



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Transcript of interview with Robert Gilkerson

Contact Information

Reference Department
Archives of American Art
Smithsonian Institution
Washington, D.C. 20560
www.aaa.si.edu/askus

Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Interview with Robert Gilkerson

from His Residence in McKinleyville, California

September 23, 1985

Willem Volkersz, Interviewer

Editor's Note:

This transcript is from a series of recordings made by Willem Volkersz over a number of years. They are not formal interviews, but rather records of conversations, often taped during photo-taking tours of the artist's studios or home collections.

The naive/visionary artists in these interviews have unique verbal mannerisms, many of which are difficult or impossible to transcribe accurately into written form. Thus, for grasping certain nuances of speech, researchers will find it advantageous to listen to the original tapes.

Our intent in transcribing these interviews was nonetheless to translate as accurately as possible the spoken word into a comprehensible written form, making changes to clarify but not to interpret. Thus the speaker's grammar is unedited. For example, "them" for "those," "theirselves," and "gotta" were all transcribed as heard. On the other hand, certain changes were made for clarity: " 'cause," was transcribed as "because," " 'fore" as "before," " 'yo" as "your," etc.

Other editorial notations are as follows: Bracketed words are of two types. Those with "[—Ed.]" or "[—WV]" are inserted by the transcriber, editor, or Volkersz. Other bracketed words indicate uncertainty: Two or more words or phrases indicate possible alternatives; "[unintelligible]" and "____" indicate words that are garbled or incomprehensible on the tape, the former being a much longer phrase than the latter; "[noise]" is self-explanatory.

The original format for this document is Microsoft Word 365 version 1908. Some formatting has been lost in web presentation.

Interview

RG: Robert Gilkerson

WV: Willem Volkersz

[Tape 1, side A; Volkersz' No. G6-A]

RG: Hello.

WV: Mr. Gilkerson?

RG: Yes.

WV: This is Willem Volkersz calling from Kansas City. How are you sir?

RG: Fine.

WV: Did you. . . I bought a piece of yours from William Jameson up in Portland. Did he tell you I was going to call you?

RG: Yeah, he did.

WV: Do you have a minute to talk?

RG: Yep.

WV: Great!

RG: What do you want to say?

WV: Well, I was real. . . I want to tell you that I really enjoy your work very much.

RG: Thank you.

WV: And I'm going to include it in a show, which uses the work of artists who combine both words and pictures. And I would like to know a little more about you, if I may ask you a few questions. I wonder if you could tell me something about your life and the kind of work that you've done before you started to make art.

RG: Well, I worked in a mine, and I worked in the shipyards.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: I worked. . . Let's see, I gotta think for a minute. Oh, and one time I worked in the hospital. I've done, maybe done thirty things in my life.

WV: Did you grow up in the Eureka-Arcata area out there?

RG: No, I didn't.

WV: Where did you grow up?

RG: In the Bay area.

WV: Oh, in the Bay area. And then when did you move up north?

RG: Well, after I got married to my wife, we moved to Placerville—that's up by Sacramento.

WV: Yeah.

RG: And I lived there for fourteen years, and I got hurt in a mine accident.

WV: Oh, no.

RG: And that's why I came up here.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: And then I went to work for a logging company after I moved up here, and it was after I was working for the logging company that I got laid off on account of that Big Redwood Tree [Park—WV], and so the government sent—to retrain me—sent me to College of Redwoods.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: And, in doing that, I didn't have enough credits, so. . . In taking the courses I was taking—I was going to be a contractor—and so they said that I'd have to take something else, and they suggested I take jewelry making, and I took that for one semester, and the teacher was not really disappointed in what I was making but he found that I was making sculptures out of wire.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: Like fourteen-gauge wire.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: And he liked them so well that he said, "From now on, if you don't mind, I'd rather have you make the sculptures in my class." So. . .

WV: Hah! Had you always worked with your hands?

RG: Oh yeah, because even when I was back in Placerville I was making reproduction antique lamps.

WV: Oh, I see. Out of. . .

RG: And I had. . . I was a. . . I worked. . . I mean I got the basis of a machinist, so even in Placerville I had all kinds of machinery in my basement, and I used to make everything.

WV: Ahh.

RG: But when I was going to college, they never taught me anything; I knew more than they did.

WV: (laughs)

RG: I mean, I'm not bragging. I'm just saying that's the way it is.

WV: You mean, you knew more about making things, putting things together.

RG: I've made antique lamps that I've had experts come there to my house. . . Whenever I'd need any money, I'd always put out a for-sale sign, and I'd take old—you know, those old cruet bottles?

WV: Yes.

RG: That come in a set? I had one of those that were chopped off, but it had a pontil on the bottom of it, and I made it into an old kerosene lamp, and a man came and looked at it, and he said he knew for a fact that it was 200 years old.

WV: (laughs) Good for. . .

RG: And I even took a humidior that you keep pipe tobacco in. . .

WV: Right.

RG: . . .and ____ in one of them?

WV: Yes.

RG: And another man swore that he knew that was old too but, like I said, I always told them the truth, because I didn't want any trouble.

WV: That's pretty neat. Well, how did. . . What I'm real curious about is how you. . . When you started to make sculpture, where did some of those ideas come from? I mean, you have a really wonderful kind of imagination, or you're looking at. . . There's something interesting going on in your brain (chuckles), I guess, and I'm just real curious where some of those ideas come from.

RG: Well, I just make something, but. . . I just make anything I'm thinking of, but what I'm trying to get over to you, in my family I have at least forty artists.

WV: I see.

RG: They're all back in New York.

WV: Ah hah! Have some of them made it big?

RG: Well, I really don't know. I just know that. . . I have never seen 'em any, but my sister wrote me a letter one time when one of the, when they were doing that book about folk artists. . . I mean, let's see. I forget the name of it but it's in Paradise [Pioneers in Paradise, Joan Hemphill, Ed., Long Beach Museum of Art, 1984—WV], and. . .

WV: Right.

RG: . . .they wanted more information, and so I wrote back east to find out what cousins and things were artists.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: And so I knew that there was quite a few, and my sister said there was too.

WV: That's interesting.

RG: My grandfather was an inventor, and I probably got some of his ideas too, even though I never knew him.

WV: Do you think that, like, making those pieces of sculpture is a little bit like inventing?

RG: Oh yeah, well, I'll tell you what. I even actually invented a safe that you can't pick that I . . . I never patented it, so I never put it out on the market.

WV: Hmm.

RG: But. . .

WV: But is making art a little bit like inventing for you, you think?

RG: Well, it is in a way. Did you see any of those bugs I made. . .

WV: Yep.

RG: . . .that've got little tiny motors in them?

WV: That's right. I have. And their ears wiggle, and their eyes move, and things like that.

RG: I'm also, I've already made five more masks.

WV: That's wonderful.

RG: Well, I mean, I'm the kind of person that. . . I'm not really nervous, but if I don't have anything to do I'm always making something.

WV: Uh huh. Now at the moment, do you have a regular job as well, or not?

RG: Oh, yeah.

WV: What else do you do right now?

RG: I'm building sets for a theater.

WV: Oh, really? How interesting. How did you get that job?

RG: Well, it was just a job, and. . . I mean, I sell a lot of stuff and all that, but I don't sell as much stuff as I'd like to. But if I, if I wasn't, if I didn't have this job, and I had the people that would buy all the stuff I make. . . Because I have at least 250 in my house now.

WV: My goodness. Now do you sell direct from your house as well, or do you just have dealers sell for you?

RG: Well, just dealers.

WV: Oh. Now. . .

RG: But if you ever came here, I'd let you take a look at what I got.

WV: Yeah, I'd love to come by and see it. Can you tell me something about how a piece of your sculpture actually develops for you? How you get an idea, and then how you get from the idea to actually making it, and what's involved in making it.

RG: Yeah, but you'd have to tell me what you're referring to.

WV: Well, say that set of pieces that was about the death penalty, for example. Where did that idea come from and how. . .

RG: Well, in the first place, William Jameson, it was his idea to make those things.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: And so I just figured out that. . . The one that—I brought it back down here—that has the hands chopped off, [correcting to fingers—Ed.] the fingers chopped off, and then they cut the head off.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: Well, I mean, it's a story, and that's what I do. Everything I make has a story behind it.

WV: I see.

RG: And, first of all, I have to get the idea, and then I go from there. And like I making a ET now—it's a little bit late—but I'm going to make it mechanical so it'll fit in my car. And I'm going to make it so that if anybody honks after they notice—my bumper'll say that ET's in the front seat—he'll wave at them.

WV: Yeah, that's great!

RG: But it all takes time. I'm not a rich person. . .

WV: Right.

RG: So if I had plenty of money, I wouldn't even be working; I'd just take and make them all the time.

WV: Now, don't you think you're. . . Aren't you getting closer to a point now where you're selling enough work that you can make art most of the time?

RG: Well, you figure it out. I make one probably every day.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: But I don't. . . There's days when I don't make anything.

WV: Sure.

RG: There was a while back, I hurt myself and I didn't make anything for a whole month, but. . . What I did, I ran a drill through my finger accidentally.

WV: Oh no.

RG: And so that one finger being swelled up kept me from doing anything with my right hand.

WV: Huh.

RG: But, see, I have to rely on some. . . I don't have no way to get any gourds, and what I want to do is I want to make a people, a city of gourd people.

WV: Oh boy.

RG: And if I told you all the stuff. . .

WV: Hah!

RG: In two more years, see I'll be sixty-five, I'll probably start my own gallery down here in Ferndale, and I'll probably still make 'em in my house, but I'll probably take 'em down there and paint 'em.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: And get more exposure.

WV: Where did your. . . Those. . . The piece that I bought was one of that gambling series. I think it says "Stud Draw" in it. Where, how did that gambling series begin, and when did you make those?

RG: Do you mean the one that had "OK Corral" like?

WV: Yes.

RG: Well, the reason I started that because I happened to pick up a magazine, and they were talking about OK Corral and the next Saturday they had that—I can't think of [the name of—WV] that movie star, but he always plays in that series.

WV: Um hmm.

RG: And he was on it, so then I went from there. You mean, the one that has the deck of cars on it, and. . .

WV: Yeah, I thought that William said that there a whole series of pieces that were all about gambling.

RG: There could be. And I'll tell you one thing, one that you would have really interested to see, the one that they had for the main line of the show that they had at his gallery in 19. . . I think it was in '83 or '4, I forget.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: And it was Black Bart. And. . .

WV: I saw pictures of those.

RG: Yeah. Well, you see there was a lot, there were some antiques in the making of that thing, and so I have to rely sometimes on using antiques because I can't bend certain types of shapes.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: So even if it cost ten or twenty dollars, it wouldn't matter; I'd buy it anyway.

WV: Where do you get most of the materials for you work?

RG: Scrap yards, antique shops, collectible shops, yard sales.

WV: Uh huh. And what kind of tools do you have in your shop?

RG: Well, I'll tell you what, the tools I have, the way I make 'em [the artworks—Ed.], I make 'em in a room that's about 16 by 22 feet, and most of my tools are fairly small, but. . . I mean, the machinery.

WV: Yeah.

RG: Small Dremmel [a brand—WV] table saw, because I just don't have the room.

WV: Right.

RG: But since my wife died last March, I just took over the whole house.

WV: I see.

RG: Because she was to the point several years ago that she wanted me to get rid of 'em and not make 'em anymore, but that was her opinion.

WV: Hmm, yeah. So now you work pretty much all over the house?

RG: Yeah, it is all over the house.

WV: I see, uh huh.

RG: Sometimes I can't find what I'm looking for.

WV: Are most of the tools that you use, are they pretty much metal- oriented, or do you also use wood tools?

RG: Some of the tools I use I even made 'em myself.

WV: Oh, really, huh.

RG: Well, I was taking machine shop at the college, and I didn't want to make any hammers because I didn't need 'em. I just regular common, you know, like ballpeen hammers, things like that.

WV: Sure, uh huh.

RG: But, a lot of the stuff. . . See, I'm even going to night school so I can make cams for to make. . . You seen those ones that I had up there that were moving?

WV: Yes.

RG: Well, those take a while to make.

WV: I'll bet they do. How long do you work on a piece?

RG: Well, it depends on what you're talking about.

WV: Well, I know, but give me an idea of the range.

RG: Well, like those mechanical ones, I'd say a week.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: Because sometimes you'll bend a certain lever in 'em and they won't work, and you'll have to go to a bigger or a smaller size.

WV: Um hmm.

RG: So lots of times I have to throw things away, because once you bend those brass rods, you don't bend them back; they break off.

WV: No, they'll break, yeah. Are there any other artists that you admire, that you ever look at?

RG: Other people's work?

WV: Yeah. Are there any artists that you really admire?

RG: Picasso.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: 'Cause see, on the wall in my bedroom, I have a few Picasso-type paintings that I made myself, and William Jameson hasn't ever been interested in them, but there is a man that has a big collection in San Francisco; he was here and he offered me four or five hundred dollars for one of them one time.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: But I told him the only way he could buy it, he'd have to buy 'em both, 'cause if I make any more I'd have to. . . In other words, nothing I make is ever made the second one of it.

WV: Gotcha.

RG: There could be two Red Riding Hoods. . .

WV: Yeah.

RG: . . .but their wording around 'em will always be different.

WV: They're totally different, yeah.

RG: And the scenery is definitely never duplicated. It's impossible.

WV: Have you ever actually looked at Picasso's work in museums, or in books, or what?

RG: Oh yeah, in books. I like Henry Moore, too.

WV: Uh huh! Hah! Do you feel that Henry Moore has ever influenced your work, or not?

RG: That he'd be interested in my work?

WV: No, has he ever influenced your work?

RG: I didn't hear you.

WV: Influenced. Have you ever got any ideas from Henry Moore?

RG: I'll tell you what. All the work that I do it just comes out of my imagination. I might. . . Here's the only thing: If I seen a Henry Moore, and they were working on it—I don't care whether it was big as a house or what—if it was, if it might have. . . Well, like say—I know it doesn't have one, but we'll say is steamship in it—that might give me an idea for something I'd be building.

WV: I gotcha.

RG: But there's nothing about his work that is something, that's like mine, but if I was rich, I'd go look at Picasso's, because there's a lot of aspects with his kind of work. . .

WV: Like what?

RG: Well, that metal type that he makes, and some of those that he's designed. Or even that man that's been covering that bridge lately.

WV: Yes, Christo.

RG: But. . . And Miro, too.

WV: Miro, uh huh.

RG: But. . . I mean, I've glanced at some of those books. I might even have some of 'em. But the most of the thing with me is I don't need any of that stuff. All I have to do is see a car go down a street and accidentally see somebody sitting in that car that looks unusual and, that'll start a-building an idea.

WV: I got you.

RG: And then I'll go from that thing there. And I'll be thinking about that idea. I'll jot it down on a piece of paper when I'm in my bathroom, and then I'll take it on from there. Sometimes some of these ideas might have been kicking around for a month or two, some of 'em maybe several years.

WV: Huh.

RG: It just depends because, you see, I have the knowledge of being able to make better ones than I'm making even now, if they're mechanical, but I just don't have the equipment to make 'em, you know.

WV: What kind of. . .

RG: I need like rack and stuff like that.

WV: Oh, I see.

RG: And at the high school, they just don't have any equipment like that, and at the college they don't like me to do that. The teacher is afraid that the wheel—or the president of the college—they'll come in and see me doing it, and he'll get fired. That's what he thinks.

WV: Couldn't you continue to take just some classes out there, so you. . .

RG: What?

WV: Couldn't you just take some classes to use the equipment?

RG: I was in the class, using the equipment, and I made a plastic sculpture, and he asked me not to ever make any more.

WV: (laughs)

RG: But like I said, if I had somebody like, if I had a friend that knew the President of the United States, that would write a letter to College of the Redwoods and ask 'em if they wouldn't let me continue doing my experimental work down there, or something like that, maybe I'd be able to get away with it.

WV: Uh huh. You know, one thing that's really intrigued me: why do you add words to your sculptures?

RG: You mean around the outside edge?

WV: Yeah.

RG: Well, it was just an idea that came up.

WV: The reason I ask is because the whole show that I'm putting together is all of artists who use words, you know, in addition to their imagery, and I'm real intrigued as to how you started to use words or why.

RG: Well, at first I only put maybe the title on the top.

WV: Right.

RG: And then, somewhere along the line, I happened to. . . I just can't remember which one it is, 'cause I've made about, of the three- dimensional ones, I've probably made 150 of them.

WV: Uh huh.

RG: See I've made about, right now, about 1242 of 'em.

WV: How do you know? Do you keep track?

RG: Most of them are numbered.

WV: Oh, they are?

RG: But the first, that first 250 that I gave away, there's no numbers on them, there's just my. . . There's my name on 'em.

WV: Right.

RG: You know, like R. G., or something. But. . .

WV: And so you first started to just add a title and that. And then why did you begin to add more words and ideas to them.

RG: Because some of it was very humorous.

WV: Um hmm.

RG: Some of it was absolutely ridiculous in a. . . If you'd seen all the work that I've ever made, you'd see how ridiculous some of it is, but wherever you go, everybody'll get a laugh. Since I've been making there's hundreds of people around this area that they'll never buy anything because I don't think they have the money, but they'll always come up and make comments and they ask me where is there going to be another show, and they'll even go to it, even if it's four or five hundred miles away from here.

WV: That's interesting. Are you trying to get a laugh, or trying to get a response out of people?

RG: Well. . . At first I used to tell people at the college that there wasn't enough ugly people around Humboldt County any more, I'd probably have to move away and find some other place.

WV: (laughs)

RG: And at one time I was at CR taking some courses, and some lady and I were standing in the same line, and there was only two in our line, and in the other line there was about 18 people, and I told her, that I said, "We better get in that other line because they'll probably take them first, and we're probably in the wrong line."

WV: (laughs)

RG: And she immediately got very indignant, and she said, "Well, you and I weren't properly introduced. Don't ever speak to me again."

WV: (laughs)

RG: So what happened was, she was behind me, and I did get taken next, and as I was walking away—maybe I was still ten feet ahead of her, because I was moving into the next position for signing up for the course—and I heard somebody in the other line make a crack, "I don't know if you know it, lady, that man makes the ugliest sculptures in Humboldt County. . ."

WV: (laughs)

RG: ". . .and if you don't apologize to him, I'll bet you any money he'll probably make you a sculpture and you won't want to see it." So what she did, she tripped on the carpet, trying to get to me. I never even tried to pick her up, even, 'cause I figured she was probably a snob, so I went ahead and kept going, but she caught up with me, and she says, "I want to apologize." And I says, "Don't worry, I'd never make your sculpture because I couldn't sell it."

WV: (laughs)

RG: But everybody laughed that heard it, you know.

WV: Oh, that's great. Well, I think you just illustrated your point. I mean, it seems like your work really demands a response from people, whether you're dealing with an idea of justice, or whether you're trying to get a smile out of people, but you do seem to enjoy getting a response.

RG: When that man up, when that policeman or whatever he was that had to do with the show that was up there in the Justice Center [a series on capital punishment made by RG at the request of William Jamison, a Portland art dealer, for a display at the new Portland, Oregon [Justice Center—WV], I was going to do. . . I made one of them, I made one of the police with his hand in the cookie jar, and then I, and I was going to do, and I

bought a trunk, and I was gonna put this cop in there, cut up in pieces, and take it into the chief and show it to him. But then I figured, well maybe that on the way up on the next show they'd probably arrest me for some chicken-shit beef.

WV: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, so you. . . Yeah, I see your point. You know, I never did find out exactly when and where you were born. You said you were born in the Bay area?

RG: Yeah, I was born in Piedmont in 1922.

WV: Piedmont, 1922. What date?

RG: What?

WV: What day in 1922?

RG: 28th.

WV: 28th of what?

RG: September 28th.

WV: Oh really, oh, you got a birthday coming up, huh? Hah. And what is your current address, sir?

RG: It's Post Office Box 2697, McKinleyville.

WV: 2697, McKinleyville. What's the zip code out there?

RG: What?

WV: Do you know the zip code?

RG: Ah, 95567.

WV: Great. Let's see if I have anything else down here that I wanted to ask you. I really appreciate your taking the time to answer some questions. I think that what I'll do is think about what you said and if I need to get more information from you I'll either write you or maybe call you again sometime.

RG: All right.

WV: I'm going to be spending next spring writing the catalogue for this show, and I may, you know, call you later and get some more specific kinds of answers to certain questions that I may have, but I really appreciate your talking to me.

RG: I'd like to buy one of the catalogues from you.

WV: Oh, I'll send you one. Don't worry about it. I'll send you one.

RG: Thank you very kindly.

WV: Okay, nice talking to you.

RG: Bye now.

WV: Bye-bye.

[End of interview]