Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Cat Gardère Interview

Contact Information
Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington. D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/services/questions
www.aaa.si.edu/

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Cat Gardère. It was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa as part of the In Colors Project. Cat Gardère and Fernanda Espinosa have reviewed the transcript and their corrections and emendations appear below.

This transcript has been lightly edited by the In Colors Project for readability. Readers should bear in mind that the original document and medium of this interview is the spoken language and that the audio recording should be considered the original source, with its particular tone and grammar.

In Colors is a project by Fernanda Espinosa, a 2022 Oral History Association oral history fellow funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. This is one of several interviews conducted under this fellowship and in collaboration with the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. Any views, findings, conclusions, or recommendations expressed in this interview, do not necessarily reflect those of the Oral History Association or National Endowment for the Humanities.

Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right, so I'm going to start. This is Fernanda Espinosa interviewing Catherine Gardère, also known as Cat, on July 11th, 2023. And we are recording at her home in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, New York. This is a first session of an oral history that will be going to the Archives of American Arts, Smithsonian Institution.

And this interview is for the In Colors Project. So, to start can you please introduce yourself? And just tell me anything that you think is important for people to understand about you to know who you are, starting with when and where you were born.

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: Hi, Fernanda. Thank you for having me, first of all, for this project.

Really, it's an honor. As you said, my name is Catherine. Everyone calls me Cat. Except for those that have known me since a very early age. Things that are important to know about me—oh goodness. I was born in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. That's probably the first important thing to know about me. But I was raised here in Brooklyn. We're sitting in my childhood home at the moment. It's also the place which I currently call home. It's the place where my father made his life's work. He was a mixed media artist. My mother also was a pretty phenomenal person and an early childhood educator.[Pause] She ran Brooklyn Heights Montessori School. A prominent school here in Brooklyn for 20 years. I beg your pardon.

Let's see, I graduated from Brown University in 2005. I have been for most of my career a photography and visual arts producer, post-production producer. And upon my father's passing in 2011, I have worked as the director of his fine art estate, fueled in part by a lot of the knowledge that I gained working with so many artists in the art world from that career with photography, and fueled from the rest by a lot of love.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much for sharing that. Just to go a little bit back, I would like to know more about your early childhood. More of like your everyday life in the Gardère family and where it all started. What do you remember from your earliest memories with your parents?

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: So, my earliest memories actually all center here in Brooklyn. Despite the fact that I was born in Haiti, I came here at age three, so I unfortunately don't remember my early life in Haiti, which to me is quite sad. So, my early memories are all in this neighborhood, really—Cobble Hill, Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn Heights, you know, centered around life in Brooklyn.

Really quite sweet—attending public school for elementary school. Really a quiet life. Mostly, at home, life at home was very colorful. Tons of art on the walls. Paul was a stay-at-home father, constantly in the studio. [00:05:00] My mother, as I said, was an educator, so always very attuned to, you know, the needs of a young child and very supportive. And I don't feel that I ever really wanted for much in the way of love or support from my parents. My brother

was seven and a half, almost eight years older than me, so he was a larger-than-life presence kind of in my life. But due to the age difference wasn't really kind of around the house very much. I was playing with friends and he was sort of out gallivanting in the city already. That's kind of what I remember.

[00:05:56]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As you started to grow up and become a child with your own memories, I guess, what do you remember about the cultures that came together at your home?

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: My home was always kind of an amalgamation of a few different cultures, but really predominantly Haitian. My mother was of Eastern European Jewish descent. She was raised in New Jersey. My father was of Haitian origin, but he had immigrated to New York in 1959, at age 14, and was raised Catholic.

So I had a Catholic parent and a Jewish parent. In terms of spiritual upbringing, religious upbringing, they didn't really, they didn't choose. Neither of them were particularly devout. In fact, I think they kind of both were non-practicing and had decided to just raise their children as good people. So, we were a largely areligious kind of household.

And culturally, I think the house was more aligned with Haitian symbols, art, books, signs, et cetera than anything else. We had returned from Haiti in 1984, so my youngest memories really were of seeing more Haitian art and Haitian culture around the house than anything else. The contrast was not so much inside the house, but rather between the house and the rest of the world when I stepped outside the door. Not to say that there is no Haitian culture in Brooklyn, because there certainly is, but in this neighborhood of Brooklyn, this is certainly not where you find a predominance of Haitian culture in New York City in the 80s. And since, Cobble Hill, Brooklyn has become quite gentrified and has turned into quite a wealthy neighborhood.

And so Haitian culture is certainly not a commonplace sight around here. So yeah, that's been an interesting cultural occurrence, I suppose you could say, in this neighborhood. But within the house, there really wasn't much conflict or any kind of yeah, clash or anything culturally. My mother was really quite fond of everything to do with Haitian culture and fully adopted and loved everything. Had loved her time in Haiti, and loved everything that they brought back from it.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

I didn't think about your—like, I knew that your dad had gone back to Haiti with his family. I didn't think about that before in terms of what it meant for a person from the northeast of the United States, like your mom to go to Haiti to live in the 1970s. Do you recall anything that your mom might have shared about her experience during that time and, what it was like for her to transform her life in that way?

[00:10:40]

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: I wish I knew more. I wish I had more to share, actually. The little that I do know, I think was overwhelmingly positive. Haiti during that time was very different of course than what it is now or even in the decades between then and now. They were there from 1978 to 1984, and I was born there in 1981.

At the time, the country was under the dictatorship of François Duvalier [Haiti was under the dictatorship of Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier during 1978-1984 when we lived in Haiti. François "Papa Doc" Duvalier was dictator when Paul left Haiti in 1959 –CG]. Ultimately, we left due to antagonism from the Duvalier regime against light-skinned members of the Haitian quote unquote "middle class" or aristocracy as well as American nationals. My parents received a tip from American diplomats to get out, and so we did.

I was of course three years old, so I don't remember this. My brother was 11, but they had been there for six years, and they returned to New York. So, I think someone recently had asked me if that hadn't happened, Do you think your parents would've stayed? I'm not sure how much longer, truthfully, they would have, to be perfectly honest. It's a difficult question to answer. I think my mother, who herself had been an artist in her younger days and in college, had already started to make the transition to education. She was teaching in Haiti.

But I think she likely would have eventually returned to New York to pursue her own professional goals.

She ultimately returned back here to pursue a master's at Bank Street College. And you know, I think ultimately, they may not have pursued a life in Haiti forever. But between this tip from an American diplomat at the Department of State and my father's close friend had recently been murdered, it was clear that they were not going to be safe under the Duvalier regime there and Duvalier's antagonism against mulattos and American Nationals in Haiti in the mid-1980s. So, I think prior to that though, what I can see from family photo albums, looks at least quite lovely.

You know, granted still photographs can relay a sort of false narrative. But Haiti during that time, for all of Duvalier's atrocities, was a more stable place. It was a safer place. I think she, my mother, that being said, you know she learned French, she learned Kreyòl. She loved island life.

She was surrounded by art. She probably was experiencing a life unlike anything she ever could have imagined coming from a strict. Jewish culture. She seemed at least from, by all accounts, I think it was something that seemed quite wonderful. But, from the mother that I remember in New York, in my early childhood, she was also quite happy here.

So, you know, we made a life back in New York and got on with it.

[00:16:32]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You mentioned that once you were back in New York, your mom was directing a school and your father was staying home and taking care of you and your brother. Were there other people in addition to your mom and your dad that were surrounding you as caretakers?

Any family members? Can you say more about your sort of family ecology at that point?

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: I've always had a very small immediate family. I've only ever known one grandparent. My mother's mother was living at the time, she was living in New Jersey still, and we would go to visit her from time to time.

She was not very involved in our—in my upbringing or my brother's upbringing. She ultimately passed away in, oh, around 2002, I think. But she was not a part of our daily life really, in much of a way in later years. Oh, I'd have to look it up. But in later years, actually she was moved at some point to a nursing home actually, that's only a few blocks away from where we're sitting now.

And that was actually nice. Not of course to have to put her in a nursing home, but she was close at least. And we could visit her and to not have to get in the car and, and drive you know, and to be able to see her after school or a couple of times a week or—she was at least close.

The only other family member that was nearby was my great aunt. Paul's aunt, who had been in New York for decades. She lived in Queens, Rego Park. And we saw her maybe once a month or so. And similarly, not involved in the children's kind of like daily life, but you know, would have these nice dinners and visits and that was very lovely.

She was an important part of Paul's life. She was my godmother. This was more of a ceremonial title. She and I didn't have too much of an intimate relationship, but she was a meaningful person to me and definitely to Paul. All of my [00:20:00] other grandparents, unfortunately, had passed before I was born. My mother was an only child. So no, no aunts or uncles on that side.

And my father has a brother. He is currently living in Canada, but at the time, during my childhood, was living in Haiti. So I only see him occasionally when they would come to New York for visits. So daily life, I'd say was really kind of kept to the immediate family. And yeah, my immediate caretaker was Paul.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Would you like to share more about this relationship? And I guess since it was your really closest relationship in some way in this environment that you were living, and you were a small family in a big city and very close to

each other, can you say more about how that expressed itself through your relationship with your father as you were growing up?

[00:21:32]

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: So, Paul was—and I should preface this by saying that as a child, I never called my father Paul. This is something I only started to do really in the last 10 or 12 years as I've started to work with his estate. Growing up I called him dad or daddy. But now I call him Paul, of course, because it's easier to reference him that way to others.

But growing up, I was a daddy's girl, you know? He was very loving towards me. That being said, he was not an easy person. He was—and I think most people who knew him would concur with this statement—I think he was a very troubled man in general. He had been through a lot. I think he held a lot of unresolved trauma and was very introverted. And wrestled with a lot of demons and a lot of pain. Outwardly, however, he expressed a lot of love through action. He had a very disciplined routine and a very serious art making practice. And despite his sort of areligiosity and the fact that he wasn't a dogmatic person, he was also a very spiritual person.

So he had a very disciplined meditation practice. My daily memories of him were every morning him getting up, meditating for hours in the early hours of the morning, walking me to the bus stop to go to school, or walking me all the way to school if the weather was nice, packing my lunch. Making dinner for us all, asking us all what we wanted for dinner at seven o'clock in the morning. And me joking that, Dad, who talks about dinner at seven o'clock in the morning? You know, picking me up from school, giving me treats or a snack or something in the afternoon, me watching him paint in the afternoon. You know, us having a few hours together in the afternoon kind of before my mother would come home. Occasionally he would help me with homework, but I don't really remember asking for help that much. And actually I have several memories bandaging a lot of wounds from his art making.

He did a lot of carpentry in his art. Most of his work is on wood substrate and he would get cut a lot either from nails or razors—there were a lot of razor blades around—a lot. So definitely was not a child-safe home. And I was the only body around, so I would get called on to do a lot first aid, which is an interesting thing, I suppose.

But all of these little things were sort of bonding experiences in a way. And you know, they were very meaningful little memories for me, you know? But like I said, he could also be quite difficult and you know, had trouble expressing himself constructively sometimes when he was upset. And a lot of times I, you know, would sort of, kind of just learn to keep to myself if he was in a bad mood. And, you know, I think artists can be temperamental sometimes.

In many ways, I think he taught me how to work with artists for better or worse, you know? And it's not a surprise. It was never a surprise to me that I immediately gravitated toward working with artists and working in the arts when I graduated college. Even before college actually, I started to work as artist assistant and felt quite comfortable working with some very difficult artists and interpreting their wishes and was able to navigate some difficult spaces and support the work of some pretty formidable artists by being able to tolerate some difficult behavior. And I'm not sure that is—I'm not sure how commendable that is actually, but—thank you Paul, I guess. But all in all, it was a loving relationship. He had a difficult relationship—he did have a difficult relationship with my brother. Unfortunately, my brother is not with us any longer though, and I don't really feel comfortable speaking for him.

[00:28:22]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

Thank you for sharing those memories. Two things came up for me right now. So I'm trying to decide where I should go. But I think it's interesting that you started talking about your career path kind of through these memories. So maybe let's just go that way. And if you can say more about your professional development and how you started working with artists, as you mentioned?

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: Sure. Actually, the summer that I graduated from high school I

assisted a photographer named John Coplans, a wonderful, wonderful photographer who got his start in his sixties doing nude self-portraits. He was one of the founders of Artforum magazine. And his work is, is just incredible.

But I won't digress there. That experience was short-lived. It was just a summer job before I started college at Brown, but it was fantastic. I really had no business printing John Coplan's work in his dark room, but that's what I was doing, and it was an exquisite opportunity.

[00:30:00]

John Coplan's partner, Amanda Means, I also was exposed to her work. She is still working and producing amazing, amazing work. And that was my first taste of working directly with artists in the real world. And I was hooked. I had discovered photography on my own in high school, starting at age 14 and had spent high school all four years kind of printing in the dark room and just absolutely loved it.

More so even than taking pictures. I loved printing. And for years after that, I knew I wanted to be in and around photography. What I didn't really know at the time, which was, maybe I had an inkling of it, but I didn't really know the extent, was that my grandfather—actually on my father's side—was a photographer.

My grandfather had passed when Paul was just four years old. So I really didn't know anything about him. But it's interesting to me to know that later, or to have found that out later. And since then, I've worked with some of his own, with some of his images, so it's just interesting, right, that I gravitated toward a medium that my own grandfather had worked with.

But back to my career, I assisted some other wonderful photographers. I worked after college, I worked as a studio manager for Arnold Newman, who was considered the father of the environmental portrait. Again, a really exquisite and amazing opportunity. After that I worked for Steven Klein a bold and very daring, and very, very well-known fashion photographer. And then I spent four years working in the exhibitions department for Box Studios which is not any longer, but during the 2000s was the top post-production house in the world and worked with clients like Annie Leibovitz and Patrick Demarchelier and goodness, I mean, everyone, just everyone, Philip-Lorca diCorcia, Roni Horn, Mario Sorrenti. I mean, I don't want to keep name dropping, but it was just an absolutely wonderful opportunity to work with some of the premier names in photography around the world. So I from there continued to do production work, kind of primarily in post-production, generally doing, working with lens-based artists, you know, all of which gave me a lot of experience with exhibitions, a lot of experience with book publishing. Eventually I worked with video as so many of those artists became and the world in general became you know, fodder for the world's demand for video content.

And then ultimately just last year, spent a year doing VFX production for video as well as feature films and TV work. So, you know, working on films and like *Causeway,* and shows like *The Last of Us* and which was also a really great experience. But ultimately the art world I think is where I belong.

[00:34:51]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: [Laughs.] So, in terms of the path that you took after college or—let me backtrack, actually. How did you end up being the director of your dad's estate? You were a person that you were already involved in different ways in the art world. You mentioned that in production, but also exhibition, book publishing, and a lot of those skills and that experience you're bringing to what you're doing right now in your role as the director of Paul's estate.

Do you think maybe this is a good kind of transition to start talking a little bit about that and the work that you have started doing around your dad's legacy? So, can you say more about that and how it connects to your professional experience?

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: Sure. So, Paul died in 2011. But prior to that, I think a couple of years prior, although I can't remember the exact date, I had a conversation with him.

I can't remember the context exactly and apropos of nothing, actually. I said to him, Daddy, I don't want you to worry about your work after you're gone. And he looked at me a little bit

quizzically and said, What do you mean? And I said, After you're gone, I want you to know that I'm going to take care of all of your work. And I think that's, I'm pretty sure that's all I said.

Again, I don't remember exactly what prompted the comment. But he looked at me with a little bit of surprise, and he said, I don't think you know what you're saying. And I said, Yes, I do. And I smiled and I said, Don't patronize me. And he said, Okay, thank you. I said, You're welcome. I love you.

He said, I love you too.

And I was like, good, glad that's settled. [laughs] And so, and that was that. It wasn't really up for discussion. I don't think he had much of a choice. I think he knew he didn't have much of a choice. There wasn't really going to be anybody else to do it. Like I said, we had a small family. The question of who takes care of an artist's work after they're gone is a very real and pressing one. And I don't think it's something that most artists think about or want to think about while they're alive. My father also died quite young. He was 66. He also died quite unexpectedly. It wasn't exactly sudden, but he was not terminally ill.

So given that, the context for this conversation really must have been particularly out of the blue for him [laughs]. Now that I think about it, might have seemed pretty inappropriate, [laughs] but you know, I'm not sure he was one to look a gift horse in the mouth.

[00:39:13]

I think, yeah, the fact of the matter is that when the time came, the question of who would do it—it wasn't really a matter of choice. My brother was older, but I was the one with the knowledge base around this. Despite the fact that my experience really was in the photography world, I had had extensive experience running artists' studios, familiarity with artists' archives. I understood exhibition practices and things like organizational systems, databases.

You know, I didn't receive a Master's in Library Sciences or things that archivists typically have, but I understood the principles. What I didn't have is familiarity with the conservation needs for painting and mixed media. And that was a real knowledge gap. So what I knew I needed to do was get an archivist in here that could help me with the physical needs and the conservation needs and could answer the questions that I had.

But that put Paul's passing in 2011. You know, you can't answer those questions overnight. And you know, in the immediate sense there were much more pressing things that needed to be addressed, and it took many years before it was time to kind of properly address those questions. You know, there were several years where it was time to address issues of legalities, finances, the physical building you know, property problems, my health, my brother's health, life, right? Our bills. And then very sadly, my brother passed away as well at age 42 in 2016 ,which was its own extraordinarily tragic premature loss for me. That was the point at which I moved back into this house and was sort of rejoined with this art in a very intimate way. And it was the point at which I kind of regained a closeness with it and decided that it was time to become connected to it and become acquainted with it and with my history and with my lineage in a way that I actually had never been before. Not even as a child. And ever since then, it's been a very intense journey [laughs].

And I suppose, you know, I've taken the title of director of the estate the first three years, from really starting in 2017, there were several archivists here that I was directing but also working with and working Monday to Friday, nine to five for three years. We photographed every piece, creating museum quality images—professionally photographed images, condition reported every piece, scanned every piece of paper to create not only an archive of the artworks, but also a documents archive. Built a database for the artworks, as I said, but also, you know, to cross reference things like exhibitions, publications, consignments sales. Built websites started social media accounts, tracked correspondence, tracked old sales records, created accession numbers, did research, researched Paul's appropriation usage, looked into conservation needs of any you know, works that might need investigations.

[00:45:36]

You know, it was an extremely laborious three years. And since then, I have been running it on my own. Since then, has also been, of course, the pandemic. And now, I am taking the

estate kind of into a new phase, a more public phase. And I'm about to kind of embark on some new opportunities. It's now in the middle of 2023 and fielding quite a few more inquiries than I used to be—although the pandemic did definitely interrupt some progress. But yeah, this has been a really interesting journey. And ultimately, you know, taking the reins of Paul's estate is—this is a role that I inherited. It's a title that I bear by default in some ways, because I don't really think there's anyone else to do it, but it's also like a hat that I wear proudly, and one that, as heavy as it is to wear, I am proud to wear.

I'm getting to know myself in a way that I've never known before. But it's bittersweet. I wish more than anything that he were here, [laughs] not only to share some of the burden, because there's a lot of work to do, I wish he were here to answer some of the questions that I can't answer, or if I try to answer them, I know that I'm just a poor substitute for his voice. And ultimately, I wish that I weren't piecing together and trying to fill in holes in my history when the answers existed once upon a time, you know. I just didn't ask the questions.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Would you like to take a minute?

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: I'm okay.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Okay.

] CATHERINE GARDÈRE: Thank you though.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: You just shared a lot of details, both about the work that you've been doing over the past several years, but also what that means for you at a personal level. Do you have, kind of taking a step back, do you have any sense of if there was a plan or what was the state of your dad's legacy while he was alive—if you were involved in those conversations at all or if that's something that happened, sort of like in the way that you're saying right now, where you kind of had to take all of these at once and you have no one else to ask [laughs]? So, I guess I'm interested in knowing, like, do you have any sense of how his career was going and who other people in the art world were kind of, in any sense or way, caring or trying to steward his contributions to the art world?

[00:50:06]

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: While he was alive, I don't know that I had any sense of his legacy, his plan for his legacy, or his kind of vision, his broader place in the art world. I think I was aware, however, of perhaps his frustration with his level of visibility in the art world. I think he had a fair amount of recognition in the late eighties and early nineties, judging by his CV. I can't, of course, remember from firsthand experience—I was quite young. But his CV is littered with exhibitions, particularly group shows. So, he was certainly active. Ultimately, I think though the work that he was doing wasn't completely understood by gallerists or the market and I'm not sure that he felt that the art world kind of knew what to do with him.

Despite that, he did ultimately become aligned with some wonderful organizations and people who were working. And so, I think there were people who kind of saw him and recognized what he was doing—but like most artists, I think he wanted he wanted more engagement. He wanted more visibility—success I suppose is a loaded word, but yeah, I think ultimately, I certainly wasn't aware of his plans, you know, at that point for any kind of future legacy. If that answers your question.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. Yeah. I think I'm interested in trying to understand what were the perceptions—I think from the point of view in terms of stewarding a memory and a legacy.

And yeah, so that's certainly very interesting. But it's also very interesting that it seems like you had to very suddenly confront all of this on your own—even though you had offered to do that, but just trying to take in all of this information at once.

CATHERINE GARDÈRE: That's certainly how it felt. Yeah. I think you know, I certainly can't speak for the outside world, right? Like, how was Paul received or known? As much as I wish that I had that information, right, how was he known in the 2000s or, you know, partly, I think I didn't know, or I wasn't aware of it because in the 2000s I was in my twenties kind of working my butt off and largely oblivious to what my parents and my father was going through. Because I was taking for granted that my parents would be around, if I'm being honest, right?

[00:54:52]

I was working an extremely demanding job and I was in my twenties, and I thought I had, decades with my parents to come. I didn't know, like, I mean, I don't think anybody expects these things will happen, right? But ultimately, both of my parents passed in 2011 and it hit me like a freight train that I was 30, and all of a sudden both of my parents were gone.

And I was robbed of decades with them that, you know, so many people have with their parents. And they were both 66, which is way too young. And it was terrible, and there's so much that I didn't get to know, and I didn't get to ask. And I can be mad at myself for, you know, taking things for granted or being, or telling myself I was an oblivious young woman or something. But I was also a young woman thinking that it wouldn't happen, because it shouldn't have happened, you know? And I mean, it wasn't my fault, you know? And that's just how life goes sometimes. But I'm doing everything that I can to piece things together and to do his work justice in his absence.

But yes, you know, I really did have to craft a legacy and confront kind of a lot all at once after the fact, right? The other part of this is that in starting this in earnest, in say 2017, when he had already passed—he had already been dead for several years at that point. Which means, you know, there had been, that's six years of silence and that's a loss of kind of momentum or, you know, that's a deafening silence of kind of quote "buzz" in the art world. I mean, this sounds like a terribly crass thing to say, right, when you're talking about death. But you know—the art world, as a marketing machine it's—the competition is enormously fierce and it's terribly, terribly ruthless. The competition is just kind of unfathomable. And for as many galleries as there are, or more galleries than there have ever been, and somehow it is still so hard to get recognition.

It is also extremely, extremely hard for—Paul would've been what would be considered a mid-career artist. And the art world generally is enamored with emerging artists. This is also an artist who—by all accounts, you know, a lot of talent, in several permanent collections, at the same time, had not been picked up by a major gallery for exclusive representation—had experienced quite a bit of marginalization over the years doing difficult work, political work—difficult to categorize. He had some factors kind of working against him perhaps, in terms of commercialization and art market forces. So, my point being, picking this work up in 2017, and then embarking on a three year project of major archival work, and then encountering a two, three year pandemic, it means I'm operating really at a serious attention kind of deficit, in terms of kind of like market interest.

Not to say that there isn't an interest there, that the work isn't worthy. It's just to say that it's an uphill battle. That being said, curators, academics, people recognize worth, and they recognize good work when you get the work in front of them. Getting the work in front of them is the problem, right, or not the problem. It's the challenge. I've never been one to shy away from a challenge. That being said, it takes work. So here I am, doing the work.

[END OF TRACK Session 1]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right, so today is July 20th, 2023, and I am recording the second session of an oral history interview with Cat Gardère. We're here at her Brooklyn home in Cobble Hill. So, Cat, thank you so much again for hosting me in your beautiful home, which was also your dad's home. So, I feel very honored to be here.

And I also feel really honored to be receiving all these memories through you. So last time we spoke, we had touched on some of Paul's life as well as your work around his archive and his memory. And we spoke previously to today's recording and we both wanted to make sure we speak about Paul's life and as much as you know about it and what you've also been told from family members.

So can you just take us through his life and what you know about his migration to the US, as well as his career?

CAT GARDÈRE: Of course. And hi Fernanda. It is such a pleasure to have you here again. And again, thank you for letting me participate in this amazing oral history project. Yes. So Paul Gardére was my father. He was born on October 31st, 1944, at Canapé-Vert hospital in Port-Au-Prince, Haiti to Marcelle Borno Gardère and Pierre Camille Gardère, who was known affectionately as Bobbi or Bobby. Both were of Haitian descent for several generations in Haiti, so of full Haitian background. Born into a family of comfortable means in Haitian

society—some would call "mulatto" class. The words bourgeoisie or aristocracy were terms that still had relevance in Haitian society. But important to know that the family did have means and were comfortable. The Gardère name is rather well known in Haiti. And so, Paul lived a comfortable childhood, surrounded by a lot of family, many cousins and by his own account had a, had a pretty happy childhood in his early years.

Unfortunately, his father died a premature death at age 31, in 1949. So when Paul was just four or five years old. I'm not sure which month. His father died by his own hand, so he committed suicide—a very tragic death. My father Paul and his younger brother Michel—that's French for Michael—the boys were not told of the cause of their father's death. They were raised in a strictly French-speaking household and in a very rigidly Catholic environment. And of course, suicide is a sin in a Catholic household. So the cause of their father's death was kept a secret. And it was very upsetting to me as a child to learn that my father was told by all of his family—that they were told that their father had moved to France. Which sounds quite traumatic to me, to be told that you've been abandoned, rather than to have to deal with the reality of the death of a parent.

[00:04:58]

Ultimately, I think the boys figured it out over time that their father had passed away. But these young boys have been left with a single mother who then has to figure out a way to support her sons. She had received schooling in early 20th century Haiti. Her own schooling was crafts based, I'm told, so cooking, sewing, painting, drawing. She managed to get a job as a secretary for an architectural firm, a US-based architectural firm. I believe it was Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton, which actually was a quite famous architectural and engineering firm in the United States. And they were in Haiti to build a dam that actually never managed to get built. And she was first hired as a secretary and then managed to move up to a draftsperson in Haiti. But ultimately, when the firm closed operations, they offered her a position in New York City.

So she left her sons and moved to New York City, leaving her sons in the care of female elders —their aunts—some of whom were nuns. And the boys were enrolled in Catholic school in Haiti. And ultimately, in 1959 she is settled in Queens, in New York, and Paul is 14 and Michel, his younger brother is 12 and she is ready for them to come join her in Queens. They've been without her for four years and at that point they've been without their father for 10 years. And they join her in the US. And according to Michel, this was a very joyous reunion. They're so happy to be with their mother again. They are living in a small one bedroom in Elmhurst, on Elmhurst Avenue in Queens. And even though it's tight quarters and the boys are sharing a bedroom and their mother is sleeping on a sofa, it doesn't matter because they're together again.

And everyone is quite happy for about a year. Ultimately, her sister, who had been caring for the boys in Haiti and apparently whom they had had a tense relationship with also comes to join in the one bedroom. And things get a little bit tighter and a little bit tenser. And so, they move to a nearby three-bedroom in then newly built LeFrak City Apartments. Apparently, the bigger apartment quickly deteriorates, and the conditions are so bad that they leave, breaking the lease before it's even up. They move a third time in less than two years, to a nearby building in Rego Park, Queens, where their aunt Madeleine, who was affectionately known as Mady, is living and where she remained until her death in 2002, I believe. A building that I spent my childhood visiting.

So, Paul's early years in Haiti really were marred by a lot of absence of his parents. And ultimately, it is kind of the rejoining with his mother at age 14 and coming to the United States in 1959 that sort of marks the beginning of his kind of formative time, and the beginning of his formal education in the United States.

[00:09:58]

When he gets here, in 1959, he receives actually a full academic scholarship and begins to study at the Lycée Français in the upper East side of Manhattan. He apparently had been a very good student in Catholic school in Haiti and continued to be a very good student at the Lycée Français. The boys spoke no English when they arrived, and bilingual education allowed them to continue to be able to learn in an academically rigorous way. Apparently, their education at the Lycée Français included English literature, language studies, everything which a Haitian, francophone, middle-upper class education would have valued in

terms of academic rigor. But Paul was really struggling with English, and by his own account, it took him four years to be comfortable in the English language. It's possible, actually, that the going to school in a French-speaking environment might have actually delayed some of his assimilation into English-speaking culture. But he said that it wasn't really until he went to college that he felt that he was able to learn and master English. I believe he also struggled with a bit of a stutter, which probably made him a bit self-conscious, to say the least.

So, during those years at the Lycée Français, he is commuting daily from Queens, in this sort of poor home life that is rich in family, but, you know, poor environment, to a wealthy Upper East Side, Manhattan life. He describes the experience as a lot of culture shock. Not only the disparity between Queens and Manhattan, but of course between Haiti and the United States. It is during that time where he's introduced to Art. Michel, his younger brother says that he does recall a family photo of Paul at age three or four looking at a very large book of art. So he does recall that there might've been some interest in art when Paul was quite young, but by Paul's account it was really as an adolescent when he felt that he gravitated towards art. As a practitioner, Paul recalled that Michel one day had bought himself a paint set, sort of a paint by numbers kind of craft hobby paint set, and that Paul, like perhaps a bullying older brother, commandeered it for himself. And Michel let him keep it and decided to pick up the guitar instead. And Paul really took to painting and was sort of off to the races with that. But as an admirer, Paul really, it was passing the gallery windows on Madison Avenue, going to school on the Upper East Side every day and spending time at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, as well as the other free museums of the city where Paul intentionally immersed himself in the visual arts. That to him felt like a safer space.

[00:15:05]

As a teenager, uprooted and overwhelmed, homesick, and longing for some sense of grounding, art became a kind of solace for him. And in fact, years later, over and over again, he referred to art as a kind of "metaphysical bridge building." And that's a quote. He really saw it as a way to seek communion with something universal and a way to transcend, if you will, the limitations of a cultural context. And so I think he apparently would—the school was quite close to the Metropolitan Museum and he would literally go on his lunch hour to spend time with his friends—the paintings, the artwork.

Then, during the summers of 1960 and 1961, he takes classes at the Art Students League where he studies with Charles Alston, who is the famed teacher of African American painter, Jacob Lawrence. And he is encouraged by his mother to pursue these artistic ambitions. Again, Michel reminded me that, that their mother, Marcelle, had had her own creative training and that perhaps in another life or another time might have been an artist herself. So really encouraged her sons to be creative. Before their father had passed, he had his own career as a photographer, which I think I may have mentioned earlier. And Haiti itself is a nation with a very, very vibrant artistic history and long lineage of creativity. Marcelle encouraged Paul to apply to Cooper Union, which he did in 1961, and ultimately was accepted to start in the fall of 1962.

He originally started Cooper Union in the architecture program, which is interesting, but quickly switches to painting. I don't know much about that decision. Perhaps it was all the math, not quite sure [laughs]. But quickly switches into the School of Art and chooses painting as his concentration. And those years at Cooper Union are critical for him. Cooper Union's then mission of free tuition was an absolute game changer for him and frankly, his admission to the school at all is a really beautiful, miraculous thing when you think of the fact that this is a Haitian immigrant applying, who, at the time of his application, is not even quite fluent in English. The school's mission to diversity at a time, pre-Civil Rights Act—this and commitment to free tuition really is a miraculous, beautiful thing and ultimately set Paul on a path that changed his life. It also introduced him to a cohort of people and artists and friends that ultimately became his community and chosen family, people whom are still my, in some ways, you know extended family. And so I think I feel a great degree of fondness, in his stead, to Cooper Union for that acceptance, for those four years. And so, he ultimately, he graduates in the class of '67 and goes on to continue his studies doing a Master of Fine Arts at Hunter College.

[00:20:45]

So again, he's remaining in New York, committed to low-cost education, not necessarily out

of a moral high ground, but more limited by means. But again, this is pretty unusual for a Haitian immigrant to be achieving this much in terms of formal education. He does his thesis on the medium of tempera paint and its implications for the images.

I'll be honest, I've not read the entirety of his thesis, but I do have it. And his thesis advisor was John McCracken, who I realize actually died the same year that Paul did, in 2011. While he's doing his MFA, he marries my mother, Marcia Green, who was a Jewish woman of ultimately Eastern European descent—Bennington graduate, a painter herself, who I believe I said earlier, later went into early childhood education, but at the time was very much still a painter. So, they are an artist couple, living together at that time in I think 311, I believe is the number, Atlantic Avenue, in a building that was later condemned. In 1973, my older brother was born, and I think that's around the time, or maybe 1974, when the building is condemned, and they ultimately are left homeless for a time.

They purchase the building that we're sitting in right now, pardon me, in 1976. It's a funky, old space that once upon a time in the late 19th century, or mid 19th century, had been a knitting factory, according to city records. And then in the mid 20th century, had functioned as an Italian social club that I later found out was called The Emerald. And they scraped together funds to purchase it by borrowing cash from friends and family. They didn't qualify for a bank loan by any stretch of the imagination. And they used the majority of the building as studio space. I think rented a section of it —found someone to rent an apartment or as a tenant or something. I'm not quite sure of the early configurations of the building, but, you know, this area in the 70s was pretty uninteresting. You know, much of the lifeblood of the city was definitely in Manhattan. I think, yeah, Paul wanted a place to paint. They needed a roof over their heads for their child. And ultimately, that was a win for them, you know.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Do you have any sense of how your parents met and in what environment—

[00:25:04]

CAT GARDÈRE: —I do.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —they connected?

CAT GARDÈRE: I don't off the top of my head know which year it was exactly, although I could rustle that up somewhere. But they met actually at a Yale Summer Art Program that I believe my mother was enrolled at as an artist and resident, if I remember correctly. I might be getting the details wrong. And I believe Paul was visiting from Manhattan. My mother was actually engaged to someone else at the time. And according to her, she said that the moment she saw Paul, she knew that she was marrying the wrong man. And that if she could feel that way about someone else, someone that she had never met, she knew that she would have to break up with her fiancé, which is what she did. Nothing happened with Paul.

All they did was shake hands. But she went back home after the summer and broke it off with her fiancé and had no intention of seeing Paul again. But apparently, they ran into each other in Manhattan and began dating and continued to date for a, a year or a few years perhaps. And, and then and then got married February 6th, 1970. The write-up of their marriage was actually published in the New York Times, as well as I think a paper in New Jersey where my mother hailed from. Clippings of those were found in the house after their deaths.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thanks for sharing that.

CAT GARDÈRE: Of course.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: So, I think you were telling me about Paul going to graduate school before we started talking about how you're—before I interrupted you and asked you to tell me more about your mother.

CAT GARDÈRE: Yeah, so Paul went to Hunter, graduated 1972, so a little bit before where we left off just now. Yes, and then my brother is born in 1973, and then they purchased the house in 1976. So yeah, and I think both of his experiences with formal education were extremely valuable. Paul left a lot of writing behind, which has been extremely valuable to me in my role with the estate and my role, you know, trying to get to know him and his experiences in those years. Obviously, I wasn't born [laughs]. But in those writings, he

speaks about his disillusionment with the art world during those years after he gets out of school. You know, he was a painter kind of entering the art world of the late 60s and early 70s, which is a time of pop art and minimalism. And he wrote that kind of the only way he felt like he could kind of describe the tenor of the times was, I think, how does he say it? A kind of high-minded formalist nihilism. So I think he felt really lost and not quite sure what to do with that. He was like, I'm not a pop artist. I'm not a minimalist. He wasn't really trying to inject himself into the trends of the moment in the New York art scene.

[00:29:59]

And I think ultimately, he's also searching, as most art student graduates maybe are, you know, you're trying to find yourself, you're trying to find your voice. What is your purpose as an artist? What is it that you have to say? The lucky ones perhaps figure that out when they're in school. But it's also no crime whatsoever if you don't. So, you know, he is fresh out of school and kind of unsure of himself. I think in those years he's making a living painting houses.

I think I recall for a time he tried to get a, a quote unquote "real job." I think he got a job doing some social work, and I think he lasted a few days, sort of ripped the tie off of his neck and said never again. Knew that, you know, the nine to five life—he couldn't do it. Ultimately, in 1977 on his son's fourth birthday, which happened to be September 11th, his mother dies. She had been battling brain cancer for a few years. She was young, she was in her early 50s, and Paul is only 34, I believe, yeah—33, 34. And he's bereft. He and his mother were incredibly close. And not long afterward, he has a dream and he hears the call to return to Haiti. And feeling so disillusioned with the New York art world and feeling lost, that's exactly what he does with his wife and young son. In early 1978, they moved to Haiti. Mind you, they've purchased this building in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, but they leave it to the care of neighbors—a close friend of Paul's from his Cooper Union Days, who's an artist, who lives right around the corner. They find a trustworthy tenant, who's also an artist and living in the building.

So between the two, they are managing the building and he returns to his motherland and embarks on what turns out to be a six and a half year period of rediscovery and experimentation with Haitian local visual culture. In Haiti, it's a time really of repatriation for him, of homecoming. He's living in the family house that he grew up in, that was built by his grandfather in Port-au-Prince on Rue José Martí, a street named after the Cuban revolutionary. And in that time, he really is immersing himself in studying not only the lineage and history of Haitian art, but also studying Vodou, local Haitian culture, Haitian history, studying the things that he would have learned, perhaps, school, had he remained there.

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He is now in a period of sort of self-education, and he is taking on a painterly style that is unlike anything that he was producing in New York. And the style is immensely popular. In 1980, Le Centre d'Art, which is Haiti's premier art institution and incubator for artistic talent, founded by DeWitt Peters, grants him his first solo show. And his career sort of takes off from there. He's immediately recognized as an incredibly talented painter—with technical prowess and clearly like a mastery of an understanding of symbolism. And I'm not sure to what extent the Centre d'Art promoted or recognized that he had been new formally trained in New York or not.

I don't believe the estate has any materials from that show. But it was it was the start of something for him, and clearly that time really, really ignited a lot for him. Whatever development in in him had been kind of halted by his migration to New York—or if not halted, maybe a detour, into Western assimilation or assimilation into Western culture, was resumed really by this return to Haiti in 1978. And in fact, when he later returned to New York in 1984, he wrote that he realized that that return to Haiti is what helped him to discover his purpose as an artist. For better or for worse, it was both his Haitian heritage and this Western training—that both cultures were informing him as a human being and that it had become his mission to marry both cultures in his work and somehow to unite both influences in his work, just as both cultures had been married in him.

He speaks of—spoke-—it's hard for me not to still speak of him in the present tense sometimes; he spoke of it as a challenge and one that he knew that he would be working

with until the end of his life. And in fact, he did work with the same concept through various series, across multiple media, in numerous styles. Relentlessly working over the same problem of how to resolve what is ultimately maybe an unresolvable problem, of what is to come of mixing two seemingly incompatible cultures that nevertheless do coexist.

[00:40:02]

And they coexist in the existence of post-colonial Haiti and post-colonial subjects. So, I think that it was those years in Haiti though, which revealed to him that this is what you will be working with. And were it not for those years, he probably wouldn't have been confronted with that in quite the the same way. It was during those years as well that I was born—so, 1981. I also was born in Canapé-Vert hospital in Port-au-Prince Haiti.

And also, during those years that he continues to exhibit in Haiti, there's a wonderful joint show with Haitian artist Edouard Duval-Carrié, who at the same time is sort of a rising star. So, you know, the Haitian art scene is growing and contemporary. Haitian contemporary art is shifting and it's a very exciting time. He ultimately, and I think I mentioned this in the earlier tape, in 1984—mind you, this is Haiti under the second Duvalier regime—and while it didn't have the problems it has today, is still a very violent place and a place quite inhospitable to Haitians of upper class, or any means, which Duvalier saw as a direct threat to his power. And especially American expatriates, of which my mother was one. Like I said before, we were advised to get out, even though we were Haitian. My father was a Haitian national. We were a family with long roots in Haiti. But he had an American wife and American citizen children and a family of fair skin and a potential target. And my mother did have a job opportunity waiting in New York. And so yep, we returned to New York and resumed life here in Brooklyn, in Cobble Hill.

And I think in the years 1984 to 1986 or so, Paul shifts away from the style of work that he was doing in Haiti. You can see the shift already beginning to happen in the later years of the quote, "Haitian period," as I kind of call it—a term really out of convenience. But he shifts. He's still working with, of course, Haitian motifs and themes, but he shifts back into a kind of strictly contemporary style, shifts into like an abstraction and symbolism, and kind of away from a pictorial, representational style. And he begins to embrace mixed media. The works that were produced in Haiti were acrylic on Masonite, which is a typical medium of local work in Haiti, perhaps due to limitations of material, I'm not sure.

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But once he comes back, he kind of very consciously sheds that. Knowing that, as informative and beautiful as those works are, and they really were extraordinarily popular, I think he knows that that style was not fully him. That it wasn't wholly authentic. It's a part of him. It's a part who he is, and yet it is not. For him to remain in that style would have been limiting and not fully authentic to his potential as an artist and his growth as an artist.

And judging by the decades of art production that ensued, he was very experimental and very playful, and I think challenged himself all the time. So, I think he probably sacrificed a lot of commercial success, so to speak, for the sake of growth, maybe in a kind of a daring way. One that is not without its own risks financially, or in terms of art market validation. So, you know, in 1985 you can see this very, very marked shift to use of plaster relief. An exploration of *vévé*, right, which are the Vodou symbols that are drawn on the floor during rituals to call in the spirits. He's clearly still exploring Haitian themes and Haitian ideas, but he's now doing it through abstraction and aesthetic language, instead of depicting pictorial scenes. He's playing with ideas in a conceptual way, instead of instead of a figurative way. And back in New York, right, he's now kind of coming back into contemporary art and modern art and sort of putting on new hats and finding new audiences, you know and immediately sort of finding new audiences to work with here.

Connections that he had made in Haiti are also following him to the United States. He does have a solo show in 1984 at the Davenport Museum of Art, which is now the Figge, was renamed as well in 1980, or I beg your pardon, that was 1985. And in 1984 has a solo show at a gallery in Chicago called Paul Waggoner. Right? So, this is sort of his first foray into the Midwest. But those, again, are this sort of Haitian regional style, but that's wonderful exposure for him and that's very exciting. And some of the works that were shown there, right, have now made it into the permanent collection of the Figge and are some of Paul's best-known works to date, right? They've traveled the most. And that's extraordinarily

exciting. The work *Madonna (Madame Duvalier)* is a stunning work and one of the most popular in the Figge's collection. And even though it's a style that Paul moved away from, still a work that he was extraordinarily proud of, and I am extraordinarily proud of, and is a beloved work in the Figge collection.

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So just because Paul moved away from that style, it's not a rejection of the work, but he continued to really grow and embrace different stylistic elements, I think truly as a reflection of his embrace of more of the influences kind of that informed his experience, which really did include Western art. You know, his arrival in the United States at 14, and so much training and love for Western art history was a huge part of who he was. And that's not a rejection of his Haitian self. It's a true love of art—for art's sake, you know? And he felt that there needed to be room in his heart and in his life and in his story for all of it. But that—and you can see this in the works themselves, as you get to know the body of his archives, right—that you can't embrace all of it without wrestling with the politics that come with it, right? There are too many paradoxes and too much violence in the history to hold it all at the same time without confronting the legacy of what France did to Haiti, right? Without knowing that, even within his own family history, right, to be a member of the upper class, right? Without knowing the history of colorism in Haiti, without knowing the class conflict and the social dynamics and the wealth divide, right? These are not benign problems. He of course knew that he wasn't personally contributing to them, but you know, you are to some extent—to what extent are you an embodiment of the histories that have come before you? Right, and he's wrestling with all of these things, and he is wrestling with them from a position in the diaspora and from a position of helplessness in Haiti and from a position of alienation and exile. And it shows up in the work, you know. But I'm digressing a little bit.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I actually had a question that I wanna make sure we go back to. You had mentioned that he went through this first big change in the content and the style of his work when he went to from New York to Haiti. Can you say more about what was happening before he transitioned to this new phase in his painting once he moved to Haiti?

CAT GARDÈRE: So, what was happening before he moved to Haiti?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yes. Yeah. In terms of his work.

[00:53:50]

CAT GARDÈRE: You know, I'm not really quite sure, because between 1972 and 1978, a lot of the work—and what I have and can see—is a lot of works on paper. And some of them are wonderful. They look quite experimental. They look as if they could be studies. Some of them are a little bit hallucinogenic even. And who knows? They might've been. They're definitely—yeah, I mean, it's just a little bit hard to say. They look a little bit lost, right, which is what he himself said that he was.

There are some paintings—[computer sound] [laughs] he was doing some large-scale work with some work with tempera, right? Remember he had done his thesis in 1972 with tempera. A lot of them didn't survive. So, there's really only one painting that I have. I'm not fond of it, if I'm being honest. And I'm not really sure where he was going, you know. He was very fond of Max Beckmann, so the work feels a little Beckmann-esque. But between his graduation and '72 and the return, '78, aside from these works on paper that I haveI don't what he's doing. And to me, that reflects the tone that I see in the writing, which is kind of frustration I think he feels deeply inspired when he returns to Haiti. And the answer to this question might actually be revealed when I get to do my own interviews with some of his peers. That's a project that I've not yet been able to throw myself into the way that I'd like to. So there may be answers to this out there that I just don't have yet—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —yeah, but it does seem like he was very much in relationship to the materials and just even his thesis, and just really trying to figure out the materiality.

[00:57:06]

CAT GARDÈRE: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And I think he's sort of trying to tease something out you know, maybe experimenting with something —whether it's kind of what he has at hand or—but I think he's feeling really uninspired by the scene in New York of the time. And maybe if he enjoyed being in school, leaving school was probably hard. You know, so I can

kind of only surmise that he just was, it just was a time of sort of lack of inspiration and frustration. But that is, at best, a poorly educated guess [laughs]. Really what I know is sort of that period in Haiti, and what happens when he returns, which is an explosion of inspiration.

You know, I think what that was an aha moment and a feeling that that time that it all clicked, right. That he felt that he came back, and that, "Now I am armed with the tools." I'm armed with enough information about who I am, what my birthright is, culturally, and I have the formal training and the context for my environments in the United States and in this New York art world as well as the material and the training to make something and to say what I have to say. You know, which is not to say that one needs that degree of training in order to do any of that. Given that he was such an academic and such a good student—and I do think that he probably was somebody who subscribed to the belief that one needs to abide by the expectations that you follow the letter of the track, right? That you get the degrees, and if you get the degrees and you know, meet the merit benchmarks, that you'll earn your accolades. You know, sort of the myth of meritocracy, if you will. I think he felt that,"If I put in the work, then I'll be better suited to for success." And there's a cold reality, right, waiting for many of us. When we find out that that's not necessarily [laughs] the way the world works. But it did arm him with an extraordinary amount of knowledge, and an extraordinary interest, and degree of information, and a lens with which to look at the world and to look at history. So that's what he did. [Laughs.] Yes.

Okay. So, I'd say the next sort of real phase right, is, he's in New York, which is really where he stays for most of the rest of his life, save for a period in the 2000s, but we'll get to that in a bit. But in the second half of the 80s, he's working in this style of abstraction and working with these symbols, right, exploring these *vévé* and *vévé*-like symbols. In the late 80s, he shifts styles again, and begins to explore working with mud and mud relief and rope. And this is another real marked shift for him. And he says this is another kind of breakthrough period. In 1988, he applies for residency at The Studio Museum in Harlem and is awarded that residency for the 1989 to [19]90 year.

[01:02:41]

I didn't realize this until just a few years ago, but he is the—or was the first Haitian-born artist in residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem. Which is a really wonderful little piece of information. And a piece of information which I tried to actually verify—an assertion that I tried to verify with the curators at The Studio Museum before going around town, you know, asserting that. And was told, actually, that The Studio Museum doesn't keep track of its Artist and Residence country of origin. They concurred that the only way to check that fact would be to manually research the biographical data for every artist in residence who came before him. So that's what I did. [Laughs.] I looked them all up. It's not really hard to do actually [laughs]. They're pretty much all on Wikipedia. But he was in fact the first one of Haitian descent and the first one internationally born, or the first year of internationally born artists in residence. And the only one born in Haiti. And I think—it's my understanding anyway, that that's the first year that The Studio Museum opened the residency up to internationally-born applicants, which was a meaningful shift and perhaps not without some controversy at the time, but you know, for Paul to be one of the first allowed in, of international artists, could just be happenstance in terms of timing, but it's pretty remarkable regardless. [Artist Francisco Alvarado-Juarez, born in Honduras in 1950, was artist in resident at The Studio Museum in Harlem from 1987 to 1988, making him the first foreign-born recipient of the museum's residency award. Paul Gardère (Haitian) and Raul Acero (Colombian) followed as the next internationally-born recipients of the artist residency in the 1989-90 year –CG]

[01:04:50]

Anyhow, so that's a wonderful little fact that means a lot to me. I don't know how much he clung to it at the time, but regardless he was working in that mud style during his residency, and he felt that those years were, it was really a breakthrough conceptually for him. He's again continuing—that style that he was working with in Haiti, at this point, is kind of long gone. He's now shifted into a much more conceptual style. He wrote really about his use of medium here, that the mud—it was really a mixture to him of sacred elements as a mixture of water and earth.

And he's making these figures into a relief that is kind of emanating from plexiglass and a

kind of wood substrate that is coming out of the wall, in a way, and forming these faces and sometimes a whole life-size body. And so, he's turning the earth into figures, earth as body, right? So, he's making what to him is these kind of sacred humans, sacred people. And yet he's not unaware, right, of the social connotations of mud. And its implications for kind of lowliness, associations of dirtiness and inferiority implications with regards to race. So for him, he's mixing here mythology and social context. A high and low meaning, right, which is something he would do over and over again throughout the course of his career in different ways.

The works also typically have a sisal rope coming out of the frame, which would carry elements of bondage. For many people, especially in the context of an African American audience, that can be interpreted as an oppressive type of bondage. For him in a Haitian context, that's not necessarily the intended meaning. Rope can be in a Haitian context, would often be used in a ceremony and a type of spiritual bondage and a type of tying you down to place. And so for him, it was a little bit different of a meaning. But he also was not unaware of the context. He also wrote that the role of the plexiglass—the mud was affixed to a layer of plexiglass and that the plexiglass was meant to carry reflective quality. So these works were really, really very conceptual, very obviously a complete departure from these strict painterly works that he was doing kind of less than 10 years prior. And you know, he now had gone from within less than 10 years, right, has gone from doing this strict painterly style, these finely painted, delicately rendered, pictorial works, to now doing these roughly cast, incredibly contemporary, mixed media works at The Studio Museum in Harlem, right?

So this is just such striking divergence. But he is now, he's still working with Haitian ideology, in his mind anyway, still working with Haitian derivative ideas and spiritual themes. But he's also putting them in a distinctly American context.

[01:10:03]

And then those years, you know, those works also receive all kinds of write-ups, and start him on a trajectory of doing all kinds of group shows in and around New York.

Working with Aljira Arts Center, doing some things with Artists Space, Hallswalls, Burchfield Penney Art Center in upstate New York. He's doing things and catching the attention of some Latin American curators. He is quite busy in the late 80s and early 90s. And ultimately gets the attention, in 1993, of the, well, I'm not sure I should say the attention, but gets a grant and wins a residency courtesy of the Lila Acheson Wallace Foundation to live and study at Fondation Claude Monet, and to live for five months in the gardener's quarters of Giverny and Monet's Gardens. And he's flown to post up for five or six months in 1993, all expenses paid, and they—him and two other artists—they're given a car to share. And they're each given an apartment and they have keys to the garden. And they are occupying what historically were the gardener's quarters. And it is an extraordinary experience and I believe that this is a residency—I'm not sure if it still exists to this day—but I know it did exist for quite a period of time afterward. And that was yet another extraordinarily pivotal experience for him.

I have my own memory of going with my mother in the summer of 1993, you know, between school years, and staying for six weeks in Giverny. I recall one night taking a blanket and a pillow and spending the night in the gardens. I'm not sure if that was legal or not, but I did it. And of course, Giverny is this quaint, sweet little town in, in Normandy, famous for being the home of Claude Monet, and famous to this day for Monet's gardens. And it is a mecca of art lovers and, you know, garden lovers everywhere. And Paul had spent five or six months or however long it was having a very, very wild experience, observing thousands of people every month come to this Shangri-La and doing this pilgrimage to this place that is, without a doubt, extraordinarily beautiful. And of course, was the inspiration for so many works of art, of Claude Monet's that are iconic and beautiful, without question. But while I think he knew that the experience was priceless, and one that he valued greatly, he was left pretty disturbed.

[01:15:26]

Other people have written that the experience left them joyous and, you know, in awe of the beauty—which is not to detract from their experience. But that just was not Paul's reaction [laughs]. Paul, of course, was a fluent French speaker, so he had no language barrier. He was able to communicate easily with the townspeople, the gardeners, you know, of which

there are legions, that take to maintain the gardens. And he was really struck, above all, by what it takes to manipulate nature and maintain an incredible falsehood for the purposes of maintaining this facade. There's no doubt, again, that it's a stunning place, and yet what he was most struck by was how fake it is. There's a work of his, right, that is—stenciled over a depiction of Monet's Gardens are the words, "Not nature." All those lily pads are growing out of tin cans. And meanwhile, the gardens themselves were built solely for Monet to paint. Paul was not a man who hates gardens, right? This is not—not trying to paint a portrait here of a man who just was a giant grump or anything. But to him, this was all a really, a perfect metaphor for kind of humanity's endless desire to control,—not only nature, but to manipulate and control everything. And in essence, this is the colonialist impulse, right? And mind you, he's in the country, which was the quote, kind of you know, at some point, Haiti had been long known as the "Daughter of France," right, under colonial rule. So he is in France, right? He is in the colonizer's land. And he's watching the machine at work, right?

And I think he's a little horrified, to some extent, seeing this beauty factory, and seeing all of this beauty as a mask for control. And I think he knew that he was going to be working with this material for quite a while. And in fact, you know, the works that came from 1993 and thereafter, you see not only references to Monet and other Impressionists appear, but you see a lot of Western and European appropriation come up much more blatantly.

[01:19:52]

And while Paul was, of course, an admirer of Western art, and he was a true lover of Western art and art for art's sake, at this point, he's not injecting Western art here as homage. He's using it as a signifier for power. He's using it as a stand-in, as a signifier for colonialism and control. Right? And he's, and he's juxtaposing in all of these works, when you see a frame or like an unmitigated image of you know, of Monet, or of Dominique Ingres or Lorraine like he is typically using it as some signifier for some other source of dominant hegemony.

And it was that time in Giverny, right, which I think gave him this glimpse up close and personal, and really got his wheels turning of how art history, in itself, right, could be used to convey that. And in, particular, how gardens seemingly benign and beautiful could potentially hold a lot of metaphorical significance. And for conversations about colonialism—when, in terms of talking about manipulation of the natural world, and I think those conversations are really rich and relevant right now, especially as we talk about environmental justice and climate change. And I mean, we could go in all kinds of directions, but he felt very, very inspired by that time. And I think a lot of people who have looked at many of the works that were produced in the wake of that residency at Giverny, have said, Wow, he must really love Monet, or He must really love Monet's Gardens or something. When in fact, you know, his method of delivery can be kind of subtle, but the impetus for his inclusion of a lot of that imagery was quite a bit of disdain.

And yet there's no denying, right, and he wouldn't deny it either, yes, of course, it's beautiful. He's not a monster. Of course, it's beautiful, but it's also ridiculous. Like, why is there a Japanese bridge? Why is there a bridge at all? You don't need a bridge. This pond is tiny. To cross this? And why is it Japanese? For what? Where is the Asian influence coming from? These are just questions, right? What did, is there some sort of exotification happening? You know, this was a man also reading Edward Said and questioning, What sort of fetish fetishization is going on that you are manufacturing a landscape in here? You know, but anyhow, there is a lot to be said. Yeah.

[01:24:17]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: As part of his process, and maybe through your knowledge of these archives that you've been organizing, are the writings from that period reflecting these questions that you're recording here? Or is this like your sense as someone that's looking at the painting and asking those questions?

CAT GARDÈRE: Both. Yeah. He stated a lot of this. I think some of the questions, you know, I think my observations then go a step further, right. Yeah, I think my work with the archives and the estate—understandably, you know, I bring this work to the world through my eyes and through my interpretations. I can't be a strict proxy for him. I wish I could in some ways, I wish I had more recordings from him. I wish I had more writings from him. For someone who had so much difficulty with English in his formative years, he became a fabulously eloquent writer. And I'm lucky that he left anything. But I wish I had more. But I of course

have interpreted and expounded on what he has left and developed my own understandings of meaning and analyses, I think through the discourses that have continued on these topics within the last dozen years, since his death. I wonder sometimes if that's fair.

You know, I think I struggle with the questions of how kind of strict and absolute I have to be to his word, to his intent. Or is that the job of the scholars or you know—there are no rules really for my role. I think all I can do is kind of the best that I can, and trying to be true to myself and to what I believe was his intent and to know that heck, if I weren't doing it, this wouldn't be happening at all. But, you know, I don't ever want to tell people what the works mean, how they should view things. But I do have memories of him, and I of course do have his words. And, you know, I can offer those to the world. So you know, hopefully my account here is true to the spirit of those without too much embellishment.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. I think my question maybe was thinking about an audience that might not be very familiar with Paul's process. And I think I speak for myself and for everyone that's going to listen to these, that we're very, very grateful to get an account, not only from someone that understands so deeply where the work was coming from, but also the actual lived experience that that was happening in.

And as you pointed out, that was in those places physically and living through that history. So thank you. I think also my question—something that I've been thinking about as I listen to you throughout this interview is I would like to know more about his process as a writer, because he was a writer as well. Which is what helps us really understand a lot of the context right now. And if you have any sense of where this practice fit in with his work and—just in the process.

[01:29:36]

CAT GARDÈRE: Yeah. I wish I knew more, which I'm afraid is my answer to most things. And before I go further, just to respond a little bit to what you just said—I think even recounting as I recount, for example, like the stories of Giverny, right, You know, I was 12. So, you know, for things like that, right, I know that I'm recounting things from a firsthand perspective, but I was also just a child. So, you know, I think so often I wish that I could kind of magically turn my memories into something more objective or something more informed or adult, you know. But we work with what we're given. But as for Paul's writing, you know, most of what I have are kind of pieces, I think. I have journals, some of which are more structured than others. Sketchbooks, again, some more organized than—and others a little more haphazard, you know, drawings that are mixed with grocery lists. A lot of yellow legal pads. A lot of notes and preparation for lectures, slideshows, things that you could tell he was preparing. You know, where he would be a visiting artist, called to give a talk or something. Books of poems. He wrote poetry—really pretty good poems actually.

Not that I'm a judge of good poems really, but lovely poems. And a few short stories and some dreams, you know, where you kind of wake up and you write your dreams down. And I don't have—no real long essays or kind of academic writing apart from, you know, a thesis from his MFA. But that tends to be it. I don't really know how it fit into his art making practice. I imagine that the notes around lectures and stuff would be only when prompted by request. For me it's extraordinarily helpful to have notes on specific pieces. And as part of the archival process, we've cataloged all of those things. Sketchbooks and poems and all of this—I can surmise that that's creative output and written as inspiration strikes.

I think I mentioned in an earlier session, right, that he had a rigorous meditation practice early in the morning. And typically, he would do the bulk of his painting and studio time early in the day. He would typically meditate also like first thing in the morning for several hours and then spend the morning until about two or three o'clock kind of, that was his devoted art practice time. So, I can imagine that somewhere in there, he's writing and using his journals to get some of these thoughts out. But to what extent he's consulting that or using them as reference, I can't speak to unfortunately. If my mother were here, she'd probably be able to shed some light, but yeah, unfortunately the sources to answer the questions just aren't here.

[01:34:35]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That brings me to another question, and I know we want to cover a little bit more of—

CAT GARDÈRE: —sure

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —the timeline for Paul's life. But I was wondering at this point, when he was doing these very important residencies and creating this work, what was the environment like with the family, your mom? What was happening like at a life level, I would call it? [Laughs.]

CAT GARDÈRE: So, my mother at the time is running—she's a director of Brooklyn Heights Montessori School. So, she has a sort of very high-powered job. She's an important person in the community here in Brooklyn. I am enrolled in school also locally. My brother is at this point in college. So, he's out of the house. And Paul is hard at work making art. You know, we are in a rhythm where I am being taken to school every day. He's taking me to school every day, picking me up. That year that he was in the residency—I think at that point I was old enough to take myself to school, and school was within walking distance.

So, you know, my mother and I survived alone. I'm sure that there were more pizzas ordered that year, however, because Paul was the chef in the house. And so yeah, my mother—yeah, she was always hard at work. Always hard at work. She came home typically quite late. So, you know, life at home was mostly Paul and I and again—I didn't call him Paul as a child. I called him daddy [laughs].

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I would be very impressed—[laughs].

CAT GARDÈRE: —yeah, no, people always ask me that. Did you call him Paul? [Laughs.] I did not. It's a shift I had to do once I took this role on just to compartmentalize a little bit. But yeah, those were our roles, you know, she was hard at work. I was hard at school and he was hard at art. And my brother was—somewhere—[laughs] being a college guy, being a college kid. Again, he was eight years older, so there was quite a bit of an age gap between us, so—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. In our previous session, and then you mentioned this again just a few minutes ago, you shared that Paul had a very constant and stable meditation practice. Can you say a little bit more about that? Any like, influences in terms of his spirituality and daily practice?

[01:38:06]

CAT GARDÈRE: Yeah. So, Paul was raised Catholic, which I think I mentioned earlier. I never knew him ever to be a practicing Catholic. Just as I never knew my mother to be a practicing Jewish person. Paul's mother, I was told, really loved yoga. I also never knew Paul to practice physical yoga, like to do asana practice, but he loved meditation. And for much of my adult life nagged me and said, are you meditating? Are you meditating? Are you meditating? Admittedly I was very stressed out [laughs] and probably should have been meditating, but he did ultimately hand me a stack of books on meditation, and I picked up the practice eventually.

But he really did gravitate toward Eastern philosophy, I think, and Buddhism—not as, not necessarily in a dogmatic way, I think. As a philosophy, ultimately found himself gravitating toward the ideologies around, or the ideas around detachment. You know, for all of his explorations of Vodou and Haitian spirituality, as much as he deeply respected Haitian religion and culture, he never once professed himself to be a practitioner of Vodou.

I think Vodou plays an enormous role in Haitian culture. And he found it extraordinarily advanced and beautiful and respected it and found enormous value in it as a very advanced aesthetic, visual language on top of its multi-layered kind of system of thought and as a sort of spiritual system kind of derived ultimately from African religion. But he never misrepresented himself—ever—as a Vodou practitioner. He was very clear about that in interviews and, and it was not ever his intent to portray himself that way. Just as it was not his intent to portray himself as a Catholic either. However, he was conscious that you can't divorce religiosity from Haiti. It is an extraordinarily religious and spiritual place. And he did believe in God and he was a very spiritual person, but he was not a dogmatic person. And I think he felt ultimately that—I mean, I definitely don't want go too far down just talking about his personal spiritual beliefs, but you know, I think, if I had to take a guess, I think he saw the confines of religion as an institution, maybe as the more troubling aspect rather than spirituality, right? He absolutely, however, saw art as a spiritual practice. And to him, I think meditation and sitting on the floor looking at a candle was—and making art—was his way of communing with something more universal. More so than praying in a church or at an altar

or, you know, any other ritual.

But judging solely by the number of books in this house on Eastern philosophy or Buddhist thought, or yoga, that would have to be my guess. That being said, there were plenty of books in this house on early Christian Gnostics and so many books in this house on Vodou. And you know, he was a voracious historian and a lover of comparative religion you know, and ultimately just a curious mind.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Alright, so I'm going to try to take us back to where we were before. But I really do enjoy having these contexts come up little by little as we speak about the timeline of, I guess Paul's life. So, you were talking about the residencies and the nineties. In '98 he won the Joan Mitchell Award. Can you say more about how we got there?

[01:44:35]

CAT GARDÈRE: Well between, yeah, I think so. So, he does this Giverny residency in 1993 and, you know, it is yet another explosive time of creativity. And comes back '94, '95, '96, '97, right, is producing these [01:45:00] fabulous works. Ultimately applies to the Joan Mitchell Foundation in 1998. You know, with a lot of that work in the category of painting. Even though those works are mixed media, they're wall based works—the media that they're comprised of definitely clearly has its foundation in painting. But the medium includes a lot of glitter [laughs] and sometimes photography, sometimes mud is making an appearance, wood, sometimes found objects.

I can't recall specifically off the top of my head which images were used in the Joan Mitchell Foundation application—metal, tin, fabric. You know, so these are mixed media works, but they're used under the painting category, and he wins. And the Joan Mitchell Foundation is a wonderful, wonderful organization. And that award is a huge honor, a huge honor. I don't know much about the selection process or the award. You know, I don't know much about how he won, of course. But that was just a huge boon for him. And the following year he has what turns out to be probably the most, you know, important, I guess, solo show of his career, which is a solo show at the Jersey City Museum of Art in 1999, a museum, which has very sadly since closed. And the show was curated by Latin American curator, Alejandro Anreus. And a wonderful interview was conducted by Haitian Scholar Jerry Philogene and the works, yeah—it's just a great show. And a beautiful catalog was printed, a black cover with a a preface by artist Carl Hazlewood.

An interview between Alejandro Anreus and Paul, and the text of which is duplicated in Kreyòl. It's a beautiful book. And there are, I think, copies floating around eBay and it's a lovely catalog. And that was really great. That was also the year I graduated high school. And it looked like, you know, positive things were to come.

But most of the works were really from that era of the post Giverny residency. Right. Paul really working in this kind of—confronting the legacies of colonialism kind of head on. Working with this garden metaphor and really successfully. The works are vibrant and colorful, bold and challenging, mixing Haitian history and Western art. You know, really exciting, exciting works. The next year, Marcia, my mother, actually receives a job opportunity up in Massachusetts, in the South Shore of Massachusetts and accepts the job.

[01:50:04]

And the job comes with a living quarters. So, my parents move up to Massachusetts. I was up in college at Brown, so not far away. And sort of a big step for them to relocate. And it has a studio for Paul. And you know, we had spent many summers kind of going up to like Cape Cod and Paul liked the light up there, and I think he was getting a little tired of the city. But it was a big deal for them to move. And my brother had kind of returned to New York and, you know, had moved into the house here and moved some friends into it and would take care of the house in their absence.

And I'm in college, so for about four or five years, my parents live up there. And Paul is painting up there and his works shift again into a a different style that is a bit more—he starts to move into something a little less structured, less rigid, and a little more—oh, I don't know how to explain it. A little more pastoral perhaps. There are more landscape elements coming into the work that I think is, you know, influenced by environment. But they're also getting a little more abstract and a little more surreal. You know, I think, I don't know, the displacement again is perhaps affecting him.

Who knows? The following year though, he's also moving back and forth between New York and Massachusetts a lot. And he's going to a lot of doctor's appointments. He'd been diagnosed with rheumatoid arthritis and in September of 2001, he's down here in New York for some doctor's appointments and he happens to be in Tribeca on the morning of September 11th, attending a doctor's appointment when the World Trade Center is attacked. And he's directly in the vicinity of the collapse of the towers and is physically unharmed, but is evacuated, like everyone else, and funneled, like everyone to cross the Brooklyn Bridge and walk home and is covered in ash. And he was extremely traumatized, and he didn't want to talk about it. And he didn't really want to talk at all. And we were very worried about him. We were also quite worried about his health.

He did have asthma already, but he was very stoic and really kind of didn't want to let anyone in. And you know, for the next few years he sort of really just went kind of back to Massachusetts, but clearly was terribly affected by this. And it entered his work in interesting ways. Images of airplanes start to kind of appear, and in kind of cryptic ways. But again, he didn't really speak about the incident.

[01:54:59]

We did seek some therapy. You know, but I think it was clear to the family that this was just, it was another episode of trauma in the life of a man who was already dealing with a lot of unresolved, lifelong trauma.

And of course, all of New York was so traumatized at the time, and for a long time afterward. And of course, as an artist does, he continued to make work and to deal with the incident through his work, you know. And so we were all grateful that he had space to do that. And grateful of course, that he didn't have to remain in New York, that he could go back to Massachusetts to be in a place with clean air and in a place that was away from the triggers of that of that incident. But he, he was really shaken. He was really shaken.

In 2008. He had begun working in the 2000s with this gallery in Chelsea called Skoto Gallery, this gallery devoted primarily to African art and art of the African diaspora. I think he was quite grateful to have found that connection after so many years, I think, of feeling a little perhaps—you know, lost in the art world, or unseen. I think he felt glad to find someone who was receptive to the imagery and, and ideas that he had long embraced, you know, from Haiti and who saw value in what he had been doing.

So, this 2008 solo show called *Multiple Narratives II* was done at Skoto—and a beautiful show. And I recall, I was working a job in the Meatpacking District, and I photographed the show for my father at the time. You know, but these were also difficult years. You know, Paul, at this point, his rheumatoid arthritis is getting challenging. His body is changing and he's having more difficulty making the works. He's not making them as quickly as he used to make them. The construction of the works has also changed. What used to be really bulky and quite large works is—now the works have become a little bit thinner and lighter. He's doing a bit more work on paper. The physical limitations of his body are just affecting how the works are constructed. They're still made of lumber and there's still quite a bit of carpentry involved, but you can tell he's just not physically capable of doing as intense labor as he once was. You know, but he's still doing as much as he can, and I think at this point moving back and forth from Massachusetts. At that point, my parents had actually purchased a home up there that they had intended on retiring to. And they're sort of going back and forth. They had come back to New York a bit more, I don't want to say full-time, but they were really splitting their time between New York and Massachusetts.

[01:59:56]

I think life in Massachusetts—while Paul liked it up there, he did enjoy this escape from city life and enjoyed the air and proximity to the ocean, especially—he felt it was culturally empty. As exhausting as the city can be—the city meaning New York City—the diversity, the richness of art culture is always there and it is a kind of humming scene that I think can feed you, even if you're not directly participating in it as an artist or even as a viewer, right. When you go—I think all it took for him was spending several years out of it to realize that when there's nothing there, it really kind of felt quite empty for him. So he needed to come back. Again, all his doctors were down here, but they're doing quite a bit of driving back and forth.

So, you know, my mother also had resumed working down here. But in November of 2009,

she is diagnosed with breast cancer. Then in January of 2010, the earthquake in Haiti happens on January 12th, and it is a devastating blow to the family. So, you know, that is a one-two punch for Paul and really the beginning of serious decline in his mood, in his wellbeing, and a very difficult period for all of us, the whole family. The earthquake itself, I mean, it's hard even to talk about it, or still to this day, right, to fathom the scale of death and loss. So, so many, so many dead and the helplessness. I mean, you know, for those in the diaspora, like looking on with just complete horror, it was just absolute agony. The home that Paul had been reared in as a child, the home that he had lived in when he returned to Haiti in the late 70s and early 80s that his grandfather had built, right, was destroyed. At the time, uncle Michel and his wife were living in it. It collapsed with them in it, and they were trapped in it for days, listening to the cries of school children in the neighboring school building—for days. And it was horrifying. We didn't know if they were okay. I mean, it was—and miraculously, they were. But the accounts were just sickening.

And Paul—the work, you know, Paul immediately pivots to a completely different series. Of course, you know, the only way he can work through any of these things is through art. And the series that it sparked was—we titled the series after he passed away. It was still in progress when he died, a year and nine months later.

[02:05:04]

But we titled it after one of the works called *Goudou-Goudou* which is the name that Haitians gave to the earthquake. And the series is dark, you know, and it's full of pain. And it literally has, you know, backhoes filling mass graves at the bottom of one of the works. And it's terribly hard. No one—though, and that was—2010 was just a terribly, terribly difficult year. Marcia is battling breast cancer, Paul is you know, Paul is dealing with enormous grief not only over his ill wife, but you know, trying to process this terrible information watching Haiti, and grieve, watching the cholera epidemic that follows. And it was just a terrible time for all of us. And in 2011, on July 23rd, which is—we're just a few days away from right now. Marcia passes away, my mother passes away. Paul's wife of 42 years. And he is stunned. They had a very contentious relationship, [laughs] but one full of so much love, and I think he feels lost again without her and does not know how he's going to carry on.

And I am—my brother is living in the building at the time—and I am living not too far away in Park Slope. And, you know, we're here for him, but he's despondent. Two weeks later, I get a call. I am reporting to work, and I get a call at nine o'clock in the morning. And he says, I need you to come take me to the hospital. I can't breathe. And as I said, he had asthma problems, so I said, Okay. I have to—I'm in Manhattan—I have to come back but hang on. I'll be there. So, I leave work and I come home and take him to the hospital. His doctors were at Beth Israel in Manhattan, so that's where we go. And it was two weeks after my mother died. And they admit him. And it turns out that he had contracted pneumonia while my mother was in decline. My mother's decline at the end was quite rapid. She had been fighting for quite a long time, but the final decline was really rapid and kind of took everyone—we all sort of lost our bearings and he was her primary caregiver and I'm sure was unable to really properly care for himself. And again, had rheumatoid arthritis, which is an autoimmune condition. So, he had contracted pneumonia. And they put him on antibiotics and admitted him and, you know, assured me like it's gonna be okay. And days go by and, you know, progressively he's losing—he's not responding though. The RA [rheumatoid arthritis] is interfering with the antibiotics and so they keep trying different antibiotics and they're running through them all.

[02:10:02]

And you know, weeks are going by and before you know it, like he's on dialysis because his blood is toxic at this point. They've pumped so many drugs into him and his organs are starting to fail.

And you know, he's fighting pneumocystic pneumonia which is the type of pneumonia that AIDS patients typically die of, because your immune system just is decimated. And in the end that's what happened. He never came out of the hospital. And I got a call at six o'clock in the morning on September 2nd, 2011, from a doctor who told me that he had passed and of just systemic failure. And when we came in, he had [laughs] a small smile on his face. And the doctor said that while, you know, they knew that he had had pneumonia and had ultimately not been able to beat this infection, that knowing that his wife had died recently, you know, essentially immediately prior to him being admitted, that the doctors were

actually not that surprised, that they see this progression of events more often than people think. And essentially that this is a variation of "Broken Heart Syndrome" which I believe is called Takotsubo cardiomyopathy or something like that. Which is death of a broken heart. I don't know if that was meant to just console me or not, but you know, multiple times in the two weeks between my mother's death and his going into the hospital, he said, I don't know how I'm gonna live without her. I don't know how to do this. They were very codependent. It's not a healthy relationship, but you know, I really think he couldn't envision life without her. You know, medically speaking, I'm quite sure that the RA really did interfere with his being able to fight this infection. You know, for my brother and I, it was a completely surreal reality, you know, like less than six months prior, my mother was standing up in front of a room of hundreds of people giving a speech. Like I said, her decline was rapid and kind of caught us all off guard.

And Paul was not terminally ill. So, it just, the world seems to make no sense, you know? And then by mid-September, we're planning our second memorial and you know, dealing with probate in multiple states, and it was awful. The problem, you know, of what to do with Paul's art was a longer-term question.

[02:15:00]

You know, in the immediate wake of a loss of life, there are so many questions and issues, and things that have to be addressed—major bills to pay and problems and kind of immediate legal issues. And you know, fine art is not really high on the list. An art legacy certainly isn't really an urgent matter, but we always knew it was something that we were going to want to address and continue to honor. But yeah, it was a problem for another time. And the thing though, in even the immediate years after Paul's death, is that as much as I tried to kind of organize things in a rudimentary way, I didn't really gain access to working with the work in like a hands-on way for another five or so years. Yeah, so that's sort of how, you know, all of this kind of estate work begins really around like 2017, even though he passed in 2011.

[END OF TRACK Session 2]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: So today is August 2nd, 2023, and I am recording a third session of an oral history with Cat Gardère at her apartment in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn, New York. And today we're going to continue recording for the project In Colors, which will be archived at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. So, Cat, thank you so much for being here again and for letting me in your home and in your life and in your father's life.

So, we were talking off the record just a little bit ago. And trying to figure out what we want to make sure to cover in this recording. Just to review, last time we had a beautiful session where you went through your father's career and life and we left it off at the point where you started talking about starting to do the work of his legacy, which you've been working on for several years now.

You also mentioned letting some years go by, because obviously, you were doing all of the other work that you had to do in regards to the loss of your family members and your personal part of the matter. So let's pick back up there. Can you say more about the work that you've been doing after your father's passing? And yeah, where you are at right now with Paul Gardère Studio and that effort that you've been carrying with you for several years.

CAT GARDÈRE: Of course. And it's always a pleasure to have you here, Fernanda, even after the project is over. I hope you'll keep coming back. Thank you. Yeah, so as I alluded to before, after Paul and my mother passed away in 2011, there were sort of several years of relative dormancy with the art and the estate. There were some activity—certain, you know consignments or gallery loans that had been agreed to previously that we honored. But in general, you know, there was a lot going on kind of legally, processing the estates. And my brother and I were really getting our bearings after enormous loss and trying to get on with our lives.

And then my brother himself passed away in 2016. And so that was another tremendous loss for me. And it was in the wake of that, that I really devoted myself to preserving Paul's work. Partly the impetus for that was partly logistical in the sense that it was the first time I kind of gained access to the house in a new way. My brother had been previously living in the space

and out of courtesy, I didn't really want to encroach upon his living space, which was where all of the art was located. And he had been having a really hard time since my parents had passed. So, you know, I didn't really have kind of free access to the works in the way that I really needed to do a proper archival effort. But that was okay. You know, he certainly was safeguarding them just fine. They weren't in any danger or anything. But to do the kind of work that I ultimately started to do in 2017, it meant you know, it meant really having consistent unfettered access.

[00:04:56]

So ultimately what I did, starting in in 2017, was to hire two archivists, one of whom was a recent graduate from NYU's Conservation and Arts Administration master's degree program. And we embarked on a full-time conservation effort that lasted about three years. The three of us working Monday to Friday full-time.

And it, you know, really was first and foremost devoted to physical conservation and preservation of all of the works. Photographing everything to create museum quality images. All of the images that Paul had had and created over the years were on slides. You know, 35-millimeter slides, which for the bulk of the 20th century was the medium of dissemination to curators of course. But of course, now those are totally obsolete. And he had done, he had had certain things photographed and put on CDs and, and stuff in the early 21st century, we needed new, better JPEGs of everything. So as we went along, pulling each work and assessing the condition of everything, we set up shop to light things properly and photograph everything.

So we were also creating new databases and cataloging works, you know, creating new condition reports for everything. Scanning—we were scanning just every scrap of paper, every slide, every negative, every reference you know, four by six photograph. Truly, you know, I guess without really realizing it you know, I've been told that what we did over those years was really, I guess the work of you know, the archival work that an institution—but to me it was necessary that we digitize everything. We put everything onto a networked drive, you know, in the cloud. At the time I was splitting my time between California and New York. I had been living in California for a few years prior, and I was still part time out there and I needed access to the archive from afar.

So, it was clear to me that everything was gonna need to be cloud-accessible. And, you know, it was as, as necessary as it is to physically protect the archive, a modern archive has to be digitally accessible. It also prevents you from having to handle objects. So, you know, while one archivist was devoted to physical preservation, the other one was devoted to digitization.

[00:08:51]

And we were creating—the database we created was also linking exhibition activity, past loans, past consignments, sales records, you know, truly everything, in addition to scanning all of this data, we were recreating history, right, this artist's history. And along the way, you know, I am learning, right. Because of course, most of the time until this process had started, my experience of my father as an artist was more as my father, less as an artist. I had of course had memories of going to his exhibitions, sometimes even photographing his exhibitions for him as a courtesy or supporting his art studio practice or helping him write an artist statement, or I should say, type up an artist statement or write some emails or whatnot. But, you know, by and large, he didn't really let me organize his studio the way I wanted to, or you know, he was pretty private about his art practice. And so and I think, like I said before, I had my own art career, not as an artist, but as a producer. And that was pretty all-consuming. And so he was my father first and foremost. And I knew relatively little about his really extensive résumé and his exhibition history and his early career, all of the things that predated my life and the things that had happened when I was a child and in school.

And so it was really only through diving into this role as steward of his career and his archives that I set about to shepherding his legacy and then representing him kind of in the current art market and art world. But you know, first and foremost was this archival effort, because of course you can't represent anyone publicly if you don't secure the integrity of the works physically first. So that process, like I said, took three years of concerted effort and in that time some really wonderful things started to happen. I documented—as we were working, I was documenting that whole process on social media and on Instagram, you

know, and people started to take notice and started to see like, what are you doing?

And at the same time that we're doing all of this archival effort, I was also restoring the building and it was a bit crazy. We were keeping the art in the building and doing the archival work in the building while the building is under construction. And we were kind of leapfrogging around the contractors. It was a little bit insane, but it worked. And sort of chronicling all of this work on Instagram. And people are taking notice. And so you know, Paul's profile was starting to, you know, become elevated and people start reaching out to me and I start having more conversations and making more connections.

[00:14:23]

And a few museum acquisitions were even made in that year, starting I think 2018 and 2019, even some high-profile ones, which were really exciting. And exhibitions started happening and all of a sudden, what went from total dormancy and virtual silence, you know, after this artist's death for a good six, seven years, activity started to pick back up. You know, this is an artist who was never not respected in the circles who knew his work, there was always a ton of admiration for the work. There was just always a lot of confusion as to why this artist wasn't better known. I never really knew how to answer the question, Why don't I know this artist? Or Why don't more people know this artist? It's such a multifaceted answer. You know, I generally answer that question with like, How much time do you have? But, you know, the work that I was starting to do was really gaining traction and above all, I felt like I was learning so much and it was becoming a really rewarding process for me.

You know, it was also very heavy and very emotional. I was spending all day, every day in what felt like my father's psyche, in a way that sometimes became too much. And I felt from time to time that I actually had to put it down, you know? And I noticed that, you know, more often than not, I would call him Paul than dad or my father. People also remarked to me, you know, how often I called him Paul, and sort of reflected that back to me, just as an interesting thing that they noted. And, you know, all of this is just sort of information. It was proof to me of how much I really needed to compartmentalize this experience.

Because between the grief and just sort of the emotional processing of everything, it's just, it's been such an intense experience. I think for anyone you know, grief and losing a parent is and can be such an intense and deeply painful experience, I think. But there's something also in particular about Paul's story and his life and his art, right, that is so full of pain and trauma and unresolved trauma. You know, the story also of the Haitian people. There is a lot of complex history here, and a lot of complex identity and weighty questions, right? And I think his work was very intentionally wrestling with all of those things, often to unresolved conclusions. To work with that subject matter in and out every day, right, to work with his writings, you know, in a very intense way, to literally transcribe his own handwriting and his journals, his private journals, would mean to be in a very intimate headspace with him. Right? And to do that for any artist, you know, it means to be in a very personal, intimate space with them. But to do it for your own father is also to invoke your own memories, your own kind of very young psychic spaces and to do it in your own childhood home. Right? This was all just a very, very intense process for me that was happening while I was grieving not only my parents, but my own and only brother.

[00:19:05]

So, you know, it was just an extraordinarily intense process, but like I said, one that has been completely transformative for me and one that has brought me into a much deeper and closer relationship with my father. Such to the point that in many ways I feel like I've gotten to know him to new depth and in new ways in death that I didn't know him in life, you know? The relationship we had in life was its own beautiful thing. It was a complicated relationship as well, but I feel as though he has emerged as sort of a whole man now with the ways that I've gotten to know him through this estate stewarding process. I think that's strictly through the work that I've done by getting to know this body of work so deeply. And I'm not an art historian. I was not trained as an art historian or an art researcher. I don't have a degree in art semiotics or history. You know, I do have a liberal arts degree, think I'm a smart person, but I don't have the kind of training that I think even a lot of the people who might end up listening to this interview might actually have. But I think that, you know, I have poured over the writings, I have poured over these images. I've tried to look up all of the references and, you know, follow the breadcrumbs that Paul has left. Paul had a lot of the schooling that I don't have, and he himself was such a voracious reader and had such an

insatiable appetite for history and art history, that if anything, you know, I spend a lot of time sifting through his history books and his art history books.

I can't recall if I mentioned it before, but between my brother and my father who were both avid historians, my brother actually was a history teacher. I just donated like a truck full of like 50 boxes of history books to the Brooklyn Public Library. And so, you know, there were so many books here that it just was impossible to even keep them all. But there is still so much knowledge here and I still learn so much just by sitting in front of the bookshelves and reading, you know, the books that they left. And I still love stumbling upon old bookmarks and seeing, you know, oh, somebody left a bookmark in on this page. And what was it on this page that they found appealing or who was it that dog-eared this page, or, oh, I found, you know, Paul's handwriting on this page or something. And that's fascinating to see those kinds of notes and relics of somebody's thought process.

So I'm sorry I got a little off track there. But anyhow, yeah, so it's that kind of depth of study though that in this process with the estate has really revealed a lot about who he was, what was driving the work, what was driving him, and ultimately you know, I think now that after about three years, of course, once the bulk of the cataloging work was done, I sort of set about to taking all of the work public, only to get stymied, you know, like so many of us, by the pandemic. But that work has now kind of resumed. So, most of the work that I do now is fielding a lot of requests—inquiries about upcoming exhibitions, requests for loans, requests for consignments from galleries that might be interested for group shows, requests for image usage or licensing.

[00:24:43]

It's one of my missions as, you know, the director of the estate to make the works and all of the materials that we've archived, which include a lot of ephemera from past shows and press and articles and whatnot, available to scholars, students, and researchers. That's something that is very important to me. Paul was known more in academic circles than among commercial collectors. Academic curators and professors really are the ones who recognized what he, like the references that he was using, the sort of references from African art and Latin American history, and they were the ones to say, we see you. He was far less understood amongst the American art market, you know? And so it really is in that spirit that I feel it's very important to continue to make the work accessible to researchers and scholars. You know, the other thing I think it's really important to do is to continue to support living artists and other community members—artists of Caribbean descent, other artists of Haitian descent, you know, anyone in the diaspora, Afro-Caribbean diaspora especially, who is doing work around migration, around identity, mixed race identity in particular, work around post-colonial discourse, you know, and especially work that's advancing diversity in the Western art canons. Those are topics that Paul just would've resonated with, and topics that I resonate with, you know topics that his work speaks directly to. So, I think Paul is—was someone who worked largely in isolation. He was a very private person. He had a lot of antisocial tendencies, and he really didn't find community. He had a sort of select few friends, most of you whom were from his days at Cooper Union. They were not from the Caribbean diaspora. They were really the friends that he made during those formative years, and they became his lifelong friends.

I really don't know what would've been possible for him if he had found supportive cultural community. I think it would've been a game changer for him as a human being, as a man, and as an artist, you know? I mean, he was of a very different generation and it was a different time in New York, but to look around now and to see the vibrancy and the power of community and just the power that is possible when people can congregate and find and operate when they are feeling supported, you know, and feeling like that they have found their tribe, so to speak, right. It breaks my heart to think that he lived and worked his whole life feeling that he didn't belong.

[00:29:49]

I think, you know, to be uprooted as a child, I mean, this is not a unique story at all, but to be uprooted as a child, to feel displaced, to feel overwhelmed and lost and culture shock. And his was not a story of, you know, extreme disadvantage. You know, he had means in Haiti. But to have means in Haiti is still to arrive in the United States and to be lower class. But regardless, you know, it is not about comparison, but there are still so many people who had it much, much worse than him.

He received many opportunities that many people never do. But I think the fact of the matter is that he went through his life very misunderstood and kind of perpetually miscategorized, in large part because of the way that he looked or sounded, or the things that he wasn't. He wasn't a dark-skinned Haitian, which meant that most people said, You don't look Haitian, or You don't make Haitian looking art, we don't know what to do with you. And I think in large part, it wasn't for lack of pride as a Haitian, but he was reluctant to lean into the label of a Haitian artist because he knew it would pigeonhole him. And what he wanted to do was to be an American artist. And yet, despite the fact that he felt that he had earned his formal education according to the letter of the rules of the Western formal system, he wasn't allowed into those spaces either. You know, and yet, I think he felt he wasn't really an African American artist. He wasn't a white artist. You know, and in some way, he felt he kind of belonged to unbelonging, and I relate to that. You know, I don't know, even just in the few years that I've been doing this and representing his work, I have gotten a really small taste of those kinds of rejection, of what it feels like to not fit into the categories.

I'm not saying—not me personally so much, but I see the ways in which his work defies categorization. In some ways, that's what makes it beautifully unique and incredibly powerful. And yet, you can also see how that might be perplexing to a world or to you know, a market system that sort of desperately wants to put you in a box, for convenience's sake or for commercialization sake, or what have you. And he really resented that, I think. I think he had a lot of disdain—openly or quietly, I'm not sure—for the capitalist drivers that forced, you know, the forced the reduction of artists and people into these minimizing categories. And I think he really had a loathing for this moniker of minority artists. And I think he saw that the West, so to speak, just wants to kind of consume everything. And [00:35:00] you know, in some ways he, after several years of exhibiting—and I think when the activity died down, he resigned himself to making the work that he needed to make for himself regardless of whether or not it had an audience. You know, I don't think he ever was the type of artist who tailored his work for the market or for the viewer. He made the work that he needed to make. And a lot of it was quietly subversive. And that's what he was going to do, sort of sales be damned.

And yet, like I said, as a young woman, I didn't really know any of that about him. I didn't know his ethos. I regret now that I didn't take more time to get to know him and question him. He was, in some ways, I think he was very private at home too, you know? He just didn't talk about it very much. The work was obviously up and hanging for us all to see, but I think he just—he would've answered my questions, had I asked. But like any—I don't know, maybe I took it for granted. So, this process for me has been really rich and informative, very personal and emotional. It's allowed me in some ways to keep him alive. I would very much like to see him and the work get more attention because I think, not just because he's my father, right? And I want that for him, but because I think the work has always been good. Obviously, I'm biased, but I also think the work is objectively really good. And more so than that, I think it's really important. The works are about topics that are somehow more contemporary than ever, which makes him, you know, startlingly ahead of his time. And the fact that it is still hard to get people to pay attention is frustrating, to put it mildly. But, you know, I'm doing what I can.

[00:38:33]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I have several questions.

CAT GARDÈRE: [Laughs.] Go for it.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I'm going to try not to bombard you with so much.

CAT GARDÈRE: [Laughs.] Go for it

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: [Laughs.] So we can go in parts. But first, I wanted to go back to the question of the relationships that your father—as a very private person with a profound inner world and studio practice—what was the role of your mother, who was his closest relationship, it seems, throughout his life, in terms of his career and trajectory as an artist?

CAT GARDÈRE: My mother was incredibly supportive. She was the—I mean, she enabled it all really.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And she was an artist herself before—

CAT GARDÈRE: —she started out as an artist herself, yeah. When they met, they were both painters. She was at Bennington College and ultimately, she left painting and went into education. And she became the breadwinner of the family and supported us all, allowing him to paint. You know, so she supported him, and I was not privy at all to that decision, and I never heard her complain about that. I never heard her, you know, gripe at him or anything about money or—I mean they had a difficult relationship. They fought a lot. They were very vocal. It was a loud household. You know, I think, like I said earlier, the sort of division of labor, if you will, was that my father was the stay-at-home dad. And my mom was the busy-at-work mom. And she worked in the neighborhood. You know, Brooklyn Heights Montessori was not far, so she wasn't far away, but she did work long hours. And, you know, my dad was the one to take me to school and pack my lunch and pick me up and have dinner ready every night. And there was a big age gap between me and my brother. So, he was largely out of the house during my childhood. So, it was me and my dad most of the time. I was also just a very responsible kid and largely pretty self-sufficient.

But, you know, he was here all the time and really did the duties of the household. He cooked, cleaned, and tended to, you know, any kind of handyman building needs. So, you know, they did fight a lot. If they fought about money, I never heard it. Right. I heard a lot of fighting, but it wasn't about that. She believed in his art wholeheartedly, though. She really, really believed in the strength of his work. She loved their life in Haiti. And she had no, to me, she never had any complaints about supporting him in that way. You know, when she was near the end of her career, on the verge of retirement you know, she rediscovered her love of painting and had plans to kind of pick that back up after retirement. And unfortunately, she passed away shortly after she retired. So didn't have much of a chance to do that, but, you know, yeah, I think she was consistently supportive of him in that regard. There was just never a time when she wasn't. Yeah.

[00:43:37]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you for sharing that. I think, you know, we don't talk enough about the work that it takes from a community of people to support one another—

CAT GARDÈRE: —yeah—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —but I think especially people like your father, who couldn't imagine doing anything else. It was almost like a duty. And just how much work it takes, in a good way, not in in a bad way, to sustain one another, really for us to be able to be ourselves. And I also wanted to go back to your comments on belonging, which really run throughout your father's work and the several interviews that he did with different people for exhibitions. There's one answer in particular that really moved me, in an interview that he did with Karen McCarthy Brown. And he's actually talking very eloquently, as usual, about belonging. So, I'm just gonna repeat one—I don't wanna like do the whole thing, but just so that people that don't have access to that catalog can hear some of these beautiful words.

CAT GARDÈRE: Great.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: So, [reading from catalog]

"Karen, as Haiti certainly has had a lot of pain and a lot of creativity, what do you think the relationship is between the two?" And then you were talking about something he had mentioned that's sort of along these lines, but Paul answered, [reading again from the catalog] There's a connection. In my case, as a kid, I was disconnected from my environment, from my point of origin. My mother refused to even think to go back to Haiti. All you heard out of Haiti was atrocities, and it just created this kind of total loneliness. And the art really alleviated it. It's like feeling that you're not even who you're supposed to be."

There's more to that answer. I can personally really relate to that. I think a lot of kids who are forced, or who left points of origin when they're already, you know, teenagers, have formulated some sort of sense of identity and are suddenly having to move somewhere else and redefine everything they are and what they do. Paul took all of that to actually make his whole life around him, make all of the work around him to try to find this identity. And I don't know if trying to find his identity is the best way of saying it, but you know what I mean, like trying to belong somewhere—

CAT GARDÈRE: —m-hmm [affirmative]—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —trying to figure out where he fit. You also mentioned you feeling some of that—

CAT GARDÈRE: —I do, yeah—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —sense of not belonging or his work not belonging to the art market. Can you say more about this huge concept of belonging [both laugh] in his work and also how that has sort of transitioned and you've sort of inherited that and how you're working through that?

[00:47:11]

CAT GARDÈRE: Yeah, absolutely. It is a huge topic. [Laughs.] Yes. And yeah, one that I think about a lot—currently. I am very much actively working through it, so I won't pretend I that I've arrived [laughs] at any answers really here.

I think with regards to the work, like his artwork, the way that I see it anyway, he spoke or wrote rather that after returning to Haiti and those years from 1978 to 1984, that he felt that he had discovered his purpose as an artist, right? Which was essentially to unite and marry, if you will, the two main influences of his life, culture, and career, which were essentially the African and Haitian influences of his origin, and the American slash Western slash European influences of his adopted home and formal education, of America. right. And that was going to be his purpose as an artist, to meld these worlds, for better or worse. And that he was going to have to figure out how to reconcile these two truths that in some extent already existed in post-colonial Haiti, right? I mean, in a sense of—the French had introduced themselves into this society and kind of birthed these new generations. So there is in some sense—what is the word I'm looking for—precedent for that kind of amalgamation. But he also realized that I, not me personally, but he, Paul, is also kind of this example of this sort of syncretism, right? That anyone who experiences this kind of cultural blending is in some ways a product of that kind of phenomenon.

And in his art, he needed his art in some ways to reflect this as well. And that for him, and he spoke later, that sometimes it's going to be a seamless blending and sometimes it's going to be a violent conflict. And over the course of his career, it took various forms, right? But over all of those decades, he's working that same problem over and over and over again. And that purpose, if you will, is what he discovered after returning back from those years. Right. And if you recall prior to those, to that return to Haiti, he didn't, he, he felt lost. He didn't, he didn't know what his purpose was. And it was that kind of return to those shores of origin where it clicked for him. So, you know, I think what's interesting, though, about that in the work, right, is that he's not necessarily saying, I belong to either of these spaces. He's saying I have to forge a third space. I have to forge—I have to create my own space because I don't belong to either of these. I belong to something new. But where do you fit? Where does that third space fit if it's new? It might not belong anywhere. And to me what's interesting is that that phenomenon in and of itself is not unique.

And if all of the people who feel that they don't belong could band together, they would realize that they do belong to each other. So, there's actually an enormous camaraderie there. That to me is really quite powerful. And it's not necessarily just camaraderie amongst Haitian Americans, it's potentially camaraderie amongst mixed race or diasporans or immigrants all across the globe, you know? There's just a lot to relate to in terms of themes here. That's sort of what I see in terms of the work, like of how he struck, of like what that theme of like where it kind of lands, right? That this feeling of unbelonging—he's saying like, I'm going to take these multiple influences and I don't belong to either of these or to any of these. And yet, by uniting them, I'm literally creating this hybrid, if you will—I don't love that word, but this new creation, and I am gonna leave it here and you can—its belonging is almost irrelevant. It exists, you know it exists, it just does. Where you put it, which box you want to put it in, is almost your problem. But I existed. You know, you can't say that I didn't, you can't say that it doesn't exist. Stop sweeping it under the rug. It did exist. Yeah. But in terms of my own feelings of belonging that's a trickier one. I don't know [laughs].

[00:55:10]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Or perhaps your experience with where Paul's work belongs in the environment that we exist in now. I mean, you know, he was talking about these concepts that we're talking about now, that are so pertinent, you know, back in the 90s he was talking

about ecological disaster—in those words. And so, you know, just in your experience of being the person stewarding this content and trying to find a place in an "art market," and I'm doing quote unquote [laughs]—

[00:56:02]

CAT GARDÈRE: —yeah—[laughs]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —or museums, or scholarship—what, have you encountered and yeah, what has been your experience in that exploration? [Cat laughs.] And I know that's also a big question—

CAT GARDÈRE: —yeah—

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —but I think you sort of pointed to that before, you know also carrying this sense of trying to find where his art belongs even now.

CAT GARDÈRE: Yeah, I mean, I have opinions [laughs] of where I think it belongs. I know in my heart that his work belongs in American art museums. Because this work is, especially with regards to, you know, speaking around topics of, you know, complex topics of mixed race and immigration and migration and nuanced identity, these are such pertinent topics now, topics that for so long we have not wanted to talk about. And we have avoided talking about that, to the point that it is deeply urgent that we talk about that. To me, to continue to keep works like this out of the conversation is almost an injustice.

But that's not for me to say, in the sense that I'm not the arbiter or the gatekeeper, you know, I'm not in those positions of power. It's a tough question, in the sense that I actually do have an anecdote that speaks to this question, that is sensitive. I'll refrain from naming names of institutions, but a wonderful work of Paul's was nominated for acquisition at a very notable museum several years ago and had the unanimous support of every curator in the entire museum.

[00:59:11]

And ultimately was vetoed by the director of the museum, who was of a very antiquated kind of market-driven mindset for not having quote, achieved enough kind of "art market accolades" during his lifetime, when the fact of the matter is that during his lifetime, he had been systematically marginalized by the art market for his background. And the art market at the time was blatantly discriminatory to artists of color, and his work was openly discriminated against. And it was extraordinarily disappointing, both to the curator who had nominated him, and it was infuriating to me. This was very recent. We were already in an era when museums were supposedly trying to correct the canons, so to speak, and right historical wrongs, and here is an American art museum essentially saying that their acquisitions were only supposed to mirror the successes of, you know, the art market of the 20th century. It was shocking, actually. And it was basically proof that nothing had changed. And it was devastating and there was nothing I could do. But it hurt, you know?

And the funny thing is that those sorts of rejections—that was one particularly kind of egregious example, but not the only one by any means. And I think it's been funny, [laughs] and by funny, I don't really mean funny, but you know, there's a lot of lip service, of course, being paid—I think we all know that—a lot of lip service around diversity initiatives and correcting behaviors. And, you know, we are operating in a sector of society and culture that likes to brand itself as progressive and liberal when it is also catering to the uber wealthy, who are often closeted conservatives. It's complicated and often very unsavory. And the fact of the matter is that what is on the surface being touted as progressive initiatives or virtue signaling is in fact empty rhetoric.

Not all of the rejections or disappointments are as blatant as that example, but there are still many examples of, even from the people who profess that they are doing the work, that are in fact woefully falling short. And what is sort of funny to me is just how personally impacted and personally offended I feel for Paul. I have to remind myself that I'm not the artist even. I feel I've devoted so much time and personal effort to the work, and of course he is my father, so I guess I take it personally, but it's almost as if I experienced the rejection as if I were him. And I really do have to remind myself like, right, this isn't my work.

[01:04:56]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: [speaks softly] Although it is your work.

CAT GARDÈRE: Although it is sort of—I guess it is my work and you know, because it is my family history, perhaps, maybe that might be why I take it so personally too. But I do think it would serve me to access some of that compartmentalization again sometimes. Yeah, I think, you know, they talk about—artists have to deal with rejection, right? Actors, writers, artists of all kinds. It's part of being an artist. Coming into this work now, I don't have a thick skin yet. I think I'm just feeling this stuff for the first time. So I think I feel very raw in it. You know, I think artists, when you're in art school and you start getting critiqued maybe early on, maybe they start to develop this thick skin. I feel like I'm like a baby—brand new, getting critiqued and getting rejected. It feels—it's hard [laughs]. You know, but I'm a big girl. I can take it [laughs], but it is kind of funny.

I've noted to myself like, Ow, this hurts. You know? So, bravo to all these artists and creatives out here, you know, dealing with rejection all the time. It really is tough.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I mean, I would say it's an especially hard position for Paul and probably anyone working within the, doing the work of cultural barrier and trying to become not part of, but change what we call America or what it is to be American. And so, yes, like, I understand artists get rejected, but I think for people who have experienced, and I'm guessing Paul experienced that in ways that were speaking to who he was, you know, racially or phenotypically, is different.

CAT GARDÈRE: Yes. And I experience to that point, the phenotypically part, I will say I experienced that a lot. I am even lighter-skinned than Paul was because Paul married a white woman. So, I am very light-skinned. I absolutely pass as white. That being said, people are often perplexed by my ethnicity. As a child, even, I was approached often, I would say, as young as 12, on the streets of New York, often by men, and I still am—people inquiring about my ethnicity. It's very problematic, especially when I was a child. But saying, You're not white. You're not white, are you? What are you, where are you from? You know? It's problematic sexually, problematic racially, but you know, and no one ever believes me when I tell them that I'm Haitian. And Haitians don't believe me when I tell them that I'm Haitian. Haitians definitely don't believe me, because my Kreyòl is bad. So, I think from my own personal experience, that's very difficult because I don't even feel like I belong to my own ethnicity a lot of the time. Right. And so that alone is painful.

I think you also said something earlier about, you know, feeling like—I forget exactly what you said, but you know, feeling a sort of lost sense of home, that I really do relate to. I left, I was born in Haiti, and I was displaced also as a child. But for me, I left so early that I actually don't have memories of my childhood in Haiti. I was only three, three and a half when we left.

[01:09:59]

But what I have, I've always had this sense of this sort of lost—this sort of sense of loss of something very early. And it was always this thing and has been this thing that it's just this sort of missing time. And, you know, it was particularly hard for me around the earthquake in Haiti. It was this reality that I will never get that back. I can never go back. And, you know, that period is just, it's inaccessible. And I thought for a long time that I had memories, and they turned out to be photographs. You know? I think in some ways I was envious for a long time of my older brother, who was old enough during our time in Haiti to actually have real memories.

So, I wonder in some ways if that experience left some sort of imprint on me, but you can't really know. But to anyone who experiences that kind of shift early in life or displacement, I mean, it absolutely leaves an imprint on you, you know? I got off track a little bit, but—[laughs]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: No, not really [laughs]. But we can go back to another question—

CAT GARDÈRE: Sure.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —I have from things that you mentioned in the past. When you were talking about—you mentioned this in the first interview as well, but I think today you went back to it, and you discussed the emotion and the feeling of sort of going back to the archeology of your father's life and, you know, encountering his objects, his letters. Can you

say more about what that has meant for you? You also, in the first interview that you carry this mission proudly and you've found a lot about yourself through this work. So maybe as we start closing down this phase, you can talk more about your reflections on the work that you've been doing, what that has been for you, and where it will go, maybe?

CAT GARDÈRE: [Laughs softly] Yes, absolutely. It's meant so much for me. I think it will also continue to unfold over time. I know that it will. I think first and foremost, like I've said, you know, I've gotten to know my father in ways that I couldn't really have predicted. All of this started, you know, in a really material way, with me needing to kind of preserve these objects, right? Hundreds and hundreds of artworks. Huge hulking physical things that, you know, in my way and need to be preserved and in handling these physical things—everything from eight feet tall paintings down to little sculptures made of ceramic or brass or cement or plaster to slides and negatives, and paper. I started really to have this entire emotional journey. Thankfully—and I'm not afraid to say this—[laughs] therapy has been a huge and very wonderful and important part of my life for decades. And so that has been a consistent part of my life throughout this process, right, and a wonderful touchstone for me as I've continued to navigate all of the sort of personal discoveries that I've made.

[01:15:10]

You know, I think the truth also is that, you know, I've wrestled with a lot of difficult things as I've sort of uncovered all of this knowledge about my father, about his pain and his own trauma. You know, his trauma also is my trauma too, right? There's the field, I'm gonna digress a little bit here, but the field also of what's called epigenetics right, is also—and intergenerational trauma, right—speaks to the fact that the experiences that we have in life quite literally get embedded in the expression of our genes and get passed down to our children. And I have taken it upon myself to learn a little bit more about that, right? And, and so in that context, it's also informative to realize that not only is Paul's trauma in the artwork, it's also a bit in me, right? His memories are in me too, and they're in his child-rearing of me—especially as my primary daily caretaker, you know? So the more I learned about him in this process, the more I was able to contextualize his behaviors on a daily basis with my mother, with me, with my brother, the more I understood and was able to form a really well-rounded picture of like who I lived with every day.

And, you know, he was a complicated person and not an easy person. And working so closely with this has—I've been able to glean so much more compassion for him. And that's been really beautiful. It's been so hard to arrive at that, and have so much more love and not be able to show it to him, you know, or to give it to him. I can still give it to the universe you know, and to my altar for him. And I can sit in his studio and meditate, and I do, and sort of ground and be with him in that way. And I do. You know, but it's in those ways that this process has allowed me to grow and unfold and become closer with him. And that's been really beautiful, you know, but heavy and hard. And there are some days where I wonder like, is this healthy? Is this too much? Do I need, should I be doing this, you know, to such an extent? And yet, I don't know that those sorts of judgements are helpful either, right?

For better or worse, this is also my birthright and my story. And I am, as a human being, someone who's devoted to personal growth and discovery. And so this feels not only, you know, like it's conducive to better understanding the work and, you know, which helps me bring it to the world in a more informed way, but also to better understanding myself and to being a more loving and compassionate human being in the world. Both of those things don't feel like negatives, so, you know, I will carry on there. I think I, you know, as for taking the work forward you know, like I said, in terms of how it will unfold, I'm sure it will continue to unfold in a personal way. In terms of the estate work, you know, I am currently working alone in large part.

[01:20:02]

I have had some support, excuse me, this past year through a wonderful organization called Soft Network who has been very supportive of Paul's estate as a kind of estate in residence, so to speak. They recognized the amount of work that I had done, the archival effort, and really have wanted to support the estate kind of publicly. So they were the ones to bring Paul to Independent 20th Century in 2022, last fall. And so this year I've been working with them. They've just been helping me in a kind of advisory capacity as I navigate all the new opportunities that have been coming my way. Currently, you know, I am fielding a lot of interest from new galleries. And so there is, you know, potential new activity in the future.

And so we'll see kind of yeah, what—the future is a little bit uncharted in that. There may be new partnerships ahead, but we'll see.

Personally, I would really like to be engaged in this work with someone. As the profile increases, there is more and more work to do. And as I'm only one person and it's quite a bit of work. I also, you know, have my own work to do. The building is quite labor intensive, and you know, it's a lot as one person. It is always, like we said, better to work in community. So yeah, things will change in the future, as all things should. So, we'll see where that goes. I also am very interested in publishing. I have my own experience in publishing. Paul was a wonderful, wonderful writer. There's a lot of great material here, and there is, yeah, a lot of interest. So that's something that's just a personal interest of mine and I think would be really wonderful to bring to the public. I also think publishing, even though, you know, there's—people are of mixed opinions about perhaps the relevance of the printed form, you know, in the modern digital age. But I think a printed book, a monograph, is still a really beautiful thing. I think there's nothing like holding the weight, like the permanence of a printed book in your hand. And as stunning and amazing as exhibitions are, the permanence of a book is just a really special thing and can be really wonderful and accessible to people who can't make it to exhibitions.

So yeah, that's something I would really love to see come to fruition. I did self-publish a small book, just a sort of introduction to Paul for people who haven't been familiar with his work. Kind of more an introduction to him and sort of the brief survey of the range of series that he produced over his lifetime, and a quick intro to the work of the estate. But as a self-published book, I really only, you know, printed a few copies and we'll see if I can do a larger run in the future. But even that, you know, was a great exercise, working with a designer and I was pretty happy with the result. So yeah, so, you know, I love doing projects of all kinds and I'm open to a lot.

[01:24:54]

Above all, just really excited about, you know, continuing to bring Paul's work to the public. And I'm working and communicating with professors, new curators, new writers, all kinds of new people. You know, it's about just bringing new eyes to the work, keeping these topics and ideas in the discourse. You know, above all, even though the dates on a lot of these works were 1980s and 1990s, the fact of the matter is they could have been made today. You know? He was making work about these topics that are still extraordinarily relevant and that's all, really—it's not about fame, it's not about money. It's just like these ideas are still necessary, you know? And the silencing of the Haitian story is still very much happening. And the reality in Haiti is worse than it's ever been. So, you know, it feels really very critical that the voices and the artists of the Haitian diaspora get more visibility than ever.

The art world has come a long way. It has. You know, it has a long way to go. But young Haitian artists and artists of the Haitian diaspora, they have more resources than they did, but there are a lot of artists getting left behind, especially those that really were working and forging ahead at a time, you know, when they had no, when there was no social media where they had no outlets and recourse, and they persisted anyway. You know, and the fact that—and this is no animosity to young artists who are rising to the top now—but there are aging artists, mid-career and late career artists who still have not gotten their flowers and a lot of artists who have passed away who without them, you know? And it is important actually that we, before we charge full steam ahead, right, that we take a moment and look back to the ones that put in the work and maybe never got their dues, because they actually really did pave the way.

So, you know, for Paul to be the first Haitian artist in residence at The Studio Museum in Harlem, you know, he didn't change the course of history or anything, but it's not nothing. And I think all of his work, quietly or not, you know, was about forcing the world to change its definitions of Haitian art and to force it to broaden its understanding of what Haitian contemporary art could be and what Caribbean contemporary art could be in the modern and contemporary art market, right? And so, the fact that Caribbean art now is really having a moment in the art world is wonderful, but he was also saying this 30 years ago, [laughs]. So, you know, bravo. I'm glad that it's happening now but would love for someone to just stand up and clap a little bit for him. Yeah. You know, that's all.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: And I would argue for Latinx art, of course if we wanna call it that. But that's a whole other conversation.

CAT GARDÈRE: A wonderful conversation that absolutely needs to be had. Yeah. [Laughs.]

[01:29:57]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much, Cat. I do wanna make sure we documented as much as we could, but also anything that I didn't ask you about that that you would like to discuss right now before we stop the recording?

Not to put you on the spot. [Both laugh]

CAT GARDÈRE: We have spoken about so much. I think I'm all talked out. I think I think I'm good. I want to thank you so much for giving me such an ample platform, you know, to speak and to share and it's been such a wonderful experience. Thank you.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: It's been a pleasure. I'm going to stop it now.

[END OF TRACK Session 3]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]