A TEI Project

Interview of Alonzo Davis

Contents

1. Transcript

1.1. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 26, 1990

MASON

> We usually start off the interviews in a chronological order, but since this show is only going to be here [Gregory Kondos Art Gallery, Sacramento City

College] for a limited amount of time, we thought it would be better to talk about the show while it's here. The show is called *Christopher Columbus Did Not Discover America and Other Related Works*. I'd like to ask you how you got the idea for the series and how you got started.

DAVIS

I went to the Association of American Cultures conference in Oklahoma City in June of 1990, and one of the concluding remarks by the contingent from the Native American community was that we should make a statement about the fact that Columbus did not discover America in 1992, which would be the quincentennial of this celebration, which is a myth. In leaving that conference, the most impactful thing to me was to do that and to start now. So I decided to do a series of pieces that stated Columbus did not discover America, starting in 1990 all the way through or into 1992. I've called this the *Mythbusters* series because it is a myth. There are several myths that we tend to perpetuate in our society, and this is one. So this series sort of takes a shot and makes some puns on different peoples or situations that are related to this.

MASON

What were some of the ideas that you had? You said you started off with a theme, and then you started to work with some of them.

DAVIS

Right.

MASON

What were some of the ideas that you started off with?

DAVIS

Well, I had a lot of ideas that I couldn't narrow down for a long time, so the idea of doing this rolled around in my head for a couple of months to approach in several ways. But I basically narrowed it down to an activity that I would do. I would mail postcards or do postcards that would address the issue. The first piece was really stimulated by sending it to the postal workers union in Casper, Wyoming. I was going to do it as a part of a mail art series. And then I—

MASON

So you always intended it to be a public—?

DAVIS

I did. I always intended it to be a public statement, yes.

MASON

Could you talk about the overall format that you came up with?

DAVIS

Sure. The overall format is that these postcards are mounted on a piece of handmade paper, and this handmade paper has grommets in all four corners and a mini-bungee cord that's expanded out from each corner so that it's like a hide or a scroll that's suspended like you would see— I would say like you would see a hide suspended with leather straps, except I used real contemporary materials. And underneath the card, which is collaged and addressed to a series of people or entities, is either a feather or an Indian head or a small item of significance. Other pieces include a tooth from a prehistoric animal, and another is the shape of the earth, which is round, making a play—on that particular card—on whether the earth is flat or round.

MASON

If we could talk about some specific pieces—

DAVIS

Okay. We'll see how far we can go with that machine.

MASON

I'll just yell if it starts to— [laughter]

DAVIS

This one is a card— And I try to use all of the cards from the U.S. Post Office official postcard which had a buffalo and mountains in the background, because that sort of set the tone for the series. In some of them, I try to do a play on words or make it a pun. This one is addressed to the World Is Round Club, Columbus Did Not Discover America, 1776 Flatearth People's Lane,

Cambridge, Massachusetts. And then below it is a collage of the world actually as a round sphereHere's another that was addressed to the Textbook Publisher's Historical Revelations Department, Columbus Did Not Discover America, Tall Tales Place, Suite 1492, Chicago, Illinois. Again, a statement on the fact that the truth in history has not been recorded in most of our texts, especially as it relates to people of color in the United States. Here's another one addressed to George Bush, president of the United States. I chose him because he is the president and because he keeps referring to the United States as America as opposed to it being the United States on the continent of North America.

MASON

What's the—? You have a little strip of writing in the shape of California.

DAVIS

The strip of writing is Latin. So many of the peoples in the United States feel that all traditions started with Latin, which is not true. Then I have a presidential seal. I collaged a postage stamp indicating the Bill of Rights and then an arrowhead on the bottom which is pointing up and to the right, which reflects where he is politically.

MASON

And there's a penciled-in arrow that's—

DAVIS

Well, the arrows that I usually do that are sort of my personal symbol are usually up and to the left, which is reflective of my philosophy and the way things should go, the way I think things should go.

MASON

So that means left politically?

DAVIS

Yeah. This next one is addressed to a woman who is an actress whom I met in New York [City] in the late seventies. An interesting person, and she's also an activist—Sandra Sharpe. And then the Frances Williams Corner Theater—Frances Williams is an old actress in Los Angeles from the black community, or

African American community, who has been in sort of the vanguard of people of color participating in the motion picture industry. So this is addressed to her. It's her actual address and so forth. She's in her eighties and like a godmother in a way. Just someone, an older person, who was out there and involved and still is. There are a lot of things I could say about Frances, but I think people should do their research on her. She's priceless. This one is addressed to Jack [D.] Forbes, professor of Native American studies. And then the fictitious part of this one is called the Get It Right Club. He does teach at the University of California at Davis, and he is of black American and Native American ancestry and has written a book about that crossover. This one is addressed to Immigration and Naturalization [Service], Ellis Island Association, New York.

MASON

Is there a reason that you collaged the feather, this time, over the—?

DAVIS

No. [It's an] artistic statement more than a symbolic statement. This one is a guy who's a scholar. His name was Ivan Van Sertima, and he works with the United Nations. He actually is involved in writing a text that recorrects history, and he's active in doing that now.

MASON

He's most famous for *They Came before Columbus*.

DAVIS

Right, right. Why don't we walk around the other way?

MASON

Yeah. This piece in the middle is that—

DAVIS

Yeah. This piece is a collaboration with tree branches with an artist named Maru Hoeber, who's an instructor here. We've done a couple of pieces together, and I thought that it would be real significant to have this statement right in the middle of the room, with the sand at the bottom. It's in a tepee-esque shape, but is really a statement towards sensitivity towards nature,

which, I think, adds drama to the exhibit as well as makes its own little statement.

MASON

How is it a collaboration?

DAVIS

The two of us talked about doing it and how it should be arranged and actually put it together and installed it. I've been doing a lot of that with artists, and you'll see in the IDEA [Institute for Design and Experimental Art] Gallery exhibit a whole series of collaborations. Okay. Let's see. This man is an African American who is named Samuel Beeler and is a chief of the Cherokee tribe of Virginia. In that part of the United States, there was a lot of mixing between the Cherokee people and African Americans. This one is addressed to Nelson Mandela. When he was here in the United States in 1990, while he made a significant impact on the African and African American community and those other segments of the population here who were sensitive to his message, the Native American people approached him to speak or to give them some of his attention and he wasn't able to for whatever reasons. But I thought it was interesting, because he is a man from an indigenous population of his continent and these are people who are the indigenous people of the United States. So in some ways it was like insensitivity or— It just seemed that he missed an opportunity to speak to these people, because it was appropriate since they have the same situation here in this country that he has there in South Africa. So it was a missed opportunity for him, I think. He really missed something, because I think these people had something to say. This is a guy named Chief Edgar Heap-of-Birds. I met him in Dallas, Texas, in 1989. We had done sort of an evaluation of— Was it '88 or '89? We sat on a panel discussion group talking about issues of peoples of color who are artists in the United States. He is a Native American who teaches in the art department at the University of Oklahoma. His artwork uses a lot of letters and words, so I just thought it was really appropriate to dedicate one of these to him. Oddly enough, I ran into him again in San Francisco a week ago and told him about this piece. He was really tickled to know that.

MASON

How does he use letters and words?

DAVIS

He makes signs like highway signs and uses statements of historical significance. One of them was something very negative toward Native Americans in Minnesota that Abraham Lincoln had said. So it was some revelations from other people and other groups that sometimes you don't associate with people like Lincoln, because you tend to think of him more in terms of his statements about slavery and the Civil War and the *Gettysburg Address*. I feel like we can hold off on talking about these pieces until another time. They exist other places, and it would throw a little bit of the continuity of this exhibit off. And these are what I call the "Other Related Works" because they are politically significant but not totally related. This one dealt with Jesse Jackson's attempt at the presidency in '88. Mafundi Thundercloud is my nom de plume which I've used on a couple of occasions. Mafundi was given to me by a woman I went to high school with, and Thundercloud came about when I was in graduate school. So at one point I just embraced these names. I don't know. So it's Mafundi Thundercloud.

MASON

Where is Mafundi from?

DAVIS

I think it's Swahili for artist and craftsman. Yeah. And Thundercloud is a sort of a Native American feeling. In this one, I used a stamp from Haiti. I've been there a couple of times. It's a real interesting place, real powerful place. [laughter] It had a lot of impact on me. I really believe in travel and seeing other parts of the world. You'll see in some of these that I have collaged stamps from correspondence that I've gotten from all over, but especially places of either artistic or personal significance. Anyway, this one is addressed to the Chambliss Children's House in Tuskegee, Tuskegee Institute, Alabama, which was where I went to elementary school and where my dad [Alonzo J. Davis Sr.] and mom [Agnes Moses Davis] worked on the campus there.

MASON

Why did you choose to go all the way back to Tuskegee?

DAVIS

Well, again, this is like doing pieces that are historically relevant. I learned in elementary school that Columbus discovered America, so this is where the myth began for me, I'm sure in complete innocence on the part of the instruction, but nevertheless— So if this ever had a chance to go— I mean, it would be great if this could be a part of this elementary school's art collection. It would be historically significant, one, because I went there, and, two, because it's the school that needs to bust the myth, so to speak. And it's relevant to my childhood. And we came out with this headdress stamp in this country, so I've begun to use these. As they come through my personal mail, I save them. This was Buffalo Bill Cody, and he represented the Wild West and the whole other side of the coin, so to speak.

MASON

This element here is just suggestive of a landscape.

DAVIS

Yeah, and art. I mean, I really wanted these to be very interesting little pieces and make a statement. I didn't want the statement to overrun the creative statement. So it was really an attempt to balance this out. This last one was addressed to Columbus Did Not Discover America, Resettling the Dust, Gorman Museum, University of California at Davis. Again, Davis is a campus where there is some sensitivity to the issues that are related to these peoples and to historical significance and telling the truth. Or, at least, on that campus there exist people who espouse those things. [Carl N.] Gorman was a man who had worked at Davis, and the museum is named after him. He's of Native American blood. They have a collection on the campus there that's quite significant.

MASON

And you're saying that it's going to continue for two years.

DAVIS

Yeah, this series. I will just be continuing to do a piece or two as I can from now until 1992. And where will it go from here, I don't know. I talked to the

director of City Gallery in San Francisco, who expressed an interest in seeing some of the slides and so forth from it. So it will take its own flight, hopefully.

MASON

I'm sorry, did you say before whether the words and the message is sort of centered in—?

DAVIS

Yeah, it's a postcard which is addressed just like a piece of mail.

MASON

So do you get the name first and then you create the images?

DAVIS

In my personal process, no. I created these images, and then I try to pick the images for whom I would want to address it. Occasionally I would say I should do one, like the one with George Bush. Part of that I had and I hadn't decided. I said, "Wow, this would be great to use the card with the postage stamp with the Bill of Rights on it to use for the George Bush one." So the idea to do it to him and the card existed separately, and then they merged, so to speak. So this was the perfect card, and I had planned to do one addressed to him anyway. And then I had some business dealings with the State Department's office of information, USIA [United States Information Agency], I think. There was a presidential seal on a business card, so I collaged that onto the artwork, as well. [tape recorder off] I'll say a few things about this as well, as if it's something else. There are three other prints that are pieces that have political significance. The reason I've been doing printmaking in the last few years is to have multiples of art that are available, theoretically, for less to more people. In quite a few of the pieces I've done, I've also wanted to take this art form or format to make a statement. So this was a piece called *Art against Apartheid*, and it was done in 1986. It's a series of six panels that are about six feet long and about fourteen inches high. It's like a long, narrow band of artwork where I used what I call "up" colors, because I didn't want this to be a depressive piece of artwork, even though the issue is a depressing issue. So I used a map of Africa. I used what we call in printmaking—in this case, silkscreen a split fountain, blue in the back with texture, and a flowing line which will flow from

one panel to the other. The first panel has "South Africa" written in it, and then below that in sort of subtle words, spelled out, sort of like— In a way, as I think about it, talking about this reminds me of Sister Corita [Kent], who certainly influenced a lot of us in the sixties and early seventies with her silkscreen works of art that included words or made a verbal statement as well as an aesthetic statement.

MASON

So would you say that most of your, quote, "political" work does have writing in it?

DAVIS

In this series of prints that I've been doing in the last five years, yes, definitely. And other pieces, sometimes there's symbols and sometimes I used images. Do you want me to talk about each panel or—?

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

Okay. I used "This Land Is for All" with a map of Africa, and then, under that, I used the names of three people whom I had met or whose paths I had crossed: Nelson Mandela, whom I actually have given one of these portfolios to; Bishop [Desmond] Tutu, whom I met in Los Angeles at, I believe, an Urban League dinner; and Miriam Makeba, whom I saw in 1965, I believe, in the Tivoli Gardens concert area in Copenhagen. It was the first time I had been exposed to artists and music from South Africa and the music about the struggle. The second panel has a heart and a map of Africa imposed on it. It has a little title that's written at the bottom called "Hearts against Apartheid." The third panel is "Save the Children from Apartheid." Written across it at an angle, it says, "Take What Is Yours." In very subtle turquoise abstracted shapes are little Bantu huts that are imposed on an outline map of Africa with a series of arrows sort of shooting up to the left from South Africa. The next one, I really like the way I took the fourth panel and used the words "Take Apartheid Apart." I separated the "a" and the "p" and put an "x" between them in the word "apart, " so it is a visual separation of it, and it reemphasizes the impact

of that word. Again, the map of Africa, in this case a series of arrows going up into the bottom of South Africa, just impacting and signifying that area. The fifth panel is part of the southern part of Africa. The words in it say "Artists against Apartheid," and then a big "x" over the map area of South Africa. And then the last panel—

MASON

Is that a call for artists against apartheid?

DAVIS

When I did this, there was a call for artists against apartheid, and this was my opportunity to make a statement. And the last, sixth, panel is a one with a flower blossoming and one with a flower dying, a real subtle map in behind. The statement in it is "Man above Diamonds," in that we should be more concerned with humanity than abusing humanity to extract jewels and symbols of wealth from the earth. This piece [*Art Against Apartheid*] was done in collaboration with Kay Lindsey, who's an artist and writer, and a guy named Steven Grace, who did the physical printing—he's a master printer—and Self-Help Graphics, which is a silkscreen print studio in East Los Angeles. This next piece is called *Act on It*, and it's a serigraph. It was done in '86, I believe, '85, '86. I think it was '85 that this one was done. It uses the word "vote" in the middle of it. It has a watermelon and a guy who happens to be Reverend [Ralph] Abernathy marching through Selma, but it's abstracted, so you really can't tell who it is. And you have an African American guy running with a torch in his hand. These were symbols of the struggle, of where we've been, where we're going, and that we should use this tool to make change—the tool being exercising the right to vote—and that we have a lot of people in our culture, especially in Mississippi, who lost leg, limb, and life to fight to get the right to vote, and we shouldn't take it lightly. Anyway, these symbols are right in the middle of the word "vote," in the middle of the "o," and then the word "vote" has sort of abstracted patterns in and around it.

MASON

It's incredibly textured. How did you—?

DAVIS

Well, there's about twenty passes of color on there, so that's why it's so rich. This is something I hope to have, either this one or something from this series, made into a postage stamp. It's sort of one of my lifetime goals to do it, because I think it's significant for our population. We have so many people in this country who don't exercise that right. Not that it's the only answer, but it's a nonviolent one. This is another one from that same series of using the word "vote." The piece is called *Now Is the Time*. This was done in 1988, and it's made or it's printed as a postage stamp about thirty by forty [inches] actually. This piece has, in the background, "Vote Jesse Jackson in 1988." It's sort of real subliminal, and you have to look real hard to find it. "Vote Jackson '88, Vote Jackson '88, Vote Jackson '88" is behind everything. Then the words "vote" are printed on top of that. I used "USA" in the corner and a circle, which is pretty much like the indicia and a canceled stamp quality in that upper area. And this particular piece is called "Now Is the Time, " meaning that this was the time for this man, and, for people who thought that this should happen, this was their opportunity to make it happen by using the power of the vote as the tool.

MASON

Okay, we'll probably get into this a little more later. But I just wanted to ask you, some artists feel that political art or protest art is their way of participating. But, in your experiences, do you participate physically as well as artistically?

DAVIS

I have participated physically as well as artistically. In different periods of my life, and depending on what the issue was, my participation has been more or less. It's interesting to look back at what I did in my late twenties, what I did in my thirties, and now what I do in my forties. There are a lot of things that I like to do, and, in doing them, I like to have impact. In order to have impact, it's important for me not to spread myself too thin. So a lot of times there are more issues that I espouse than I actually act on. At this phase or this period of time in my life, I tend to pick an issue, and that tends to be the one that I will try to focus my energy towards for whatever given period of time, and then I pick another issue. I think we all should be active within the society in which we live. But I hate to admit that, somewhere along the line, I learned that I

couldn't do it all or I wasn't going to have the total impact on the world, so I had to pick as opposed to being spread and not impactful. So it suits my personal rhythm at this time.

1.2. TAPE NUMBER: I, SIDE TWO OCTOBER 26, 1990

MASON

As I was saying before, we usually start off chronologically. I'll ask when and where were you born, and then we'll talk about your background and family life and your family background. Don't forget to give us names, too, because a lot of people say, "My aunt, who was really important," but you never find out what—

DAVIS

Don't hesitate to ask if you catch me doing that. I don't know that I will, but—

MASON

Okay. So when and where were you born?

DAVIS

I was born in Tuskegee, Alabama. It was really Tuskegee Institute, which was just outside of the city of Tuskegee, Alabama. They had a hospital on the college campus, and I was born in that.

MASON

And what year was that?

DAVIS

That was February 2, 1942.

MASON

And who are your parents?

DAVIS

My mother's name is Agnes Moses Davis, and she's from Anniston, Alabama. And my dad's name is Alonzo Joseph Davis—he's Sr. —and he's from Washington, D.C.

MASON

Can you tell us something about their background, their professional background or their interests?

DAVIS

My dad grew up in Washington, D.C. His people came from Virginia. On both parents' side there was mixed blood of Native American, European, and African.

MASON

Is that something that you grew up realizing? Or was that something that you came to realize later?

DAVIS

I guess it wasn't significant in the first part of my life other than realizing that my skin was lighter than someone else's, so obviously there had to be somebody else in the picture. But I grew up as an African American in a community that was all black and a college that was all black.

MASON

How did the mixture go? There was mixture on both your mother and your father's side?

DAVIS

Right, right. I don't know how it went on my dad's side that much. He does, and he's told me, but I haven't held onto it. On my mother's side, I don't know my grandfather [Stephen E. Moses]'s heritage as much. He is from the Macon, Georgia, area. But her mother was Delia Brockman, and she was from the offspring of a Native American Cherokee. I would imagine both sides of the bloodline is Cherokee, because Cherokees are in the Virginia area all the way into South Carolina. She was from South Carolina, Charleston area. She was born from a union of— Well, the first generation on this continent was a slave woman and a slave master. They had a child that took the last name of the slave master, which was Brockman. And then, from that union, there was a male child who married and lived with a Native American woman who was Cherokee. So my grandmother is from that mix. Her name was Delia

Brockman, and as we go through this interview, Brockman will keep appearing. That was the first slave name on my grandmother's side of the family that we have an oral history of back to slavery.

MASON

So your mother would tell you these stories?

DAVIS

My mother, my Aunt Clara [Moses Wilson], Aunt Sybil [Moses]. In her family, there were seven sisters and four brothers. So it was a large family. She was the last of the kids in that family, so I had a lot of aunts and a number of uncles.

MASON

Who was living in the Tuskegee community, as far as an extended family?

DAVIS

You mean from that or outside of the immediate family? That would be friends or—?

MASON

Well, what—?

DAVIS

There were no other blood relatives living in Tuskegee. There were blood relatives living in Anniston and in Birmingham [Alabama] that I was aware of in the South.

MASON

So let's start with your father. What was his educational background and his personal background?

DAVIS

My father went to Dunbar High School in Washington, D.C., finished there. He was the first member of his family to go to college, and he went to Howard University. He finished Howard.

MASON

Do you know what he studied?

DAVIS

I believe that his undergraduate and graduate studies were the same. After he left Howard, he was in the ROTC [Reserve Officers Training Corps] for a while, so he did a little military. Then he started working at Tuskegee. Somewhere or other, he also had a fellowship to go to Yale [University], and he went there for a while. Then he finished his Ph. D. in child psychology at the University of Minnesota in Minneapolis.

MASON

So he studied psychology as an undergraduate, as well?

DAVIS

Yeah. And my mother, her father was a contemporary of Booker T. Washington. We have family photos of Booker T. with the other black educators in the South or in that region of Alabama. He's one of them, standing on the steps to the courthouse, I think, in Anniston. He started the first secondary school or primary and secondary schools for black children in Anniston. My mother went to what was called a finishing school, which would be like a high school. It was a boarding school, and it was called Barbara Scotia. He sent most of his children there. Then most of them went to Talladega College in Talladega, which was just outside of Anniston, right between Birmingham and Anniston.

MASON

Did either parent have an interest in the arts at all?

DAVIS

My parents' interest in the arts was primarily in feeling like it was important to know how to play a piano.

MASON

Why was that?

DAVIS

It was part of having some culture. It wasn't important to be a pianist or to be a composer, but it was important to know how. In all of my mother's family, that was the real key in their education—that they have a music background. But none of them were creative, to my knowledge. They weren't making or doing original compositions. It was more works that had been written that were significant for people to play, Brahms or—

MASON

No, not Eubie Blake. [laughter]

DAVIS

Right. No, no, no. Eubie Blake was not in the picture. [laughter] Probably in the picture for some of the boys in the family who took off and did their own thing. But it seemed like that upbringing was pretty conservative and traditional. And seeing that they all went to this private boarding school and most of the women who taught in this school were Anglo, from the North, with a classical, European approach to education, their perspective on culture didn't include the things that black Americans were doing at the time, or I wouldn't think so anyway, other than maybe some of the Negro spirituals. Those were always around when we were growing up.

MASON

What did your family think about spirituals?

DAVIS

It was important. Those songs were real important. And some poetry. Paul Lawrence Dunbar poetry was always something that was "You've got to learn this; this is real important"—something that they would push that was culturally significant to black people. And then, growing up in Tuskegee, we were on a college campus, so we had some privileges that weren't available to a lot of other kids in the South. We didn't know that until we came to the West. Like kids, I mean, you take it for granted, because it's there all the time.

MASON

So when you say "we, " you're talking about your brother Dale [B. Davis].

DAVIS

My brother Dale and all the other little kids who were growing up whose parents worked at the college.

MASON

So there were a lot of other families?

DAVIS

Yeah, a lot. It was a little family town in a way. I mean, everything centered around this college. And small commerce was centered around the college too. There were people who owned grocery stores and dry cleaners and gasoline stations. Just about all of the shopkeepers were black, other than downtown. Downtown was like this foreign zone for which there was the Piggly Wiggly market [laughter] and the theater, for which it was blacks and whites on different sides. And the dime store had drinking fountains that were black and white. I didn't get upset about those as a kid because I didn't have to have it and I didn't have to use those fountains.

MASON

Were you generally not encouraged to go downtown?

DAVIS

Yeah, we weren't encouraged to go downtown. We weren't held back from it. I rode my bike down there a lot just to check out what the white folks did over there. As I look back at our situation, we were somewhat privileged for people in the South at that time. The college campus had a swimming pool, and all the kids who lived around that part of the college or area or city could go there. And there were tennis courts. So there was an outlet for activity that was not relegated to the downtown Anglo community. I mean, the only thing about that, they had their white swimming pool, and because it was whites only, I was always curious. I'd go over there and look to see what was different. Just because there was a "no" in front of it, there was a need to understand that or have a sense of it.

MASON

And what do you remember was going through your mind when you saw that it was just a swimming pool?

DAVIS

Well, yeah, it was just a swimming pool. I probably had a little bit of an attitude of wanting to swim in there only because somebody said I couldn't, not that I didn't have access to an equally fine swimming pool on the campus. So when I look back at that kind of situation that I grew up in, I was privileged by comparison to some of the other people or kids around me. And I still maintain contact. I have better contact with those kids from Tuskegee than I do with the kids I went to high school with in California. They were more about keeping up with one another. There was a real high level of consciousness among their parents, and we grew up feeling like we have to make a difference. That we're special people, too, and we have to be twice as good to be equal. So in a way, that is probably why I'm so highly motivated to do a lot of things, from all those kinds of influences and things that were issued as values and things of significance and things to achieve or to work toward.

MASON

Do you have just one brother?

DAVIS

I just have one brother, yeah.

MASON

Is he older or younger?

DAVIS

Younger.

MASON

Do you think he was impacted the same way?

DAVIS

Yeah, it's hard to get— You can't— I mean, that kind of an environment can make you or break you. Even though he was a lot younger than I was coming out to California, you can't get away from the significance of it. The Tuskegee experience follows you. It's like a great place to be from, but probably an

awful place to be stuck for the rest of your life. I can't speak for him, but I'm pretty sure I'm pretty close to the mark on the fact that our roots from there made a difference in who we are. When I first came to California— Well, when I first started teaching in California, I was really surprised at how unmotivated a lot of students were. Having come out of the South— And even going to high school out here, I wasn't the best student, but I was motivated. I was curious, I was goal-oriented, and I had plans. They changed all the time, but I had plans. And I didn't find that with a lot of kids.

MASON

You said Booker T. Washington, and he was obviously really important. So when his philosophy was taught to you, it was more about achieving things rather than the side of his philosophy we always get in high school—where you can't do art, you have to do industrial things or manual things. I mean, how did that play—?

DAVIS

We never got into that dialogue. I didn't grow up being aware of the Booker T. Washington controversy between him and [W. E. B.] DuBois and the speech he made in Atlanta. But I had a lot of respect for the fact that I came from a place where people had a sense of self-worth. They knew how to go for it. They controlled their own destiny through business and commerce for the most part. And they were managers and operators and teachers and barbers and grocers and groundskeepers and watchmen, from doctor to lawyer, all the way down or up or across, whatever that means. But we had the full strata of layers of human beings in terms of accomplishments, social level, etc.

MASON

So what was your father teaching? You said he got his Ph. D. in child psychology.

DAVIS

Yeah, my dad taught psychology and education. He was the dean of education on the Tuskegee campus for a while. And my mother worked on the campus in the library. Prior to working in the library, she was a schoolteacher.

MASON

So while you were there, the civil rights movement sort of started coming along. Were you aware of that?

DAVIS

Yeah, we were very much aware of black-white issues and the Ku Klux Klan and the difference between the music from both cultures, from the high end and the low end, so to speak. So from black gospel church to blues that was played late at night, that you could only get from Tennessee when it was nighttime through a station that had a strong signal, to classical music to hillbilly music. The advent of television was taking place then, so you would see that. You would see the hillbilly or country-western music on television a lot. You would just begin to see a few blacks on television, either through popular music— I guess *Hit Parade*. I think that was— And what else came on television? They had the "Coca-Cola Minute," which would be a minute of some significant cultural contributions that black Americans were making. The guy who conducted the Tuskegee Institute choir was on that "Coca-Cola Minute" once, and that was a real big thing. We all were around the TV and so forth.

MASON

He was a man named Dawson?

DAVIS

Right. Yeah, William Dawson.

MASON

I read in one of your catalogs, I think, that you said that he was influential.

DAVIS

Yeah, he was sort of a creative mentor in that I guess he just saw I was sort of a right-brain child walking around. And I had an interest in creative kinds of things. It wasn't defined or really nurtured. He would have me listen to music and point out things and ask me certain things to think about that dealt with the creative expression in music, but it translated over into the visual arts, which is the area that I have chosen.

MASON

What do you mean it's translated? Specific things? Or a way of expressing?

DAVIS

How do I say it? It's hard to verbalize. Well, the kinds of things that he would ask me to do— And how can I translate this into visual art, I'm not sure. But the kinds of things he would have me do were listen to music or listen to drums or identify instruments or ask me could I play or where did that music come from or could I interpret. So it started a curiosity toward that kind of thing. He had traveled to Africa, and he did a lot of interesting things that were fascinating to me. I just paid special attention to the kinds of things that he would put before me. I can't give specific examples of them. But once, on that trip back from Africa, he did show me some currency from a country in West Africa, and it had the image of an African man on it. That was real interesting to me because I had never seen any other currency other than the U.S. dollar. That sort of turned my head around that there's something else out there. There's other money that's spendable. There's money with other people on it who are from other ethnic groups and cultural significances, and that the only dollar wasn't the U.S. dollar. I mean, at an early age, it was sort of a world view through currency that was just a gesture, but it just opened up a door, a vista that I held onto. I'm sure he had no idea how significant that was at that time. This guy just had a lot of creative energy, and I used to liked being around him. He would be listening and interpreting, and he would have body movements, reactions to music and things he was listening to.

MASON

You mean he was also a dancer?

DAVIS

No. He'd just jump or raise his hand, or "Did you hear that?" Or "Whoa!" [laughter)

MASON

He was into it. [laughter]

DAVIS

He was into it. Exactly. And he wasn't a heavy proponent of jazz or anything like that, which I feel like— Gee. But he was really into Negro spirituals, and he

had written some classical music, as well, in the same way. He was from Anniston, Alabama. He was a contemporary of— He was a little older than my mom. Actually, he just died, 1990, this year, so he was well into his eighties if not close to or ninety. He was a giant, but he wasn't understood on the college campus. I mean, he was what people would call a space cadet today, or an egghead. There wasn't as great a need for what he had to contribute, or people didn't understand his significance yet. So he had some conflicts and some turmoil in his life. He wasn't able to keep the job at Tuskegee, and he went to Fisk [University]. He did work there, and then he came back to Tuskegee. So it was sort of interesting following his life.

MASON

So they actually ended up firing him?

DAVIS

I don't know what— Letting him go or firing him or not renewing a contract. You know that process. George Washington Carver was still living when I was born. I think he lived until '46. And his presence was still real heavy around, having been the inventor of so many things.

MASON

Did you ever meet him?

DAVIS

I did, but I don't remember. I was almost one year old. I know that I saw him because my folks have told me that I saw him. But I take pride from coming from this little town. A lot of people, black Americans, have ideological conflict with the kinds of things that came out of Tuskegee. But I espouse independence and self-sufficiency, and I think a lot of that came out of having grown up there.

MASON

Yeah. I mean, when you read *Up from Slavery* in high school, sometimes it makes you really mad. You think that Booker T. Washington is trying to limit what black people can do. But, on the other hand, when you read it again, it just seems like he's trying to achieve a balance between trying to— Well, I

mean, they call him the great accommodationist, but he was just trying to achieve a balance between the practical and the creative.

DAVIS

Well, the practical and the intellectual. And I think, as a kid coming up, there really was a big thing about being self-sufficient, being able to do— And the examples, the role models, were those of people who could do for themselves. They were self-sufficient.

MASON

What about other artistic or creative—? I mean, I don't want to say folk art, but what about quilters and craftspeople? Were there any of those kinds of people around you?

DAVIS

They were around. I wasn't really impacted by them. I was aware of some quilts, but not people making them. Just that they were interesting things. There was a guy who taught on the campus that did ceramics and would have exhibits in a little showroom on the campus. I remember being fascinated with the objects that—

MASON

What kinds of—? Sort of like sculptures?

DAVIS

No, they were pots, clay pots, for the most part. Interesting glazes and colors. There was another man there who was an artist who had a stroke, and he was bedridden for most of his life, I think. Freeman, Mr. [D'Edquard] Freeman. He lived across the backyard, down the ditch, through the gas station, between the car showroom and a gas station, and across a little bridge over a ditch that— He was this man who lay up in the bed who was a painter. He painted with a paintbrush in his mouth and his toes. His daughter was an artist, and she was one of my art teachers. Elaine Freeman Thomas was her name. So that was impactful. I had a buddy named Gene Ramsey, and we used to run around drawing cars, not unlike any other teenagers, except we were really into it. Interestingly enough, Gene, who I thought might go into art, because I thought he was good, he went into psychology, into my dad's field. But

drawing those cars was real important. One of the times I remember drawing cars was when there was a parade on campus. President [William V. S.] Tubman from Liberia had come to the campus, and they had a parade for him. Here was a man from Africa sitting on the back of a Cadillac or whatever, and we were drawing the cars. Not only was that of cultural significance, but it was right into what we were into as little guys.

MASON

Did you think of an art career at that point as being possible?

DAVIS

At that point, no. I was just doing it.

MASON

Yeah. You were probably seven or eight years old, whatever.

DAVIS

I was just out there, right. I was just out there. I tried to play the trumpet, and it got stolen. My folks wanted me to play the piano anyway, so they said, "Well, the trumpet's gone, so you have to take piano lessons." And it didn't gel. The first instructor was too rigid, and the second instructor and I just didn't communicate. I don't know what it was. I didn't accomplish anything. He really tried to work with me, but there wasn't anything he could do with me at piano, I guess. I did a little recital once, I think. And I got my parents to let me take typing instead of piano. So I took typing for about a year and a half to two almost. There was another significant art experience in I think it must have been about the seventh or eighth grade. I did some drawings and paintings that I got some acknowledgment and acclaim for. That sort of tipped the scale of "Hmmm, maybe I can do this" or "Maybe this is something."

MASON

So you were put up in a show someplace?

DAVIS

Either it was put in an exhibit or I think I got a little award for being creative or, when they write your reports, "Shows artistic talent" or whatever. And it's funny. Just a little thing like that can set a young person's track or path or

focus. Another thing that I did in elementary school that followed my life pattern and my lack of fear of doing that kind of thing was public speaking. I wasn't drama oriented or whatever, but they would have me be an emcee. I was like a little master of ceremonies in the fifth grade, but that stuck. And then once I had to do the *Gettysburg Address* in some little exercise or assembly program.

MASON

You probably still remember it. [laughter]

DAVIS

Yeah, parts of it anyway. I don't think I did it correctly all the way as a kid, [laughter] but it introduced me to public speaking. It helped me move away from the fear of standing in front of a crowd and speaking. And it's gotten to be something that I sort of enjoy. I enjoy moderating dialogue. I'd rather be the moderator than the guest speaker in a way. And I like facilitating things. I like introducing and then summarizing and giving a synopsis or keying in on important points made by several people on a panel. I think that that experience as a kid set the tone for my professional practices in that area as an adult.

MASON

Who is your Aunt Clara and where does she come into this?

DAVIS

Aunt Clara was sort of the matriarch of my mother's family, the stable element, the one in Birmingham who had the house. I mean, she was old enough to be my grandmother. When you understand that line of time between the youngest child and the oldest child, I think she was either the second- or third-oldest child. She was a stable person who ran the only nursery school for black kids in Birmingham and was a social person. She was in the society of black people, so she was aware of a lot of— Things that I wasn't aware she was aware of as a kid. So when my parents had problems, we would go there, or when there were vacation times, we would go there. She had no kids. She was really into her nieces and nephews. She was a good aunt, and she was always looking out for us, the family, the sisters. She was

my grandmother's backup. She was like the other stable element of what was a really strong group of black women out of that family. In a way, she was the one real stable element. She always had an interest in what we were doing. When I had the gallery [Brockman Gallery], while she was living, she was into the gallery. And she was into PR [public relations]. She was always wanting to promote the gallery and let people in Alabama know what was going on in California with this nephew and so forth. She was the communicator. All things went though her, so to speak. She was the channel and the vehicle for who was— She was pretty organized, too, obviously. You know how organized people are when they die in that the will was in order and certain things are in place. And she handled a lot of the funerals for the other sisters who died ahead of her and stuff like that.

MASON

Amazing.

DAVIS

Yeah, she was one of those. Rock of Gibraltar, bigger than life. You didn't realize she was a short person. It was hard to realize she was an old person because she had a strong spirit.

MASON

Is there anything else that you want to add about your experience in Tuskegee? Other family members? Were you and your brother close?

DAVIS

Yeah, but we fought like cats and dogs, [laughter] Not right now that I can think of. There were a lot of interesting people around. We had fights and played hard and took risks and fell out of trees and down ditches and played in the little caverns where Booker T. Washington and the people dug the clay to make the bricks and went to the basketball tournaments on the campus. All the black colleges would come to Tuskegee to play in this tournament every year, and I remember that as real significant.

MASON

Why?

DAVIS

I just liked it. [laughter] Energy, activity. I liked knowing about Clarke College or Xavier University or Grambling [State University] or Florida A and M [University]. I mean, the fact that they were playing basketball was important, but it was also significant to know where they all came from and that there were all of these colleges. Alcorn [State University] and Tougaloo [College], Fisk. I mean, there were all of the traditional ones, but there were a whole bunch of other ones that you know you never heard of except around these sports activities.

MASON

Did you pick one out that you wanted to go to when you grew up?

DAVIS

No, I didn't, really. I didn't. I think my parents sort of picked one for me. I think my parents would have had me go to— What's that black college in Atlanta that's all male?

MASON

Oh, Spelman [College] is the women's college and—

DAVIS

I keep thinking, Morris Brown [College]. I was fascinated with Morris Brown, but it wasn't Morris Brown. Morehouse [College].

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

Morehouse. So I think I was destined— I was being pointed in that direction, I think. But we came to California before that real focus thing took place. I liked Xavier because the guys crossed their heart when they were going to shoot a freethrow. [laughter]

MASON

That's funny.

DAVIS

I mean, little stuff that kids pick up that's— And I would like to go down— I mean, I tried to play in a tournament. I wasn't good. They had little tournaments for kids, and I was real insecure about getting out there. It really wasn't my thing. I played tennis. They had these clay tennis courts on the campus, so I enjoyed tennis as a sport.

MASON

What was the religious background?

DAVIS

My dad was brought up in the Catholic Church and my mother was brought up in the Congregational Church, and then there was a Baptist church on the corner of her block in Alabama, in Anniston. So somehow she was Congregationalist by— But if you couldn't make it that Sunday to that, then you went to the Baptist church. Or all the other little kids in the neighborhood went to the Baptist church, so there was a crossover on her side. And my dad's side was straight-ahead Catholic from a basically poor, working-class community in Washington. My grandfather drove a coal and ice wagon and had a little laundry business. So definitely business, working-class kind of people who were like a lot of light-skinned black people who were affiliated with the Catholic Church. They were staunch Catholic, just didn't move from it, just ingrained. But it wasn't ingrained in him. As soon as he got to be an intellectual of sorts, he left the church as the vehicle for salvation. And so, growing up, my parents let me do whatever I wanted to do. So they basically let me find— I had to go somewhere Sunday. [laughter]

MASON

So you had to go to church, but they didn't—

DAVIS

I had to do something. I think I was real glad for the outing, too. So I went on my own, and I ended up going to the Episcopal church, I think because other kids were going there whom I knew was probably a high motivator. The guy who was the minister or the father of that church was easy to communicate

with. And I think I enjoyed the ritual. That was an intellectual church more than the traditional black church.

MASON

Yeah, they seem to be highly motivated.

DAVIS

Yeah.

1.3. TAPE NUMBER: II, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 26, 1990

MASON

We were talking about the religious aspect of your childhood. You ended up having to choose, and you chose Episcopalian.

DAVIS

Yeah. And you said they were like—

MASON

They seemed to be highly motivated people.

DAVIS

Yeah. Now, I'm not sure I chose them because they were highly motivated people. I think I could just connect. They were intellectual. They had an interest in ritual. It wasn't so dogmatic. And I was comfortable with that religious experience, I guess. When we would go to Anniston [Alabama] or Birmingham [Alabama], we would go to other kinds of churches. I remember the shouting and the really spirited songs and gospels and so forth. While it was fun to go, I guess it just didn't hold me. I had that choice at that time, so I kept going back to the Episcopal church.

MASON

I can't imagine your father [Alonzo J. Davis Sr.] as a Tuskegee [Institute] professor going to a shouting church on Sunday or letting you go.

DAVIS

He didn't go to church on Sunday. He would go to chapel, and in some cases that was required of faculty. So we might go to chapel in the evening with him or we might not. They would have the invocation, they would have a guest speaker, and sometimes they would have the singing of spirituals. That was a rather high-art kind of experience when I think back on it, even though there were black spirituals. It certainly wasn't like the down churches. This was more thought out and processed and practiced and rehearsed. It was treated more in a classical sort of vein in a way. But all of those church experiences were good ones for me. It was weird seeing people fall out in church the first times I experienced that. It was hard to understand how that could happen. That was then. And now, having seen it and experienced it from my travels and just going in other places— In Los Angeles, I went to the Presbyterian church when we moved out there, because that's where the kids across the street went, and there were good constructive activities for teenagers. You didn't know that you were being programmed and kept out of trouble or that there was trouble around the corner if you didn't do some of these things that your parents said or had you do.

MASON

I'm sorry. You said that you did or did not know?

DAVIS

Yeah, I didn't know. I just took it for granted that we had to go to church. You just had to do it. In a way, it was just like education. I mean, when I came out here and went to public school, there were a lot of kids who were satisfied finishing high school, but, man, not in ray family. College. You had to go to college. And I'm glad I was capable. [laughter] Because that was the rule of thumb, and you had to do it, and you would not be thought of well if you didn't accomplish that. I had counselors in high school tell me I couldn't cut it. And the way I went about my education during that time, I guess they were probably right for the majority of people who were like me, but they weren't right about me.

MASON

Okay, so at Tuskegee there was a special school for all the kids who went to—

DAVIS

Yeah, it was kind of like a college.

MASON

So you were probably quite well prepared for—

DAVIS

Programmed. Prepared, maybe not, but programmed, definitely. There's a difference between being programmed and being prepared.

MASON

How were you being programmed?

DAVIS

Well, I feel like you were being programmed because there were these expectations built and these goals that other people had established for you.

MASON

Were they really specific things? Or was it just—?

DAVIS

Well, to be a professional something. I wasn't really being programmed towards the arts, but I was being programmed towards being a professional in a field.

MASON

So the art—

DAVIS

If not an educator, a doctor, and if not a doctor, a lawyer, and if not a lawyer, a person of significance in the community that made a difference through having gone to college. It was just—

MASON

So when you got the art award, it was just—

DAVIS

For them it probably didn't mean too much, but for me it meant a lot. But I don't think I would have had the opportunity to take off if we had remained in the South.

MASON

What year did your family come to Los Angeles?

DAVIS

My folks split up in ' 56, so my dad stayed behind, and my mom [Agnes Moses Davis], trying to make the decision of what to do— The thought of a black, middle-class family breaking up was considered wrong. You're supposed to stick it out or stay together for the children and blah blah blah blah blah. All of the values of the South were impacting that decision, whereas in California we don't practice those things, it seems like. So I think it was real hard for my mother to leave the security of family life and to strike out on her own with two kids. So that's one of her greater accomplishments in many ways.

MASON

Were you close with your father?

DAVIS

Yeah—

MASON

How did his child psychology thing work in the family?

DAVIS

Well, I don't think it worked too great. My dad went to the school of "Don't spank the kid, " and I had to be spanked. I mean, I was just one of those kind of— I was shuffling around, not obeying, and doing my own thing, spacing out, and not being tuned in or focused in the stratosphere, being a right-brained kind of person in the household of a very structured man who was very orderly, very much a scientist in his approach. For things to have real significance, they had to be able to be proved scientifically. If it could be proved scientifically, it was valid; if it couldn't be, then in a way it was like it's not real. "You've got to be able to prove it to me." And he was a disciplinarian and— I just had to get some spankings. So that sort of broke the school of

learning that he had, I think, worked in. I think there were a lot of things about me he didn't understand. I'd take things apart and couldn't put them back together. I was more interested in growing flowers than killing chickens or raising food. [laughter] And I had two left feet when it came to sports. I mean, I was out there trying, but when I look back on it, I was next to the last guy picked on the baseball team. [tape recorder off] Where were we?

MASON

We were talking about your father and how you kind of confused him. He couldn't quite understand you.

DAVIS

Well, yeah. I was just a normal kid, and, I think, being a child psychologist, he probably had training on what this is and what this isn't. I feel like I was just a little different than all— Not all the other kids. But I heard the beat of a different drummer and responded to a different kind of stimuli. Which is interesting. Some of my attitudes are real similar to his. Especially as I grow older, it's real interesting to sort of see.

MASON

Scary or interesting?

DAVIS

Not scary. We talked about some values that we both had in common: perseverance, persistence, being focused, all of those things, the importance of those things. He was a real disciplined man, and at the time, as a kid, I was just out there in ten directions. As an adult now, I really try to be focused, and I've been successful because of my persistence. I've achieved a lot of my goals through perseverance. I think that sometimes you can't really talk about those things at fourteen, fifteen years old. I mean, now it's like we can talk about it. I'm forty-eight, and he's eighty-one. So even though some of those things are instilled, they were things that I had to come to on my own and learn to appreciate in him as an adult that would be, in some ways, something I might react against or not see the value of as a teenager.

MASON

So your parents split. Now, how did your mother gravitate towards California?

DAVIS

Well, I think my aunts, specifically Aunt Clara [Moses Wilson], encouraged her, probably my Aunt Louise [Moses], who she was close to. I think they were the sisters closest in age, and they had gone to college together and to Barbara [Scotia], the finishing school or prep school, together. So they were tight. Louise had come back from being in Germany with World War II and—

MASON

I'm sorry. What was she doing in Germany?

DAVIS

She was a WAC [Women's Army Corps] and headed up the entertainment for the soldiers. She came out of Fort McClellan in Georgia and then went to Germany right after the war and spent some time over there. I don't know that it was specific to the black soldiers or not, but I'm sure, to some degree, it was—her work and so forth. So that was interesting—her coming back from Germany and speaking German and bringing us German lederhosen, those little pants. That also was significant in knowing that you could go somewhere else. Anyway, as a kid, I wasn't aware of the problems my parents were having with one another. They tended to keep that to themselves pretty well. So the rift in the family I wasn't really aware of, or if I was aware of it, I was interested in something else, and I didn't focus on it, and it wasn't a major stumbling block in my emotional structure, upbringing, whatever.

MASON

So it wasn't as if your father was like an alcoholic and you knew something had to be done.

DAVIS

Yeah. If he was an alcoholic, I didn't know it, or if he was playing on the family relationship, I didn't know it. All of the things that tend to happen in family structures that are negative I was unaware of. Or the positive. I lived there too. Everybody did what they did. I was out chasing butterflies, trying to get a little collection. And if my parents were arguing when I was gone, or fighting, I didn't know it. So let's see, where was I at? So then, in the summer of '56, I guess, my mother went to Birmingham, and then my dad came up there. They

asked me did I want to stay in Tuskegee or go to Chicago or California, I don't remember. We went to Chicago first on that trip. I liked to adventure, so I was into going to Chicago, even though that was the only time that I could tell that it was a crisis. So I didn't know what to do. And the other conflict was, well, I could go play Little League baseball back in Tuskegee. So my concerns were those concerns. Anyway, it was worked out, probably with them, that I go. So my brother [Dale B. Davis] and I were with my mom in Chicago, and then we stayed with some friends in Ben Harbor, Michigan, who were originally from Tuskegee, the Woodfords family. I guess, during that time, they were working out what to do. But I'm a high-energy kid, and they sent me to camp with a bunch of other kids in Kalamazoo. And then, when the camp was over, we were going back to Chicago to catch a train to California. So we took the Super Chief.

MASON

So how did it feel being out of the Tuskegee environment for the first time?

DAVIS

It was just all a new thing. I think I was just wide open to new— I wasn't afraid. And, well, coming out here on the train was exciting. Since for me it wasn't family breaking up, it was adventure.

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

My brother was young. He was pretty young, so I'm sure he didn't really know what was happening either.

MASON

There wasn't any—

DAVIS

Traumatic—

MASON

Or there wasn't that feeling of— Well, you were in a more or less segregated black community. So there wasn't that feeling of, "Well, I'm going to be in the North now, and things are going to be different as far as the racial stuff is concerned"?

DAVIS

No, no. No, we were going to California, and it wasn't about getting out of the South for racial reasons. Now, we were very much aware of how difficult it was to vote. I remember my dad coming home saying he had to pay a poll tax and he had to take a test and remarking on some of the stupid questions that were given to black people to answer on these tests to qualify to be able to vote, like "How many windows in the White House?" Things that were really insignificant in terms of cultural affairs or knowledge of government or good citizenship or anything. They were just stupid. And then, coming out to the West was like eye-opening. There were real cowboys out here, Indians at the train station, people selling artifacts that were real artifacts as opposed to what you saw in a Tom Mix movie or Roy Rogers or Hopalong Cassidy.

1.4. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 27, 1990

MASON

Today we'll just continue. We'll pick up where we left off yesterday. Your mother [Agnes Moses Davis] had left your father [Alonzo J. Davis Sr.] and came to California. And when I was listening to the tape again, I had asked you why she chose California, why she came out here, and I wasn't quite clear on— You mentioned some of your aunts. I was wondering if you could talk about that again.

DAVIS

Sure. I think the influence to come to California was probably twofold: one, to get as far away from the situation; two, there was a family friend from Birmingham who had moved to California, and this woman's husband was a bishop of the A. M. E., African Methodist Episcopal church, so his widow was living in Los Angeles, and so it seemed like a place that was far away where there were some extended family opportunities. My aunts [Clara Moses Wilson and Louise Moses] had called out, I guess, to California or

corresponded to see if that was feasible. And there was a house to rent when we got here. So we basically were able to just transition right in immediately. The other reason was her desire to get a master's degree in library science. That process meant enrolling at the University of Southern California [USC]. We lived in a neighborhood that wasn't far from there, right near Fourth Avenue and Exposition [Boulevard]. So I think [it was] that combination of things, California being the place of the future, on the Pacific, being far away from Alabama, and being a good place to start over, because there was extended family and educational opportunity.

MASON

What kind of neighborhood was that that you moved into?

DAVIS

The neighborhood was a primarily black neighborhood with working-class people with a sprinkling of Asian Americans. I went to a junior high school called Foshay [Junior High School]. It was really my first real introduction to some really hard-core kids as well as a multicultural, multiracial situation. It was predominantly black, but there were a lot of Koreans and Japanese and Chinese students there. There were a number of Euro-American students who were in attendance there. It wasn't far from USC, so some of those people who were real strong advocates of public education sent their kids to schools in the neighborhood and so forth. That was a real interesting mix.

MASON

Were there conflicts?

DAVIS

Were there conflicts? There were only minor conflicts. I think what really happened, it was more normal than abnormal. The conflicts tended to be more on kids who were haves against the have-nots than white against black. There was some tension between a few kids from the Algonquin gang who were black and Hispanic and some other little gang that was— And it seems that junior high school is a gang time, so there were all these little groups of kids. I had to learn how to fight and negotiate my way out of fights. And I had to learn how to cuss. So, for me, it was a great revelation of survival to come

to California, because I had to deal and I had to learn how to work things out. I had some buddies who would protect me on my way home if there were some guys who wanted to jump me for any stupid reason that junior high school people can come up with. I had one fight in a classroom. A guy slapped me on the back of the head and I had to retaliate. And then my buddies jumped in on that guy. It was just that kind of tension. The kids would want to intimidate you for your lunch money. I mean, it's just really what I regard as normal for that age period in a public school kind of situation, which I was grateful for, because it really did make me a little more streetwise, definitely more streetwise, than I was coming to California. There was an area that we discussed yesterday that I didn't cover that I wanted to mention. When we talked about the racial issues in the South, although where I grew up it wasn't a real, real issue, we were all aware of it, and there was a high consciousness of it. There was a lot of conversation in the family and in the community about the white kids over there or the white kids on the bus. There were issues related to civil rights. I remember 1954, when the Supreme Court decision came down, as a big sort of landmark time. As a kid, I was rather naive and I thought, "Okay, well, everything's going to change now, because that's the law of the land." Obviously, it didn't. Two years later, we moved to California, and I'm caught up in a whole other series of events.

MASON

There wasn't as much talk about civil rights here?

DAVIS

In California?

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

No, it wasn't as much of an issue, and there wasn't as much black-white dialogue as there seemed to be in the South. And I've always contended that the multicultural aspect of California keeps the tension down between black and white people because there is— It seems like all groups need somebody to work against or they have tensions with, and here in this state it's just so

diversified that everybody is subject to be disliked by somebody else or another group that comes in on another lower rung of life or work status. It's the old immigrant adage of "Those new people, they're going to ruin the neighborhood." It's more the new people than the black people. Although, when I was in high school, I was in a neighborhood, or just outside of a neighborhood, that was changing tremendously. We experienced a white flight where blacks and a fair number of Asian people were buying into what is known as the Baldwin Hills community. All the white kids I was going to school with, their folks started moving. They moved to the [San Fernando] Valley and West L.A. And what was a real integrated community rapidly became a minority or predominantly black community. And the real estate values dropped. The market dropped out because of the black flight into these communities. There was a lot of tension among adults during that time. We weren't one of the families that moved in, so we didn't deal with any of that sort of conflict. One of the things in coming to California, in terms of being an artist— I left Alabama with an interest in art, and then, when I got here and I saw I had a chance to have an elective, I took art classes. I'd always kept that in my back pocket as something I was fascinated with. But coming out of a first- or second-generation, middle-class family—well, second generation on my mom's side, first generation on my dad's side—there was this real push to be a professional. Since the traditional family had broken down, I was a little bit more on my own. But my mom was going to graduate school and trying to run the house and trying to keep me and my brother [Dale B. Davis] fed and him and me in school. I had a little more freedom, and I got out from under the thumb of a lot of parental expecta¬tions to some degree. So I was able to find my own way.

MASON

How did the junior high school experience, the classroom, the teachers, the kids—? Did the kids tease you because you wanted to draw? Or did they think it was cool?

DAVIS

I didn't have any teasing about art. I had kids teasing me about the shape of my head, or white kids who had never been in school with black kids who wanted to rub my hair because I was amenable to communicate with them. So

there were those little things. And I had a hard time learning to discern the difference between the Japanese and the Koreans and that there was not only some physical differences but there were name differences and there were cultural differences. Chinese and Japanese tended to be a little more clear, but the Koreans— But all of that was a learning thing. And then kids from Mexico who wanted to be Spanish and— All of a sudden there were all of these other issues that came into the picture related to different peoples and their races and their identity. So I took these art classes in junior high school in— what was it?—the ninth grade, liked it, began to make some friends, was fascinated with Spanish architecture in Southern California. When I first got into Union Station, that was like, "Wow! Unbelievable." And then the palm trees tripped me out. I had a buddy that would take me down the street where there were a lot of palm trees. It's real interesting that, when you're used to a certain kind of geography and you're thrust before something else, and it's out of your references of experiences, you get befuddled. So here I was in all of these palm trees, and I couldn't find my way home, because I couldn't make out palm trees. Whereas, in the South, I would know where the magnolia tree was in relation to XYZ. So there were a couple of times in L.A. that I just couldn't figure out where I was because all the palm trees looked alike. [laughter] Then I went to Dorsey, Susan Miller Dorsey High School. There I started out as a science major, and I ended up a science major, but I would keep taking elective courses and would go to summer school so I could have art class. So I just kept doing it. I was pleasing myself and I was pleasing my parental expectations.

MASON

Did you see your father at all?

DAVIS

My father came through a few times. He left Tuskegee and went to work for the State Department in Indonesia. I think there were some attempts or overtures towards getting the family back together. It just didn't work out. It wasn't a real issue for me. It might have been a little more of an issue for my brother than me. I had a new-found freedom. I could take art classes. I could do my thing. I was out from under the thumb of a real disciplinarian, and my mom was busy trying to— She was in the survival mode, so I had a lot of

freedom to explore the creative end of art as opposed to just the cultural end of art. As I mentioned earlier, the family was real strong on the cultural end but not necessarily on the creative end, because they know artists starve and all of these stories about artists' life-styles and so forth, half of which are true and half of which are fantasy. But we all have to answer our own calling or work that out somehow. In high school, I was pretty much a green kind of kid. I wasn't real hip. I liked to hang out with the guys who were hip, and I was a little intimidated by the girls, but I always liked to make gestures like I knew what was going on. I wanted to play sports, but I really didn't have it. I wasn't hungry for football or basketball. I fantasized about playing basketball, but I didn't have that mean spirit, "I've got to." I wasn't driven. So I got a job, and I worked for a black radical newspaper called the *L.A. Tribune*, and I worked under a woman named Almena Lomax, who happens to be the mother of Michael Lomax, who is in Atlanta, Georgia. He's a county commissioner, something like that. A real interesting family. Anyway, she broke me into sort of a radical, left way of thinking, questioning authority, don't settle for, and the police are not God, and there are people who are abusing or taking advantage of people of color, or there are people of color who are not—

MASON

So was this a pretty popular newspaper?

DAVIS

It was a weekly, relatively popular. It constantly had financial problems. But it wasn't a lackey, paper. I mean, it took a bite. It had strong editorial statements and a real scrappy, no-nonsense editor/owner. I was a printer's devil. I worked five, six days a week after school, and on Saturdays I cleaned up in the mornings.

MASON

So you were really attracted to the paper's outlook or—?

DAVIS

I didn't know what I was there for in a way. I was a kid who wanted a job. I wanted to work. I believed in work and was raised with a strong work-value ethic. Then I am in this situation. I'm going, "Wow, this is really different from

the other black newspaper in town. These people work real hard, and they have a real strong philosophy about the way things should be or not." So that was a real positive experience. In a way, she was like what you call like a godmother or role model or that kind of a thing. [tape recorder off]

MASON

I have to ask you what a printer's devil is.

DAVIS

Oh, a printer's devil is the lowest-rung person who works in a printshop. They had a Linotype that ran on lead ingots, so I would take the lead type, clean it, melt it down, skim it off of a big pot that would be in the back of the storefront where the paper was made, and then I would pour it into these molds and make these ingots. We'd hang them over the Linotype, and then the guy would— So I did all the gofer work. I ran and got coffee. I cleaned up. I washed the type. I melted down the lead. I cleaned the bathroom. Just you name it. But it was a great work experience. I did everything. I didn't have a car and didn't have an opportunity to drive, but I did get a license. I took driver's training. So after I got my license, I was able to drive this woman's car on either Wednesday or Thursday nights when the paper went to bed, as the term was. And they'd make these mats which would get the impression of the type, and we'd take them over to a big printing house. So I would get to drive her car to the printing house. It was a real big thing for me. I mean, it wasn't more than maybe four or five miles, but it was a big deal. I'd drive back past my mom's house and take the long way home just to get. a little drive time.

MASON

But you didn't start a fascination with the printing process?

DAVIS

It didn't really start a fascination with printmaking. With the printing process, yes. I did some illustrations that were included, and then I tried to do some things for the school paper. So I did a couple of little things for the school paper, trying to be an art editor, but it wasn't much. In school, I was an average student. I didn't excel in any one subject with any straight A's or

anything like that. I was a B and C student mostly. Occasionally I'd get an A in one class or another.

MASON

Was there an art club?

DAVIS

There was an art club, but I didn't really participate in it. But I would take a lot of art classes. I just worked it out so I had a lot of electives. By taking classes in the summer, it allowed me to have extra time for things that I— It seemed like almost every semester I had an art class. So I ended up with basically a science and art major by the end.

MASON

So what did you spend most of your time doing?

DAVIS

Assignments and sketching and doodling.

MASON

So you were mostly by yourself in high school?

DAVIS

And fantasizing. By myself or in a classroom situation. The classroom situation was very motivating, because there were all these people who were supposedly better than I was. I was fascinated with what they could do within the creative realm. I was one of those kind of students— I don't think I really stood out. I worked hard at it. I was driven, and I was fascinated, but, from my point of view, there was always somebody better than me. It's been interesting as an adult to try to look back and find some of those people and realize that some of those people peaked then and that was it. A lot of them did not continue to pursue art or to become artists. They took other avenues. That really surprised me, because I was so into their abilities at that particular given time. But then there was always the adage that I would always hear from time to time, but I didn't believe it, that the B and C students are really the ones that end up going the furthest. In a way, I see that happening or I've

seen that happen with a lot of my associates. They weren't necessarily the best then. They evolved, they grew, or they matured with what they did.

MASON

I guess sometimes B and C students are— A students are kind of the ones who conform, and the B and C students are maybe more rebellious.

DAVIS

Yeah. I even tell my students today, "I know you can do a good job and you can do it perfect and you can answer this, but I would like to see you do something more challenging. Take the risk. Risk the B instead of the A. Take it further out." Which is hard for them to embrace. And these are community college students. But high school was also a socialization time, some girlfriends and interacting with people from different cultures on a more concrete basis, having dialogues, going to little forums.

MASON

To learn about their—

DAVIS

To learn about them or to learn about people from the white church across town and what they did.

MASON

You were still going to church during, high school?

DAVIS

I was still going to the Presbyterian church.

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

And they had a lot of activities. There were some camps and—

MASON

So you probably started to think about college.

DAVIS

Yeah. I didn't plan ahead. I had a counselor who said I would never make it to college. That befuddled me, because I knew that this family I came from wouldn't accept anything less. I had to go to college. But I was insecure. I didn't have my focus on at that time. I didn't really know what I wanted to do, and I couldn't really sort of take off. I didn't have the direction or the good grades like all the other kids who were marching off to [University of California] Berkeley or Dartmouth [College] or XYZ college. I didn't have it together.

MASON

Art school was not an option?

DAVIS

Art school wasn't an option. I mean, within the family structure, it was like four-year college. I didn't think I could get in, so I didn't apply several places that I wanted to go. There were two places. I wanted to go to Hampton [Institute] because it had a history of art. And it was a black college, and I remembered it as a kid. And then I wanted to go to Antioch [University] because they had an interesting program where people would go to school a semester, then work a semester, and then come back and go to school again. So it was a five-year program. There was work-study involved, and there was a lot of traveling.

MASON

How extremely practical.

DAVIS

I was really fascinated with that kind of education opportunity. It wasn't abstract. Or it wasn't just abstract. But I was walking around at eighteen, nineteen years old thinking I couldn't get in. I needed the confidence. And I had applied to one small college. There were two, I think. I applied to two colleges in California, in L.A., that I thought I could get into. That was Pepperdine [University] and Chapman College. But even then I didn't do the follow-through that I would have, should have. So I applied and went to LACC [Los Angeles City College], which was very important. In some ways, I say I got

my best education at Los Angeles City College. I had some dynamite instructors. I had people to help mold a direction. I started studying the social sciences and philosophy and psychology. I got my English up to par from the low-level English to the college-level English. UCLA has that too. There's an English that they'll let you take in order to take— I don't know. I forget what they call it. But, anyway, I got that together. It was also a period of time when it was a real radical campus, and there were a lot of issues related to civil rights and—

MASON

So you went there about '61?

DAVIS

Yeah, '60, '61. The guy who was known as Maulana Ron Karenga was there. There was another guy who was a nationalist who was there, who is dead now, and I can't remember his name. But they used to have these tremendous debates. So I started becoming a little more political and issue oriented. These instructors I had kept pulling my brains and making me think of things in different ways, reading Richard Wright and Kafka.

MASON

Had you read any black authors?

DAVIS

Yeah, I had, but I hadn't read anything as— Richard Wright was frightening to me because everything didn't work out all right. He wasn't— [laughter] It's like, "Whoa!" It frightened me. And then I learned about world religions and atheism and agnosticism and all of that through this philosophy. There was a German philosophy teacher—I think her name was Rachenbach—and she just had one of those extended heads. She just really put it on you and challenged you and made you question and rethink. And I took one art class. I took a design class from a man named Johnson. And the class was right— It was just in sync with who I was. I made the decision then that I was going to be an art major regardless of parental— I excelled and achieved in that class. It was a design class. It just felt right, and it just fell into sync for me. But the other thing that was happening around that college was the counselors were saying

that only one out of ten of the people who go to that school are going to—or maybe it was one out of one hundred—were going to go on to a four-year school, and that kind of freaked me out. I was like, "Oh, man, I don't want to be one of these statistics. This can't happen to me." So I said, "It's time to get out of here." So within a year I had transferred to Pepperdine, which had accepted me. I think they'd accepted me— I don't know if there were any conditions or not. When I applied or when I was accepted in and I got into the art department, I saw that there were other kids there that were on scholarship, and I applied for an art scholarship. So I got it, and I worked in the art department. It helped to augment my tuition that way. My dad paid for my education. He was back, I think, from Indonesia by then and teaching at Florida A and M [University] for a short while, and then he went on to North Carolina Central [University]. But the experience at Pepperdine was one of a real conservative church school.

MASON

Yeah, I can imagine.

DAVIS

And that was like, "Wait a minute. This is not— Is this Texas or California?". There were all these people, from the Church of Christ who were from Texas. Their view and outlook in life was contrary to what I thought the world should be about. It was exclusive as opposed to inclusive.

MASON

So they didn't really experience the sixties.

DAVIS

Yeah. Their sixties was hating John F. Kennedy. I mean, I had an instructor who was like happy when he got assassinated. I was dumbfounded when that happened. And I had these religion classes that we had to take that would only embrace the philosophy of the Church of Christ. It wouldn't acknowledge Buddhism or Catholicism or any other isms. And I knew that wasn't right. I mean, there were just too many other people in the world. So it really started causing me to shut down on traditional, formal religious training.

MASON

Did you live there on campus?

DAVIS

I lived on campus. That was great. Living on campus was good. I mean, I ran into some problems with some of the students. One kid had the Confederate flag in his room, and we kept taking it down, and he didn't understand. I mean, now I understand how he could not understand where we were coming from. But, at that period of time, there was no way that we could leave that Confederate flag up. I mean, it symbolized oppression for those of us who were black students on the campus. But I had some interesting experiences living on a campus. It was an opportunity to be away from home, out from under maternal guidance, and make some decisions on my own and some failures on my own. I worked a little bit when I wasn't doing the little scholarship stuff. And then the art history— Again, I was an okay student. I wasn't the best.

MASON

Yesterday you were saying that it really put a bad taste in your mouth how you were taught art history.

DAVIS

Yeah. Well, I was about to say I had an instructor named Mr. White, who is gone now, but his view of art history was western European only. Coming from an enlightened community in the South, I wanted to know about who were the African American artists and did he know of any and where were they. He couldn't deliver that information for me. I knew there was some inequity in the information based on that. And then, in the art history book, we might have covered two paragraphs on Africa, two pages on Egypt, which was alluded to as not being African. And then we'd get all the way up to contemporary time and we'd have maybe a whole half a chapter on Picasso and very little to no discussion of the influence of African art and how that played with what he did as an artist and that whole period of other artists—Modigliani and Braque—just that whole period of artists through that cubist phase and even in some of the German expressionists. It just wasn't touched. So—

MASON

How did you find out about it? Did you challenge him on that in the class?

DAVIS

Well, challenge to some mild degree.

MASON

I'm just— You were in the radical sixties when people were really loud.

DAVIS

Right. This was like '64. I'm leaving college, and, for me, things didn't get loud until about '65, '66. So there were always things happening, but they weren't happening in L.A. They weren't immediate, and I wasn't confronted with them. I was trying to get out of school, and the war in Vietnam was going on. So I finished college. It was like—I wasn't going to change schools. I just wanted to get out of that school. It was a real lesson in conservative America and its inability to embrace difference. It was a proponent of sameness, Milquetoast, and— Anyway, I finished there. I finished in the summer. I was a few units behind in a science class. I had to take a science class in order to get my paper. So I did that.

MASON

In one place I read you got your degree in art, education, and psychology.

DAVIS

That was Pepperdine. It was like art education, art and education— I forget. I'd have to go back and look at the diploma to see what it really was, whether it was art and education or whether it was art, education, and psych. I know I took a lot of those classes.

MASON

I was just wondering if there was some way you were trying to combine all those things.

DAVIS

Yeah. The only way my folks agreed for me to be an art major was that I prepare myself to be a teacher. So the education classes were a must. So I left there and I went to— What was I going to do? I skipped a couple of things.

During college, I worked at Harlem Hospital the year after the riots in Harlem, which I think was either '62 or '63. I worked with hyperactive kids out of the psych ward with a buddy.

MASON

Did you get a summer internship?

DAVIS

Yeah. A guy named "Tony" [Shelton] Bishop, whose aunt was the head psychiatrist. Her name was Beth Hawes. And then the psychiatrist I worked under was Chesarina Paoli, an Italian woman. So we spent that summer, we worked together. Then, the next summer, I went back to New York and—Maybe it was that summer. We heard about the civil rights march on Washington [D.C.]. We delayed our return to go to that. So we went to that in Washington, D.C.

1.5. TAPE NUMBER: III, SIDE TWO OCTOBER 27, 1990

MASON

Okay. Did you want to talk about the Harlem Hospital?

DAVIS

Yeah, because the Harlem Hospital was a real interesting experience because there were hard-core little boys. A lot of them were really bright but what I call out of their bodies with energy. Either the public schools couldn't challenge them because of all the distractions, or they were just delinquent as that was the only way to get attention. The socialization thing was really off for a lot of them—broken families or families that were broken for which there was no structure for them to participate in. I mean, I came from a theoretically broken family, but there was such a strong family structure that I didn't really feel like I missed a stride in my growth. But these kids, whew! And even some of the families that were together were in such turmoil that the kids were real confused. But anyway, my buddy Shelton Bishop and I, we drove to D.C., and we participated to some degree in that march in Washington. We were in the crowd, and we were just becoming acclimated to our issues that were bubbling during that time. And I had—

MASON

You heard Dr. [Martin Luther] King [Jr.]'s speech?

DAVIS

I heard Dr. King's speech. I think my mother saw a photograph of me in either *Time* or *Life* magazine from when I was there. And it was me—she could tell by the top of my head! I couldn't have picked it out. It's been interesting to have that experience in common with a lot of people, a lot of whom I have met later in life. I hardly met anyone there then. I mean, it was just me and my buddy. We had this experience, and then we drove on back to California. But there are a number of artists whom I've met who were there. A lot of people who were in political situations I've been in were there. So it was a very, very powerful time. As a kid, I didn't realize how powerful it was. I was really into it, but I was into it at a distance. And then, in the early sixties, like '61, '60-'61, I also—mentioning L. A. City College—went to a lot of different political meetings and stuff, some of which were communist oriented. Just real curious, just trying to get the full expansion. And then I had people telling me I shouldn't be at those meetings and that there were spies at these meetings and so forth. I was kind of naive, and I couldn't see that. But, in retrospect, in looking back and in looking at how some of the situations have worked out or failed or have been infiltrated, that was definitely the case. We didn't know who was who or whatever. Then I picketed for a stronger civil rights platform when the Democratic [Party national] convention was in L.A. at the [Los Angeles] Sports Arena there on Figueroa [Street] and what was then Santa Barbara [Avenue], now Martin Luther King [Boulevard]. That was a real mixed crowd of people from all different kinds of political walks of life. That was the time that Adlai [E.] Stevenson was making a bid, and John F. Kennedy got it and was the nominee from the Democratic Party. So there were a lot of little things that— I call that a little thing. I guess it's a big thing when I look back at it. I didn't get arrested, I didn't get in trouble, I didn't have a run-in with the police or whatever, so it was—

MASON

You were careful?

DAVIS

It was a safe activity. I don't know if I was careful or that maybe I was just blessed. There was a guardian angel keeping me from being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I'm trying to think if—

MASON

So how are you working your art in around the activities that you were—?

DAVIS

Well, I was just doing art. I don't think the art was socially relevant. I was just politically active, and the art I was doing was something else and more classroom-oriented assignments. I hadn't really taken off to be the artist's artist as much as I was into doing art, but I needed a structure, I needed guidance. I needed somebody to tell me, "Okay, this is the next assignment. These are things to do." Now, I might do little sketches and doodle and— And the art was not political, as I remember. I did do some pieces that were African oriented. I tend to think most of my work at that time was really one of cultural quest and identity more than political rebellion. I would be out there on the line, but I wouldn't be painting that activity. The paintings might be a takeoff from African sculpture or reexamining my African American heritage and trying to look at it from an African vantage point or "where did that come from" kind of thing.

MASON

So you were concentrating on painting and drawing.

DAVIS

And sculpture.

MASON

And sculpture.

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

What kinds of materials?

DAVIS

All kinds. It was really an explorative period. Plaster, wood, resin, welding. The paintings were mostly oil and maybe some watercolor. And a lot of drawing assignments, which weren't my favorite, but I did them. That kind of thing.

MASON

Do you have any of those today?

DAVIS

Yeah, they exist. I'm trying to decide now about whether to keep them or chuck them. They just take up space in a sort of a state of deterioration. And then there are others that are good that I feel that I should hold onto for historical reasons. But I don't feel like I need to have all of that stuff, those exercises and drawings on newsprint; that's going to disintegrate anyway. So, let's see, that gets me out of college, and then I was going to go— I was going to New York every summer, it seemed like. I was just real fascinated with the city and the cultural energy there.

1.6. TAPE NUMBER: IV, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 27, 1990

MASON

I don't know where we are. You'll have to just take it from here.

DAVIS

We're in Shingle Springs, California, which is about fifteen miles west of Placerville and about forty-five miles, give or take, from Sacramento. We're on a two-acre site in the middle of a five-hundred-acre pasture in the country. This is a site where we created an earthwork [*Nine Phone Calls to the Future*]. This was done in collaboration with an artist from Sacramento by the name of Tom Witt and myself and several students and interested participants.

MASON

This is your first earthwork?

DAVIS

This is my first earthwork. This came about from the collaborations concept through the IDEA [Institute for Design and Experimental Art] Gallery exhibit. Tom and I had been talking about doing another piece in the city of Sacramento, but what we wanted to do did not seem appropriate for the spaces that were available and the loops that we would have had to jump in order to secure those spaces.

MASON

You mean you wanted to put an earthwork in the middle of an urban space?

DAVIS

Yeah. Originally we were going to do an earthwork and found-object piece in the middle of a vacant lot in an urban space. My idea was to do something a little more serene, more in nature, and more meditative in concept. In this case, we talked to the person who owned the property, Pat Brown, about using one of three or four possible sites on her property.

MASON

When did the project start to come together? Or when did you start to conceive—?

DAVIS

We started talking about this about six months ago, but this particular site and getting permission from Pat to create it here happened in August of this year. After we were able to focus in on the property, then we identified the site. The intent of the site was to build a dam that overlooked a ravine where there were a lot of oak trees, and that this site would be a place where someone could sit and reflect either away from the two-acre property or on the two-acre property. So you could either look over into the ravine, which is where the five hundred acres surrounds this property— And because we decided to build it in a ravine, and there are two natural springs of water, we decided to build a dam that would contain water that would overflow from the existing ponds. So we secured the services of a guy named Everett Fox, who has a ranch in this area, who is a retired Caltrans [California Department of Transportation] road operator, so he has knowledge of heavy equipment—tractors and back hoes. Once Tom and I had conceived of how we wanted the

lake or the mini-lake or the huge pond to be formed, then Everett came with the equipment and scraped the earth and built the dam, and we specified the shape that we would like to see it in. On the face of the dam, we laid sheets of slate and river rock. On top of the dam is a clear sheet of—I guess you would call it case-hardened or tempered—smoked glass that is standing eight feet across and four feet high. We built a form out of railroad ties that's about a half a foot down that this glass is supported by. So it's a real kind of ethereal piece. It's like a piece of glass that grew straight up out of the earth, so to speak, because the railroad ties are buried in the ground. It's a transparent yet obvious shape. The other thing that we did is we released the water from the two ponds on the day of the sort of ceremony that we had here, and by releasing the water, it halfway filled up the dam that we had created, and there was a constant flow of water from the two spaces. Unfortunately, the water table is not high enough to keep a continuous flow. This area of California has had a drought for the last four years, so, when and if the drought ends, there will be another or a greater body of water here. What we also did was we dug around a tree and cut it back and created a little island that will have growth. So we planted tulips and daffodils around that tree and then also on the side of places on the earth where the earth was scraped. Today, when we came out, I planted or distributed wildflowers that were in a blue hue in certain spaces and then wildflowers that had a red hue that would be in other spaces. So these are plants that will just keep coming up naturally. And I bought some rye grass to plant. Since the winter season is coming, it will add a really nice lush green area to that site.

MASON

Do you have plans, when the drought's over, to somehow coat the bottom or finish the bottom so you can keep a pool of water? I mean, is this something that you want to come back and maintain?

DAVIS

Well, I would like to come back and maintain it. The biggest issue is the water table. If there's a constant flow of water from the ponds above, there will always be water in the lower level. We had a misunderstanding on the significance of reducing the table in one of the ponds so that there would be a constant flow of water. At this point it's dammed up, and it really needs to be

reopened. Otherwise, we have to wait for the rainy season and hope that the water table is raised a lot higher in this area than it has been, in the last four years. If that's the case, then we will have that constant body of water in there. There are also three poles that are sticking up in the north end of the pond, and those are to house a painting that will be made— Actually, the shapes and all have been cut out. The actual painting of it hasn't happened yet. That's a pyramid form on corrugated tin that's been primed and will be painted. It also marks a direct line to the glass and theoretically will be reflecting the image of the sight line of the glass. What it is, it really becomes a painted sculpture in the middle of the pond. Once. the water table is high, then, at some point, the water will probably touch the bottom of the painted sculpture.

MASON

So the water trickling in— Do you mean to have that as another sound for the sculpture?

DAVIS

Well, there was no sound intent. There was a desire to have a flow, a trickle of water, move over or cascade over rocks. There is a real quiet sound that's generated by that, but nature will dictate that. And there are some other pieces here on this property that I might mention. On this sculpture that's directly in front of us, this large steel piece that's by an artist named John Riddle, who now lives in Atlanta— When he was moving to Atlanta, I bought this from him. I had it on some property in San Diego, and when Pat purchased this land here and I had moved up to Sacramento, I thought that this would be a great spot to put the piece and help her have a little sculpture garden.

MASON

Yeah, it works really well from so many different angles.

DAVIS

Yeah. There's also a second piece that's over by the little guest house that's in disrepair right now. The piece is by Kenzi Shiokaba, who used to exhibit at Brockman Gallery. It's a wood piece, and because of the heat and the dryness

out here it really dried up. So what we've been doing is soaking it in linseed oil so it will— Actually, it's ready now to be reinstalled somewhere here on the land. I'm not sure where I want to put it right now. Originally, I had it up by the pond, and now I think I'm going to put it a little closer in to this other sculpture. John Riddle was also an artist that exhibited at Brockman Gallery and made a lot of interesting social comments with his work and did some real massive sculptures like this as well as a lot of smaller pieces and paintings. In a way, it's kind of a loss for him not to be in California, because he added a lot to the mix, so to speak.

MASON

A lot of his smaller pieces were assemblage?

DAVIS

Yeah, a lot of his smaller pieces were assemblage. Social comment, a lot of social comment in his work.

MASON

What made you decide that it's now the moment for you to do an earthwork?

DAVIS

I have been fascinated with that for a long time, but I guess the combination of having met Everett, who is someone who could actually use that equipment, and Tom, who was open to collaborating on that kind of idea, and then Pat, who was willing to make the property available to let us experiment and play, it just created an opportunity that hopefully will be repeated. And thinking about this artist in residency coming up in Texas [at San Antonio Art Institute] and the vastness of that state and the openness of the property, I kind of think I might try to do something there as well in this medium. My focus in the last few years has been more and more on doing more public-access kinds of pieces and on stretching the ways that I view art and what I consider to be art.

MASON

And you had a ceremony.

DAVIS

Yeah, we had a ceremony. [tape recorder off] At sunset, we had a ceremony, which was called an incident, called *Nine Phone Calls to the Future*. [tape recorder off] We had this conclusion to this earthwork by inviting a series of drummers to come. About ten came to do a drum ceremony to this, what was called an incident. The incident was called *Nine Phone Calls to the Future*. There were a series of flares that were lit behind a white partition, nine of them, along the base of the dam, so it gave off this glow of light. The flares were burning and the drums were playing as the day turned into night. It was just after sunset, so that it got dark and we could see the stars. There were about thirty people here. It was real quiet, real reflective, with the energy of the drums and the burning of the flares. When that was over, everyone just either left quietly or came into the house on the property. Some people had brought food—it was sort of potluck—and that was the end of it. But this piece will probably be most effective in the spring, because that's when the flowers will come up, the bulbs that are planted around that tree. That's when the hillside will be green and the water table should be pretty high from the winter, from the melting of the snow in the Sierras. I mean, this water comes all the way in from the Tahoe [Lake Tahoe], Cosumnes River and Truckee Rivers, and underground springs. So if that water table is real high, then this will probably flow even till the summer of next year.

MASON

Anything else?

DAVIS

No, I'm sort of anxious to see this after all the stuff grows back. Right now it feels a little raw to me. But there were a lot of learning experiences in doing., this. There were a lot of chiefs and not enough Indians, and everybody had five ways to one solution. There were a lot of egos involved in the process. So I relearned some things about human management and ego and timing. I ran into a situation where a lot of people waited till the last minute to do their input, and that was frustrating for me, because I had other obligations and things I needed to do. And waiting for other people to give their input or change their mind or—

MASON

But that doesn't always happen on collaborative projects or--?

DAVIS

It doesn't have to. It doesn't have to.

MASON

What do you think it was about this project, then?

DAVIS

The individuals. More the individuals than anything else. So if I were to work with these individuals, I would work with them differently, or I would chose a different group of individuals to do another project of this nature.

MASON

Is there one particular message or anything that you would like the viewer to get out of seeing the piece?

DAVIS

The intent was to create a contemplative space where one might sit in nature and reflect. And hopefully that will happen when one is either standing or sitting on the dam or overlooking into that glass area.

1.7. TAPE NUMBER: V, SIDE ONE OCTOBER 28, 1990

MASON

Today we're in Alonzo Davis's studio in Oak Park [California], and we're going to talk about *Public Art Concepts: Collaborations with Alonzo Davis*.

DAVIS

Okay, this exhibit is in the Institute for Design and Experimental Art, which is a redeveloped firehouse, in which there are studios upstairs that are disoccupied, and I happen to be in one. The institute itself is a nonprofit organization that promotes contemporary art and experimental art through an exhibition program. I applied to do an exhibit and then subsequently got funded through the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts [Commission] New Works Program to do this exhibit. This exhibit is about collaborating with a series of other professional artists and students on concepts for public art. I interacted

with each one individually to attempt to come up with a successful piece, and in most cases it worked out. In some cases they were pieces that were actually realized, and in other cases there are pieces that are concepts only.

MASON

Where are they students?

DAVIS

The students' works are throughout the exhibit.

MASON

I mean, where they—

DAVIS

Oh, the students are from the California State Summer School for the Arts, which took place this summer at Mills College in Oakland, and the other students involved are students from American River College, who assisted with the installation, and a former student collaborated with me on a piece, and two students from Solano Community College in Suisun [City], California. Maybe I should list the artists. Let's go over to the exhibit. I'll describe the two pieces that are outside of the gallery. There's a series of chain-link fence that was designed for the inside and the outside of the gallery as an entryway that would cause a maze. And the way the chain link is painted, it creates a visual optical illusion and moire pattern as the light is cast on it and as you look at it. And then also, installed on the front of the building, is a graffiti mural by two students from Solano Community College. This mural is made of Masonite panels, four foot by eight foot, and they are stacked so that they are eight feet across and twelve feet high. In this case, these were two students of African American heritage, so I worked with them in coming up with an imagery that would be sensitive to their heritage as well as to the kind of contemporary statement they make. So their charge in doing this spray-can artwork was to use an image with an African mask and an Ashanti doll and to use the words "public art" and "idea" in it in some kind of way. That was basically what they had to work with and what they did. Another piece involves a concept with another instructor at the State Summer School for the Arts, who is also an acknowledged artist in Santa Monica, California. His name is Magu, also

Gilbert Lujan, or a.k.a. Magu. This concept came about just interacting after our class on what could we do to collaborate for an exhibit. We came up with a bridge that would alleviate some of the traffic congestion in East Oakland, South San Francisco area, not that we know these communities are ready for it or that there is money for the building of such a bridge, but this is an imaginary bridge that two artists collaborated on. The idea was to bring people from the Candlestick Park-San Francisco airport area across to Alameda, where there is a large recreational beach, and then into East Oakland, where there is the Oakland airport and Oakland Coliseum. The bridge would use four lanes of traffic that would be a tube which would be a public transportation tube that would have a bullet train in it that you could enter and exit within ten to fifteen minutes on either side of the bridge. Also, we played around with the support systems, making them characters that might reflect an Aztec kind of Native American image that would be the buttress support that would come from the water level up above the bridge as part of a support system. We both realize that it will take engineers and other structural people—architects—as well to actually put this together, but this is an imaginary concept. This is the kind of thing that could be taken to a group of people and say, "Now, this is what we want to do. How do we make this and what's the best way to make it happen?" Who knows? Maybe ten, twenty years down the line it might be embraced as a viable concept. This piece is a series of long, hanging strips over a pool of water surrounded by river rock, and these strips are paintings that are on paper. But the concept is that they be on copper or aluminum. They act as a mobile in that they suspend freely and can turn or be wind activated, depending on the flow of air through a given space. And this was done in collaboration with students from the state summer school and myself and the other people who were here helping with the installation. The idea for the hanging part came out of the school. Tying it into this exhibition I worked out with a fellow named Phil Brown and David Lindsey. Phil is an artist, and David Lindsey is an architect and builder. A lot of people have been responsive to this piece, especially when they know that the paper material that they see has— The possibility of doing it in metal or permanent materials is real attractive. Over here is another work from the summer school project, and this is by a black girl who I was real pleased to have in my class. She appeared kind of slow in getting work done, and I really put a lot of pressure on her to do this. She delivered, and I was really, really

pleased later to find out that she is a slow learner and just someone who has to work real hard, but, yet, very determined. I was glad to have a chance to talk to her mother to learn about her. Anyway, she just really took off with this project. I took the students to downtown Oakland and I gave them two sites to conceive works of art for. She chose the city hall and developed a stained-glass window concept. It's really a very, very dull city hall in the middle of a redeveloped area. So what she was able to accomplish here was phenomenal.

MASON

Yeah, it's quite beautiful. The sense of color is really amazing.

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

This area right now is just—

DAVIS

It's just window. It's just a straight-up window, not very exciting at all. This piece is the watercolor concept for the collaboration idea with Tom Witt that we talked about yesterday out in Shingle Springs. It is basically a rendering indicating what we had planned to do and what we had talked about—the visual of our verbal conceptualization.

MASON

Have you taken a lot of photographs of the site?

DAVIS

I had a photographer come out and shoot the site before and after and during. This piece is a piece by another student from the State Summer School for the Arts, and she chose Laney College as the site she wanted to develop a piece for. This is a watercolor of a sculptural concept. The sculpture has several elements that are active. There's sort of a windmill and a banner and a little symbol that suspends on an arm that would be— Actually, three elements that would be wind activated: the propeller or windmill-type form, the banner, and the symbol. This piece is by Robert Jean Ray, a local artist here in Sacramento of African American heritage. We collaborated on doing an image

that would impact the community which in Sacramento is primarily a black community—it's called Oak Park. Our concept and talks were about coming with signage that would define this community and give it a sense of identity and pride and image. So we developed concepts that would be a banner, a billboard, and a stationary sign, so that, when you would enter and exit Oak Park, there would be that sense of place. It was an interesting challenge, especially for him, since he tends to work very small. We did an actual, realized banner, which worked real well.

MASON

Could you talk more specifically about some of the symbols that are embedded?

DAVIS

Well, the symbols are a takeoff of a sun—sunrise, sunset. There's a horn that is blowing hot music. There's a symbol that's a suggestion of human beings and trees and reaching up, and it's In black and white. This piece is a site-specific piece that came about through several discussions with Maru Hoeber. First, we were going to do a park and light a park. Anyway, we had several ideas, and then this one finally came to be what we narrowed it down to. This is a series of about forty tree branches or small trees that were taken from a piece of land that was overgrown. The trees were cut down, stripped and sandblasted, and installed in this area of the gallery, so you must walk through in order to see other parts. So the idea is that you have to experience this piece by going through it, not just standing back and looking at it. This is a concept that, in terms of public art, that we envision being used in the lobby of a building, especially a building that has sort of a sterile entryway, so that you would have to pass through the trees in order to get to the elevator or offices or what have you. It just kicks off a whole different feeling once you're standing or walking through these trees, even though they're in a gallery or a sterile environment as opposed to out in nature. So it's to bring people, in a sense, closer to nature or back to nature or sensitize them to nature. And also we have installed, with this exhibit, a motion sensor, so, when people walk through, lights go on in a subtle way. And we have a tape, an environmental sound tape, on which birds sing and chirp. [activates tape] You can see that. An interesting part of this one is that when we had done the installation and

gotten all these pieces up, the next day there were a couple of feathers on the ground, and none of us could explain how they got there. They weren't intentional. We took that as a symbol that we were doing the right thing and also went out and gathered more feathers and brought them in as part of the installation. This is the banner in full size, which is close to eight to ten feet high and about four feet wide. Over here is a student piece from the state summer school. This young lady had conceptualized putting an enormous bronze sculpture in the bay of the Loop in Chicago. She said Chicago was a real masculine city, so she wanted to put a male nude figure lying down, as opposed to a female. Just to give you a sense of scale, the boats would tie up to the sculpture, and people could walk inside the sculpture, and there would be shopping malls and. visiting and restaurant areas and a hotel inside the sculpture. So it lies across that whole large area there, probably a half a mile or so. Over here is—

MASON

How could you—? Is that feasible to make a bronze that huge?

DAVIS

Is it feasible? Well, it's really dependent upon the human spirit, if we want it. I mean, is a nuclear sub¬marine feasible? Yes, because we made it, but it's pretty expensive and large to build. We have the Statue of Liberty, and we have the Washington Monument, we have Mount Rushmore. When you look at the scale of things like that, or the World Trade Center in New York, I mean, it's not that big. It's not impractical. I mean, it can be done. Whether the desire for it builds is a whole other thing. But if the human desire is there to build it, we can build it. I really believe that. I mean, we have the Dome [stadium] in New Orleans, and that's an amazing structure too. This is a mural concept that came from a series of small drawings from students from that same state summer school program. We've put two large sheets or rolls of canvas together. This piece you're looking at is about ten feet by sixteen feet or something close to that. Maybe it's eight by twelve. Students actually collaborated together to come up with this painting for a mural. Now, this could go on the side of a building, and it could be enlarged three times its size, or it could be its same size. It's a concept that was developed large that could go somewhere else. I like the fact that the students worked out problems and

were able to set aside their personal egos to make this happen. That's not an easy thing to do. They were also able to negotiate and make decisions on leaving some things out that other people wanted in and develop a rationale for that. They used a lot of personal symbols that were important for them and a lot of symbols that I was surprised that some of the students included, such as the image of Spike Lee here from the movie *Do the Right Thing*. And the Aztec god and pyramid. Here's a brother with a boombox next to a knight going into the lightning. The knight is in interplay with an actual knight in shining armor on a horse to a knight from a chessboard. So you can sort of get that back and forth. This was an archway and column area on the campus at Mills. One of the students took photographs and imposed that image into this piece. And then a series of clouds and so forth tie the piece together. Here are a few more pieces from that state summer school project. This was a real exciting piece for me. This kid came up with an idea that I was working on with someone else differently, but still real interesting. This is a concrete wall that has an interesting form. It's a graffiti wall. It's a wall where people can go and make their mark, so to speak. It would be available to artists, painters, poets. Well, what does he say? "This is a piece of concrete sculpture and built to resemble a modern ruin." And after years, this piece could be sandblasted or painted over, and then a new series of young people who have new statements to make can come and make their marks on this wall. So I thought that was an interesting piece to come up with.

MASON

What about the point that some people make that graffiti artists like to appropriate a space that's not theirs or that—?

DAVIS

Well, here's a kid with an idea to create a space for it. I know there are a lot of artists who want to do something because of the challenge of it not being an appropriate space or a designated space, and that's going to exist too. But in this case, it's at least made that process easier. I mean, it's not a subway train, and you don't have to climb over electric wires to get it and be run out of there by cops or security guards. And it's okay, since that's the thrill of doing it, especially at that time in your life. And I understand that, but— [laughter] This is another piece for Laney College. This young lady had a piece that would

be a fountain that would have water streaming down from up high and then fall into a pool that had sort of a colorful basin to gather the water. It's an interesting one as well, especially how the water pipes are wrapped around the structural parts. This framework existed on campus, so, in order to get the water up, instead of hiding the pipe or whatever, she had painted pipe go up and wrap around and then drop the water down. This is a piece I did with a woman in Oakland. She's an African American artist that I've been collaborating and talking about doing things with, and we've started doing things together. Her name is Violet Fields. And this is a piece that is— The actual size is eight feet by twelve feet, and it's about eighteen to twenty inches deep. Now, this is a prototype that's built out of wood, but it is to be a concrete sculpture that would be cast concrete and either cast and tilted up or cast in place and then with corrugated steel on the front and fiberglass. Concrete, while it's wet, can be stained and painted and so forth, and that's the way this has been treated. The concept is that this would be an appropriate piece for a meadow or a park or a large piece of private property or in a courtyard in a city mall. The piece is a sculpture, but it also acts as an amphitheater. It has that sort of curved shape, so that if there were some musicians or a poet that wanted to, this is sort of a staging area in front of a work of art that would bounce sound back towards the audience, as well. It's a fun concept to do, yeah.

MASON

I've never seen fiberglass used as fabric that way ever in public, in a public piece of sculpture. It's really beautiful. I hope you get a chance to build it.

DAVIS

Yeah. This is a piece that is sort of a takeoff on Mount Rushmore. It's a collaboration with my brother, Dale [B.] Davis. We have the little figures here to sort of show scale of how this would be. And this is a hat that would be reflective of kind of a— It's sort of a cross between a cowboy hat and a Native American hat, so a western hat. So, in a way, it's fun. It's a tongue-in-cheek piece instead of an obvious image of a president or a specific person. This piece is a piece of steel that's been welded into a sculpture. Again, it's mounted on a little platform here with little figures and rocks and trees so that you can see the sense of scale. And it's to be mounted over a pool of

water. It would be appropriate for a park or a corporate office exterior. I made this homage to Richard Serra, because he was a sculptor who was of quite a bit of controversy in the last few years about a piece that he had done for a federal building in New York. There was a whole issue about it being appropriate or inappropriate for the space. And it was—

MASON

Yeah, people were saying there were drug deals going on behind this huge wall.

DAVIS

Right. Yeah. So it's homage to him. I don't know that it has— I mean, it's not really taking up his issue as much as such a humungous piece scalewise in relationship to everything else, and for all the trials and tribulations he went through to defend his piece, right or wrong. This piece back here is a piece that we saw in progress yesterday at Grant High School. It's a mural. The focus of the mural is to be multicultural in nature, based on the fact that this high school has people from all walks of life there: African American, Mexican American, a lot of new Asian immigrants, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Thai are also there, a number of young students from Russia. It's just a school that is just amazing in that there are so many people represented there. Anyway, this was an attempt to bring in cultural heritage, contemporary and ancient. So we used some sculptural images from the ancient past and incorporated them with contemporary figures or images of people. Here's an Anglo kid in traditional dress with Levi's, and then, split in half, another half being a Greek sculpture. Here's a young black kid doing one of the sort of flips in the hip-hop dance kind of attitude. This will be a globe of the world. Here's a Native American, probably mixed-blood Hispanic/Native American, western-looking image. This is a Peruvian sculpture. There's a sculpture from India, an African sculpture image, a Japanese mask. This is an African sculpture that is split in half at the head. One half of the head is African, the other half is robot, and a telephone line is coming out from the ear. And this is an ambitious piece in that it's 31 feet high and it will be 129 feet long. The theme of the piece is *A Place to Be Somebody*. The collaboration on the image and the execution involved students, other artists in the Sacramento area, and was initiated by myself with Leslie Pierson and Armando Cid. Okay. That pretty much covers

this area. There's one other piece that— Here we go through the trees again. This last piece is a piece that, for me, was a purely inspirational piece, and it was installed in this room because it's a real quiet, isolated space all to itself. This was done in collaboration with Maru Hoeber, and it's called *Light Sieve*. It's river rock in a long, narrow pile on the floor, and it's bordered with wood. And then, as the river rock runs out to the ground, sand comes into play, so the shape is sort of like a stretched pyramid, if you would. And it has a tube of neon light buried in the middle of it. The light filters up through the— It's a blue, sort of a river, hot, neon blue that comes up through the rock. And then, in order to make this room quiet and meditative in nature and give it enough light, we put some theater gels over the fluorescent light up above in the room and disassembled the other neon tubes that go in so that this room has a real quiet, meditative quality. This was done in conjunction with Maru Hoeber and myself. I have to say that it was inspired to some degree by the kinds of works and my appreciation for the things that Isamu Noguchi has done in his public-space works, [tape recorder off] The one thing about this exhibit is that it sort of represents a cornerstone of transition for me in that this is the first opportunity I've had to take on as ambitious a project [as this] in terms of a series of ideas for public art. It also indicates a point of departure in a sense that I want to do more of these things to be actualized for public spaces. I'm learning to work with and am continuing to work with and learn with other people from other professions and other artists whose visions are different but whose egos can handle differences and compromises and collaboration. How do we fuse our thoughts together in order to make some of these things happen? One of the things this exhibit has taught me about working with other people is that you have to weigh a lot of variables and put a lot of combinations together before making the final decision and how important it is to have people who can take a concept and have it actualized or help make you realize it who are not necessarily the people who are going to make the art but who can help make the concept real. That was really what happened with the assistance that I had in putting this up. And it's bigger than me. I couldn't have done it by myself or it would not have been the same.

1.8. TAPE NUMBER: VI, SIDE ONE DECEMBER 1, 1990

MASON

The last time we met, we left off talking about your summer trips to New York, and you said that you were working in the Harlem Hospital.

DAVIS

Right. I was working with the department of psychiatry in conjunction with Columbia University. I was working with hyperactive young kids in sort of a recreational therapy activity. At that time, I thought I was interested in going into art therapy. It was something that I followed into graduate school and then went another direction. But it was quite interesting to do. In New York, I visited a lot of galleries and museums and met a lot of artists and also traveled to surrounding areas. As I think back about it, as a young person I had kind of a wanderlust. As an adult I still do. But at the beginning of my graduating from high school, I started traveling, and it became very important to my life-experience education. I try to encourage people now, especially students, to travel. It sort of fills in a lot of the blanks and makes life even more meaningful.

MASON

Well, I guess what would be good is if you could just talk specifically about the things that you saw in New York and who you met and some of the styles and influences and things that were current then and the things that impressed you. Was Romare Bearden at the Studio Museum [in Harlem]?

DAVIS

Romare Bearden was there, but I didn't meet him at that time. I think the Studio Museum was— I think it was going. New York got to be a mecca for me, so I would just go every year for quite a while. It wasn't to meet or interact with artists specifically until 1966, and then I went across the United States. If I can jump and say. a little bit about that period— When I finished college, I had studied a lot of art history, and my instructor had never heard of any black artists. I knew coming from the South that a lot of black artists existed, and, having lived in a city where there was a black college as an institution, there was an effort to be in touch with that history. I remember seeing pottery and some paintings and things on the campus that were by either professors or students. Anyway, that set me off with a negative attitude about the institution where I was going to school, but it also allowed me to know how

limited contemporary art history was in terms of the big picture or an inclusive picture. And also, taking a lot of art history classes, Renaissance and so forth and the early impressionists and cubists, I wasn't really thrilled with art history as a subject the way it was taught. So when I finished college in '65— When did I? 'Sixty-four.

MASON

'Sixty-four.

DAVIS

'Sixty-four, yeah. So I finished college in '64, I got a job, I went up to San Francisco State [University] to enter an art therapy program, and they basically told me I would have to write my own program. So I came back to L.A. to pack my bags— I left a deposit on an apartment. When I got back, I had been admitted to USC [University of Southern California]. USC did have an art therapy program.

MASON

How long did you spend at San Francisco State?

DAVIS

It was just a hot minute. I was just coming back to get my clothes to go to school there, and here was a letter from USC, so I didn't go to San Francisco State. So I enrolled in that with a man named Mr. Lanier. I don't remember his first name at this point. Anyway, I did work toward my teaching credential. While I was there, some people from the L.A. Unified School District came on the campus and basically immediately hired me from my master teaching classes. I did student teaching at Washington High School and a junior high school here in the Los Angeles area.

MASON

You were teaching art?

DAVIS

I was teaching art, yeah. So I got hired to work at Manual Arts High School. I was living at home that semester, so I saved the money and went to Europe that summer to see all of the art history that I had studied that I wasn't that

enthralled with and didn't do that well with. [I was] just sort of a B and C student. And I got to make my own decisions about what I liked. I went to Florence and Rome, Italy, and the Prado Museum in Madrid. I loved El Greco and Goya and enjoyed Michelangelo's unfinished works in Florence. I went to Venice. I just got saturated: Paris, Belgium.

MASON

So just seeing the things in person.

DAVIS

Seeing the things in person. It made a big difference. I got to like it on my own terms. I didn't have to remember the dates and when the guy sneezed and— And I got to choose what was significant to me. I was really impressed with van Gogh. I mean, it was like "Wow!" I went to the van Gogh museum in Paris and the impressionist museum. I was just taken aback by how much African art was in the London Museum in the basement— numbered and categorized and stuck away. That was art history. That was really art history. Then I came back, worked another year at the same high school. My brother [Dale B. Davis] and I, who was a student at 'SC [University of Southern California] at the time—I guess he was in his first or second year after transferring from LACC [Los Angeles City College]—we decided to go across the country and visit my dad [Alonzo J. Davis Sr.] but to visit the black artists in the United States. So we went from L.A. to Phoenix, Arizona, met Eugene Grigsby.

MASON

Okay, I'm not sure how you began to identify who these artists were and where they were exactly. Did you start reading things?

DAVIS

I just rambled. I mean, I asked Eugene who—

MASON

How did you find out about Eugene?

DAVIS

His son went to Occidental College who was a friend of "Tony" [Shelton] Bishop, who also went to Occidental College. I think I had met Charles White by this time, and he had told me about some people. So it was word of mouth.

MASON

Now, where did you meet Charles White?

DAVIS

In Los Angeles.

MASON

Okay, I just— Let's see, he was at Otis [Art Institute]—

DAVIS

He was Otis.

MASON

—by '65.

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

So, okay. But how did you get to Otis? I guess what I'm trying to do is really try to understand the black art community during that period in Los Angeles.

DAVIS

Okay. Here it is. When I went to Europe, the Watts riots took place. When the Watts riots hit, all of a sudden there was a fusion of energy from the artists' community in a reaction to— So then they had the Watts Summer Arts Festival. And so I came back to that. So this energy is beginning to percolate and bubble. Was I tapped into it? No. I was on the fringe. I was just trying to get it together, so to speak. Just finished college, trying to teach. The school I'm teaching at— There's a revolution going on; it's bubbling. The US Organization was carrying pickets in front of the school.

MASON

The US Organization?

DAVIS

US Organization, which was [Maulana] Ron Karenga's group. A lot of the young students were becoming nationalist oriented. And the Black Panther energy was beginning to happen around that time as well. There was the beginning of a strong African consciousness and black power. So that began to happen in '66, '67. And in the summer of '66, my brother and I took off on a word-of-mouth trip in a little Volkswagen and a sleeping bag, basically. One would sleep outside on the ground, the other would sleep in the back of the car and rotate. Once in a while, we'd get a hotel somewhere, if we felt like it was comfortable, when we were in the South.

MASON

Okay. So before you left, let's see— Who were some of the artists that you were in contact with besides Charles White? Do you remember?

DAVIS

No.

MASON

Did you know Noah Purifoy?

DAVIS

No, I didn't know Noah. I just knew of the energy and what was happening. I think the questions that you are asking me, really— All of that energy started to fall into place in '67. And I really haven't chronicled my life, so this is an attempt to do it in this process. I would imagine that some of these dates would be a little askew.

MASON

Yeah. That's fine. No, I guess I'm just trying to—

DAVIS

You're looking for—

MASON

Before and after—

DAVIS

Right.

MASON

What did you leave? What did you come back to?

DAVIS

Right. When I went to Europe, I left Los Angeles being really naive to the energy that was happening in the Watts area and its problems. When I came back, there was a riot that affected my community way away from Watts and my brother telling me that the National Guard and machine guns and so forth were on the street and we couldn't get home. I was like, "But we don't live in Watts. This is an affluent, wealthy black neighborhood. Where are the—?" And he said, "Well, the curfew went all the way to Olympic [Boulevard] or Wilshire [Boulevard]." So, in effect, the whole black community was shut down, which meant that middle-class people and affluent people couldn't get away from it, and they had to deal with it.

MASON

You were in the Baldwin Hills area?

DAVIS

No, Leimert Park. Yeah, Crenshaw district. So that kind of sunk in. And when we decided to take this trip, it was like, "Hey, let's do something this summer. We're twenty-one, twenty-two, -three years old, and it's just time to get out, out in the world." So, no, we did not have a list of artists to visit per se. From Phoenix, then we met Paolo Soleri in Scottsdale, who is not a black artist, but his architecture was so wild and so unusual and underground and subterranean that that was real mindblowing and a very positive experience for me and for my brother. I'll never forget that and the fact that he was working with students and students were having that experience. We just walked upon it. I had read something about it in *Los Angeles Magazine* or something like that. And then, from there we went to Texas, and we didn't meet anybody there. We knew of John [Thomas] Biggers, but we weren't able to connect. And then, from Texas we went to Jackson, Mississippi. In Jackson,

we went on the campus at Jackson State [University], met some of the art students, met the chairman of the art department there, who I don't remember. He had done a lot of murals in that area. It was also the time of—There was a march—Boy, what was that guy's name who went to University of Mississippi? It's not Medgar Evers. Boy, I'm always able to say it.

MASON

A Panther or—?

DAVIS

No. This was just a guy who was a student, James Meredith, pretty innocent of the situation until it erupted. It was also the time that Martin Luther King [Jr.] and SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and the Panthers were air trying to deal with each other, the Southern Christian Leadership Council. All different kinds of energies were happening. There had been a march, and there was a march from north of Jackson down into Jackson. There was a big situation where people got tear-gassed and beaten.

MASON

When you were there? That happened when you were there?

DAVIS

Yeah. Well, it just happened. I wasn't in that march at the time, but we were in Jackson. I had called a white guy that I had gone to school with. He was from Vicksburg. So he came over to my aunt [Celeste Chambliss]'s house. He was a preacher, a student of theology. Wow, what is that march called? Anyway, he came over and said, "Hey, this is a real difficult time here in Jackson and in the state of Mississippi." He covered our license plate, and he said, "You all will be viewed as freedom riders, so you don't want to be seen here because your car might be blown up. But not only that, your aunt's house might be burned down. " So that was a real eye-opener. And then we went out to Tougaloo College, where they had a big meeting. Either John F. Kennedy or Robert F. Kennedy flew in, and James Brown performed. And King and all the—Huey—Was it Huey? No, that's Huey Newton. The other guy whose name is Sekou Touré now. [Stokely Carmichael]

MASON

Oh, yeah. I can't remember the name either.

DAVIS

Anyway, all the contingencies from SNCC and the Black Panther Party had marched into Tougaloo. And, hey, everybody had a gun. My cousin [Mark Chambliss] had a gun in his glove compartment. It was real. The state troopers were out, and it was a mixed crowd. There was a lot of black and white on the campus. And we knew the tensions were real high.

MASON

So because you were traveling through, did you feel a part of this? Or did you feel like you were sort of—?

DAVIS

I felt very much a part of it. I felt a part of it, even though I wasn't subject to the abuse that many of the people who were in the march had to withstand. Then there was a big presentation on the state capitol grounds in Jackson, and I went to that. So my brother and I and my cousin or my aunt— Then from there we went to our hometown where we were born. We went to Tuskegee [Alabama], and we saw Bill [William] Dawson, who was inspirational to me. I had mentioned his name to you. We visited several people who we had grown up with as children and we got to remeet as young adults.

MASON

How was that?,

DAVIS

It was interesting and kind of fun. Their children were in college or just out of college. I think most of the children who had grown up in Tuskegee went away to school and would come back from time to time. We were right in with that group. And we stayed at the president's house, Foster, William Foster. His daughter was there, Adrian Foster. She had gone to Oberlin College. And we went to the [George Washington] Carver Museum on the campus there. Then we went up to Birmingham [Alabama], which has become a homestead for my mother [Agnes Moses Davis]'s family, and met some young artists there, students or people who were aspiring to be artists. And I think Ron— Ron Adams? No, not Ron Adams. Ron Moore was a fellow who was an art student

there and subsequently came to California, ended up working for Brockman Productions, a CETA [Comprehensive Employment and Training Act] program, and has now moved back to Birmingham.

MASON

What kind of work was he doing then? What kind of work were the students at the universities doing there? Was there a general—?

DAVIS

No, it was real eclectic. There wasn't a black art movement per se. A lot of these artists and art students did black mother-and-child and did traditional watercolor painting. It was a real mix. They were doing landscapes and still lifes, typical student work. Some of the mother-and-childs were white.

MASON

What was Ron Moore doing?

DAVIS

I know Ron Moore more for the work that he did later as an adult. As to what he was doing then, it doesn't stick. Then we went up to see my dad in Durham [North Carolina]. He was teaching at North Carolina Central [University]. And I didn't meet a lot— I met one or two artists up there. We really met several musicians. And then we went to Washington, D.C. but didn't go to Hampton [Institute]. I should have. It was just one of those situations.

MASON

You wanted to apply there because you knew about the artists there.

DAVIS

I didn't have a connection. It wasn't part of the chain link of "You ought to go see" referrals. So we didn't get there, but we did go to Howard University and check out that whole scene. James [A.] Porter was still living. I met him. I think Ed [Edward] Love was there. Lois Pierre Noel was there.

MASON

While Ed Love was at— I think he got his M. F. A. from Cal State in '67.

DAVIS

So maybe he wasn't there then. Yeah, he did work at Howard and I made trips there and met. him. He went to [California State University] Hayward? He finished Hayward? Cal State Hayward?

MASON

No, I have Cal State, but they didn't put down—

DAVIS

Which one. Maybe it was California] State [University] L.A., because he was from here. It was a lot of people.

MASON

Yeah, a lot of famous names.

DAVIS

So we would just shuffle from— I was just curious more than I was into what they did or— I was really into how did they do it, what was their survival.

MASON

What were some of their stories.

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

What were some of the stories?

DAVIS

I can't— I don't even remember them. What stuck out to me the most out of this trip was that most of these people who were successful were forty years and older, and that, as a young person in his early twenties, I had a long race. It was a long-distance race. And that most of these people were persistent and dedicated to what they were into. On that trip from D.C., we didn't go into Baltimore. I think we went into Philly. I had an aunt in Philadelphia. In Philly, we just did the traditional Philadelphia School of Art. We may have met one or

two artists there. And then we went to New York, and that's where I met Romare Bearden and Charles [H.] Alston. Romare was the kind of guy that would connect you with a lot of other people. My connection to Bearden was, for me, an interesting one, because he immediately just became somebody I just had a respect for. He was unselfish with information, and he was accessible and generous in his manner and very soft-spoken. So he introduced me to—

MASON

Well, they had that Spiral—

DAVIS

Yeah, some of the artists out of that—

MASON

Hale Woodruff was a part of it.

DAVIS

Hale Woodruff I met through— I met Hale Woodruff.

MASON

Charles Alston, Norman Lewis.

DAVIS

Norman, that's the one I was trying to think of. I'm not sure if I met Alston or not, now that I think of it. It was Norman Lewis. He lived in a funky little studio above someplace in New York.

MASON

Yeah, the Spiral was down in the Village [Greenwich Village].

DAVIS

Yeah, yeah.

MASON

I guess they all lived around there.

DAVIS

They lived all over. Norman was a character and a little in outer space in his life it seemed. And it seemed like he lived a hard life, it was a difficult life. But he was a hell of a painter.

MASON

You mean economically or personally?

DAVIS

Maybe both. I didn't meet Jacob Lawrence on that trip. I was always curious about who he was, and I had heard a lot about him. But just the stories about these different people were enough to make me really have a sense of there is a body of people who are black who are making a statement who are artists who are out there doing it regardless of their ability to be in a Manhattan gallery or to be—

MASON

Well, some of them were in Manhattan galleries. I mean, they were showing.

DAVIS

Yeah, but a lot of them weren't represented with any vigor and didn't get the push that a lot of the other artists who were white got. Jake did well; I think he was with the Terry Dintenfass Gallery. And Romie did well.

MASON

Yeah. Why do you think those two out of probably everybody else did so well?

DAVIS

It's hard to say. Right-place, right-time connections. I hate to say this, but it was almost like the right white people picked up what they were doing and ran with them. In a sense, they became the token for the black arts community in New York. I don't know if it was that they were singled out as a token, but they were the chosen ones.

MASON

Did Bearden ever talk about how he felt about that? I mean, he had a. show at MOMA [Museum of Modern Art] in '71, and it was a big thing.

DAVIS

I mean, the guy was so modest, it was no big deal to him. He was like just— He was just like your grandmother almost, just "Can I serve you some cornbread?" or "Let's have a little glass of wine" and "How are you boys doing? Where are you going from here? Well, you ought to see such and such." He didn't brag. You wouldn't know that he was an artist of stature by his demeanor. And he didn't wave his flag at all, hardly at all. But everybody was like, "Romare Bearden, Romare Bearden." He was like the word. [laughter] So, in a way, it was kind of funny. I feel like, in a way, at this period, that I'm that way in Sacramento, as I'm probably the only black artist in Sacramento that's getting any acknowledgment. So people are always saying, "Oh, Alonzo Davis, have you—?" But Romie was upscale, big-time New York, and so everybody thought you were the ultimate. And if you are the ultimate, then you don't have to promote yourself, I guess. He didn't.

MASON

What did you think about his work? Was he doing collages?

DAVIS

I was real fascinated, real fascinated with what he did and the fact that he had been to Europe and was a student of the works of Matisse and was influenced by some of the cubists. Even though I had been to Europe, I didn't do any art over there and I wasn't part of a movement or a hangout of artists, so to speak.

MASON

Did you meet any black artists when you were in Europe?

DAVIS

When I was in Europe?

MASON

Yeah. I don't know if we talked about that.

DAVIS

No. I did see Dexter Gordon in Copenhagen— musicians. I think Thelonious Monk or— There were several black musicians playing in Paris. But it was mostly that energy.

MASON

Was music important to you?

DAVIS

Yeah, and jazz was important. I would say that it was more important to me than other black artists at that time, because I had no focus on other people. I was just trying to get myself together and trying to find out who I was and have some life experiences. And then, from New York, we went up to—

MASON

Well, I want to ask you more about New York. Let's see. What about some of the others in that group? There was Merton Simpson, who was a dealer—

DAVIS

Yeah, I met Merton D. Simpson. Yeah, I met Merton.

MASON

Now, what was he like and what was he—?

DAVIS

But I think I met Merton another time, like in '68 on another trip. And I was fascinated— And Romare Bearden, again, was the vehicle to Merton. What was interesting was that Merton had this fabulous collection of art on the East Side of New York in the high-rent district.

MASON

He was a dealer.

DAVIS

Well, he. was dealing African art, but he was also an artist. So Romie made sure that Merton pulled out some of his work to show me, which was real

interesting that he interceded beyond Merton's business world into his creative world. I don't know if he's still doing art now or not. But he was running back and forth to Paris and New York selling high-quality, high-priced African sculpture.

MASON

Did you learn a lot about that from him?

DAVIS

Well, it was sort of an entree. I've never been a real student of African art, even though I have done some exhibits and sold African art. I usually relied on scholars to authenticate and supply.

MASON

Who else is there? Richard Mahey, Emma Amos. You don't hear much about her.

DAVIS

No, no. I only know her work through books.

MASON

Yeah. Reginald Gammon and Al [Alvin C.] Hollingsworth?

DAVIS

Hollingsworth I met. I don't remember a lot about him. I do remember his work. And there was another guy, Eldzier—

MASON

Eldzier Cortor?

DAVIS

Right.

MASON

Oh, yeah. He was from Chicago.:

DAVIS

Yeah. I met him. And there was another little guy [Ernest Critchlow], he was a feisty little tiger. He's still living, too, living in Brooklyn. He was a part of that group. Anyway—

MASON

Yeah. So did you ever participate in that group, with these people as a group?

DAVIS

No, no. And then I would go see a guy who I had grown up with and liked his daughter [Michelle Murray] a lot. She had become a dancer with Alvin Ailey, and his name was Albert Murray. He and Romie. were buddies. But Albert was such a scholar, it was real intimidating to be around him in a way, because he had so much knowledge, and he was always challenging you. His thing was always to catch you at something you didn't know and then pound you down to the peg. So, I don't know, when I would go see Albert, I was just like, "Is Michelle here?" Anything else, it was like, "Hey, I'm a blank canvas. There is no writing on this blackboard. Give me a break." [laughter]

MASON

Yeah, I've read some interviews or an interview he did with Romare Bearden in a column, and you can see how much respect he has for Bearden's work.

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

But some of the ideas it seems they were talking about in this Spiral group were like— I guess, eventually, they tried to formulate a black art aesthetic.

DAVIS

Right. Yeah, I feel like it happened, it was impor¬tant, and then it split off. Everybody went and did their own thing. I keep seeing that happening over and over again. We had a black art association here in Los Angeles.

MASON

The Art West Associated?

DAVIS

No, it was called Black Artists Association. They came together, had meetings, talked about the black aesthetic and how to define black art and what must black artists do. But then the artists who were hot and had their self-confidence together and their focus and direction, they tended to just hit in there. They did what they did, and then they just went off and—So those groups have been significant for pulling people together, creating a focus, and becoming a launching pad, and then they don't serve much purpose after that.

MASON

So you're saying the people would have been—

DAVIS

There was a need, and it filled a need, and then it dissipated. And I felt like Spiral did that. The only one that looked like it hung tight was the Afri-Cobra group out of Chicago with Jeff [R.] Donaldson. He was like the spearhead of that in a way. But even the Afri-Cobra group kind of went its own way, although they still come together from time to time. Nelson Stevens is in Massachusetts. Jeff is now in [Washington] D. C. Another guy [Roy Lewis] who's a photographer is in Maryland. So it's sort of split off, although that's the only group that seems to still have some common thread running through their work.

MASON

In Harlem, there was a Harlem Cultural Council that seemed to be important to the community. They set up jazzmobiles and dancemobiles and that kind of thing.

DAVIS

I saw a lot of the jazzmobile, loved it, thought it was the ultimate, and tried to do things like that here.

MASON

What was it? What was the jazzmobile? Like a bookmobile kind of thing?

DAVIS

It was basically an open-air truck or a truck with a lot of equipment in it that you could break out. I think, again going back to music, I'd take a break from Harlem Hospital or some of my trips in New York, and it would just be music in a corner pocket, in the back of an alley, or down at a cul-de-sac little street, or across from a restaurant. Or in downtown Manhattan there was a brother playing bass in front of an office building. It was like, "Wow!" I mean, it just was the ultimate to me. So that really inspired me several years later to produce cultural events for public places. I did a lot of concerts in parks and in downtown Los Angeles in little venues, more as a producer of an event. I mean, not as a musician. I just love to make that kind of thing happen. Then I participated with an artmobile here in L.A.

MASON

Was it part of the [Compton] Communicative Arts Academy or the arts tours?

DAVIS

No, this was part of L.A. city schools. It went around to a lot of schools, including a lot of the black or predominantly black high schools in L.A. Melonee Blocker was an artist involved with that, Bill [William] Pajaud.

MASON

About what year was this?

DAVIS

And Doyle Lane was a ceramist who was— 'Sixty-six, '67 was when I remember being involved. It was two portable trailers that were set up as an art gallery with medium to small-sized works by a variety of different people—Hispanic artists as well.

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MASON

You were talking about the artmobiles here.

DAVIS

Right, right. And you want to go back to New York to catch a plane.

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

I kept going back to New York. I mean, New York for me was the ultimate. I thought that was the only place an artist would be successful. I was going to New York every summer from 1962 on.

MASON

What about some of the black galleries that were—? Were there any black galleries then in New York in the early—?

DAVIS

I remember the Studio Museum. There were some shops that sold African artifacts in Harlem. I guess it might have been a gallery. But as a professional space, I don't remember it per se.

MASON

I remember now what I was going to ask you. It seemed after the Watts riots, museum professionals were trying to look at ways of integrating the arts with the community and bringing art to the community. And that's maybe how some of these artmobiles, some of these artmobile project things got started.

DAVIS

It was a strange period. I mean, there was the Harlem riots—the riots in Harlem—and then the Watts riots and the riots in Chicago. Detroit went. It was just happening all over the country sporadically. The artists were demanding exhibit time and space, and museum professionals were trying to figure out which black artists were palatable or up to their academic standards or whether the art by blacks was valid or legitimate. I mean, there was a lot of— Whew. And it wasn't necessarily— I mean, it was a reaction to; it wasn't a sincere effort of inclusion. It was a reaction to and a response to pressure. It wasn't with a sincere desire to understand what this segment of population in the United States was making art about.

MASON

What makes you feel that way—that it wasn't sincere?

DAVIS

I mean, it was just sort of like what we were talking about coming up in the elevator to do this interview. I mean, it's like these people were nonplussed about what black artists were doing, and they were only reacting to it. And they wanted to have an academic say about it when some of the art was not coming from academia, and then they wanted to judge it by European standards when the art wasn't necessarily derivative of that experience. And then there was the argument that African art is only valid to Africans and not to African American experience, so that we shouldn't be showing that experience in our work. Then there was work that was real revolutionary and riotous in nature, and that was kind of contradictory to what we should be aspiring for. We shouldn't be burning the flag. I mean, there were a lot of artists who were doing flag pieces. And. this was going on not just in '66 but, I mean, it hit in '65 from out here, and it went into the seventies.

MASON

Yeah, I know in New York I think the big catalyst was the *Harlem on My Mind* show in '68—

DAVIS

Right, right.

MASON

—when the black merchants and cultural coalition came out with Benny Andrews.

DAVIS

Yeah. So it was like sparks happening. And, again, I was maybe twenty-four years old, reacting. Not a student of all of what was going on. I was just a part of it and got caught up in it and was real curious and just wanted to be around. I held all these other people in high esteem, and I was in awe of who they were and what they were doing. I never saw myself as a significant player for years. And even when I opened the [Brockman] Gallery, I saw myself as a vehicle, not as a major player, in a sense. I was reaching for, and I was a little insecure about what I was doing, because I always thought, "Man, Noah

Purifoy is such a monster. He's such a mature artist. His stuff has got so much going that—" What he and Judson Powell were doing in the Watts Festival was just so gutsy. And John Riddle was doing this real revolutionary sculpture and stuff. I just held these guys in awe, and I felt real young and naive in a way.

MASON

What about some, of the nonblack artists? Did you see any of the work by [Robert] Rauschenberg and [Jackson] Pollock?

DAVIS

Yeah, I saw all of those guys' work.

MASON

Andy Warhol?

DAVIS

Andy Warhol. I mean, they weren't black and—

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

I mean, I was at a period of time where I was really impressed with them and what they did, but the people who were putting them in the forefront were not inclusive of the black experience, and therefore I wasn't rushing out to hold them in high esteem. Those were the white guys. I mean, right now it sounds unfortunate that it should be that way, but it was, and it was real. We, as a people, were excluded and not written into history and not included.

MASON

Yeah. Did Norman Lewis have a connection with like—? Since he was working in abstraction—?

DAVIS

Norman was connected with like Mark Tobey and a group in that school. While those guys were getting over, Norman was just kind of sliding down. So he never really hit what I call fifth gear in his lifetime.

MASON

Did you come in contact with their work maybe through him somewhat or—?

DAVIS

No. I came in contact with their work through art history classes and then by way of Romare Bearden and by way of Norman saying, "Well, I was part of this, and da da da da da." Then I connected it, and then I realized that, hey, Norman was part of it, but he wasn't included as a significant member. His work was quite good. Quite good.

MASON

What about reading? Were you doing a lot of reading? You mentioned [Franz] Kafka and [Richard] Wright when you were at L.A. City College.

DAVIS

Yeah, reading about art? Contemporary art?

MASON

Not just art, but books. I don't know, *Autobiography of Malcolm X or something*. [laughter]

DAVIS

I did read the *Autobiography of Malcolm X*. It was good.

MASON

Yeah. I guess everybody— I don't know, other things about philosophy or even Asian, like Zen.

DAVIS

Well, that was much later, in the late seventies, early eighties, the real fascination with the Orient and sort of Zen philosophy. I was fascinated. The Japanese prints had such an impact on the impressionists, and then African art had influenced the cubists. That whole controversy— In art school I just expected it, and then, when I got among black artists, it was like there was an issue, a real issue. That here these European artists were not crediting their influence, and was it valid or invalid for them to use this influence in their

work and legitimate or illegitimate for them to not credit. I've gone with the argument back and forth in many ways, but, at this point— It is important to credit your influences. Once you do that— I mean, artists are influenced by other art and other artists from other cultures, mine as well. So it must be acknowledged, and it's important to be acknowledged. It's as important for European Americans to acknowledge any influence that they have from other cultures as it is for me to acknowledge my influences as an African American.

MASON

I was trying to get you to think if there are any books that stand out that were important to you, not just about art but any kind of reading that you were doing. Did you read the Négritude poets?

DAVIS

Who?

MASON

Négritude? [Leopold] Senghor and—

DAVIS

No, but I did hear the Watts poets from the Watts Writers Workshop. I wasn't into poetry too much at that time. I don't know that I did a lot of reading. Even now, most of my reading is recreational reading or business reading. It's not scholastic reading. When I look at *Art News* or *Art in America* or *Black Art International*, unless I'm really caught up with the artists, I'm usually looking and studying the visual more than I'm reading the words. And when I get into reading the words, then I go get a novel. [laughter] I'm not a student of catalogs unless I'm fascinated with something and I want to pursue it. But that's just who I am. I guess I had to come to grips with— In terms of reading, I'm. a very visual person, and so most of my information with art is by going to see it and spending time with it more than it is reading about it and reading criticism and interpretation. Having disagreed with most criticism and interpretations and my negative experiences in art history classes probably reinforced that direction of drifting away from it.

MASON

Okay. All right. Well, we can stop here unless there's something that you want to add.

DAVIS

No, I'm curious what your next question is. [laughter]

MASON

Oh.

DAVIS

What shall we cover next time?

MASON

Well, hopefully, we can start to talk about the founding of the Brockman Gallery.

DAVIS

Okay. We're real close. I would say that, to finish off this trip, we went up into Maine, we went into Connecticut, we went to Quebec and spent a little time in Canada, then down into Detroit. And that was interesting— Motown was hot. I had some cousins who knew other artists and a cousin who wanted to be a designer, and I did see a couple of people's works there in Detroit. I don't remember their names. But Detroit had a lot of muscle and energy. And then in Chicago there were murals beginning to happen. So I went from Detroit into Chicago and then on out through the Midwest. I heard some jazz, went to some clubs, Chicago and Kansas area, and then on back through Utah—beautiful—I guess a corner of Nevada, and then back into L.A. But the significant part of that whole trip for me was that I got to see artists of color, that they were out there, that they were doing it, they were making a significant statement. That the statements that they were making were interesting and valid, and that these people were doing it, and that they were—to repeat myself—forty years of age and older, which to me, at that time, was old, and that it was persistent, and that there was room for me, that there was an opportunity for a person of color to be an artist and to make a statement and to do art.

MASON

How long did the trip take you?

DAVIS

It was basically a summer. Yeah.

MASON

Okay. So we'll finish off with that next time.

DAVIS

And then we can go into the gallery from—Because then the next year is when the gallery opened. One of the things on the trip that we talked about was, "Wow, we ought to open up our own gallery in Los Angeles. There are no galleries that focus on the black artists." That was just an idea that, as you have a lot of ideas, kicking them out with— It was a fantasy and not anything that we started making concrete plans for, that it was going to be an immediate reality. It was just put in the atmosphere. And a year later we were making steps in that direction.

1.10. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE ONE APRIL 20, 1991

MASON

Today we're just going to finish up your road trip with your brother [Dale B. Davis] throughout the United States. We left off in New York, and you said that you went up into Maine and Quebec, and then you came back down into Detroit, Kansas, etc., on your way back to L.A.

DAVIS

Yeah, after leaving New York City, we went and visited a friend who was working a camp in upstate New York, a fellow named Harold Logan. And he was a kid whom we had grown up with in Tuskegee [Alabama] and had gone to school in the northeast and was running a camp there. Then we went up into Canada.

MASON

I'm sorry, what kind of camp was it?

DAVIS

It was a camp for young people.

MASON

Oh, like a summer camp.

DAVIS

Yeah, summer camp. This was a really, really smart guy. It was also a part of reconnecting with our roots, kids whom we had known in our childhood whom we hadn't seen since we left Alabama in the mid-fifties. And then into Canada. That was an interesting experience in that we were in Quebec, and we really didn't know that there were French-speaking sections in Canada. The assumption was that it was an all-English-speaking country. Then—

MASON

So how did you negotiate?

DAVIS

Well, like anywhere, if you can't speak the language, sign language is— My brother had actually taken French in high school, so we were able to make it.

MASON

Did you visit artists?

DAVIS

No, we didn't go to any art galleries or anyplace like that. But Montreal was really interesting because of the architecture. We really enjoyed looking at the city and its structure. And then, from there, we came through Toronto—we didn't stay—and then down into Detroit. We had relatives from Mississippi in Detroit. There we partied. It was—

MASON

Motown, you said.

DAVIS

Yeah, it was Motown. [laughter] So we went out to a lot of little nightclubs and dance clubs, so to speak, places, and stayed with a cousin. What's

interesting is that my cousin's children were also interested in art, and I think that our trip through there helped influence their direction.

MASON

What's your cousin's name?

DAVIS

Eddie Chambliss was my cousin's name. And his two children— They actually had three children, but there were two— Butch [Chambliss] was his son who went into graphics, and I forget the name of the daughter right off the top of my head. [Wanda Chambliss] There were a number of cultural institutions in Detroit, but we really didn't spend a lot of time there looking at those things. Later, having gone back to Detroit some other times, I went to the Detroit Art Institute and the museums there. This other time in Detroit, I was really impressed with the public art. It was phenomenal to see those works there. But that was a trip that was probably sometime in the early eighties—late seventies, early eighties.

MASON

Was this with the NCA, National Conference of Artists?

DAVIS

No, it was an independent trip. Yeah. And then from Detroit into Chicago. Somehow I get the sequences of things mixed up in that I don't know if it was this trip or another trip— Well, there was an NCA conference in Chicago sometime later, and we were made very much aware of the Afri-Cobra movement. I think that trip was in the seventies. Also the murals of [William] Walker.

MASON

The *Wall of Respect*.

DAVIS

Yeah, yeah. I was very impressed with Chicago as a muscle city. We also had, again, the same friendship relationships that went back to Tuskegee, people we had met and grown up with or who had come through Tuskegee or friends of my parents who had gone to college together. So it was networking and

more dealing with cultural ties than art experiences per se. When I think about it, that pretty much ended the trip in terms of the discussion that might ensue from this kind of an interview. But what did happen during that trip at some point— and it might have been through Kansas or while we were bored in Iowa looking at the corn—we kicked around a lot of ideas. One of those ideas was, "Wow, wouldn't it be great if we opened a gallery? There seems to be no place like this available for artists of color in the West." It was just off-the-cuff kind of dialogue that we were having with no serious intention. It was just "what if" or "let 's dream." There was no idea that this would be a reality within a year and a half of those travels.

MASON

Do you remember what some of the things you were dreaming about were? Like who you would put in it or what it would look like or where it would be?

DAVIS

I had no idea what it would look like or where it would be. We did focus on the fact that it should center around the works and efforts of the black American artists. And we pretty much dropped it. I mean, when we got back to Los Angeles, we got involved with our lives. My brother was going back to 'SC [University of Southern California], and I was going back to teaching in the classroom. We really didn't know that this was even a possibility at the time. So I guess that took us. to the end of the summer of 1966. Oh, now I remember. It was the James Meredith march that I wanted to mention. When we had that last interview, I couldn't think of James Meredith. In Mississippi.

MASON

Okay. I'm glad you remembered. [laughter]

DAVIS

Oh, boy. It really worried me that I couldn't remember who it was. It just really disturbed me. It was such an impactful time, event, period. There were so many issues and tensions going on related to that, the Meredith march. I mean, there was Stokely Carmichael and Martin Luther King [Jr.], and there was SNCC [Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee] and Southern Christian Leadership [Conference], and then a lone student who just wants to

go to [University of] Mississippi, Ole Miss, and be left alone to do his thing. There was tension between the black and white community, the North and the southern community. There was also tension between the different factions in the civil rights groups and strategy, nonviolence versus don't turn the other cheek.

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

So that was— [laughter]

MASON

Okay. So where were you teaching?

DAVIS

I had gotten a job teaching at Manual Arts High School in Los Angeles, which was a predominantly black school on the edge of that community that had responded to the Watts riots. So there was a lot of tension on that campus related to the issues that came up.

MASON

Yeah. I was just reading something about that, how the different part of the black community responded to the Watts riots. For example, some thought the riots were, well, a revolt.

DAVIS

Over there.

MASON

Well, no, they thought the revolt was constructive. And there were others who thought that the revolt was basically destructive and people should work to channel their energy in a. constructive way. Whereas there were other people who thought that, because of the impression that black people have suffered over the years, that we should rise up and we should demand our rights and things like that. Basically the black middle class versus the black working class.

DAVIS

Underclass or working class.

MASON

I don't know if that's the way you saw it or not.

DAVIS

Well, I was in the "struggle for the people" kind of attitude. I think I supported the civil unrest and response to what seemed to be an oppressive kind of situation in Los Angeles, especially with the law enforcement, which continues today. Some of the uprising of the students was not necessarily well founded. A lot of it was reaction. But I feel like the masses of people as a whole had sort of taken as much as they could take, and then the reaction was a natural course. So it had a lot of merit, and it also led to a lot of other things. I mean, the riots were in '65. This period that I'm talking about, returning to Los Angeles, was in '66, which is a year later. Some of it was just filtering to students, and then some of the students, I think, felt a great need to be heard. Some of it was a reaction to the way the law enforcement community and the city fathers handled the riots. So there was a lot of tension. That tension came about from within the school and from external forces off campus. One of the issues that I was really concerned with as a teacher at that school was interfacing with the young black male students. While I taught art, I was really interested in them understanding life and its processes and kinds of things that they would be confronted with, such as contraception, self-worth, an attitude of independence, and self-reliance.

MASON

How did you try to convey that?

DAVIS

Well, one of the ways that I projected that was through an example of— A lot of the youth were working, or the ones that I was dealing with might have been working, for a liquor store or a car wash. Their view of that kind of employment was that they were content to continue to stock the refrigerator. I was trying to project that they had the opportunity of ownership and control of the business that affected their community or that was in their community.

That all people didn't necessarily go to college, but all people still had to make a living. That they had a right to be businessmen and they had a right to ownership. So that was like kind of what I used to try to project. Having come from Tuskegee, I lived that kind of experience in that community, in that city, town, where we owned everything in our community: the laundry, the cleaners, the dry goods, even the car dealership.

MASON

Was this message also part of some of the black radical organizations? Because you talked about [Maulana] Ron Karenga and the US Organization last time, or the Black Panthers, or that kind of thing.

DAVIS

I really don't know, in total, if that was the case. I wasn't formally affiliated with either group. I do think that I was influenced by a lot of the aspirations and rhetoric of those groups, and I picked what seemed meaningful to me. In '67, which was the following year, I transferred to another school [Crenshaw High School]. It was also the year that I opened a gallery. So I guess in December of '66 I took off some time, and I was looking in several communities in L.A., actually. I was looking in the Silver Lake area, and I was looking in the Crenshaw district.

MASON

Now, Crenshaw at that time, wasn't it like a changing neighborhood? It was kind of integrated but becoming mostly black? Or had it become mostly black?

DAVIS

Well, Crenshaw really changed in '60, between '60 and '65, it seems. There was a tremendous amount of white flight in the sixties—well, in the late fifties and early sixties. When I was in high school, it was not quite 50 percent minority or non-Anglo. And I think by the time my brother finished Dorsey [High School], it had tilted over the other way. I think when he started Dorsey, which was just as I left, in '60, it was about fifty-fifty. Then there were a lot of racial conflict situations, and it just perpetuated the continuation of what was known as white flight. So that community really flipped ethnically between '56 and '62.

MASON

I just brought that up because I was wondering if you were trying to look specifically for an integrated neighborhood so you could—

DAVIS

No, I was really looking for an interesting place. I've always enjoyed an integrated kind of multicultural setting. I had taken some time off, and I was looking in a couple of neighborhoods. I came back to the neighborhood which was Crenshaw/Leimert Park and was walking around that neighborhood and ran into another artist named David Bradford. He was just looking around too. We both went in this space on Degnan [Boulevard] and said what a nice studio or art gallery it would make. I think we looked at two or three places on that block. What had happened was a lot of the shopkeepers were leaving that community. It was predominantly a Jewish merchant's neighborhood. There was still a delicatessen on the block. There was a large restaurant called Raffle's. But the small merchants were beginning to make a move, and eventually the big ones left too. I said to David, "I'm going to get that spot." I think while David was thinking on it, I was acting on it. So I went back and sort of announced to my mom [Agnes Moses Davis] that I had found this place and that I was going to rent it and open an art gallery and that my brother and I had talked about it when we had gone traveling. It was really not a planned, well-calculated event. We didn't have a business plan or a strategy or any of all of those things that a business school would tell you to do.

MASON

So you were looking at it as a studio/gallery space, really.

DAVIS

Yeah, yeah. And I got the usual parental concern: "Do you know what you're doing?" and "You don't have any business experience" and "You didn't take business in college." "Do you know what. you're doing?" So, obviously, I couldn't be deterred. I was told to see the lawyer next door and get his advice and see to it that the lease that we wanted to take would be legitimate. He gave us some advice, just basically straight-up legal advice, and I signed a lease, and I had the space in January.

MASON

Where did you get the money to rent it, though? It seems like it would be really expensive.

DAVIS

Well, I was teaching, and I had a personal cash flow and a small savings. So—

MASON

So you didn't have to take out a big loan.

DAVIS

No, and I didn't know what I was doing, [laughter] And the place was set up in a way that it didn't cost a lot to establish the— I didn't have to do any major renovation. Basically, I had to put in some lights, and I might have put in a new carpet—I don't remember—or have gotten the landlord to put in a new carpet, painted the walls, and then tried to figure out what am I doing. So from January to March was planning time. Of course, when we got it, we thought we'd just set up an art gallery right away, boom. But it took two or three months of process. All of a sudden, now we had to print an invitation, come up with a name, do a mailing, find artists. So what we ended up doing was going back and forth on the name, and we finally decided to settle on a family name of historical significance. I don't know if I mentioned anywhere else in the interview about the name Brockman, but—

MASON

Yeah, you said it was the first—

DAVIS

First slave, and it was also my brother's middle name. There were no Brockmans to carry the name in terms of offspring, male offspring, in the family. So we settled on that. It made the family happy, and we went on into "I don't know what we're doing, " but it was an art gallery. [laughter] And the sophistication of it really came through learning by the seat of our pants.

MASON

Did you go around to other galleries to see what they were doing?

DAVIS

Yeah, we checked out a few, but there's nothing like doing it. You go to other galleries, and they have what they have. It's up, but you can't figure out what their process is. We got some advice. I think as we got into it we began to check out other galleries more than when we started. There were a couple of galleries in Los Angeles that were quite helpful to us, one in just being willing to talk and, in some cases, doing business with us. That was the Ankrum Gallery and the Heritage Gallery.

MASON

They weren't showing black artists then, were they? Because I know they eventually started to show them, like in the seventies.

DAVIS

Yeah, I'm not sure when Charles White established his relationship with Heritage. I'm not sure. Bernie [Bernard T.] Casey was showing with Ankrum, but I'm not sure when. But I do remember that Joan Ankrum and Ben [Benjamin] Horowitz were people who were just willing to talk, willing to have dialogue. I guess we were odd in that there was nobody like us in that kind of business, and we also had that business away from the mainstream of the art community in L.A.

MASON

Did you go to Golden State [Mutual Life Insurance Company] and talk to Bill [William] Pajaud?

DAVIS

No. We were led to Bill and visited him as an artist, not as a curator of a collection. I was very fascinated with his work and his watercolors. We eventually had several exhibitions of his work. But what I remember most vividly is going to sort of a backyard exhibit sale at his home in Los Angeles somewhere off of Washington Boulevard and being really impressed with his watercolors.

MASON

I was just wondering about that, because in one article I was reading you said that since the L.A. [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art] had recently relocated in '65 out of the community over to Wilshire [Boulevard] that you thought the Brockman Gallery could kind of fill a cultural void for that area.

DAVIS

Well, there were a number of interesting coincidences and what seemed like a logical move for opening the gallery in that community. The county art museum had left the community. There was no commercial venue for exhibiting the works of black American artists.

MASON

There was always the Watts Summer [Arts] Festival.

DAVIS

Well, the Watts. Summer Festival had just started. There were the socialite women's groups that would have a show every once in a while, but it didn't perpetuate support of the artists in a financial way. It was more social. And it wasn't professional. Although what they did, in many cases, was quality or it had merit, it wasn't business. And we had set up a business. We weren't establishing a social organization.

MASON

So did you perceive that there was a market, then, that you were kind of—?

DAVIS

Well, we felt like there was a market. We moved into what was the wealthiest black neighborhood in the city of Los Angeles, which had successful professionals living in it. So it seemed like a natural. But come to find out that, at that time—and it may have changed now—there tended to be a pattern of those people that we felt that we had the natural niche towards. And part of it was our inexperience and part of it was this pattern of spending outside of the community. So it tended to be the fact that, on one hand, it was probably a bad move to attract the wealthy or the more financially solvent black middle- and upper-middle-class people in their own community. We would have probably been more successful if we had moved to La Cienega [Boulevard], because it was just a greater attraction to go somewhere else to buy. That

happened with the Crenshaw shopping district as well. It crashed financially. Now, it's taken a change since the last two or three years since it's been developed. There's also a greater consciousness of support of black businesses by the black population.

MASON

So when did you start to realize that the black community wasn't really coming out? And what did you do?

DAVIS

Actually, during the civil rights period, I noticed a pattern, somewhat of a pattern, that we had a lot of white clients. And a lot of the white clients initiated response from blacks. Once the civil rights era was over and once we really wanted to focus more on having blacks become collectors and consumers of the works of black artists— And we lost that clientele, which was, on the one hand, foolish on our part to have let it slip out of our hands. I don't know what I could have done. Probably more marketing, making a geographical move, and, on the other hand, maybe nothing at all. I mean, the time and the situations changed, and the support of issues changed. So there was not that thrust from that community to buy the works. There was more of an emphasis on supporting issues related to women or Hispanics. Those things were valid too. But I think we were caught up in a trend, and while we rode the trend, we didn't find a way to capitalize on it and make it perpetuate itself. So we were left with this wealthy community that didn't buy art. [laughter]

MASON

Yeah. Well, you've been there. You're the oldest black gallery in Los Angeles, so you must have done something right.

DAVIS

Yeah, we did something. [laughter] We're survivors.

MASON

No, I mean something right.

DAVIS

Oh, yeah. I'm sure we did a lot right. Again, we were not experts in the field. We were really artists doing a gallery. We became relatively sophisticated in the process as we sort of learned by doing. We were recognized nationally for the kinds of exhibitions and challenging exhibits that we put together. In some cases, a lot of what we did was artistically excellent but financially unsuccessful. We also learned that there was a spending curve, too, at galleries. While you would have exhibits that would be successful, then you would have two or three that wouldn't be. And then you might have one that gave you a lot of notoriety. So there tended to be a pattern of— And there were also times of year that there tended to be greater spending.

MASON

Well, Christmas.

DAVIS

Yeah. So—

MASON

Off the top of your head, what was the best show you did in terms of money? And what was the most sort of controversial or, you say, "artistically excellent" but nonpaying show?

DAVIS

Well, I thought of anticipating that question. The most artistically challenging exhibition was the environmental exhibition that Noah Purifoy did [*Niggers Ain't Never Ever Gonna Be Nothin'—All They Want To Do Is Drink + Fuck*]. It was just— It knocked everybody out. There was nothing for sale. And it was an experience. It was site specific. Nobody else had been doing those kinds of exhibitions at that time. I think even those shows that were financially successful were excellent exhibits as well. David Hammons did real well with the body prints. John Outterbridge had two or three exhibitions that sold well and that were aesthetically challenging. Elizabeth Catlett had her first exhibit in the United States in many years at Brockman Gallery, and that worked. A good number of pieces sold there, and it moved on to other institutions and sold there. We did put together two exhibitions of West Coast black American artists for the Studio Museum in Harlem, and they were received quite well.

Then we had other exhibits by interesting artists. Dan [R.] Concholar did real well with us. Gloria Bohanon. There was a guy named Eugene "Legend" Hawkins who did interesting work. I mean, he was a legend. You heard of him; you didn't hear, of him. He passed through time. He ended up doing portraits in the streets of Berkeley after the late sixties, early seventies. He would drop in and drop out, but in the files you will see records of his exhibitions. And I exhibited. My brother exhibited. He was doing a lot of ceramics at the time. I was doing collages and screen printmaking and a little painting. It was interesting that the artists who came to us were recom¬mended by other artists by and large.

MASON

Well, what was your first show?

DAVIS

I think that first show was Dale's work and my work. And then I think the second show was Eugene Hawkins. Because I've been moving so much in the last few years, it's like— I do have a book that has all of those exhibits, but I don't know if it's in Sacramento, L.A., or here in [San Antonio] Texas.

MASON

Oh, that would have been a good thing to have.

DAVIS

I know it's not here in Texas, actually, but I do have it. I think it's in Sacramento. We also did exhibitions that included artists who were of other ethnic groups. We tried to focus on Chicano artists. We exhibited a number of Japanese American artists and a fair number of Anglo artists as well.

MASON

That was right away that you did these?

DAVIS

Pretty much. Pretty much within the first year or so, yeah. We really did respond a lot to that civil rights period, and we did show a lot of art that reflected the movement. We did a fund-raiser for Angela Davis.

MASON

Right. She mentioned that in her autobiography.

DAVIS

Yeah. And we were able to raise a good— Well, a number of artists responded to the call and submitted work. It was also financially successful. They were able to raise quite a bit of money. They kept their own books because it was a fund-raising activity.

MASON

These were the Soledad brothers?

DAVIS

Yeah. I'm not sure. I just saw the art move. We helped process the artwork.

MASON

Yeah. I don't know if this is a good time to bring it up now, but in the files I was reading an exchange that you had—and this seems like it was either a Black Artists Association meeting or a Black Arts Council meeting— something between you and John. I don't know John who— Riddle or Outterbridge. It was just kind of a snippet of the exchange. But you were talking about the issue of standards and quality. John Riddle or Outterbridge or whoever the John was saying that the message is important—you have to look at where the artist is coming from—and you were saying, "But standards and quality are important." And that's one thing that I was reading that you said about the gallery, that standards and workmanship and craftsmanship were really important to you.

DAVIS

I'm glad you brought that up, because, again, it's one of those areas that I forgot about—the Black Arts Council or the Black Artists Association. There were a number of attempts to try to pull together groups of artists to sort of form a unit, not necessarily to do the same art. It wasn't a format like Afri-Cobra or anything like that, but I think most of us were college-trained artists, so we were aware of the different periods and movements of artists throughout history. If you look at the cubists or impressionists, that was like a

group of people moving toward a certain kind of aesthetic statement or dealing with a certain question. We were black artists dealing with the question of civil rights and nationalism and African heritage and living in America, or the United States of America. While all those were issues— Well, the issue of black art versus being an artist of color, and was there a black art statement— I think, in the beginning, we really did try to have it as a movement. And like many movements, it gets started as a tremendous momentum, and then one or two people carry it, and then other people either drop out or—

MASON

People split off and form their own groups.

DAVIS

—split off, and there are factions. I think we were young and naive enough to think that there would be no factions. We'd have these great discussions and drink wine and talk, talk, and try to come together to solve all the world's problems with art. John Riddle was another artist who was a sculptor, and we did quite well with his work, and he was very much concerned with issues. So we really got to what came first, the chicken or the egg, in our discussions— whether a statement was more important than art or the craftsmanship, etc.

1.11. TAPE NUMBER: VII, SIDE TWO APRIL 20, 1991

DAVIS

There was a woman there in Los Angeles who came by the gallery when it first started. She just quietly came and looked in the window and then came in the door. Her name was Ruth [G.] Waddy. Ruth is still living today in the San Francisco area, but she has been instrumental, she and her sister [Gladys Gilliam Little], with taking works of black American artists to Russia in the fifties. And she coauthored that book *Black Artists on Art* with Samella [S.] Lewis. She was a very powerful force and one of those kinds of people who had a real clear point of view about who she was and where she was coming from, and her sister was even stronger. I would go and spend a lot of time listening and talking to her. She had a lot of influence.

MASON

Yeah, she had the Art West Associated group. So you went to participate in those meetings? Or just a personal contact?

DAVIS

More a personal contact. I may have gone to a few of the meetings. The thing about being in business or being an art dealer was that there were things that I was interested in exhibiting, and there were artists whose work I was interested in, but I was not necessarily interested in everybody's work in all of those groups. It got to be that a lot of work that I didn't care for or didn't think I could move would be done by a lot of artists in those groups, and they would think or feel slighted or that we were uppity Westside people who weren't concerned with the movement. But, really, we could only handle so many artists. There needed to be five or six other galleries to represent all of the other strains that were out in the open being done by artists in the L.A. community. So there were factions and different splinters.

MASON

I'm sorry, I wanted to ask you— Because you were talking about Ruth Waddy, and you were saying that she had a strong point of view, I wanted to ask you what that was, because the work that I've seen that she put in her book is more social protest kind of work. And I was wondering if she was doing that really early, if that's her point of view or—

DAVIS

Her book was pretty— I think what I got from Ruth was her strength of belief in the African American culture. Aesthetically, I don't think that we always saw eye to eye on what was of merit. It was very difficult for me to deal with the desires of people and what we could actually exhibit and sell. We were not a nonprofit organization and we weren't a charitable organization. Even though we were a community-based business, we were still a business, and the doors in a business are open based on your ability to sell a product. We had to sell art, so we had to acquire art that we believed in that we could sell.

MASON

Well, she did mostly prints, though. It seems like prints would sell pretty easily. I mean, I don't know—

DAVIS

We did sell some of Ruth's work. I am not necessarily speaking about Ruth's work as much as I'm speaking about some of the artists in that organization that she initiated [Art West Associated].

MASON

I don't know if you can be more specific about— You said there was some art that just didn't appeal to you or you didn't think you could sell.

DAVIS

Well, it would be in poor taste to mention who they were.

MASON

No, I don't want you to mention names, but I didn't know how you could—

DAVIS

How I could make a judgment? Well, let's just say that if we had three or four artists who we were exhibiting who did works that were figurative of black imagery, well, that's really about as much as we could market or handle. And then, of those, maybe there were twelve artists doing that kind of work at that time, and we, in theory, had the four best.

MASON

Right, okay.

DAVIS

But the fifth through the twelfth certainly felt that theirs was of merit if not better than who we selected. Or if we had those artists, why weren't we showing them, as well? We tried to compensate for that by having group exhibitions that included their work. But, by and large, we weren't successful with their work,, even though we had nice exhibits that included them. So you had to make selective decisions, and in some cases you became the bad guy, which I wasn't ready for, but when you're in the playing field, you have to learn fast that that's part of it. You learn to develop a strong ego and have a good shell. I mean, there were times when it really disturbed me, and I would take it personally and not understand. But in hindsight it's real clear.

MASON

So through all this you had time to do your own work? [laughter]

DAVIS

Well, I tried. I was a young, strong, and a strong-willed, Renaissance-type person, so I really felt that I could do all of these different things. The more people would say, "You can't, " the more I would try to prove that I/we could. So I was teaching full-time, I was running the art gallery, I was doing my art, I was having a social life, and I was driving a sports car. [laughter] I was just out there. By the time I was— I guess after three years. into it, two or three years into it, I really had what was close to a physical breakdown, because I was just pushing all of the ends and both candles, if not all four candles. And I ended up in a hospital with a double hernia, and I don't know if it was from helping lift John Riddle's sculpture or from emotional pressures that I was under—I also got married during that period of time—or dealing with the artists in the business. So I ended up with a double hernia. But I remember in the hospital thinking how good it was to just be in the bed. [laughter]

MASON

To just kick back.

DAVIS

And I really had not learned how to rest. I had just learned how to do, and I grew up with that strong work ethic. You had to be twice as good to be equal. So it was always that push. And that hospital bed was wonderful. From that point, I sort of— I can't say that I really stopped, but I started pulling back on some things. So at that point— Let's see, that was about '69. And then in 1970 I decided to stop teaching, that I was really more interested in doing my own art, and I really did not want to give up the gallery. In making the choice between the three things—which one to give up—I gave up the classroom. I tended to feel that the classroom was taking all of my creative juices. I was giving it to my students, and I wasn't exercising it or practicing it myself. They had all my ideas. I wasn't doing it as much. I was fast becoming a Sunday painter, which I resented and resented on other people as well as myself. So in '70 I left the classroom.

MASON

I was just wondering if you could—

DAVIS

I was over at the black students union, and they were burning down the school. And Martin Luther King [Jr.] got assassinated and—

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

So I was doing all these things to sort of quell that energy, then exhibit that energy, and also deal with my own personal feelings about all of those things at that time.

MASON

Yeah. That's what I was trying to get back to— work—not to say that the work that you were doing was a direct response to any one of these events, but I guess I was just trying to gauge maybe how you perceived your work was changing at that time or things that you were doing at that time or experimenting with. Like, the two prints that I've seen, the *Black Modern Dance* and the *Heart Dance*, they were abstractions, kind of figurative abstractions. I'm wondering if you had been doing that recently or—?

DAVIS

Well, through college, I really was doing work that was assignments and more traditional landscapes and still lifes. That work was not about self-discovery or ethnic identity, and there was never any lead in that direction on the part of my formal education in art. So I would say that, like, the *Black Modern Dance* and the *Heart Dance* were a beginning towards that kind of consciousness coming through my work. It was there in my rhetoric but not necessarily there in my art.

MASON

Okay. How was it there in those two prints? I mean, was it just abstraction? Was that experimental? Or was it—?

DAVIS

I guess, in a way, it's like it's not obvious, but, for me, I was very much moved by the black dance, contemporary dance. So those were sort of my attempts to sort of capture that kind of statement that was being made by Alvin Ailey and George Faison and any other number of people at that time. I would just go to these concerts and be turned on. I don't know that I did it related to music at that time, but I would be influenced quite a bit by just going to jazz concerts and sort of checking out the, quote, "scene, " unquote.

MASON

Yeah. I guess we can talk about that more later, because I wanted to ask you about Larry Clark, because he was trying to do things also between the visual and the music. And I'm wondering how that kind of—

DAVIS

Yeah, yeah.

MASON

But that's later. That comes later.

DAVIS

Actually, it's not far away. That's interesting that you bring his name up. Also, during this period, we were the only ones on the scene, and we became the Westside art gallery or so forth. So it set up a certain amount of tension for artists who were in the other parts of the community, Watts and Compton, who didn't necessarily have access to what we were doing. Then there was another woman who started a gallery that overlapped ours. She did quite good work, and she had a good gallery—I think it was Gallery 66—which was Suzanne Jackson.

MASON

Yeah, Gallery 32.

DAVIS

Gallery 32, right.

MASON

How was that different from—? I mean, I hear things about her gallery. People always say, "Oh, you could do things there that you couldn't do other places."

DAVIS

Yeah. I think she probably allowed greater experimental kinds of things at her place. I'm not sure that she was as focused on sales as we were, although she had to be to some degree. It was the new place, so as Brockman was in '67, her place was in '70 or whatever year she opened. So everybody wanted to go over there. And, again, it was not in the black community, so it had the lure—

MASON

It was on La Brea somewhere?

DAVIS

Well, it was near Otis Art Institute, near MacArthur Park, in a building with a lot of designers and so forth. So it had a whole other mystique. She was this woman who had come from Alaska and San Francisco—and Aquarian, also. Interesting that we were both Aquarius and sort of had foresight and vision to do these, and we were willing to be risk takers.

MASON

Yeah. Did you find yourself competing with her, with her art?

DAVIS

In a way we kind of competed, and it was probably unnecessary. A lot of the artists would sort of pit us against each other, which was really petty. There would be this, "Well, I'm not going to show with you; I'm going to show over there, " or back and forth, when, really, Suzanne and I, we had the control. But pettiness and devisiveness always finds its way in a lot of situations, and that happened to some degree.

MASON

What about the other galleries?

DAVIS

But I had a lot of respect for her, and I still do. She's an interesting person.

MASON

Yeah. You exhibited each other at other galleries too.

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

What about the other gallery? Your friend I met on the plane—Dawson?

DAVIS

Oh, Ralph Dawson?

MASON

Yeah, Ralph Dawson, who had Chicago West. Oh, and there was the other one, Gallery Negre, which you don't really hear— I don't really know what that was all about.

DAVIS

Boy, I really— Where was that one?

MASON

I don't know.

DAVIS

Gallery Negre. Was it in Pasadena?

MASON

I don't know. I've just seen the name, but I—

DAVIS

I tried to start a second gallery with some artists in Pasadena.

MASON

Oh, really? When was that? In the seventies?

DAVIS

Yeah, early seventies. It didn't last long. But it was like a satellite site. And then Chicago West was an interesting gallery, and it brought some artists who were from other parts of the city and others who also were new to L.A. from Chicago on the same—

MASON

Hence the name.

DAVIS

And it was in the community of Brockman Gallery. It was a nice space. I liked what they were doing. That gallery didn't really conflict with Brockman and its objectives or artists. There wasn't that conflict between the artists as much. There were artists who were loyal to Brockman, and then there were artists who were not loyal to any gallery and just wanted to run between all of them, to hook it up and do their thing. We tried to control that, and I don't know if that was good or bad at this point.

MASON

So you would, say, represent John Riddle or someone?

DAVIS

Right, right. If we represented John Riddle, we really didn't think he should be exhibiting somewhere else. Or, if he did, it should be courtesy of Brockman Gallery. Many of the artists didn't feel like they should have any allegiance. Part of it was a lack of sophistication on their part, and part of it was a lack of our ability to develop the loyalty and to establish a kind of formal contract that would lock them in. In retrospect, I don't think that would have been a good thing, the formal—

MASON

You kind of think of it as an artist yourself, how you would—

DAVIS

Well, as an artist myself, I'm so much aware of all of what happens, and I tend to only try to deal with one business in one city just to avoid the sort of petty back-and-forth stuff. Or, if I do have a relationship with a business and consider doing business with someone else, I mean, I'll say, "Look, I have this

opportunity, and is this in conflict with you? Or can you match it?" So I learned a lot. [laughter] I learned a lot, oh, boy, the hard way and, in many cases, just through experience. The lessons of common sense and the lessons of failure and the lessons of success. And a lot of these things, it's like dealing with artists, but it's like learning how to handle and manage people and their product, and, in this case, their love product, because it's not just a product, it's their art, and it has a very personal attachment. You're dealing with a lot of different kinds of egos and sensitivities. And then you're dealing with people who feel very strong about what they do, and they really want to tell you what to do.

MASON

Did you find that you functioned sometimes as a critic for some artists? I mean, when you went out to look for artists, did you become aware of somebody's work and then say, "I like what this person does so I want their work in my gallery"? Or did you kind of like go out to see what people were doing and say, "Well, maybe in a couple of years we can—" I don't know.

DAVIS

There was not a formal process. I recently gave a talk at the San Antonio Art Institute to what is called the senior seminar class, and I said that the artists that I really tended to look at most critically were the artists who were recommended by other artists that we exhibited. So those tended to be the best referrals. Those people who came in cold, it was always awkward and difficult. I did go out to different venues where artists would exhibit and sort of do on-site research. I met Dan Concholar in a park behind a library. in Los Angeles, in South Central L.A., and was really impressed with his work, and we established a relationship based on that work that I saw. So if there was work I saw, I would talk to them, tell them I had a gallery and would be interested in exhibiting their work at some time. I didn't try to nurture artists. I did court those artists whose work I thought we should exhibit, and that would be by either, offering them a show or asking for them to consign some work to us for a limited period of time.

MASON

How does that work exactly, consignment?

DAVIS

Well, consignment is a business relationship where a person will put their art—in this case, art—in your charge for a period of time for you to sell and generate a percentage for them, and then you take your cut, so that there's— They're taking a risk that you can sell their work, so they're willing for you to have it tied up for a period of time. You're taking a risk that you can sell their work and keep it in good shape and that you think you can sell it. So you basically bring it into your inventory. But you don't own the work. You're not buying it with the hopes of selling it. So you're not accumulating an inventory that's taxable at the end of the year. It's an agreement to loan short-term for the purpose of a sale.

MASON

Okay. I don't know if you want to continue or if you want to just pick up.

DAVIS

Well, I think it would be interesting maybe to pick up or to try to get to 1973. When I left the high school in '70, I had decided to go to graduate school, to throw myself back into the mix of being an artist, a producing artist, and to be challenged and to be around and among other people doing that. So I applied to go to Otis Art Institute. I had to put together a portfolio, which was, I guess, not the strongest but got me in. And they let me in the B. F. A. [bachelor of fine arts] program, not the M. F. A. [master of fine arts] program, so I couldn't move right towards a master's. The other goal was that, if I was going to teach, I wanted to have the option to teach on the college level. The B. F. A. meant that I had to spend an extra year. I had a B. A., but I didn't have as much studio time as was required through a B. F. A. program. So they let me into the fourth year of a B. F. A. program. And, under that, I studied with Charles White, among a number of other artists. But Charlie was— We really fought, in a way, because it was a real struggle. I wasn't a draftsman, per se. A lot of my focus was in the design area and in printmaking and not necessarily in figure drawing. So I struggled in that class with him, and he gave me a hard time. But he was real supportive, and we began to develop a friendship relationship that was sort of a back and forth. And he did things that would help support the gallery in some ways. I mean, he would buy a work, and he would refer me to his dealer related to his work. And Elizabeth Catlett was

exhibiting at Brockman Gallery, and that was his first wife. He offered to help support that exhibit in a discreet manner, because there was remaining tension with her in relationship to him.

MASON

But she was all the way in Mexico. [laughter]

DAVIS

Bad blood goes wherever. [laughter] And there was definitely bad blood. So that was a pretty interesting time. Also, my marriage broke up.

MASON

Was your wife an artist?

DAVIS

No. She [Rebecca Braithwaite] was in the banking business. But I was no longer the financial end. I mean, I wasn't working anymore; I was living on savings. That probably didn't help at all. So that was 1971. And I finished that program, and then— I'm trying to— When did [Richard M.] Nixon come into office?

MASON

That was like '68.

DAVIS

Okay.

1.12. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE ONE APRIL 22, 1991

MASON

Today we thought we'd backtrack a little and sort of finish up the late sixties maybe and early seventies and talk about the relationship of black artists to institutions like LACMA [Los Angeles County Museum of Art]. In the late sixties the Black Arts Council was formed with Claude Booker and Cecil Fergerson, and apparently they tried to put pressure on LACMA to get black artists in. And there were a few shows. In 1972, there was the *Panorama* show [*Los Angeles, 1972: A Panorama of Black Artists*], and before that there was a

show, *Three Graphic Artists: Charles White, Timothy Washington, and David Hammons*. But the black art community didn't seem to be satisfied with the museum's response to the demands by the council, so I was wondering if you could talk about your perception of that.

DAVIS

Sure, it's interesting to address—what?—almost twenty years later, and so I have a maturity-growth response as opposed to the one that was immediate at the time. There was a real issue of artists of color not being included and/or considered as part of the artistic community doing works of art of excellence, and there was a lack of understanding on the part of the curatorial and historical arts community related to the impact, significance of, and the kind of work being done by, in this case, the African American artists. This was also a period of time that was after the Watts riots. There was a tremendous surge of self-identity, self-pride, and sort of a cultural renaissance that was taking place in the black community. Not that artists didn't exist prior to that, but there became a greater need and a greater demand to be heard. So several entities began to take place, and energies sprang from that particular period. There were a series of exhibitions that were initiated by Noah Purifoy and Judson Powell. They had a series of summer exhibitions in Watts [at the Watts Summer Arts Festival]. I participated as an artist and also as a gallery person bringing artists to the exhibition in addition to all the other artists from in and around the community. These were real powerful and important exhibits for which there was very little coverage from and attendance from so-called mainstream communities, especially the art critic community. Then there was a gentleman by the name of Jim Woods who had— I think it was called Watts—

MASON

Studio Watts?

DAVIS

Studio Watts. This was set up to do any number of creative things, but my recollection of it was primarily focused on the visual arts. It was a fantastic situation where they had a sort of visiting artist program, they had community art activities, and they brought artists in from other communities to impact on

the artists that were a part of that program. Out of that grew, not necessarily directly, a number of community exhibitions: Brockman Gallery, the Black Artists Association. The two gentlemen you mentioned, Claude Booker and Cecil Fergerson, began the Black Arts Council— Was that—?

MASON

Yeah. How was the Black Artists Association—?

DAVIS

Black Artists Association. Then there was something like the Black Arts Council.

MASON

Right. No, I was asking how those two groups were different. Was the Black Artists Association kind of split from the—?

DAVIS

The Black Artists Association was just artists, and this was an attempt to get together and communicate about things and issues and aesthetic statements that were related specifically to their immediate concerns and work. The Black Arts Council's focus was more towards generating opportunities for artists and stimulating and creating greater audience base within the black community as well as the community at large. So they focused more on doing exhibitions and generating those kinds of things. They did sell some art, and they did do advocacy efforts towards major art institutions and interacted with boards trying to make sure that. blacks were represented in decision-making places where the visual arts were concerned.

MASON

Because I noticed there was a conflict between the Black Artists and the Black Arts Council, like in the seventies, when it seems that artists felt that they were sometimes left out of the Black Arts Council, some decision making, and that they didn't really have any— It seems that the Black Arts Council might have— There was a communication gap, I would say.

DAVIS

Well, the Black Arts Council became successful in making things happen in a short period of time. Many times those people who are operating in what we call left-brain activity tend to forget the creative people's input is necessary, because systematic processing is necessary to make some of these other things happen. This is not peculiar to black artists or black arts organizations, but it was certainly something that was felt by this group, because all of a sudden people are affecting who you are and what you do without getting your input. In many cases, it felt like it was an intentional exclusion and that it was particularly peculiar to this particular group, when, in fact, I found over the years that, hey, it happens all the time, that most museums are not cognizant of how important it is to have an artist sit on the board as well as the banker and the lawyer, that all disciplines need to be represented, and it is the business of the artists. Therefore it is significant that artists participate in the decision-making process, the visionary aspects of it, and the long-range planning. It's just key and critical. But that mistake is made across the board all too often, and, still, here in 1991 it's an issue and valid. Those arguments were valid at that time and are still valid now. But we as a group took it real personally, and I tended to have to walk both sides of those issues. I was a practicing artist too. I was a gallery owner. And the third issue was that I was not in the nonprofit end of the art scene. My business was a for-profit business, and therefore I had a whole other point of view that, in some cases, was unlike anybody else at the table and so not necessarily understood. A lot of people operate on the point of view that artists suffer and the starving artist syndrome and that we need to do these things for artists for exposure more than for artists to have economic success. My attitude is artists eat, too, so they deserve the same kind of $50 ticket that you deserve to whatever it takes to feed a family. So these were real issues, and they came up. Now, in terms of the museums, the Black Arts Council was a real driving force with the museums. Number one, Booker and— I think Booker was a guard with the museum originally and moved into an assistant curatorial position, and I believe a similar kind of growth thing for Cecil Fergerson— And then there were a number of other gentlemen related to this. And I think, very significantly here, these are black guys overseeing the security of the institution, and they're not represented. Their culture is not represented, their history is not represented, and the people who represent their creative force are not considered. They were in a position to affect an institution that

claimed to be American. It's not American to me unless it's inclusive as opposed to exclusive. So there were meetings and stirring kinds of rumblings going on within the black arts community that they weren't being represented, so they decided to bring force on the institutions that were responsible and public institutions. So there was a basement exhibit that was what I would say token and not of high quality, but it was something that the museum just threw at the—

MASON

You mean the *Panorama*?

DAVIS

I believe that's the one. I don't—

MASON

In 1972. It was a big survey of—

DAVIS

There may have been two. And it was in the rental gallery of the museum, as I remember.

MASON

Yeah, that would be the *Panorama show*.

DAVIS

It answered the need, in a way, of the Black Arts Council in that it got a lot of people exhibited, so it addressed many artists. But it did not necessarily address quality, it did not address curatorial excellence, and it did not address the need to be exhibited and seen in the better spaces of the museum. So it was a token or pacifying activity from my vantage point.

MASON

What was the artists' response?

DAVIS

Well, artists were glad to be included and glad to participate, and those who weren't included were jealous and so forth. But it wasn't that good.

MASON

Now, why wasn't it good? I mean, it seems that—

DAVIS

There were some good things in it, but—

MASON

Okay, but they got a black guest curator, too, if we're talking about the same show. This guy Carroll Greene, he was a curator who was brought in. It wasn't like some of the things that happened in New York like the Whitney [Museum of American Art] show where they would have their regular curator who would just go out and pick whatever he wanted. It seemed that it could have been a good opportunity for—

DAVIS

It was an excellent opportunity.

MASON

—to show—

DAVIS

It was an excellent opportunity. It was in a poor site within that institution. And it tried to address too many issues, and it tried to include too many artists. So if you're talking about excellence, then the exhibition with Charles White, David Hammons, and Timothy Washington was the one that had curatorial excellence and the greatest impact.

MASON

In terms of—?

DAVIS

In terms of the institution, in terms of being a major exhibit, in other words, in a sense, almost a retrospective of the kinds of works that those artists were doing, and the work was real challenging. But that exhibition caused a tremendous amount of uproar. And I remember us having a meeting at

Samella [S. j Lewis's house that Charlie White did not attend for whatever reason.

MASON

This was the Black Artists Association or just—?

DAVIS

I believe—I don't know—it was probably everybody. It was a real tough meeting, and I had a hard decision to make there, personally. The artists at the meeting wanted the exhibition to be open to all artists, and they felt that this was a token exhibition and that it didn't do anything for the arts community at large in the cry of addressing this community. I represented two of the three artists, and those two artists were David Hammons and Timothy Washington. As the gallery owner, I couldn't take a personal point of view. I had to back and respect the point of view of the artists that I represented, and that was my position. Personally, I was in a real conflict about it, because I had strong feelings that the masses should be represented and so forth. But, yet, here were probably two of the strongest artists who exhibited at the gallery with an excellent opportunity, with excellent work, and to be exhibited along with the dean of black art, Charles White. So it went back and forth with David and Timothy, and both of them said, "Hey, we have an excellent opportunity. We think our work is of merit, and we think we'll have impact, and it makes a black statement, and we want to do it. We don't care about everybody else saying all of these other things, " that that wasn't their issue. They happened to be selected, and they wanted to do it. So, at the end of the meeting, I basically said, "Well, I represent these two artists. They want to do it. I'm going to go forward with it. I'm not going to. shut it down." And it really pissed some people off. I mean, it was tough. It was real tough. The same group of artists and a number of activists in the community decided to picket the exhibit. Having been a pro-union person and a person who had gone out on strike and a person who had always refused to cross picket lines, to face a picket line, that was against something that I was doing or responsible for to some degree. Probably one of the hardest things I ever had to do in my life in terms of ray personal principles was to cross that picket line and to be cussed out by those people who I felt a part of. But I crossed the picket line, and I went in the exhibition. Oh, man, my head swims now from that feeling. And

then going in and running into a few artists there who— I mean, John Riddle just laid into me with the most negative series of four-letter words. Yet, when I got in there, it was a hell of a good exhibit. The work made a statement. It was black. And there were a lot of black people in there as well as white people, and that made me feel real good. So I feel like it was the right thing. And a level of excellence existed. So it was better than the other show that we just mentioned, the *Panorama*, for the right reasons. These artists needed to make an impact on this institution, and it didn't need to be in a token space or a token situation. The treatment was first class, the art was first class, the exhibition was first class, and the response to it was serious—it was financial. The museum purchased works from that exhibition for their personal collection, and major collectors came out of that exhibition.

MASON

Who?

DAVIS

These were private-party people, but they were major collectors. These are people who were wealthy people in the L.A. area who bought the work and followed these artists.

MASON

Even over in the Crenshaw district when you had Charles White over there?

DAVIS

I think, as a result of that, there was a greater response and respect for David and Timothy's work. Those were the two artists that I was representing at the time. So in thinking about it and thinking about the museum and its responsibility and all of those issues, the failing of the museum was to not continue to do things on that level, and the failing of the museum was to not initiate things as opposed to react and respond. It shouldn't have been necessary to continue to have the black arts community clamor and revolt and do the militant move all the time to get the museum's attention. So after the David Hammons show there should have been—I mean these three artists the museum should have planned another exhibition three to five years away reflecting artists coming from maybe another point of view or do a national

survey. I mean, because there was a lot of energy, there was a lot of interest, and there was a lot of attention focused on it. And they should have given Henri Ghent an opportunity to do it as a major exhibit like Philip Morris [Inc.] did, that—

MASON

Two Centuries—

DAVIS

Two Centuries of Black American Art.

MASON

Was that also brought about by pressure and bickering and arguing?

DAVIS

Sure. But advocacy is important. And—

MASON

Well, the reason I'm asking that is because when you read— Like Kenneth Donahue did an interview, and you read in newspaper articles and stuff that he always says, "Well, we really saw this need, and we decided to address it, and we did this on our own."

DAVIS

No, the need was confronted. They were. confronted. So, being confronted, the need was being broadcast. Whether they heard it or not becomes another issue. There was a thing where, once black artists or artists of color or African American artists achieve a certain amount of notoriety, then they don't want to call them black. So it was fine to have a second-class subcategory until the artists achieved a certain amount of recognition, and then, from that point, there was a resistance to deal with any labels that might be indicative of where that artist's major influences came from. I just don't think that— If you want to find Brer Rabbit, you have to look in the briar patch. You can't look out in the ocean, and you can't look out on the desert horizon line. So these people would say, "Well, we're concerned about black American artists, but we don't see any." But they didn't go to where they were. It's as if you go to Mexico and you don't speak Spanish and you say, "Well, I didn't meet any

Mexican artists who spoke English who could communicate with me, so we didn't include any." So that kind of mentality and logic sort of followed what you might call a racist pattern or an exclusionary pattern or an old-boy-school pattern. These things are just gradually breaking down, and they're just constantly being broken down. I guess what was happening in California was kind of like a jackhammer. These artists were the jackhammer, and they were just making this noise and shaking these people up and causing all these problems. It's like, "Well, you don't have to raise all this noise and cause all these problems for us to hear you, " but then they weren't heard unless they made that noise. And then that made a way for women artists to say, "Well, wait a minute, hey. These are predominantly white male institutions that are bastions for this kind of an exclusive group." And the Chicano artists are saying, "Wait a minute. We're here, too. We are American citizens, and we make cultural statements that are significant. If this is the United States of America, then it is a diverse country with diverse images, issues, statements. If this is a white museum, call it a white museum. If it's a Los Angeles County Art Museum, goddamn it, let's have Los Angeles County represented here." Not necessarily that area artists have to be from L.A. County, but it has to reflect the kinds of things that the county should be exposed to, and that does not mean exclusively Western European artists or artists that are making only one kind of statement or that are only Anglo and male. I don't say that to put those artists down. They just need to be included with the rest, not exclusive of the rest.

MASON

Sort of one last thing I was wondering was how did those shows have an impact on Brockman Gallery and the—? I guess what I'm asking is you were saying that the museum was opening up, but you kept having to pressure them. But did it seem like the museum was finally going to open up? And did that have an effect on the black arts community in terms of seeing the possibility of finally being represented in these museums, finally being a, quote, "success, " unquote, finally being part of the mainstream or successful or whatever you want to call it instead of just kind of being in the background all the time? Was that a new possibility that people were thinking—?

DAVIS

Well, that was the hope. But institutions like that pull the safety valve, get the heat off their back, and then close back up. So without the pressure of the Black Arts Council and— Samella Lewis was active. She was employed by the museum to—

MASON

Yeah, the education—

DAVIS

The education program, but that was still token. It was like "Get somebody in here." And while that was okay, they didn't really give her the kind of run that she would need to develop an excellent program or a program that would address issues of the black arts community.

MASON

I think I can say my question more succinctly. The possibility of being involved in the museum, do you think that maybe created a new professionalism among black artists?

DAVIS

Oh, I think so. It created the fact that, one, they could exhibit in those kinds of institutions, that the possibility existed for other artists. But it didn't happen as much or as fast as a lot of them would have liked to have seen it happen.

MASON

Okay. Well, now that we've gone over that, I just wanted to go back to the history of the Brockman Gallery and maybe talk about your shows there and the changes in Brockman Gallery, like when Leonard Simon came in and those kind of things. I guess we could pause for a minute, [tape recorder off] Okay. I'm just going to go through some press releases, and whatever you want to say about the shows, how you responded to their work or how you chose it or whatever strikes you about the shows, just say it. Maybe we should try to get the title or something.

DAVIS

Yeah, you had asked me about Pasadena artists, and I wanted to address that. So this might be a little time to do it. There did seem to be a lot of black artists

who lived in the Pasadena community, Pasadena-Altadena. Not that there weren't a lot of artists in that area, period, but then there were those who were black as well. So it seemed like a little haven or a place that creative people were drawn to to live. John Outterbridge was one and probably one of the more successful and loyal artists that the Brockman Gallery was involved with. I consider John the poet, the prophet, philosopher, and the new dean of the black artists in Southern California. There was Curtis Tann, who was the then director of the Watts Towers [Arts Center], an enamelist. And then this exhibit that I'm looking at of three Pasadena artists: Cecil Burton, who came out of Long Beach, who did cast resin sculpture which was quite interesting. John Stinson, who was a relative of Curtis Tann. John did real fine, small paintings and drawings and some enamel work. And John Martin, who— I don't remember his work that well. I do believe that these were drawings that were included in this exhibition.

MASON

It was 1969.

DAVIS

And this was a 1969 exhibition. This was a series of works at Ankrum Gallery that were reflective of artists that exhibited at Brockman Gallery. As I said, Ankrum was a pivotal point and was open to— In a way, like the *Panorama*exhibit at the county art museum, we did some real large group exhibits in other places outside of the gallery. And Ankrum was a first-class space that was open to doing these kinds of exhibits. So this one was an exhibit of the artists that the gallery represented over a period of time. [tape recorder off] Okay. In this exhibit were. artists John Outterbridge, Kenneth Kemp, Doyle Lane, Bill [William] Pajaud, Timothy Washington, Dan [R.] Concholar, John Riddle, Ron Adams, Samella Lewis, George Clack, Melonee Blocker, Milton Young, Marion [A.] Epting, Ruth [G.] Waddy, David Hammons, Dale [B.] Davis, and Alonzo Davis." There's just a couple of things that I would like to say about this exhibit that are included in this sort of statement on the show: "The Brockman Gallery features black artists and is devoted to the impact of their art on the black community. The Ankrum Gallery is devoted to self-expression of the artist and his reflection of the human condition in our

society." That sort of gives you a feeling for that. The date on this exhibit I believe was 1969. Yeah.

MASON

Did you sell a lot of work?

DAVIS

Yeah, we did. Ankrum was real good about helping us sell work through their gallery. I actually bought pieces from them for my personal collection as well. John Riddle had his first one-man exhibition at Brockman Gallery in November, 1969. He did the *American Dream* series. What I liked about Riddle's work was that it was aesthetically real strong and very specific in terms of making a statement. His work was very statement oriented and very much concerned with his portrayal of the black condition. And to quote this writing on John, it says, "Mr. Riddle's work is extremely strong yet sensitive and deals with black America." John was born in Los Angeles and now lives in Atlanta, Georgia.

MASON

Did he also go to Otis [Art Institute]?

DAVIS

No, he went to California] State [University] Los Angeles, and, actually, I was one of his— He's older than I am, but our cycle in life was a little different. I was a master teacher for him when he was getting his teaching credential and doing student teaching at Los Angeles High School, L.A. High. I helped him break into the system, so to speak. I own several pieces of John's work, and my brother [Dale B. Davis] does too. The ones that I am most fond of are the large metal sculptures that he did. Dan Concholar exhibited with the gallery many times. It's interesting that we're doing this talk in San Antonio, Texas, and he was born in San Antonio in 1939. Then he grew up in Phoenix, and then he moved to Alhambra [California], and later on into L.A. proper. He's the artist that I mentioned earlier that I met in a park. I really liked his use of color and so forth.

MASON

He was really interested in African-oriented work.

DAVIS

Well, he did a lot of series. He was an artist who really worked in series. He did a yellow bus series that dealt with the busing issue. He did a broken heart series. He did an African series. And they were all quite intriguing. There's a quote here by William Wilson describing his work from the *Los Angeles Times*: "His torn, organic forms, with rectilinear organization, masses of earth color, dramatic line, flashes of high color saturation—" And that kind of quote is real interesting because it really sort of skirts some of the other issues that Dan was dealing with, which were ethnicity, cultural identification, and exploration. These will always be issues that we would face, and we generate a lot of information on these artists to the press. By and large, we just didn't get a lot of response, and there were all these criteria and so forth that galleries had to— That they would not review any group shows or that gallery hours had to be within such and such or

MASON

Really? I never heard—

DAVIS

Well, just they wanted to deal with institutions that had a standardized pattern of operation, which I guess may be convenient for them to review exhibitions during their work hours.

MASON

Yeah, like I said, maybe they only had— Well, the *L. A. Times* was like Henry Seldis and William Wilson, so maybe they just felt like they didn't have enough people. But Wilson did the Watts Summer Festival once, so I don't know. Well, was he invited? Did you invite them to the shows and they just didn't come or—?

DAVIS

They would come to one or two over a number of years. It wasn't within the area of interest they were reporting.

MASON

Yeah. So Wilson basically really didn't have an impact on what black artists were doing? I mean, did black artists kind of—? I mean, he always had something negative to say about black art. Did that affect people? Were they upset? Or did they just—?

DAVIS

Oh, yeah, people would be mad.

MASON

Or did they just ignore him, saying he didn't know what he was talking about?

DAVIS

No, they didn't ignore it. They took it personally. I don't know what to say about that. He was the only one. People were so dependent on him writing something about them, and then, if he didn't say something they liked, they gave him greater power and greater impact than I think was deserved. Somehow the myth of the critic making the artists was perpetuated. So many of the artists bought into what I would call the western European myth that if you get good reviews then you're going to be famous, wealthy, wise, and successful, and all doors to Rome will open. I probably bought into that to some degree as well. But I learned fast that that doesn't necessarily make or break an exhibition, especially one that was so singularly focused as the kinds of things that we were doing.

MASON

What about the black newspapers?

1.13. TAPE NUMBER: VIII, SIDE TWO APRIL 22, 1991

DAVIS

There were no black art critics and there were no black art historians or black artists who were writing criticism. So the *L. A. Times* was the only publication. And then a lot of the artists really wanted the *L.A. Times* because it reached the public at large and not a singularly focused audience. So it was kind of a catch-22 there. But I think there's fault there with the *[Los Angeles] Sentinel* not making an effort to catch the bandwagon and hear the cry of this particular segment of the black community. The kind of reporting that was

done on art was more in the line of the social page. But I think the *Wave* was more responsive, which was a weekly sort of an advertiser that had excellent coverage and had greater impact in the community. I think the gentleman's name was Chester Washington. Chester Washington was the owner and publisher of that paper for some time, and they tend to have a certain amount of sensitivity to the arts, openness to it.

MASON

The reason I was asking is because, like you said earlier, in some cases the critics do—at least in the so-called mainstream art community—make or break artists sometimes. And when you think of like Clement Greenberg's relationship to the New York school and Jackson Pollock and his impact, and there weren't any critics dedicated to reviewing black art, one wonders whether black artists saw that as a plus or a minus, because if they felt that they were going to be ignored anyway, then they could do whatever the hell they wanted to anyway. So just basically I was asking, looking back on it, I mean, was it really a big deal that—?

DAVIS

Well, even looking back on it, yeah, it was a big deal. I mean, it was a big deal for the artists and it was a big deal for the gallery to be published in the major, mainstream newspaper. There were a lot of people who read it. And it's more important that something was said than being totally ignored. So if that something was negative, that was great. At least we provoked something, stimulated a response. It's almost like saying there was an accident on highway 405; everybody wants to go look at the accident. So if William Wilson wrote something and it was negative, everybody wanted to see, "Well, why did he say it was negative?" So it would just fester. And if it was positive, then there would be other kinds of people who would come out, because they'd say, "Well, this must be something." So the art critic was critical, but it was not the end-all tool to marketing. Looking at another exhibit here in '69 of Marion Epting and Michael Rougier, Marion Epting is an instructor at Chico State, California State University at Chico. He was an interesting painter/printmaker, primarily a printmaker now. A tremendous amount of energy, a universal focus in his work, and a student of Charles White. A real eccentric guy, a real little guy who was a high school football quarterback, so, I mean, he had a lot

of spirit, and feisty. Michael Rougier was not a black artist. He was Canadian and a craftsman and did very interesting and creative inlaid wood works and later moved to Vancouver Island. What was interesting is that a lot of his things at this particular time reflected patterns, land patterns and land masses that you would see maybe in Amsterdam or in Japan. When questioned about it, he reflected on flying for the Royal Air Force over Japan and the sort of aerial, topographical kinds of images that you would see were reflected in his work. This one is an exhibit of works by David Hammons. He had won an award at the Municipal Art Gallery in downtown, Barnsdall Park area, Los Angeles. So the members of the Black Artists Association did a little announcement to say congratulations. This really is a comprehensive list of those artists who were in that association, and it's probably significant that I read it off: Melonee Blocker, Gloria Bohanon, George Clack, Dan Concholar, Alonzo Davis, Dale Davis, Marion Epting, Ernest Herbert, Kenneth Kemp, Doyle Lane, Samella Lewis, Mike McLinn, John Outterbridge, Bill Pajaud, John Riddle, Arenzo Smith Jr., Raphael Vendange, Ruth Waddy, Timothy Washington, Milton Young. All of these people weren't necessarily active all of the time, but they did make up a core of artists who were black who were interested in issues who were willing to come together and talk who didn't necessarily agree but agreed to disagree. And these were artists, too, that the gallery sort of said, "Okay, this becomes the core group or the umbrella group that is exhibited at this space." That's a great image of David Hammons's work. It's sort of a body print of a man wrapped in the American flag. At the [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art], just reflecting back on that, the work that David Hammons did was body prints, in some cases with painted images, symbols, and so forth. I think the one that County Museum purchased was a piece reflecting Bobby Seale being tied in a chair.

MASON

Yeah, *Injustice Case*.

DAVIS

Injustice Case, with a bandanna around his mouth where they wouldn't let him speak at the trial which had taken place in Chicago. It was a pretty powerful and impactful piece. And then Timothy's works were, at the time, on a metallic sheet where he would spray or paint a mat black paint and scratch

through, etch through, images in a dry-point process, and in some cases he would assemblage elements into the piece itself or onto the piece itself. They were also very strong pieces. Gloria Bohanon exhibited with us quite a bit, and her work tended to be towards the abstract and sort of spiritual in nature, very quietly lively. She explored a lot of things that related to feminine qualities. Let's see. Oh, yeah, Nathaniel Bustion. Sonny Bustion was an interesting artist to work with. He had been a professional athlete. He was born in Anniston, Alabama, which was my mother's hometown. We were in graduate school together at Otis Art Institute. He was one of those artists that, for me, was hard to deal with in that he had sort of a split personality. At one time he would be just this big, six-foot seven [inch], three-hundred- [pound] gentle giant, and then you turn around and you're dealing with a three-hundred-pound hostile bear kind of—

MASON

He was a big guy. I can imagine he was a threat.

DAVIS

He would maul you. He did good work, good work. He got a lot of energy and expression and his inner gut out in his work, and worked well in clay, worked well with paintings with pastel overlays that had a Francis Bacon quality. But my business relationship with Sonny was different from my personal relationship with him, because he would exhibit and then we might make a sale or we might get a deposit on a work, and then he would want to be paid right away, or he would have another opportunity at another place, and he would want to come and take the work out after we had gotten it all set up to run for a month. So we finally just said we wouldn't show his work anymore. It was one of those situations—and I talk about this in art school a lot—where sometimes the artist being his own representative is his own worst enemy and that sometimes artists' communication skills are just off. In dealing with all of his hostility and anger and demands, it was like, "Wait a minute. I'm in business, and I want to enjoy being in business. If I need all this hostility, I may as well go back into the classroom in a hard-core school and get that from those kids." So we just refused to exhibit his work at the gallery anymore, at least while I was at the helm. Some years later he called and said, "Well, what did I do? What's the deal?" I tried to tell him that his communication skills

clash with the objectives of his art and of us, and that we would be glad to exhibit and handle his work, but he needed a business representative to handle his communications and consignment and contractual relationships with us, because it just wasn't working. I don't know that he ever resolved that or if that ever made any sense to him, but it was an interesting situation. I usually try to talk about those things to artists, especially aspiring artists or artists who feel insecure about communication or who have all these pent-up energies that don't come out right when they're talking to somebody they really wanted to talk to and everything goes wrong. Van Slater is an artist who died within the last three years. He was a printmaker out of UCLA and taught at Compton College and had a large family and was just a real interesting, steady guy. He did good work, was always suspicious of galleries and the people who dealt in the business of art. So although we exhibited his work from time to time, we never really developed a strong exhibit relationship. We liked him, but he wasn't one of the artists that we were successful with. It was really unfortunate, because the work was good. I think we could have gone further with it than we did, but we couldn't get beyond our personal communication barriers. Another artist, named Arenzo Smith, exhibited with Van Slater in one of the exhibits we did. He did a lot of drawing and watercolor and had moved to California from Philadelphia. He was very active in the black art movement, and he was always there, present and vocal. He later moved to Hawaii and worked over there for quite a while. I haven't heard from him in the last ten years. He was also a person who was at an early, real early phase—unrelated to art—really into diet and health food and vegetarianism and so forth. Elizabeth Catlett had an exhibit in 1971 at Brockman Gallery, and it's probably one of the stronger exhibits that the gallery has had. It was prints and sculpture, very powerful work, wood and stone and one or two bronze pieces. She had done a piece called*Unity* that I have ended up collecting that was a fist with two faces on either side, and it represented student revolt during the Olympics in, I believe, '68 in Mexico City, and also the fist representing black power and John Carlos's statement and the three guys who ran the relay down there. There are some things here that we wrote about Elizabeth that I think are real interesting. She was an expatriate from the United States. She at one time was married to Charles White, and they had a very hostile separation. She married a Mexican artist, Francisco Mora, and they had three sons. Both of them are still living and

active today. He's a printmaker, and she's still doing sculpture and some printmaking. One of the successful pieces that we sold quite a bit of was a piece that she did called *Malcolm Speaks to Us*, which was related to Malcolm X and the impact that he had on the black community internationally.

MASON

She was nationally known by the way. She was the first nationally known, celebrated, famous artist that the gallery showed. I was wondering if this was like a turning point in the gallery's life or if it was just an opportunity that presented itself.

DAVIS

The opportunity to exhibit Elizabeth's work sort of came about from a trip I took to Mexico City in 1967 or '68. I'd seen her work, and we'd just started the gallery and initiated some communication, so it resulted from a relationship that was being nurtured and developed from when we first started as opposed to like all of a sudden in 1971 we exhibit her work. She had not been exhibiting in the United States and had basically lost her public in this country. So her exhibit really became an introduction to the United States from her exile. And then for her it just snowballed. Once the momentum got going from the Brockman exhibit, then there were some other exhibits, and other people were interested in her work, and probably four or five major exhibits happened as a result of this introduction into California and then back into this country. She was a feisty woman and very opinionated and very on top of it. I had a lot of respect for her. I tiptoed around her on some occasions just because I knew that she was going to catch me if I slipped up. So it was very important to sort of get it right in terms of dealing with her. She was also a longtime friend of Samella Lewis, and that relationship resulted in a book [*The Art of Elizabeth Catlett/Samella Lewis*] and some other lectures and exhibitions.

MASON

Right. Did she actually come to Los Angeles for the exhibition?

DAVIS

Yeah, she came. And we had to get bonded to get her work out of Mexico. The work was shipped up to Tijuana. She couldn't ship it out. I had to go get it. Then it was going to be real expensive to get it into the U. S., so I went to Tijuana to get it. There was a Japanese guy who owned the warehouse, and he didn't speak English. So I was going through the Mexican group next door to get them to translate to the Japanese guy about how to get this work out. Then I loaded it up in this little Volkswagen van I had and drove it to the border. Then the border guards wouldn't let me go with this work because they were declaring it a national treasure, although they didn't know of her. So then I had to get all of that stuff bonded. It was quite an interesting, complicated process. Fortunately, I was traveling with some checks and could do that. But it was a hell of an exhibit. And, again, it was one of those that should have been reviewed and published and been in major publications, but it didn't happen. We did sell a piece out of the show that we had to Bill Cosby. We sold a number of pieces, and that ends up how I happened to get that piece called *Unity*. Bill and his wife had bought a lot of works. We schlepped them out to the studio and set up a long hallway, and he would come through and say, "I like this one, I like that one."

MASON

How long had he been involved in the gallery?

DAVIS

Well, he wasn't involved in the gallery. But he—

MASON

I mean, coming to see the work.

DAVIS

He didn't come. His agent or his set designer would come and say, "Well, we would like to have some works that are representative of the black community or black artists, because Bill Cosby wants it, and we're sensitive to it." Cosby was also interested in acquiring some pieces himself. So you took the mountain to Muhammad. Anyway, we had sold quite a few pieces to Bill, including some of Varnette Honeywood's work. He really likes her work a lot. But for some reason this Catlett piece either bothered him or Camille [Cosby],

or they were concerned about it. After acquiring it and invoicing and so forth, they decided not to take that piece. And I had basically said to Elizabeth we had sold the piece. So here's the piece back, and I was stuck with it. I ended up subtracting some money from another financial operation, actually from the *Louis Armstrong* commission, deducting, my cut or my commission from that. So that's how I ended up being the official owner of the *Unity* piece. I feel real good to have it. It's a strong piece and a historically significant piece. Ray Holbert is a guy who exhibited with the gallery in '72 and an interesting person, a real interesting person that I just connected with. I went visiting David Bradford, who was an artist who had exhibited with the gallery off and on for a long time, and David had moved to Northern California and was teaching at UC [University of California] Berkeley. This guy Ray Holbert was one of his students, and Ray was just always in the studio. So I actually was going to visit David and I would always be impacted by Ray. Ray did real meticulous drawings and Prismacolor pencil and Xerox combinations and etchings and paintings that would be like the side of a head and what's going on inside the head instead of an exterior portrait. I was really fascinated with him. We became good friends, and I'm still in communication with him today. One of the interesting things about Ray was that he was a book artist, so he kept a real detailed journal of every day in his life. He would do it as a journal and as a work of art. So now he's kept these journals— He must have fifteen, twenty journals representing twenty years of his life. We had an exhibit of his journals and of his prints. We were never financially successful with his work, but his work always made a very strong statement and drew an interesting crowd and an unusual group of people. He's an artist that still deserves to be recognized, and I'm real interested in his growth. He's interested in computers and drawing a lot of computer-generated stuff now, and he's a teacher at San Francisco City College. [reading] Art has always been difficult for me to verbally describe, but it does involve the six senses we all have, including what we have managed to learn verbally and academically from several sources. Otherwise, art is as everything else is. I don't always paint or print in an obvious black imagery because some of my work does not involve any faces or figures that directly relate to black people only. I have no limit of who I want to reach. Everyone seems to count. I'm fascinated by fantasy. It runs a little ahead of reality before it becomes reality. I like to pursue my fantasies when I paint and/or print. There are exciting things happening in our heads, and

fantasy and make-believe dreams stimulate me into creating new images like nuclear scales and vitamins, battery-powered electrical storms, or molecules and atom factories.

MASON

And that's his theme?

DAVIS

Yes. And this was that Elizabeth Catlett brochure. Wow, what a surprise this is. Is this your writing or is this mine?

MASON

No, that's mine.

DAVIS

Yeah. We did have a collection of work or a body of work that Brockman Gallery— We call it the *Brockman Gallery Collection*. It's really the art that my mother, Agnes [Moses] Davis, my aunt, Louise Moses, my brother, Dale Brockman Davis, and myself would purchase to support the artists and to support our interest in what we thought were good or successful pieces. In 1975, we had an exhibit [*Brockman Gallery Collection*] at California State University at Los Angeles of that body of work which represented probably fifteen or twenty different artists. This is an exhibit in 1977, *Third World Women*. What's interesting about this exhibit is that it's really reflective of the sort of multiethnic interests that Brockman had. Even though its focus was on the black American experience and black American artists, we were always integrating or interjecting works by other artists who had certain kinds of ethnic sensitivity to their work. And this one I've just looked at, Isabel Castro, Irena Sabantas, Terri Hamada, Donna Nako, etc., who were Asian, Hispanic, as well as black artists like Varnette Honeywood, Kinshasha Conwill, and Melonee Blocker.

MASON

Why did you want to group the women together? Were women, overall, making different kinds of statements than men were? I know it's a difficult question.

DAVIS

Women's issues were very much alive, and the issue of artists of color was a significant area to explore. So, in this case, it was a group exhibit to get at what was happening among, in this case, fifteen different artists. I would say that the Elizabeth Catlett exhibit was, in a sense, the same kind of statement: a black woman of African American heritage living in Mexico and influenced by their culture, very much influenced by their culture as well. But these were women living and working in L.A. I guess we focused on this exhibit and came up with these people or these people referred other people to participate. Bill Pajaud— I probably talked about him a little bit before. It's kind of like Sonny Bustion in a way; we ran hot and cold with Bill. We really liked his work, but he was subject to some moods that made it hard to have a consistent, ongoing relationship with him. He had some real high expectations, some of which we couldn't always meet.

MASON

In terms of—?

DAVIS

In terms of the business end of sales and so forth. And while we did do well with his work, it ran hot and cold. So he later went with Heritage Gallery, which was Charlie White's gallery, and that went about the same way, which was real interesting. I didn't get that from him, but I did get that kind of information and knowledge from Ben [Benjamin] Horowitz, who was the owner and director of Heritage Gallery. And I think Bill always felt that he wasn't acknowledged or he didn't achieve to the level of some of his peers or people in his age range or group. He would see people get local and national success.

MASON

Other people from L.A., you mean? Because I can't really— I mean, other than Charles White—

DAVIS

Well, he and Charlie were buddies.

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

They were partners. But Charlie just went boom.

MASON

Yeah. But he had already had—

DAVIS

But Bill was and is a significant artist and did work, I think, of real high quality and merit. His watercolors are excellent. And he did things that dealt with the black experience—I mean, with other experiences as well. But the things with the—

MASON

The *New Orleans Jazz* series.

DAVIS

Yeah, the New Orleans jazz, the church, Eureka Jazz Band Parade are just really really very, very special. But Bill wasn't one who got picked up, and his work never sort of— His success never caught on fire, so to speak.

MASON

I guess what I was saying was Charles White had been shown in New York, and I wonder if that was one big advantage that Charles White might have had over—

DAVIS

Hard to say. Good work is good work. And then David Hammons and Timothy Washington jump out there, and here's the two Young Turks, and they're getting it. Even I experienced some of my own personal, professional jealousy with the success of David and Timothy, and I had to come to grips with that, as well. But that was not my period to be recognized. I was in another role and sort of— I have come into my own much later. Fifteen, twenty years later I've gotten my notoriety act together in terms of being published and being included and being recognized, so to speak. But, nevertheless,. Bill had excellent work, great mastery of the watercolor medium. He was instrumental

with the Golden State Mutual [Life Insurance Company] collection, and that was a real major kind of undertaking. He has now moved to Las Vegas with. his family, and he's living in that—

MASON

Oh, he must have just moved there.

DAVIS

Yeah, just recently.

MASON

Yeah, because he was talking about going.

DAVIS

John Outterbridge, this was an exhibit announcement from 1982 [*Ethnic Heritage*]. John has sort of been with us at the gallery since its inception. He did metal assemblage, metal and wood and leather assemblage pieces. Then he did this exhibit here with a series called the *Ethnic Heritage Group*, which were sort of doll-like images that were reflective of high tech, new world, yet very African, African American images and throwbacks, kind of dealing in both contexts of new- and old-world images. Very, very, very thought provoking and challenging. And John's statement here: If the *Ethnic Heritage Group* is about anything, it's my attempt to lend a note about the journey of a people through the ages I work out of a spiritual force. The significance of this body of work is that it is very much in progress. There are so many untold tales about us. So many of these pieces aren't titled. The people provide the titles: children, writers, winos. The works utilize a variety of materials: fiber, metal, fabric, hair from a barbershop floor and from friends. It's kind of spontaneous. I like to speak a little beyond the understanding of humanity. And that says it. In our gallery note we say, "Brockman Gallery offers this rare opportunity to preview an outstanding new group of collector items by this important, powerful, and dramatic artist." And it's very much there. John is still very much alive and active in the community. John now, interestingly enough, is the ongoing director of the Watts Towers and the Watts Towers Arts Center, which includes the towers, and he's given it a tremendous amount of vision

and growth. He's still active. He will be exhibiting at San Antonio Art Institute. His exhibit is scheduled for October of 1991.

MASON

A one-man show?

DAVIS

A one-man show, yeah. And he's beginning to do some public art pieces, too, and has recently gotten a commission.

1.14. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE ONE APRIL 22, 1991

DAVIS

Okay. So we're continuing the talk about artists' exhibits at Brockman Gallery. There was a woman that we showed a lot named Enrica Marshall. Enrica was originally from Tanzania and of mixed-blood heritage—British and African. We met her through a referral of another person who used to work at the gallery, I think Pat Johnson. We heard about her work off and on for a while and finally got a chance to meet her. She did mostly works that were serigraphs that dealt with scenes and imagery that were reflective of Africa. And she still lives and works in Southern California. Then we would also do exhibitions for Black History Months. We got that annual call that some of the artists sort of resented, but it did become a time of year that the community at large was open and interested in the works that were being produced by black American artists. Other artists that we exhibited were Paul Goodnight. Paul lived in Boston. We exhibited a group of works from his Haitian series. We had traveled in Haiti around the same time as a part of a conference. I think it was late seventies, '76, '77, somewhere in there, as I remember. I would constantly run into him or his work when I would travel in the East. I was very impressed with the technical quality of his work and his portrayal of African and African American imagery through his paintings and drawings. Varnette Honeywood was another artist that we had a fairly long-term business relationship with. We own some of her work in our collection. Her people are from Mississippi. I'm not sure if she was born in Mississippi or Los Angeles. I know that she went to Los Angeles High School and then went to college at Spelman [College] in Atlanta. She does real interesting work that is collage and painting and deals

with the black genre, scenes that would be peculiar to our cultural group that may have carryovers into other groups, as well, but they're certainly peculiar to some of the black American experience. Such as *Dixie Peach*, where a woman is having her hair pressed and straightened and using this Dixie Peach grooming oil. That was certainly a real popular piece that she did.

MASON

Had she always been doing those kinds of collages?

DAVIS

All the work that I've known of hers has been oriented that way in terms of style and imagery. And she's gained national attention with her work and prints. It all tends to be statement oriented and pretty positive in its approach. Bernard Hoyes is an artist who was born in Jamaica, lived in Los Angeles, and I think was related to John Riddle in some way. He always tried to capture that little bit of both cultures, the Jamaican experience and the African American experience and some throw-ins of the sort of reggae-Ethiopian philosophy and spiritualism. LaMonte [F.] Westmoreland is an artist who is from Wisconsin, came to Los Angeles, and spent quite a bit of time teaching at Santa Monica High School. He really became a student of the black art movement, has done a lot of documentation, research, and collecting of black artists, as well as being an artist himself. His works are pointedly sort of tongue-in-cheek.

MASON

Yeah, he did like a Cream of Wheat series and—

DAVIS

Right, a watermelon series, Cream of Wheat series, Aunt Jemima series, a lot of collage and painting in his work, and a lot of point-counterpoint using imagery that might otherwise be contradictory. In many cases, his statements are sort of humorous. Another series he did was his target series. I liked his work a lot. Something that I'm real sensitive to that I wasn't able to address in a proper way with LaMonte—and I still have flashbacks on it— was that one of the exhibits that we did with him, we had a break-in in the gallery at a time when we didn't have insurance, and some of his work was stolen. So we were never really able to settle with him in a financial way, and we were only able

to get him to assume the loss, so to speak. To this day I regret not having found a way to compensate him for it. The work was never found by the police or whatever. We did a reporting and so forth. This broke down the significance of our relationship, and so then he really shifted over to exhibiting with some other galleries.

MASON

They stole everything or selected pieces?

DAVIS

Selected pieces, two or three pieces, but—

MASON

That's really strange.

DAVIS

I don't know. Well, we were both handled by Lizardi-Harp [Gallery] for a while—I don't know if he's still with him—and he was exhibiting with Tanner Gallery also. The Tanner Gallery was owned by Joyce Thigpen, and she bought it from Samella [S.] Lewis, which was called the Gallery for a while. Before that, I think Samella called it—

MASON

Contemporary Crafts.

DAVIS

Contemporary Crafts. So that had a sort of interesting history and change. I'm not sure how active the Tanner Gallery is now. I know Joyce ran the cycle that we all do where, while she was doing okay, it wasn't really turning the kind of profit margin she needed to see for it to be a sole entity. Marie [E.] Johnson, San Francisco-area artist, born and reared in Baltimore, Maryland, daughter of a minister, and the church is in her work. She was also militant or responsive to the militant issues of the period. She did assemblages that reflected black culture and everyday life¬style. She's done some installations that reflect the black church and that experience. She's also an active organizer in the San Francisco Bay Area and has been instrumental in stimulating and perpetuating the communication between young aspiring and established artists in that

community and also continuing to keep the community exhibit link together. She has a daughter, April—I think it's April Johnson or— Yeah. I don't know if she's changed her name now. She is a weaver and assemblage artist. In 1981, we did a joint exhibit [*Prints by Jacob Lawrence*] with a woman named Pat Johnson, who used to work at Brockman Gallery. She got her first job in the arts with Brockman. And she opened a gallery with another woman in San Diego called New Visions. Collectively, we purchased a number of works on paper by Jacob Lawrence and had an exhibit and brought Jacob down from Seattle and had him give a talk and visit and do a little presentation to some young people. It was just really a very special exhibit and presentation. We had the *John Brown* series and the *Builder* series, which were historically and— The *John Brown* series was historically important to black people, and the *Builder* series was certainly important to the strong work ethic of certain groups of people in the United States and to unions and then to carpentry and masonry and so forth. And not a lot of artists have taken that working-class group of people and made art from people who walk on scaffolding or who hammer nails and do construction.

MASON

But do you think they feel like the art community would kind of ignore them because they'll say, "Well, that's just social realism, that was already done in the 1930s"?

DAVIS

Well, Jacob Lawrence was a part of 1930. He was out of the Harlem Renaissance period and the WPA [Works Progress Administration] period. And out of the WPA, he was probably one of the younger artists involved, and he was also successful at a very young age. Jake is a very significant artist today, and I feel that he is continuing to be recognized by major institutions.

MASON

Yeah. You said he gave a presentation. When artists like Elizabeth Catlett and Jacob Lawrence come, do they give more technical things? Did they show how they work? Or was it more of just a historical presentation?

DAVIS

A more historical—

MASON

I guess a workshop or a—

DAVIS

More a historical overview of how they became artists, what some of the major influences in their lives were, the kinds of things that they were attracted to. We really didn't do workshops that dealt with technique or process. Very seldom. I'm sort of reaching for any that we may have done, and I really can't think of any right now. Also in 1981, we had an exhibit of works with Charles Dickson. Charles is from South Central Los Angeles, went to Fremont High School, and lives in an industrial space in Compton. In a way, Charles has been oriented towards being a street artist in that his goal of exhibiting and putting his work before the public was probably solely initiated by him, and he controlled the activity, so to speak. He was not dependent on a gallery structure to exhibit his work, so we never really developed an ongoing relationship. I think he always felt, wanted to be, and probably still is independent of galleries for his creative exposure. But we did do some exhibitions with him. We were successful with selling his work a few times. And his work is real good, real good.

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

We did do a number of autograph parties at the gallery. The gallery became a focus for a lot of activities that were not necessarily visual-art oriented exclusively. There was the Black Librarians Caucus, which would use the gallery for autograph parties, and sometimes we would have receptions there and opportunities to meet people who might be in town who were dignitaries or whatever. We did an autograph party for Roy Decarava, a photographer from New York who did a documentation of black imagery. As I think about it, we also had—

MASON

Gordon Parks?

DAVIS

We had some works— Well, we had a book of Gordon Parks. We had a book on Romare Bearden that Abrams published. We had a book on Charlie [Charles] White that we were able to make available for a short period of time.

MASON

I thought you were trying to think of other photography exhibits.

DAVIS

No. So there were a series of those kinds of activities that took place as an undercurrent to the ongoing exhibition program, and that was kind of interesting. We didn't talk much about Doyle Lane, but Doyle Lane was an artist that we exhibited a lot. He was a potter or ceramist. He lives in the Highland Park area of Los Angeles. He's originally from Louisiana, a very quiet, almost withdrawn guy, but when you see his work, it's just extremely dynamic and very, very delicate and very sensitive and very well crafted. He was a master at glazing and glaze formulas, especially in the low-firing techniques. I just wanted to make sure that we included Doyle in this. There was another woman whom we met through Doyle who was a Russian immigrant named Anna Martin, and she was also an excellent craftsperson who was a jewelry maker. We've continued to have and exhibit her work-annually at the gallery. She lived in Los Angeles for a long time and then moved to Northern California, now resides in Santa Cruz. Okay. In 1984, we did an exhibit of works by Varnette Honeywood related to the Olympics, and that was a real interesting body of work, collages and watercolor combination. In '86, we did an interesting— This is a sort of an exhibition schedule. We did an exhibition of some artists who had done a lot of murals, and it included Richard Wyatt, Kent Twitchell, John Valadez, David Bradford, and Charles White. In May of that year, we did a print exhibition [*Romare Bearden*] and some original on-paper pieces by Romare Bearden. We basically borrowed that collection of work from a private collector in New York. We were real successful with the prints and weren't able to sell the originals; they were quite expensive. We also had handled and represented some artists from outside of the country or outside of what I would call the forty-eight states. We had the works of Martin Chariot, who is an artist of Mexican and French heritage who lives in Hawaii.

His things range from murals to oil paintings and are reflective of Hawaiian culture. He's the son of another famous artist and painter in Mexico. I'm trying to remember his dad's name. Jean Chariot. Something like that. And then we had an artist from Brazil, whose works we exhibited quite a bit, named Terciano. He was from Salvador de Bahia, and watercolor and oil painting of the African cultural influence in that part of Brazil. I think that exhibit was in 1989, so you can—It's gone quite a bit. My last exhibit [*Recent Works*] at Brockman Gallery was in 1990, and it was reflective of a *Blanket* series that I've been working on since 1980. So it represented pieces from ten years of work. [tape recorder off] In the effort to do a lot of outreach and move the work out of the community and into the greater community of Los Angeles and Southern California, Brockman Gallery did a lot of satellite exhibits. Some of them were in community centers like the Westside Jewish Community Center. Some of them were in other galleries. I think I mentioned Ankrum Gallery. We did exhibits in Santa Barbara or just south of Santa Barbara. It's Montecito. Just south of Santa Barbara in Montecito there's a gallery, Galleria del Sol, and there was a guy there who did outreach for that gallery. His name is MacDuff Everton. MacDuff had come to do some documentation for a slide company on black artists in Los Angeles and saw the work and made the connection with us and this gallery in Santa Barbara. We did a number of exchange kinds of exhibition activities with him. He's sort of been someone who has constantly stayed in touch with us through the years. He's an Anglo artist, photographer, who does photographic documentation that's primarily focused on western life-style, western cowboy life-style, in a way, and Mexican culture. He's exhibited at UC [University of California] Santa Barbara. [tape recorder off] Let's see. Where were we?

MASON

You were talking about—

DAVIS

Oh, yeah. And he's been published in *National Geographic* and has constantly been a link for us to things that were happening in other communities that we might want to be aware of or participate in. This is an announcement of an exhibit we did with a furniture company called San Fernando Furniture. It was in Los Angeles, another segment of Los Angeles. And it was, again, an

opportunity to do outreach and attract people from other communities. As I remember, one of the people that came to this was the then state senator Alan [G.] Sieroty, who was very instrumental in arts legislation. Alan became someone who would frequent Brockman Gallery as a result of the kinds of things that we were doing. I would visit him in Sacramento to discuss issues related to black artists and to artists in general. He has been a collector of art from Brockman as well as other galleries. I've had ongoing conversations with him in terms of artists' rights and artist issues. I still talk with him today from time to time. He is no longer a senator or no longer in the senate. You were going to say? MASON; You said he was involved in arts legislation. You mean in terms of like getting the California Afro-American Museum started?

DAVIS

Well, certainly that was something that he would support and have to vote on. But he was instrumental in issues that dealt with artist, rights. He was instrumental with the California State Summer School for the Arts, the California Confederation of the Arts, the royalties percent act, Arts in Prisons, the California Arts Council. All of those have been areas that he's fought for and championed. He was like open to everybody. He wasn't someone who ignored the plea of the black artist, nor was he someone. who dealt exclusively with the black artist. I'm trying to think of— There was something recently— Oh, yeah. Then we had a big fund-raiser, "Art Against Apartheid, " and he bought works from that auction. Several of those pieces he donated to the city of Los Angeles. So he's been instrumental in not only buying but placing art in collections of museums and municipal institutions that sometimes don't see what's going on in alternative kinds of communities and settings. Robert Gore is an artist who exhibited with Brockman off and on for a while too. He's an Anglo artist who is from Missouri. I worked with him at Manual Arts High School. He traveled to Spain and did some tremendous pieces while he was living there, and we had exhibited his work off and on. Another artist who was an Anglo artist, who was called the "father of serigraphy, " is from the New York area, a gentleman by the name of Guy MacCoy. He was a master silkscreen artist, and he had one or two exhibitions at Brockman Gallery as well. Another woman, Elaine Towns, exhibited with Brockman, who was an artist who grew up in Los Angeles in a predominantly black community and did her undergraduate work at UCLA and then was

awarded a Fulbright [scholarship] and went to Spain and lived in Europe for a long time. Upon returning to Los Angeles, she began to make herself known through exhibitions, which included shows at Brockman Gallery. There was another artist that we had sort of a long¬time working relationship with, and that was Stan [Stanley] Wilson. Stan was an artist who grew up in Pasadena—in Los Angeles and Pasadena, actually—and we met at the Otis Art Institute. Stan did work that was of clay and fiber actu¬ally. He did some weaving, fiber pieces, that all had real strong African ancestral statements in it. Stan went to FESTAC [World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture]-Nigeria, and upon returning from that did even more African-oriented or African-influenced works that became installation pieces and little temples and real special statements. He also did some real interesting drawings, a combination of those two things. We felt real good about the kind of work we were able to exhibit of Stan's, and we had real interesting collectors interested in his work. Here's a quote by Stan: "My inspiration comes from my day-to-day existence." [A critic wrote:] "What has evolved in Stan's work is a compelling interpretation of the black American experience informed by the potent cultural presence, the ancestral fragments, of the African forebearers." This is just extremely visible and powerful in Stan's work. He was one of those artists who had a lot of energy and was really eager and willing to participate in a lot of the kinds of things that Brockman Gallery was projecting, and he was pretty loyal to his working efforts with us. We had a lot of respect for him and his work.

MASON

I don't know if we want to—?

DAVIS

Yeah, we've got another question.

MASON

Okay. Well, I was just going to ask if you had anything to say sort of. overall about the exhibitions or the things that you were trying to do in the exhibitions.

DAVIS

Well, there are a lot of different kinds of exhibits, and, being in business, we had to take into consideration that we needed cycles of work that was marketable or that we could attract clients or collectors to. We also liked to exhibit work that was challenging that might not be financially rewarding for us. So there was always a concern for balance and a desire to have successful exhibits. Sometimes the public really wanted the "nice exhibits, " quote, unquote, and we couldn't always provide that. We wanted challenging kinds of things instead of things that might be a little more traditional or— I don't want to say— Well, let's just say what I wanted to say. Challenging would be things that would not necessarily be immediately embraced. It might be real provocative. It might not be nice. It might not be pretty or reflective of the positive side of our culture.

MASON

Outside of Noah Purifoy, the exhibition that you mentioned [*Niggers Ain't Never Ever Gonna Be Nothin'—All They Want To Do Is Drink + Fuck*], is there any other exhibition like that that you can think of? Because when you were going through that I didn't really—

DAVIS

Well, David Hammons's work was real challenging. He did a penis series that a lot of people didn't understand. The artist whom I mentioned from Pasadena who did the cast resin works [Cecil Burton] was real esoteric in a sense and nonblack oriented in terms of its visual context. It was done by a black man who was an artist, but the public had a hard time embracing that work. Stan's work was real hard for a lot of people because it was so African, in a way, and so demanding, and not necessarily something that— I would get comments like, "Well, we really like it, but it's not something I would want to put in my house." It just provoked too much voodoo, if you will, that kind of—

MASON

Well, on the other hand, Betye Saar's work is extremely popular, and hers is—

DAVIS

And we didn't really handle Betye Saar's work. Yeah. I think we had one or two exhibitions that were group shows that she had work in. That would just be a

response we would get from some people. Now, that's not to say that with Stan's work we didn't have some success. There were some other people who— Maren Hassinger exhibited with us just once or twice. She did cable art, and we weren't able to generate collectors to respond to her work.

MASON

Yeah, but she had had a show—maybe that was later— at the L.A. [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art], though.

DAVIS

That was later.

MASON

That was later?

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

So do you consider yourself one of the earlier venues for her, then?

DAVIS

No, not really. I mean, we didn't really work with her. I mean, she just. happened to show with us more than she was someone who was one of the artists who was part of the main group. There were a lot of artists who would just come through Brockman, so to speak, and I would say she was one of them.

MASON

The main group being?

DAVIS

A lot of those people that—

MASON

Oh, the Black Artists Association?

DAVIS

Or the people whom I mentioned, whom I read from those press releases.

MASON

Okay. So, overall, would you say—? I'm not going to ask is there a black aesthetic. I don't know. That's a strange question. But would you say that there was a kind of black mainstream artist? Or was it that everybody's work was just so diverse or so individual that you wouldn't even—?

DAVIS

Well, I'm going to address the black aesthetic question and say that like any group of artists that comes together or anybody of people that have collective thought or who have a common denominator that they work toward, it's valid to call it impressionism or cubism or the black aesthetic or the black art movement of a certain period, just like the Chicano art that came out during the seventies and early eighties. I mean, it has a certain character that is peculiar to a culture or a message or a statement or—

1.15. TAPE NUMBER: IX, SIDE TWO APRIL 22, 1991

DAVIS

I think there's a black aesthetic that is peculiar to the kinds of statements that a lot of black artists are compelled to make and portray. There's a guy out of Boston who does— Dana Chandler is a big proponent of that kind of thing, and he exhibited at Brockman Gallery and did a body of work that was just directly hostile toward the white establishment and the white aesthetic and purported to espouse a black aesthetic. And a number of artists have worked and focused in this kind of a direction. And just as any image is valid to paint—Texas landscapes or Norwegian still lifes or New York skyscrapers—the imagery that black artists choose to paint is valid also. Because it's done by a black guy doesn't necessarily make it good, nor does it make it valid or good if it's done by a white artist. It's the quality of the work, and the subject is the choosing of the artist. The artists have that right. If it's that which they choose to express and they are participants in this culture, then they deserve and should be recognized as a part of what goes on in the United States of America and cannot and should not be ignored. On the other hand, it's not valid to

pigeonhole all black artists into the, quote, "black aesthetic, " unquote, in that there are many artists who acknowledge their ethnic heritage but choose to paint outside of that experience or in addition to that experience or include that experience in the big picture of all of what they do. So some of those artists I would say would be Richard Hunt and Martin Puryear and Sam Gilliam [Jr.]. And I tend to think in that direction at this time.

MASON

So what you're saying is there isn't a black aesthetic.

DAVIS

No, I'm saying there is a black aesthetic among a certain group of black American artists, and that it is valid.

MASON

Okay. So that's mostly social protest and—

DAVIS

Well, it's more art that deals with and is concerned about black imagery, black issues. I wouldn't say it's limited to social protest. It's bigger than social protest. It encompasses sort of the spectrum of the black experience, which is church, which is dance, music, and so forth. I would say that Varnette Honeywood's work is within the context of the black experience and so is Faith Ringgold's work. So you've got two real divergent kind of energies still dealing with the same thing. Charles White and Romare Bearden. None of these artists are afraid to call themselves black, and being black is not— the issue with them as much as being allowed to make the kind of statement they want to make and be recognized for it and it being considered valid within the context of the culture and place and experiences that they have and live.

1.16. TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE ONE APRIL 22, 1991

MASON

We're going to talk about your going back to graduate school. A couple of days ago you mentioned that you wanted to get back into a community of artists, and you got into the fourth-year B. F. A. [bachelor of fine arts] program at Otis [Art Institute] as a preliminary to going into the M. F. A. [master of fine arts]

program. So if you could just talk about that and why you chose Otis and what you learned there.

DAVIS

I guess at that time, 1970, I had become frustrated to some degree with my own productivity and felt the need to take classes by going to school and being among artists and also wanting to acquire an M. F. A. degree in order to increase my mobility within the education community, thus allowing me to qualify for jobs that a B. F. A. would not. I chose Otis because it was an art school but also because Charles White was there, who was the noted black American artist. And there were a number of other black students there that I was aware of, so that common ground, that common bond, was an attraction, especially when I went on the campus and talked to a few. [Charles] Ron Griffin was an artist there, a student there at the time. Marion [A.] Epting was finishing, and Stan [Stanley] Wilson was a year ahead of me at Otis. And then the other artist I had mentioned, Nathaniel Bustion, and then sometime, I guess a year or so later, Gloria Bohanon entered. So there seemed to be a movement of a small but significant number of us who wanted greater social mobility, and we saw this as a vehicle. I think a lot of us were attracted to the school because it was accessible within downtown Los Angeles, because Charles White was a famous black American artist that we all admired, and because there were other students of color there. So, really, that's sort of how I entered. I took drawing with Charles White and enjoyed his ability to preach and teach. He was quite an orator and tended to reach into the black church to communicate when he got wound up, talking about figure drawing or art or life and what it meant and took to be an artist. So he was inspiring and intimidating because he was certainly a master at his craft. But he had a tremendous amount of spiritual power that he was able to cross a lot of borders with.

MASON

What did he teach you about drawing?

DAVIS

Well, I can't say he really taught me a lot about the technical aspects of drawing per se. Most of the instruction there was leading by example and

giving direction. It wasn't a school that pushed the development of technique or explored a lot of techniques. It basically took what you had, what you brought— What you brought to the table is what you had to work with, and that's what they would either criticize or evaluate and make suggestions on. My drawings were not my strongest suit, yet I did struggle through that class. It was primarily figure drawing. Again,. I think I learned more from Charlie about life and about being an artist than I did about doing drawing per se. If anything, drawing was his platform or his pulpit, so he preached from his pulpit. He had you in a drawing class, but drawing was not the sermon.

MASON

What was he concerned with? What things did he preach about?

DAVIS

Well, what it took to be successful, the kind of effort and commitment you had to make to your art and your profession, your career, the kinds of life hurdles that one has to face, and the options and directions that were open to you and also the doors that would possibly be closed to you, especially as a black artist. So that's not necessarily the kind of thing he would relate to you in class. He might talk about his own personal experience and some of the things that did not happen that perhaps should have happened for an artist of his talent, some opportunities that he didn't get, but also about his personal perseverance and fortitude. Here's a little guy who had a lot of obstacles, born in Mississippi, raised by his mother in Chicago with very little, was in the war, had one lung that he lived on, and he was a heavy smoker and drinker. I guess another word for Charlie was that he was feisty and that he thought big. I mean, he had great vision, and he was a universalist in his work. Although his portrayal was of black imagery, the spirituality of his images was universal.

MASON

Did he teach you anything about murals? Did he talk about that?

DAVIS

No, no.

MASON

He started some political group in the fifties for black artists. I think it was in response to the House Un-American Activities Committee and that problem with Paul Robeson and the communists and stuff like that. That seemed to have been a part of his earlier life—involvement in political activities. Was that still true then?

DAVIS

No, I wasn't aware of him being actively politically involved. He was certainly verbal and vocal about things that he felt strongly about. What they were specifically, I can't really recall. But he had this sort of great ability to pull people together, to get people to come around him, and to be a catalyst for energy, for art. I mean, he made people draw, and he made them work hard at it, and he pushed his students as far as he could get them to be willing to go.

MASON

And you said that you had had a conflict with him about something.

DAVIS

Oh, in my second year at Otis, when I entered the M. F. A. program, I guess I was maybe too serious about my goals and what I had to get out of it and so forth. So Charlie would come up and shoot the breeze and sort of kid around with me and the other black students who were in that studio. I tried to relay to him that I didn't want to joke around. I didn't want to play. I didn't want to shoot the breeze or play the dozens related to art. And I think part of it had to do with just being extremely serious and, in a way, probably a little uptight. It was a—

MASON

You mean he would criticize your—?

DAVIS

I was just— It was more like— It wasn't necessarily— It wasn't academic criticism. It was more like— I really didn't want to work with an adviser in that kind of a loose capacity. While I had a tremendous amount of respect for him as an artist and as a man, my attitude in the studio was real serious. There was a time when I was going into debt in order to stay in school, and my little

financial fiefdom had fallen down because of my car, and I was changing my personal marital status, and business was tough at that time. So I guess we had to separate our agendas, because our communication patterns were real different. Although I did then and do now respect him, I asked to have him withdrawn as an adviser, because I didn't feel like it would be mutually beneficial for me and it would have been an unhealthy situation for the two of us to constantly be at each other's throats. I think he was a little hurt by that, also, because he had stuck up for me in some situations. But it was just a decision I had to make. And I continued to communicate with him and relate to him in a less formal way.

MASON

So what role did he have in your final thesis?

DAVIS

None. Not in a direct way. My studio work was primarily under the advice and criticism of a guy named Wayne Long and Manuel Fuentes. They were the ones who were assigned to oversee my activities.

MASON

So do you want to talk about your thesis project?

DAVIS

Well, it's kind of interesting to resee this, and I really appreciate that you pulled it out of the files, because it sort of helps me reunderstand who I was and my interests and my areas of growth at that time.

MASON

I was wondering what you meant by the first statement.

DAVIS

My graduate adviser, Wayne Long, was a white instructor, and what I said about him was that he allowed freedom to grow and develop in the chosen black direction in that he didn't put it down, he wasn't critical of it, he really supported whichever way I wanted to go, and just really gave me advice on trying to make it work aesthetically and within the context of who I was as an artist. And I appreciated that freedom. It was a predominantly all-white school

other than one or two other instructors of color, and I had real strong ties to the black art movement and wanted to continue to pursue art that was at least intellectually connected to it, if not spiritually, and in some cases imagewise as well.

MASON

Yeah, I was just wondering if being an art student at that time when there was so much attention being paid to American art—you know, pop art and op art and abstract expressionism—I was just wondering if you felt that there was a push by instructors at times to be like Jackson Pollock or to be like Andy Warhol.

DAVIS

There were some instructors who had strong leanings in certain directions. In the M. F. A. program we were basically given advisers to work with. So my advisers were selected based on those who were going to impose an ideology or school of art on me. There was one guy whom I was real fascinated with, but he was way out in a whole other place, and we could never really come together in terms of our thinking. His statements were real esoteric and psychedelic. As much as I was attracted to this guy's knowledge and being really hip— He told me that he didn't want to be my adviser because where I was coming from just didn't match and it would have been a bad mix. So I felt like this adviser system worked pretty well for me. I had a lot of freedom, and I worked real hard. I spent that two years working on the *Symbol* series and using the symbols as sort of— Well, to go back on that, I started exploring ancient and contemporary symbols and using a lot of Egyptian symbols in my work and a lot of contemporary symbols. I was just full of symbols and overwhelmed by them. And then it started narrowing itself down to, I think, arrows and stop signs. The arrow became a real important symbol because it transcended ancient and contemporary times. It showed itself in caves, and it shows itself in everyday life. Beyond the physical importance of the arrow, it also became a philosophical symbol in that it represents direction. We're all faced with taking and making decisions based on directions that we want to follow in our lives. And it represents, in a sense, a fork in the road. So it represents decision making, deciding which way to go. Then I also used it to indicate positive and negative, up being positive, down being negative. A lot of

the arrows in my work are up and to the left, which is indicative of a political attitude as well.

MASON

You said you'd been looking at Egyptian symbols. Why Egyptian?

DAVIS

The Egyptians used symbols as a language probably more than anyone, and I was fascinated with the kinds of stories and images that they would tell by using pictures and symbols in their communications. I thought this was. interesting here in this little foreword: "I see myself as a message bearer. The projection is of and for the future of mankind and black peoples. As most men see their mission on earth, I am going to pursue mine through my art and life-style." Rereading this, it carries through to today and how I'm living my life and how I carry or project myself and also how I communicate with students. I've definitely, in the last few years, been very much a part of the multicultural or the culturally diverse movement in California and take a lot of pride in projecting my history as an African American and my ancestry and my roots in Alabama. And I make an effort to seek out students of color, to be a role model—not necessarily an example, but a role model—that they too can be successful and how this was the way I did it or this was a way to look at it. And my life-style— I've had certain levels of success that they too can achieve. I like to give example by doing or by having done, as opposed to saying what someone should do without having done it or experienced it myself. Being a person from African American culture, I'm extremely aware of the lack of documentation in journals, publications, history books, and so forth. Even in doing this paper for Otis, my research for my paintings and for this paper was done more by seeing and hearing and talking with other respected black artists throughout the U.S. It was done with interviews and travels in different parts of the country. I think in the back here it listed all the conferences I went to and all the different people I talked to, so that was kind of— Or for me, in a way, it was like this approach that we're dealing with—oral history. The references aren't there in the books, and no one was making an active effort to document what the artists were doing in the sixties, especially among the black American artists. So it did happen to some limited degree, and there was certainly a lot of catch-up going on. But this kind of tradition is as valid as

anything else. It's just a matter of getting this into the learning system of mainstream America so that it doesn't get lost and it becomes a part of the whole.

MASON

Well, maybe you could talk about the work that you did.

DAVIS

Yeah. Let me see. A lot of this work had some political relationships and the fact that artists of color are not necessarily being addressed in history. I say here that "The black man in the United States is a particular species in that he has been bitterly enslaved and has come through a hundred years plus of abuse to understand the Western world's technology through Western education, philosophy, language, values, and culture, aesthetic and beauty standards. The situation of an aware black student in the Western-directed schools is a strange one.*Symbol* series addresses itself to a concern about the direction of black American people and the way they relate to the rest of the world and other black peoples. This project is addressed to that direction, though all the images are not black, nor are all of the symbols obvious. Black means first: first man, first mother, first madonna, first language, first religion, first music, first civilization, first government, first art, first culture, first direction." I guess, in describing. a work that I did— You put this one piece here in front of me. This one is called *Caution*, 1971. And it was a pretty interesting description, and I'd rather read it than try to recapture it from memory.

MASON

I remember you just talked about what each—

DAVIS

Each symbol is, yeah.

MASON

And here you have a profiles kind of a— Not realistic, but—

DAVIS

Well, that one—

MASON

Which doesn't really appear in any of your other works that I know about. The use of—

DAVIS

Of images?

MASON

Yes, but recognizable, human—

DAVIS

It does appear in some paintings, but they haven't necessarily been published. I do remember several figurative pieces that I did the year before doing this, which was '70, '71. And then the *Self-Portrait* series used profile a lot.

MASON

Yeah, I haven't seen any work from that series.

DAVIS

None of that was ever published. And then I used abstract derivatives of African sculpture in a lot of work also. But in this particular piece the arrow is for misdirection. Then there's a yellow caution sign which is cautioning for the black man. The cross is for the repressive force in the black community. In Los Angeles we've always had a real problem issue with police and police mentality and police abuse, and here in 1991 we have that as a very obvious case within the city of Los Angeles where seventeen policemen participated in the beating of a black man [Rodney King] for speeding. I use the black power sign with the raised fists, the symbol of a political button here which is collaged with rhetoric on it, and a Christian symbol behind the rhetoric of a cross, and then a caution or stop sign with the image of a man's head bandaged on it. And I say here that The black man has a bandaged head from being bombarded by all of these "correct" misdirections. The circle button with words is for the politicians who promise everything until elected. The star is for the law, a repressive force in the black community. So a piece like this is sort of interesting in that it has. a lot of meaning, and the meaning sometimes

means more for the artist than the viewer on first sight. I think that was true with a lot of the work that I did during this period.

MASON

You mean in terms of the—?

DAVIS

In terms of the artwork itself in that it was very stark and real challenging, but it wasn't necessarily literal in its—

MASON

No, I mean the symbols are really direct, so you mean that there are other—

DAVIS

There might be other —

MASON

—interpretations.

DAVIS

Yeah, there might be other interpretations of this piece. And then I think of some of these other pieces, *The White Aesthetic*, the *Yellow Bus* series, they were— The *Yellow Bus* piece really dealt with the redirection for busing of young people, not necessarily busing for integration but for quality education, and that it was not enough just to bus black children to white schools or to predominantly white schools and vice versa. I mean, everyone wants their children to get a quality education and grow up with a healthy, wholesome self and sense of self. I was concerned that black children be bused towards a pan-African direction and an understanding of the universal world, not just an occidental world or a Western society. So that was sort of the impetus for that particular piece. Then there was a piece that was an all-solid piece, an all-solid, black piece called *The Black Aesthetic*, I used the symbol of black to reflect black people. It had a rope from it, and it had a button on it, sort of a Third World button on it, and it kind of stood for being careful and not getting hung up. That was the use of the rope and the noose kind of symbolism, the kind of thing that we've always had to strive away from, which is being physically abused as a people. That's something that has historically happened. Now we

may not have as much physical abuse, except in Los Angeles, but we may be victims of psychological abuse. Where's this other one?

MASON

In the bag?

DAVIS

No. This one, which has a lot of shock element to it: *The Niggers Will Survive the White Aesthetic*. And this was an all-white piece that had a symbol of an African mask in it, and it—

MASON

You mean it was a canvas with—

DAVIS

No, it was a collage that was suspended on a board. It was like raised from the surface, and then it had this African mask sort of breaking through this collage and then, underneath, it had some plastic tubing. I don't quite remember what I had inside the tubing, but it was like either water or a liquid. But to read this short paragraph: This piece deals with the ability of the black artist to be included in art publications, museums, galleries, and other white or so-called white institutions and what he has given up in order to be included and what eventually happens to the relationship of his thinking before thus being pulled away from his people to be in the mainstream or to be hung by the system. This problem, oddly enough, is a burden on the revolutionary Caucasian-American artists. The *White Aesthetic* uses elements of simplicity, white, the absence of color, basic shapes with texture, the symbol being that of color and the noose at the end of the rope. And that really sort of addressed the issue of what it might take to be included in the mainstream of the art community.

MASON

Was it a reflection of what the L.A. [Los Angeles] County Museum [of Art] did?

DAVIS

Yeah, and also a reflection on the struggle that all of these artists had to deal with, and the fact that so many art historians, educators, critics really would

say you have to give up the kinds of things you do in order to be successful within the structure or confines of the contemporary art world instead of the artist making it and defining it. It was just really a slap in the face for people whose history and direction didn't come from the same motivation or influence or culture.

MASON

Do you have somebody in mind who was telling you these things?

DAVIS

It was just really the whole art system and just having seen it and watching how difficult it was for artists to break through and participate in the major league or to not be relegated to being second-class citizens in the art community by virtue of the fact that you weren't doing what the majority of artists were doing, or you weren't a part of that group. I had here a closing statement: To play games with and to challenge the white aesthetic is dangerous, but it cannot be ignored. It must be understood. It is like fighting the sea. The black aesthetic must develop an understanding of technology and media without losing sight of its message, its audience, and its cultural heritage.

MASON

So then you're back to the issue of quality and standards and craftsmanship.

DAVIS

Yeah. I mean, we live in the fastest-paced society on the planet, one of the highest technologically developed societies, certainly one of the more industrially advanced societies and economically strong societies. We can't ignore that. And nothing told me more about that than when I went to Africa with my thoughts about what Mother Africa was and what my roots were and my sense of Africanism.

1.17. TAPE NUMBER: X, SIDE TWO APRIL 22, 1991

MASON

What year did you go to Africa? I mean, about what year?

DAVIS

I think that was '76 or '77. But the African American is a peculiar breed. I mean, he has an African heritage and African roots, but he's also a product of a Western technological society. So, in a way, we're a hybrid between the two, and that's an interesting thing and an important thing to come to grips with, and not losing sight of either one.

MASON

You said that you had a certain perception before you went to Africa and after you came back. How did your relationship to Africa change or deepen?

DAVIS

Well, it let me know how Western I was and how important Africa was to me in terms of my roots, but in terms of my life-style and pace and patterns, those were very Western. But what I'm really trying to say in this discussion in this area is that quality is important, understanding of time and place is important, embracing those things that we can take advantage of in the society that we live in is important, and also coming to grips and acknowledging our past and current cultural histories. It's important to know and to acknowledge our African ancestry. It's also important to know and acknowledge that we live in a multicultural society in the United States, that it's culturally diverse, with many groups of people bringing all kinds of things to the table from their backgrounds and their histories, and that we can't just accept one direction or one point of view. That all of it is important and valid.

MASON

Okay. When did you start your Africa series?

DAVIS

The *African Consciousness* series started really right after— I think it started right after Otis. So it sort of progressed from this body of work into the *African Consciousness* series, which I worked on for about three years. And then I went to Africa. Then I did a series of pieces upon returning from that. And then, somewhere in between there, I did the *Self-Portrait*series that I told you about that sort of reflected directions and changes that were going on inside my head.

MASON

Okay. Well, you can talk about that now, I guess, unless you're tired.

DAVIS

Well, this was an interesting group of names here of people and experiences that I had that I used as references for this graduate body of work and paper. Charles White was obvious, whom we've talked about. A guy named Ed [Edward S.] Spriggs was the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem at the time.

MASON

Did you know him when he was in L.A.?

DAVIS

Ed Spriggs?

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

No.

MASON

Well, I don't know if he was in L.A., but he was on the West Coast. I always see him referred to as a "West Coast filmmaker, " so I was just wondering where he was.

DAVIS

David Hammons, whom we've talked about; Ron Griffin, who was a student there; Camille Billops, whom I had met through the National Conference of Artists; Benny Andrews, who is an artist in New York whom I talk with a lot; David Bradford I mentioned, who would exhibit at Brockman [Gallery]; Ray Holbert at UC [University of California] Berkeley; Samella [S.] Lewis, who was at Claremont [Scripps College] by that time; Elizabeth Catlett, with whom I had a lot of dialogue (I don't know if you saw any of the letters in the files; there were some interesting letters); Ed [Edward] Love, who was an artist who had

been overseas who had returned to the United States and was working as a sculptor and teaching at Howard University.

MASON

Yeah, he's also really into Egyptian motifs. Did you talk about that specifically?

DAVIS

To some degree. He's in Miami now. Did you know that? Yeah. He's head of an art school in Miami. Barbara Jones, who is an instructor at Malcolm X College, who is, I think, one of the only women in the Afri-Cobra movement; Nelson Stevens, who is an artist with the Afri-Cobra group; Bing Davis, whom I met at an NCA [National Conference of Artists] conference; Richard Hunt; Jeff [R.] Donaldson, who was at Howard [University] and had left Chicago, who was the spearhead of Afri-Cobra; Harold Dorsey, a guy I met and talked with in Jackson, Mississippi; John Outterbridge, whom we have spoken about; Larry Clark was a filmmaker whom I had a lot of interaction with.

MASON

Yeah. Last time I was wondering whether you both were sort of interested in music and jazz music— Well, he's interested in using a kind of jazz aesthetic in his films, and I was wondering if that's where you drew that idea from or what was—

DAVIS

Not specifically. We had a lot of dialogue and even arguments on the black aesthetic. Larry was sort of a Marxist in his approach. We tried to collaborate on some things together, but I think we explored the revolutionary issues together a lot and had a lot of dialogue. And he was very heavy into John Coltrane, and I learned a lot about John Coltrane through Larry. Huey Beckham, who was an artist in Houston and still is (he teaches at University of Houston); my brother Dale [B.] Davis; and Beverly Robinson. Then I attended several conferences that were quite interesting, National Conference of Artists in '71, '72, and '73, the Black Academy of Arts and Letters in Chicago in '72.

MASON

What was that?

DAVIS

It was a group that had Charles White to speak as well as a number of other artists from the East. And they presented papers and gave lectures. I caught a plane, went to it. I actually tape-recorded it, but the tape was real poor. I really wanted to document Charlie and his talk. And this one was a real interesting one too. It was a black arts conference that was sponsored by the Carnegie Institute in Pittsburgh. There was an exhibit, *Dimensions in Black Artists*, La Jolla Museum [of Contemporary Art] in San Diego, which was quite good. I guess that's pretty much it. I did visit the DuSable Museum [of African-American History] in Chicago. There was an organization that doesn't exist anymore called the Communicative Arts Academy in Compton. The Southside [Community] Arts Center, which was an arts center that fostered the growth and development of a lot of black artists and had a lot of historical significance.

MASON

What did you get out of the Communicative Arts Academy?

DAVIS

Well—

MASON

That was John Outterbridge.

DAVIS

Yeah, he really developed a community arts center. They took an old boxing gym and made a gallery, classrooms. And it was an environmental piece. I mean, the doors were art, everything that they touched was turned into an art: the doorknob, the windows. So it was really a total environmental space for which black artists had all kinds of activities going on: exhibits, booths, classes. I think the Paul Robeson Players started out there as a little theater group. The [George Washington] Carver Museum in Tuskegee, Alabama, which I have work in and for which, for me, had an important collection, because it represented my first beginnings in Tuskegee. I've mentioned here the street murals of Berkeley and Oakland and really Los Angeles, too, because there

was a strong public art effort being made by Chicano artists and the Latin communities.

MASON

Okay. You said you started the *African Consciousness* series right out of Otis. Oh, and did you mention this or did I read it? That Charles White got you to think in series instead of—

DAVIS

Oh, yeah, yeah. I guess when I first started into the Otis process, I was really jumping around a lot and trying to do a whole bunch of things. Charles White was one of those artists who said how important it was to explore a single idea and to pursue it to its fullest and exhaust all possibilities of other things that you could do with it before going on to something else. That was real meaningful for me, because it helped me focus, and it helped me develop a body of work that had continuity and that had a single thought pattern that ran through it. I continue to try to work that way even now.

MASON

So how did you first conceive of the *African Consciousness* series?

DAVIS

It was just a direct evolution from the work I was doing at Otis. I mean, I was beginning to incorporate African art in my work, and I was very much interested and concerned about Africa and African American relationships to it. And from there it sprang, and my political energies ran into it, and my cultural energies ran into it.

MASON

Was it like the *Symbol* series, where you had some collages and some—?

DAVIS

It was like the *Symbol* series in the sense that I was using vacuum-form African images, masks, out of plastic and painting over them, and then collaging over them.

MASON

I'm sorry, you were using plaster African—

DAVIS

Plastic.

MASON

Oh, you were making, your own masks from an African— I haven't seen any pictures from this, so I'm not really sure what you mean.

DAVIS

Yeah. In that series that I did at Otis, I started vacuum-forming some three-dimensional kinds of images so that they became in plastic but raised, and then I would paint over them and incorporate them into the work. Then the *African Consciousness* series, as I think about it, it started out using that, but then it really went into a collage almost exclusively with a lot of texture and the interplay with the silhouette symbol of the map of Africa. I did that for a good two or three years.

MASON

About how many—?

DAVIS

Pieces did I do in that series?

MASON

Yeah.

DAVIS

Probably somewhere between fifteen and twenty.

MASON

Was this part of it?

DAVIS

No. But that is a vacuum-form image, part of that mask there. What year is that?

MASON

'Seventy-six. It's called *USA Bicentennial Reflection*.

DAVIS

So that was the end of that. And that particular one was— It was the bicentennial year for the United States of America, and I wanted to make a statement that was inclusive of the African American experience. So I incorporated, I think, half of an African mask image, part of a symbol that delineated the flag, then I used electrical wires there to go around the crest of the mask and come out a part of the collage form in the piece.

MASON

So it seems that formal issues of texture and juxtaposition of textures was important to you.

DAVIS

Yeah. It was always important, yeah.

MASON

How would you say that your use of African symbols was different from, say, European artists' use of African work? Or if it is different, if you see it differently.

DAVIS

Well, I see it differently because it's my culture, and I think I place more cultural significance on it, not just aesthetic significance on it. So not only am I interested in the delineation of line and form and mass, but I'm also interested in its spiritual significance, its symbolic use, its cultural heritage, and my relationship to it.

MASON

And then your *Self-Portrait* series was around the same time.

DAVIS

Yeah, I think it was around that same time. I had just finished art school. I was trying to see where I was at and exploring what was inside my head, so I did a

series of pieces that were silhouettes, which were tracings of my profile. I cut them out and made a stencil and sprayed and painted them on a series of small canvases and painted all kinds of symbols and images inside these heads. And then I did a few large ones that had— I have to look for the catalog. I think it's in my study in the other room. In them I used the head, that profile looking left and looking right, and then I had a series of neckties and string and rope that I had hanging out of the painting, which symbolized giving up using those kinds of uniforms to be successful. I was letting go of formal dress. I think in some of those I also used a transparent African mask so that it was there and it wasn't there. You were looking through it. That was also a vacuum-form plastic shape that was attached to the canvas.

MASON

I suppose the sort of obvious question is, when do you know you're finished with it? When does a series play itself out?

DAVIS

When does a series play—? I guess you just have a sense. I mean, when is a song over? It's just when you can't do anymore, when you've exhausted it. Sometimes you think, "Oh, wow, I could do more." There's probably been an occasion or two where you sort of go back and hit it, but you're not inspired to go much further. So it's over. It's like, when is a painting finished? Well, it's never finished. You could always do something else to it, but it's— When you've exhausted it and it's exhausted you. Yeah.

1.18. TAPE NUMBER: XI, SIDE ONE APRIL 23, 1991

MASON

You wanted to start off talking about Brockman Productions.

DAVIS

Okay. Brockman Productions came out of an outgrowth of Brockman Gallery. We had been doing community-related exhibits and activities since the inception of the gallery. Due to our financial management problems of the business versus the community and do-good activities, we were advised that some of the community-related exhibitions and exhibits and concerts in the

park should fall under another type of business structure. So in 1973 we formed Brockman Productions as a nonprofit community arts agency to do the community-related activities that Brockman Gallery had originally done. Through the support of our political constituencies, we learned about support systems throughout the state, within the city, and the National Endowment for the Arts [NEA]. And Congresswoman Yvonne [Brathwaite] Burke was instrumental in pointing us to a program at the NEA that our organization would fall under, and that was the Expansion Arts Program, at that time headed up by Vantile Whitfield. We were able to receive NEA grants through that category to continue to fund the outdoor exhibitions, the concerts, and we also initiated a film festival series. This film festival series was focused primarily on black and Third World and independent filmmakers, as well as students from those communities. The exhibitions were community oriented, and it allowed a lot of the artists who were interested in exhibiting at the gallery that the gallery couldn't handle on an ongoing basis an opportunity to be exposed to the public through another activity and source. Concurrently with that, we did a series of jazz-related music in Leimert Park, right up the street from the gallery.

MASON

This was part of the Leimert Park Festival?

DAVIS

Yeah. I think one of the most notable musicians that participated with us in this program was Horace Tapscott and his Pan-Afrikan [Peoples] Arkestra. These were real exciting periods, because these kinds of activities hadn't been happening in this particular community. Through the growth of these activities, and with an ex-student, Greg Bryant, we initiated the first Watts Towers Jazz Festival. That series is annual and is ongoing today. So that's been over fifteen years, probably very close to twenty years of activity. We did not continue to produce it after the first three years. It was then turned over to the staff of the Watts Towers Arts Center. So Brockman Productions began to answer these things for the community, and it got to grow into a real community arts agency. In some cases, it overshadowed the activities of the gallery for a period of time. At this time, also, my brother Dale [B. Davis] had

indicated a desire to change his relationship with the gallery, and I wanted to continue it.

MASON

You mean because of the change in the gallery's focus?

DAVIS

Well, he was just tired of the gallery business itself and just wanted to change his own personal focus. He later became involved and active on the board of the community arts agency [Brockman Productions], the production side. I had been involved in a series of meetings with Jim Woods, whom I had mentioned earlier, who had the— What was that called?

MASON

Studio Watts.

DAVIS

Studio Watts workshop. He was involved in housing development for the Watts community, established the Studio Watts Foundation, and was involved with some HUD [United States Department of Housing and Urban Development] grants, and was doing conceptual pieces with artists related to that housing. Having participated in a lot of these brainstorming meetings, I found that I was giving up a lot of ideas and concepts and so forth, and once they were funded and initiated that, one, I wasn't an active participant, and two, the activities went to other artists, and in many cases from outside of the community. So I sort of picked a bone with him and kept pushing at him. Some years later, he came by the gallery, and he wanted to tell me about a program he thought that would be appropriate for Brockman Productions and that we should apply for it. That was the CETA program, the Comprehensive Employment and Training Act. So X got the applications for it from the city of Los Angeles and was probably totally bamboozled by the amount of paperwork it required to go for it. But myself and a woman named Judy Hopshite, over probably a two- or three-week period of time, put this proposal together and were able to generate a request for funding. We circulated it to our political constituencies in the community as well. We received our first $50, 000 grant to employ artists to do works of art in public places. [tape

recorder off] So from that initial grant, at that dollar amount, I had a revelation that here was a window of opportunity and a chance to take off and fly instead of doing real small, token kinds of projects. I was teaching part-time at the time at California] State University, Northridge. I think that application went in in '85, and by '86 I realized that we had a real good operation opportunity. So I left that position at Northridge and—

MASON

You mean the CETA application?

DAVIS

Yeah.

MASON

It's just that I have '78 as when you got the CETA.

DAVIS

No, '76 was when we got that first CETA grant, as I remember. I don't know what you have that would say differently. Where did you—?

MASON

Let's see. I saw something in the *International Review* about the CETA program. But—

DAVIS

Anyway, I left Northridge and became executive director of the nonprofit corporation on a three-quarter time basis—close to full-time—to run that program. We hired artists who were not employed but who had a track record of interest in public art. We hired them to do and produce murals in public places in and around the city of Los Angeles. We had a really strong group. And then we continued to apply for funding, doubling and sometimes tripling and more each year. We operated under two titles. I know one was Title VI, which was the artist program, and then there was another program that we took on which was a program that was a support-training operation, where we were training young people to work in artist-oriented or. art-oriented facilities. We branched from just the mural concept to sculpture. We hired musicians. We hired several of the musicians from the now well-known

Hiroshima jazz fusion group. We were able to initiate their first recording contract with a major company. I think it was A & M Records. We also hired Kenny Dennis, who is a well-known drummer, and then we had another musical group called Baya, which was a Latin jazz group. So we had concerts going around the city of Los Angeles in different venues, school workshops, public parks, open courtyards, and little satellite sites like in downtown Los Angeles. We did some streetcorner events as well. Then we established a graphic arts program. We hired a graphic artist named Camille Higgins to run and manage that program. They trained artists who had an orientation towards graphic design to do and produce brochures, flyers, invitations, etc., for nonprofit civic and community organizations. You were going to ask a question somewhere in there.

MASON

So you got funding for the separate programs. You would put in applications saying you wanted to have a graphic arts program? Or you would just put in a general application, and then they would give you money, and then you would devise programs, and you could do whatever you want? I mean, did you have to get approval for every program that you—?

DAVIS

When we wrote the proposals, we wrote the proposal that was inclusive of the program. In other words, under Title VI, we applied for muralists, musicians, graphic artists. So as the years developed it built. But it wasn't a separate application for each category. That went in as a total part of the package that we offered to do.

MASON

Okay. What was your part? Did you oversee? Did you have a staff that you put together to brainstorm ideas? Or were they mostly your ideas and you got people to help you implement them?

DAVIS

Well, beyond the first one, I was able to put together a staff and employ a team. The paperwork load was awesome, so I hired an assistant, an accountant, a fiscal manager, and a program coordinator. Well, I had a

program coordinator for each program that we were doing. So there was someone over music, there was someone over graphics, there was someone over the public art projects. Some of the artists, also, that I thought would be interesting to mention who initiated this program were Kent Twitchell, who has done extremely well in Los Angeles with murals.

MASON

I'm sorry. Initiated what program?

DAVIS

The mural, the public art. The artists who were directly involved in doing public art. So these were like artists that did murals.

MASON

So they were responsible for—

DAVIS

They were artists.

MASON

—for getting the— Okay, they were artists who were responsible—

DAVIS

They were not responsible for grants. They were responsible to make art in public places.

MASON

I thought you were saying that they were the ones responsible for getting the government to implement—

DAVIS

No. But they did major murals in L.A. Kent Twitchell was one, Tito Delgado, Suzanne Jackson, Dan [R.] Concholar, Richard Duarto. These were some of the first artists who worked for us.

MASON

Some people have said that the CETA program was like the WPA [Works Progress Administration] all over again. Would you go that far to say that there was really that much money and support for artists and programs who received it?

DAVIS

I thought that the CETA program was like the WPA period in that it began to initiate government support for the arts. But then it didn't last long. So the depth of that support was short lived. But I do think it was an important movement and an important phase of this era's support of artists and of art in public places. And it came in, I think, under [Lyndon B.] Johnson and [James E.] Carter. And when President [Ronald W.] Reagan was elected, it was terminated rapidly. We saw one title close down in thirty days, and the second phase of our funding support shut down within ninety days. So, to my recollection, we were operating from '76 to the beginning of '81.

MASON

Thinking back on all the different programs and activities, which things were you most excited about?

DAVIS

I really liked the mural project that we had in the beginning, because we had a dedicated core of artists who had a commitment to public art. They had good training. They had good work habits and a commitment to excellence. By the end of that visual arts phase, we had a lot of younger artists who did not have the same work ethic and tended to be right out of school and had not, quote, unquote, "paid their dues." So there was more contemplation about doing the work than actual doing it. And while it was a nice holdover for them, it wasn't my vision. The music groups that came through were extremely exciting and very dynamic and certainly carried their weight and did some very innovative programming. Then the graphic arts program went pretty well. It sort of was a roller-coaster project.

MASON

Would you say, then, that the program in general had more impact on you as kind of an administrator? Or did it also have an artistic—?

DAVIS

Boy. That was during the phase of my *Mental Space* series. That series of work was really my escape from the tremendous amount of administrative work that I was confronted with. But, yes, I did learn the ropes of administration and management, financial and personnel. It became a never-ending kind of commitment to keep those kinds of projects rolling on the level and scale you wanted them to be on. So, I mean, I was devastated when it ended. I was also sort of glad when it ended. I didn't feel obligated to keep trying to perpetuate what I had done. It certainly took a while to decompress from trying to find a way to keep that kind of operation running, because we had worked up to about a $2 million operating budget. Losing that kind of money in ninety days was like falling down a well. We went from that to about $30, 000, which was close-out money, and a few grants from the state and the NEA. It was like when it was over it was over. There was no recourse. There were no other places to reach to augment, supplement that kind of operation.

MASON

But you had actually been doing murals before the CETA came in.

DAVIS

Yeah, yeah. My initial interest in murals or public art started around 1970 when I left teaching and started at Otis Art Institute. I worked with the Good Shepherd Episcopal Church. They were building a manor across the street from the church, and the pastor had a lot of vision and willingness to allow creative things to happen, so I did an assemblage on the walls of the construction site, around the construction site.

MASON

Out of what kinds of material?

DAVIS

Wood, tin cans,, bottle caps, leather, paint. So it was a temporary piece, but kind of unusual.

MASON

Yeah. It's a lot different from the other works we were talking about yesterday. Well, not a lot different, but maybe conceptually different, would you say, from the *Self-Portrait* series or the *African Consciousness* series?

DAVIS

Oh, yeah. Oh, yeah. Most of the stuff that I was doing in those series that we talked about was flat. This was three dimensional. And either later that year—I think it was later that year—a couple of us decided to paint a wall on Crenshaw Boulevard that was between Fiftieth [Street] and Fifty-second Street, or Fifty-third [Street]. Somewhere.

MASON

Around Fiftieth and Crenshaw. [laughter]

DAVIS

Yeah, Fiftieth and Crenshaw. And that became the Crenshaw Wall. We started doing images on this wall without permission and learned fast that we needed city permits. The police came. So we had to sort of regroup. But I think that energy came out of wanting to have greater visual-art impact on the public. We were finding through the gallery that there were a lot of people who liked art, but we weren't reaching the working class, certain segments of the middle class, and everyday people. They weren't coming in the doors. Whereas, with murals and art in public places, they were confronted with it in their everyday traffic patterns. So we tended to continue to look for public art sites where there was a lot of foot or automobile traffic. Los Angeles being an automobile city, it tended to make sense to put the art where there was the greatest circulation of people. They tend to be in cars. So that was the logic behind that and a number of other murals that I initiated in L.A.

MASON

What were some of the other areas?

DAVIS

Well, the Crenshaw Wall became a changing wall. Every two years there would be a new series of murals up, and it would be done by a group of artists selecting a certain space on that wall.

MASON

Did it have a specific theme every couple of years?

DAVIS

It did and it didn't. The first two times out, it had real specific themes, or you could tell that the artists were either revolutionary or nationalist in their sort of political orientation.

MASON

Lots of raised black fists?

DAVIS

Right. That was there. African imagery. Then it changed, became more spiritual. Then it became more scenic with sort of black genre pictures of football players or role-model images. Then there was a guy named Snake Doctor who initiated a graffiti youth movement to do the wall. So a large number of graffiti artists from all over the city and in some cases from outside of the state came to that wall to make a statement. The work was excellent, but there were a number of people who couldn't embrace the graffiti, I mean the fact that it was graffiti. So one artist painted it out and did his, what I call, tired Martin Luther King [Jr.] dogma on the wall. That may still be there today; I don't know. But the beauty of the wall is that it reflected the attitudes and changes in the community and the sensitivity of that community. We did try to stick within that Crenshaw community for a long time. Once the CETA program came on, then we went all over the city of Los Angeles with mural pieces. It became where artists found sites or where agencies or entities would call. So from the back wall of Otis Art Institute to the Inner City Cultural Center.

MASON

I noticed that some of your murals seem to be related to the work that you were doing. Like in '75 you did the Mental Space mural at La Brea [Avenue] and Veronica [Street]—

DAVIS

Veronica, yeah.

MASON

How would you say that your murals and your paintings are related?

DAVIS

I try to keep a close correlation even though I've always felt some obligation to do things that the public would relate to. [tape recorder off] Where were we?

MASON

Well, I was asking about the relationship between the murals and paintings, and you were saying that you wanted to—

DAVIS

Oh, yeah. In some ways I was torn about, "Do I do what I think the public wants or do I do what I'm about?" I made a middle passage there of trying to do the kinds of work that I would do in the studio but in a way that it would have public appeal and would generate sort of a good feeling for people who would be impacted by it on a daily basis.

MASON

So what did that mean, then? You said that the murals are on the freeways, and there's also the element of speed and having to comprehend something really quickly sometimes.

DAVIS

I tried to use things that would be simple and easy to grasp. These were like little thoroughfares, so you could really only take in so much at a time. They became quick messages or quick— In some cases, I call them a color bath. It's like-driving through a color bath. You may not grasp all of what's happening at one time, but it would be an interesting thing to pass by. And as you continue to pass by this kind of an image or whatever, you would sort of comprehend more and more each time.

MASON

Do you want to talk about the mural at the Watts Towers, *Homage to John Outterbridge*?

DAVIS

Oh, yeah. That was an interesting opportunity. John Outterbridge took over the Watts Towers and began his directorship of it. It had been redesigned, rehabili¬tated. It was basically a new structure from what used to be an old house that was a studio space. And he wanted images. He wanted some public art images out there. He wanted some murals. So I did one with some abstract forms and elements that had Adenkra symbols and a zebra stripe and a big moon or a sunlike image, and I entitled it *Homage to John Outterbridge*, because I believed in him and his vision for the place, and I wanted to make a historical statement in his behalf to him.

MASON

Well, eventually the [1984] Olympics came, and there was a commission for that.

DAVIS

Yeah, that was interesting. Actually, I started trying to continue that public art effort in, I guess it was, 1970— When was that? When was the bicentennial?

MASON

'Seventy-six.

DAVIS

City. The city bicentennial.

MASON

Oh.

DAVIS

Maybe it was '82 for the city of Los Angeles. So I got involved with them trying to carry the thrust of some of the public art projects that we had running during the CETA period. I worked with Jane Paisano and Hope Tschopik with very little success. We were able to secure one mural site in downtown Los Angeles and eventually got a grant, a partial grant, for Kent Twitchell to execute a mural in downtown L.A., but it ran way beyond the bicentennial. So the effort, in that respect, failed in terms of it being a big, impactful opportunity. The bank was Security Pacific, as I remember, that did sponsor that one. But the connection with Hope and Jane Paisano I thought was a

good one. Eventually, Hope moved over to the Olympic organizing committee and worked specifically for the Olympic Arts Festival. She had not given up the vision, and I continued my dialogue with her about the possibility of doing these murals. So eventually I wrote a proposal that went to Bob [Robert] Fitzpatrick, who was her boss, and it was turned down twice. And then I tried to go out and get it funded privately, through private industry. I contacted Peter Clothier, who had recently left Otis Art Institute as its director, to see if he would be sort of a development director for the project. While he was interested in beginning to take some initiative on it, he fell into another opportunity to head the Loyola Marymount [University] department of art. So the ball came right back to me again, and it looked like it wasn't going to happen. Then we started renegotiating some other events to do with the Olympics in terms of music concerts and performances, and that did happen. But somehow Peter Ueberroth spoke to Bob Fitzpatrick and said, "How come we're not doing any murals? Los Angeles has this history of murals, and more murals in this country are in Los Angeles than in any other area." So Bob spoke to Hope, and Hope called me and asked me to redo this proposal. There were other artists who had proposals in for murals. I think that I had had the first one in and had the one that was most comprehensive and most inclusive of the total Los Angeles community, and that's probably why I got the contract. So it was something I initiated and managed and negotiated. From there, the concept was to select artists who were good, had a high standard of excellence, who had done two or more murals in and around the Los Angeles area, and that hopefully that group of artists would be representative of the city and its various communities, ethnic and otherwise. So we were able to put together a pretty comprehensive group of people to participate in the program. Then, the next problem with that project was where we would put the murals. We had basically ten artists. We needed ten sites, and we needed ten highly visible sites. Originally, they wanted to put it along the course where they would run the marathon. The marathon ran from Venice and all through Hollywood and Crenshaw and central L.A. and Wilshire [Boulevard]—It just wasn't going to work. So we were able to negotiate with Caltrans [California Department of Transportation] to put the murals on the freeway, which was, again, from my vantage point, the most visible place in the city, where the most amount of people travel. It was the gateway from the Hollywood Freeway and the Harbor Freeway into the [Los Angeles Memorial]

Coliseum area where the games would actually take place. So we were able to secure support under "Jerry" [Edmund G.] Brown [Jr.]'s administration to initiate it, and it was with Mayor [Thomas] Bradley's blessings and the department of Caltrans and the Olympic Arts Festival. And it came out of the support of a grant given by the *Los Angeles Times* foundation. I have to give a lot of credit to Hope. And then the guy who oversaw our activity in the Olympic Arts Festival was a man named Ted Welsch. He sort of was an ombudsman between all of the various factions and made sure the project ran smoothly.

MASON

So your Olympic mural—

DAVIS

The Olympic mural [*Reflections on L.A.*] is, again, tied to the kinds of work that I was doing in the studio. While I tried to tie it into the Olympics and into Los Angeles, I. did it in the format of the *Blanket* series.

MASON

By the time you painted that mural, what things had you learned about painting murals from your other experiences that you brought into the Olympic mural project?

DAVIS

Well, in this particular case, this mural faced the direction where it was going to get a little more sunlight than I wanted it to. So I did a lot of overpainting. The main thing with this one was to do real good wall preparation so that it wouldn't deteriorate fast. Then I used a lot of colors that wouldn't bleed underneath, so it had a strong underpainting. And then those colors that did tend to fade to some degree I would tend to paint in layers, so there might be layers of some of the warm colors that might be three or four layers deep instead of one or two.

MASON

Okay. Was there anything else you wanted to add about your murals in general or the Olympic project?

DAVIS

I think that it probably had— It was one of those projects that wasn't planned and that a lot of people were skeptical of. They thought that they were going to cause automobile accidents. But there were none that happened during this project. It did take the monotonous quality of freeway driving in this slow, drudging, rush-hour section of downtown Los Angeles and make it a little more interesting and give riders a visual break. And I was really pleased with the work of the artists who participated in the project. Very few of the pieces have had any major vandalism. In a city like Los Angeles, you have to expect that kind of thing to happen. It did with one or two artists, but we had the support of private companies that provided some graffiti guard materials for us and we were able to protect them for the most part.

MASON

And you're working on a couple of murals now. The one in Sacramento, is that—? We should talk about that.

DAVIS

Yeah, I did one. It's completed.

1.19. TAPE NUMBER: XI, SIDE TWO APRIL 23, 1991

DAVIS

It was interesting. After finishing that mural project in Los Angeles, I really looked around, and there was nothing else to do in a way. I wasn't able to sort of put together that kind of thing with that kind of impact. So we ended up doing some little small projects here and there but nothing really major. I needed a change from that geography, so I moved to Sacramento to run the city and county's public art program [Public Art Program of the Sacramento Metropolitan Arts Commission]—it was a "percent for art" program—and initially got thrown into that community's activities. But last year I did an exhibit of *Public Art Concepts, Collaborations* with myself and other artists. One of them was to do a mural for a high school called Grant High School in Sacramento. It's 33 feet high and about 150 feet long, so it was sort of the largest undertaking that I had done. I did this mural [*A Place to Be Somebody*] not necessarily as my own imagery. I did it as a collaboration with Leslie

Pierson and Armando Cid and then hired other artists in addition to them to actually execute the mural. This particular emphasis of this particular mural was to dwell on the cultural diversity of that community and the population of the school.

MASON

And it's all finished?

DAVIS

It's finished, yeah. I couldn't come to Texas unless it was finished, so it was like—

MASON

Yeah, yeah.

DAVIS

And, boy, did I work hard at finishing, because the time was creeping up, the rainy season was starting, and it was getting cold. So we started in— Well, the attempt was to start in the end of August, and I guess we did to some degree, and we didn't finish till the first week of December.

MASON

How do you feel about that mural now?

DAVIS

I have mixed feelings about it. It's a good piece. On anything there are things you could do different and so forth, but it isn't my statement totally. So that's interesting to let your ego out of it and let your own personal statement be separated from it. When I look at the slides, it's hard for me to say, "That's an Alonzo Davis." And it isn't. It is an Alonzo Davis collaboration with various considerations based on the school's desire to have something that was culturally diverse and to work with the concepts of other artists who were very prominent in the kinds of imagery that would be portrayed. But, again, it's a good piece. I'm proud of it.

MASON

And the mural that you're helping out with now in San Antonio?

DAVIS

Well, I have an advanced painting class that I've been teaching. When I initiated the class I had said that I hoped that we could get to do a mural before the end of the semester, so I'm basically turning students loose here at the end of the semester to do two or three murals on Saint Mary's Boulevard, which is the college strip hangout of little restaurants and beer joints and dance places. It's their work, and I'm simply the guiding, driving force behind getting it done. [tape recorder off] I wanted to mention and credit the artists who participated in the Olympics project, because their energy and input was critical to having made it happen. It included Roderick Sykes, Richard Wyatt, Kent Twitchell, Terry Schoonhoven, Judy Baca, Frank Romero, Glenna Boltuch, Willy Heron, and John Wehrle, as well as myself. So that comprised the ten artists who did the images for the Olympic mural series. There were other murals that happened as a result of this energy simply out of other artists' desire to do things that were related to the games. This just happened to be the only one that was sanctioned and supported by the Olympic Arts Committee.

MASON

Did any of those artists have an influence on you in the way you did your murals? Any techniques or—?

DAVIS

I think to some degree. I mean, we had like collective meetings from time to time to discuss wall preparation, kind of material used. One of the artists had a contact with Liquitex paints. We tried to negotiate a deal with Novacolor paints and weren't able to, so we bought Liquitex from their warehouse at a substantial savings. Several artists had real intricate presentation formats for showing the proposals of the work that they wanted to do, and some of the artists had some problems getting that together, so that was a shared activity. And it was a learning activity for me. I hadn't seen such elaborate renderings for these kinds of projects as I had seen with some of the other people's work.

MASON

When I look at the murals from your latest series, the *Blanket* series and the *Mental Space* series, it seems that there are some big differences, obvious

differences, between that body of work— To me, anyway, since I haven't seen your whole body of work— But between those and the work that you were doing right out of Otis, the *Self-Portrait* series and the *African Consciousness* series, in terms of— I mean, it seems later there is a move away from including your references to the figure, except maybe the use of, like, an eye or something like that. The imagery seems to be much more positive and self-confident. There's really complex layering of imagery and media. I don't know if you agree with that or not. Would you say that that's a difference between, say, the *Mental Space* series and the previous series? And could you talk about the *Mental Space* series and about how it came about and how you—

DAVIS

Well, if I can just maybe address the difference. All of these stages are stages of growth and development and learning from others as well as by doing. I would say after the *African Consciousness* series, I didn't feel as great an obligation to have to continue to dwell on the African theme or that I had to continue to emphasize an obvious ethnic thing.

MASON

Why? I mean, why had you felt obligated and why did you—?

DAVIS

Because I was very much a part of revolution and the civil rights era, and it was a major issue with me. And after that trip to Africa, my— It's like after Malcolm X went to Mecca he was no longer singularly focused on the energy of the black American— It was like his energy was focused on the black American in the United States; his energy was focused on the black American being universal.

MASON

You never said exactly where you went in Africa.

DAVIS

I went to Ghana and Nigeria.

MASON

Okay.

DAVIS

So I think after that series, upon my return, it was that burden of what I was trying to do and trying to say was lifted, and other things became important in terms of what I chose to do. I also began to have a— I can't say these things won't change, but I began to have a focus on doing art that had a more positive statement after that trip, as opposed to a reaction to or the desire to sort of right the wrongs of society. I pretty much said, "Well, I'll paint the rights and I'll react to the wrongs in another way." So I've tried to have the work be more spiritual in nature, have a more reflective quality, a more curious kind of development, and, hopefully, a little more universal appeal. It doesn't take away from who I. am and how I view myself culturally in this society. It's just how I choose to blow my horn or to play my music at this time. In 1980 I got involved with a printmaker I had known for a long time named Ron Adams, and I did a lithograph right after the death of an aunt [Clara Brockman] in Birmingham, Alabama. That print that I did was sort of an image of a floating cloth, or a floating piece of cloth with a fabric texture, quality, with a lot of symbols in it. I called it the *Blanket* series and *Homage to Aunt Clara*. That set a whole other direction for me. I started looking at some other things that had ethnic reference, but they were more related to quilts and patterns and clotheslines and textures and things that I would see from my travels. The *Blanket*series evolved from the print to paintings that were stretched out like hides, not on stretcher bars, to strips of narrow strip paintings that were pretty much in the format, not the imagery but the format, of kente cloth, which I had seen in the northern Ghana, that the men would weave. That was real fascinating to me. So I started doing these little strips of canvas as paintings, and eventually that evolved into woven kinds of pieces. I started doing woven paper and woven canvas as paintings. This is the longest series or body of work that I've been involved with. It's interesting, and it doesn't seem to end. I still seem to be with it. You had mentioned another series that you were interested in that I did, and that was the *Reflections on Haiti after Brazil*. That was a real impactful body of work, because I had gone to those two countries and found them very fascinating and was very fascinated by the kinds of cultural patterns and statements that were being made by the indigenous people, the people of African ancestry,

and those who were of mixed blood, especially in Brazil, in the music and samba schools. I didn't necessarily go there and say, "Okay, this art is going to be like this. " I find that a great deal of what I do at this particular time comes from the subconscious mind and motivation, so sometimes it just is art that moves through me as opposed to art that I'm doing consciously. And then, going to Haiti, I got caught up in some voodoo kinds of ceremonies and practices. Probably why it affected me the most is because I said it wouldn't affect me. Intellectually, I sort of ruled it out.

MASON

I'm sorry. You said it affected you. How did it affect you?

DAVIS

Well, let me finish that train of thought. Intellectually, I tried to rule it out, and I thought I wasn't going to be affected by it. But then I found myself having visions and dreams. A friend went to a sort of a fortune-teller, wisdom person and came back with some information that was very much related to who I was and what I was about. I was like shocked that a medium could delve into my psyche. When I came back to the United States from Haiti, I was like under a spell and just had a real hard time shaking it. I started doing a body of work that was called *One Day After Haiti*, *Two Days After Haiti*, *Three Days After Haiti*, so I would just work on *Seventeen Days After Haiti*, *Twenty Days After Haiti*. It became a series of pieces that was just my catharsis of working this out. And then, after that, I started thinking about that trip to Brazil and sort of the impact and ceremonies and things that I had experienced there. So then it merged. As I evolved out of the Haiti experience, it merged into the Brazil series. So that's why that series was called *Reflections on Haiti after Brazil*. After working it out, I was freed of whatever this was. And it's hard— I can't tell you that— I don't have a literal explanation for what it was that I was experiencing or was under, but I would imagine it's like some of the things that you see when people are in church and are captured by the spirit and are so moved to do things that they're not aware of themselves doing it in their conscious mind. Anyway, after that, and after having worked through it and worked it out, I went back to Haiti just to see if my spirit and soul was clear and so forth, and I didn't have those kinds of experiences or anxieties or fears or overwhelming energy. So that's how that particular series evolved. It was

not a long duration of time; it was maybe three or four months of working on those. So it was a catharsis. It was a way to work it out. But I liked it. I liked the result, and I liked what happened.

MASON

What did the work look like?

DAVIS

It looked like wings and hearts and crosses and arrows and energy, a lot of use of energy. Oil pastels. What I did is I had a silkscreen format that laid down basic shape, and then, within that basic shape, it was like a hand-colored print, one of a kind, from an initial same image, and then it just evolved. I used acrylic paint and I used oil pastels.

MASON

In other words, in the series each work is—

DAVIS

Each work is almost all the same, and yet everything is different.

MASON

So it's not a linear progression. Each work is sort of a complex reflection of the other work, and it all—

DAVIS

Each day was different. Each thing I had to work out was different, but they all are related, not in a structured way. I didn't base what I did yesterday on what I would do tomorrow, but the approach and the media was pretty much the same.

MASON

And in some of the Mental Space series, like this collograph [*Metamorphosis*] you did in 1977 and some of the things that you were saying about the *Blanket* series, it seems that you were— I don't know. This whole thing seems like you just started to really have fun and really enjoy yourself.

DAVIS

Yeah. I think I sort of let go of the weighty obligation to deal with social issues and just, in a way, have fun, try to do things that portrayed—not portrayed—gave off positive energy and sort of lifted the cloud from over my being. I always— I mean, I don't know if— You make these comparisons. But I look at Miles Davis's music, and it fascinates me that he did these really fabulous pieces in the early phase of his life, and so many of my jazz friends and fans are like stuck with what he used to do. And now his work is like even more demanding and challenging and growing. I saw a PBS [Public Broadcasting System] documentary of him and his discussion of creativity and evolving. I like to think that I am moving in that kind of direction and that I'm not getting stuck and that the work continues to be fresh and well done and new. I'd like to be a twenty-first-century man. I mean, I'm moving in that direction. I'm not interested in being a nineteenth-century painter. So I don't want people to say my stuff is tired. I mean, I really want them to say it made them think or it made them feel good or it challenged them or "Here was an artist who came out of this community who did some really thought-provoking work or really well-developed pieces." And I guess energy is really a major part of my work. I like to portray energy, and, hopefully, it's positive energy. I got that out of William Dawson. I mean, that goes back to an interview I did with him in, I think, my last year in graduate school, in '73, when I went to visit him. He talked about the energy in his music. And he was so animated and such an old man to be so vibrant and vital. That session we had was just fabulous. So in coming back from that experience, it made me want to do something about Tuskegee [Alabama] and my roots and my experience with him. I had started a painting, and I just couldn't get it. I was ready to give it up. And I had it in the studio. I think I had turned it upside down somehow. It was just to get it out of the way. And upside down was the vision. I felt free to mess it up almost. And then, all of a sudden, things started happening. Instead of trying to paint the chapel and the chorus and the literal Tuskegee. experience, I really got into painting the energy that I got from the man who was the composer and the conductor.

MASON

What was the name of that painting?

DAVIS

Well, I didn't have a name for it. And he came to visit my studio in Los Angeles some years later, and he asked me did I have a title for it, and I said, "No—" But I explained to him what I— He said, "Call it *Energy*. Just call it *Energy*." And, again, that stuck. It had a lot of impact. He was also the first person to show me a coin and paper money that had an African man's image on it, and that was something that made me realize that the world was bigger than— And I don't know if I mentioned this earlier in the tape.

MASON

Yeah. On the first tape we talked about it.

DAVIS

Yeah, I did. But it's like little things, as a kid— You never know what's going to affect a kid and how that's going to impact. But there were little things like that that were just like little clues to say, "Hey, the world's different than the world you live in." Because of that kind of thing, whenever I travel outside of the country, I'll send paper money back to a kid I know or to my daughter [Paloma Allen-Davis], because it can just set something off. It can be real interesting how that affects someone further down the line in their life.

1.20. TAPE NUMBER: XII, SIDE ONE APRIL 23, 1991

DAVIS

I'll sort of give a verbal response to some of these visual pieces that we have here and talk a little bit about the *Mental Space* series and the *Pyramid* series, I guess, to begin with. I think I did address the *Mental Space* series. It was really a body of work that was done when I was under a tremendous amount of mental stress and working as an arts administrator during that Brockman Productions phase. I used it as the release, the escape valve. In a way, it was like it saved me from the madness— or I felt like it was madness—that I was dealing with in terms of being an executive director type. I did a lot of things that sort of had space or airy kinds of qualities, things that were suspended in space, or things that dealt with illusion, and things where you might cut through a surface and find another surface or cut through another surface and find sky. So some of the pieces in that are reflected in a lot of the drawings that I did. There was also a piece entitled *Beyond*, a piece

called *Metamorphosis*. A lot of these had to do with— Well, the technique involved a printmaking process that I did with a fellow artist named Bill Wheeler. He and I had gone to Otis [Art Institute] together, and he had established a graphics studio in the Silver Lake area. I worked as the artist and he worked as the master printer in this case, so he was very instrumental in helping me produce these editions. Also during that period I was involved with doing collographs—well, actually a little later—of what I call the *Pyramid* series. With this series I used a lot of transparencies with layers moving in and out of a pyramid form. Again, the attempt to create illusion. There were collographs in this series, and there were paintings on unstretched canvas. The paintings were, in many cases, done to give the feeling of lifting off or levitating from a surface or from a sort of defined gravity, if you will.

MASON

You mean the painting—?

DAVIS

The image of the pyramid on the painting. It was like the pyramid was lifting up. Then I experimented with some sewn forms. This one that was called *Ethnic Pyramid* I did with unstretched canvas, and then the pyramid shape was cut out. The pyramid shape was cut out and then sewn back in so that the pattern of the pyramid was created by the sewing as opposed to with a painted line. It's like it's there and it's not there. I attached, in this particular case, some beading and wire and feathers and little bells that would hang down from the painting itself. You can see by the title sometimes. I call it *Ethnic Pyramid*, and then I also said it was for the *Mental Space* series. So these bodies of work were running so close together. I was in a way working on two series at one time and hadn't defined which way they were going. As late as 1980—'79-'80, I believe—I did a mural that reflected that image on the side of the studio wall on Degnan Boulevard. [tape recorder off] Let's see. There was also a series called *Bag* series that overlapped on the *Mental Space* series, as well. This *Bag*series was really a pun. It started out with me thinking about some of the people that were working at the time who had all of these different places that they were coming from, so to speak, or different ideologies, different focus areas. There was a term in the community of "What's your bag?" or "What are you into?" So I started doing these drawings

and paintings of paper bags with a reflection on different people coming from different bags, so to speak. That was also a small series. There were not a whole lot of pieces in that. It was a fun group of drawings and paintings to do.

MASON

You did that in the Otis—? When did you start that?

DAVIS

What's that?

MASON

The bags.

DAVIS

I don't know that I have a specific date on that.

MASON

I was just wondering if that was a part of your thesis project.

DAVIS

No. No, no. It overlapped the *Mental Space* series and the *Pyramid* series. So it was in the '78, '79 period of time, to my recollection. 'Seventy-seven, actually, is on this particular piece. So '77, '78. I think that pretty much takes us through that particular phase. Somewhere in the early eighties is that *Blanket* series I talked about that I started in New Mexico, in Santa Fe. After that one print, then I just really started to jump into a lot of different pieces and just began to take on that cloth influence, cloth-like quality. I think all of these bodies of works are still tending to deal with a message or statement or social concern, some dealing with family or real personal kinds of things, and others sort of national, universal, or ethnic concerns. One of those strip paintings that I talked about that had kente cloth, kind of a long, narrow format, was a piece called *Of Nuclear Concern*. It was acrylic and collage on canvas. I did another piece, a piece I really liked a lot, called *Who Shot the Sheriff?* It sort of dealt with or was a reflection on the song ["I Shot the Sheriff"] by Bob Marley. Most of these pieces that I'm talking about now were probably started during the period that. I went to Dorland Mountain Arts Colony. I spent probably two to three months in an artist retreat space finishing the*Pyramid* series, actually,

and beginning this new series of pieces from the *Blanket* influence. I have a quote here that I wrote regarding this: "The *Blanket* series represents a discovery of self through family relationships, old communal traditions, allegiances to maternal lineage. Discovery of self through fatherhood brought a resolution and culmination of the *Pyramid*series" —that's sort of a comment on my daughter [Paloma Allen-Davis] coming into the world around that time—"and expresses the self beyond self, natural order, cosmic awareness, universal oneness, and an attunement with a higher order." I also feel like the *Blanket* series is influenced by images from the Southwest, Native American hides, Mexican blankets, clotheslines from the South, fabric and folk art that I would see in Brazil and Haiti and in other travels. Then there were a few pieces that dealt with where I was at emotionally in terms of relationships that came out of that series. I did a series of sort of drypoint etchings that I printed as a line print and then painted them as individual pieces, so they had the same image but they were all one of a kind based on the fact that each one was painted and treated differently. There were probably fifteen or twenty of those prints that I did. Again, this *Blanket*series involved, in the early stages, a lot more symbols than what I'm using now. I used the symbol of a watermelon, the sun symbol that you see on the flag in the state of New Mexico. I used some paper airplanes painted in, a symbol for infinity, as well as arrows. In 1987, I exhibited a number of these pieces at the Isobel Neal Gallery in Chicago. It was a one-person show [*Alonzo Davis: Soundscapes*] during June and July, and a lot of the works from this particular series were first shown at her gallery. This one that I'm looking at is called *Redwood Light*, and it sort of gives the kind of impression that you get when traveling in Northern California in the redwood trees and the light sort of filters down through the tops of the trees and across that reddish-brown bark. It's a magical kind of quality. This painting is an attempt at reaching that kind of quality or mood or attraction. There were a couple of other pieces that were in that kente-cloth-strip phase. One was *Great Leaper*, which has sort of an oriental character to it. Another one was influenced by going to a Catholic church of the Paba Indians right off the grounds of that reservation in northern San Diego County. It was during an Easter period, so it influenced me to do this piece with a heart and the cross coming out of the heart and the bottom of it having sort of an Easter-egg shape. So it was *Homage to the Paba Indian* in that community. During all these periods, and even now, I continue

to try to do printmaking. I have a love for printmaking. I don't necessarily function best in that process totally, so I tend to try to involve a master printer with my work because it gives me a certain amount of control. And being a painter, the inks tend to work different than paint. With a master printer, I don't have to address my impatience with the long, tedious process of edition printing. So with the prints in the last few years, I've tried to make them make some statements. I try to pull an issue out that concerns me, and I try to address it. In 1983, '84, somewhere around there, I did a piece called *Act on It*, and it had to do with citizens having the right to vote. I incorporated the word "vote" in the print, and I had little subliminal as well as obvious images. Having come from the Southland having had relatives in Mississippi who gave up arms and limbs and took great risks to vote, I think it's a privilege and it's something that we should not ignore. It is a tool for social change and a nonviolent one. So I wanted to stress that. And then I ended up doing a series of paintings called the *Voter* series and exhibited those during that '84 period, since that was an election year. I just tried to do that particular series as a consciousness-raising series, not taking a political stance one way or the other but more of initiating one to act. I remember my mother [Agnes Moses Davis] was really reluctant to vote when I was a kid, and my folks had to pay a poll tax. I remember my dad [Alonzo J. Davis Sr.] having to take a test in order to vote, and the test had ridiculous questions like how many windows in the White House. Now that we've sort of overcome that denial, it's just something that I think is important to do. In '85, I did a print called *Art against Apartheid*. I did a series of six for a portfolio. These prints made statements about apartheid. I used words as well as a silhouette image of Africa, and then I singled out the South African area in this map.

MASON

We talked about those when they were all hung up together in the show at the [Sacramento] City College, the very first session we had.

DAVIS

Oh, yeah?

MASON

Yeah. You had the postcards, and then on the wall by the door there was a—

DAVIS

Okay, great. Again, it's sort of using printmaking to make a statement with multiples that are more accessible than paintings. Then we did another piece. Maybe we— Oh, yeah. That was in the Sacramento gallery [Gregory Kondos Art Gallery], yeah, in Sac City. Did I talk about the piece Now Is the Time with Jesse Jackson sort of written underneath as subliminal?

MASON

Yes.

DAVIS

Yeah, okay. Well, those three prints— Let's see. The Jesse Jackson one, *Now Is the Time*, and *Act on It* and this recent one I did on El Salvador were done in a postage-stamp format, so it's as if it's an enlarged stamp. I hope to continue to do that. I like the stamp as a possible image to work with, and actually at some point in this lifetime I'd like to produce a stamp. In a way, that's an ultimate public art form since it reaches everyone through the mail, millions of people. Also in '84, I was doing these murals, '83-'84, but I also did some paintings related to the Olympics coming. They were studies on canvas and on paper. And they were kind of fun, using the Olympic rings and suggestions of a pole-vault image and a shadow casting down from it. Actually, I had put these pieces away, and it would be nice to see them again. I remember enjoying those paintings. I don't think I've exhibited them in any major way, so, yeah, I need to rediscover them. I have a show. in '92 at Lawrence University in Appleton, Wisconsin, and I want it to be reflective of the eighties and nineties.

MASON

You mean it's a retrospective?

DAVIS

Well, eighties and nineties. That's not really a retrospective, but it encompasses ten years of work, give or take. I guess I'll talk a little bit about Hawaii.

MASON

I just wanted to ask you some overall questions.

DAVIS

Sure.

MASON

But— Okay, well, you can talk about that, and I'll, just save them for the end.

DAVIS

Okay. In 1988, I got a fellowship and was invited to the [University of Hawaii] East-West Center to be an artist in residence there. That was for approximately five or six months. I was invited there to paint, to give a talk about what I did, and to do an exhibition of the works I had done there, as well as to bring some works that were in that series. This was a great opportunity for me because I could focus exclusively on the work without worrying about earning a living. I worked with a gentleman and fellow artist named Marshall Kerry as a studio assistant. There was another artist there named Reihana MacDonald from New Zealand, of Maori ancestry. We tended to respond to similar stimuli. I tended to work on the*Blanket* series with much larger formats on canvas and paper. This was where the canvas started becoming sewn as opposed to glued together. I did pieces that reflected a certain sensitivity to my experience of being in Hawaii. I think one was called the Royal Navigator, which dealt with the water and the sea. There was another one called Cloak for King Kamehameha. Then there was another one called Hibiscus Winds, another Mango Lover. And these were all reflective of an influence of being in that part of the world, the planet, or— In a way, it didn't feel like the United States, even though it was. I really enjoyed the cultural diversity of the islands and the mix of people and interacting with people from Asian-Pacific backgrounds. And I did one that looked like a kimono in a way as well. So they were six, seven feet by four, five feet.

MASON

So how is that related to—? What's the name of this one?

DAVIS

Shelter. *Shelter* was done in Sacramento before going to Hawaii, and it has more of a Native American feel to it to me. I guess in that Sacramento period I did some pieces called *Studio Jazz*, which related to a guy named Le Grand

Rogers, who is a drummer whom I used to hang out with there. And I did another large piece called *At Juanishi's Invitation*, and it was a piece that reflected going to a Native American sweat ceremony.

MASON

What kind of ceremony?

DAVIS

Sweat. Having come back from that sort of cleansing, it just really jumped into this painting. I mean, it just flowed right out. It was sort of interesting in that, having gone to the sweat lodge and through the ceremonies, it just sort of pulled the creative juices up in me and these paintings came out. I would say that just before leaving for Sacramento I was just at the beginning of weaving the paintings. Then I really started weaving the small ones once I got to Sacramento. Somehow they came out of that experience there.

MASON

So sometimes your woven ones are— When I saw your show at the Brockman Gallery when it was up, sometimes they're painted strips that were cut up and then sewn, and sometimes it seemed like they were all sewn together and then painted over the top of the pieces. Was there a difference in technique between the glued ones and the sewn as far as cutting them up and sewing them together? Or did that have any significance?

DAVIS

It would vary, it would vary. Usually—if we take the paper pieces as an example—I would paint them, do sort of a painted treatment on them, and then I would end up using two sheets of paper of this sort of handmade paper that I would buy from a distributor. And then I would cut them into strips, weave them together, and paint them again to make that a completed piece. There were occasions where I would— Well, like with Hawaii, I think I gessoed the canvas, the large canvas pieces. I gessoed them, wove them together, and pinned them. Then I took them to an upholstery shop, and they sewed them, and then I painted them. So the steps varied somewhat, but most of that work had a tremendous amount, of layers and transparent colors and overlapping kinds of qualities on them.

MASON

I noticed in some pieces there were— Well, I can't find one here, but there was a kind of Jackson Pollock layer where you—

DAVIS

Yes. That's usually the first layer that goes down, where there's a lot of free-splatter brush stroke, loose kind of quality. That would usually go down on the gessoed surface, and then the painted pattern of transparent colors. Then sometimes I would do splatter on top of that again, so it would— Sometimes some of these paintings have ten or fifteen layers of paint and approach. This one that I've been working on here in San Antonio is this large paper piece that's out here. I mean, I brought it from Sacramento. I couldn't resolve it there. I've added two or three layers to it here, and I don't know how much I had on it when I left Sacramento. I like for the paintings to have a lot of body and a lot of depth and a lot of surface quality. I really just work on them until they resolve themselves. Some paintings take years, and the same format of another painting might take a month or two.

MASON

Would you say these are your most abstract or—?

DAVIS

These tend to be the ones with the least amount of symbolism in them. Even the arrow has been dropped in a lot of these, not consciously. It's just that they resolve themselves before I can mess them up with trying to put a message in them. And I don't mean that in a derogatory way. It's just that I'm sort of the vehicle that does these art pieces, and they surprise me sometimes. I've used the arrow as a symbol, as almost— It's almost become a signature in my work, so a lot of my friends and associates have come to expect that. There was a period of time where I almost felt obligated to throw it in somewhere so that it would appear to have my signature. But these last few pieces that I've done here in San Antonio don't have it for the most part, or, if they do, they're very subtle. It's almost something you would have to discover.

MASON

Did you kind of rediscover the abstract expressionists? Or was it more—? Well, you were just saying that it kind of surprised you that you decided to stop before you added the symbols. So why was that satisfying? And when was that?

DAVIS

I never really stopped to analyze it, but I can say that I've always been drawn to abstract expressionism and liked the energy that evolved from the works of art that came out of that period.

MASON

Even at Otis?

DAVIS

Even at Otis, yeah. And if I wasn't doing it, I admired it in other people. However, I don't feel compelled to be in a school of art or feel like I'm obligated to have a certain influence in what I do. What I do, it happens to be what I do. I guess a few years ago I've become more and more aware of Helen Frankenthaler's work and really like it, but I don't necessarily base what I do on her work. But I do see relationships in my work.

MASON

In terms of color or—?

DAVIS

In terms of color and technique and approach and maybe even attitude. I'm not sure. I think she's learned to stop a lot sooner in her work than I have. Mine still tends to go on and on and on, whereas she is able to sort of stop at a place that's kind of interesting and is fascinating for me. Because she is a respected artist, and it's like, "Wow, why did she stop there?" or "That was great that she could stop there."

MASON

So why did you decide to try to get away from the square canvas? You wrote in your thesis that that was one of the things that you were trying to do then, but why was that important to you?

DAVIS

I guess the square canvas represented the same old traditional way of looking at art and at painting, and I really wanted to have a fresh approach to what I do and did. I tried making those bags out of canvas. That wasn't necessarily successful, but I worked on it. Then looking at sort of Native American buffalo hides, they were real irregular and stretched with leather or rope, so those were fascinating forms. And the fact that I started becoming mobile in my life-style made that attitude and approach to art complementary with what I was doing. So not only did I have sort of another format but I also had eliminated a shipping problem. Now I roll the pieces up and put them in a tube instead of building a crate to ship them flat. And a lot of the work doesn't require a frame. That's an interesting way of looking at— It's almost like hanging a rug on a wall or a tapestry or a skin or a hide.

MASON

So you're kind of walking the line between so-called crafts and so-called fine arts.

DAVIS

I don't see it as craft at all. I think craft is sort of more involved in another direction.

MASON

And what direction is that?

DAVIS

Craft? It's more tooling and— I mean, there's craftsmanship in your work, but, when you say craft, it makes me think of furniture or pottery or jewelry.

MASON

You mean functional things?

DAVIS

Functional, even nonfunctional, but from the structure of a craft approach. If anything, I think my paintings are approached from more a design quality than from a craft quality. I did study a lot of design, and I know that I do design

problem solving when I get caught in the work. I start taking it apart or do drawings that would be almost a design problem as to how to approach or solve this piece. One of the things that I'm really beginning to focus on now is doing installation pieces and collaborations with other artists for public art kinds of things. So I really see the work evolving into more temporary kinds of statements. I have an altar concept that I would like to do in an abandoned gas station here in San Antonio in a community. I'd like to do it with light and candles and painting and memorabilia and just begin to create a three-dimensional assemblage of stuff and make it an art statement, and probably a statement that would evolve over a three-month period of time but would maybe only last a week or two after it was complete. And I recently did a piece here called *Twelve Phone Calls to the Future*, which was a neon— Did I talk about this one, the neon piece?

MASON

Not on tape, no.

DAVIS

Okay. It's a neon piece that was elevated on a float about four feet high, four to five feet high, and this float was covered with black cloth. The neon was attached to the top with two candles on either side, and then there were ten candles down at the bottom of the pontoon. So there were twelve candles lit. And, at night¬time, I had the neon turned on, and I floated it out in the middle of this pond so it just sort of glimmered and glistened. I hired a drummer to play rhythmic patterns at the head of the pond, and I had a guy who was a pyrotechnic sculptor set off fireworks at the back end of the pond where the water sort of goes into— There's a little stream that sort of goes into the pond. All of this was done from sunset in about an hour's time. So it was a temporary experience, but it was a very moving kind of reflective, interesting piece. So I'm looking to do some more pieces that have that kind of quality.

MASON

You mean temporary or—?

DAVIS

Temporary. And in a way it was sort of an illusion, because the neon and the candles were reflecting off of the water. Then I had an additional twelve little boats of styrofoam with candles in it also floating out in the water separately. And this was influenced by this guy here, this sculptor I mentioned, Bill Fitzgibbons, and an artist in Sacramento named Tom Witt, who had done a piece around another kind of body of water that he and I collaborated on to make a—

1.21. TAPE NUMBER: XII, SIDE TWO APRIL 23, 1991

DAVIS

I was saying this artist Tom and I collaborated on creating a pond.

MASON

You talked about that, too.

DAVIS

The smoked glass and the sculpture in the middle of the water and then lit these flares around it and had drummers come and sort of do a ceremony.

MASON

This was at Shingle Springs [California]?

DAVIS

Yeah, at Shingle Springs.

MASON

Okay. How did you see the relationship between the public permanent pieces like the murals and the private temporary pieces like the installations?

DAVIS

Well, the permanent pieces have to take into consideration a lot more elements. I've been looking at trying to do a piece for a building in New York, and I have to be concerned with the kind of stone and the kind of pavers, because this would be a mosaic kind of image that would come off a building and down to the ground. It would have a fountain, hopefully. It sort of involves the public at large, safety factors, security, permanence, so a lot more

things go into it to make it happen than some of the temporary pieces. Temporary pieces tend to be away from people, and the people are tending to watch it. It's almost like a performance piece instead of a permanent work of public art.

MASON

Are you doing any other kinds of performance?

DAVIS

No, not yet. I've actually talked with a couple of students here [San Antonio Art Institute] about working together. There's a woman named Bettie Ward who is a senior at this college. She's what I call an older student—she's forty—and she's done a lot of performance pieces and has been a singer and is now graduating in sculpture. So we talked about doing a performance piece of some sort, but nothing has been nailed down yet.

MASON

Will it be the same kind of thing as with the Tom Witt project? Will you build something?

DAVIS

I don't know. It will probably involve some structure and involve us creating something that would happen and be for a limited number of people, sort of invited guests, or take place on private property and hopefully be documented by videotape.

MASON

Well, you said you had slides of the *Twelve Phone Calls to the Future*.

DAVIS

Yeah, yeah.

MASON

What about the piece at Shingle Springs? Did you say you videotaped that? Or did you take photographs?

DAVIS

I have some photographs of it, yeah.

1.22. TAPE NUMBER: XIII, SIDE ONE APRIL 24, 1991

MASON

Today we wanted to talk about the Brockman Gallery, why you left it, and what's going to happen to the gallery now that you've gone.

DAVIS

Let's see, I left Los Angeles in 1987. I was in the process of slowing down and phasing out a lot of the activities I was involved in within the city of L.A. I had served on a lot of boards or organizations and had also been running Brockman Productions, so I resigned as executive director of Brockman Productions and turned its operation over to the board but continued to run the gallery. I think that happened in the '85-'86 time frame. It got to be kind of hard to pull away from a lot of the community activities and the boards I was involved in, so that weighed in my decision to leave Los Angeles. And also, I had accomplished a lot of things in L.A., and I just really felt like it was the time to change, and I wanted to move to and live in a smaller community. While a lot of people ask why didn't I move to San Francisco or Chicago or New York, which sometimes tends to be the pattern of artists in the West, I just decided it was not necessarily what I was looking for.

MASON

Why not?

DAVIS

I wasn't interested in being in a major metropolitan area. I wanted a slower-paced place with just a different rhythm, a different beat, a different speed. So I left L.A. for that reason. I didn't necessarily leave to shut down the gallery operation. I tried to leave it in place with what became two managers of the business, a woman named Alicia Griffin and then Debbie Byars. For some time I had been trying to shift the responsibilities of the operation. Financially, it just really didn't have enough money to pay the kind of salary that needed to be paid for a full-fledged director/curator. I had tried to do that with Leonard Simon a few years before that, and it just couldn't make that shift. I kept

finding myself stuck with management and operations and curatorial decision making. So I was trying to remove myself from that but yet still have a viable entity happening. And then I went through the two managers of the business in a way that the same kind of standards weren't necessarily there. Although these people had good intentions, sometimes their business skills or communication skills were detrimental to the sort of public relations and marketing end that we had established over a period of time.

MASON

When you say that the managers, you mean Debbie and—?

DAVIS

Right, Alicia. They were certainly sincere and made great efforts but couldn't turn a corner financially. In many cases, some of the exhibitions suffered, and some of the communication with the artists suffered. So operating at a distance just didn't work out. As of this year, I have technically closed the gallery operations down in terms of being a formal art gallery, a formal retail space, and have approached it with another format. Still wanting to have a business space and being affiliated with Los Angeles, I decided to maintain the space and to make it available to creative people on a short-term basis. It falls in line with another thing that I've been doing, which is acquiring artists' spaces. As I left them, I'd sublet them to other artists so that there was sort of a continuity and it always stayed within the hands of creative people. I wanted to keep art on the block in Los Angeles. So I have two studios now, one that is sublet to Darryl Evers, who is an artist in residence with us, and Kamau Daaood and Billy Higgins have the other space. And Kamau is a performance artist, poet, and Billy Higgins is a jazz drummer. So they do these ongoing programs. We call them BG studio one and two. So the natural succession for the gallery space was to move into that direction but to keep it somewhat limited so that it wasn't a long-term use opportunity, that artists could use it up to six months. It's wide open, and they can do whatever they want to do in there. I mean, they can do exhibits, they can use it as studio space, it can be mixed-use space, it can be performance space, they can do screenings in there. One guy is a computer artist who's interested in the space. In the fall, or right now, there's a family—two sisters and a brother [Mary, Jackie, and Alden Kimbrough]—who have a major collection of revolutionary art and historical

posters that will have the space through August. I guess they came on in March. They'll have it for this initial six-month period, and so it's the Kimbrough collection, it's not Brockman Gallery.

MASON

Okay. I'm still not clear on your relationship to the gallery. You're just a landlord? Or if an artist wants to use it as an exhibition space, do you provide like a consultancy for that artist? Do you do any kind of management or—?

DAVIS

I provide a consultancy and we provide— There's track lighting, there's a pedestal, there's space. But, in a way, I'm sort of like a landlord in that I'm making a space available. I'm not doing programming.

MASON

Right, but you offer some management.

DAVIS

But we probably take it a little further because we do technical assistance. We try to help them get off the ground. We have a mailing list that's available to them that is accessible for their use.

MASON

Do you think there's—? Are you trying to keep the galleries a multicultural—?

DAVIS

Yeah. My personal focus is that it be available to whomever comes through who has a concept of merit. So it's not exclusive to any one particular group.

MASON

So then, when you left for Sacramento, that was a permanent move?

DAVIS

It was sort of a trial balloon. I mean, you go, and you decide to rent an efficiency apartment instead of a two-bedroom apartment because you don't know how it's going to turn out. I wanted to make the move, but I was doing it cautiously. I was trying to see if it would work out, and it did. It served the

purpose of breaking that bond with the city of Los Angeles. I was able to be more involved and more creative with the kind of output just because I was able to say no to situations there that were difficult for me to say no to in L.A., especially in terms of just getting involved and being a part of the community. I had paid those dues and really just needed a break to focus on my own directions.

MASON

You began to do installation pieces there, earthworks and things like that, that you probably couldn't possibly do in L.A. What other kinds of things do you think you were able to do in that setting that you couldn't do in L.A.? And how has being there affected your work?

DAVIS

Well, I had a large studio in Sacramento, and that was a really good space. I was able to really focus on being and working in that space because I had fewer distractions and I was more driven and determined. And the weather, the mood changes in being in that sort of climate— You know, it had the four seasons, and that was interesting. So I would do things that reflected on the fall or the winter or the spring, which tended to just be more dramatic than in Southern California. Also, I was close to the Bay Area—within a two-hour drive—so I was still not totally removed from creative associates. I would go over there from time to time. It wasn't a criteria to be there, though. It was really nice not to— It was like it was great to visit, but you didn't have to get caught up within the total spectrum of that other art community. The earthworks and those kinds of things just kind of happened as things were available. I had a friend [Pat Brown] who had property outside of Sacramento, and I would spend a lot of time there. Just sort of access and someone who was open to something happening on their land allowed me to think in that kind of direction. I didn't have to pursue someone or pursue the unknown to find access. So conversations and those kinds of things led to that.

MASON

What about in terms of your audience or public or just the general attitude towards art in Sacramento? Do you think there's a greater receptivity for the kind of work that you're doing than there was in L. A.? Because one usually

associates the more northerly California artists with a certain kind of spirituality. It seems that they have a greater spirituality in their work than the—

DAVIS

I didn't necessarily find that true.

MASON

It's just a cliché?

DAVIS

There were a lot of artists in the Northern California area. Sacramento has a rich group, of artists there that maybe you wouldn't think you would find, but they tend to be a little bit too regional. They don't reach out as far as I think they could and should. I think probably the influence of possibilities had to do with having worked with the city's public art program and being exposed to the number of proposals and concepts that the artists would submit or attempt to do. That opened my head a lot. And then I had a greater opportunity to interact with the artist community at large based on my contacts through that and being in a studio where there were a lot of other artists doing a myriad of different kinds of things. And it was a smaller community. There were not as many black American artists there, so my associations changed quite a bit. A lot of the artists that I associated with were Native American or Chicano and Anglo. So I had a greater awareness of their activities, as well, than I had in Los Angeles. In terms of the public, I had a greater public in Los Angeles, actually, but this was sort of a fresh public, and I was a new kid on the block, so to speak, so that helped attract people to what I was doing. And then I had been teaching there—sort of reentered the teaching community in the summer of '88—so I had students who sort of followed my activities and came to studio events.

MASON

I want to talk about your teaching, but I also wanted to ask you, who is your public? Who do you feel your audience is?

DAVIS

I think it's real mixed. There's a natural association with those people who follow the works of African American artists, so that's one audience that's constantly available to me, not that they necessarily understand the kinds of things that I'm doing in some cases. There's a student audience—those people who are looking for new things and for artists who are teachers, trying to learn and discern from that kind of an experience. Then there are those people who just like way-out things who tend to be followers. Then there's just the arts community in general, some of which is interested in contemporary art. So I tend to draw down from all of those groups in varying ways and at different times. It's probably peculiar to the kind of thing that I'm doing at one time or another. So the earthworks or the installation pieces might draw one kind of crowd and the paintings another to some degree.

MASON

Well, Kay [Lindsey] asked you a good question. She asked whether you had one person in particular who seems to follow your career.

DAVIS

This woman just died last week. Her name was Camille Higgins. It was always important to her to keep up with who I was and what I was doing, and I really enjoyed that kind of connection. Also Cheryl Dixon, writer and professor of art at Dillard University in New Orleans. There are other people who follow through, but it's hard for me to say. It's like defining those people who try to keep up with me as an artist and my work, or is it the friendship relationship that I have with them that also connects to art in some way? I work with a woman named Mary Lynn Perry. She's my agent in Sacramento. She keeps a real close monitor on what I'm doing. I work with a woman named Winifred Day and with Harvey Evans, who have a business called Corp Decor in Oakland, and they sell a lot of my paintings to the business community. We have an ongoing relationship. John Outterbridge has been one of those people who's always been there, and we have this brotherhood as men and as artists and as people who have crossed the burning sands together so to speak. I'm sure there are others; I just can't recall.

MASON

You mentioned having a spiritual relationship with Matthew Thomas.

DAVIS

Well, I have a real strong connection with him and his work, but I can't say that we follow each other's career or that we're that type or maintain that kind of parallel connection that I think John and I do.

MASON

So, in other words, in your relationship with John Outterbridge, you discuss art issues, you discuss—

DAVIS

Being human beings.

MASON

What about your teaching? What kinds of things do you think are important for younger students to know?

DAVIS

Well, I'll answer your question a different way than you're asking it and say that I taught in public schools in L.A. for five years, from, I think, about twenty-five years of age to thirty. And, when leaving, I said, "I'm good at this, it's something I can do well, but right now I can't bring enough to it. And it's also very draining, and it's a major distraction in terms of my personal goals and so forth. What I would hope to do is reenter the education community when I'm a more mature person, when I can bring life to the classroom and be able to give a much fuller kind of experience." I left teaching full-time in 1970. Then I did part-time teaching in the community colleges in 1971 through '76, actually, teaching at community colleges and state universities.

MASON

What subjects did you teach?

DAVIS

Afro-American art history, beginning drawing. Those are the two main subjects. But then I left that in '76, one, because Brockman Productions was getting off the ground and, two, I was tired of being pigeonholed into the Afro-American art history when my degree was in painting, printmaking,

design. I had an M. F. A. [master of fine arts] and was sort of qualified to work on the levels that a lot of other people were getting and weren't made available to me. And one of the other reasons to reenter the education situation was I had the skills, I had the experience, I had the track record. I could bring the pitfalls and the glories of success as an artist to the classroom. I felt like I could give a real hands-on life experience, and it also would provide me with a steady income between the ages of fifty and sixty, which would be the time to sort of look at retirement or look at a saving-for-retirement kind of situation. I also know that I have to balance that to my creative energies as well. So, this time at it, I think I can manage it better than I could when I was in my late twenties.

MASON

The way you're describing it, it sounds like your teaching style is somewhat similar to Charles White's in the classroom in that he spent a lot of time talking about life experiences. Would you say that's true?

DAVIS

I would say that's true. I try to bring a realistic picture, I try to give real challenging assignments, and I try to talk about what it takes to be an artist, what the sacrifices are.

MASON

And what are those?

DAVIS

Well, before I say what they are, let me say that I also try to prepare people to get organized towards what is expected of them as professional artists as well. So the pitfalls are the things that you don't get together. It's like if you don't have your resume written, and it's not typewritten. That's a pitfall. And a lot of artists just kind of play it off. But if you go to college, then you're working toward being a professional, and you need to have your act together on all levels. So how to make presentations, how to present yourself, how to get your slides together, how to write proposals, how to be clear about your intent, how to put a biography together, how to use a computer to your advantage in terms of moving information around so that the person who's

going to be reading your stuff will be able to focus in on it. What kind of money you can expect to earn in a lifetime, how to protect your financial interests in a grant situation, how to ask for what you want. All of these things to me just sound like commonsense activities, but they really aren't. Art students want to paint. It's like, "I don't want to get involved in all these other things." But—

MASON

They feel if their work is good, somebody will notice anyway.

DAVIS

Right. I tend to tell them that the best artist that paints in a closet is one that's never seen. They've got to be good, and then they've also got to find a way to communicate what they've done to the people who handle or respond to or support or purchase the kinds of things that they do.

MASON

Do you tell your black students anything in particular about being black artists?

DAVIS

Well, I always try to pull the students who don't have a consciousness aside. Like here there's only one black student on this campus, and he's not really aware of the history that follows him. So I've made a point to say things about Charles White or Jacob Lawrence or Romare Bearden. His style is like Hughie Lee Smith's, so I'm like, "Well, there's a guy named Hughie Lee Smith, and if you can't find it in the library here, you ought to go to Trinity University and see what you can find over there." So I try to lead. I can't hold his hand and do that. I talked about John [Thomas] Biggers. He's a Texas artist, and he's black. He's accomplished major things, and he's done murals. He was doing a picture of a boxer. There's a guy in Birmingham, Alabama, who did paintings of boxers who went to the San Francisco Art Institute, but it was like the paintings of boxers he did showed that energy of the punch as much as it showed the portrait of the person standing behind the gloves. So I try to relay that kind of thing to him as well. But it's a slow process, and he's got to be curious. He's got to want for it. But the kind of impact I'm having on this campus just as an

artist and person is something also that he takes pride in, just me being here. So there is a little power in presence as well.

MASON

Is there a particular student that you think you've had a great impact on or that you perceive that you've had a great impact on in their work?

DAVIS

Wow, it's— The answer is yes, and there's not a particular one. It seems to be that a number of them have expressed that. But then the burden is on them to continue through their life to make it happen. And I really try to prepare them for it. The advanced painting class here at San Antonio Art Institute has been exceptional. I think that I've reached at least four or five or the eight students, that I've turned them on. They relay things back to me that are real positive. They've taken to heart the kinds of things that I've asked them to do, which is like go beyond painting and get ready for life. I even require them to do a long-range plan which would project who they saw themselves as and where they wanted to be in five years. It was a real difficult exercise for many of them, but at least it got them thinking and establishing some goals. I'm sure those goals will change with many of them, if not most of them. But there's a sort of a process to looking at where you want to be and avoiding some of the pitfalls and the other distractions. that are out there. And you can see them in the projects that they write for me.

MASON

So you're trying to prepare your students for the world and for—

DAVIS

For life as artists.

MASON

We've been talking a lot about how black artists are excluded from institutions, galleries, and publications and things. Do you think that's changing? Do you think there is a de-emphasis on race as far as the art market and the world—?

DAVIS

Well, there's a catch-22 on that. There's a de-emphasis on race, but then, all of a sudden, you still find that there is still a small number of artists of color being included in the big picture. So I question the de-emphasis of race in that people want to de-emphasize it when those artists attain a certain level but then perpetuate it as a category sometimes to keep a division. So it's just not equity across the board. I don't know. I look at this school. There's not enough recruitment. There certainly needs to be more black students, just looking at the numbers in the state of Texas. Somebody's not doing their job. That's the picture that I have.

MASON

Well, I guess I was also thinking in terms of do you think that there is kind of an alternative structure for black artists to become, well, quote, "successful, " unquote, or well known? Because there are obviously black artists who have been successful, it seems, without those apparatuses.

DAVIS

Yeah. I mean, there is the network within the culture that can carry these artists or a fair number of these artists. It's just a limited amount of access they have to the art public at large. But, yes, they can be successful without mainstreaming.

MASON

So that network consists of places like the Brockman Gallery, the California Afro-American Museum?

DAVIS

Yeah. The California Afro-American Museum, the Studio Museum in Harlem. I mean, these are like institutions that are established that are strong cultural entities that give young, promising artists the opportunity to get their stuff out there before a public that they may not have access to through the mainstream. But each generation's obligation is to create these kinds of spaces for their artists.

MASON

So you don't see a general phasing out of the need of that institution?

DAVIS

No. No, I don't know that that— Because there are so many people who don't go through the traditional education process who are still artists and whose communities or whose ability to network outside of their community is limited. So the institutions are still needed, and the artists still need those institutions, [tape recorder off]

MASON

Okay. I think it's clear by now that you're not only interested in African American issues. You're also interested in other cultures. You're interested in multicultural issues. How have you been able to address that interest since you've been in San Antonio? And how do you want to address them in the future?

DAVIS

Well, I guess over the years I've been, a part of a movement to acknowledge the cultural activities of the diverse population, especially in California, and acknowledge the contribution and the influences of the historical homeland and its fusion with North American culture. So I participated on the panels of the multicultural artist programs for the California Arts Council, and I represented those interests on a number of boards that I sat on in Los Angeles. I've always made an active effort to include that community in the audience development that I would do for my own work or exhibitions. Here in Texas, I'm here as an educator, a visiting professor, and happen to be an artist of color. I just think my presence makes a difference for a lot of people. I always address my history and where I come from and what my background and bloodline is to all of my classes. It's just a point of reference. I try to-be real clear about it without evoking any prejudice or alienation of any other group or groups. And in working with the college president here [San Antonio Art Institute]— We have sort of weekly sessions on Wednesday afternoons, and I've said, "Well, if you're going to be in Texas and you're going to be the only art school in the Southwest, you need to attract other people." There's such a large Hispanic community in this part of Texas—we're only a few hundred miles, if that, from Mexico—and there's a tremendous amount of potential to reach students from Central and South America. I also felt that this school had an excellent opportunity to attract students from the Pacific

Rim countries, especially countries like Cambodia, Thailand, Indonesia, Korea, and even some of the Vietnamese people. So I always make that kind of presence known and way of thinking known. There's a change in the recruitment position, and one of the things that I have said is that whomever takes on this position should be Spanish speaking or be willing to learn so that they can communicate in that other language, should it be necessary. There's just a large number of people like that who need to feel at home sometimes, and using another language is sometimes that key to breaking barriers of insecurity or dealing with the unfamiliar.

MASON

Well, how has that gone down with the board and the administration? Because, of course, a lot of people see different cultures as threats and not as equal.

DAVIS

Well, I'd just say that it's open, that people have been open to what I've had to say about it. But I'm not playing— I'm not on the board. I'm not privileged to board decisions, and I'm not trying to participate on that level at this time. It's one thing to say these things; it's another to put them into action. But there's a receptivity and, I think, a desire to move in that direction. This is not to be done to move the white students out of the picture. It's just to make this international, and it's an excellent opportunity for this institution.

MASON

Do you see art as a way of bridging the gaps between different cultures?

DAVIS

Well, there are so many ways of bridging the gap, and art is simply only one. I mean, music is another, literature is another, business is another, trade is another, commerce, travel. I really try to emphasize travel among students. Learning other languages of other people and world history. All of those things coming together make a difference. It's real easy for people to isolate one thing and then not deal with it. But to have an infusion of all of these kinds of things I think makes it truly international.

MASON

Do you want to talk about the Oil and Blood, the In Lak'esh project?

DAVIS

That's a project in Sacramento that's a collaboration of thirty-one artists and thirty-one poets. They've been paired off so an artist and a poet produce a product that is the result of their collaboration. I'm one of the selected artists to participate. I'm working with a poet named Teresa Vincigerra. We've talked about—and we haven't finalized it—but our concept is to do bus stops. So we were thinking of doing a series of bus stops that use poetry as language. And we talked about the poem being in several languages or languages that might be peculiar to the different communities that these bus stops might find themselves in. So it might be in Cambodian or it might be in English, it might be in Spanish, probably the same poem. And these bus stops would be designed and executed in an artistic way as well as having language as part of their structure.

MASON

So it's sort of a mural concept for the bus stop? Is that it?

DAVIS

Well— It's hard to call it— I don't know yet. Yeah. I mean, it hasn't really been determined whether it will be painted, whether it will be three-dimensional, whether it would be cut out, and whether it will be models for bus stops, or whether we'll actually do actual bus stops. So the collaboration effort is towards that. We'd like to do some actual ones, but we don't know what—

MASON

Oh, I thought you were working with bus stops which were already in place.

DAVIS

No.

MASON

Oh, I see.

DAVIS

No. These are concepts for—

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MASON

Do you consider yourself a successful artist? Are you where you want to be right now in your career?

DAVIS

Interesting question. Am I where I want to be right now? I think I'm moving toward where I want to be and successful to some degree. I'm never complacent about being totally satisfied. I mean, there's always something new you want to do or another opportunity that might be challenging. There's always something around the corner, so I'm not complacent in any shape or form. But I'm challenged and I'm always looking. And as opportunities come, if I have the opportunity to do them and become successful, then I've gotten to that step of the hill. And then I'm looking up at the next one. And that's true with artist-commission opportunities.

MASON

You talked about the stamp. You were hoping to get a stamp commission.

DAVIS

Yeah, I'd like to do that at some point. I'd like to see it happen in my lifetime.

MASON

Is that your next big dream?

DAVIS

Well, it's one of those long-range dreams. Those are the kinds of things I'm dreaming after, pursuing, fantasizing. I'm almost fifty, and I'm looking at that as that particular period of time when I want to put some financial security together so I can be a retiring, working artist. That's part of my dream, to find an institution or work situation that will support my creativity, but I can also earn a living to realize that last phase of my lifetime, if I am able to have a long life.

Date: