



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Transcript of interview with Eddie Owens  
Martin (St. E.O.M.)

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# Transcript

## Preface

### Tape-recorded Interview with Eddie Martin at the Artist's Home in Buena Vista, Georgia

March 6, 1984

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

#### Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "themselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: "cause," was transcribed as "because," "fore" as "before," "yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "\_\_\_\_" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

## Interview

**EM: Eddie Martin**

**WV: Willem Volkersz**

**AW: Allan Winkler**

**[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. M2-A]** [23-minute tape sides]

[Volkersz was accompanied by his wife Diane and Allan Winkler—WV]

WV: You had to go to Washington, D.C., to a meeting?

EM: All them \_\_\_\_ folks sang up there.

WV: Yes, that's right. How have you been?

EM: Sit down there. You can sit over there.

WV: Thank you.

EM: Oh, I been holding on.

WV: Good.

EM: I'm slowly going down, but manage to keep surviving.

WV: You look fine.

EM: Well, I feel pretty good. My creativity, though, is gone.

WV: What do you mean?

EM: Well, see, I have to do this [taps something related to fortune telling: \_\_\_\_\_—Ed.] for a living. . . .

WV: Yeah.

EM: . . . and it's got where I. . . . I used to could combine the two.

WV: Right.

EM: And I can't do it no more.

WV: Huh?

EM: So I have to put the art down and do this for a living, to make the bread. I'm not on the social security and all that mess.

WV: Uh huh.

EM: Which I don't go nowhere these days, anyway.

WV: Do you ever sell any artwork at all?

EM: I sold a thousand dollars worth here in December, to a bank out here in Buena Vista [pronounced Byoo-na—Ed.]. I have. . . . A few collectors have come here and wanted to put you under contract, you know, but I don't want to be bothered with that contract nonsense because if you're creating, you want to create what you want to create, and he wanted me to contract to make these sculptures and so forth, and. . . .

*[Interruption in taping]*

EM: I really didn't. . . . I made them, I finished them off, and put life into them, and a black lad I had would, you know, keep [adding] them up until they got to the last adding, and then I'd go there and work on the base and put the finishing touches to it—which I have done with most all this work around here. But they won't never mention nothing about blacks being, you know, helping me, I always tell them that the whites had nothing to do with it, but black help is the one that done this.

WV: Right.

EM: But they won't put nothing. . . . You know how they are about black people; they don't want to give no credit for nothing. But they all very smart, a lot of them. And I had some talented lads here with me. I wish to hell I had them back now. I got a thing I'm trying to start on up there, that over there where them eyes are on that building.

WV: Right.

EM: I'm going to call, I'm going to make it into a shrine before I pass on out of this world—or from this world to the next one. Go and get reincarnated. I hope it's a constructive person and not some evil person.

WV: When I've shown slides of that building with the eyes on it, I've often wondered where those eyes came from? Is that, where did these kinds of images come from, for you? Right out of there, huh? [meaning EM's head—Ed.]

EM: Yeah. Well, you see, I've done a lot of research into different cults and religions and all such as that. And I call myself Pasaquan, which you see the name over the door. Outside.

WV: Oh, outside, yeah.

EM: And that's the next new religion that's going to come into the world, when the time comes for it. I don't know when it's going to come on full stage, but something's got to give, something's got to come up into the world besides what we have now, because the thing. . . . This organized religion is on the way out—as I can see

it—because it doesn't serve the people's needs. People need to go back to being natural people, being themselves. I don't haul in with all this conformity: you've got to cut your hair, you cain't have a beard, you got to have on a tie, you got to have on this, and all such as that. I don't believe in that. I believe in being a natural person. And when my God created Man, he gave him rituals, and Man has, in his greed, has robbed Man of all his dances and rituals of the hair, and rituals of taking care of the beard. That's all been robbed and taken away from them. It was known back in the ancient days, among the ancients in the land of [Mu, Moo], in the land of Atlantis; they knew about those things, but when it went down, the cult went down with them. This has been, there's a fringe around where you can see signs of it in India, Burma, China, Japan, where they have the hair all up, and so forth and so on. And in the Abyssinian sculptures, you see the braided beard and so forth and so on, and that's all high culture, or high skill, or high art. But Man has lost it. But I went back and dug it up.

WV: What did you dig it up in? Is it in books?

EM: The Kingsborough edition. I went through in the library in New York City. There's five of them. But two and three is the most important ones. And while I was researching in there, I come upon a picture of a god, Quis-satl, and he was sitting on a dais. And his hair was all bound up, and his hair, and he pointed his hair to his head. So when I saw that, I took that as a symbol and a sign. I said, "That means something." Well, from that day on—and around that time I saw a news travelogue of the Sikhs of India, which was a military \_\_\_\_\_ of the British Empire.

WV: Um hmm.

EM: They was doing their morning rituals of putting up the hair and wrapping their beard on a string, and to me that was the most fascinating and difficult thing that I had ever seen. So I thought, "Well, I'm going to research and do in there, and learn how to do all of that." So I began to bind my hair, and grow my beard out, and wrap it on strings, and so forth, and put jewels in it. But you see that I was never given any publicity on that, of what I was trying to do. It's just. . . . I was in the streets of New York, where people saw me, and was ignored. And I couldn't get any hold, and I wouldn't conform, and I wouldn't do this. So I had to go into this thing of the card-reading business to be able to get some money and to learn how to do those, read the cards.

So I learned, and then in '57 I came back here and I started to build and do these things. Now if I had a had something more. . . . But on this hillside here, that was all I had, and it was all full of ditches and gullies, and water run down out of the house. I've got it all scotched now, where the water runs, and don't wash away the land. But it was a very hard ordeal, and I built up these things, and built these—and could-a done more if I could have just devoted my time to the art, you see, but I had to run out there, direct my workers, my helpers, and then come back in here with some neurotic person and deal with them and two or three other, and run back out there, keep them straight, run back in here, do a little more, and it. . . . And I used to combine all that, but as I say, I can't do that anymore. It just, it won't, it don't work out. So I just figure, well, you'll just have to cast the art aside.

But I have started this building out there, which I hope to make a shrine in there before I pass on, but I don't have any helpers now. This lad I've got here now, he doesn't adapt to anything like a artwork; he's got clumsy hands, you know. He doesn't know how to handle the trowel. The other day, I was handing a trowel, and making a thing for a doctor—urologist doctor; I took it to him yesterday. And he said, "You handle that trowel like your hands was made to handle it." I said, "Well, I've got a lot of experience with it."

When I have. . . . I was very skilled at it, when I finally laid it down. But I had this, I can still go back to some. I don't think of it. I'll recapture the skill that I had with it when I was in my height of it. It's too bad that I didn't, but anything Indian, foreign, or not like other things, is cast out of this house, cast out of our country. Everything is conformist and, you know, Christmas to Christmas. And that really ties creative people's hands, with creative ideas. You can't get them in, and you can't get nobody to listen.

WV: Hm. Do you have Indian blood in you?

EM: Yes.

WV: Yeah, that's what I thought.

EM: Yes.

WV: What tribe is it?

EM: Cherokee.

WV: I'll be, huh. What percentage, do you know?

EM: I really don't know. My mother was very Indian looking, and my father, but you know along and way back

and the Indian, it was not popular to be Indian.

WV: (chuckles) Right.

EM: 'Cause otherwise you'd be shipped away to Oklahoma Territory. So they stayed behind and they wasn't shipped away, and it was never mentioned. I remember one time my mother told me that her father was almost a full-blooded Indian. And when she told me, she looked around, said she was afraid somebody would hear her say it, you know. But I never did tell anybody about it, say anything about it. And really, I just forgot about it, until I come back here and began to realize that natural people was [the] most important people in the world, and not these curriculum people that we have on this planet today. It's just a mess. But we gonna always have it, as long as we have the people who are pulling the strings.

WV: There seems to be a lot of people who really appreciate you for the artwork you've done, though, or for the whole, the effort that's here. It's just amazing.

EM: Well, it's been a massive effort, but. . . . And it's taken everything I have made. I have put. . . . I don't know what I put in here. I never kept books on it. I never kept track of what I spent. I just spent from day to day, and what I needed and what I had and what I wanted, I would get. My wants in life is simple: just some food and a bed. That's all I want. I don't want all this opulence and all this luxuriousness. That don't appeal to me at all. I just like to be live simple, and have a car so I can go to the grocery store when I have to go. Are you taping that?

AW: Yes.

WV: I'd like to keep track of. . . . I mean, you've said some very important things the last time I taped you, and it's very useful for me to remember exactly what you said. . . .

EM: Yes.

WV: . . . so I can tell other people about you.

EM: Um hmm.

WV: I've shown your slides, of your work, at some art colleges at times, when I lecture. Most people are just very, very amazed by your work, and the strength of the work, and the power of it.

EM: Um hmm. There's a lot of strength and power in it. But I'd love to do some more again. I'm going to finish that shrine out down there if I can get somebody, but I'm afraid none would take it but this lad here, because he has clumsy hands when he holds something. He holds like this, you know. To be artistic, you got to have artistic hands, you know, where you can. . . . I won't say he couldn't do it, but. . . . I've trained so many and they have left me, I just have a horror of trying to show anybody else. And these are kids that go through these high schools, and they're not. . . . They've been brainwashed. And they're not adaptable, like them kids who dropped out of school. They was anxious to prove that they could do something, and they was anxious to put up, set up these walls with the cement on them. Where I could draw, just to see what I could put on them, you know. And I simplified it, and cut out designs, and measured it all out, and I'd say, "Well, this is the design; you just put this here, and draw a mark around it, and move it over to that marker. I simplified the whole thing for them. But they left. They didn't see me making any money at it, and they want to get on out into the world, so today they're running forklifts in Chicago, in New York and now in Columbus there. [group chuckles]

WV: Uh huh.

EM: I been thinking about trying to get one of them to come back, or a few of them, the one that stayed with me the longest, that helped me do this down here. There's a guy that can do brickwork, but he wants \$12.50 an hour, and I can't pay that.

WV: So there's brick underneath these walls? There's brick and then cement over it?

EM: It's brick walls built up, and then a coat of cement.

WV: Right.

EM: One coat you put on. Then you come back with the last coat, and that smooths it out very good.

WV: Right.

EM: And then you draw in all of these designs. I was laying, thinking, last night. I said, "I just don't see how you've done it all." But anyway, I survived it and did do it.

WV: Isn't this building at the end, isn't that a shrine, as well? I thought maybe it was.

EM: Oh, that's going to be the heal. . . . I was going to call that my healing well. People would come there—there's a well underneath, the old dug well—and I was going to say, "Well, this is my healing well." And people, even today, ask me, "When you going to open the healing well?" Of course it would be psychosomatic healing, you understand, which is a lot of it in the world.

WV: Right, sure.

EM: Just the power of suggestion. But I haven't opened it up. And then, two years ago, I had to go for open-heart surgery. . . .

WV: Oh!

EM: . . . and when I was in the hospital, I had a whole bundle of watercolors, about this big around, about 65 or 70 of them, stolen from me. And a lot of drawings I had had, had done.

WV: Oh, you mean you had them with you in the hospital? Or were they \_\_\_\_\_?

EM: No, no. I left them here.

WV: Ohh.

EM: And I paid someone to stay here and watch this, and when I come out of the hospital, there was a video crew coming here from California to shoot video of me, you know, and I told this boy, I said, "You watch these people," and I said, "Keep your eye on them." But he had a damn girlfriend, and she had to tow his ass off from here, you know, instead of being here to keep his eye on this, and they disappeared. He says he didn't get them, but I think he's a damn liar. He did get them. Because he made a remark to me one day, he said, "I'm going to be very rich one day." I just thought, "Well, how?" to myself, but I didn't give it a serious thought. I didn't know the painting was missing then. I had a feeling something was wrong when I come back from the hospital, but I didn't go look because I had to recover. If I had a found out them paintings was gone, I don't think I would have made it because I would-a had no desire to live. So then, after I got up, I said, "Well now, I'm going to get these paintings, and I'm going to have them all framed up. And I'm going to open up a museum in this place here." But I went, and they was gone. Well, man, it just broke. . . . It almost broke my heart. It killed my spirit almost. But it was a blow to me. I haven't recovered from it yet. I lay some time and cry at night, and then I think, "What can they do with them? They can't never get nothing out of them, unless when I'm dead and gone, they hold on to them for years." But the evil dog that did it, he's evil enough to burn them up!

WV: Ohhh.

EM: Because he destroyed several works of things I have: A necklace, and a big cape I had with these beaded fringe on it—he cut off a couple string [and then]. He was jealous of me, you know, because this video crew here was shooting all this scene on me. Well, hell, they didn't want to shoot him. I drug him in on a couple of scenes.

WV: Oh.

EM: But they cut all the beauty of it out when it was videotaped, when it went on the cable TV. They cut all of that, all the beauty they cut out. They just tried to make it just as flat, and. . . . But I did get a chance to show the braiding of the beard.

WV: Right.

EM: And showed it braided up, so at least I've left my message behind me when I depart from this spirit world and go to the next one.

WV: Well, you know, I'm putting together a show for the Kansas City Art Institute of work by very special artists—like you. And, like I wrote, would there be anything that you might have made that we could put in that show? Possibly something you might want to sell. I would love to see you represented in this exhibition.

EM: Well, let me see. Let me get these. . . . I've got a couple more. They're not framed here. I had some folk scene thing, but I sold him. [moves away—Ed.]

AW: Did I hear a \_\_\_\_\_?

WV: Right. Yeah, right.

*[Interruption in taping]*

[EM brought out a number of paintings—WV]

EM: Well, this is the best one I found laying in here. This is one here of a band, bunch of musicians and dancers.

WV: Oooh. Ahh, this is beautiful.

EM: And these here. . . .

WV: Wow! I'd never seen your. . . .

EM: This is contemporary. This isn't contemporary; this is kind of an Oriental scene there.

WV: Are these gouache or. . . .

EM: Watercolor.

WV: Watercolor, uh huh.

EM: Now here's a contemporary thing: a woman who [wash place, watch plays].

WV: Hmm.

EM: And this is a woman in the tearoom, who when I first started, reading the [tea] leaves and tell fortunes. This is a rural scene: a sharecropper's family with the children and the collard garden and the house.

WV: Ummm. They're terrific. Never had seen these.

EM: Here's a bunch of musicians again.

WV: Do you look at other pictures when you're doing these?

EM: No, I don't.

WV: You just \_\_\_\_\_, right?

EM: No, no. I don't use visualize other [work]. I work from the mind. This is another. This is still life.

WV: Oh, that's beautiful. I love that. Isn't that a nice one?

AW: Yeah.

EM: They need to be framed.

WV: How would you like it if I framed some of these and tried to sell them for you in the show?

EM: Well, I know, but how am I going to get them back if they don't sell?

WV: I could ship them back to you.

EM: Yeah?

WV: We could sign a contract. I have an agreement that we could sign. I would love to have a few of these. This is a beautiful one.

EM: Let me look in here further. I just looked up here now, but I see it, and I think it's gone.

WV: May I take some photographs inside here?

EM: Yes.

WV: Thank you.

[End of interview]