



Smithsonian
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Transcript of interview with Mary T. Smith

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Interview with Mary T. Smith

at the Artist's Home in Hazlehurst, Mississippi

March 2, 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," "theirselves," 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

MS: Mary T. Smith

WV: Willem Volkersz

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. S1-A; 23-minute tape side]

[An interview with Jim Sudduth is recorded on the reverse side of the tape—Ed.]

[This interview, where Volkersz was accompanied by Allan Winkler (AW), took place outside where MS read the words on her signs, accompanied by barking dogs and a chorus of chirping birds.—Ed.]

WV: This is a tape recorder.

MS: You want to take some more? [MS is hard of hearing, and frequently misunderstands my questions.—WV]

WV: No, I just want to talk to you for a minute. This'll put it down on tape. Can you tell me something about how long ago you started to make this? [a garden filled with paintings—WV]

MS: Huh?

WV: How long ago did you start to make this?

MS: How long ago did I make it? It don't take me a long time.

WV: Huh.

MS: Don't take me long.

WV: How many years you been working on it?

MS: I started year before last.

WV: Ah.

MS: About three years ago, I think. Three years ago. Three years I made them pictures, that's three years.
[pause] All right, come 'n ____ go around there.

WV: You come with me.

MS: Yeah, yeah. Oh.

WV: What's this picture say here?

MS: Huh?

WV: What's that say?

MS: "1984. Year." "1984 year." That's it.

WV: Uh huh. Uh huh.

MS: Uh huh, nineteen . . . that's right.

WV: Let's go to that one.

MS: And there up yonder. "De." "De." You can't see "De," but "De Lord is good." "De Lord is good." And "I love the good and hate the bad. The Lord knows I do." And "I thank Him day and night." And "I thank Him day and night." "He is mine." "[Hi!] [Hi], Lord." ["Hi" sounds more like an expression of pleasure, not transcribable.—Ed. & WV]

WV: Oh, that's ____.

MS: "Christmas is gone by. Christmas has gone by. Lord's birth day." [Reading the text in her paintings, MS frequently repeats phrases—WV]

WV: Oh, that's nice.

MS: Yes sir, "The Lord's birth day." And up yonder outside there are the r-e-s-t-r-o-o-m, restroom!

WV: Uh huh.

MS: Restroom! (laughs) Restroom. That's the place, ah hah. Yes, Lord.

WV: Great.

MS: Uh huh. And down yonder, "The Lord is head of the world."

WV: Ahh.

MS: "The Lord is head of the world."

WV: I get it, uh huh.

MS: "He ____ the first day."

WV: Uh huh.

MS: Um hmm. So here's the head of the world. "De Lord is head of the world."

WV: How about this one here?

MS: "Candy. Candy is what I want. Candy."

WV: Candy, eh? Ahh!

MS: That's the, that's the ____ candy, like a ____, a Christmas bun, last Christmas. "Candy is what I want. Candy, candy." (laughs) And then, go around there. Um hmm. In there. Go right here. "Preacher, here am I." Here, here. Get up there. Two ladies standing on the side there, and the preacher, "Here am I."

WV: I got it.

MS: See him in the back, here, "Here am I."

WV: Uh huh, how about that one.

MS: "Are you for the Lord?" See there, that's the preacher, but, "Are you for the Lord?" Asking if they're still [a Lord]. I said on there, "Are you for the Lord?"

WV: That's great.

MS: So they got to say something. Yes.

WV: Uh huh.

MS: And we can't see their mouth here making nothing. I 'nt put nothing there. And. . . .

WV: What'd you put this one on? Is this an old sign? [____—Ed.]

MS: Huh?

WV: Is this an old sign?

MS: Uh huh.

WV: Where'd you get it?

MS: Take care! Be careful, don't be care, what. Out in the woods up yonder, down under the ground, almost. And I couldn't reach it, and I dug. I hit something down under, down in the ground, and I come to find this thing! I put it up there.

WV: Oh, that's great.

MS: I drug it down here from way up yonder in the wood, right yonder.

WV: Uh huh.

MS: Uh huh. I ____ ____.

WV: What's it say up here? "Do. . . ."

MS: "Do you know me?" "Do you know me?" (laughs uproariously) "Do you know me?"

WV: How about this sign here?

MS: "Who is you? Who is you?"

WV: "Who are. . . ." Are you asking me?

MS: Yes. (laughs) That's what that is on there [a sign facing the highway—WV], "Who is you?" That's, that's like anybody can drive up or come up there, "Who is you?" (laughs)

WV: That's great. Is that your barn?

MS: Huh?

WV: Is that your barn?

MS: That barn, oh, that house over there?

WV: Is that yours?

MS: Uh huh.

WV: What do you keep in there?

MS: Oh, nobody living; my sister dead. [Apparently her sister used to live there.—WV]

WV: Uh huh.

MS: Died 1964, and she's dead. And so then my boy put a top on it, five years ago. But he left here. He went back [and all].

WV: What's inside?

MS: Huh?

WV: Work inside?

MS: Work inside? No, it ain't work inside. That's got to be worked inside.

WV: Oh.

MS: You know they tore up inside.

WV: Uh huh?

MS: Uh huh, that's a fact.

WV: You paint your house?

MS: I did it. I painted, but I'm going to paint again. I got three or four bucket of paint in the house now, to get the ____.

WV: Uh huh.

MS: Then I got to paint all this old fence again.

WV: Do you go buy the paint?

MS: I have. . . .

WV: Do you buy it?

MS: I have to buy it.

WV: Ahh.

MS: Yes. [Describes her recipe for whitewash—WV:] 'Course I buyed lime a-lots of times. I mix up lime go on the tin. Take some boiling hot water, like a four, five gallon of boiling hot water, and pour it in into my big pan, and stir and stir and stir and stir, and take my brush and go to work. Ah, I have to stir there. Yeah, all the time.

WV: Where do you get the money to buy the paint?

MS: Where'd I get the money to buy it? To buy [it]? The governor's furnish me little bit money for to live off of, but I'm trying to fix some work for somebody can see when they come by here. [Dear, Here] governor, governor. Yes, Lord, ['a course]. I don't get [earn—WV] nothing myself.

WV: Huh.

MS: No, too old to work.

WV: How old are you, Mary?

MS: How old is me? Well, my birthday when it come, I be a eighty number. I come to the world 1904.

WV: 1904?

MS: Uh huh, you know what that is!

WV: You're going to be eighty years old.

MS: That number's it. (laughs) That's right. That's right.

WV: That's great.

MS: That's right.

WV: Ah.

MS: Yeah.

WV: You going to have a birthday party?

MS: Huh?

WV: You going to have a birthday party?

MS: No. But I have some people that I worked for. I started working for them when I was seventeen years old, and they ain't never missed from calling me up every birthday.

WV: Wonderful.

MS: Every birthday a letter come. So much in this one, so much in that one, so much in that one, so much in that one, so much in this, and that ____ ____.

WV: What kind of a job did you have?

MS: Job did I have?

WV: You worked for those people?

MS: I house-cleaned, and yard-cleaned, and they used to use wood, and stayed up kind of stair in the house, and I had to tote I don't know how many loads of wood upstairs. They have a long porch, long [as long as from—WV] here to that fence, and I have pull 'em up that high, full of wood.

WV: Huh.

MS: Full of wood. Down in [Wesson]. That when they lived there then, [Wesson].

WV: Huh.

MS: But now they. . . . The old lady is dead, and. . . .

WV: Yeah.

MS: The old lady's dead, and her daughter. . . . They had a daughter, two daughters by Jackson [Mississippi—WV]. One daughter fifteen miles west of Brookhaven.

WV: Um hmm.

MS: Um hmm, so they all come by here and see about me, all the time.

WV: That's good. So they take care of you.

MS: Yeah, they come by and see about me.

WV: Do you go to church?

MS: Sir?

WV: Do you go to church?

MS: I go sometime. I don't go so often now. I just stay here at home.

WV: Um hmm.

MS: They ain't [catching, kitchen] over there.

WV: Uh huh. What made you decide to do all these paintings?

MS: How that?

WV: How did you start? Why did do them? Why are you doing them?

MS: How I do when I start paint?

WV: Why?

MS: Where?

WV: Why?

MS: Yeah. Wait. Am I why?

WV: Yeah, why did you start to do them?

MS: Why did I start?

WV: Yes.

MS: Ahh, I started 'cause. . . . [mulling:] How, why I started. Now. You see, I started. White just shows up. And see 'n dark you can't see. [still misunderstanding the question; apparently thinks he's asked about why she chose white.—Ed.] If a light [shone] on the white, you show all around here. But if it were black, and nothing you couldn't see no nowhere. I like where you can see. It's a ____.

WV: That's great. Uh huh.

MS: It's ____, it's a ____ up there.

WV: That's good.

MS: Yeah, where you can see.

WV: Uh huh.

MS: One man asked me that way back here when I first started painting. "How come you paint the ____?" I said, "For you can see when you pass your car light out there on the highway go at night; if anything going across, so you can see it.

WV: Uh huh.

MS: ____ outside. . . .

WV: How about the pictures? Why did you start the pictures?

MS: Huh?

WV: Why did you start the pictures?

MS: Oh, "How I paint the pictures?" I just get on the shelf there, lay 'em on the shelf, and get the white paint, and smear on the white, and then get all them little different cans of paint, and go to making the ____ _____. And, um hmm, and make all that, and then write them words.

WV: Oh.

MS: Yeah, all of 'em.

WV: Great.

MS: Uh huh. Yes, Lord. Do more writing, work 'em all back over good. Uh huh. Yeah, yeah. (pauses, laughs)

AW: [unintelligible]

MS: What he want that? [asking WV—Ed.]

WV: He wants to buy another one.

MS: You want that 'un? All right.

[Interruption in taping]

MS: ____.

WV: They're beautiful.

MS: I thank you.

WV: They're beautiful.

MS: Okay.

WV: You going to make more?

MS: Huh?

WV: You going to make more?

MS: Yeah.

WV: Good.

MS: All right.

WV: Next time we come by you'll have more.

MS: Huh?

WV: Next time we come by here you'll have more.

MS: Oh, sure enough. Okay. (laughs) All right. Yeah.

WV: Thanks again.

MS: Yeah, okay. Bye-bye. Good luck.

WV: Thank you.

MS: Yes, good luck.

WV: Good luck to you, too.

MS: Yeah. We go here. Drive carefully. All right.

[End of interview]