



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Lonnie Holley,
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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Lonnie Holley on July 29, 2020. The interview took place in Grocery on Home in Atlanta, Georgia, 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 FRANCO: Okay, this is Josh T. Franco interviewing Lonnie Holley at Grocery on Home in Atlanta, Georgia, on July 29, 2020 for the Smithsonian Institution Archives of American Art Pandemic Oral History Project. Lonnie, thanks so much for joining and talking to me for the archives. And we're just checking on American artists and basically starting with, how have you been doing since March, since reality kind of shifted for us?

LONNIE HOLLEY: I'm in the midst of it. In a sense, what I mean by in the midst of it, I am in the midst of the conditioning of it's almost like the Twilight Zone.

JOSH FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LONNIE HOLLEY: Matt, what is this?

MATT ARNETT: Just, here—hold on, sorry, it's—hold on. All right, there you go [adjusts laptop.]

LONNIE HOLLEY: Okay. It almost like the Twilight Zone, if I—if we had to look at it as—a human perspective of it because you got to remember if we—I always say thumbs up for Mother Universe, so I'm looking at the whole earth itself in the midst of the rest of the planets and whatever else has to happen in the universe and our activities as humans and how my music and my art have been more of a representative, are—for that type of information. And then all of a sudden, you get—you get told, or you get—you have to digest that there has—something came into our way of living that can easily take your life. It scares you. And it makes you a little bit more thankful for each second of your life or that builds into the minutes and hours and whatever part of life that you have, especially with me having to be the thinker involved in all of this. I'm a type artist that have to think about like the piece downstairs, there in the Smithsonian. *Yielding to the Ancestors While Controlling the Hands of Time*—

JOSH FRANCO: Yep.

LONNIE HOLLEY: —are so in the process of yielding and being submissive, are to the educated facts about us as humans, but still having to be in the midst of the hands of time, being controlled. Not always by me, but by society itself and especially now that we're dealing with in the digital perspective of it. It's kind of scary.

JOSH FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Have you—either in music or sculpture, what kind of art have you made since the virus hit us?

LONNIE HOLLEY: Well, I'm constantly doing my computer art. I do images every day, or I take and make art on the computer. I paint. I got—Matt got me paint brush on computer. Also, I got some designs as far as graphics that I can do to the paint brush once I get their paints laid out. I can then graph-ify it and cube-ify it or whatever else I want to, say, form it. And then put it into one image and then file it, for Matt to take a look at it, and move it to the next level of saying, this is what has been accomplished by Lonnie's brain during his lifetime. The main thing is that's what my interests is now in art, is to say this is what I've done since 1979 or since I got the news that I were an American artist by the Lloyds of London and being appreciative for that, or I've moved on and on and on, but constantly drawing, and growing and growing and growing, showing others that we have these abilities, but we can increase our imagery, our understanding of materials by the amount that we want.

[00:05:42]

JOSH FRANCO: Yeah. That's like—so, you know, you make sculptures out of things you find. And I thought that might have limited you, but if you're using the computer, then it doesn't matter if you can leave the room. You can do it on computer, it sounds like.

LONNIE HOLLEY: I mean, but you got to think about my life as far as once I get back from my trips and my music, I'm always returning to the same more like setting of my life. I'm not a street runner, or I'm not going all the time. I'm not having events at my home where I'm having a lot of guests or anything like that. I'm—for me, I've put myself into a type of situation where I'm mostly looking forward to doing something each day. I keep enough where I—either—when I'm going away, I'm collecting enough books, I'm collecting enough information, I'm taking enough pictures, I'm seeing enough sayings not only to sing about, but also to art about. And with those things, especially when it comes down to are—the planet and how we as humans, not just because we are together, we don't see all of the great and the greatness that is occurring for our lives, in the midst of our lifestyles.

JOSH FRANCO: Does this moment feel like any other moment you've lived through?

LONNIE HOLLEY: Talking to you now?

JOSH FRANCO: I like that question. I was asking you, too, about the, you know, 2020, we're all sharing a feeling, which is largely fear, but other feelings, too. Does it feel like something you've experienced before?

LONNIE HOLLEY: But right now, talking to you about it? Yes, it do makes a difference. And it matters because this virus is a scary situation and it has caused a lot of things to occur. Even if I wasn't utilizing these things, it's a lot of things that is occurring to people that are utilizing or have utilized them to have to break habits. And I can understand breaking our habits in order to be able to get ready for a new habit because—and we was going to have to do it anyway; we was going to have to learn how to become more technical than our—than going to school, than being in a social group of doing things together. We could—we was always leading up to having homework.

JOSH FRANCO: Yeah.

LONNIE HOLLEY: So from homework to working from home. You—I think you can understand where I'm coming from.

JOSH FRANCO: Yeah.

LONNIE HOLLEY: Or from homework to now having a computer in front of you or—and having your school there. The computer—Cold Titty Mamma, I call it Cold Titty Mama—Computer Technology Management will be managing us from home. So—but again, it's got to be a measured thing, like a cup that you're measuring a certain amount in, in order to make a perfect cake. If the finances or economics does not equal out for everybody to get the same amount of funds to be available for power, for all utilities, for paying for the homes that they're living in, for—to make sure that the groceries or whatever else, the food or whatever else is there to meet their requirements. And all of these things, especially with prices now on the rise.

[00:10:45]

And if we—we may not be socializing that much and social distancing even more. But people, when they do go out, they still want to look fine. They want to put on their best; you understand what I'm saying? They want to show themselves are dignified, in a sense. Nine times out of ten—and I'm not just saying certain women, but most of all the women have to have their makeups. They have to have their hair done, their nails done. They had to have pedicures for their foot, and all of these other things. Now they—at this day and time, that just don't feel right. It is almost like they, no, I can't do this. I won't go. So it's almost like we have created an environment of people that is requiring certain things in their life that they just can't drop all of a sudden and start downgrading that. And the—trying to get the best of what they can function out of their brain. I call it thought-smithing. If I can't have—if my body is not at ease, I can't do my best thinking if I'm constantly worried about something that doesn't make any sense.

JOSH FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LONNIE HOLLEY: I'm not saying that the virus doesn't make any sense. But for humans to have to worry about it or see their loved ones that is perishing about it, and their loved ones might

have not even had HDTV or HD radio to warn them that this thing is there. And if the next stage of the virus is to say, watch out for it becoming airborne or animal—uh, it could affect animals, just think about it. I'm not trying to put it there. But this is something that, seem to me, is passed on from one to the other. Are we ridding ourselves of the waste of it to the point that we can say it's all right to throw all the trash, to throw the gloves, to throw all the masks by the thousands, each day by the thousands, into the waste? Are we putting them in these plastic bags, sending them off to a waste site that's a landfill? Are we incubating something that is going to come back out through whatever drainage that these things have and make even a worse virus? This is my thought about it; this is the way I think.

JOSH FRANCO: I hadn't thought about that. I wonder if you've thought about the, um—you know, the level of noise has decreased because everyone's staying still now. And humans aren't making as much sound. Have you thought about that in this time?

LONNIE HOLLEY: Well, in a sense, noise that we make, one way or the other, affected one thing or the other because the noise that was being made, or especially the vibrations from the mobilization that is going up and down the highways.

JOSH FRANCO: Right.

LONNIE HOLLEY: The factories and things that were in the process, the sound there, everybody just don't pick up on normally, but these sounds was being pushed out into our environments and then echoed and rippled off of the water and rippled off of the leaves and different things, blowing in the wind and affected the way that the creatures was living, and all these other things are, along with what has been happening in our burns, our fryers.

[00:15:45]

Our creatures has been put on the run. Then all the creatures that have been left behind that was burnt up, and something else came along and ate, ate, ate, ate, ate, ate, and then turned around and do, do, do, do, do, do, do, do. All of these things that was making these other effects that we are not measuring microscopically and saying, this is a—still, and in fact—an effect, not infection, but effect, uh, effect, you got to remember. Affect/effect, being effected by—you understand what I'm saying? That's the point I'm trying to get you to know, is that we are being affected by everything, whether we want to be or not want to be. So what you just asked me, do I feel that things are a little bit more calmer now that there is less happening, less partying, less noise, less noise from the big city, which we don't even see it going on, but all the noise going on in every place in the big city, but at some point, all this noise is almost being like a big old ball, a wave and wave and wave and waves of sound. So if you look at my abstracts or the things that I do abstractly and say, I wonder what Lonnie Holley was thinking about when he did this piece of art?

JOSH FRANCO: I ask that all the time.

LONNIE HOLLEY: You understand what I'm saying?

JOSH FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LONNIE HOLLEY: Is that all of these things that is going on, I may not be able to sit down and tell Matt Arnett—William Arnett, which William Arnett is not keeping a record of most of the thing that I'm saying now, but our—Matt Arnett is; that's William Arnett's son. But there are artists beyond me that need humans to help them with their information about a situation. That's the reason why I think it needs a lot more volunteering. I think that humans should be willing, if they're studying, to become curators. If they're studying to become directors or they're studying to handle art in any way, form, or fashion, they should be willing to volunteer some. I think that should be passed on down through our—the churches. That should be passed on down through some kind of community service and all these other kinds of things to get humans closer to that togetherness, where we can say, okay, we found that you was involved in civil rights. We would like to know what it was like for you, what it was like after you came off that trail from Selma to Montgomery. How did you feel? How were your feet? Ask some personal questions. It was some really, really harsh personal things that needed to have been answered there. I mean, Congressman John Lewis just left Washington, D.C. I think they left—they took his body back out of the Capitol today, didn't they? Or yesterday?

JOSH FRANCO: I think so, yeah.

[00:20:03]

LONNIE HOLLEY: But again, this man had such a wave in the ocean of activism until all that work behind him. That's the reason why I looked at the situation. And I knew that he wouldn't have wanted nobody to just be thinking about him all alone. But what about all these other people? What about all these other human bodies? What about all the feets that carried them? What about all of them that is now deceased and they—all the memory about them is what somebody had took the time to ask the questions, to get it into written documents.

JOSH FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LONNIE HOLLEY: It's—I don't want to say it's hard, but it is factual that we look at our precedents where everybody—we can allow all the spirits to be appreciated and not just from those—for whatever rights that the Negroes began to march in protest. It was the earlier protesters, but there was earlier protesting—protesting been going on ever since there were humans, but some way or another, even the cave people went to protesting. Ooh and ahh, ooh and ahh, they began to protest, you know? So it's the way that you holler and shout and scream. And say what—we're not eating right. You could tell that to your friend. Or I don't feel right about that. Just by you saying I don't feel right about that, that's another right. And I know there's a lot of rights to right. But if we're going to leave those rights wrong, and nobody even care whether we even try to document what is just and right, not just right. Just and just is two different things. Justice, justifiable.

JOSH FRANCO: I understand, yep.

LONNIE HOLLEY: You understand what I'm saying?

JOSH FRANCO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

LONNIE HOLLEY: So if we want to try to do that now, we need to do that quickly, quickly, by coming together with a greater togetherness because we're trying to leave this planet; we're trying to colonize the moon enough for us to go further from the moon after we do five or 10 years of colonization on the moon. And I'll probably be dead and gone, but I already look forward to that because I've already asked for 50,000 years of wealth and preservation from the planet Earth to do whatever else that we need to do in a more teachable manner, in a constructive manner, where we could do good with it and be proud of ourselves. This is—this is—and I'm going to still say, we should consider—still see ourselves as a front running nation. We should keep ourselves there and say if it's no more than the way that we are utilizing the data and the data banks, how much we are allowing to go from cloud to cloud, how much information we are having a constant research on to file it from A to Z, where it can be easier for us to contain it, read it, get an understanding of it, understand the data; where we can, then, when the next generation get here, it's almost like passing the torch in any Olympics. When we pass the torch, the next generation pick it up. It'd be a lot, lot easier for them to then rectify it or electronically get it laid out.

JOSH FRANCO: Yeah, I think—

LONNIE HOLLEY: I've talked too much, I'm sorry.

JOSH FRANCO: Well, I just really hope you can visit us at the Archives some day because I think a lot of the batons and the spirits live here because we have those materials and this is where you go to pass those things on.

LONNIE HOLLEY: You have them there. That's what it's all about. That's what it's all about. But there—what is—what I'm afraid of, what I'm afraid of, if it ever came to a point where people get so riled up and not see the information that has been preserved and the way that we need to see it as information, not as objects that's going to make me angry.

[00:25:31]

It's a lot of stuff that I've seen, I thought I should turn my head and not look at it because I grew up that way. But then after visiting the Smithsonian for those two weeks, I came up and visited because you all invited me up for two weeks, and I came up and I visited. I went back home and my mama thought I was going stone crazy. I was just working on the sandstone during that time. But I—when I got back home in 1982, the exhibit from '81 to '82, and I got back home, man, I'm saying wow, humans did this. And I didn't have nobody to talk to on my level. I didn't have

nobody to try to express myself to.

And I—all of that I had to keep within myself really until I met Matt's father [William Arnett] later on in 1984, '86, that I could talk to somebody, okay, I can walk the path and look at my art, and then explain to him why I did this and why I cut three sides or four sides to my sculpture instead of having one frontside and a backside. I never even hardly did a piece of art like that. My art was worth is completely all the way around, but the piece downstairs of *Yielding to the Ancestors While Controlling the Hands of Time*, that piece was made out of heavy duty foundry material for making molds of big, huge pieces of metal. That's what that was made out of.

JOSH FRANCO: Yeah.

LONNIE HOLLEY: And I think you all have another piece down that was made out of some just small sticks and it was called *Sticking Together*. But just putting some sticks together, it almost looked like a Pinocchio piece, that I put sticks together, but I end up creating a human out it.

JOSH FRANCO: Yeah, well, I hope this is just the first conversation. And for the last question for this one, though, I'm glad this is visual because I'm curious about your bracelet and your rings. Do you want to describe those?

LONNIE HOLLEY: I have my—

JOSH FRANCO: I love that, yeah.

LONNIE HOLLEY: Well, when I'm holding something in this hand here with my rings, I don't get no calluses on my hand, and when I'm cutting, I don't cut my wrists or something with a saw or something.

JOSH FRANCO: Very practical.

LONNIE HOLLEY: But this arm is more like having the grip and hold and, by me cutting all the time, sometimes I'm cutting a little bit faster and I never cut—I never cut this hand at all.

JOSH FRANCO: That's a great solution. All right. I'm going to stop recording. I'm not hanging up. I'm just going to stop recording. But thank you, Lonnie, for this.

LONNIE HOLLEY: Thumbs up from Mother Universe. Thank you. Also thanks to the Smithsonian. And may you all have [unintelligible] again because you all had my birthday there. And that was something else. Uh, it was just beautiful. Thank you. Thumbs up.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]