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Oral history interview with Alisa Sikelianos-Carter, 2020 September 1

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Alisa Sikelianos-Carter on September 1, 2020. The interview took place in New Haven, Connecticut, and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa 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

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. Hi, Alisa. How are you?

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: I'm doing well. How are you doing?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I'm well, thank you, um. Welcome to this, uh, virtual space, uh. This is an interview for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. And today is September 1, 2020. I just have to remind myself.

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, if you and please introduce yourself and then let us know how you're doing, um, and how you've been doing over the past few months.

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Yeah. Thank you so much for having me, um. My name is Alisa Sikelianos-Carter. And I am a painter, mixed media painter, um. And I am—right now, I'm doing okay. Um, I think over the last several months, I have—it's been a real roller coaster of feelings. Um, I'm at a residency, a fellowship at NXTHVN in New Haven, Connecticut, currently. And when, um—I've been here since January. So, when COVID hit the United States, I was here, um, in—starting in March—February, March. And I think initially, I felt very sort of devastated just by like—just this, like, drastic change and sort of how I imagined this year to be, um. And I really didn't know—I've never experienced anything like this before, so I wasn't really sure what to do, um. And I—so I'm living in New Haven with my partner. And I also—we have a 16-year-old daughter, who at the time when we came here was in boarding school. And so, in March, she had to come back because everything was, like, shutting down. She came back and she was with us actually up until this past weekend; she went back to school. And so, that was a really different too, because I think everyone is struggling. But, like, teenagers, I think are really—have been hit so hard in this way that unlike adults, at least, like the adults that I know. So, when she came back and when we all kind of realized what our reality was going to be, it was just like a very heavy time, um. We also had our three-year-old niece with us, so it was just like we were in our apartment; we didn't know if we should move. Essentially quarantine but it felt really just, like, very dramatic and very stressful and, like, unfamiliar.

And for, like, several months, I didn't—I have this amazing studio that I had access to, but I didn't really make any work. So, just kind of, like, knocked out by this, what was happening, um. And I feel like—I felt really, like, complicated or really conflicted rather about that, because, like, so many artists didn't have access to their studios. So many artists were, like, in school or, like, are independent—outside of school, like, working students, like, were locked out of those spaces. And so, I have this amazing space that I wasn't utilizing. So, that felt really—I felt guilty about that, um. So—but instead of—I mean, I did come here periodically after we quarantined, like, actually quarantined legitimately. But um, I did start gardening, which I know a lot of people did [laughs]. And that was really huge. And, in general, I'm a gardener. But my partner and I, we're from Albany, New York, and so we went back and forth, and basically built this whole garden from scratch, which was, like, just, like, really important for both of us. And we have, like, flowers and also vegetables and that kind of became—my partner's also an artist, so it became our practice in this way where we were just like, okay, we just have to do this, like, in our backyard. And we also have, um, a vacant lot that we own where we built, like, beds and grew or are growing still currently all these vegetables. So, that was how I sort of emotionally, like, got through this time, initially.

And I think in about May or June, it's, like, end of May I started to come back in my studio and actually start to work and felt, like, a release, just—I think just the gardening really helped me,

like, feel creative again. And so, I um, finally started to—yeah, just to make things. And, like, the pressure—I think part of it is that, like, I'm in this really incredible, like, prestigious fellowship. And I was, like, I have to make work and there's people coming and—I mean, it's obviously changed because of the new terms, like, we didn't—for very long, we didn't have visitors for so long. We had, like, virtual studio visits and we had um, you know, not the same sort of traffic and so—of course, I wasn't like—I didn't need to, like, make for—because there's—because no one was coming, I didn't have to, like, make anything sort of have on display. But I still felt, like, I wanted to utilize the space that I was gifted and, you know, that I have access to, um.

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So, I just felt pressure that my own sort of self-induced pressure, um. But I think, yeah, the gardening and then, like, just the weather. It's, like, it being warmer, all these things sort of just, like, lift. I started to open up more and feel, like, less depressed [laughs], essentially, like, I was really repressed and felt, yeah, like, really just heavy with everything. And then—but also that—um, like, that kind of lightness lasted only for a little while, because of, like—of—you know, in the end of May, in June, um, with the death of George Floyd and also, like, earlier in February, and, like, all of this, like, really unnecessary death and, like, violence and police brutality. Like, that was, like, incredibly heavy, another, like, weight on top of what's already happening. And—um, but it felt different, like, I felt, like, I had to make work in response to that, where with COVID I just was, like, I couldn't—I just didn't know how to respond. And I—and, like, through those very, like, traumatic and depressing experiences and, like, the deaths that I referenced, like, I felt, like, okay, well, I have to—like, it's kind of my duty to make work.

And so, that was, like, when, you know, I started to actually, like, generate some things and it felt, you know, better and also terrible, simultaneously. But um, yeah, so I think now I've been, like, consistently working. I'm still—we're still going back and forth and gardening and whatnot. But I feel a lot more stable in, like, my practice, and, like, kind of—I understand, like, my vision more. And I think, like, had I not been in residency, like, it's, like, there's so many things happening. It's, like, I'm in a residency, like, a new city I've never lived in, new people, new cohort, like, an incredible cohort. But—and then like this COVID and then uprisings and police brutality and, like, obviously, very necessary uprisings. But, like, all of those things, just like, all these things happening that I had to adjust to and I—maybe it would have been different had I been home—I mean, it would absolutely have been different had I've been home in good and bad ways, you know. Like, I feel super supported being here, but it's also unfamiliar. And so, that was kind of—that was—like, added to the anxiety of it. Yeah, I think that's not all of it, but that's, like, a lot of what I was feeling and have been feeling.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Yeah, um. If I understand correctly, your work is—a lot of it is about around Black sacredness—

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: —in different ways. So, I'm wondering how—what your observations are around all these intersections that you're discussing, um? And also, what's the work that you've been creating that you just mentioned?

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Yeah, um. I think in regard to Black sacredness, let me think. I mean, yeah, so, like, thinking about in terms of, like, the—like, highest rates of death are within, like, Black and Brown communities, um, which is devastating. And obviously thinking about, um, deaths by both cops and white supremacists against Black and Brown people, like, all of that. And I—you know, I think initially, like, I didn't—COVID, it just felt so, like, what is this, and we didn't really know. And now it's, like, very clear, like, who is, like—who is the most impacted? And so, it's, like,—it's much easier to see, where in the moment, I just was, like, what is happening? Like, everything is changing. And that's, like, a very privileged view, because I was, like, oh, I'm at this residency. I feel like I can do—I have all this freedom, and then it was, like, this like huge, like, sort of monster came and, like, changed that. But I didn't really understand that at the time. And so if I—I think I would have framed my—sort of my role differently in this world, like, as an artist had I recognized that, but I was very much, like, in my, like, own world of, like, my family, and we're just, like, feeling all these different feelings.

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But I think, um, now in retrospect and currently—I mean, it's still happening and obviously, like, there're still uprisings and all of that and there's still deaths happening and violence in that way.

I feel, like, um, it's really—it feels really heavy. It feels, like, I—like the work that I make is, like, very much to, like, acknowledge and honor and also, like, escape, like, this other world that I want to exist in where, like, Blackness is, like, revered and just totally elevated and is just like existing in all this beauty and safety and protection. And so, it, like, feels very intense to, like—I'm making the work in response, but also as, like, a separate. Like, it's not—it's not only in response to white supremacy. It's its own thing and its own world. But it feels heartbreaking that it's—it feels very relevant, and that is heartbreaking. Like, that feels, like, I am—yeah, like, it feels like that I am—I look forward to a time when, like, it doesn't feel like I have to do that, if that makes sense, and have to, like, continually, like, uplift in this way. I don't feel, like, it's a burden, but it is a burden for Black and Brown people. You know, it is like if there's, like, such a huge way to constantly have to prove, like, your sacredness, your—the reason that you should, like—or to give a reason why you should be able to live and live freely and without fear. So, I think, yeah—and I'm sorry, what was your second question?

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, I forgot also [laughs] but I know it was—I think I'm just interested—I don't know exactly what question I asked, but I think I'm interested in knowing more about your perspective about the different narratives that are happening right now around both what you're talking about Black bodies, but also, you know, the pandemic, the uprisings, and all of these intersections. What are your perspectives? And also, I think, from my previous interviews with people at the residency, I know it's been a really rich space to have conversations with other artists. So, yeah, if you can just talk a little bit more about that.

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Yeah, I think—I mean, I guess if you're asking, like, what do I believe for the narratives, I mean, I think that—and so, it was totally jump in, if I'm not answering this correctly, but I believe that—now, I'm like, what do I think? I think that—I mean, I listen to the news a lot, like, specifically one particular news source and—*Democracy Now*. But I think it's, like, I feel—I don't know. It just feels really heavy [laughs]. It feels very—like, every day and I'm working, I'm just, like, kind of—like, honestly, just, like, cursing to myself. And, like, it just feels sort of unbelievable, like, where we're at and not, like—you know, with COVID, I just feel, like, the way that this is all going down, it just feels, like, we're, like, in general, our humanity and, like, being this country just feels—and I mean, everyone, like, it feels like it's just never considered and it feels—that feels terrifying to me that we're, like, being sort of steered in these directions by the powers that be, um, who don't care or consider our humanity. Um, I think as far as the continued violence and white supremacy, it feels absolutely—it's just—it's like it's all the same. I mean, of course, like, whoever is being—like, if anything terrible happens here, it's going to be the people who are sort of, like, the lowest—who are seen as the lowest by the, you know, whoever's in power. And so, like, the folks who are being impacted are going to be people who are, like, lower income or like houseless or people of color or trans people or—and so, like, all of that, it's just, like—it feels, like, everything is coming to this, like, sort of, um, breaking point. And it's—feels—it's always been scary, right? It's like—for—if you are any of the groups I listed, if you're, like, marginalized in any way.

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But there's something. There's like—it's like reaching a fever pitch at this point where it just feels like everyone is realizing it. I mean, obviously there are people who don't—or they're realizing and they feel good. They're—they feel like finally, you know, like, there's this, like—specifically, like, white supremacist and transphobic people. Specifically, there's, like this, people feel very emboldened to, like, act and to respond. And in my own personal life, I've had—like, people in my family who have sort of come out as white supremacists, and it's, like, white people. And it's just, like, really intense. It's really intense. And it's really scary, you know, to, like—for—it's really—it's like, you're really, like, being asked to choose a side and like—as I said, I have a daughter, and she was really radicalized in this moment. I mean, she—you know, I've always—I have a very specific viewpoint, and I've always sort of brought her up in that—from that perspective. But she also has another family, her father's family, who has a different view. And so—and she's Black and my partner's Black. And so, the three of us have been, like, experiencing this together in our little pod, you know, since March. And she really, like, became—just really got very clear in her beliefs, which was really—it's sad that you have, like, to have your 16-year-old be exposed to so many things. And she knows. It's not like I was sort of keeping, you know, history and reality from her but, like, your brain changes over time. And she's just, like, can understand things way more clearly. And to see her really understand that was really—it was, like, a positive thing, you know. But then I can see other people who have gone the other direction. And that's—that is really—it's, yeah, I keep saying it, but it just—it feels terrifying, because you don't know—because, like, the literal teenager who just killed two people last week, you know, he's a year older than my daughter. And that's—that is—I can't even—like, it's mind blowing that that that

person—you know, like, what it takes for that person to get to that point to do something like that, or think that this is, like, the right thing or think—they're doing—you know, they're protecting people. So, I think that it's, like, the same—it's as bad as it's been, but there's something that has changed. I think—I mean, maybe Trump being in power, it's just, like, there's something that's made it feel even more sort of urgent and intense. And everything is, like, louder and brighter and scarier, um. Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, going back to the work that you've been, uh, making since May, can you just tell me a little bit more about what that is and also where you were going with it?

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Yeah. So, I have in, I think, April, May, June, I was working on these smaller paintings, um. One is a part of a series, um, that is thinking about or based on, um, four suicides of enslaved Africans during the Middle Passage and sort of those bodies going into the ocean, and then somehow magically, like, them adapting to the water and living in the ocean, the bottom of the ocean. And so, like, images of—the images that I'm currently working on are just, like, kind of that—them—the bodies floating to the bottom, essentially, like, that travel or experience or whatever. And that's, like, base also off of like a larger painting, like, a 10 by 12 foot. It may get smaller. But painting—so, those smaller paintings are kind of based around this larger painting, um, that I started previously, but I've been working on here at Next Haven. And then another piece, um, *Never Let Me Go*, is another painting that is thinking about, I guess, like the deaths, not all of them. There's, like, four figures, Black glitter figures in the center of it, and it's just thinking about the, um, deaths that have happened and then, like, around those figures, there's like this swirl of black and, like, different sort of, like, luminous materials and hands and feet kind of coming out of that spiral or swirl, um, and thinking about, like, the interconnectedness of, like, Blackness and, like, loss and ancestors, like, who are with us and, like, not letting them go and being with them. And also, like, the folks who have died who are now ancestors and, like—and not letting go. Like, for example, like, Breonna Taylor, like, still fighting for justice for her murder and not letting go of that and, like, not letting her name or her spirit go, um, and just—yeah, just holding on, just, like, don't give up and, like, continue to fight and hold on, um. So, those are like that—that's kind of what I've been thinking about. Also, some other paintings just, like, of infinite Blackness or *Black Moon*, is what I have been referencing—calling them. But just, like, another place in their planet where Blackness is sort of the only thing, and it's, like, beautiful and, like, never stops and is limitless. So, those are the works right now that I'm working on.

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FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you so much, uh, Alisa. Before, uh, we go, I wanted to ask if there's anything that, uh, you wanted to discuss today that I didn't bring up?

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: No, [laughs] I don't think so.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: I know there's so much going on, um, and so 20 minutes can feel really short. But I really, really appreciate you taking the time.

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Thank you. Take care.

ALISA SIKELIANOS-CARTER: Take care.

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