



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Frederick
Eversley, 2020 August 19

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Fred Eversley on August 19, 2020. The interview took place in Fred Eversley's home in New York City, New York, and was conducted by Nyssa Chow 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

NYSSA CHOW: [Inaudible] Hi, Fred.

FRED EVERSLEY: Hi. How are you?

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.] Uh, thanks for being willing to speak to us today about your experience of this current moment and the—the significant events of this past year and also to just witness for us what was most significant to you about, um, this, sort of, shared experience with 2020, um. So, if I can just invite you to do anything right now would be to share with us what has been significant to you this year? What's foremost on your mind?

FRED EVERSLEY: Well, the most significant is, uh, surviving this whole virus thing, uh, and basically, I've been totally locked down for five months. Uh, luckily, I have a, you know, a five stories plus basement plus roof building. So, I have a big building, uh, and I've been, uh, occupied and, uh, sort of, getting things set up. I mean, I moved here—I've owned the building for 40 years, uh, but I moved here full time about a year and a half ago from my studio of 50 years in California, and uh, so, it's been occupied, just, sort of, getting everything organized, uh, finishing taxes, finishing this, finishing that, getting set up, getting machinery and everything sent from California to here to begin work. Uh, I just got my main casting machine here last week. I—just a half an hour ago—ordered a batch of resin to start making some new pieces for the first time in almost two years, um, and um, uh, following the whole action of, uh, the, uh, medical situation and how it's affecting, uh, everything.

I mean, uh, if uh—and I'm lucky in that I'm—I'm in New York. It's—I've gone from the very worst situation in the whole America to the very best situation in all of America. Uh, I followed that closely, like, every single day, um, and, uh, I'm witnessing how it's also causing social breakdown. I mean, more murders, more breaking into stores, more this, more that which is too damn bad, um, you know, I mean, it is the most drastic thing that's happened to this country certainly in my lifetime, probably the most drastic thing that happened since 1918, um, and it's having a profound influence on the entire art world, me, uh, everyone I know, um, and, um, trying to figure out how to deal with this entire new environment.

Um, I mean, I was scheduled to go—be—go down to Washington. I was scheduled to go back to California, uh, you know, I mean, I do everything myself, my own plumbing, my own everything, uh, because uh, I don't want people in here, uh, particularly, and uh, I see very few people, a few friends, uh, and even that's at, uh, social distancing and with masks and things, um. The only person I interact with closely is my wife, um, and uh, luckily, she's right here, uh, working full-time, setting—helping me set up the building, uh. I planted a large garden on the roof that occupies a lot of our time and is getting into making some art herself, um, and so, it's a very strange thing, not going to openings, not going to museums, uh, not going to galleries, um, dealing with, uh, meetings like this—Zoom meetings. I had one major meeting with about 40 people, um, my fraternity brothers from college, uh, about a month-and-a-half ago and then some other meetings, uh, with friends of mine in Europe. I call Europe almost four times a week. I have friends everywhere, um, and calling around America every week, uh, to friends, uh, and family, um.

[00:05:18]

So, it's a very different kind of environment, um, and I don't know where it ends. I mean, uh, I think we're under the worst, uh, government possible for this kind of a—a situation, um, uh. I think Trump is the most destructive person, and I know him. I've met him, you know, uh; he's the most destructive person possible for the job, uh. I don't know—I have very bad feelings how this

is all going to end, uh. Perhaps, um, perhaps, you know, out of a miracle, we'll pull it off; I have very big doubts. I mean, uh, I watch the, uh—uh, last night, uh, I watched—I've been watching the Convention—the Democratic Convention, uh. I know a lot of the people. I—I know Biden. I know Clinton. I know all these people for years and years and years, uh, and uh, hopefully, you know, that whole crowd can get together and alter, uh, the whole possibility of, you know, this country ever coming back together again, uh, but I have my doubts, um.

Anyways, so that's what's—I've been dealing with, uh, and I spend a couple hours a day, at least, dealing with that, um, and um, so, I mean, I finally decided to—I—just start doing work—new work here, uh, which is, uh—I just—literally 15 minutes ago—ordered a big batch of resin to make some wood pieces—literally 15 minutes ago, um, and um, yeah, I mean, um, you know, I mean, my history with the Smithsonian, uh, is sort of very complicated in a way.

I mean, it started probably, I guess, in about 1972, uh, or '71 when the, uh, the National Museum of American Art, uh, bought a piece of mine, uh, for inclusion in a show, of, uh, young American artists that traveled all over the world. There used to be an agency that no longer exists called the, uh, United States Information Agency, which is basically a foreign propaganda thing, and my little piece that was bought by Joshua Taylor, the director of, uh, the National Museum of American Art—it's called the National Collection of Fine Arts in those days, uh—traveled all over the world, and I have a lot of the documentation and such and, uh, and then, uh, they actually bought a piece for their collection in the, uh, mid-'70s, uh, and then in 1977, I got appointed as the first artist in residence in the history of the Smithsonian, uh, and I did that for three years.

I was—basically had a large studio in the basement of the National Aerospace Museum, uh, and uh, I was nominated for that position by Steve Weil who had been the deputy director of the Whitney Museum and had just become the deputy director of the Hirshhorn Museum, uh, and uh so, I did that for three years, spent three years in D.C. getting to know D.C. extremely well, had, uh, shows at the National—I mean, I had shows at the Smithsonian, but also shows at the National Academy of Sciences—two shows, uh. One show at the Federal Reserve Bank, um. One show at the headquarters for the American Institute of Architects, close to the White House, uh, and uh, Jimmy Carter was the president at the time, uh.

[00:10:14]

So, I did some favors—I mean, it's—it's a crazy time—I was able to do a lot of favors for the White House, and in return, the White House, uh, had me over for parties and things like that, uh, gave me the, uh, uh, presidential box for the National Opera a couple of times, uh, uh. I mean, there's all kinds of funny stories. I mean, people thought I was Hamilton Jordan of all people, right—and uh—because we were about the same age and the same height and such, um, and um so, I spent three serious years in Washington and then two more years of commuting to Washington rather often because my girlfriend who I'm paying, sort of, when I—while I was in Washington—became, uh, head of the Institute for Museum Services, uh, and uh—uh, but she was in a fairly major job—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FRED EVERSLEY: —uh, and uh so, I would go down and spend weekends with her and she'd come up and spend weekends with me here in New York. I bought New York—my—this building I have in New York during that time, basically to allow us to have, uh, a place in New York together, uh, and we did that until about '83 when we broke up, uh, but I still have the building, and now, all these years later, I'm using it full time, uh, and um, I mean, I could go on and on and on. I'm still in contact with some people at the Smithsonian, um. Alan Ullberg was the associate general counsel of the Smithsonian, and I speak to him fairly often, uh, uh. He's now retired, but still very active in the D.C. area—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FRED EVERSLEY: —um, and, I mean, I could go on forever about my connections with the Smithsonian and D.C., um.

NYSSA CHOW: Well, I—I'm listening to the timeline of your career, and, you know, this is—this is hardly the only, you know, historic—historic and significant moment that you lived through and, you know, been practicing through, right, um—and yet, I'm—I'm—

FRED EVERSLEY: That was a period of from—basically, from '77 to '83—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FRED EVERSLEY: —a lot in Washington, uh, at least half time in Washington, at the Smithsonian and around the Smithsonian, uh. Since then, I've been in California as my primary—primary—I have New York. I spent a lot of time in Europe doing, uh, commissions in Europe, uh, commissions in the Mideast, uh, and um—and using New York basically as a—a couple-months-a-year base, uh, on the way back and forth from California to Europe and the Mideast, um, and then in terms of, uh, current history, uh, I finally got evicted basically out of my studio of 50 years in California, uh, uh, because they wanted to rent to a commercial establishment for a lot more money than an artist can pay, uh, and so, I moved back here full time and just have been fixing this place up and getting it ready to do work, uh, when all of this crazy, I mean, situation with the, uh, corona hit, uh, and um, so now, I'm essentially full-time in New York, um, uh—and I probably—I'm probably going to go back full time in making just small plastic pieces of sculpture as opposed to some of the large commissions—the large commissions in front of the Miami Airport, at the San Francisco Airport.

I mean, uh, I did large commissions all of the world, 40 feet tall, 30 feet tall, uh, and um, yeah, and I've—I've been sitting here watching, uh, America go through its—a great—greatest crises in my lifetime. I mean, uh, I was involved in the Civil Rights Movement, uh, in the '70s mostly, uh. I was actually in Europe the whole time of the Watts Riots. I arrived back to a town halfway destroyed by the Watts Riots, uh. You know, I'm—I'm a graduate engineer, and so, I mean, my first—I went to Brooklyn Technical High School here and then, uh, Carnegie Mellon University in—in Pittsburgh. I was the first Black person at the university, uh. I was the big experiment [laughs], uh, and um, uh, and then from there, I went out to California extensively for six months, uh, to work for an engineering company that was owned by, um, one of my fraternity brother's father, uh, and the Vietnam War kept getting worse and worse and worse, and my job which was basically building the major laboratories—acoustical laboratories in NASA Houston, uh, kept me out of, uh, out of the army—kept me out of the draft and then I had an automobile accident that immediately kept me out the draft for the rest of my life.

[00:16:42]

I retired from engineering, uh. I was living in Venice, California surrounded by all the artists and all the jazz people and all of that, uh, and I just started making art, and I had fairly—I mean, good success. I was having shows, uh, three months after I started making art, uh, and, uh, it was, kind of, culminated in a one-man show at the Whitney Museum, uh, I guess, uh, two years after I started making art, uh, and then followed by gallery shows in Chicago and Kansas City and San Francisco, and uh so, I—that's what I've been doing the last 50 years basically is making art and making sculpture, having shows, doing big commissions, um, and uh, I've watched—in terms of racial progress, I've watched America go through all kinds of, uh, fits and starts, I mean, from the Watts Riots in LA, uh, through, uh, things getting much, much better, and uh, uh, you know, I mean, I was lucky in a way, in that I was living in Venice, California on the beach, which is surrounded by artists, 20 miles away from the ghetto—from Watts and such, uh, and so, I knew of it.

I went down there. I had a couple of friends living down there, but I wasn't full-time down there, subjected to all of the bullshit that happens, uh, and in New York, I live in SoHo, uh. Again, at—at one time, when I first moved here, there was a fair number of minority artists, uh, that, you know, basically over the time either died or moved away, uh. Most of them died actually over the years, uh, and uh so, I had not been subject—I mean, I—I had a crazy career. I integrated the first hotel in the state of Texas—

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

FRED EVERSLEY: —you know, uh, July 1, 1963, on my way to Mexico—on my way to California for my engineering job. It was by accident, but I did integrate the Alamo Motel in San Antonio in '63 and then I got—my first commission was a commission for Ray Hunt for his hotel, the hotel that John Kennedy was assassinated in front of, uh. I did my first large, uh, fountain, uh, and so, I have this, uh—I've had great experiences in Texas, although Texas is, for the most part, a fairly segregated state, uh. It didn't affect me. I mean, I was in—building the laboratory—the laboratories at NASA Houston, uh.

[00:20:12]

Unknown to me—actually unknown to me, the FBI had arranged with Hertz Corporation that I

had the only Mustang in the state of Texas, uh. It was a red Mustang, and every cop knew who I was. I had no idea about this, I mean, until the very end almost, uh. So, I mean, I speeded everywhere I went; I did this; I did that. I mean, no one ever did anything, uh, because I had this important job, um, and so, I worked there three days a week. I, for the most part, worked 12 hours a day. I'd come home and eat in the hotel where I was staying at right next to NASA and then I'd go back to LA on the weekend, and I had no idea of what the state was really, uh, and even since then, I mean, my experiences in Texas have been pretty good because I was an artist.

I existed in that funny little art world, uh, and uh, actually, I had—I mean, I integrated the, uh—literally the grand opening of the Museum of Fine Arts in Houston by accident, uh, because the woman who's head of PR fucked up and invited me, uh, and uh, I didn't realize I was the only Black person to have walked into an opening of 6,000 people, and I was the only Black person except for the waiters, right? Uh, and even though I only planned to stay a day, I ended up staying a week to go through everything, every single thing, uh, because I felt it was important that I show my face, um, and [laughs] I mean, I could go on for hours about this kind of thing, um, and uh, the same thing. I mean, Chicago's falling apart right now, uh, but my experiences in Chicago happened to be very, very good, uh. It was just the right time, at the right place, uh, and uh, and the right crowd of people, uh.

So, my experiences—I mean, the only Black artist I ever got to know in Chicago was Richard Hunt, um. He's the only one I got to know well. The only Black artist I got to know well in D.C. was Sam Gilliam who lived up the street from me, um, and uh, here in New York, there are several Black artists who lived in the neighborhood, uh. One by one, they died off or moved [laughs], um. So, I think I'm the only Black artist left just, about in the neighborhood. I mean, uh, Crystal, who I knew very well, uh, lives right across the street, and he died a month ago. So, I mean, there are a very few artists left in SoHo, um, and uh, SoHo right now is a ghost town in that most of the businesses haven't reopened, uh. So, I'm looking out the window and looking at the big buildings across the street and they're very empty, almost, you know, uh—and um, the um,—I have no idea what's going to happen here, um.

Right now for me, it's fine, but I—I have no idea of the future, um, and, I mean, most of the trouble, most of the unrest, most of the killings and everything happened in Brooklyn, which is where I was born and raised, uh, uh, but I haven't lived in Brooklyn since 1959, you know? Um, and uh, I mean, what I've seen in terms of, uh, the stuff that happened in Minneapolis and such, uh, I was actually fairly shocked because Minneapolis is a town I happen to know, uh. The Walker is the big Museum in Minneapolis. Berta Walker, whose family built it, is a friend of mine. She worked at the Whitney Museum when I had my show there, uh. She now has a gallery in Provincetown, uh.

[00:25:02]

So, I used to go to The Walker with Berta in the '70s, uh, and I, you know, I—Minneapolis was a very liberal, fairly wide open town as far as I could see. I mean, I never had—I gave lectures at the university, uh. I was in and out many times and never had a single problem. I stayed in normal hotels right downtown, um, but obviously, unbeknownst to me almost, there was a Black ghetto that I didn't know about and never saw, uh, where things were not as sweet as they were that I experienced, um, but again, I don't think it was anywheres as bad, even in the Black ghetto back then, as it is now, um.

So, I was shocked when the whole thing went down in Minneapolis—really shocked, uh, and I called Berta who's now whatever—almost 90 years old living in Provincetown and had a long talk with her about it. She was shocked, um. I haven't—well, I've—the virus—I haven't been anywhere, but, I mean, um—and now, there's trouble in Chicago. Chicago's a town I spent an enormous amount of time in. I've had so many shows in Chicago, um, uh. Again, I never had one piece of trouble in Chicago, uh, but obviously, there is a problem in Chicago, uh, and um so, I mean—well, I mean, the virus and the fact that I'm, uh, 78 years old, and I'm, you know, susceptible to a—a very bad situation.

So, I keep locked down, but the virus, um, prevents me from going around basically to Chicago, or Minneapolis, or any of these places, um, and seeing with my own eyes, perhaps getting involved, uh, trying to get some of these things settled, um, uh. So, I'm in this very funny situation where I—I'm very well aware of what's happening in America, uh. What's happening in America has a lot of—to do with who's president and such and—and the makeup of the Congress, uh. I mean, Washington—I mean, I've been in the White House maybe 15 times when

Jimmy Carter was the president, uh, and now, I watched what's happening, and I am shocked.

It's so different from everything I observed, every—and I—I speak to people. I mean, I speak to people at the Smithsonian. I speak to people like Mary Anne Goley who used to be head of, uh, Art for the Federal Reserve Board, uh. I speak to a lot of people, uh, still—Alan Ullberg who's, you know, uh, uh, was the general counsel—I mean, he really helped me out, and I used to spend a lot of time with he and his wife in Maryland on the way to, uh, go crabbing and stuff, um, and America's changed to the better in a lot of ways, but right now, America is in a, an enormous crisis, like, worse than I've ever experienced in my lifetime, uh, and I just hope and pray that, uh, Trump gets thrown out and that Biden, uh, becomes the president and turns this thing around. Otherwise, I mean, I honestly—I don't know. I mean, I don't know, uh, in terms of myself, what I can do.

My wife is Swedish. So, I mean, I could always go live in Sweden, um, uh. It's a very funny situation to be in, um. One of my collectors—a Black guy, who's the vice chairman of Citibank, I just saw in the LA—*New York Times*, is thinking about running for mayor, uh. Last time I saw him was literally just a week before this whole thing—the whole virus thing came about, um. He owns two of my pieces, uh, um. I think he's crazy to want to be mayor, but I support him in a minute, um. So that is two day—that's literally two days ago when that whole thing, uh, came—was announced in the *New York Times*, um. So, I haven't had a chance to call him yet, um. I think America is at a crossroads, uh, that can go either way, either get much worse or better.

[00:31:06]

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. I feel, like, I mean, that's a—a powerful way to, sort of, end this interview, but I'm just wondering if there's anything I haven't—you would like to leave here as—as the last thought—this idea that we're at a crossroads, um. I'm—I'm—all—listening to you, I keep—I can't help but wonder what is—what do you see that is possible now that maybe was unimaginable before, right? What is—what do you—you know, I'm hearing all of this, "I don't know what will happen," which is what everyone's feeling, but, um—but we rarely articulate what are we worried—what do we suddenly think is possible that maybe was completely unthinkable, right? This time last year—

FRED EVERSLEY: I think that, you know, uh, the scientists, the doctors, and such, we eventually get a handle on the—the pandemic, um. What I don't know, in terms of America, does it become a dictatorship run by Trump, or do we get back onto a fairly even keel, uh, under Biden? That is what I do not know, and for the next two nights, I'll be eight hours—I mean, I'll be up watching, uh, but, I mean, I think things are never—like, the country is at its crossroads that's more dangerous in every way I know, health-wise, politically, security-wise, everything, than it's ever been in my lifetime, and, uh, that's what I feel, um, and I'm not smart enough to fully understand—I mean, it'll all come out in the next three months, right? By Christmas, it will be out, one way or the other, uh, and um, there isn't very much that I, as an individual, can do other than, you know, be supportive and, uh, give some money and blah, blah, blah.

There's not very much I can do. I've never felt more helpless, um, about, uh, being able to influence the situation, uh. I've watched people that I know very well—Bill—Bill Clinton last night and such, uh. I know him very well. I—I—many people, I know very well, uh—Al Sharpton, people like that, right, uh—and I'm hoping that they manage to, uh, be effective, uh, in um, changing this situation, uh, but, you know, I mean, this country, uh, does have a racist background, uh, and it really could go either way. It really could go either way, and I'm just extremely lucky that—maybe, that I came along when I came along, uh, which is probably the best time for me to ever come along in the history of this country, um, because I do not have full confidence that things will get better in my lifetime.

[00:35:31]

NYSSA CHOW: Well—

FRED EVERSLEY: I do not have—I wish I did, but I don't.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm [affirmative]. That is a powerful statement. Um, thank you for sharing that, uh. I mean, it's—it's quite powerful to say that you feel lucky to have [laughs] come along—

FRED EVERSLEY: No, I mean, I've been extremely lucky.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah.

FRED EVERSLEY: I don't know very many people who've been luckier than me, Black, white, or purple. I don't know very many people, uh, that have had more freedom, more success, more anything. You know, with me in college in my engineering job as an artist, I know—I mean, I know very few people who've had it as good as I have, uh, and now, I recognize how good I— basically I have it—I've had it, uh, and uh, I'm watching literally everything fall apart, you know? I'm watching Europe fall apart, not as bad as America, but I'm watching it fall apart. I'm watching, uh, this disease ravaging South America—I mean, I know Brazil. I had great times in Brazil. Right now, Brazil is horrible, uh, and, you know, will be horrible as long as I'm alive I'm sure, uh.

I know South America. I know Africa. I know the Mid East. I've had great experiences, I mean, wonderful experiences, and I think, no matter what happens with the virus, that, uh, those experiences cannot be recreated, at least in my lifetime, maybe never, you know. I mean, there's so much bitterness, so much everything, uh, that I don't know if, uh, the world can ever be as good as when—I mean, I came in the world at the right time, after World War II basically, and then up until recently when things really fell apart, uh, politically, health-wise, all kinds of ways, and uh so, when I look at it objectively, I have to consider myself incredibly lucky—

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

FRED EVERSLEY: —you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm, mm-hmm [affirmative].

FRED EVERSLEY: Uh, I came from nice, well-educated parents, uh, who lived a very good—very good lives themselves, uh, and, uh, uh, what can I say? I mean—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FRED EVERSLEY: —you know

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

FRED EVERSLEY: —it's a crazy time, and they keep hoping that things are going to get better and maybe they will, uh; maybe they will.

NYSSA CHOW: Right.

FRED EVERSLEY: I hope they will.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, Fred, thank you so much, um.

FRED EVERSLEY: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: We really appreciate, uh, that you were able to find the time to talk to us today. It was incredibly valuable and I really appreciate it personally, and I know everyone else will as well.

FRED EVERSLEY: Okay, fantastic. Thank you.

NYSSA CHOW: Thank you very much.

FRED EVERSLEY: Okay, bye.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay, take care and be safe [laughs].

FRED EVERSLEY: Okay, thank you.

NYSSA CHOW: Bye.

[00:39:08]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]

