



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Transcript of interview with Eddie Owens
Martin (St. E.O.M.)

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Transcript

Preface

Tape-recorded Interview with Eddie Martin
at the Artist's Home in Buena Vista, Georgia
March 20, 1977
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," "themselves," 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

EM: Eddie Martin

WV: Willem Volkersz

DV: Diane Volkersz

[Tape 1, side B; Volkersz' No. M1-1] [23-minute tape side]

[WV was accompanied by his wife Diane—Ed.]

EM: . . . now I go back, from before the Bible was ever written, this comes from. These are some of the oldest symbols known to man—that one over yonder especially. That was when ____ ruled. That was when Atlantis and [Mu, Moo], when all them was up above the water.

WV: Uh huh. Where do you get the information?

EM: Well, I've done a lot of research on James Churchwood. Did you ever hear of him?

WV: Which. . . .

EM: Sir James Churchwood.

WV: No, I haven't.

EM: He wrote about Mu and Atlantis, and the lost continent of Mu. Well, he was a real scholar, because he didn't publish nothing till he was 65 years old, and all he'd done was the, to quest of knowledge, you see. And he's the best writer on it.

WV: Right.

EM: And he tells, it tells about Atlantis sinking. And you go talk to the Hopi Indians in the west, and they mention about the flood and the water and how they would be on a bunch of dirt, and it would start sinking, they'd hop in a boat, and they'd go on to another little piece, and they'd be on it, and it'd start to sink. And they come to the west coast, which was solid—all the rest had done give away—well, when you read back in that and go check with the Hopi Indians, see, that all jibes, you see.

WV: That's beautiful.

EM: But in a, in even the study of archaeology, they ignore that subject, practically. [moves away] You know, this education system we's got—it's not a true educational system; it's the gloss over.

WV: Well, I think that's very true in many ways.

EM: It's more of a conditioning thing than it is. . . .

WV: To get you ready for our capitalist society.

EM: That's right.

WV: Oh, boy. [walking into area where EM has jewelry and costumes he has made on display—WV]

EM: See, I make clothes and all sorts of things.

WV: Oh, boy. Ahh, it's beautiful.

EM: Headdresses. . . .

WV: Look at that!

EM: This is a bit low, because, so I can get in and out of truck with it. This is a costume. This is what I'm going to wear to Savannah if I go.

WV: Oh, that's beautiful.

DV: Those are cowrie shells. [evidently, from the sound, it is loaded with them—Trans.]

WV: Oh, they're shells.

EM: Cowrie shells.

WV: Yeah. Where do you get them? Do you have to buy them?

EM: I get them from the Cree Indians out in the ____.

WV: Uh huh. Oh, that fireplace is nice.

EM: These are the kind of paintings I do.

WV: Can I take photographs in here?

EM: Yeah, you can take photos. [has moved away from the microphone—Ed.]

WV: I'd appreciate it.

EM: And here's [noise] [unintelligible]

WV: Oh, is it?

DV: ____ ____?

EM: [Crab], yeah.

WV: Oh, yeah.

DV: How'd you get it on here?

EM: Here, let me put it this way.

WV: Let me get this flash ___ed up here.

EM: Behave. [spoken loudly(!) to a dog—Ed.] [laughter]

WV: Hah!

DV: [unintelligible]

WV: Jason'll like that.

EM: [unintelligible]

DV: He loves animals.

EM: Well, he might bark, but he don't mean no harm. He's not used to children. I have to get dogs here. I have so much violence and _____.

WV: That's interesting. A lot of people that I've been. . . .

EM: The windows shot out, and people come and throw acid on the walls, and human feces, and, oh, just anything to annoy. There's a bunch of ignore ass people around here. Excuse my French.

WV: Yeah, I understand.

DV: Have you lived here a long time?

EM: My mother and. . . . It's my mother's home.

DV: Oh.

EM: I'm a native here. Come in here [into another room—Ed.] This is where I got the tables, in here. [Tables with scalloped, hammered aluminum edges EM had made—WV]

WV: Ahh. Boy. Are all these made out of like aluminum?

EM: Yeah, that's a screen.

WV: Boy.

EM: I had it all together once, and I had some nieces and nephews here, and they'd come running and romping and playing, and knocked it all loose.

WV: I see.

EM: Pulled it apart. You see, now these _____ hangings here that I made [unintelligible] Did you see that reed growing out there?

WV: Yes, I did.

DV: Oh, that cane?

EM: Yeah, that's just a [page from that, cane from that].

DV: Is that one of _____?

EM: Except [it's, its] wood _____. That comes from Japan. They don't make them anymore.

WV: Huh.

EM: Then here's a little hallful of stuff here.

WV: So you just, you added all these things to an existing house.

EM: That was. . . . This is all I added on, this here part. Used to be a fireplace went there. And this was all out on the ____ here. [dog barks] Behave now.

WV: Well, he likes it. [dog is apparently licking baby—Ed.] He's just laughing; he's all right.

DV: He's laughing.

EM: It tickle you, don't it Jason? And here's more stuff.

WV: Are these things on the wall made out of cement, or are they made out of wood?

EM: Cement.

WV: They're all made out of cement.

EM: [moves away] Three-fourths of ____ _____. Here's more hangings.

WV: Oh, they're beautiful.

EM: See those nice ones there with the cross in it; those would make nice altarpieces for a church.

WV: Oh, boy, wouldn't they ever. The beads in the _____, are they wooden?

EM: Yeah, they come from Japan, but you can't get them anymore.

WV: Did you have to paint them, or do they come that way.

EM: They come, but the wood is chinaberry and sassafras in it.

WV: Oh, boy.

EM: And that's [Skinton, skinton] dye.

WV: Uh huh.

EM: And these tables and all I made. That bed I made. The pottery I [loosed] up; I bought the pottery.

DV: You did?

WV: My wife's a potter.

EM: Can you handle design on the pottery, though?

DV: Yeah, I like to decorate pots.

EM: I know, but can you do Indian motifs?

DV: I've never done that.

EM: That's very hard. I know I was. . . . When I did that one, I saw one of them tried, and I had to learn how to design a round _____.

WV: What do you use all the rooms for? Do you wander through them, or do you meditate in some of them, or. . . .

EM: Well, sometime I wander around, look, you know. I try to get a. . . . You can't get no one cooperation, you know.

WV: Ah.

EM: _____ here. You see, I'm a poor boy, you see, I come from a sharecropping people, you know, and so forth and so on. And the ones that's got the money and the college education and all, they expect you to crawl to them, you know, and I don't crawl.

WV: Good for you.

EM: You know, I've never been what you call an asskisser.

WV: Good for you.

EM: Not [once] in my life. That's why I've never got anywhere, you know. So if I went crawling to them, you know, and put them above me, let them think that their knowledge was stronger than mine, why they would come around, but I can't do that. I care about who I associate with.

WV: Yeah. Yeah, ____ _____. Huh. Now you were in New York for some years?

EM: Oh, yes, 31 years.

WV: Oh, that long.

EM: _____. Come on this way.

WV: Look at those beautiful dogs. Hi, Buddy.

EM: [unintelligible] All show people.

WV: Ahh. Now do people buy those [the jewelry—Ed.] from you?

EM: I sell a few.

WV: Do you ever take them to shops, or anything like that, or not?

EM: They want you to sell to them for \$15, and they make the money.

WV: Yeah. Yeah, it ____ hard keep it ____ _____ enough.

EM: I don't do those. A boy helps me with thoe. I design 'em.

WV: Oh, I see.

EM: And I have to pay him four dollars an hour to put it together, so how can I sell it for \$15?

WV: Oh, boy.

EM: Some of them masks got a hundred. . . . That big one's got \$150 worth of labor in it, alone.

WV: Are these landscape paintings yours, too?

EM: Huh?

WV: The landscapes are yours, too?

EM: Yes, yes.

WV: I'll be darned. They're real nice. They've very different from the other ones.

EM: Well, that ____ one there, that was done a long time. . . . That one I thought, I figured I'd set the world on fire as a painter, you know.

WV: Uh huh.

EM: Behave, Luke. [dog—Ed.] But it never happened. Come this way. See, here's this thing I carved. This [comes from] a slab in the sawmill.

WV: That's nice! And those are brass tacks?

EM: Tacks, um hmm.

WV: Where do your images come from?

EM: [points to head—WV]

WV: All in there. Terrific.

EM: It's a beautiful day.

WV: Ohh, look at that! God!

EM: This is a beautiful jacket I made, see.

WV: Oh, I like that.

DV: Is that felt, too?

EM: Felt.

DV: Yeah.

EM: It was a mistake. I should-a used good wool, but I just had that color and I liked it at the time, and I was experi. . . . Ain't no needle in this, ____ _____. That's not put, no needle used, except this cross stitching; that was done with a needle.

WV: So how's the rest done?

EM: Glued.

WV: Huh! Oh, that's why it's all stiff in there.

EM: Uh huh.

WV: What kind of glue do you use? Is it white glue that holds it together best, or what?

EM: Borden's [white—WV] glue.

WV: Yeah. I know that stuff, yeah. C'mon, buddies. [Dogs are nabbing at baby Jason; DV is having to shield him from two large German shepherds—WV]

DV: Hmm, he [the baby—Ed.] loves animals.

EM: [moving into another room—Ed.] This is all work of mine. Now here's a, now here I've gotten a. . . . Not this [noise] See, in that little ____ _____.

DV: That's beautiful.

WV: Oh, the intensity of the colors is real beautiful.

EM: See, there. See all the brass tacks?

WV: Yeah. Now this boy helped you with these, too?

EM: He made the whole thing.

WV: ____ _____.

EM: I just designed it.

WV: Do you draw them out on paper?

EM: Yeah, I cut them out of black felt, and I cut the [fine]. He cuts the felt out, and I. . . .

WV: And how do you tell him what colors go where, or do you?

EM: I do. I got the guide to color. He has no. . . . He can't design.

WV: He can do the work.

EM: I was talking to him the other day, and he said, I said, "Well, you can, you could do things, [Junior], but you can't design. He said, "Well, give me time; maybe I'll learn." I said, "Well, it took me a long time." (laughs)

WV: A lifetime.

EM: Now here's a _____. Here's a _____. This is a friend of mine, Mr. Goldman. Behave, Luke!

WV: What's [unintelligible, spoken to Diane?] How are you, sir?

Male voice: Hi, how are you?

DV: Hi.

EM: Anybody _____ God? [unintelligible]

WV: Oh, very nice. Who bought two?

EM: [Elias Guess] out of New York.

WV: Oh. Boy. [unintelligible]

EM: That's all built up from scratch.

WV: Now, do you build a wooden armature for them? Are they cement, or not?

EM: Yeah. I just set some chicken wire. . . .

WV: Yeah.

EM: . . . and lay down like a cross, with the neck down here, and add some up in for the shoulders. And then after you get that built up a little, then you cut some more and, you know, put around in it, and keep reinforcing it.

WV: Okay, yeah. So that the center is somewhat hollow.

EM: No, no, no.

WV: Oh, it's not. Oh, it's all, it becomes solid.

EM: It comes all solid. Now that boy made all of these [exotic busts—WV].

WV: So they get real heavy, I bet.

EM: Oh, they are.

WV: Huh! That headdress is beautiful.

EM: But he can't get nowhere without me, though. It seems like I'm able to transform myself into him. Because if I leave him alone, he'll mess it up. But I got to be. . . .

WV: Got to be right there.

EM: Not right there all the time. . . .

WV: Yeah, sure.

EM: . . . but I got to look every, [through] to fifteen or twenty minutes, to keep him straight.

WV: I see. Now is he a local man that. . . .

EM: Yeah, he's a local farmboy. He was in Viet Nam, and got married, and got a kid.

WV: Uh huh. How old is he?

EM: I don't know, I think he's 27, 28, or something like that now. He been working for me ever since he was 14 years old, off and on helping me. Him and his brothers and cousins helped me with all of this.

WV: Boy.

EM: They is quite an artistic family. They come from a good family of black people. All of. . . . The families play music, can sing and dance, you know, all such things.

WV: Oh, that's great, uh huh. Does he come in on a regular basis, or how do you. . . .

EM: No.

WV: Just whenever he has a chance to come down and. . . .

EM: He has another job. I'm learning photography now. He's done learning, and picked up this. Now we got a movie camera and a projector.

WV: Right.

EM: I'm going to start making some films. Because. . . Now that film showing in Atlanta [a film made in conjunction with the Missing Pieces exhibition, in which he was included—WV], they cut my dance, and my ritual, and my chant, and everything. They bring me right up to where I come to the chant, where I'm really fixing to come on, they wouldn't even give the rhythm of my bells in the dance!

WV: Ohh.

EM: Wouldn't even put up an _____. I was so disappointed. Really upsetting.

WV: Huh. So you're going to produce one of your, so that the whole thing can be in there?

EM: I'm going to make one of my own, because I'm going to leave it behind when I'm dead and gone. At least, you know, it'll be somewhere somebody could see it.

WV: I'd love to play. . . . If you ever get that, I'd love to play something like that to my students, you know. I could like rent it from you, or something like that.

EM: Well, I'm going to make it, and I'm also going to do. . . . Them _____ and them things that I showed you on the reed thing.

WV: Uh huh.

EM: I'm going to lay it out on that table and show how it's done, and everything, and show how this is done, and so forth and so on. That's what I'm getting the camera for. He's digging it out—I can't dig nothing out of books, from some instructions. I don't learn verbally. I learn from observation. And, now see, he learn how to take my Minolta camera—it's like that [pointing at my camera—WV].

WV: Yeah, that's basically like this one.

EM: Well now, just watching him, I done picked that up. Now he's figuring out the movie camera. I told him this Friday he could—no, he didn't come Friday—Thursday. I said, "You keep stalling with that book," I said. "It's a little [more—Ed.] difficult than you think." He said, "Well yeah, it is," he says, "but it's a challenge. I'm going to work it out."

WV: That's neat. That seems like you two work together real well.

EM: Well, we was born under the same sign. Cancer, you see.

WV: Uh huh.

EM: I'm born the fourth; he's born the second. So we kinda jibe. Now, he's got brothers and cousins that used to work for me, and I couldn't be around them more than three or four minutes and I'd get, begin to get confused in their heads, you know. But I can stand by him and work, and keep my concentration in my _____, but, with them others, I have to step back. I just get dizzy, some of them. They just. . . . But I put up with anything to get it done, you know.

WV: Uh huh. Did you start. . . . You started doing all this when you came back from New York.

EM: Huh? Well, I come back in '57, and his. . . . This is what I'm working on here.

WV: Ohh. Now. . . .

EM: I want to animate this. But you see, when you get it animated, there's no way you can get it before the public. Everything is censored. Like that film up in Atlanta; they censored my ritual, my dance, everything [that] was important. I even blocked in this here figure for them. See, you know, put the white on, sewed the blue on, and brought life to it right quick. They even cut that out.

WV: Now you're sure that wasn't just because it was a matter of time?

EM: That's what, that's the jive she. . . .

WV: That's what they said, yeah.

EM: That's what she gave me. She said, "I only had 28 minutes and so. . . ." I said, "Well, you should-a given me a little more time. I had more to say than the rest of them."

WV: Yeah. Yeah, that's a good point.

EM: But. . . .

WV: When was it you came back from New York and started your work in. . . .

EM: '57.

WV: And that's when you. . . .

EM: '60, I started the building. As soon as I got title to the four acres of land, you know.

WV: Uh huh.

EM: Before, it was all a family thing. And as soon as I got these four acres, which you see, where [all, I'll] cut the grass.

WV: It's beautiful ____ ____.

EM: Then I started, because it was mine. There wasn't nobody to say, "You can't do this. You can't do that." And so forth.

WV: Right.

EM: You know people love to tell you what to do.

WV: I know, I know it. (laughs)

EM: Especially when you're fooling with art.

WV: Yes. I know exactly what you're talking about.

EM: And I wouldn't have no money coming from. If you're making a lot of money with it, they've got great respect for you, but. . . .

WV: Yeah, money's the key to lots of things in this culture, isn't it? Boy.

EM: It's the root of all evil, to be very truthful with you. It's done become God. Instead of God, we've got money now.

WV: Yeah, I think you're very true, very right there. So then, after you worked on the buildings, did you start to make the purses and the clothing. Did that come later?

EM: Oh, uh, I made two purses about thirty years ago, and the professor at Mercer University of sociology, him and his wife bought two, and from that two I've made up that other bunch. [That I'm talking about.] And then I sold him two of those. I'm going to ____ some pictures of them now and send them to some of the finer shops about the country, and see if I can do a little bit, but you know, I'm. . . .

WV: You probably. . . .

EM: You've got to have a good camera, you know, to send pictures, [take] good pictures.

WV: So they can see what it's like, yeah.

EM: I've never been in this thing for money. Because early in the game I realized I couldn't make my living in my art. So God was kind enough, and He opened up me an avenue for reading cards, and being a fortuneteller. That's the only way I could have ever done this.

WV: Huh.

EM: Because there's nobody gives you no subsistence to do nothing with, an' appropriations. . . .

WV: Now do you still do that?

EM: Unless you have a college degree and a good lawyer and good connections in Washington, and then you can get all of them. But I can't.

WV: Do you still read the cards? Now, here, for people?

EM: Yeah. I'm going to start like tomorrow, I hope. I've been closed five weeks. But I was intending to close

the first of April for two months, but I couldn't make it till April.

WV: You mean financially?

EM: No. I just give out.

WV: Oh.

EM: I have so many people, that's the trouble. See, all the publicity I get brings me fortunetelling. It don't bring me no art customers. That's why I hate for people to take pictures of this place. They always say, "Oh, that's the fortuneteller's place! Go see him!" They don't say, "This is an artist."

WV: Huh. Yeah, I see you as an artist much more. You know, of course I don't know you in any other way yet, either.

EM: Um hmm. _____. I can do lots of thing. You know, I have a great. . . . I'm an innovator, really. But I don't get no chance to innovate—only for what pleases me.

WV: Do you get a lot of visitors during the summer, to look at your buildings?

EM: No, no, I got these dogs to chase them away. I used to have so many. See, I used to have to put up with people who were reading fortunes, and then there'd be somebody wanted to look around, and time I showed them around there'd be somebody to have fortune, I read that fortune, and somebody else wanting to look around. Well, it was taking too much out of me.

WV: Yeah.

EM: And white folks are very arrogant. They're a funny race. When they come to your place, and they see if you're an Indian or if you're a black person, or if you're not just like them, they don't have no respect for you. They just jump out, and they start running all around, running here, and they don't ask you nothing. And I got tired of it. And I got these dogs, and they don't bother me no more. (laughs)

WV: Yeah, right. Right.

EM: They don't bother with these dogs, so they leave me alone.

WV: You solved that problem.

EM: I had a lot of roughnecks out of Columbus coming around, you know, trying to muscle their way in, or you know, push their way in on you. If you didn't have sense enough. . . . You know, I knew psychology enough that I could smell ten minutes ahead of what they were going to say ten minutes from now, and I could, you know, keep from off their balance and they could never get theirselves together to really get they wanted, you know.

WV: (chuckles) That's great.

EM: But if I hadn't of known psychology, I would have never, I'd of been, had a lot of trouble with them.

WV: Huh. What did you do the years you were in New York? Various kinds of jobs?

EM: No, I never was no worker. I mean, never. . . . I run away from home when I was 14. I didn't hold no jobs.

WV: How did you support yourself?

EM: Oh, there's always a way if you're smart. (laughter) I was smart and I was smart, and good looking with it, and the women loved me, so I didn't have no trouble. (laughter)

[Break in taping]

EM: When people pay you money for fortunes [fortune-telling—WV], they don't want to you take up no time with art. So I learned to look out for myself.

WV: Right.

EM: You see, I hit the streets of New York when I was a 14-year-old kid.

WV: Boy, that must have been something.

EM: On my own, and I didn't even have a. . . . Nobody. Know nobody there.

WV: You decided that New York was the place to go, huh?

EM: Yes, I used to look around at people when I was a kid, and I used to wonder, "Are these my people?"

WV: Hey. Down. Stay away. [speaking to the dog.—Ed.]

EM: "Are these my people?" And I used to wonder to myself, "I don't use that. . . ."

WV: Hey, hey. [speaking to the dog.—Ed.]

EM: Stop it! [speaking to the dog.—Ed.] I used to think of what. . . . "My own mother and father," I said, "Somebody must have sold me out. I don't know why I got here. What am I doing in this part of the country?" I was always thinking of Broadway and the dance and the theater, you know, artistic things, and I couldn't see farming and plying a mule. [It was the theater for me. OR: It wasn't real for me.] [walks away—Ed.] In other words, when you're working for the other man, you just _____ [unintelligible phrase]

WV: That's good. I want to take a picture of this table, because it really is beautiful.

EM: [unintelligible phrase]

WV: Oh, yeah.

EM: [unintelligible phrase]

WV: Well, I sure appreciate you taking the time to talk to us. It was very nice talking to you.

DV: Very nice meeting you.

EM: Same to you.

WV: And you have a gorgeous place.

EM: Here, let me give you a string of beads for your little baby here.

WV: Oh, boy.

EM: Here.

[End of interview]