



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Jessie Benton,
2020 August 10

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jessie Benton on August 18, 2020. The interview took place at Benton's home in Chilmark, Massachusetts, and was conducted by Josh T. Franco 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

JOSH T. FRANCO: All right. This is Josh T. Franco interviewing Jessie Benton at her home in Chilmark, Massachusetts, on Martha's Vineyard on August 10th, 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. That's the scripted part, and it's done. And so, Jessie, thank you for joining us for 20 minutes to document this year. So, I have some specific questions about your father, Thomas Hart Benton. I kind of wonder what you might think. We can talk about that, but first, I just want to know how you have been since March, since COVID-19 sort of hit us all.

JESSIE BENTON: Well, I was dealing with another physical issue. And so, the isolation and the quarantine—I had—I was already in quarantine. I was going through chemo, and I couldn't see anybody anyway.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Right.

JESSIE BENTON: And because of my extended family lifestyle, we're all quarantined together. So, I'm not experiencing the loneliness and isolation that most people do.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JESSIE BENTON: And, uh, which is, you know—makes a big, big difference for how I see the world. It hardly changes. So, I'm just sad that I can't see my children, you know, as often as I would like and like that. But generally speaking, it hasn't been hard on us as it is. Our business is run with Zoom, you know, and we can socialize and FaceTime and all that kind of stuff. So, for me, it's—isolation and quarantine has been, um, a wonderful kind of experience, to tell you the truth.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Oh, interesting. Who are some of your extended family quarantine bubble?

JESSIE BENTON: In the quarantine bubble in Los Angeles, there's 14 of us, and the children who live there, we had "gate dates" we call them. And because we have a big gate, and they could park outside the gate, and we would park on—I mean, we would walk down to the end of the gate and we could socialize with a wine bottle and glass in between, you know, the outside and the inside of the property.

So, you know, it hasn't been terrible. And it's been, certainly—we've all come up with creative ways to manage, and that's just to throw it out. I mean, one of the blessings of COVID, I think, is the fact that people are quarantined, and they are—there's so much creative—creativity coming out of the Internet and the YouTube and all that. And it's wonderful in one way and very difficult, I know, for people in another way.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. But how different it would be if we did not have this technology, right?

JESSIE BENTON: Isn't it amazing? Especially Zoom, I mean, Zoom came at the same time. You know, the comet, COVID, and Zoom all kind of arrived just in the nick of time. You know? I think—I don't know, but—

JOSH T. FRANCO: And am I correct that you also operate a hotel in Baja? Is that right? And—

JESSIE BENTON: Yes, in Mexico.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —how has that been impacted?

JESSIE BENTON: It's been very affected, but at the same time, we're in a very isolated area and the hotel is set up with different casitas, so we can ensure privacy and, you know, private dinners, private terraces, everything is. And so, we've been running at a lesser capacity, but we have continued to be running except for these last summer months, but we're starting again at the end of October.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great.

JESSIE BENTON: I haven't been able to go, but the hotel is fine. Yeah.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, you've described L.A. a little bit. Can you describe the context where you are now?

JESSIE BENTON: Ah, beautiful Martha's Vineyard, terrible place to be isolated. [Laughs.] With my 13 turkeys who are my pets that I feed every morning, my swimming pool, my view of the North Shore, you know, I can't complain, let me tell you.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, yeah. And what—

JESSIE BENTON: We have a shopper. You know, I don't go to the grocery store, so we have a girl who shops for us, and she puts the groceries in the car. Then we disinfect the packages, and then we bring home the groceries, so that's the way it is everywhere.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. Um, what about the painting behind you?

JESSIE BENTON: That's a vineyard. I can lean away. See it? It's a vineyard still life, probably done in the '50s. The vase that's behind me also is the base in the painting.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That's nice.

JESSIE BENTON: And it's vineyard flowers, it's coreopsis and, you know, wild roses. And it's just a lovely still life.

JOSH T. FRANCO: It's great. Yeah, I do—it's so—I've been—like, defining America is really a conversation again right now. It's always a conversation, but right now, the other thing that's happened in 2020 is all of the events around Black Lives Matter and around racism and how we do talk about it and don't talk about it in this country. And I found myself hungry for definitions of America and things I could think about and think against. And so, I picked up, you know, again, your father's book, *An Artist in America*, which is such a great kind of romp, you know, art history is romp through the country.

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And, um, and so many pictures of what America are—is and are were produced by your father for people in public buildings and in museums. Even if you don't know his name, you've probably seen his works and held then in their head. So, I was looking at *An Artist in America* and this interview is also—we've been asking the other interviewer—the interviewees who are mostly artists, what's it like to be an artist in America in 2020? So, this is just really helpful kind of historical touch point.

So, I just want to read you a quote from that and see—and then ask you if it still holds up, it's still an important question. So, this is the fourth edition and Thomas Hart Benton added a little afterword in each new edition, and this one is written 18 years after the previous one. Um, so he's writing later, and he says, "A great many thinking Americans, even in artistic circles, felt that the concept of an American art with an American content was too important to be brushed aside." So, I wonder if you think—and if he might think it's still important that there be such a thing as an American art.

JESSIE BENTON: I certainly do. I have—how could I not?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JESSIE BENTON: I mean, I was raised that, you know, art should represent the places where you live, what you feel, what you believe in, and it's about time to redefine America anyway. And I think my father's definition of America back in the 1930s when he was doing the murals was an explicit definition of our own history and of what America was to him, which was a melting pot. He was married to an immigrant. He championed the underdog. He—especially the African

American, of course, and he represented them in all of his murals. I think he's the only American painter who painted, you know, African Americans as people rather than as slaves. And before that, you know, there was a—there were paintings, but it was always in terms of slavery.

And even though his feelings about that—he was a progressive back then. Um, of course, when he was young and beginning, the ideas of communism and socialism were—they were becoming more and more popular beliefs. And of course, the crowd here on Martha's Vineyard where I was raised was a bunch of progressives and liberals that started the whole thing.

And so, for me and for my father, I can't detach an image of my father or a feeling of my father from what is happening now is finally happening. I mean, we were so sure in the '60s that the civil rights movement was going to change America. That's why I live in a commune. I was part of that whole pressure and river of positive sentiment and life to go in the right direction, which was now called the left direction.

But it's like what's happening now is so close to that, except that it should have happened then and now it's happening now. I don't care when it happens, as long as it does happen. And the fact that the protests are continuing, I mean, if I was—I would be out on the streets. If it wasn't for the COVID, I would be out there, too.

But, um, that's what daddy loved. He loved the movement of the '60s because he said it had taken too long as it was. I mean, you've got to remember, when I grew up in Kansas City, Missouri, I remember quite well when Ralph Bunch, the head of the—present head of the U.N. at the time, came to Kansas City. There was no place he could stay, so we put him up. And that was true. And it was something that—it was unacceptable. But there was—it was—in my house, it wasn't there.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JESSIE BENTON: And, uh, it wasn't in some people, but, um, it was something that—it's been, you know, something that has been a sad, sad story in this country that has to be changed. And we do need justice and—but back to art. Art is, as you say, I mean, I have friends who are artists, and it's very difficult for them now because there's no venue for them to sell paintings. Galleries are closed, or—I have a particular friend who used to sell his paintings in a bar in a small town in New York, upper New York state. It was an artsy bar, but that's where he made his money in the summer, and then he had a winter job, and that's closed.

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But—and then yet there's other artists who are doing incredibly successful where you have to be vetted before you can even see or buy any of these paintings. So, I think that art right now is—I think I would agree with my father's view of gallery owners and museum owners, quite different from the way I feel about it. But it seems, um, a little on the effete side, as he would say. That was one of his favorite words. Precious—that it's not robust. The art market isn't robust enough, inclusive enough. I know it's out there, but it's not getting enough popular sentiment. And I think that's what daddy really loved the most was making noise about art that would be a public conversation.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Do you think all the disruptions of this year will lead to undoing some of that preciousness?

JESSIE BENTON: I hope so, because it would become—it would make—it would give less well-known artists more of a chance. And that's, of course, what you always hope for. It's in any creative field that there's room for the new, and whatever it is, and the old. In other words, you know, you don't exclude one for the other. It should be a continuum of just enthusiasm. And I know that there's—the market's big right now. I know that because the stock market's so shaky, that old, very, very rich people are investing in land and paintings and so it's kind of a hot, hot market.

Unfortunately, not for all Bentons, but just those kind that are quintessential Bentons. You know, that—the, like, horses and landscapes and the deserts, and as long as it has a conversation in the painting. I can't unload a still life, for instance, even though it's most beautiful thing in the world. It's just not going to happen. In other words—go ahead.

JOSH T. FRANCO: So, Benton paintings are still circulating pretty actively.

JESSIE BENTON: Very actively. Yeah. There's a lot of serious collectors that have always been there and, um, it's always—there's always been collectors for Bentons and people who truly love him and represent a great deal—there's people that, you know, from the Midwest who have to have a Benton because it speaks to them of their youth and where they grew up. And then, you know, he did paint all of America. He wasn't limited to his region. I have always objected to daddy being a regionalist because he painted everything. He painted Hollywood. He, you know, he painted the East Coast, West Coast, Middle, South—he was fascinated with the South. He went everywhere. The upper reaches of the rivers that he loved, and which are in South Dakota.

But, um, oh, Josh, I tend to just talk. So—

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's fine. Wait—I was just thinking about, you know, normally in the normal work—now I work for my office or my apartment like everyone is. But in the normal, I went downtown the other day and walked by the museum building, the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and realized that I couldn't pop in. And I had such a habit of going in at least once or twice a week and walking by that large Benton that's installed there permanently. Um, and just not getting to stand in front of the Benton every week is such a sad thing, and—but it makes me think about spaces for it.

And the other thing I want to ask you if you have thoughts on is your parents and your childhood home in Kansas City that's preserved as a house museum. That's one of the first things I thought of when the COVID hit, which—that's I don't know what's happening there now. I don't know if you do, but, um, that's small groups of people in small spaces. So that's impossible, right now I'd imagine, with COVID. And—

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JESSIE BENTON: I'd imagine it's closed.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, I'd imagine it's closed. And of course, I hope this all isn't permanent. But I wonder what the permanent effect will be on the idea of touring artists' historic homes. Because it's not just the Benton home, there's a whole world of preserved artists' homes in this country that are really important for educating Americans on their artistic legacy. So, do you have any predictions how that might look going forward, visiting these homes?

JESSIE BENTON: Absolutely none. I mean, as long—the museums are closed, too. I mean, I can imagine big museums opening, perhaps, you know, one person at a time or something, but that's.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JESSIE BENTON: I know this is something we have to come up with some kind of creative idea. You can virtual tours, you know, and stuff like that. It's just not the same, though. You don't get the feelings of the places themselves. But maybe that's—our children, my grandchildren, live on this machine. Maybe they don't need it. You know, maybe they can do virtual tours and find the joys that we find in visiting things tactically, you know?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JESSIE BENTON: I don't know.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Another thing, I was just—this is just an imagination game. I wonder if your parents were still around and hosting that kind of Saturday night music sessions and salons at their home, what might be the topics of conversation or who might be the interesting cultural figures that are there these days?

JESSIE BENTON: Well, everybody came to daddy's house in [inaudible] and the Saturday night music night was not—it was—it could be folk music, it could be classical music. I mean, we had incredible musicians, actors, Hollywood movie stars, poets. But let me tell you, mostly the conversation was not about art, but about politics.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Do you think that was—

JESSIE BENTON: You're frozen.

JOSH T. FRANCO: —the space where people felt freest to speak?

JESSIE BENTON: They certainly did. They certainly did. And there was a lot of dancing and, um, bourbon and wine and people having a wonderful time. Conversations were great. The music also was great. You know, my father was a musicologist. He collected folk music from the very beginning on those sketching trips of his. He also had notating music by that—through the harmonica. He invented a notation for the harmonica, for Hohner harmonica, and they actually printed it with each harmonica they sold of how to record and play and notate music, any music.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JESSIE BENTON: So, he wrote it all down. He was also a great friend of [Alan] Lomax. And the Seegars, Charlie Seeger at Columbia.

JOSH T. FRANCO: That's great. The thing that stands out to me about his writing, too, but the spirit of those salons when I hear you talk about them and others write about them. Does it seem like people knew how to disagree. Disagreeing is a skill. And the way your parents ran their house and their social lives made it possible for people to disagree and talk through the disagreement, have fun through the disagreement even. And how do we—

JESSIE BENTON: Yes.

JOSH T. FRANCO: How do we build that? Because that seems to be missing, the ability to disagree with one another seems to be missing.

JESSIE BENTON: I am not so sure. It's funny. It's a very thought-provoking question because how did they disagree back then? Is um—there were subjects they just didn't talk about, Josh.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Hmm. Well, that's um.

JESSIE BENTON: There was um a code that you could be a Republican—and I mean, there were feisty arguments, believe me because daddy had a lot of patrons who were Republicans and also friends. And they knew that they disagreed, and they would get along. But there were certain subjects that just were untouchable. And certainly, the one of race was untouchable, and there was a sort of laissez faire—should I say they knew that daddy was a champion for Black people in those days. And it wasn't the people that we knew. It was just fine for daddy to feel that way as long as he didn't invite them for dinner with them.

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JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Sometimes a matter of just not talking.

JESSIE BENTON: Now, that's not true anymore. So, this is the beginning of a dialogue that I don't think has ever happened before.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Woah.

JESSIE BENTON: Because our children and our grandchildren, my generation—I'm 80 something. Um, they're different. They have no—they're color blind. My grandchildren are colorblind. They don't see any difference. Their friends are all different colors.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

JESSIE BENTON: That's, you know—now that they're getting to be 15, 16 years old, they're beginning to know the difference. In other words, now the dialogue begins. But growing up, there is no—but when we grew up so many years ago, we—there were no—in our schools there were only white people. And you know what I mean? And Black people have their schools, and there was segregation, and there was no sharing. And that's changed. But I think that what's happening now is original. And I think that's why it's going to be hard. And we're going to—we're in an experimental phase, and it has to be discussed. Like any problem, it has to be talked through. But you have to talk to people who agree and disagree, and that's going to be really hard. Maybe if we could get rid of this president, we could have a better dialogue. Excuse me, but I am political.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. Say what you need to say. Well, I think it's really refreshing to hear someone with such perspective say, "This is original" because other things, it seems to be not that big a strain. But there's this idea that it's "just a repeat of the '60s," but that's not true is what you're saying.

JESSIE BENTON: It isn't true. It isn't true because more people believe that this is wrong. That divisiveness that exists inside of people, not just outside—then, it was outside. We had to get rid of the separation of bathrooms. Now, we're talking about people's hearts, inside. That's, you know, that's a whole different ballgame. You get—you have to have some idea of what internal external means, you know, like the rules on the outside. But it's not just the rules on the outside, it's the rules in people's hearts whether they're going to accept something that they don't want to accept. And that's what has to change.

And in doing so, you change law.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah.

JESSIE BENTON: And that—or you change the damn laws first and then make people obey. And that's the other way around it. But either way, you've got to talk about it.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah, that's great.

JESSIE BENTON: And you have to find it in yourself. You know, what is it inside of you that makes you feel this way about this certain person?

JOSH T. FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative.]

JESSIE BENTON: You know, um, that's a big—that's going to change the structure of all of the social world of the United States of America. That's what's wrong with it right now. It's not facing itself. It's pretending nothing—they're in denial about everything. Except for those people out on the streets, you know, get pushed around.

JOSH T. FRANCO: Yeah. That's a great and powerful statement. So, we're the Smithsonian, we expect to be around a long time, so this is a record for the future. So, what do you have, if anything, to tell Americans in 100 years about being an American in 2020?

JESSIE BENTON: In 100 years, I hope to hell you're doing a better job than we're doing right now.

[They laugh.]

JOSH T. FRANCO: Great. Perfect. Great. Well, thanks, Jessie. I'm going to stop the recording now.

JESSIE BENTON: Okay, Josh. Thank you.

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