



Smithsonian  
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Oral history interview with Lillian Pitt, 2020  
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# Transcript

## Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lillian Pitt on September 1, 2020. The interview took place in Portland, Oregon, 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: There. Did you hear that?

LILLIAN PITT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LARA EVANS: Okay. Great. This is Lara Evans in Santa Fe, New Mexico, um, and I'm interviewing Lillian Pitt in Portland, Oregon, on September 1 of 2020, for the Smithsonian Institution, Archives of American Art Pandemic Project. Hi, Lillian. How are you doing?

LILLIAN PITT: Hi. I'm just fine. Thank you.

LARA EVANS: How—how have the last few months been? Could you tell me?

LILLIAN PITT: Oh, yeah. It's just been chaotic and had a heavy heart with the pandemic. And— and on my reservation, uh, there's been an outbreak, terrible outbreak in Warm Springs, which is just over the mountain, uh, Mount Hood. And, uh, it has been so sad that, uh, I'm losing my childhood friends, and our chief lost his wife. And so sad times, you know, with the— with the pandemic, and, uh, I'm unable to help except maybe send what few dollars I have over there to the families to help them. And, uh, they've had a water issue where they've had to boil their water. And that has just now been fixed after months and months of living without water and having to drink out of bottles and boiling their water for dishes and such. And—and it's been so hard over there. And there's nothing I can do about that, uh, except, you know, just pray, you know. And I haven't prayed so hard in a—in a very long time. And, uh, its—it's just really sad.

And so it's—it makes going downtown really hard with all the, uh—oh—all the chaos that's going down there at the, uh, U.S. Justice, uh—Office. And there's a special group of people who are doing all the damage. And, uh, the President is supposed to be coming in today or tomorrow. And, uh, I do—excuse me, but I don't know what he's going to do. Its, uh—Most of the people in Portland, Oregon are—are Democrats, so it's not [laughs] going to be any solving there. And so, you know—so yeah, I kind of have a little, um, bit of pessimism about that. And, uh, so I want to feel good about everything, but there's nothing really to feel that good about, uh. Except, um, one of my students a long—a long time ago is doing really good, has a new job at PNCA. And she is—is working in Seattle to help another Native artist get the job and public works. So hurray for her. That's good news. And—and I've got things on—on the back burner that I'm working on. So I'm keeping busy.

LARA EVANS: Great. What's the NCAI?

LILLIAN PITT: The NCAI? That is—is coming up in March. And, uh, that's in Santa Fe, right?

LARA EVANS: That's the National Congress of American Indians [laughs]?

LILLIAN PITT: Oh, that [laughs], oh. So I think they are coming to town, but I can't remember. So, you know, I—I think I'm going to get involved but find not too busy to get completely involved. I've been—been part of their speaking and such before, but it's—it's just too difficult to do everything. And so it's, uh—it's pick and choose, you know, and not really what's best for me, but my timing, you know, because I'm just—I'm getting older and slower, and uh, I have to really plan and then remember where I put my notes [laughs].

LARA EVANS: So what are you choosing now?

[00:05:00]

LILLIAN PITT: Right now I'm choosing, um—choosing to work on the Oregon, uh, Cultural Trust license plate. I'm one of 20 that's, uh, been chosen to do the Oregon license plate. So that'll be such an honor for my ancestors that I really hope to get it. And so I've been working on that. And I've been working on public art. And I've been working on fulfilling the, um, uh—the grant I got from the Longhouse in Vancouver—I mean in—in Olympia. And, uh, that's to make new work. That's cast. And so casting glass, and so I'll—I'm going to have a one-person show. It's just in the Gorge, uh, at, uh, at Hood River. And Hood River has been fairly closed off with their, uh, opinions of Native American fishermen.

And so it's—it—my show will be about building these beautiful tools that our ancestors made thousands of years ago and how beautiful they are. And—and it—and I will cast them in glass. And I'll also, uh, wood fire them at the anagama kiln and I will raku fire them. So we'll show that these are the items that our ancestors made and they're just as beautiful as what artists are doing today. So here you are, and I want to just empower them with knowledge and not shame them. And so it—it's going to be a little tight line that I'm going to have to—have to give speeches and/or just give talks to educate them. And, um—and so that's—that's about the only thing I think I'm doing to help—help the cause as they say.

And, um—and today at 4:00, um, I've got, uh, uh, a Zoom meeting with someone in Australia, talking about how to survive as an artist with all this stuff that's going on. So—so I'm just availing myself to—to, uh, to everybody that wants to talk to me. And, uh, with everyone passing, uh, you know, I need to—to be sure that my voice is heard and, uh, the truth be told as I know it.

LARA EVANS: So how are these art projects of yours going forward, um, under the circumstances—or how have your projects been impacted?

LILLIAN PITT: Oh, gosh. It's—it's just been hard to get there. I mean, to be safe. And Juno studio with the glass casting is—that had to be changed because I was going to have a blown glass project and, uh, that got canceled. And so because, uh, the glassblowing studio is closed and they're not going to open up until everything is—is—is—the virus has changed. And so that's, uh—uh, that's one reason I had to change and restart my project. So that's where my flexibility and resilience come in.

LARA EVANS: So you had to switch to cast glass for that reason?

LILLIAN PITT: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LARA EVANS: What is it about the—the casting process that's easier and safer?

LILLIAN PITT: Uh—It's—it's done—Juno can do it all the time. And because that's—it's helping him make a living too because that's what he does. He—he—he has a glass casting business, and so—and glass fabrication business. And so we're working together and he's not too far from me. So that makes it easier. Whereas with blowing it, I would have to go to Washington to Dan Friday's, uh. He has to rent a studio that is—has the kilns to fire the—or to blow the glass with. And—and then it'll be like four days in a row to continuously work and work as fast as we can. And so it's—it's I can do the cast glass at my own time because he can fire a whole lot of pieces at one time. And so that's the difference with that.

[00:10:11]

LARA EVANS: Do you need to be on site when the guests—when the glass casting is going on?

LILLIAN PITT: No [laughs].

LARA EVANS: Okay. So you can stay safe at home?

LILLIAN PITT: Yep, I can. So I just pick out the, uh, New Zealand [inaudible] crystal and he writes down which pieces are going to be this color, that color, and then I leave. And so it—it makes it real—a lot safer and more convenient. And so—and I just hope that they turn out there in the kiln now as we speak, so.

LARA EVANS: Exciting. What's the timing about when this piece of public art will be completed?

LILLIAN PITT: Um—We have been working at the Vancouver—Fort Vancouver Land Bridge, and, uh, that's on, uh, national park and—U.S. National Park. And so we're doing stones, uh, the, uh,

Columbia River Basalt Columns, and we're etching into that. And Juno is also a sandblaster, so we're sandblasting designs into it. And, uh, he's had to rearrange his sandblasting little area to— to hold the rock. Because the first time we put the basalt column in, it crashed the floor [laughs].

LARA EVANS: Oh [laughs].

LILLIAN PITT: And so—because it weighs, you know, almost a ton. And so he had to stabilize the floor. And, uh—and so we're doing that. And so we're hoping to have it finished by 2020. And so —and then we've got another art project in Shelton, Washington. That's through the Washington State Arts Commission. And, um, that was, uh—that's going to be a fun project because it's for children, kindergarten through the third grade. And so everything's done kind of like in miniature to—to make the kids feel good and safe. And so—so we're just starting on that. So we've got all kinds of things going. I—I do, let's say.

LARA EVANS: Do you see, um, any impacts in the way public art projects are going forward right now as a result of the social unrest around monuments?

LILLIAN PITT: And yeah—yeah, you know, that's why we've had to really think, you know, about the children's—the children's thoughts and stuff. And so we're—we're just trying to be as positive about everything. And we're focusing on being kind. And then—and then it was a place where our ancient food thing was with the, uh, wapas, uh, which is a root and it has a beautiful purple flower. So we're going to make that and then put in little images of—of plants and different things. And then inside, we'll put, uh, being kind, being thoughtful, and all these positive emotions for the kids to feel. And so we're thinking about what we're doing ahead of time. And, um—and plus we're staying out of Portland. Well, I'm not going to do anything downtown. I have only been downtown twice and—but far away from where all the ugliness is. And so I don't want to go downtown and—and a lot of the—a lot of the people that live out in the outlying areas will not go downtown. So they've been impacted terribly. The business had been cleaned out and I don't like seeing all that, and, uh—the damage that people are doing—

LARA EVANS: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LILLIAN PITT: —that aren't even from the area. They're just kind of moving in. And so that is the worst part is—is going downtown and see the changes.

LARA EVANS: Ordinarily would you be going downtown?

LILLIAN PITT: Yes. I love going downtown and so—and—and all my galleries that I was showing in down—downtown are—they're out of business. And—and uh, you know, all of the shows have been cancelled. And so it's just—there's just no point in it. And that's why I'm showing in—in Eugene and—and, uh, Seattle and, uh, Fort Vancouver gift shop. So I've resorted to gift shop items. And so it—it's—it's been—it's been kind of fun thinking of doing these things. Like we're making—I'm, uh, designing masks with my masks, you know, on them—on the images and—and, uh, you know, and so doing stuff like that is—is kind of fun and making little small, cute things. And—and, uh, you know, it's fun. I can make it fun.

[00:15:53]

LARA EVANS: Do you have any of those masks on hand?

LILLIAN PITT: No, not yet.

LARA EVANS: Not yet? Okay.

LILLIAN PITT: We just started to design those [laughs]. Uh—[iPhone alarm sounds] So it's—it's really going to be fun. And so we've got two designed. And—and—uh, you know, my brother, he is, uh, the leader of the COVID-19 Task Force, or he has to judge the people to make sure they're —they're, uh, in isolation and—and has to follow everybody around. And—and he wants—he wants a whole slew of masks. And so—to make it more excited—to make people wear masks. You know, so we've got to get with it.

LARA EVANS: Yeah—Um—How are you caring for yourself and loved ones? And—and are you being cared for, too?

LILLIAN PITT: Um—I have a partner and, uh, we—we get along. We—off and on, there are times, you know. And, uh—and so we watch out for each other and, uh—and then people have been

bringing food and stuff. And they're—they're very generous with their time and our neighbors are really wonderful. We're all taking care of each other and, um, sharing recipes and taking food over. And—and I have not had time [doorbell rings] to learn how to cook. And there's one of our neighbors at the door right now [laughs].

LARA EVANS: Perfect [laughs]. That's great timing.

LILLIAN PITT: Yes [laughs] So they come over and visit. And—and, uh they're the only ones we let [doorbell rings] in the house. So otherwise, we do porch visiting and such—such as that.

LARA EVANS: Well, that's perfect timing. And thank you so much for speaking with me today and —talking about what's going on. And I hope you enjoy lunch with your neighbor [laughs].

LILLIAN PITT: Oh, I will. Thank you. Thank you.

LARA EVANS: All right. Take care, Lillian.

LILLIAN PITT: You too. I love you to pieces [doorbell rings].

LARA EVANS: Oh, same here. I'm tearing up. Okay.

LILLIAN PITT: Bye. Me too.

LARA EVANS: Bye.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]