

Ulysses Jenkins

*Ulysses Jenkins: A Doggerel*

Getty Trust Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by  
Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes  
in 2020

Interviews sponsored by the J. Paul Getty Trust

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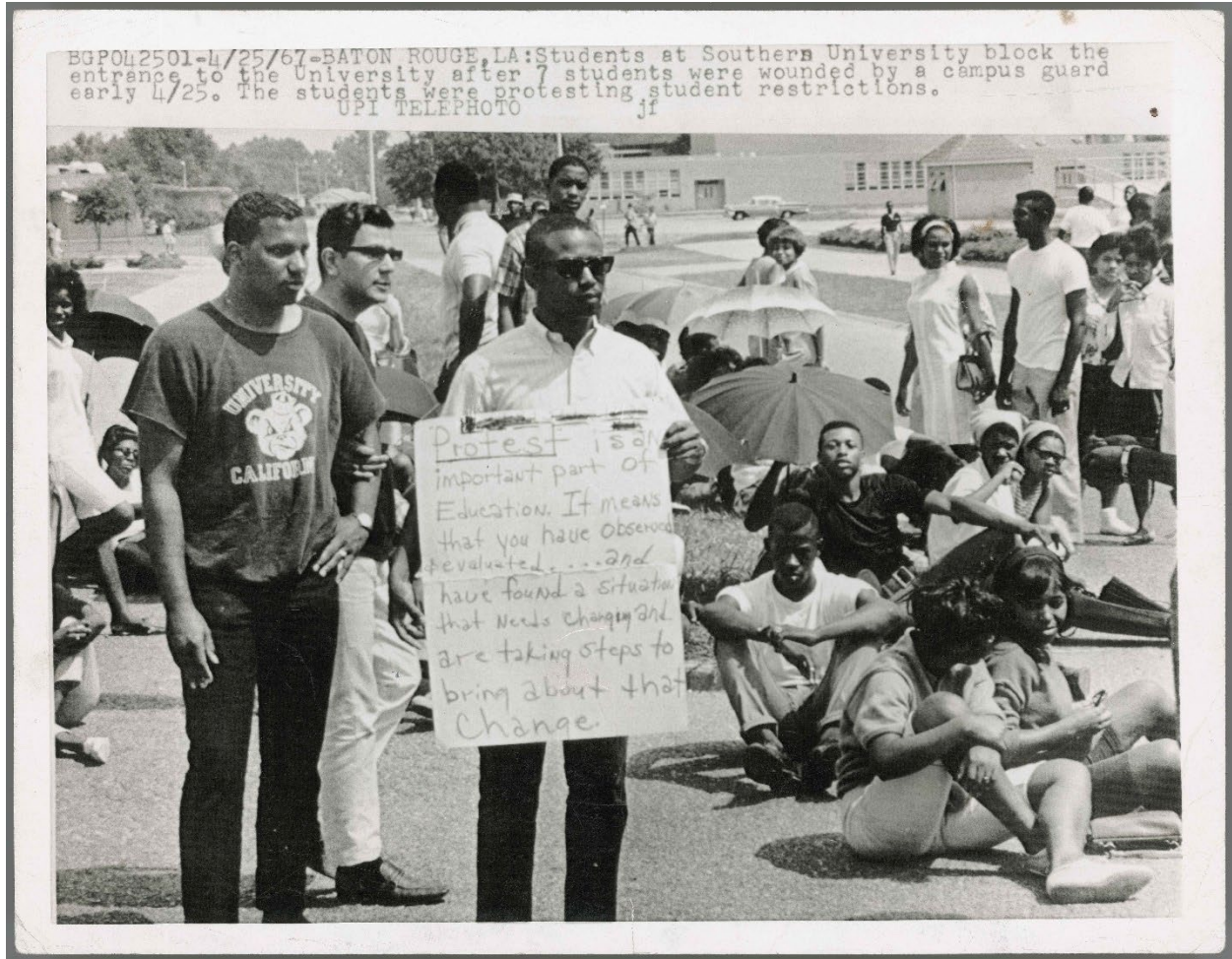
Ulysses Jenkins, "Ulysses Jenkins: A Doggerel" conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes in 2020, Oral History Center, The Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 2022, under the auspices of the J. Paul Getty Trust, 2022.



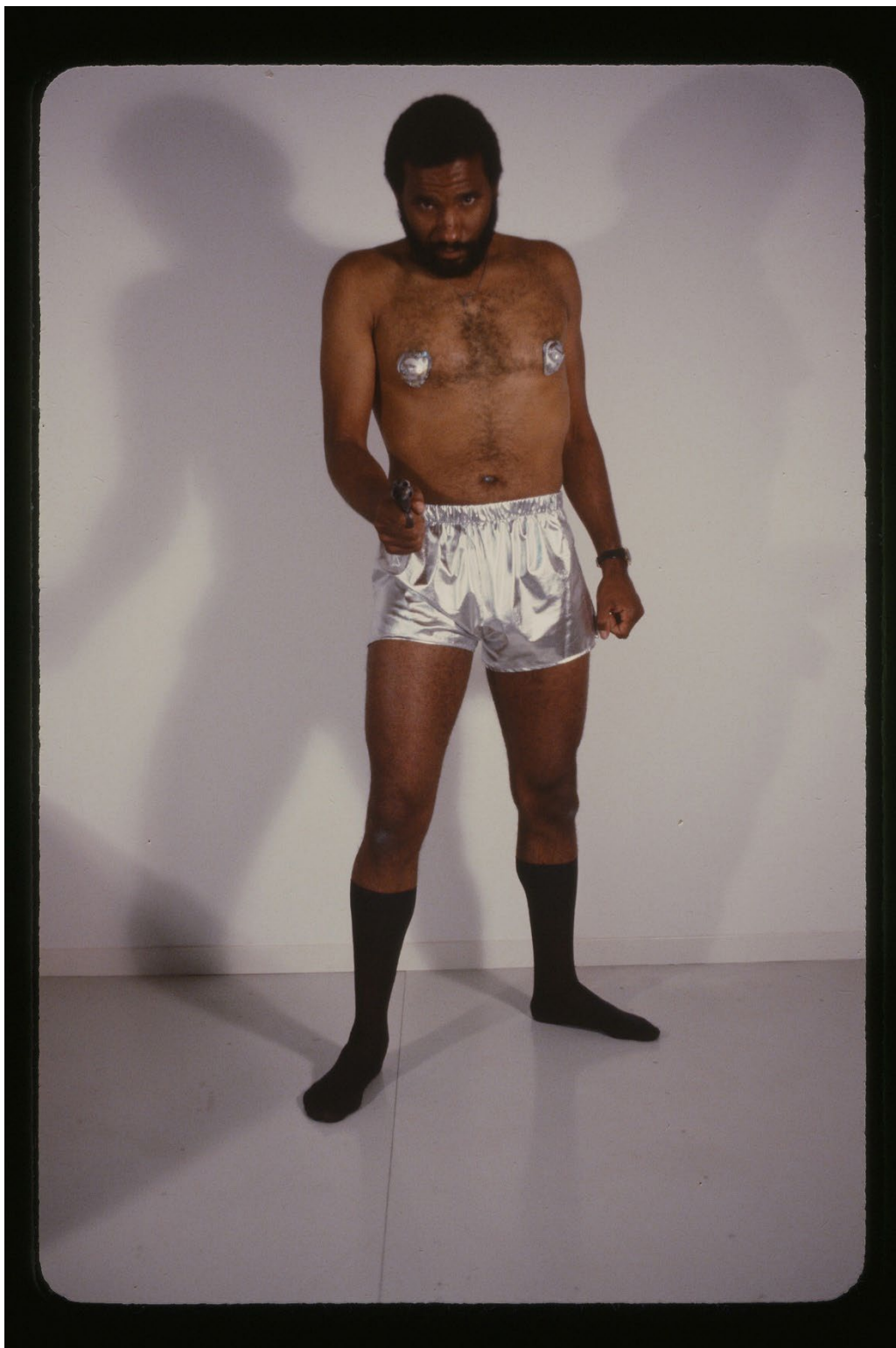
Ulysses Jenkins in the original performance of *Peace and Anwar Sadat*, 1981.



Ulysses Jenkins (left), his mother, and three siblings in front of their family home in Los Angeles, 1962.



Ulysses Jenkins (left) at a protest at Southern University, 1967.



Ulysses Jenkins in the performance of *Just Another Rendering of the Same Old Problem*, 1979.



Ulysses Jenkins (on the ground) in a still from *Inconsequential Doggerel*, 1981.

## Abstract

Ulysses Jenkins is a video and performance artist, and associate professor of studio art at the University of California, Irvine. Jenkins was born in 1946 and grew up in Los Angeles, California. He graduated from Southern University in 1969 with a degree in painting and drawing, later graduating from then-Otis College of Art and Design with an MFA in intermedia in 1979. Jenkins began his art career painting murals such as *The Rat Trap* and *Transportation Brought Art to the People*. In the 1970s, he began working in video and performance art, later creating pieces like *Mass of Images*, *Two-Zone Transfer*, and *Inconsequential Doggerel*. Jenkins was a part of Studio Z and Video Venice News, as well as created Othervisions Studio and the Othervisions band. In this interview, Jenkins discusses growing up in Los Angeles, including integration and racism, education and sports, and his early interest in art; attending Southern University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, from 1964 to 1969, including cultural experiences and art curriculum; experience with the draft during the Vietnam War; returning to Los Angeles and connecting to the arts community; moving to Venice, California, and creating murals such as *The Rat Trap*; moving to Hawaii, living off the land, joining the Fellowship of Christian Pilgrims, and gaining new perspectives on colonialism; returning to Los Angeles and working on projects like *Transportation Brought Art to the People* and the *1848: Bandaide* section of *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*; early experimentation with video work, including filming *Remnants of The Watts Festival*; connections to networks of artists and gallerists like David Hammons, John Outterbridge, and Linda Goode Bryant; attending then-Otis College of Art and Design from 1977 to 1979, including working with Charles White and performing *Just Another Rendering of the Same Old Problem*; working in video and performance art like *Inconsequential Doggerel* and *Dream City*; collaborations with artists and musicians like Maren Hassinger, VinZula Kara, Senga Nengudi, and Frank Parker; creating Othervisions Studio and the Othervisions band; teaching at the University of California, San Diego; living and working in the Bay Area, including creating *Natives in America*; teaching at the University of California, Irvine; telecommunications work, including *TelevIEWS*; interest in Afrofuturism and doggerel; and reflections on his life and work.



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## Interview 1: November 8, 2020

01-00:00:00

Tewes: All right. This is a first interview with Ulysses Jenkins for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative. This remote interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on November 8, 2020. Mr. Jenkins joins us from Inglewood, California; Dr. Cooks joins from Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thank you everybody for joining today. And, Bridget, why don't you take us from here?

01-00:00:25

Cooks: Okay, excellent. So, Ulysses, we would like to start from the very beginning. If you would start by telling us when and where you were born?

01-00:00:39

Jenkins: I was born on September 19, 1946 in Los Angeles, California. The birth occurred at Hoover General [Hospital] on the eastern side of LA.

01-00:01:03

Cooks: Can you tell us something about your parents' backgrounds? What were their names, where did they grow up?

01-00:01:13

Jenkins: I guess I'll start with my mother, Mildred—something you'll find maybe/maybe not amusing, but I found interesting—Mildred Amanda Taylor. She was born in Lecompte, Louisiana. That's near Alexandria, Louisiana. My father, Ulysses Jenkins, Sr., he was born in Omaha, Texas; that's near Dallas and Fort Worth. Both of them moved to California in the forties, near the end of World War II. I believe that on a certain level, after their meeting, they had a union and then I came into this world. What was the rest of that question?

01-00:02:49

Cooks: You know, Ulysses, in a previous conversation to me, you had mentioned that you were born premature.

01-00:02:56

Jenkins: Well yeah, well I was getting to that. I've got to get them together first! [laughs]

01-00:03:00

Cooks: All right! I'll be patient. Go ahead.

01-00:03:04

Jenkins: I mean, I don't want to get into all what happened after they got together, but you know, here I am—or there I was, or in the beginning there came the embryo, and to whatever degree that you want to get to that point. I was born premature. For the record, I was a premie, and I was born at six pounds, six ounces. So on a certain level, my mother was being very protective of me when I was younger. And I'll leave it at that.

01-00:03:54

Cooks:

Okay. And so you were the first child, and then you had other siblings that came after you. How many siblings?

01-00:04:08

Jenkins:

I ended up having two other brothers and a sister. The numeric number was that I was first, then a second brother, then my sister, and then my youngest brother.

01-00:04:27

Cooks:

Okay. And where did you all live in Los Angeles, what part of the city?

01-00:04:33

Jenkins:

We lived in what is considered Southeast LA. I remember as a young child that we lived around Central Ave., something that was sort of like where most of the African American community had migrated to in LA. We lived near Sixty-Second St. at First. And then we moved [to the] northern part of Central towards where we lived on Forty-Third Place. That also had to do with, of course, where my father was. His profession was a barber; I don't think I've mentioned that. My mom worked in the clothing industry Downtown LA. She worked in the garment industry, yeah.

01-00:05:50

Cooks:

Was she a seamstress or a tailor, a designer? What was her relationship to that industry?

01-00:05:59

Jenkins:

I think she might have did some seam—what you just said. Seam, seam—why can't I get that word out? Anyway—

01-00:06:12

Cooks:

I know what you mean, yes.

01-00:06:15

Jenkins:

Yeah. And a presser, and she pressed clothes after they were made. But that was their professions. My grammar school days were at a school called Wadsworth Elementary. It's just kind of interesting that we ended up moving from that community on that side of town after I was around ten years old. That was when we moved to the West Side, or what was considered the West Side at that time. It was part of the migration that was going on that was sort of instituting the integration side of society. When we moved to where we moved to, which was a street called Spokane St.—which for those people who know LA, that is located near the intersection of La Cienega and Jefferson Blvd. Now there's a subway line. That subway line, when I was a child, was a train line, and freight trains used to run down that street. They used to run the Red Car down the middle of Jefferson, and my mom used to catch that Red Car to her job in Downtown LA. Yeah.

01-00:08:19

Cooks:

You know, Ulysses, can you give us a sense of the kind of values that your parents had? You know, what was important for them as parents who were raising four kids? What kind of things were instilled in you from your family?

01-00:08:37

Jenkins:

Well, for the most part, you know, don't get in trouble. And of course, the real—since we were doing this whole thing with integration—I mean, there were white families on our block. We were, I think, maybe like the third Black family on my block. My street was a dead-end street, because there was a lot of, at that time, undeveloped land around our home, and we used to play in those lots, vacant lots. Matter of fact, me and my friends, later on we built a treehouse and did the whole thing that was going on in terms of youth in those days, playing—or let's say imagining—that we could have our own world by building these treehouses.

01-00:09:41

And matter of fact, on the other side of La Cienega was the City of Culver City. But the lots that were on that side of La Cienega was the backlot for Desilu Studios. We weren't supposed to go over there, see, because Culver City had this whole thing about no Black people. And of course, that didn't mean nothing to us kids, and so we would go over and play over there, get in trouble, of course. They were into this de facto segregation about Culver City, but we didn't know that at the time. All we knew is that we were told we weren't supposed to be over there. That was kind of giving you a little bit of an idea, when you asked what did our parents tell us—well, they were trying to keep us out of the way in which young Black kids, because they didn't care—I mean, I actually found it interesting when I'd reflect on this that that was the same thing that I ran into when I ended up going to college, undergraduate school, that not being accepted or being acceptable—I should put it that way—to the white community.

01-00:11:22

It was interesting having friends who were Caucasian, because we went to school with them. I mean, that's a whole 'nother thing about moving from one side of town, going from being in a predominantly African American elementary school to the West Side, where it was more predominantly Caucasian, and that shift in the cultures, let alone the personalities. I mean, I had one friend of mine who was a good friend. He lived up the street from where we lived. We used to walk home a lot together. One day he says, "Well, come on over and let's just hang out at my house." I figured, "Yeah, that's cool." So I go over there to his house, and his mom saw me coming and told him, "Don't let him into our house. Don't let him in the yard." So I, of course—nothing I can do. I just went home. You know, as mothers will do, my mom asked me, "How did it go today?" I just said, "Well, you know, I got sent home from this friend of mine's house." This was the beginning of her—not the beginning—but one of her wisdoms. She says, "That's okay. If they come to our house, he can come in." So that notion, that understanding of



what that was about, in a certain way, I realize now was an introduction of liberalism, *Black* liberalism.

01-00:13:31

During my school years, I would run into a lot of different kind of circumstances like that. Especially when we started moving towards junior high school and the whole thing with the girls. [laughs] So what do I say about that? Because you know, I think a lot of people today don't understand how—well, maybe they do just from what the media produces. In late elementary school and moving in towards those years of beginning the teenage years, the girls, the Caucasian girls, of course, were going nuts over Elvis! And you would say, "What kind of disease has hit these girls? What is wrong with them?" The only phenomenon that we, in the Black community, would have recognized as the similar kind of thing was anything that had to do with Black entertainers, as well. I would say now, looking back, Ray Charles was a major influence, but Ray couldn't dance. So this whole thing with Elvis and his swivel hips and, you know, *The Ed Sullivan Show* and all this stuff, where you just go, Why? I mean, Black people have been doing this forever.

01-00:15:32

Cooks:

Ulysses, let me ask you—I'm imagining this transition in your life from going from Central Ave. to—from the southern end to the West Side a bit more, and you growing up and seeing different kinds of people. Do you remember what you thought you would become, getting older? Did you think you'd be a barber like your dad? Or when you were closer to Culver City did you think, I'll be a performer?

01-00:16:05

Jenkins:

No, I'll backtrack a little bit. When I was a little younger, one Sunday afternoon my dad was doodling on a scratch piece of paper, and I noticed it. I thought, Wow, that's fantastic! I want to try doing that myself. And so that introduced me to starting to learn how to draw. As a very young child, when there were so many of us kids, we'd see a lot of—they were starting to put a lot of cartoon characters on the TV set. Of course, the one particular show that people would—used to watch all the time was Disneyland, and *The Wonderful World of Disney* would come on. And you know, as kids would do, you'd fall into this thing about the characters in the shows. So I started drawing them and making cutouts, and we'd use them in our play—I didn't realize at the time I was making mini-installation works—so that we could use these characters and create our own storylines, little dramas, whatever, you know?

01-00:17:45

Cooks:

And, Ulysses, this is in elementary school? I mean, you were quite young when you were doing this?

01-00:17:48

Jenkins:

Yeah.

01-00:17:50

Cooks: Wow!

01-00:17:52

Jenkins: So if nothing else, I had this notion—getting back to your question—that if there was a way to make a living doing that, then that's what I wanted to do.

01-00:18:09

Cooks: And, Ulysses, did your parents or your siblings, did they encourage your artistic ability? Did they realize that you were talented in this way?

01-00:18:20

Jenkins: I'd have to say, yes, my mother did. And on a certain level, I didn't know that she had a very similar creative interest, you know?

01-00:18:30

Cooks: Oh, well, what do you know? Yeah, tell us about that.

01-00:18:33

Jenkins: Well, I mean, just later on in my life my aunts would tell me, after my mom had passed, that my creative abilities was something that she also had. And at the same time, which you have later on in my life that comes to fruition, was this singing thing. Because at a certain point when I was growing up with my siblings, we could have been The Jackson 4, you know, or The Jenkins 4. I mean, we used to all get together and sing with my mother, who was also singing in church. She didn't necessarily join a choir or anything, but she'd come home and, you know, as you probably might have had the same experience with your mom, singing in the kitchen, cooking. So as most kids do, they follow the patterns of their parents.

01-00:19:46

Cooks: Okay, and were you—

01-00:19:48

Jenkins: Oh, oh, oh, I must add to that. I'm just talking about my mom. But when I was very, very young and I was staying with my grandparents, my father—see, my father was the baby in his family, so he had older siblings. And his sister, who was just a really incredible, loving person, she had daughters that played piano. When I was a little kid, I used to just hang out with them at their feet while they were playing piano. They used to play piano in church. So this music thing was sort of like in the background, waiting to show itself in one way or another in my life.

01-00:20:43

Cooks: Yeah, that's really great to know. I also wanted to ask, Ulysses, if you were an athletic kid.

01-00:20:52

Jenkins: Yes, that was actually the thing that I pursued first and foremost. When we moved over to the other side of town, to the then-West Side, there was a park,

a playground park, Baldwin Hills Park, and I played little league baseball. We were all influenced by Jackie Robinson. As a young Black man, Jackie Robinson was actually—before we even recognized Martin Luther King, Jackie Robinson was the symbol of integration. Having that integrated experience, you sort of leaned on Jackie from the standpoint that: I could do it, that you could make it, that you had a chance to make it into regular society and be somebody. You know, using Jesse Jackson's moniker, "I'm going to be somebody."

01-00:22:15

Cooks:

Could you tell us about where you went to junior high? You were getting to that with—

01-00:22:24

Jenkins:

Yeah. So then, the whole thing about going to junior high, I went to Louis Pasteur Junior High, and that was the big deal on a whole 'nother level. Like I said, you're coming into your maturity or your maturation as a teenager, and so then the sociopolitical issues start to show up even more vividly. In particular, what was really interesting, we were all becoming aware of the social circumstances. This is like around 1960, so the Civil Rights movement was really happening. The other thing that was going on is the recognition of the people that you went to school with. When I was really young, I couldn't tell the difference between the Jewish people and the non-Jewish people. But you became very aware of the Jewish people, because they had all these holidays that we didn't have. So you'd have to go, Oh wow, they get off and we don't. And as the history lessons would go, we'd learn about the Holocaust. At the same time, I had friends who had these tattoos *from* the Holocaust embedded on their arms or on their bodies somewhere. As far as the guys were concerned, we'd have these PE classes—this is when you start taking PE and guys are showering and shit, and they'd show you those tattoos as a way of identifying their history and the social experiences of their families. The only thing that I thought—you know, and I felt bad for them. I also had Japanese friends. In our neighborhood there were Japanese people who had come from the internment that the Japanese had. And so we were all sort of telling those stories to each other. But the thing was when we would be in class, and the way the histories would go, they would—because of the community that we were all embedded in, which was—the integration was primarily with the Jewish community—we heard lots of stuff about the Holocaust, but they wouldn't necessarily speak very much about the internment of the Japanese. And they'd go by the slavery as fast as they could, without dwelling on it.

01-00:25:21

Cooks:

Yeah, I was going to ask you, Ulysses, how much—I don't know if you can even remember at this point; it's hard to know what you knew as a kid—but do you remember learning about African history or slavery in the United States from school or did you learn it from your family or did you learn it at some other time?

01-00:25:46

Jenkins:

I got some of it from my family. You know, the thing is—sort of backtracking—when I was very little and I'd be spending time with my mother's mother, my grandmother, they had the Black library across the street from my grandmother's house. She was the head librarian, and she'd take me to the library with her. And there's all these books that I had access to, to just look through. Of course, as a kid, you know, I didn't know how to really read yet, so I'd just look at the pictures. But my mother's family was the most literate Black family in that small town. My mother's oldest brother, who became a captain in the military during World War II, when he was younger, he'd go around and read the newspaper to all the elders in the town. So this whole emphasis on education was definitely put upon me and the rest of my siblings in the family through that connection, I would put it that way.

01-00:27:08

Cooks:

Okay, that's helpful. That's helpful, too. So, thinking about your time at Pasteur, and you're around different people with different stories and ethnic histories that you're learning about, I wonder if art—were you taking art classes at that time?

01-00:27:29

Jenkins:

Oh yeah, most definitely.

01-00:27:30

Cooks:

Can you tell us something—yeah, go ahead, please.

01-00:27:33

Jenkins:

The art that I was doing was expanding from an interesting position that being—see, the thing is, when I was in grammar school—you know how people get their papers put up on—either their papers or their artwork gets put up on the bulletin boards? If you were able to do that, that automatically gave you presence, which—I didn't realize that was really the beginning of, How do you get fame? [laughs] But of course, I knew I could draw, and I wanted to get my drawings up, so that was what I did.

01-00:28:14

And of course, that changed as I started to get a little older, when—back to your question about athletics—when I realized I had a little athletic ability. Meanwhile, in the neighborhood that I was going to, at that park that I was telling you about, Pop Warner football started to come into play. I decided to want to play that, and I did play. I think I might have mentioned this: when I was playing Pop Warner football, we won the championship. Now, this is like '58 or '59. And because our team was integrated, they wouldn't allow us to play in the championship game in Hawaii, which really broke all of our hearts as young kids. Because, you know, the fantasies and the myths of Hawaii and all this stuff. Again, we were getting shown denial because of who we were, what we looked like. So I'd always had this notion that I would really like to go, one day, to Hawaii—which as you've read, I eventually did do.

01-00:29:51

Cooks: Amanda, were you going to say something?

01-00:29:54

Tewes: Sorry, go ahead. That's fine.

01-00:29:56

Cooks: I was going to ask what kind of art you were exposed to outside of the school. So I'm thinking about Exposition Park, thinking about Watts Towers, if there were other artists in the community your age or older, things that you—

01-00:30:14

Jenkins: Well, no. I mean, the thing is, I didn't really start getting exposed to art and the notions outside of the fantasy stuff that I was doing on my own until I got to high school. And that's when I found out that there were kids taking art workshops at the County Museum. I was envious of them on a certain level, that, why wasn't I doing that myself? But you know, at that same time, you had to have your parents involved to do that, and that wasn't something that my mom was either involved in—actually, in my early part of my interest in art, I was being discouraged from following that path, because my family didn't necessarily—they were into education, but they were not into the arts or understanding that you could have a career in the arts. Matter of fact, when I graduated from high school saying that I wanted to be an art major, my dad would say, "Well, can you make money in it?" Later on, I was graduating from undergraduate school and wanted to go to graduate school. I just said, "You're going to have to watch me. I'm going to prove you wrong. I can do it."

01-00:32:05

Cooks: And, Ulysses, where did you go to high school after you left Pasteur, where did you go to high school?

01-00:32:11

Jenkins: Hamilton High School.

01-00:32:13

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:32:14

Jenkins: See, where we lived it was called the optional district, so I could either have gone to Hamilton or Dorsey. And Dorsey, at the time, was becoming more predominantly African American, although it was still integrated, because there was a very large Japanese community surrounding Dorsey High School. As a matter of fact, that was one of the larger Japanese American communities, because that's where they—a lot of those people resettled in that area.

01-00:32:52

When we're talking about sports, the main thing about the sports community in LA was the different leagues. And lo and behold, Dorsey was in what was

called the all-famous Southern League. The Southern League had Jefferson High School, Fremont, Dorsey, and all of which were predominantly Black or African American schools. They had some of the baddest dudes you can imagine. I mean, they were superstars! Matter of fact, I ended up befriending a few of them when I ended up going to college, because they came to Southern University, as well. When we all found out that we all came from LA, we were able to trade stories. Because I actually ran in the city finals in the prelims. I could never have caught up with these guys. Some of these guys ended up running in the '64 Olympics—or '68 Olympics. That's how great they were.

01-00:34:21

Cooks: Ulysses, you were playing football in high school and you were running track, also?

01-00:34:26

Jenkins: Yes, I ran track.

01-00:34:31

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:34:31

Jenkins: Yeah, see, and when I played football, I was a flanker or a receiver.

01-00:34:39

Cooks: Okay.

01-00:34:40

Jenkins: I could catch the ball. You know, what can I say? [laughs] Between that and running track for—we were in what was called the Western League, and the Western League had Hamilton, Venice High School, Westchester, [and] Fairfax High.

01-00:35:04

And of course, during that time, in terms of my social evolution, I got, if you want to call it "drafted," by the social club. See, the thing is that I didn't hear about anything like this in the other schools. Because like I said, between the two districts of Dorsey and Hamilton, on a certain level I never heard of any social clubs at Dorsey—other than maybe some of the gangs, if you can call them social clubs. They had these social clubs at Hamilton that were almost like fraternities and sororities, and I got invited to join this social club called The Aladdins, which I didn't know was one of the cream-of-the-crop clubs. And of course, what these clubs were into, the politics, was if you could dance or was popular—you know, I could do the dance thing, no problem. [laughs] And because you were in sports, you were an attraction, you became a social attraction. This was kind of something that I wasn't thinking that much about on a certain level. But anyhow, we had a sister club that was at—this is taking it to another social level here—a sister club at Fairfax High.

01-00:36:57

Now, of course the predominant culture inside these clubs was the Jewish community, so these were a lot of Jewish girls and stuff like that. Then eventually they'd take us to these parties. And myself and another Black guy, who was a friend of mine, who was a star on the track team, we were told, "You go and get the party started." We looked at them like, "What are you talking about?" They said, "Go over there and dance with these girls." So culturally, it was something that we hadn't either practiced or knew much about, other than we'd heard the music. They were playing the Beatles. How do you go from listening to Motown to "I Want to Hold Your Hand?" So that whole cross-cultural dynamic occurred or was occurring, at least for us in particular. Once we got a chance to get a hold of the beat, then okay, "I Want to Hold Your Hand." And anyway, we made the party happen.

01-00:38:30

But you know, being in that social club—pledging and everything like that. Although I suppose if you were trying to get into a gang, there are certain things that they pledge you to do. Unfortunately, they're not always positive. The thing that these Caucasian kids would do is they'd have us go and pour detergent—you know there's a big fountain on Wilshire and—I don't know the name of the cross street—but there was this big fountain, and they'd ask us to pour washing detergent in there and make it bubble, and then we'd disappear. The police would come, but we'd be gone.

01-00:39:26

See, the thing is going to Hamilton High in that community, I mean—you know when high schools make you go around selling raffle tickets? We'd go in the neighborhood around the school, and the neighbors would call the police when they saw us coming. And the police would say, "What are you doing over here, boys?" We'd say, "Well, we're just selling raffle tickets like all the rest of the kids in our school." They'd say, "Well you know, you don't live around here, so you need to get out of here. And if you don't get out of here, we're going to arrest you." That's just *one* of the circumstances.

01-00:40:12

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, I'm thinking also about what happened at Hamilton. Part of your appeal: you're an athlete, you can dance.

01-00:40:27

Jenkins:

Oh God! [laughs]

01-00:40:29

Cooks:

You were developing as an artist, also. Did they know that you were an artist? And how did that become part of your social life?

01-00:40:38

Jenkins:

Well, as an artist, you know, I didn't—like you were asking about and I was telling you about those kids that were going to LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. The only thing that I understood was that at the time, I

thought I wanted to be a commercial artist, and so I was taking these classes that would teach you how to make posters and things that would allow you to get into the art world as a commercial artist. Once again, my father—the emphasis on making money.

01-00:41:11

But I had this one teacher who really defined my art direction, who was the teacher of the commercial arts class. She would be on your case about what to draw, how to draw it, when to draw it, and all that stuff. I came to the conclusion—I said, "If this is what it means to be in commercial arts, I don't need somebody like a slave driver on my case. I want to be free." I thought being an artist was being a free individual, and the notion of freedom. The notion of freedom was what I was searching for in my search of art discipline. That's actually how I discovered the notion of fine arts. And that was something that deterred me from thinking that I wanted to work for anybody doing commercial art, with them determining my art procedures.

01-00:42:31

Cooks:

And, Ulysses, with this program that you found out about that other students were involved in, taking workshops at LACMA, was that something that you were able to apply for? Or were they only for the white students?

01-00:42:47

Jenkins:

No, I don't think it was just for the white students. But the thing was—again, you had to have—your parents had to be involved. Unfortunately, my father wasn't that involved in my life later on in my life. I mean, he was doing his thing. And my mom, she was working like unbelievably insane to keep us going. You know, four kids, man. That was another thing that I had to take responsibility in, helping my mom with my brothers and sister. So once again, the notion of what I was going to pursue, I had to figure that out.

01-00:43:40

Cooks:

I'm trying to also figure out, in addition to you having what seems to be a natural ability to draw, and coming from a family that has artistic talent, was there a moment when you started to go to LACMA or other museums in LA that made you discover artists who were working as fine artists in the past or in your moment? Was there inspiration from any of the institutions around the city?

01-00:44:16

Jenkins:

No.

01-00:44:19

Cooks:

Okay.

01-00:44:19

Jenkins:

I mean, just plain and simple no. There was no signpost directing me to a museum. It's totally different than today. You can drive around the City of LA, or for that matter maybe even in Orange County, where there's banners



that are being flown around to show people that, hey, there's something at this institution that you should go and investigate. And if there were, there wouldn't have been anything of Black artists. I mean, the thing I would say, which I found—I have a lot of different circumstances in my life that actually came to pass after my own investigations. In particular, probably one of the biggest ones was when I discovered Charles White. I had been studying his drawings and painting works through books that I had come across. But most of the art instruction that I did get happened when I went to undergraduate school.

01-00:45:35

Cooks:

Let's talk about that transition, Ulysses. You were saying that you, at some point in high school, wanted to be a commercial artist until you realized it was more demanding than you wanted, and you wanted to be free to make your own choices. So you decided to go to college, and you go as an art major. Is that correct?

01-00:45:59

Jenkins:

Right, right.

01-00:46:02

Cooks:

Okay. Tell us what college you went to and how you chose that college to go to.

01-00:46:10

Jenkins:

Well, I went to Southern University. A lot of my family members had gone to Southern University on my mother's side of the family. I think my dad had gone to Prairie View in Texas, because he was from Texas. But my mother's family seemed to get a lot more impetus on me going to Southern University. So for me, at that point it was either going to City College, LA City College or Southern University. And the notion of, okay, you could go to a four-year school versus a junior college. Also, the emphasis of going to a Black college. After going to all of these integrated schools growing up, the notion of going to an African American college, it was intriguing.

01-00:47:42

Cooks:

You started at Southern in 1965. Is that correct?

01-00:47:45

Jenkins:

Sixty-four.

01-00:47:45

Cooks:

In '64, okay. And so after this experience of being in an integrated educational situation, you were really interested in what Southern could offer you?

01-00:48:00

Jenkins:

Yeah, I was interested in it. Let's put it this way: when you were asking about different ways in which you learn things, the curiosity, if I have to put it that way, about your own people was looming large. And to whatever degree that my relatives were making that a point of reference that I should follow, I

listened. On a certain level, I'm getting back into who I was. I tended to listen to what my parents were telling me. Although, there was this streak of rebellion that came with being a teenager that was also developing. [laughs] On a whole 'nother level, I needed a little bit of freedom from the way in which the parental dominance that I was feeling, that I needed to get away. And going away to college, that was the direction that was going to get me there.

01-00:49:43

Cooks:

Ulysses, go ahead and tell us about that transition. How was Baton Rouge different from LA?

01-00:49:52

Jenkins:

Oh, it was *way* different. You just don't know. First of all—I think I've told this story—going from LA to Louisiana. Back in those days, we took the train. There wasn't any student air flights and all that stuff that developed later on. You'd go down to the train station, and all your family came down to the train station to see you off to college. If you know about Black families, everybody made you some food to take with you. On our way down South, when we got from LA, this train—Southern Pacific train was the train [route]—and we'd have a stop in San Antonio. Well, my father's sister met us at the train there. Another food delivery. And we were very glad to get it, believe me.

01-00:51:11

And then the next stop was Houston. When we get into Houston, we're walking into the train station to use the facilities. And this old white man comes up to me and says, "Boy, I want you to carry my bags." I looked at this dude and I said, "What?" "Carry my bags, boy." You know, I'm seventeen, and I'm looking at this dude and I'm saying, "You've got to be kidding me. You know, they just passed a law that—" this is the civil rights law. I said, "They just passed a law, and I'll never carry your bags again in this *life*." He had a fit. He was jumping up and down, screaming at the top of his lungs. "This boy won't carry my bags." I said, "Oh God, what am I going to do about this?" And so I started laughing at him, not realizing that I was placing myself in harm's way. Just because they pass a law doesn't mean that they're going to be following it. You know, Jim Crow was still the norm. But I just kept on laughing and kept on walking. That was just *one* incident.

01-00:52:47

Because the real issue became: my mentality was West Coast, not Southern. That was the thing that you had to learn, that you had to change your way of thinking and *seeing* the way that these people—and of course to recognize how the African American community had themselves set in a certain mindset that goes all the way back to Reconstruction. You know, all of those kinds of things we ran into. Of course, being from the West Coast—which I ran into problems with some gentleman from New Orleans, who kept on trying to call us hermaphrodites, because we were wearing mod clothing. We were from the West Coast! You know, stripes on our pants, tapered [legs]. We thought we

were cool. Actually, when we got to Baton Rouge—and me and my friends would go to the local delis and stuff to eat—they always knew we were from out of town, out of state, because they could tell by our dialect. And then the guys in the 'hood that were outside Southern University, they had this thing—I forget the name of that Spike Lee movie that he did.

01-00:54:43

Cooks: Oh, *School Daze*?

01-00:54:43

Jenkins: *School Daze*. We had the same circumstance that he put in that film, about the brothers that were from the 'hood versus the brothers that were going to college. Same thing. Because the guys in the 'hood would be really envious of us, in terms of maybe getting further in our education, with our dialect, the way we looked. Of course, they figured they were going to put us in our place if we were going to be in their neighborhood.

01-00:55:25

Cooks: Ulysses, just to clarify, did you travel by yourself?

01-00:55:29

Jenkins: No, no, no. This is how my family worked it out. They had me going with my cousin, one of my first cousins and a friend of his—they went to LA High, so in a sense their background was also integrated. And then we had another friend of ours who came with us whose mother had been a past Miss Southern, and he had been adopted. He was actually Chicano passing as a mulatto in the South. I don't want to go into all those stories, but that was just like, wow! I would say the whole notion of—which you learn when you're down there—of the various skin colors in the South versus—especially from the people who would come out of the mulatto areas. I mean, it was almost like a whole 'nother culture within the Black culture, and like I said, you were getting this lesson about Black people.

01-00:56:59

Cooks: And, Ulysses, so there's four of you, you're all young men. You're all going from Union Station in LA all the way to Baton Rouge. And were you all enrolling in school at Southern?

01-00:57:12

Jenkins: Yes.

01-00:57:13

Cooks: Wow. So you kind of arrived with your own community.

01-00:57:17

Jenkins: Well, it was good that we did, because, you know, it took a little while for us to make friends with some of the other students. Although, because of our family connections—see, there were people in the administration that knew of our family members, so you were able to at least make that kind of connection. But what can I say? There's a whole lot of stuff that you don't

want to spend a lot of time with in this interview that I could tell you about the variances that we had to endure. [laughs] But by having our own friends there, that did help a heck of a lot. But you know, what can I say?

01-00:58:17

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, thinking about college, there's a couple of things I wanted to ask you about. One is about the art curriculum, what it was like for you as an artist. And then also, since we're talking about what was going on socially, about the threat of the Vietnam War and being drafted. Either one of those, if you would start to tell us about your thoughts.

01-00:58:42

Jenkins:

Well, of course, we were all threatened by the Vietnam War. I have one draft story that I will tell you, since now I can't get drafted. I got drafted or at least got sent my notice for the draft in about my junior year. I still had a whole 'nother year to do. What they would do is they'd send you your 1-A draft notice, and then you have to—they tell you later, after you get that notice, then you'd wait for the notice to tell you to come in and be drafted. What I did—which today you probably couldn't get away with it, because of the Internet—but back in those days with snail mail, they'd send me the notice in Louisiana at the end of the school year when I would be traveling back to LA, so I'd send them a return notice that I'm in LA, so then they would have to send me a draft notice or a notification in LA. By the time they got back to me in LA, I was back in Louisiana. I was doing that back-and-forth thing with them; it was like a dance. They'd notify me in one place, and I'd be in the other place. We'd do that for about a year, and that got me through graduation.

01-01:00:26

After I graduated, that's when they finally drafted me. In terms of when they drafted me, I was trying my best to figure out how to get out of it, like everybody else. What a lot of guys were doing, which I did as well, I thought, Well, maybe I can get out of it by getting married. So I married my girlfriend at the time. I thought that might help, but it didn't. But the thing that I did do, because I had gotten married and I was out—I had graduated—I needed a real job, and so I got a job with the LA [County] Probation Department.

01-01:01:31

Cooks:

Okay. Now that I understand this timeline, I'm going to stop and go back to college. [Jenkins laughs] I didn't realize that we were going to go past college. I want to get there, but let's—

01-01:01:44

Jenkins:

Well, when you asked me about how to get out of the draft, that's sort of how I—you didn't let me get there.

01-01:01:51

Cooks:

I apologize. Yeah, I didn't know the dates would take us that far. I want to go back to that—

01-01:01:58

Jenkins: Okay, you want to go back in time. Okay, let's take this machine backwards.

01-01:02:04

Cooks: We're going to rewind.

01-01:02:03

Jenkins: Rewind. [imitates the sound of tape rewinding]

1-01:02:06

Cooks: Would you tell us about being an artist in college? What kinds of things did you learn? Were there people that were influential for you as professors? That kind of thing.

01-01:02:19

Jenkins: Well yes, because the thing is what happened to me and why I was majoring in art—of course, during that time we had a real big meeting that came to our college with Stokely Carmichael. I forget the other person who came with him. But Stokely came to campus, and he really got the whole campus in an uproar. Sure enough, because we were in an uproar—just like you see today—only these days they don't wear sheets—the [Ku Klux] Klan came to our campus to tell all the Black students, "Don't you all get yourselves in a tizzy, because we're still here. We don't care who comes to your campus." They came and burned crosses and all that crazy mess on our campus. When Stokely was coming, of course, the emphasis of the Black Panthers was also coming, you know? I mean, just because you're in Louisiana didn't necessarily take you out of the understanding of what was in the media, and in particular from the West Coast, since we were from the West Coast.

01-01:03:48

I mean, that whole thing of being from the West Coast, it had its double entendres there, where people thought you were famous just because you were from LA—the girls in particular. That was a whole 'nother cultural thing you had to deal with. Of course, when we first came down there, people our age were already going to bars and drinking. You couldn't do that in LA; on the West Coast, you had to be twenty-one. Down there, you could go into a bar at fifteen years old. We were learning how to drink, we were learning how to go to the bars. You'd go to the bars, and so as soon as the women would find out you were from the West Coast, zoom, they were on you, just like mosquitoes. So anyhow, learning the social implications of your presence in the South and what that meant. We learned a little bit about bar culture and all that kind of stuff.

01-01:05:05

At the same time, getting back to what you were asking me about, in terms of my influences in my art program, I had one professor named John Payne, who literally saved me from not getting out of the Art Program. Because I had this art history class where the professor—and I don't remember his name, but he had this—which I learned and I still use to today—do not give quizzes to your

students on material that you haven't covered. This professor would give what he called pop quizzes, or quizzes unannounced. We as students would be very angry. And of course, as I said, my militant, rebellious streak was really starting to develop in those days. See, the thing about Black colleges, what a lot of people don't know is that they're very conservative. They're very conservative, because they have to answer to the white man. They're not going to do anything that's going to anger the Caucasian state of being, because that's how they get paid.

01-01:06:45

Anyhow, this particular professor had this real kind of [persona], like, I'm the man and you're going to do what I say, regardless to what you think. So after he gave us one of his little famous quizzes, the students started at least trying to ask him why. It came around to me, and I stood up. Of course, with my new rebellious being and state of being, I put him in a place that he probably didn't enjoy, because it made him very uncomfortable when I said that he wasn't very appropriate in giving us quizzes about things that he hadn't even talked to us about or indicated that he was going to cover. After I said that, the rest of the class jumps up and started joining in. Anyway, to make a long story short, we all failed the class.

01-01:08:03

That's when I met this professor, John Payne, who was my drawing professor, but also became another one of my art history professors that I had from having had to take the class over. In some ways, that was a blessing in disguise, because he invited me in to have a talk with him and we had a very interesting talk. He was from Chicago, as a matter of fact, and he went to the Chicago Art Institute. In that talk, he actually engaged with me about rebellion. It was around '67, '68, I believe. But you know, they've actually got this movie on Netflix, I hear, about the Chicago trials from [1968, *The Trial of the Chicago 7*]. All that stuff is in the air, okay? He just talked to me about being a lot smarter about the revolution or revolutionary moves that you think you want to make, and to think about the strategies that are necessary to be successful. See, nobody ever talked to you about that, necessarily. I mean, I don't always see that today with young people. You can go run out and do something, but have you thought it through, thought it through to the point that you are able to actually make a difference? So that changed my way of thinking about being a revolutionary, but also in terms of, What kind of art did I want to make, and what was the statement that I wanted to make in that art?

01-01:10:22

Cooks:

Ulysses, just to be clear, was this—John Payne, was he Black, was he white?

01-01:10:27

Jenkins:

No, he was Black.

01-01:10:29

Cooks:

Okay, he was Black. And your art history professor that failed everyone?

01-01:10:33

Jenkins: He was Black.

01-01:10:35

Cooks: And in that class, did he teach you about any Black artists? Earlier you had mentioned—

01-01:10:40

Jenkins: No, we were being taught—not to cut you short—but we weren't taught anything, necessarily, about Black artists. You know that book, *Janson's [History of Art]*, that was the bible, okay? If you know anything about art history, in terms of the sources that most people, in some way, start from, that was what we had to learn. Just as an aside, this had something to do—I guess I could confess this: we were also exploring marijuana. One day I went to art history class and we took a few puffs, because our friends in San Francisco would send us stuff in the mail, you know, you could get away with it back then. So we took a few puffs, went to art history class. One day I was sitting up in class, and I started pointing out different things out of some of the images that the professor was showing us that weren't really there, and everybody else saw it. [laughs] It really helped me understand my ability to create abstract images out of—how do they say, something out of nothing?

01-01:12:22

Cooks: So you were getting a total education, I think this is what we're getting across here. And this person, John Payne, what kind of work was he making? He was a Black artist. Was he an abstract artist, was he figurative, or something else?

01-01:12:38

Jenkins: I think he was a little bit of both. He did a few abstractive things, but he was also figurative. Basically, our classes that we were taking would start you off with figurative drawing. But when you went into painting, [they] would have you doing still life with objects, and stuff of that nature. So eventually, we did figurative drawing, but we did not have nude models—or did we? I'm trying to remember. No, I don't think we had nude models.

01-01:13:15

Again, the conservatism on a Black campus was the thing that—you know, it took me a while. It took me that confrontation to start to understand the conservative notions that I'm going to even say that really were embedded in the Black campus, because if nothing else, they were more happy to see you going to church than going to the nightclubs off campus. I mean, we had restrictions in terms of dating the women. If you were dating a young lady, she had to be back in her dorm by ten o'clock, she could not get in a car with you, you couldn't take her off campus. What eventually happens in about my junior year—well, first of all, this is when the rebellion thing started happening. Of course, when I first came to campus, I was living in a dorm. And then about the end of my freshman year I had a talk again with the head of the dorm, and he said, "You know, Mr. Jenkins, when you first came here you were a wholesome young man, but something's happened. What's going

on?" Well basically, I'm starting to understand my own maturity at least, that I—here's that whole thing—I wanted to make my own decisions. I hope I'm not telling on myself. [laughs] But this freedom thing is starting to turn into something that becomes my whole being.

01-01:14:57

So the next year, when I was living on campus, I end up deciding—because when you'd go to class—this is in my sophomore year—you'd get up in the morning to go to class. If you had a 9:00 class, you know, you'd be out of your room by like 8:45 or so. By 9:00, there was somebody inspecting your room, and they would be on your case about not making up your bed and all this stuff. Man, I was like, What is this, man? So eventually, I ended up moving off campus, me and another friend. But then the next year they built this unbelievable hotel—not a hotel, but yeah, well, it was sort of like a hotel; it was an apartment building. And you imagine, in Louisiana, across the street from the football stadium where the people would party is a crazy—you know, they love football down south. And me and some of those guys that I was telling you about that I came down there with moved into this apartment building that had a swimming pool! Do you know what that meant? [laughs] Party all the time! Let me tell you—I shouldn't be telling you this. Anyway—

01-01:16:23

Cooks:

I think this is all fine for you to tell. These are special stories. I do want to ask about what kind of art you were making at the same time, because you're talking about this whole development—right? Freedom—

01-01:16:39

Jenkins:

Right.

01-01:16:40

Cooks:

—in various aspects of your life. How does that turn—

01-01:16:45

Jenkins:

Influence my art?

01-01:16:45

Cooks:

Exactly. What does your art look like? What were you exploring?

01-01:16:48

Jenkins:

Well, the thing was we had such a real traditional curriculum—see, the thing is, since I'm doing this thing with this retrospective with the [Hammer], I actually got a chance to see some of the work that—which you might ask Erin [Christovale] to show you—

01-01:17:09

Cooks:

Oh, your retrospective with the Hammer [Museum]?

01-01:17:11

Jenkins:

Yes.



01-01:17:11

Cooks: Yeah.

01-01:17:14

Jenkins: There was a lot of sculpture work I was doing. I used to take these large pieces of laminated wood and make these sculptural works out of those. I mean, I almost started to follow sculpture, because I wasn't too bad at it. But I still enjoyed my drawing and painting thing. At the time, I was actually doing—I would take a design that I would make up, and then I would transform that design in the three different mediums that we could get to at our campus. I'd take a drawing and I'd turn it into a sculpture, and then I'd turn it into a painting, and then I'd turn it into a print—what is it called when you take a copper plate and etch into it?

01-01:18:13

Cooks: A lithograph?

01-01:18:14

Jenkins: Huh?

01-01:18:15

Cooks: A lithograph?

01-01:18:16

Jenkins: Yeah, well, it could be considered a lithograph, but I'd do these etchings and make these prints out of the same design. What I learned from that, obviously, that when you would take that design, even though you might have created it as a drawing, transposing it into the different mediums forced you to have to adapt to what that medium required. In that sense, I actually didn't realize I was learning, teaching myself how to become an intermedia artist. Because later on, when I get to grad school, that's the choice I made in terms of what my major would be, which was going to be intermedia. The thing that I learned from doing intermedia was the fact that no matter what medium that you are working in, you would be judged by the people who work in the media on the particular expertise that they expected.

01-01:19:27

Cooks: Ulysses, were there other professors who were working in some of those other media that were influential?

01-01:19:36

Jenkins: Oh yeah, yeah, there were other professors who were teaching sculpture. John Payne taught sculpture as well as painting. And then there were some other professors who taught painting. I forgot the name—I should have looked it up, but the name of the head of the department—

01-01:19:59

Cooks: You know what—

01-01:19:59

Jenkins:

—was an Impressionist painter, which you would have seen in the paintings by Foad Satterfield. For that matter, we all were, in one form or another, Impressionist painters, because that was the style that was being taught.

01-01:20:22

Cooks:

Do you want to say more about Foad Satterfield? Because he comes into your life in this moment when you're in college, is that right?

01-01:20:28

Jenkins:

When I met Foad, he was the first informative artist of my same age that I'd ever known. From that point of view, on that train ride where it took us—the train took us through Lake Charles, [Louisiana]. I think we got off in Lake Charles and we met one of my cousin's relatives, Duane Redfud. The Redfud family was a very influential family in Lake Charles, and so they gave us a party. That's where I met—his name was Floyd at that time—Floyd Satterfield. And I really marveled at, on a certain level, what he knew, disciplinary-wise, and the fact that we could have a conversation back and forth. I never was able to have that kind of a creative conversation with another African American artist. And so we ended up buddying up. Later on, we became roommates in that apartment that I was telling you about.

01-01:22:10

Cooks:

And Foad is a painter.

01-01:22:12

Jenkins:

Yes, he is a painter, as you probably have seen if you looked at his work. I mean, I still marvel at his capabilities. His abilities really were asking me, indirectly, "Where are you at with your abilities?" Which I think if you have somebody that you're going to school with, you get that comparative relationship in terms of your skills. Because I didn't get into what I'm doing nowadays, in terms of performance and all this other stuff, until later on, until I started actually painting murals in Venice, [California].

01-01:23:10

Cooks:

You know, Ulysses, another name that we have in our notes from your time at Southern is Professor J.P. [Jean Paul] Hubbard.

01-01:23:16

Jenkins:

Say that again.

01-01:23:20

Cooks:

Professor J.P. Hubbard.

01-01:23:24

Jenkins:

Oh yeah, that's the one who was teaching us the Impressionist style.

01-01:23:30

Cooks:

Okay. He was your professor and Foad's professor? Were you both—

01-01:23:36

Jenkins:

Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. Mr. Hubbard, man, he was, because he was the chair, he was actually demonstrative, I mean, on a certain level. Because, you know, you respected him from not only his position, but from his creative ability. In that sense, a lot of people may and may not have recognized that. I see it, I can see it now looking back, that that was the style that you wanted to emulate.

01-01:24:28

Cooks:

Ulysses, because of Jim Crow in the South, were you able to—did you have the option of going to museums to see art off campus in the area, in New Orleans, in Baton Rouge?

01-01:24:42

Jenkins:

Well, the thing was, once again, nobody made an emphasis to tell you that that would be something that you'd want to go do. But that thing that you mentioned, Jim Crow, I wasn't necessarily after the experience. I mean, another experience I had, just in Baton Rouge, me and my cousin went to the state Capitol and we got chased out. When we got chased out, the guard told us, "What you boys doing here?" We go, "Well, we came to see the state Capitol." He says, "You boys came on the wrong day." I said, "The wrong day? What are you talking about?" He says, "You all ain't supposed to be here except on certain days of the week." You know, those kind of circumstances, you would run into that a lot.

01-01:25:36

It's funny you asked that question, because Foad—or Floyd—became the first African American graduate student at LSU [Louisiana State University] in the end of the sixties. That's something that he doesn't necessarily like to say, but it's the truth. Because he graduated before I did, primarily because he was going to summer school when I was coming back to LA. I believe he got into graduate school, and then he got drafted. I think that's how that happened. He got drafted out of graduate school, but he came back and finished.

01-01:26:34

Cooks:

Ulysses, when you were coming back to LA for the summers, were you working? Did you ever work for your dad?

01-01:26:43

Jenkins:

Yeah, I was working. I was working in the summers.

01-01:26:46

Cooks:

Did you ever work in a barber shop? Or what kind of work did you do?

01-01:26:49

Jenkins:

No, I didn't work in a barber shop. Actually, I worked in this defense company over in Pasadena. They were coating these helicopter blades. That was probably one of the best jobs I had, because I made a lot of money. The thing was, I had to make the money to continue my education every year in the summers, so I had these part-time summer jobs.

01-01:27:21

Cooks:

Okay. Yeah, that's helpful. Let's talk about the end of college, and can you tell us a bit about that transition when you were graduating? Did you feel like you were an artist, and what were your plans for your future?

01-01:27:43

Jenkins:

Well, I knew I still wanted to be an artist, but I didn't know exactly how that was going to take place. I just had to get back to LA, because being in the South, on a certain level, meant being displaced in terms of the art world in LA. The one person that made the difference for me, when I did get back to LA, was that I met John Outterbridge.

01-01:28:18

Cooks:

How did you meet John Outterbridge?

01-01:28:22

Jenkins:

Oh, I think somebody might have directed me to go and meet him.

01-01:28:30

Cooks:

Okay.

01-01:28:30

Jenkins:

At the Watts Towers. And so I met John—oh, that's what it was. Somebody told me that John was possibly looking—I was looking for work—that he was possibly looking, that he could possibly hire me. That's what it was, to work at the Watts Towers. When I was there, he didn't necessarily have a position, but he directed me to try Barnsdall [Art] Park. Of course, when I go up to Barnsdall Park is when I meet—well, I didn't meet her directly—but I met the director at that time, and they were going through a transition. And when that transition came—God, I forgot the woman's name already.

01-01:29:20

Cooks:

Was it Josine [Ianco-Starrels]?

01-01:29:21

Jenkins:

Yes, Josine. How could I forget her?

01-01:29:24

Cooks:

Yeah, she's fantastic. Yeah.

01-01:29:26

Jenkins:

Yeah, Josine Starrels. She hired me to be an artist preparator. I used to help hang the shows and everything, but that was like the beginning of my post-undergraduate education, because she would—her father was one of the original Dada artists, so she would just run me through—which I'd already had some of that history from those art history classes that I'd had and *Janson[s]*. It just sort of like sparkled my realization that my education was working. And so I worked there at Barnsdall.

01-01:30:23

Cooks:

Ulysses, what was that like, to have Josine on one side, in a way, or in your constellation, and John Outterbridge? What kinds of things were you learning from both of them, what kind of roles did they play in your life?

01-01:30:37

Jenkins:

Well, I'm kind of giving you a description of what it was like working with Josine. I mean, I was there when she was in the preparation of putting on a Charles White retrospective. At the same time, John was helping me realize what *was* the Black arts community, which eventually got me to realizing Brockman Gallery. Because Brockman was the only other location that Black art, at least as far as I knew at the time, was occurring, in particular with what was going on at the Watts Towers. Of course, that's where you would meet—see, the thing is, I was from LA, but I was still an outsider, because I didn't know the Black artists that lived here in LA. Of course, I would hear about them, and I would hear about them, at a certain level, being up at Barnsdall. So by word of mouth and publication—of course, in the newspapers you'd find out about different things.

01-01:32:04

And on a whole 'nother level, I was still going through this marriage thing. So anyway, that takes me back to this whole thing about getting drafted. See?

01-01:32:24

Cooks:

Let's go back there, let's go back to getting drafted. I want to make sure we're clear on the timeline, too.

01-01:32:29

Jenkins:

Well, the timeline is that I was looking for work. I actually got work initially—which you might remember—the May Company on Crenshaw. I became a display artist.

01-01:32:49

Cooks:

Wow. Now this is right out of Southern [University]? Coming—

01-01:32:52

Jenkins:

Yeah, that was after Southern.

01-01:32:53

Cooks:

So you were doing displays in the windows, or inside the store, or both?

01-01:32:58

Jenkins:

Both. On the windows and inside the department store, you know, in those very high ceilings, and creating work that would hang from the ceilings, which eventually led me to doing these murals that I ended up doing that were very high and hanging off of scaffolding. But I was doing that. See, when I got married, that wasn't enough money doing that, they didn't pay you a lot doing that kind of work. So if I was going to support me and my wife, I needed to get some real money. That's when I applied for the job with the County to become a probation officer.

01-01:33:57

When I was getting that job, I had to take a physical, and I discovered I had high blood pressure. So that when I went down to my physical for the draft—yeah, I first of all asked the doctor, because most guys, you know, you'd go into the draft and guys would have these huge, huge portfolios of medical problems that maybe sometimes are mostly made up. I just asked the doctor, "Could you at least write me a note?" When I found out I had high blood pressure, "Could you write me a note just stating to the fact that I had high blood pressure, and could I get excused from the draft?"

01-01:34:52

So when I go in the draft—oh my God, somebody should make this into a movie—you've got all these guys. You know, since my family had moved from the East Side to the West Side, I go in there and there's all these guys I hadn't seen since I was a kid, because we're all the same age, getting drafted. We're all sitting around, and they call your number and you come up—they make you strip down, you're sitting around in your underclothes. This is the army. I give them my note. And they make you squat down to your knees and they make you hop—you've just got your socks on and your underpants. My rebellion thing comes out. I said, "I'm not doing this." [laughs] And the guy goes, [in a loud voice] "What do you mean?" And they're yelling at you. "Hop forward three feet." I said, "I can't do it, man. My ankles are messed up," which I had messed up my ankles playing football. They made me come through the lines, go back, put on my clothes. After they looked at my note they told me, "Okay." Bam, I was rejected. I literally almost danced out of that place, because I said, "Thank God, I've got my life back. It's *my* life. Finally."

01-01:36:51

That's the feeling that people felt about the draft, because once you were drafted, you didn't know where they were going to send you. More than likely, they were probably going to send you to Vietnam. I had friends who were writing me letters from Vietnam, which was really horrible stuff: being attacked at night, being awakened at night from surprise attacks, and just all kinds of stuff, you know? But as far as I was concerned, I had gotten my life back, and now I could really pursue my life as an artist.

01-01:37:35

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, I just want to make sure we've got the dates right, too. You graduated from Southern in 1969?

01-01:37:42

Jenkins:

Right.

01-01:37:43

Cooks:

You started working for the May Company on Crenshaw and Santa Barbara, right? Wasn't that Santa Barbara Blvd.?

01-01:37:51

Jenkins:

That's what it was called then.

- 01-01:37:52  
Cooks: Yeah.
- 01-01:37:54  
Jenkins: Santa Barbara and Crenshaw.
- 01-01:37:56  
Cooks: Okay. and then you worked there for, you think, a year or less than a year, and then you got a job at the County?
- 01-01:38:03  
Jenkins: Yeah, I would say a year. I don't remember how long it took me to get out of there, but—
- 01-01:38:14  
Cooks: Okay, and what kind of work did you do for the County? You were working in juvenile hall doing what?
- 01-01:38:20  
Jenkins: Well, I was a probation officer working in the living quarters. The thing that I had going for me was my ability to create programs that kept the young kids attentive, with art projects. Eventually I moved out of the living quarters station into the creative production part of the facilities, where we produced programs for the whole facility. Oh, what I also did was I became a lifeguard.
- 01-01:39:11  
Cooks: For the swimming pool?
- 01-01:39:12  
Jenkins: Yeah, man. Hey, I told you I already had been living at a swimming pool, [laughs] and that was the coolest job. My God! Come to work to go and hang out at a swimming pool? I had to make sure that the kids wouldn't drown themselves, of course. But then we had these co-ed swims, and eventually I had to create a program for the administrators. Do you remember the song—you may not remember it—called "Smiling Faces [Sometimes]"?
- 01-01:39:48  
Cooks: Yeah, oh yeah.
- 01-01:39:49  
Jenkins: [sings] "Smiling faces, there's no traces," and all that kind of stuff, right? I created this automatic swim thing with the kids, sort of like the Olympic swimming, where the people do all these different kind of things.
- 01-01:40:11  
Cooks: Like synchronized—
- 01-01:40:13  
Jenkins: Huh?

01-01:40:14

Cooks: Like synchronized swimming?

01-01:40:14

Jenkins: Yeah, synchronized swimming with the kids to "Smiling Faces [Sometimes]," laughing at the administrators. I had this thing against authority. [laughs] And I *was* an authority for the kids, who was looking out for the kids, basically. The kids just loved it, you know? So they're swimming, and when—smiling faces—and I had them at one point where they'd wave at the administrators and, [sings] "Don't tell lies." Anyway, I'll stop. [laughs]

01-01:40:55

Cooks: That sounds great.

01-01:40:59

Jenkins: But see, that becomes a small inkling of my notion for performance art. I didn't know it yet. When I had that job, I started painting backgrounds for the programs, the creative programs that they had me produce for holiday programs, for Thanksgiving and Christmas shows. I had to paint these big backdrops for those shows, which I would design and have the kids paint, which eventually got transferred into my mural painting days. At the same time, those were the jobs that I had.

01-01:41:47

Eventually, I came to the reality that I needed to get out of probation. That had a lot to do with the social climate, because when you were hanging out, just when you're not at work, and people would say, "Well, what kind of work do you have?" I'd say, "Oh, I'm a probation officer." Of course, then they'd go, "You're the *man*?" I'm going, "No, I'm just a probation officer." But as far as that, that term in itself just identified you with the system.

01-01:42:24

Cooks: So you did that for two years?

01-01:42:27

Jenkins: About two-and-a-half years.

01-01:42:31

Cooks: Okay. Were you thinking, How can I become a full-time artist?

01-01:42:37

Jenkins: Exactly, exactly. And then, unfortunately, my marriage broke up, and just a bunch of stuff. Because the thing about that job is you take it with you, you take it home with you. You've got all these issues, you're carrying all of these psychological problems that these kids have, plus the problems that you're having with the authoritarian authorities that run the place that are trying to control *you*. And you know, I had problems with that. [laughs]



01-01:43:13

Cooks: So at the same time, you're working—or is it from there that you meet John Outterbridge and he introduces you to Josine at Barnsdall? Is that the order?

01-01:43:25

Jenkins: Actually, after I get out of working for the County, that's when I needed work again. Now see, this is just prior to me trying to get into graduate school. Of course, during that time I apply to Otis [College of Art and Design] after—while I'm working for Josine at Barnsdall.

01-01:44:01

Cooks: Had you met Charles White at that point? Was that part of your decision? No.

01-01:44:04

Jenkins: No, I hadn't met him. Of course, I was familiar with his work, because I'd gotten some books about his work.

01-01:44:12

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:44:14

Jenkins: At the same time, I'd also started—see, here's the thing, which I still have to try to reconcile with myself: when I left working for the County, I moved to Venice. As far as I was concerned, and what I was telling people—they'd ask me, "How did you get here?" I said, "Oh, I'm in retirement. I retired from the County." The money I got from retirement from the County is what I was living on.

01-01:44:59

Cooks: Okay, but was that true? Because you weren't retired. I mean, you were—

01-01:45:05

Jenkins: I was retired from the County.

01-01:45:05

Cooks: But only after two years. You weren't getting any additional money.

01-01:45:12

Jenkins: No, I had money that I'd accrued from my salary.

01-01:45:17

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:45:19

Jenkins: So I was living off of that, retirement funds. I came to Venice and I had a room in this place called—which is now called the Mayor's House on the boardwalk in Venice. Here I was, living on the boardwalk for \$75 a month across the street from the ocean. It was unbelievable. It was incredible, as a matter of fact. The stuff that we did on the boardwalk in Venice in those days, I can't tell you, because it's X rated. [laughs]

01-01:45:59

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:46:04

Jenkins: See, the thing is when I moved to Venice, at that time—this was like '72—the Beatnik scene had started to deteriorate, and the hippies had sort of taken over the boardwalk, so there was an alternative cultural change that was going on on the boardwalk in Venice. When I started painting murals on the boardwalk, on a certain level—I didn't know at the time—that gave me a certain notoriety on the beach in Venice. There was times when I could walk down the boardwalk in Venice and everybody would point at me. If I have to say it, then I was *somebody*.

01-01:46:55

Cooks: Did you go to Venice to be an artist, did you go there to be a muralist?

01-01:47:00

Jenkins: Yes.

01-01:47:01

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:47:01

Jenkins: Yeah. I mean, the thing was, where I painted *Rat Trap*, I had scouted out that location and decided that I wanted to make that my place to start painting in Venice, because I realized from looking at the mural by the LA Fine Arts Squad, *Venice in the Snow*—have you seen that painting? I was blown away by that! I just said, "This is just incredible, that you could paint a landscape of the boardwalk in an alternative seasonal setting." In that sense, that's why I painted *The Rat Trap*, as far as my notion of the cultural realities that I was experiencing and wanted to make a statement about.

01-01:48:08

Cooks: So, Ulysses, could you tell us how you went from moving to Venice to then painting on the walls? What kind of community, what artists did you meet? That's a big step. Not everyone can just say, "I'm going to take over this wall." What was that transition like?

01-01:48:26

Jenkins: Well, first of all, I have to backtrack. I was somewhat familiar with Venice from when I was a teenager, because we used to go to Venice to go to the beach. From where I lived, you could just go straight down Venice Blvd., catch the bus, voila, you're in Venice. Which at that time, of course, was really an alternative culture, anyway. They used to have a tram that used to go up and down the boardwalk between Venice and Santa Monica. As a teenager, when we were athletic, we'd chase the tram and sneak onto the tram and ride it, going back and forth between Santa Monica and Venice. There was this location on the boardwalk called Pacific Ocean Park. Pacific Ocean Park was at the same kind of, let's say notoriety, as Disneyland. A lower level, but everybody went to POP, as it was called. I actually ended up coming back

there when I was starting my video adventures, and I used to create these closed-circuit video scenes in a nightclub at POP called The Cheetah [Club]. Friends of mine who had a band called Skillet, I would put these monitors at the foot of the stage, and then I'd shoot them closed circuit-wise inside the club, and so that people could see the performances up close. You know how that is these days, but we were doing that back then.

01-01:50:30

Cooks:

This is a little further in the timeline though, right?

01-01:50:35

Jenkins:

Well yeah, it's a little further in the timeline, a little bit further from the standpoint of after I started painting murals on the boardwalk, I meet this guy. And you say the other artists—I met this artist guy named Zingale, Michael Zingale, and he was a really good abstract painter. Matter of fact, he came up to me—I met him when I was painting the mural on the boardwalk. When I moved to the boardwalk, I didn't know a lot of people, but I met Michael. And the fact that he was a painter, we hit it off right away. Of course, while I was painting that mural, he introduces me to this video workshop that was occurring on the boardwalk. That particular interaction was what got me interested in video.

01-01:51:50

Cooks:

Ulysses, let's back up just a second. I want us to stay in Venice. Was *Rat Trap* the first mural that you did?

01-01:51:57

Jenkins:

Yes.

01-01:51:59

Cooks:

Okay. Did you have to get permission, did you have to—

01-01:52:05

Jenkins:

Oh yeah, I had to get permission from the owner. And the owner of that location was a head shop.

01-01:52:12

Cooks:

Okay.

01-01:52:13

Jenkins:

Okay. They sold paraphernalia for people to get high, so that's why my painting is a little psychedelic.

01-01:52:21

Cooks:

Well, tell us about the painting. Tell us why you came up with that idea.

01-01:52:26

Jenkins:

Well, the idea was about the social notions of the day. Since I had moved out of LA to Venice, I placed the City of LA on this mousetrap or a rat trap, there being the title. The title was inferring that you people in LA were trapped.

This had something to do with the environmental thing, but you see these skulls that I painted in the landscape in the background. That was a reference to the smog. These days people don't know how bad smog used to be in LA. I mean, it was thick. There were days that you couldn't see—it was worse than fog, and then you mix it in with fog and you couldn't see anything hardly in LA. Let me see here. You want me to talk about the painting. I have to take a look and see if I can describe it.

01-01:53:43

Cooks: Okay. Yeah, because it doesn't exist anymore, and so it's important for people to hear you talk about it and your ideas.

01-01:53:51

Jenkins: Well, a lot of my paintings don't exist anymore, and that's a whole 'nother thing, especially about my mural career.

01-01:54:03

Cooks: You're *in* the painting.

01-01:54:04

Jenkins: Yeah, I'm at the end of the painting in a little figurine that looks like *The Thinker*. I'm at the end. See, I have this freeway that comes out of one side—yeah, here we go. [looks through book] I've got myself sitting at the end of a freeway; that's the freeway sign going into the City or to the rat trap, saying "distorted dreams." I also had this thing about rules, of course. The double-painted lines are turned into these two snakes, that the lines will bite—you know, it's like these serpents that'll bite you. And then, on the other side—well, on both sides the freeways are supported by these figurines or these nude figurines that are holding up the freeway. That's a reference to sexuality and the whole thing of sexuality back in those days. There's also—[phone rings] Oh okay, hold on here, I've got a message I need to at least take care of. It'll keep ringing if I don't.

01-01:55:54

Cooks: Do you want to take a break?

01-01:55:54

Jenkins: No, no. I'll keep going. I just can't answer this text that I just got. Okay. Anyway, let me finish with *The Rat Trap*.

01-01:56:09

Cooks: Okay.

01-01:56:11

Jenkins: Well, okay, I'll keep going. On the off-ramp on the left side of the painting is a signature figure of Mr. Goodbar, and it's this candy bar, which I kind of used to like. Mr. Goodbar comes off the freeway, as if there's something that you would take—if you were to take that on-ramp, another on-ramp into the City. But it comes to the edge of the front of the painting into this field of multi-colored marijuana plants. Also, going back into Mr. Goodbar taking you to the

horizon line, the painting of the sky is painted primarily as an abstract expression, where the sky is, the clouds are. The paint is dripping, and the other part of the sky is painted in a pointillism style. Of course, in those clouds—and in there was this one skull that has a cross in the center of it, which had an inference towards the religious connotation of religion, because you had this whole revival of religions back in the day. You know, seemingly there's always some kind of religiosity on the horizon, which is where this happens to happen. I don't think there's anything else, unless you've got a question or something else you might see in the painting.

01-01:58:30

Cooks: I do, I have questions. Yeah, this is amazing. So this is 1972.

01-01:58:35

Jenkins: Yeah.

01-01:58:36

Cooks: It was on a head shop on Rose Ave. and Ocean Front Walk.

01-01:58:42

Jenkins: Right, well that's—see, the thing—the indication of the head shop is all that written stuff down below.

01-01:58:50

Cooks: Yeah, tell us what that is, please.

01-01:58:53

Jenkins: Well, that's just an indication of what's inside the head shop.

01-01:58:55

Cooks: And you painted that, also, Ulysses?

01-01:58:59

Jenkins: I think I did. I don't remember now. I'm not sure if it was something that the owner wanted me to do.

01-01:59:07

Cooks: Okay, and could you just tell us—I can read some of them. "Jewelry."

01-01:59:14

Jenkins: You know, you go in a head shop and that's all the different kind of wares that he was selling, also.

01-01:59:26

Cooks: Okay, okay. Thank you for explaining that. I'm going to ask you one more question, too, about the freeway. Those figures that are holding up the freeway, are they all women, are some of them men? Are they classical Greek style?

01-01:59:47

Jenkins: I don't remember the style, but they might be mostly women, I don't know.

- 01-01:59:52  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-01:59:53  
Jenkins: The only painting that I might have painted with a nude person was me.
- 01-01:59:59  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-02:00:02  
Jenkins: But that was [me] having my own sexual revelations about who I was as a young man. You know, I was around twenty-four when I painted this painting, but maybe close to twenty-five or—yeah, about close to twenty-five when I painted that nude painting of myself. But then, of course, the next painting that I ended up doing—all right, see at the time that I did that painting is when I met Judy Baca.
- 01-02:00:40  
Cooks: Right. Yeah, I wanted to hear—what did you think about your work in relationship to the other murals that were in Los Angeles? Were there other murals that inspired you?
- 01-02:00:53  
Jenkins: Oh well, of course there was Asco.
- 01-02:01:00  
Cooks: Yes, okay.
- 01-02:01:01  
Jenkins: I had become aware of their work, in particular Gronk [Glugio Nicandro] and Willie Herrón. I was impressed with the work that they were doing, and that was in East LA.
- 01-02:01:23  
Cooks: Were you going from Venice to East LA to see their work?
- 01-02:01:29  
Jenkins: I think I might have, but then I think I might have seen publication of their work more than anything else. You know, back in those days, LA was so very territorial; you couldn't go to East LA as a Black guy without running into trouble. And of course, I had friends who were able to go over there. I had one friend in particular, he used to hang out on the East Side, but that was because he was a light-skinned brother, so he didn't get hassled too much. They might have thought he was from the Caribbean or something.
- 01-02:02:05  
Jenkins: But the work, of course, was—back to your question—that informed me, for the most part, it was very—all that work was figurative. As you could see in that particular painting that I painted, I was painting several various different styles inside the composition that I was painting.

- 01-02:02:43  
Cooks: Okay. You were influenced by so many different types of styles: the professors you had in college, Asco, maybe John Outterbridge at this point—
- 01-02:02:54  
Jenkins: Yeah.
- 01-02:02:56  
Cooks: —artists at Barnsdall when the Charles White show—well, that happens a little bit later.
- 01-02:03:02  
Jenkins: Well, the thing is, I'd also become aware of David Hammons.
- 01-02:03:09  
Cooks: Please tell us how this happened.
- 01-02:03:12  
Jenkins: [laughs] Well, David was being recognized out of the shows that he was having at Brockman [Gallery].
- 01-02:03:22  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-02:03:24  
Jenkins: Of course, at the same time I eventually start painting the murals at the Venice Pavilion through Judy Baca's program—or collaboration. Her name wasn't even Judy Baca then; it was Judy Grup. A lot of people don't realize that her brother was the sheriff in Orange County, which—I don't want to go into it—because after we painted that mural at the Venice Pavilion, she creates SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center].
- 01-02:04:13  
Cooks: Now, which mural at the Venice Pavilion are you talking about? Are you talking about—
- 01-02:04:19  
Jenkins: It's *The History of Venice*.
- 01-02:04:21  
Cooks: Okay, and is this the one that has the snow?
- 01-02:04:25  
Jenkins: No, this is the one that I painted. I painted three or four different panels.
- 01-02:04:34  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-02:04:36  
Jenkins: But I painted the one that's *The History of Venice*—natives, native sunset.

- 01-02:04:50  
Cooks: Okay, and would you tell us more about that?
- 01-02:04:54  
Jenkins: Well, it's in terms of the history of Venice. The original inhabitants of Venice were Native Americans. I painted a scene of them sitting on a hillside looking over the beach and the Santa Monica Bay, watching the sunset. In a sense, it was my own sort of surrealistic, Impressionistic, fictional scene. But there was a scene that I painted prior to that scene, which I don't have any images of, where I painted an ocean with the waves breaking onto the beach, that I used sort of a Pollock style, and I threw the paint into the power of the wave.
- 01-02:06:00  
Cooks: Ulysses, would you just clarify for me, was—*The History of Venice* was part of the Venice Pavilion? It had multiple panels.
- 01-02:06:08  
Jenkins: Right.
- 01-02:06:11  
Cooks: Was it the LA Fine Arts Squad that initiated that project? Or who was in charge of that project?
- 01-02:06:16  
Jenkins: No, that was Judy Baca's project.
- 01-02:06:17  
Cooks: That was Judy Baca, and that was a predecessor to the much bigger mural—
- 01-02:06:25  
Jenkins: No, that was a predecessor to the one in the—
- 01-02:06:29  
Cooks: In the LA River.
- 01-02:06:30  
Jenkins: In the [San Fernando] Valley, yeah.
- 01-02:06:32  
Cooks: Yes, okay, okay.
- 01-02:06:33  
Jenkins: Yeah, *The History of California* [or *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*] mural.
- 01-02:06:37  
Cooks: Okay, so that comes after *The History of Venice*, and you did your own panel for *The History of Venice*.
- 01-02:06:42  
Jenkins: Right.



- 01-02:06:44  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-02:06:45  
Jenkins: I did my sections. See, after I finished those murals is when I moved to Hawaii.
- 01-02:06:55  
Cooks: Okay. Were there other murals that you did? I have in my notes the LA Fine Arts Squad was part of your consciousness or your community at the time. Is that right?
- 01-02:07:05  
Jenkins: Well, they were part of my consciousness, they weren't a part of my community. I actually meet one of the members, Victor Henderson, later on in my return to Venice, and I actually get a chance to live in a studio that he was leasing out. That studio actually had been, at one time, a rehearsal studio for The Doors.
- 01-02:07:36  
Cooks: Wow! And that's later.
- 01-02:07:39  
Jenkins: Yeah, that's later.
- 01-02:07:40  
Cooks: Okay. I'm also thinking, Ulysses, about other artists that were in Venice. I mean, Venice is a place that attracts a lot of different kinds of people. I don't know if you knew people who were part of the Light and Space movement, like Larry Bell.
- 01-02:08:01  
Jenkins: No, I didn't know—I heard about those people later on. But see, there's a certain kind of stature thing that occurs, even in Venice. And if you're not a part of the art establishment, you weren't going to know Larry Bell. I'm a complete outsider.
- 01-02:08:24  
Cooks: Okay.
- 01-02:08:24  
Jenkins: For a long time, I really—that's the way I considered myself, in terms of an outsider/outsider art, whatever you want to call it.
- 01-02:08:38  
Cooks: But you were able to meet Judy Baca, and that was important for your development as a muralist and becoming more of an insider. I mean, she's—
- 01-02:08:47  
Jenkins: No, she wasn't an insider either. She worked for the City. She worked for the Recreation Department, and she was trying to get in. That's what it was. When

we painted that mural, we artists who she'd contacted helped *her* get towards that notion of being recognized inside of the arts community of Venice. Okay? Because as far as most people recognized her at that time, she was just a city employee who worked for the Recreation Department, which was how she was able to get the location of the Venice Pavilion, because the Venice Pavilion was run by the City, by the Recreation Department. Okay, so that all connects now?

01-02:09:39

Cooks: Yes, thank you. Were there other murals that you did before you went to Hawaii?

01-02:09:48

Jenkins: No, because when I finished doing that Venice mural, I was just burned out. And the woman that I had met on the boardwalk, her name is Victoria, it was Victoria Scott, but she went by the nickname of Pippi. You know the story of Pippi Longstocking? That was a moniker that she was going by at the time that I met her. When I met her in front of the Pavilion one day—because people used to hang out and—there's a film that was made actually, called *The Venice Renaissance*, that sort of has images—you can check with Erin [Christovale] about that. She has a copy of it.

01-02:10:44

Cooks: Okay.

01-02:10:48

Jenkins: The owner of the film has made it difficult for me to even think that I wanted to show it, although it shows me painting *The Rat Trap*—

01-02:10:58

Cooks: Oh wow.

01-02:11:00

Jenkins: —and some of my earlier paintings. For my history, it's an important piece of work. Erin said that she was going to try to contact the guy—Jim Rosellini is his name. It was one of his student films that he had shot when he was at the film school at UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles]. But anyway, he has a picture of me. Like I said, I'm in it, and he has one scene at the end of his film of me playing with Victoria's baby, Antasha.

01-02:11:58

Of course, when I met Victoria, she sort of enticed me to follow her on home—or maybe I decided to follow her home. When I got to her apartment, she says, "If you're going to come in, I'm going to let you know there's something in here that if you don't like to deal with, you can leave right after you—I'll show you." So she lets me into her apartment, and I see that there's a baby, six-month-old baby in the bed. I said, "Well, you know, that's not a big thing to me." I didn't think so at the time. Eventually we become a couple, and I stay with her and end up—like I said, after we finished *The History of*

*Venice* murals, we moved. She makes the suggestion that, How would I like to move to Hawaii? That's all she had to say, because you know why, because I had always wanted to go to Hawaii.

01-02:12:55

The thing about it is when we got there or when we went there, she also told me that she had permission to move onto this land in Hawaii, which I really was enticed. Of course, we go to Hawaii, and when we get there it's a vacant lot.

01-02:13:15

Cooks:

Ulysses, I'm going to stop you, because I want to make sure we finish [with] Venice, and then I want to talk about Hawaii.

01-02:13:22

Jenkins:

Well, the thing about Venice is that we finished it, because I leave.

01-02:13:28

Cooks:

Well, I have one question about—you mentioned this Michael Zingale person.

01-02:13:35

Jenkins:

Yes. See, Michael, as a friend of mine, we move into this collaboration with video.

01-02:13:46

Cooks:

Now, how did that happen? How did you go from murals to video? That's what I really want to get at before we move to Hawaii. Could you talk about that?

01-02:13:55

Jenkins:

Well, the thing is, this video workshop was going on on the boardwalk. To a certain degree, it was a marvel. I mean, you may not think of it now, because everybody's shooting video. But back then, to be able to do recordings in video that you could play on your television set, now just imagine that! That was like, How do you do something like that? And then, the fact that you could—which was the principle of video art. You could play and record the video, and then if you didn't like it, you could erase it and rerecord the video. That gave you production capability, which is how I ended up shooting the *Remnants of the Watts Festival* tape. And so Michael became one of my member friends when we started the Video Venice News.

01-02:15:00

Cooks:

Okay. Would you tell us about those two things? One is the *Remnants of the Watts Festival* tape, and then also what was this Video News in Venice project, please?

01-02:15:14

Jenkins:

Well, I have to tell you in reverse, because the Video Venice News was a group of us that were taking the workshop. See, the thing is, to learn how to use the equipment, you could rent it. That's how the people who brought it—

you see, the piece of equipment is called the [Sony] Portapak. This is the same equipment that Nam June Paik had gotten off of the ships that came into New York City in the late sixties, and which he used to introduce video into the art world. Also what was happening simultaneously was this thing with cable TV and the notion that the government gave cable TV the capability of allowing community people creating community programming called public access.

01-02:16:18

In the interim, myself and Michael—and then we had another guy named Billy. And I forgot, there's another—oh, of course Victoria worked with me. You know, there was all this bad publicity being put on the festival in Watts by the newspapers and the media to discourage people outside the community from going to the festival, so that the festival couldn't make any money. We realized that if we could take this video equipment and videotape the festival and show what's really going on—because I'd been to the festival already myself, and I knew what was going on out there. We mentioned a little bit in my documentary about the gangs, but the gangs primarily weren't that bad and they weren't necessarily out to create problems. They were more or less, more than anything else, trying to defuse the police. Matter of fact, they would make the police chase them so that they could defuse what the police was up to.

01-02:17:35

So Michael goes with me, and we go out and we shoot the Watts Festival, which was really an incredible experience, to say the least. The fact that I ended up documenting—one of the few places outside of Brockman and the Watts Towers where Black artists could actually show their work was at the Watts Festival. In that documentary, you see the work that was being exhibited in that festival, which I had one of my paintings with me giving the finger, standing in the middle of the road, with my feet on the double-yellow lines, nude.

01-02:18:34

Cooks:

And that painting was in the Watts Towers Art Festival?

01-02:18:36

Jenkins:

Yes.

01-02:18:37

Cooks:

Okay. Did you—

01-02:18:38

Jenkins:

And that painting got arrested on the boardwalk in Venice when I showed it. I showed it on the—huh?

01-02:18:46

Cooks:

Did you show it at Watts first, and then you showed it in Venice?

01-02:18:50

Jenkins:

Yeah.

01-02:18:52

Cooks: Okay. Did they confiscate it or did you—

01-02:18:54

Jenkins: Yes, what happened is I was showing—you know, because artists were always showing their work on the boardwalk. They still do, right? I was showing my painting, and these elderly people in one of the apartment buildings, who were really upset about, first of all, seeing a nude man—then, of course, he's giving you the finger—you see my rebellion there. They had my painting confiscated, as you said. The police came and confiscated my painting, they arrested my painting, and I had to bail my painting out to get it back.

01-02:19:37

Cooks: [laughs] Were you showing your work on the boardwalk, like people do today, to sell it? Were you selling your paintings?

01-02:19:44

Jenkins: Well, if somebody wanted to buy something, I would sell it. But nobody seemed to want to buy the paintings that I was making.

01-02:19:52

Cooks: Were they all figurative or they were Impressionist in different abstract styles?

01-02:19:56

Jenkins: Oh, there were a lot of different—some of them were abstract and some of them were realistic. I had this one painting I had made of seeing the Earth from the moon, and some other ones were abstractions.

01-02:20:10

Cooks: Do you still have any of those, Ulysses?

01-02:20:14

Jenkins: I only have one right now. Well, I have one still life from when I was going to Southern, and then I have this one that I had painted, which was a surrealist painting that dealt with some psychological issues that I was dealing with back in the day from taking LSD. I mean, everybody took LSD. Everybody who was in the alternative culture, I should say.

01-02:20:47

Cooks: You know, Ulysses, before we wrap up for today, I wanted to go back to Brockman Gallery, because you mentioned that a couple of times. Were you going to Brockman—you were working as a muralist. At some point you met David Hammons. Can you put all of that together, that moment for us?

01-02:21:11

Jenkins: Well, I didn't really work at Brockman.

01-02:21:14

Cooks: But you went—

01-02:21:14

Jenkins: Until later on, until later on in the later seventies.

01-02:21:23

Cooks: Were you going at this time in the early seventies to see art?

01-02:21:27

Jenkins: I think I might have went there a few times, and that's when I got familiar with Hammons's work. Because the thing is, when you talk about the other artists—see, when I started going to Otis [College], that's when I got a little bit more familiar with the artists who had been to Brockman.

01-02:21:53

Cooks: Okay.

01-02:21:54

Jenkins: Of course, when I started going to Otis is when I met Kerry Marshall.

01-02:21:59

Cooks: Okay, so that's later after Hawaii.

01-02:22:02

Jenkins: Yeah, that's after Hawaii, after I returned from Hawaii.

01-02:22:05

Cooks: Okay, so we'll get to that then, we'll get to that—

01-02:22:10

Jenkins: Yeah, but before that, when I was painting murals in Venice, I came home one day—I don't know if you've ever been to this place. It's called the Venice Place, and it was on—the street has changed the name; it used to be called West Washington Blvd., and I think now it's called Abbot Kinney. At the Venice Place there was a place next door to it that had a small little shop on one floor, on the bottom floor, and then it had an apartment on the top floor. I lived in the top floor with Victoria and her baby. The bottom floor—friends of mine that I paint a mural of later on, Billie and Cookie Harris—I paint them on Crenshaw—well, they had a jazz club called the Azz Izz. And that was unbelievable, because all these jazz musicians would come and play there all night long, because it was one of the only late-night places that jazz musicians could find to just do their after-hours stuff.

01-02:23:26

So anyway, when I came home one day, here's this brother sitting in our apartment. You know that song ["Me and] Mrs. Jones" by Billy Paul? He's got a thing going on with your old lady. That's the first thing that came to my mind when I see this brother sitting up in my house smiling. I'm going, What is this dude doing here? So then, before I could say anything, he goes, "Hi, my name is David Hammons. I've heard of you." [Cooks laughs] I said, "What?" I said, "I've heard of *you*." [laughs] I couldn't believe that I had that kind of

notoriety, that somebody of a certain kind of fame already had come to locate me. And that's where we began our friendship.

01-02:24:41

Cooks: Wow!

01-02:24:39

Jenkins: At that point he invited me to his studio, which was the studio that you have always heard of called Studio Z. I used to go to his studio, and we used to—and what Hammons would do is he'd—and he still kind of does that, if you know him—he would invite you to do these sort of artistic communication activities with him: drawing on the same sheet of paper or things like that. And then he'd talk to you about what you're doing or what he's doing, or in terms of social circumstance and society. The thing is, at that time I didn't even know anything about what Studio Z was, not realizing that I was being invited into a whole 'nother side of my career that was to come when I meet Maren [Hassinger] and Senga [Nengudi] and then eventually Frank Parker.

01-02:25:50

Cooks: So in the early seventies you meet David Hammons. He's invited you to Studio Z, but you don't really become a part of it until after you return from Hawaii. Is that right?

01-02:26:05

Jenkins: Well, I never really became a part of it. I just started collaborating with Senga and Maren.

01-02:26:09

Cooks: Okay, and that was after Hawaii.

01-02:26:13

Jenkins: Right.

01-02:26:13

Cooks: Okay. You know, I think, Ulysses, we should stop. And when we get back together, we can start with that move to Hawaii.

01-02:26:25

Jenkins: Oh, okay. You want to go to Hawaii?

01-02:26:27

Cooks: Yes.

01-02:26:28

Jenkins: Okay, that's fine with me. That's another adventure!

01-02:26:31

Cooks: [laughs] Okay!

01-02:26:34

Jenkins:

Actually, Hawaii changed my life. I mean, really. A lot of my notions or understandings of what was going on on the mainland here got really refocused when I went to Hawaii.

01-02:26:52

Cooks:

Okay, let's start there in our second interview.

01-02:26:55

Jenkins:

Okay, all right.

01-02:27:00

Tewes:

Sounds good! Thank you both.

01-02:27:03

Jenkins:

All right. Well, I hope I gave you enough, or at least filled in some questions that you may have received from the reading that I sent you.

01-02:27:19

Cooks:

Ulysses, you were terrific.

01-02:27:20

Tewes:

Bridget, why don't you go ahead and stop recording?

01-02:27:22

Cooks:

Okay.



## Interview 2: November 14, 2020

02-00:00:00

Tewes: This is a second interview with Ulysses Jenkins for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. This remote interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on November 14, 2020. Mr. Jenkins joins from Inglewood, California; Dr. Cooks joins from Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So welcome, everybody, welcome to a second session. Bridget, why don't you take it from here?

02-00:00:28

Cooks: Yes, this is great. Thanks for being here, Ulysses, and we're excited to continue through the adventures of your life. [laughs] At the end of our last session, you said to us that Hawaii changed your life. We want to talk about Hawaii today, and also talk about the fact that at the moment when you were thinking about going to Hawaii, you were also applying to graduate schools. Could you tell us about that moment, graduate school and Hawaii as both on the horizon for you?

02-00:01:08

Jenkins: If I didn't mention it before, at this time I'd finished a mural at the Venice Pavilion. At the same time, I thought that I'd apply to graduate school. I don't remember if I told you this, too: I was having a conflict with my mother in terms of filling out the forms for affirmative action, to get my application approved for financial aid. And because of that conflict—the conflict was primarily the fact that she became a little paranoid of having her taxes being reviewed. I didn't know much about that, and she just didn't want that to happen. So she wouldn't fill out the forms that I needed from my parents, basically just to sign off on that.

02-00:02:38

Cooks: And where were you trying to go to graduate school? What did you have in mind?

02-00:02:40

Jenkins: Otis [College of Art and Design].

02-00:02:41

Cooks: To Otis.

02-00:02:44

Jenkins: Yeah. See, the thing is, that I had applied to UCLA [University of California, Los Angeles] to their Painting Program. At that time, I was into painting from my undergraduate degree. And they turned me down, which I didn't—I wasn't aware that they were more into abstract art or conceptual art, as well. And figurative painting, they weren't necessarily into, nor were they into figurative painting with African American imagery. So what occurred at this time is that I went—after I got my rejection, I went to UCLA to pick up my work. And as

I was leaving the campus, I run into this dude who becomes actually, later on, very influential in my career. I run into Gary Lloyd, very well-known sculptor and painter. He saw me and he says, "What have you got there?" I said, "Oh, it's just my work. I just got rejected from the grad program." So he took a look at my work and he goes, "Oh, you should be going to Otis." I, inquisitively, asked why. He says, "Because Charles White teaches there." I was like, Oh wow! I had, in my own research, my own personal research, had been studying Charles White's work anyway. I said, "Okay." So that's why I applied to Otis.

02-00:04:41

But then, after I went into this conflict with my mom, the young lady that I was going with says, "Well, why don't we go to Hawaii?" I said, "Yeah, right." Because you know my story about Hawaii when I was a kid. I said, "Well, yeah. I've always wanted to go to Hawaii." So that's what we did. We packed up our stuff and went to Hawaii.

02-00:05:14

Cooks:

And so did she know anyone in Hawaii? Or was this just like a dream, Let's go to Hawaii, it's wonderful there.

02-00:05:24

Jenkins:

No, she had lived there already. I think I might have mentioned to you that she had a little child? Well, she had gotten pregnant in Hawaii, in her previous visit there. And then, unfortunately, the guy who was the father of her child was one of those misogynist types who didn't treat her very well, so she left him. To that extent, when I met her, she was actually trying to make her way back to Hawaii, as I was to find out later. So, as she made this proposal to me, I said, "Yeah, man. Let me get on now."

02-00:06:19

Because to a certain degree, I hate to say, it had something to do with the way that I had—my relationship with my mom. Going back to the actual—in the beginning there was this kid who was born premature. She just always tried to control my life. To that extent, I had been trying to free myself of that notion of control, which you see the pattern in my life already. I ended up going to school in the South, on another level, because it was a good way to get away from being under that dominating parental guidance, if you will. So here it goes again; I'm going to Hawaii this time.

02-00:07:24

Cooks:

Did you have a plan to do murals when you were in Hawaii or did you have an idea of what your lives would be like there?

02-00:07:36

Jenkins:

It's funny you ask that. I didn't have a plan to do murals, because—I'll explain to you why once I start talking about actually being in Hawaii. But you know, you hear the term "the Wild West." When we leave LA and go to Hawaii, and you asked, Did she know any people there? She had friends there, which—

after we landed in Hawaii, of course, and I got my first taste of banana bread, which—you know, it's in the sense of people in Hawaii, it's almost like a candy. It tastes so good. But we initially come to Hawaii, because she had also been given a lease to some property near Hilo, which is on the northeast side of the big island of Hawaii. We went directly to that site to see if there was a way that we could live there. And to my surprise, and maybe hers—I'm not sure—[there] was nothing there. This was a plot of land that was set to be built upon in this layout for a new community, so it was nothing there but lava pebbles on the ground. I said to myself, "Oh Jesus, what did I get myself into now?"

02-00:09:46

So we decided to get up and move on, and so we move on to the Kona side of the island. While there, of course, we were—at the side of the road, actually—and people back in those days [would hitchhike]—and of course it was like that on the mainland a little bit—you'd just stick your thumb out and somebody would give you a ride. And lo and behold, some friends of hers come by and pick us up. We go with them, and they lived on the side of this mountain. You know, on these islands you're either on the top of the mountain or in the middle of the mountain or you're down at the base of the mountain, which is generally where the beaches are. So anyway, we go to this mountainside with this friend of hers and his family.

02-00:10:59

This is where living in Hawaii at that time, in the community that I was living in, was sort of like this hippie environment. We go to this house and this couple says, "Wow, come on in. Have some acid." And of course, you know, if you were a part of the so-called informed hippiedom, you drop your acid. That's where everything starts getting surreal. [audio stops]

02-00:12:03

Tewes:

So, Ulysses, it looks like you've muted yourself here.

02-00:12:06

Jenkins:

Well, I'm trying to unmute. You told me that you were muted.

02-00:12:12

Tewes:

Yeah, you're good now.

02-00:12:14

Jenkins:

Okay. You were saying something, Bridget? Bridget is muted.

02-00:12:22

Cooks:

I wanted to ask you was this the first time that you had acid?

02-00:12:27

Jenkins:

Not exactly.

02-00:12:28

Cooks:

Okay.

- 02-00:12:30  
Jenkins: Do you want to hear my acid history? [laughs]
- 02-00:12:32  
Cooks: Well, I just wanted to know if this was the first time, because then that would have been really historic.
- 02-00:12:38  
Jenkins: No, it wasn't my first time. The thing is, I'm sure people of my generation would understand what I'm talking about. Today, all these young people are doing marijuana like, Wow. Back in those days, smoking marijuana was a big deal. As you might have remembered, a famous album cover entitled *Are You Experienced?* by Jimi Hendrix?
- 02-00:13:10  
Cooks: Yes.
- 02-00:13:11  
Jenkins: Okay, that's what he was talking about: have you had any acid? And if you hadn't, you might be left out of the insight that comes from taking it. You know, that becomes a whole 'nother kind of conversation, actually.
- 02-00:13:31  
Cooks: Yeah. So you're saying you moved to Hawaii, and you somehow raised enough money to fly to Hawaii—I mean, it's expensive to fly to Hawaii now. Was it—
- 02-00:13:41  
Jenkins: Yeah. At the time that we went, it was around—because we only bought one-way tickets.
- 02-00:13:49  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-00:13:50  
Jenkins: But those one-way tickets, back in those days, were around like \$150 to \$175. Now remember, this is 1972 or '3. Yeah, 1973, I believe.
- 02-00:14:11  
Cooks: Okay, that's what we have. Yeah, '73 to '75 that you were there.
- 02-00:14:14  
Jenkins: Yeah.
- 02-00:14:15  
Cooks: And that was a lot of money!
- 02-00:14:16  
Jenkins: Yes, it was.
- 02-00:14:17  
Cooks: Yes.

02-00:14:18

Jenkins: Considering. Well, the thing is, when you say—are you trying to indirectly ask me where'd I get the money? Well, be straight with it! [laughs]

02-00:14:27

Cooks: No, I'm directly asking you. I'm directly asking: how did you save money for both of you to fly to get there in the first place?

02-00:14:40

Jenkins: I mean, I knew I was doing some kind of work; I can't remember exactly what, but you know, that's how we got the money. Okay, okay, okay, now I get it. During this time after we decided to go to Hawaii, I owned a bread truck.

02-00:15:03

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:15:04

Jenkins: You know those big trucks that have the driver's seat, and then the rest of the truck is hollowed out for carrying the bread or the products?

02-00:15:23

Cooks: Right.

02-00:15:23

Jenkins: I had bought one that had been converted into a living situation, and it had a double bed that let down, had cabinets and all this stuff. We lived in that truck during the time that we were saving to go to Hawaii. And then I was also living—since we were living in the truck, because I had the truck but we weren't living in it at first. But then when we moved into the truck, we also moved into the Venice canals, which these days I think we couldn't do it. See, back in those days there were a lot of vacant lots in the Venice canal area. It was just unbelievable, actually, because in the Venice canals you've got all these ducks and all this wildlife that was living in there.

02-00:16:21

It was really cool, because the baby, [Antasha], would be out—me and the baby would hang. That aspect of that relationship was one of the most real interesting developments. Because as far as the time that I spent with them, the two of them, when I was painting the murals, I'd take the baby with me and give her a paintbrush and let her paint onto the wall, which was really interesting. She developed later on in her life the skill to draw.

02-00:17:04

Yeah, I hope you're getting a certain kind of picture of the lifestyle that I was living.

02-00:17:11

Cooks:

Yeah, this is helpful to just think about how you made that transition. And then it seems like when you got to Hawaii you were still living this kind of transient hippie lifestyle back on this mountain.

02-00:17:25

Jenkins:

Yeah, well when we got to this house and these people gave us the little bit of enlightenment there—of course, this is kind of how this hippie culture operated, especially in Hawaii: come on in, have some drugs, take off your clothes. So we do that. But then, all of a sudden, my then girlfriend leaves with the dude, and they go to another house that was on the property. And I'm left in this home with this guy's wife, and it was a little awkward, you know, in a psychedelic way. [laughs] But after the fact, I decide, Well, you know, I don't want to be sitting up in here with this dude's old lady, so I'm going out and find my wife or my girlfriend, I should say.

02-00:18:38

But then I had another experience that I'd also never had. Now, if you've ever been out in the countryside when the full moon is *not* out, and all of a sudden nightfall is really completely pitch black, I mean, it's like a blackness that I hadn't really actually experienced. Prior to me going out there, we had been having these conversations about the Hawaiian gods and legends of that sort, and so they were talking about the *menehunes*. And to whatever degree that I did not or was not aware of what that's supposed to mean, I got this sense when I got outside, The *menehunes* are here. I know I was there, but whether or not they were there is—[laughs] in the meantime, I realized I wasn't going to find my girlfriend, because I couldn't see where I was going. I ended up going back into the house and having conversation with this woman. More than anything else, I was trying to find the baby.

02-00:20:12

Eventually, my girlfriend does return. And at the sense of that I decided that we really need to move on, which we did do the next day. They had directed us to this other location in the Kona area called Rock Bottom Rd. We go to Rock Bottom Rd., and there's all these hippie folks living in this camp area. Some people had tents, some people didn't. Of course, we were a group of people who end up not having a tent, but we did make a way for us to sleep out. And if you've ever slept outside in the outdoors, that's kind of what I'm talking about, sleeping on these rocks.

02-00:21:26

In the meantime, there's a local guy whose property where all this was occurring, and he had invited me to come to his place and have a conversation. This became one of the first conversations of enlightenment that I get in Hawaii, by this Hawaiian guy. This guy starts to tell me about the issues that the Hawaiian people had with all of these people who were coming from the mainland to Hawaii, under the notion that they had found nirvana. And under that premise, the Hawaiian people were really upset, because here's

all these youthful people thinking that they can come and just claim a spot to live on. It was sort of like the same thing that happened in California, when people came to California and started to claim land. So then anyway, he shows me his chest, and he's got—remember, this is the seventies—he's got a tattoo that goes from his shoulder down to his waist of a Black panther. In my curiosity, I said, "Dude, what's up with your panther?" And so he begins to tell me about the history of the Native people in Hawaii, and how their lands had been taken over by the Americans in terms of Queen—

02-00:23:37

Tewes: Liliuokalani.

02-00:23:39

Jenkins: Say it again.

02-00:23:40

Tewes: Liliuokalani.

02-00:23:42

Jenkins: Yes, Liliuokalani. Well, you know the story.

02-00:23:48

Tewes: Well but, what did you learn from the story of this experience, being you're this guy from out of state—

02-00:23:53

Jenkins: What I didn't realize, the thing—I'm sorry to interrupt you—but I hadn't realized that I was a part of what he was talking about, by mainly being there under those precepts. And that he also begins to tell me that the local people, in terms of their being put upon by this—he shows me this baseball bat and he says, "We do these raids on these hippies on the beach, and we beat them to let them know that this is not their land, nor would they have an opportunity to claim this for themselves, because it's our heritage." This was the first indication that I was—I would run into this same story later on while I'm working in Hawaii, when I worked at King Kamehameha Hotel. And anyway, I'll get to that. But that whole notion and what he was telling me made me start to rethink some of the experiences that I'd already had back on the mainland. And that's where I'm saying the whole experience in Hawaii, and realizing that these Native people had been put upon in such a way and such a manner that their whole culture was being usurped—or should I use a more precise—in a colloquial term called being pimped.

02-00:26:06

Cooks: And so, Ulysses, tell us more about how this impacted the way you thought about experiences in California or in Louisiana. How did you apply this new information to your experience?

02-00:26:23

Jenkins: Well, the thing is, you start to recognize that this, in particular, had more to the indication that you're asking about was specifically related to what

happened to the Native American people. I'm seeing it in real time, and talking to the real-time occupants of the experience, you know? If I use that term again: are you experienced?

02-00:26:56

Cooks: What did you do next? I mean, you're part of this little family, the trio—

02-00:27:02

Jenkins: We stayed there for a little while. Oh, here's the ending of that conversation I was having with that Hawaiian brother, was the fact that he asked me, What did I do? And so I told him about my paintings and my going to school and all this stuff, and how I'd left my career as a muralist. He tells me—and I'll speak in the pidgin that he was talking to me in—"You not stay here long. You get—" uh, oh, oh, oh, oh—"you get ambition." I said, "I get ambition? What are you saying?" He says, "You not stay here long. You get ambition, and you go. You go." And he was right. Eventually, the longer I stayed in Hawaii, the longer I felt the need to continue my career.

02-00:28:08

And what you were asking me earlier, yeah, I thought maybe I'd try to paint or do murals in Hawaii. But it was a similar kind of thing—not this actual same thing—but a similar kind of thing that I ran into when I moved to the Bay Area. When you're not from that area, the local people don't necessarily embrace you. So by my not being from Hawaii, even if I could've actually done a mural or something, the reception that I—because if I were going to paint murals in Hawaii, I'd have to paint history of the Hawaiian people or the Hawaiian culture, for the people *themselves* to actually embrace *me*. Okay?

02-00:29:10

Cooks: Did you find a community of artists while you were there?

02-00:29:15

Jenkins: I did find other artists. As a matter of fact, I did find one of their major muralists in the islands. He was a Caucasian guy and his father had been a muralist there, and he was painting large murals—of course, he was painting murals of the Hawaiian culture. But at the same time, I came to realize the difficulties that I would encounter just primarily based on the principles that I was just telling you about. That was the first indication that I needed to rethink this whole thing.

02-00:30:02

But I did do a lot of drawings. I actually had a whole series of pastel drawings that I did. I was drawing skylscapes from the location that we eventually moved—[Tewes sneezes off screen] *gesundheit!* [laughs] We moved from Rock Bottom Rd. to this location where we were told about, that there was a treehouse that had been vacated. We moved to that treehouse that was primarily a tree that had a platform built off of it. It had two levels in which—the bottom level we had the little girl sleep at, and then we slept on the upper level. The tree was right near the main trail that went up this hill. We were



living primarily in a mango forest. It was unbelievable! The roof was a big plastic tarp, and we caught rainwater. And there was a lava flow on the side—wait a minute here—oh okay—if I'm the treehouse, then there was this lava flow on the side of the tree that had these—I'll just call them holes—holes in the flow that I used a refrigerator shelf, grate, that we cooked on. This was *Robinson Crusoe*.

02-00:32:04

Cooks:

And so what did you do for work while you were there, and how did you meet other people?

02-00:32:11

Jenkins:

Well, there was no work while I was there. I mean, we were living off of welfare, if you want to call it that.

02-00:32:17

Cooks:

Okay.

02-00:32:17

Jenkins:

There was some kind of state aid that you could apply for, which—of course my girlfriend, who was a mother, of course, could apply for, and that's how we got money at that time. But living in this particular form of living, which, like I said, we caught rainwater into—we had this large trash bin as a receptacle, so that's how we got water. We would have to boil it at a certain point to use it, because of the mosquitoes. When you're living outside like that, you've got everything that's out there in nature. The only thing that's really trippy about Hawaii is that you don't really have any dangerous animals that would attack you. I mean, the only thing you might [find], if you did run into, could be wild boar. And somebody in there—who knows what they were thinking—brought them to the islands, but there weren't any in our area. And since we had all this wild fruit growing, that's what we ate! That's kind of how things went.

02-00:33:45

But then ended up having this little altercation within the context of the relationship and—I'm not going to go into all of that. Well, let's put it this way: she got into some kind of sideline altercation, I'll call it, with seeing somebody else, and then she took the baby with her. And I was, you know, at our home, so called. Since it was getting late, and I said, "Where are they?" And thinking about the child. I go down the road, and I think she must have left a note or something where they were going. So I find where they were at and discover this relationship that she was engaging in, with the baby in the other room. So I grab the baby and go home. She comes back home and is upset with me. I have an argument. I get told that I'm not the real father, so I don't have any rights to do what I did, dadda-dadda. You get the sense of that.

02-00:35:10

Cooks:

Yeah, that sounds awful.

02-00:35:13

Jenkins:

So then the next day, when I wake up, she's packed up and tells me—and I hope you don't take it as hard as I did—"I'm leaving you, and I had been planning on doing this in the first place." I said "Oh, really?" So I get left—oh, that's what it also was. You know how people get this stomach flu?

02-00:35:47

Cooks:

Sure.

02-00:35:49

Jenkins:

You get those fevers and all this stuff, and so overnight kind of thing. I ended up making this chamomile tea and all this kind of stuff to try to help her get better, which she did. And then, of course, because we were sleeping together, I ended up catching it. That's when I get this proclamation that she was leaving me, in the jungle, by myself. Revelation time, one more time. [laughs]

02-00:36:29

Cooks:

That sounds awful.

02-00:36:32

Jenkins:

Well, it was! What can I say?

02-00:36:35

Cooks:

Yeah.

02-00:36:38

Jenkins:

See, this is how crazy this time was. There was this guy who used to come by—he lived up the hill—passing by our tree, and he was a devotee of this guy called Maharaj Ji. I don't know if you've heard of this kid, but he had a lot of followers. This guy passed the tree on his way to the post office and actually checked in and said, "Hey, how are you doing?" Then I told him, I said, "Man, I'm not doing so good. I've got this stomach flu thing." He says, "Okay, don't worry. I'll take care of you." This guy not only went to town got me stuff, but also would—you know, he did the same for me that I did for her and helped me recover. So that was actually kind of magical, because at the point that I felt that I was just really screwed over, here appears this guy. From that point on, things changed dramatically, as far as my being by myself. And of course, if you are familiar with the evangelism of even today, I got eventually pointed in a direction of this evangelist group, and so I ended up joining that group and leaving the treehouse. And they took me in.

02-00:38:39

Tewes:

And what were they called?

02-00:38:40

Jenkins:

Huh?

02-00:38:42

Tewes:

What was this group called?

02-00:38:45

Jenkins:

The [Fellowship of Christian] Pilgrims. On a certain level, I actually needed to do that, because I needed to get out of this psychedelic mindset that I had sort of—you know, it came from too many drugs, basically. When you're out there in the wilderness all by yourself, I mean, it makes you think a lot about, What are you doing, where have you gone to, and all that other stuff. So while I'm living in that community, I get—well, I would say this, because it wasn't like I was an addict or anything, but I cleaned up and started seeing things a little differently.

02-00:39:41

That's when I started—you know when you lived in that community, you had to get a real job, which I did. I got a job at the King Kamehameha Hotel as a waiter. That's when I met a whole 'nother set of local people. Actually, there were a lot of Filipinos that worked there, and we—not only did we work the regular hours of the restaurant and the hotel, but we also did the luaus.

02-00:40:16

Cooks:

Okay.

02-00:40:16

Jenkins:

And at the luaus, I started to really see this whole notion of how the culture was being manipulated. There was one night I was doing a luau, and this tourist, I'll call him, he jumps up on top of one of the tables and starts yelling at the hula girls. And this whole notion that he wanted one, while he was—you know, he'd been drinking too much, and his wife was sitting there talking about, "Harry, sit down. Sit down. You're embarrassing us." And no, he's just like, "I gotta have me one of these girls." And they literally were girls. The women who were doing the hula were these thirteen—actually from like twelve-year-olds to like fifteen-, sixteen-year-old girls. I was looking at this, I was like, Oh my God! And of course, he eventually got put in his place. But at the same time, I started—again, another lesson on how the culture was being manipulated for money, to maintain a certain status.

02-00:41:48

And then the status of the tourists itself was being revealed to me. I had this experience as a waiter. One morning I was serving breakfast, and this lady got up on me. I mean, literally she was—I could feel her breath right behind my ear asking me to serve her coffee, but was actually trying to get me to service her in another way. I just told her, "No, ma'am, I don't do that." And then there was this guy who was a British guy, who starts asking me, "What tribe are you from?" I said, "What tribe? I'm from the LA tribe, okay?" You know, he had this notion that he thought I was somebody from the islands—no, he thought I was from Fiji, that's what it was. If you know the Fijians, of course they are of African descent, which later on leads me to do this project I do called *The Nomadics*. But anyway—

02-00:43:20

Cooks: Ulysses, help us transition from Hawaii back to LA, because Hawaii had—it seems like it had a huge impact on your life, in the sense that it opened you up to all these new experiences, and you learned a lot about colonialism.

02-00:43:40

Jenkins: Oh absolutely!

02-00:43:43

Cooks: And but, that is very much a part of the theme of your work.

02-00:43:48

Jenkins: Absolutely! [laughs]

02-00:43:50

Cooks: Can you help us get back to the mainland? And let's talk about what you did to apply this Hawaiian experience to the kind of art that you were making, because your art really starts to shift, and we want to make sure to hear you talk about that.

02-00:44:13

Jenkins: Okay. A couple of things happen.

02-00:44:16

Cooks: Okay.

02-00:44:17

Jenkins: First of all, while I'm in this Pilgrim group, this young lady comes into the group who's living in the house, who happens to be a former Miss Hawaii, which I could not believe that I was—I would get up the mornings and be sitting down having breakfast with a former Miss Hawaii. And literally, she was beautiful. We became good friends, and at a certain point, within the activities of this Christian group, we were both in the choir, and that's when I got to be really good friends with her. She actually took me, because we were friends, to visit her family. As an outsider, you don't get that privilege, to actually be amongst, number one, the real locals, the real Hawaiian people; and by the way, a queen? Oh man, I was over the top! I mean like, Me? Yeah? So anyway, things got to the point where I was trying to, in terms of this Christian concept, control this other part of me that was having these other notions that would be considered wrongful. I said, "I need to get out of here." So I left the group.

02-00:46:06

Lo and behold, who comes looking for me, but Miss Hawaii. You see her picture in the book, Leina'ala [Teruya Drummond]. And God, that really blew my mind, that she would do that. But it was more the case, because I guess I disappeared, that she was trying to find a brother, in the sense of this community, that had disappeared. She found me on the streets of Kailua. That's where I had moved to at the time. I explained to her why I left and all

that stuff. But I didn't tell her specifically the actual reason why, because I didn't want to not only embarrass myself, but make it a negative.

02-00:47:21

So anyway, at a certain point, though, I actually had moved—I think the term is *mauka*—up into this really incredible house. It was designed like a Japanese temple; it's not a house. I mean, it was unbelievable. When you drove up to that place, you'd smell all the plants—ginger, in particular. I don't know if you've had the chance to smell the plants of ginger, but you're smelling this on the way to this house. I had an opportunity to actually to own that house! Now, you can imagine from where I was coming from, from living in a mango forest to now actually trying to have an opportunity to own this incredible house that was made out of this really incredible wooden frames and walls, and all this kind of stuff. But at this point, I had come to the notion that, I think I needed to leave Hawaii, because my mother had been getting ill. And I knew that I didn't have the kind of money that it would take—that price I quoted you had increased—to try to get out of there and come back. [laughs]

02-00:49:00

I'm preparing to go back to LA, and lo and behold, there's this parade in the streets of Kona. And who do I run into in the crowd at that parade? It was King Kamehameha Day or something like that, and everybody was in costumes and Hawaiian dress and this whole thing. I run into Pippi [Victoria Scott] and Antasha, and I told them, "I'm leaving tomorrow," which I was—or it was the day after tomorrow. So she wanted us to get together one more time and have this picnic, sort of a goodbye kind of celebration, but actually, she was trying to get me back, which really blew my mind. But at the same time, I just couldn't do it. The thing that hurt me—again, my real feelings about the situation, that after we had the picnic and we spent the day together, the baby, she just was going nuts for me to stay with them; she thought I was back. She's three years old. And of course, Pippi wanted me to spend the night. I knew myself: if I spent the night with her, I wasn't going to be leaving Hawaii. [laughs] So I turned that little invitation down.

02-00:50:52

And just a sideline note. Since I've been doing this, I've been having conversations with [Pippi]. She's left Hawaii, and she's now back in her home state of Washington. She was originally from Spokane—not Spokane—yeah, well, is it Spokane? Anyway, we've been having conversations lately, and we actually have had a conversation about what I'm just telling you. [laughs] The thing that was interesting about the conversation for me—I'll cut it short—she actually said to me, "You know, I realized that you really loved me—now." I said, "Wow, okay. I'm glad you figured that out." [laughs] But at the same time, if I hadn't have left, we probably wouldn't be talking now.

02-00:52:04

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, I'm going to take this opportunity to move us—

- 02-00:52:09  
Jenkins: Back to LA?
- 02-00:52:09  
Cooks: That's what we planned, because we want to make sure we get that.
- 02-00:52:11  
Jenkins: Well, that's where I'm trying to go!
- 02-00:52:14  
Cooks: Yes, I'm going to push you a little faster to get back to the mainland. So you see Pippi, you make the decision not to take her up on her invitation.
- 02-00:52:28  
Jenkins: Right.
- 02-00:52:28  
Cooks: And you go back to California. So let's start there, and talk about what you did when you returned to Los Angeles.
- 02-00:52:40  
Jenkins: Well, when I got back, of course I start painting murals again. To whatever degree that I'm following the timeline, I ended up painting. Well, I ended up working with Judy Baca, actually, I guess with the painting with the mural projects, and then that project in the [San Fernando] Valley.
- 02-00:53:06  
Cooks: At SPARC [Social and Public Art Resource Center]?
- 02-00:53:07  
Jenkins: Yeah.
- 02-00:53:09  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-00:53:13  
Jenkins: [phone dings] And—okay, sorry, I've got this text message here.
- 02-00:53:20  
Cooks: Okay, we also have you around the same time, Ulysses, that you're working with Brockman Gallery Street Graphics Project on Crenshaw.
- 02-00:53:26  
Jenkins: Well, that happens after I work on that mural in the Valley.
- 02-00:53:32  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-00:53:34  
Jenkins: Matter of fact, it happens while I'm working on that project in the Valley.

02-00:53:37

Cooks: Okay, well please tell us about your project in the Valley, and then we can talk about—

02-00:53:44

Jenkins: Well, that project was *The History of California* [or *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*], and it was originated by Judy Baca, and I was just one of the artists that was invited, I'll put it that way, to paint in that project. It was a juvenile diversion project itself. Now, the only thing about it that I had some sense of remorse, because of my background as a probation officer, they gave me a lot of the most ill-informed, non-artistic kids on the project. When we were doing that project out in the Valley, before we ended up down in the location, I'd be teaching the kids on the grass. And do you know people would be driving by yelling the N-word at me? And you know, "Nigger, you need to get out of here," all this kind of stuff. I mean unfortunately, it's like a whole lot of that stuff that you saw going on this last year with these supporters of Trump. I was experiencing all that back *then*.

02-00:55:21

And of course, if you know anything about the way Southern California has evolved, a lot of the people that moved to the Valley—I mean almost, in fact, if I'm not mistaken now, is it kind of like that in Walnut Creek?

02-00:56:00

Tewes: I think there's a long tradition of a white population out here, but it's become much more diverse as—

02-00:56:05

Jenkins: Yeah, it's probably a lot more diverse now than when I was living in the Bay Area, but I had heard a lot about that area when I was in the Bay Area. For the most part, that's kind of the way America is. Where there's a lot of the inner-city cultures versus the people who live out in the other areas outside of the city.

02-00:56:38

But anyway, the Valley was like that. I don't know if I was the only one who experienced that, because a lot of the other people who were involved in the project were women artists, which was more of what Judy Baca was really more interested in. I'm saying that primarily because of what I witnessed. At the same time, there became an issue with her partner, Donna Deitch, who is an independent filmmaker these days. Well, just the thing is that their relationship was supposedly a secret, although it wasn't that much secret when it came to getting paid. There was this issue where Donna Deitch did not want to pay you even what you were supposed to be getting that was in the contract. So anyway, I put up with it. My mural didn't get to be really executed the way I wanted it to be, because the kids just didn't have any talent. But I was able to at least get the outline drawn onto the wall, which I had designed.

02-00:58:14

Meanwhile, I got this offer to paint in the 'hood, on Crenshaw. The painting that I did with Alonzo Davis's Brockman Gallery project was one of the first murals that was painted in that location. That location, on a certain level, got immortalized by *Boyz n the Hood*, because the guys who are in the movie pull up next to that site, although our murals had been long painted out. The thing is, that's the only thing about that project that I had—my sorrows, I'll put it that way, was that Alonzo had—while he was controlling the wall, they would paint out all the murals that had been painted the year prior so that they could have a whole 'nother group of artists paint, and I think, for the most part, so that they could get paid from the City.

02-00:59:29

Cooks:

And, Ulysses, for the record, would you tell us about the mural that you painted? The name of it and about the content?

02-00:59:34

Jenkins:

Well, the mural that I painted on Crenshaw was called *Azz Izz*, which was the name of the club that was underneath where I lived in Venice, with a picture of Billie and Cookie Harris. They were the musicians. I met them when I was painting *The Rat Trap* in Venice. They used to live in a bread truck in the parking lots of Venice and all around in that area. But when they had moved out of that truck to their club, like I said before, they used to have one of the really great late-night jazz clubs in LA at the time.

02-01:00:28

Cooks:

Okay. And we also—

02-01:00:32

Jenkins:

Oh, you want me to talk about the mural in the—*The [History of] California?*

02-01:00:38

Cooks:

Well, yeah, please talk about that. I mean, you talked about your experience as a muralist, but then you had the opportunity to at least draw out the outline. Can you tell us about what the content was, even though you didn't get to finish it the way you wanted to?

02-01:00:55

Jenkins:

See, if you had told me that ahead of time, I could bring [an image of] the mural to me. The mural primarily starts off with the conflict between California and Mexico. I'm trying to remember what the imagery was historically. It goes from there to—I actually need to see the mural to give you the content.

02-01:01:28

Cooks:

Okay.

02-01:01:29

Jenkins:

So just—



- 02-01:01:32  
Cooks: Do you want to pause?
- 02-01:01:33  
Jenkins: I just know that there's a picture of Bidy Mason in it and some other content that had to do with the African American presence in California, and then—
- 02-01:01:48  
Cooks: So, Ulysses, let me ask you something just to clarify. You worked on *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*.
- 02-01:01:57  
Jenkins: Yeah, that's what that mural was called.
- 02-01:01:58  
Cooks: Oh, okay. Before you said *The Great Wall of California*, and I thought that must be a different mural, but you're talking about *The Great Wall of Los Angeles*?
- 02-01:02:10  
Jenkins: Right.
- 02-01:02:11  
Cooks: Yeah, that mural. Yeah, absolutely. You have Bidy Mason. You have a focus on some of the Black pioneers who started the first Black newspaper.
- 02-01:02:29  
Jenkins: Yeah, that's probably so. I mean, the thing is, without me seeing it, unless you were able to do research on the imagery in it, I can't necessarily remember, because like I said, on a certain level, I sort of have put that mural out of my mind, because of the unfortunate experiences I had with doing it, because I never really finished painting it.
- 02-01:02:54  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-01:02:55  
Jenkins: What you see now is a repaint job by SPARC.
- 02-01:03:04  
Cooks: Okay, all right.
- 02-01:03:05  
Jenkins: And I didn't necessarily like what I saw. But it's somebody else painting over what you had—your original intent was being changed.
- 02-01:03:19  
Cooks: Right. Okay, well, I'm glad that we clarified that with the titles, because now it's clear that you were involved in *The Great Wall of LA*, and the section that you were involved in was called *1848: Bandaide*.

- 02-01:03:35  
Jenkins: Right.
- 02-01:03:36  
Cooks: Do you know why it was called *Bandaide*?
- 02-01:03:41  
Jenkins: Because of the consequences that it's showing. Because I believe it showed Native people getting hung. I mean—
- 02-01:03:52  
Cooks: Lynching.
- 02-01:03:53  
Jenkins: Lynchings, yeah. Lynchings that were being [perpetrated] on people of color. I think it talks about the railroad coming, there's a train.
- 02-01:04:06  
Cooks: Yes.
- 02-01:04:07  
Jenkins: And I think that's near the end of the mural, of my section.
- 02-01:04:13  
Cooks: Right, so you have, in that section, Joaquín Murrieta.
- 02-01:04:14  
Jenkins: Oh yes, okay, so you've got all the history.
- 02-01:04:17  
Cooks: Yeah, I do have it. Just for the record, though, we want other people, when they find a picture, just to know your thoughts about who you gathered together to feature in the content. And that's what is really helpful, because it's a legendary project.
- 02-01:04:38  
Jenkins: Well, it has its legends, I guess. But like I said, it's—without me seeing the imagery, I can't really explain what I was trying to do. Although—
- 02-01:04:52  
Cooks: You know, I—
- 02-01:04:54  
Jenkins: At one time I had written a legend for the mural, because that's how I used to produce my work, actually.
- 02-01:05:04  
Cooks: Okay.

- 02-01:05:05  
Jenkins: But I don't know where that is right now. I'm almost sure that if it exists, Erin [Christovale at the Hammer Museum] and her cohorts have dug it out and taken it with them.
- 02-01:05:19  
Cooks: So, Ulysses, I did see the mural online, and I sent a link to you in the chat. I don't know if you can see it.
- 02-01:05:28  
Jenkins: Oh, I saw that. I saw that. But what you probably have is the reproduction.
- 02-01:05:38  
Cooks: Yes. From what you're telling us, it's probably not your original, but maybe you could look at it and tell us is this your original design or not.
- 02-01:05:49  
Jenkins: Well, I don't know if I can find it, because when I hit "chat" I don't see it now.
- 02-01:05:57  
Cooks: Okay. Let me send it again, because I think it is important enough for the record for people to see. I'm going to send it again in chat, and when you click on that link, it opens up to the sparcinla.org page.
- 02-01:06:12  
Jenkins: Oh, really?
- 02-01:06:15  
Cooks: Yes. And then you can scroll down. It says, "*The Great Wall* - History and Description, How it Happened." It goes down, and then when you click "1848 to 1910," the mural section that you're talking about appears.
- 02-01:06:37  
Jenkins: Okay, well I haven't gotten any chat notice yet.
- 02-01:06:42  
Cooks: If you click on chat at the bottom of the screen, it should pop up.
- 02-01:06:46  
Jenkins: It's not popping up.
- 02-01:06:50  
Cooks: Okay, all right. Well, it is helpful to know that you were able to start it, but it was frustrating, because you weren't able to finish it.
- 02-01:07:04  
Jenkins: You know, like I said, I had just gotten to the point where—okay, here's the thing: I was painting both of those murals at the same time. The one in Crenshaw and the one in the Valley.
- 02-01:07:21  
Cooks: Okay.

- 02-01:07:22  
Jenkins: Tujunga Wash. There it is. If you know how the summer temperatures go, we had to be at the Tujunga Wash mural in the morning. I mean, like early, so that you could get some work done before noon, because by noon, you know, the temperatures in the Valley would reach near 100.
- 02-01:07:48  
Cooks: Sure.
- 02-01:07:49  
Jenkins: So I'd do that in the morning, then come to LA and paint the Crenshaw wall in the afternoons, and that's what I did that summer.
- 02-01:08:04  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-01:08:05  
Jenkins: The two murals simultaneously.
- 02-01:08:09  
Cooks: Ulysses, we also have listed that you did the transportation mural at the same time in 1976, *Transportation Brought Art to the People*.
- 02-01:08:22  
Jenkins: I didn't necessarily think that I had done them at the same time, but—
- 02-01:08:27  
Cooks: What's your memory of—
- 02-01:08:28  
Jenkins: I thought I might have done it at—well, I think I might have done it, because I know that I did—*Transportation Brought Art to the People*, it was started in the late winter into the spring of the year that it was supposedly completed.
- 02-01:08:59  
Cooks: Okay. We have 1976.
- 02-01:09:03  
Jenkins: I see.
- 02-01:09:04  
Cooks: But can you talk to us about that experience? How did you get that job? Was it based on the work you had already done for SPARC?
- 02-01:09:10  
Jenkins: Well, yeah, yeah. It was based on my winning the competition for that wall.
- 02-01:09:15  
Cooks: Okay, tell us about the competition. You haven't mentioned that yet, so we're interested in that.

02-01:09:22

Jenkins:

Well, the competition primarily had come from—I might have gotten the application for the competition through SPARC, I might have gotten it—but I knew it was primarily—the competition was being conducted by the DMV, and the DMV would choose your design. The design that I had created also the story of transportation, I used the story of transportation of the people of color that came to California. But I also had this image. I don't know if you have an image of the mural. It's in the book [that I wrote, *Doggerel Life*]. This is the center—as my hands are in this position, this was the center of the mural, which I turned into the trunk of a redwood tree.

02-01:10:31

Cooks:

Okay.

02-01:10:32

Jenkins:

And there's this image—they had a redwood tree in some books of California that had a tunnel at the base of the tree, and so I used that for the basis for the image that you see in that mural, with this guy and an ancient—well, I shouldn't call it ancient—but at the time, a Model T Ford, driving through the tree. At the base there's a construct of a train, of a super train going across the base. And then I had these ethnic identities being portrayed. On this side is an African American guy with this bundle on his head, or otherwise, I wanted that to symbolize the trouble that Black people had to carry in their minds, that it was heavy. Then on this other side was an image of a Chinese guy, for the Asian community. No, no, no. The Asian guy is down below where the train is coming in, and the fact that the Chinese helped build the railroads. And then above it—I'm trying to remember, who is that guy?

02-01:12:30

Cooks:

You know, there are pictures in *Doggerel Life*, but there's no picture that shows the whole mural, so it's helpful for you to walk us through it.

02-01:12:38

Jenkins:

Well, there is, there is one. I thought it was a picture of the whole mural at the opening.

02-01:12:52

Cooks:

Okay.

02-01:12:53

Jenkins:

And the band that's there—oh actually, yeah, there's a picture—okay. There's a picture of me on the scaffolding?

02-01:13:03

Cooks:

Yes, on page forty-nine.

02-01:13:06

Jenkins:

Right. And you see that I was, at that time, painting in the railroad train, but I also had this stagecoach, which is actually on the other side of the other page.

02-01:13:28

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:13:29

Jenkins: The stagecoach, in terms of how that imagery represented the postal aspect of the history. Oh, and I see, at the base I had this picture of this little, small Latin guy, this Mexican guy with a young child, and they're sort of like carrying a weight on their backs, trying to kind of get into California, coming right past this railroad train. So that when you go above that, which—I guess there isn't any other fuller picture of the mural; I thought there was. I guess when she put this in here she didn't put that picture in here as an inclusion. I'm trying to remember.

02-01:14:44

Cooks: You know, Ulysses, while you're thinking about that, I wonder if you could also tell us a bit about your process. Because it seems like you learned and thought a lot about colonial violence when you were in Hawaii, but it seems like a project as ambitious as this required some research.

02-01:15:05

Jenkins: Oh yeah, I did the research in California to whatever—most of the paintings that I did were based that way.

02-01:15:14

Cooks: Can you tell everyone about your process? Did you go to the library, you talked to people, I mean, where did you—

02-01:15:20

Jenkins: Oh yeah, I'd go the library or I'd find books on the history, in particular like California, to identify the imagery that you would be engaging with. The only thing about mural painting, on a certain level, a lot of times—especially the subjects that I was covering—they weren't necessarily always imagery that had been popularized in the mainstream of society, so I would be thinking that maybe people would possibly recognize what I was painting. But the fact that I submitted this history, in this way, to the people who were judging the competition and I won, I presume they understood it.

02-01:16:26

Cooks: Did you know which DMV it was going to be installed in LA?

02-01:16:31

Jenkins: Yeah, it was at the DMV on Hope St.

02-01:16:35

Cooks: And did you know that when you were applying?

02-01:16:40

Jenkins: Yes.

02-01:16:40

Cooks: Okay, and—

- 02-01:16:41  
Jenkins: I mean, that was the thing. When I first did that mural, the thing that was really good about it was that it was one of the second murals that was painted facing a freeway. That meant you got an enormous audience, actually, by the people who were either stuck on the freeway or just passing. [laughs] And of course, this particular mural was not that far away from USC [University of Southern California].
- 02-01:17:22  
Cooks: Is this off of the 10 or the 101?
- 02-01:17:22  
Jenkins: Yeah, it's off of the 101.
- 02-01:17:26  
Cooks: Okay.
- 02-01:17:29  
Jenkins: Was it the 101? The one that's near the Coliseum.
- 02-01:17:32  
Cooks: Oh, that's the 110.
- 02-01:17:34  
Jenkins: Okay, so it's the 110, and it actually becomes, once they build the [California African] American Museum, very close to that institution, as well.
- 02-01:17:49  
Cooks: Okay. Ulysses, can you tell us how you put a team together? Because you're the designer; you're the researcher; but then to execute it, you have to have a whole team of people. Can you just explain how that worked for you?
- 02-01:18:07  
Jenkins: Okay. Here's the story about the team: the team was just me, I painted it by myself.
- 02-01:18:13  
Cooks: The whole thing.
- 02-01:18:15  
Jenkins: Three-story mural.
- 02-01:18:21  
Cooks: What do you think about that? I mean, I'm stunned, but what do you think?
- 02-01:18:26  
Jenkins: [laughs] That came about because of the situations that I was going through as a muralist.
- 02-01:18:37  
Cooks: Okay, tell us.

02-01:18:37

Jenkins:

You see, when I finished that mural you see in those pictures, the opening with me with the mayor, Tom Bradley—do you know that Judy Baca—there was a local TV program that would go around on Saturdays and show you the different events that were going on in LA. I was supposed to be a part of that program on the weekend that I had my opening. She sent them to another location where this woman was having an opening the same day, whose mural was not as big or—I would say I didn't think was as important as the mural that I was doing. So that's why I have my own little representation or documentation of that opening.

02-01:19:47

Cooks:

Okay, so we're learning about some conflicts in the mural community at this time, for sure.

02-01:19:54

Jenkins:

See, now you're getting into the point of finance. You know, trying to finance yourself as a muralist becomes very difficult as the number of muralists start to—I mean, on a certain level, all the artists of color are realizing that to paint a mural is a way to get recognized. And the sense of recognition—if I talk about my career with my students, I have to actually tell them that during this time, artists of color could not show in museums or galleries, and if you were a muralist and were able to paint in a certain location—that's why I started to see the problems with being a muralist at the time that I stopped doing it, because financing, number one. But the mural painting genre had started to move out of the 'hood and move into the West Side. On the West Side, of course, was the more affluent communities, and they did not want to see images of people of color that they would be facing on a daily basis, back in those days.

02-01:21:28

Of course, the group that I was enamored of, the LA [Fine] Arts Squad, those were two white guys that was painting those murals. And they were *great* muralists! I mean, they were super. But at the same time, they didn't necessarily paint imagery of human beings, figurative human beings in their paintings. They usually did stuff that was landscape oriented, although they did paint people in their mural *Venice in the Snow*, but those were Caucasian people. And so the notion of people of color fitting into the landscape, and that's—I was *doing* that!

02-01:22:24

So I started to realize that I needed to—when I go to grad school—get out of mural painting, but also the notion of not only just getting out of it because of that, but like I said, the financial thing. Judy Baca and Alonzo Davis were competing for the money that the City was giving for mural painting. At the same time, I was painting for both of them. I could see this contention and this competition between the two of them, and I just got to the point where I said, "I need to get out of this and get to my own career of—" whatever that's going



to be, if I was going to continue as a painter. I'd gotten recognized as a mural painter by now. And of course, when I get into grad school, video was breaking out as the new avant-garde genre, and I got very interested in pursuing that. Not even knowing that on a certain level, I was also creeping into performance art when I did *Mass of Images*.

02-01:23:57

Cooks:

So let's slow down here, because this is all really fascinating, Ulysses. Because one of the questions we have is: did you consciously stop doing murals in order to get into performance-based media and video? I mean, did you—

02-01:24:15

Jenkins:

Yes.

02-01:24:17

Cooks:

And was it, in part, based on what you're saying right now, to get away from that conflict between Judy Baca and Alonzo Davis and that competition?

02-01:24:26

Jenkins:

Well, that was their conflict. But by my being a part of their—in association with projects that they were doing, I just said I needed my—once again—my independence, you see?

02-01:24:46

Cooks:

Okay. So what did you do next? Because we have notes about you meeting David Hammons. We wanted to know, in terms of timeline, what happens next? Do you go to school?

02-01:25:02

Jenkins:

I reapply, I reapply to Otis [College of Art and Design], and I get in.

02-01:25:05

Cooks:

Okay, great.

02-01:25:06

Jenkins:

This time my mother says, "Okay, I'm going to sign the papers." [laughs]

02-01:25:13

Cooks:

And she was happy to have you back from Hawaii?

02-01:25:15

Jenkins:

Absolutely.

02-01:25:16

Cooks:

Okay. [laughs]

02-01:25:17

Jenkins:

I mean, you know, I basically ended up living at my mother's when I first got back from Hawaii, and then eventually moved back to Venice.

- 02-01:25:31  
Cooks: Okay, so let's talk about Otis then. Because you're there, you start there in 1977, is that correct?
- 02-01:25:39  
Jenkins: Right.
- 02-01:25:40  
Cooks: Okay. And you know that Charles White is there, and he's someone you greatly admire.
- 02-01:25:47  
Jenkins: Yes, and then of course I'm taking courses with him. A funny thing about that, what you're asking me about: when I graduated from Otis—or getting ready to graduate from Otis—I think it might have happened after I did *Two-Zone Transfer*—and Charlie says to me, "What happened to all those murals, young man?" I said, "Well, they've had their day." [laughs] That became like a running joke between the two of us.
- 02-01:26:27  
But see, what most people don't seem to understand is that when I transferred my ideas of the artistic work that I wanted to do, the notions of the education that I was getting with Charlie becomes a major aspect of what the input—because I talked about, when we were talking about the storylines in the murals, when you were asking me about these, did I know about these other African American artists? I learned that history through Charlie, because he was friends with a lot of the early Black artists of the early twentieth century. He would tell us stories about his friendships with those guys, and how he was able to work himself into the art world through those friendships and those associations. The fact that Harry Belafonte was a good friend of his, that I met at UCI [University of California, Irvine] when Harry Belafonte—I don't know if you remember when Harry Belafonte came to UCI and gave a talk?
- 02-01:27:50  
Cooks: No.
- 02-01:27:52  
Jenkins: I went to that talk, and he was talking to some other people. When I told him I was an ex-student of Charles White, he stopped talking to those people and came over to talk to me. That was really impressive.
- 02-01:28:09  
Cooks: So, Ulysses, tell us about Otis. I mean, you went there, it seems like, to really work with Charles White. There were other faculty there. There was also a whole curriculum. If you could tell us about what was the program there?
- 02-01:28:25  
Jenkins: Well, see the thing about Otis at that time, we were in the middle of being released from our contractual commitment with LA County, so we were about to lose our sponsorship.

- 02-01:28:43  
Cooks: Now, who are you talking about, when you say we were about to lose our contract?
- 02-01:28:48  
Jenkins: I'm talking about the school [that was then] called Otis Art Institute.
- 02-01:28:49  
Cooks: Okay, so they had a contract with the County?
- 02-01:28:53  
Jenkins: Right.
- 02-01:28:54  
Cooks: For a space, or what was the contract for?
- 02-01:28:56  
Jenkins: No, no! The school itself was getting financial support to *exist*. And see, this becomes a real crazy thing about the Otis family and the whole thing, which all came out while we were going there. The Otis family, which also owned the *LA Times*—you might not know that story—and so all of that was in the configuration of how Otis existed. It was Otis Chandler who actually ended up dedicating the institution that becomes Otis. That's why it's called Otis. It was the Otis Chandler family, which also owned the *LA Times*. But they were about to leave that relationship with the arts institution called Otis, and so Otis had to find a new sponsorship at that point while I was going there. On a certain level, it actually gave us, as students, a whole lot of freedom, because a lot of the institutional overriding guidance was being loosened, to a certain degree, because the faculty had to worry about whether or not they're going to have a job. And that went on for the two years that I was there in grad school.
- 02-01:31:01  
But at the same time, I was—my major was called intermedia, and when—
- 02-01:31:13  
Cooks: Okay. Well, tell us about that, because I'm wondering if when you went to Otis, is this when you got—was it where you first were introduced into making video or did that happen somewhere else?
- 02-01:31:25  
Jenkins: Well, it happened when it happened in Venice, if you remember the story of me—
- 02-01:31:30  
Cooks: Okay, with the [Sony] Portapak.
- 02-01:31:30  
Jenkins: Yeah, right, with the Portapaks and all that stuff.

- 02-01:31:36  
Cooks: You were continuing that at Otis, or was it more of the drawing and figurative work?
- 02-01:31:40  
Jenkins: No. Well, Otis had its traditional instruction. But at the same time—see, video at that time was the new avant-garde, and the only other school that actually was teaching video was UCLA; USC didn't even offer it. That was another reason why I was interested in going to Otis, because I could pursue video.
- 02-01:32:13  
This major that I just described to you was an interdisciplinary major, which also interested me, because I was kind of already doing it, but I hadn't gotten any kind of educational background behind that relationship to interdisciplinary arts. When I started doing that, as I've mentioned before, I had met Gary Lloyd, and when I started going to Otis, he was teaching there. I became a TA with him while I was there. But the guy who ran the interdisciplinary program that I'm talking about, intermedia, he actually taught some really—I can't think of his name right now, but I'll get it for another—in terms of another conversation [so] that you can have it. Oh, Forst, his name was Forst. God, I can't think of his last name right now. But—
- 02-01:33:39  
Cooks: His name was Miles Forst.
- 02-01:33:42  
Jenkins: There you go, there you go.
- 02-01:33:43  
Cooks: Yes.
- 02-01:33:44  
Jenkins: That's in the book, or you looked it up?
- 02-01:33:47  
Cooks: I know that. I don't know.
- 02-01:33:49  
Jenkins: Oh, you know Miles?
- 02-01:33:53  
Cooks: Well, I know his name, but other than—
- 02-01:33:53  
Jenkins: Oh okay, because Miles was one of those really—he was the most out-there professor that you could also have. I didn't take classes with her, but what was her name, Judy—she was a part of the Woman's House.
- 02-01:34:10  
Cooks: Judy Chicago?

02-01:34:14

Jenkins:

Judy—no, no, not Judy Chicago. Oh God, I can't think of her name now. [Wanda Westcoast.] But she and this other woman, Beverly [O'Neill]—Beverly taught at CalArts [California Institute of the Arts]. When Otis changed, she was an administrator at CalArts. Anyway, I'll find the names, since you guys want these names.

02-01:34:47

But anyway, we're talking about Miles. See, Miles was so out there, he had this seminar class where he had the whole class go and tear down a structure of a house, and tell them that that was how they were going to make their art. And then he'd lecture on that premise. Remember, this was the time of conceptual art, so the whole notion of conceptually understanding how to deconstruct—that's what he was really good at: deconstructing. Because he also did sculpture. The deconstruction was the art, in the physical sense of the deconstruction. I can't really go into some of the other stuff that he might have—not that he *might* have, that he *did*. [laughs] You've got to remember, this is the seventies, and I've already given you these other stories about the notions of, I'll call it inspirational drug-taking. But at the same time, some did and some didn't do that. I'll just leave it at that.

02-01:36:29

Cooks:

Well, Ulysses, if you could help us with the timeline. We know you were at Otis for two years.

02-01:36:36

Jenkins:

Yeah, this is '77. In the fall of '77, I got accepted. I was surprised. And then I find out that they were really interested in *Mass of Images*.

02-01:36:49

Cooks:

Let's go back a little bit, because we also have that you were taking classes at Santa Monica College.

02-01:36:58

Jenkins:

Well, I took those classes at Santa Monica College, because I felt that after being in Hawaii all that time and coming back into LA—and already, really, I'd made my decision to get out of mural painting after I painted the DMV mural.

02-01:37:15

Cooks:

Okay. Did you go to Santa Monica before Otis? Or did you go at the same time?

02-01:37:21

Jenkins:

Before.

02-01:37:23

Cooks:

Okay.

- 02-01:37:24  
Jenkins: And I think I might have done it the summer before.
- 02-01:37:27  
Cooks: Okay. Let's talk about that for a moment, just to make sure we're getting all of this for the record. When you were at Santa Monica College, summer of '77 or let's say—I think maybe that fits into the timeline if you started at Otis in fall of '77.
- 02-01:37:46  
Jenkins: Yeah.
- 02-01:37:47  
Cooks: And you took classes with John Sturgeon.
- 02-01:37:51  
Jenkins: Right.
- 02-01:37:51  
Cooks: Who was influential. And then there was a woman who you took classes with. She taught a class on—
- 02-01:37:58  
Jenkins: African American film. That was Ann Powers. That's what I was telling you earlier here.
- 02-01:38:03  
Cooks: Okay. We just wanted to have you talk about it on the record while we're recording.
- 02-01:38:08  
Jenkins: Well, the thing about those classes, they both actually become very influential. And of course, I had known John Sturgeon, who was the neighbor of Michael Zingale, and so we used to meet in Venice. Matter of fact, I ended up running into John Sturgeon prior to my getting my job at UCSD—I mean UC Irvine, but I'll have to get to that again. But I'll just say that John Sturgeon shows up. And then, of course, I see him again when I'm in that exhibition at the Getty, *California Video* [in 2008]. I'm the only African American in that show, because of the timing in which I was doing video, I was considered, at that time, the only African American making video art.
- 02-01:39:08  
Cooks: And so, Ulysses, when you were at Santa Monica College, you are learning about African Americans in film.
- 02-01:39:20  
Jenkins: Well, you can see the difference, or the combination, of the two classes I took. I take this video class, and at the same time I'm taking this class about African Americans in film, and that influences the project that I make in John Sturgeon's class talking about African Americans in media.

- 02-01:39:39  
Cooks: Is that project the *Mass of Images* film?
- 02-01:39:44  
Jenkins: Yes.
- 02-01:39:46  
Cooks: Please talk to us about *Mass of Images*, because this is 1978.
- 02-01:39:53  
Jenkins: No, it's '77.
- 02-01:39:56  
Cooks: Okay, this is 1977. Okay, the film itself says '78, but maybe that's when you finished the production of it?
- 02-01:40:01  
Jenkins: That might have been when I edited it.
- 02-01:40:04  
Cooks: Okay. And this is one of these legendary avant-garde films.
- 02-01:40:12  
Jenkins: It has turned into that. [laughs]
- 02-01:40:13  
Cooks: It has turned into that. And that's why we're stopping for a moment, just because we want to hear you talk about this moment in your life, right? Where you were taking video—
- 02-01:40:25  
Jenkins: Well, I'm taking video, but see, the thing about it—if you don't know John Sturgeon's work—I was very, to tell you the truth, impressed with what John was doing, because John was doing these ritual performances. And to that extent, my video is a ritual of its own kind, talking about the media and the influence of the stereotypes of African Americans in the media. And so, unbeknownst to me, I actually just—the poem—I called it a poem at the time—but the rap [laughs] that I end up saying: "You're just a mass of images you've gotten to know/ from years and years of TV shows/ The hidden thing, the hurting pain/ was written and bitten into your veins/ I won't and I don't relate/ but I think, for some, *it's too late*." Anyway, a little performance for you that—huh?
- 02-01:41:40  
Cooks: Ulysses, this is part of your whole spectrum. [Jenkins laughs] Because the whole—we will talk about this later, but I'm going to mention the whole term doggerel, that you use over and over again.
- 02-01:41:53  
Jenkins: Yeah?

02-01:41:55

Cooks:

You know, to me, even you being able to just recite this poem with the performance of it, just here in this oral history! I mean, it's part of who you are. It's your work, but it seems to be also just your presence in the world.

02-01:42:11

Jenkins:

Well, I evolve to the doggerel moment after I do *Two-Zone [Transfer]*, because I had been wanting—what happened in one of my classes at Otis, one of the students told me when I was getting ready to do *Two-Zone* that, "Oh, you aren't going to make it in the art world." I go, "What are you talking about?" They said, "Because you can't do anything but copy this Eurocentric history that is the art world." Now, they didn't tell me exactly like that, but that's what they were telling me. I said, "Oh really?" And this was in a class that I had with Charlie. I said, "I'll show you." That's when I actually came up with the notion, that's one of the ways that I was inspired to do, to make *Two-Zone Transfer*.

02-01:43:16

Cooks:

Okay, can you talk a little bit more—a lot more about *Two-Zone Transfer*? Because this is another one of these legendary films. Kerry James Marshall, Ronnie Nichols, Roger Trammell—who we haven't talked about yet—Greg Pitts. Can you talk about—just your whole design? I mean, the presidential masks, starting with the RTD [Rapid Transit District bus] ride, the spirit that visits in the night. Tell us everything!

02-01:43:54

Jenkins:

[laughs] I've been a big fan of surrealism all my life, actually. And I actually was a real big fan—as you can see in some of the landscape paintings that I have painted. I mean, *Rat Trap* is a surrealist vision. So I was a big fan of Salvador Dali. And again, for me to be a fan of surrealism, and at the same time being very interested in the paintings of Charles White, I realized that there was another kind of connection that I could make with imagery that had to do with Black figurative imagery, which you see in my paintings. I mean, at the end of *The Rat Trap*, at the end of the freeway, that's a self-portrait of me in *The Thinker* position. So that's another comment on who I think I am. And at the same time, something that I try to do in every work that I've ever made, is to be that thinker. So you know, the autobiographic[al] context, that also is in a lot of the work.

02-01:45:26

Which I would say, about—just a sidetrack here, back to the *Mass of Images*. I think I mention this in the autobiography. But as a child, my mother used to allow me to go to our neighbor's house to watch television. And of course, one Sunday, when I was supposed to go over and watch some TV—because we didn't have a TV at the time—they had gone out to dinner. And I was a crazy fan for this show, which you may have not heard of, or may have heard of, called *Hopalong Cassidy*. And of course, as a child, I had this little fit, where I was screaming and hollering about, "I couldn't see TV." And of course, my



mother, she told me, this is how she tells me, "I thought, Oh my God, I've got to get my baby a television set." And that's what she did.

02-01:46:38

From that point on I, indirectly, I actually was—like most kids of my generation—I was a fan of the television programming of that time. To the extent that even—which I mentioned earlier, the other big kids' show was the [*The Wonderful*] *World of Disney*. And of course, eventually, the program that had the Mouseketeers, The Mickey Mouse Club. See, those were the—and those kind of programs for kids, okay, were the only ones that really had any kind of inkling of the notion of art! I mean, you know, they didn't have any of these programs that they have today, which are all over the place. I mean, you know, this is like way before—actually, in a way, that was the forerunner for that show of the Jacksons, if you can think of the fact that they had that cartoon show with the Jackson 5, [*The Jackson 5ive*]. In that sense, it was a recreation of an animated program for kids, and in particular for African American kids.

02-01:48:04

So that's why when I said I was making installation work and all kinds of little stuff for me and my brothers and sister just to—because we couldn't afford the kind of toys that were on the market for kids to have. So I create this whole world for me and my brothers and sister to play in, that would have all the cartoon characters that were on TV or in the comic books. I would draw them, cut them out as cutouts. Which, you know, when I saw the Red Grooms work back in the day, when that was popular art, I said, "Jesus, I was doing that kind of work when I was a kid!"

02-01:48:48

Cooks:

And, Ulysses, thinking about *Mass of Images*, because you have this collage or montage of images of African American people, white people in blackface—when did you, did you see those kind of images growing up? Or what really inspired you?

02-01:49:08

Jenkins:

Well, that came from that class by Ann Powers.

02-01:49:10

Cooks:

Okay. As a child watching TV, did you know about those images?

02-01:49:16

Jenkins:

Not necessarily.

02-01:49:16

Cooks:

Okay.

02-01:49:17

Jenkins:

I mean, I knew about *Amos 'n' Andy* and that kind of thing, because that was the kind of programming that was being—that was on TV when I was growing up, and possibly one of the only shows that had any kind of Black

imagery. But Laurel and Hardy in blackface, when I saw that, I just said, "Oh my God! I didn't know they were doing that." But then, the whole understanding of blackface in the media and how it even came about from that—I forget the guy's name now, [Al Jolson], who was singing, "Swanee, how I love you," and all that shit.

02-01:50:05

Cooks: Right.

02-01:50:05

Jenkins: You know.

02-01:50:06

Cooks: I know who you're talking about, from *The Jazz Singer*.

02-01:50:08

Jenkins: Yeah, *The Jazz Singer*. Or the notion of the film *The Jazz Singer*, the idea that that becomes not only a popular film, it was the beginning of sound *in* film, the mimicking of Black culture, which was also happening around the same time as *Birth of a Nation*.

02-01:50:41

Cooks: I wanted to ask you a question about the end of *Mass of Images*. We're almost out of time today, so we can pick up with talking about these two films next time.

02-01:50:53

Jenkins: Okay.

02-01:50:54

Cooks: But at the end of *Mass of Images*, I had always expected that you were going to smash those TVs, and I thought maybe it was a practical issue or maybe it was a conceptual idea, but I wanted to hear you talk about that.

02-01:51:07

Jenkins: Well, it is a conceptual idea, because you have to remember what I said, "They won't let me."

02-01:51:15

Cooks: Okay.

02-01:51:15

Jenkins: Okay? As much as we hated these ugly images of ourselves being portrayed, what kind of power did we have to get rid of them, you see? We had no power against the commerciality, the fact that we had been commercialized into a product that, unfortunately, still goes on. I had to make this a reference point, actually, when I started teaching Afrofuturism to my students about hip hop, that this guy Ol' Dirty Bastard, on a certain level in his own characterization of himself, was recreating the stereotype.

02-01:52:02

And the premise, which was also embedded in *Two-Zone Transfer*, is the fact that the notion of these images is because we were getting—you get paid to *degrade* yourself. Now it doesn't come out as literally as I'm saying it now. But I mean, a lot of these comedians sometimes don't realize that their comedy is at the degrading notion of how they're getting paid to degrade the Black community. Why do you want to do something of that sort if you understand—although some people—I mean, they just had this whole series on Showtime about comedy at The Laugh Factory on Sunset Blvd. It was interesting looking at that. On a certain level, I kind of was playing with the notion of comedy in my work, but that's the doggerel side. [laughs] And I arrived at that doing *Two-Zone Transfer*.

02-01:53:41

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, let's stop here. And I would love to start with exactly where we are, with *Two-Zone Transfer*, because you've been talking about it—and I appreciate you taking time just to explain why the TVs weren't smashed. I think that's a really important point to make sure is understood, that that was deliberate and conceptual—and then we can start talking about how in *Two-Zone*, you're doing all this education, and it's a real—

02-01:54:15

Jenkins:

Yeah, we've got people who need an education. [laughs]

02-01:54:19

Cooks:

What was that?

02-01:54:20

Jenkins:

I said yeah, *Two-Zone* was an education.

02-01:54:24

Cooks:

Yeah, so let's start there. And then we can end here, Amanda?

02-01:54:27

Tewes:

Great. Thank you, everybody.

02-01:54:30

Cooks:

Okay.

02-01:54:31

Jenkins:

Okay!

## Interview 3: November 15, 2020

03-00:00:00

Tewes: Okay. This is a third interview with Ulysses Jenkins for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. This remote interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on November 15, 2020. Mr. Jenkins joins from Inglewood, California; Dr. Cooks joins from Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thanks, everybody—session three here! Bridget, go ahead and start us off.

03-00:00:33

Cooks: Okay. So last time we spoke, Ulysses, we were talking about the late 1970s. You were helping us understand your motivation for *Mass of Images*, and we started to mention *Two-Zone Transfer*. This session we really want to start there and hear what you'd like to tell us about this amazing collaboration with Kerry James Marshall, Ronnie Nichols, Roger Trammell, and Greg Pitts. Could you start by telling us how you all became acquainted?

03-00:01:21

Jenkins: Ronnie Nichols, Kerry Marshall, and Greg Pitts were all classmates of mine in grad school at Otis [College of Art and Design].

03-00:01:34

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:01:35

Jenkins: Roger was a very good friend of mine, actually one of my workmates back at—hold it, hold it for a second. I've got a blank, I don't know why—when I was working at Juvenile Hall, and we were both counselors together. I thought that he would make a really good—in terms of my casting choice—he would make a really good person to play this spirit that awakens me in the *Two-Zone Transfer* scenario. Then, of course, Kerry Marshall—if you aren't familiar with who he is these days—was a really incredible young artist at the time. I met Kerry at Otis, and to find out that he had been studying with Charles White when he was in high school, taking classes with Charlie on the weekends with these classes that Charlie was doing for young people. And Greg Pitts, Greg Pitts actually was a real innovator in terms of—he had a gallery in his church, and he was showing African American artists that also weren't having opportunities to show. Of course, in getting to know him while we were in school, I thought that he would make a good complementary character in my production.

03-00:03:53

Cooks: And, Ulysses, was this the Pearl C. Woods Gallery?

03-00:03:56

Jenkins: Exactly.

03-00:03:58

Cooks: And did you show work there?

03-00:04:01

Jenkins: No.

03-00:04:02

Cooks: Okay. We heard about that gallery, because Senga [Nengudi] talks about it, and I just wondered if there was a connection with you, also.

03-00:04:10

Jenkins: Well, Senga exhibited there pretty regularly. I think a lot of the work that she was recognized [for] early on in her career went through Pearl C. Woods. Then of course, Ronnie, he was from Arkansas, and he had enrolled at Otis at the same time.

03-00:04:35

And to a certain degree, we all used to hang out together, being that we were Charles White's students. I mean, we had this experience, which gives you another notion of how things were then and unfortunately may still be. We were hanging out in the courtyard at Otis talking to Charlie, and all of a sudden, one of the white students comes up and says, "Oh, look at all the crows sitting on a fence." So you know, we were ready to kick his ass. I'm sorry to say it that way, but that's what it was like. Charlie said, "No, no, no. Leave this cat alone. He doesn't know any better." But he also said something that became a major pinpoint of something to remember. He said, "The real thing that you've got to do is you've got to bring them to your backyard. Don't go where they're at, because that's not necessarily going to make a change. The thing is, if you bring them to your backyard and let them see where you're *really* coming from, that's the move." And that stuck with me. I'm pretty sure it might have stuck with the other guys, as well.

03-00:06:09

At that time—and we're talking about *Two-Zone*, of course—I was inspired by a couple of other artists. Now, I mentioned Gary Lloyd. Who I didn't mention, who was inspiring to me, was one of my video instructors, Ilene Segalove. You might not have seen—Ilene, myself, and Gary Lloyd were pictured in an article that was the cover article on video art [called "Art as Video"] in the *LA Weekly*. I believe that Erin [Christovale] has that magazine and the cover sheet. But then, of course, another source of my—another aspect of the source of my inspiration, besides Ed Bereal, was the partner that I was involved with at the time, and her name was Celia Shapiro—or as she was going by the name at that time, Sally Shapiro. She was a really good video artist and photographer. And I met her at this women's media gathering.

03-00:07:59

You know, back in those days, the women's movement was really emerging, and I'd go to their meetings to see what strategies they were coming up with. It was really interesting, because on some levels it was—you could say they

were comparative to the kind of strategies that the Black community was engaged in, only theirs had more of this feminist construct, which there was a—and I don't know if her picture is in here or not—[looks at *Doggerel Life*] but there was a Native American lady, who was really the leader of the group, and I found that really fascinating. I'm sorry I can't remember her name, but we made good friends when I was doing that.

03-00:09:03

In the meantime, making a long story short, after—so what happened: when I was living in Venice I had got—the whole gentrification thing was starting to get a little crazy in Venice, and I got kicked out of my studio that I had in Venice at the time, so I moved in with Sally. While we were living together, she suggested that I might take this acting class, and so I took this acting class on the West Side. By taking that acting class, it placed me into a certain relationship to the traditional notion of acting. You see, all this stuff, there was a technique. I think it was called The Technique, or something, that I was learning.

03-00:10:32

Cooks:

How was this different from the traditional form of acting? Did you have acting training before?

03-00:10:39

Jenkins:

No, but the thing is, I was informed how [in] this particular way of acting, you drew upon your past and incorporated that into the characters and the characterization that you were performing. So anyway, she was encouraging me to do that, primarily based on—maybe because when I might have shown her *Mass of Images* or that kind of a thing, she thought that it would be a good thing to have under my belt. That helped formulate a notion of creating a narrative performance, besides the fact of having had seen the satirical notions that Ed Bereal had going in his Bodacious Buggerilla group, okay?

03-00:11:52

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, tell us about Ed Bereal. How did you meet him? How did you see the Bodacious Buggaroo group?

03-00:12:05

Jenkins:

Buggerilla. Bu-gger-illa.

03-00:12:10

Cooks:

Buggerilla group, Bodacious Buggerilla group.

03-00:12:13

Jenkins:

Yeah, there you go.

03-00:12:15

Cooks:

I've heard of them. I've never said the words before, so you had to help me through that.

03-00:12:19

Jenkins: Well, now you've got the pronunciation.

03-00:12:22

Cooks: [laughs] Thank you. So how did you come in contact with Ed Bereal? And then we'll get back to *Two-Zone*.

03-00:12:29

Jenkins: I'd heard of Ed. You know, you'd hear about these events that he was doing, because he was doing his street performances, but I hadn't ever seen them. So that when I went to—that time that I was trying to get myself caught up on some video production skills, and I go out to LACC [Los Angeles City College] and I walk in the studio, and lo and behold, who's there but Bodacious Buggerilla? And of course, Ed is there, but I didn't really meet him at that time, because he was in the process of producing that program that he was creating, and so I just sort of stayed in the background and watched.

03-00:13:12

The thing about seeing that was that you go, Oh wow! Because the show that he was producing was a spinoff from [Rowan & Martin's] *The Laugh-In*. If you're not familiar with that program, *The Laugh-In* was the top pop sort of TV show at that time. They were spoofing regular media, which was, you know, it was *The Smothers Brothers [Show]*. It was *The Smothers Brothers* program, which had all these incredible performers and comedians, and all this stuff on that show. You've probably heard that acronym—or not the acronym, but this mannerism that Sammy Davis, Jr., had brought to the show called "Here Comes the Judge," and that came out of that show. There's probably a whole lot more, but I can't remember everything, but that's just one that comes to mind.

03-00:14:25

And so the notion of comedy or satire really had appealed to me, which goes back into my doggerel thing. But see, then, when I was seeing the work of Ilene Segalove, she was such—she still is—she was an amazing narrative kind of artist, and she was doing these programs about her family background and her relationship with her mother. She would dress herself in costuming where she'd reenact her teenage years. Those videos were so amazing. I mean, you could go online—I think if you go on YouTube, I think it is, you might be able to find some of her videos that were—they just really knocked, if you will—[I'll] use that term—knocked my socks off. And then she was my professor.

03-00:15:42

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:15:43

Jenkins: She was one of my video professors at Otis. There's another guy—and I can't remember his name exactly—William something or other, [Wegman]—but he was really good. He was like one of my first performance instructors. But the

main one that most people kind of have me connected with also was Chris Burden. And see, when I took [the] Chris Burden performance class the summer before I went to Otis, the main thing—which is interesting, because one of the things he told us I've also sort of transcended—but he would say, [points] "Don't think any of this work that you're making as a student is worth anything, because it won't be." Which is kind of weird on a certain level, because the one that he's really famous for [what] he did at UCI, where he locks himself in his locker, which—I had that locker in my classroom when I first started teaching at UCI. [laughs] But anyway—

03-00:17:15

Cooks: So you took a class with Chris Burden before you started at Otis. Where was that class?

03-00:17:20

Jenkins: No, it was the summer school at Otis.

03-00:17:25

Cooks: Okay, got it.

03-00:17:26

Jenkins: After I'd gotten accepted.

03-00:17:29

Cooks: So, Ulysses, all of these things: Ilene's class and Burden's class, Chris Burden's class, thinking about Ed Bereal, and you sitting in on his classes or watching him work at LACC—

03-00:17:45

Jenkins: Yeah, I was watching his productions.

03-00:17:45

Cooks: Okay. And then *Mass of Images*, you know, the class that you took at SMC, at Santa Monica College, this is all the context, is that right?

03-00:17:59

Jenkins: Right. See, the thing is, now first and foremost, there was *nothing*. This is the thing that people don't understand. I think it might be mentioned in the *California Video* catalog. But as a Black artist, moving into this genre that's considered to be the new avant-garde, how do you study it? Where do you study it? How do you figure out a way in which there's a means by which not only will people want to see your work, but what are you going to say?

03-00:18:47

Cooks: Ulysses, did you start working on a script? Because there's a definite narrative arc in this film, where you start at the bus stop; you get on the RTD; then there's this dream, this kind of restless dream.

03-00:19:04

Jenkins: Yeah, well that—see, all of that stuff—some of it was improvised.



- 03-00:19:11  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:19:11  
Jenkins: Especially the bus scene.
- 03-00:19:14  
Cooks: Really?
- 03-00:19:16  
Jenkins: Yeah, because if you recognize—when I'm doing the bus scene and I'm using—see, I'm trying to establish the premise of the two-zone transfer. If you ride a bus—I don't know, I haven't ridden one in a long time—but back in those days, to get from one side of town to the other, you needed a two-zone transfer, and you had to ask for one, which I do, on the bus. I'm really indicating that I'm going from one part of town to another, okay? In a sense, I'm also indicating I'm going from one reality to another, which is where you end up finding me doing that bedroom scene, which is also my way of indicating surrealism. That it's a surreal dream you're about to enter into.
- 03-00:20:26  
Cooks: Ulysses, I want to be conscious of time. I want to talk about this video, but I know you're doing so much other work, too, that I'm going to kind of walk us through this to the next film. But just to say that—
- 03-00:20:50  
Jenkins: Well, the next one is *Inconsequential Doggereal*, actually.
- 03-00:20:52  
Cooks: Right, and so before we go there, I did want to just finish talking about *Two-Zone* a bit. You have this narrative arc. The surrealism you're talking about is coming through Los Angeles, as a place that you're navigating through the two-zone transfer. You've got this team of people who are your collaborators, who are creating this avant-garde—you know, it's experimental in the sense, as you're saying, that you're treading new territory. You don't have Black mentors to follow in this new kind of—
- 03-00:21:32  
Jenkins: Well, let's put it this way. I think I said it before. My major, in terms of a Black media, let's just say I was influenced, again, by Melvin Van Peebles.
- 03-00:21:47  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:21:49  
Jenkins: *Sweet Sweetback's [Baadasssss Song]*. Because what a lot of people don't get about *Sweet Sweetback*, which I found out after the fact, is that Melvin Van Peebles was also making an experimental film. And that placed his film, besides being an experimental film, but it was also a Black avant-garde film.

03-00:22:22

Cooks: Right.

03-00:22:22

Jenkins: You see? I felt that if I had a little bit of that mixed in the narrative, which when you mention the other guys it was really great, because I didn't know that Kerry could play piano.

03-00:22:41

Cooks: Wow!

03-00:22:44

Jenkins: When we do that church scene in that video, he just sits down and starts playing, and I'm going, "Oh okay, we've got that down." And [that] gives it a little bit of authentic flavoring, if you will. The other part of it that comes through with Greg Pitts—see, when I'm doing this preaching thing, that's Greg in the background who's doing all the call-and-response stuff. Of course, the fact that they're wearing those masks, you know, it was unbelievable. After I made that piece, I was getting invitations to mask festivals, and I didn't understand it, because I said, "Look, I bought these masks! I didn't make them." [laughs]

03-00:23:45

Cooks: Wow. In that video we're in different rooms, but there's that one artwork on the wall that remains the same. I wanted to hear you talk about: what was that artwork in the background, and why did you use it?

03-00:24:08

Jenkins: Well, it was a drawing of me and my brothers and sister with Santa Claus.

03-00:24:13

Cooks: A drawing that you made?

03-00:24:16

Jenkins: Well, the drawing was from a photograph of us when we were kids.

03-00:24:21

Cooks: Okay, and you drew this—

03-00:24:21

Jenkins: Yes, and I reproduced it as this drawing that you see in the scene in the bedroom. In another way, I was trying to also exemplify—because back when they shot that, there was no real adjustment—because it was black-and-white photo, we looked like all these little black spots with this white man. So I thought, Well, I'm going to put that in there, not only for the memory of my brothers and sister, but for the context of what that photographic quality from back in the day, what that was like.

03-00:25:08

Cooks: This is incredible to hear you talk about, because I'm just—I can make the connection so quickly to how you're processing images at that time, and how

you're bringing in the kind of invisibility of you and your siblings from the past, how that is part of the story you're trying to tell. It's wonderful.

03-00:25:34

Jenkins:

Well, thank you. That's what I was also doing. But you know, to set up that bedroom scene, that in itself—I don't know if I mentioned that before, that I didn't know that Kerry had done a mock-up installation sketch of that whole scene that got retrieved and exhibited at the Charles White retrospective and his students show [*Life Model: Charles White and His Students*]. It was surprising to me. I hadn't realized that Kerry had done that.

03-00:26:17

Cooks:

Was it in part collaborative if Kerry had a sketch?

03-00:26:23

Jenkins:

Well, it was collaborative in the sense that I wrote a narrative script, and then I let certain people, within the context of what we were performing and doing, add their emphasis of how they felt: either their character, what they should do, or whatever. Because when it gets to the James Brown scene, I'm really trying to make this comparison, which I felt was—it still goes on—who, as a pop figure or a person of influence in the Black community, who was more important: was it the Black preacher or was it your favorite pop star?

03-00:27:22

And so, in doing that in particular, I did James Brown, because—here's another flashback. When I was fifteen years old, my uncle wanted to take me to go see James Brown. And because of the religiosity of my family, he had to try to disguise the fact that by him taking me and supposedly my cousin to go see James Brown, he wanted to go spend the evening with his girlfriend instead. So he takes me to the—I can't remember the name, this famous—

03-00:28:18

Cooks:

The Palladium?

03-00:28:18

Jenkins:

Yes, the Palladium. Yeah, yeah, how did you know—or is that written in the book?

03-00:28:22

Cooks:

This part is in the book. But yes, the Palladium.

03-00:28:25

Jenkins:

Oh yeah. Yeah, so he takes me to the Palladium and drops me off and tells me, "Okay look, I'm going to go and do this thing. When I get back, you just be out here waiting for me when it's over." I said, "Sure!" Of course, at fifteen years old, I go in there—I mean, there were young adults inside. I had on my coat and tie like everybody else and I assumed I must just look like a real young man, as it were. And there were what I thought were all these grownups, which some of them obviously were, but people at least in their thirties. You know, at fifteen, people in their thirties look like really older than

you. And when James Brown hit the stage, I couldn't believe the women who were drinking—because everybody was drinking at the bar—dropped their glasses straight to the floor, glasses breaking all over the place. People are running to the stage. When he started doing his show, of course—[sings] "[You] got your high heel sneakers on—" oh my God, and hitting that groove, I said, "Man, I can't believe these women are dancing on this broken glass. This is unbelievable." You know, took off their high heels, in stocking feet, doing the Mashed Potatoes! I said, "Lord have mercy!" So—

03-00:29:59

Cooks: All right. Ulysses, I'm going to bring us back to the art.

03-00:30:03

Jenkins: I know, I know, I know. I could take you to a whole 'nother performance here.

03-00:30:07

Cooks: I know you can, and you're going to get up and dance. I wouldn't be surprised. [Jenkins laughs] I'm just going to move us in another—

03-00:30:15

Jenkins: But the reason why I'm even telling you that: when we performed *Two-Zone Transfer* at Otis, the first and probably the only performance of the show, because we did do it after the show was over, again, for the video. This is where I had a duplicit kind of recognition of music in my work, because after I did that performance using the soundtrack of James Brown at the Apollo, when we did it live in that soundtrack, the women are screaming. When I was performing what you saw on the video with me being James Brown, the women were screaming at the performance. I didn't know—you know, I'm doing my performance, but I'm going like, What are these women screaming about? And of course, you know, what can I say? I guess I mimicked James Brown well enough that I must have got them excited, I don't know. [laughs]

03-00:31:26

Cooks: All right. Now, I have a question for you about video.

03-00:31:31

Jenkins: Yeah.

03-00:31:32

Cooks: Because it's at the same time you're exploring performance. And we're talking about this in *Two-Zone Transfer*, and the power of it, even if you are mimicking someone else, right? There's a real power there that's impactful for you. At the same time, you're making other videos that really are documentary videos. So we have *In the Spirit of Charles White*.

03-00:31:55

Jenkins: Yeah, right.

03-00:31:57

Cooks: That was released in '82, but the footage is from earlier.

- 03-00:32:02  
Jenkins: Yeah, the footage was from my first year at Otis. My first—
- 03-00:32:05  
Cooks: Okay, so '77.
- 03-00:32:07  
Jenkins: You know, my first year at Otis, and I'm in this lecture class with Charlie, and he's telling us about his retrospective at Barnsdall [Art Park], and so he says he's going to take the class to his retrospective. I said, "Ah! This sounds like something that I should videotape." See, my whole documentary thing that I was into in those days was trying to capture Black events that the media was not really paying attention to. So when our class goes to Barnsdall, I bring a Portapak and I videotape—as you could see at the beginning—when Charlie is walking up to the entrance into the show. And then he reaches up and grabs the wall like he was under arrest. And lo and behold, one of the white students comes up behind him and starts spreading his legs and trying to act like he's The Man. I thought, Oh, this is too much, man! But anyway—
- 03-00:33:15  
Cooks: Yeah, the footage that you capture, it's incredible. And I'm so glad that you—we're all glad that you were able to record that. That moment really speaks to racism in the artworld, you know, that—anyway, go ahead.
- 03-00:33:33  
Jenkins: No, but that's true. You're right. At the same time, what you also see is—I went back, of course, to the opening of the show. That's also included in that footage, where you do see a young Betye Saar—at least I should say a younger Betye Saar—and at the same time, a lot of his fellow students, who had studied with him at Otis, who were at that show. Actually, Senga and her husband are in that footage, which—I didn't even know Senga at that time. But because I was covering the event, she shows up in the footage.
- 03-00:34:26  
Cooks: So, Ulysses—
- 03-00:34:27  
Jenkins: But then also—I've just got to say this momentarily.
- 03-00:34:29  
Cooks: Please.
- 03-00:34:30  
Jenkins: Also my mother is in that footage, as she was walking in the gallery.
- 03-00:34:40  
Cooks: That's fantastic!
- 03-00:34:44  
Jenkins: Yeah, one of the few videos that I ever have of her.

- 03-00:34:47  
Cooks: How did you get her—you know, she was reluctant to help, because of the financial situation, that kind of disclosure. Did she finally come around to you being an artist?
- 03-00:35:00  
Jenkins: Oh yeah. Well see, the thing is, what I found out later after she had passed on was that she had been herself artistically inclined. And at the same time, which I do later on in my career, when I start talking about my soundtracks work, we were—I think I mentioned that earlier, or if I didn't: me and my brothers and sister, we used to sing with my mother.
- 03-00:35:26  
Cooks: You did, yeah. You mentioned that.
- 03-00:35:28  
Jenkins: That's kind of how I got onto that [idea that] I ought to give it a shot as a singer.
- 03-00:35:34  
Cooks: So she understood and appreciated your artistic—
- 03-00:35:39  
Jenkins: Oh yeah, she really appreciated it. This is something that I know, that I talk to my students about. How many of them have been told by their parents—or even asked, "What are you doing trying to major in art?" And that's how it came to me from my father, "Is there any money in it?"
- 03-00:36:05  
Cooks: Right. So, Ulysses, at this time, I'm going to read some other titles of works that you're making. *In the Spirit of Charles White*. Invaluable footage, just incredible. *King David* is one of my favorites. [Jenkins laughs] You are creating an archive. You were creating an archive of Black art history. Were you aware of that at the time?
- 03-00:36:35  
Jenkins: Not necessarily. I mean, I just knew that since David [Hammons] and I had become friends, and he actually—oh no, I think I might have asked him could I do a video of him before he—because that video was the last day that he was in LA before he moved to New York.
- 03-00:36:57  
Cooks: And you met him because he was also a student at Otis studying?
- 03-00:37:00  
Jenkins: No. Remember, I met him when I was in Venice.
- 03-00:37:04  
Cooks: Okay. And he was also at Otis, because he studied [with Charles White].

03-00:37:11

Jenkins:

Well, yeah. He eventually—which I didn't know of at the time—he did his own studies with Charlie. He didn't attend Otis, but he would go there independently.

03-00:37:26

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:37:30

Jenkins:

So anyway, that's kind of how that happened. But the thing is, when I went there—you know, that whole introduction on that *King David* thing, that's David, pure David performance art, with the hand going over the roach and the roaches crawling up the wall. That's David Hammons, that's pure David Hammons.

03-00:37:57

Cooks:

A couple of questions about this that I have at the same time. One is: how did he feel about you making this film? Was he excited to have a document of where he was as an artist?

03-00:38:12

Jenkins:

Well, it is a time capsule, in terms of his work and where his work came from, on a certain level, and his ideas of the time. I haven't really been able to do much in terms of—because a lot of people have seen that video now off of my website, and David doesn't want me to show it.

03-00:38:39

Cooks:

Okay. It's—

03-00:38:40

Jenkins:

Now see, this is a whole 'nother thing. This is another aspect of—since he's been highly recognized, he does not necessarily want people to know everything they could know about his working process.

03-00:38:59

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:39:00

Jenkins:

Because he gets into a lot of his working process and his thinking in that video.

03-00:39:06

Cooks:

Yes.

03-00:39:09

Jenkins:

So if you're able to give younger artists the opportunity to—actually we had a grad student at our campus who came from New York, who was African American. He was doing nothing but David Hammons. I had to continually tell him, I said, "Man, you've got to break yourself of mimicking David Hammons's work, because you may—people may like it, but for the most part,

you'll never get recognized for whatever ingenious thinking that you have of your own."

03-00:40:00

Cooks: You know, I wanted to hear you say something about the other person involved in the video—one of the other people—LaMonte Westmoreland?

03-00:40:08

Jenkins: Oh yeah, LaMonte. Well, LaMonte, I got him to do that voiceover. LaMonte is a pretty good artist, but I don't know how much recognition that he's ever got.

03-00:40:29

Cooks: Right. Was he at Otis?

03-00:40:33

Jenkins: He might have gone to Otis, I'm not sure. But I know that he lived in Pasadena or Altadena, where Charlie lived, so he was in the neighborhood. See, there was a group of artists—[phone dings] hold on here. There was a group of artists that lived in Altadena that pretty much were a part of this whole group of artists that—[phone dings] Jesus Christ—[there was a group of artists] that lived in Pasadena, and so that became a particular group of Black artists that lived in Pasadena.

03-00:41:37

Cooks: The center of that was Charles White?

03-00:41:39

Jenkins: Yeah, Charles White and Nathaniel Busting, who was also in that video that I did on Charlie.

03-00:41:47

Cooks: Okay.

03-00:41:49

Jenkins: He does these huge sculpture—pottery, big pieces, and stuff like that. But—

03-00:41:58

Cooks: Ulysses, at this time did you think of yourself as a performance artist or a video artist? Or were you not concerned with titles? You were open? What were you thinking?

03-00:42:12

Jenkins: Yeah, I was pretty much not concerned with a specific title, although I thought I was becoming—I was, in a sense, becoming a video artist.

03-00:42:24

Cooks: Okay. Let me ask you about—



03-00:42:26

Jenkins:

But let me tell you this, though. What gave me the notion of what I'm talking about is when I won two NEA [National Endowment for the Arts] awards for *Two-Zone Transfer*. That actually blew my mind. I got the emerging artist NEA award for the video. And then I got an alternative artist, because alternative art spaces was a big thing back then, and I got that award through Brockman Gallery. This was either just before I left Otis or just before—yeah, I think it was just before I left, as I was starting to work at UCSD [University of California, San Diego].

03-00:43:19

Cooks:

Well, Ulysses, tell us your relationship with Brockman [Gallery] then. You were saying this was part of you getting this award. What was your relationship with Brockman?

03-00:43:28

Jenkins:

Well, of course Alonzo Davis went to Otis. As a matter of fact, a lot—the majority of Black artists—and I'm saying the majority, because I don't know about all of them—[the majority of Black artists] that actually went to art school went to Otis to study with Charlie and Betye, because there were no other African American arts professors in any of the art schools in LA at that time. That's why when Gary Lloyd told me, "You need to go to Otis and study with Charles White," that was like enlightenment in its own right.

03-00:44:15

Cooks:

So you were able to connect with a network of other Black artists who were there for the same reason: to work with Charles White, to develop as artists. Alonzo was part of that. He had his gallery with Dale [Brockman Davis].

03-00:44:32

Jenkins:

Right. He had already graduated by that time. He wasn't going to Otis.

03-00:44:37

Cooks:

Did you show work at Brockman?

03-00:44:39

Jenkins:

No.

03-00:44:39

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:44:40

Jenkins:

No, actually—no. I think after I had graduated there was some kind of festival that they put on, and they showed *Two-Zone Transfer*.

03-00:44:53

Cooks:

And you won an award after that screening?

03-00:44:56

Jenkins:

Well, I think I got the award before the screening, but that's kind of how I remember it.

03-00:45:04

Cooks:

Okay. I wanted to ask you, Ulysses, about *Remnants of the Watts Festival*. I mean, this is another film where there's no comparison, there's no one else making this kind of work at the time. And I can't help but just to think about how you have your own practice as a performer, and then you also have this very serious practice documenting the world around you in a documentary fashion.

03-00:45:36

Jenkins:

Well, let me say this. Now, *Remnants of the Watts Festival* got made from that workshop that I was taking in Venice. And once again, I recognized the problem for the Black community was getting positive representation in the media. Of course, my only distribution at that time was public-access television. So after we shot it, I showed it at [the] Santa Monica cable TV station, and that was the beginning of where I was doing that kind of thing.

03-00:46:22

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:46:24

Jenkins:

Because I end up eventually going to New York after I graduate from Otis to show *Two-Zone* at this cable TV program or exhibition, and that's where I meet Maren Hassinger.

03-00:46:46

Cooks:

Okay.

03-00:46:46

Jenkins:

In New York.

03-00:46:48

Cooks:

In New York, and it was because of—

03-00:46:50

Jenkins:

*Two-Zone*.

03-00:46:50

Cooks:

It was because of *Two-Zone*.

03-00:46:53

Jenkins:

Yeah.

03-00:46:54

Cooks:

Was it also *Remnants of Watts Festival*? Was that also shown in New York?

03-00:47:00

Jenkins:

Well yeah, that's what I'm talking about.

03-00:47:02

Cooks:

Okay, got it.

03-00:47:04

Jenkins:

Because see, the thing is, what you see in the *Remnants of the Watts Festival*, which a lot of people tend to overlook, is the art show that's being shown in the video. That was the only place—and it's even mentioned in the video itself that this is the only place where Black artists could show their work!

03-00:47:31

Cooks:

Right, and you got Cecil and Miriam [Ferguson]. It's great to have that footage of them talking about—

03-00:47:36

Jenkins:

Right. Yeah, in particular because, unfortunately, Cecil is no longer with us now. Of course, the amazing thing about Cecil is that he started as a janitor at LA County Museum [of Art] and eventually becomes a curator himself, in particular [specializing in the] representation of African American artists and their relationship with the museum.

03-00:48:08

Cooks:

Yeah.

03-00:48:07

Jenkins:

And I try to tell my students this, the same thing: you never know what and where you will find yourself until you take yourself out there. So because I was out there, I was running into—when I was shooting at Watts Festival, I didn't get any footage from it, but I met Richard Pryor, and he did one of the most craziest things I'd ever thought of that anybody would do. When I walked up on him—first of all, when he saw the camera, he told me to put it down. I said, "Well you know, I'd just like to get a little interview with you and what you think about this." He just goes, "No, don't interview me. I'm not here for *you* to get anything out of *me*." I'm going like, Wow, okay. After I thought he was The Man in coming.

03-00:49:12

This is the thing that I think a lot of people don't understand. When we shot—which is still one of my most favorite parts of that video—when I was on the stage with War, that was one of the most unbelievable experiences. The fact that when we walked up to the stage with our equipment and they said, "Oh, you guys must be from the big media," and they let us on the stage. So while War is singing "Get Down," [sings] "Police and their justice/ are laughing while they bust us/ We gotta get down." And then the crowd is going, oh, berserk. I'm just like, Oh wow, you know? That's an experience I will never forget. Of course, after the show was over, they invite us to the apartment where they were staying and, you know, we shared a little stuff at their apartment. [laughs] And they were telling us all kinds of stories! They were telling us the stories of the last night of Jimi Hendrix in London, where he was supposed to be meeting up with them, and just a whole bunch of stuff. This is like insider music stories.

- 03-00:50:51  
Cooks: Well, Ulysses, let's talk a bit about where your art is really starting to take you, right? Because you're making different kinds of art. You're getting, it seems like, tremendous feedback.
- 03-00:51:05  
Jenkins: Okay, okay, what you just said, I'm doing all these different things.
- 03-00:51:12  
Cooks: Yeah.
- 03-00:51:12  
Jenkins: It was all a part of my major: intermedia.
- 03-00:51:20  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-00:51:21  
Jenkins: And the thing about that major that I found out even more so, the more I did my work—even though you might fluctuate and change mediums, the thing that you really have to be accountable to is the quality of the work. And that was the biggest—hard part for me was going from visual art to music. Because when you go into music, now you're responsible to the quality of work that you're trying to produce by the standards of the musicians. You're being judged by *their* standards, not by your—say, for example, [laughs] my novice abilities. When I started my band, I couldn't even talk to them about music, because the only language about art that I knew was the visual arts. I'd say, "Hey, man, can you get your values a little this and a little that?" They'd go like, "What are you talking about, *values*?"
- 03-00:52:46  
Cooks: So, Ulysses, let's talk about—part of your training and encouragement at Otis was expanding into different media, but also traveling. You're getting more and more encouragement, and good feedback from your work in different media. But as you mentioned, you went to New York. Could you—
- 03-00:53:07  
Jenkins: That's right. I'm glad you brought that up. I was going to bring that up myself.
- 03-00:53:10  
Cooks: Yeah, great, good, because we want to hear about: what did that first trip to New York do for you as a trip?
- 03-00:53:18  
Jenkins: Oh, it just really opened up my mind. Well actually, the first time I go to New York they have one of those crazy blizzards in New York. I mean, the snow in some streets it was at least ten to fifteen feet high. You had to hike over those snowbanks just to get to the subway. In terms of that, when I went to New York, I was informed by Miles Forst to hook up with one of his friends. And so I meet with this guy, and every day while I was there I'd visit him. Because

of all that snow, you know, people take for granted here about the notion of drinking alcohol? I'd have this coffee and cognac drink with this guy every morning, and maybe a little puff on some other stuff, and then you'd just hit the snow, man, you'd just be out there. This class and the class that I eventually also took is a grad class that was created by Wanda Westcoast. That's the woman I couldn't remember the other day. And Wanda Westcoast was a part of that group that did [*Womanhouse*] in LA. And Wanda was incredible! Between her—huh?

03-00:55:02

Cooks: What was the class, Ulysses, what was the class? Was it a performance class that she taught?

03-00:55:06

Jenkins: No, no. It wasn't a performance—it was a lecture class, and she made the lecture class this trip to New York to go see all the galleries.

03-00:55:14

Cooks: So you went with other people from school.

03-00:55:16

Jenkins: Right.

03-00:55:17

Cooks: Did she work with you?

03-00:55:18

Jenkins: Huh?

03-00:55:19

Cooks: Was she also part of that trip?

03-00:55:22

Jenkins: Well yeah, she'd be there, but we were all staying in this place called Westbeth [Artists Housing], which was a very famous studio location where real famous artists lived in that building. And so here we are. See, that was a thing about Otis that I did appreciate. Otis was about putting you, as an art student, into the artworld as you were a student, which is—unfortunately, like we can't do that at UCI, because we're so far from the arts scene. But it was the grad students at Otis that actually started LACE [Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions], okay? Actually, LACE in itself was a part of the original Downtown art scene. That space, which was on Broadway, was originally owned by Asco. And so the students started hanging over there and being involved in it and helped start LACE, but also helped—started MOCA [The Museum of Contemporary Art], which Gary Lloyd was a major component as an artist and as a professor, with the origins of the art world in Downtown LA.

03-00:57:14

Cooks: When you went to New York, what were you expecting to see? Were you expecting to see different artwork at galleries and museums? Were you expecting to find an art scene like the one you're talking about in Los Angeles, where artists are founding institutions? What was your—

03-00:57:34

Jenkins: No, we were going to see the real artworld, period. And for the most part, we did. Now I'm trying to remember the people that we met.

03-00:57:48

Cooks: Well, you met Senga, you said.

03-00:57:51

Jenkins: No, I didn't meet Senga. Not there.

03-00:57:53

Cooks: Oh, you didn't meet her, okay. Did you meet—

03-00:57:56

Jenkins: When you're asking me about this class, I was going to Otis.

03-00:58:03

Cooks: Right.

03-00:58:04

Jenkins: When we went there—I'm trying to remember. There's a writer here in LA who came from New York, and I had first met him in New York at that time. He writes about avant-garde art. I don't know if you can think of him.

03-00:58:29

Cooks: I'm not sure.

03-00:58:32

Jenkins: But anyway, I met him. I met this woman named, I think RoseLee Goldberg, who had written a book on performance art, which she was in the process of writing when we met her. What would happen is Wanda had appointments with all these various people who would tell us about, of course, their work, but also would inform us about how things would go/would operate in New York. So as a student, that was just fascinating and really helpful to actually see—for more than anything else, coming from LA where there wasn't anything like that actually going on—to actually be thrust into the artworld itself just really was overcoming in terms of you now felt like, Oh my God, this thing is real. It's not just something in a book or in magazines. And of course, we saw various works of art.

03-00:59:52

Cooks: And you went to the major museums at that time, and—

03-00:59:54

Jenkins: Yes.

- 03-00:59:56  
Cooks: —got the whole feel of the city.
- 03-00:59:58  
Jenkins: Yeah. I mean, you know, getting the feel of the city is riding the subways, basically. [laughs]
- 03-01:00:07  
Cooks: Did you meet Linda Goode Bryant at that time?
- 03-01:00:09  
Jenkins: Not at that time.
- 03-01:00:10  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:00:11  
Jenkins: No, I actually didn't meet Linda until I came back to New York to record *Cakewalk* for—
- 03-01:00:17  
Cooks: Yes, for Houston [Conwill].
- 03-01:00:18  
Jenkins: For Houston. So—
- 03-01:00:23  
Cooks: And was it a week or two weeks?
- 03-01:00:26  
Jenkins: I think it was about two weeks or a week-and-a-half. I forget. I think it was two weeks.
- 03-01:00:31  
Cooks: Okay, and then you come back to California.
- 03-01:00:35  
Jenkins: Yeah, so we come back to Otis, and we're going back to class. But see, the thing is, like I said, at that time going to Otis was like your first step, really, into the artworld, because you were constantly meeting—while I'm going to Otis, Laurie Anderson comes to Otis. That's where I sort of got the notions that I started doing later in my work, from having seen her do a performance at Otis. And Barbara [T.] Smith, who was a former grad from UCI, I got a chance to meet her. And actually, meeting Barbara gave me the inclination to actually—I give her the credit, as well, for inspiring me to actually do performance. Because once again, I'm going like, here's a woman who is leaving her whole family for the arts, and to do performance art at that. If you know of her early work, the work that she was doing was really out there. I said, "Well, if this woman can do this stuff, what's wrong with me?" You know, which made me question, as a student, "Why can't I aspire to do what I have ideas for? Don't let them be just ideas, but move on them."

- 03-01:02:22  
Cooks: So you come back to Otis. You're taking classes, but you're almost at the end of your time there. You were there '77 to '79.
- 03-01:02:31  
Jenkins: Right. Well, when I come back, I end up doing *Two-Zone*.
- 03-01:02:36  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:02:37  
Jenkins: And then after I do *Two-Zone* for my graduate thesis project, I do *Just [Another Rendering of] the Same Old Problem* performance.
- 03-01:02:54  
Cooks: Okay. I haven't found that one. I don't think I've seen that one.
- 03-01:02:57  
Jenkins: I don't know if there's any—there should be some images of that in here.
- 03-01:03:01  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:03:03  
Jenkins: Let me see if there are.
- 03-01:03:06  
Cooks: I haven't seen the video itself, though.
- 03-01:03:08  
Jenkins: Oh, there is no video.
- 03-01:03:09  
Cooks: Oh, well then, that's why.
- 03-01:03:13  
Jenkins: Yeah. Well I mean, there were images. There are still images for that piece.
- 03-01:03:16  
Cooks: Yes, yes. It's also around this time in '79 that you start teaching at UC San Diego, is that correct?
- 03-01:03:28  
Jenkins: Right. [looks through *Doggerel Life*]
- 03-01:03:31  
Cooks: And how did that feel? I mean, you're leaving Otis, you're inspired by these women artists to kind of fulfill your vision—
- 03-01:03:41  
Jenkins: Okay, if you go to page eighty-three.



- 03-01:03:45  
Cooks: Yes.
- 03-01:03:50  
Jenkins: Those are stills—
- 03-01:03:53  
Cooks: Yes, okay.
- 03-01:03:53  
Jenkins: —of the reenactment of that performance.
- 03-01:03:58  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:04:00  
Jenkins: It's kind of talking about the Black male as a sexual object.
- 03-01:04:08  
Cooks: And stereotypes.
- 03-01:04:08  
Jenkins: And stereotypes in the media.
- 03-01:04:11  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:04:12  
Jenkins: So you know, there I am with pasties and these underpants. The whole notion is that I—that performance is kind of interesting, where I do a transformation performance. Because when the audience comes—the audience is seated, and I walk in with a broom, a push broom, and I'm dressed—as you can see partially in the reenactment here, I have on this shirt that just makes me look like I'm a worker, and I sweep around this table that I end up sitting on. I put the broom—now, in the meantime, I've got a monitor that you see on the table. In the actual performance, it's a closed-circuit setup, where the camera is focused on the table. When I sit down, I'm in the frame. But at the same time, you see me doing this reading; I end up acting like I'm reading some kind of instructional or informational context in the book, and then I start screaming, "No, no, no!" And I get up, and I take—there's a cigar box that has the dildo in it. I take the dildo out of the box. Now, the thing about the dildo is that on the head of—since it's a Caucasian-looking dildo, I put blackface on the head of the dildo. In the performance, I actually take out—I have this coat that's on the chair, and I take this pistol out that shoots blanks. I got this from a Hollywood prop shit store, and it shoots these blanks. Now, the whole time I was in rehearsal practicing it, I never hit the dildo, but in the performance, I hit the dildo. The dildo's face is right in the front of the screen, and I also—as you see, there's a remote control. And so I hit the remote control, and the remote control has the dildo's head in the front of the monitor going tchika, tchika, tchika, doing its thing. [laughs]

03-01:06:56

Now here's the thing. You asked me about my mother. My mom comes to—this is my graduate thesis show. She comes, and she's got herself in the front row. [laughs] And the whole time that I was practicing or preparing this performance, she kept asking me, "Well, what are you going to do?" I said, "Mom, I can't tell you. You've got to come and see this." [laughs] So she was going to make sure that she was going to see it, so she was in the front row when the dildo is bobbing and jabbing and doing its thing.

03-01:07:35

Cooks:

It sounds very awkward.

03-01:07:38

Jenkins:

[laughs] It was, kind of, but it was funny, too. It was very doggerel.

03-01:07:46

Cooks:

That's fantastic.

03-01:07:48

Jenkins:

The irregular variation, sometimes a comedic verse. So anyway—

03-01:07:54

Cooks:

So this was your thesis show?

03-01:07:57

Jenkins:

This is my thesis show at Otis.

03-01:08:01

Cooks:

And when you went to Europe, you went with other students. Was this then before you graduated? Or—

03-01:08:06

Jenkins:

No, that was before. That was before our thesis show.

03-01:08:09

Cooks:

It was before. So let's not skip over going to Europe then. Can you tell us about that trip?

03-01:08:15

Jenkins:

Yes. Thanks to Wanda Westcoast—see, I lived up the street from Wanda Westcoast. This is the other thing that a lot of people didn't know. Wanda lived in Venice, and she lived down the street from where I lived. I used to see her on occasion on the boardwalk in Venice, and we sort of kind of got familiar with each other, because at the time—see, after I painted *Rat Trap*, I became a [makes air quotes] quote, unquote, some kind of entity on the boardwalk, which is a whole 'nother kind of way of recognizing fame, which I wasn't expecting. But I was a known entity on the boardwalk at that time.

03-01:09:04

So I got to know Wanda. And Wanda and Beverly O'Neill were very important to me while I was at Otis and when I was getting ready to get out of

Otis. Beverly is the one who helped me get my job at UCSD. She was very good friends with Eleanor Antin and some of the other professors. The guy who did the happenings—you can't think of his name either. For some reason it escapes me, but—it'll probably come to me. See, the thing was, because of affirmative action hiring now, I end up following Tony Ramos, who leaves UCSD. And they're looking for another video artist, who just so happens to be a person of color, who happened to become me. The guy who I'm talking about, who I was having a problem trying to remember, it just came to me: Allan Kaprow.

03-01:10:36

Cooks: Oh, Allan Kaprow. Okay.

03-01:10:40

Jenkins: Okay? See, my conversations with Allan Kaprow actually helped me, inspired me to do *Dream City* [in 1981].

03-01:10:48

Cooks: And you met him after you were at UCSD?

03-01:10:51

Jenkins: Yes.

03-01:10:54

Cooks: So before we get to UCSD, did you want to say anything about the trip to Europe? You were saying that Wanda—

03-01:11:00

Jenkins: Oh yeah, well, the trip to Europe was just—see, the trip to Europe was not only a fantasy, but an unbelievable trip.

03-01:11:05

Cooks: Okay.

03-01:11:06

Jenkins: Because I was the TA for that trip, and it was me and about maybe another couple of guys, but mostly it was all women again, primarily; some single, some married, whatever. And you know, the thing is when we get to England on our first stop, that whole time-expanded thing that hits you, it was just like you were drunk walking, man. It was unbelievable, and I'd never felt anything like that before. But we were living in this house that Wanda—of a friend of hers—and it was in the Cockney area. And so we'd go out, and you're trying to talk to people. You knew they spoke English, but that Cockney shit, man, I said, "Man, these people, they speak worse English than Black people. How can I understand what the hell they're saying?"

03-01:12:19

Cooks: So there was a culture shock.

- 03-01:12:20  
Jenkins: There was definitely a culture shock.
- 03-01:12:23  
Cooks: So where did you go? You went to England. Did you go to—
- 03-01:12:27  
Jenkins: We went to England, we went to Amsterdam.
- 03-01:12:30  
Cooks: Paris?
- 03-01:12:31  
Jenkins: Yeah, we went to Paris. They went to Germany, and then we got from Germany to Venice, in Italy.
- 03-01:12:43  
Cooks: And so was this all part of Otis's tuition? I mean, this was all included?
- 03-01:12:48  
Jenkins: Oh, you had to pay for it individually, after you had paid your tuition.
- 03-01:12:52  
Cooks: Okay.
- 03-01:12:52  
Jenkins: That's the same way that we went to New York. You'd register for the class, and then you had to raise your own money or get some money from wherever you got it and pay for your reservations and your housing.
- 03-01:13:08  
Cooks: So, Ulysses, this sounds very expensive.
- 03-01:13:13  
Jenkins: It seems like it, but Wanda was able to get us some really good cut rates.
- 03-01:13:21  
Cooks: Okay, so it was affordable. You were able to raise your own money to be able to go?
- 03-01:13:25  
Jenkins: Yeah, yeah. And of course, you knew that—the class was advertised—the class was usually in the spring, so you had the whole year to really raise your money to get—you could register for the class, but you had to have raised your money so that you could pay for your accommodations.
- 03-01:13:47  
Cooks: And so what was this experience like? It seems like the world opens up when you go to Europe for the first time and you see—

03-01:13:54

Jenkins:

Well, there's a whole bunch of stuff that opens up, you know? Because the thing is, this house that we're staying in, we have to leave. Unbelievable, because we're staying in this house with this woman, whose husband is a traveling salesman. So lo and behold, to our maybe misunderstanding of the way the accommodations were going to go, he comes home and we've got to leave, because she wants us out, because she hasn't seen her husband for a few years.

03-01:14:27

Cooks:

Okay.

03-01:14:30

Jenkins:

Just coincidence, I guess. So we have to leave. In leaving—now, you're going to like these stories.

03-01:14:39

Cooks:

All right, but we want to make sure we're talking about the art, too, because—

03-01:14:42

Jenkins:

Oh yeah, you're going to be talking about the art. But see, this is a part of the art.

03-01:14:46

Cooks:

Okay, I'm ready.

03-01:14:49

Jenkins:

We have to leave, so I've got to get all these women to pack their things and get out of this house that we're staying in. Of course, you know London, there's that Cinderella thing: the subway stops at midnight. And so I have to get them all packed and out of the house so that we could get to the subway before midnight, which, you know, they were being really reluctant to move. I'm getting them to get their things packed so we can get ready to go. At the same time, Wanda had on this trip—oh yeah, she brings her daughter with her. And so she and her daughter take this taxicab to the location that we're going, which is sort of—I forgot the name of the section of London where we were going. When we get there, I get there with all these women before Wanda shows up. Because she's the professor, she's made the reservations.

03-01:15:57

When the woman comes to the door—and this is where my performance act starts to really work out—she, the manager of this bed and breakfast that we're staying at, comes to door and sees me with all these white women. And then she's suspicious of who I am and says, "Well, who are you?" I knew that Wanda had told me that she had made the reservations under her name, so I said, "Well, I'm Mr. Westcoast." I tell her that I'm her husband, and I just happened to get here ahead of her, so the lady wouldn't close the door in my face, which she wanted to do.

03-01:16:45

Then, when Wanda shows up, she's trying to leave the taxi driver—the taxi driver is trying to take her to *his* house, which I could not understand. I had to come over and do more of this husband thing and tell this guy—who happened to be from the Middle East—I said, "Look, dude, if you don't let my wife alone, I'm going to have to do something to you." He finally releases her, and so I get Wanda to the door. When we're going to the door, I say, "Wanda, look, I told this woman I'm your husband." She goes, "Okay." So she plays into it and tells the woman that I'm her husband, and we're here to take up the reservation, so we all get in. I have to sleep in the same room with Wanda and her daughter, on the floor. From that point onward, we're in this bed and breakfast. When we're sitting down having breakfast, and all the other women are all crowding around me, because I'm the TA, this woman who runs this bed and breakfast is flabbergasted. She's just like, What is going on with this man and all these women?

03-01:18:07

Anyway, to make a long story short, we had—here's the thing that was the most unusual. We had to go to this café to give the keys back to the house that we had been staying—Wanda had to—and have a meeting with that woman. Meanwhile, I'm sitting at a table and there's these Black women sitting at this table. I thought, Well, Jesus, I could talk to them and find out what's going on in London. While I'm talking to her—or talking to this one woman anyway, this sister—this dude comes over and starts bringing me bitters, or what they like to call bitters or beer. And then after it was time for us to get ready to go, he brings me the check. I'm going like, I said, "Hey, dude, I thought you were making this order." I didn't know that this sister was a prostitute, so he thinks that—yeah, right, he thinks that I'm trying to get over. I said, "Look, man, I'm a guest in your country, and I don't know what you're up to, but *you* pay for this beer." He goes back to the bar, reaches in his cloth bag and comes out with a hammer and proceeds to come at me. At that point I'm going, Oh shit, this is turning in to a John Wayne movie. Let me get up here and defend myself. When I start scuffling with this man, everybody in the bar comes and jumps on him! They kick him out and this whole thing. So then this Greek guy, who gets fond of me, because my name is Ulysses—

03-01:20:11

Cooks: Ulysses, this story—

03-01:20:13

Jenkins: Yeah, but let me finish.

03-01:20:15

Cooks: We've got to get back to your art career.

03-01:20:17

Jenkins: This is a part of my art career, believe me.

03-01:20:19

Cooks: Okay.

03-01:20:21

Jenkins: This guy, this Greek guy says, "Oh man, we're not like that. Let me take you to a really cool place." He directs us to go around to this club, which turns out to have been the original club that the Sex Pistols played at. When we go into this club, there's a reggae band. Now, reggae hasn't hit America yet, and they're singing sociopolitical songs that everybody in the club is going, Yeah, that's it. They're singing the anthems that we want to hear. I looked at that and I said, "Wow, this sociopolitical thing is really real here," as it related to class. That was a thing that I've—again, another connection that matches up with what I had discovered in Hawaii, only this time it's in Britain.

03-01:21:26

In Britain, of course, it's more about class than anything else. You know, when it comes to the music, when it comes to the arts. Because when we go to the museums in Britain, and I go to—when we go to the British Museum, I started asking one of the people who help run the museum at the British Museum, I started asking him about what the British did in Hawaii. The guy gets really upset and wants to kick me out of the museum just for asking a question about: what did they do to the Hawaiian people? If you can see what I'm getting at, there were confirmations, see, about the foundations of colonialism. That's what I was finding out. As this trip were to go on, I was recognizing that just because I was an American, because I wasn't famous, you didn't mean anything to those people. You know, everybody tells you, "You go overseas, you go to Europe, and because you're a Black person from America, that everybody might be in love with you because you're visiting them." No, because if you ain't got no money, you're just a nobody. Because I ran into that in a couple of other places, although—

03-01:23:13

Cooks: In Europe?

03-01:23:13

Jenkins: Huh?

03-01:23:15

Cooks: While you were in Europe?

03-01:23:17

Jenkins: Yeah.

03-01:23:18

Cooks: So you're talking about part of the value of your trip to Europe was not necessarily the art in the museums, but the experience of engaging with people in different places?

03-01:23:30

Jenkins: Yeah.

03-01:23:30

Cooks: Okay.

03-01:23:31

Jenkins: Yeah, because I'm a young African American male. I'm in my thirties now, okay, and I don't think I'm a kid. Matter of fact, I'm older than most all the other students, because all the time that I spent outside of grad school and having my mural career and everything, so that by the time I go to Otis, I'm thirty years old.

03-01:23:56

Cooks: Right.

03-01:23:58

Jenkins: And I'm actually bringing this up, because that gave me an emphasis to consider, What is going to be the best way to me to get recognized? I've kind of already gotten recognized as a mural artist, but after going on that New York trip, I really come to recognize that: how am I going to get recognized into the quote, unquote artworld? So—

03-01:24:31

Cooks: Well—

03-01:24:31

Jenkins: Go ahead. What was your question?

03-01:24:32

Cooks: I was going to say, I'm trying to get us back to UC San Diego, because this becomes your first professional job. It's not in the artworld, but it's as an art professor.

03-01:24:47

Jenkins: But the thing about it is, I won those NEA awards while I was at UCSD, and the faculty that I was with, like I mentioned—the Antins, Eleanor and David—David plays a major influence on me from my conversations with him, which helped me make *Inconsequential Doggereal*. But at the same time, my conversations with Allan Kaprow helped me realize *Dream City*.

03-01:25:29

Cooks: Did that seem like a good move for you, from going from your travels, leaving Otis, going to UC San Diego, becoming an art professor, and then winning these awards, did you feel like you were really on your way?

03-01:25:47

Jenkins: Of course. I was onto something. See, the thing is, getting that—as you both might be able to attest—getting a job out of grad school is phenomenal, number one. And getting a job as a professor, even though it's part-time, it was unbelievable, and as an African American, you see? I didn't necessarily know that I was following Tony Ramos, okay? And Tony Ramos was—is



very heavily affiliated with Allan Kaprow. That sort of is a part of—and I will call it that—the legacy that I followed.

03-01:26:52

Cooks: Ulysses, I was going to suggest that we really talk about some of the work that you're making at this time. Because you've already mentioned how David Antin, Allan Kaprow, have been influential on the work that you're making.

03-01:27:05

Jenkins: And of course, Eleanor. I mean, you know—

03-01:27:07

Cooks: And Eleanor Antin, yes.

03-01:27:09

Jenkins: I'm in the company of some of the greats. And that in itself influenced me. That's what made working there kind of cool. But at the same time, you see, that conservative reality that came with Ronald Reagan was busting out.

03-01:27:32

Cooks: Okay, and you make a lot of work at this time in the early eighties.

03-01:27:35

Jenkins: Well yeah! Well, you have to make work, as you well know, to be at a UC. If you ain't making work, you ain't going to be there.

03-01:27:47

Cooks: Before we wrap up this session, there's two things I'd like us to talk about. One is the videos that you were making at this time. So let's talk about some of these. *Dream City* is one you've already mentioned.

03-01:28:07

Jenkins: Right.

03-01:28:07

Cooks: You're talking now about Ronald Reagan, and this was a performance at the opening of Rachel Rosenthal's Espace, Doing by Doing, the DbD space?

03-01:28:17

Jenkins: Right.

03-01:28:17

Cooks: Can you just tell us about that scene? You're making art, you have these peers—

03-01:28:24

Jenkins: Well, before there's a piece that I did, that I don't know if you have it. Yeah, I think it's in this book, too. There's a piece that I did before, just prior to *Dream City*.

03-01:28:41

Cooks: Is it *Columbus Day: [A Doggerel]*?

- 03-01:28:43  
Jenkins: *Adams Be Doggerel* [in 1980].
- 03-01:28:44  
Cooks: *Adams Be Doggerel*, okay.
- 03-01:28:47  
Jenkins: Well, *Columbus Day*, as well, I believe. But—
- 03-01:28:50  
Cooks: We want to hear you talk about this work.
- 03-01:28:54  
Jenkins: Which one?
- 03-01:28:56  
Cooks: Well, we want to hear what you have to say about all of them, because they're made around the same time, and just for us to get a sense of: what were your priorities, what were the visions you had as an artist that you wanted to fulfill?
- 03-01:29:12  
Jenkins: Well, in the book on [page] ninety-three, there's an image of *Adams Be Doggerel*. I did that piece prior to doing *Dream City*. As you can see on ninety-five, *Dream City* is—you see, the thing is, I don't know if the way these are located in the book right now, timing-wise, because I do the piece at LACE, I do the piece at LACE after I do *Adams Be Doggerel*.
- 03-01:30:04  
Cooks: And the piece at LACE is the *Columbus Day* piece?
- 03-01:30:05  
Jenkins: Yes. Of course, the *Columbus Day* piece is just at the beginning of the gallery called LACE. I do that piece, and it's talking about the kind of—what I was starting to investigate, my premise of doggerelism. I was just trying to talk about the relationship of *Columbus Day* itself, as I wanted to define it as a doggerel experience for Native American people.
- 03-01:30:56  
Cooks: Can you now, Ulysses, just tell everyone about the meaning of this word for you, in your practice, why doggerel appealed to you and how it's become part of your life as an artist in your work?
- 03-01:31:10  
Jenkins: Well, for the most part, I needed to get out of the traditional theatrical concept. And I was interested—which is what *Columbus Day* becomes—I wanted to start doing some kind of ritual kind of work, being influenced, in particular, by Betye Saar and the notions that Betye would talk about in her classes that related to African ritual. I put that together with, on a certain level, what you can maybe get a sense of in the photographs of my grandparents, who were African American and Native American, in terms of who they are. And I started doing various works that really were trying to investigate that

history, which I end up getting into later on in a video that I do called *Mutual Native Duplex*. I do that piece when I'm living in the Bay Area.

03-01:32:40

But anyway, backtracking—oh, *Columbus Day*. I wanted to try to make a commentary about how Native Americans were being mistreated, not only in society, but in the media—in particular, in films—and all that way in which they were being mistreated or misrepresented—that's the word I'm looking for—it's a continuation of, if nothing else, the practice of genocide. The metaphors in that piece that have to do with the lawn mower—I started using a lawn mower in my piece to talk about—the lawn mower is—which you see, in particular, in *Inconsequential Doggerel*—the lawn mower is my symbolism for the western movement, that people are being mowed over by this Western culture. So in *Columbus Day*, the lawn mower—I bring the lawn mower into the piece as a part of the installation piece that has all these artifacts of Western society in the grass catcher.

03-01:34:09

In that performance, there's—I used radio sounds and different recordings of different—and I think there's a documentary soundtrack that's played in that performance from a radio program that I had recorded that described, from an old western, the usage of how Native American people—I think I might have got it off KPFFK, as a matter of fact—that describes this horror, if you will, of the genocide of Native American people. And the whole idea that this is some kind of great thing that the natives did for the occupiers, who were coming in to share food with these colonial people. In that piece, as you see, the gentlemen who are in the piece: of course there's Billie Harris, who I've talked to you about before. Billie was incredible in that piece. I'm sorry I don't have a recording of that performance. And then there's this other guy—let me see here. I think I've got his name in here, who was Brazilian, and in terms of—yeah—

03-01:36:00

Cooks: You have Benny [Duarte].

03-01:36:01

Jenkins: Yeah, Benny.

03-01:36:01

Cooks: Benny Duarte.

03-01:36:02

Jenkins: Benny Duarte. He was doing capoeira, dancing and playing this Brazilian instrument. And then there's, oh, Jesse [Chuy] Castro, who was a Mexican native person.

03-01:36:28

Cooks: And, Ulysses, how are you connecting with all of these musicians? I mean, they're not at Otis. They're—

- 03-01:36:36  
Jenkins: I did *Columbus Day* after I got out of Otis.
- 03-01:36:40  
Cooks: Right. How does your art community expand?
- 03-01:36:44  
Jenkins: Well, these are people that I know, that I'm meeting. I mean you know, that's kind of—if you hang out, that's what I keep telling my students. Get out!
- 03-01:36:53  
Cooks: So you're meeting them at galleries, meeting them at bars?
- 03-01:36:55  
Jenkins: Right. I'm meeting them on different occasions in society here, if I can use it that way.
- 03-01:37:05  
Cooks: All right. That's vague, but—
- 03-01:37:08  
Jenkins: Well no, it's not vague. I mean, what if I tell you—who are you meeting when you go out?
- 03-01:37:12  
Cooks: Well, my question is really were you meeting them at art galleries or in different kinds of places?
- 03-01:37:19  
Jenkins: No, no. Because I'm just going out into society. Look, Onaje [Murray], who is mostly a really incredible musician, I have him—he's in the performance, and he's using the xylophone, which creates these really incredible sound effects. And then of course, I'm showing these slides during the performance—
- 03-01:37:53  
Cooks: Right.
- 03-01:37:55  
Jenkins: —that actually have pictures of Chuy and different places, of hotels and stuff like that, that I was actually, you know—I don't want to say influenced, but was aware of from their financial wherewithal down in La Jolla, okay?
- 03-01:38:20  
Because I had an experience, actually when I was teaching down in La Jolla at UCSD, where I went out to have lunch with some other faculty members. One of the persons wanted to address me as the—here it is again—as a janitor. I said, "No," I said, "I'm a professor also, okay?" I mean, that experience—I haven't even gotten into the experience about working in La Jolla, because at a certain point, when I first started working there, I was getting offered opportunities to stay in guest housing by some of the other faculty members. I just said, "No, I don't think that's going to work," because of what my own

work represented. Because the guy was telling me—if you're staying with somebody who's telling you when dinnertime is and when you should—I said, "I'm not here to have dinner with you, or worrying about whether or not I'm going to make dinnertime." I got out of that. But anyway, that whole notion of what La Jolla represents is a whole 'nother story I'm not going to go into.

03-01:39:51

Cooks:

But you still had a vibrant art community that you were connected with in LA? I mean, you're driving—

03-01:39:58

Jenkins:

Oh yeah. I never got away from that, because that, for the most—see, the thing is, when you asked me about whether or not I felt I was part of the artworld when I'm working at UCSD, all the faculty on the faculty, which I can't remember all their names now, had big careers. And the big careers that they had were not in San Diego, it was in New York. All those people were written up in all the foremost art magazines, and they were in the art museums, of sorts. So you know, as a young faculty person you're trying your best to meet up with these other people that you're supposed to be in association with. That's kind of how that all, you know, in a way, it gave me an emphasis to try to get that kind of reputation so that I could feel like I was fitting in.

03-01:41:14

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, at this time did you connect with Studio Z? David Hammons, who you knew, brought you into the group or introduced you to some of the people in the group. That gives you a New York connection. Is this correct? It gives you more of a platform. How did that happen?

03-01:41:38

Jenkins:

Not necessarily.

03-01:41:39

Cooks:

Okay, how did Studio Z come into your life? Because it seems like it's around this time in the early eighties, is that right?

03-01:41:48

Jenkins:

Well, that happens after I meet Maren [Hassinger].

03-01:41:49

Cooks:

Okay, tell us about that.

03-01:41:51

Jenkins:

And after I meet Maren, when I was showing *Two-Zone Transfer* in New York, when I meet her again in LA, she introduces me to Senga [Nengudi]. When I meet Senga, that, unbeknownst to me, was going to be a really important aspect of our collaboration. The thing is, the whole emphasis or notion of Studio Z, on a certain level, is it changes, I'll just put it that way.

03-01:42:37

Cooks: Well yeah, explain it to us, because we want to get it right. We want to get the facts right.

03-01:42:42

Jenkins: Well, to get the facts right, you've got to talk to Senga. But for the most part—

03-01:42:45

Cooks: Yeah, we are! Yeah, we are.

03-01:42:47

Jenkins: But for the most part, when David leaves LA, that's the end of Studio Z. *He* is Studio Z, which is a concept that he—now, he actually told me this, that the only reason why there was a Studio Z is because he actually had his studio. And to a certain degree, a lot of the people that were working with him comprised what would be known as Studio Z. I mean, there were gatherings and meetings at his studio, but at the same time, when he was no longer present, Studio Z is really—just becomes a mythology.

03-01:43:39

Cooks: Okay, but you develop relationships with people who were part of that, and have important performances after David leaves?

03-01:43:48

Jenkins: When we did *Adams Be Doggerel*, a lot of the people who were affiliated or knew of or are aware of Senga and Maren came to that performance. Even Greg Pitts came to that performance. So you know, you're getting a lot of the people who are part of the African American art scene were showing up. But in that sense, that's when I recognized, on a certain level, in terms of the importance of what Studio Z represented. I wanted to create my own studio, which I ended up doing after I had won that NEA award. I moved off of Adams Blvd. to Vermont and Adams, and created the Othervisions Studio. When I had created the Othervisions Studio, I had this really amazing—that was an amazing time at the time that I had that studio. Once again, my affiliation with Senga and Maren and some of the other people that we worked with during that time was—if I will, the transformation of people who worked with Studio Z started working with Othervisions.

03-01:45:41

Cooks: Okay, Ulysses, we're going to take a break soon. But the last thing I want to ask you about before we have a break is: could you tell us about meeting Senga and Maren, and what did that mean to you as an artist, to connect with them?

03-01:45:55

Jenkins: Well, as you may or may not—obviously don't know—but when I meet Maren she tells me, "We should meet again in LA." I thought, Okay. When I go to meet Maren, Senga's there. And of course, we end up, as you see on page ninety-three, that's what it looked like during that piece of *Adams Be Doggerel*. There's all the names of the people who were involved in that.

Calvin Keyes, the guitar player, is a good friend of mine that's connected to Mildred Howard and Sally Shapiro. Because I meet Mildred Howard through Sally Shapiro. They were very good friends, which gets caught up, once again, when I move to the Bay Area. And Roger Trammell is, if you see that picture, he's sitting right next to that desk there. He was playing the boom box that's sitting there next to his head, which was one of the sound pieces in that performance.

03-01:47:46

In that performance, we were doing our performance, which was—you can't see it very well in this picture. But behind Maren is this long trough that was full of earth. In that particular piece, there was a glass pyramid. And my whole premise in that was to get the audience up out of their chairs and get them to find the glass pyramid, which was really a metaphor for finding yourself. If you find that glass pyramid, then you've found yourself. In the meantime, we did an audience transfer where we—I invited the audience up to replace the musicians and have them take up the instruments. And *we* sat in the audience and allowed them to be the performers. It was a really interesting kind of concept on that level.

03-01:48:50

Cooks:

Yeah, this is really interesting. Ulysses, do you remember what you were reading or listening to? I mean, this idea of this glass pyramid, it sounds ancestral.

03-01:49:03

Jenkins:

Well of course, that's—

03-01:49:05

Cooks:

Was it coming from Betye Saar's class that you had taken before?

03-01:49:10

Jenkins:

Absolutely. It's something that I was getting from Betye. See, there's a lot of stuff that I've gotten from Betye that, once again, people don't associate with me and Betye. At the same time, you have to realize, I'm getting these two mega Black artists' input into the kind of work that I'm making, and it's coming out in all these different works. So that by the time I do this, I'm starting to do rituals, which is what I wanted to do. Because the thing that I also recognized, when students started telling me that I couldn't be anything unless I copied Eurocentric work, I had to find a model for me to fashion my work that had something to do with ancestry and African American content. And so that's where the notion of rituals was a form that I actually had already started, on a certain level, when I was doing *Mass of Images*. *Mass of Images* is a ritual.

03-01:50:28

Cooks:

You know, when you met up with Maren and Senga, did you feel like you had found some like-minded folk?

03-01:50:34

Jenkins:

Oh, definitely, definitely! See, the thing about—which is interesting, after these past few years there's been—there was a retrospective here in LA or a show of Senga's work, and that was the first time I actually had come to recognize or realize that Senga and Maren were dancers, that they had had these instructional classes about dance and stuff like that. I just thought that they were performance artists doing what they do. I didn't know until we did *Flying* [in 1982 for *Afro-American Abstractions* at Barnsdall Art Park], where I actually see their movements and their choreography and stuff of that nature, did I come to recognize that they had this dance formulation in the way that they produced performance.

03-01:51:40

See, the thing is, a lot of the stuff that we were doing also didn't specifically point at a particular choreographer, until I do *Without Your Interpretation* [in 1983 at Art Dock]. At that time, we had started having these performance classes at Othervisions Studio with [the dancer] Rudy Perez. Like, I tell my students, "Get out there, and you will find—it's either you will find your direction, or your direction's going to find you." Because that's what happened to me, in a lot of the instances of what I was doing. Let's see, what work do you want to concentrate on here?

03-01:52:33

Cooks:

I think this is a good place to take a break, Ulysses.

03-01:52:37

Jenkins:

Okay.

03-01:52:38

Cooks:

And then let's come back—I guess we can stop recording and then—

03-01:52:43

Tewes:

Let's go ahead and stop here.



## Interview 4: November 15, 2020

04-00:00:00

Tewes:

Okay, this is a fourth interview with Ulysses Jenkins for the Getty Research Institute's African American Art History Initiative, in association with the Oral History Center at UC Berkeley. This remote interview is being conducted by Bridget Cooks and Amanda Tewes on November 15, 2020. Mr. Jenkins joins from Inglewood, California; Dr. Cooks joins from Irvine, California; and I am in Walnut Creek, California. So thanks, everybody. Bridget, go ahead!

04-00:00:34

Cooks:

Excellent. So we are starting in the early 1980s. And, Ulysses, this is a moment where you were making a lot of work. I wanted to start by hearing you talk a bit about *Dream City*, because that was an important video that you made. So could you tell us a bit about that?

04-00:00:59

Jenkins:

Yeah. Well, *Dream City*, of course—I was invited to do the opening performance at Rachel Rosenthal's studio entitled Espace DbD. I was really humbled, to be honest with you, that she would ask me to do that opening for her. I did this multi-, let's say, cultural performance that had various members of—friends that I had been working with previously in other works, but at the same time, an addition of some other people.

04-00:01:50

And that performance went from six in the morning until midnight—or to three o'clock in the morning the next day. A fifteen-minute performance every hour, and I videotaped those performances. And then we played those performances back at the entrance of her studio, so that when people came in who came in at—see, the thing is, you could get a ticket and you could leave, since it was all day, and come back. I'd sort of planned it that way, in that the video recording of every performance was also in a playback situation on a monitor. So if you didn't see the early performances, you could get caught up on what you had missed, and so that kind of extended the narrative through a mediated form.

04-00:02:56

And so then, I also performed nude in that performance, which a lot of people misunderstand the nudity. For the most part, when I performed nude—which I did in a few other performances or video works—I'm using the figurative relationship imagery-wise of my nudity as a metaphor for the truth. So that when you see me nude, I'm really portraying, if I have to say a character, the character of truth is nude.

04-00:03:50

Cooks:

And did this feel like a happening? I mean, it's an unusual—

04-00:03:54

Jenkins:

Oh, it specifically was like a happening.

04-00:03:56

Cooks: Okay.

04-00:03:57

Jenkins: Once again, after I did *Adams Be Doggerel*, I understood a relationship to having audience participation. We got the audience, as you would see in the videos, people would join in, in particular at the midnight performance. But during the performance, in one point, Barbara McCullough, who also would perform with us, she comes into the performance with a birthday cake with Don Cherry, the famous jazz musician, who I think she might have been going with at the time. And when she brings that birthday cake up to me, you start hearing everybody singing "Happy Birthday" to me in my birthday suit. So you know, that takes off, and the whole audience is singing it. I think that was a melody that Roger Trammell started, as I remember.

04-00:05:07

The thing is, the way the performance was set up, I'd have the Western culture and Eastern culture, and we'd go from the various cultural dynamics by the performance of the performers. So that I end up having somebody doing tai chi, then there's this performance by Nobuko Miyamoto, who runs a group called Great Leap here in LA of Asian artists. And Nobuko was actually a character and actress and dancer in *West Side Story*.

04-00:06:07

Cooks: Ulysses, why did you have this East and West theme? Can you tell us about why you do that?

04-00:06:14

Jenkins: See, at the time, what was going on in our society, there was this whole sort of little edginess to the import of Japanese culture in the eighties, when Reagan was taking over, and so I wanted to import that notion into my work. Because you know, a lot of people going back to abstract expressionism were trying to get into meditation. And a lot of artists were practicing Buddhism of some form or another. So I was able to bring that into my performance and say that, as far as African Americans, if we didn't necessarily practice, we were aware of that cultural dynamic in terms of how meditation was an important part of your being.

04-00:07:23

Because see, on the other side, on the Western side, I had this group, this sort of pop group, if you want to call it that, called the Western Heroes, which in that group there was a guy who was their guitarist, Eloy Torrez, who—he painted that mural Downtown with Anthony Quinn, if you're familiar with—again, the murals. He's a muralist, and Eloy went to Otis, and in that sense, he was also a student of Charles White. So there's all these various connections, as you've heard about already, that come up in my work. But there's another guy who plays saxophone in my piece, who's really important: Harold—I can't remember his last name right now. Let me find it here [looks at *Doggerel Life*], in terms of *Dream City*.

04-00:08:47

Cooks:

But, Ulysses, while you're looking that up, was it—

04-00:08:49

Jenkins:

Harold Hunter, Harold Hunter. And see, the thing is, I had done a video with a group, actually, that had Harold Hunter and Eugene Mingus, who was Charles Mingus's son: Andre Burbridge. That was actually one of the early musical performances that I did. I had made the soundtrack for that performance. You know, there was a whole lot of different aspects to *Dream City*, because you see Senga and Maren, of course, also being featured in the video. That whole thing, for the long extension period of it, was a ritual that continued on and on.

04-00:09:57

Oh, and so in the beginning of that, in the video, I use this dead cat. The dead cat was a commentary that I was trying to make on how we disregard nature. And the fact that I found that cat the week before we did the performance— and back in those days when I'd do my ritualized performances, I'd be trying to figure out: what kind of metaphor did I want to bring in the work? I found this cat on the street and it had been hit, and I thought, Wow. So I packaged it up, took it to my mom's house and put it in the trunk, and didn't take it back out until the day of the performance. So, as you see in that video of that performance, I take this cat out, and it's got maggots just streaming all out of the [orifices] of the body. The thing that was so unusual: there were these three nurses that came to the performance at six o'clock in the morning— which was very unusual, I thought—and the first thing they said to me is, "Don't let the maggots touch [you]. Don't let them get on your body," because I was nude. And of course, I didn't. After I'd pulled the cat out, later on, when we had that break in between the performances, I went and buried it down near Ballona Creek. But the cat was a commentary about how we're treating nature, that we seemingly don't care about nature or the things that go on in nature, which was pretty much a part of this piece called *Dream City*.

04-00:12:14

Cooks:

Okay. Ulysses, I want to move on to the next major work that you made around this time, and to continue to talk about the different themes in your work. Because nature is one, as you're mentioning, but there's also this recurring theme of relationships, particularly between men and women, and that really comes out in *Inconsequential Doggerel*. So could you talk a little bit about that?

04-00:12:47

Jenkins:

Well of course, like most young people, I was having my relationships as a part of my life. I think I had broken up with Sally Shapiro or something around that time, and was trying to just make commentary about: how do you maintain a relationship?

04-00:13:16

And of course, the continuation of the lawn mower, which I thought was my perfect doggerel moment. Because when you see a video or an image of this

Black guy laying on the ground calling on the lawn mower—you know. I made that piece at UCSD, so I was able to talk to the guy who was mowing the lawn. I said, "Dude, could you just allow me to include you in a video that I'm making? All you've got to do is just come at me like you're about to run me over." You know, a very inconsequential situation. And of course, when people see that, they go, "Oh my God!"

04-00:14:15

And the thing about the video at that time, what you may not see in my other videos—technically, I didn't use dissolves. I hadn't gotten that technology available to me yet, that you could dissolve the imagery between one another. So they're like cuts, [makes cutting motions] cuts, cuts. *Inconsequential Doggerel* was originally made as an editing exercise for my video classes.

04-00:14:50

Cooks:

There's lots of cuts in the video, so it's helpful to hear you talk about it being inspired, in part, by your relationship dissolving with Sally. You have arguments happening between men, you have cuts of digital—

04-00:15:11

Jenkins:

And I have that little dance, that little dance on the field, which in a sense is a—it's a dance, but it really—it's an exercise. I played football in high school, and that's the movement that you have to do to play defensive halfback.

04-00:15:34

Cooks:

Okay.

04-00:15:34

Jenkins:

But I turned that into a dance. I basically used the metaphor of sports that—you talk about this thing about relationships, I was trying to say that a relationship is a contact sport.

04-00:15:50

Cooks:

Ulysses, you also have all these other images in there, as well. The—

04-00:15:56

Jenkins:

Well yeah, there's lots of different types of images.

04-00:15:58

Cooks:

You cite—*Mass of Images*, your own work, appears in this film. Fires, explosions, Ronald Reagan, right? He's another theme that appears throughout many of your works at this time.

04-00:16:13

Jenkins:

Well, Reagan was—most people tend to not think of Reagan as something controversial, but he was very controversial, and in particular with the Black community. And of course, because of the rising of the Christian, born-again Christian movement. Because I had never seen young conservatives until I started working at UCSD. That was actually shocking to me at the time.

04-00:16:54

Cooks: So it's great to get a combination of these documents, right? With Ronald Reagan speaking, and clips from the news and explosions, and then also this personal expression from your own life, that you're fusing them together in this work.

04-00:17:11

Jenkins: Yeah.

04-00:17:12

Cooks: Yeah.

04-00:17:18

Jenkins: Well you know, *Inconsequential Doggereal*, actually, like I said, its original intention was just as an editing exercise for my class, my video class at UCSD. And then, of course, there was this opportunity to get it displayed in an exhibition. And then, there it goes. It just sort of took off.

04-00:17:42

Cooks: And you won an NEA award for it.

04-00:17:43

Jenkins: Yeah, I think so.

04-00:17:44

Cooks: Yeah.

04-00:17:46

Jenkins: The thing about *Inconsequential Doggereal*, at the time that I made it, I was trying to exemplify another concept that I came across that's called paramnesia. And it's the ability to remember imagery that you have seen from one moment to the next, as if—and I'll use the example of if you're driving down the freeway, and you see an image. And you drive a few miles, and then you think about the image that you had seen; you refresh your mind. That's the process that I was trying to create in the editing process. See, the thing is, these early videos that you're referencing, they're still not necessarily—the music video, MTV has not yet happened, and the stuff that I was doing actually augments when MTV starts to happen. What a lot of people didn't know [is] that a lot of the imagery that was in the early videos were coming from the surrealist films of the early twentieth century, in which—I was very influenced by *Un Chien Andalou* by [Luis] Buñuel and [Salvador] Dalí. So—

04-00:19:27

Cooks: Yeah, and that style is coming through the tensions and the repetition of images like you're talking about, trying to recall images. We can see that in the technique that you're using at this time.

04-00:19:48

Jenkins: Right, because the thing is, what I was trying to also do is sort of like an addition equation—or, I should say, mathematics—from the standpoint that

you have one and one makes two, but then you can do one and three subtracts to one. And then at the same time, when you get to certain kinds of imagery on the sociopolitical scale, you have division. All of that stuff is happening with the imagery that you are looking at, although you don't realize that that's what's going on, because all you're doing is trying to identify—which is a part of the dramatic aspect, or the dramatic aspect of viewing media.

04-00:20:47

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, I want to move to a video that you mentioned in our last session, from 1982. The video that you made called *Flying*.

04-00:21:00

Jenkins:

Well, *Flying* I didn't make a video. It's a performance, though.

04-00:21:02

Cooks:

Okay, it's a recording of a performance. Is that right?

04-00:21:06

Jenkins:

There's no recording of that performance.

04-00:21:08

Cooks:

Oh, okay.

04-00:21:11

Jenkins:

There's just still imagery that was taken of the piece.

04-00:21:15

Cooks:

Okay, and—

04-00:21:18

Jenkins:

And it was associated with an exhibition that was traveling from New York called [*Afro-American Abstraction*].

04-00:21:26

Cooks:

Okay.

04-00:21:27

Jenkins:

It actually was one of the first articles, at least in our time, where African American art was featured in *Time* magazine, and Senga was in that show.

04-00:21:41

Cooks:

And you were in the show.

04-00:21:43

Jenkins:

Well, I was in the performance.

04-00:21:45

Cooks:

Right, okay.

04-00:21:47

Jenkins:

When I realized that Senga was in the show, I went to Josine [Ianco]-Starrels at [Los Angeles] Municipal Art Gallery and asked her, could we do a

performance for the opening of that show? So when you see those images, we did that on the night of the opening of the performance.

04-00:22:09

Cooks: Okay, and there is no video documentation.

04-00:22:11

Jenkins: No.

04-00:22:13

Cooks: But the costumes—I wonder if you could just talk about your memories of that performance, because the costumes and the gestures are so grand. You know, the photographs are iconic at this point. Did you talk about your idea for the collaboration with Senga—

04-00:22:33

Jenkins: We did talk about it. And of course, in that piece, in particular, is where you see the emphasis given by my collaboration with Senga and Maren. Those gestures and what have you come from their dance background. And then there's me and Frank [Parker], who are doing something else, apart from what Senga and Maren are doing. We utilized the architecture of the building to do part of that performance. Another part is where we started to come out of the shrubbery in the park. And then there's a—what you don't have, necessarily, a photograph of—but there's a woman who's playing trumpet named Juana Nash, who I had performed with in a previous performance. She's playing trumpet, and then there's two other guys who are playing percussion. That was the improvised soundtrack that we did in that performance.

04-00:23:49

Cooks: Okay.

04-00:23:49

Jenkins: So that when people came into Barnsdall Park—that you're familiar with—when you do the walkway, as they're walking in, we're doing the performance simultaneously.

04-00:24:04

Cooks: Yeah, this is helpful to hear you talk about, *Ulysses*, because there isn't a video, so it's helpful just to help us understand the photographs.

04-00:24:12

Jenkins: Right.

04-00:24:15

Cooks: Okay, I wanted to also ask you about *Without Your Interpretation* [from 1983 at Art Dock], because that's another important work in your oeuvre. And—

04-00:24:26

Jenkins: Yeah, well—yeah, go ahead. I'm sorry, I'm cutting you off.

04-00:24:29

Cooks:

No, I want to hear what you have to say. I was just going to say how impressed I was by the whole roster of people who were involved, you know? Because you've got this band, Life in the Park with Debris; make-up is done by Patssi Valdez—sorry, yeah, Patssi Valdez from Asco.

04-00:24:49

Jenkins:

Yeah, right.

04-00:24:50

Cooks:

And she's legendary. It's exciting to think about all of these artists coming together to support each other. And you have that scarf that looks like the American flag, and that reappears in your work.

04-00:25:08

Jenkins:

Right.

04-00:25:10

Cooks:

And you're singing, and there's just a lot going on, and I would just love to hear you talk about that collaboration.

04-00:25:16

Jenkins:

Well, that's the first performance that I actually sing in. That happens because of my collaboration with Michael Delgado, who I meet working in Hollywood, which sort of relates to the whole construct, if you will, of the whole construct of that era in terms of the time of Reaganism. On a certain level, it was very difficult to find work, in particular as an artist or in the arts, because they were cutting back funding from galleries and museums and all that stuff. [looks through *Doggerel Life*] There's only this one image in the book for *Without Your Interpretation*, but it does have all the names of the people who were in it. I mean, the fact that there was Todd Gray—I'm on page 106, if you're trying to follow me—Bob Dale, Senga and Maren and Crono, May Sun, Liz Rodriguez. The whole thing with Life in the Park, of course, was a band that Michael was in. Now, I started working with Michael as—the actual tune that I'm singing I had originally worked out with Michael, because when I was working at this video duplication company in Hollywood, and that's where I meet Michael.

04-00:27:25

I was doing this class for Nancy Buchanan. In terms of teaching her class, it was a performance class. And I wanted to do a performance in the class that would get the students—get *them* to get up out of their seats and participate, so I come up with that song. When we did this on the campus as a class activity, all the classes that were surrounding our class stopped and came over to see what we were doing. I thought, Wow! I said, "If it was that moving, let's do this as a real performance," and that's how that performance got initiated.



04-00:28:17

But let me see here, the place that—I'm trying to see if I've got that mentioned in here. Oh yeah, the place that I did it. I did the performance—the name of the place was an alternative art space called the Art Dock. And the Art Dock, of course, it was very interesting. They were doing all these different alternative exhibitions. So for us to do an exhibition with them or to do a performance, we did it not in the space that they usually did their performances or their exhibitions, but on the loading dock of a chicken factory just down the street from their location, so that when people—I don't know if you can see that in the—yeah, you can a little bit in the photograph.

04-00:29:17

Cooks: Yes.

04-00:29:18

Jenkins: That piece was lit by people's car lights. It was like going to the drive-in.

04-00:29:25

Cooks: Is this in Downtown LA, Ulysses?

04-00:29:26

Jenkins: Yeah, in Downtown LA near First St., where the bridge goes over the—

04-00:29:36

Cooks: The river, the LA River?

04-00:29:37

Jenkins: It goes over the LA River, right. So we are down the street from that location on First St. at this chicken factory doing the performance. And the performance was being lit by the audience's headlights, because, you know, it's outdoors and it's in the evening.

04-00:29:56

The one thing that happened that was so unusual—which I had some pictures of but I've lost them now, unfortunately. When we were about to start the performance, the neighbors or the people who had studio spaces in the building of the Art Dock, they called the police on us and tried to stop us from doing the performance, which I didn't realize that they were going to do that. Because when we did a rehearsal, they didn't say a thing to us, nobody complained or nothing. But I think, once again, because we're people of color, we're getting attention, all right, but not the kind that you'd necessarily think. As you see in this performance, I'm performing in pajamas, which is, again, my indication of bedtime and surrealism. So when the police come, I've got to try to talk them out of not only stopping the performance, but not arresting me, which they wanted to do. Because they thought that—they said that they had a disturbing-the-peace complaint from the people who lived in the building. So the guy that's mentioned in here, [Carlton] "Carl" Davis, he was the curator of the Art Dock. He was able to talk the police out of arresting me and taking me away, because if they took me away—

04-00:31:41

And the fact that when we did that performance, I only had one extension cord coming out of the chicken factory that gave us power so that we could run—if you've seen the video, there's the band, there's a TV set or monitor that's running video, and I think maybe some other electronic components. Oh well, in the band there was—VinZula [Kara's] playing his keyboard instrument that had to be electrified. And anyway, the instruments that the musicians were playing, all that stuff was all connected to one extension cord. You can understand the way—as they say, [necessity is] the mother of invention. You have to try to make it happen by any means necessary. I think you know where that comes from. That's one of the magical aspects of that performance, besides the fact that I was doing my first public singing performance.

04-00:32:59

Cooks:

So would you tell us a little bit about that? Why you returned to your roots, in a sense, with singing? Because you grew up knowing you could sing; your mother could sing; your brothers and sister could sing. Why was this a good time for singing to be a part of your work?

04-00:33:18

Jenkins:

Well, this is actually, besides the notion of—as a singing performance—there's all these movies. I mean, *Stormy Weather*, all these great African American singers who are involved in films of the past. But I got the notion that I might want to try doing something like that from Laurie Anderson and the contemporary art performance form that had people singing. I thought I could add my name to that link of artists who sing and perform.

04-00:34:12

Cooks:

Okay, I think this is great. Because before, when we're talking about some of the earlier work, like *Two-Zone Transfer*, you're lip-syncing!

04-00:34:22

Jenkins:

Yeah. Now, you've made the connection. You see, when I did James Brown or lip-synced James Brown, I always had a problem with the fact that actually I had done it. From the point of view that I had won an NEA award for that whole performance and the fact that whether or not I was going to get sued for copyright violation, that becomes the notion of why I end up creating my own band for the soundtracks of my videos.

04-00:35:07

Cooks:

So let's talk about Othervisions, because you mention VinZula.

04-00:35:14

Jenkins:

Yes.

04-00:35:15

Cooks:

And we have a band that's performing, right? Life in the Park with Debris is the name of the band. Are some of those members in the new band, the Othervisions band? Or how did—

- 04-00:35:30  
Jenkins: Well, the Othervisions band becomes a different band. But the fact that—the title that you just gave, *Life in the Park*, the "Debris" is the rest of us. [laughs]
- 04-00:35:45  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:35:45  
Jenkins: We're the "Debris," because *Life in the Park* was Michael's band.
- 04-00:35:53  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:35:52  
Jenkins: Which was really interesting, once again, for me to start rehearsals with the band and all this stuff. If you could see, looking here on—I'm trying to find the page—[looks through *Doggerel Life*] you were looking at those pictures of *Flying* with all that stuff.
- 04-00:36:22  
Cooks: I was, yeah. I'd seen those before in other contexts. I mean, those are circulated.
- 04-00:36:28  
Jenkins: Right. And you see the people in *Without Your Interpretation*. There is Bob Dale and Maren Hassinger, and there's Frank Parker. And in fact, if you look at that makeup—Patssi Valdez, man she turned it out, man! And—
- 04-00:36:51  
Cooks: Yeah, it's great.
- 04-00:36:53  
Jenkins: Oh, there it is, on page 105, that's the original Othervisions Studio. It was an incredible 2,000 ft. studio on the second floor of this building above a fish market. The owner of the building ran the fish market—huh?
- 04-00:37:14  
Cooks: Where was this in LA?
- 04-00:37:16  
Jenkins: On Vermont near Adams Blvd. The thing about it is that on the windows that I'm looking at was the west side of the building. On the other side of the building, the similar windows gave you the landscape of Downtown LA. And that was a really—I mean, I really had built that studio out. As you can see, I had stage lighting in there.
- 04-00:37:51  
We used to have events. The opening of the studio itself, I'm not going to go on about it, because I could—as you know I would—I had an African band that played, and one of the guys named Loughty Amao, he was the original interpreter for this African radio show on KCRW that was playing ju-ju music

from Nigeria. And he brought his band to my studio, and they played that ju-ju music and African music at the opening. It was just unbelievable. What an incredible night that was. I'll stop there, because I could keep going.

04-00:38:47

Cooks: But it's clear that music is becoming more of your practice than it has before. I mean, for you to start a band, right? And then the band starts to feature regularly in your video[s].

04-00:39:02

Jenkins: Well, the thing is, I needed a way to make soundtracks. That was primarily the point that I was trying to make about trying to get away from using pre-recorded music. And you know, actually when I'm teaching, I'm telling my students to go over to the Music Department and find those students—somebody's got some music that you could probably use, that they've never thought would go anywhere. But you know, the music students, they've got a thing going on. And of course, as you know, at UCI [University of California, Irvine], I've become really good friends with Kei Akagi, who I do *Notions of Freedom* with. You know, music.

04-00:39:53

Cooks: So one example of this, as you're speaking, in 1983 you make *ZGrass*.

04-00:39:59

Jenkins: Yes, that's with VinZula.

04-00:40:01

Cooks: Okay. And this is, to me, quite different—

04-00:40:06

Jenkins: Well, of course!

04-00:40:07

Cooks: —from your previous work, because the visuals are all completely computer generated.

04-00:40:15

Jenkins: Right. Well, this is like in '83, having computer-generated imagery was not necessarily—I took a workshop at the Long Beach [Museum of Art], because of David Ross. They had this video lab in Long Beach, which was an attachment to the Long Beach Art Museum. All of the video art that was getting made by independent video artists, primarily, was you were going to that lab, primarily because of having video-editing equipment everybody didn't have. I mean, you'd be having conversations with artists that you never thought you'd even meet by having your own appointment there.

04-00:41:02

And so I took this computer workshop in Long Beach. The name of the computer, I believe, was data something or other. Anyway, the program that we used, the title of the program was called the ZGRASS [Z80 Graphics

Symbiosis System]. And so what you see in the video—because back in those days you couldn't just dump it onto a laptop or one of the thumb drives or anything like that, you had to record it straight to video, and so the stuff that I was doing, that's what I decided to do. What you see in the video is actually some of the exercises that I had been creating with this ZGRASS program.

04-00:42:09

I had been trying to edit it and make something out of it, of course. And I run into VinZula Kara, and we're talking to each other about what we do. I told him about this video, and he told me, "Oh, by the way, I've got some music," some experimental music that he'd been working on. And that's how *ZGrass*, as a composition, came together.

04-00:42:47

Cooks:

I mean, just to make the point to everyone about the diversity of your work at this time, also in 1983, the same year that you made *ZGrass*, you make *Cakewalk*.

04-00:43:02

Jenkins:

Right. Well, I got asked to come to New York by Houston Conwill and his wife, Kinshasha, who were friends of mine.

04-00:43:12

Cooks:

Okay.

04-00:43:12

Jenkins:

Before they left LA. His wife, Kinshasha, became the house manager of the—I forgot the name of this house that's on the hill with the Barnsdall Museum.

04-00:43:37

Cooks:

Oh, the Hollyhock.

04-00:43:39

Jenkins:

Yes, the Hollyhock House. And that was just the most amazing thing, you know? Of course, I had gotten to meet them in other circumstances in the artworld here in LA, but the Hollyhock House—can you imagine the fact that it's being managed by a Black woman who used to give these art parties in the Hollyhock House? That was unbelievable, because you know, the Hollyhock House is this unbelievable architectural phenomenon. And you know, we're in there just—you know how Black people party. We're partying in the Hollyhock House, man! [laughs]

04-00:44:29

Cooks:

Okay now, before you digress. They move to New York.

04-00:44:34

Jenkins:

Right. They move to New York, and this is after that picture of us at the Crenshaw wall.

04-00:44:44

Cooks: Okay, yes, yes, yes.

04-00:44:45

Jenkins: Which they are both in. So—

04-00:44:52

Cooks: And at this point, you know, when you go back to New York, is this when you meet Linda Goode Bryant?

04-00:44:56

Jenkins: Yes.

04-00:44:57

Cooks: Okay, great. We wondered if that connection—

04-00:45:00

Jenkins: I meet her as a part of my coming to New York, and which—I actually have to bring the portable video equipment, I had to bring a Portapak with me to New York. And see, that was one of the reasons why I didn't stay in New York, because of the means of having equipment. I didn't know of—which I had this really interesting talk with one of the managers today, Rebecca—I think her name is Rebecca [Cleman] at E[AI], Electronic Arts Intermix, who are now distributing my video work. Anyway, I didn't know of them at the time, and if I could have rented equipment from them.

04-00:45:58

So I bring my own equipment to New York to document—which Houston wanted me to do—to document the *Cakewalk*. And so that whole thing I shoot and produce all the different camera angles in the whole thing, and it became what it is. And I'm glad I did it. Of course, Kinshasha, she is very happy. If you ever talk to her—I don't know if I sent you her number or not—but you could talk to her about the meaningfulness of how that work becomes one of the few videos of the kind of work that Houston was doing. Not only from the work that's in the gallery—because the gallery, actually, they perform inside of an installation that he created. That's what you're seeing.

04-00:46:58

And then, of course, the whole performative notions that are in there. It's a ritual. I forget who I had this conversation with. Maybe it was somebody during *Now Dig This!: [Art and Black Los Angeles, 1960-1980]*. But we, as the artists from LA, had this vehicle of communication in our work that was done primarily in the form of rituals. If you think about all of us who have gotten recognized, we all did rituals of one form or another. And—go ahead.

04-00:47:48

Cooks: I wanted to just pick up on that a bit more, because part of the rituals in African traditions is the role of the griot, which I think is part of—

04-00:48:02

Jenkins:

Right, and that's another aspect of something that I came upon while I was trying to—see, the thing is, when I was doing *Two-Zone*, getting back to that conversation I had with my fellow grad students, I realized if I was going to get out of this traditional theatrical genre, I needed to find a character that was related to the African or African American context and community. And there it was. More than anything else, there it was in the sense that even when I was doing James Brown, I didn't realize at that time that I was doing a contemporary griot performance.

04-00:48:53

Cooks:

Because it seems like, Ulysses, in two of the videos that I had noted that I wanted to hear you speak about, the *Peace and Anwar Sadat* from '85, [based on a performance in 1981], and the [*Ever 4 Us*] in 1987, you sing, you perform, but you're continuing this tradition of poetry, reciting things that you've written. I mean, the oral tradition is coming through as you're passing on information from the past to the present and into the future.

04-00:49:35

Jenkins:

"Jes Grew," Ishmael Reed.

04-00:49:38

Cooks:

Yes, right. So he talked about this in *Mumbo Jumbo*.

04-00:49:43

Jenkins:

Right, exactly!

04-00:49:43

Cooks:

Okay.

04-00:49:44

Jenkins:

And that's what I'm doing!

04-00:49:51

Cooks:

Could you talk to us a bit about, specifically, how you're doing it in *Peace and Anwar Sadat*?

04-00:49:57

Jenkins:

Well, in *Peace and Anwar Sadat*, the thing about that piece—I mean, I ended up creating the dialog with VinZula and the other guy that's in it. And the fact that I have this idea of doing something that would honor Anwar Sadat, in particular. The way in which that piece evolves, from the standpoint of the video images that you see—of course, that eye, which is Frank Parker's eye, okay, I wanted to use that as the all-seeing eye. To a certain degree, it fit in with the hieroglyphic notions of an eye that could be related to Egyptian culture. See, the thing is, I remember only parts of that dialog that I had made for that. But that whole thing about getting up early in the morning and doing these different things and stuff, I was recalling my mother in that dialog. And then I actually read backwards and forwards, as you just mentioned, in times

of the dialectic that you hear. So you know, I'm experimenting, once again, in terms of what I'm doing.

04-00:51:54

But at the same time, I'm trying to push this idea about how the notion of peace—and the fact that Anwar Sadat had gotten murdered for peace, and I end up asking the audience to consider a more peaceful demonstration as we go forward. Therefore, *Peace and Anwar Sadat*.

04-00:52:36

Cooks:

Yeah, that's beautiful, Ulysses. I wanted to also ask you about *Ever 4 Us*. And this is another moving kind of emotional work from you.

04-00:52:53

Jenkins:

*Peace and*—not *Peace*. I don't know why I said that. [laughs]

04-00:52:56

Cooks:

*Ever 4 Us*.

04-00:52:57

Jenkins:

*Ever 4 Us* was actually a sort of swan song to Maren Hassinger, who was leaving LA. See, the thing is, around this time she's leaving to go to New York, move to New York, because she's got a residency at the Studio Museum in Harlem. Senga has moved from LA and moved to Colorado, Colorado Springs, where she lives. So these are two of my not only favorite, but my main collaborators at the time. And Frank Parker, who was also—and of course, the three of them were original members with Studio Z. Frank is leaving the domain in his life, and he's leaving a relationship that he had and becomes a homeless person in Downtown LA. So I decide to make this particular performance piece and video to emphasize this moment in my career. And you know, it has some aspect of a sentimentality in it. Of course, you see Senga—not Senga, but I mean, you see Maren and her daughter. And her daughter as a baby, who is now a grown woman, which is amazing! When I had the show back East, I got a chance to meet her again as a grownup, which was just like, Wow! And Maren gave her this really interesting name: Eva Darling, okay? [laughs] That's what I have to say about that work, primarily.

04-00:55:19

Cooks:

Fill me in, also, Ulysses, because are you working full-time as an artist, or are you still working at San Diego at the same time?

04-00:55:29

Jenkins:

No, I'm not working at San Diego. I'm doing artist-in-residency work primarily.

04-00:55:38

Cooks:

Okay.



- 04-00:55:38  
Jenkins: I got an artist-in-residency grant in about—I think it was '65 or '68.
- 04-00:55:47  
Tewes: You mean '85?
- 04-00:55:49  
Cooks: Eighty-five, yeah.
- 04-00:55:48  
Jenkins: Eighty-five, I mean. Thank you. I heard about the program, and artists being able to get artist-in-residency grants from the State of California. So the California Arts Council, you apply, and if they like your work that you submit, then you get a chance to do the grant. The thing about it is you had to find yourself a community sponsor. When I first started, I had some issues with trying to find the right kind of community sponsor. Eventually, I find William Grant Still [Community Art Center]. And the videos that I make at William Grant Still helped James Burke start the African Marketplace, okay? And that sort of snowballs, as you know anything of the history of the African Marketplace. But I do that—huh?
- 04-00:56:55  
Cooks: Can you tell us how your videos helped with the African Marketplace? Just what that connection is?
- 04-00:57:01  
Jenkins: Well, I documented it.
- 04-00:57:02  
Cooks: Okay.
- 04-00:57:04  
Jenkins: And so then he had something that he could show sponsors to get further sponsorship.
- 04-00:57:09  
Cooks: That's fantastic, yeah.
- 04-00:57:11  
Jenkins: Yeah. And then of course, I went to East LA and started a video program there, where they could document their artists. They started a directory of Latino artists. So I'm sort of travelling the byways of cultural enrichment or identification, with my notion of how video can actually give recognition, because you've got to see—this is mid-eighties, and community art centers did not show video, let alone video of artists of the same ethnicity. What I was trying to prove to them [was] that it wasn't as difficult as they thought it was. In a lot of the cases, like I did even at William Grant Still, I would go and get a TV, just a regular TV set, get a VCR, and started saying, "Hey, now you can start playing videos here."

- 04-00:58:24  
Cooks: How did you—
- 04-00:58:25  
Jenkins: Huh?
- 04-00:58:26  
Cooks: Do you remember how long your residency was at William Grant Still? It was '86 that we have that you started there.
- 04-00:58:34  
Jenkins: Right.
- 04-00:58:36  
Cooks: But it was more than one year. Was it a three-year project?
- 04-00:58:39  
Jenkins: Well, it kind of overlapped, because one of those years in those three years, I went to East LA and started a video program out there, Self-Help Graphics [& Art], and it was run by Sister Karen [Boccalero].
- 04-00:59:00  
Cooks: Wow!
- 04-00:59:02  
Jenkins: So you know, I was just trying to lend my expertise or knowledge of the power of this medium to people in the 'hood.
- 04-00:59:17  
Cooks: So you were bringing video to Self-Help Graphics in the community that was there?
- 04-00:59:22  
Jenkins: Right.
- 04-00:59:23  
Cooks: That's fantastic.
- 04-00:59:27  
Jenkins: And of course, I'm getting ready to actually go to move to the Bay Area by this time.
- 04-00:59:35  
Cooks: Yes, and you make a video before you go called *Stinji*.
- 04-00:59:39  
Jenkins: Exactly.
- 04-00:59:40  
Cooks: I'd love to hear you talk about that. I mean, this is another important video. It's very much from the 1980s, in terms of the themes that you're exploring with AIDS. You've got this character that's also in a band, right?

04-00:59:59

Jenkins:

Well, the character is me, pretty much. [laughs] I mean, I'm taking my own life and transposing it so that I can make the story, number one, but also carry it into the final scene, which is the AIDS indication. Although I talk a little bit about certain issues when I'm with the band at the band rehearsal, in the songs that I'm singing there. But *Stinji* comes from conversations that I was having with the woman who's in the video with me.

04-01:00:43

Cooks:

Lavina Jones.

04-01:00:47

Jenkins:

Lavina Jones. And if you haven't noticed, she tends to look like Dorothy Dandridge. I always thought of her as that sort of look, which for me, I thought, Wow, I get a chance to do this portrayal with this really beautiful sister. See, Lavina was a nurse, and we used to go out and have dinner and have these conversations. And she would be telling me about all these people who were showing up in the hospital deathly ill, and which nobody could figure out why they were getting that sick. And so then when it started coming out about that sickness was going to be called HIV and AIDS, I got the idea of: why don't we make a video based on these conversations that she and I had been having? So that's the premise for *Stinji*. I kind of used my whole, again, my whole lifestyle as the background for the video. You know, when I'm coming down that ladder, that was my studio in Venice that happened to also be, at one time, the studio for the Doors, which was down the street from Wanda Westcoast. [laughs]

04-01:02:37

Cooks:

Such a Venice story, I love it.

04-01:02:40

Jenkins:

Yeah, well those days, man—I won't get into the Venice story part, because we'll be losing time.

04-01:02:47

Cooks:

Okay.

04-01:02:50

Jenkins:

The whole premise of the story is a day in the life of this performance artist, who happens to turn out to be me, who, as you see in the beginning of the video, talking to his partner or girlfriend, trying to get a chance to come over and pay her a visit. In the meantime, I get an interrupting call from the band, which we play into this, "Why aren't you here? You're late," the whole thing, right? It's band talk. So hang up with Lavina, go to the band. We have a rehearsal, and in that rehearsal, I sing some songs—I think there's one or two that are fairly good, worth listening to. Oh, "Emergency," that's the one I'm remembering now, "emergency, from the left and the right." Okay? There was another one that I did that had that famous saying of Nancy Reagan—God, I can't remember it now. But—

04-01:04:20

Cooks: Oh, she would say, "Just say no." That was—

04-01:04:23

Jenkins: Yeah, I started making—I was improvising that, actually, about, "Just say no, you don't have to go," and that whole thing. So anyway, I get this call while I'm at the rehearsal, which was something we planned, that she's—Lavina is calling me about, "Where are you? I thought you were going to be here already." So I cut the rehearsal short, leave the dudes—oh, oh, but one of the guys in that band—see, this was the beginning of the Othervisions band, actually. One of the guys in that band is Mark Stewart, who goes by the name Stew these days, with his own band called The Negro Problem. You know Stew? [laughs] See, the thing is, all the people that you are realizing that I worked with were all of the people who were pretty much the consummate underground. We were the Black underground in LA. What can I say? That's kind of the way we rolled back in those days.

04-01:05:47

Cooks: Ulysses, thinking about this amazing rich community you have in LA, tell us why you left to go to the Bay Area. We have that in 1989. You did *Stinji* in '88, and then the next year you go to the Bay Area. Tell us about that move, please.

04-01:06:07

Jenkins: Well see, the thing is, being in the underground, you unfortunately find yourself stuck. You know, that's why I mention this to my students about recognition. And then you have to look at the quality of the recognition that you're getting and who is giving you that recognition. The biggest problem that we had, which you probably have a better understanding of it yourself because you're a writer, that we couldn't get anybody to write about our work. We're only now getting the written kind of, let's say, writings that we should have been getting back then. Which would have been, in that sense, a competitive reasoning for even our existence. Because we were doing some of the same things that the other Caucasian artists were doing, but we weren't getting recognition for it.

04-01:07:12

And the fact that what is also occurring at this time is the notion of multicultural art. The thing is, you had various people who were Caucasians, who were doing their versions of artists of color community stylings in their work and getting credit for doing that kind of work! And so when the whole notion that there were opportunities to get grant opportunities because of multicultural work, my work started to take off a little bit. That's why you have so many different people in my work, because I was trying to give all these other incredible artists that I was working with an opportunity to find some kind of recognition.

04-01:08:15

Stew became one of the former members who really took advantage of it. He was in the band that went to the San Francisco Art Institute with me, which also happened around this time. We did a performance at the San Francisco Art Institute that was one of their first multicultural presentations. It was supposed to have been a lecture, and I decided to do this performance instead of a lecture. And so Stew came with me and the rest of the guys, and that's when he became a member of the band. I mean, it was just an amazing time. So when I go to San Francisco, when you're asking about San Francisco, we do this performance at the San Francisco Art Institute, and that's when I meet Regina Mouton. And because of that meeting, I end up moving to the Bay Area, and I'm living with her in Oakland. So we become a couple.

04-01:09:37

Cooks: And is Regina an artist? Or—

04-01:09:40

Jenkins: Yeah, she's an artist. She had just graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute—and I think I had given her number to Amanda. That was interesting from the standpoint of the work that I start to do first was that performance at the Exploratorium, and then I started doing all these other works. I did *Mutual Native Duplex* and *The Nomadics* when I lived in the Bay Area.

04-01:10:24

Cooks: And just to be clear, the performance at the Exploratorium is *Natives in America* about Black history?

04-01:10:31

Jenkins: Right.

04-01:10:32

Cooks: Okay.

04-01:10:33

Jenkins: Right.

04-01:10:34

Cooks: And were you finding more opportunities and an interest in multiculturalism in Oakland than LA?

04-01:10:40

Jenkins: Yes, yes. I was getting more—my phone was ringing off the hook when I lived in the Bay Area. I mean, I really loved working up there. First and foremost, after we did our performance up there, I couldn't believe the amount of interest there was in what we were saying in that work. The fact that that was more of an interest than I was getting here in LA, once again, we were straddling that edge between not just being an artist of color, but the avant-garde, which was really appreciated in the Bay Area. And the fact that I was one of the few African Americans doing video work or multimedia work—

- 04-01:11:38  
The other artist that I found when I moved to the Bay Area was [Lawrence] "Larry" Andrews. I don't know if you're familiar with his work. And Larry was—oh man, I had some really great conversations with him, because the work that he was doing was really avant-garde, as well. He had been to the Art Institute in the Bay Area. But his work had got him traveling to Europe with his video work. You know, you probably—Amanda could find him in the Bay Area. I think he's still there. I think he ended up moving into—is it called the Berkeley Hills?
- 04-01:12:26  
Cooks: Okay. But you found a really rich community while you were up north.
- 04-01:12:32  
Jenkins: Yes, yes. And a lot of that had to do with, of course, knowing Mildred Howard.
- 04-01:12:38  
Cooks: Yeah, so please tell us about Mildred Howard, one of the great American artists. [Jenkins laughs] We're hoping to be able to speak with her, also.
- 04-01:12:48  
Jenkins: Absolutely.
- 04-01:12:48  
Cooks: What was Mildred's role in your career at this time?
- 04-01:12:54  
Jenkins: Okay, so Mildred goes back to Sally Shapiro. She was a friend of Sally Shapiro's. And also Calvin Keys, who was back in *Adams Be Doggerel*. Calvin's wife was Maria, yeah. Maria, who was Argentinean, was a good friend of Sally's. So you've got all these people sort of connecting as friendships. And of course, I have to say, unfortunately, my relationship with Sally had ended, but I was still—see, that's the whole thing, if you know what I mean. You're in a relationship with somebody, you become friends to their friends. My friendship with Mildred never ended, which was really a great thing, because Mildred—as I found out as my friendship expanded with Mildred—is a very good friend with Betye Saar. So there's all these things that come together.
- 04-01:14:12  
Cooks: And Mildred was in the Bay Area. She's still there.
- 04-01:14:15  
Jenkins: Right, right. She's there now.
- 04-01:14:17  
Cooks: So you were able to connect when you were up there.
- 04-01:14:21  
Jenkins: She got me the performance gig at the Exploratorium.

- 04-01:14:25  
Cooks: Okay. Now, how was she able to do that?
- 04-01:14:26  
Jenkins: She was working at the Exploratorium.
- 04-01:14:30  
Cooks: Great.
- 04-01:14:30  
Jenkins: And she was an advisor on the community level with the California Arts Council. When I moved to the Bay Area, I—see, the thing is when you're an artist-in-residence with the California Arts Council, you're on for three years, and then you have to reapply after three years. So when I had my break, after my three years in LA, is when I moved to the Bay Area. And then I reapplied to do work in the Bay Area, in which I started having—my sponsorship was with this arts organization or media organization called BAVC [Bay Area Video Coalition], which was in San Francisco. That was really phenomenal. Because now, not only do I have a sponsor, but I've got access to the best video equipment that you could have, which I didn't know at the time they were connected with that lab down in—what's the community near San José where all the media companies are?
- 04-01:15:54  
Cooks: There's Santa Clara, San José, Palo Alto.
- 04-01:15:58  
Jenkins: You know, that's where Apple and all those other companies are.
- 04-01:16:04  
Cooks: Yeah—
- 04-01:16:04  
Tewes: The Silicon Valley, in general?
- 04-01:16:06  
Jenkins: Silicon Valley.
- 04-01:16:07  
Cooks: Oh, okay.
- 04-01:16:08  
Jenkins: I didn't know how much BAVC was connected with that until I ended up on the board of BAVC, and then some of the people from Silicon Valley were showing up. I almost became part of that Silicon Valley lab that IBM had that actually had been developing all the portable computer stuff. That was starting to happen at the time that I was leaving the Bay Area to come to UCI.
- 04-01:16:44  
Cooks: Okay, so let me just clarify. You had your three-year California Arts Council artist-in-residency in LA.

- 04-01:16:56  
Jenkins: Right.
- 04-01:16:56  
Cooks: You then went to the Bay Area and reapplied?
- 04-01:16:59  
Jenkins: Right.
- 04-01:17:00  
Cooks: Did you get that second application?
- 04-01:17:03  
Jenkins: Yes, I did. That's what I'm saying. When I got that—before I left LA I did—you mentioned a couple of videos, but I did one more. It was the one—[drops book] Jesus—it's the trilogy of *Mutual Native [Duplex]*, *Nomadics [Quiet as Kept, The Nomadic]*, and there's one before that.
- 04-01:17:36  
Cooks: *Beating the Bush?*
- 04-01:17:37  
Jenkins: No, no, no, no.
- 04-01:17:40  
Cooks: *Natives in America*. I'm not sure, Ulysses.
- 04-01:17  
Jenkins: Let me see if I—I don't know if I have it here or not. [*Columbus Day: A Doggerel.*]
- 04-01:17:50  
Cooks: But when you got the second California Arts Council application accepted it was for the Bay Area?
- 04-01:17:57  
Jenkins: Right.
- 04-01:17:58  
Cooks: So were you there in the Bay Area for three years?
- 04-01:18:03  
Jenkins: Well yeah, I was there for three years, because after that time I eventually come to UCI.
- 04-01:18:09  
Cooks: Is that the reason you left the Bay Area?
- 04-01:18:11  
Jenkins: I left the Bay Area, because I was, first of all, running into—I was going to run into the problem of trying to get a job in the Bay Area. I was having problems getting a job, a teaching job, in that sense, because I would always



be up against a Bay Area artist, and they'd always choose a Bay Area artist over me, because my work would be indicating my work that I'd done in LA. That regionalism thing would raise its head.

04-01:18:45

That fall, before I applied, of course, and I was in LA for the holidays, and I ran into Daniel Martinez at a party, and Daniel asked me, "Hey, man, are you interested in a job?" I'm going like, "Heck yeah!" He goes, "Well, we've got this position that's coming up in the Art Department, and you ought to apply." I said, "Really?" I just said, "What kind of chance do you think I've got to get it?" He said, "Well, you've got to apply first, and then we'll see what happens." I said, "Okay, I'll do that." And that was just before I'd actually gotten—I'd gotten pneumonia. See, what you didn't know, when I was down there for that interview that you mentioned, I was recovering from pneumonia.

04-01:20:03

Cooks: What year was this, Ulysses? Was it 1990?

04-01:20:08

Jenkins: That was '93 or '92.

04-01:20:13

Cooks: Okay.

04-01:20:15

Jenkins: Yeah, because it was the fall of '92.

04-01:20:18

Cooks: That makes sense. And I was at your job talk, because I was an undergraduate.

04-01:20:22

Jenkins: Yes, that's what I was thinking you would start to remember.

04-01:20:23

Cooks: Yeah.

04-01:20:27

Jenkins: But you know, the thing was in conjunction to that, I knew I was going to be losing my artist-in-residency. The artist-in-residency, I've got to say, was a really fantastic thing from the point of view that they had started having these large gatherings of all the artists in California who were a part of the artist-in-residency program. And they had it in Monterey at a place called Asilomar [Hotel and Conference Grounds]. An incredible, incredible place. So here's all these artists from all over the State of California in all these apartments that they had at Asilomar. People were giving lectures, and then of course, as you well might think, parties, artist parties. It was just unbelievable! You know, I had this little advantage, I thought, because I had a residency in LA and in Northern California, so I knew artists from both communities, which was amazing. I could walk from one party to the next, [laughs] and I was welcomed.

04-01:21:57

Cooks: Okay, I'm going to ask you about coming to Irvine. So you start there—let's see, you interview in '92, so you start in '93?

04-01:22:08

Jenkins: Yeah, well that interview, I think—yeah, it was something like that. That interview, of course, as you said, you attended. I get the job, and I'm starting in the fall of '93. I end up packing up and leaving the Bay Area, which was difficult, to say the least. I was glad that I had a job, but I had established all these different circumstances, like you were asking me about. I mean, look, I was an artist-in-residence at the Headlands [Center for the Arts] in Marin County. And of course, I had that residency at the Exploratorium. I had done some work with the Oakland Museum [of California] and the Berkeley [Art] Museum I'd had some shows with. You know, I was getting established in the Bay Area, and then to walk away from that, it wasn't easy.

04-01:23:25

Cooks: Yeah.

04-01:23:26

Jenkins: See, the thing is in the Bay Area, if you are a recognized artist, then on a certain level you get moved around to the other institutions that find your work interesting, which you didn't have happening here in LA, where you had to actually know somebody to—I mean, we're having these conversations. I've still never had my work shown at MOCA [Museum of Contemporary Art] here in LA.

04-01:24:02

Cooks: So what was the art scene like coming back to LA? Because you have all these friends, you have this network here. You start reconnecting and you start making videos again back in Southern California. What was your focus for these videos? How was your work changed after being in Northern California?

04-01:24:25

Jenkins: Well, on a certain level it had changed, but because I had just finished doing this series of videos that were identifying certain kinds of connections to multiculturalism. But at the same time, people were trying to get rid of multiculturalism, because they didn't like having to compete against artists of color, or that artists of color had the same input that the mainstream artists had. But then I was still kind of doing—which we didn't talk very much about—the work that I was doing, the telecommunications work that I had done—it started with the Electronic Café [International] back in the mid-eighties, in 1984, for the Olympics.

04-01:25:27

Cooks: No! Well, Ulysses, let's—I would like to hear you talk about that.

04-01:25:32

Jenkins:

When I was in San Diego—and I'll give you, if you want to see, there's a video that I did called *Televiews*, and it's a project that I made for open house at UCSD [University of California, San Diego]. It was based on a class that I had on cable TV and making television for cable TV, which you see that I had already started doing. But I also, from the courses that I'd taken at Otis [College of Art and Design], had been interested in telecommunications via Gene Youngblood.

04-01:26:28

Cooks:

Oh!

04-01:26:29

Jenkins:

And Gene Youngblood's book, *Expanded Cinema*. I had taken his class at Otis that he talks about media and the future, and where the future was going to go. I mean, this was in the late seventies before I—the last classes that I was taking at Otis. And here's Gene Youngblood talking about digital technology *then*. Okay? So anyhow, I was also a TA with Gary Lloyd, who was doing these kind of telephone communications. He was making art with—I'm trying to think of what the name of the damn communications tool that he was using. Oh, he was using [Qwip] fax machines as a form of making art. And so what I end up doing in *Televiews* when I'm at UCSD, is I let him make one of his works in this particular program that I'm creating at UCSD. Also, as well, I have Gene Youngblood and [Herbert] "Herb" Schiller give a lecture about the future of communications. I'll send you the site so you can see those videos.

04-01:28:15

Cooks:

Okay.

04-01:28:16

Jenkins:

Once again, I guess, in a way, I'm one of the few, that I know of, African Americans who is working in this area. So this is sort of another, as you were pointing to, another point of different reference in terms of the work that I'm doing that I'm interested in. At the same time, I run into this couple, [Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz], who are doing this project called *Hole-in-Space*. If you go to the Electronic Café online and look at *Hole-in-Space*, you will see this virtual communication project that they are doing, which is just—it was just unbelievable. The thing was, I was doing something with my *Televiews* project that was similar to the work that they were doing, because I had hooked up on the campus at UCSD a means of the students doing—I had students doing art performances at the student union, and transmitting it back to the television studio in the arts parts of the campus. They bounced the signal off a metallic blanket. I'm trying to think of the piece of equipment that we used to do that. Anyway—

04-01:30:02

Cooks:

Ulysses, let's take a break real quick.

- 04-01:30:05  
Jenkins: Okay.
- 04-01:30:07  
Tewes: Here, let me pause for a second. [break in audio] Okay, we are back from a break. Bridget, you were going to ask Ulysses a question about some of this work.
- 04-01:30:18  
Cooks: Yes. So, Ulysses, we were talking about the kind of work that you were making when you came back from the Bay Area to Los Angeles and working at UCI. You were saying that this history of work that you did for *TelevIEWS* when you were at UCSD informed your work in the nineties when you came back. Can you talk to us about that work in the nineties?
- 04-01:30:44  
Jenkins: Well, what happens is I started doing more experiments in that type of work. I had sort of stopped working with Electronic Café, although I did do some work just before I came back, where I did an electronic video piece, a videophone piece through the Electronic Café with a band, to this—I forget the name of this large European arts conference.
- 04-01:31:41  
Cooks: Okay, we can fill in the name later then.
- 04-01:31:43  
Jenkins: Anyway, we end up doing a performance at this place in Germany where they have this event. I had been doing this videophone work with my studio in Oakland, and that was kind of exciting as well. I'll say, once again, there weren't that many people doing that kind of work. The whole notion of videophone, the way we were doing it is what we're doing now [in this interview]. But we didn't have live imagery at the beginning; it was still imagery.
- 04-01:32:42  
Cooks: Ulysses, was it *Documenta* in Germany?
- 04-01:32:45  
Jenkins: Yes, it was *Documenta IX*.
- 04-01:32:46  
Cooks: Thank you, excellent. That's really exciting.
- 04-01:32:49  
Jenkins: Yeah, I'm sorry. I couldn't think of *Documenta*, the name of it.
- 04-01:32:52  
Cooks: No, no. That's fine.

04-01:32:55

Jenkins:

And we also did a piece for New Year's to an Electronic Café location in Tokyo for New Year's. So those are the kinds of things that I was doing that were in another context. See, a lot of the work that we were doing, even the people who were running the Electronic Café, initially, which I was trying to get to in our initial conversation, we did in '84. I was collaborating with Kit Galloway and Sherrie Rabinowitz. If you were able to find that *Hole-in-Space* piece, when I saw that and realized that I had been working in a similar manner, and the fact that they also knew Gene Youngblood—so once again, things start to fit together, in terms of our knowledge of certain things.

04-01:34:04

And so anyway, Kit and Sherrie devise this whole intra-city network called the Electronic Café for the 1984 Olympics. There were four or five locations in LA, and they set up this thing that we now call electronic cafés, or the fact that you could go to a café and you'd walk in. There was a whole setup so that you could talk to somebody in another part of town. And because there were different ethnicities, it also represented what the Olympics was all about.

04-01:34:51

Cooks:

I've been looking at that Olympic banner behind you for all the times you've been talking, so it's nice to hear you talk about your involvement with the Olympics.

04-01:35:00

Jenkins:

Right. So that's what we did. And after I left LA, you know, in my conversations with Kit, he decided that he wanted to continue doing it. He had actually purchased a whole bunch of the—at that time—the new devices called videophones that Panasonic had created. The only problem was, which you still have today with your cell phones, is that everybody doesn't necessarily want to be seen on the telephone. If somebody calls you early in the morning, that's the last thing you want them to see, is what you look like when you wake up.

04-01:35:50

Cooks:

Ulysses, tell us why this technology appealed to you. Was it separate from your artistic practice, in a sense? Or—

04-01:36:00

Jenkins:

It was the future.

04-01:36:03

Cooks:

Okay.

04-01:36:03

Jenkins:

You've got to realize, the whole notion of what we were doing, even when I started doing video, was the future. And that aspect became problematic for me, because they didn't necessarily—the people who were in a certain level of control did not see—and I said this earlier—they did not see an African

American image in terms of the future. The imagery that I was producing, the context that I was presenting, they did not see as the future.

04-01:36:45

Cooks: Okay. So I wanted to look at some of the work you were making. I want to really hear you talk about teaching, because from the 1990s through like 2008, 2009, I know you're teaching at UCI.

04-01:37:02

Jenkins: Yeah.

04-01:37:03

Cooks: You're making videos still. And one of the videos I wanted to hear you speak about is *Notions of Freedom*—

04-01:37:14

Jenkins: Right.

04-01:37:15

Cooks: —a multimedia installation from 2007.

04-01:37:21

Jenkins: Well, *Notions of Freedom*, of course, comes about with my acquaintance with Kei Akagi. And of course, in those conversations—Kei played with Miles Davis, which I have found fascinating. And everybody who has ever played with him, they start talking like him at a certain point when they start describing Miles. Miles was actually another one of my favorites, as a favorite person to follow. The thing that you've been asking me about, actually you could attribute to my notions with Miles, from the context that Miles always was pushing, pushing forward to something new if you follow his career. He always worked—this is where the music thing comes in—he always was working with younger artists. All the guys that I worked with in my band were ten years younger than me—all those guys! Which goes back to my graduate school experience. Because here I am in my thirties, and all the students that I'm working with are in their twenties, okay? There's nothing I can do about time, so the time—where there's that gap.

04-01:39:15

You know, I think about it. If I had went to graduate school when I first applied, I would have went in primarily as a painter. Now, I may not have had all that experience behind me that I got from the mural painting and the video, because that was filled in during the time that I was painting murals. So—

04-01:39:45

Cooks: Okay.

04-01:39:47

Jenkins: —that, hopefully, sort of gives you a better understanding of how—so that when I get to Otis and I end up taking that class with Gene Youngblood and working with Gary Lloyd and his futuristic work, when I step out of Otis, I'm

ready for the future. In that sense, that's what I was actually trying to do: to become this futuristic African American artist. The only other artist at that time that I knew of was Ed Bereal, that worked with television. But I did not find out about Tony Ramos [until] later, as I am following him in the position that he leaves at UCSD.

04-01:40:51

Cooks:

Ulysses, did you overlap at all with Ed when he was at UCI?

04-01:40:55

Jenkins:

Only from the standpoint of when they had jobs at UCI, and I always was getting turned down. [laughs]

04-01:41:04

Cooks:

Okay, because you know, I met Ed as a student at UCI and I met you as a student, but I couldn't remember if you actually overlapped—but you didn't.

04-01:41:15

Jenkins:

We didn't exactly overlap.

04-01:41:16

Cooks:

Okay. So I wanted to move on to kind of have you talk about the art that you were making in the 2000s, the first ten years: *Bequest*, *Planet X*, *Notions of Freedom*. But I want to hear you talk about that in relationship to what I know as a strength of your teaching and a theme in your work, which is Afrofuturism. And you've mentioned it a couple of times already. Could you talk about how Afrofuturism is a part of your work now, as someone who's making work, who's teaching about that them in art?

04-01:42:02

Jenkins:

Near the end of the nineties, getting to near the end of the nineties, and actually probably a little bit of time after *Notions of Freedom*, I started hearing about Afrofuturism from another acquaintance, a girlfriend who was going to CalArts [California Institute of the Arts] at the time. After she graduates, she goes to New York and gets a residency at the Whitney Museum [of American Art]. Her name was Kara Harris. And so, in that sense, when she goes to New York, that relationship ends. But as I found out—where is that book? Oh, in my reading of this particular book about Afrofuturism—I don't know if you're familiar with this. *Social Text*. Alondra Nelson. There was this website that she references that I find out when I'm reading about it that Kara was one of the members of these African American artists who were talking about the future in a cultural context. "Jes Grew" is also mentioned in here as one of the forms that they are following. And then there's this book, *Flame Wars: [The Discourse of Cyberculture]*. These are the texts that I use now—where "Jes Grew" is also mentioned by an author named Mark Dery. Okay?

04-01:44:22

So, in that sense, when I started reading up on this whole notion of Afrofuturism, I said, "Jesus, I've been doing this from way back when!" As a

matter of fact, that's one of the things that I try to emphasize, in particular, when I was talking to Erin [Christovale at the Hammer Museum], who was doing the work that she does about Afrofuturism. I said, "Look, myself, and then, of course, all those Black filmmakers who were going to UCLA at the same time that I was going to Otis, we are the Afrofuturists!" You see? Because the thing is, a lot of people start off talking about Afrofuturism starting with hip hop. I also find that interesting, because actually, Mark Dery talks about Jimi Hendrix, Sun Ra, some of the other musicians and poets and writers: Octavia Butler, Samuel Delany. In his book he has interviews with those people. And the fact that they have Greg Tate—he has an interview with Greg Tate that is just the absolute bomb. Did you see Greg Tate when he came to UCI?

04-01:46:00

Cooks:

I did, yeah, and I've seen him perform in other places, too.

04-01:46:04

Jenkins:

Right. Well, Greg Tate is a formidable writer—

04-01:46:08

Cooks:

Right.

04-01:46:09

Jenkins:

—that talks about Afrofuturism. Which I was glad I got a chance to meet him when he was at UCI. But see, the thing is, when you've mentioned what I'm doing—I'm teaching at UCI—I take the opportunity to actually give my students a scan through Black history, which in doing that course it is now—and I'm now almost giving a class about Black women. Because I start off—if you've ever seen this documentary called *The Real Eve*—it's online, and *The Real Eve* talks about this one African woman that we're all related to. The human race is related to it through the mitochondri[al] DNA. I start the class with that, and we go through this history that we have in America. But by using *The Real Eve*, I ask, "If that mitochondri[al] DNA makes us all connected, that means we're all related. So how do you justify the racism that is practiced?" And it's primarily because of the unknown, the fear of the unknown.

04-01:47:46

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, I'm thinking, also—you've mentioned Erin [Christovale] several times in the past sessions that we've had, and I think about the exhibitions and how it seems to me—and please say if it seems to you, too—that you're being discovered or rediscovered in the last fifteen years.

04-01:48:09

Jenkins:

But I'm always being rediscovered, [laughs] I'm always being rediscovered. That's the whole thing about this, you know?



04-01:48:17

Cooks: I want to hear from you about why you think that is. So something specific in mind. We're talking about temporality. I started talking to you just now about Afrofuturism. Where we ended was with the original Eve. There's something about temporality, the way that your work, and the way you think, goes through time, right?

04-01:48:41

Jenkins: Right, right.

04-01:48:42

Cooks: And so—

04-01:48:47

Jenkins: Those two books that I showed you talks about—especially the use of *Mumbo Jumbo's*—Ishmael Reed's use of "Jes Grew," and this whole notion of going forwards and backwards simultaneously as the figurative way in which Black people—what I try to do in my course: tell them that when they took us from Africa, we had to reinvent who we are. And that reinvention is the arts that we make, that is constantly going forwards and backwards.

04-01:49:29

Cooks: Ulysses, do you think that that concept has something to do with your constant discovery, people constantly discovering your work today?

04-01:49:40

Jenkins: Yeah.

04-01:49:42

Cooks: I'm thinking about *Now Dig This!*, right, *America is Hard to See*, *California Video*. You mention Erin Christovale as one of the co-curators of your retrospective that's going to be coming up at the Hammer [Museum]. And do you think it also has something to do with Afrofuturism, that people are finally catching up to the work that you've been doing?

04-01:50:08

Jenkins: Of course, of course that has to do with it. I mean primarily, because of the Eurocentric notion of what art is supposed to be about, it's only now that a lot of people are starting to discover what the notions of African art is all about. You know, even if you were to look at the people that I've mentioned, in terms of David Hammons and Senga and Maren and some other people. Even the fact that the other day when Erin was over here and they were going through my stuff, they found these drawings I had from Frank Parker. And nobody's been aware of that, the work of Frank—I don't know if anybody's ever wanted to *see* that work. But Frank was doing some pretty interesting work as a sculptor, installation artist. And I happen to have ended up with his drawings from the hospice that he died at. Frank was living in Downtown LA, and he got real ill and they put him in this Catholic hospice. And the nun who was taking care of him called me and wanted me to take his drawings. Evidently, while he was at the hospice, he was drawing on his way out of this world.

04-01:51:48

Here's the thing. I tended to think—and this goes back to my studies in art, art history-wise—that people don't necessarily pay a lot of attention to the arts communities that Black artists create, and in particular, here on the West Coast, wherein they pay a lot more attention to you if you're on the East Coast. And that in itself becomes a whole 'nother kind of way in which the art world kind of operates. So that's why if you don't go to New York and you never get mentioned—see, David was trying to get me to move to New York when I was there, and I almost did it, but I got the job at San Diego. So having an opportunity to actually have access—that word comes up again—access to the technology. I didn't know of E[AI] back then, and whether or not I could actually get access to the video equipment that they might have been affording artists. I didn't know that that was happening in New York. And of course, even if I had have known it, I still had to get *paid*. I was going to get paid to be an instructor at UCSD, so I took it and did not move to New York.

04-01:53:29

Cooks:

Kellie Jones is someone who I greatly admire as a curator and a scholar, and the [curator of the] *Now Dig This!* show, you know, she's based in New York. She shines a spotlight on, from her research, about Black artists in Los Angeles, has this terrific exhibition at the Hammer that has inspired people internationally to really look deeper. I remember when the exhibition was in LA that you performed.

04-01:54:11

Jenkins:

Yeah, we did a performance. It was actually a recreation that Senga had thought that we should do that memorialized, on a certain level, Frank [Parker]. I played Frank's part from the original form of the performance. And you know, it was fun. I mean, the fact that we got three encores was just unbelievable.

04-01:54:40

Cooks:

Yeah, I was there for that, and it was incredible. I wanted you to say something, as someone who's performed for most of your life, [Jenkins laughs] performing now and performing in the seventies, does it feel the same? Do you feel that age again? What's it like to perform with the same people now that you did forty years ago?

04-01:55:04

Jenkins:

Well, I'm not [performing anymore]—well, I guess I am. I mean, you saw that thing I did for 18<sup>th</sup> Street [Arts Center], and that was with Michael Delgado, the original member of what becomes the Othervisions band.

04-01:55:22

Cooks:

Okay. Let's for the record, what's the name of the performance? I want to make sure—

04-01:55:28

Jenkins:

Let's see, what was the name of that performance? Oh, *Good Trouble*.

04-01:55:34

Cooks: Okay, thank you.

04-01:55:37

Jenkins: You know, trying to make a little commentary in regards to getting people out to vote, and of course the remembrance of John Lewis.

04-01:55:49

Cooks: And you're singing, and it's lovely!

04-01:55:50

Jenkins: Oh, thank you. [laughs]

04-01:55:54

Cooks: Do you feel different performing now than you did a long time ago, like in the eighties or seventies, or does it feel the same?

04-01:56:05

Jenkins: Let's say like that last performance, it's different, because I'm doing it right here at home in my studio, and I don't have to do all the rigors of what it takes to—you see, the other thing about all that work, I primarily had to create the production of those works and execute the production. I was the director, the performer, the technician. Because the ones that got videotaped, I was in charge of getting that done. All of that stuff actually goes back to Otis, when they were talking to us about conceptual art, that if you're going to do it, you've got to document it yourself. And not only document it, you might have to write about it, as well. That's where that magazine that you've probably have also heard of or seen called *High Performance*—I was getting my work published in *High Performance*, primarily because I was making it sure that I got it documented, and then I'd have to write about it to submit it to the magazine. [phone dings]

04-01:57:29

Cooks: Ulysses, I wanted to ask you a question about writing.

04-01:57:35

Jenkins: Uh-huh.

04-01:57:35

Cooks: Because now that you're more famous than ever—

04-01:57:40

Jenkins: Oh, *really*? [laughs]

04-01:57:42

Cooks: Yes, and people are writing about your work more than ever. Does the critical reception of your work change—or how does it influence you? Or does it have any impact on you at all when you read what people are writing now about your work?

04-01:58:01

Jenkins:

Well you see, the thing is what I end up having to realize, first and foremost, is that they're just catching up with me, okay? And I mean, it's flattering. I won't deny that much about it. Because I had a show in New York a couple—now it's a couple of years ago at E[AI], and I couldn't get to the show. I was so upset about that, because the weather was so bad you couldn't fly into New York, so my flight got canceled, so I missed the show. But Maren went to it in New York and told me how much the audience really was into my work, which was nice to hear. But I'm sorry I wasn't there.

04-01:59:00

I still came back there, because they had me set up with two other shows: one at EMPAC [Experimental Media and Performing Arts Center] [near] Albany [at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute], and another one at ICA [Institute of Contemporary Art at the University of Pennsylvania]. When I was at the show—maybe I didn't send you the—they recorded the question-and-answer session that I had at EMPAC after they showed my work. And this one lady, who had gone to the New York show, asked me this very interesting question, just in terms of how did I create the variances that were in my work? I said, "Well, on a certain level it had a lot to do with the changing in technology. You know, the technology would force you to have to rethink your working style and concepts." And then, the other thing was, of course, that I'm rethinking this notion of doggerel.

04-02:00:26

Cooks:

You are?

04-02:00:26

Jenkins:

Yeah, because doggerel doesn't stay the same. I mean, it moves with everything else.

04-02:00:31

Cooks:

Okay.

04-02:00:33

Jenkins:

That's what you see in the work. They're all different ways in which I see doggerel, and which also slips over into the music that I start making with the band. I'm just fortunate that this band that I end up having are just some very good musicians. And of course, they also would move in the direction that I was trying to go into. I don't know if I said this before, but when I first started working with the band, I had problems communicating with them about what I was thinking in conjunction to the music. But like I said, having to study other musicians—Miles [Davis] was one major one, and the way that he was thinking about how he wanted to change his music, but understanding the notions of improvisation. Because you find this notion of improvisation, in particular, in the ritual context of African art. And you start to realize that that's a natural context that we, as Black people, practice to that extent, even in our lives.

04-02:02:14

Cooks:

So, Ulysses, we're coming to a close of our conversation, and I wanted to really get a sense of what you're thinking about for the future, because everything you've been talking about—improvisation, right, it's an ongoing aspect of Black survival. You're rethinking the notion of doggerel. You have work to be made, and you're having a retrospective that's coming up. In our conversation we've talked about you winning the National Endowment for the Arts fellowship three times. You were awarded the Black Filmmakers Hall of Fame first place award in experimental video in 1990 and in 1992.

04-02:03:03

Jenkins:

That's when I was living in Oakland.

04-02:03:06

Cooks:

Can you give us a sense of your vision for your art in the future, and really what you would like people to understand about your work, given this retrospective?

04-02:03:19

Jenkins:

Well you know, when you think about SpaceX, which was supposedly sending some astronauts today to the space station, I—during this rediscovery, I've been going through my old work—or for that matter, my video technician that works with me now—and we came across this video that I hadn't finished, which was very interesting. I'd forgotten about this video, that I'd even started making it. We finished it, because I just needed to for this retrospective. But it's a video that starts off—do you remember—maybe you don't—the opening for a program called *The Outer Limits*?

04-02:04:15

Cooks:

I do, yes, but tell other people for the record. Tell everyone what it's like.

04-02:04:21

Jenkins:

I used the opening for *The Outer Limits*, and it has that theremin sound. [sings tones] And then the guy talks about, well, "We're going to take control of your TV set," and all this kind of stuff, which I really—I always loved that commentary. And then it cuts to—which I had forgotten I had done—these images of these astronauts spacewalking in the space shuttle while making the current space station. It's amazing, because the footage was—NASA was sending this footage on the Internet, and I decided to record it, a little *ZGrass* thing there. And then it goes from that and it cuts to Apple, the location of Apple in Silicon Valley. And then it cuts to all these people in a room that I guess they are making—yeah, I think they're making the first Macintosh computers. When you see that, that automatically gives you a time variable of when this video was made. So then it cuts to all these kids working with computers, portable, small portable computers. And then it cuts back to the astronauts in the space station. And then it eventually cuts back to this website that was also being made available by NASA so that you could hear the communication between the astronauts and NASA in Houston. And I hadn't

finished the video, so then I just re-added that *Outer Limits* insignia to the end of the video, and I end it.

04-02:06:40

Cooks: What's it called, Ulysses?

04-02:06:44

Jenkins: Okay, hold on, hold on—you want it. Oh God! [gets out of chair] [Cooks laughs]

04-02:06:49

Tewes: Let's pause for a second. [break in audio] All right. We are back from a break, and you were just about to [tell] us, Ulysses, about some of your newest work.

04-02:06:58

Jenkins: Well, I was just going to say that the name of this video was *Arizona Back Below the Deep Blue Sea*, and that's sort of a phrase that Jimi Hendrix had used for—it's either in one of his songs, or a song that he was going to create. Because when you see the video, it also shows not only the astronauts, but it shows the Earth below that's in the environment that they're flying through, obviously. So—

04-02:07:39

Cooks: This is incredible that you were able to finish a work that you found in your own archives.

04-02:07:46

Jenkins: Yeah, well, it was nice, it was nice. I have had a little bit of slowdown. I had wanted to try to get back with Lavina [Jones], but that's not necessarily going to be happening, because I think she moved to Washington, the State of Washington, but we're still in contact online. And when you ask about the future, I can only say that it's unknown at this time.

04-02:08:28

Cooks: Will that video be in your show at the Hammer?

04-02:08:33

Jenkins: I hope so. I've just got to get Erin and Meg [Onli at the Institute of Contemporary Art] to take a look at it. I don't even know what videos they're going to show yet.

04-02:08:45

Cooks: So how involved do you like to be in the exhibition of your work?

04-02:08:49

Jenkins: With this show, I've got to see. Because they've taken so much stuff out of my studio, man, I don't know what they're going to show. And then every once in a while, when I run into Erin she goes, "Oh hey, I want to show you this!" And, "Have you seen this?" And there is like stuff that I had written long ago,

forgotten about, and they've got it. I mean, they're like some gold miners or something. I'm like, Jesus!

04-02:09:20

Cooks: That's the work of the curator.

04-02:09:23

Jenkins: Yeah, but you know, at least—the person that you're going to be exposing, you've got to let me have some kind of say-and-so in the—

04-02:09:32

Cooks: And when does the show open, Ulysses?

04-02:09:36

Jenkins: I don't have a specific date, other than the first show opens in the fall, next fall.

04-02:09:44

Cooks: The show at the Hammer next fall?

04-02:09:47

Jenkins: No, not at the Hammer. At ICA. It starts at ICA in Philadelphia.

04-02:09:53

Cooks: Oh, terrific!

04-02:09:54

Jenkins: And then it comes to the Hammer the following winter.

04-02:10:00

Cooks: Okay, great.

04-02:10:04

Jenkins: So you know, I guess they're getting me just in time for Yo History Month.

04-02:10:14

Cooks: [laughs] Okay, well, we'll look forward to it, Ulysses. You've been very generous with your time and your memories.

04-02:10:24

Jenkins: As I've said to you before, there's a whole lot of stuff that I just haven't had a chance to actually realize. I think you have this, but I'm going to play you this one tune off of one of my CDs that I did, if you can bear with me here.

04-02:10:58

Cooks: Which CD is it?

04-02:11:01

Jenkins: This is from *Turquoise Blue*.

04-02:11:03

Cooks: Okay.

04-02:11:03

Jenkins:

Track eight, called "Life." [music plays from CD] [Ulysses Jenkins sings on the recording] "I've lost a lot of love in my life, the parental responsibilities/ I've wandered through this life, looking for what's out there for me/ At times becoming contrary, not interested in formalities/ Pursuing what will be will be [sings along with recorded music] and calling myself free/ I've been a good Samaritan, I've been crying/ [motions tears falling down face] Tried being higher and higher than, lost my soul but found it again/ Someone said, 'Walk in my shoes,' but mostly I've been paying dues/ With experimental lifestyles, which were revolutionary, too/ Defying my responsibilities, some of them I [lose]/ Some were consequential—" [points and says over the music] inconsequential, now—"some of them I choose/ I've been a good Samaritan, I've been crying/ [motions tears falling from down his face] Tried being higher and higher than, lost my soul and found it again/ Again, again, again/ Ooh, ooh, ooh/ So what do you do when life continues/ Creating your own liberties, while most folks seemed trapped to me/ I've been a good Samaritan, I've been crying/Tried being higher and higher than, lost my soul but found it again/ I've been a good Samaritan, I've been crying/ Tried being higher and higher than, lost my soul and found it again/ Again, again." [music ends, and Cooks and Tewes clap] Thank you, thank you, thank you.

04-02:15:32

Cooks:

Thank you, Ulysses. We're going to end it here.

04-02:15:36

Jenkins:

Yeah, I thought that that song would help summarize the interview.

04-02:15:41

Cooks:

Thank you.

04-02:15:44

Jenkins:

So just remember, [sings] "I've been a good Samaritan." Yeah!

04-02:15:52

Cooks:

All right! Thanks, Ulysses.

04-02:15:55

Tewes:

[laughs] Thank you both for your time.

04-02:15:56

Jenkins:

Huh?

04-02:15:58

Tewes:

Thank you!

04-02:15:59

Jenkins:

Oh yeah, you're quite welcome.

[End of Interview]