



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Erica Lord, 2020
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Erica Lord on September 9, 2020. The interview took place in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and was conducted by Lara Evans 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

LARA EVANS: This is Lara Evans in Santa Fe, New Mexico interviewing Erica Lord also in Santa Fe on September 9, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Hi, Erica. How are you doing today?

ERICA LORD: Hi, doing [laughs]—doing all right [laughs]. Doing well today.

LARA EVANS: Could you tell me about how these past few months and weeks have been for you?

ERICA LORD: They've been, um—being across the board, but they've been—they've been tough, um. I think one of the biggest things that has been challenging is being alone. I live alone, and so, I—other than Zoom conferences or talks—I really don't see people [laughs], um. Or, you know, I have, like, a friend that I'll walk with [laughs]. Or my landlord, but other than that, I don't really see a lot of people in person, and I just, um—talking to people over Zoom is important, but it—nothing is quite the same as seeing people in person, and so, that's, I think I'm a pretty social person, um. I like people. So, it's been hard to be without that. It's been lonely.

LARA EVANS: Yeah. Did the—has the, um, COVID impacted your artistic making?

ERICA LORD: Yes, I think, in some ways, directly and in a lot of ways indirectly in that, um—I think the biggest thing that—is that, you know, the, um—one of categories that's at a higher risk—my immune system is stressed because I deal with a lot of pain as I'm still recovering from a serious accident, um, and so, all of those surgeries and all of the treatments and things that I was scheduled to have, um, done over the past six months all got postponed or delayed or cancelled, and because that affects my health and my ability to sit and do anything of endurance for any period of time, doing art which requires a lot of focus and endurance all the time [laughs] has been really difficult.

So, I think, like, indirectly that's the biggest way it affects me, and I have to be careful about going out in the community because of the additional risks that I'm dealing with and then directly, like, uh, a lot of my time has been spent—I, kind of, shifted focus with a lot of my work that most of my creative energy has been getting put into sewing and making masks—that I've been making a lot for my students and their families, for my friends, and, uh—and different people around the community, and so, I'm glad that I'm able to do that, that I have the skills to sew and do that, but it means that I haven't been—at first, I thought I was going to get a lot of work done during this period [laughs] And then the reality is that, I—I feel like I'm still trying to find my footing and balance during this time to find a flow [laughs].

LARA EVANS: If—if it weren't for COVID, what would you be working on, do you think?

ERICA LORD: I think, um—

LARA EVANS: Did you have something planned?

ERICA LORD: Yes [laughs]. I had—I had planned to do these, um—I was continuing with this DNA-beaded series with these burden straps—these DNA belts and this dog tuppie [laughs] that I was making, um, but those looms are too large to really bring home, and so, they're at my studio, and—but I haven't had—it's—our studio has been, kind of, not closed, but we've been asked to, um, not come in unless it's really important, and so, the amount of time that I've been down there is dramatically reduced, and so, like, those bigger projects that I thought I was going to be working on throughout the summer have all gotten, kind of, postponed and delayed because it's just—they're not something that I can bring home.

I live in a small—very small studio apartment, and so, it's not—you can't really do a lot of work here [laughs]. You know?

LARA EVANS: So, you mentioned having students. Has there been an impact there? I imagine there has been.

[00:05:02]

ERICA LORD: Yes, that—so, I teach—I forgot [laughs]—I teach at The Institute of American Indian Arts, and even though I'm a part-time teacher, I was also helping to develop some of the first MFA classes for our MFA studio arts program that we should launch next year, hopefully, um, but usually the summer allows teachers, you know, a little bit of a break to, kind of, refresh and rest for a second, but this summer has been just—it's felt like non-stop work, like, we never got a spring break. We—it hasn't felt, like, much of a summer break at all [laughs]. That's—we're either planning or trying to figure out creative ways to teach, especially teach art over an online, you know, format, and so, a—I feel like a lot of energy has been put into that and still scrambling, like, you know, the rules or what's happening with the students changes all the time which forces us to adapt and shift our—our teaching methods and what we're teaching or how we are teaching it.

So, I feel like a lot of that energy, like, I would have been more prepared for the semester when it started, but my classes kept get—kept changing and then, you know, the challenges that we're dealing with, with students, especially our students, a lot of them still being back on the res where there's, you know, limited or non-existent internet and cell service, but they still want to learn and have access to us. So, it's been hard [laughs]. We've learned to become very adaptable. And I'm glad that I know—I feel like I'm more tech-savvy or feel more comfortable with an online format and with tech stuff than some of the other teachers, but it's still, um—so, we've been helping each other a lot, like—and that's been really nice, but it's a lot of work [laughs].

LARA EVANS: Um—Are there some things that you think haven't been captured by standard accounts of our current crisis? Um, I'm thinking both about COVID and the racial unrest, the conflict over public monuments, all those things together.

ERICA LORD: Yeah, um, one thing, like—when, especially with my, um, freshman or younger students, like, one thing I repeat over and over is, like, you know, I like—I really like art history as a means of looking back—looking back because history tells us dates and events and, like, archaeology finds objects or sociology talks about belief systems, anthropology talks about people, but art history, kind of, brings those all together, like—and one of the ways I would test this with them was, like—like, you guys are all too young to know—to have lived through the Vietnam War which we all know that, like, what do people think about it? You know, like, how did they feel about the Vietnam War, and, you know, it wasn't popular, and I was, like, how do we know that, and it, kind of, always, like, hits—has—they have this, like, ah ha situation.

I'm, like, it's because of the art—art and music and poetry, like, it's creative expression that helps us to understand, like, how people are actually feeling or thinking or reacting to things at that time, and so, like, even though there's all these—I mean, they're so much happening in the news right now, like, you're seeing between racial tension and protests and, like, COVID, and all these things, and I don't think it's any, um, coincidence that they're all, kind of, erupting together. It's—I think when we look back on this, it'll be all the more important to look back at the artistic or creative expression that came out during this time because it's one of the—we're being forced to slow down which is really great [laughs]. Like—and contemplate these things and think about this stuff, um.

I feel like I—it seems like a lot of other artists that I'm talking—that I talk to are also dealing with the same, kind of, challenges where we're not as creative—we're not as productive as we first thought we were going to be. We're not getting as much done as we wanted to or thought we were, but I think eventually a lot will come of this time, and I think that's going to be really important to look back on. There's just so much happening, and artists and creatives in general have always been the ones that, kind of, help us understand the thoughts and feelings, I think. So, I think that'll be—does that answer—

[00:10:03]

LARA EVANS: Yeah.

ERICA LORD: —does that [laughs].

LARA EVANS: What, um, memories or lessons feel the most urgent for you in this moment?

ERICA LORD: I think the—I think I was saying being forced to slow down and connect with people again, um—people that I, you know, at first, you know, it always, like, push off calling or doing something, like, this is the first time in a long time that I've talk—actually talked to people over the phone that I haven't talked to in a long time, like, that—that's—those memories and those moments and, like, feeling like it's okay to randomly reach out to people and to say, like, "Hey, I care about you [laughs]. How are you doing," um—has been really important and just—yeah, slowing down and, kind of, thinking about what's most important and learning how to help each other. I think—and finding that community and finding resilience in that community I think has been the, um—has been what's been an urgent is what's gotten me through all of this, like, reconnecting and finding people and finding community despite being able to see people, um.

I think that's been really important [laughs]. I don't have a family here to connect with, but I—it's been nice to talk to other people that, you know, are spending time at home with their kids or their parents or hoping that—and for all of us to be doing that at the same time, like, is really, you know, like, I really hope a lot comes from that. I hope we remember this or carry that forward [laughs] after this—oops.

LARA EVANS: Are there, um—are there ways that you see it affecting family at home in Alaska or in Michigan that are different from what you see here in Santa Fe?

ERICA LORD: I know that, um, my—they've been really strict—I'm glad that Alaska in particular has been really strict about, um, their quarantine and stuff that they're not allowing people to, uh—if people fly into Alaska, they're not being allowed to fly within Alaska unless they've quarantined for two weeks because that's one of the scary things about the village is is, like, we don't have hospitals or doctors or nurses and a lot of them. So if someone gets seriously ill, they have to fly into Fairbanks or Anchorage. So, we—they have to do everything they can to prevent that from—that virus from getting into the villages, and so, like, that, kind of, um, because at first, I was thinking about going home and then found out I wouldn't really be able to [laughs]. Or would be really hard to, um, and having to let go of that was really—was hard, but I'm glad that they're taking those extra precautions up there because we saw in the Navajo Nation how it just, I mean, everyone is in such close quarters and they're very family-oriented, and so, the virus can spread so quickly.

So, Michigan has been—Upper Michigan has been pretty, um—the—had pretty low numbers still, and so—and then scene, I mean, I guess my mom just hangs out at home gardening, too [laughs] for a lot of this. Like I said, they just want to take down the Mackinac Bridge between upper and lower Michigan because—between the hot spot and one of the coldest spots. So—but, um, yeah, other than that, I haven't seen much difference, but know—I know it's impacted a lot of people in Alaska, if not directly, like, the economy and the jobs and stuff have affected—I mean, suicide rate is really high right now, and that—that's really tough. It's always pretty high up there, but this is triggering a lot of people. It's been, kind of, hard.

LARA EVANS: Where do you see your—your artistic work going in the future as things—I don't know—either get better or worse or stay the same?

ERICA LORD: Um, I think, like, I think it'll take some time for us to feel comfortable enough to start really connecting with people again, like, I'm so eager to see people, but I know I can't, and so, like, even as things start to open back up, I think people will be slow to return normal. I know I will, but I want to, um. So, the, um—what was it again [laughs]. How we—how will it change [inaudible]—

LARA EVANS: I was asking about your artwork. The project that you were working on before the pandemic started—the burden strap—

[00:15:01]

ERICA LORD: Yeah.

LARA EVANS: I was wondering is—do you feel that work will still be relevant? Do you anticipate it changing?

ERICA LORD: I've—well, I am definitely, um—I had started on a—research to start doing a COVID

one because that's one of the type of diseases that you would use to—the DNA—or RNA test that I use to code the patterns, um—they—they're something—they have to be a type of disease or virus in this case and COVID fits one of those. So, that's one of the—yeah, like, I had a list of things that I was going to work on and COVID's getting pushed, kind of, to the top because I want to work—run that and, like—

LARA EVANS: Can you explain what the burden strap is and the DNA and—what—what is that?

ERICA LORD: Yeah. So, I look at—I like taking traditional objects and applying them to, like, a more contemporary experience, um. Should I put the image on the screen?

LARA EVANS: Sure, yeah.

ERICA LORD: And let me pull this up, um. So, here's one—sorry, it just took me a second to get the image ready, um, and—okay, okay—close share screen and go to photos. Okay, so this is, um, just a rough shot of my most—the last one I completed, um. You can see an example of the test—what these DNA or RNA tests look like on the bottom and then how I translate them into beads above, um. That's me working on one, um, [inaudible] match the patterns, and I've worked on a couple different form—oops [laughs] formats, like, this is one.

Okay, so, this is—one of these burden straps looked like, and I like taking traditional objects and applying them to a contemporary thing. So, these are drawn from traditional baby belts or burden straps, um, which were these, you know, you would—if you needed to carry a bundle of sticks or a jug of water or something you carried on your back and the strap would go underneath the baby or the burden and then wrap here, and so, I was trying to think well, like, well, what—what's a contemporary burden that, like—because I don't carry bundles of sticks or babies around—

[They laugh.]

So, I thought, you know, well, diabetes is the first thing that popped into my head, and so, I was, like, well, I'll create a diabetes burden strap, and I had a friend that was a microbiologist who first showed me these tests, and he was like, "Here. I don't know you—what you would do with them, but I had a feeling you'd like them because they're colorful" [laughs]. I was, like, "Yes," and so, I started looking at diseases that affect Native populations disproportionately, so diabetes, um, certain cancers, a lot of, um, like—uh—the uh—tuberculosis, and COVID, like, for—at the beginning of the pandemic, like, in April—March and April, I think we're, like, what—two or three percent of the population here in New Mexico—very small, like, but we took up 58 percent of the COVID cases, and so, that—those kind of crazy disproportionate numbers—I think that that work is still really relevant, if not more relevant now, and it, kind of, just shows the, sort of, socioeconomic and racist, like, alignment of these diseases that healthcare and treatment is—is affected by the socio-economic reasons which are often tied to race, and we are, you know—Natives have always been really high.

That's why we're number one on almost every disease [laughs] and high-risk, and so, I want to, um—so, like, one of the projects, like, most of them have been burden straps like this, um. So, COVID will be a burden strap and then things like the dog tuppie or dog blanket was, um—is the —what is it—to, um—I'm blanking on the serum—diphtheria serum—because diphtheria was the disease that, um, that I did or [inaudible] commemorates the sled dog run from my village Nenana to Nome where they brought the diphtheria serum by dog sled to save the village, and so, that's why that one is being, um, beaded into a dog blanket form instead. [The dog run is called, "Iditarod."]

[00:20:17]

So, like, I'm really excited to get back to those. I feel, like, at least this is giving me a lot of time home to do the research part of things [laughs]. But it's, like—so, once we're able to go back to the studio regularly, I feel, like—I hope that I'll have, like, this explosion of creating things because, um, I'll just be happy to be back there [laughs]. I think it'll be—I mean, other artists are also coming slowly back into the studio so that will, like—the collaborative aspect of some of these projects will have to wait on them, too, but I'm excited to finally make things again [laughs].

LARA EVANS: Thank you so much, Erica Lord, for sharing your experiences during this difficult time.

ERICA LORD: Yeah, thank you. I'll be glad and curious to see how everyone else is doing, too. So —look forward to it.

LARA EVANS: All right.

ERICA LORD: Thank you [laughs].

LARA EVANS: Take care.

ERICA LORD: Thanks, bye.

LARA EVANS: Bye.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]