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SKOWHEGAN SCHOOL OF PAINTING & SCULPTURE

**Lecture by Elizabeth Catlett
Summer, 1985**

Transcriber: Judith Stoodley

Introduction: My name is David Driskell; I'm a Governor of the school – you've heard that word around a good bit, and perhaps many of you are wondering what do *Governors* do? We help with the administration of the school... program, the academic side of the program. And...that includes selection of faculty, selection of students, the issues of scholarships, et cetera. But my role tonight is one which I'm delighted to do. It's a difficult task, because the person that I'm about to introduce has so many credentials, has so many good things to her credit; but most importantly, she is one of the greatest artists that I know.

Elizabeth Catlett, Elizabeth Catlett-Mora...Elizabeth Catlett lives in Cuernavaca. She was born in Washington, DC; she was educated at Howard University in Washington DC; and her Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa. As a matter of fact, she was the first person to receive a Master of Fine Arts from the University of Iowa. It doesn't make her old; it just makes her good. For many years she taught in the United States; there's different schools, Universities, colleges, working on her own; and then went Mexico City where she, for a number of years, headed the Sculpture Department at the University of Mexico in Mexico City. And it is from that position that she retired, just a few years ago. She did not really retire because her work continues – she continues to exhibit... frequently, not only in exhibitions arranged of her work, one person shows, but in numerous group shows. She continues by... being asked to do major commissions, one being the celebrated work of Louis Armstrong at Armstrong park in New Orleans,

Louisiana; she did a major commission for the School of Engineering at Howard University; she has just finished a work, or perhaps is still working on it – a work for York College. I could go on naming those kinds of accomplishments. But most importantly I think of Miss Catlett as being a person who has bridged the gap between many, many worlds in art. Her art speaks for itself. She is in the tradition of the great artists who imbue in their work a sense of that which is morally concerned, that which is dedicated beyond the concept of aesthetics and beautifying. It teaches, it moralizes, it reaches into the annals of history; and so it is in that tradition – the great tradition of Ben Shahn, and other great artists of that tradition that Elizabeth Catlett comes to us this evening. I think I've said enough, Betty (laughs)(laughter). So I want you to listen to her, and let's welcome, from Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico, Elizabeth Catlett. (Applause)

Speaker: Which is forward? (pause) This one's forward, right? First I'd like to introduce another artist from Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico... my husband Francisco Mora, who's a painter and a printmaker. (Applause)

Comment: (Francisco Mora speaking?): And a Fresco Artist!

Speaker: And a Fresco--Well, that's a painter. (Applause) I live in Mexico, and... first I have to tell you that we got caught in a rainstorm, very hard, and our bags got soaked, and although they're plastic they have, little cloth zippers on them. So the little house where we are is all decorated with intimate bits of underwear and pajamas and so-forth (laughter). But what really got soaked was the speech that I wrote. (laughs)(laughter) So instead of resting, I re-wrote some things, okay? On the plane from Boston to Waterville I read a magazine called *Success* (laughter). And the two articles that impressed me the most were "The Art of Networking" and, maybe it didn't impress me as much because at the reception I really wasn't networking as I should have been. And "Join the Yuppie Revolution," (laughter) by Jerry Rubin (spelling), who used to be... (laughter)--Really, I don't know whether you saw the magazine, but he used to be *the* "Yippie" of the 60's. And... it seems to me, from his article, that the yuppies-- the *yuppies* have One: saved America from a terrible depression, by establishing businesses. It said that, I think 80% of employees were in businesses over the last four years; Two: are largely responsible for America's health revolution; and Three: have helped changed the role of

American women and the structure of the American family. The article made me realize that I have been away from this place for a *long* time. (laughter) Then-- well I told you about the luggage, and so-forth. So now, I really don't know how many yuppies are here at Skowhegan (laughter). But I do know that since there's not only a generation gap between me and most of you, there's also a cultural difference. And I thought we might benefit mutually if we divided our evening into three sections. One: I'm going to make a talk, because I was invited to make one. And two: I'm going to show you about, oh, forty or fifty slides of my work, so you can see how I work; and I thought you might be interested in why I do things – technically and aesthetically. And three: Some questions from me to you, because there are a couple of things going on-- a lot of you are from New York-- that I want to know about. Is that okay?

Audience: Affirmative murmurs.

Speaker: All right. I'm here to tell you about my work and about myself. I am Black, a woman, a sculptor, and a printmaker. I'm also married and the mother of three sons, the grandmother of five little girls. I am a student and a teacher. And much of my life has been spent learning and passing on what I have learned to other people. I was born in the United States, and I am now a citizen of Mexico – because I have lived there since 1946. I went to Mexico on a grant, and met a handsome Mexican and got married... And stayed. I believe that these facts about me have influenced my work and made it what it is today. And so I thought I would elaborate briefly. I am Black, because my great-great-grandmother was kidnapped from the beach at Madagascar and brought to the United States to be sold as a slave. Both of my mother's parents, and my father's mother were slaves. I have lived in ghettos all of my life in the United States, with the exception of Greenwich Village in New York, and the French Quarter in New Orleans. So I am Black in heritage and in culture. I think you should know that I'm a figurative artist. Since I studied with the regional...regionalist painter, Grant Wood, who taught me at my most impressionable age, to create from what I know best, I work with the subject matter of Black people... sometimes Mexican people. I sculpt, draw and print women, because I know how a woman feels in body and in mind. Many of my sculptures and prints deal with maternity, because I told you that I have all these children and grandchildren. As a student I was strongly influenced by three artists, completely different in their ways of working. The first one was

James Porter at Howard University – a painter, a teacher and an art historian, who introduced me to the seriousness of art and the need for dedication. Grant Wood, who also taught me the planning and development of a work of art, and the necessary formal discipline. And “Asib Zadkin,” of the modern French school, with whom I worked when he was a refugee in New York City during World War Two, studied and argued, learning again to maintain an open mind, and to experiment. His belief was in an art that should go from the international to the national. Now, he sculpted musicians and poets and harlequins; and I reasoned that my art should go from the national to the international; and so I worked with Black women as my main preoccupation. As a teacher I’ve had to learn first how to teach, in order to answer my ever-asking students. And from them... Black, White, Japanese and Mexicans, I have learned... From a American white student in my class at the University of Mexico’s Art School I learned to use pneumatic and electric tools. From the Japanese students, an insistence on hard work as enjoyable ... and new casting techniques, incidentally. From my Black students I learned that everyday people are intimidated by the intellectuality and commercialism of the world of critics, galleries, and frequently, museums. And from my Mexican students, an understanding of the importance of heritage. Theirs is the great pre-Hispanic culture. I have known for some time, as a Black woman, fortunate enough to have become a sculptor, that I must work figuratively. Although abstract form interests me, basically I am limited at least to a recognizable figure, by what I have chosen as the dues that I must pay, that I want to pay, and I am privileged to pay. This is the conscious accepted limitation, so that almost anyone can relate to something in my work. So that they can at least pass the barrier of “What is it supposed to be?” and move on from an interest in surface quality, let’s say, at least, to form and space relations. Everybody’s looking very serious, we’re all different; many of you maybe don’t believe in figurative art, or that it’s old-timey. I just want to tell you a little story to equalize all of us, okay? It’s a Mexican story. Real quick: There was a Mexican peasant coming to the big city for the first time, and he’s sitting beside a very intellectual mathematician. And the peasant is very excitedly looking out the window at all the cows and chickens and trees and new towns... and different kinds of houses and lakes and so-forth, and the mathematician is very bored; he’s sitting with his arms folded, and he’s looking into space and dozing. So finally he turned to the peasant and he said, “Let’s play a game.” “Umm, like what?” “Well,” he said, “I’ll ask you a questions, and if you can’t answer it, you pay me ten pesos; and then you ask me a question, and if I can’t answer it, I’ll pay you ten pesos.”

So the peasant thought about it, and he said, “No. You’ll take all my money; you know so many things that I don’t know.” And he went on, very happy, looking out the window, enjoying this and that. The mathematician’s sitting there, bored stiff (laughter) thinking “How can I pass the time?” So finally he says, “All right, let’s play it this way. You ask me a question, and if I can’t answer it, I’ll pay you ten pesos. And I’ll ask you a question, and if you can’t answer it you pay me one peso.” The peasant thought it over and he said, “Okay, let’s play.” So the Mathematician says immediately, “What was Einstein’s Theory of Relativity?” (laughter). The peasant reached in his pocket and gave him a peso. “So now it’s your turn.” The peasant said, “What is it that goes up the mountain on four legs, and come down on three?” (laughter) Well, he thought and thought and thought.... And finally, not very happily, he took ten pesos out, and gave them to the peasant. “So now it’s my turn. What’s the animal that goes up the mountain on four legs and comes down on three?” The peasant reached into this pocket and paid him a peso. (laughter) (Applause). So let’s all start out equal, okay? In 1970, I had an exhibition called “The Black Experience,” in the Museum of Modern Art in Mexico. And although it was the first figurative and social exhibition in that institution, it was enthusiastically received by the public – and by the critics. And I wanted to see what Black people thought about it, and so we brought it to the Studio Museum in Harlem. Had the same results. And since then I have exhibited, I guess for about fifteen years, mainly in many small Black galleries, cultural centers, universities, and even provisional spaces in churches and other meeting places within the black community. The interaction between me and those attending these exhibitions, all on a high-professional level, has contributed greatly to my development. Because mine is an alternative art. I have not sought fame, galleries, museums, publicity, and all that is generally considered necessary to be a recognized, important artist. My rewards have been others... more important to me. I believe that my art reaches people on many levels, and I brought a fan letter to read. It’s very short. It says: “Dear Mrs. Catlett. I am a new subscriber to *Essence Magazine* and I have just finished reading the article about you in the June 1985 issue. I never knew about you before now, but I’m glad you have been showing people with your talent that Black women are not to be ignored. I plan on reading more about the role Black women have played in art. My art history course in college never even mentioned the roles Black women might have played in shaping the contemporary art world. Sincerely, Terraine Mitchell (spelling). And last night... my husband and I were talking to a Black artist who teaches at Boston University, John Wilson – he just won a national

competition to do a bust of Martin Luther King for Congress. And he was telling us that he was about ten years old, and he used to go to the museum; and there was nothing there he could relate too. All the great paintings were paintings of white people. The only thing that had anything to do with Black people were some African sculptures, down in the basement, with the kind of lettering that says-- by the appearance of the lettering, not in words--this isn't art; this is...handicrafts. This is...black magic, and so-forth." And that's... one of the things I've been trying to do. When I taught at Dillard University, I mean, Black artists are... We are the people who are not there. I was looking, just in my room at the Skowhegan Honors. There are no Black artists in the Skowhegan Honors. The Women's Art Caucus gave me an award, and then couldn't find another Black woman, and finally they found one who made beautiful quilts. And I talked to them, because they were museum... – people that worked in museums and galleries and so-forth. We are the *invisible* artists. But we have a whole nation of people that need art; and I'm not offering myself as an example to anybody in here; I'm just trying to explain why I do what I do; and the way that I work. Two years ago I exhibited woodcarvings and prints in the New Orleans Museum of Art, because two Black ladies in New Orleans who were on the board, or had been on the board of the Museum, I **think** – they deny it – but I **think** insisted that I have the exhibition. And it was also very successful. There was a lot of enthusiasm from the Black security guards, who were suspicious of us when we went in. We got to be very friendly, and they would tell me, "right on." The museum director and the New Orleans art critics-- In fact the art magazine came out and did something on the cover, and so forth. -- So enthusiastic that the museum circulated the show for a year through the South. I was very happy that it went to places like the University of Mississippi and Little Rock, Arkansas, and it's now circulating the print section. My greatest interest and ambition is to bring art to my people – Black people – and also Mexican people. And my people to art. When I taught in New Orleans in 1940/41, the "Delgado Museum," which is now the New Orleans Museum, is in the middle of Central Park; and Central Park was off-limits to black people in 1940/41. And a huge Picasso retrospective came to New Orleans. And so we arranged that my Art History class – which had been limited to slides – could go to the Museum on busses, so we wouldn't step on the sacred ground of Central Park, and see the Picasso show the day that the Museum is closed. This was the first visit of my students, mostly from Louisiana, to any museum, and they're college students. And I think that this is an intolerable situation. I want my people to *enjoy* museums, and find something in them

in which they can relate to. My experiences in a peoples school in Harlem, understanding the great hunger that exists for the best in culture, and which they are denied, led me to this alternate course. This desire was reinforced when I went to Mexico and worked with the artists in the public art movement. Mural painting and print-making. Where our principle aim was to use our art for the benefit of the Mexican people. We made linocuts for the campaign against illiteracy, and for the construction of schools. -- linocuts because they could be mounted and sent to a printer, and printed in editions up to eighty thousand. Engravings for textbooks, printed in the Indian languages, so that people who spoke language, in Zapotecan can learn to read and write in their own language. We made posters and leaflets for peasants so that they would sell their produce at the government's established prices and not be ripped off. We also printed and signed, but did not number, prints to be sold at book fairs and other places at popular prices – 5 pesos/10 pesos. We Black people know from experience of the material and spiritual deprivation existing in our communities, in our and other ghettos; and we know the resulting emotional and mental conflicts frequently ending in wasted lives. We as artists are the most sensitive elements in our cities. We can make our work relate more to the needs of the most needy, and our lives can become more meaningful. Art for people is not just in summer park programs and street murals; and we know that in our consumer society possessions are more important than people. The people have life. And this is our connection to art. As artists what we create must also have life-- Its own life, it's own vitality. The lack of this element is what makes so much of what is being produced so boring and so mediocre. What does our creativity, what does our creative activity really have to do with our place in society? Now that's one of the questions I'm going to ask you; I didn't mean to read it yet. (laughs) Sculpture for me is – this is the page that didn't get wet – sculpture for me is a way of life. I must take time almost daily for modeling or carving or drawing out an idea. And when I can't – I mean when I'm like traveling – I'm looking at forms and people and expressions and seeing why they are like they are. To express my ideas creatively through this three-dimensional form is a necessity. I learn all I can about technique. I continually search for new tools with which to work more effectively. I seek new experience; I learn from many people. I plan to learn something here tomorrow. But I work from dual necessities, social as well as aesthetic, political as well as physical, emotional as well as intellectual. Sculpture is my connection between nature and society. When I physically transform a raw material – wood, clay or stone – into an aesthetic expression of the life of my people I feel complete as a human

being. Now I read my part, and now I'm gonna show you some slides. (Long Pause) I (Unintelligible) ... It's in backwards, but you don't mind? I went to Mexico on "a Rosenwall" Grant to do a series on Black women in 1946. And it was... there were fifteen... I was doing prints, sculpture and painting. And I did a series of fifteen lino-cuts, and this one was called "There are Bars Between me and the Rest of the Land." It's a very small lino-cut, and I learned the possibilities, technically, of working with linoleum, in the Graphic Arts Workshop.

SLIDE

This was another one; this was called "I have Given the World my Song."

SLIDE

This one was... This isn't going on in the States anymore, not illegally[sic]. This one was called... I don't remember, really. Had to do with lynching.

SLIDE

And I had studied lithography at the Art Students League. Some people were talking to me about "Bob Blackburn" (spelling); he was at the Art Students League at the same time. This lithograph - we worked on stone, and we had a printer in the workshop. This was some of the individual work that we did. They look so *big* up here. This one was "The Well Polished Boot in Latin America." It's very obvious, huh? A little bastard boy polishing somebody's boot....

SLIDE

On this, well I guess this was one of the first lithographs I did - I was impressed by children— orphans or children with no families-- who wrapped themselves up in posters to keep warm, and slept in doorways and corners and so-forth in Mexico.

SLIDE

Now, this one I was very impressed by a little girl with eyes that looked like buttons; and I was trying to use, as a formal element, the “revolso”(spelling), which is like a shawl which has many roles in Mexico. And I was trying to use it as a textural, and...--a form, and a textual element in this lithograph.

SLIDE

I work sometimes from... intellectual--Oh, I explained that, I guess. An un-intellectual idea, or a creative idea. I went to Havana , Cuba in 1963, to a meeting of Women of America, and to see the Cuban revolution. And I was impressed by the Women of America; they were either White, Brown or Black, and they were welded together in that congress. And so I did this woodcut, which is—it’s-- the color’s not very good in this slide, but they’re under a green leafy bow. And what I was trying to do aesthetically was to have the faces of-- the face of one merge into the face of the other.

SLIDE

This was a linoleum cut called “The Sharecropper” that came out of my memories of North Carolina with my grandmother, who had been a slave at one time, in her youth. And... it’s in.... I’m very proud of this print, because it’s in six museums, including the Metropolitan.

SLIDE

And generally when I do a lithograph I do a drawing first, to work out the dark and light values, and contrast and so forth. And then I work on the stone, or the plate-- which ever, metal plate-- which ever. But this one I did directly on the stone. And I think it has a freer quality; it’s not a tight *drawing* like some of the others. The show that I had in Mexico at the Modern Art Museum on the Black experience was partially because I felt very guilty living in Mexico, where there wasn’t any racial prejudice, and segregation, and discrimination, while people were--Black students and white students who were in Mississippi were trying to get the vote. So that was

why—and the Mexican attitude was “poor black people, we don’t discriminate”. And my idea was to give them, in this exhibition, an idea of the struggle and the strength and the dignity of my people. And this is what I did on Malcolm X *before*, when I was interested a little bit... I guess influenced a little bit by Pop Art, with a repetition of elements to reinforce an idea. And... it’s called “Malcolm X Speaks for Us.” And my husband, at this time was doing abstract art; he now works with abstract – there’s a bottle of cold water under here; that’s why I keep stopping. Now he’s working with the figure, and with abstract art at the same time. But we work together, because abstract art interests me very much. And other kinds of art interest me. I mean...I’m not a narrow-minded figurative artist. I know why I do figurative work. So I printed all these things, and technically I printed them all, and I put a piece of paper on the floor, and I’m laying them out to see how they look. And I saw that I needed something to tie them together, so I did a little textured thing with some acrylic, which I printed. And... he was helping me; he was the one to that suggested I do something to tie it together; and then when went off for the weekend. And when we came back I had won a prize. (laughs)

SLIDE

This was part of the same exhibition. It’s in backwards – It says, “Life is Beautiful.” And I did it because everyone was going around with buttons on. Many of you were little children, or maybe not born in the early part of the 60’s, but people were wearing buttons, and buttons that said everything, and this was one of the buttons that landed in Mexico. Now, in Mexico only God is perfect. And if you do something, you can’t do it perfectly; and somewhere in all those buttons in one that is turned around. I can’t see it right now. Oh, there it is: It’s the second but...it’s the first button on the second line

SLIDE

This I did around the same time I was trying to do color graphs and I didn’t know how. And every time I would print – it’s on a great big piece of paper, about this high, a double sheet, and every time I would print I would get about five or six printed, and then I would make a mess. So I did it in silkscreen and let our printer print it. It’s called “Girls.”

SLIDE

And I stopped doing lithography for a number of years because our printer got to be a great prima donna; and I had tried printing, and it takes so much time printing. I guess you have to know these things in order to know whether it's well done or not well done. Like if you're a sculptor you have to know something about bronze casting to know whether it's – if you're going to work in bronze – to know whether it's well done or not well done if somebody else is doing it. So I started – before I'd only worked on stone – I started working with a young printer at the art school; and... he studied on the West Coast of the United States. And he said, "Try the aluminum plates." And so this print I was trying to see what I could do, you know, with rubbing, and touché, and different elements. So I tried a lot of them in this. That was a technical problem.

SLIDE

This one I did because a friend of mine wrote a book about... called **The Art of Elizabeth Catlett**, and a big publishing house in New York that does art books – Abrams – was going to publish it; and then they decided that they didn't know the people that I knew who would buy it. But while we were discussing it with them, they said that sometimes they use a print to sell the book. So I did this lithograph for that. And...it's a combination of the way I work. It's... I'm interested, very much influenced by African art, which I think is the greatest, some of the greatest, technically, bronze and wood sculpture in existence. And pre-Hispanic art, which I think is very great stone-carving and coin work. Terra cotta. But these two kinds of art, for me, express an idea, or an emotion, or a feeling, or a vitality, through form, and not through detail. Even though it's figurative, I try to use the *form* instead of the detail to express what I'm trying to say. This was a young lady who came – This was ten years ago... because it was the International Women's Congress in Mexico... The United Nations... Remember, they just finished one in Nigeria. She came with all this hair. I thought it was fantastic, so I did a drawing of her. And I did the lithograph from it. Her name is Lovey; and it's called "Lovey Twice."

SLIDE

And this was a little girl that a friend of mine brought by, and she was so prissy with her little mouth twisted up, that... I wanted to do a drawing of her. And at the same time, I was thinking about, in lithography, that you can also use.... --what's it called in English? --*relief* printing. And we have Bougainvillea vine outside of my studio; so I took some Bougainvillea flowers off and inked them; and pressed them onto the plate. And that's what printed around the edges.

SLIDE

And this lithograph I did because I was very impressed by all the Mexicans that come into Mexico City because they can't make it wherever they live. And they're confused by the city. I was trying to give the idea of the... cold... removed feeling of the city these people can't get into. And...also, I had never found out how to erase on the metal plate. So that's what I was trying to do here, too. So I used== I finally found out you could do it with benzene, if anybody's interested. But this is in backwards. Who was going to put all my slides in the way they should go? (laughter)

Comment: (Unintelligible)

Speaker: Uhuh; and I would say: "This is the *front*; this is the way it goes, you know...remember? Well, at least they're right side up. It doesn't matter. Bob Whiteburn got me some paper to take back to Mexico, and I wanted black German etching, 'cause I was going to do something in relief, and *white* arches. And I got black arches and white German etching. So this is something I tried (laughing) to do on the black arches. And also I had bought some *beautiful* Japanese paper. And... this was an aesthetic ideal it had nothing really that *moved* me greatly. But I was trying to do something on... on – so I had to draw it, you know, backwards, in reverse, like a negative.

SLIDE

This is the last litho print I did. I did it as an extra thing to go in the book. So the book has a Linocut in it. It's called "The Survivor."

SLIDE

Now, I worked with “Asid Zidken” (spelling) and he influenced me very strongly; and this is a terra-cotta head I did right after I finished working with him. And...I don’t know; I don’t have any slides of what I did at the University of Iowa shortly afterwards, but this was some of the first sculpture that I did; I don’t think I’ve changed too much.

Question: What was the name of the person you worked with?

Speaker: Of what?

Question: You mentioned a name (Unintelligible 577)

Speaker: “Asib Zadkin”. A French sculptor. After World War II a lot of people – he went back to Paris – and a lot of people went to study with him. He was running from the Nazis. A beautiful well-known sculptor in Paris, who came to New York and lived in cold-water flat on Charles Street...with a big studio and no heat.

SLIDE

Now this a big terra-cotta life-size piece that I did because the woman who posed for it, who works at the Met now – “Joan Sandler”—was-- impressed me with her beauty, but I also technically wanted to *build* like the Mexicans do, a hollow terra-cotta piece. So it has supports inside. And it’s about this high--well, it’s life-size.

SLIDE

That was a long time ago. I do small things in clay, and later on cast them in bronze to work with them in wood or stone. Larger. This was later on, a figure in wood. I don’t have a... I don’t have a... slide of it.

SLIDE

This right here is when I started working at the University; and it was a little modeling I was doing, a huge—well, huge for me-- wood-carving about this size; and it was a plaster model, and one day I came to school and the model was gone. So I put a little sign on the door, and I said, “Whoever took my plaster model, I cannot finish my woodcarving unless you bring it back. And after I’m finished, you can have it.” And the next day there it was (laughs)(laughter) But they didn’t come back to....(Tape ends)

END SIDE A

...let me know who to give it to, so I made a bronze cast out of it. And it won a prize in the Second Bi-annual,,, Sculpture Bi-annual.

SLIDE

This is polished bronze head, I guess around life-size. People ask me to send them slides, and I send them slides; and I’m not very organized, so the slides that I brought were the slides that I had.

SLIDE

Sorry. This is a... was also a model for a woodcarving. I think I have the woodcarving when I show you the wood sculpture. This is the back view. I was trying to express the closeness between a mother and child. I see a lot of mothers and childs by *male* sculptors – Henry Moore does a lot. But the mother’s always separated from the child; and sometimes the mother is looking off in the distance and the child is over here...And I think that they don’t know what motherhood is.

SLIDE

This was also a small piece ...that’s...that I did large in wood. And because I like to work with the grain of the wood – this I was trying to do in triangles... and the-- on the side, technically, on

the side-- that side there's a triangle; on this side between the arm and the shoulder there's a triangle, and the leg that comes up – there's a triangle; you see where the skirt goes up, there's another triangle. It's all a series of triangles.

SLIDE

Now, this is a stone – they have beautiful stones in Mexico; this is a green marble – and stones to carve. Mexico is a sculptor's paradise. Bronze is cheap; there's a lot of stone; there is a lot of nice wood...if you can find it...

SLIDE

This is an Onyx, called "Recognition." I was trying to show the idea of Brotherhood/Sisterhood. And... someone told me it was erotic, but that wasn't my idea.

SLIDE

And this is the back view. This is the way I work sometimes, this is a very small, about this size, maybe... eight inches. Terracotta figure, that's a mother and child. And this is the bronze cast of it, and you can see it from the front.

SLIDE

And then I did a marble of it. And the child is an independent child – it comes out from the mother. (laughter)

SLIDE

And here I was trying to work with the idea of pre-Hispanic sculpture, with a division of form... to try to express an idea. I think I have another view....

SLIDE

...Yeah, a side view, I believe. This is a very hard stone that I had to work grinding, instead of carving.

This is orange Onyx. This is the same – remember the little shiny bronze figure? – Here you can see the triangle. See the triangle between the head and the shoulder and the arm? And the triangle in the other leg...

SLIDE

...and the triangle on this side it's another view of it.

SLIDE

And this is a black marble. I told you I have beautiful stones in Mexico. Here I was working with an Indian feeling. But people in Mexico tell me that when I do Mexicans they look like black people. (laughs)

SLIDE

And this is an abstract – another stone that had to be ground. Sometimes I forget all about people that do an abstract sculpture. (laughs)

SLIDE

This is another view of it. The color is much nicer – it's kind of a rosy color; you can see a little bit of it on this side.

SLIDE

And this is a brown Onyx. It's a couple – I think that I did a woodcarving of it; I think that you can see it clearer -- Here I working with the stone; in the other one I was working with the form.

SLIDE

This is a mother and child.

SLIDE

And you can see it better here. I tried to express with the form the feeling that I want to feel. This is-- what I wanted to do here was a *protective* mother, who's looking out at the world while she's holding her child very close to her.

SLIDE

Um... this one went in sideways. That's all right. ... it's called "Unity," and there are two heads – this is a big carving – There are two heads...

SLIDE

...and this is the other side; they grow into a fist. And I did it before Stokely Carmichael raised his fists. I just thought – it was an idea I had after seeing-- I guess subconsciously because later on I realized--after seeing the frescos of Diego Rivera in Chapingo , where he has an open hand... and then a fist. An open hand...a weak hand, and then a fist which is unity. And so those two heads-- If you can look – turn your head and look at them (laughter) – They grow out of the fist. Like on this side you can see the little curve? That's one head.

SLIDE

And this one was "The Black Woman Speaks"; it's also a big carving, and I was using the shape of the wood because it had like, the limb of the tree growing out in the back; and I used that as

part of the structure. This belongs to David Driscoll, and I don't know whether he knows, but when I working on it there was a young man who was a Muslim – a black Muslim, who was running from Vietnam, I think, sitting in my studio watching me, and telling me... things about the Muslims, and I was working and listening. And this side – well, I like when I'm working with wood to use the grain of the wood; people ask me: "Well, did you do that intentionally?". Well, the grain comes out; I know the way it works if you make a curve, but because the way the tree goes, if you make a curve across, whether it's figurative or abstract then you're going to get--you're going to see more grain than if you're just cutting up and down vertically. But... this side of the wood – it's a tropical wood – this side of the wood had absolutely no grain in it; it was almost flat. So I painted that thing on the side. And people say: "What is that?" And I say, "It's magic." (laughter) And they say "What's magic about it?" I said "It makes people ask 'what is that?'" (laughter)

SLIDE

This is another kind of very lovely wood in Mexico, that I was trying to do a floating figure, and... when I say that I like to use the *form* to express the idea, here I wanted to give an uplifted – you know, the arms raised – an *uplifted* feeling. And I felt that if I ran that line around in a curve; it would have to go up. I mean it would reinforce the upward feeling. But I didn't like it floating, so I put a hole in it and stood it up; and I thought it was much-- it worked much better that way. You know that you do things, and you have this great idea that it's going to turn out this way, and when you see it, it's not like you wanted it; but maybe you can do something to it and it'll come out even better, right?

SLIDE

This is a woman getting out of her skirts. This is one view. And the reason I did it is..., technically I wanted to see what I could with that diagonal wood – thin wood coming down.

SLIDE

This is another view....

SLIDE

Remember that I showed you a piece of brown Onyx with two people embracing? This is what it started out to be; but because the stone is different from the wood it turned out very differently. This is a very small carving.

SLIDE

And this is a wood... After I did it I suddenly remembered Barbara Hepworth used to paint white in holes... – And I hadn't meant to. Like when I was at Iowa, and working on my thesis – a mother and child – I was working and working, and all of a sudden everything came out just perfect. And I was so happy I had-- the clay was all ready – it was to be a stone-carving – because I had solved all the problems of form relations and shapes and so-forth. And so I had time to go sit in the library and look at books. And I was looking at a book one day, and there was my sculpture in a sculpture by “William Storrick”. *Exactly* the same thing. And I after I did this, I suddenly remembered Barbara Hepworth makes holes painted white. So I put a white dot. (laughs)

SLIDE

This is the mother and child that I did from that bronze--from the model, the plaster model. It's in the “Women in New Orleans Boyfuther Museum”. It's about this high.

SLIDE

This is a detail. It's mahogany, Mexican mahogany.

SLIDE

Now, when I did the two heads with the fist, before I even did that – maybe two years before – I started out doing this because of a poem I read by “Jose Marati” about Unity; and I turned the *wood* the wrong way. You know, if you’re carving it ought to be vertical, and it was the other – the vertical was this way, so I turned it that way. And I couldn’t carve it, because technically I wasn’t able too. And so I put it away. And I had to have a show in Los Angeles ‘bout two or three years ago, and I was working real fast to get some new things; and I said what about that piece of wood I put away? So I got it out, and I found out that now I can carve it.

SLIDE

And this was a sculpture that I did recently for a man in... a doctor in Detroit. And I took this slide to show him that I was really working on it; and this is the way I work. I start out with a...chainsaw and cut away; and then I use an electric hammer on wood; and those rasps that you use on boats? Plastic, I guess that’s what they’re for. Some kind of ...form.

Audience: Sureform

Speaker: Sureform, yeah. And then I carve by hand... and it goes along.

SLIDE

This is... the way it looks finished.

Audience: Is that stained wood?

Speaker: No...no.

Audience: (Unintelligible)

SLIDE

I use... technically, I use tung oil on the wood.

Audience: Does it darken the wood?

Speaker: I put--It *turns* darker, and with time the wood turns darker. I did sculpture once of a pregnant woman – you know, a shape just to-- a shape of the pregnant women – and I painted on it with a dark stain. The woman --the nice *slim* women, you know? And, David, it was at “Fisk”; remember that little girl bought it, “Tansely” or something? She paid \$30.00 down and sent me \$25.00 a month for a few years. It was a big-sized sculpture. Well, the wood turned dark, and slim little figure disappeared.

SLIDE

Here’s the side view of it. And I think maybe that’s the last....

SLIDE

And there’s the back-view. And I think maybe *that’s* the last....

SLIDE PROJECTOR CLICKS

See, that’s the last slide. (Applause)

(Pounds on Podium) Everybody--Everybody wake up because we’re now at part three. I have a question; and I’m very sincere about the question: As I said before, when I was talking about the yuppies, I’ve been in Mexico for a long time; I come to the States and give a lecture; or maybe I go to New York, or to Boston, and I see a couple of exhibitions; then I go home. My husband and I were in New York in May; and we went to the Whitney and we saw The Bi-Annual [sic]. And I was completely... unmoved by anything I saw there except the men and women’s restrooms. (laughter) If you saw that exhibition – I’m not kidding-- if you saw—I mean I’m very serious-- if you saw that exhibition you know what I mean. It was done with... graffiti and lights.

And it was *fun*. But a man had given me a list of young artists, and I went and they were there. And I didn't understand it. and I want to know if somebody here can tell me... I listened to one of the docents who had some very bewildered... middle-aged, middle class ladies, and she was explaining somebody's work and she said, "He hates women, and so he paints women in very disagreeable positions." And that was very evident. And then she said, "And he doesn't want people to know what he's about, so he..." – I hope the artist isn't here (laughter) "...he always puts in something so that people won't know what he's doing." And after I listened to that, I decided that I didn't want to listen to the docents; I'd rather hear it from some artists that live in New York, and who know what's "in" in New York. And... because I was looking at an art book, a book called – maybe you've seen it – a book called **Looking at Art**. Part of it's written, and part of it's pictures; and at one point there was a painting-- or a reproduction of a painting-- by Rembrandt or somebody, and it said: "This is the painting so-and-so by Rembrandt;" and you turned the page and it said something like, "It was sold for \$200,000." And this was to show that your idea about the painting immediately changed by what had been said about it. And can anybody explain to me the importance of the Whitney Bi-annual [sic]? I'm serious. (long pause) Look, I didn't come to just stand—You know, preachers talk and teachers talk; and I'm neither. And fathers talk. And I'm not your Mama (laughter). And (laughs) so I want a little go and give-and-take here, okay?

Comment: It's supposed to be a thermometer of what's happening.

Speaker: A Thermometer?

Comment: What I mean is, a kind of feeling of what (unintelligible 802)

Speaker: ...of what's in? Or what's going on, in New York? Come on, tell ; explain it. You started out nicely.

Comment: I live in Seattle; hey, that's what *I* do.

Speaker: Oh. You live in Seattle. Who lives in New York? Who saw the Whitney Bi-annual?
Yeah.

Comment: Well, I think it's interesting you ask that, because this last show....A lot of people have been discussing that.

Speaker: Uhuh.

Comment: Although it is supposedly a thermometer of what is going on in New York, a lot of us don't exactly agree with the representation – the work shown there. And it's really hard to say if that really shows what *is* going on in New York, or even at the Whitney.

Speaker: Or even what?

Audience (Discussion, multiple voices): Or even if it shows... what's...good in New York. *It's not strictly a New York show though; it's supposed to represent what's going on in the country.*
(unintelligible melee of voices) We've been asking, Is it really showing us what's going on, what is good, and what's going on?

Speaker: Somebody else?

Audience: (Unintelligible 817-819)

Speaker: Let's have it one at a time? Now everybody wants to talk, huh?

Comment: So to see that, just to see that show, one hasn't seen – coming to New York for a while, I consider at least that I would be pretty – I would not know what to think of it either.

Speaker: Well, I went-- we went to the show that opened the Reconstructed... or Modern Art museum; and there were some things in there, down on the first floor that confused me. But I could still... I still had an idea of why they were there. You know what I mean? But this one I

didn't; I really didn't. The one thing that interested me was some that were on China. Not that it was a great work of art; but I went *behind*, and the way that all those things moved around back there, was what was intriguing to me. You know, they have these little things that went around and then you saw them on the front – like we saw a show much *superior* in 1973, in Paris, by a German artist named “Mack”, who was – is it Kinetic in English? — a Kinetic artist. And he left everything wide open so you could see what he did. And that was a really tremendous, that exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in Paris. So that would interest me a little bit, but I wasn't impressed by it. What really impressed me was the men's and women's restrooms.

Anybody else? No? Well, I have another question. My question, and this is very sincere.... I know that art can be a lot of things. And we have lots of (Unintelligible 841-842) as Mao Tse Tung said once, “Let all the flowers blossom.” We have all kinds of ways of working, and for different reasons. I know art can be decorative, and it can be fun, and it can be investigative, and it can be... very serious and very personal, and very public and so forth. Why can't it be social and political? That's what I want to know. Why can't it be? Why do the critics pan it? For example, they had a big show in New York and Boston a few years ago – I was talking about it to you today, remember? – and... Mr. “Kramer” panned it (laughter) in the New York Times. And he said that everything that was “in” at the time that these – it was Black artists, Black artists from Boston and New York – everything that was “in” at time was very good. Anything that was social or political wasn't art. The show that I had in New Orleans, the critic said that it was very expressive, and very interesting, and blah, blah and so forth. But when I tried to do something political, like I had a print called “Angela Libre” that I did when Angela Davis was freed; and it was on silver paper, and I wanted to make it very happy. And I had her head in all kinds of colors; and I was doing it – technically – with silkscreen, so that if you looked at it one way you could see her portrait, but if you looked it at another way it was just a blob of color. You know, from the way the light hit it. And that print of Malcolm X was in the show. So he said when I tried to do something social, then I really messed up. And I wanted to tell them that that Malcolm X print won first prize in the Mexican National Print Show, and they didn't even know who Malcolm X *was*. And that's my question now. Why can't art be social or political? Then it's *non-art*? You know what I mean? Does anybody want to explain it to me? I've very serious.

Comment: (Unintelligible 872)

Speaker: It's what?

Comment: I think that social and political art is more (unintelligible)

Speaker: More fashionable?

Audience: Yeah, and I think also part of it is... minorities are (unintelligible) the little things and....(Pause)

Speaker: The majority

Comment: The majority...(unintelligible)...pushing. And so they're alienated. For which we have (unintelligible)...South Africa, (unintelligible) and Lebanon. (Unintelligible)...actually admirable now that (Unintelligible)

Speaker: Anybody else have any ideas?

Comment: I think what you're bringing up is the gesture in (Unintelligible)..Whether someone wants to take on the role or the responsibility of keeping the kings laughing. And maintaining a particular distance – do you know what I'm saying?

Speaker: (Affirmative sound)

Comment: By making fun of (unintelligible) and also, I have another side. But that's just one point. Whether someone wants to take on the responsibility of reading them first. (unintelligible)...Karl Marx's book, and making marvelous art about it. And then finding that they're really an imperialist capitalist later on in life; and they are going, "Oh, God. How could I

identify (unintelligible) and I really believe in this” I just have the feeling that there’s an inner fright....

Speaker: A what?

Comment: A fright to take that responsibility...

Speaker: I did that--

Audience: I think what she’s saying is—I mean, I don’t know; it’s trendy to do it, but I don’t think there’s a heck of a lot of conviction. I don’t know, necessarily....

Speaker: That happened to me once. I did a print on the Panthers – the Black Panthers – and then I read **Soul on Ice** “by Eldredge Cleaver”. And I took him out, (laughter) because he was-- I’m not kidding-- he was anti-woman in that book; and I couldn’t stand it. So I took him out! (laughter, applause) Also, Diego Rivera painted a mural at the Rockefeller Center, which they knocked down because he put Trotsky in it. And... he came back to Mexico, and painted it again. And later on he went back into the Mexican Communist Party, and he wanted to take Trotsky out, but they wouldn’t let him (laughs)(laughter) The question that I asked when I was talking, What does our creative activity really have to do with our place in society? That was my last question. Anybody want to tackle that one? (Long pause) I talk to students, you know, and they say: “I’m doing this, and I’m doing the other...” And I understand... I mean, that they’re doing this and they’re doing the other. I have a son that’s an artist – he was at Skowhegan. He’s... trying real hard to get into a gallery. Castelli was interested in his drawings for a while; oh he was way up here. Now he’s (unintelligible), he kept saying, “Come back in September; Come back in March...” (laughter) Now he’s in Germany. But I know... I mean, I know what young people feel. I just want to know-- this is another question that I’m introducing here... That aside from developing technically, aside from developing aesthetically, aside from making our careers – I’m not talking about-- what was it that I talked about at the first? What do you call them? (Shuffles through papers) I lost it, I lost it. (laughs) Yuppies! I’m not talking about yuppies, I’m talking about people making a career out of art, you know? It’s hard to live on art.

It's hard to live on your art. Very few people make it. But the question that I'm saying, asking, is: What does our artistic production, our creative activity, have to do with our place in society?

Comment: Isn't what we do ultimately just, no matter how you do it, or how you go about it, kind of your reflection of how you view the world, and how you view your place in society?

Speaker: Uh-hm. Has to....

Comment: So you should work as honestly as possible, whether it's that direct--, common or not--it's got to be talking through that...

Speaker: Yeah, I agree. I agree. I think there are a lot of the different angles; that's why I was interested in hearing your opinions....

Question: What is our place in society?

Speaker: I don't know-- what's your -- I know what *mine* is. (laughs)

Question: I mean, I--that's what (Unintelligible), I'm not just being like sarcastic.

Speaker: That's what?

Question (multiple voices): I'm not quipping, I'm just curious. I don't know. Sometimes it seems like it's real low and (Unintelligible) And other times it seems like you may be the only person doing what you want to do, so it's an important place in society, even though we don't usually have money (Unintelligible). *I was interested, you saying that you said you wanted people to be able to look at what you were doing and...*

Speaker: And what?

Question: *You wanted people to look at what you were doing, and feel as if they understood it, or that they didn't have to think about what it was... because I find that's one of the hardest communications I have. When I work abstractly is... if I go to see my grandmother or something, and she wants to see my slides, she feels alienated from me. She doesn't understand what I'm trying to do, and then I feel set apart from her.*

Speaker: Well, can't you talk—can't you talk to her about it, what you're trying to do?

Question: *Yeah. But I'm saying I have the opportunity to speak to her about it, but if you have an exhibit and you can't speak to the people that are coming to see...about it; I think that's the question that I ask myself, is How much can I communicate every--to each person, instead of trying t...o just go for a certain... group of people who seem to understand what I'm doing.*

Speaker: Uhuh. I thought that this question, you know, that we would get different *kinds* of answers, because people had different *ideas* about what we are doing. I mean, I have-- I'm an old lady. I'm 66 years old. (laughs) I... found my place; but when I was your age I had the idea that... being an artist was putting a lot of paint on a canvas... And-- I mean, this was when I was in college, maybe a little younger – putting a lot of paint on a canvas; and... sometimes it turned out well and sometimes it didn't turn out well. And then I went to Iowa, and Grant Wood limited us – He broke down painting into all of it's little sections, you know, like, What is a line drawing? What is a value drawing? What is the chemical composition of the paint, and so-forth and so on. Very elementary, and it wasn't until maybe I was in my twenties that I began to get some idea of... what I wanted to do with my art. And it's *still* not clear to me-- completely clear to me. I have, sometimes I want to get into plastics and... make things move around and... you know, it's-- do some fun things sometimes; so we have conflicting ideas about our positions and so forth. Sometimes in my life I have-- when I was very poor and didn't know where I was going to get the next meal for my kids (Unintelligible 995); he would go out with the little portfolio under his arm to see if he could sell something. And I would say, "What I'm going to do is make a lot of money!" And then I would design... women's scarves and send them to New York. I was going to be a big scarf designer (laughs). So we have conflicting ideas about these things, and I was interested in asking because... I meet a lot of young people, but I don't meet a

group like this group. I think this is a very select group; and I was interested in seeing what your ideas were. But... Yeah.

Question: I'd be interested in hearing about the students you have in Mexico (Unintelligible 1007-1008)

Speaker: I have, as a teacher, decided about art students, that there are three kinds of art students. One kind...well, let's say four kinds. There is one kind that has no talent and doesn't work, so that's that with them. There is a kind of student that has very little talent but works very hard. And then there's another kind that has a lot of talent and doesn't work; and they're more or less on a par, as far as getting anywhere in art is concerned. And once in a great while I find a student that has a lot of talent, is a hard worker, is organized, knows how to promote himself, and so forth and so on. And then I get a good artist. And I have had some of those... Quite a few... Very creative students-- I had one student who invented ways of working in clay. Of... and welding. He would take clay, and very rapidly make some forms, and cast them in plaster. Then would take all the clay out; and he would bend metal and weld it into the form. You know what I'm talking about? Oh, somebody in Washington was writing a book; and they wrote him and asked him to send up, to write-up what—how-- what his technique was, and send it up to include in the book. I think it was on welded sculpture, I'm not sure. Students in Mexico are very -- on the University level -- are very political, because of... they live very closely with the meso(? 1039)-Mexican people. A lot of them have come from... slum areas or rural areas and they know how people live. And they work *with* the people. We had the strikes in 1968, for example; a bus turned over in a town nearby and killed a lot of people. And the students went in and kidnapped the busses because the bus line wouldn't pay indemnity. And when they saw how the people lived in the town, they did their social work in the town. University students do social work after they've finished... whatever. See it's a whole different system. And... it works like the Junior College level. What comes after... Preparatory school; it comes after junior high school or secondary school; then it's preparatory school. By this time students are on a higher level than when you finish secondary school in the States. Because, first of all, Spanish is... phonetic, and they learn to read and write in the first and second grades; and that's it. I mean they don't have reading and writing problems like we do with English. So by the time, well, when they get into

preparatory school, they do their Junior College work, and then they go into a professional school – preparatory school is three years – they go into a professional school, whether it's economics, law, medicine, art, music, whatever. And they have a Bachelor's; and when they finish they get a (Unintelligible 1064 sounds like Lu Sensiator), which isn't a degree in the States. But they do a year's social work, or six months, which means, if they're a medical student they have to go practice medicine somewhere... in a hospital; if they're in education, they have to go and teach somewhere, either voluntarily, or... if they can get paid for it, okay. If they're an artist, they have to work somewhere as an artist. Well, the students went into that town and built the water system; they built the school. They had engineering students, architectural students.... They're very social and politically conscious, because it's a whole different system. Now, in Mexico we have political refugees from all the Latin America. We don't have any from Cuba and we don't have any from Nicaragua. But we have them from El Salvador, from Brazil, from Chile – many from Chile – wherever there is repressive dictatorships we have students; we have - not students,-- we have *refugees* in Mexico. Since the Spanish War, Mexico has opened its doors to all political refugees. And... most of them are intellectuals, because ordinary people don't have the money to run, and so these are intellectuals. The only poor political refugees we have in Mexico are *thousands* of Guatemalans who have come over the border, running from the rural army in Guatemala; and Mexico is settling them in different areas. And so the intellectuals teach in our universities; and our students are very aware of the problems in Haiti, in El Salvador, in Nicaragua, in all of these countries. That's one *big* difference. Anything else? Can we go? (laughs) Well, I hope I didn't bore you.

(Applause)

END OF AUDIO