



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Wendy Red Star,
2020 July 28

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 recorded interview with Wendy Red Star on July 28, 2020. The interview took place at Red Star's home in Portland, Oregon, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

JOSH T. FRANCO: All right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Wendy Red Star at her home in Portland, Oregon, on July 28, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. So Wendy, thanks for taking some time to talk to us. Talk to me for the Archives. And yeah, this project is just, um, a way to check in and create a record for the impact of the things happening this year on American artists. So really, how have you been since March? Was the first question.

WENDY RED STAR: Well, thank you for having me. And this is a highlight, especially during this time, just to have access to talk, um, to people, especially when you're in such isolation. Um, so since March, uh, you know, I've been self-employed as an artist, uh, since 2016. So one of the tools that I have, that I think has been really great for the situation that we're in right now with the pandemic, is, like, dealing with the unknown.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: Because the way that I've sort of positioned myself with, um, my career is I'm never quite knowing when an opportunity is going to come. And so I sort of, have learned to kind of deal with that really uncomfortable feeling. So it's interesting, I feel like, you know, with my family, my sister and stuff, they're kind of now feeling what I've felt since like 2016 with this unknown. So there's definitely that. But it um, surprisingly, it's been a really wonderful time for me to reflect and think about how I was working before the pandemic. And I almost liken it to a little bit of an abusive relationship with my art career, where I was just going all the time, relentlessly. Traveling, doing one project from the next, and really working out of this sort of fear that I didn't quite recognize until, like, all of those things kind of shifted, got postponed, canceled, disappeared.

And so I'm really just kind of spending my time, like, analyzing, like, how, you know, how things are going to change for me and how I want to approach, you know, my career and my practice going forward, especially in this time where I'm not doing—my career path isn't working the same that it originally was before.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That raises two questions for me. One is about travel, because you're not the first artist to, kind of be relieved that a lot of travel's stopped, most travel's stopped. But the thing that's replaced it is like normally we would travel to do an oral history in person and now we're doing them on Zoom.

So how have you—have you been enjoying this, like, Zoom ecology we have now? Or is it tricky? How do you do studio visits this way if you've done them.

WENDY RED STAR: I feel it's like it's turned me into a performance artist.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

WENDY RED STAR: So it feels very performative to me in a way, where I'm like making sure my environment looks pleasant [laughs] in the background. And um, you know, I sustain myself a lot through doing lectures, going to different universities or institutions to do lectures.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: And I realized with Zoom, doing lectures is completely different. And I'll have to shift my old, like, PowerPoint strategy where I really fed off the cues from live crowd. And

that's pretty much absent with, um, doing a Zoom lecture. So, yeah, so that a lot of things have sort of switched up. But I also think this is kind of wonderful. I mean, it's almost in a way, you know, like, I can reach more places virtually. And it will be less wear and tear on me mentally and physically. Um, I just have to harness it a little bit better, make it more engaging.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I'd love to, like, tips you've learned to do that. And I also if you, just for the record, if you can name some of those events that have been either canceled or postponed, that you were looking forward to this year.

WENDY RED STAR: So I was really looking forward to a solo exhibition at the Joslyn Museum that was going to open in June. And that has been postponed to 2021. And—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's in Omaha, right?

WENDY RED STAR: Yeah. Omaha, Nebraska.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

WENDY RED STAR: That's still happening. I mean, it's like a deep, uh, research project on the Indian Congress, which happened in 1898 in Omaha, Nebraska. So I'm looking forward to that. And in a way, I'm actually kind of, think it's good that it got postponed because it gives me, allows me more time to really kind of go deeper into the research.

[00:05:19]

Um, I had scheduled to go to the Wellin Museum in Clinton, I believe it's Clinton, New York.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: I was in a group show there and I was scheduled to do a workshop and some lectures. And originally, the travel and everything was set and they canceled that, it was up in the air, and then they decided to do some Instagram live lectures, which I've never done Instagram live before. And so that was really wonderful. And they paid me the full fee—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh!

WENDY RED STAR: Which was very generous of them. Um, so, yeah, it's like things got canceled. But then I really feel like the institutions, at least the ones that I've been working with, have really kind of stepped up to brainstorm, like how to navigate, um, like moving forward virtually.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. What about your studio? Because some artists, you know, their studios are in buildings that they couldn't access for the last few months or, you know, just for different reasons. Has this changed access to your studio or where you make work?

WENDY RED STAR: Not at all. I've always worked from home—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: So I have access [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

WENDY RED STAR: To my materials. Um, so that hasn't changed. That hasn't changed at all. Oh, I'm sorry. Did you hear that?

JOSH T. FRANCO: No.

WENDY RED STAR: Okay, good.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

WENDY RED STAR: That was my email coming in, I turned it off.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh yeah.

[cross talk.]

WENDY RED STAR: Sorry about that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —a ding. I actually didn't hear. I think I turned mine off. Um, yeah, so, the other thing. Artists are very media savvy, media observant people and we've been asking, um, what they're observing, what's missing in kind of mainstream accounts of things that are happening. Either COVID or protests around the murder of George Floyd and racism. Um, yeah. So what are you seeing and what are you not seeing?

WENDY RED STAR: No, it's so interesting, I um—my father, he's struggling a lot. He's going to be 79 in a couple weeks, but he has a lot of auto immune issues. Um, and he's generally kind of, nearing towards the end of his life. So, um, I've been really spending my time hard core isolating so that I can, like, relieve my mom of her caretaking duties for a couple of weeks. So I just came back from the reservation.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: But it's been really fascinating to go back to Montana, where the Crow Indian Reservation is located, and to talk to my father and, you know, I say, "Well, how do you think us Crows are going to get through this? Do you think we'll, uh, really feel it economically?"

And I think we will. But he was like, "No, we've always been living, like, in this, like, in horrible economics, you know? So I think, like, we're well equipped for getting through that." Um, which is, like, devastating to hear. But, you know, painfully true. But also, like that's—we're so resilient as a people. But my great fear is, um, this is what I'm feeling, especially when you—and we're actually, COVID is really, um, affecting the Crow community. That's where the high numbers are in the counties where the reservation is. But also thinking about, like, the Navajo Nation.

My dad, his first language is Crow. And that's it for me. That he—that generation, his generation, there's maybe one generation above him, but hardly any. If they get it, that's it. That's a whole, like, knowledgebase gone. And then I just think about my daughter, like, oh, I'm her source for Crow culture. [laughs] And I'm not ready. I'm not ready.

And I—that's what I feel like is missing in the conversations around the pandemic and how it's affecting Indigenous people. Is that—the Navajo Nation, most of the elderly folks of my dad's generation, or the generation above him, they only speak Diné, you know? So that's it, if we wipe them out, that's it for us.

You know, for my generation and then we're the knowledge keepers. And so that's what I'm constantly thinking about when I'm taking care of him, and just really trying to soak up as much as I can. But it just seems, like, what a shame that would be to be cut off because of, you know, the way that the U.S. Government has not like been proactive of getting a handle on the pandemic.

[00:10:17]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you feel like your peers in your generation who were thinking about this also?

WENDY RED STAR: No, I'm in a way, sometimes it's disappointing. When I go to the reservation and I have my own cousins, like, blatantly just pop in the house and we're trying to tell them, you know, like—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: —really, like, this is it for us, you know, is that elderly generation. And, you know, my generation still really depends on my dad's generation for everything still. So, it's like I wish it would be taken more seriously back home, too. And I think that—I can't say what is happening on the Navajo reservation, but if it's anything like mine, I think there's some of that too. Where it's just, like, the information coming from the government hasn't been "take this seriously, wear a mask". Like, it hasn't trickled down.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Are they providing information in Diné?

WENDY RED STAR: I don't know. I don't know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That seems like an important thing to do.

WENDY RED STAR: Right. But I just—I do feel like just from my reservation, thinking about the other reservations, I would say that it's a similar situation for sure.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Um, are you finding yourself thinking about, imagining new artworks that have this kind of content directly involved? Or is it just creating more space for you to keep working? I mean, the isolation does have that kind of silver lining of time to be in your workspace.

WENDY RED STAR: Yeah, you know, for me it's not like directly, like, about like the pandemic itself. But I think it relates in that I am piecing together these historical timelines. You know, that is the history and the culture of the generation of my father, that when he goes that's gone. You know, especially with the language, I don't speak Crow. I know several words and things like that. But so much of the perspective is within the language and for that to be gone.

So really accessing that generation and their knowledge to piece together these historical timelines is what I'm focusing on. And I think that very much relates to the pandemic and the decimation that it will cause. So it's not outright like this is about [laughs.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

WENDY RED STAR: —the pandemic. But, um, I think it's kind of like what you're doing now. Where you're sort of archiving or sending information about the 1818 flu. I'm just trying to be there to archive and hold that history.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. You're also situated in Portland. There's a lot going on in Portland.

WENDY RED STAR: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So what are you serving as a resident there?

WENDY RED STAR: Oh, my gosh. It's, um—In a way I'm so proud. I'm like really proud that it's proactive because the city is always in the media about being the whitest city so—and it's great that the white people are doing the work. That's how I feel like they're continuing to protest, because they're—I think that's what they should be doing. So I think that's really wonderful.

And just even driving to go get groceries or whatever. People, not just downtown but in the neighborhoods, are having their own little protests, like, on the corners with Black Lives Matter, um, posters and things like that. So to me, it just feels like, very vibrant. And there's a statue of, I think George Washington, that I was always bothered by, that was sort of hanging out. And then one week I went by and it was toppled over, and I was like, "Whoa." And now I've driven by and there's like a bouquet of flowers there on the pedestal.

But it's just kind of fascinating because, before I was just like—sort of like I never really liked that statue, but I would drive by it thinking nothing would ever come of it. I never even thought to take it down, you know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

WENDY RED STAR: So when they took it down—now there's no statue there and a bouquet of flowers. It's like. It's like wild.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: I like it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: If you were asked as a known artist who lives in Portland, to create the replacement for a public sculpture like that, would you accept? And if you did. What would you think you would create?

WENDY RED STAR: You know, that's what I was sort of thinking. And I was thinking, man, I would like to make a miniature or something that would go on there.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

WENDY RED STAR: Not like this huge thing—

[00:15:03]

[cross talk.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: —you have to get really close to see.

WENDY RED STAR: Yeah, and I was like, oh, maybe it would be like dwelling on some sort. Or I was even, you know, I'm obsessed with horses. So it's like maybe, my take on like a horse sculpture or something. But I really like this idea of, like, not making a huge statue, but something kind of small [laughs] you have to kind of go up to. And I think part of that is because that bouquet is so tiny on there. The bouquet of flowers, that's kind of brilliant in itself to have that there. Um, so, yeah, I think I probably would do something, but it would be definitely something tiny.

JOSH T. FRANCO: I imagine the colors, you know, small bouquet is a small object, but the colors make it visually, kind of—

WENDY RED STAR: Yeah. It's—and they're actually kind of dying right now, too. So that's also interesting to see that happening.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, so, you know, the Archives, we can reasonably expect to be around for a long time, and our content, what we create and preserve to be around. So I have been asking artists, speaking to artists in 100 years to—what do you think they need to know about being an American artist in 2020?

WENDY RED STAR: I love that it's a shift. It's a big shift that's happening. And I feel it and I feel like there's no way around it, like people have to contend with it. Everyone actually has to contend with it in some way. And that's, to me, progression. And I'm excited about it. I'm excited about all the movement that's happening. Even if, um, the movement is, violent at times. I think it's the only way that the shift can happen. You know, we're just—we have nowhere to go and we're confronted with it.

So I think that's what I think this time is about. Great movement, and shift, and change, in a direction that I hope is favorable—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

WENDY RED STAR: —to people of color. Um, and moving that forward. So that's what I think. I think that's what will be looked upon this year.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, you're such an efficient responder, Wendy. It's great.

WENDY RED STAR: Oh am I?—[laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do we have—You know one thing that seems—it's changed for me, it seems to change for a lot of people is their relationship to social media. So, um, I've enjoyed following your Instagram. Has that been like—

WENDY RED STAR: I've enjoyed following yours—

JOSH T. FRANCO: I don't know if I was following it so closely before, so I'm like, is this new? Is all this—the way you're using it different? Do you—

WENDY RED STAR: I—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [inaudible] different?

WENDY RED STAR: I fear it. You know what I fear? I just, it's hard for me when—because, as you being an archivist, we're not doing things on the surface—like if an image flashes up—uh, social media has bred this breeding ground to just be very reactionary.

Like, there's a great example of this, uh, protester riding a horse in Chicago, this Black man on this beautiful paint horse. And there was stuff going around about how this, uh, Black protester stole this police horse and was riding it through town. Then like a few weeks later, it came out, no, that's his horse and he owns a few horses, and, uh, he didn't steal. And like he was getting all this, like, death threats and things like that.

And that's the thing that really frightens me about where we're at right now, it's that, um, people don't do or take the time to digest information. They just are reacting left and right. And especially now with the protests and the pandemic, it's even a shorter fuse.

And so I just feel like to me, um, it's—in a way, people are saying, don't be silent. But I think the situation that we're in right now, it's a breeding ground where it does cause silence in some ways because people are so reactionary.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: So I don't want to be silent. I'm not saying be silent. But I do think that it's important for me when I post—Um, I'm always looking for an empathetic sort of route and an end for people who are viewing my social media. Because I want to know the full story, and so I'm not ever really going to post things that are just going to catch an eye, and—you'll have something you'll have to slowly digest. And it's always been that way for me. I think. And more so now.

[00:20:14]

JOSH T. FRANCO: I think text in your work is one device you use to slow down looking, because you have to read—

WENDY RED STAR: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: You have to get in and read.

WENDY RED STAR: Yes, absolutely. Yeah. And so, I actually have a hard time following those people who are so like, "this is wrong and this is right." Black and white things. Because I know it's so much more complex and so much more nuanced. And I do kind of love those stories that come out two weeks later that [laughs] no, this guy—

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

WENDY RED STAR: —has three awesome horses and he was out there with his paint and protesting. And there was a lovely, um, article. I don't know, I can't remember which outlet it came out. Him like hugging and kissing his horse. And I was like, that's such a better story than, sort of like, he stole this horse and was, like, out there, like, no, it's so much deeper. He's part of that community.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: And, uh, he has his horses and he lives in Chicago. And there's so much more there.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

WENDY RED STAR: I'm always looking for that.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Um, that's great. Do you have any last—

WENDY RED STAR: That's after you complimented me for being really efficient in my responses. I feel like that when, like, all over the place. [laughs].

JOSH T. FRANCO: You did great. Do you have any last words for the record about this year, being Wendy, being an artist in 2020, being a mother?

WENDY RED STAR: Yeah, I just want to say, like, my income has shifted dramatically.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: To—like, really shifted. So that's something economically that I've noticed this year. And luckily last year I was able to save up a year's worth of emergency fund. And so for me, where I've been finding comfort—I am visiting a teacher for Chautauqua Art Institute. And I've been meeting with students and even doing a little workshop. And where I'm finding the most comfort is talking to artists about various action plans on how to sustain themselves during this time, or how to confront, like, or find comfort in sort of the unknown. Because I need that, too.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

WENDY RED STAR: And so, um, for me, like I said in the beginning of this interview, I'm really

finding this time to be a great time to reflect, especially on the old ways. Didn't you feel, like, when you were doing all that travel that it was a bit, like, out of control? Like, that we can move our bodies all over—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, well, there's you know—

WENDY RED STAR: —so easily.

JOSH T. FRANCO: There's an interesting branch in art history in the last few years too about observing the relationship between the, like, explosion of the jet age, and like the '60s, when people started being able to just jump on planes and the development of the art world.

And, um, it's really good to have that scholarship around now because it's a way to digest something that now has ceased. And like—

WENDY RED STAR: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: And it is great, it's, yeah. It's just—it's not—it wasn't sustainable, clearly. And we're feeling it, it's not spiritually sustainable. Certainly not environmentally sustainable.

WENDY RED STAR: Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

WENDY RED STAR: So I just really felt that it's like, well my body was in this state. And then the next day it was in this.

JOSH T. FRANCO: [Laughs.]

WENDY RED STAR: And then like two days later, it's over here. And it was just—

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

WENDY RED STAR: It seemed, like, to happen so quickly to over the last five or six years. And it got to the point for me where I was like, this doesn't feel right. Like the wheels of the train or, I don't know, like the car are going to, like, spin off at some point. Except it seems like that happened to the whole world. The whole world was, like, stopped and came to a screeching halt. So, yeah, for me it's about reevaluating and thinking of ways to stay connected, but in a more sustainable fashion. So it's really brilliant that this interview is happening, and we are doing those things.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Thank you.

WENDY RED STAR: Thank you.

[END OF redsta20_1of1_digvid_m.]

[END OF INTERVIEW.]