



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Allana Clarke,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Allana Clarke on August 18, 2020. The interview took place at Clarke's studio in New Haven, CT, 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: Hello. Hi, Allana Clarke.

ALLANA CLARKE: Hi. How are you?

NYSSA CHOW: Good. Hi, I see you're in your studio. Thanks for joining us today.

ALLANA CLARKE: Yes, yes, yes. It's wonderful to meet you virtually and start this conversation.

NYSSA CHOW: Same, same, um. Well, as you know, we're focusing on preserving this moment in the form of these conversations. What is your experience of this moment, and in all the ways that it's absolutely particular to you, right? Um, and maybe even how it's informed your practice at this point, um. So maybe you can just start with this question, which is, what do we need to know in order to understand how you, in particular, have experienced this current moment this year?

ALLANA CLARKE: [Laughs.] Yeah, um, so let's see. I think that—because, yeah, so—[laughs] one, where are the words even going to come from? There are so many traumas associated with this moment, and it's really hard to even compartmentalize or like create some sort of like lineage or like even make any sense out of it. And so even for me to think about [laughs], you know, what you would need to know in terms of—that, then, relate to how I'm understanding this moment. My brain is just like blah [gestures] [laughs]. That's what initially comes to mind. Then after I get through that complete brain freeze, um, and the like confusion of where to actually even start, I mean, I think that, overall—I mean, I—so not kind of thinking about COVID-19, so putting that trauma aside and thinking about our current like political realm, which then, of course, intertwines with COVID, but if COVID wasn't happening, but we were still [laughs] existing within, you know, complete social and political unrest, I think from how I'm understanding this moment is that none of this is new at all. Right? Like, all of the things that are now hashtags or conversations that people who have never really thought about these things are having, like this is nothing new to me. And not to sound like pretentious, or like, um—I don't want to curse on this, but like [laughs], you know, an asshole.

But like, if you exist in a body that is socially and politically marginalized, this is not new. This is your everyday existence. This is—you know, has been your reality since, you know, the second you are brought into the world. Right? Um, and if you are lucky enough to make it into your adult life, right, and your life not be tragically, um, taken from you and brutally taken from you, right? Like you are still existing within frameworks of white supremacy, um, and everything about how you understand yourself and how you navigate a world is conditioned by that truth, you know? Um, and it's really difficult because it's completely overwhelming, um. And how do you even find ways or even moments of, like, solace. Right? Or even opportunities to really reflect on the specificities of your existence, um, and try to see that bigger, larger picture, right, where you exist and then all of these other entities exist, right? Like, how can we see that system? Like getting there is so, so difficult. But my visual art practice, right, and the like kind of curiosity and like inclination to continually deconstruct things, like that has allowed me to be in this position where I can do that, um. And so that's kind of good, kind of bad, in the way that—so good in the way that none of these things are new.

[00:05:03]

I've already been thinking about these things, and I want to think about that bigger picture, right? Like, how can we exist in ways that are not completely like compartmentalized, right? And exist in ways where we orient our bodies towards equity and justice, um. And then simply, but

also doesn't seem very simple [laughs] of like seeing another person's humanity, you know? Um, and so, yeah, long/short of it is none of this is new. And I've already been thinking about all of these things that are now hashtags and social media one-liners, right? Um, I have no solutions. I don't know if we can ever [laughs] like really resolve this, right? I mean, especially if not everyone within your society or your community is interested in going through this process of deconstruction, um, and reorientation, um. So, yeah, yeah [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: I mean, this may be far too large a question, but let's see, what do—what does a process of deconstruction look like? I know that is huge, but, you know?

ALLANA CLARKE: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Even the brush strokes of it, what does it look like?

ALLANA CLARKE: Yeah, I mean, I'm absolutely still figuring that out, um. But I think for me, what that looks like is a process of un-learning. Um, and what I mean by that is—so like—so there's an artwork behind me, um. And I think actually this piece is a wonderful example of this, like, process of like un-learning and reorientation, um. And so my background is I'm Caribbean from Trinidad, um. And then that that means many things, right, so I'm an immigrant within the United States, but I'm perceived as being African American, right? Um, but I'm also, then—because I'm from the Caribbean, there's this history of colonialism, right? That's integrated within my being. And so the ways in which I have now come to understand colonialism and white supremacy to have operated within me personally is through the histories that I inherited, so from the matriarchs of my family, so specifically my mother, um.

And so these kind of beautification processes, right? Which would be like using skin lightening creams or, um, pinching the bridge of my nose every night in an effort to, like, straighten it. So it's not so wide, right, and flat, um and then using like chemical hair relaxers and weaves, right? And so the material that this work behind me is made out of is hair bonding glue. And so it's basically liquid rubber latex. And you use that—you take a small amount of the material and you put it on like a weave, which is hair, and then there's threads or it creates like a long track that you then attach to your head. So literally, just gluing in someone else's hair [laughs] into your head, um. And that hair is straight. It's long. And, you know, not that, in the abstract, there is anything kind of maybe wrong with that, right? Like this like history of hair for Black women is really complicated, right? And there are many different reasons why you would choose to like transform your hair. But for me specifically, like these were traditions that were passed down. And I had no choice in these processes, but I then understood them to be necessary and normative. And me even like seeing my hair without it having—without it being, like, chemically straightened, like I didn't know what to do with myself. It was like something [laughs] that I understood to be completely wrong that I needed to correct. And so then you engage in these really destructive rituals, right, and then over time, right, like the weaves and the chemical relaxers, like, makes your hair follicles really brittle. And so it's damaging you, literally damaging you physically and also psychologically.

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So this kind of lack that you understood existing within you innately can become real and physical and true. And so now it's this kind of really perverse, um, interdependent relationship between you and these materials. And so as, you know, I grew older, I started questioning these processes, and I didn't want to do this anymore. But I—it was like really agonizing kind of severing and separating myself from that, um, and allowing my hair to exist in its natural state, right? It's kinky. It's radical. And that is okay, right? There's nothing [laughs] wrong with that. That is who I am, um. And so, then, this process of like un-learning and reorientation, for me, occurred in that realization and then bringing this material into the studio, um. And it also, then, existing in—at these various intersections where it is object based, but it's also performative, um. And I'm pouring hundreds and hundreds [laughs] of bottles of this material on a flat surface, usually in like a rectangular shape, um. And then it starts to cure from the top, creating this like really thick skin, so the longer it cures, the thicker the skin gets, um. And then I am jumping in with all parts of my body: my hands, my elbows, my feet, um, parts of my legs, right, and performing gestures that are associated with gestures performed on the body, like twisting, pulling, pinching, um, ripping. And then those kind of movements are captured within the surface of the—of the piece. And then they kind of then completely cure, and it's frozen in time. And so I am creating new rituals with this material that are not destructive, right? So I'm reorienting them in a way that is now healing and cathartic for me, um. And that has been a really, really powerful and an extremely transformative process for me, um.

And so, yeah, so for me, that's like an example of it. And then the work, in the end, I'm then kind of peeling it and then reshaping it, so it's not, um, ultimately in a rectangular shape, so it's kind of break—again, like breaking that rectangle, um. And then the material is also kind of alive because overtime, it dries out. And then I have to moisturize it, um, with—I'm going to grab the bottle because I just think it's so funny [laughs.] [Walks off-screen to grab bottle] So I have to moisturize it with this material called Black Beauty.

NYSSA CHOW: What?

ALLANA CLARKE: I know, which is a latex polisher [laughs.] And so I'm, you know, literally moisturizing and caring for the skin [laughs] of this object. Um, so, yeah, like so thinking about these processes and rituals of care that, for me, were very like destructive and traumatic and reorienting those gestures to serve in my healing, to make myself whole again.

NYSSA CHOW: Well, just a little earlier when we were speaking off tape, you said of the existence poems.

ALLANA CLARKE: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Stunning. Do you want to talk a little bit more about what that means?

ALLANA CLARKE: Yeah, yeah. And so, a little bit of the history, so like, my practice is interdisciplinary. My background was in photography, but my practice in its current state, I make video performance works. I make weird objects that kind of exist at an intersection. It is this. It's not this. It is and not all at the same time [laughs,] um. And then text and language has also become a really important part of my practice, um. And so a piece—or a project that I was working on before these pieces, I was using cocoa butter as my material, um, and creating these, um, poems with the material. And so I was getting wooden letters fabricated, making a mold out of that, and then melting down cocoa butter, pouring it into the mold, and then I pull it. And now I have a letter that's made out of cocoa butter. Um, and—wait, I completely forgot your question.

[00:15:29]

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, it's just—

[They laugh.]

The moment, okay? It's the moment; it's not us. We were talking about—[cross talk.]

ALLANA CLARKE: Oh, the poem, yes, yes. I was like, why did I start talking about this? [Laughs.] But, so, to make those works, you know, I'm always reading. I'm always consuming, uh, literature. And I'm then always writing and kind of pulling out like fragments, either words or sentences, and then reconstructing those things to make poems of my own. And so from—through that process, then kind of bringing that same idea into these works in terms of how I'm titling them, so like the title of the series is *As the Ground*, and then each work will be individually titled, which I haven't like figured all of them out yet. I haven't had a complete conversation with every piece yet to see what they want to be named [laughs.] But the ones that I have and how I'm thinking about it, um, or thinking about it existing is like little sentences or phrases or words that, if you're kind of like reading them, they are also very poetic and hint to the conceptual nature of the work, um. And then also could be like strung together in different orders to create new like articulations and new meanings, as well, that would then further break open the work that you're seeing on the wall or in whatever space it's, um, installed in. So that's a bit of my thinking about that, but not—it not being completely done or figure it out, but how I'm going through the process. Um, like, the decision making process, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, I just wanted to cycle back to another point of view that you mentioned, you said I am, you know, immigrant as well. And, you know, in—I heard you talk about this idea that there are multiple narratives, right? There are multiple histories, as well. And I'm just wondering how—I mean, if at all, how has that aspect of who you are, this—that you being an immigrant, you say, what does that make visible to you about where you are now? This country that you're in, this place that you're in, this [inaudible] that you're in, this life that you're in, this history that you're in?

ALLANA CLARKE: Yeah, I mean, I—so, you know, I think that's ever-evolving. And for me, what that initially felt like was, you know, this idea that I wasn't Black enough, um, which is really

hard, right? Because that would come from other people who are Black, right, within an American cultural context. But to them, I wasn't necessarily Black enough. And I—and so that's one thing, which is—that's—I'll circle back to it [laughs.] But—well, okay, no—I'll start—I'll start there and then kind of think about [laughs] how I'm understanding this in our present time, or even not understanding it, but anyways, um, so, yeah, this idea of not being Black enough, then, led me to kind of wonder, like, what does it mean to be Black in the first place? Right? Like, what do I need to take ownership of that I'm not, right? Because I don't know, right? And how Blackness is articulated is really different, depending on diaspora, right? Um, and so then I—you know, I kind of just like went through this process through either like literature—mostly literature, um, so like thinking about this like intersection of being, for me specifically, Caribbean, but being Black, um. So I was reading a lot of like Frantz Fanon and like trying to really understand these different histories, um, and understand like the compartmentalization of Blackness, right? And ultimately, what I understood is that—oh, and Audre Lorde, as well, right. She talks about this, this like notion of not being Black enough, um.

[00:20:37]

But ultimately, what I decided on is this idea that is, I think, just passed down to, you know, many different groups of people. But I'm specifically thinking about being Black and being a woman in the world, this idea of just not being enough and not being able to kind of find comfort or exist in a space of rest or tenderness, right? Like, you're kind of constantly being asked to, like, defend yourself or reduce yourself, right? And so then that idea of not being Black enough or not being X enough, like that's a tool of white supremacy, right, to make you believe that you are existing within some type of lack, right. And then also to look at each other, right, to look at the people who you could have camaraderie with, right, but look at them with suspicion, so you can't go through this process of unification and then go through this process of like understanding the complexity of your subject positions because you're always looking at each other, um, suspiciously, right, and with doubt. And so those are all tools of the larger system to divide us, right? And for me and I think [laughs] maybe just all of us, that is still continuing to play out, right? It's pitting us—pitting the masses against each other in an effort to kind of divert attention away from the larger systems and institutions, um, that are truly shaping our existence, right, um, and forcing us to bicker amongst each other and not be able to see each other's humanity, right, and not be able to, um, help each other, right, and kind of unify. Um, yeah, and so I get that—I guess that was a really long answer, but [laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, well, maybe for the last question, I referred to something you said at the very beginning. You know, I noticed this tension. You said, you know, this is not new, right, which implies a knowing, right?

ALLANA CLARKE: Yeah. Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: There is an incoherence to this moment as well, [inaudible], you know?

ALLANA CLARKE: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: I don't know if you can speak to that tension that you feel, or maybe there is nothing you can say about incoherence.

[They laugh.]

ALLANA CLARKE: I know. Ay yai yai, yeah. I mean, I think, yeah, this like knowing, not knowing, certainty, uncertainty, and like that being a spectrum, but I just—I ultimately think it's just so sad because we live in such a—and exist within such a small fragment of the universe and even our understanding it—right, we are only existing within the known universe, right? There are so many unknown knowns, right, like we know we don't know some things [laughs.] And it's just, to me, so sad, like the state of affairs, because, God, the world, the universe is so huge and fascinating. And like the power—like humanity is so powerful. Like we've literally created miracles, right? Technology, like the fact that I can talk to you like this or like the technology that we all are accessing every day, like that is incredible.

[00:25:22]

It's mind blowing. And, you know, technology has accelerated so rapidly that 100 years ago, I don't even think, you know, maybe people could imagine the things that [laughs] we have right now. You know, so, like, humanity is so powerful. There's so much potential for good. And to orient ourselves towards, like, life and like expansion of our understanding of who we are and

our place in the universe and, you know, this may sound like super hippie-ish. And I don't often [laughs] articulate these things, but I just—and it's really kind of overwhelming, if I really just think about it too much, because I just—I just think it's so sad. There's so much more to the world and to the universe and to our existence. And I like—why [laughs] do we choose this, right? And like, I guess, you know, any kind of generation or era of people, there was probably someone saying what I'm saying right now, right? So I don't know; maybe that's just a part of humanity, but it's, why is that a part? Why does it—and does it need to continue? Right. And what is the purpose? What's the point of that? Right, and so yeah, like I want to have hope, but hope is such a tricky word and space because—and yet I often kind of just default to that, right, especially when I'm like speaking to other people about everything that's happening because, you know, if you don't have hope, then what do you have? I don't know. Like, is the other side of hope action, right? And is hope too much of, like, a magical, imaginary space where, like, you're taking a completely hands-off approach and then hoping everything will turn out okay, right? [Laughs.] So can we have action, right? Like, can we exist in a space of like action and intersectional transformation? Um, and I do not know. I am trying to do that, right, um, but how do you model something that you've never seen necessarily, right? [Laughs.] Um, like you have little bits and fragments and, right, that you have seen, and now you know, and now you inhabit. But how do you, like, make that a framework? Um, and how do you actualize something that has not necessarily existed on this scale?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

ALLANA CLARKE: Yeah. I do not know what I'm trying [laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: But it almost—it makes me wish there was a word for not knowing, waiting to see, and living in the meantime.

ALLANA CLARKE: Right?

[They laugh.]

Where are the dictionary experts or the linguists? Come up with something. [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, well, Allana, thank you so much, especially for the additional treat of being able to see the work in progress, oh my gosh.

ALLANA CLARKE: Yes!

NYSSA CHOW: Thank you for giving us a chance. Um, is there anything I didn't ask you about you would want to leave here?

ALLANA CLARKE: Um, I don't think so. I think—I think this was like a therapy session, I feel.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: I'm so glad.

ALLANA CLARKE: I'm feeling a lot lighter right now.

NYSSA CHOW: Me, too, right? Sometimes this—all the small connections are the huge—the biggest moments in the day, right?

ALLANA CLARKE: Yeah, oh gosh, absolutely.

[They laugh.]

Oh, man. Yeah, but maybe I do have—yeah. I hope to see action in the world [laughs.] And there's so, so much potential and possibility. And we just need to access it and activate it. Right? All of the like amazing attributes that we admire and idealize in other people, like they exist within us as well, right. Like you have the power to transform your future through action. Um, and it's time. And let's do this. I'm ready. I've been ready [laughs.]

[00:30:40]

NYSSA CHOW: Gosh, "I'm ready. I've been ready," is the best last words—

[They laugh.]

I can think of. Thank you so much.

ALLANA CLARKE: I should copyright it, put it on a T-shirt.

[They laugh.]

Thank you so much.

NYSSA CHOW: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]