



Smithsonian  
*Archives of American Art*

Oral history interview with Julia Santos  
Solomon, 2020 August 26

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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Julia Santos Solomon on August 26, 2020. The interview took place at Santos Solomon's home in Woodstock, New York 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: Hello, Julia. Welcome to this interview. Thank you so much for taking the time to participate. This is an interview for the pandemic project at the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And today is August 26, 2020. And, Julia, if you can please introduce yourself and just tell us a little bit about how you're doing and how these past few months have been for you?

JULIA SANTOS SOLOMON: Well, good morning and thank you for having me. I am an artist. I've been creating art for, uh, about 40 years. And it is truly my calling in this life. And I was born in Dominican Republic and have lived in United States all my life. Um, my art is truly tied to my roots and where I come from and all of my experiences in life. So, uh, just want to establish that that is what I love, my passion. And it's how I express myself.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you, Julia. And, um, how have these past few months since the pandemic and all these big shifts started, um, how have—how has this time been for you, m, as an artist and as a person?

JULIA SANTOS SOLOMON: Well, um, I'd like to say that I've never experienced anything like this before. I had an experience last year where I created a mural in the town of Woodstock with the intention of creating an oasis for people because before the pandemic, we were already living through a lot of difficult times. And my intention was to create a peaceful place for people to come and refresh themselves from all the stress. What I did not understand then was that this pandemic was coming. And um, it has become that—it has become a place where people go and sit, where they'll bring their children or for a cup of coffee, and they gather themselves there. I went there immediately when the pandemic broke out and found myself doing that, and also crying in front of it. So, there's that the idea that art can succeed where politics and economics fail us. We have certainly lived and are living through a period of time like that. And I took it seriously, that it was my opportunity to do something for the community.

My work tends to be very personal. And this speaks and it comes from personal history and emotional energy. However, in 2019, I began that shift. I have done other murals. And I'm always thinking about what should this mural communicate to the people who are seeing it? And what is my intention? In my search, I always come to a place where I want the intention to be healing in some way. I have another mural in the City of Kingston, where I considered that very, very carefully. And I was thinking about diversity and energy and circulating and healing. I have been working personally on a series on, uh, the Trujillo regime, which was a 31-year dictatorship in the Dominican Republic. Many Dominican artists have approached this subject. And for some reason, it became my time to explore it. However, it's a very painful [laughs] part of our history, and it's not been easy. So, when I was working on it, I had to really step back from my understanding of what happened. I was four years old when he was murdered. So, I did have some psychic recollection of that time. However, when the pandemic began, I could no longer access that part of me. It closed down. And I had to accept that I would have to do minor things in my studio, like restore work or organize my research, you know, my photography. I had to do some different things.

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And when the pandemic hit, um, I lost two extended relatives early in March. And then, three weeks later, we lost another two, in April. And I have never experienced a time where grieving for lost ones was limited. There was nowhere I could go. I couldn't be with my family. And I'll be

honest, I'm still processing those deaths. So, what I did was I approached a church in Woodstock, and I had a conversation about feeling that I had lost part of my humanity, because I could not worship; I could not grieve these deaths. And out of that conversation came a very different project, which is the one that I'm involved with now. And it's called *In Memoriam*. And what we did was, we created a large banner that said, you know, if you've lost someone to COVID, we would like to honor them. And we gave them an email. Um, but what I want to explain about this project is that even though I'm the person who's painting and I'm the person who originated this concept, there's many hands behind it. You know, there's the person who got a funding, so could buy materials.

There's the pastor who did a service on Facebook, and she and I are constantly in conversation. She receives the names. There's a woodworker who made these crosses that I had designed. There are two grandmothers, one who primed the crosses, the other one who painted them white and delivered them to me. And then I put those names on the crosses and install them. When I install them, I feel, I feel the loss when that cross goes into the ground. Not just my loss, but people I don't know, I feel it. And I have had to manage myself around it. Many, many people attended a service for this project, a religious service, on Facebook. We just posted it and understood the necessity to call these people's names. And we found out that in reality, people are watching from Europe and from the Caribbean and from, you know, Indonesia, and that there were people there from all over. And that was a very powerful thing to understand about the pandemic.

As a matter of fact, one of the people who watched is a social anthropologist out of, uh, George Washington University. And she is doing a *In Memoriam* project with her graduate students. We've met, the pastor and I, with her. And now we're planning to do a classroom setting with her students, so we can talk about this project. And it's very interesting to me that something is personal is growing. There's the need. People who have friends or family members on that lawn, go there. They have an object. They have a material evidence of that person because we were losing 800 people a day in New York, and they were being put in refrigerated trucks with labels on their toes. That's so painful. You know, eventually, if they found the right body and, you know, cremated them and send them to the family, I know how much relief those ashes brought to some of my relatives. There are some relatives who're still waiting for them, some who have been delivered. But even that process is absolutely mind boggling.

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So, as an artist and someone who can express the human condition, I find that this particular project is addressing that. I felt it was important that Black Life Matters cross with this. So, we have the names of African American people who have lost their lives to violence and racism. And what we've done is—what I've done is I've painted those crosses black, and their names are in white. And as things continue to go on, I will continue to do it that way. I never expected [laughs] that my work would take community-based direction. But here I am. The first day that we put in the crosses, we were interviewed by the local paper. And the pastor and the photographer went inside and I stayed in. I was still installing and a man stopped. I don't know who he was, but he stopped to thank me for dealing with it, for giving acknowledgement. Because, you know, up the street, we have a fancy coffee shop [laughs] and people stand in line to get the super-duper lattes. And so, they're going to walk by there and some choose to not look; some choose to look, and some just stand there. So, the pandemic has redefined, for me, what might—my art should look like.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Going back to the actual, uh, pieces that you installed in these church in your hometown, it's interesting to me that on one side, you have this oasis that can provide a space for people to alleviate their need, uh, and to kind of step away from all these crisis that involves us also being inside all the time. Um, and then on the other side, you have the crosses, uh, intersecting with other lives that have been lost. Not directly through the health pandemic, but through the racial crisis. So, how do you see—I see your art addressing these kind of both sides. Where do you see those connections? How do you observe that from your perspective?

JULIA SANTOS SOLOMON: The last cross I put in was the name of a Brazilian musician who died in Brazil. And the person who approached me about it lives between those two areas. And personally, when I go and I put in a cross and I feel that loss, I then go and I sit in front of the mural. You know what I mean? I do that. The other—the mural's on a corner, right, so you don't see it from the street. It's on the side, and it's a little bit more private than the crosses which was faced traffic and faced the main street. On the other side of the mural, there's an area just for children with little bunnies and little butterflies and birds. And even that sight is so simple,

also provides some, you know, direct relief, because those creatures live in the field in front of the mural. You know, there's little baby deer and there's rabbits and there's butterflies. And all of these things actually are in that habitat. So, I go from the front to the back. Pain and relief. I had no idea that I'd be the person doing both these things in the same location, none. But there it is. Yeah.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Talking about your—right now you're in your studio. And you share with me before that, you've been able to be there throughout the pandemic. How has your space changed, uh, during this time, or your interaction with your space? Have you seen any impact, um, on your routines or, uh, daily life from how we've had to, uh, arrange our lives differently during these times?

JULIA SANTOS SOLOMON: Well, you know, the studio is now a place where I come in the morning to pray and meditate. That was a practice that I did at home, but now I do it here. There are exhibitions, so I am packing and, you know, working around the day-to-day stuff related to that. But now, part of my art supplies are white crosses. You know, I can show them to you if you'd like. But I have now a workstation for that project. And that's my table where I make the crosses, and in front, the dry and I have all of that out. And so, that's it. I have a particular box and tools [laughs] in the box that I put there for when I go to install. The studio is now also a place where I am processing more than I would have. You know I used to come and sit, look at books, think, write whatever about the art. But now, um, I'm looking for photographs and thinking. In order for me to do that, it requires that I have an area here where a lot of photos are out. And I usually—you know, of course a lot of my work in the past has been tied to family.

And let me—I'm going to show you—so, you know, the old work would have me do research, like, this a photograph of my grandfather, Julio, who I was named after. So, finding that photo was important to me. And then, you know, when I was a kid—in Dominican Republic when I was a baby, there were no photo—no photographs unless they were formal. So, I had very, very few photos of myself as kids. So, if I find something, I'll draw it so that I can keep it longer. Or, you know, I come from a very strong matriarchal line, and I'm just now starting to explore some of the men. So, all of these references are there except that now, I have other references. It's not just my family. And usually, I'm a very tidy artist. I would have that cleaned up, and I will put it away. But now, I'm like, nope, there's something there you need to find. You don't know what it is. Just take your time. That's new. I mean, I'm the kind of artist, you would come in; you wouldn't believe that I'm—you'd think I was a surgeon or something. Everything's clean and neat and orderly but not now. It's not as important. Now I have to change, change my routine, change how I process. So, I'm giving myself room to be flexible because I realized that this is not regular time. It's not what I—this is not what it was. This is something new, different, and I have to do things in new and different way.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much, Julia. I really appreciate, um, you sharing your space and observations. Um, before I stop this recording, um, is there anything that you'd like to say on this—during this interview that I didn't ask you about?

JULIA SANTOS SOLOMON: I would like to address, um, the contribution of Latin artists. I would like to address the value of having us be part of the conversation. Many of the crosses on the lawn are not Latinos, and they are not Blacks. These are many, many Caucasian people who are in pain. And for some reason, it came to me to do that. So, I'm servicing them as well, and I'm servicing myself and my family and anyone else. There's a name coming for someone who lost someone in Mexico. So, I would just like to thank the Archives for this opportunity and to remind everyone of our ability to make a contribution historically in this moment, in the past, and in the future, just to talk about that. And I thank you for the opportunity to be part of this project.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much, Julia. Take care.

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