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Oral history interview with Ilana Savdie,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Ilana Savdie on August 20, 2020. The interview took place in Savdie's studio in New Haven, Connecticut, and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa 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

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. Hi, um, Ilana. Thank you do much for joining me for this interview. Um, so, today is August 20, 2020. And I—this is Fernanda Espinosa. I am interviewing you for the, uh, Pandemic Project at the Archives of American Art at Smithsonian Institution. Um, and if you can just, uh, introduce yourself please.

ILANA SAVDIE: Hi. Thank you for having me. Um, my name is Ilana Savdie. I am originally from Colombia um, and, have been living in New York for about 11 years. And currently, I'm based in New Haven out of the NXTHVN residency. So, I'm currently in my studio at NXTHVN.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Great. Thank you. So, as you know, uh, we've been talking to different artists to get a sense of how they have been experiencing these very shifting and different times. Can you just tell us how you've been doing, um, in the past few months basically since the pandemic started?

ILANA SAVDIE: Um, yeah, that's been—it's been tricky because the past few months have just felt like every week I've had to recalibrate completely. Like, every week feels like something seismic happens and there is a constant sense of needing to recalibrate. Um so, I think when—and sort of finding a new normal. So, I think at the beginning, um, when the pandemic first started, I think—and the world was brought to a halt, um, my fears and my anxieties were kind of very much located in the possibility of different administrations, like seizing power and that sort of, um—things like curfews or lockdowns, or invasive surveillance and watching the government kind of constantly fail to anticipate and respond, um, was—it was just—it was really overwhelming and it felt kind of like this—reminiscent of the sort of dystopian future that I've read about or seen in movies. It just was kind of an overwhelming thing. Um and so, the kind of need to constantly recalibrate and re-evaluate what's important to me and how to kind of handle these moments, um, has been—it's just—it's been essential to kind of keep doing that. Um, I have been finding myself most grounded when I come to my studio, and I'm very lucky to be in a program that's allowed me to do that and given me the space and time to do that. So, it's kind of been this, like, push and pull between feeling with this kind of creative charge and also feeling this overwhelming sense of dread and anxiety around, you know, this kind of extraordinary moment.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah. So, you're sharing the space with other artists, fellows in New Haven right now? How was it for you to experience all of this while in a space like that? Um, and I imagine, you know, away from your—with your usual networks and family and connections?

ILANA SAVDIE: Yeah, it was—it's been interesting because I've been—I already—I had just arrived here, I think, a month before the pandemic hit in the U.S., or maybe a month and a half, two months. So, I had already felt like I had uprooted myself. I already felt like I was outside of a norm for myself, whatever that means as an artist in New York. But the focus here was essentially to just come to studio every day and being in a place like this where there was—I didn't have to be isolated into a small apartment and not see anyone. I did get to kind of interact with people even though it was sort of at a distance. And it has—it has been helpful to feel this kind of sense of community that keeps getting reinforced, rather than being completely alone. So, it's been—there is a removal from my family and community, and that's been difficult. But because we're all in that same boat here, we've all kind of got into connect as a result of that, which has been—it's been nice. It's been one of the more positive things about this past year.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, what have been the conversations that you've been having with fellow artists around these times? Uh, not only the pandemic, uh, and everything that that involves, but also the recent uprisings and all of the political turmoil that's happening around the country?

ILANA SAVDIE: Um, yeah, I think it's been a lot of both—I think a combination of both, like, shock and also not, not being that surprised. I mean, something that's important to say about NXTHVN is that it's a Black-run organization. And most of the people here are people of color, if not, I think all are people of color. And so, being in a community where people tend to support each other, um, and there's been a kind of—there's just—it's been—there's been a sense of, like, understanding and all voices here are unique and amplified, um, rather than all of us being kind of isolated. I think that's been kind of important aspect of being here that—that's—it's just—it's made it easier for all of us to continue to come to studio. It's been reinforced to all of us by the people that run the organization and by each other that the best thing that we can all do now is continue to come to studio, continue to make work and continue to make our work—um, continue to make our voices heard, because their voices are all valued. And I think that's not something that all of us grew up knowing or have like been—it has not been reinforced to all of us. And also, I think all of us here, the—what?—like eight or seven or—shit, however many of us there are [laughs], but all of us have been making work about this already to varying degrees. I mean, I have kind of—I always—through my work and thinking about things like invasion, control, and sort of seizing of power and colonization, rebellion, and all of that as it relates to touch and intimacy in the body, the body in a constant state of recalibration.

So, all these things that are particularly charged now, they feel like they've always been a part of my work. And now they're a little bit less abstract, I guess. And so, being in an environment where I get to communicate that with other artists that are experiencing similar relationships to their work in this time, it just kind of keeps—it keeps the emphasis around the studio and the time spent in here, and the communication between each other and support and collaboration around community. It just—yeah, going back to, like, it doesn't feel, like, there's this kind of isolated relationship to this time. It feels like there's kind of communal relationships to this time and feeling better.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah. As you mentioned, there's many artists that have already been, um, talking and observing, um, some of these fears and hopes throughout their career. And for some of them, things have shifted; for some of them, things are kind of going to a different layer. Um, I'm interested in hearing, um, your observations around our relationship to the digital, which is something I know that you've, uh, kind of been working on for some time. Um, and now, it just feels like everything, we are is digital, uh, well, for some of us. So, how do you—what are your reflections around that?

ILANA SAVDIE: Um, yeah, it's funny because I've actually been kind of, like, bouncing off of the—or butting up against the digital right now because over the past few months, something that's happened with my work is that I've kind of been tapping back into things that I grew up around and that informed my narrative that I'd sort of not really been—I took for granted and haven't—hadn't really been talking about directly my work. And a lot of these things, um, the sort of ethos around—I grew up around the Colombian Carnival. It was—I grew up in Barranquilla which is where the Colombian Carnival is hosted every year. And the kind of ethos around the carnivalesque and the themes and, and aesthetics around it have always had such a big impact on me that I've never—and uh, my aesthetic interest that I've never really allowed myself to, or not allowed. I just never really accessed them as much of my work as I am now. And the sort of folklore around it is kind of—it's just sort of oral history tradition around the Colombian Carnival that is really hard for me to access from a distance and hard for me to access digitally. Um, I'm talking a lot about intimacy and bodies relating to each other and relating to power as it relates to bodies and states of recalibration and intimacy and touch, and things that thinking about my social relationships being only accessed through a grid on the screen, um, as talking heads. It's sort of—there's a kind of contradiction there that I've been having a hard time reconciling. And that's just in terms of that specificity. I've kind of been like—I'm not quite sure even how to address that, like being—not being able to have, like, geographical privilege to the things I want to talk about in my work. Yeah, it just kind of felt a little bit of like a disjuncting with that. Um, and then I also realize that it's kind of hard to not talk about the sort of surveillance culture that we're all—the sort of threat of, like, invasive surveillance, like I said. And I just kind of had to put that away, not think about it, because it is overwhelming. Kind of a loss of any type of privacy and what the threat that has on people like me or people like—the people I love, communities like ours.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, talking about surveillance, do you think that some of those pieces are maybe missing from the narratives of this time? Or how do you—how do you see those kinds of themes coming up or not coming up in the current discussions?

ILANA SAVDIE: Um, I might—honestly, I feel like I'm not as equipped to talk about it, because I have been trying to ignore it. That's my response. I think—and maybe the fact that I'm doing that—I think a lot of us are doing that because we kind of don't know how to deal with it. A lot—I've heard a lot of people just be like, I don't care about my privacy, let's do this back surveillance thing. That's the only way to handle this pandemic. And those aren't the same people that are watching, uh, protesters be targeted, that are—those aren't the same people that are paying attention to the protesters that are being targeted by this type of surveillance and that are disappearing. I mean, like, that's a—there's a very clear history that deals with, like, the disappearing of people as a result of surveillance. And so, I think that, um, yeah, sometimes—I mean, there is a certain type of privilege that you have to be able to, like, I don't want to think about it and not think about it. And, yeah, that's not lost on me, but it is—it gets overwhelming when I actually try to dive into that concept. I just—yeah, like I said, like, I think communities like ours are the ones that suffer when there is that kind of surveillance.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, so, you previously mentioned, um, your relationship to Barranquilla. Um, I'm not sure if you still have your family connections there, um, or other people, but I'm interested in hearing what has been your relationship, uh, to them in these times and how you've navigated that.

[00:14:48]

ILANA SAVDIE: Um, yeah. I mean, most of my family is still there, and Barranquilla's suffered quite a lot as a result of COVID and I don't know—I think a lot of it is just, like, the—actually, like—maybe should—I'm not going to speculate on what it is, why it is. But I know that I haven't been able to see my family, um, because—most, if not, all of my family are either in Barranquilla or they're in Miami which is where we moved to when I was 13. So, I haven't been able to be physically present, and we are a very kind of—we're—I'm close to my family; I'm very lucky to have a big family and—um, so that's been really hard. And then it's also been really hard to, like I said, not be able to be, like—I had a lot of trips planned to Colombia as part of sort of research. I was supposed to go to Carnival which I haven't been to as an adult, um, and actually have, like, direct conversations with people and collect my own imagery as research. And I haven't been able to do any of that because the carnival was canceled and—for the first time, I think, since it started, and—if I'm not mistaken. Yeah, so it's just—it's been hard to be distant from what—the things that have a semblance of home.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And the carnival would have happened in March?

ILANA SAVDIE: So, the carnival would have had—the carnival for 2021—it's always at the beginning of the year, um, so it was part of my plan to go a few times. And then it is here. And then get there for the carnival. It's always three days before Lent, so whenever that lands.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Can you just talk a little bit more about, I don't know if it's that work or any other work that you've been doing, um, during this residency, and also, as a result or not of these times?

ILANA SAVDIE: Um, yeah. So, like I was saying, my work deals with power and intimacy and sort of the bodies that are deemed inconvenient for a concept of purity, um, and how those bodies locate home and history and heritage. Um, and so, I look to a lot of the kind of physical structure and like—I looked at, like, a variety of different organisms, and how power sort of propelled through their physiological interactions. Like, that's part of the way—the way I research bodies for the work. And so, something like this virus has been really interesting to me because just in terms of, like, the concept of a virus being the sort of parasitic, um, thing that—like the behavior of a virus is very parasitic and it can we thrive. It can only, uh, live and multiply and reproduce by attaching itself to a host cell, um. And I think like society, we've just all kind of been thinking about the things around the parasitic and the invasive and the kind of attack, um. So, I've just—I've been interested in the kind of clinical approach to bodies in that sense, um, and thinking about power in this very kind of biological way, um. And then thinking about how, I mean, something like a virus that is—literally this—this is just particles. The size of a virus is tiny and yet it's this monumental, seismic thing that has affected all of our lives. And so, thinking about

scale shift of bodies and having bodies co-exist and how to kind of relate to bodies in a painting together through—like altering of size and altering of scale and, like, thinking about ways of exposing power that way and control and things like that. So, coupling that with the themes around the carnival that are sort of the inversion of social norms and kind of protest body as a form of mockery, mockery as a sort of form of protest of authority and the kind of uncrowning of higher functions of thought. Having these sort of themes coexist feels like it's all happening in a much more cohesive way for me than it ever has. And I think it's in part because I have the space and time and kind of support here in this residency to do so. But it's also because of—there's a very kind of acute experience with all of that that feels less and less abstract than it has ever before. So I've been able to sort of develop this and this new body of work as a result of that, I think.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, where do you see your work, um, going forward, um, in the future? How do you see this from the residency? Where do you see yourself going from here?

ILANA SAVDIE: It's an excellent question [laughs]. And it's hard—that's been the hardest thing to think about is where things are going to go, because it's hard to know. Like, I have a show planned that is—it's even hard to imagine if it can or can't happen because last time people had shown planned, all the galleries closed and everything needs to be rescheduled and watch—I feel so much is hinged on an election that's about to happen, that the kind of handling of everything that's going on right now is hinged on who's president or which administration is empowered in, like, two months. So, I feel like it's—it's been really hard to make plans. And I'm kind of exercising and kind of—a new type of, like, submission to this—to the unknown right now. And which—that's kind of something that feels like it's a collective thing; like societally, we've all had grown accustomed to the sort of, um—yeah, like a kind of mass complacency almost to the unknown.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much. Um, there's a few things that I—I'm really kind of staying with as we close this interview. So, some—I wrote some of these things down if in case you saw me, like, doing this [laughs]. But I just wanted to capture here, like, inconvenient bodies, on crowning of power, submission to the unknown. So, I'm going to kind of carry that with me as I think of these times, um. And I also wanted to ask you, if there's anything that we haven't discussed today that you'd like to just, um, document and recording this interview before we finish?

ILANA SAVDIE: Um, I can't think of anything [laughs]. I'm sure there will be, but I can't think of it right now.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That's fine. I just wanted to offer that, um. But um, if you're good, I think we have everything for now. Thank you so much for joining me again, um. And it's been a pleasure talking to you.

ILANA SAVDIE: Thank you for having me.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. Bye-bye.

ILANA SAVDIE: Bye.

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