



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

**Oral history interview with Ernest Crichlow,
1968 July 20**

**Funding for the digital preservation of this interview was provided by a
grant from the Save America's Treasures Program of the National
Park Service.**

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Ernest Crichlow on June 20, 1968. The interview took place in Brooklyn, New York, and was conducted by Henri Ghent for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

HENRI GHENT: Ernie, when were you born and where?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: I was born in Brooklyn, June, 1914; June 19, 1914.

HENRI GHENT: Are you a native Brooklynite?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Yes, I am.

HENRI GHENT: In what section of Brooklyn were you born?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Really not too far from the museum. I was born on Bergen Street between either Grand and Clawson or Grand and Lanaka. I don't exactly remember but from about four till eight or nine I was at 978 Pacific Street because I occasionally drive by that area now.

HENRI GHENT: Yes. Were you an only child?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Oh, no. One of nine.

HENRI GHENT: Where are you in that group?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Next to the oldest.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me something about your early family life, you know, your parents and your other sisters and brothers and what they are doing, etc.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Well, I grew up, as I said, on Pacific Street and I have sort of fond memories of the neighborhood because I lived next door to an Italian family and my mother and the Italian woman would act like babysitters for each other. The business of going downtown shopping isn't like it is now. It was a major undertaking, you know. You had to arrange to leave the children somewhere to go down to some places like A & S's and Am's, the stores that were very popular then for shopping. Almost nobody went to the city to do any shopping. You just went downtown. My father was a mason in the old country, Barbados, he comes from Barbados, British West Indies. A mason was the kind of person who could do anything, you know, he was a bricklayer, he could do plastering, cement work and, most artistically, he used to do those decorated ceilings, which are quite a thing. We used to have all these various molds. He used to do that.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, that was very popular in the brownstones.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Yes, yes. I wish I knew it now since I have one. It would be a great help if I had even kept the molds. He was also quite a cricketer.

HENRI GHENT: Oh?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: We lived in a wood frame house. He used to saw down the bats for us and my brothers, we would all practice batting in the backyard.

HENRI GHENT: That wasn't a very popular game in this country in those days, huh?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Well, in our community it was because there were a lot of West Indians there.

HENRI GHENT: I see, and they understood the game.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: They understood the game and it was a big thing on Saturdays and Sundays in the summertime, when the games were being held mostly in Park Circle. They used to play at Park Circle and then there was some place up in the Van Cortland Park, I think it was, and in Pelham Bay Park they used to have matches and it was always a great thing because they would have all the West Indian candies. I don't even remember the name of those. They're coconut candies they used to have, and there is a peppermint candy they used to have all beautifully decorated. The decoration was as much as the taste.

HENRI GHENT: Were all of your sisters and brothers born in this country?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: All except the oldest. She came here when she was about six months old.

HENRI GHENT: So what was your childhood like growing up in a big family like that, in sort of an interracial neighborhood in those days?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Well, I guess I feel sorry for the kids nowadays because I realize that there were so many things that we had that they don't have. We had a real sharing of cultures, which I think is almost a blackout today -- white children know just their culture and the Negro children know just their culture. There isn't enough of that blending that happened in those early days. As I said, there were block communities and area communities rather than, you know, closed-in communities.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, ghettos.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Yes. There was also open fighting amongst the blacks and particularly the Irish at that time. There used to be a lot of fighting and . . .

HENRI GHENT: Friction between them, yes.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: But as I said, it never was the sort of thing which flared up like we have now. It would be a local thing.

HENRI GHENT: It didn't spread, it didn't spread. It was strictly local and regional.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Strictly a local thing. But as I said, I remember one particular incident that I guess explains the difference in the cultures. My mother left me with this Italian family and went downtown and for some reason she stayed much longer than supper time and this Italian family tried to get me to eat. I was quite hungry and I really had made up my mind that I was going to eat but when I got to the table they had this tremendous wash basin -- all I could imagine was that it was a wash basin -- full of spaghetti and I just couldn't imagine how anybody could eat out of a basin that you wash . . .

HENRI GHENT: Your body.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: You know, so I really didn't eat and I remember coming home and telling my mother and she thought it was just a big joke. She said you think they would actually give you food out of a dirty basin? But in my childish mind I had associated these things only with washing and never with something to serve food in. Now I know those are very lovely, those basins, and you use them to put all of your delicacies in.

HENRI GHENT: They are collectors items now.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: But at that time I didn't know that. I think the other thing about that area was school. I think that you had a chance because most of the schools were -- you didn't even use the word integrated then -- you know, it was just the accepted thing. They were neighborhood schools of the kind of the neighborhood that I was in, so the schools were always, you know, usually 60/40 one way or the other -- pretty well mixed.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, surely.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: And you grew up seeing stupid white kids as well as stupid Negro kids. While what has happened to the schools nowadays, the Negro kids are usually, if they are in a class where there are white kids, they are usually the ones that are on the low level of the class and never on the high level. There you saw everything in a more natural state and I have always said that the teachers in those days might have been more prejudiced than many of the teachers are today, but they were skilled craftsmen and they believed that as a teacher that you had to learn, there was never any excuse for it.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: You didn't have all these psychological reasons for explaining why you couldn't learn because of your background, etc., etc. They considered themselves a professional and you went into their class and when you got out you were supposed to know what you were taught. And you were supposed to be taught in that class or they would feel that this was their prestige at stake, so they taught.

HENRI GHENT: I would assume that you mean that the quality of education in those days was better than it is today?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: I would say so, I would say so.

HENRI GHENT: And the teachers were probably more dedicated than they are today, wouldn't you say?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Yes, I would say -- maybe it is not even dedication; well, I guess dedicated is the word. I would have just said that they were just more professional about their job.

HENRI GHENT: I see, yes, I see.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: And that meant that there was no excuse for you, or no explaining the fact that a child didn't learn. You had to learn.

HENRI GHENT: As you know of, were there any unions in those days? Teachers unions and that sort of thing?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: In those early days, I don't know. I wasn't aware of teachers unions until I was in my late high school years. That was the first time I was aware of it. I did know about unions because there were very few Negroes in the building trades and for a long time the only part of my father's working as a plasterer was because he worked on the Jewish Hospital that is right down the block from here.

HENRI GHENT: Oh, I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You know, when they were putting up one of those wings he worked there and this was one of the difficulties, the union. I don't know if he ever officially got in -- I think he just got what they called working papers.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Allow you to work on a particular job and one of the things that did happen was that the West Indian masons were in great demand. You know, because they did this plastering, they did a lot of it at home, while I think that many of the skills that the Southern Negro brought was a different kind of skill. It was in iron work of various kinds, but this Old World masonry, you know, the inside -- I am not talking about the outside, it was very different -- was in great need in large areas like hospitals and many of the new buildings they were putting up on Eastern Parkway in those days. He worked right in this immediate area.

HENRI GHENT: In addition to being an artisan, was your father otherwise artistically inclined?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Not to my knowledge and yet I vaguely remember, I am trying to remember for certain and I have asked my mother about it and she was sort of vague about it -- I don't remember it, it was my father or one of my father's friends that used to -- I don't know whether they were drawing it for me or helping me draw, you know, copying Mutt and Jeff when I was a young boy. I vaguely remember, and I am not sure whether it was my father or one of his friends, but I know there was somebody that used to be at the house who either drew it for me or was helping me draw. That seems to stay in my mind.

HENRI GHENT: Do you remember what age you were?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Oh, I would say around six and a half, seven.

HENRI GHENT: Were any of your sisters or brothers artistic?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Not in the sense that we are speaking of, in terms of drawing or painting or modeling or anything like that, no. My sister sews, you know, one of my sisters sews, but that was a much later period because she is much younger than I am. So that wasn't something that was going on in my early stages.

HENRI GHENT: I see. And what about your mother? Did she have any artistic leaning?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Not that I noticed. They did have, however -- I think this is true of most of the West Indian or the people in the Church of England -- part of your education is a musical one.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I always used to marvel at the fact that the people could take up a book and sing a song that they never heard before because they could read music.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, yes, surely.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: I guess in school, at that age, I thought of reading music only in terms of an instrument. I never thought, at that stage, of your reading music for voice alone and without any accompaniment and would find that they had this thing, and also to hear them. You know, I remember clearly, especially around the Christmas and Easter holidays, there were a certain number of songs, like the Messiah, that they used to sing in different parts. My father would be in one part of the house and she would be in another part singing these things and they come back to you and you realize how beautiful. They both had very fine voices but not . . .

HENRI GHENT: Weren't trained voices, just natural voices.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Just natural voices, and because they could read music and sing these different parts I remember it was something that all of us as kids always admired. Not one of us could really do it.

HENRI GHENT: I understand. Tell me, did your parents encourage you to be an artist?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Yes, I think they encouraged me, I guess in the best way parents could encourage their children. They always felt that even though we were poor, that if you wanted to do something they would try their darndest to help you even if they didn't understand what it was all about. They felt if you wanted to do it that was enough and, as I said, this was during the Depression and there were many of our relatives who thought my parents were foolish in letting me go on to art school, even though I was going on a scholarship and it wasn't costing the family anything. They felt that I should be out getting a job or at least learning something that when I got through I would be able to be of some help to them in their older ages. But they felt that this was my life and I should do whatever I wanted with it.

HENRI GHENT: What about your childhood school days? Did you like to go to school?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Not particularly and I think it had to do with -- I used to have trouble with my eyes and I think I was never a great reader. I look at my son and I marvel at all the reading he has done already and I realize that at his age I had done a very limited amount of reading. But I think by the time I started to go to high school I really got quite excited about going to school. For one, I was getting a chance to do a lot more drawing than I was doing in public school and junior high and I remember distinctly one English teacher, she was sort of slightly crippled and deformed, but she had one of these beautiful voices and she used to read Shakespeare to us. I remember that I would go through school almost waiting for that -- it was my last two periods -- for the chance that she would -- she wouldn't do it everyday -- but the chance that maybe part of the time she'd read.

HENRI GHENT: She would recite some Shakespeare to you.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Because I would tell you, it was like another world, you know. She just had that ability to bring things to life.

HENRI GHENT: You were fascinated by it.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Yes. That was the beginning of making school exciting for me.

HENRI GHENT: Did you understand much of what she recited?

ERNEST CRICHLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: Or was it just the content, rhythm of the language?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No, it was both because she would then discuss it with us.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: She was really, I think, a remarkable teacher. I think she excited the whole class, but I remember it had a distinct reaction on me.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me about your spiritual background. Was your family particularly a religious one?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I would have to say yes and no. Coming from the West Indies, the schools, everything, was dominated by the church down there, as you know. But we weren't what we call churchgoers, even though as a very young boy I remember getting books and prizes from Sunday school Bible class, etc.

HENRI GHENT: That was the Episcopal Church, right?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Right, yes. But this was very early. From the time, I would say, in my early teens, until I was about twelve years old, I don't think I really went to church except, you know, going with the fellows to see the girls. That was it and my family didn't insist, you know, and they didn't go regularly themselves. They would go holiday times. My mother had a house full of children so usually Sunday was cooking day and washing day and getting us all ready, and my father, Saturday and Sunday were his cricket days so there was never any emphasis put on it.

HENRI GHENT: They had their hands full.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: We had a friend of the family, a Reverend Mathews, who was a minister and he was just a delightful old man as I remember, and, I don't know, he had some difficulty with his family and was separated from his family and he used to spend a lot of time at the house. He was full of stories and he used to teach my sisters, give them piano lessons. And as I got older, say about fourteen or fifteen, we used to have these long, involved discussions about, you know, all kinds of philosophical problems, religion and politics and whatnot. He was just fascinated and caring what I would have to say. I remember he always used to say, well, he felt that in my own way I was about as religious as anybody else, you know, because it was a religion of principle and he felt that was just as valid, and this was sort of a rare thing for me as a boy to hear because usually around churches people are very rigid about concepts of what is religious and what isn't. But I think this was the kind of atmosphere that I grew up in.

HENRI GHENT: Did you partake in any of these discussions?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Oh, yes. With him, yes. I used to then have private discussions with him.

HENRI GHENT: Oh, I see. I see. Sure. Tell me, when did you actually start to work at art in earnest and at what age? In high school or in elementary school?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I would say in junior high school, because I think I had an art teacher and I think she was the first one that made me feel that there was something really special about this. Up until that time I was doing it like for fun.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Draw and then you got whatever little satisfaction that you got out of it. But I remember we had an art club and she was so excited when she would see my drawing that what would actually happen in the art club is that it became almost my private studio. She would have the kids sit for me and, you know, made it possible for me to have all kinds of supplies to work with and really encouraged me to search further. Then when I was in high school the chairman of the art department, a Miss Florence Newcome [phon. sp.], I will always remember her, she was the first one who started telling me about the great Negro intellectuals.

HENRI GHENT: Was she herself Negro?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No, no, and she also used to arrange for me to come into her office and sort of dust the books. I think it was just her way of allowing me to feel free to use these books that she knew I didn't have at home and almost would not find in the public library, but they were there available for me every -- I think I used to do it three afternoons a week. And while I was there I remember her making a point, that these -- bring books over to me, this was Langston Hughes and this was Countee Cullen and this was so and so and this was African art, and this was this, you know. And I think in her subtle way she was sort of exposing me to this whole new world.

HENRI GHENT: Without forcing it on you.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Without forcing it on me and also making it possible for me to continue to go to school because it wasn't much I used to get, maybe two or three dollars a week, so that meant that my carfare and lunch money was assured all the time that I was going to high school.

HENRI GHENT: When you graduated from high school, what did you do then?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I won a scholarship to commercial art school that was called a Commercial Illustration School of Arts, on top of the Flat Iron Building. I was there for three years and this was in the height of the Depression and I came out. I think while I was there I started running into young art students who were not even thinking about the possibility of art as a means of earning any money. See, when you come out of high school, the tendency when you go to art school is for you to go into one of the professional art schools that prepares you for some one of the applied arts, which is very different nowadays, where the kids come out of high school and actually think in terms of going to an art school to make them a full-fledged artist, not a teacher or an illustrator or anything but just a painter. You see that was something you picked up on your own, you got outside and . . . [interruption] Well, I would like to go back a little bit because when I hear myself -- like for instance I just mentioned the fact that we got something like two or three dollars. It wasn't anything like that, it had to be very much less because I remember when going to high school things were so bad at home that I used to skip the el here at Franklin and Fulton Street. I don't know if you know what "skip the el" means but it means getting on without paying.

HENRI GHENT: Oh, yes.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Climb up all those trestles and walk along the platform before you get to the steps and then you go up the steps and you get on the wooden platform.

HENRI GHENT: That was very dangerous, wasn't it?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, but that is how I used to go to school so I would have a nickel, you know, sometimes just carfare back or sometimes I would have fifteen cents which would be . . .

HENRI GHENT: Three rides.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No, what I would do is skip one ride and have a nickel to get back with and have ten cents to find one of those places where you get a frank and soda for a dime. So I just wanted to go back to that because this about two or three dollars -- I realized two or three dollars would be a tremendous amount of money in those days. So it was, as I said, it had to be very much less. The other thing that I wanted to say about the school, about the art school, about the difference in the schools today is that this was the Depression so there was practically no jobs for the white kids who were trained to go into commercial and advertising art -- it wasn't even heard of. It just shows you're thinking -- the only Negro whose name I knew that was doing anything commercially while I was going to art schools was E. Simms Campbell. Now I remember going to visit him.

HENRI GHENT: He is the cartoonist?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. But at that time he was working for Esquire and I remember going to visit him and he took some things around. Nothing ever happened and then -- to get back to where I was -- then I started meeting a lot of these young, mostly white, art students who were going to the League and studying in private classes and got me all interested since I couldn't find any work anyway, you know, in the commercial areas where I was originally trained. These kids were going to all kinds of night classes which were mostly in the Village, all free then. To go to drawing classes all you needed was ten or fifteen cents to pay for the model. And the next thing I knew, my whole approach had sort of changed. Originally you felt that when you get this skill as an illustrator, you are going to make a lot of money, you are going to be able to do all these things you wanted to do. And that went out the window and then, like you never even thought about it, you just sort of eased into this really bigger world about art and what it is all about, and the other applied world got farther and farther away. Then I remember reading somewhere -- this is around the same time, I think, I don't remember where it was -- but that there was this Negro woman who was a sculptor. I remember going on, convincing my parents to let me go -- this was before I got out of high school -- to let me go over to Harlem and see this woman. This was Augusta Savage. I remember getting out the subway in Harlem. First of all Harlem was like heaven to me because I lived in a mixed neighborhood and I always sort of used to dream about this place which was all -- everybody used to talk about all these Negroes in Harlem. You see, there was no place in Brooklyn where there were a lot of Negroes in any one spot, you know.

HENRI GHENT: Yes.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I remember going up to Harlem because I used to listen to Duke Ellington at that time. He used to be on every night from the Cotton Club. I used to sit up and have my -- just almost like this listening to my grandmother's radio because I didn't want to make any noise because it would be late at night. And this idea of going to Harlem and walking down on Lenox Avenue -- when you hear this over the years it is just like a dream world. You can't believe that you're actually going to be walking in this neighborhood where all this stuff comes from. So I walked around Harlem and I walked up to 135th Street where Augusta Savage was, you know. You read about this great woman sculptor who had traveled in Europe, studied in Paris, this is going to be a big thing. So I get to this address and I look in the registry -- no Augusta Savage -- and I am getting very nervous now and I finally found somebody and they said of course she lives here. She lives right downstairs. And this was the basement! Now I just couldn't get over this, you know, because after all this is a great goddess of mine now. A great woman who is a sculptor and here she is living in the basement and I have to go through where the coal chutes were.

HENRI GHENT: And all the garbage cans.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, and then you knock on this door and you are led into this room. And almost like magic, all of the temporary shame I had of having to go to see this woman in the basement was gone when this door opened and there was this room with books all over the place, bookshelves -- which I didn't have at home and didn't see at any of my friends' homes -- there were pictures on the wall. And at the time that I came in Robert Pious was doing a portrait of Augusta so this was another special treat. This was all going on, and I met Norman that same day.

HENRI GHENT: That is Norman Lewis?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I met Norman Lewis, yes. I think he used to be sort of like a caretaker around the building. So these are the little things that sort of built up my need to realize that this is perhaps what I wanted to do. It sort of came on me gradually because I really didn't start out with the idea of being any great painter or anything else like that. I really just started out being a commercial artist.

HENRI GHENT: But just to see other Negroes who had the same aspirations was thrilling for you.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, it was. Very much so.

HENRI GHENT: So you got out of commercial art school and what happened?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, then I started, as I said, meeting these kids and going around to drawing classes in the Village, meeting other artists, particularly Negro artists.

HENRI GHENT: Who were some of them?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, there was a fellow by the name of Johnny Atkins. Johnny Atkins took me over to the Village and I met the Delaneys.

HENRI GHENT: Is that Beauford Delaney?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Beauford and Joe Delaney.

HENRI GHENT: Beauford lives in Paris now. I met him there.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And outside of Norman, there was Bob Pious. I don't know if I met Aaron Douglas at that time because, you know, he was like steps above. He was living in a different kind of world, I mean he was a teacher and all that sort of thing. A little later I started really going uptown and meeting these artists in a cluster and that was I think around the time of the projects. Then I came in contact again with Norman and with Spinkey and . . .

HENRI GHENT: That is Charles Alston?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. Romey wasn't so much around at that time because he was either going to school or he was working for the department of -- I don't know if he was working for the Welfare Department at that time. He may have been going to school but somehow I don't remember Romey as clearly at this early stage as I did Spinkey and Norman and Ronald Joseph, who is in Europe and I haven't heard a thing from in years. There was a very fine pianist, was his name was Johnson? I think his name was Johnson, yes.

HENRI GHENT: Joshua Johnson?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I can't remember his first name but he spent a lot of time in Europe and came

here and he just didn't sort of fit. He was always sort of lost but I used to see him around the projects, you know, and of course there was Augusta Savage, West, Fred Perry -- you know, when I think of all those names -- I think if you spoke to Norman, I think he could tell you because he stumbled on an old book of the list of . . .

HENRI GHENT: What about Barthe, the sculptor, did you meet him?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Only a couple of times, and Barthe again I felt was in a different -- more like Douglas, they ran around in a different crowd.

HENRI GHENT: And they were in a different age group, too.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, yes. As I said, like Norman and Romey and at that time Ed Bates, who was a dancer, used to be around there and Jake was only a few years younger but it was enough for him not to really be in, you know.

HENRI GHENT: Did you align yourself with these other artists in a sort of fraternal way? Did you have any kind of an organization or did you just get together from time to time and talk or what have you?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I remember we did have a Harlem Artists Guild but I couldn't say that that was really for talk, that was more economic. You know, we were trying to get on the projects or keep our jobs or something like that. But there was a lot of socializing and, you know, artists like to talk so even after our socializing there would be these creative discussions, I would call them. But you would have to admit that it didn't start out to be purely a discussion, you know. You would start out to get together and I remember that there used to be these Saturday night get-togethers which were social and cultural. But I would say that if I could remember back -- you know, it gets so vague when I . . . You start thinking about discussion and then I realize I am jumping a tremendous space at this particular time that we are talking about soon after my first acquaintance with the Negro artists. I don't think we were having the kind of discussions, soul searching discussions like we are having now. I think we were just -- I would say quite honestly, for most of us, we were just getting the skills and having contact with loads of white artists who had skills that we didn't have.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: So we were learning about lithography, we were learning about etchings, we were learning simple things, like even how to make gesso panels and the use of casein and egg tempera, you know. Until that time, I think most of us just learned how to draw and paint. We didn't know about all the special techniques because I don't think we had that kind of art training. I remember -- what is his name, the cartoonist who is now in Europe? Ollie Harrington, who was doing one of his class projects at Yale. He was doing a mural and he was doing it in egg or casein tempera. This was a big thing and I think that artistic-wise I don't know what the mural was, you know, but it was a big thing technically for him to have the skill of learning how to prepare the gesso panel and keep the egg at the right amount of consistency to use it as a medium. I think we were more concerned with that aspect of painting at that time.

HENRI GHENT: Speaking of the Depression, were you ever connected with the WPA as an artist?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, when I said projects that is what I meant.

HENRI GHENT: I see, I see. The WPA.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That is really where I got a chance to meet most of the Negro artists, you know, because we all came to one place at least once every two weeks to get paid or something and you found you would be in a long line and after you saw a guy two or three times you spoke to him and got to know him.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me, Ernest, after you got out of the commercial art school were you able to find any kind of employment as a commercial artist at all?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: It is so little that it would almost be nil.

HENRI GHENT: Well, so how did you maintain yourself?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, we were all on projects.

HENRI GHENT: I see, and that lasted for a good while, did it?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: And after that what did you do?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, after that -- what did I do after that? Gee, what was I doing? Well, the first thing is that I had a studio where I was also the caretaker of the building -- that took care of my rent, so I didn't have rent to worry about. I guess you would sell a picture occasionally and get an occasional commercial job -- I think I had a small teaching job at one of the settlement houses. Now you ask me a moot question, how did you live all these years? Oh, for a while during that time I illustrated one children's book.

HENRI GHENT: For whom?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Harcourt Brace, and then there was about a three-year period before I did another one. Then, as I said, I would get a sporadic job every now and then but I think I existed solely on these two afternoons a week that I used to teach in the settlement house.

HENRI GHENT: All the time that you were doing this commercial work, did you find any time at all to work seriously as a painter?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Oh, yes, because I didn't have that much work for it to take up that much time, really. I never had the time to work seriously -- it was just the other way around. Matter of fact, we had no serious work to do as a commercial artist. I did get a job maybe once a month or whatever a month so that I had considerable time to paint, you know. At that time I was also interested in -- I guess I have always been interested in some kind of causes or something, and I remember we used to have an organization called The Committee for the Negro in the Arts, which I used to be chairman of. We used to be trying to do something about our image and get Negroes jobs in the various fields.

HENRI GHENT: Did you have any success?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, not in the art field, not in the plastic art field, but I think there are a number of Negroes who are in films today that came out of that organization. For a while Harry and Sidney used to be in that organization.

HENRI GHENT: Sidney Poitier and Harry Belafonte?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, we had what we called a show place, Club Baron, and we used to run shows there.

HENRI GHENT: Where is the Club Baron?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: On Lenox Avenue. I think either 131st or 132nd Street, around there. We used to try to even get people off the street to come in and fill up the place and have Harry and Sidney out there on the platform in those days.

HENRI GHENT: Well, what were they doing?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Sidney used to do a little act, you know, a surgeon performing an operation used to be his favorite one that he used to pull out of the hat and Harry used to sing. At that time he started out doing the pop stuff -- that was before he was doing the folk songs, and you know, people like Alice Childress around. Jake used to be around and Charles White used to be around and it was sort of more like a self-help program than anything else. We used to sort of lean on each other and I think that is the first times of any serious talks about Negroes in the arts. Also serious talks about the role of a Negro artist.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me, all this time, were you still living at home with your parents?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No, as I told you, I used to have a loft where I . . .

HENRI GHENT: Oh, I see and you lived there too.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, as I said, in exchange for keeping the building up I used to get space.

HENRI GHENT: I see. Are your parents still alive?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No. I lost my mother, the last one living, about three years ago.

HENRI GHENT: Really?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: So she has lasted pretty long.

HENRI GHENT: How old was she when she died?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Eighty-three.

HENRI GHENT: That is fantastic. Now let's go to . . .

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You know, we haven't talked about art yet.

HENRI GHENT: Well, why don't we talk about art then. Have you any recollections of sound, of tactile feelings or visual associations that you remember and that you call on now as an artist?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: There are so many things that are in the back of my head that I try to relate to my painting and I don't know if I can ever get it out, but I guess it has a lot to do with certain feelings I have about certain people. I don't know whether it is my mother or my grandmother or the first old, weak but strong, very, very dark woman, but it's the sort of image that I think sort of haunts me. A sort of -- a purple, black strength that is almost like wood, like ebony, that has a tremendous beauty and strength and at the same time almost looks fragile and I feel that somewhere along this is the sort of people I paint. You know, even though they are children, they have this -- well, they

have the strength but they are not big. There is no bulk.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, I understand.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: It is a sort of lean, lean kind of strength. I get the same kind of feeling from Ornette Coleman's "Lonely Woman." It is a kind of . . .

HENRI GHENT: He is a musician, isn't he?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. It is funny to talk, it is a peculiar thing to put into words, and yet I know exactly what I mean. It is a kind of quality that is beautiful and soft and yet harsh. That is definitely one kind of reaction. I have always been interested in music, particularly all kinds of jazz. Now I like the classics but I never associate my work with the classics, and yet in painting I feel that my painting is classical.

HENRI GHENT: Yes. Yes, lyricism.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: But my approach to it is more, I feel, more jazz than classic. It may look classic on the surface, you know, but I like to feel that there is that earthiness.

HENRI GHENT: Earthiness underneath.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, that earthiness there. Sometimes I even ask myself this question, "Well, gee, for all of the things that you know has gone on in art and you still persist in painting the way you do paint, what really is the difference, what makes you think that your handling of this child or this old woman or just this piece of folk is any different from anybody who just can draw or paint?" And it is a disturbing question to me many times, but I feel that there are these other things that I feel are going into this painting that I hope is coming through, that is much more than just, you know, just a picture of a person. I don't know how to put it in words any better. Maybe if I thought about a particular painting and try to think of some of the things that went on in my mind and also some of the things that people notice that I don't notice. I remember having a discussion with, I think it was, Leon Bibb one time and he was saying, "Why is it Ernie, that in every one of your paintings, even if they look depressing, somewhere along there you have a little bit of greenery?" Now I never really noticed that and he said that he noticed it on a considerable number of my paintings, whether the kid is inside or outside there is that little bit of beginning of new growth.

HENRI GHENT: Would you say that is sort of subconscious feeling of hope?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, but the minute he said it I knew immediately that it belonged there.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, yes.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You know, as I said, it belonged there because that is always what I am trying to believe, because I believe that there is this tremendous strength that we have. So that it belongs there for the strength and also it belongs there for the continuation which plant life to me is. It's a constant renewal of this bit of fresh, sprouting greenery. It is very interesting that that is all it used to be and then all of a sudden it became full growth and flowers like you see in *The White Fence*, which came almost last in the painting. It is, how do you say, you are boxed in and you are not without things. I don't know if this is making sense. How can you say you are boxed in and you are without things and somebody can be boxed out and be without things?

HENRI GHENT: When you mention *White Fence* are you referring to that painting that I think is

absolutely fantastic?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: With the very, very blond little girl with this almost terrified expression on her face and the small white, picket fence separating her from I don't know how many two or three black children. Talk about that painting more because, you know, I have never really had a chance to discuss it with you at length and in depth. It is really a fascinating picture.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, you know, it is something to -- I find it difficult to talk about art without talking about a specific. You see, I find myself a little more at home and I guess it is because I've sort of avoided taking my art into all the many new and exciting things that are happening. Yet I feel I react to all the things that are happening, but I just feel that for me I need this way of saying what I want to say. But to get back to this painting, I really was hoping that this isolation of putting these Negro children in this enclosure -- one of the things that you may have noticed, or as you see one of my paintings you will notice -- this whole business of the color white is being used oppressively. It is either restrictive or oppressive. You have got to know whether it comes out unconsciously or not, but I remember in many of my earlier paintings I always reacted to this business about the fencing in of people. I remember in a very early painting there is a girl behind a picket fence, but this is a black picket fence. Still a black child, but she is behind a black picket fence. Then there is the question of this reaction of white against white, you know, of this white child, who is large and big and dominating the picture with her whiteness, and the white fence and these pressed-in groupings of Negro children who're in a barren whiteness and they become the only color there. And my feeling that this is on this white plane that these colored, black children become almost their own flowers in this barrenness. And the flowers that are beyond them are all very light but they are not in the area where the children are. I don't know if I am making myself clear because every time I react to this picture I react to it a little bit differently. You know, something else is there that I know should be there but I really didn't plan it to be there.

HENRI GHENT: I understand.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You know, I originally planned just this isolation of these two elements, having to see them side by side and hoping that there is enough there without anything else to make its point.

HENRI GHENT: Explain, if you can, Ernie, why she had this fantastic expression on her face.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Even the expression is sort of hard to understand because as I worked on the painting I think the expression changed, you know, to get the right expression. I didn't want her to feel that she is immediately reacting to the children but yet you need to feel that this tremendous contrast and play and friction is going on. Where she doesn't know whether she belongs, or whether she is happy where she belongs, or whether she can cross over, or whether the children want her or don't want her, whether they want what she has or she wants what they have. All of these things are things that I see every single day.

HENRI GHENT: That painting was done obviously out of an experience, your black experience.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I think what I am really trying to say is that they may be very conventional of means but the thinking behind them is not the conventional thinking.

HENRI GHENT: It is almost -- it is beautiful, it is meaningful, and it is also terrifying at the same time,

if you know what I mean. It is something that almost defies description or explanation. I know why it is difficult for you to -- I understand it, but I . . .

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: As I said, it is almost a terrible thing to think that something comes out of your head and you would feel that it would be the easiest thing for you to explain but beyond the fact of the most obvious explanation, which is not the explanation at all, is this departmentalizing of people. But that is only your entrance into the picture. That is only, as you say, as you look at it more, it seems the other things began to grow out. That it is more than just the fact that this is showing the isolation or the racism or the inability of children to reach out and be children. You know, this is a normal growing time of their life and this is the time when it is easiest for them to make gestures to each other. As I said, nobody is reaching out and I think that is the sort of a horribleness about it. You can't even say that they are resisting or you can't say that they are trying. It's sort of a void and it has a quiet stillness about it, you know, like just before a storm.

HENRI GHENT: Obviously you are not a person who is out to run away from reality.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No, not at all, and, as I said, it bothers me sometimes because it isn't that I don't know or care about all the exciting and interesting problems that present day artists are solving, but I just feel that in my short life the things that I have to say I have to be direct about it. I have to say it in the most graphic way I know. These are almost bad words to say today but I feel that an artist has certain kinds of responsibility. I still see him as basically a teacher, an educator. The thing that makes him somewhat special is that he has these sensitivities more developed than others have and I think that part of his job is to try to let others see these worlds that he sees and that maybe they haven't seen, or present it in such a way that they will begin to see their world a little bit better.

HENRI GHENT: Now I haven't seen all of your work, certainly, but I have seen a great deal of it and you, as is the case with a great many black artists, seem preoccupied with Negro subject matter. Am I right in my thinking?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You are absolutely right. Maybe I could tell it another way. I remember in my earlier years I was very influenced by the French school of painting, which was abstract and distortion but the image was still there. Now I guess I had a little relative success with it and I would remember that my folks were both living at that time and I know that they were somewhat proud, after all their son is an artist and occasionally they would see his name in the newspaper and occasionally I would have a kind of exhibit, but I didn't feel that anything was really touching them. I think that they felt that it was very nice that people thought it was something special, and since I was happy doing it I think they enjoyed whatever praise or prestige it brought to the family. But I didn't feel that it was anything that really reached out to them. And it began to bother me because I felt that all the things they went through that made it possible for me to be an artist I should somehow be able to say thank you in a way that they would know I was speaking directly to them. I think it was out of trying to solve some of these problems that I decided to go back and just try to draw and paint as honestly as I knew how. And I felt that when I was doing it as honestly as I knew how I had to resort to some form of realism.

HENRI GHENT: So in other words, you consciously seek a particular Negroid style in your work?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I would say so. Now this whole question of what becomes a Negro art or a Negro style is -- I don't know, it gets vaguer as you get to it. Because I said it, in truth, I feel that my paintings are perhaps closer to the -- earlier it used to be more in the Flemish school when I used to really do this underpaint and glaze and whatnot. But I think it is certainly in the tradition of

the great realist masters, and that certainly is not a black tradition, you know. But I think that is not the important thing. I think what is the important thing is the content of the material and that there is no question of the what and why of my work. You know, just thinking about a painting that I am sort of getting together on -- I know again it's rare because most artists today like to feel the painting grows on them and it isn't something that is thought out -- but all of a sudden the interest that I have in the use of plant life in painting is something new to me. As I said, it was always very vague before, a very small thing, but I have been thinking about this for a considerable time. And I think one week, all of a sudden, I am going to get to it and get it over with. And it's my reaction -- really if I say what the painting is, because I can almost see the painting, you know, it is really a painting of a Negro child that you see through the bars of a cotton plant. And to me it is as clear as a prison bar, you know. This doesn't say whether or not it will be a lousy or a good painting, but the stimulation that I have already gotten out of thinking about this thing has given me all kinds of jars already. Now it is up to me to bring it off so that it means more to people than just a painting of a child in a field. When I think of some of my paintings it reminds me of a statement that I think Baldwin made once that I think is kind of true -- we're always telling the same story. You know, we're telling the same story, just telling it differently, but you're telling the same story in essence and I think my story has to do with the entrapment of my people. I think that it is various paintings but it is the same story. I think of one painting I have of a young Negro girl trying to run and there are stop signs and iron gates and one-way streets, you know. And in a way I think that this is what I am hoping, that my painting is reaching out to people and saying look at what you have done, or look at what is happening to us, or where are we going or can we go. This is really an extension of my real life. In other words, I don't see it as any separation. I think whatever success I have had as a painter has to be because I really believe my paintings are pretty much the way I am. I am not the kind of person who yells and screams a lot so I can't do the, you know, the powerful type paintings.

HENRI GHENT: Yes. You are not the militant type.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No, but I know I have strong feelings and I hope that they come through and that is what I try to do in my painting. As I said today, when so much emphasis is made for art that does not come through with a crystal clear or a strong statement I realize I am running pretty much against the tide. But I think that you decide what you are and that is what you are.

HENRI GHENT: Indeed.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I think that is the way it is.

HENRI GHENT: Ernie, have you personally ever encountered racial prejudice as a black artist?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That is a terrible question. It is terrible in the sense that it is so subtle I think that most -- in the creative fields -- I don't think people even realize that they are being discriminated against.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, I can understand that.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Certainly any black artist would have to say that of all the people he knows the least prejudiced people would be the people in the arts. But when you add up the score card and you realize how few Negroes have made it in the arts, no matter what kind of reputation they have, you have to realize that this is perhaps one of the biggest areas of discrimination. Bigotry. You realize the we have artists with names, you take an artist like Jacob Lawrence who has perhaps won every prize that any American artist can win. When you think of the white artists of his caliber today, you know, some of these guys have made tremendous amounts of money, they can

teach any place they want to, they are guests all over, traveling all over the world. This is not happening too much.

HENRI GHENT: Romey Bearden is another case.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, these men should be lionized. They are lionized mostly, whether you want to admit it or not, as Negro artists. So I think that one of the things that some of us will have to begin to learn is that you can get outside and talk about how this is a great intellectual and cultural world without bias and without this, but I think we are going to have to recognize that those of us who are accepted, if we are accepted we are still accepted on the same level that any other black individual is. You are not accepted as a part of this thing, and your work, many times, when it is evaluated is still being evaluated apart. So as I say you might as well take it from there and take whatever advantage there is in it for you and use it from that vantage point.

HENRI GHENT: Speaking of artists like Jacob Lawrence and Romare Bearden being lionized only as black artists instead of just fine artists, would you, Ernest Crichlow, prefer to be known as an artist who is a Negro or as a black artist?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I would think I would rather be known as a black artist because you are playing with terms really.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, that is true.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You are playing with terms and I think we find that out because after all the attempts that are constantly being made, especially by the white critics when they deal with the work of American Negro artists, their tendency is to try to explain that they should get out of the box of being a Negro artist and just be another artist. Yet whenever they evaluate their work they put them back in that box. No matter on what kind of level, sooner or later they never -- at least I don't ever remember reading a criticism, a really serious criticism, that didn't come back to the fact -- somewhere it was made very clear who he was. Now it is true that there are some Negro artists working in the abstract tradition that I think some of us don't even know are Negroes, but if they reach a certain amount of prominence, by the time that they reach that prominence then, because of the nature of our society, because there are so few, they have to again put you back in that box for their own protection of their own position.

HENRI GHENT: Exactly, yes.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: So I think it is a myth to think that you can work outside of it.

HENRI GHENT: You are anything else but.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You know there are strengths and values within it and I think we are better off for taking these advantages and working out from this knowing right off the bat that there is this difference. You see, this question of being universal constantly comes up in the art field, about artists not wanting to be this or not wanting to be the other about feeling that their art belongs to the world. But my reaction to this is that I like to, as I told people, I like to think about this whole world of art as one great big pie to which people from all the various cultures contribute things. And this total pie is the universality of art, but there are all kinds of little pieces. There are pieces that are African, there are pieces that are American Negro, there are pieces that are Italian, there are pieces that are Greek, there are pieces that are English. This is what it is. Your art becomes universal when it is thrown into this pie and it is then available for anybody to use. But your

contribution is only what you can bring to it. This is your specialness and this is the thing that makes it ring true and this is the thing that makes somebody else want to go to that pie. Because they know that if they go to that pie and they see this is this person's statement, this has some identity and reality that is his and his alone. I think that when you talk about art it is so contradictory because to get outside you have to get inside. And then from inside you go outside. You just can't be universal without first being specific.

HENRI GHENT: I wouldn't imagine that the current rise of black nationalism has affected you and your approach to your work because you have always . . .

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I have been doing it for many years. Many, many years. No, this has been my story for long before. As a matter of fact, I used to be criticized not only by Negroes but by many white artists for limiting myself.

HENRI GHENT: But you persist?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: But I persist. I say well, there are a lot of other people who can do a lot of other things and it may be small. They say well, it is just a small little area in terms of art. Why do you limit yourself to this? Well, this is the thing that I feel most at home with.

HENRI GHENT: You can make the best contribution.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And that is it, it may be a little tiny one but this is maybe all I have to offer.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, surely. This is your thing and you are going to stick with it. Bravo! Ernie, do you think that the Negro artist should now with, you know, big social revolution taking place in this country, direct his efforts to the black community, that is, by exhibiting almost exclusively in black community colleges, universities, etc., in order to aid the cause of liberation of the black man in America?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: No, I wouldn't say that at all. I would say that you have to do both. I think that the criticism has been the other way around. I think what has been wrong with so many of our Negro intellectuals is the tendency of feeling that they didn't want to be limited to only doing that. So I think that the question is the inclusion of this as a total part, or a very important part, of your audience. But not exclusively your audience, because I would think that so much of what we really have to say sometimes needs to be seen and understood more by the man than by ourselves.

HENRI GHENT: Have you traveled very much?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Only recently.

HENRI GHENT: Where are some of the places that you have been?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I have been to Jamaica, West Indies, three or four times. And the rest of my traveling I wouldn't really even call traveling because it has been just like stopping off. Like for instance I went on that AMSAK tour, I went to Senegal, but that was ten days.

HENRI GHENT: Was that to the Dakar Festival?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: You did go to that? I didn't realize that.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. I went as a private citizen.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Not as an artist and I had nothing shown or didn't talk to anybody about art. I went as a private citizen because I wanted to see the country and it was a tremendous financial deal.

HENRI GHENT: That was quite an uproar about the American Negro participation in that show and I understand that they weren't very well represented as a result of the arrangements on this end.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I would say -- I guess the best word would be to say that the American Negro painters boycotted the show and justly so.

HENRI GHENT: And that was because of -- I believe it was -- what is the woman's name? Mrs. Brown, was head of it and from the outset there was a great deal of resentment that a white woman should be at the head of an art project by and for Negroes.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I don't even think that was all of it because there was a lot of divided opinion amongst the group of artists. But it was the indifference and the handling and also the fact that this richest of all nations could not afford a small sum of money to guarantee that the American artist would be well represented. And just the personal handling of the artists was very, very badly done.

HENRI GHENT: This would appear to me to be another indication of the lack of interest in the work of the American black artist.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. Well, there are many more. I think that there is the whole question of the art -- Mr. Bearden may have raised this -- the art that is going into the embassies, even the African embassies. The State Department has been sending art. I don't know whether it is on loan or not to their various embassies around the world, even the embassies in the African countries don't have the work of Negroes.

HENRI GHENT: You mean to tell me the American government sends art to American embassies in African countries that do not include the work of Negro artists?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That is right.

HENRI GHENT: Well, how does one explain that?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You explain it.

HENRI GHENT: This is absolutely ridiculous.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: It is one of the things that has happened.

HENRI GHENT: How is it explained on the other end?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: It is explained very easily. This work is selected on a very high level and I guess the answer is that the Negro painters are not on that level. Now I think it was last year or the year before there was a print show that was being sent to African Embassies and there were no American Negroes represented. And even though we raised the question of -- I think the question

of Bill Major's name was raised and I forget what they said. Oh, they said these were painters as printmakers, something such stuff like that. So since he was exclusively a printmaker and not a painter, I guess that let him out. And this is an interesting story because I think Romey had written a letter -- we had gotten through to John Davis of AMSAK and I think Romey or John had written a letter and the letter came back with some remarks about an evaluation of American Negro artists and no question of caliber as the reason for why they were not included.

HENRI GHENT: Well, that hardly seems feasible enough in view of the fact that both Jake and Romey and yourself all are artists whose works sell, you know.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That is hard to explain except for the question that you asked me much earlier, did I think there was prejudice in the arts.

HENRI GHENT: Well, that answers that, doesn't it.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That answers that, yes.

HENRI GHENT: Ernie, do you make a living as a painter or do you find it necessary to supplement your income to support your family by taking a job?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I have to supplement my income. I guess the first thing is that I guess like many other painters my wife works, so that helps.

HENRI GHENT: What does she do? May I ask?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: She is a microbiologist.

HENRI GHENT: How long have you been married, incidentally?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Sixteen years.

HENRI GHENT: Sixteen years and you only have one child, is that right?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That is right.

HENRI GHENT: It's a boy?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: How old is he?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: He is thirteen.

HENRI GHENT: What is his name?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Anthony.

HENRI GHENT: Anthony. And your wife works and obviously you work too.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I have a private teaching class, a group that I've been working with now for about the last seven or eight years. So I do that and then I teach in a cultural center in the community here, Walton School [phon. sp.]. I teach a children's class.

HENRI GHENT: Is that here in Bedford-Stuyvesant?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: And that keeps you afloat?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, and as I said I do some book illustrations of children's books. And as you put it all together I have just been made a consultant on the board of education staff.

HENRI GHENT: Oh, really? An art consultant?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Of a fashion, I guess. I don't know exactly what I am yet.

HENRI GHENT: What does that entail? What are the responsibilities?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: This has just happened this week so I really don't have all the full details, but one of the things that it is to do is to supplement the art program that is federally assisted in the school system. So I will be going around -- I will only do it maybe one day a week -- go around to the schools, see what is being done. If I feel that the best way to explain what I mean is to go into the classroom and bring my physical presence there and maybe one or two paintings and talk to the kids about it, let them ask me questions, or maybe, if I feel it is best, for me just to sit down and talk with the teachers about it. It is something that will be worked out in the individual schools depending upon the problem.

HENRI GHENT: Have you begun this job yet?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I visited one school.

HENRI GHENT: How did it turn out?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I think it may be quite terrific, at least in this school I visited, because there is a rather young dynamic assistant principal and she seems to feel that what these kids need is something else besides the three R's, which she is giving them. She feels that they need to have some extra meaning to their life, so she is quite happy and interested in having me work with her.

HENRI GHENT: She is cooperating fully then?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Very much so, very much so. She thinks it is about the best thing that has happened to the school.

HENRI GHENT: Now what sort of approach do you intend to take ultimately in this program?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I am not sure yet because, as I said, I am not sure what my limitations will be.

HENRI GHENT: I see.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: But I would say that my big thing would be to try in some way to make the teachers, even the Negro teachers who are handling these children, recognize how important it is to allow some room for self-expression that is not limited to the . . .

HENRI GHENT: Traditional sort of thing.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: Do they seem, other than the principal whom you have already said is working very cooperatively with you in your ideas and plans, do you think that the teachers themselves will be cooperative?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, that is hard to say. All I can say is that I hope so because some of my approaches may be very different from theirs, because I feel that it is so important to leave as much room for this inquiring mind that these children have and I think that that comes before the disciplines that they are working on right now. And you have to have a sort of free atmosphere to get free questioning, you see. You can't have kids only to be able to talk if you give them permission and then say all right now express yourself and think that they are going to jump up and say well, I think that this is a green apple or a blue sky or a purple moon or a green sun, you know. Because you have already channeled their mind to feel that this sort of thing is ridiculous or you don't react spontaneously. So as I said, I don't know yet but I am going to start Monday working with it, taking a group of children into the library -- I don't want to go in the auditorium and stand in front of them or do anything like that. I want to get them out in a small room where I am almost on their level and just talk to them.

HENRI GHENT: Yes. And hopefully you will reach them, so to speak.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I hope so. I mean, that is the whole purpose of doing this. To get back to this thing about doing what you have always wanted to do and what you thought you ought to be doing, this came as a surprise to me because I didn't think anybody was noticing me and what I was doing. They evidently got wind of it because I used to go around to the schools doing this for free for years. I felt that as a children's book illustrator I should, and that is how the schools knew of me because they would hear from the publishers. Most of the white illustrators didn't come into the Negro schools. Very few of them did or the Negro school principals and guidance counselors didn't really know about -- you know, didn't get the response.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, surely.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And, naturally, living in the community and knowing the things the kids don't have, you feel a little responsible so the next thing you know -- and if you say yes two or three times you find out that they don't bother to ask anybody else. They know if they plead long enough they will get me and that is what used to happen. But I guess eventually the word got around and they would like it done in a more organized way.

HENRI GHENT: Ernie, let's digress a minute and talk about the Bedford-Stuyvesant community. As you know the Brooklyn Museum will inaugurate a community art gallery that is being created for the express purpose of encouraging and stimulating creativity in the arts, as well as trying to build a bridge between the institution and this rapidly changing community. As you well know, when this institution was established 145 years ago it was not the same community that it serves now and, as is commonly known, museums were always looked upon as palaces for the privileged. Of course, this is no longer true, fortunately, and what do you think about the advent of a group of Bedford-Stuyvesant artists who are going to initiate the new community gallery at the Brooklyn Museum?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I think it is a terrific idea for the museums to be one of the cultural arms in the community. I think this is what most museums have not been. As you said, they had belonged to the cultured few. I think that the museums were places where parents brought children when they didn't know what else to do with them. They could always see some odd things but it was never something that was part of the life of the community. I think this attempt is a very, very worthwhile one.

HENRI GHENT: You certainly come from Bedford-Stuyvesant, and I can't say in all truthfulness that I was surprised that there are a great many talented people in that area, but I will say that I was not prepared for the degree of professionalism that is almost consistent in what I have seen among the group that will exhibit here in the coming months.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, you know I just remembered back that this museum played somewhat of a role in my becoming an artist.

HENRI GHENT: Oh, really?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I used to come here in my early teens and at the time with my buddy who is still a very close friend of mine, Larry Jackson, and we were interested in drawing. And we used to come to the museum and maybe because there were so few Negroes running in and out of here and we never created a nuisance but we were extremely well treated. And I remember even at that time there were no Negro guards here, mostly all white guards, and I remember one of the guards coming over to us and explaining -- because we used to come with our cheap little 25 cent pad, try to hold the pad and try to draw in the sculptural section downstairs -- he told us how we could get -- he went out and brought chairs for us, and that was a shock. And then he told us that we should go upstairs, I forget where, up on the fifth floor or someplace like that, and he said that they would loan us an easel to work with. We never had had an easel before and we didn't even know how to set the damn thing up! So we used to come here regularly, we would get our easel and folding chairs and then they gave us a pass. In those days the museum used to be closed a couple of days except, I guess, to members and you either paid 25 cents or something to come in. We got these passes and the guard said that is a better day to come because then there is practically nobody around and you will be left alone.

HENRI GHENT: Good.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And we always sort of had a warm feeling for the museum, but again this was an isolated situation so I always remember it for that.

HENRI GHENT: Ernie, what are your sentiments about politics, domestic or international?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, I guess the biggest thing today that confronts all mankind is survival. Unless this mess we are in is cleaned up by, I think, art, nothing will have any meaning. The world will be a meaningless place. It will just be a desert. Basically I would like to believe that most artists have been humanitarians and that means that they have been against things like wars, all wars, and especially this most cruel of all wars, and this is really cruel. I would like to hope that it is over and done with and I feel that as an American we have a responsibility because, you might say, that we are the biggest and the baddest nation there is and it seems ridiculous that if we want to stop a situation we can't stop a situation that involves a small country. You know, it is like anything else, you want to stop something, the quickest way to stop is to stop. I think that's it, and the violence there is the same kind of thing that I think creates the kind of atmosphere that we have in this country -- the small price that is put on human life and human value.

HENRI GHENT: By that I take it you mean the incredible number of assassinations we have had in the past few years.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Definitely, and I guess the shocking thing to me about the King assassination is that I believe, and I think most black people in America believe, that every Negro activist whether he is a militant or the Rap Brown type or the non-violent type of a Dr. King, is that when he steps

out in the street he knows that he is a marked man.

HENRI GHENT: You can't win either way.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: He knows he is a marked man and we know he is a marked man. I think that the terrible thing is that we have allowed ourselves to separate them. And allowed -- and I have to say this is the man -- allowed him to think one is a better way than the other. I think each man knows that this is the way he has to do it but he also knows that in doing it he is putting his life out there. You just sort of wait for the time, that's really all it is, waiting for the time you know it has to happen. I think it is terrible to live in a society and know that a man is doing no more than speaking his piece and know that he is going to be killed for it one day.

HENRI GHENT: What are your feeling about the coming presidential election?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I must say it is kind of sad. I must say it is kind of sad.

HENRI GHENT: Did you have much more hope for it before the assassination of Senator Robert Kennedy than you do now? Do you think the situation has been made worse? I mean the choice?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I think the terrible thing about politics is that you're always compromising. It is very rare that you find a man that has all of the things so that you like Kennedy for certain things and you like McCarthy for others and the rest they don't even -- from my point of view -- the rest don't even count. I mean it is so sad.

HENRI GHENT: Meaning Richard Nixon and Nelson Rockefeller and . . .

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Humphrey.

HENRI GHENT: And Wallace.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I think the tragedy is that -- well I shouldn't say -- it is tragic, but the seriousness with which he is being considered as a voice, you know.

HENRI GHENT: We are talking about George Wallace?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. You know, there is a man who is certainly -- almost every utterance and every law he has supported has been unconstitutional and he has the voice and the eyes of the nation. And I think of all the innumerable men of good will who when they take a position that is unconstitutional, before you know it they are in prison, jailed and whatnot. It doesn't matter who you are or even how distinguished you are if you just realize that this happened to a man like Dr. Spock, you know.

HENRI GHENT: Yes. What you say is true, because if we can put any stock at all in national polls, just the other day I read where there is a very good possibility that George Wallace will get a minimum of ten million votes. Can you imagine that?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: You can't imagine it if you stop for a moment and think about some of the things that've been said. I think the black activists, to a man, have said that this is a racist society. Now if you don't believe it, this is ten million who are willing to go on record.

HENRI GHENT: Exactly.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Now you are not counting all of those who support and will not go on record, but the fact that so many would go on record is an indication of how they feel. And also what they want. They want a different kind of America so for everybody who wants a decent America there are just as many who don't want it to be changed. Matter of fact, want it to go back and they are not just wanting it, I think, they're doing things about it. This is a very disturbing and yet exciting atmosphere because I think at the time that you have all this reaction taking place, we also have to recognize that almost all of the progressive measures that are taking place in this country are growing out of the rights of black people for their full citizenship. They have extended the progressive interpretation of the existing laws for which they are not the only beneficiary, but the whole nation. Of course I think it is very terrific to want to go to the moon and for man to extend his horizon as far as he can see it, but if he is doing this at the expense of man's spirit then it is meaningless.

HENRI GHENT: It is for nought.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And this is about the way it is. You can't talk about all these tremendous scientific achievements and then turn around and say with all this you can't feed and clothe . . .

HENRI GHENT: Or live together for that matter.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And house or live together with a major portion of the world?

HENRI GHENT: Too bad. Ernie, you seem to have your days pretty much mapped out and full, but I was wondering if you by any chance have any hobbies?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: What are they, may I ask.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: It is funny because I am staring at my favorite one. I am a real bug on tape recorders. I have had about -- I am now on about my fifth or sixth that I constantly am taping mainly music.

HENRI GHENT: Really?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I am really a hi-fi bug and I guess I basically like to be comfortable and it is a terrible thing to say that as much as I love music and love going to concerts I really must admit I enjoy it best . . .

HENRI GHENT: In the privacy of your own home.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: At my own home, comfortably relaxed. I think that it has a lot more meaning. I think there is something wrong about going and sitting and it isn't even like a theater where the halls are darkened and you are left to your own thoughts. You know, these new concert halls, they put so much money into them that they want you to see them while you are listening. You know, and it sort of takes something away. Music for me, like all the arts, is a very private and personal sort of experience and sometimes you can't isolate it when everything is too visible around you. I think it was last Saturday I saw the Royal Philharmonic and the music with a tremendous orchestra, with well . . .

HENRI GHENT: Disciplined.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Disciplined, yes, and yet I felt as though I was fighting to keep to myself.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, I understand. Do you have a preference for jazz or classical music?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I would say that I am sort of in the middle. I really like good music, I don't like mediocre jazz and I don't like mediocre classical music and I don't like pseudo jazz or classical music, you know what I mean?

HENRI GHENT: Yes, I do. Who are some of your favorite jazz musicians?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Well, oh, they are endless. Of course, first and foremost I put Billie Holiday because, I don't know, I guess it has to do with my finding her at the same time that I was finding myself as a person, you know.

HENRI GHENT: I think that you could safely say that Billie, she wasn't the first but certainly the second soul singer after Bessie Smith.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. Well, you see the thing about my reaction to Bessie Smith and to Billie, I think it was an era. I think Billie's singing rang truer to me because it represented my era better than Bessie's.

HENRI GHENT: I know exactly what you mean.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: But I think Billie to me has always been the really great artist and even when her voice was gone the conviction with which she sang just sort of tore your insides out. So I have about five hours of Billie on tape and some days I guess I am, you know, one of those . . .

HENRI GHENT: You get in your bag.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes and I can stay there and get myself my little drink and don't care what happens to the world and I sit there and I sort of get myself together.

HENRI GHENT: Do you find that it depresses you or does it give you a boost?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: It gives me a boost, it doesn't depress me, not at all. As depressing as her life was there was the one thing about her life that -- you know, if you say that you have a certain thing to do, she did what she had to do. I think that there is no comparison. I think she stands out.

HENRI GHENT: First and foremost.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That's right. I will give you all these people coming along now being great, but there is something about Billie and me -- that is all I can say.

HENRI GHENT: Yes. You and Billie got a thing going.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: That's it. She has always done that for me. I am a great Ellingtonian and I think Dizzy is one of my favorites. For all the ravings that Miles got I always feel that Dizzy is still the greatest for me.

HENRI GHENT: What about "Cannonball" Adderley?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: "Cannonball" -- for a while there he got into this folksy bag and some of those things I like quite a bit and then it sort of ran out, you know. It just sort of got commercial after

a while. It didn't keep up. And the same tragic thing, to me at least, I felt about Coltrane, the way he was doing and then after a while these follows got so far out that they began to lose me and I think that's what happened.

HENRI GHENT: This improvisation, you know. I believe they call it progressive jazz.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: But I think it needs something. There is something there that just sort of got away from me.

HENRI GHENT: They have gone a little too far out, eh?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. I guess I have always loved the cello and one of my favorite classical works is Bach's unaccompanied cello work.

HENRI GHENT: Did you ever hear Rostropovich?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I have got it.

HENRI GHENT: Yes? Oh, it is beautiful.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I tell you, I have got his, I have got Stalker(?) but that is my idea of -- I go from jazz to Bach, especially his cello works.

HENRI GHENT: Have you ever heard the young English cellist Jacqueline DuPres?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, she is quite marvelous.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And then there's the guitar, not folk guitar but the . . .

HENRI GHENT: Segovia?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Classic.

HENRI GHENT: Oh, yes. Well, that is quite a hobby you've got.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And the terrible thing I guess is that it doesn't cost anything really. You know, the initial investment, the cost of the tape, is really so small and for what I get out of it.

HENRI GHENT: Do you want to talk about if you are involved in any experiments with color or new materials in your work?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: One of the things about my going to the West Indies, and I think the same thing happened when I was in Senegal, I had grown up as a city boy, and I see the drabness of city color, and I think it was really quite an exciting experience to hit the Caribbean and see the white sands and these blue-black people and this rich color that they wore. Because I don't see it as cute and glorious and exciting like the travelers do. I always remember on my trip to Haiti watching out the window these women going down the hill carrying all of their wares on their head and I remembered all the artists who used to talk about these great beautiful stately women, and I got the exact opposite reaction. My reaction was that of a beast of burden. I felt that they all had sway backs just like the old donkeys who were over-worn, so I don't see it in that way. But it did give a new dimension to color for me in terms of playing it against this thing which is my basic theme.

HENRI GHENT: I understand.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: And I think that if there has been a real change in my work it has been the way I am using color. I think it had been stimulated tremendously by this visual impact of these tremendous contrasts and naturally what they were. You know, the light is so strong there and in Africa that it just sort of bleaches everything and makes the light things lighter and the dark things darker, and in between there are all these things to excite your eyes and these variations of almost simple color. But just the variety of it in its various lights and shades, just visual things, and then of course the emotional effect it has on you also.

HENRI GHENT: Tell me, Ernie, are you presently with a gallery?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Officially, no. Unofficially, I guess, the ACA still think that they represent me. It is sort of a floating state of something that I haven't resolved and I will have it resolved in the next few months.

HENRI GHENT: Yes, that is a gallery in downtown New York, isn't it?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, 57th.

HENRI GHENT: You were one of the artists that were represented in that big Negro art show at the City College of New York, weren't you?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I was.

HENRI GHENT: You were also represented at the show that . . .

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: The Forum Gallery held?

HENRI GHENT: The Forum Gallery, yes, and the Harlem Cultural Council Show, were you in that?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, I was.

HENRI GHENT: Have you done anything exciting in the interim?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Gee, I guess not. One of the things that I did do that I got a little bit of a bang out of is that I was asked by the family of Lewis Latimer -- they were naming a school after him in this neighborhood -- and they asked me if I would do a portrait of the old man which the family wanted to donate to the school. Well, all of my paintings have been of people, but they have never been direct portraits of that sort, so this was a little bit of a challenge.

HENRI GHENT: It was a commission?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes. I don't know, I think it turned out -- they were very pleased with it and one of the advantages of doing that type of portrait is that you are not confronted with the personality himself. You know, they gave me all the material, I read his -- he was quite a poet -- I read his writing, I read some of his letters and all they could tell me about him as well as supplying me with all the various pictures of him and various things, and tried to image the kind of life it was for a Negro, electrical engineer, fifty or sixty years ago. You know, he worked with Edison and Bell and was even in the front office and by all rights his family should have enough stock in Edison and AT&T to be well off. But that's again the way that we are used, because he was really one of the Edison pioneers. So that was a sort of an interesting thing. And I have gone back to doing

lithographs again, which I hadn't done in fifteen or twenty years.

HENRI GHENT: Oh? Well, that is something.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: So that was sort of exciting in the last year or so, just getting the feel again. I have been doing that.

HENRI GHENT: Well, how do you feel about it?

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: I am sort of excited about it and I guess to add to the excitement was almost the immediate reaction, which was a very favorable one. I would say that one of the exciting things is the relationship I have with Norman and Romey, like we sort of found each other again. In the past few years we have really become very, very close. It is the sort of thing which, if you don't hear from one another in two or three days, you just call to find out if you are all right. This is the sort of thing that I don't think -- we've all remarked. It has come about so suddenly we realize that, you know, in all of our lives this has not been the sort of thing that artists have done. Maybe we are just getting scared because we are all getting old now. But anyhow, it is really quite wonderful. We get together at each other's studio and we shoot the breeze and I think the biggest thing is a sort of a caring.

HENRI GHENT: And a sort of closeness and togetherness, yes.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: Yes, and in a way, I think we are all sort of helping each other even though we work differently. And this is the kind of exciting thing about it, that we can be so close, because we work in completely different ways, as it should be. But in many instances I find quite a closeness in thinking -- even though our works are so far apart -- between Romey and myself, the way we feel about these particular things that are going on, even though our works are so far apart. There is this sort of closeness and we sort of established a lot of things, like we try to make up our minds no matter who the artist is, if there is a Negro artist showing we are going to try and go whether we know him or don't know him. Apart from just wanting to go see the thing I think we want to feel it is our responsibility to be there. I think that these are some very healthy things and to me very rewarding and it is really enriching. I really look forward to our Saturdays and I told you that is why we didn't get together last Saturday. Now, as a matter of fact, we have difficulty trying to keep it so that we can say what we want to say to each other. There are a lot of the fellows come around and they come around just to be around and sometimes we really want to talk about something besides just having a social evening. But I think, as I said, it is really very good.

HENRI GHENT: In other words you are just dedicated to art, you want to paint, you are going to paint regardless, and that is all there is to it.

ERNEST CRICHLLOW: If I have been able to do it all this time, you know, I think there is no reason why I shouldn't be able to continue and feel surer of myself. I think one of my problems really was because I have had to do commercial work and also because my work was never in that sort of mainstream of any one particular thing. I never knew whether I was really getting through. It is only in the last few years that I have begun to realize that it is really getting through. And then all of a sudden that gives you the extra kind of spurt that makes you know that well, hell, it's really worth it. I think I would have gone on before but I was sort of feeling my way, but I think there is a sort of -- now I feel, a sort of confidence.

HENRI GHENT: You have reached a certain plateau.

ERNEST CRICHLOW: That I have that I never had before about my work. Because I think I know now that this is valid and this is me and this is all that really counts. As I say, the styles will go by and I will hope that I'll have a place and that is all you can do.

HENRI GHENT: Thank you very much, Ernie.

END OF INTERVIEW

Last updated... September 18, 2002