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Oral history interview with Emma Amos,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Emma Amos on October 3, 1968. The interview was conducted by Al Murray for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

AL MURRAY: Let's begin with your early childhood and just what it was like. Where were you born and so forth?

EMMA AMOS: I was born in Atlanta, Georgia. My parents had always lived there. I have a brother. We're from a middle-class family, an old family in Atlanta. My father was a druggist, had a drug store and has had it for over forty years. I was what is loosely known as a child prodigy. Otherwise I could draw when I was in the first grade and all the little children loved the things that I drew and I did masses of paper dolls and things. And then it got really serious and people thought oh, she can really draw. So they gave me things to copy, which nowadays is very bad; nobody gives children even follow-the-dot paintings. But then they gave me everything that was going, coloring books and things to copy. I remember I really learned figure drawing from Esquire magazine and Vargas girls, I think it Vargas.

AL MURRAY: Yes, the pretty girls.

EMMA AMOS: The pretty girls. At one time I had stacks of them. I had drawn them and copied them. And I think I cheated. I think I used tracing paper to trace them and then I would develop sneaky ways to get it off the tracing paper onto good white paper so that nobody would know that I had traced them. And then I would say very proudly that I had done it never mentioning that I had traced it. And then of course I would paint them. And they really were good. They were copies but they were good. So I learned some forms of anatomy that way. I must admit I was very hep on—I was crazy about the New Yorker magazine. They had - and they still do - but not tuned to it - they had masses of sketches of clothes. Certain stores like Filene's of Boston and I think Montaldo's who had artists to do good quick sketches of women's clothes. And I loved those. The structure of the body and everything always looked so chic. So I did masses of those too. And that probably helped with knowing how to simplify the figure. Because they were very simple. They were always just pen and ink or wash or something - or not even wash, they were just straight black and white. So by the time I was, let's see, maybe nine or ten years old I was really very good at doing likenesses and all the things that people ooh and ah about when anybody can do that. They say, oh, you're great and ooh and ah. I was not sure of myself. I knew I didn't have what I thought artists have, which was a great deal of imagination. I had no imagination. Of course I didn't use any. I was always copying what I saw. And right around that time my mother wanted me to study with Hale Woodruff who was in Atlanta then. I can't remember exactly what he was doing. I guess he must have been at Atlanta University.

AL MURRAY: Yes. He was teaching. Roughly what period was this? What year?

EMMA AMOS: This was in the forties, 1945, 1946, like that.

AL MURRAY: I see. And you were approximately about how old then?

EMMA AMOS: About nine. I never did study with Hale; he left before I got a chance to work with him. Besides he wasn't really able to take private students. My mother always held that against him. But why should he bother with some little kid who could draw New Yorker cartoons. So he never did. When I was eleven they sent me to Morris Brown College. They had an art department and I took some course with a woman who I think is still there, I can remember her name. Well anyway, she was very nice and it just proved that I was at least as good in my drawing, in my actual draftsmanship as the college kids who were in the art department there. But then they weren't any great shakes because they were just like Negroes in all the art departments there at that time. They were just doing kind of very strange things.

AL MURRAY: They really seemed to have a feeling or some perception of the difference between commercial art and serious art - did they?

EMMA AMOS: Well, we were all confused at that time. I didn't know then what commercial art and real art was. But I knew when I saw what they were doing that it wasn't real art. And they didn't seem to know. I can remember just seeing stacks of awful paintings on unbelievable material, masonite and makeshift stuff; no canvas. And using terrible paint. It just would be so strange and all very murky, ugly colors and what not. And that really wouldn't be the teacher's fault, you see. You know, we were so far from the mainstream of art. There were no museums and no galleries you could go to. There was nowhere in the world to know what art was about.

AL MURRAY: So what then would you say were your earliest influences? How did you happen to start drawing? – Just by looking at pictures in books and magazines and so on?

EMMA AMOS: I don't know. I was nearsighted for one thing. I was very nearsighted as a child. I didn't like to play outside very much, although my brother and I did play. But I'd be usually inside poring over, being very close, six inches away from a piece of paper. That was my greatest sport. In fact I was good at it. Now there may be something to being born with talent. I think there may be something to it. You're born with an ability to draw possibly, or you develop it very quickly. For instance, I've met a lot of people in art school and around in the last few years who sort of take up art at the age of thirty. And I really do stand amazed because I don't think it possible. I think there is something basic that you have to have, a feeling for being able to draw or just that facility. Even if you never use it, even if you just do fiberglass molds of pieces of pie that you've never even drawn – I still think that being an artist still is based, is grounded in the ability to draw.

AL MURRAY: Now what were you studying in school at this time, in junior high school and then in high school? What were some of your other interests? And were they related to painting and that sort of thing?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, everything I did was always related to art, not so much to painting because it really was sketching. It wasn't oil painting because I was still afraid of that until years after. In high school I was a specialist in art. They had no majors then. I was getting all A's in almost everything except maybe trigonometry or something. I finished high school still being very interested in painting but not doing anything about it other than just, you know—I think I may have started entering the Atlanta University art shows when I was in high school.

AL MURRAY: What high school was this, by the way?

EMMA AMOS: Booker T. Washington High School in Atlanta. At that time there were only two really big high schools – Washington High and Howard High on the other side of town. Now I think there are fifteen – I don't know how many – there are an awful lot.

AL MURRAY: They had a lot of real athletes at that time.

EMMA AMOS: Who came out of Washington High. Yes. Right. Many. But I didn't know anything about athletes. I was still the nearsighted kid. My brother went to school in Atlanta. He went to Morehouse for a year. He's two years older than I so he was going to college while I was in my last year in high school. I started dating college boys then, his friends, you know, big deal. He took Morehouse as his first year of college. I think this happens in a lot of Negro families. They leave home then you decide that the Southern schools aren't good enough. So he left Morehouse and he entered Lafayette in Pennsylvania. Again as a freshman, sort of using Morehouse as a prep school. And they thought of doing the same thing with me. I finished high school when I was sixteen so I was very young. I had skipped a lot of grades and took a lot of tests and got out at sixteen. So did my brother - he finished when he was sixteen, too. But I decided I never wanted to set foot in Spellman or any of the colleges in Atlanta. I never applied to them. Instead I applied to Antioch which is a school in Ohio. My father went to Wilberforce back in nineteen something. And he was always crazy about Antioch. It was a good school then and they had a very progressive policy with their students and they were interested in the Wilberforce kids. I don't know whether they had Negroes then. But he had the impression that they did. He thought it was a very forward-looking school. In Atlanta nobody had ever even heard of Antioch. But we decided to apply anyway. And of course they were thrilled to get a broad mix of students. First being a Negro and second being from the South they were pleased to have me. I think I probably did very badly on the College Boards. They were given out at Emory University and we were trucked out there and sort of plunked in the middle of a whole batch of white kids. And it was very grim and traumatic. I mean I just can imagine how anybody, any Negro could ever survive that kind of thing. Because then in 1953, Atlanta was totally segregated. So I took the College Boards and, heavens, if I had been trying to get into some school where that was all that counted I never would have made it. I don't remember what my score was but it couldn't have been good. I was just so nervous and it was awful. Anyway, Antioch didn't use the College Boards. They used psychological tests that they have of their own. It was administered by someone at Atlanta University. I took it and I got in. They were pleased to have me. And so I went. I was there from 1953 – 1958. I was an art major at Antioch. And of course it was wonderful. It's a beautiful school, a lovely campus. You work half the year and go to school half the year. I got to work in Chicago and Washington and in New York and really expand. That's where I got to go to galleries and museums, that's when I really got to see the art world.

AL MURRAY: Do you remember the first big art gallery?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, let me see, what would have been - I don't remember my first big gallery so much as I remember the feeling of being an artist in a community of artists. Antioch gave that feeling very easily. And the head of the department, Bob Metcalf, was not a painter. He was a stained glass man. And he was marvelous and very interested in his students. He had masses of slides that he had collected over the years on trips to Europe,

slides of stained glass work. For a while there I was tempted to get interested in stained glass. But I just couldn't stand all that shattered glass all over the place. I can't even remember the big galleries. I know never liked museums. Even to this day I never go. They're just too big. I get tired as soon as I walk through the door. My first job was in Chicago and I don't remember ever going to a gallery there - I just can't recall. But of course working in Washington I was going to the National Gallery. I forced myself into it. And in New York you can't escape the small galleries. And I think that's where art is. You get a feeling of one man's work because they usually have one-man shows and you can see everything, a whole style, a whole life type in one place. That was much more important to me, and still is. Antioch is an international school. My fourth year at Antioch I went to England and I studied at the London Central School there. That school was recommended to me by the Englishman whose name I just can't remember, who died last year.

AL MURRAY: Was he an art critic?

EMMA AMOS: Yes, he was a very famous art critic and wrote a lot.

AL MURRAY: Herbert Read?

EMMA AMOS: Not Herbert Read. This was one who died just before Herbert Read - Eric Newton. He said there were three good art schools in London - the Slade, the Royal College, and the Central School. And I think at that time he was on the Board of Directors of the Central School and he recommended it. And it was cheap and not very hard to get into because it was comparable to a free city school. It might have been more difficult for a Londoner to get in but I don't think it was. It's very much like Cooper Union - oh, no, that's too hard to get into. Well, anyway, it was a good school. I went and I took real art courses. I was surrounded by real painters and it was wonderful. That's when I started printing. I took a lot of etching classes with Tony Harrison who is now teaching at Columbia; and I took painting with William Turnbull who is a sculptor and painter, a Scotsman who was teaching there then and probably still is. And there were several other very good teachers. The whole system in England is so wonderful. Painters, sculptors and other artists subsidize their living through teaching. And it kind of an understood thing that the jobs aren't academically tight the way they are here in New York. At New York University you can teach for three years but if you don't go for your Ph.D. even if you're a Picasso they kick you out. It's not that way in England; at least it wasn't then. So I went there for a year and I came back with lots and lots of paintings, oil paintings. This was the first time I had ever really done any. And masses of etchings. And I had a show at Antioch and got in a few nationwide shows. There was one in Provincetown that first year I came back, and what not. Anyway, I finished up that year at Antioch after London. Got my degree in 1958. Then I went again to London and finished there. Everybody was giving me credit in all kinds of ways. Antioch was giving me credit for going to London. And London gave me credit for going to a college in America. So I got my degree in etching in London in 1959 for two years work there. Then I came home. I was tempted to stay. But then I decided - well, my father was paying for all this - I never had a scholarship. He felt that as a Negro who had a certain amount of money it wasn't fair to try to get a scholarship. We know a lot of people who are doctors and what not and they automatically get scholarships for their children. But my father thought this wasn't really right. If you could afford to send your kids to school damn it do it. So I decided the gravy train was over and I came home. I stayed in Atlanta for a year because I couldn't think quite what to do. You know, thousands of dollars had been spent on my education and I couldn't even type. So how do you get a job? I lived at home. And I did a little drawing. I couldn't paint. There wasn't room; and no reason to. But I met a lot of nice people in Atlanta through a woman who continually writes letters to the Atlanta Constitution and the other papers in Atlanta - a woman named Caroline Becknell, an outspoken Southern lady from a very good family who is one of these strange Southerners, you know, who really has her conscience. I used to read her letters to the Editor castigating this one and that one for being racist or what not. And I finally called her up one day just on a chance and I asked her if she knew of any gallery that would take the work of a Negro. And she got all excited and said, "Chile, honey, I know just the gallery for you. And it's a lovely gallery. And you don't worry 'bout a thing, just shinny up there..." It was just too funny for words. White Southerners are real cute the way they have that funny way of talking. So she gave me the name of this girl, a very young girl who had this nice gallery called the New Arts Gallery. The girl's name was Judy Alice Anderson. I called up Judy and she said, "Well, bring your work around." And she turned out to be another rich Southerner with an extremely funny accent. So I took my etchings out and showed her I think a few slides of paintings. She liked them very much and she gave me a show of etchings. And she placed some of my paintings around—the Atlantic Public Library had a show of paintings and etchings. And altogether she was very nice and has continued to be. She had a very good gallery in Atlanta. I don't know if it still there. I think she just operates out of her house. She was written up in Vogue magazine last year. She's sort of a big moving force in the South for young talent - not Negroes particularly, but anybody who's any good. And she bemoans the fact that there's a very slow awakening in the arts in Atlanta. There are so many people with money there that they've got to spend it somewhere so they're becoming aware of art. But, for instance, when she had the gallery, or a place of her own, she had a Franz Kline show, and she had quite a few big name New York painters there. And I can remember she had an original Albers. As a joke she had it marked for ten dollars and nobody bought it. She had it for two years and couldn't sell it. Albers heard about it and he said send it back up to me, it's worth - oh, I don't know - two hundred at least - it was a print. Anyway, that was Atlanta. I decided that was enough of Atlanta after my one little show and getting my name in

the papers. So I came to New York. Just like everybody who comes to New York, I didn't have very much money. I was trying to get a job doing anything other than selling at Bloomingdale's so I taught at the Dalton School. It was supposedly to teach art which I really didn't know anything about - I never took any education courses in college. But it turned out not to be art at all. I was an assistant in the first, second and third grades at Dalton. Which was nice because I met a lot of nice people. Bill King and his wife Shirley King (who is no longer his wife) taught there. And, oh, I think most of my friends - and in fact the Kings introduced me to my husband and to almost everybody I know. So the Dalton wasn't a total loss even if they did pay me \$1800 a year. I didn't paint that first year at all. I did etch. I worked with Leo Calapie who since has moved to Chicago. But he had a marvelous studio. He's a member of the old Atelier 17 along with Hayter who is a famous English etcher who sort of started the whole deeply-bitten etching school of printmaking. And I worked with Leo in his studio. It was cheap, just a few dollars an hour or something. I got to do some printing and I did some new things. And through people I met at his studio I started an association with a gallery here in New York and I still show etchings there - at Associated American Artists. I've never shown my paintings anywhere. I got brave about three summers ago and I took slides of everything and I marched around after all the galleries had closed. It was the dumbest thing I could do. And I got discouraged going to these places. Everybody looked at my things, which I thought were very good, and they said, well, you know, we can't use it. And I can remember Bertha Schaefer, before she even looked - she never even saw what I had - she just looked at me and said, "I don't care who you are or what you are I'm booked up for the year." I slunk out, having waited for about forty-five minutes to see her. It was altogether all the bad things you hear about trying to find a gallery. I'll never do it again. I will never take my things around. Because it's too crushing and it's too hard on you and you don't paint after that. You just stop. No matter of where you were, if you were in the middle of a painting you just can go on because you wonder what you doing it for. You know, you can't sell if you don't have a gallery and it just stops you cold. It's terrible. All the paintings I have are in storage in my own studio, which I sublet. There's a prospect now that I'll be going into another studio with some other artists. And there I'll get loaded down with more paintings again and I won't know what to do with them.

AL MURRAY: Oh, I think you will. In terms of the work itself can you say when you began to see a sort of purpose or direction in your work? When did you start settling down to do certain things, you know, what some people call "find yourself", find a direction - not yourself necessarily. What about when you were in Antioch?

EMMA AMOS: When I was at Antioch I just really learned that I wasn't the best thing in the world, that there were people who didn't learn how to draw from Vargas girls, who knew what drawing really was and that it wasn't just a technical thing, that there was something to it. And I did a lot of drawing then and really proved my drawing ability. At that time it was what I've described before, it was just technical; it had no oomph to it and it certainly didn't mean anything. It was just those awful things that people look at and say it's nice. But I really didn't get all fired up at Antioch. I was too young possibly, or possibly it just wasn't the time. I really think I found and stopped worrying about myself as an artist my second year in England - etching and the whole idea of printmaking and having a handsome, a well-thought-out and finished work that satisfies you. Well, I sort of discovered color then too. I think the main thing about my painting now stems from then and it was the discovery of color. I think that may have had something to do with my teacher who was very up on color in printing, which before that had just been mostly black and white. The restraint and the knowledge you have to have in printmaking to use color, the fact that you use different plates for each color or you have to be pretty damn good at inking the plates if you're going to use just one for two or three colors spilled over into my painting. And I stopped using just an enormous palette of mishmashy colors. I limited my palette and my painting then was quite good. That's one of them over there. It was - oh - in the abstract expressionist vein. The show that I can remember that really kicked off my painting was - I think it was called "Ten" - well, maybe not a number - but it was American Painters and it was just coming to London then. It was a show at the Tate. It had in it De Kooning's *The Woman* it had Barnett Newman; it had all the big abstract expressionists. And it was a knockout. It set everybody in London on their ears.

AL MURRAY: What year was this?

EMMA AMOS: It was a beautiful show. This would have been 1959 I think. I don't think it was 1957. I think it would have been 1959. And that same year Jackson Pollock had a show (I don't remember when he died) I think he was dead already - at the Whitechapel Gallery. That was a beautiful show. So I really wasn't being influenced by English artists at all other than my etching teacher who was really just teaching me - I didn't actually see very much of his work. It was all American painters because they were the big deal there. So I guess that show really was a turning point. I'd forgotten about that show at the Tate. It was a fabulous show. It was just stunning. The size of the paintings, the colors, and everything about it. I went to New York University and got a master's in Art about three years ago. Which has been kind of a bore. I don't know what drove me to get a master - I thought it would help me get a job or something. After I left Dalton I started working as a designer. I had taken weaving at Antioch and also just a little bit at the Central School in London. So I had this craft. And I've used it. I went to work for Dorothy Liebes. She hired me not because I was such a great weaver (there are an awful lot of good weavers she could have gotten) but on the strength of my etchings. She never saw any weaving; she only saw the etchings. And she loved the colors. So I worked for her and still do off and on since 1961. And did an

awful lot of things that were counted as art; really they should count as art. I did a huge, huge, forty-foot abstract rug that's in the London Hilton, it's a Bigelow rug. And the lobby rug for the San Francisco Hilton. A whole lot of commercial things. But they're very modern real life paintings. I didn't oversee the finished product. They were just done from small color drawings. But they're me in a way I guess.

AL MURRAY: What weavers did it?

EMMA AMOS: They were done by Bigelow Carpets. And in fact an awful lot of their – what do they call them? – custom carpets – area rugs have been done by me. Some of their best sellers. My father finally bought one of them and put it in the house. I can't afford them. They cost too much.

AL MURRAY: Tell me, what painters did you like or did you have any particular interest in before this great abstract expressionist show in London? What were your interests technically and so forth up to that time?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, dear. That's digging very deep. At Antioch I think I must still have been swallowed up in Europe. Remember my teacher was a stained glass man.

AL MURRAY: What was his name?

EMMA AMOS: Bob Metcalfe. He has a son who is a sculptor and painter who lives in Paris. He's very good. But I don't think Bob is terribly well-known in anything but stained glass. Always he did stained glass best. Anyway, Metcalfe had me all tuned in to Europe. And even though it might have been 1956 or 1957, before I went to Europe, I was still thinking that Europe was the center of things. And I probably was very tuned in to Picasso and Matisse and Cezanne and all the guys everybody worshipped for so many years. I can't remember thinking about any American painter or any particular painter. Certainly no Negroes because they seemed so sort of far out to me. I associated then and sort of still do a great deal of so-called Negro art with either that sidewalk chalk drawing kind of stuff or the old, old Siqueiros kind of WPA art. And it's all a drag and so boring to be associated with that.

AL MURRAY: It is interesting that three painters who really come out of that Mexican thing – Rivera, Siqueiros and Orozco – people see their work and since they are of workers they think of that as being Negro and African.

EMMA AMOS: Right.

AL MURRAY: It's really Mexican.

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: Nobody sees that in a drawing. It was a proletariat association and had to do with politics that influenced certain murals they were looking at at the time. I think that probably the WPA fallout had a lot to do with it.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. I don't know. That's an interesting point, which came first? Negroes did paint like that – right? Did they pick it up because it looked like Negro-type art?

AL MURRAY: I'm not sure. But it seems to me there was a certain type of relationship between some of the things that would be derived from the Aztec or the early—

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Well, there would be.

AL MURRAY: Well, frequently people think that that's Negro. But it more directly derived from the Mexicans than from, say, African sculpture or something like that.

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: It resembles it.

EMMA AMOS: Right. It's only now that I'm beginning to realize – I got everything confused. I couldn't stand any of it. It all looked so damned ethnic or something. It's only now that I'm beginning to weed out that there really is such a thing as Haitian art and it's very beautiful. And it's not like that. But I had thought that all of it had this funny primitive look, you know, all laid on thick with a trowel and it was really not a natural kind of thing. I thought it was all copied. It was a style, in other words. And now I find that there is a natural primitive thing that isn't just copied and that certain countries have it, certain artists are practicing this kind of thing. I certainly wasn't going to try to learn how to do that because that was exactly what I was getting out of, trying to escape with my New Yorker drawings and I was trying not to do those awful murky paintings. I'm trying to remember if there are any Negro artists that I saw then. I don't think so – other than the murals at Atlanta University that Hale did. And maybe a few other peoples paintings that were around at that time.

AL MURRAY: Aaron Douglas – were you aware of him?

EMMA AMOS: I had been to Fisk and I had seen some of his things. He was like nothing to me. I remember at Fisk seeing Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings. I was very impressed by that.

AL MURRAY: Yes, she made that special gift of the things from the Stieglitz collection to Fisk.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right. It is a permanent collection. It wasn’t just a show. I was so young when I went I don’t remember.

AL MURRAY: It was probably just happening then. Or at least it was still new at the time you got there.

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: There were, of course, younger Negro painters who were much more hep to what was going on.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right.

AL MURRAY: When did you make any contact with them? For example, when I was in Paris in 1950, which was a little bit before your time, there were painters like Romy Bearden, and Bill Rivers who were good painters and of course contemporary with Romy were people like Norman Lewis who were painting and who were probably showing and so forth. But you were not aware of them? What about Jake Lawrence?

EMMA AMOS: I didn’t hear about Jake Lawrence practically until I was a member of Spiral.

AL MURRAY: Is that right? What about Horace Pippin, for example?

EMMA AMOS: No, I never had heard of him. I was completely ignorant of all that.

AL MURRAY: In high school during Negro History Week or something like that you never heard of Henry O. Tanner?

EMMA AMOS: No. Don’t you remember Negro History Week? They just cut out a picture of a peanut with George Washington Carver underneath it. And that was the end of that. I don’t think anybody even knew those things then.

AL MURRAY: I did.

EMMA AMOS: You did?

AL MURRAY: In Mobile, Alabama where I went to high school I knew about Henry O. Tanner and all those people. During Negro History Week we used to get those things from Washington and we had books, you know, the Brawley Books and the Woodson things and the Crisis and Opportunity and there used to be etchings and drawings and so forth of Augusta Savage.

EMMA AMOS: Well, we had all those things in our house but I would never read them. It never would have crossed my mind. And to this day I don’t know very much about Tanner or any of those people. And it a damned shame because they were good.

AL MURRAY: Right.

EMMA AMOS: I learn more from talking to Romy than I do from talking to anybody else because he knows and it’s very important to him, you know. And now I can look back and see that I was really throwing out everything that wasn’t white.

AL MURRAY: Would you say actually – you know, this gets into the rhetoric and the statements and the cliches of the time – but I just want to ask about this: really when you think about it was it a matter of it’s being white or was it a matter of being what was there; not because it was white but what was in the museums, what was in the books and so forth? Was it a matter of trying to get in touch with what was being presented as reality? Or was it a matter of escaping what was black? Sometimes that gets confused. What do you think?

EMMA AMOS: That’s a very good point. Yes. It’s sort of like it was irrelevant. Anything black, all those little Crisis magazines. And my mother had everything any Negro had ever written. We had all the Du Bois books and he was a friend of ours and he came to our house and he had everything. He didn’t care what he said; he just had it, you know. But I would no more have read any of his books or understood the philosophical and political meaning of what he was saying than the man in the moon because it seemed it didn’t have anything to do with me. That was a kind of Negro thing. And this was not what we were supposedly striving for. You know, we had

our eyes so directly on the path of integration then. And even up until maybe three years ago everybody was thinking that way – or maybe a little bit more. You couldn't believe that there would ever be a time when you'd really want to know something about Negroes and find out. For instance, when I joined Spiral, the point in Spiral was to find out if there was anything that they should hold on to that meant being a Negro and that also had to do with being an artist. And my feeling the whole time I was a member was no, there wasn't; you're an artist first and you might happen to be a Negro but it doesn't really do anything to your art and you just can sit down and paint "Negro" – there's no such thing. I still feel that way I think. I think that if you do sit down and paint Negro you're exploiting a monetary value on something that has a Negro "look." There is a value on it and when you do that that's what you're trying to cash in on. But I think it a little deeper than that now. I think my understanding has grown to feel that not that you have to throw everything away because you do feel that there's something you could say about Negroes. You don't have to be William Styron to paint Nat Turner. In other words, it's an open field. If you and the Negro want to talk about Negroes, okay. A few years ago you would have thought nothing of Styron writing about Negroes. You wouldn't have thought it was so strange. But now a thing that says it's peculiar, because Negroes really have the inside on that or should have. It's confusing.

AL MURRAY: Well, tell me this. Sometimes these things do get a little bit over stated simply because you're concentrating in a certain way. I just want to test what you're saying. During the time when you were making drawings from the New Yorker and Esquire this in a very real sense could also be called the age of Joe Louis.

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: How did you feel about Joe Louis at the time?

EMMA AMOS: Oh! Ah! I loved fights. And I still do. A nasty streak in me I guess. I felt, as I think I still do – I mean I'm just what you'd have to call an all Negro. In other words, the chips on my shoulder are not chips; they're boulders. And when a Negro does something really good I think of him as being a Negro and I think it's really hot and this is what I felt about Louis. You know, all the children used to sit around the radio and hear "the Brown Bomber is now going to say something to his Ma" or something really stupid. And you felt very proud because this man was beautiful. He was a beautiful cat and he was doing what he was good at doing.

AL MURRAY: He was the champion – right?

EMMA AMOS: He was the champion.

AL MURRAY: And he was as good as anyone could be in that field.

EMMA AMOS: Right.

AL MURRAY: But you see you were not trying to escape that; you were identifying with it. At the same time when it came to art and writing and what not, is it that that wasn't quite good enough for the standards which were sort of following your ambition?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Okay, yes.

AL MURRAY: You see what I mean? Sometimes these things get overstated by people who are not aware of how complex Negro life is and how complex Negro attitudes are and therefore they will take it in a sort of polemical context and say well, she hated herself as a Negro and this and this and this. Well, you were talking about setting certain standards that you didn't find in certain fields that Negroes satisfied in the course of the way you solved it.

EMMA AMOS: Right. Yes, I'm saying that. And I think I'm also saying that I felt, and still do in many ways, that the standards for Negroes are lowered. Now it wouldn't be in the fighting world. Because there was no way to beat Joe Louis. You just couldn't. And they never have found anybody to beat him.

AL MURRAY: Right. In other words, you're asking for the highest possible standards to be followed and you were concerned with measuring yourself against them.

EMMA AMOS: Right.

AL MURRAY: Is it that you're saying that Opportunity and Crisis didn't strike you as being in the league with the New Yorker.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Possibly that. I wasn't thinking so much of that as I was still thinking of trying to work my way out of the Styron mess. Which is asking if a Negro had done it would it have gotten the same acclaim? No. Because there's a different standard. I'm judging. What could a Negro do to get the same acclaim? Now the subject is very important, very vital now, you know; the subject matter. Black, painting black, writing black, and what not. He gets a tremendous amount of attention because he's white? I don't know. I'm asking. I can't figure

it out myself because I don't understand what's happening in an area like this.

AL MURRAY: Let's look at this since you bring up Styron, do you think that today people would say that Styron is a better and more important writer than Ralph Ellison who is a Negro? That *The Confessions of Nat Turner* is a better-written novel and more important and more powerful novel than *Invisible Man*?

EMMA AMOS: Well, I would hope not! I would hope not because there's not the same power at all. There's no comparison. But he gets much more attention than Ellison has ever gotten I think. For instance, he gets it from me. I have gotten Styron's book and I'm so sorry I've tried to give it away. I had to go buy it to get it. I don't even have Cleaver's book but I have Styron book. It's just foolish. I don't have one of books and I have Styron's book. Why?

AL MURRAY: But you are reacting differently now than you would have back in the 1940's and 1950's - right?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right.

AL MURRAY: Now, one other question about that part - what did you think of Count Basie and Duke Ellington during those days?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, nobody can touch them. There's nothing like jazz. And this would have been the only hope that *Spiral* had for really striking out. If we could have found something that was like jazz to say something about Negroes, all right. You know, jazz is dying now. Jazz is supposedly dead.

AL MURRAY: Not really. The commercial promoting public is one thing but what the musicians themselves are doing is another. If they're promoting a certain type of pop singer it doesn't mean that the blues singers have cleared out and gone.

EMMA AMOS: Right.

AL MURRAY: It's just that they're not putting emphasis on them and booking them and so forth.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. But those guys will die because they have no way to eat. I mean we would really like to go hear Mingus. Where is Mingus playing? Nowhere. We would like to go to hear some of the people we like. And they're not anywhere. You can hear them in this town. And New York is one of the few towns where you were able to hear jazz musicians. And they're being killed off because there's never been any interest in jazz because it was a Negro thing. And it had - oh, awful things associated with it like dope and what not. But the kids now instead have rock music which is just sheer hallucinating business. But that doesn't keep it from selling. It's not a stigma. The stigma of jazz I suppose will always be with us no matter how much they played it at the Philharmonic, or did at one time. It's being killed off because it's not profitable and nobody cares about it as a very vital art form because it was always performed best by Negroes. Count Basie and Duke Ellington are a little different because they played to a very wide audience. They could hit a lot of people. I don't know, the whole question of Negroes in entertainment and in art is a difficult one because we seem to have it in entertainment, we have certain things to offer that automatically segregate us to styles and what not that come and go. Here we are with a thing called jazz that we're past masters and it goes out of style and that wipes out a whole community of artists who will just stop. What kid is going to learn to play the trumpet like Miles Davis if Miles Davis can't get bookings. Painting I don't think will get that way. I think it would be years before Negroes will ever make big inroads on painting. I can never forget - somebody told me this so I can use the guy's name - to one of the biggest New York art critics somebody said, "Why are there never any Negroes at shows or openings or anything?" And he said, "Oh, I see a lot of Negro girls. They come to the openings all the time." He said, "Don't Negroes show?" And he's really one of the biggest critics and he writes for two major magazines and he is the hottest thing going. And he really thought that there was no discrimination. Well, there may not be any discrimination. Negro girls at openings are just decoration and if he doesn't realize that then a stupid man. I had a friend say, "Well, all Negroes have to do to go to an art opening is go. They're not there because they don't go." I don't feel it's that way. I think they don't go because they're not in that East Hampton clique, that whole social thing. It's a very social-sexual thing that's involved there. There may be a few girls who get in it but they're not painters. Who knows what they are.

AL MURRAY: You know, they have this thing going now - little art galleries being established in Harlem instead of where art is.

EMMA AMOS: Is. Yes.

AL MURRAY: I've written about this. The whole principle of centralization that's involved in urbanization gets thrown out when Negroes get involved, you know. In other words, Broadway is where the theatre district is. So that's where the theatres should be - right?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right.

AL MURRAY: But somehow or other they start talking about community theatre. Bringing it to the people. But the people should be in the art world.

EMMA AMOS: Yes, the people of Harlem need to get out of Harlem. They can go downtown just like anybody else can. That is a rank case of segregation. But, then as I said before, I've always had my eyes trained on integration. It's hard for me to stray from that even though it's out of fashion now to be integrated. I disagree with that museum they have up there. I think it's terrible. I think the way they staged a show that they had here this spring where they sent one of the directors of that museum to my house with another fellow, who is supposedly with the Museum of Modern Art. I didn't know who they were. They were just here to pick paintings for a show at a commercial building, the Pan Am Building. They came and we were supposed to go over to my studio to look at paintings. But one of them didn't feel like going over there so they never even saw the paintings. They picked etchings. I remember getting very upset because my etchings are shown all the time. They're not doing me any big favor and they're not delving to find Negro talent, which is what they were supposedly doing. They didn't even see my paintings. They don't know what they look like. They never have seen them. Anyway, they picked prints for this show. And I guess they've gone off tripping through New York figuring that they've been in the studios of almost all the Negro artists and they know their work. They don't. And those were two of the fellows that were connected with that museum. I don't know - I can't believe that they've done it again, that there is another thing supposedly for the black community that is directed by the white community. I mean in one breath it's segregated, it's in Harlem and it has nothing to do with the real art world so-called; and then in another breath it's directed by the real art world to keep those painters in Harlem so that they up there and nobody sees them.

AL MURRAY: Well, there's a difference between a Negro painter and a Negro boxer. Do you follow me?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right.

AL MURRAY: The same standards have to apply. You can't say he's worth too much. If a guy is out for the championship he's going where the real potential is.

EMMA AMOS: It's a very touchy problem. I gather from the Times this week that they're having the same problem at the Brooklyn Museum with this new director they have there in the new gallery. It's called the Community Gallery and it held a show of people who feel that they are not just schleps from the community. They feel that they are real artists and that they do it seriously. And though they're showing there this month they pointed out that they don't like to be shunted into a community gallery. They want the same standards of the Museum to be applied to them. And they want to feel that they have been selected as a group to show because they're good; not just because they're creeps who happen to live in the community.

AL MURRAY: Well, you would say then that your whole conception of yourself as an artist has always been - or since you became conscious of what art meant and what it meant to be an artist in the serious sense of the word, that you insist on operating in the world of art per se?

EMMA AMOS: Right. I don't want to be segregated into a black community of artists. I don't think it's important the color of the artist. I think the color of his work is important. And I think his work is the important thing. But this doesn't seem to work. It really doesn't. Everyone sees your color. The artist unfortunately is a social part of what he does. He has to sell it. And it's killing that he actually has to sell it on the market place. But he does. If he's not able to join that central marketing area he'll never get anywhere. I think one of these years instead of going around to galleries I'm just going to go out and buy myself a whole lot of new clothes and I'm going to all the Monday and Tuesday night openings and see if there is a way into that social thing. There must be. There must be a way to get in to the real world. But even so it's foolish to think about it. Because once you got in you be the token. It's rough.

AL MURRAY: Yes, in that sense. Now, on the other hand, how do you feel about what gets into your painting from what they now call "black experience" or the Negro life style or the Negro sensibility, because fundamentally this will be another dimension of American sensibility, American experience and could represent a reaction to experience which other people with different backgrounds wouldn't have? What is your conception of your work in connection with that? Because what we been talking about in connection with black galleries and so forth in terms of segregation is essentially political, but there is an artistic or aesthetic point of view involved also. What about that?

EMMA AMOS: Well, I have managed to get around that question by doing a lot of self-portraits and in this way I can rationalize doing somebody black. Because I'm not black but I can make myself look a lot blacker. And it really has a lot to do with economics too. I can't afford a model and I'm doing figures and things now. So I'm always handy and I just look in the mirror. I've been doing this I guess for about four or five years now. And it's fun. It's fun because I can do lots of variations on me. And I think when I first started I was just using me as a

shape sort of like the little wood dolls that you get in art stores, you know, you can see that the arm goes this way and that way to check the shape. Now I've stopped blotting out the things that are black about me, you know, the bone structure, the thickness through the nose, and this and that. You know let's face the fact that this is me so go ahead and draw me. And then when I started color - now I make me brown or whatever happens to be what I'm looking for. This is really begging the question I'm sure. But I don't think I could have done it ten years ago. I don't think I would have been interested in doing the figure. The colors would have been wrong. Everything would have been wrong. I don't know.

AL MURRAY: Why do you think you're more interested now?

EMMA AMOS: Well, I said that I started doing the figure. At first it was just kind of an amorphous shape. It got to the point where I wanted the color, I wanted the brown skin against red backgrounds and I really wanted the texture and the look and the whole thing. And I think it's definitely that I've become aware of black people and that black is beautiful and there's nothing wrong with it; and that it's something to remark upon and to make a record of.

AL MURRAY: Right. Now I'm curious: why do you think you didn't discover this in discovering Picasso? In other words, Matisse and Picasso knew that it was beautiful.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. I think I took it as - I didn't take their subject matter. I took it as kind of a lesson. I saw it as Cubism. I saw it as form. I completely rejected what they took it from.

AL MURRAY: Is that right?

EMMA AMOS: The masks and the figures and what not. I was taught that there was nothing in Africa. Right? Africa was jungles. And what they got, you know, they made up. In other words, they invented African sculpture. I couldn't see that there was beauty in African sculpture. I see it now but I didn't learn it from them. I only learned structure and form from them.

AL MURRAY: Yes, I see. I see what you mean.

EMMA AMOS: It's just the climate of the times that's getting me around to working the way I am. And I find myself looking at black people on the street and wishing I could ask them to model. But I don't. So it always has to be me in my imagination.

AL MURRAY: So your involvement with African sculpture during your earlier days as a student and so forth was purely technical?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Nothing. I think I would have to qualify as the prime case of a brainwashed person. You know, completely brainwashed. Not able to see anything beautiful in anything to do with being black other than the people who - I was proud of Duke Ellington and people like that. But I swallowed all the other meannesses you know, all the other things - "you're not as beautiful, your features are not as good, you have nothing to offer, you came from nothing and you are nothing." And it's the kind of insult that we live with every single day.

AL MURRAY: But were you not aware of a certain type of reaction that was also very prevalent among Southern Negroes - about flat behinds, and thin noses as undesirable. Did you think of that?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Now I knew a little bit about that but not too terribly much. I'm trying to think. There were not too many of those taboos that we practiced. I remember I never shaved my legs - because Negro men always dug hair on women - I didn't shave my legs until I went to college. And that would be about the only thing I can remember doing or recognizing.

AL MURRAY: Well, what about shapes of the body now, you know, because you're an artist and this is important. Would you say that you had the impression that Negro men, for example, had certain preferences in terms of shapes or—

EMMA AMOS: Oh, yes.

AL MURRAY: —or certain features of the body or face which were different from others and that they responded to in a certain type of way, some of which very few white girls have? Were you aware of that at all?

EMMA AMOS: No. It would be my experience exactly to the contrary. The Negro men I knew, the corner boys, you know - not the Negro men - the guys who whistled, whistled at white characteristics like "Hey, man, look at that chick with those big legs." Well, that's not a characteristic of black women.

AL MURRAY: You mean calves?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right. I don't know about all black women, but most of the tribe we derived from don't have

heavy legs. They have slender legs with good strong kneecaps – right?

AL MURRAY: What about the walk?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, yes. Well, black women do walk rather well. There's no comparison. And they whistled at long hair. That's not a characteristic of colored girls. Apparently all men like long hair. I don't know why. Or is it a Western trait?

AL MURRAY: Sometimes I guess in given periods of time.

EMMA AMOS: Or they liked long hair. Because now I think people's eyes are getting trained to a nice woolly mop. I think it sexy. It's here. I think it getting that connotation. And it's young looking to have a Brillo pad hair style – right?

AL MURRAY: Yes. Afro-Brillo.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Afro-Brillo. That's what it is.

AL MURRAY: Well, it can achieve a chicness when a person doing it tears it off with a certain aplomb.

EMMA AMOS: Well, right.

AL MURRAY: Which is style.

EMMA AMOS: Yes, that's style.

AL MURRAY: Well, we were talking about certain things which you were accepting or identifying with, and certain other things which you were in a sense avoiding. Now what I'm curious about is when you made these responses, were they aesthetic responses? Or whether sometimes it a political generalization about the thing? Because something gets left out when we talk in terms of politics and a lot of politics kind of seeps in regardless of it. I mean certain political considerations would sort of plot out what was going on otherwise, like movement – dance, voice, the sexiness of the voice, the Southern thing which might be ridiculed in a certain context would be thought of in a different way in another context, you see. What were some of your other impressions of what was going on?

EMMA AMOS: Well, when I grew up I think I rejected all Southern music, all – it wasn't rock and roll – rhythm and blues. And I was taking piano and I was very interested in listening to piano music. And it was not fashionable really to like people like Piano Red and all the groovy guys who I hear in are now groovy in Atlanta, the homespun kind of guys who, you know, you heard their records. And they didn't get national acclaim at all. But they were obviously Negroes. Now I won't say that I liked white pop music because in the fifties that was unbelievable corn; it was just so hokey, such sentimental songs and such stupid things. But I think when I was growing up, when I was in high school and when I was getting ready to go to my integrated college and everything, the main thing that I can think of is total rejection of everything black.

AL MURRAY: Now let me ask you this: when you were at Antioch and you came back to Atlanta, say, for the Christmas holidays, and so forth when parties were going on, what was the experience at the parties?

EMMA AMOS: Well, all my friends all went away to school. And when we would get together, (even to this day when I go home I don't see anybody because there's nobody left I grew up with) the only people I'd see would be other kids who'd come home from Radcliffe, or Vassar – most of the kids went away to really shiny Ivy League schools – and they all had pretty much the same experience I had. And they were all experimenting in being really white, to get as white as they can get and still be black. And you wouldn't even discuss what it was like to be black in a white school because you admit that there were any problems with it. You know, you might be grinding your teeth at night but you would never say that you were having great troubles because you were integrating and you figured maybe it would be hard because you came from the South and it wasn't all that easy. So it wasn't just me. Everybody I knew went away to school.

AL MURRAY: Well, now you'd go to somebody's house, let's say, you're back in town, and somebody would come by and you'd go around and visit. Now the majority of Negroes that I know, you can't be there for thirty minutes visiting unless they'd play some records.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right.

AL MURRAY: Then if they have a party they're going to dance. It's not like the people in New York who just sort of talk and indulge in character assassination and gossip. In Atlanta, in certain sections of Atlanta that I know, and in Mobile everybody would dance.

EMMA AMOS: Dance, yes. When you dance to the music you dance to what's groovy.

AL MURRAY: Were you out of touch with the slang?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, no. No. Because that was one of the things that we didn't try to integrate out. We all danced. And I thought I had three left feet all through high school until I went to Antioch. And I discovered that I could out-shuffle anybody on the floor. "Natural rhythm" notwithstanding. I don't think I had any natural rhythm. It's just that I had confidence that I was better at it than they were. And so I figured, you know, I felt that the thing is the Negroes have rhythm. All right they have rhythm. So I have rhythm. So I could dance. And I've been able to dance ever since.

AL MURRAY: The Negroes have a dancing tradition.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. The tradition of Mr. Bojangles.

AL MURRAY: You're a very nice-looking girl and you could make it to parties in Atlanta—you wouldn't be a wallflower, you'd have to dance.

EMMA AMOS: Right. Yes.

AL MURRAY: So when you take that out of that tradition and put into another tradition, a no dancing tradition, you begin to see it in another perspective - right?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right altogether. You're so right. You say one thing and then it is wrong. It gives the wrong impression. No, I guess I really couldn't have thrown away all my music; okay, so I did like rhythm and blues because that's what you dance to. Okay.

AL MURRAY: Right. You have a problem of evaluating it in terms of Bartok who was probably big at that time.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. We didn't dance to Bartok.

AL MURRAY: But the girls, let's say, if all these fine brown frames from Radcliffe and Antioch and Chicago and what not got together they would hardly play Bartok? Do you see what I mean? They would rather play some Louis Jordan or Nat King Cole or a bunch of things. Is that true or not?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right. Now my feeling is that now in these schools, just from the little things that I read in the paper I gather that the kids are segregating themselves. And they're not integrating. They probably take their groovy records and then they sit around and they say look at how well we dance together and they're admitting that we can dance better and we can do this better and we can do that better. Or they're finding things and they're no longer sharing it or sublimating it or something. Their blackness is the thing to do and to be now. They're trying to not have white roommates. It's a totally different thing now. And I would have fallen in with that, too, I'm sure. It's just that I came along at a different time.

AL MURRAY: Well, when you look back at what you were doing - although when you put it in different ways, you say getting away from blackness and going to whiteness - do you find that when you think about it that you were also competing and you were representing blackness?

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: Would you say on second thought about it - I'm just curious just because I know these things can be formulated in a certain way.

EMMA AMOS: Under certain circumstances. Only sometimes. But I think the catch there is representing blackness. I think most of the time I was able to wash out any feeling that I was actually representing blackness. The only time I ever felt that, or still do, is when I do something bad, you know. I still take the world on my shoulders and I figure oh, dear, I'll never get into white heaven because I've done something black bad. But I don't think in just ordinary things like going to gym class or being in an art class or what not I felt I was representing black people. It just never occurred to me. It only was bad things. I can remember the first time I was in London I rode the tube and I was sitting there on a lovely upholstered seat. And two or three black students came in. They were well-dressed. And they started to smoke. And I fidgeted and I wanted to get off that damn thing. I was looking all around hoping that no white person would associate me with those guys. And it wasn't until a few weeks later that I realized you could smoke on the underground. And those were African students and here I was shouldering the burden of the world, as so many Negroes are wont to do - that everything a black man does wrong is your fault. And whenever I want to feel foolish I remember that. I was on the verge of telling them, "Don't do that! You're showing us up." And they would have laughed so hard.

AL MURRAY: How did you feel, or do you have any consciousness of how you felt about white students who were

not as smart as you were? Did you have any awareness of that or any involvement with that sort of thing?

EMMA AMOS: No, I don't think so. There would have been so few of them who were not as smart as I was. I had made A's and what not in high school but in a sense that amounted to absolutely nothing. So that my first two years at Antioch were a real struggle. And though I was bright and I had a very high IQ and everything I had no actual learning. My math was terrible, everything was terrible. And it wasn't until my last three years that I started making really good grades, you know, above C's and D's that I got out of the doldrums. So I never found too many white kids that were not as smart as I was. And if I did I figured, you know, that's just the way the cookie crumbles. I never separated myself along racial lines that way. Talent didn't seem to separate me from white kids at all. I can't think of anything that made me think of being a Negro on campus other than the fact that for the first couple of years I was at Antioch I dated Negroes. And out of the entire student body - I don't know, I hate to guess the number - there were only about ten Negroes on campus. To think that we had to date among ourselves sounds funny; we didn't have to; it was just that we sort of did for the first couple of years. And then I started going out with white fellows. And that was no big deal either. It didn't matter one way or the other, it seemed then. Now that I'm getting used to living in America I'm convinced that things are racist and that it probably did matter to the white kids what the Negroes were doing. But I don't know, I can say.

AL MURRAY: Do you feel that some of the, let's say, rejection of some aspects of the experience of being a Negro in Atlanta had to do with the fact that a number of the things that you were interested in were not given any prominent significance among the people that you were associating with? Do you feel that there was anything of that involved in your attitude?

EMMA AMOS: Well, if I understand the question, you mean that the things I was interested in might have been a little too arty or too—

AL MURRAY: Specialized, or abstract, abstruse, or whatever.

EMMA AMOS: Well, by the time I got really interested in art and in philosophy and all the things that I came out of college spouting, all those obnoxious things, there were one or two people I can remember seriously alienating. But I think that was no different from any college kids. They're just born obnoxious. But by that time we were all sort of serious about one thing or other and you couldn't find anybody who was not serious about school and who was not serious about being interested in something, chemistry or some field. At least I didn't. Most people were very interested in something. So you didn't run into anybody who was really a Neanderthal and gave you what for for being interested in art. Most people tended, and still do, you know, to look at the things you do with awe because they haven't done them. Or they haven't done them recently. Or they've never done it, or it's something new. And they appreciate anything you can tell them about what you've done. Of course there were always a few people who envied what you did. Or didn't like it. And what can you do about that? Nothing. That's just common jealousy and it gets very boring.

AL MURRAY: What about the process of discovery of and moving in circles which were different from Atlanta? We could go back to Antioch. For example, there was a matter of actually coming in contact with flesh and blood painters and becoming involved in art as a living activity. But along with that there was your conception not only of painting but of the whole world, and it was quite a different change; there was a change, in other words, from the experience that you were having. What was your reaction to this? For example, a few minutes ago you were saying something about when you got back together with the other kids from other schools you wouldn't admit certain things which were actually happening. And certain of them would not.

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: Well, what was the nature of the new experience that Antioch represented?

EMMA AMOS: It all seems so long ago it's hard to remember. There must have been many social things and, you know, little things that would have been strange. I can't remember anything that stands out. I'm trying to think of some cues or something that would help me. I just can't think of anything unusual. London was a little different. I learned how to be alone in London. You know, I learned what it meant to be alone. College is such a friendly place, and especially here in America where people put such great value on being friendly and being nice to people down the hall and going to visit the new girl in Room so-and-so, and really putting their hand out to help. Whereas in England it wasn't that way. And you didn't have any family. And you really didn't have any roommates; you might have them but you didn't know them and there was no guarantee that you'd ever get to know them. And you might have classmates in a painting class and you'd never get to speak with them. It turned out to be a very lonely time where I had to rely on anything personal that I could dredge up in the way of feeling worthy and feeling that I was an artist and that what I was doing was a normal thing to do. Because I had already taken myself out of this country and put myself in a new country and I was doing this so seriously and being ignored in a sense, you know, and having to make an accounting to myself every night as to whether this was worth doing. The kids who were in that school didn't have to make that kind of adjustment; they were there

and what they were doing possibly was more normal than, say, picking up from London and coming to America or something – in effect what I had done. So that was a completely different social scene. And it was very rewarding when I found friends and I remember that as being a much more important adjustment to make than going to Antioch. Because I had been out of the South and my parents were very cosmopolitan. And I'd been away to camp and had the whole middle class thing. And also the summer before I went to Antioch I had spent in prep school at Hampton Institute in Virginia. And I had loved it. I almost stayed there. It was just marvelous. I met so many Negroes and they all said, "Why are you going to a white school?" And I got a taste of what it would be like to go to a Negro school. And it would have been wonderful. I would have really loved it. But I told myself wait a while. I had high visions I was going to integrate myself. So I didn't go to Hampton. I thought I'd go ahead with my great plans. But aside from that, while there was a little bit of adjusting on going to Antioch it hadn't really been too traumatic. But London was something different and it took a good while to adjust. I don't think I adjusted at all that first year. I was living with two American girls who went to Antioch but they were going to London University, they weren't going to my school and we weren't taking the same courses, also they got fed up with London University after about five months and they packed off to Paris. And they left me in London alone in this apartment we'd taken. And I promptly got sick and never went out for about two months. Probably I was just petrified, just scared to death. The second year I went back of course I had friends that I had made the year before and I was much more relaxed about it. And I finished college. By that time I thought I was pretty hot stuff. I made lots more friends, English friends this time, not just American students and had a much better time. And that's when I really felt that I was an artist because I was living over there as an artist then. I was no longer a college student.

AL MURRAY: Did you make trips to Paris back and forth from London?

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: How often?

EMMA AMOS: I didn't go to Paris very often because I never spoke French very well. So it wasn't any great treat to me. And I didn't know anybody in Paris. If I had had a few names I probably would have enjoyed it. But I didn't know anybody. When I went it was just to go sit in a cafe or march up and down. The only person I ever knew in Paris was Kenny Clark, the drummer. I had met him on the boat once going over. And whenever I went to Paris if I had the money I'd go to a club and listen to him. And we'd talk and what not. And that was all; I knew nobody else. So I traveled a lot with various people, you know, whoever had any money at Christmas or New Year's or whenever you could get away. I went to all the countries – Germany, and hitchhiked around; and we went to Yugoslavia.

AL MURRAY: What were you primarily interested in in these countries? Just general—

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Just general touristy traveling around because I was in Europe and it was the thing to do and it was always so cheap. Living there cost nothing; absolutely nothing.

AL MURRAY: Did you go to Spain?

EMMA AMOS: Yes, we went to Spain one Christmas and had a ball. Got chigger bites that lasted for about eight months. And went to the museums there. I loved the museums there.

AL MURRAY: You went to the Prado?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. And that was so wonderful. I've never seen any museum as nice as that.

AL MURRAY: People really remember it. The Prado is a very special experience.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. There was a museum in some little town like San Sebastian or some place, just a city museum, that was also spectacular. But nobody was there. And the paintings were so nice. And it was as if Spanish art is extremely thoughtful. It must be a national characteristic of their art and they make their museums thoughtful to hold the paintings. It's really a lovely thing to see the art of Spain. I don't know whether I'll ever get back again. It's kind of off the beaten path.

AL MURRAY: How much of Europe did you cover actually?

EMMA AMOS: Well, I traveled through Spain, France, Germany, Austria, Italy, Yugoslavia. That's it. I never got to Greece. And I didn't get to Scandinavia. I think that's about it.

AL MURRAY: North Africa?

EMMA AMOS: No, I didn't get there. I've been to Italy several times. I always managed to get there. It's just like going to Paris.

AL MURRAY: What would you say you liked about any given country, say, Germany or Italy?

EMMA AMOS: Well, I much prefer any of the warm climate countries and warm-bodied people to the Germans. I hated the feeling I had in Germany. I was only there for about four or five days. We hitchhiked from Strasbourg through Germany to Munich and fooled around and got to Austria and then went on to Yugoslavia. And all the time I was there I felt I could look behind me and see a crowd of people. People just stared at me so hard. And I couldn't understand why because there were lots of soldiers over there. I saw Negro soldiers all the time. I saw their wives. But I think it was a kind of root rudeness. It wasn't just pure curiosity but just 'we must look at this strange person', and there was a feeling about it. People stared at me in a lot of places. They stared at me in Spain because although I'm not particularly tall, anybody is taller than the Spanish peasant. I can remember riding on the subway in Spain in Aruba or whatever it was and being a whole head taller than everybody. And everybody would face toward me and just stare at me like I was some kind of Amazon. It was so funny. But there you don't get a feeling (well, it's probably all in the mind) that people are expressing animosity, as you do in Germany. I just didn't like it at all. Italy I loved very much. I think partly it's because of the language. Although I don't speak Italian you can almost speak Italian, you know; you can just sort of fiddle and there isn't a cold insistence on proper pronunciation such as always got me in France. You know, I've studied so much French and I can't say anything in French. And if you made some little error they just wouldn't speak to you. And since I've read about the French character and there is a little coldness there, you know. They not too anxious to help you out. I didn't know it, I thought everybody loved Americans. But Italy I adored. I think I liked Italy and England best. And Yugoslavia – Yugoslavia was heaven. But I think all the Mediterranean stuff is just so beautiful. You just couldn't compare it with anything. I imagine Greece is like that.

AL MURRAY: How involved was art with your travels aside from museums?

EMMA AMOS: Not at all. I didn't even sketch or anything. I don't sketch as a rule, anywhere. It didn't have anything to do with it; it really didn't. It was just for fun. I can't remember getting anything out of it other than the museum trips and seeing the art. And in France I saw less art than I saw anywhere else. I enjoyed the art in just the little town of Dubrovnik and the sculpture of Mestrovic in Split in Yugoslavia much more than I dug the Louvre. But that was because I got that tremendous ennui that I get when I go into a museum. It's just too damned big and I just can't go through it.

AL MURRAY: Do you think that your actual work has been significantly changed, modified, or any emphasis shifted as a result of the political situation in the United States with reference to Negroes other than this thing that you alluded to about an emphasis on blackness which has changed certain attitudes of yours, or you feel certain attitudes have been influenced by it?

EMMA AMOS: I don't think it's changed my work other than subject matter. Well, as I explained before, getting down actually to the nitty gritty of what the figure looks like I had already started to do the figure, and I don't think it influences my work at all. The thing that influences my work most is what am I going to do with it. And I think that must be true of any artist at any time. You know, you get discouraged when you find yourself stuck with a whole lot of stuff that you can't give away because it isn't right. You know, people don't want it; they don't want to give it anything. And if you have no outlet to sell it then sort of what's the point in doing it? And you really have to talk to yourself before you spend an awful lot of money doing more things. And it costs a fortune to paint. It costs me much less to etch because I have an outlet for it and I get a few little checks sometimes dwindling in every month or so from this being sold or that being sold and it makes me feel good and it pushes me on to doing more work in printmaking. And I feel that the greater the volume of work the better the work will be in my case. But in painting I don't know what will ever happen. I hate to feel that I'm making of my gallery an odd-looking, a thing that's going to be so special that I'll never go because I feel that I'm not good enough or I'm not this or I'm not that. I keep putting it off or something. And so therefore I will always have a storeroom full of paintings. I hate to think that that could happen. But I really can't push myself out to look for a gallery. And Silvan Cole, the head of Associated American Artists, told me once that he never takes an artist who doesn't bring his own working paintings and stuff in. Which made me think you know. He never takes anybody who's just recommended and whose work is brought in by somebody else. He said he just can't be bothered with it. He wants to see the artist and he wants to know what they're like and he wants to know that they're interested in showing, he wants to know that they care. And there are a whole lot of other reasons that he has. So therefore I think maybe I'm not quite right in giving up so soon about going to galleries. But I feel almost the door is not open. Just going in off the street is too much to ask of anybody. Maybe someday I'll do it. You know, somebody will look at my work and say, "Gee, I think this is good enough." And I'll call Fred and Fred will come down and he'll take them. And that's what I'm looking for. Because I just don't think it's done off the street the way I try to do it and the way most kids try to do it. I don't think it's done that way at all. There's some way to get around town. There's a way to sell your things. And that's not it.

AL MURRAY: Would you like to spend more time with paint?

EMMA AMOS: I want to be doing both. That's when I really work best is when I'm doing both things at the same

time.

AL MURRAY: Do you find yourself doing the same subject, let's say, in different media?

EMMA AMOS: Yes, absolutely. I do it in two different ways always. And they relate. I just went back to print-making this summer in the last three or four months when this commission came up. And I got so many ideas from starting to print again for painting that I feel that I've got to take some money and go into the studio and just do some paintings. But, as I say, I'm stymied by the fact that I'll be stuck with more paintings. And it costs me money to keep them. I'm making them for no reason. Nobody has ever seen them and I have no way of selling them. I don't think I've ever sold a painting. Yes, once.

AL MURRAY: You're talking specifically of canvases, oils and canvases. When you speak of being stuck with it you're speaking of oils and canvases – right?

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: But so far as expressing yourself in a plastic medium whether it's etching, drawing, what not, this you're constantly involved with?

EMMA AMOS: Right. Yes.

AL MURRAY: It's a matter of whether

EMMA AMOS: Of where I'm going to keep it. It's at the point now where my husband says, "Throw them out. Throw them away."

AL MURRAY: What specifically engages your attention, challenges your technique, stimulates your imagination at this time in approaching any particular subject matter in any of the media that you work in?

EMMA AMOS: Right now color is my main thing. And I want to stress this business of images of people, lots of people not just doing static things on canvas, you know, with more movement. And I have visions in my head of what people would be doing and I have to paint it in order to do it. You see, when I do prints one of the reasons I get so interested in painting is that with all the leftover bits and pieces I always make collages. And collage is a marvelous way of working really, picking up things and moving them around. And the whole time I'm doing that I sort of make collages as my form of drawing for either the next print or the next painting. And if I'm not painting along with this then I feel I'm not really doing everything I should be doing. I do all these things at one time or I'm not really doing it properly. And now I'm getting more movement in my prints and I want to see it in my paintings.

AL MURRAY: I notice in some of the things that you are experimenting with color in very shockingly new ways.

EMMA AMOS: Yes.

AL MURRAY: One way may be different from another, a different color from another. Orange will be a different color from the reds. The face will still be another color. Just like different colors on garments.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Right.

AL MURRAY: In other words, it's sort of an abstract way of approaching the figure.

EMMA AMOS: Right. Yes. I love the figure now because I see it as just a big shape and the more contorted I can get it the better, you know, because everything just seems to work—there's nothing as beautiful as the female figure. I'd love to have a male model but I'd like to pick him out. Not just any one would do. Because I'm not interested in angles so much now. I like the curves. As you noticed, everything is all curvy, curvy line. Looking at work – I don't know which came first, this or that. I know they were all done within a period of two or three months, all the things in this room, the lithograph, the little painting of the watermelon tree, the watermelon apple tree, and the figures, and that crazy lady. And that's when I went back. Because out of these things that I have hanging up here over in my studio there must be fifteen paintings that were done at the same time. And really out of that batch about ten of them are really good. When I paint I don't think in terms of painting for shows. I think people think that way. A lot of artists do. But if I had to paint for a show I think I would go nuts. Because you have to paint everything to look alike and my things never look alike from one year to the next. I think it's so boring to make your work look like a gigantic statement of life's purpose. I think one of the things that has made Picasso so good is that he's never been stultified by having a look. His things vary tremendously from period to period.

AL MURRAY: Whatever is engaging his talent.

EMMA AMOS: Right.

AL MURRAY: And working out certain problems or just following certain interests. I can remember he was playing around on the Côte d'Azur with sea urchin shapes which were stylized in various ways. He just played with it as if he could exhaust an idea which, of course, is inexhaustible with the type of imagination that he has.

EMMA AMOS: Right.

AL MURRAY: Would you find yourself challenged in that way rather than a matter of painting a unified show or something?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. It would be hard, you know. Because people come into this room and they look at (that painting is not mine) – this one is, it was done ten years ago. And they say, "Is that yours?" It's funny. I guess I should take it down. Except I like it. It doesn't look like the others. It looks as if I can't make up my mind about what I'm doing.

AL MURRAY: What is that called?

EMMA AMOS: It doesn't have a name. It has some figures in it; they're almost accidental. I saw them after I had been painting it for a while. Of course it's abstract expressionist – just lovely brush strokes and every thing. But there's a bull and a bull fighter. Turned up the other way there's a ghost. So it has a figure in it to me. I always see the bull. I never pay much attention to that figure type business. Somebody pointed that out to me. But I've never been able to give it a name because I think bulls and bull fighters are completely out. You don't paint bulls or clowns.

AL MURRAY: Yes. But there was a central awareness of subject matter when you were with that piece of watermelon over there.

EMMA AMOS: Yes-s. But I wasn't even doing watermelon either.

AL MURRAY: Until later it turned out to be a watermelon?

EMMA AMOS: Yes, it turned out to be a watermelon.

AL MURRAY: So your ambition now is to be able to work in several different techniques or different media at the same time?

EMMA AMOS: Yes. To be able to do all those things; mainly just to be able to work. And that means having a place. I think I would always have to rent printing space in an etching studio like Blackburn's because I could never afford to have a press. They cost too much money and you have to have a certain kind of studio to have that kind of weight in it. But I certainly would like to have a real silkscreen studio and a painting studio. And the only way to have that is to get some more commissions. And I don't know whether I really want to go after some more commissions. I would be perfectly happy to continue working as I am to pay for studio space. But, as I said, it's a great problem what to do with the paintings. So I just hope something happens and that I can get rid of some of them.

AL MURRAY: So there's a basic interest in design, in commercial design?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, yes. I love to weave and I love to design upholstery and carpets and dress fabrics and things. In fact one of the things that I was all het up about last year – no, the year before last when I had the baby and I just sort of gave up on it – was I wanted to start a printmaking workshop in Harlem and teach women how to screen prints, and work with some young designers and do a line of textiles for dress and upholstery similar to the ones that are done in Finland. The fabrics are black and white, very simple but very beautiful and very modern. And these things are all imported from Finland and they're now \$8.50 a yard. They're extremely overpriced. And it's nothing that good solid designers couldn't do with hand spinning. It would be a perfect project for anywhere, not just in Harlem. It's just that I thought it would be nice because there's good cheap loft space there and there should be City money to finance it. But everybody mentioned this to says, "Sit down and write out a program." Well, I can't do that. I want somebody to come to me and say, "Do it. You do it, because you know how." And I couldn't write a program on it. I don't know what they mean by that.

AL MURRAY: Just a little sort of final note on biographical material. After you had been to London and so forth, you came back to Atlanta and you had some shows and then you came to New York.

EMMA AMOS: Right.

AL MURRAY: Then what personally happened with you among other things was that you got married.

EMMA AMOS: Yes. Among other things.

AL MURRAY: And this is a part of the total business of living.

EMMA AMOS: Oh, yes. Yes.

AL MURRAY: You didn't think of this as being, as making any special sacrifice from your work; it all fits together?

EMMA AMOS: No, it didn't change anything. When I came to New York, as I said, I taught at the Dalton School where I was introduced to Bobby. When I came to New York I had been going out with a fellow and he promptly wandered off and got married to somebody else. And I was crushed. Then I started going out with Bobby and we dated for a full five years before we got married. We got married in 1965. And it didn't change anything. He works as a marketing director, and was an advertising director. He's very much interested in art and he helps me with everything I do here. He built my silkscreen boxes and he fixed up my studio so it's easier to work in. And he carts around prints - he does anything to help with what I'm doing. And there's been no real problem being married to him that I know of. Except maybe now when I feel that interracial marriages are out. And I don't think ever - well, I wouldn't say I don't think I'd do it again - I think you marry for love, you know, you marry because you can't think of anything that you'd rather do. But I think that things have changed now to the point where maybe I would not have even met him because I might not have taught at the Dalton School. I think we're going to have a period where there are not going to be so many interracial marriages for a while. Maybe not right now, but in a little while when things really get worse or better depending on how you look at it.

AL MURRAY: How does a painter feel about being a mommy?

EMMA AMOS: A painter feels about being a mommy - I like being a mommy. I think it's great. But I'm telling you it doesn't help your work any. And I have to have a sitter even if up here working because if my hands get covered with paint or I'm holding paper I can't change diapers and it's a drag. But that only lasts - I keep telling myself that women are really much brighter and much stronger than men and that all the really bright, strong women in the world have two or three children and they manage somehow. And it's a special thing, you know, that you really dig and you wouldn't give up just to be a painter. Everybody has children; all the big painters. And all the big anybodies have children. I think it's something you can do.

AL MURRAY: And you certainly do not find that you have any less interest in painting?

EMMA AMOS: Oh, no! Oh, absolutely not! In fact, I'm afraid that one of these days I'm going to get carried away and the next thing that's going to appear on one of my canvases is going to be a little fat curly headed cherub. And now how am I going to explain that!

AL MURRAY: That's good. That's good.

EMMA AMOS: Which would be terrible.

AL MURRAY: Do you find yourself being politically more involved and more activist than in previous times, or were you always somewhat active and somewhat concerned?

EMMA AMOS: I always been concerned, yes. And I don't do very much, you know; actually I talk more than I do anything else about politics. But I think by saying a few things you can - if you make a lot of noise you can draw attention to things. I think being a member of Spiral was great. That was one of the most political things I ever did. And that wasn't even very political because it wasn't a political kind of group. It was just nice, you know. And it was lovely being the only woman in the club. It was absolutely super. And it was a great kind of honor. I never have understood why they picked me. Because I think, you know, there are a lot of other good people who would have liked to be a member of that club. And I hate to think of it as ended. I don't think it's ended. I think that any time anybody wanted to call a meeting of Spiral that everybody would show up, and we'd talk about the same dumb things we've already talked about.

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