



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Interview with Howard Mallory

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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

Howard Mallory Interview

AFRICOBRA Interviews

Tape HM

TV LAND

(Background Conversation)

Q: So, Howard, can you talk to us a little bit about what made you join the AFRICOBRA movement? What made you decide to be part of it? I mean, you can go back in time. Just talk to us a little bit about that moment in time, what it represented to you, and why did you decide to join them?

HM: Well, I was invited to a meeting by Napoleon Henderson. And, he said that he thought that I might be interested in becoming a part of the group. He said, you know, attending the meeting didn't necessarily mean that I would be a part of the group. But, you know, he said that, you know, listen to what we've got to say.

And, I attended the meeting, along with ... I don't think there was nobody else there at that particular time, that was also on that invitation. And I, you know, kind of knew everybody involved, because I had previously exhibited with Jeff Donaldson and Barbara Jones and Wadsworth.

So, anyway. I kind of got roped into being concerned about what I was hearing, and found that I kind of identified with several things. And, one of the main things that I was concerned about is the philosophy. And, I guess I got, from what I was listening to in the group, that the philosophy was in line with things that I felt for some time, and felt that was not being addressed.

And consequently, after several meetings, I was asked, you know, if I was interested, that they would consider voting me in. And, the rest is kind of history, because when they accepted me, then I threw myself in it wholeheartedly. So much so that all the other things that I was doing sort of went to the wayside.

Q: Can you talk to us a little bit about the importance for you to do art for the people? You would consider your art had a mission (Inaudible), but actually with a purpose, like a social purpose, or the community, or the people?

HM: Well, being a very community-oriented person at the particular time, it was something that I felt that was something that an artist should do. I wasn't completely sold on everything, because I didn't really get the essence of everything. But I was sold on, first of all, the color, the use of color. And I was sold on the fact that the messages that was projected and in the philosophy was for the community. And so, consequently, on that basis, you know, I, like I said, threw myself into it 100 percent, really.

Q: What makes your art, your pieces, your work, considered AFRICOBRA? For example, the piece that we have here behind you, the "We Must Go Home With Something to Build a Nation." How would you describe that piece AFRICOBRA? What makes that piece AFRICOBRA? What are the characteristics?

HM: Well, one of the things that I felt that is needed for African-Americans to do is to search for and begin to try to identify with their roots. And, if anything was accomplished at this point, as far as learning tools, I thought that we had to go back to Africa and use the knowledge that we acquired to help Africans who would have a free choice of coming to the United States.

Q: So, define "nation." When you talk about "to build a nation," who would be the component of that nation? How would you define that nation, a sense of nation?

HM: Well ...

Q: You see the way ...

HM: A nation ...

Q: ... (Overlap/Inaudible) entity?

HM: A nation, necessarily within a nation, is one of the things that I kind of had leanings to, through Elijah

Muhammad. And, I felt that one of the things that we needed more than anything else was control over our own destiny, which I thought was being circumvented by the so-called powers to be.

Q: Right. In this particular piece that we have here, you did use lettering, and typography, within it, which is one of the characteristics of AFRICOBRA. Can you talk to us a little bit about the meaning of that specific thing? "We Must Go Home With Something"?

HM: I didn't quite understand your question.

Q: In your piece that we have here, written down in the piece, with lettering, it says, "We Must Go Home With Something." Could you maybe elaborate a little bit into that phrase, "We must go home with something"? And then it talks about home, engineers, educators, technicians. To build a nation.

HM: Well, that, in fact, is a question that answers itself, I think.

Q: True.

HM: That, it speaks of the things that we have achieved, in terms of education and whatever, to elaborate on the whole Marcus Garvey philosophy of going back home, as liaisons for helping people that was yet in Africa. For a nation that would inundate the country, and develop a philosophy of respect.

Q: Out of the work that you do currently ... not the AFRICOBRA work, but the work that you do currently ... how do you see the relation between your work and what would be considered African work?

HM: I, again, did not understand your ...

Q: What makes your current work, the work that you do now with found objects, related to African work, as a culture?

HM: Because part of the nature of how work is created in Africa is, they're actually using the materials that they put their hands on, to.... They don't necessarily seek materials that are offered to them, like for instance, in supply stores. They go to the bush and they chop a tree down and they go from there.

Q: And, would you ...

HM: And ... go ahead.

Q: Sorry. After you. Go ahead. You mentioned in a previous conversation we had, the presence of spirits in your work. Can you talk a little bit about that?

HM: Well, the area that was photographed yesterday is an area that I have dedicated. I call it the Temple of Ancestral Spirits. And they are people that I have been through in my life that have passed away, but had an impact on my development.

And, consequently, those particular items which rest in the temple have a life of their own. They've developed a life of their own. Sometimes, they're hung on a wall and they fall off, and I gather from that that I'm being told by some other power beyond my own concepts that there's something else to be looked for in what I've already done.

(Background Conversation)

HM: Well, the creative process, to me, is in the mind, and not in the body. And, consequently, I utilize the spiritual concept of what comes to me as a gift from the Creator, and I look for the energy to produce whatever I have to do through the spiritual connection that I have, rather than through a physical or visual connection.

Q: But you still use ... I mean, when you were working on your work, I saw you touching, and looking for the texture. I mean, some of the found objects that you find, they have a lot of contrast, in terms of the texture, the way they feel when you touch them. Is that important in your work?

HM: Yes, it is, because they suggest something that can be used in trying to depict the concept of a piece. You know. I use, for instance, bottle caps, as symbolic of cowrie shells, as eyes, which are very similar to work that comes out of Africa.

But, from an urban prospect, what's the name, I try to find things that are discarded. Because I have, also, the concern that what's happening to the planet is because of our negligence using what materials that exist. We have a throwaway society, which is creating the problem, as far as I'm concerned, right now, of the global warming. Because, we don't use what we have. We throw away. You know, it becomes garbage to us. And,

consequently, it inundates the environment with material that's harmful, in terms of the people on the planet.

Q: Right. What is your experience, or what was your relationship with, Jeff Donaldson? I mean, what was of him, in the AFRICOBRA movement? Can you just tell us a little bit about Jeff Donaldson?

HM: Well, I found Jeff to be a very, very, very dynamic person, from many, many years ago. As a person that not only had some direction, but also had an aura of leadership, and the aura of leadership came through what Jeff usually advocated. And he pulled a group together, because of some ideals that were valid, everyday existence. And I guess that helped to form some of the philosophy which developed in the group.

Q: Were you able to see the Wall of Respect? When you first saw the Wall of Respect, what did you feel? What was special about it?

HM: I was not anywhere really connected with any of the people during the creation of the Wall of Respect, even though I knew everybody who actually participated in the development of it.

Q: What was your take on it? You were able to see it, right? Being created?

HM: Yes. Yeah.

Q: What was your take on it? What did you find incredible about it?

HM: Well, to me, it was a beginning of a message to the community that, you know, our self worth is not defined by the powers that be. And that we should not only, as James Brown said, Black and Proud. You know, our offering to the planet ... not the United States, per se, or Chicago, per se ... but our offering to the planet is valid enough for us to feel good about ourselves.

Q: Right. Can you talk to us a little bit about, like, what makes a piece of AFRICOBRA AFRICOBRA? The characteristic? What was important for you, in terms of color, the (Inaudible) of music, or the link between music and the visuals? Maybe especially about the (Overlap/Inaudible) ...

HM: I never saw music as being a part of the concept of AFRICOBRA. I only saw the message through the philosophy as being a part of it.

Q: So there was no link between music and the visuals somehow?

HM: Well, no. Not for me.

Q: I see. How about, like, the other characteristics? Like, the color, the use of human figures, (Overlap/Inaudible) ...

HM: Well, the coolade, the colors were cool with me. Because I thought that color is what we're about. And that's what they call us. Colored. So, you know, that was symbolic to me as being a part of who we really were.

Q: Something that you mentioned yesterday which I really like, if you don't mind repeating that, that we have, like, a good audio, was the fact that we are stronger when we are united, versus being individuals. Can you maybe elaborate a little bit on that, and the fact that, as a community, you're much stronger when you're united as people?

HM: Well, I can answer that in very simple terms. There seems to be unity in numbers.

Q: Cool. That's great.

(Background Conversation)

HM: My name is Howard Mallory, and I was a member of AFRICOBRA.

(Background Conversation)

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(Background Conversation)

Q: Can you talk to us a little bit about the Freedom Train that you have in your house, the piece that you've been working on? That you were telling me that it's, in a way, your personal Wall of Respect? And if you could talk a little bit about your heroes, and what do they represent? Those kind of things. About the specific piece.

HM: The concept came to me because of the fact ...

(Background Conversation)

HM: The name of the piece is the Freedom Train. And ...

Q: Very good.

HM: And it's led by Harriet Tubman. And, the heroes that I personally accepted as the people who struck a blow for freedom in this country, for African-Americans, before they were African-American, were, in essence, Marcus Garvey, Nat Turner, Huey P. Newton, Martin Luther King, and WEB Dubois. And ... I think that's about nine figures.

And, they have been a work in process for over four years, because the elements took and created a problem of deterioration, I should say. And I enjoyed this, rather than become angered over it, because of the fact that it allowed me to continue to work on it. So, it changes, and sometimes new figures are being conjured up, so to speak, such as Barack Obama.

And, I've been very happy about the fact that my neighbors all assumed that the children of the neighborhood would do something about it, ripping off this, that and the other. And nothing has ever happened. My neighbors said, "You don't think that they're going to let that stay up there." Well, it has stayed up there for four years, and not one mark of destruction or graffiti or anything like that has happened to it.

And, as I said, it gives me an opportunity every year, in the summertime, to rework it. And the youngsters in the neighborhood come and watch me work on it, and ask me questions about it.

Q: Is that important for you? To create that piece for the community somehow, for people to enjoy it and see it?

HM: Did you say, was it important to me?

Q: Is it important that people could actually see it and enjoy it, your piece? That's why its place in the outside world is very important?

HM: Yeah. Yes. Because, it's a history lesson which I have absorbed as being a motivation for me to continue to work at the whole philosophy that AFRICOBRA sort of embedded in my psyche. You know, it's an educational process, and I use the craft that I have developed, from found objects, to give me an opportunity to express myself.

You know, I may not be able to articulate, pulling a person off the street and saying to somebody, "Now," you know. I've had the opportunity, through the work, to be able to express myself, and also pass on some information to young people who basically don't get it in school.

Because, you know, it's a known fact that our history is submerged under discriminatory practices. Let's put it that way. We really don't exist, in the society that we live in. And only because of people expressing themselves and relating to it, and raising enough controversy about what goes on, that we get access to acknowledgement.

Q: So, that's very important, what you're saying.

HM: Yes, it's very important to me.

Q: Could you talk about the importance, for you, of responsibility in art? I mean, is that part of what maybe that specific piece represents, is the responsibility of actually keeping that alive, and letting young people know who the heroes are, and to be proud of who they are and their history?

HM: Well ... again, you know, I don't know how to relate to that question as such.

Q: The question is really, is responsibility in art important to you?

HM: Yes.

Q: Like, social responsibility.

HM: Yes. More important than anything else that I can think of. Because, you know, I'm getting along in age. I'll be 80 years old soon. And, you know, as James Brown said, "I'm black, and I'm proud."

Q: Okay.

HM: And I want the world to know that.

Q: Right.

(Background Conversation)

(END OF TAPE)