



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Bob & Bob
(Francis Shishim and Paul Velik), 2020 July
10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Bob & Bob on July 10, 2020. The interview took place in Santa Monica, California, and was conducted by Matthew Simms 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

MATTHEW SIMMS: You guys see on the screen now that I'm recording? It should show you.

MULTIPLE SPEAKERS: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: So, you know that you are being watched and everything you say is recorded. So, this is, uh, Matthew Simms, um, and I am interviewing The Dark Bob and The Light Bob, who are both, I believe, in Los Angeles, California, Santa Monica in one case, Marina Del Ray—is that right?

LIGHT BOB: No, no. All together in Santa Monica.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay. Great, and today is July 10, 2020, and this is part of the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution Pandemic Project. Now, does that sound like a good title for a—

LIGHT BOB: No [laughs.]

MATTHEW SIMMS: No?

[Cross talk.]

DARK BOB: What else might we come up with? The Death and Dying Interview. No, that—

LIGHT BOB: No, that's worse. How about The Creative Artists, uh, Online Project.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay, okay. Well, all those I guess.

DARK BOB: All right.

MATTHEW SIMMS: I just wanted to check in with you guys, see how you're doing?

DARK BOB: Thanks. Thank you. How are you doing?

MATTHEW SIMMS: I'm okay.

DARK BOB: I mean, just real quickly, I know you teach art history and you—

LIGHT BOB: Thank you, thank you. I'm doing great. I have been teaching, yes. And I've been, like, drag racing. I've been playing tennis, walking, swimming, going to not so many parties, making art, and trying to get Dark Bob to conform.

DARK BOB: And I've been trying to get the Light Bob to get a new suit, because you can see right there, he needs one desperately. Thank you. Thank you, very much.

LIGHT BOB: It's a thousand-dollar gray suit.

DARK BOB: I'll give you 1,000 dollars to throw it away. How's that?

LIGHT BOB: Mr. Simms, what—

DARK BOB: Sorry, Matthew, but I just— Oh, wait a minute. [Picks up black rotary phone receiver that is sitting on his desk.] Hello, is this the Zoom line? Oh. Hey, Matthew, Light Bob. It's—this is Zoom—the technology—

LIGHT BOB: We're on the TV. Dark Bob, we're on the TV.

DARK BOB: Hello? Hello?

LIGHT BOB: We're on—

DARK BOB: Oh, it's not on the phone?

LIGHT BOB: So, [laughs] I'll help him.

DARK BOB: I have it, the Zoom app, on my phone.

LIGHT BOB: No, that's from last year.

DARK BOB: Oh.

LIGHT BOB: Look what's next to his phone, Matthew. Look.

[They laugh.]

A tape dispenser from 1920.

DARK BOB: You shouldn't be making fun of me. [Hangs up the phone.] I'm the other half of Bob & Bob, thank you very much.

LIGHT BOB: So, to answer your question, everything is normal, fine, well, healthy. Art is being made, um. We're out and about. Yes, it's a little, um—all the stores are closed, I don't know why, it's a little confusing out there, but in studios and in galleries and in the world of art, it's a teeming, wonderful place.

DARK BOB: Well, that's not my experience, Matthew. I've been staying locked in, uh, and enjoying it, honestly. I mean, uh, I'm a recluse anyway, so I've enjoyed my time away from people. I can't stand people. They get in the way; they interfere with my thinking, uh, and most of my inspiration comes from inside anyway, so. So I'm happy just, you know, locked away, uh. Few people I see; I do see the Light Bob a little bit. We've been doing the little drawings, so on, but I'm happy that the world is shut down. I never needed it much anyway.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, you have two complementary perspectives here, which some people—

DARK BOB: Dark and light side.

LIGHT BOB: The world is not shut down. And why are you reckless? When did you become reckless?

DARK BOB: You talking to me?

LIGHT BOB: You said you were reckless.

DARK BOB: Did I say reckless? I don't think I used that word.

MATTHEW SIMMS: You said you were a recluse [laughs].

DARK BOB: A recluse.

LIGHT BOB: Oh, you have clues. You're a detective with clues?

DARK BOB: See, Matthew, this is what—for 40 years, I've been working with this. He doesn't understand a word I say, never has.

LIGHT BOB: I must admit it's true. The world is open and alive and well and, for some people, it's a little Dark Bob, and for the rest of us, we're at the party, which is the set of the drawings—series of drawings we're doing right now.

MATTHEW SIMMS: I want to hear about those. What's these drawing that you guys are—

LIGHT BOB: The party is great. Um, we are doing drawing of people at parties, and the people range from senators to, um, well, the guy at the drugstore—

DARK BOB: To your favorite breed of dog.

[00:05:00]

LIGHT BOB: There's—yeah—there's some [laughs] show animals, and—

DARK BOB: We are holding parties on a piece of paper.

LIGHT BOB: —and past presidents and celebrities and writers and historians—

DARK BOB: And artists, that's right.

LIGHT BOB: —and we are being paid handsome sums to explain to all to them that the old times —like, Teddy Roosevelt's there, and Franklin Roosevelt's there. The old times are not necessarily better than the present times, and the present times are not necessarily terrible and epidemic, whatever that word you were using, and with a little bit of perspective, we're really okay, you know. There's no—there's no world wars going on; there's no terrible disasters, really.

DARK BOB: Oh no. There's no world—Afghanistan and Syria and global warming, everything's just fine. Thank you, yeah.

LIGHT BOB: Well, I don't know about that, but yeah, the country has the flu; the country's in a bad mood, but you know—

DARK BOB: The world has the flu.

LIGHT BOB: True, the world has the flu, but by and large, everyone is doing what they usually do.

DARK BOB: They are?

LIGHT BOB: Yeah.

DARK BOB: I'm not.

LIGHT BOB: Because you're locked away.

DARK BOB: Yeah.

LIGHT BOB: What are you drinking, like, your scotch and soda; you're taking your pills.

DARK BOB: Oh yeah? Watch this. There you go, it's a glass of light [holds glass tumbler of an iced beverage up to desk lamp].

LIGHT BOB: So, we are doing drawings and artworks of great celebration and integration.

MATTHEW SIMMS: How do you get everybody to show up to these parties? I mean [cross talk]—

DARK BOB: We draw them, and there they are [laughs].

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.] That's amazing.

DARK BOB: [Laughs.] It's incredible what you can do on a piece of paper.

LIGHT BOB: [Laughs.] Craziest thing. I think it's Dark Bob's studio, but we draw them, and they appear.

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.] No RSVPs, just there they are.

DARK BOB: That's right, that's right. And they can say whatever we want them to say. That's the other nice thing. We can put little balloons coming out of their mouths with words and, uh, they're going to toe-the-line with us.

LIGHT BOB: And they loan us their clothes. Aristotle Onassis loaned Dark Bob his suit today for this call.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Both ties? Or just the one?

LIGHT BOB: Yeah. Yes. And I got my suit—

DARK BOB: Everybody Light Bob mentions is dead. Have you noticed that? The Roosevelts, uh, Aristotle Onassis. I think that, after this conversation, Bob & Bob need to talk about who we're going to have over that's living. Maybe we should have a party just to forget people.

LIGHT BOB: Maybe he's Edgar—Hoover, that guy, Hoover?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

LIGHT BOB: I got my suit from Clark Kent, and so they're very generous, our party guests.

DARK BOB: Now we're back to the suit. You know, I think, really, Matthew would like to hear something that's historically relevant, that um—and takes people to a level of understanding that it's—that requires us to say some really important, brilliant things.

LIGHT BOB: Okay. Look. When Picasso—when Picasso was doing his most famous painting—

DARK BOB: Another dead guy. Yeah, go ahead.

LIGHT BOB: —there was a war going on, and it was bad news for sure, right? And the world was up in arms; they were stealing his paintings; museums were getting looted, just like our days now.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

LIGHT BOB: But, you know, we've had past flus, and I'd have a flu before a war any day; wouldn't you agree?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yes? I mean, yes. No question.

DARK BOB: Well, I like when wars are far away, whereas the flu here has come to us, uh, but you know, it's almost as if the war has come to us. We're suffering fatalities; we're suffering from poor leadership, all the same conditions as a war, only it's here. Uh, we're struggling with one another; the country is divided down the middle. We're in a civil war—we are in a civil war in America, uh, and how can we not—

LIGHT BOB: General Lee is out again? And—Robert E. Lee is out again? With those guys, those confederate guys?

DARK BOB: That's one of the issues that's happening right now, that people don't want to be celebrating, uh, the lives of what some call traitors, you know. I mean—

LIGHT BOB: Have you been drinking, Dark Bob? Have you been drinking?

DARK BOB: You're looking at it right here.

LIGHT BOB: Well, as I was saying, Mr. Matthew, these are fine times, and we're not at war. There's no South versus North, and I think Dark Bob's having delusions.

[00:10:07]

DARK BOB: Well, it's a hoax. Light Bob thinks it's all a hoax, uh. But, no, we are at war in America. I'm terrified of what's going to happen after the next—I really think, after the next election, one way or another, people are going to go crazy. It's terrifying. Everyone is so, uh, polarized under this administration—

LIGHT BOB: Can we talk about art again? Our drawings at the party?

DARK BOB: Well, what do you want to say about that?

LIGHT BOB: Well, should General—is it Robert E. Lee or General Grant?

DARK BOB: Well, what about either one of them? What's the point?

LIGHT BOB: Well, if they were to join the party and if they were to have a conversation with Franklin Roosevelt, who is there, and Andrew Carnegie's there, what would they talk about?

DARK BOB: Uh, they would talk about how, uh, being dead is a lot easier than being alive.

MATTHEW SIMMS: They have that in common [laughs].

DARK BOB: Yeah. They certainly do.

LIGHT BOB: Next question, your honor.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Speaking of, uh, dead people, I thought of Achilles, and then I thought of Achilles tendons, and then that led me to Dark Bob's recent mishap, and the walking with the flip-flops in Rome or something, and—

DARK BOB: Oh, lord.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Did you heal from that or—

LIGHT BOB: Oh, I get it, heel.

DARK BOB: Since it was a heel injury, I'm guessing that you're trying to be funny about—

LIGHT BOB: [Laughs.] Oh, that was funny, heel. Did you get it, did you heal?

DARK BOB: But I have. It took almost two years, Matthew.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Oh. That's—

DARK BOB: I ripped a tendon on the bottom of my foot walking through Spain in flip-flops during a transportation strike. There were no busses; there were no taxis, you know, so if you wanted to go to the Prado or whatever, I had to walk, and I ripped my foot up. It was terrible.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And, being from Southern California, all you had in your suitcase were flip-flops.

DARK BOB: Exactly. So—but I did see a lot of great art, and it wasn't until I came home that I completely collapsed and fell apart, and that's when the injury really got me. So, a lot of physical therapy, and I'm a little smarter now—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah.

DARK BOB: —I'll never do that again.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And, do we have any news from Llyn? Llyn Foulkes?

DARK BOB: I do talk to Llyn, and he's doing okay. He's locked away, you know, Llyn is 85 years old; he does feel vulnerable, uh. He had, uh, quit smoking, and recently told me he was going to start smoking again—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Oh.

DARK BOB: —and I was disappointed, but he said, "You know," he says, "I'm 85-years-old," and [laughs], you know, if he wants to smoke, he says, "I'm going to smoke." So, I didn't know what to say, honestly. I'm someone who quit smoking; it's a really tough deal, you know.

MATTHEW SIMMS: I bring him up, because—is that how you guys met? In his class? Or was it—

DARK BOB: We did, yep.

LIGHT BOB: We did. We did.

DARK BOB: In fact, this just happens to be sitting on my desk. This is Llyn beating us with a T-square for being messy in his painting class.

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.] Did that help? Did it—

DARK BOB: The beating, uh yeah—[laughs]. Ever since then, we've been very careful and clean.

LIGHT BOB: Tidy, tidy. Yeah, yeah.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, what other stuff's going on? What are your views on larger issues? Larger—big matters—

LIGHT BOB: I'm getting an electric bike to go out into the woods.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Into the woods. [Laughs.] What woods would those be?

DARK BOB: That would be Woods Davy—if you know what that is.

LIGHT BOB: Uh, up there, above Malibu there's all sorts of trails and ways to, like, be with animals and not have to ride a normal bike inside.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay. And you're doing a lot of outdoorsy kinds of things, Light Bob. Why is that? Are you an outdoorsy kind of, active—

LIGHT BOB: Yeah. I like being out in life and being alive, and the ocean is really nice, and nature here, we had an amazing, uh, rainy season. So, the people are a little skittish, but nature is really robust, and really like fragrant and clean. There's no cars moving, so it's really wonderful.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

DARK BOB: The traffic's starting to come back a bit—

LIGHT BOB: You're right.

DARK BOB: —because we're reopening businesses.

LIGHT BOB: No, it's because you stand out in the freeway and try to get autographs.

DARK BOB: All right, that didn't make any sense, and so that will go down through eternity in the history of the Archive, thank you very much. See, when he says something stupid, it reflects on me, Matthew. I mean, I'm prepared to have a brilliant—

[00:15:09]

MATTHEW SIMMS: Big bro here [laughs]—

LIGHT BOB: Okay, big matters, big matters. You asked about Dark Bob. Bob bought Thrifty, the drugstore chain—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Really?

DARK BOB: There's no such thing as Thrifty; it's now Rite-Aid, and uh, and I have no ownership in Rite-Aid, not even in stocks or dividends.

LIGHT BOB: Oh, all right. Next question.

MATTHEW SIMMS: You guys do know each other, right [laughs]?

DARK BOB: Hello [he picks up the phone receiver again]? It's the art world. They want to know what Light Bob is talking about.

LIGHT BOB: [Laughs.] This—

DARK BOB: I'll check, and I'll get back to you. Thank you very much. [Hangs up the phone.]

LIGHT BOB: This is ridiculous. That—who was that you just—

DARK BOB: That was the art world. They wanted to know what the hell you're talking about.

LIGHT BOB: Dark Bob bought Thrifty.

DARK BOB: Okay. There is no Thrifty, so—whatever. Whatever.

MATTHEW SIMMS: You had a pin you wanted to share with us, Dark Bob.

DARK BOB: Well, I did, as a matter-of-fact. This gets right back down to, uh, politics and the election—where is that? There we go. [Holds up a red pin with white text that reads 'AN ARTIST FOR PRESIDENT' to the camera.] Now see how that might work out someday.

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.] Any recommendations or any specific artists or pairs of artists?

DARK BOB: Uh, well, let's see—

LIGHT BOB: Bob & Bob.

DARK BOB: Yeah. I think Bob & Bob would be good. I'd be president; he'd be vice president—

LIGHT BOB: No, I would—we'd be co-presidents, and we would have good measure toward all.

DARK BOB: That's right

[Cross talk.]

MATTHEW SIMMS: —or consulate or something.

LIGHT BOB: Yes.

MATTHEW SIMMS: That never worked well, historically, by the way.

DARK BOB: To have two presidents at once or—

MATTHEW SIMMS: Yeah, like back when Napoleon overthrew and became an emperor—

DARK BOB: Right, right.

LIGHT BOB: Matthew, if we—if you stepped into the Bob & Bob time machine, what—where would you go to? Would you go back to your favorite era or into the unknown?

MATTHEW SIMMS: I would go—I might go into the future to see these parties. I think I might want to step into one of these drawings.

LIGHT BOB: Oh, my god. That's so—

[Cross talk.]

DARK BOB: —one of our parties. You're in, Matthew. You just got into the door.

LIGHT BOB: I just took a screenshot of you; you're in.

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.] Okay.

LIGHT BOB: Now, how it works is if—when we draw you in Dark Bob's studio, you will arrive, you will appear—

DARK BOB: You will appear—it's as real as you are.

LIGHT BOB: We have Ed Kienholz, Bob Irwin, we have—who's that old guy that you like so much? The American—not Norman Rockwell, the other guy who was a troublemaker but an amazing muralist?

MATTHEW SIMMS: Oh. Uh—

DARK BOB: MacDonald-Wright? I don't even know who you're talking about.

LIGHT BOB: Oh, he was famous. Okay, well—

DARK BOB: I don't like anybody. I'm trying to look at the drawing right—he's not in our latest drawing; is that what you're talking about?

LIGHT BOB: I'm just trying to illustrate. I'm trying to draw to the point —that was a joke—

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.]

LIGHT BOB: —that whoever pictures we draw, they come to life.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, what if I'm in the shower, and you draw me—

LIGHT BOB: Oh no.

MATTHEW SIMMS: —do I suddenly show up in the drawing naked?

LIGHT BOB: No. No, no, no, no. The picture I took, like, you know, I took a screenshot, I'll do it again—you'll show up in a charcoal-gray shirt with a smile on.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay.

DARK BOB: There is going to be a showerhead above you. You will be the only person at the party with, you know, water coming down on you.

MATTHEW SIMMS: And then, the caption—do you do captions or no captions?

DARK BOB: Yeah, we do write on the drawings.

LIGHT BOB: Yeah, yeah. Tony Curtis is there. Um, who else? The last party was there—

DARK BOB: I don't know. What are you doing, reading obituaries?

LIGHT BOB: No.

DARK BOB: You are—the only living person Light Bob has mentioned is Robert Irwin, and, uh, is he still alive, Robert Irwin?

MATTHEW SIMMS: He is. He is, yes. But do you do thought bubbles?

DARK BOB: Yeah, we do.

LIGHT BOB: Yes, sir.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay.

LIGHT BOB: Yes, and a lot of them are paying Dark Bob stacks of cash; we don't know why yet.

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.] Okay.

DARK BOB: I ask, and they pay. What—you know.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, I'm looking here at the old clock, and I see we only have a couple minutes left—

LIGHT BOB: Aww.

MATTHEW SIMMS: —for our conversation—

DARK BOB: Matthew, let me ask you, is there something you're trying to elicit out of artists that we might, in the last couple of minutes here, contribute to—

LIGHT BOB: Why'd you use the word "illegal?" Why? What's—

DARK BOB: —to form your synopsis or your thesis?

MATTHEW SIMMS: This is good. We're checking in; we're just checking in [laughs].

DARK BOB: Checking—all right.

LIGHT BOB: Is that a restaurant you go to, The Checkin' Inn?

MATTHEW SIMMS: The Checkin' Inn—All the restaurants here in Long Beach are still closed more or less, you know, so—

DARK BOB: How come Light Bob's not wearing a mask?

MATTHEW SIMMS: I don't know.

LIGHT BOB: I don't wear masks, but I'll tell you one thing. So, Beverly Hills, some of the stores are closed; they're all nervous. Dark Bob shows up like this, and he's opening his own store there.

[00:20:04]

MATTHEW SIMMS: In the middle of the street?

LIGHT BOB: Yeah. I gotta get a break and do that. I missed it.

MATTHEW SIMMS: [Laughs.]

LIGHT BOB: Well, thank you. Thank you Matt, this has been great.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Well, thank you very much. I have enjoyed speaking with my two favorite Bobs, and I have to say—

DARK BOB: Favorite art team [laughs].

MATTHEW SIMMS: You know, um, I hope you stay well and productive and I can't wait to check out the party.

DARK BOB: Yeah.

LIGHT BOB: Yeah. We will send you a picture of the party. You will be in it.

MATTHEW SIMMS: Okay. Well, bye guys.

DARK BOB: Thank you, Matthew.

LIGHT BOB: Thank you. Thank you, so—

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]