



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Carolyn Lawrence

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Transcript

Preface

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 11.5.3. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Speakers are indicated by their initials.

Interview

Carolyn Lawrence

AFRICOBRA Interviews

Tape CL

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(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: If you can just tell me your name, looking at me, and the fact that you were an AFRICOBRA member. If you can say your name, I was a member of AFRICOBRA.

CL: Carolyn Mims Lawrence, and I was a member of AFRICOBRA.

Q: If you could tell us a little bit about your participation in the Wall of Respect.

(Background/Off-Mike)

CL: I was one of the members of AFRICOBRA, and I was invited to participate. And I worked with William Walker, who is a muralist. And, as Barbara mentioned before, he helped or did obtain the building on which the mural was painted. And I helped him with the section honoring black Muslims. And it was just a good experience for me. He was like a mentor in that effort. And I also worked on the newspaper stand, which was right at the corner. Because I came in kind of on the tail-end of things. And that's the way in which I contributed.

Q: How was the experience with creating the wall? Was it fun? Was it interesting? What did you find?

CL: Well, I thought there was just so much energy out there. And it was just a dynamic situation, because you had the artists working, the community reacting to what was being done. And I thoroughly enjoyed it.

Q: Did you feel ... we were talking earlier about almost like an army of people around that you guys were able to see. Did you feel threatened, at some point?

CL: Well, during that particular event, to see them up there on the building was disconcerting. Very, very ... it took me back quite a bit, because they were so unexpected and so out of character with the intent of the whole project.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: Could you repeat the last part that you were saying?

CL: I was just saying that seeing these people on the top of the building, opposite the mural, armed, it was very disconcerting. And I was just startled. I was startled by their presence, because it was very out of keeping and out of character with what was going on.

Q: What would be your interpretation of why were they there? Do you think they were afraid of ... they were actually aware of the power of that wall and of the meaning of it? I mean, what was your interpretation of them being there?

CL: Well, I was just so startled. I wasn't quite sure, but I knew that they felt threatened. Or someone. Some person or presence or some group felt threatened by what was going on. And I just didn't quite know how to take it.

Q: Were you surprised at the importance that the Wall of Respect ended up having? What it represents for the black art movement. The creation of that wall. Were you surprised?

CL: No, because I've always felt that art was very, very powerful. So, in some ways, I was not surprised. In other words to ... in other ways, to be in the community and to see the dynamic of what was going on was very surprising.

Q: Could you elaborate a little bit ... I mean, the fact that there's a lot of women represented in some of the art

from AFRICOBRA. The figure of a woman empowered. Is that important? And why does it repeat, especially in the piece that we have of you, in this room, today?

CL: I think I got lost in your question.

Q: Is it important, the figure of women, of representing women? I see that there's a lot of it in some of the art that we see today in this room. Why is it important?

CL: Well, it's very important because women have been the centers of the black family. So it was very important that a woman's image be seen. And I think that it ... it's speaks to the women in the community. You know, it certainly speaks to me that women have an important role to play in our society, and certainly in our families, as mothers, as caretakers.

Q: Can you talk to us a little bit about how important it was for AFRICOBRA to work as a collective, instead of focusing on the individual needs of an artist, but more so as a collective, and the idea of responsibility in society? If you can build a little bit about those important (Inaudible)

CL: Well, I think I'm freezing

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: To me, one of the important things of AFRICOBRA as a movement, and to separate maybe from other kind of art that was going on in that time, was the fact of the social responsibility. Why was that important? You can just maybe mention that at some point, or elaborate. Just in that that was something to really consider.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: The fact that you were working not for museums or galleries, that you were creating art for the people.

CL: Well, again, you've got to look at this in the time that all these things were happening. And I know, as a student at the University of Texas, having come through that, having stood in the lines, and participated in the pickets, and then finally having to ... having graduated. So when I came out of school, I was just more anxious to see things change. I knew that change was coming. I didn't know how it was going to manifest itself. And having just a few years of teaching in elementary, I was just happy to be in Chicago, working. And I have always taken my art very seriously, so I wanted this art of mine, and of other artists, to correct some ills, to make some changes about how people lived, African American people lived, and how they thought about themselves; how they cared for their families; how they spent their money; how they valued ... valued things that were important to them. And it was important that they not be led by that present media to embrace things that had no real value, and that completely negated their whole existence.

Q: If you don't mind, maybe for background, while we're seeing this, if you can just briefly tell us some of the events that happened in that specific period of time, back in the sixties, that maybe made an impact in the creation of AFRICOBRA.

CL: Well, yes. Of course, the death of Martin Luther King was just paramount. And the kind of reaction that people had in the communities on the West Side, the violence, was just astounding. And seen in that context, all of us, as artists, were very concerned about what this world is going to ... what this world is going to be like ... what it was going to be like, after his death. And we were very aware of the many problems in our communities. And having a great love for our people. And that's what that mural was about, showing images that expressed the love for people who had contributed so much in their lives in the community, and for ... for the world.

Q: Would you say that the positive aspect of AFRICOBRA is more focused in the positive ... it was a reaction for all the violence and awful stuff that was going on, that preceded it? Would you say that?

CL: (Overlap) It was a very positive reaction to the violence that was going on.

Q: And the fact that you guys didn't focus in the victimness of which was happening in the entire black art, that you were just more focused in the pride, focused in the heroes, focusing in the idea of unite, and the social responsibility of those aspects. Could you maybe mention some of those? Do you agree?

CL: Yes. I think that the wall certainly demonstrated the images of people who showed great strength, great endurance, great stability. And those images, I felt, were appreciated by the community and anyone else who saw them.

Q: Would you mind telling us, for the audience that doesn't know about the history of the Wall of Respect, what happened with the Wall of Respect, and the fact that it's no longer here, how did it disappear? Do you mind just

telling that to the camera?

CL: Well, I'm not sure that I have all the details. I know that the building on which the mural was painted came down, in 1971. And that parts of it were moved to Malcolm X College.

Q: What was the impact of the Wall of Respect to maybe other muralists that you see right now in Chicago? Do you see that? Do you see an impact or an influence? Because there's quite a few murals that, in a way, seems to have been inspired, they have some kind of ... would you agree with that?

CL: Oh, yes. I would agree with that. That murals all over this city and all over the country were inspired by the Wall of Respect. And I know that, in my own teaching, I emphasize quite a bit mural painting inside the building. And they, too, remained intact. They were not marked on. And this was over a period of time. Students accepted them as a presence in their everyday life. In their everyday lives.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: So, Carolyn, could you talk a little bit about the ... you were part of the In Search of a Nation. So if you could ...

CL: Part of the what?

Q: In Search of a Nation, that exhibit called Ten in Search of the Nation.

CL: Uh-huh. That was the one in ...

Q: You were a part of that, right?

CL: Uh-huh.

Q: So if you don't mind just starting just by saying I was part of this exhibit or this show called Ten in Search of a Nation. Just elaborate what that meant, and who was part of that review, and what it represented, and why it was important. And where did it take place? Just a little bit about that event. Just by starting to say I was part of.

CL: Okay. I was part of the exhibition, Ten in Search of a Nation that took place at the Studio Museum in Harlem. And that was a real thrill for me. And all of the members of AFRICOBRA participated, or their work was displayed. One thing that I was impressed with is the sound of music. When you often go into galleries, it's quiet. And people are completely engaged in looking at the work. But AFRICOBRA was about creating an atmosphere for the work; creating a background; creating life for the work. So I found it to be an exciting exhibition, for that reason.

Q: Could you talk a little bit of what in your work makes it AFRICOBRA? What it is (Inaudible) And also if you can talk a little bit about the history of (Inaudible) you joined AFRICOBRA, and how that ... and which specific characteristics or concepts of AFRICOBRA you assimilated in your work and what was important.

CL: Well, when I joined AFRICOBRA, we were developing the criteria for our work. And so I strongly supported all of those things. And having had a background from IIT and with the Chicago public schools, approaching the idea of problem-solving. You give certain criteria or you set up certain requirements for art to be developed. And then you develop it within boundaries or within limits. And I thought that was very good. It forced the artists to exercise some discipline in terms of creating. And I thought that was a good thing. And in my teaching, I also emphasized that approach, because it calls for artists to search, search deep, and to think. To think about what they're doing, instead of being all action-oriented. And so when we were told that we'd like to see those coolade colors, and bright, intense color ... because we know that black people do like color, and often they like very bright, lively colors. And so I used them in my work. Also lettering was not ever a problem for me. And I wanted to make sure it was incorporated into the image, so that it was not a sign but it was well integrated and developed into the design of the piece.

Q: Could you mention some of the other artists that were part of that exhibit?

CL: Well, Barbara Hogue, naturally. Napoleon Henderson. And Jeff Donaldson. And also Howard Mallory. There were others, I think. There were others.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: The art world, in that period of time, was mostly male dominated. Was it important, the fact that there were three women that were women, in AFRICOBRA? And what was their angle, in a way? What was different and why was it important?

CL: Well, I think it was important in that the black community is full of women. Has women. And they're part of our culture. So I never felt, though, however, any different from any other AFRICOBRA member. I felt I was accepted because I had a background in art, and I understood what I wanted to say and how I wanted to express it, and that I had the knowledge of the language, and that was good. And I'm glad that that was that atmosphere, because I'd never thought that my work was evaluated as a piece coming from a woman.

Q: But do you think that there was anything of the fact that you were a woman that added into the group? Or it wouldn't make any difference, it was more just considered as an artist.

CL: Well, I think that women do have a kind of point of view and a sensibility that men might not have. And so I think it's reflected in the work. And ...

Q: Would you say that maybe AFRICOBRA, if it didn't have women, it wouldn't be the same? It would have been like ... I mean (Inaudible) what AFRICOBRA was as a movement? Would you say that?

CL: Well, I think they did. It's almost hard to put it into words as to how they did. But there was always ... part of it was having to do with ... our meetings were often held in the general household. Household. And Jae was there on her sewing machine, sewing up the artwork. And we would stop doing something or talking, and she'd go into the kitchen, and make lunch. And, I mean, how can you ignore that and how can you say that that has no effect on how everybody related to each other? So I think that the presence of women did add a flavor to the group that would not have existed if it were all men. And we were strong, outspoken women. We weren't ... we weren't sitting along the side. So our presence was always felt, and not in a divisive way. And I guess that's the reason why I never felt as if being a woman was that big a factor, because we spoke our minds. And the men in the group encouraged that. I mean, they listened. You know, they listened. We were important.

Q: Would you say that by looking at the Respect that it was relevant after the program? That it was a good thing? I mean, did it make an impact in the society?

CL: Yes, I thought it was very relevant to our society.

Q: How would you say, do you think it's relevant now? That the (Inaudible) is still going on, and there's like a new generation of artists, still creating AFRICOBRA work? Do you think it's still relevant as (Inaudible) I know it's a different history, but what would you say is relevant about AFRICOBRA now?

CL: It is as relevant then ... relevant now as it was then, and probably even more so, because these issues have not been solved, I'm sad to say. These issues exist. You could say, in some ways, that some people may have earned more or be more economically sound. But then there is always this undercurrent of things that need to be dealt with. And the messages of, say, for example, of unifying the family are very, very important. Because I think our youth seem to be more detached from their parents, and their uncles, and their aunts, and their cousins. And far too many of them are rather alone and isolated.

Q: Carolyn, can you talk a little bit about the role of Jeff Donaldson in the creation of not only the wall but also AFRICOBRA. And what was your personal relation with Jeff? Do you have any specific story to tell about your relationship with Jeff Donaldson?

CL: I don't know if I can think of a specific story to tell there. I know that Jeff was definitely a presence. He would be a presence anywhere, you know. Tall, thin, lanky. Strong opinions, you know, a about everything. But with his strong opinions, he never made you feel as if you had nothing to say that was as important.

Q: So he was a good listener?

CL: Yes, he was a very good listener, and a very creative person. The conference that he led, over in ... I think it was CONFABA at Northwestern, it was just amazing. And it was just a beautiful spiritual atmosphere. I know the first ... I think the day or so ... to fear ... to hear Phil Cohran play, I'll just never forget that. You know, there are many things that happen during your life. Some things, as forgetful as you may be, you don't forget. And we were in a room that was quite enclosed, and the sound of that music was just wonderful. He knew how to bring people together and to create an atmosphere that was very sensual and wonderful.

Q: Can you tell us a little bit about that first meeting that you had that it was decided to create the AFRICOBRA? And what was the role of Jeff Donaldson? Would you consider him like the leader? How would you define his role?

CL: Well, I was not a founder, so I was not at the first meeting. I came in at a later time. And, you know, he did invite me to join the group. And I was immediately impressed with everybody and how things were done.

Q: What was your work difference before and after AFRICOBRA, and how did AFRICOBRA impact the way you

work and your vision?

CL: Well, I think that the way I dealt with figures and the way I dealt with the background was very different, after that. There was a freeing up of my way of expression, and I was able to incorporate feeling into the work; that it was not just about a figure or a still life or ... and there were scenes, but I examined the subject in terms of what I wanted to convey to the viewer.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: Do you want to go maybe with what Kenny was asking you, first, and then I'll ask you (Inaudible) questions?

K: Tell us why it matters.

CL: AFRICOBRA, you mean?

K: Yes. AFRICOBRA. Well, I think it matters and ... because this was an opportunity for many artists to work together. And that is not always an easy thing for people to do. But I think when you understand that communication with a broad number of African Amer... American people is essential, that all your personal opinions or personal problems with things begin to be overridden by the importance of working together. There was a show over West, at what was, I guess, called Amphitheatre, at the time. And we were over there, with our art, hanging our pieces, and working well into the morning, together. And it did not seem to be a problem. And I think, in discussing our work, in evaluating our work ... I know I had the greatest respect for what other people had to say about it. And how well it lived up to the criteria that the work communicate to the community. Important, important, messages. I know, in the one that I did with the children in it ...

(Background/Off-Mike)

CL: The painting I did with the children in it, it was so important that children be seen not only in their innocence, but that they develop a freeness of spirit. And they need to do it at a very young age, and keep that freeness of spirit as they develop. Because all of us had lived through segregation, in our own personal schooling and upbringing. And so we know what that does, how that kind of atmosphere tends to shut down the beauty of your inner spirit. I will never forget. I mean, I can ... there are flashbacks of those water fountains, with the colored ... colored people, and then the water fountain for white people. And it also, for our parents and our uncles and our aunts, who had to live through that time, their spirits were often crushed. And so all we had was each other. We had each other to rely on. We had each other to bolster our nature. Bolster or en... encourage our talents. And to renew our ... our courage. And so when ... when you go through that kind of life, you don't want that for your children. You don't want that for anybody's child. And so those children, as far as there in Langley, were just as important as my children or anybody else's children. Your children. So I think that's important as a movement. There was, I felt, a real reason for being. I felt a real importance, that my life had importance because of AFRICOBRA, and that opportunity to work with other artists.

K: That's terrific. Children of the future, huh?

CL: Yes, definitely. Because we're always planting the seeds for the future.

K: And how do you plant those seeds?

CL: Well, you plant those seeds by allowing them to know that they are worthy and important and necessary to society as a whole. Necessary to our world.

K: Children of the future.

CL: Yes. Uh-huh. Uh-huh.

Q: So going back to AFRICOBRA, do you think ... talk to us a little bit about the process of critique. You guys got together and just talked about each other's work, and just about the process.

CL: Well, we would go from artist to artist, and I don't think we usually started off always defending or talking about our work. It was just there. And that everybody had a chance to give their opinions about it. Their evaluation of it. And it was never destructive. It was always supportive.

Q: But it was strong? It was a bold statement? I mean, how was (Inaudible) the process? Was there any particular member that was very outspoken, in other words, or another that was more quiet?

CL: Well, I think we all spoke up. I don't think there's any one person, because if ... as dominating a person as Jeff could be, he was no more outspoken than anyone else, in terms of evaluating the work. He always allowed input from everyone.

Q: Is there any specific piece done maybe another member of AFRICOBRA that especially touched you or influenced you that you can mention?

CL: Gosh, that's pretty hard to single out. I guess I was just too touched by so much work.

Q: Or any one that comes to your mind just right now, a very specific piece that maybe ... if it made an impact on your memory, somehow. Maybe you can talk about ...

CL: I think Wadsworth's Angela, to me was just such a powerful piece. That certainly touched me.

Q: In which way? Could you go a little bit more in detail about what was so special about the piece, apart from the subject matter?

CL: Well, I think the power. The power of it. And the force of the circular movements. It really did feel as if that piece could just come across ... come off the wall. Completely off the wall. A lot of the colors and the shapes sort of merged around the edges. Her afro kind of blended into the background. But then the face had a very strong, sculptural quality about it. The planes of the face. The cheeks and the chin. And the forehead. They were very strong. And there are a lot of women, you know, who are not noisy women, but there's an inner strength, and a hardness, and a sculptural quality about how they interact and what they do among other people. He captured that strength of women. He really did.

Q: Could you talk a little bit about (Inaudible) I think it's called Unite.

CL: Yes. That's another favorite of mine I have. Barbara is a fantastic printmaker. And she had a way of taking forms that were simply overlapped and laid out, and there's a power in her message, as well. The verticality of the forms is about strength and stability.

(Background/Off-Mike)

(END OF TAPE)