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**Oral history interview with Humbert Howard,
1988 Oct. 26**

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Humbert Howard on October 26, 1988. The interview took place in Philadelphia, PA, and was conducted by Marina Pacini for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

[Please note: sections of the interview have been edited due to the repetition of various statements.]

MARINA PACINI: Mr. Howard, the first question I'd like to ask you is about your background. Could you tell us where you were born?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I was born in Philadelphia.

MARINA PACINI: And when were you born, what is your birthday?

HUMBERT HOWARD: In 1905.

MARINA PACINI: Could you tell me something about your parents, what did they do?

HUMBERT HOWARD: All right. My mother was French and Indian, Ethel Howard. We lived at 1415 North Watts Street, in Philadelphia.

MARINA PACINI: And your father?

HUMBERT HOWARD: My father was born in New Jersey.

MARINA PACINI: And what did he do?

HUMBERT HOWARD: He was a waiter at Broad Street Station. My mother was French and Indian and she was born in Delaware.

MARINA PACINI: And when did they come to Philadelphia?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Slips my mind, goes back in time and it's hard to remember.

MARINA PACINI: Okay. How did you get interested in art?

HUMBERT HOWARD: My mother was, let me tell you this first because this will tie things together. My mother was born in Delaware, my father was born in - Howards of Virginia - he was born in Virginia. My mother was French and Indian, my father was black. That's the truth.

MARINA PACINI: And how did your interest in art develop?

HUMBERT HOWARD: In my youth, as I sat in a room behind the desk of a young artist who drew pictures of the Indians and the urchins of Philadelphia and it made me interested in art, I became interested in art because of this young man sitting before me in school.

MARINA PACINI: And who was this man?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I don't remember his name.

MARINA PACINI: Did he go on to become an artist that exhibited in Philadelphia?

HUMBERT HOWARD: That I don't know but I went on to become an artist from that period because I watched him draw the animals in the class and it excited me. And I became interested and I wanted to do it too.

MARINA PACINI: And how old were you?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I was about 7 or 8.

MARINA PACINI: So it was very young.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Very young, that's how I became interested.

MARINA PACINI: And did you start drawing at that point?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yeah, and I asked him for what he was drawing to give 'em to me and he would give 'em to me and I would take them home and I would put them on the wall in my bedroom. And that's how I became interested in art from a student who sat before me.

MARINA PACINI: When did you start having any sort of formal art education?

HUMBERT HOWARD: All my life, since I was born.

MARINA PACINI: Did the school you attend have art classes?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yeah, well, in my art class I became interested.

MARINA PACINI: When did you start taking actual classes?

HUMBERT HOWARD: From that time for the rest of my life.

MARINA PACINI: Were you taking them in school or outside of class?

HUMBERT HOWARD: In school and I went to the Barnes Foundation to study.

MARINA PACINI: But the Barnes Foundation was much later, wasn't it?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh, yes. But I started from the beginning. I was excited by this young man drawing the animals in the book. Then I became infatuated with art. From that day on, I painted to this very day.

MARINA PACINI: When did you decide that you wanted to be an artist?

HUMBERT HOWARD: That's what I decided that I wanted to be, because I studied from then on.

MARINA PACINI: You attended Howard University.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, I did.

MARINA PACINI: Now how did it come about that you went to Howard as opposed to some university in Philadelphia?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well, my grades, I was a scholar and that determined what I wanted to do and I did that particularly. So from that day on, I was drawing, painting.

MARINA PACINI: Well did you take art classes at Howard or were you enrolled in...

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh, yes, I studied art there too.

MARINA PACINI: What did you get your degree in?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I didn't finish Howard University.

MARINA PACINI: You finished at the University of Pennsylvania. So you were taking art classes at Howard, who were you studying with while you were there?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I was taking academic courses, because I studied foreign languages and everything, and I was in theater, I studied dramatic art. I was an athlete. I was put there because I was a good football player.

MARINA PACINI: Did you get an athletic scholarship?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes. And then I studied acting.

MARINA PACINI: Did you take any classes with Alan Locke, was he there while you were?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I knew him personally.

MARINA PACINI: Did you meet him there?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, I didn't meet him there. But I knew him personally.

MARINA PACINI: Was this after you were at Howard that you met him?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No. I had that kind of a life, I knew everybody. And I came up in a good family. There were two of us, David and Humbert.

MARINA PACINI: Why did you leave Howard?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well, I wanted to study further. I thought when I went to the Barnes Foundation, I met Miss de Mazia. This great teacher there, see, and I became intensely interested in art.

MARINA PACINI: When did you start your studies at the Barnes, was this after you'd finished at Howard?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh yes, years later.

MARINA PACINI: Can you remember, was this in the '30s or the '40s?

HUMBERT HOWARD: They could give you that. It's a great place. I became the art director in the negro world. And then I went to Howard University which is a black institution. And I was made the

art director because I'd gone to Howard and I was an athlete, and played football, all those things.

MARINA PACINI: But you didn't graduate from Howard; you got your degree from Pennsylvania?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, I left there.

MARINA PACINI: Why did you leave?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Because I wanted to go to Penn.

MARINA PACINI: What was it that Penn had that was more interesting to you?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I became interested in the Barnes Foundation.

MARINA PACINI: But the Barnes was after you finished at Penn.

HUMBERT HOWARD: It's a checkered world. And I worked at the post office, things like that.

MARINA PACINI: When did you start working at the post office, after you graduated from the University of Pennsylvania?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, I stayed in the arts by going to the Barnes.

MARINA PACINI: What did you do after you graduated from college.

HUMBERT HOWARD: When I left college I went to the post office, that's how it worked, see.

MARINA PACINI: So, you supported yourself working at the post office.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Right, and I bought this house.

MARINA PACINI: So you've lived here ever since?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes. And my teacher's next door.

MARINA PACINI: Who's that?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Harry Safarby. He was one of my teachers.

MARINA PACINI: Where?

HUMBERT HOWARD: The Barnes Foundation.

MARINA PACINI: Can you tell me a little about what it was like to study at the Barnes Foundation?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh, it's one of the greatest institutions in the world.

MARINA PACINI: Who did you take classes from?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Miss de Mazia, Miss Violette de Mazia. She's important. I was introduced to all these great French painters that Barnes had. And they liked me, and I stayed there and studied.

MARINA PACINI: How many years did you study?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I took about three years.

MARINA PACINI: Did they charge you for your studies?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No. That's interesting, it was free.

MARINA PACINI: How did you get accepted? Did you send a letter?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes and I was accepted. It's well known and there's a book on the Barnes.

MARINA PACINI: Can you tell me who else was at the Barnes when you were out there, who else you might have studied with?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Miss de Mazia, Harry Safarby...

MARINA PACINI: And what did he teach?

HUMBERT HOWARD: He taught art, too, at the Barnes.

MARINA PACINI: And how many times a week did you go out there?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I worked at the post office and they allowed me to get off certain days to go to the Barnes. I had to struggle, see.

MARINA PACINI: Did you study, say, for one or two afternoons a week for a couple of hours or was it for a whole day?

HUMBERT HOWARD: About three hours on a certain day in the week. But see the fruit of it all was the great paintings. The great masters.

MARINA PACINI: So they would take you through the collection.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh yes, we did that too. Jeez, it's hard to imagine, but everybody knows it. It's one of the greatest institutions in the world.

MARINA PACINI: Were there other black artists studying with you at that time?

HUMBERT HOWARD: At that time, no.

MARINA PACINI: Not at the Barnes.

HUMBERT HOWARD: No.

MARINA PACINI: And what about Howard and Penn?

HUMBERT HOWARD: At Howard University, I studied there, and the University of Pennsylvania.

MARINA PACINI: But you were not taking art classes at Howard.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh, yes. And my teacher was a great painter himself.

MARINA PACINI: Can you remember his name.

HUMBERT HOWARD: I can. [pause] Porter.

MARINA PACINI: Was it James Porter?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, James Porter, that's my teacher. One of the greatest of all time.

MARINA PACINI: Can you talk about what he was like as a teacher? What was his teaching method?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I knew him personally, and he was good to me and he was very interested in me.

MARINA PACINI: What about some specific things in terms of technique or style? Did he teach a particular style, like abstract or realist art?

HUMBERT HOWARD: He taught about what artists did and how they painted. And they went to the schools and watched the cadavers, cut the hands of a cadaver, like that, and we had that kind of lessons. That's how we became interested in anatomy. He's mentioned in much of the literature of the times. Then I became the art director of a social club here in Philadelphia, the Pyramid Club.

MARINA PACINI: I did want to ask you about the Pyramid Club and now that you've brought it up, who started it?

HUMBERT HOWARD: A famous doctor, downtown, South Philadelphia.

MARINA PACINI: Dr. Walter Jerrick, is he the one?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Walter Jerrick was the doctor.

MARINA PACINI: What exactly was the Pyramid Club supposed to do, what were its goals?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Black social club. It was a social club like the real ones in the world, one of the greatest. You know about the Pyramid Club.

MARINA PACINI: No, actually I want you to tell me anything you remember about how it was organized, what were its goals.

HUMBERT HOWARD: It was organized by Walter F. Jerrick.

MARINA PACINI: What year was it? Was it 1941?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes.

MARINA PACINI: You said it was set up as a social club.

HUMBERT HOWARD: And I was made the art director because I had gone to Howard. Then I would pick out all the artists in New York of renown and Philadelphia and they would send to the annual show I would have. They were using my brains because of what I had done.

MARINA PACINI: Now how did this work? Did you decide what artists to send a prospectus to and they were invited or was there a jury?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I picked them. Because I knew all these artists.

MARINA PACINI: So there was no jury system set up?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No.

MARINA PACINI: You would go visit each individual artist, select a certain number of works and that's how the exhibitions were organized.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Just name one and I had his work.

MARINA PACINI: It wasn't that announcements were sent out and artists would send the work and you would select like on a jury selection.

HUMBERT HOWARD: I would go to New York and get these different artists. It was so personal. You'll find it all the way through.

MARINA PACINI: And were you only visiting New York and Philadelphia or were there other places?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, there were other painters in the country.

MARINA PACINI: And how were you finding out about these artists?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Because I knew myself.

MARINA PACINI: Did the Pyramid Club do things other than art events?

HUMBERT HOWARD: It was a social club.

MARINA PACINI: What other kinds of events were organized? Did you support other black musicians or poets or playwrights or strictly the arts?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I would say art. I don't care what its nationality, I would select the work. There was an annual exhibition every year, for years, I can't remember the dates. The great Bearden, I picked his work. I would go to his studio and walk up the steps on 125th Street and pick out the piece of work that I wanted to come to the Pyramid Club annual. See how personal it was?

MARINA PACINI: There are many Philadelphia artists who were included in the exhibits at the Pyramid Club. Were they all members?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, they were selected by me to show in that show which was an annual.

MARINA PACINI: And how did you get to know these other Philadelphia artists, were you members of a group someplace else?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I was socially prominent.

MARINA PACINI: I take it what you're telling me is that the circle was very small and you easily found each other.

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, because we would invite painters from different cities and I would go to cities and pick out their paintings in their studio at the time.

MARINA PACINI: But what about artists like Selma Burke and Dox Thrash, how did you meet them?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Because I was an artist in Philadelphia and well known. I bought this house because I was a painter because I went with the government.

MARINA PACINI: While you were working at the post office were you exhibiting and selling a lot of work?

HUMBERT HOWARD: At that time, you didn't sell much painting. But now, but after I finished at Barnes, I learned so much more. I did so differently.

MARINA PACINI: But you worked at the post office the whole time, you never could support yourself as an artist, you had to work at the post office.

HUMBERT HOWARD: That's right.

MARINA PACINI: When did you sell your first painting, can you remember?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well, I did sell easily enough.

MARINA PACINI: Did you start selling when you were very young, I mean in the thirties?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well, I would say yes, when I was a member of the Club.

MARINA PACINI: But the Club didn't start until 1941. Did Barnes ever buy any of your paintings?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, I never tried to sell to Barnes. Isn't that odd, I went to school there and never tried to sell to him.

MARINA PACINI: Why is that?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well, I didn't need it. I outpainted everybody. Room's full of painting, that's my style, see.

MARINA PACINI: So then you never really felt you had to sell your paintings.

HUMBERT HOWARD: No. I went beyond my training. I became prominent, I sold well.

MARINA PACINI: You did sell well. Can you remember, was this in the fifties, or forties?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Fifties, and during the Pyramid Club.

MARINA PACINI: Were paintings sold from the exhibitions at the Pyramid Club?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh, yeah, absolutely.

MARINA PACINI: Who went to those exhibitions? Was it predominantly members of the black community?

HUMBERT HOWARD: The prominent black people.

MARINA PACINI: Did members of the white community come to visit?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, I believe that, I was an integrationist.

MARINA PACINI: I'm not questioning whether the Club was open to whites...

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, at one time they were not open.

MARINA PACINI: But were they invited to the events?

HUMBERT HOWARD: They were invited to the events. But you couldn't belong to the black club.

MARINA PACINI: And did they attend the events?

HUMBERT HOWARD: They attended. All the prominent doctors and everything. It's an odd evolution but it's important. You couldn't belong if you were white.

MARINA PACINI: But you did exhibit the work of white artists.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, I did that. That's my thinking. I said no, the black must be - it must be black subject matter or I won't take the painting.

MARINA PACINI: That was the criteria.

HUMBERT HOWARD: That was the criteria. So if you were white, it was black subject matter, you could handle it. It was an idea of integration. It was the growth of living together, just what you see here. You didn't have to make any excuses, you just painted well and you were selected. You were accepted by Humbert Howard, he was the art director.

MARINA PACINI: In the thirties were you at all involved with the WPA?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, I was on it.

MARINA PACINI: You were on it.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Cause my age tells you.

MARINA PACINI: So then this was before you started working at the post office, because wasn't the whole idea of the WPA that you were not employed and therefore...did you get your job at the post office afterwards?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes.

MARINA PACINI: Can you remember when you started working at the post office?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, but you can get it from the post office, or from the Pyramid Club, see I didn't have to keep those records. And I didn't, but I did the work. I picked the great negro artists, Romare Bearden, all of them, all of them, I brought them here. One painting from their studio, they were all in New York.

MARINA PACINI: Can you tell me about your experiences working on the WPA?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I lived at 230 N. 53rd Street at that time in a nice big house like this. And I was socially prominent and that's what I did.

MARINA PACINI: What kind of work did you do while you were on the WPA?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well I believe I got on the WPA when I wasn't working.

MARINA PACINI: Did you ever have any association with the Harmon Foundation?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, but I knew about it because it was historical. I sent to New York, I sent to shows and I was always accepted.

MARINA PACINI: Were there any other organizations or institutions in Philadelphia that were open to black artists?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Because of me, yes.

MARINA PACINI: Which organizations would those be?

HUMBERT HOWARD: The Pyramid Club.

MARINA PACINI: Yes, but I mean other than the Pyramid Club, was there anything else, was the Art Museum open to black artists, or the Philadelphia Art Alliance, was there any other group that opened their doors?

HUMBERT HOWARD: It was interesting, I was the only member, even the Philadelphia Art Alliance, I was the only member.

MARINA PACINI: You were the only black member?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I was the only black member, I was never discriminated, ever.

MARINA PACINI: You were not discriminated against. Why was it you were the only member, were the other artists not trying to join?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Evidently. Because if they become...Porter - who was great, he was my teacher at Howard - I would know him and I would invite him and give him a show at the Pyramid Club in Philadelphia. It was so individual. It was how it had to be done. It was like my mother who was head waitress at John Wanamaker's tea room. She was fair and beautiful and all that. So Philadelphia, so individual.

MARINA PACINI: You were a member of the Art Alliance.

HUMBERT HOWARD: I was a member of the Art Alliance, accepted the first black member. Always the first.

MARINA PACINI: What is the Allen's Lane Art Center?

HUMBERT HOWARD: That was this place up in Allen's Lane and I was life teacher, I taught life.

MARINA PACINI: It was an independently run small school?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes.

MARINA PACINI: Who were the other teachers there, do you remember?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I was the only teacher there.

MARINA PACINI: Is this up in Germantown?

HUMBERT HOWARD: In Germantown.

MARINA PACINI: Which is where the Pyramid Club was?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No. North Philadelphia. Girard Avenue and 15th.

MARINA PACINI: I didn't know it was so far downtown, I thought it was much further north than that. Was it always at 15th and Girard?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, 1517 Girard. I was in the post office for 25 years and I was a painter then too. I would leave the post office and go to Jersey to paint the landscapes.

MARINA PACINI: So you would paint on weekends.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oh yes, I started 5 o'clock in the morning, so I could paint. I studied at Barnes from the post office as a clerk.

MARINA PACINI: When did you retire from the post office?

HUMBERT HOWARD: About four or five years ago.

(END OF SIDE ONE)

MARINA PACINI: The next thing I'd like to do is to give you a few names and ask you to tell me anything you can remember about them. Can you talk about Dox Thrash?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Dox Thrash, yeah, he was a member of the Club and he was under me because I was the director, and we were close friends and he was a great painter and he discovered the carborundum print method. You can't touch any of them that I don't know.

MARINA PACINI: Do you know anything about Dox Thrash's youth, his background, where he studied art, any of the biographical details on him?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I only know that he must have come from the South and that he was prominent, and he discovered the carborundum print method. He was a friend of mine, a very close friend.

MARINA PACINI: What about Sam Brown, was he a member of the Pyramid Club?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, he wasn't a member.

MARINA PACINI: Why not?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I don't know.

MARINA PACINI: Did he ever exhibit there?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, but he exhibited around other places.

MARINA PACINI: Did you not like his work that you didn't invite him to come and exhibit there?

HUMBERT HOWARD: He didn't need me, I don't think.

MARINA PACINI: Was he successfully exhibiting elsewhere?

HUMBERT HOWARD: You see, he exhibited around town, other places. He knows me, I know him, and I think he's a nice man and a good painter.

MARINA PACINI: Were you exhibiting anyplace else in town?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Everywhere, anywhere.

MARINA PACINI: Where?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I exhibited at the Academy...

MARINA PACINI: Were you part of the annuals or did they give you a one man show?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, my painting, The Yellow Cup by Humbert Howard.

MARINA PACINI: You exhibited at the Art Alliance?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, a member of the Art Alliance, the first one of my race.

MARINA PACINI: Can you tell me anything about the Dubin Gallery?

HUMBERT HOWARD: It was a small gallery in Philadelphia. We used to send pictures to their shows.

MARINA PACINI: You didn't have an exclusive relationship with Dubin. You'd just periodically send him some pictures and he'd include them in an exhibition?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yeah, and I was included in the exhibitions.

MARINA PACINI: Do you know anything about Hank Dubin, about his background, how he got into art?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Not as much as I should, but the name is familiar.

MARINA PACINI: How about Robert Carlen?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I knew him because I exhibited with him for a while, he handled my work.

MARINA PACINI: Now how did that come about, did you go and approach Carlen or did he come and look for you?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Because of the Pyramid Club, I was the director, he'd come to me. But I showed there.

MARINA PACINI: Because he exhibited the work of several black artists.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yeah, that's right. I was one of them.

MARINA PACINI: And I believe Selma Burke.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Selma Burke, I picked her up, and I knew her personally. And she was great. I can tell you who they are, what they did and whether they were good or not.

MARINA PACINI: Was Robert Carlen among the few dealers in Philadelphia who would handle the

work of black artists?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes. He was the foremost.

MARINA PACINI: Did everyone in town know that he was the one dealer in town who would handle the work of black artists? This was known?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yeah, mostly because of me. Maybe I had picked the guy up, you know, so I knew Carlen, and I'd go to Carlen and I wanted a painting of that primitive woman and I did it. I would often feed it to the Pyramid Club, the Pyramid Club was good, they had class and we had class.

MARINA PACINI: What about Edward Loper?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Loper is a good painter.

MARINA PACINI: Can you tell me anything else about him?

HUMBERT HOWARD: At that time, he came along with the artists, and I would pick his work up for the annual, which I did every year.

MARINA PACINI: So every year there'd be an annual exhibition.

HUMBERT HOWARD: Always an annual.

MARINA PACINI: Were there other smaller exhibitions during the year or was the annual the only one?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Very few.

MARINA PACINI: Would the other shows during the year be one-person exhibitions?

HUMBERT HOWARD: One person, very seldom. Usually in a group of these many pairs.

MARINA PACINI: Can you tell me what other galleries in Philadelphia handled the work of black artists?

HUMBERT HOWARD: There were very few.

MARINA PACINI: Was Carlen the only one in the forties or was there someone else?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Carlen was only one, yes, and I was of them.

MARINA PACINI: Did you ever have any association with anyone from Temple University?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yeah, because of Tyler School. Maybe there would come a good painter out of Tyler School and I happened to notice him or her and I would bring them into the fold, so to speak.

MARINA PACINI: But you never studied there yourself?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, Howard University.

MARINA PACINI: Why didn't you go to Temple?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Because I liked Howard because I was a football player, played right end, championship team, unscored, undefeated.

MARINA PACINI: Can you tell me anything about Allan Freelon?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Allan Freelon was a great teacher of art in the public schools of Philadelphia. He was a personal friend of mine.

MARINA PACINI: And where did he come from, was he a Philadelphian?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Philadelphia.

MARINA PACINI: Is there anything else you can tell me about Allan Freelon?

HUMBERT HOWARD: He was a great teacher. Handsome man, married a white girl. Lived in the suburbs.

MARINA PACINI: Is he still alive?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, I don't think so, but I'm not sure.

MARINA PACINI: Did you have any association with Janet Fleisher? The Little Gallery?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes. I knew her.

MARINA PACINI: Did she sell the work of black artists?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Did she say she did?

MARINA PACINI: No, I don't know. The reason is that I came across her name, she was given an award by the Pyramid Club, so I assumed that she must have somehow...

HUMBERT HOWARD: I might have given her an award, I don't remember.

MARINA PACINI: You don't remember what it would have been for?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Not that prominent. Cause I would invite 50 artists from different states along the eastern seaboard to the annual show that I would give there and Freelon was one of them. So I can tell you immediately where they stand.

MARINA PACINI: What other galleries have you been associated with?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Most of the time I was with the other galleries.

MARINA PACINI: Which ones?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Philadelphia Art Alliance. I was a member. I broke the color line there too.

MARINA PACINI: What was it like in Philadelphia as a black artist? Did you feel that doors were closed to you or were they open?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well, I'll tell you this way, you were good or you were ordinary.

MARINA PACINI: You felt that as a good artist that doors were open to you.

HUMBERT HOWARD: They would open to artists who were good and those names you will encounter all along. You'll never skip any of them.

MARINA PACINI: Then you never felt that as a black artist that there were opportunities that were not available to you.

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, because we didn't judge that way, we judged like Barnes did.

MARINA PACINI: Well, you personally may have, but what I'm interested in is what about the other institutions.

HUMBERT HOWARD: When you say Barnes, you cover everything. He was great.

MARINA PACINI: What about the Grabar Gallery?

HUMBERT HOWARD: What's the name of it?

MARINA PACINI: The Grabar Gallery?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, I think that was more like a beer saloon, or something like that.

MARINA PACINI: The last area to talk about, is to talk about your painting. Do you want to talk to me about how your style developed? Did you start off working realistically and then become abstract or ...

HUMBERT HOWARD: I painted this way almost all the time.

MARINA PACINI: Okay, we're talking to a tape recorder which can't see the paintings, can you describe?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Unfortunately, my eyes are failing me.

MARINA PACINI: Just talk about how the different styles that you've painted in over your life, did you ever go through a period where you painted abstract paintings?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes, I went to that, but that's lately.

MARINA PACINI: Because looking around the room, the paintings and art works you've got in here are predominantly figurative.

HUMBERT HOWARD: I work with the figure. But to get back to Barnes now, when you find me going like this I'm Barnes.

MARINA PACINI: What is it in particular that you saw at the Barnes Foundation that shows up in these paintings?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Great French painting.

MARINA PACINI: So, for example, the influence of the Fauves?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yeah, dating if you turn and see that painting hanging on the wall.

MARINA PACINI: What's the title of it?

HUMBERT HOWARD: It Happened at Camp David.

MARINA PACINI: When did you paint that?

HUMBERT HOWARD: When they did it. That's Begin, Sadat, and Jimmy Carter. That's the way I chose my subject.

MARINA PACINI: So then many of your paintings are depictions of historic events?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Yes. Philadelphia events. Many of them. But the influence is in the Barnes Foundation. See, I studied out there.

MARINA PACINI: It's the paintings you saw at the Barnes Foundation that influenced your style.

HUMBERT HOWARD: And put this down, and my teacher next door, Harry Safarby.

MARINA PACINI: Is this something that you've just started doing recently? What is this that you've painted on?

HUMBERT HOWARD: This here? That's a wheel barrow.

MARINA PACINI: Now is this something that you've just started doing recently?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No, not recently, I've been doing it 2 or 3 years.

MARINA PACINI: Up until the last five years you've worked predominantly in oil on canvas?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Oils mostly.

MARINA PACINI: Did you ever work with prints?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No.

MARINA PACINI: With sculpture?

HUMBERT HOWARD: No. No, it's sculpture that way, I worked in the wheel barrow. See I would create this image out of a wheel barrow.

(Tape off/on)

MARINA PACINI: Now is there any other event in your life that you felt was very significant in terms of your artwork, other than your study at the Barnes, for example?

HUMBERT HOWARD: Well, I think Barnes is unusual and it's one of the great institutions of the United States, so therefore that is the epitome.

MARINA PACINI: Okay, has there been anything else that was extremely important to your art?

HUMBERT HOWARD: I'm in all their collections, I'm in the Philadelphia Museum of Art. It's called The Yellow Cup by Humbert Howard.

MARINA PACINI: And is there anything else you want to say to wrap up the interview?

HUMBERT HOWARD: My home, and how I live, things like that, the influences I have experienced.

You can't take one word and tell as much as a paragraph. Well, you couldn't leave Barnes out.

End of Interview

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