, we may not be able to show identity, like in the process of that, but being able to re-tell that story, it cannot be escaped.

ELIZA MYRIE: Giving y’all a little five minute, wrap up warning. So last thoughts, wrapping up, and then, we’ll let you know the next step

JM: Oh, okay

CC: Okay

ER: Okay, cool

CC: Alright. So, one more question. Real fast, rapid fire. Discuss support systems for your art practice.

ER: Woo! Oh. Um, this. [Laughs]

JM: Yeah, this is great

CC: Yeah

JH: Mhmm

ER: Totally needed it, yeah. Uh

JM: Um

CC: I'm gonna say an easy one. I'm gonna say, uh, people. Um, because, you know, be it someone who, who brings uh, you should check out this this grant opportunity. You should check out this program. Or, or, here's some like submission guidelines, whatever, whatever. Um, a lot of the, the things that I've been able to do with, with my art is solely because of of, uh, people, uh, and our relationship and them like, liking and understanding and appreciating what I do and, uh, hopefully that the rigor that goes into it.

JM: I like that. People, too

JH: Yeah, I'm gonna say people, too. Yeah.

JM: People and relationships

CC: Yeah. But I think that, you know, that's go-going back to like legacy and lineage. I mean, that's always, uh, it's always part of the community. You know? Like, uh, in 1995, uh, Onyx said in their second album All We Got Iz Us.

ER: Yeah

CC: You know? Um, now I think that sometimes, you know, 'us' can also be an interesting word because it, does, how, what are the, what are the parameters of 'us?' But, it, it's every movement um, is really, at the core of it, is really driven by a chosen few people who do like, extraordinary work, right? And, and labored. Um, all we got is us. You know? Might not be as many as we would like, may not be like, whatever, whatever. But still, it doesn't, it doesn't take much to change a life. Or to change direction and

JM: Jody I was talking to some lawyers last week that are, um, bringing cases in Tennessee to sue against the book banning, the history banning and stuff. And, um, what they said is, like, as they surveyed the state and talked to people, like, in majority Black areas nobody is paying it any mind. We're still too [inaudible 00:39:34] in doing what we've always done is that the border lands in the all white areas. And when I say border land I'm talking about more integrated places. And, um, the all white places were a lot of the the, where people are actually like making the complaints and trying to do stuff. Um, and even if they did ban things in, in most like majority Black areas, people would, they've always taught, where did we learn our Black history? Like I didn't, I didn't learn a lot of it in school. I learned it in my community--

ER: I was gonna say church. Yep, yep

CC: Right

JM: At Black history pageants at church. Bible school. After school programs. I mean, so, I think we'll be alright as long as we continue to do what you say. Like it's up to us to continue to pass it on.

CC: Sure. And I mean, the other part of that is though, like, we often exist outside of where mainstream white society looks.

JM: Yeah

CC: Right? Like, so, we are like, one of the least checked for groups that allows us kinda to just operate under the radar and do our own things, right?

JM: On our own, yep.

ER: Mhmm

CC: Like, Jamie Foxx said like, when he had his like big break like, uh before Ray but like Collateral? He was like, "The thing that saved me was that white Hollywood had no idea about any of the stuff that I've done before. Like, if they had known that I had done like, 'Booty Call,' I don't get that role [group members laugh] in this Tom, Tom, you know, Cruise film.

JM: Yeah

CC: So, it's like a blank slate. Like, who's this guy?

JM: He was Black famous at that time

CC: You know? And, and that, it's like there are two different Hollywoods

JH: Yeah [laughs]

ER: Yeah, definitely.

CC: Really two different Hollywoods. And, um, I feel like we exist, uh, kind of the same way. Where it's just like, we, we been doing this. And they're like, 'well, how come I've never seen you?' It's like, you know why. You know what I mean, like [laughs] you don't, you don't often check for where these things happen.

JM: Yeah

JH: That, that is a, uh, I guess you could say, a good sup-source of support for me is in seeing people like y'all. Like when I see you lecturing at, you know, a college. You know, that's like, hey, that's, that's, a, a win for you, but it's a win for us too. When I see you lecturing, you know? Or speaking at the city. When I see you, you know, doing your thing at the high, at the Hunter, you know, these type places, these type settings. That's a win for all of us. And that inspires me, you know, to keep going, to, to get to that point. And

JM: Well you inspire us too, I mean you out here too

CC: But it's all, it's all, it's all conversation, right? You know? 'Cause we, we all, again, like, with us existing and doing these things and doing it in the community, that's the, that's the way it works, man. You know? Iron sharpens iron, right? But we-

ER: Which, that's the essential part of that strengthening. That, that village for, for the artist, you know is that sharpening so you can even be in the same space with other artists, and they may not have, you may not have even have the same artistic language, but you still pull from their experience, and their, their win, their, you know. And you can fuel your own from that. You know?

JM: Yeah

ER: I've been inspired by so many artists that are not poets. Period. They're like nowhere near it. And if you ask them to be a poet, they're gonna laugh at you. But I've been inspired by them just by their momentum. And I've been like, "Yo. You keep doing it. Let me just, let me just, let me see what I can do. Let me see if I can shake it."

EM: Alright everyone, we're wrapping this session up. I know I'm cutting you off in the middle of your thoughts, but the morning session--

JM: What was next? 'Cause I wanna think about these when I go home.

EM: The Artist Table is complete. We really hope that you had a great conversation with your neighbors [inaudible 00:43:19-0:43:20]

ER: They need to sell these cards

JM: They do

EM: Other artists--

ER: Total market there.

EM: I know a number of you are staying for the next session, which is great. We'll keep this movement going

ER: I thought we were actually leaving [mouth noise]

CC: What?

ER: I thought [inaudible 00:43:30]

EM: Um, we have something that we do called a Photo Boot, um, and Jay, who it sounds like many of you know will be taking portraits outside at Heather Hart, who is one of BLT's cofounders at the Oracle.

ER: There is no meeting

CC: I ain't going outside so I don't sweat before it

JM: Oh, man no.

CC: The swamp [inaudible 00:43:24]

JM: I bet it's getting humid out there.

CC: Oh right, the out there, it's sweltering

JM: I feel like they might have turned the air on

CC: But it's like, it wasn't like, 'oh, this is comfortable.'

JM: [Laughs] Maybe [inaudible 00:45:15] got a fan or something that works better.

ER: [Laughs]

JM: A box fan

CC: I'm surprised, it's supposed to be raining. I'ma sit out there and eat my food.

JM: Sit outside. When does the next thing start?

CC: That's a good question. That's what I was wondering because of like, we started late

ER: Is this, was this lunch?

JM: I don't know. It was breakfast for me.

CC: [Laughs]

ER: Yeah

JM: They, I guess they have lunch after, I don't know, I don't know.

JH: I know they said something's supposed to start at one

JM: Do you, you didn't even get your food, and you haven't, your name is out there with food on it

CC: Yeah they got one on top

JM: Yeah

JH: That's what's on the table?

JM: Uh huh

CC: Yeah

[Chairs moving]

CC: Do we get to eat the people's food who didn't come?

JM: I'm getting read to get me some more red beans and rice if they don't

CC: I was gonna, I was gonna take one for, uh, gonna take one for my wife later.

ER: That hibiscus is fire though.

JM: Is it good?

ER: It's so good. But it's a diuretic

JM: Oh naw, I don't need that, then

ER: But it's good for your blood pressure

JM: Really? Oh maybe I-

CC: [inaudible 00:46:11] back there. I saw them

ER: That's my jam. Yeah. It's fine. I'm like-

JM: [inaudible 00:46:13]

CC: That's always what I look for first when I walk into a space

JM: The bathroom

CC: I'm like, you never know, you know. Gettin' older

JM: I know

ER: I'm gonna get me some more hibiscus

JM: I just love seeing all the artists in here today. That's so nice.

CC: I'm gonna have to talk abstract art sometime. 'Cause this, it's become, it's been one of my biggest inspirations for the past four years

JM: Like who? Who inspires you, you said Mark Bradford

CC: Mark Bradford is my guy. So, I, I was familiar with him before, uh 2019. But, I love, I love process. So, you could have like, a redneck who's like, uh, a plumber, like, uh, 'let me show you how I do,' and I'm like, 'wow.' You know? I just love seeing the, the way that the the parts connect and everything, so. I'm watching a video of Mark Bradford, uh, discussing his process. And he's like, you know, 'I build these layers up and then like, I, I bring up like the center-

JM: [inaudible 00:47:13] Yeah

CC: The edge, then I add something on top of it. It's like, a lot of times, I don't know, I'm not going until the the second or third layer comes off.

JM: Yeah

CC: And I thought, I was like, man. If, uh, if I apply this same, uh, line of thinking to text, what happens then? And then I was like, what are the two epiphanies I've had in the past like eight years happen. And it opened so many doors

JM: Really

CC: Because I was like, all text is malleable. All of it. So, I can I can do whatever I want with it as long as I can justify why-why I'm doing it, and this or that. And everything, so it changed my relationship to all of it. And, uh, after that, then like the floodgates are opened and I've--

AJA SCARLATO: How'd it go?

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JM: It was good!

END OF RECORDING

Transcribed by Aja Scarlato 02/26/2024

To be copyedited.