Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Michael Harris

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Transcript

Preface

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 11.5.3. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Speakers are indicated by their initials.

Interview

Michael Harris Part 1

Tape H1

TV LAND

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: So let's talk about you for a minute. Tell me, what is your profession?

MH: I'm an art worker. I teach art history, I am a painter, artist, and I'm a curator.

Q: That's a handful.

MH: Yeah. (Laughs) I guess I ... I can multitask, and I love art and sports, and so I love to work in all aspects of it. And I've been fortunate enough to have the opportunity, because sometimes you can make a difference, doing one thing, and you can't make that same difference, doing something else. So that's what I do.

Q: You chose art or did art choose you?

MH: (Laughs) When I went to college, I went to college to play baseball. And in choosing a major, I decided that English wouldn't work, because I do not like 19th century English literature. I particularly abhor Charles Dickens. I'm not fond of T.S. Eliot, and I don't see the ... you know, Shakespeare's language doesn't speak to me. And, at that time, we weren't listening and reading Toni Morrison or James Baldwin, Richard Wright. And I didn't even get Hemingway. So art was the other choice. And later, it seems, they came full circle, and so now I write, and I write about art. But, you know, that was why I chose the major of art.

Q: Art has become your life.

MH: It is. But, you know, my grandfather was a very prominent man, and he had a white-collar job. He was the first black Olympic gold medalist. But he was brilliant and just a wonderful person. And he would bring the cardboards that they folded his white shirts around, in the laundry, to me, from the time I was three, and I drew on them from the time I was three. It was just something I did. Never thought about it. So art was always in me. It was always something that I felt comfortable doing. But I just didn't focus on it as a possibility, because when I was young, you never saw black artists. You never saw art that spoke in that way. So I knew classic art and I loved the art, but I never saw myself in it, until I got to college. And then I began to consider it as a career option.

Q: Tell me about your artwork.

MH: Now? (Laughs) What do you want to know?

Q: I want you to describe it to me. I'm Chauncey Gardner. I'm in a childhood world. I know nothing about you. I don't know who you are, I don't know what you do, I don't know what your audience. So if you can just describe it to me, as a ten-year-old boy, what you do.

MH: I'll start from the specific and I'll work back.

Q: Okay.

MH: Presently, I'm doing a series that comes out of my experience in Barbados. And I'm looking at the land, the culture, the history. And using photo-based media in a grid-like manner, which kind of is this quilt process coming back full circle. And so I use the images to kind of capture ideas and the spirit of something. Art for me, generally, is a way to articulate my experience, my social reality and experience, my larger cultural reality. So I sort of am an individual within the context of my larger associations and affiliations. And my art allows me to express that. And I got into it, hoping, at a certain point, to make a difference. You know, to make a difference in the world. To make a difference in my community. To represent people who maybe weren't represented. And so it ... art is a verb. (Laughs) It works. It does things. And I think sometimes in the contemporary world, we lose sight of that, that ... no pun intended ... that art has always, for humans, been a means of doing something. Of making something happen. Or at least having the illusion, the sense, that you could make something happen in your world. And from my study, I know that it makes a difference. I know that it has an

impact. I know it changes people. It affects people. The Yoruba have a word for art, "ona." And ona is about the transformation of material to ... into a higher form, more energy, releasing more ashe. And it also begins to, metaphorically, reflect the potential to transform the human into a higher state. A higher consciousness. And so I hope, in some way, to be a participant in that process.

Q: It sounds like a lot of responsibility. It sounds much bigger than that art, in a sense.

MH: Well, why are we here, if not to contribute to something larger than the self? I'm not here to contemplate my navel.

Q: Interesting. So how did you come to AFRICOBRA?

MH: I was a young student, trying to find a connection to black art. I wanted to go to grad school. I had these aspirations. But, you know, they were fuzzy, as they are for a lot of people at that age. And then, when I enrolled at Kent State, for grad school, I took a trip to Washington. And I saw art, in the galleries, that just mesmerized me, and I knew I had to go there. And I began to transfer ... began the process of trying to transfer to Howard. Jeff Donaldson saw something in me, and he encouraged me and let me come in to Howard, as a graduate student. And there I met the most incredible people. Skunder Boghassian was one of my painting teachers. Al Smith. I met Frank Smith there. I got to work with Jeff Donaldson, Lois Maiolu Jones was professor emeritus. Just these ... these people that I encountered, the art I saw in DC just energized me and revolutionized me, because I saw something that I had never seen before. And my relationship with Jeff grew, my relationship with Frank grew. I met Wadsworth Jarrell. James Phillips. And, eventually, they invited me to join AFRICOBRA, in 1979. And I was just ecstatic to be a part of these great artists; to be among them and to learn from them. And I did.

Q: From your perspective, what is AFRICOBRA?

MH: It's an artist collective with a communal consciousness. And, you know, it's hard to describe because it's a brotherhood. There ... I would say ... use another term, but the women who were in the group are no longer in the group, so we have become like brothers, those of us who are still surviving. Like family, in a certain sense. And we also are workers in a struggle to define, represent, and defend African people. Visually. And my research has shown me that race was constructed ideologically for a particular purpose. But it was embedded in the social consciousness of the larger nation, through images. Through misrepresentations. Through minstrelsy; through, you know, American genre paintings, the certain symbology that's implied when you have women and blacks marginalized and put in certain kinds of positions. There were caricatures that came out in the Currier and Ives Darktown prints, in the Harpers Weekly Black Bill cartoons. These things were just pounded into the American consciousness. And these images, I think, established in people's minds what race was. They had power. And so the struggle to counteract that destructive force is part of what we engage in, in a certain sense. And then African societies materialized their beliefs, their spirit, their culture, visually, through performance, through art, through symbols, things like that. So there's also this cultural production that we're a part of, I think. You know, and these are grandiose ideas. Part of it is just that we're a group, making art, and we play off each other, in the sense that musicians do, and we lift each other higher, through that tension.

Q: There's a discipline involved. There's a higher purpose to this art. So, as a collective, you can drive the work to a certain end. Not be so specific.

MH: Right. There's the creative process, first of all, that is always involved. It's not just political. And in the creative process, sometimes work ... I think you have an ethereal dialogue with your work. And this work talks back and forth to you, once you are tuned in to your own voice. And when I came back from Bahia, I was trying to do a piece. It's called A Velha Preta. Bahia. A Velha Preta, which means the old black woman. And I tried to make that piece blue, because I was feeling Yemenja, the goddess of the sea. But the painting would not let me paint it blue. It would not work until I changed the color. And then, once I got to the right color scheme, the painting opened up. And I can't explain it in any way that makes logical sense. But if you paint or you write music, you know what I mean. Sometimes that unlocks it. And there's ... that's a part of this process that we all go through. That's why you can see our individual voices in our work. And we share ... we share this understanding of the process, and then we focus on the part that we can talk about, in AFRICOBRA.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: From your perspective, what was the genesis of AFRICOBRA? What caused it to happen originally? You weren't part of the original part. But just from your perspective, what you've learned, your understanding of that period.

MH: From what I've been told ... and I talking to Jeff a lot ... African Americans were inadequately ... were poorly represented in American society. In newspapers, in movies, in television, in ads. And a lot of the representation was that of dysfunction and, you know, all these problematics. You've got criminals and things like that. And it

persisted ... it still persists, a lot of times, because when you think of welfare, even though there are more whites on welfare than blacks, you always see a poor black as a representative, so that begins to be associated in the public mind. And so the Wall of Respect was an attempt to counter this, having an outdoor gallery, as Nelson talks about, with the outdoor murals. And to provide images of who we are, rather than who we aren't. And to have self-control of those images, as all human groups attempt to do. And AFRICOBRA apparently grew out of that, an idea of creating an aesthetic, and having an art that was for the people, that was conscious of the people in the community, rather than the art world and the galleries and the critics; but an art that spoke to, for, and about the community. And that is my understanding of how it came together. And these artists talked, shared their vision. Those who did not, as I did, drink the Kool Aid, didn't join. But those who felt that they could work like this, together, joined. And I think that sometimes, like The Beatles ... good musicians, a great group. And I think that sometimes a collective has more power, more energy, more force than individuals. And we have great individuals. But as a force, as a group, I think we've had more power, more effect, more impact.

Q: (Inaudible) here that you represent sort of the new breed of AFRICOBRA. I know you've been with the group for 30 years. But I mean in terms of the relevancy. I assume that this group was formed ... the Wall of Respect was done in 1967. Had this reached a boiling point, do you think, within the black community, in terms of a confluence of events? I mean, do you feel like it had reached a point that was so acute that this sort of manifested itself out of that? And I want to then talk about is it still relevant today.

MH: It is hard for me to say what caused AFRICOBRA to manifest.

Q: Right.

MH: Because I wasn't in Chicago. I was in Cleveland. And I was a student, at the time. But, in retrospect, intellectually, I know that the riots, the black power movement, the linking with the freedom movements in Africa, the civil rights movement, the anti-war movement in the larger society, all these things were coming up, questioning society and ... so a lot was going on. There was a lot of impetus for change. And the times, I guess, were open to a lot of new ideas. There were a lot of things happening globally. I think that the black power movement, of which AFRICOBRA ... AFRICOBRA is a part, is much different than the Harlem Renaissance. The impetus was different. This was more about self-determination, and representing self rather than using art and culture as an entree into larger society, for integration. And so I think a lot of that comes ... a lot of AFRICOBRA's impetus comes out of these forces that are going on at the time. I can't speak to the specifics, but that's my impression.

Q: (Overlap) just looking back. Right. So are those same things relevant today?

MH: I think they're more complicated today, because I think the ... I think that there are forces, conservative forces, out there that are still seeking certain kinds of control. I think ... my slogan is that the conservatives have ... and the conservative wing of the GOP should be 18th century ideas for the 21st century. (Laughs) So I think it's relevant today. It's just more complex today. We've been inundated by media, saturated by media that does not represent this voice, by and large. And so we still have to be heard. We still have to be a part of the dialogue, those of us who have a particular orientation; those of us who are addressing a particular audience; those of us who do not want to be minstrels. And kind of update the whole minstrel paradigm. I see that going on. So, yes, we need to be out here. We need to have a communal base. We need to have an art that has some kind of collective responsibility inherent in its creation. So I think we're relevant. But it's just ... everything is more complicated, so it's harder to find a sound bite, a catch phrase.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: It speaks to the future, as well. It speaks to the next generation.

MH: Yes. Kevin Cole is our newest member, and he's younger. And we're looking at younger artists who have certain sensibilities. And I think that one of the important things that I've seen, growing up, was the intergenerational dialogue. You know, I used to maybe have debates with my uncle, and hang out with my aunt. And I learned about swing, and Duke Ellington, from my uncle, and jazz. And he was trying to teach me about horn players and the different sounds between Ben Webster and Coleman Hawkins, and how they could play the same song and you could hear their voice. And that intergenerational dialogue led me to help him understand what was going on in my time. And I think that that dialogue is what has to continue. And by having younger artists in our group, having these dialogues, it keeps us fresh with new information. And it gives them a link to the past and what they build on. And I think that that is absolutely necessary, and I think that there's enough of that happening that it can be exciting. And so it bodes well for the future, in my mind. But I am an optimist.

(Background/Off-Mike)

W: Back when AFRICOBRA was started, there was a different type of vulnerability and a different type of

openness for what they were trying to do then. Folks today they're just kind of doing their own thing.

MH: Now, when you say the people ... the community at large?

W: The community that (Inaudible) for something.

MH: Yes. I think that since the mid-sixties, that communities that we lived in have changed. First of all, not to be a conspiracy theorist, but a lot of highways were cut into cities that divided neighborhoods. And they provided military access to neighborhoods, and I think that was an outgrowth of the riots. I think that communities have been split so that they're more monolithic in terms of economic stratification, because middle-class and upper-middle-class blacks have been able to move out into places they could not before; therefore, the communities don't have the diversity within an area. And this means certain communities are more hardcore. And, you know, I think you see a rise of certain kinds of behaviors that come out of that, as people become more nihilistic. They're more hopeless. And that is a problem that is far more widespread now than ... in my mind, than before. I think that drugs have become a much greater problem. And a part of me thinks about the opium wars in China as a means of pacifying people. And these issues were not the same, back then, as they are now. They were bad issues, but it's just ... it's just not the same. And so some kids in some communities might not see a positive professional person in their growing up. I didn't have any money, growing up, but there were doctors that lived on the next street. Athletes. Jim Brown lived on the next street. You know, so there was a diversity of personalities and people in the range of my experience. And that helped me. Plus some of the beauty in my family that was supportive and ... and pressure from an aunt who was a teacher, and all of that. But ... you know, for excellence and for diction and things like that. And my grandfather. But, still, they were accessible to all kinds of people in my community. And I don't see that being the same now. So the issues are ... the issues are different. The forces that we are fighting are different. The beauty is that we have the image of a president and his family, who have ties to this community, here in Chicago. Therefore, they have ties to my community. That we didn't have. And I see that people are recognizing the needs for coalitions more. And I hope that happens, because people who have the same economic and political agendas need to coalesce, instead of squabbling amongst themselves. That's always been the strategy, divide and conquer. So.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: So, to summarize the answer to that question, you know, then and now.

MH: Then and now? More of a black community that was a community. With a diverse population. In the mid-sixties, I think, that was a much greater reality than now. The community has been dispersed, and economy stratified. And race is ... (Laughs) Issues of race are uniters, because you have a common enemy, a common problem. When you make the game more complex, it's harder for people to find as many ways to identify with each other. And that's the game now. It's harder.

(Background/Off-Mike)

W: (Inaudible) how would you respond to something like that?

MH: One friend of mine said art is an ultimate act of love. Another friend has the phrase that I like, is art is a verb. If it is radical to affirm people African descent, then the society we live in is very sick. If that healthy attitude is radical, the society we live in has serious problems. Our art is not about destruction. It's about construction. It's about affirmation. It's about talking about who we are. Which is what art does. What art should do. Talk about who we are, who we can be, who we want to be.

(Background/Off-Mike)

(END OF TAPE)

Michael Harris Part 2

Tape H2

TV LAND

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: Michael, could you tell us what AFRICOBRA means, just the word, like in ten seconds?

MH: AFRICOBRA means African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: AFRICOBRA means African Commune of Bad Relevant Artists.

Q: And could you talk to us a little bit about ... if you don't mind just listing the members of AFRICOBRA. The founding members first, if you remember them all?

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: Jeff Donaldson. Jeff Donaldson. Napoleon Henderson. Napoleon Jones Henderson. Wadsworth Jarrell. Barbara Jones Hogu. I think Gerald Williams ... were the members I knew who were founding members. Carolyn Lawrence and ... who else? Howard Mallory. Were here in the beginning.

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: Jae Jarrell.

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: Founding members of AFRICOBRA. Jeff Donaldson. Wadsworth Jarrell. Napoleon Jones Henderson. Barbara Jones Hogu. Carolyn Mims Lawrence. Jay Jarrell. Gerald Williams. These are the founding members that I knew about. When I became a member, Frank Smith was a member. Barbara and Carolyn and Howard were no longer members in the Washington, D.C. contingent. James Phillips had become a member. When I became a member, Akili Ron Anderson joined with me. Shortly thereafter, Murray DePillers and Adger Cowans became members. Jeff Donaldson passed away in 2004. Murray DePillars passed away in 2008. And Kevin Cole became a member in 2008.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: Could you maybe mention some of the musicians that influenced somehow ... throughout the history of AFRICOBRA?

MH: I could only speak from the time I became a member. And the members I know have been influenced by Monk, by 'Trane, Coltrane, Charlie Parker ... but not as much as Coltrane. You're looking at McCoy Tyner. James was always fond of Cecil Taylor and Ornette Coleman. And then we've also looked at Fela Kuti. We look at Bob Marley. And blues men, like Howlin' Wolf and Muddy Waters are names that I've heard over the years. And then we have the AACM, and the Art Ensemble of Chicago, and people like that, who were here. I've heard their names mentioned, but I was not a part of the Chicago incarnation.

Q: Were you familiar with Lester's music?

MH: I was not.

Q: But what do you think, what you heard from yesterday? What was your ...

MH: I loved Lester Lashley. I love what he was doing. He reminds me of some of these other groups, particularly the Art Ensemble of Chicago, whose music I do know. And he reminds me of them. And the percussive elements remind me ... we also like the World Saxophone Quartet, with David Murray. And some of the percussive qualities in his work remind me of some of the musicians I've heard in the '80s and '90s that have affected the group. So I can understand the relationship, now that I've seen it. It was fantastic. And he is so creative with the things he has on his instruments that remind me of certain African percussion elements.

Q: Would it be wrong to say that there is a clear relation between that music, or music in general, with the specific work that you have behind you? It almost looks like a pentagram, today. It's unbelievable. Can you elaborate a little bit (Overlap)

MH: Oh, not a pentagram. Not the evil. (Laughter) This work is called A Love Supreme. And it is obviously based on the John Coltrane song. And so there's a sense of rhythm that is very much a part of AFRICOBRA, when I became a member. And then I tried to have spiritual elements, because there are symbols in there that come out of African spiritual traditions. There's the symbol at the bottom, gye nyame, that comes out of the Adinkra of Ghana ... it means fear none but god. There are the bennu birds that are symbols of resurrection and renewal, and are affiliated with Osiris in Egypt. And above that is the all-seeing eye of Horus. So.

Q: Do you see that represented in the current work from other artist from AFRICOBRA (Overlap)

MH: Yes.

Q: ... music and art (Overlap)

MH: Oh, yes. James Phillips is almost an ethnomusicologist in his understanding of this segment of the music. And I learned so much from James. And Murray DePillars was very similar in his understanding of music and how important it was. Wadsworth Jarrell is always having musical references and suggestions about performances in his work; even though he has ... you know, he has stepped out of the group, I learned so much from him, over the many years that we were together in the group. And we're still friends, so I still learn from him about that. So you see it all the time. Napoleon Jones Henderson has these references in his work. And I remember an incident, when we were coming to an AFRICOBRA meeting, when I was in grad school, in New Haven. And Nap came across, picked up Nelson in Springfield. They came down and got me in Connecticut. And then we went to New York, to pick up Adger. And then we crossed the bridge. We're heading down through New Jersey. And a tape came on with a Thelonious Monk tune on it, and everybody in the car started singing along to Monk. You know, to the rhythm. Not the words; just the rhythm of the tune. Everybody knew. And I can't imagine that experience anywhere else. I can't imagine that experience with anyone else. It was amazing.

Q: You said that there is like ... the part of your brain that deals with rhythms and patterns and color is somehow the same one that when you do music?

MH: Absolutely. There's a part, I think, of the human consciousness or the human brain that responds to things differently than the part that responds to language and linear structures. And that part responds to images, I think, in a similar sensual way that we respond to music. But then music affects people in ways that go beyond the visual, which is why I think so many artists attempt to connect the visual to the music. Because I think we're on the same train. But music has a force that's ... that can take people into trance and bring them out, if people know what they're doing. If they know how to play.

Q: Do you use music while you are doing your art?

MH: Absolutely. And the music I play affects my consciousness. I found this out. If I'm playing Coltrane or I'm playing the World Saxophone Quartet, my thinking is a little different than when I'm playing other kinds of music. And I play all kinds, in my studio, because my personality is always looking for something new. Something different. I can't have ... I can't have the same thing every day. I can not.

Q: (Overlap) I mean, a group, listening to the same music, it serves also a function of uniting, and do you feel closer to the people that are with you, when you're together? I mean, like the case that you mentioned about all of you singing to the same tune.

MH: I don't think the music brings us together. I think the fact that we share a sensibility makes us have an understanding of similar music.

Q: And going with that, the shared sensibility, do you see that there is such a thing as ... Barbara mentioned this today, the fact that black people respond certain ways to black colors and certain shapes. Do you agree with that? Do you think there is maybe like some kind of shared sensibility that you just mentioned?

MH: I think that is cultural. I'm afraid of essentialism, biological essentialism. But I think that culturally, yes, that is a part of the experience. And I think there's a rhythm that is a part of our experience, our cultural practice, that affects people. And we respond to it. In different ways than, let's say, harmonies might affect another cultural experience.

Q: It's a hard question, but I think it's important. The thing that I know (Inaudible) trying to do a good job and kind of projecting how it's going to look (Inaudible) my understanding is AFRICOBRA was a lot more interested in the social impact that this could make. I mean, I believe there was historical events happening. The assassination of Martin Luther King. And at this time AFRICOBRA felt that it was their duty to make a difference through art. Would you elaborate a little bit to that? Do you think that's right?

MH: I think it's right. I think ... I firmly believe that art ...

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: I believe that AFRICOBRA has originated and has continued with a sense of responsibility; that art has a social responsibility; that we have to be conscious of our audience. And our audience is, first, our community. The gallery scene is something that I hope respects what we do because it's what we do. But that is not the target for what we do. I firmly believe that art works; that it is something that does something. And that's what we try to do. And then Jeff Donaldson always told this story. He had his work up in a lounge, nightclub, here in Chicago. And he was sitting at the bar. And he didn't tell someone who he was. And he said, well, what do you think about the art on the wall? And Jeff was so proud. The guy looked him and said, oh, we always could do that. (Laughs) And I think that captures that sensibility, that connection that validates. When you have that

connection to a community that you're speaking to, and they respond, that's the call and response; that's the musical structure. So musical structures become cultural structures. Improvisation. Call and response.

Q: Would you say that there has been like a social responsibility of the collective, of the AFRICOBRA movement, that it was very important?

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: I cannot speak to how important we have been as AFRICOBRA. But I can say that social responsibility has been terribly important to us. One of the highlights, when I first joined the group, was that we were invited to show at the United Nations, by the Committee Against Apartheid. And we all did a piece to show our connection to what was going on in Soweto. It was the commemoration of the Soweto massacre of 1976. So, in 1980, we all did a piece called So We Too, so that we would identify with this global struggle. And that was an extension of the earlier identification with the struggles within our local community. So we always have felt that social responsibility was terribly important to what we do. It becomes the raison-d'etre for what ... for why we exist.

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: Thinking maybe of a 15-year-old looking at this. Just like five key moments that you think are relevant to what (Overlap)

MH: Prior to the formation of AFRICOBRA, Jeff Donaldson talked about hearing Martin Luther King's speech, I Have a Dream speech, but being disappointed that there were no marching orders. There were riots in the cities, in the middle '60s. In Watts, in Cleveland, in Detroit, and around the country, that showed that people had unrest; they were dissatisfied and frustrated, that they'd had enough. I think the Wall of Respect was a transformative moment, and it led to about 1,500 community murals, in this country, between '67 and '75. AFRICOBRA formed in '68, the year Martin was assassinated. Malcolm X had been assassinated earlier. There were the protests at the '68 Olympics, where we began to get on an international stage. And I think these things were key to the sense of responsibility that we had to be active. That's ... that's my sense of it.

Q: Perfect. One more thing. Again, for a 15-year-old kid, would you say that it was different in the way black people were portrayed, early '60s versus now?

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: Earlier, in the '60s, blacks were invisible in media or visible as caricatures, stereotypes, or archetypes. Now, because of the fight that so many people took to the streets, took to the boardrooms, took to various arenas, we have the visibility of a president, we have people in Congress, we've had people running cities, we have influence in media. It is not where it needs to be, but it is moving in a direction. They have information that was not available in 1965. We have African American studies programs at universities across this nation. We have publications that leave a record. No matter what is happening today, there is a record that was not readily available in '65, that was hardly available before Arthur Schaumburg developed the Schaumburg Center. You know, in the 19th century, these terms were not available. So there has been progressive because of the efforts, the sacrifices of people. And artistically, I think, AFRICOBRA has had a dialogue across this world, where Africans have been influenced by what we do, just as we've been influenced by what they do. Contemporary African artists have told me this.

Q: Great. One more thing. Also related to that question, would you ... I know it's an important part of your book ... can you talk a little bit about some of the way that black people were portrayed in media? That is was kind of like ridiculous.

MH: Right. In the media, black women tended to be asexual, so they tended to have mammy stereotypes, to be older, and all of that. I could go into that. I won't. Black males tended to be criminalized as thugs, as brutes, or emasculated, as (Laughs) as was in Driving Miss Daisy, to an extent. These kind of male figures that did not have power. The Steppin Fetchits. Or there was invisibility. Black intelligence was not ...

(Background/Off-Mike)

Q: The way they were portrayed in the media.

MH: Right. In the mid ... before the Wall of Respect, blacks were portrayed as stereotypes, caricatures, and archetypes. We have the mammy. The woman was a mammy figure, or a maid, or something like that. She was asexual, beyond the age of desire, and against the stereotype of what a woman ... a desirable woman would be. Males were ...

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: So I find, in AFRICOBRA art from that period, you have like Wadsworth Jarrell's piece on Angela Davis, so you begin to get a woman who is heroic. Nelson Stevens would often show women with these heroic heads, and you're looking up at them, which made them even more heroic. And we're talking about not only women like Angela Davis, but maybe everyday women, to show the heroic in them. Murray DePillars eventually did a Queen Candace series that dealt with this historic figure from ancient Sudan. But also as a way of making a tribute to the heroism he saw in his own mother, here in Chicago. We have these glorious Afros that explode. Because the mammy had the bandana on her head, which covered the whole tradition of hair and adornment and artifice that we find among black women, all the way back to old African cultures. Men were presented as Uncle Toms, as Steppin Fetchit kind of figures, or they were criminals, or some kind of deviant figures. And in the work, we have powerful young men, shown with resolution. Jeff Donaldson often showed them as revolutionary, because for them to be self-determined was revolutionary. And we have the emphasis on the family, because there were so many forces pulling at a family; pulling at a man's ability to support his family; to be a part of it; to have representation that his children could look up to. So we provided images that countered that. They would be called counter-hegemonic.

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: I'm Michael D. Harris, and I am a member of AFRICOBRA. I have been a member since 1979.

(Background/Off-Mike)

MH: I came to understand ... well, Jeff ... I've been very fortunate in that I've had incredible mentors. Jeff was probably my first mentor, and I saw him as such for his entire ... for the entire period I knew him, before he passed. He was uncommonly brilliant. He was part of the Wall of Respect. He was a founding member of AFRICOBRA. He set up the conference CONFABA that radicalized art, all over this country. You hear people talk about it today, and it happened in 1970. As a mentor, when I got to campus, he encouraged me. He made little suggestions. And he just watched me grow. And that was part of his genius in the group. He could lead by encouraging people to see what he saw, rather than in some kind of didactic method. But he was a very powerful personality. In the eulogy I wrote for him, for International Review of African American Art, I talked about him as taller than most. And he was like a stern big brother. He did not suffer fools gladly. (Laughs) And if you were going off the track or you needed something, he would give you a push. I've had ... he's kicked my behind, a couple of times, for going this way or not doing that. But I am so much better for having known him and been associated with him. What I also love about Jeff is, despite this tall, six-five figure, with a powerful voice and this powerful personality, there was a delicacy you could see about his sensitive personality, in his art. You know, his art is ... shows that sensibility. But in the world he was born into, he could not show that. You just could not.

(Background/Off-Mike)

(END OF TAPE)