



Smithsonian
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Oral history interview with Kay WalkingStick,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Kay WalkingStick on August 29, 2020. The interview took place at WalkingStick's home in Easton, Pennsylvania, and was conducted by Melissa Ho 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

KAY WALKINGSTICK: Okay. So, what do I—I do this, I guess—

MELISSA HO: Uh, you don't need to do anything, um. We just started recording. My name is Melissa Ho, and I'm interviewing Kay WalkingStick on August 29, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Project, and Kay is speaking to me from her home in Easton, Pennsylvania. So, hello Kay, and thank you so much for making time for this, um. I'd like to start with just asking you, uh, simply, how have these past several months been for you?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: I think a lot easier for me than many other people to tell you the truth, um. I'm retired. I haven't taught since, uh, 2005. So, I've been out of teaching for a long time, and, um, we have a home in Easton, Pennsylvania which is a small town on the Delaware, uh. So, we don't have the mobs of people to deal with when we go out to a drug store or grocery shopping [inaudible], um, and my house is—is um, big enough so that, uh, I have a studio, not a huge studio, but a small studio. I have a couple of storage rooms. My husband has his separate studio. Both of our studios have doors on them [laughs] so we can close the doors, uh. We have an upstairs, um—our home is upstairs—downstairs is devoted to our art, and there's a library down here and an office. I'm in the office right now.

So uh, we haven't been out at all, you know, seen people at all. We haven't, uh, had visitors other than my assistant who comes in once a week, um. We haven't—this is where I've been. I've been in this house most of the time, and you know, it's eight months now, isn't it? It seems like—

MELISSA HO: Ten months.

KAY WALKINGSTICK:—absolutely forever, and we miss seeing friends. I haven't even seen my family. I haven't seen my son for months, uh. I have grandchildren I haven't seen, uh, but we're perfectly safe, and we're really perfectly okay, which is, I think, really wonderful, I mean, we both have, um, pensions from our—our respective, um, universities, and my husband Dirk Bach was at, uh, RISD and I was at Cornell. So, we have enough money to live on. We don't have the threat of losing our jobs. We don't have jobs anymore, uh. One can—has always made out alone so being alone isn't a problem [laughs] you know, being on our own, um.

So, really, you know, we're happy, if that's, you know, a fair assessment, and maybe I hope a lot of other people are, too, but I know it's a lot harder for people who are working or who have children or who have children who are going to go to school, and the decisions of do you send the kid to school or do you make them sit in front of a computer all day, you know, the problems that others have, we simply don't have, and that's a great blessing, uh. We can sit on our back deck and have dinner and, you know, just not worry about other people, how they're getting by. I do worry. I worry about my kids, of course, uh. My son hasn't had a job for six months now, um. That's hard—hard for him, hard to know about. My son—my grandson has—goes to Rutgers, and he's not going to be going to Rutgers now. He's going to be at home, uh, studying, uh, via computer.

So, my family is effected, but I, as an artist, have not been, um. I make art. The big thing for me is I haven't been to a museum in six months.

[00:05:02]

I miss the museums. I miss the Met. I miss the museums tremendously, um, but that's a small price to pay for good health—

MELISSA HO: Sure.

KAY WALKINGSTICK:—and a small price to pay, uh, all together. I mean, this is—that's my big complaint is I miss the museums.

MELISSA HO: Yeah. So—

KAY WALKINGSTICK:—I worry about my kids, but I don't worry about us. We're in good shape.

MELISSA HO: Has—I mean, it—it sounds like, um, you know, your studio practice, in a way, has been, um, undisturbed by the pandemic, but I wonder if the larger circumstances of seclusion and, and not being able to feed yourself through seeing art, going to museums. Has that affected your work at all yet?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: It has, but the big thing for me is I—I'm a landscape painter primarily, and I travel a lot. I go to places and make drawings and photographs and come home with the material and work from it for six to eight months and then go off again somewhere, uh. I haven't been, uh, out of this house for months much less traveled. So, um, I'm, kind of, running out of imagery, um, which is unfortunate, but I have a lot of other imagery that I can pull out, you know, I have photographs and other things that I can go back to and work on, but there will be, uh—there won't be any new places appearing in my art for a while because I haven't been anywhere. I miss the travel.

MELISSA HO: How much would you normally be traveling a year? How much would you be traveling in a, in a—in a year under normal circumstances?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: Usually go to—we usually travel twice during the year, uh, and of course, one, we could go to Europe [laughs] we could go to Europe occasionally, and we travel in the West, here in the States, um, but we're usually on the road at least twice a year, and we like to go up to the—to New England. I like to paint water up there. I like to, uh, paint the ocean.

MELISSA HO: So, this much time in the studio in Easton is pretty unusual for you?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: It's unusual, yeah, yeah, it's unusual.

MELISSA HO: Have you been—

KAY WALKINGSTICK: We're making the best of it. I think that we are. I think—as I said I'm using—right now, I'm working from, uh, some drawings and photographs of the Grand Canyon I did in—oh, geez—years ago, probably five years ago.

MELISSA HO: So, you're able to travel through your work maybe, um, in your mind at least?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: But I do miss that tremendously—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: —um, but the odd thing is that I, uh, had a show that was supposed to opening in—on, uh, March 15th, I think, and, um, the work was put up—was sent, put up, and then the show was extended through June, and it—the plans had been for it to be up a month-and-a-half, and it ended up being up quite a bit longer, and there were, um, some major sales in that, um, exhibit. It was at the, um, Charles Froilick Gallery in Portland, which of course is, uh, a long ways from here—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: I had planned to go out, of course and hope to go to, uh, the Columbia Gorge and make some drawings there, um, and did not do that, but the show itself, uh, was seen by a lot of people, and there was some significant sales out of the show in spite of the fact that nobody could actually go to the gallery—

MELISSA HO: Yeah, wow.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: —and then there are people—there were people who made appointments and did go, uh. The gallery was letting in one or two people at a time, and they were all masked and very careful, but basically, there was no opening. There was none of the, um—um, excitement of, you know, lectures and, uh, receptions and all that. None of that happened—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: —uh, and yet, nevertheless, by some miracle—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KAY WALKINGSTICK: —[laughs] works sold. So, very strange. It's been a very strange time.

[00:10:03]

MELISSA HO: Yeah. Are, are you doing anything—anything new during this time? Have you, um —have you changed any of your—whether everyday habits or studio habits?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: No, and that's why I said that I think that we've really—it's been easier for us than other people because, um, we haven't had to change our habits. We [inaudible] have—house large enough so that we can work separately, and, uh, the only thing that my husband usually does the grocery shopping, um, and that's the only reason to go out—is to bring in food and once in a while go to the drugstore—

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: —go to the doctors. We're old, you know [laughs] so we go to doctors.

MELISSA HO: Well, I mean, we don't know exactly what, um, the next half year or year is going to bring, but I wonder if, you know, if you've looked ahead to the coming months and have any thoughts on how you envision your—your work continuing as—as—as this crisis continues.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: Well, as always, uh, one's work and one's ability to work depends a lot on what happens in the political situation in this country. That has always been the case, and any kind of thing political, uh, upheaval has affected my work, um. When you think of, uh, something, uh, like the early '70s, uh, when—the American Indian movement, uh, the Feminist movement, Black Freedom Movement were all at the same time, and those things definitely affected my work and I think everyone's really, uh, to a greater or lesser degree, uh.

So, that—I think that what's going on in our politics today will affect us all, and I think it will affect what happens with the pandemic, as well, um. This may be not the appropriate time to talk about it, but I feel that our president has let us down terribly as far as the pandemic, um, is concerned, and if we change that, if he is no longer our president, perhaps the, um, the uh—the virus will be, um, handled better, and we'll be able to get out, and we'll be able to travel, and there will be a, uh, vaccine. Either way, there will be a vaccine eventually uh, but sooner than later would be good.

So, I really feel that a lot of our—our life right now is dependent on what happens politically in our country, um. I worry about that.

MELISSA HO: You mentioned, you know, the—the period in the '70s of great social change, um, and I wonder if somebody who lived through that, you know, as an artist, um, as a Cherokee Woman, um, as an American, does—do things feel different to you now with the—the conversation, the heightened awareness it seems about systemic racism, you know, the call for social justice, um? Does it remind you of earlier times or does it seem different to you or, sort of, a continuing—continuation of the same?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: Well, uh, I have very mixed feelings about it actually, um. I think the Women's Movement, uh, has been quite successful, um, in that there wasn't much hope for becoming what you wanted to become, um, and I have been very luckily—lucky, and what I, I set out to do, I was able to achieve, um, but I certainly didn't expect that, and so, the Feminist Movement, for me, opened up a lot of opportunities that I didn't expect I would have when I was in college in 1955, um, and as far as, uh, [laughs] the, uh, #MeToo Movement, um, [laughs] it was a—it's hard to talk about because really, people, kind of, expected guys to be assholes—

[00:15:12]

MELISSA HO: Yeah.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: —[inaudible] and they were. They didn't disappoint. Some of them were not, and [inaudible] dated if you could or marry if you could—

MELISSA HO: [Laughs.]

KAY WALKINGSTICK: —uh, so that, uh, the things that have gone on and men have been arrested for, I'm very pleased to see, and that's a huge, huge change from the '50s, uh, and I'm not sure that people realize what a great change it's—it is, um. I think that, as far as African Americans and Indians are concerned, I know very little about Latino people, uh—I mean, what has happened in their lives—or Asian people in their lives for that matter, but as far as Blacks and Indians, I think in some ways, things are much better. Things are better, and in some ways, things haven't changed at all. Not at all.

I mean, the, the rights of—of Natives, for instance, Native people and their treaties—treaties are still ignored, uh. You know, they always said that the treaties were in—were valid in perpetuity, but actually, in perpetuity only meant 20, 30 years and then it was forgotten, uh, and that is still going on, and, um, you think of—of what happened in the, uh—the, uh, clashes with the government over—over the, uh, pipeline. The pipeline going. That's Indian land, dammit, and yet those—those reservations, uh, rights are ignored, um, but that's another thing I'm hoping a change of—of presidency will, uh, make some changes as far as the land use is concerned—environmental abuse of the land, but also Indian rights of the land, uh.

So, there have—there have been improvements, and yet, a lot of things are not better, not different at all. People are still selfish and greedy and jerks, you know.

MELISSA HO: Yeah, it's a tension, right, between thinking about the individual and thinking about the, the communal. Right now, those—that—that seems very clear, um. Let me check the time. Maybe just one more general question. What do you think you will remember most, um, from this time?

KAY WALKINGSTICK: This time? The isolation, just not seeing people. I miss people—

MELISSA HO: Yeah, yeah.

KAY WALKINGSTICK:—and I'm not lonely. I have a fascinating and funny husband who's a good artist and loves an awful lot of really neat stuff, but I miss seeing other people, I do. I miss seeing my kids.

MELISSA HO: Yeah, I think we're all looking forward to getting on the other side and being able to be, um, together with people—

KAY WALKINGSTICK: Together with people.

MELISSA HO:—in real space and not just virtual space, but Kay, thank you so much for, um, meeting me in virtual space, um, for this time, and, uh, we really are grateful for you making time for this interview.

KAY WALKINGSTICK: Well, thank you. Thank you very much. Bye now.

MELISSA HO: Bye.

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