

GALLERY A FERRO

Speaking Her Mind: Then and Now

Gladys Barker Grauer, curated by Adrienne Wheeler

November 11th, 2017 - January 12th, 2018 Main Gallery, 73 Market Street Newark, NJ

Interview of Gladys Barker Grauer (G), conducted on September 9, 2017 by Adrienne Wheeler (A) for the archives of Gallery Aferro on the occasion of the exhibition *Speaking Her Mind, Then and Now*.

A: Where were you born?

G: Cincinnati Ohio

A: And where were your parents born?

G: My mother was born in Alabama, and my father was born in Tennessee.

A: And where did you grow up?

G: I grew up in Chicago.

A: And where else have you lived?

G: Lived in Cincinnati. Grew up on Chicago, when I finished at the Art Institute of Chicago, I moved to New York, and I lived there for three years, and then I moved to New Jersey. Those are the places I've lived the longest.

A: When did you start at the Art Institute?

G: 1941. To New York 1945. To Newark 1950... 1951, maybe 1952?

A: Now of the places you've mentioned, including the places of your parent's birth, has any of them influenced you as an artist?

G: I would think Chicago influenced me the most because that's where I grew up, and the particular time

that I grew up has a great influence on my life, even today. At the time, I grew up during the deep depression, not only was it the depression but there was a lot of turmoil in society.

I know in Chicago, even though I lived in an all black neighborhood and everything, but the people... there were movements within the town, within the city. And one of them that I remember as child, was "don't shop where you can't ring the cash register." And what that meant was that the white people owned businesses in the black neighborhoods, but they'd have black people working there, but you bought something there, you gave the money to the black person and they gave it to the man and he puts in the cash register. And there was a whole rebellion, that if you don't trust us to put the money in the cash register, then we won't shop.

A: So there was a boycotting, an official boycotting of the stores.

G: Don't shop where you can't ring the cash register. Plus there were a whole lot of strikes going on during my growing up. There were unions; many unions were being organized at that time. I really don't how to put it, but it was time of unrest within the society.

And also during this time, that the Mussolini went into Ethiopia, and I remember my mother and my uncle having a bitter argument about it. My uncle, when he came home from work the first thing he did was turn the radio on, he listened to the news

A: Your uncle lived in the house with you? This was an uncle that lived with you?

G: Yes, we shared an apartment. Now my uncle could

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not read. But he depended on the radio to get news. My mother read. So she read the news. But the thing is what I'm bringing up here is even though my family was just first, second generation out of slavery, none of them had either gone to or finished high school. My uncle couldn't read. I think my mother completed the first year of high school but yet they were very involved, in something outside of the household, which gave me a vision that things of importance went on outside of my community. So that's why I would say that these things were an influence.

A: What you're reacting to here, Emma Wilcox just brought up a photograph from 1960. Its you. Looks like you with your children.

G: Yes. It's three of them. That's before Leon.

A: Yeah and it says "We need a better world for our children." And it reads "Gladys Barker Grauer Socialist Workers candidate for United States senator from New Jersey at her home in Newark. She's an activist, an active member of the Avon Avenue Parent-Teacher Association and the Clinton Hill neighborhood council, which is pressing for improved school facilities in the area. When the sit in demonstrations began in the south Mrs. Grauer joined the weekly sympathy picket line organized at the Woolworth's store in downtown shopping area. Her three children in the photo above are Edward, Antoinette and Edith."

A: Of course this is actually the Gladys that I knew first, before I knew you as an artist. I knew you as a parent activist because in Newark at that time when we were getting ready to go to school, they were starting to redistrict the schools and it was still redlining of neighborhoods. And I remember you and your husband and

my parents and the Thompsons and the elder deceased Congressman Donald Payne, who was a young parent at the time, Gus Heningburg. And at the time all these families were meeting in schools and in various homes, so that was the Gladys I knew first.

G: That was a very interesting period. I was going to say something about the Woolworth rebellion...

A: Were you finished talking about your mother your mother and your uncle?

G: Oh well I was just going to say that. My parents, by being so interested in something besides baseball, and what happened on the corner... Within my mind, it sort of carried me outside of my immediate environment, to know that there were things happening. Outside. Or even in other countries that affected me. It affected in my family so it gave me an interest in what was going on in the world.

A: That actually that answers one of the other questions on your schooling, you attended Art Institute of Chicago, where did you go before that. What high school did you go to?

G: Well my schooling was very interesting. I went to several elementary schools because also at that time, I had a stepfather, and my stepfather was a construction worker and therefore we had to move wherever there was something being constructed. So we were in Detroit for a while. I went to elementary school in Cincinnati and went to elementary school in Detroit. I went to elementary school in Chicago and I think I went to elementary school... because we had to, the family had to move wherever a job was being done. But we finally settled in Chicago so because my mother gave up that stepfather.

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so because my mother gave up that stepfather. I won't tell you why, but anyway. So, my mother and I settled in Chicago.

A: Do you know why she settled in Chicago? It was that sort of last city you were in and she decided to stay?

G: No, she had been in Chicago a couple of times. Because I think when they were building the subways I don't remember exactly what they were building in Chicago but my stepfather was there. And my mother evidently, the different cities that she had been in, St. Louis, Detroit, she liked Chicago the best.

A: How did your education and your upbringing influence your choice to become an artist?

G: Ok. First of all when when we lived Chicago, there was this artist, his name was Jay Jackson. And at that time the theaters, or the parent company, did not print things and then sent it out for them to post. They had individual artist that actually made the paintings. They actually drew things that were put up in front of the theatres and that's what Jay did and he did the movie star, the copies. What he did was the stars and lettering of what the film was about. And I was fascinated by that.

A: So he was sort of employed as a sign painter but he was a visual artist.

G: Yeah. And I was fascinated because I used to watch Jay work every day.

A: And how old were you then when you were watch-

ing him work?

G: Maybe six or seven years old. I can still remember watching him draw movie stars. And when I started drawing, that's exactly what I started drawing, and I did the movie magazines and I drew all the movies stars. Which I think is interesting, because I could draw the movie stars everybody thought I was so talented, to be able to copy these things.

A: Well apparently they were right. Were there any movie stars in particular that you remember that were more fun to draw than others? It's just curiosity.

G: I remember some I drew. Greta Garbo. Joan Crawford. Just anybody but not any particular lifeform, I just drew movie stars. I wasn't creative then. Actually I was about maybe 10 or 11 years old when I started to draw movie stars.

A: Did you ever travel outside of the United States to study art?

G: No.

A: And you've just mentioned Jay Jackson. Are there any other artists that influence you? And if so, why?

G: Well when I became, once I got to the art institute, I have to say, the art education in the schools, I would have to say in the black schools it was practically non-existent. I didn't have an experience in elementary school. I think I was about in the sixth grade and what happened in the school, and I was one of the better black schools, and the supervisor would come around once a year. To check on what the teacher was doing for art, and what she did was

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the supervisor came round and she gave a lesson and then we had to do what she, you know, we had to follow instructions. And after she finished she liked my piece and she took my piece, well, I was so flattered. I had no idea what it was like but I just thought you know, that my piece was the only piece that she wanted to take with her. And the teacher that I had at the time was just I guess a very nice teacher because I still remember her and all I remember her is with fond memories and what she used to do. Like if we got assignments or something when I finished my assignments she had a drawer in the back of the classroom. And I could look in that drawer and pull up pictures and draw them. I was still in the stage of copying, not creating and I could sit and draw in her class.

High school art was hilarious. All they had was chalk, and they didn't have any paints or crayons and so they just had chalk. And the first assignment, one was to draw a snowstorm. Well living in Chicago and that's all it does all winter, it snows. And you walk to school in the wind; it's the windy city, the wind is blowing the icy snow, into your face! And we get there and she wants you to draw a snowstorm. I don't remember, but I do know at that point I talked to my mother about going to the Art Institute because they had Saturday classes for children. But you had to pay for it. So she registered me for art classes at the Art Institute. I think I was maybe a sophomore in high school. So the three years in high school I went to Saturday classes at the Institute. And that's when I became more creative.

A: So when you say you became more creative you began, and started doing what?

G: I stopped copying. We had costume models and we had to paint or draw them. What else we did we have

to do...we had costume models, they took us out landscaping, still life...

A: so in your interpretation you became more creative.

G: Right. I stopped copying. And I have to look at something and then interpret it as you saw it. I mean copying, somebody already put it there.

A: So I just want to go back to artists who have influenced you in what way. I know that you mentioned Jay Jackson.

G: Jay, that's right.

A: But I think you'd also at some point in one of our conversations mentioned Charles White....

G: Down the hall in Chicago there was the South Side community arts center. And it was just an old mansion that had been turned into an art school. And what they did, they had an exhibit of black artists here. This was when I was at the Art Institute, and at that time I didn't, I hadn't had any education in art in school so I did not know about any black artists. I remember walking in and walking into that exhibit. I don't remember whether the artist was there. I just remember Charles White and these big drawings and the hands; I was just enthralled with that.

And while we're on the subject of the South Side community arts center, Margaret Burroughs. I knew her at the time, as Margaret Taylor Goss. She was married, she had a daughter and she was a graduate student and I was a first year student. And she was working on her master's degree. And she was very involved with the South Side

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community arts center. So also at that time I was very very silly 18-year-old kid and she was trying. Trying to get me to mature. I have to laugh because I was so ridiculous and Margaret tried so hard but anyway she did tell me that I was going to go up to South Side community arts center, she wasn't a teacher at the school, she was a student there!

A: She felt it was her responsibility.

G: That I was going to go up there, three days a week. That I was going to teach a children's arts class, me and my girl. I had a friend. That's the thing. Me and this girl were the silliest people in the whole school. We were actually clowns, when I think about it now. If I were to meet somebody like that, I would probably pick up something and knock them on their heads, because they were so foolish.

But anyway she told me and Helen that we were going to go to the community arts center and we were going to teach three days a week and we were going to teach art to the children there. That I did. I stopped my silliness enough to do that. And I went there three days a week. To these kids. Then Helen and I decided we were going to take them to the Field Museum. That's the Museum of Natural History in Chicago. So we decided that we were going to take them there and the people in charge, were all, No! They did not want us to take the children because the children would do this and the children would do that... And that was my first learning, that when you take them outside of their immediate community and take them to another community they become other people. We took these supposedly little wild children down to the museum. They had never been there and it was an experience I will never forget. I learned, so in later years when I was

teaching. That was the thing that really made me a half-way decent teacher because I realize that you know children really act the way you expect them to act.

A: And do you think in that moment that's what led you to choose education?

G: Yeah. Because as I said I was very silly, in any other things, but when it came to that particular situation I settled that. And I took those kids. I did what Margaret told me to do but I didn't do anything else she told me to do.

A: Now you also mention at some other point one other visual artist, Pablo Picasso.

G: Pablo Picasso. Picasso came to me, I think when I was at the Art Institute when a lot of things came to me... they had some Picasso's. My first impression... first of all with Picasso was the fact that he could go away from realism and create what..the front, the side, the back of a thing. I was just amazed, and I was just so interested in taking things and changing them. You don't have to do exactly what's there. Do it your way. See when you're in class and the teacher is telling you, you do this, and you use this color, do this and that other thing and you do that. But when you look at Picasso, at his real earlier drawings he was, he was a master. He was a master and he could take that and do a whole lot of other things with it. And that is what really sort of influenced me all my life. Is the fact that you can do what you want to do with it. Whatever you can think of, you do it.

A: Thinking outside the box.

G: Exactly.

A: What about any literary artist, writers, poets, that

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provided influence or inspiration?

G: Well the first person that comes to my mind is Langston Hughes. In his early work, he wrote a lot of these little two line things that were so deep. I took from it a couple of paintings, I've quoted from him. What I called one is "I wish the rent was heaven sent" and that was a painting I did on homeless people. I titled it "I wish the rent was heaven sent." I've done a lot with his simple statement... I don't remember the whole quotation, but it's justice is a blind goddess a fact we all know, it's the fact that we black folks all know it, her bandage hides two festering sores which once perhaps were eyes. And what he's saying is that justice is not fair. And I've done several paintings on that issue, because as we deal today, we know that justice is way past us. In fact in one I did of justice, I took the bandage completely off.

A: Because she's no longer pretending. No protection.

G: And as I look at the cases today, of you know, people that are killed with the hands of police shot with their hands up in the air and all that, and justice says it was fair.

A: So this is a perfect segway into the next question/ statement. Many artists myself included have talked about your influence on their art practices political ideologies and careers. Ben Jones in particular speaks very candidly about his radicalization and political identity as a socialist and the fact that his introduction to socialism came through you and your husband, can you, and I think that you have already touched on your own radicalization, or your own formulating of your sense of social responsibility and political identity. As a socialist. Would you like to speak a little more about that?

G: Well I have to go back to the Art Institute again. When I came there, this silly little 18 year old I just sort had a sort of an idea about that. But I wasn't too interested in what was going on in the outside world. But at that particular time in the late 30s and the 40s, was, especially with during the war, when the war first began and all that, you had also had as I say you had unions organizing, there was a lot of radicalization, you had all these youth groups, you had the Young Communists League, you had the Norman Thomas Socialists which was CORE at that time.

Let's see. You had had the Jewish group, the Zionists. And I can't think of all of them, there just all of these organizations, and by golly, there were at least three or four of each one of them at the Art Institute. Artists at that time were very radical. You had all these little groups. So at lunchtime all they did was argued back and forth. Also, on the weekends, each one of them, they were grabbing at the young people. They had what they called socials. They'd have parties. And they get you to come to their party. Or come to their party.

And of course being a silly 18 year old I made my rounds of all the parties. And in the process, I learned a lot. I learned a lot about the Jewish Zionists. The Young Zionists. They were they were they called themselves labor Zionists, and I think they still exist today. They're the anti-movement within Israel right now. And at that point, I think the ones I geared most towards were the Norman Thomas Socialists. And the NTS differed in what way.

A: Who were they? Or who was Norman Thomas?

Norman Thomas was a socialist. And the youth group was made up of Methodist ministers on the campus of the University of Chicago. They formed CORE. And that

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was what CORE did. See each group had their own way of working, or dealing with issues. The Young Communist League dealt with communism, to establish communism all over the world, they were very loyal to Stalin etctera. The Zionists. and the other groups, called the Communist Party stalinists, you know they argued back and forth. But the reason that I went toward, more towards the Norman Thomas Socialists, I don't know the reason I went towards the Norman Thomas at the time... But all they did in Chicago was they fought discrimination, and what they would do... Chicago was just like any other city at that time. There were certain places you couldn't go, you couldn't go in there to eat. There were downtown places you could go into. But if you got out of downtown, if you if you happen to be over here and you want to go in the restaurant over there, it is like going down south.

Also there was something called restrictive covenants, which I was not aware of, and I was not the least bit interested in, because I wasn't buying a house. But that's what they fought was, with restrictive covenants where black people couldn't buy houses and or couldn't get an apartment. So what they would do is go out on Saturday nights and Saturdays they would go to these restaurants, which didn't serve black people. And as a group they would have a black person with them and they would go in the restaurant and sit down.

So one time they convinced me to go, I got there and it was a most terrifying situation because I was old enough to know. That it's Chicago, if you were caught walking down the street that was in a white neighborhood after dark, it was like being in Mississippi. They called the cops and arrest you. So anyway we go to this restaurant and you go in and we sit down and I am absolutely terrified. We sit down and the waitress

comes over and she says we don't serve niggers here. And so we just kept sitting there. So then the manager comes out and he says they were going to call. He says all right. So he gets on the phone and he calls the police. So then we got up and we left. And I thank God for that, and then I'm scared, because I think when we get outside they're gonna tap us outside. But anyway. After I got over that fear, an anger came up in me.

So I continued to, you know, every weekend, I would go out with them. Then I start, then I sort of left, you know, I wasn't too anxious, I spent some time with them, and there was something called the International Club that was downtown that was not too far from the Art Institute. And so my friend Helen, Helen my friend was Jewish, the other silly girl. She was a silly little girl. So there was something called International House. So she said let's go there. So we went there this particular Saturday and it was quite an experience. For the first time I met Palestinian Jews and my eyes opened up because first place they're dark skinned and had real nappy hair! I will always remember these days. I mean they were white. I mean you you know they were not brown. They were just sort of olive colored. And you knew they weren't African American but they had this kinky African-American hair! And that was a nice experience, I learned to do Jewish dancing. But what I'm telling you is I learned to appreciate other people. In my silliness. If I hadn't been a silly kid I probably wouldn't had that experience. As I think about it now, I really wasn't as bad as I thought I was.

A: Maybe what you or someone else may have been referring to silliness, may have really been the developing of an open person.

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G: Probably. Because I realized that not only were there Palestinian Jews, there were Native Palestinians there too. Arabs, and I met all these people. So then the radicalization came of course when I moved to New York. Well the thing is that at the Art Institute, especially for black kids, what you do is you go to New York and that's where you go to become a very famous artist, is you go to New York. But you go to New York and you find out they're very clannish, artist are very clannish, it wasn't easy to get in with them. In the 40s. It was not easy to get in with them. Especially with women, black women artists.

So anyway, in New York, I think every week there's some kind of demonstration, and that is the way that I sort of got involved in New York, with...

A: With other radical artists?

G: Yes, but by this time I'm no longer 18 years old I'm in my 20's now and it's more formulaic.

A: Now were there groups of women artists that you met and formed alliances with once you got to New York. Who were working artists at the time?

G: No. I'd go to exhibits and things, but everybody knew everybody and everybody was hugging everybody else. So very exclusive still. You're still very clannish let's say. I really did not get to know the artists. Some people that I knew already... I'm trying to think... Cortor! (Eldzier Cortor) He was an artist. He sort of took me under his arm, under his wings, you know, when I got to New York, so therefore, he took me around to exhibits and things like that.

A: So you were meeting some of his contemporaries

Do you remember any of the women who were with him? Who were his contemporaries at the time?

G: No.

A: Did you have any experiences with the WPA or FAP?

G: No at that time I was too young. I went to class. I went to dance classes and I went to art classes. Through the WPA.

A: Through those programs. So your teachers were teaching through WPA or FAP.

G: Right.

A: I want to shift the focus just for a minute to talk about your processes, your artistic process and I mean you work across so many, make so many different media. I don't know that I would say so much different genres but certainly your media is broad, it's vast. You're a muralist you are a doll maker you're in assembler you are a constructionist, you paint you sculpt you are a weaver... To go back to the Art Institute of Chicago which seems to be a huge turning point for you in your own life and in your career and your decisions about art. Were you primarily studying weaving then?

G: No no.

A: So when did the weaving come in?

G: the weaving came in very late at the Newark Museum. They had a workshop at the Newark Museum. At the Art Institute I had a friend. As I matured I had other friends besides silly Helen. Anyway, I had a friend who was in dressmaking. At the Art Institute no matter what

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you did you had to start from scratch. If you were a painter, you had to not only stretch your canvas but you had to size your canvas. You weren't buying sized canvas.

A: Were you mixing your own pigments?

G: No. That we didn't do, but there were some students who went to the Art Institute. You've heard of Shiva paint? It was two brothers and they went to the Art Institute for two years and they would mix paint for everybody so they just dropped out and went into the business. So therefore at the Art Institute we had to buy Shiva paint.

Well anyway, back to the friend of mine, and she was in dress design. And in dress design you had to start out making your own fabric. So she had to weave her own fabric. And she made herself a suit. And she wasn't a thin girl. She was a pretty heavy girl, she wasn't really obese, she was buxom! And she wove this material, I can still remember it, it was a sort of blue grey weave, it was a small thing. And when I saw the material on, as a suit. So, oh, so amazing to me. So I wanted to take weaving. And I spent two weeks...warping the loom, and I quit. And didn't go back to it, until 20 years later. More than 20 years later, at the Newark Museum I took weaving. And now the reason that I did that was someone had said that my lot of my work at that time was looking like fabric. And I thought about it. I thought about doing tiles, and then when this class came up at the museum I just took it.

A: Now they said your work was looking like fabric. Meaning your paintings look like fabric?

G: Yeah.

A: That's how people interpret it? They thought they saw patterns, or weaving patterns emerge in your work. So I guess back to this question. Do you see similarities or differences, besides the obvious similarities and differences in materials? You know, materials in terms of tactile differences, or as integral components of the greater whole in terms of how they fit into your work? Because I know that you will weave and then you will paint on your weavings?

G: Yeah, let's go back to Picasso-

I learned from him that you could do anything you wanted to do. I started out when I first left art school, oil painting, because to me that was an artist. An artist oil painted. And the thing was I could never finish a painting. Never. So then I couldn't figure out why, I think I know what happened- at some point I would get bored with it, I would have it all planned out, and I would get bored with it. So then I started using gouache, or tempera paint, tempera or gouache, and that I could do because it didn't take so long. And I also realize with the oil painting, I was making this plan and I was trying to stick to the plan. And I also found that when I moved over to gouache that piece, I had a plan. But within my plan and then working with it, it would grow

A: Because the nature of the fluid, the fluid nature of gouache? As opposed to oil?

G: Yes, and it would grow, and the way that it would end up, would not be quite the way it had started. And at that point I realized that, I remember one of my professors, one of my art teachers, had always told us, you make your plan and you stick to it.

And then at that point I said, you don't have to stick to

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the plan. So I went through the gouache, I'm trying to think of what's the other...I used a lot of things. You do as much as you can with this, and then it begins to get you bored. Or it moves you on to another thing. I think to the gouache I might have moved on to the weaving, and what happened with the weaving, I started with fabric, and I did everything you can possible do...I started out weaving rag rugs.

So for Christmas that year I made a rag rug for everybody in the family, and my friends. And only one person put them on the floor. Everyone was hanging them up! I mean, the ones I made for myself I put on the floor. So then from the rag weaving rugs, I started to put in figures, faces, bodies, and then landscapes. Then from that, I made a weaving, and then I made painting from the weaving. I played back and forth with a thing. Then in the process of the weaving, I think...I needed...yes, when I was weaving, what I did, was not solid material, I bought print. At first I started out with rags that I found and stuff like that, and then I started buying hundreds of dollars worth of fabric!

Anyway, the people...if I wanted a black person, I would get a fabric with some black in it, or black and white fabric, and for the white person, I would get something that had some pink or something, The people would not be just a solid color, and after that, I made dolls. I made something called fluffy duffies. And that was a pillow that had, it was a figure, a head, all consolidated together and the arms would come around the head, and so it was all one piece, and then there would be one long piece sticking out which would be a leg. I must have made about a least a dozen of these. And the purpose was, they were called Ghetto Pillows. And what they did, they had the leg, you could carry your pillow with you wherever you went, and if you wanted

to sit down someplace hard, you could sit on it, and while you're walking, if somebody tried to attack you, you could take the leg and swing it at them.

And so all that came from my weaving, these figures that were all combined together that inspired the heads of dolls. Then I made some dolls the same thing. I didn't make them out of a solid color fabric. I made them out of print. Print fabric. So the face was print, and my daughter, I had given her one and she lived in the colonnades apartments at the time. And it was a big doll and she said she was walking down the hall with it, holding onto the hand and dragging it along. And this woman came along, and said look how you're dragging that baby! And she said when the woman looked at it she said Ho! Because it was black and white fabric.

And from those, I just go from one thing... and then the weaving, the weaving has stayed with me the longest. What I do with anything, until I can't do anymore, I can't think of anything else to do with it. I would never make another doll now.

A: I wanted to ask you, do you ever revisit?

G: No.

A: So once you exhaust it?

G: I've wanted to go back, but I can't. The interest isn't there anymore. From the weaving, with the fabric, what happened was, I think I was doing a pond or something, and I needed blue. And I thought about the New York Times that came in a blue plastic bag. And I wondered if I could weave the plastic. And sure enough I did. And something else I also found out that weaves beautifully is the brown paper bags. First you have to you have to cut

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Gladys Barker Grauer, curated by Adrienne Wheeler

November 11th, 2017 - January 12th, 2018 Main Gallery, 73 Market Street Newark, NJ

them into strips and you wet them, and you let them dry. Almost dry. They have to be a little damp when you weave them. They are as strong as iron. So I went to the plastic, and I wove the blue in there, and then I decided, well let's try some more, you know, and I start collecting, put another color plastic, in something else I was weaving, and then I decided, let's just go to all plastic bags.

A: And in that, did you start thinking environmentally, in terms of recycling, with both the plastic, and the paper, being recycled material?

G: No, not at the time. I was just so engrossed with collecting different colored materials. There's something else that I left out, that helped me move from one thing to another. Now, some of my pieces, I have a way of taking a paper, and dividing it, and dividing it into four or five or size parts, with irregular lines, and within these spaces made by these irregular lines, I put a whole figure in there, the heads, the arms, the feet, everything, I've done a lot of pieces like that. I did a piece like that called the Krugerrand. And that was African women.

A: Based on the South African coin?

G: Correct, Yes. And these are mothers sitting there holding babies, African mothers holding babies and the babies are all kind of ashen grey, They're dead. And they're sitting there holding. But everything fits within that space, no matter how, if you have to put the leg over the shoulder or wherever you have to put the leg or the arm, you put it all within that space. It's very challenging to fit it all in the space.

A: And that actually leads to the next question about you know which medium you may choose for a par-

ticular purpose. Is there one medium that's a better vehicle than another for conveying a particular idea. Because so many of your ideas are wrapped around social issues or you are talking about social issues.

G: Yes. Actually I would say gouache and watercolor. Acrylics, I've done some things that are acrylics, but they are not really my thing. I use acrylics on the plastic, because they go on the plastic. But I say watercolor and temperas.

A: Now I know you also use corrugated cardboard. When did that enter?

G: Oh, I use so many mediums. Ok, so the corrugated board preceded the plastic. I think the weaving was first. The corrugated board came with the homeless.

A: You've continued to use it? You haven't exhausted the cardboard yet? In some of your more recent works you've used it

G: The corrugated was very very fascinating, because I started out with simply just using it as corrugated, then I built a little house which I gave to Russell which he gave to his son. But I built this little corrugated house. You can get it in white, blue and tan. I don't know if you can get it in any other color. So with those with those three colors, and corrugated is a very interesting material, because if you cut it one way and you cut the other piece the other way and you put the two pieces together the light falls on them differently and it looks like two different colors. It cast shadows and it makes a really fascinating design.

A: You know we spent a lot of time on process probably because I'm so interested in process.

G: Well that's my main thing.

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A: But in this exhibition we've been formulating ideas about the exhibition and talking about the title and trying to figure out how this exhibition would be different from any other, how this interview would be different than other interviews that you've done. And I've sort of concluded that when you are talking about a life in the arts, I would say that spanned over 70 years at this, of 70 years of being involved in the art, in 70 years of creating art, that it's almost impossible for there not to be some sort of overlap. So we were trying to figure out ways, different ways to talk about your influences as a mentor as a teacher. As a person who has created space for other women. To work to understand that they can work as artists maintain a practice in the middle of their life their other lives their mothers their wives significant others. And we didn't want to focus too much, on you know, relationships, because often that happens when we're interviewing women artists, or talking about women artists, it somehow or other it always shifts to their children and their families. And so in that I want to go. To your gallery the gallery that you opened in the 70's in Newark on Bergen St.

G: With the gallery, that was a very interesting thing. It was something that I had wanted to do a long time. And then the riots came to Newark, and space became available, because these businesses moved out, especially in the South Ward. There was no damage done to the buildings in the South Ward, as much as they tried to try to say that there was looting, there was only a certain area that was hit. And this place became vacant. It was a dress shop at one time, and there were two places that I wanted, one was across the street, and I think it used to be a law office or something I couldn't get that. So I've got that space, now when I got the space, I'm a very interesting person because I mean I didn't have any more business

sense than my puppy dog did.

A: But you had a vision.

G: I had a vision, yes. But anyway I opened up a gallery And also it was for my benefit, my children were old enough to come home from school, and I had a big German Shepherd dog at home and I told them if they opened up the door, and the dog don't come to the door to meet them just close the door and keep on truckin. So they were safe in the house with the dog and so with the gallery, my girls were teenagers, they were old enough to make dinner. They were old enough to do a whole lot of things for themselves, they didn't need mommy there all the time.

I opened up the gallery not having any idea, I'll be honest with you, I had no idea what the heck I was going to do except I had an idea of what a gallery was like. The first thing that happened, I did know Eleta Caldwell was an artist. In fact, she was the only artist I knew in Newark. Interesting thing when I moved to New Jersey, every weekend I went to New York, to the galleries because I didn't know any artists here. And I would go to New York to the galleries to the exhibits the museum you know and things like that. And actually I met more of the New York artists then, than I did what I when I lived in New York. So Eleta was the only artist I knew in Newark, so I talked her into it. And through Eleta I met Nettie, they were both teaching at Weequaic High School.

A: Nettie Thomas?

G: Yes.

A: I talked to Eleta about maybe having an exhibit-no, no, no, I said, you have enough pieces, it's a small gallery and

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so anyway she decided, she agreed to have an exhibit. And who did I expect to come? You know, her family and a few friends and something like that. Must have been about...well of course, teaching at the school, a lot of the teachers from the school came, and what had happened was there were artists in Newark, there were artists in East Orange, there were artists all around but there was no gallery, and they heard, they heard that there was a gallery in Newark.

And so the day of Eleta's exhibit opened up, there were people all out on the street, it was just something I hadn't expected. Onnie tells the story that he was riding down the street on his bicycle and he said he rode by and he saw something that said art gallery and so he said he rode around the block and he came back to see that there was a real art gallery there. I think of course then everybody started coming in, Ben started coming in, all these people starting coming in, because there was no art gallery. And at that time I met a lot of the New York artists, for some reason, I don't know why, I had no idea why I didn't meet them before. As I said, I knew some of them. See, I'm not good on names. I met the Jersey City women artists... Once the gallery got started I had no problem getting exhibits. Because there were artists that wanted to do exhibits. Also what I opened up the gallery to, I had Sunday painters, or I had people who had been, who had liked art in high school, and they were doing little things and there was a couple of people. There was one guy who wanted to have exhibits. So I said OK so he comes in with all these painting and in big orange letters he has his name written on all these pieces. But I didn't talk him down His name is Mr. Johnson.

A: Oh yes! Lester Johnson, I know Mr. Johnson you know he still does work. He's pretty old.

G: Every time I see him I put something on Facebook, it makes me feel so good.

A: Yes! Because he's primarily a sculptor.

G: Because when he first started out, I had to tell him, next time, don't put your name in big orange letters! Because he does those phenomenal sculptures that are chessboards that are all carved from one piece, without anything joining them. Yes! As a teacher, as a mentor, it always makes me feel good to see somebody who went way beyond where they started. I brought him up because he's one of the people who I exhibited. He wasn't an artist then but he wanted to be. And I'm just so glad because once he had that exhibit, he started bringing things in for me to see..

And then the next thing that came from the gallery, the gallery really grew way beyond me. And I'll tell you, my husband had a good job, and he was paying rent on the thing, because half the time it didn't even make the rent! First thing we did, by this time, I had attracted a lot of women artists: Janet Picket, Nettie, Bisa (Bisa Washington), I can't think of all the names, it was 12 or 13 artists. It started out with me, Eleta, and Janet. And we called it Black Woman in Visual Perspective. And we sent out, I don't know how we contacted people, but we contacted people that were how should I put it, they said we were elitist, that were career-minded, that this was their thing.

A: That art was their career.

G: There were people who had little paint by numbers things, things they ordered, and we had to eliminate them, try not to hurt their feelings, but we wanted women who really wanted to do art. My thing was, the women, Janet had a husband, Nettie had a husband and a child. All

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these women have jobs, by the way! So they're working, they have a family and a house; they had children, and all those things. I had gone through that! I had children, and a husband, and a house, our finances weren't good, I had to make ends meet. That's the point when I said, I was doing art, I did tee shirts, or some little jobs or something like that, and at some point I said, no, I have to do art. Just have to. And I realized, that I didn't want these women, to get to the point when the house, and the children became more important than them. So what we set up, we were very ambitious, we were going to have at least 4 exhibits a year, and you could not put more than 2 old pieces in, you had to have at least three new pieces.

A: So that people were constantly working?

G: So you had to keep working, you couldn't just turn in old stuff, and through the gallery, well of course, I met every artist in New Jersey. It was just an amazing thing. We met the New York group; I think they were called...with Cay Brown. Now these people were all in NY before, but I just didn't have what it took to meet them. I met Cay Brown and then the Jersey City group, one in East Orange, we met them, then what we did, is, we formed a national conference of artist, a New Jersey group. We had the big thing in Jersey City. Now the Newark Museum...I have to go back.

A: That's fine.

G: When I first came to Newark, and the first thing I did was go to the Museum, and then I went to the library. Because these were the things I was based in, even as a kid. I was poor, so what I had to do as a kid, I went to the library, I went to the Museum. Because they were free. So when I came to New York, came to

New Jersey, the first thing I did, I went to the Newark museum, and to the library. And I'm telling you, they are fascinating compared to other cities.

A: And they're connected too.

G: In New York, maybe you can go to one library but you can't take anything out... Or you can go to the branches and take things out... It's a whole thing... In the Newark Public Library, I was just amazed, you can go just go in there, Mr. Dane was there; there was the print department there. It was just great for me! So anyway, we formed the national conference of artists. Another thing, I keep going back, let me go back. There was always this complaint, the Newark Museum they're white, they don't do this, they don't do that. So I decided, well I'm going to become a volunteer, so I was the first black volunteer! My theory was, and this was something my mother taught me, my mother told me when I was very young, she said, if you see a whole lot of white people, and a whole lot of black people, go sit with the white people. They're going to do one of two things. Either they're going to get up and leave, or they're going to talk to you.

A: And it would provide you with a different experience.

G: What she told me, was don't isolate yourself. And of course, at the time, what did that matter to me. I went to the Art Institute and I acted like...she didn't want me to act. But anyway, so what I did was I became a volunteer at the Newark Museum. What I found out was there were black people working inside, it wasn't a whole thing, and also you have to know how museums work. How do you get in here? You don't get in there sitting over here complaining. And we formed a national conference of artists. And being a volunteer I asked Sam Miller for a meeting. And he said we could use one of the rooms in

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the Ballantine house. And we had a meeting. And there must have been, 75 people there from New York and everywhere, that came to the meeting.

So then, after we had the meeting, then, Ben Jones had met Hubert Williams, who was a police director, this is an interesting story, do you know it?

A: Others don't know it!

G: Ok. So Ben calls me up, so Ben has a way of shifting things out to other people. So he calls me up and tells me that I have to meet with Hubert Williams. I say, who's he? He's chief of detectives. I say, I come from Chicago, I don't like cops. I grew up with two gun Pete. He says, no, you have to meet with him. And see something I learned from being with the radical movements, is you're not there by yourself. You represent people. So therefore what you don't like, it's not important. What is important is what's good for the group. So that's something I learned being in the radical movement. So I said ok, I'll meet with him. So I met with Hubert Williams. I think our meeting was at 9 clock or something like that, I get there, I'm waiting, he doesn't come in, finally he comes in, and he's a very handsome black man. And I was very impressed with him, and he says to me, would you like a drink. And I say, no thanks. And he starts pouring him a drink, and I think to myself, this isn't going to work. So he pours himself a drink, and we talk, and we talk. Nice conversation, and just before we're leaving, he says to me, is there anything I can do for you and the artists? I said, well we'd like to have an exhibit at the Newark Museum. He said, oh that's no problem. He says, the city pays the utilities for the Newark Museum. They cannot refuse us anything. So he gets on the phone, right then, and he calls Sam Miller up and says, I would for you, I would like you to

have a meeting with Ms. Grauer. Blah blah about having an exhibit at the Newark Museum. So, ok. Something else I learned from the radical movement, never never go to a meeting by yourself. If you're representing a group, don't go to a meeting by yourself, you can be bought out, you can be accused of being bought out, you can be accused, and also you need someone there to pick up what you missed. So I told Eleta. So we went to the meeting, and before we went to the meeting, we decided that, well, previous to that, the group in East Orange had an exhibit at the Newark Museum, a few years before, they had a lot of artists there, and I still have the catalog from it. But what happened was, the Newark Museum had nothing to do with it. They just gave them the space and let them do what they wanted to do. So what they did, they had good artists; I mean really, they had the top of Black artists there.

A: Do you remember any of the artists in that show?

G: I told you, I'm not good with names. Any black artist that you can think of at the time was there. I'm trying to think of one black artist that was just there recently. They just gave them the space. They had artists, and they had people with paintings they had done in high school. What they did was they gave them the big gallery and they had to fill it up. And they practically filled it up. So Eleta and I decided, we don't, they're not going to do that to us. So when we got there, Sam, that's the first thing he said, he said, well you pick the artists, you have them bring the work in, we'll set a date for bringing the work in, and blah blah blah. So I said, well, I really don't know to do that. I said, I wouldn't know how to do that. I wouldn't know what to put in and what not to put in. And Eleta said, I don't know anything about curating. So Fern Thurlow was the curator of painting, and she was at the meeting. I said, I think it would be better; she's a curator

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of painting, if she picked the work out, than if we picked the work out, because I don't really know anything about doing that. Sam looked at us, (sighs for effect) well have them send slides in.

Now, what's the problem? We've got to get some artists.

A: Oh You didn't have any artists lined up?

G: We didn't have a lot of them! You know? Russell (Murray) was big help. In fact he joined Black Women in Visual Perspective because they needed a man in there. And he had some good exhibits. So anyway, what we did, I knew Rex Gorleigh. And we had lunch with him and he was telling us about the artists in South Jersey. And then, he hooked us up. Rex Gorleigh, he was a painter. Wally Conway (Wallace Xavier Conway) was the curator of exhibits at the Trenton Museum. So he knew everything, so he's another person, who started out as a painter, he didn't paint anymore; he was curator of exhibits at the Trenton museum. So he knew every artist, every black artist. So he just gave us the whole list, we put a painting of his in the exhibit also, he hadn't painted in years. So anyway, the exhibit at the Newark Museum was really good. I have the list, at this point I'm not good with names, I don't remember everyone who was in that exhibit. Ben. Willie Cole. Eleta. Nettie. Janet.

A: Was Bisa in the show?

Yes. And the one who does sculpture, in south jersey?
A male?

A: Mel Edwards?

G: Yes! I told you, at my age, I know my name. You ask me my name; you ask me my children's names that's what I know! But don't ask me anybody else. But anyway, it was such a great exhibit that the Jersey City museum, the curator came over to see it, and the whole thing just moved whole to Jersey City after it left the Newark Museum. What I discovered there is that Sam Miller, as a lot of people, did not know what was going on in the black community. After that, they started purchasing black art. By the time Sam Miller left, they had a good collection and they're still collecting. I just want to say that, like my mother said, you don't isolate yourself. You put yourself out there. And that's what happened, in that particular situation, I think Sam Miller's eyes were opened. I don't think he was prejudiced at all, he did not know. I mean, he was running a museum. He wanted to run it, he wanted the best things. And after that, they started lots of black themes. They had had a few black themes, maybe 20 years apart, something like that. But once they got a look to see what black artist were doing. They opened up. So that's something I'm very proud of. At the time I was doing it, I didn't know that's what I was doing, All I knew, was let's see what's over there.

A: And its interesting, because many of the artists that you've named, and were talking about, at this point it's a forty year span, most of them you still have a relationship with, most of them I've heard them, talk about your influence on them, in their lives and careers as artists, and most of them have continued to make art, in their own right, most of them abroad, or in the other states.

G: That's what just makes me feel so good. As I say, it went way beyond me. That's what its about. As a teacher, that's what your about, you're about making people do the most they can do.

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A: So we've talked about a lot, we've covered a lot of territory, is there anything of particular importance or significance that we've overlooked in this interview that you would like to add? And we can always add to this interview....

G: One thing, I would like to say. There's a couple things I would like to deal with. One, is what I was doing 20 or 30 years ago, the artists are just beginning to deal with today, they are just beginning to deal with police brutality. But I think some of my first pieces, were dealing with police brutality. And you just think, over all these years it hasn't changed.

I think the main thing is, the problem I was faced with, or the issues that I dealt with, are still issues. They haven't changed. They haven't gone away. Homelessness. Poverty. You know, all these issues are still here, And racism is still here.

Also I'd like to see to the artists. You don't wait for the opportunity to come to you. You make the opportunity. If something is going on over there, you don't sit over here and complain that they're racists, or this or that. Go on in there. As my mother said, either they'll tell you to get out, or they'll leave, and you can have it all to yourself. But don't sit over here and not know.

A: You have to be engaged and participate. I have found that to be true. Where I've found myself complaining about different things that seemed to be happening. But I was really standing on the outside...

G: But it was really happening and you had to get in there and change it! You have to get in there and change it. And change it. It's not going to change itself. We have to change it.

A: So my last question, or my last question I should say, for today, is what motivates you to continue creating art?

Whatever's happening today that I feel emotional about. What I do in my art is a lot of my feelings, what I think, I don't write well. In fact, I used to think I was a very poor speller, but what I found I just wasn't one to write a lot. So therefore the things that I have to say, I put it down.

A: And so your art gives voice, to your opinions, your thoughts, your social responsibility.

G: I think about the things I'm dealing with right now- police brutality, racism, same things I was dealing with 30 years ago, 40 years ago.

A: Issues that impact women and children

G: I wish they'd go away.

Something else I want to say- I don't always do things like that. I have a piece of a mother, and she's braiding her little girls hair and the little girl is braiding her doll's hair, I have people dancing, in fact I had a whole series I called Saturday Night. It's based on Fats Domino. You know, Monday, Tuesday, come Saturday night, and on Sunday his head is a mess. Based on the fact that black people, we work, we slave, we're mistreated all week... dancing, because that's what we do. I used to go dancing every Saturday night.

A: Where did you go dancing?

G: In Chicago. I'm talking about when I was single. My husband didn't dance. We used to go to dances and he would stand around, sit around, and then about 20 minutes he would want to leave because he didn't dance.

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A: In Chicago were there any clubs you used to go to, any bands you used to see?

G: Well In Chicago we used to do, lets see. Chicago had nightclubs. We used to go to nightclubs. You had Count Basie, all the big musicians and they used to go there. It was expensive, you had to have a cover charge, so we would all chip in to pay the cover charge and then we'd order one drink.

A: So maybe next time we'll talk about Chicago style music, and whether or not it influenced your work.

G: You know why I'm laughing. I liked the black music. But I was a hillbilly. I love hillbilly music. Nobody in my house liked hillbilly music.