



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Cliff Joseph, 1972

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with Cliff Joseph in 1972. The interview was conducted by Doloris Holmes for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

## Interview

DOLORIS HOLMES: I am interviewing for the Archives of American Art and documenting the protest art movement of the 1970s. Today I am interviewing Cliff Joseph, who is the co-chairman of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. Cliff, will you tell me something about the Coalition - when you started, something about your membership, the history, and then what you're doing at the present time?

CLIFF JOSEPH Well, the Coalition began with the black artists' protests of the Metropolitan Museum's "Harlem on My Mind" show, which occurred some time between 1968 and 1969. At that time, Allon Schoener of the New York State Council was in charge of setting up the "Harlem on My Mind" exhibit. We had several protests about the way the show was set up. One of the things we were in protest against was the fact that Mr. Schoener chose not to use the talents and expertise of any of the members of the black community - artists, art experts, leaders - to help in setting up the show. One other omission was the fact that there were no black painters or black sculptors included in the exhibit. This was especially hard to understand since the show was supposedly set up for the purpose of showing to the public the cultural contributions that had been made by members of the black community.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Cliff, you mentioned that black critics and experts were not used in the "Harlem on My Mind" show. You also mentioned that the kind of art represented was not what the black community would have wanted. Could you describe how you feel the "Harlem on My mind" show would have been if the black artist were actually used?

CLIFF JOSEPH Well, I think it would have been a much richer show. Certainly if people like Edmund Gaither of the Elma Louis School of Fine Arts, who has quite a bit of popularity with the black community, and Ed Spriggs had been seriously consulted, I think this would have been quite an asset to the show. These are people who are known to the black community and highly respected by the community. I just think that regardless of the kinds of pieces that might have been selected, it just seems ridiculous for someone to say, "We are going to set up an exhibit which will show the cultural contributions made by a body of people," and then for that exhibit not to include any paintings or any sculpture is just fantastic. Certainly I don't think I need to tell you. You've probably done some looking around since the black art movement. And there are many, many fine works of art to be seen done by black painters and sculptors. At this point I won't name any names.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Okay. So "Harlem on My Mind" took place. What did the Black Emergency Coalition do at that point?

CLIFF JOSEPH Well, we certainly didn't hesitate to verbalize our grievances. We let it be known to Tom Hoving, the director of the Metropolitan Museum, and to all concerned with the show, that we were dissatisfied with this factor: that there were no paintings, no sculptural works by black artists in the show. We certainly did not agree with the form in which the show was presented; it was a little more than a photographic exposition. We took to the streets with placards and slogans and leaflets to air our grievances publicly, and to ask people to support our protest by not going into the exhibit.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Cliff, what you're talking about raises the whole question as to whether there is such a thing as black art. Can you tell me what you feel about that whole subject?

CLIFF JOSEPH Well, I think that I would not say that there is black art per se. I believe in art. There is, however, a black experience in art; I think every culture has its own experience which the artist of that culture brings to his work. Certainly the black man in America has had a very unique experience among minority groups which he finds is important - certainly I find it important in art - to talk about it, to tell about it, to depict in his work. I can do this without giving very much thought to it.

DOLORIS HOLMES: What about your own work?

CLIFF JOSEPH My own work - it's such an interesting question, because I've done a lot of work. I've done quite a bit of work which I would not necessarily call my own. Now let me explain that. I began as a commercial artist, and as a commercial artist the kind of work I produced was not really mine, but the work that I was being paid to do by someone who had described methods and results which I had to satisfy. I think that there was a time when this kind of work even crept into the personal things I did when I sat at the easel at home. There was somehow a

desire to sort of be what's called a "mainstream" painter and to do the kind of artwork I felt would easily be sold to the art-buying public. So there was a certain image that art dealers and other people seemed to ask for, and somehow there was a feeling that I had to fit into this image. Then, certainly, the growth of the civil rights movement had its effect on me, and my whole political outlook was affected. I feel that it was at that point that I began to really grow politically. And I could readily see the conflict between what I had to do, what I felt I needed to do, and what I was doing.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Are you implying that your involvement with the civil rights movement helped you, liberated you so that you were more able to be free as an artist? Is that the kind of thing you're trying to say? I still have no sense as to what your art is like. Do you have any black artists from the past that you identify with? Do you have any past cultures that you bring into your work?

CLIFF JOSEPH Well, I can't very well say that I identify with or have been influenced in my style or my technique by any artist. At least none that I know of. People have said that they see various qualities in my work that remind them of this or that person. I certainly drew a great deal of inspiration from a painter like Goya. I dug Ben Shahn. I like Benny Andrews' work, I'm inspired by him. He's a contemporary of mine and my co-buddy in the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. But my feeling is that my thing is my own, and it's social protest. I think my naming the artists I've named, that this should be very clear. My identification is with social protest artists, so that my work does reflect our times, perhaps all times, and power structures. I think that's been throughout our history. Power structures have vamped on people, and I am a product of a great deal of vamping. So this is what I talk about in my paintings. My work is anti-war - not just the Vietnam War. I feel my statements on war speak out against all wars destructive to human life, and certainly against social injustices. So that my work does have a lot to say about what's happening in America today and what's happening in the world.

DOLORIS HOLMES: You were saying before that you now have representation in other states throughout America and that the membership in the city is something like 150? Is that it?

CLIFF JOSEPH Our total membership is approximately 150 and that includes people from out of state. And it's growing. From day to day we get inquiries about, and requests to join the organization from people who have read about our activities vis-a-vis the Metropolitan and the Whitney. They've become more and more interested in being part of it.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Tell me about the Whitney. We haven't gotten to that yet.

CLIFF JOSEPH The Whitney Museum story goes back to 1969 when we requested a discussion with the directors. We were asked to come and talk with them. We sat down and talked with Mr. John Baur and Mr. Robert Doty and another gentleman whose name escapes me at the moment. I'll think of it later. We had a talk that stretched out to about six months, during which time we actually went into negotiations because we had suggested the National Black show. We felt that, since black shows were being done, it was certainly about time for the Whitney to do one. There were many young black artists who had not been heard of, and who deserved to have their work shown in such a museum. We also urged the Whitney to include black artists in the Whitney Annual Show. We were aware that they had made some purchases among black artists, they had works of Romare Bearden to mention one, and we asked them to increase this acquisition of black art. Now, let's get back to the proposed Black Art Exhibit, which, when we first mentioned it, met with quite a degree of resistance on their part. The whole idea behind this was not just to have a National Black show, but to involve black curators in the museum selection of art work. We knew for a fact, and it was certainly admitted to by the museum directorship, that there were not black curators on the staff. When we got to the question of having a black curator on to work on the proposed black show, we were told that this could not be done. Certainly they weren't going to go out and hire a black curator just for that show, and they certainly had no thought of hiring one permanently to the staff.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Did they give you a reason for not wanting to hire a black curator?

CLIFF JOSEPH The only reason they gave was that there were not openings available, and they certainly could not fire one of their curators to make room for hiring a black curator. And in fact we'd just have to wait until somebody dropped dead or something like that. This was about how that went. And so we suggested the idea of having a guest curator come in just to relate to the National Black Art Exhibit, which by this time was being accepted. They had decided that it might be a good idea to have such a show, to get in the act because other museums had done it. The Philadelphia Civic Center Museum had done it, and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts. I think at the time the Brooklyn Museum had also staged a small show of black artists. It was not national in scope but there was something going on there. The main thing they were sold on was the idea of getting into the competition. We left the discussions at the Whitney with an agreement in which they said something like, "We will have the black art show during the prime time (which is one of the demands we made) of 1970-1971. And also we will consult with black art experts wherever feasible." As it turns out the Whitney reneged on both these points. They did not arrange the exhibit for the prime time season.

DOLORIS HOLMES: What do you mean by "prime time?" A specific month? Is that what you're talking about?

CLIFF JOSEPH Well, this is the time of the art season when there seems to be a peak in terms of art viewing and art buying among the art viewing public. Of course, as the Whitney points out, and we will certainly agree, there are other times in the calendar when important art shows are held. But this is considered the prime time because of the mood, whatever brings more people in. Everything has its season - baseball has its highest point of the year, and so on. Anyway, they reneged on this and decided to have the show during the 1971 spring season. The idea of consulting art experts wherever feasible was a very weak kind of thing in the beginning. We didn't like it. But the only reason we decided to end negotiations was because we realized it was impossible to get an agreement on the point that we wanted at least a guest curator to work on this show. As it turned out Robert Doty was the only selector of the show and he went about his selecting in a very questionable way. Now, we have it on record from people whose statements and testimonies we respect very highly - these are black art experts and artists - who were visited by Mr. Doty that his visits did not go beyond questioning them for the names and addresses of black artists in their area. They were not consulted in terms of questions such as, "Would you go with me and help me in discussing the works of these artists? Perhaps you have some advice you would like to give in making the selections." None of this was done. In visiting the studios of several black artists, much of the work they would have chosen to show Mr. Doty was ignored in favor of perhaps some piece he had already heard about or seen exhibited or whatever.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Let me interrupt at this point. Do you have any sense as to how many black artists there actually are either in New York City or are in the United States?

CLIFF JOSEPH That's really an impossible question to answer. Prior to this whole black art movement and my involvement in it as a member of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, I was not aware of too many of my black brothers and sisters. Since the black art movements we have gotten to know each other a little better, and I've met several black artists; men and women. But I cannot say to you that I know how many there are because I really don't. It seems that, you know, almost every day I get to know someone new, and someone new is brought to my attention. We have people who have been painting for a long time, for years, who I've never heard about. There are young painters just springing up. There are students. It's just too much. I would guess that there are many, many, many, running into thousands of black artists.

DOLORIS HOLMES: How many black artists were in this show at the Whitney? I'm trying to make a point. As a member of the Women's Art Movement I know that even with the minimal amount of attention given to any woman artist that there must be 90% of the women artists who have gotten no recognition whatsoever. And I think that the establishment simply does not realize how many artists there are, whether they're black or whether they're women, and one of the good things that's happening out of the protest movement is that the artists themselves begin to find out how many there are and begin to find out how much strength they have. How many artists were there in that Whitney show?

CLIFF JOSEPH My understanding is that out of a selection of approximately 70 artists, there were approximately 15 withdrawals from the show. So that would leave you with a balance of about 55 who were actually represented in the show. I'm sure that that's an inaccurate number because there would have been some last minute withdrawals which were not brought to the attention of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition. Anyway, you had said something about the percentage of black women involved. Here again, I have not made an estimate as to what percentage of the black art population are women. I will, however, say that I think, aside from the racial factor, that women have gotten very badly shaken in this field as well as other creative fields or industrial fields or whatever. And certainly I believe that black women have come up with the shortest end of the stick.

DOLORIS HOLMES: Cliff, what do you see as the future of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition?

CLIFF JOSEPH I think that the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition should and will continue to seek out the injustices that have been done and are being done to artists - not just black artists, the cause of the Black Emergency Cultural Coalition, but we're interested in injustices done to artists and to art. Our feeling is that art has a very vital part to play in the lives of people, not just aesthetically, but in terms of their real needs. Many people don't understand the way in which art can influence thinking and feeling and lifestyle and so on. Madison Avenue has picked up on this and has been using its brand of art for years to influence people and to direct them.

DOLORIS HOLMES: What do you mean by "real needs?"

CLIFF JOSEPH Well, just that. I'm talking about emotional needs and needs in terms of living more creative lives, more productive lives, and so on. I think that much of these needs are denied people in our culture. I see art as an inspiring revolutionary message for people. I think that it's about time that we took some leadership in helping to bring about the kind of culture that is more interested in life than the kind of culture that we presently

live in.

END OF INTERVIEW

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