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Oral history interview with James W. Washington, Jr., 1987 June 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a tape-recorded interview with James W. Washington, Jr. on June 29, 1987. The interview was conducted at James W. Washington's home and studio in Seattle, Washington by Paul Karlstrom for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Interview

JW: JAMES W. WASHINGTON, JR.
PK: PAUL J. KARLSTROM

[Tape 1, side A—30-minute tape sides]

PK: James, this is something that I've looked forward to for quite some time. We've known one another now for five years or more.

JW: Something like that.

PK: Whenever I come to Seattle, if I can, I try to come by, at least be in touch. And I think this interview is perhaps a little overdue. We have a day to talk about you and your work. And I would like to introduce you a little bit. You were born sometime in the early part of the twentieth century, and I will leave it to you when we go into the interview whether you want to be more specific than that. I believe you were born in the South, in Little Rock? Is that right?

JW: No. I was born in Gloster, Mississippi.

PK: But I guess when we get into this, you will talk about some childhood days in Arkansas. At any rate, you came to the Seattle area around 1943, early war years. And since 1956 you've been producing highly original stone sculpture, among other things. The best-known examples—those that I'm familiar with—incorporate animals and sometimes various religious symbols, special symbols, in combinations which suggest to me a personal investigation of some universal principles or ideas. Your work is both mysterious and accessible in its gentle simplicity. This is a subjective response on my part. Today I would like to try to enter the world of James Washington, the special world of forms and symbols. And with your help, James, I would like to try to gain some understanding of this very special, very singular art. First of all, I think we should start with the man himself, and I would like now to get some brief outline of your own background, some biographical information. We don't need to go into any great detail, but why don't you just start at the beginning. I don't know if you want to say when the beginning was, but to give an idea or your own origins, what you come from and when you became interested in art, when you began to even see a future for yourself as an artist.

JW: Well, as a future for myself, that did not happen until after I had really acquired semi-proficiency in the arts. I was intrigued with it, and I started about 13, at the age of thirteen or thereabouts. And it consisted of drawing. In fact, first drawing on the streets, on the concrete with crayon, and then. . . .

PK: Where was this?

JW: This was in Mississippi.

PK: Okay.

JW: And challenging the other young kids of my age to make any mark with crayon—and I would furnish the crayon—and regardless to how weird the mark was, I would always be able to visualize that mark, whichever marks they'd made, as being a part of any human being or anything that I imagined. This mark would remain a part of that individual, or thing—without eradicating any part of the mark they had made—but let it be a unified part of a whole. And in so doing, I developed my imagination and was trying at the same time to stimulate their imagination. And that was before I went to paper. I first was in concrete. (chuckles)

PK: So you began almost as a conceptual or a site artist. You were working and doing pieces out of doors, on the sidewalk.

JW: Oh, I was doing them on the sidewalk with crayon. (laughs)

PK: Tell us a little bit about your early life and your family, your background.

JW: My father was a minister [Rev. James W. Washington]. And my mother [Lizzie Howard], she was a very

religious person. I would say she was not a religious fanatic, but she was just a truly religious person, concerned with the creative aspect of religion—in learning, and living, and relating to people, and helping people. I was born in a small town, Gloster. . . . [Fourth child in a family of three boys and three girls]

PK: That's the Americanized version of Gloucester.

JW: Yeah, and that's about, oh, I would say, about 90 miles south of Vicksburg.

PK: So this was the small town in which you were born.

JW: Yeah, a small town. I don't know how many people it had, just a very small town. However, I had people there who own a hotel cafe, my aunt and others and like that, but as I said, my father was a preacher. . . .

PK: What was his church? Was it a Baptist. . . .

JW: Baptist minister.

PK: So presumably you spent a fair amount of time, certainly Sundays, when you were a kid, in church.

JW: Well, yes. I was admonished to go to Sunday school. I don't know whether I was forced to. I was supposed to go, and the only thing I would require, before going to Sunday school, was a flower in my lapel. (laughs) So out in the yard and get a flower and put it in my lapel, then they'd take me to Sunday school. And that was part of my life, you understand.

PK: Could you describe this community? What was the basis of the economy? I suppose it was an agricultural area. Do you recall?

JW: Well, it was. The environment was such . . . that is, out of the city. Within the confines of Gloster proper there was a sawmill. We had a big sawmill, the Gloster Lumber Company. It was owned by F. A. Anderson. Most of the men and some of the women were employed there.

PK: So it was almost a company town.

JW: It was almost a company town. However, people did farm, but not in Gloster. They were like four or five miles out; they'd farm and they brought their produce to town. But then we had other places to work. There was an oil mill and compress, and things like that. Pickle factory, where they made pickles. The people grew cucumbers and they had pickle vats, big vats, where they pickled pickles. (laughs) That's a good, combination, pickled pickles!

PK: Was this primarily a black community?

JW: No. It was a white and black community. Usually a railroad track separated most of the blacks from most of the whites. However, we had some white on both sides of the tracks, but it was . . . somewhat of a segregated town, in that respect, as I recall. We had our Ku Klux Klans.

PK: Did you? Really?

JW: Yeah.

PK: You had your own chapter, right there in Gloster.

JW: We had our own chapter of the Ku Klux Klan. And we had people who were real viscious. We had some there who were very nice, and color had nothing to do with it. Some of 'em were just fine. I found some there just as good as some people that you find up here. Yeah.

PK: In Seattle here.

JW: In Seattle, or anywhere else.

PK: In the eighties.

JW: Yeah, so it's an individual thing, you understand. It just so happened we had so many individuals who were just on the other side. . . .

PK: Yeah.

JW: Yeah. And so few on the constructive side.

PK: Although we're still not saying exactly when you were born . . . this was in the 'teens, we're talking about. When you were a child.

JW: Yeah. Yeah. But usually I don't say much about when I was born. I didn't know nothin' about it. (chuckles) But then . . . if you'd asked me how old I am, if somebody wanted to know, I couldn't very well tell them, because from my reading of this thing in the Bible. I read a hundred and three psalms, and it says that God furnish you food to eat, that's good to your taste, and with that food he renew your youth as he renews the eagle, so I don't know how many times I've been renewed. That is all I know about it. (laughs)

PK: And so you eat well.

JW: (laughs) So I'm always being renewed.

PK: Lucky you. Well, you look pretty renewed to me. (chuckles) But from an historical standpoint, in providing an idea of your own setting, where you spent your early years, it was in a town representing the old South. . . .

JW: Um hmm.

PK: . . . a segregated community. . . .

JW: Um hmm.

PK: . . . one which, I would imagine, was pretty typical of a smaller Southern town of the time, of the early 1900s.

JW: Yes. It was typical of small Southern towns, but if you go to a much larger town, the much larger town become much better.

PK: How do you mean better?

JW: More liberal. Like for instance, you go Vicksburg, or someplace like that, and people seem to be more liberal. Go to Memphis, people seem to be still more liberal there than at Vicksburg.

PK: Even then, you think?

JW: Yeah. Even then. You can feel a mixture of hate and goodwill.

PK: Ahh, I didn't realize that.

JW: Other words, in the vernacular of the day, you pick up the vibes, and you can sense they're different. And then their relationship and how people act and conduct themselves is much better. The people didn't seem to be as clannish in the larger town. Even in New Orleans, you would see a difference.

PK: Did you as a child ever visit any of these other towns, the bigger towns and cities, or did you stay pretty much in Gloster?

JW: No, I visited 'em. In fact, I used to work with a banana messenger out of New Orleans.

PK: A what?

JW: I would go from Gloster to New Orleans, and get with the banana messenger, or fruit messenger, every Wednesday. And then we would get a fruit [railroad] car of fruit.

PK: What's that?

JW: Well, a fruit messenger has to do with buying, selling, and delivering fruit. Sometime they live in New Orleans, and they would go to the Thalia Street wharf and select fruit to buy.

PK: I see.

JW: And then he would watch them while they were loading the cars, loading freight cars and refrigerators, with a certain class of bananas and apples and oranges, and things. Then the fruit messengers would come up there and look in those cars and decide which car of fruit he wanted to buy and how much they would pay for that car of mixed fruit or bananas. Then he would negotiate and pay for that car, and then it was our responsibility—me working with him—we would leave New Orleans on a Wednesday, usually on the Wednesday, on the freight. The freight would pull the car. And we would leave out with green bananas—they'd take off all the ripe ones at the Thalia Street wharf—and we'd leave off with green bananas and other fruit, and it was my job to see that that fruit is ripened, or began to get ripe, before we'd get to Mississippi. And using whatever it entails, I would have to do that. The most primarily thing I'd have to do is open up the frigerator car so that the ice would melt, and the

cold air would escape through the frigerator door. That is, if I needed that kind of assistance. So I'd open up both doors, on each end, on top of the car, and let it get a little warm in there and ripen 'em. And sometime if I needed I put a heater in there. And see to it that they were ripened in some consistency. Not all ripen at once, but gradually. And then my next job was to call up each store, in any little town that we were going to approach.

PK: Along the way.

JW: Yeah, call them up and tell them that, even though I'm 300 miles away from there, I'd call them up and tell them that we were headed for that town, and we'd be in there today or tomorrow or tonight, whichever is the case, and tell them where we'd be located, around the railroad station, or wherever. Then they would come up from their stores and buy banana. They'd come up with a truck. Sometime I'd have to stay in the refrigerator half of the night, till some merchant would come from about 50 miles out from the town we were stationed. So they would come in, and I'd stay in the car and wait for them while my boss, the banana messenger would be playing cards in some hotel or something. I'd stay in there and wait till they come. (laughs)

PK: How old were you then, James?

JW: Oh, I'd say, I might have been about fifteen, I'm not sure.

PK: Teens.

JW: Yeah, um hmm, yeah.

PK: That sounds as if it might have been a somewhat unusual opportunity for a young person in the South, particularly a black person—anybody—to be able to get around, to have a reason to get out to other towns and the big cities.

JW: Well, it just so happened, it seems to me—as I recall back—that the Italians, they didn't care. They wanted somebody to do the job and work with them.

PK: So you were working with. . . . Your boss was Italian?

JW: Yeah, yeah. Like Battalio and others.

PK: What do you mean when you say they didn't care?

JW: Well, I mean they cared nothing about color.

PK: I see.

JW: To the extent that some of the other people would have.

PK: And the older, more established. . . .

JW: Well, I wouldn't say the more established, but some of the more discriminating Caucasian people. They didn't want blacks to have that kind of a job. But Battalio thought otherwise. . . . He didn't care. He was concerned about getting service. Although he's a banana messenger. He would trust me, you know, and I think I was worthy of being trusted because I always acted fair. And so he'd leave me in the car selling bananas while he's in a hotel (chuckles), you understand?

PK: Yes.

JW: And even if he were there, he'd be in one door, and I would be in the other one, and we'd have our hat right in the middle of the floor, and people would come and buy bananas for twenty-five cents a dozen, or whatever. (chuckles) And both of us would be selling and throwing money in the hat. Now, the average person, Southern-white, wouldn't let you do that. You know, other words, that was too much freedom. He wouldn't have stood for that.

PK: So this was breaking down the proper order of things.

JW: Proper! (laughs)

PK: Not s'posed to be that way.

JW: Yeah.
[Interruption in taping]

PK: We had a very temporary break in taping. James, you were talking about your early experiences in this small

Mississippi town, and about your experiences with the banana messenger, which I find interesting. What memories do you have? Do you feel that. . . . Do you have memories of suffering from discrimination in that town? Is that a part of what you carried with you from your early life in the South?

JW: No. I carry no chip on my shoulder whatsoever. I realize that the situation that exists was not normal. It was just something that added to somebody's mind, and they were trying to seize the monopoloy with their attitude. And so I didn't let that bother me as such. I did regret the condition that exists as a result of that. But then I found a way to escape.

PK: [nods—Ed.]

JW: In fact, if they would confront me I'd tell them how I felt.

PK: What do you mean?

JW: Well, for instance if some of them would challenge me.

PK: And say what? Say, "You don't belong here." Challenge something you're doing, or where you were?

JW: Well, for instance, I had. . . . I'll give you one.

PK: Okay, please.

JW: I was standing once talking with another black man—young man—and a white fellow came up. He looked like a drunkard, I think, he was kind of half shot. But he knew the other black man; he didn't know me. When I say black man, we were young.

PK: Right, kids.

JW: And he called him, "Hey there, Jim, you old son of a so and so, come get a drink, you son of. . . ." And he looked at me and say, "You. . . ." I say, "Listen, I don't like that kind of talk and I won't drink your whiskey." (chuckles) He said, "I like niggers, but I don't like colored people. If you don't believe I like niggers, ask Jim." I said, "I don't have to ask him nothin; you don't like me because I don't take your mess. That's it. If I take your mess and take that junk that you're putting out to him, you'd like me, too, wouldn't you?"

PK: So you felt that you could speak up that way?

JW: I didn't felt like it. I knew!

PK: You just did it.

JW: I just did. . . .

PK: And then this guy, this drunkard guy was intimidated because you simply. . . .

JW: Well, he didn't have no recourse.

PK: Yeah. What could he do?

JW: He couldn't do nothin'. Other words, what I'm saying is this: Is that you should try and be right. You don't go around bullying others. But you stand your grounds, and they can tell the difference. You understand?

PK: Yes.

JW: I can recall one night I was with three white men—and we were going down on the river. They had a rumor that some gangsters was coming down from Indianapolis, down the river, in a boat. And they were gonna stop somewhere on the Mississippi River in a houseboat and. . . . For some reason, I don't know the nature of the trip. Of the three men I was with, two of 'em was whiskey makers, and one was a friend of mine. I'd done odd jobs for him. So that third person, he was kind of a whiskey drinker. So I said something in the course of a conversation with the third man before we got to the boat, where these gangsters was at, and he said, "You remember, I'm a white man." I say, "What you complaining to me about? I had nothing to do with it." (laughs uproariously)

PK: What'd he do? Did he. . . .

JW: I said, "If you act like somebody you wouldn't have to tell me that."

PK: Did he laugh, did he think that was funny?

JW: No, he didn't like it. He was mad as heck. I was the only black there, but it didn't matter with me what he thought. The average black would have been frightened to say something like that. Not me!

PK: How did you. . . . How can you explain that you felt free to behave in a way that presumably could have led to consequences? I mean, blacks were abused in the South, sometimes for less than that, if they went up against the wrong person—an authority figure.

JW: Um hmm. I felt the strong force within.

PK: How did you come to this realization that if you stood up as an individual, stood up to people, that they were going to have to deal with you as an individual?

JW: The only way that I account for it is this, and I wasn't cognizant then of many things that I know now. And that is, that, if you become synchronized with the cosmos as such, then you have that assurance from within. You can't be a bully, you can't be somebody that's going around looking for trouble, but you have a recourse, you have a refuge. And if you have a sense of that refuge coming from within, and once that emanates from within you, then you set up the kind of environment that's not conducive to violence from the other person. You understand, he'll sense that he better not (laughing), he better do something different. Other words, he'll sense that he better get off the wrecking crew. Even though he failed to get on this construction gang, he has to get off wrecking crew. See what I mean? I can name different means by which to know this. I'll recite more like that and give you a better insight on what it is. I hope that this interview will bring out some of the things that I'd like to say relative to why we are here as people. How we can best utilize our talent, the God-given talent, to reach our ideals—and value. Where does the validity of the mind rest? Is this a mechanical thing? Are we secure by creating a materialistic conviction? Or being materialistically inclined? Or being materialistically orientated, motivated, is that where it's at? Or is it somewhere else? And I want to deal with that something else.

PK: Well, we will. That's a big part of why we're here. . . .

JW: Yeah.

PK: . . . because I believe, and I know you believe, that you've chosen to deal with these issues, to realize them in a tangible way through your art.

JW: That's right.

PK: But what interests me here is that I sense you feel that your early years in the South already provided sort of a background for your world view, for your present world view. Even though you weren't aware of it at the time, you were—correct me if I'm wrong—but you were behaving in a way that was consistent with a philosophy that you came to develop later on. What I would like to know is how did that come about then? How, where did you draw this strength? Where did you get this insight? Did it have to do with the church, with your father, with your mother—you said she was very religious. Have you ever thought about how the early phase of James Washington was put together?

JW: What led to it, as I can look back now, is the environment that was created by my mother and father.

PK: I see.

JW: The environment, under which I was able to live and conduct myself. And when that environment was prevalent, through your life, and at your home, if you are receptive to that, then you become conditioned to the same environment or the same vibration, as it were. And by being receptive to the same environment and utilizing the same vibration to express yourself, then that is a tangent leading to truth. When you get in that tangent leading to truth, then you become enlightened. Nobody have to tell you this is right or that is wrong—you feel it.

PK: Do you feel that your parents were aware of this? Do you feel this was a conscious sort of technique, method, on their part to try to steer you in a certain direction?

JW: I know that they were sensitive to what I was doing. They might not have talked about it. They never verbalized this type of thing. But it was so. . . .

PK: They left that to you.

JW: Yeah. (laughs) But they were sensitive to that. They were very sensitive to that. And my mother was very sensitive about my talent. She observed me, what I was . . . doing.

PK: This is your artistic talent?

JW: Yes. Well, yes, and how I conduct myself. She was very sensitive about that. One day she was in the kitchen; she had just finished cooking, and I had finished eating, and I sit out on the back porch, on the steps. And she had the door still open while she was doing the dishes. I spied an object across the alley, and went over there. It was an old shoe. And I picked up that old shoe and brought it back to the steps and took it all apart. And I just looked at it, examined every part of it. And I didn't know that she was watching me. In fact, I didn't know what I was doing. But I know I was curious about the shoe, and how it went together. And about a week or something after that, she came back from town. . . .

[Tape 1, side B]

PK: James, I'm sorry that I interrupted your anecdote. Would you please pick up where we left off with the shoe?

JW: My mother, as I before said, was observing my action as I was on the step and taking that old shoe apart, and I didn't know that she was observing me. So about two weeks after that she went uptown, as it were. When she came back home, she told me that Mr. Arthur Samuel, who was a shoe repairman, would like for me to come up there and study shoe repairing under him. She observed how interested I was with the shoe, and she reached the conclusion that I wanted to explore much further. And she evidently contacted Mr. Arthur Samuel and told him about what she had observed, and he invited her to send me up there so I could repair shoes under him, he'd teach me what he knew.

PK: So did you apprentice then to him?

JW: I apprenticed under him, and I learned the things that he knew about just the common shoe, heel, putting heels and soles on, and then sewing the soles on with a very common stitcher. And then, after learning what he knew, then I wanted to learn more. I always wanted to, as it were, leapfrog in knowledge. Leapfrog in knowledge. That is, when I get to one thing that I've figured out I always want to see, pursue its potential further. So then, under those circumstances then, one day a fella came in there and wanted him, Mr. Arthur, to put in some counters in his shoe—that is a stiffener. Mr. Arthur's reply to him was that he didn't have any, that his order of stiffeners hadn't arrived, and that he could come back later and he would put him in some stiffening. I said, "What did he want?" And so he said, "He wanted some stiffeners put in." Stiffeners and counters are the same. I said, "Well, I'll make him some." And they both looked at me, and they said, "Make him some?" I said, "Yes." So I realized that they had a roll of Baby Ben leather that's flexible, and then I visualized the possibility of making 'em out of that. They agreed. So I take the man's shoe, and I opened it up, taken the heel off, and then I taken off the sole, that part of the sole that's under the heel, and then I rolled it back and tacked it down. Then I taken out the lasting tacks, and I taken the old counter out, and I wet it and I straightened it out, and made it flat.

PK: What is it that you took out?

JW: The counter. Yeah, the leather back in the inside of the shoe. So then I used that as a pattern and put it against the Baby Ben leather and cut out another one, and then I scribed it—that is, shaped it up—and pounded, and put it in. Then I put the heel back on. And then he was pleased. I had reached the point where Mr. Arthur Samuel had led me in his knowledge of repairing shoes, and then I was able to, not only to order counters already made and put them in, but then I wanted to make some. I wanted to enter into the creative realm of shoemaking. So then that's why I suggested to him that I would make them. I had never seen him make them. All I've seen him do was order them already shaped and put them in.

PK: Right.

JW: So I had no reason to venture out, you know, other than trying to pursue an avenue of creativity, because he hadn't taught me that. But nevertheless, it was a successful venture, you understand. And from that time on, I pursued, leapfrogging again, I went on to making shoes.

PK: Actually making shoes?

JW: Yeah. And we'll go into that later, but later on I was hired by the government and put in charge of the orthopedic department for the government before I came out West. I was making arch supports and adjustments by a doctor's prescription.

PK: So this really started you on a profession, finding the shoe and your mother's observing. . . .

JW: Well, it's not necessarily just a profession, as such—and then it could possibly be—but it was a creative adventure. Because this creative ability can be applied in painting or sculpting or anything.

PK: Do you view all jobs as potentially creative adventures?

JW: That's right. Yeah. All jobs that you can get into are creative, potential creative adventures. For instance, bricklaying. Now we consider that as a common job, you know. Of course, a bricklayer makes good money. But then, you can be an artist at bricklaying. All you have to do is make proficiency in bricklaying and you become an artist.

PK: What about imagination? Does that play a role? Is that what makes the difference?

JW: That's a part of it. You have to have a good imagination. Imagination is the key to success in most anything. If you have no imagination, if you have no foresight, if you have no vision, then the people perish—and an individual perish without any vision. You have to have vision, in order to reach your zenith. If you can visualize something, then you can bring it in to manifestation or you can advise somebody else, and give them the idea, and they can bring it into manifestation, if you can't do it yourself.

PK: So it's the idea.

JW: Yeah, but you have to realize it.

PK: It's the vision, it's the idea. . . .

JW: That's right.

PK: . . . and not the technique or the process.

JW: No, it's the idea. That's the one. . . . The idea or the imagination, can help you bring anything into manifestation. Other words, with imagination, you can go into an unknown world and bring into a material world things beforehand have never been seen before.

PK: Well, I know we're going to be talking a lot more about that, I think, when we get on to your art. But let me ask this: Is is possible to have so-called art without imagination?

JW: You can have art—and you see a lot of it around—but no one can produce art without imagination.

PK: How can you tell that? I mean, how can you, James Washington, spot that which is presented as a work of art but seems lacking in what you feel is the. . . .

JW: Not only seem; that is lacking.

PK: Okay.

JW: Other words, I can be put in a room where there are thousands and more paintings and line 'em up, and not know the name of the artist—the same amount of sculpture, and line 'em up—and I can tell you the one with the stronger quality. And don't have to spend more than five or six minutes there looking at them. And I can tell you the one that has the highest quality in the group.

PK: How can you. . . . What do you look for? Obviously, you look for imagination.

JW: No.

PK: How do you spot that?

JW: No, I don't look for imagination.

PK: Well, the results of it.

JW: Imagination is the pot they cook in. (chuckles)

PK: Right, I understand, okay. So what do you look for, how do see the evidence of _____ _____?

JW: The quality of which I speak is something you perceive rather than see.

PK: Okay.

JW: You perceive it rather than see. Once you become aware, then it's just as obvious, it's just as plain as though you see it with these eyes. You don't see it with these eyes.

PK: So it's a sensitivity. Do you feel that you can develop this sensitivity, perhaps by looking and thinking, or is it something, do you feel, that's a. . . . You're born with it.

JW: Not just by looking. Because you are thinking about looking with these eyes. . . .

PK: Well, I meant more than that.

JW: Yeah. Because I have a poem, as a result of Doctor Fuller. He introduced me to some people at the Seattle Art Museum, and they were from back east, and they were art teachers and all, from the university. And he introduced me to them, and we was at the museum, and I went on looking at the art, and so they went on with their little group, and finally they'd come back and get me and say, "Come up here. We want to show you something. What do you think about this piece of art?" They'd pick out an abstract. "What do you find good in this one? What's. . . ." And I would point out whatever I found that was good in it I'd tell 'em.

PK: Do you remember whose it was? Do you remember the artist?

JW: No.

PK: But it was a nonobjective thing.

JW: A nonobjective-type thing, you know. And then I'd go on looking at the exhibition. Then they'd come get me again. So finally they came about the third time. My remarks to them were, "I treat the museum just like I do people in the community," you understand. I said, "If I pass by a home that I don't particularly like, or their yard isn't well-kept, I don't stand there and bicker. I just go on to the next and appreciate the one up the street." (laughing) I say, "We have to do art the same way. Because I realize that if I'm standing up arguing about some painting there that doesn't make sense, you understand, and has no quality, somebody behind me want my place." (laughs)

PK: Um hmm.

JW: And I say, "Another thing about it. Once we go into a museum, and we find a piece or look for a piece that we don't particularly like, and then we bicker about that piece, then, with that negative idea, you would look for another piece like that so you can bicker about it. But if you find the good, just like you find the good in an individual, then that idea will look for some more good. But if you start looking for and finding the bad, then that'll lead you to look for some more bad. Find all the bad about the individual and never reach the good." So, as a result of that, I coined a poem, as a result of that meeting, and it goes like this:
They look, they look, and they look,
But they see not.
For they look with their physical eyes.
They look, they look, and they look,
But they see not.
For they look with their physical eyes.

So what we have to realize—and I hope this interview will shed some light on it—and I'm also mindful of the fact that I cannot explain an ultimate. But I can illustrate it. That's all. An ultimate is too deep for an explanation. Only God can do it. So we all, every individual you see has the potential with which he or she can observe articles, observe people, perceive the quality of the individual, and tell whether that individual is sincere or whether he is a phoney. Every individual you see, or ever will see, has the ability to find his or her talent or talents, and to utilize that talent, and to energize it with the force that God has given him or her, and can animate any subject, whether it's writing, speaking, sculpture, or whatever it is. This is the only thing that we have in the world that's worth anything. It's not what you get in school. The teacher can't give it to you. It's what you have within you. And our bodies are the temple of God, and the spirit of God dwells in us. And it's that spirit, if we possess it, we can inject it into subject matter and make it live. And that's what's wrong with the churches today—just hundreds of 'em. They know nothing about this truth. They don't propagate it. They couldn't propagate it if they wanted to. A lot of the pulpiteers couldn't propagate it because they couldn't explain it. They couldn't give you the insight on what it is that you should develop. And therefore they refute a statement relative to this. They say, "Well, what is he talking about?" Religion to them is getting ready to go to Heaven, or give me some more money so I can give it to Christ. And the people fall for it. But the idea of how to develop an individual, how to develop your highest potential, this is what we need, and that is the result of the chaos we're having, because the people, they're not able to do that. They have churches, churches, churches. And everybody's trying to get money, and that's all, and not about how to develop the individual.

PK: Do you feel that these ideas you're expressing come, originally grow out of the views of your folks, ultimately Baptist experience? Was that the foundation upon which your view is built?

JW: You wouldn't have to be a Baptist, you wouldn't have to be a Methodist, you wouldn't have to be a Catholic.

PK: Well, what got you thinking along these lines?

JW: It's such a congenial atmosphere. (chuckles) Congenial atmosphere, and being sensitive to who I am and my potential—and then cognizant of the fact that I'm more than what you see.

PK: If you hadn't had a Baptist minister for a father, though, and a mother who was very religious, do you think that—well, you can't know this—but do you suspect that your development would have gone—your philosophical development—along the same lines? I mean, were their other things along the way that. . . .

JW: It could have possibly been. My mother need not be a Baptist; she need not be a religious person. My father wouldn't have to be a preacher. Or he could have been a Catholic. You understand?

PK: So it's not the church.

JW: It's not that. Other words, it's not just becoming the member of a church or being affiliated with a church or being concerned about church. That has nothing to do with it. Other words, that's not a controlling factor.

PK: But it's a contributing factor.

JW: It's a contributing factor providing. . . . Providing if you are sensitive and seeking for truth. You have to be seeking for truth. Even if you were not a Baptist, you should seek for truth. Some people out there in the world are not even a Baptist or a Methodist but are seeking for truth. And they're more inspired, and you can converse with them a whole lot better on the same level I just told you about than you can with the people who have three or four degrees and are preachers.

PK: I understand.

JW: You understand?

PK: Yeah.

JW: But the only thing about it is this. If the people I'm referring to, who are inspired and seeking for truth and have a feeling of the knowledge, and if they were connected, that is, have some religious affiliation, and can so reach some discipline of their knowledge through that channel, then that's fine. Some discipline. I don't mean just exterior discipline, but discipline from intuition. Other words, everything has to come from within. The exterior discipline is okay, but it must lead to a discipline from intuition.

PK: Well, what I want to do a little later in our session is develop this kind of progress that you had, almost like a growth, development of these ideas. And I hope that you can describe a few of the landmarks along the way. I would ask you in connection with that though at this point, when did you become conscious or aware of this intellectual direction you wanted to pursue—philosophical, whatever you want to call it. The search for truth was what you wanted to pursue. Was there a point when you realized that this was important in your life?

JW: I realized at an early age that to be truthful and to be concerned about people—that's all involved—and to care about people, I realized there was more to it than I was able to comprehend at that time. And then I had to condition myself mentally and, as it were, spiritually to find out what was this information and where was it emanating from? And I found out that it wasn't emanating from outside, because I would talk with young men of my own age and younger, and I'd get a feedback that was not conducive to what I was thinking. Sometime it was a violent thing, and they would use peer pressure. I remember, for instance, a group of boys sometime would ride about 50 miles from Gloster up to Harrison, Mississippi. That's a little junction town; you can go over to Natchez from there. And then we'd catch a freight train and ride back. And we had done this, on this particular Sunday. And I was with about three or four more boys my age, and I had left them for some reason and went up exploring something up the tracks, or something, and when I came back, they said, "We about ready to go. We're going catch this freight train out." They said, "There's a boy up there. He said something bad to us. We gonna throw him off the train when we get going." He was a white boy, you know, that they wanted to throw off. You know, they told me that they want to throw him off. I said, "No, you're not throwin' that boy off. You ain't gonna fool with that boy." I said, "We ain't gonna do nothin' with that boy." See what I mean?

PK: What did they say?

JW: "Uh huh?" I said, "No, we ain't gonna do nothin' to that boy. We ain't gonna put our hands on him. We ain't gonna touch it." I say, "What did he do to you?" And they tried to tell me, I said, "No, you ain't gonna do nothin' to him." See what I mean? Other words, I was not concerned about peer pressure. I'm concerned about people. You understand? And I knew they wanted me to take part. Other words, they recognized me as a potential leader, so why wouldn't I take advantage of it and say what's right? You understand?

PK: Yes.

JW: You see what I mean? So that was my opportunity, and I'm just so proud now I accepted it. You understand?

PK: Um hmm.

JW: So, you see, I could have very well said, “Oh yeah,” to be part of the gang, see, “Yeah, let’s do it.” You understand? You see what I mean? That attitude was not in me. And they couldn’t sell it to me. I didn’t need that peer pressure to feel like somebody.

PK: Did these friends of yours back then begin to see you as slightly different?

JW: They might have. I didn’t really view all of the different facets of their life, or something like that, but I could have cared less. You understand? If this young man had done something to me, I would have told him what I thought of him at the time and still wouldn’t have tried to throw him off the train. (chuckling) You see what I mean? But he hadn’t done nothin’ to me, and when I ascertained what he’d done to them, it amount to nothing. So why would I, why would I want to do something to him?

PK: It sounds to me, James, as if at a rather early age you moved beyond viewing people within groups, on the basis of color or any other kind of group. If I understand what you’re saying, you’d already become interested in people as individuals, with their individual qualities, and that you refused to be trapped into a more limited view. Do you feel that this is true? Did you have at that time, or perhaps a little bit later, any close white friends?

JW: Yes. I had friends and was just proud of it, even in this little town. . . . I’ll tell you what happened once. We had a rich white lady. I think she was rich. I don’t know, she might not have been. But she had a big home. (chuckles) I knew some of my friends who had worked for her in her yard, you know, and then she got me—I forget how she acquired me—to work in her yard around her flower beds. So I worked all day and. . . . I might have worked two days, but I worked, I know I worked a full day. Long about that evening, just before I was to be paid off, she came to me and said, “Did you see some mail around there on the porch?” I said, “No, I didn’t see any mail around there.” “That’s funny,” she said. “I had some valuable things around there for the mailman to pick up.” I said, “Well, I didn’t see them.” I went on back to work. And later that afternoon, she sent the maid—I think, the maid, probably maid and cook, combination—out there to tell me to come in there, in the house. I went in, and just as I stepped in the door, the music was playing, and she wanted me to dance with her. I refused. And I stood up there a minute, and I walked back out and went back to work. Later on, just about the time I was about to get off, some of the officers came up there, city officers, and they didn’t say they had arrested me, they said they wanted to take me downtown to question me. I said, “What about?” “Well, some papers was missing out there in the front, on the porch.” I say, “What!” And they named some things that she didn’t tell me! (laughs) I don’t know what she had told them. I went down there with them, and there was a big store they worked in. I don’t know all the things they had in the store, but anyway they carried me down there. They were little constables, or whatever it was, you know. They say, “What we gonna do, we just gonna let you loose till you go find that stuff.” I said, “You can let me loose, sirs, but I don’t know what it looked like.” (laughing) So, “Well, we’re gonna keep you, but we’ll keep you in here then.” They put me in the back.

PK: They put you in jail?

JW: In a little room.

PK: They put you behind bars?

JW: Well, some secure little place. They hadn’t arrested me, or nothing like that. I don’t know, I wouldn’t call it a jail. A friend of ours (a family friend), a white fellow, Mr. Larry, I think by name, he heard that what they were doing, and he came down and told them, to turn me loose. “Let that boy loose.” And said, “That woman ain’t done nothing but lie. . . .” (laughing) He said, “She ain’t doing nothing but lying to keep from paying him.”

PK: Yeah, boy.

JW: And one of friends, who had previously worked for her, he told me the next day, she came out there and hid one of her hoes from him, and then, you know, made out like he had misplaced it to keep from paying him. (laughing)

PK: So you had friends then that would come forward and then speak for you. . . ?

JW: Oh, yeah. Yeah, even though they were few, you understand.

PK: Well, there are very friends like that for anybody. Now, I want to make sure I have this right. Who was the woman that wanted to dance with you?

JW: Well, you see, evidently—now I can look back and suspect just what would have happened. I can just look back. And she probably wanted me to dance with her, then she would have tore my clothes or something, and pretend something worse than the loss of papers.

PK: Right. And then she wouldn't have to pay you, either.

JW: I would have been dead then, because, you know, if she would have gotten enough people to believe. You didn't have to have enough, just three or four. . . .

PK: That you had tried to rape her or something like that.

JW: Yeah, anything that was imaginable. Well then, they wouldn't have listened to my side. Other words, the people. . . .

[Tape 2, side A]

PK: James, sorry for the interruption. You were going to conclude this anecdote.

JW: Well, I was just about to say that method was the way those folks acted for handling something like that, the situation I've just described. If I had of went and danced with her. . . . I'm just foreseeing the possibilities this could happen, and it couldn't have went any other way. I would have been bound to go somewhat similar to what I'm about to say. She would've claimed that I tried to attack her some way, and she would have sent out an alarm, she'd have got two or three to come, and then they would've heard her story, and if I would inject anything in that was contrary to what she said, they would have said that I'm disputing her word, and that would have made them mad. Then if I had to say something to them, they would say I'm disputing their word. They would have started violence then, you understand. I'm pretty sure, you know, that they would have started beating on me or doing something like that, you understand. Anything I would have said, unless I would say what they wanted me to say, would have been wrong. That is the way they would handle it. They would say, "Okay, now, I tell you, you confess and we'll stop doing what we're doing."

PK: Then what?

JW: Then you confess, then they feel justified in doing whatever they want to do from that point on.

PK: Did you have any lynchings, hangings of that nature, or anything like that, that you remember?

JW: Well, I recall hearing about things like that but not seeing it. All they would need to show that a crime was committed is that somebody suggests that you did a crime, and then you disputed that person person's word. (laughs) You understand?

PK: (chuckling) Yeah, I want to know a couple of things. I want to know, first of all, why did this white lady, who you thought was rich and whom you were working for, why would she want to bring this to that point where she could set you up for violence? Certainly not just so that she wouldn't have to pay you?

JW: Yes. That's all.

PK: So that's how little your well-being. . . .

JW: That's right. Other words, I'm not sure that she was rich, but she was reputed to have been rich, because she had a fine home.

PK: Well, she certainly had more money than you did.

JW: Yeah, I didn't know it at the time, but my friend told me after—that he worked for several days or a week with her and she hid the hoe and tried to create a commotion and didn't pay him, saying he stole the hoe, you understand, and she started a lot of messing with him on that.

PK: So she figured she could use this basic social structure in the South at that time to get out of paying. . . ?

JW: Yeah, just paying a bill.

PK: But doesn't it, wasn't it appalling to you as a young man that she might go to that extreme?

JW: I couldn't understand it. I couldn't understand it.

PK: She probably put your life in jeopardy.

JW: Yeah. Now what I'm saying about her wanting me to dance with her and the possibility of what could have happened, now I don't know that to be so, but it must have been something, you understand, she. . . . Why would she want me to come in from out there working and come in there to dance with her? That's the question.

PK: Well, I don't know that we want to pursue that on tape. I mean, you may have been a very attractive young

man.

JW: No, no, no, I wasn't. No.

PK: You weren't always as attractive as you are now?

JW: (laughs) But I'm just saying, why would she want to do that, and the maid was standing right there? The maid wasn't ten feet from us. Do you see what I mean? So she wasn't creating any private situation.

PK: I understand.

JW: So I'm just telling you what I figured she was trying to do. I don't know.

PK: I think it's interesting. An experience like that, and the implications of an experience like that, that in some ways the system was stacked against you to the point where you could be put in jeopardy simply on the word. . . .

JW: Now not just me.

PK: No, I understand.

JW: All the blacks were subject to that kind of trap.

PK: How did that fit then with your developing ideas about the potential good in people? Was it hard for you to reconcile the realities of the social situation, the inequities in that situation. . . .

JW: Uh, somewhat.

PK: . . . and what you imagined, or what you believed by that time, was more important.

JW: Yeah. And that's the reason some blacks left the South with a chip on their shoulder. You understand, they left the South with a chip on their shoulder. They assumed, and a lot of them believe now, that all whites are dangerous, that all whites are up to get them, all whites are up to do this or that to them. I didn't believe that. Why I didn't believe that is because I accept people as individual. I could. . . . And in fact I could have a fuss—or shall we say an encounter—with a white on this block, and go two blocks down, and find another white with whom I relate and not even mention it.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: See what I mean? So this is why. For some reason I was able to do that. You understand? And I'm able to do it till this day. You understand?

PK: Let's take a jump now. Let's take a jump. . . .

JW: Leapfrog.

PK: Leapfrog. Let's leapfrog.

JW: (laughs)

PK: How does this attitude, this world view that you've described, come into play later on in your art?

JW: This world view. . . . If you go. . . . We have to separate the world view from our artistic achievement. We have to separate that. Because I wasn't motivated by the world view. Other words, you have to go inside, and it's inside that you have the freedom, and that you are not motivated by the world's attitude at all. So I was able to go inside and to find out from inside just who I am and my potential. And by so doing, then I was able to realize that every individual has the same potential (not the same talent), but he or she has to develop it. You understand? I was able to perceive that potential. But they have to bring it out. You find your potential by getting off the wrecking crew and getting on the construction crew, and whether they are white or black. I perceive that potential in everyone. So with me, then I knew that this same potential had been awakening me, then I say, "Now, how can it be used? What is it all about?" I hear. . . . You go to church and you hear about God this, and your body is the temple of God, and all that, and they never give it an explanation as to what that means. And then every time you talk about, try to get an explanation, they tell you, "Well, you are going to get it in Heaven." You understand? It's always the Heaven bit. I know that led to chaos. It led to perfect chaos—if chaos can be perfect. You understand, because the people were not able to deal with it.

PK: Well, _____ _____.

JW: When I say deal with it, I mean somebody born and live here on the earth; they reach the age of eight or ten or twelve, fourteen years old, and every time they try to get some kind of understanding of how they should live or how they could develop, they give them the Heaven bit. These are not the kind of young people who will find themselves. Do something for themselves now, experience some of this life now!

PK: Are you saying that your art then is, in a certain way, a more tangible substitute for Heaven? That this is where you. . . .

JW: What I'm actually saying is—you can find God through your art, for God is spirit. The nature of God is love. And that's where you establish the continuity between people and yourself. That's love, that's nature. You use that God nature to reach out to people. God is a spirit. It's that spirit in you, God gives you, that can animate whatever talent he has given you. You see. You can animate whatever you're doing, whether it's writing, speaking, or whatever. And not only that, but you can use that same spirit to perceive where the other person is coming from. Other words, the universality of life is based on this spirit. The universality of art is based on this spirit. Because they're one and the same.

PK: So this is what your art is about.

JW: That's right. I'm not still searching for this truth; that is, I'm searching for more of it. I'm still trying to find out how much of this spiritual truth that one person can possess and how, to what extent he—in this case me—can animate subject matter and make it live. If we would go back then to Greece, we would be able to observe and discuss one of the sculptors [Pygmalion]. He was able to acquire a greater abundance of this spiritual truth than the average person of his time. So much so, he was able to depict a woman, perhaps in granite or marble, and was able to inject in her so much life, so much of this spiritual force, that she became so animated, so pretty and so much alive, he requested that he be permitted to marry her. So his sculpture was so alive he was able to marry it. (chuckling) It had so much of that life in it. So this power is what the individual can get, can achieve, can utilize, out of a religious environment. You hear some of these pulpiteers talking about Heaven and the Kingdom of God, and some of them couldn't explain it to save their lives. And they've been to Rochester [school—Ed.], been to all these institutions, but then you hear 'em talk, and you can't take any take-home pay (good information) from that church. Because they never think about creating a heavenly experience here, and when they talk about the Kingdom of God, they talk about somewhere way up in the midair, and if they use the philosophy of Christ, who's supposed to know about the Kingdom of God, he say the Kingdom of God—is within you as found in the seventeenth chapter of Luke—the Kingdom of God is in you. (chuckles) And do not let somebody tell you, "Look yonder, there, and somewhere else." This is to take place now, but they have to know how to deal with it, from their point of reference. And they have to know what tangent to pursue. And they have to know how to stimulate other people to have that awareness. And that's what church is all about.

PK: Right. Well, let's leave church for a minute, and get. . . .

JW: Uh huh, okay.

PK: Let me suggest this, so then you can tell me if I'm right or wrong—that—as I mentioned earlier—art is a substitute for Heaven, or religion. I sense that you have a special relationship to your art, to the pieces that you create, and in part it must be because of this animating force. You see that as the visualization, perhaps, the realization of this special force, this animating force, that you associate with certain universal principles. And that giving life to these pieces then creates for you a special relationship between you and the works of art. Am I on the right track in trying to understand you? Then, secondly, how do these objects tap into the absolute—I think that's a term I've heard you use before—the universal, these higher principles? How do these objects themselves express some of that which you seem to think is of the utmost importance? Did I make that clear?

JW: You made it clear. When I arrived at the point that I felt like I had discovered this principle, or this force, and I was able to inject it into subject matter, then I proceeded to observe other artists and see to what extent they were able to use this, and to perceive whether they had it in their work also. And if so, how many? Who were they? How consistent they were.

PK: Who were they? Can you mention a few? I don't want to distract you.

JW: That's okay. For instance, Morris Graves, Kenneth Callahan, Mark Tobey, Picasso. . . .

PK: You like Picasso.

JW: We're not discussing liking. (chuckles)

PK: Sorry, right.

JW: We're discussing who had this quality. (chuckles)

PK: Who had it, um hmm.

JW: Michelangelo. And I can name others whose work has this quality. Inasmuch as our bodies are the Temple of God, and in John fourteen, Christ said, “I will be in you, the Father and I will make our abode in you. Your body will be the Temple of the Holy Spirit.” When you are cognizant of this, and are able to inject it into subject matter, then that’s the God force. You inject it in whatever talent God has given you. That’s the force that makes thins come alive. It’s alive or it’s dead depending on whether it possessed this quality or is void of it. And to what degree you can do this will determine what capacity you have in acquiring or utilizing this force. And this is not a fanatical point of view. It’s not saying, “Well, you got to be Baptist, you got to be a Methodist. . . .” You don’t have to be any of those. Just seek the truth. You don’t have to be a Baptist; you don’t have to be a Methodist. But it is expedient that you have some kind of line of discipline. And usually there’s more to true religion than to propogate the idea of the God concept. A certain amount of discipline will help you unify what you have. Some church people don’t know what that unifying force is, so they just go on a wild tangent; they become fanatics. But they actually should help each individual unify that force within him or her, and how to find and utilize it.

PK: Does the force help you as an artist select your subjects, for instance? Do you feel that you’re guided to materials, to subject matter, by the force?

JW: Uh, yes. Yes. Other words, I can pick up a stone of any shape, and I can work with it about five minutes and tell you its potential. To the degree that it will lend itself to the force that I’m talking about, and to what degree. And how much alive the subject I’m trying to depict, or want to depict, will be. How strong it will be. Another thing about it is this. I can change subject matter and sometime the subject will be much stronger, out of the same piece of stone.

PK: Do you think then that within the material itself, as Michelangelo thought. . . .

JW: Um hmm.

PK: You know, part of it was realizing, releasing the figure—the bound slave, for example—within a particular block of marble. Do you feel that an image is contained—within the stone, in your case—that is waiting to be discovered? Is this part of it?

JW: Not only one image. There are many images in there.

PK: Um hmm, but you said some are more successful than others. . . .

JW: Yeah. That’s right. And the artist has to determine that. He has to perceive the quality. Once he’s started on it, he can perceive the potential of it so far as producing the object in question, but to what degree this spiritual force will allow itself to animate the subject is a different thing. Other words, under these circumstances, where do you start in there? I’m talking about myself now.

PK: Right, now that’s fine, yeah.

JW: I’m not going to try and handle other sculptors’ approach.

PK: That’s what we’re here for.

JW: When I start on a sculpture, regardless of the subject, within five minutes I can tell whether this piece of stone will lend itself to a high-quality of a bird or man or what have you, and to what degree of quality. Now. In order to be consistent, then if I work, for instance, an hour on that piece, and go off somewhere—go to lunch or take a trip—when I come back, I got to be cognizant of the condition under which I left—the environment around this piece of stone—in order to establish the continuity between what I had previously done and what I’m gonna to do now. Because if I’m not of the same mind and spirit, then the previous part of it can be very good and the rest of it can be very mechanical, it can be just as flat as I don’t know what.

PK: Do you have a little piece in here that we could look at and maybe you could help me understand a little better how that piece was realized, incorporating some of these ideas?
[Interruption in taping]

PK: James is going to send me back to school and subject me to a test. We have. . . . We’re sitting here in the studio—and I maybe should say this at this point—It’s an absolutely fascinating room, divided into two parts, one part that’s like an office, and in the other part there seem to be many things stored. I’ve never figured out exactly how he works in here, but maybe we’ll get that secret out of him later. James has suggested that we look at a few pieces that he’s chosen randomly and set around the room, and I am supposed to determine, to see if I can perceive this force. We have, what? One, two, three, four. . . . These five?

JW: About five, yes.

PK: And I am obliged to look for what? The strength?

JW: You're supposed to perceive the art force. Perceive the intangible quality of the piece regardless of the subject depicted. You understand? That is, what do you get from inside that you feel like the strongest, regardless to the subject. And then, I would like for you, out of the five pieces, to tell which one's the strongest, which is the next strongest, which is the next strongest, or which is the weakest, you understand, and do it in sequence.

PK: All right, I will do this for the sake of education. The piece that I respond to—and I have to, that's where I have to say comes the strength, it's my response—that little piece behind you—which interestingly enough is a relief piece. I don't have any idea really what the subject is.

JW: That's The Fetus and the Egg. It's a relief. It's one of the pieces I've been invited to display in the governor's invitational show.

PK: What is the material? Is that. . . .

JW: Yeah, that's a kind of, oh, a marble, I'd say.

PK: The next strongest piece, for me, is to my right here. It's a work of 1978.

JW: That's A Study of Self. That's my study of me.

PK: That's a self-portrait.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: With the bird.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: And it looks a Mayan stele. I was going to ask you at some point if you feel you have any influence from the Mayan, the flat slabs that are carved.

JW: Not that I know of.

PK: Have you seen those?

JW: No.

PK: So you're not really, you don't have a book on them, or anything.

JW: No, I don't have any.

PK: The next strongest piece. . . . I feel a sort of a tie. There's a very small piece that is realized only partially, I think.

JW: This is the first piece I sculpt, after starting sculpting.

PK: Really.

JW: Yeah. It's a young Greek boy, a lad.

PK: That, I feel a force—I don't know whether it's the force—in that. The next, which is a very impressive bust, is a portrait of. . . .

JW: Jomo Kenyetta, Burning Spear, of Africa, Kenya.

PK: It's a very impressive portrait bust. The others are a little less conventional, and I find that arresting. That appeals to me. So I would have to put that number four.

PK: Let's forget the Sperm Chasing the Egg, because I like that very much. I think that's strong.

JW: Thanks. Thank you, um hmm.

PK: So that's my response. Does that tell you anything? How do you feel?

JW: Well, actually, I'll just tell you my, what I feel _____, and then you can toy with your concept. This one is the

strongest [A study of Self—JW].

PK: I chose that number two.

JW: Yeah, this is the strongest. Kenyetta is number two. And these other pieces, this one [Fetus and the Egg—JW] is number three.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: And this one number four. This could be three, this one here could be three or, could be three or four between the two of them, equally. Huh. Other words, I'm going by the quality that I perceive in them. Now, then you say as some people have said, "it's a matter of taste."
Well, it's not that. It's more than that. Even though it's not an exact science, in the way we like to think of it, it is an exact science because it has the quality. It's how all masterpieces or good paintings are supposed to be chosen.

[Tape 2, side B]

PK: We just concluded an experiment, shall we say, an effort to try to perceive power or force in James Washington's sculpture. And he and I seem to have slightly different perceptions, but at any rate, we did have up at the top of both our lists the self-portrait, this that I described as a Mayan stele. It's a relief and. . . . What kind of stone is that?

JW: Well, I actually don't know. It's a desert stone, yes. But I don't know what the nomenclature would be. It's not a granite, and it's not a sandstone, and. . . .

PK: Where did you find it? I mean, how do you find. . . .

JW: Well, I got it from the Northwest Terrazzo & Stone Supply Co. Inc. I just found a group of stones and I picked out for color.

PK: Is that you find most of your material?

JW: Sometime. Sometime I go up to mountain and get a stone.

PK: But sometimes you actually go into the field and to nature and. . . .

JW: Yeah. And sometimes I have to order them, from back in Wisconsin, big stones, the ones like in the Sheraton Hotel, and over seven feet tall. A big one, we order that from down in Wisconsin, and we get 'em from everywhere. Hmm.

PK: Well, so we have this piece that is a self-portrait, from 1978, called Study of Self, and it shows you, if I may just describe it, in profile view from the right side, and you're confronted by a little bird, and that bird, the form of the bird echoes your profile. Then on top, above your head. . . . It's a very handsome, arresting image. Above your head is a fish, and this fish has somehow gotten himself up in the air floating over your head. Although you say that you can't describe in a formal sense this power, the presence of this force—or in anybody's work, I think—you can, I believe, describe some of the elements and the forms, or how they came about. Would you do that for me?

JW: The forms, how they came about is that just before I had executed this piece, Study of Self, I had also done a piece, The Study of Mark Tobey. I wanted to do a study of Mark Tobey, and I did this piece, and then I said, "I should do one of myself." So the piece of Mark Tobey is in a collection at the Benaroya Restaurant.

PK: Where's that?

JW: South Seattle. Yeah. They bought it; they own the Tobey. So I kept the study of myself. I wouldn't sell it to anybody. I told 'em it wasn't for sale.

PK: Did you do the Tobey from life, from him? We're going to talk about Tobey later.

JW: Well, I did the Tobey from my experience of him. I might have glanced at his picture to keep the proportion in my mind, of his features.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: But then all the rest of the information, I had it in my head of how Tobey should look. Now when I started on this, I had nothing in mind other than just doing a study of myself, and then all the other features was added as

the stone would lend itself. And inasmuch as I'm concerned with birds, and with nature in general, I decided to use this bird, where he was looking up at me as though we were conversing on some subject. Now, I notice when you started out choosing at the beginning this was your first concern. This piece [A Study of Self— JW], the piece that you used as probably number two, was your first, was your primary, your conviction.

PK: How did you know that? Because I. . . .

JW: (laughs) Remember now what you have to be careful about is when you're selecting art is not to be concerned about the subject. The subject has to fall in the background. And let the quality come out. You judge it by the quality. Other words, if a person tell me he or she like a painting, or really doesn't like a painting, "I don't like that one," I say, "Why?" "Well, it's got a cow in it, but I don't like the cow." You know, they don't like the cow. (chuckling) But if it's something that they like—if it's a dog and they like dogs—you understand, it isn't too hard to please them. But then if you're concerned about their conviction about art, then you have to find out first why they like the piece, or why they don't like it. And somewhere in there you can tell whether they understand what they perceive and are looking at or not. And usually you can, on the first impression, you can tell, you can tell whether they can make a good judgment or not.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: I could tell that you wanted to make a good judgment. You understand? But then you would try to prove it by subject. . . .

PK: Then I tried to think about it, right?

JW: Yeah, yeah. (laughs)

PK: And are you suggesting that it's best not to think when approaching your work?

JW: Not only my work but any work. When you're going to a museum, if you have the ability to perceive a piece of art, you don't have to look at it five minutes to tell whether it has quality. And you don't have to go up there, "Let's see who did this painting or sculpture." When you get involved in that, you're not judging the art. Other words, when you, by using the same approach, when you meet an individual that same thing will happen. You can always if you, if the individual has something to offer. You don't have to look at his clothes to tell whether he has something to offer, you see.

PK: Let's go back to this piece just for a minute.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: Well, first of all, it's very typical of your work. I mean, this is what I associate with your special expression.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: I want to ask a couple more questions. For instance, that fish. I love that fish, on the top. Why is the fish there?

JW: Well, the fish is there because I'm concerned about life, and during that time I was doing a series on the Creation. This wasn't a part of The Creation, but I'd done a series on the Creation, and concerning all of life, and the possibility of all of life having something of a kindred spirit within. Not necessarily this creative spirit, but something that would unify all of, mankind with the animals and with the fowls of the air, that he—man—can understand them if he understand their language. Everyone, whether it's a fish or whether it's a bird, each one has a language. And so you have to understand their language. Just like your body. Your body has a language. You should understand your body language. All of the intestine. Anything in you has a language. Everything is all-inclusive in a way, that everything has a language. They work well with man, we work well with them, but we have to know what their language is.

PK: And you don't mean this literally, of course, that we're literally going to converse with words.

JW: Otherwise words, words are not necessarily the right language for everything.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: Other words, the English language is artificial. The German language is artificial. You understand? The Italian language is artificial.

PK: How about bird song?

JW: That's not artificial.

PK: But that's their language?

JW: I know, but it's not artificial.

PK: And what's the difference?

JW: That's a good question; the universal language is the one.

PK: Is it more natural or. . . .

JW: For instance, this I've tried to explore, when I went to Europe. I went to seventeen countries several years ago. I went there studying the universality of life and the universality of art. And what is the universality of art. And I wanted to converse with people by bypassing their native tongue. And this is what I had to do, is to prove to myself that there's a language, a universal language, you understand, above the French language or the Italian language. And I wanted to find out how I could prove that to be true. So what I did, for instance, to give an example, when I went to Rome, I went in and signed into the hotel, and then I asked for a card. And on the card I made a notation on the back, something in English. I don't know whether I put the name of the hotel in English, or any other other information that I thought of, but then I said, "Now, I'm going hide the card, even from myself. I want to put it somewhere that I knew it'd be secure, but I just wanted to hide it, just forget where it was at." Unless I get into. . . .

PK: Big trouble.

JW: . . . big trouble, then I would locate it, sit down somewhere and locate it. Well, I went around through the town, and when I figured out that I had went far enough to be considered lost. All I knew I was just somewhere in town, then I approached the first person I met that looked pretty nice, put out the right vibes, I approached him, and started to talking with him, even though he couldn't talk my language. Then once he, and then they observed that I couldn't talk their language, then they condescended: they broke their language down. They began breaking it down. We began conversing, as it were, in the universal language.

PK: Well, how did you converse? Did this person know some English?

JW: To recall now, we had to use signs, we had to use some of every conceivable thing.

PK: What were you asking? Asking the directions to your hotel, or something?

JW: Back to the hotel—among other things. And when I got that over, then I'm asking many other things, anything that I wanted to know that was simple, and not too complicated, you understand. And I held 'em there. . . . In France, for instance, I had five or six; one man would stop another person, you understand. And they were eager to converse. They were eager to communicate. And I was able to enjoy watching them trying to help me. They was able to get me back to my hotel, without me bringing up the card. Other words, I couldn't afford to bring up the card then, because if I'd brought up the card then, they'd say, "Well, why you didn't bring it up before?" (laughs) So what I was trying to find out was the universality of life and the universality of art. Where does the universality of art lie? Where does the universality of life lie? And then how do we communicate with people with whom we have never met, even though they have different language. Can we communicate with them? And this is the thing I wanted to know. And I met some people in Europe, and within five minutes after I met them, they had me on my way to their homes to fix food for me. I'd never seen 'em before.

PK: Saved a lot of money that way, right?

JW: Yeah. Yeah. And then after we got into their home. . . . This was, for instance, in Denmark. We got to their home, the husband, he went into the house and got on the phone and calling somebody out in the suburbs, telling 'em to come in and meet me.

PK: When did you go to Europe?

JW: About in the, oh, about in '60, in the sixties. Well, it might have been '64.

PK: Did your wife go with you?

JW: No, I went alone.

PK: You went all by yourself?

JW: Um hmm.

PK: How long were you gone?

JW: I don't know. About a month or something more. I went to seventeen countries.

PK: That's a lot of traveling in that time.

JW: Well, what I did, I had to, in order to get the job done. . . . I accepted it as my mission. And the American Baptists, I told them that I was going, and they said, well, they'd give me x number of dollars if I'd come back and tell them my findings about what constituted the universality of life and the universality of art.

PK: Oh, so you really proposed this as something of a study. . . .

JW: This was a study.

PK: And it was backed by the Baptists.

JW: Well, they. . . . Well, to a degree, they backed it. They gave me so many dollars, you know; I was going on my own regardless. But I told them about it, and they wanted to be a part of it, and they wanted me to come back to Green Lake, Wisconsin.

PK: And you had to give some talks. . . .

JW: Yeah, on my findings. And conduct some seminars at Greenlake. And that's one of the photos showing about one fourth of the people with whom I met. Here it is.

PK: Yeah, we're looking at, this is . . . 1964 Greenlake, Wisconsin. This is August, and there's James with part of his class, I guess.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: And what were you findings? In this case, you went not really so much as an artist, but to explore some ideas.

JW: Well, I went as an artist. However. . . . That is to say that I introduced myself to all of the ambassadors in each of those countries as an artist from America.

PK: You did? You went and. . . . You went to the American Embassy, or. . . .

JW: Well, I had planned my trip. And my procedure was, that previous to my entering a country, I would call up the embassy and tell the ambassador, or the cultural attache, that I would be in that country at a certain town at a certain time, and I'd like for them to arrange a meeting between two or three of the leading sculptors and three or four of the leading painters. And I wanted to meet with them. Sometime I might add, which was the case at that time, that I was one of the advisor's to the governor in the arts, a member of the state's art commission, in the State of Washington. And they would make that arrangement, and then they would call me and tell me where the meeting would be. And I even met with the professors of the royal academies.

PK: So in each country, they were able to arrange a special meeting for you with somebody of prominence in the arts.

JW: Yeah, with the artists, painters and sculptors.

PK: Do you remember any individuals at all? Were there any that stick out in your memory more than others?

JW: Well, some of them, and for instance I'd name one, Professor Jones. He's a professor at the Royal Academy in Denmark.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: Yeah. Professor Jones. He sticks out extremely well. Plus others, which I have their names.

PK: How did they respond to your views? Did you tell them about the purpose of the trip, these investigations that. . . .

JW: No.

PK: You didn't talk about that with them?

JW: No. I was trying to ascertain what I wanted to without even telling the nature of my trip. They didn't know

what I was looking for.

PK: The universal language.

JW: Yeah, yeah, what constitute the universality of the art. And, by talking with them, and seeing their work, then I could tell whether or not they was aware of this, whether or not they were enlightened. If they were, I would find it out.

PK: And did you find some who were enlightened?

JW: I found some enlightened, and some in high places, like Mr. Jones—yeah—that was not so enlightened.

PK: But he. . . .

JW: Maybe I shouldn't have told his name.

PK: No, but you liked him. You remember him.

JW: I liked him fine. But he was not of the truth; he was not cognizant of this force as I perceive it. And the way I ascertained that information was to observe his work and to see what kind of feedback I was getting. See, when you observe work that has this force, you try to sense the feedback. The Bible say, "Try the spirit by the spirit," and then you get this feedback. See, once you put out this force, then you get the feedback offered. And that's what you have to rely on, not just who did it or nothing like that. So what happened was that I went and he showed me his office. Then he took me to his studio. And then he take me down where his helpers were who were doing the sculpture.

PK: And he was doing large-scale sculpture, is that it?

JW: He was doing large-scale sculpture. I was able to find out his approach to his art. He drew some of the preliminary plans and the other fellows carried them out.

PK: Right. That's not too unusual for big work.

JW: Yeah. But I didn't like it.

PK: You don't approve of it.

JW: No. So what happened was, after he'd taken me down there and introduced me to his assistant, then he had to go back to the office for some reason, to a phone call or something, and then they told me, his assistant told me, that all he did was a little preliminary drawing, and they did the work. And one of them told me, say, "Would you believe," he said, "the work previous to the one we're working on now, see, I signed it under the bottom. See, he doesn't know it. See, I put my name on it because I did the sculpture." (chuckles)

PK: Well, you know that is a practice with big commissions and it's not unheard of that the actual fabrication of work is done by others, especially if they're working in steel. What kind of material?

JW: Yeah, but here's the thing: it's just manipulating steel; it has no force, no quality whatsoever. It's just like the news reporters interviewing Mahatma Gandhi in India. "A report is out that you don't care nothing about art. What is this, you don't like art?" Gandi said, "That's the wrong report. It say that I don't like art." He said, "There are two kinds of art. One, you can perceive the soul in it; then the other one is just manipulating." You understand?

PK: Did he say that?

JW: Yeah. He said, "Now there's a difference." You read it in Mahatma Gandhi's ideas. You should read that. And he said, "There's a difference in it. One has quality, one has no quality."

PK: Did you. . . . I was going to ask you, before we get back for just a minute to these pieces, if in developing your ideas it was all your own intuition, or if you actually studied. I don't believe you had a lot of formal training in these subjects, but did you do reading? Were there specific works that you discovered and turned to that expressed some of these same ideas? You just mentioned Gandhi. That would be an example. Were there any other sources?

JW: Well, I had discovered some of it before I read Gandhi.

PK: Right. Right, I understand that.

JW: I just use whatever information I had or could find. Yeah.

PK: But in further developing the ideas, or maybe refining them, were there other thinkers or philosophers that you found useful, and said, “Yeah, yeah, I agree with that.”

JW: Well, I found some that hinted at it. You know, for instance, some of them hinted at it. I don’t know whether I can find what I want at this time. I think I have found one here. Pick out this big one here.

PK: This is a book, The Complete Works of Marino Marini, with essays by Herbert Read for one, also Patrick Walberg. Now what do you mean, that in the text and the writing about, or in the work itself, you. . . .

JW: I perceive it in the work itself, even though in the photograph it loses some of his power, but some of his explanation of his approach is what I gleaned, which accounts for the quality. And I have others that have mentioned some. . . .

PK: Can you find me an example of a work that you feel particularly expresses what you’re talking about, when you. . . .

JW: Well, most all of his work.

PK: Okay. So it’s not just the particular work; it’s the horses and. . . .

JW: No, no. Well, that’s a painting.

PK: You feel it in the painting as well?

JW: That’s right, um hmm, um hmm. I feel it in the painting itself.

PK: You perceive it. What about this one?

JW: That’s good. It can be nonobjective. . . .

PK: This, we’re looking at something called The Shape of an Idea, is that right?

JW: That’s right.

PK: 1964-65. It’s a bronze piece. And it looks—I can’t tell what it is—it looks like a figure standing on its hands, or something, upside down.

JW: But that doesn’t matter. In other words. . . .

PK: No, I know, but I’m just describing.

JW: No, I understand, I understand. Your description of it is good. But I mean, that doesn’t matter so far as this quality is concerned. Other. . . .

PK: It’s quite abstract, actually.

JW: Yeah. Other words, it doesn’t mean that this quality can’t be in an abstract.

PK: No, I understand.

JW: It could be an abstract, or nonabstract, or whatever. You can have a very powerful piece of work, even if the figure has no arms, no legs, and no eyes—in fact, no head—and it still can be a masterpiece, if it possess this quality.

PK: I believe that. I agree with that.

JW: Yeah. Other words, the quality of which I speak is what determines a masterpiece—or a very good piece of work as opposed to a mediocre piece. Other words, when you rely on the manipulating of a piece of steel or something, or color for your values, then you miss the true art. You miss it completely. So this quality has to be perceived not just as seen with the eyes. The artist put it in there. If he possess it. He can’t do it unless he possess it. Only thing he can do, if he doesn’t possess it, is to emulate his teacher or copy somebody else.

PK: What does Marini say in the text that impressed you as being on the right track. Do you remember anything in particular that he said?

JW: No, I read it, but I can’t remember. Actually, I never try to pin them down. Sometime I underscore what he

said. I'm pretty sure in this case, if I'd look in there and find out things he said, I would have underscored. And sometime I put three stars by it, you know, to emphasize the statement that he made. But actually, I'm not trying to emulate what he has said, I'm just moving forwards with what I find of truth, I think; I'm veryifying what he believe.

PK: Right, right.

JW: Yeah, so that's all it amounts to.

PK: But what kind of thing would it be that would serve that function, that purpose? What kind of thing?

JW: Uh, you mean. . . .

PK: Because he's not going to be talking about the same thing you are in exactly the same way.

JW: No, not in the same way.

PK: It would be helpful to try to see what you would view as a parallel, you know what I mean?

JW: Yeah. Well. . . .

PK: Maybe you could find something. . . . We could bring it in after lunch.

JW: Well, we'll bring it in, and I'll do it. I'll bring it; I'll be happy to bring it.

PK: So just to wrap up this part, you don't feel—let me see if I have this right—that in the development of your own ideas, in this philosophy—and you have a very, I think, very specific and clear point of view, having to do with perception and quality and universal principles and such. Other thinkers and artists haven't really contributed—do you really feel this?—that they haven't contributed to the refinement of your ideas and your work. That it just happens to go parallel, but you don't feel that there have been certain things along the way, certain authors you've read, that added to your understanding. Any other philosophers.

JW: No, it just supported what I believed.

PK: So you really feel that it's, in a way, an independent discovery?

JW: Yeah, it is an independent discovery. But what stimulated me, I couldn't go back and tell you the minute or discourse leading to it.

PK: Right, I understand.

JW: Because here's the thing about it. I don't care what somebody says concerning this facet of sculpting or painting that I have mentioned, I don't care what somebody say, the other person, party number three, can't grasp it unless he's awakened within. He won't know what they're talking about. He wouldn't know how to apply it.

PK: Okay.

JW: You see what I mean? You might know how to talk it in a lecture, but how to apply it is what you need to know.

PK: But it doesn't mean anything.

JW: It doesn't mean just write or sculpt, but animate also. You see what I mean?

[Tape 3, side A]

PK: James, when we concluded the last cassette, we were debating. . . . No, we were discussing the role of other ideas, other writers, other artists in developing your own unique view, and then philosophy. And you said that you felt it was pretty much an independent process, your coming to your ideas. But you did mention at least one other artist who expresses some of what you feel, and that was Marino Marini—and we have this book here, and you found a passage which you had marked, which you said you would read, to perhaps give some idea of at least where you feel there's parallel thinking. Is that right?

JW: That's right. After observing his work, that is, from his books and from museums I've seen, then I saw one of his books and I wanted to find it; I wanted to buy one and have it in my library. And then I knew that he had found the truth; but then I wanted to know whether he could verbalize it or not. Whether or not he had been awakened or were cognizant of it. I knew he must have been cognizant of it to be consistent in his work, and I

find it in most of his work. So then, what we have here is a Herbert Read introduction on him. . . .

PK: I see.

JW: . . . which he's telling about, I think, what he—Read—has pulled out or gleaned from this sculptor. So this is what it says, "The purpose of this brief essay will be to try to define the distinctive quality of Marino Marini's sculpture, comparing and contrasting his work with that of his predecessors, and with the work of certain of his contemporaries. Such a method, which is indeed the general method of art criticism, does not in any [way] seek to diminish the uniqueness that belongs to the work of a great artist. This uniqueness is essentially a power or energy. What we sometimes call a force of nature and is sometimes born with the artist, as singular as his physiognomy. . . ." That word p-h-y. . . .

PK: Physiognomy?

JW: ". . . physiognomy or temperament. It is, indeed, that temperament or psychic disposition, canalized. . . ." C-a-n-a-l-i-z-e-d, canalized. ". . . .and driven in a peculiar direction." (chuckles) That's particular direction. ". . . gaining power by the constant limitation of its direction. Every sculptor, if he is to succeed, must possess this element: gift. Which is not so much a gift as a curse, by which he is impelled to give expression to an inner need by shaping a malleable substance into truthful symbol." Is that enough?

PK: Sure, that's enough. Of course, that's Herbert Read, writing about the artist. Do you feel that that would be an accurate description of your own experience?

JW: Yes, because it's a universal. This concept is universal. It could be applied to Tobey, or anybody. And the people who are bored of this, they're bored of it because they have not, they have not entered this realm of consciousness. They are potentially equipped, but they have not entered this realm of consciousness. So that's what I say, once the artist has entered into this realm of consciousness, cognizant of the fact that he or she possessed the capacity to acquire this. And nobody can give it to them. No teacher can give it to them.

PK: Right.

JW: Other words, _____ Tobey had it, he hadn't discussed it with 'em. He didn't verbalize on this. But I knew he had it; I got it by. . . .

PK: Osmosis?

JW: . . . osmosis.

PK: Do you. . . . Can we take a few minutes before we break for lunch to talk about Tobey? Would now be the moment?

JW: That'd be okay.

PK: Although we're sort of jumping around a bit—there's no problem with that. You arrived here in the Northwest and at some point, if I understand correctly, studied with Tobey and obviously had a personal contact. Could you tell me something about that? The nature of your contact, when it happened, and what you feel you got from Tobey. When did you meet him?

JW: Well, I met Tobey about in 1945, and how I met him is that I was having a show, my things had been accepted at Frederick & Nelson [Seattle department store] in the Little Gallery, at Frederick & Nelson. And Mrs. Theodora Lawrenson Harrison, who was director of the galleries, said that she would like for Tobey to see my work and I should meet him. And she proceeded to call and make that possible, and told him about me and the quality of my work. And so then he wanted to see my paintings. He wanted me to bring some of my pieces to his studio, and let him see them, so I did. And he liked them very much, and he said I could study under him. And during that time, I had entered, during that same year, I had entered a piece in the Seattle Art Museum. And so I studied with Tobey for quite a while, I'd say several years, at his studio.

PK: Where was that studio? Do you remember?

JW: The studio was on, oh, they call it Brooklyn Avenue, in the University District. So after studying with him for a while, he had other. . . . He had other people in the class, too.

PK: Was this a formal class? I mean, scheduled on a regular basis, and he was really. . . .

JW: Yeah.

PK: It was formal teaching.

JW: Formal teaching, depending on your definition of formal. Yeah, he had other students; we paid him.

PK: Do you remember how much you had to pay him?

JW: No, I don't, I can't. . . .

PK: I mean, did it seem reasonable to you at the time, that. . . .

JW: It seemed reasonable at the time, yeah. But anyway, it was not a whole lot, but it was a reasonable amount. I didn't mind it. But anyway, I started working with Mark. He left the class one day, and after looking at some of my paintings—I brought 'em to him to study, just to criticize—and he looked at 'em, and then he got up and left the class, and then he went to his window and looked out, and his hands were 'hind him. Then he turned around and he said, "You don't need to study under me, or anyone else, anymore."

PK: He did?

JW: Yeah. He said, "In this life you either have it or you haven't got it." He say, "You have it."

PK: Hmm. How long did you study with him then? It was not that long.

JW: No, I'd say about three years.

PK: Well, three years, that's pretty long, actually.

JW: It might not have been; it might have been two or something like that.

PK: Once a week?

JW: It might have once a week, or once every other week, or. . . .

PK: What do you think you learned from him? Do you feel you learned anything important from him? What was his contribution to you? You obviously admire his work.

JW: Yeah. Well, his contribution to me was not to give me anything that he had, but his contribution was to help me bring out of me what was in me. And that's all the contribution a person need.

PK: Now how did he do this? Specifically.

JW: Well. . . .

PK: By his example, or by his. . . .

JW: Well, what he did, in his method of teaching. . . . That is, he taught by using examples. For instance, you would bring a work to him that you have executed, and he would look at it, and then he might go to the drawing board and try to create a reasonable facsimile of that work so far as the outline is concerned, and he might make a statement like this. If you had a red, yellow, red, red, or something like that, or yellow-yellow, and yellow-yellow, probably some other color, hue close to yellow. He might make a statement, he said, "Now I want to go downtown, and you don't seem like you want me to go downtown." He say, "You have one, one, one, and then two. One, one, one, and two. You see, I want one, two, three, four." (chuckles) "I want to move." Well, then you have to catch what he meant. He wouldn't do it for you, you understand? And I could catch just what he meant.

PK: Was that the only formal art instruction you had?

JW: Well, I studied a little with—that is, being around—Harry Louis Freund, artist in residence from Carnegie stationed in Little Rock, working on murals. He talked to me about art, like that, but that's the only way. . . .

PK: But that was more informal, right.

JW: Yeah, informal. And then I studied some with Glen Alps, graphic art. And there were block prints and things like that. And he was a professor at the university [of Washington]. Some of the things he taught were lithograph. We printed some lithograph on the stones. But some of the things he told me I had to put down, not utilizing them. When they'd tell me things I would prove as to whether or not they were true. He told the class, when we were doing a block print, if your hands slip on the block, and you make the wrong incision, nothing you can do about it; you've destroyed that block.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: See, I don't believe that. So what I did, when I went home that night I said, "Okay, I'm gonna get me a block." And I was doing it just as nice, and I made up my mind to get careless, let it slip. "Okay," I said, "Okay, now I got to find what I can use to repair that." I'm going to refill that incision, and then get something that could fill it. Something that would dry, and something that I can resand, and resurface, and then put the varnish on it again, and try printing. Other words, he said, "Nothing you could do," so I defeated that idea of his. I say, "Now, how many fellows at that class would just take him on his word, "nothing you can do about it, nothing you. . . ." "Yessir." I did the leapfrog again. I left the known and went to the unknown. (chuckles)

PK: Did you show that to Alps?

JW: No. No, I didn't.

PK: Was that at the university?

JW: Yeah, yeah.

PK: Were you enrolled then as a student, or just taking that special class?

JW: A special class, um hmm.

PK: So you were never enrolled. . . . What was the extent of your formal education? I gather it was pretty spotty. You were largely self-taught?

JW: Yeah. Yeah, well, I went to Amit County Training School. That was in Gloster. And then of course, I taken other studies, like home study course. Like in drawing and things like that. It was a line of study on how to depict objects.

PK: I understand, yeah.

JW: Yeah, it had nothing to do with in-depth thinking. You couldn't get nothing like that out of it.

PK: Let me ask you this: Do you feel that you're better off as an artist that you didn't have extensive training in a more formal situation?

JW: Yeah.

PK: Is that what you think Tobey meant?

JW: Yeah. Other words, Tobey knew this, that what I had and what he had, that you can't get it out of textbooks. He knew that the average teacher wouldn't even mention it. They wouldn't know what you was talking about. He knew that. And I don't care how much booklearning you have, I don't care who you studied under, if you don't have that information, then you are lacking a lot.

PK: Yeah.

JW: If you don't have that, you might make a living teaching painting, but you won't have the real in-depth thinking of the art. For instance, I was called on the phone by a young lady. . . . I could tell it was a lady on the phone. She wanted to know was this Mr. Washington, and I said, "Yes." "Well, I'm a member of a class at the University of Washington, and we, leading up to getting our degree, we want you to lecture, we want to have you as our spokesman." And I say, "Well, why you want me?" She said, "Well, we know you. We know how you think." And I say, "Well, you check with the faculty and with your teacher and see whether or not they want me, and whether or not we can agree on the honorarium or whatever." And she said, "Well, we want you." So then we left it at that. So the next day their teacher called me. And he's an artist out there now. He's a teacher. So he asked me whether I had agreed to do this, to lecture to them. I told him, providing that we can get set on the honorarium, and the time. And he said, "Well. . . ." Then he asked me about how much it would take, moneywise. And he said, "Well, I have to apply for a Ford Foundation grant for that." And so I said, "Okay, when you do you let me know if you get it." So then he called me back later on, about a week, I guess, or somewhere around, told me that they had it. And then we set up a time, and then he put out some flyers on it. I think I saw one here, I had it the other day, concerning me speaking up there, and they got it on their Ford Foundation grant. And the day I went up there to speak, we had most all the sculptors from the university and some painters was in the audience. Of course I knew most of them. I kidded them a lot. And then I told the students, after they introduced me, "Now, I'm not going to discuss your curriculum." I said, "Hopefully, your teacher have taught you that." I said, "I'm going to discuss you. And see if I can be instrumental in stimulating you so you can pursue your true tangent, if you haven't already found one." And I said, "If you have already found it, then to further enlighten you." I said, "That's what I'm going to be about." And then I told them that I'm going to give them so many minutes for questions afterwards. And when I got through, they came up to me and told me that the things that had been burdening 'em all the year in the arts, that I cleared 'em up in thirty minutes.

PK: Oh, really? What do you suppose they meant?

JW: Huh?

PK: What do you suppose they meant specifically? Did they say?

JW: Well. . . . I didn't have to ask 'em. I knew what they meant.

PK: You mean you sensed that they were. . . .

JW: If I had to ask them, I wouldn't have known if they'd of told me.

PK: But did you sense that they were confused about their direction. . . .

JW: What it is. . . . I would say every teacher there are inclined to find themselves, and have found themselves tied with the paperwork. . . .

PK: Right.

JW: . . . and some of them are just interested in the degree, in this teaching because they have a degree in art. And knowing nothing but what the book says. So what I proceeded to do is to try to bring out of them the quality they had in them, or to at least deal with it, from their point of reference, from inside, and to tell them how I feel about the intangible side of art. What leads to that and how you express it in their artwork, and how you make proficiency in that area. What evidently the teacher had been doing, was giving them a good dose of the curriculum.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: And I had previously made a statement on that. Not at this particular meeting, but out to the university, in which I stated that, according to my observation, the teacher-pupil relationship in many of our schools are equivalent to the blind leading the blind. (chuckles)

PK: They liked that probably.

JW: I said, "It just seemed to me what some of 'em are doing, they're going home at night, some of the teachers, and they're scrutinizing their curriculum, and then they're coming back the next morning and dishing it out to the pupils. And to the extent the pupils digest it, to that extent they recommend 'em for a degree.

PK: Well, what do you mean? In the studio class, are you talking about a situation where the student, to be advanced, has to imitate the preferred style of the teacher, not necessarily the teacher's own style, but the ones that they would say are acceptable, which show a certain level of sophistication, and so it becomes an exercise to try to please the teacher. Is that what you mean?

JW: No, I'm saying that the teachers are usually going by the curriculum; if he or she hasn't found him or herself, and just have that degree, they're going according to the curriculum, and if you emulate what's in the curriculum, they say you passed! If you can repeat what the curriculum says, you're in. If he could just play that back. That's all you have to do. And then put so many hours doing whatever else they tell you to do, you're in. I told them, "Under those circumstances, if you are giving them their degree, look at the degree on paper." I said, "If you're writing degree on paper," I say, "following degree, put in parentheses, 'meal ticket.'" (chuckles) I said, "If you look at it on the wall, read it from bottom to top. All it says, 'I am certified.'" I say, "When do you or they become qualified under those circumstances?" I say, "You can get five or six degrees if you get them according to your talent and as a result of developing your talent." I said, "Nothing wrong with that." But to get them according to how you digest some curriculum, put so many hours in—it doesn't mean a thing.

PK: Why. . . . Do you think there's any point in artists going to the university, anyway?

JW: That depend on the teacher.

PK: Well, yeah, but what did you just say about Tobey, that the great thing about Tobey was finally that Tobey said, "Go on, do your own thing."

JW: No, the great thing about Tobey was him helping you find yourself. I made that clear.

PK: Yeah, right, I understand.

JW: I meant that helping you find yourself rather than give you something. I told you he had nothing to give me and he didn't attempt to give me anything. Other words, you can't find a painting in my collection that look like

a Tobey. Because he didn't emphasize that. This is what. . . . I'm saying that the university or any school, or any teacher, supposed to help you find yourself, not give you something.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: He has nothing to give you that's worth anything. He can use the curriculum to bring you up to date. For instance—and I told them this—I say, "It's a way to use curriculum. If it's a painting a class that you're in, you use the curriculum in bringing them up to date on what the artist done in 16th century, how they mixed their colors. That's number one. Then you can bring them up to date on how their contemporaries are painting, how they're mixing their colors. But number three, you have to involve the artists themselves—into what they want to do, how they want to say it, how they mix their colors. They might want to revolutionize everything that has happened previous to that time, and they should have that privilege." And you mentioned about them probably not liking what I say to 'em out there, and the average person probably would think that, but within two weeks they wrote me a letter and told me they would like for all the teachers in the United States to hear what I had to say, and if I would I write it out, they would publicize it.

PK: When was this?

JW: Huh?

PK: Recently, three years ago, or more. . . .

JW: Well, I'll show you a little of it. I don't have but one copy. I have the magazine in my library.

PK: Oh, you mean they did publish it?

JW: Sure. But you know what happened after I turn in the information they wanted out at the university so they could publish it? Later I receieved a letter from Notre Dame, saying they had read it, after the U.W. had published it. They had read it, and said, "We read that, and we've been looking for somebody who could speak like that, and would I come with all expenses paid."

PK: Did you go, did you accept?

JW: Well, I answered in the affirmative, and then a little while after that they wrote me another letter, or called me, and asked me could they give me a show.

PK: Really?

JW: A one-man show while I was there. I answered in the affirmative.

PK: When was that?

JW: About 1970. But anyway, I went to Notre Dame. They give me this show, and the day I spoke, one of the Catholic officers, who was sitting back there listening, he came up to me and threw his arms around me, he say, "You know, today is my birthday, and you are my birthday present."

PK: Was Jacob Lawrence teaching yet at the university?

JW: He's not teaching now, no.

PK: Yeah, but I mean when you gave this talk to the students, was Jake around then?

JW: I think Jake was in New York.

PK: Oh, he hadn't come out yet, huh?

JW: I don't think so, because he was one of my special guests at my show in New York; when I had a one-man show, he was living there then. I think he was still living there. . . .

PK: What about him, I mean, you know, I don't want to put you on the spot, but do you feel any affinities with his work? Do you feel there's some of the language there that you're talking about, or is it not, you know, to your. . . . Does it fit in with the ideas you've been talking about?

JW: Yeah, I would say this about Jacob Lawrence; he is one of the strongest artists, who is a painter, that's around. He's one of a kind.

PK: Really?

JW: Yeah, he has this quality. Now, he might not be able to verbalize it. I haven't discussed that with him.

PK: I was going to ask you if you've talked with him.

JW: Well, I've talked with him, but not about that particular thing. I have talked about it around him where I've been in meetings and he was there. Jacob Lawrence's work is extremely strong. I was hoping that he would be able to do one of the murals of the capitol of Olympia, Washington.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: But then I was wondering whether or not he would, because even though he has the quality—whether or not they're able to pick up on the quality, and not to look for the depicting of the features. Because he can depict people; I'm pretty sure he can, but he has most of his in abstract.

PK: Right.

JW: He was, you know, deeply in abstract, and I'm sure they would want a more conventional thing, and I was hoping that he would or could make the transition, but evidently he couldn't. I haven't seen what he presented to them.

PK: Which commission is this?

JW: Well, for the senate [Washington State Legislature, Olympia].

PK: Oh, yeah.

JW: Um hmm. You know, they talking about doing away with some paintings they had already commissioned, and then they didn't. Some of them looked at the ones he submitted, and then they said they didn't think his would fit in.

PK: Well, that's often the problem that artists run into. We better cut now, because we're almost out of tape, and then we can pick up after lunch.

[Tape 3, side B]

PK: We've been bouncing around a little bit here, James, productively I think. I wonder if we could now go back and very quickly bring you from the early days in the South to the Seattle area. I mean, what were the major steps that you and your family took, and then you finally, to have you end up here?

JW: Well, if we start then from Arkansas, rather than Mississippi. . . . Arkansas is where I married my wife.

PK: How did you get to Arkansas?

JW: I got to Arkansas. . . . My mother lived there. And I was working at Vicksburg, and so I wanted to go and be with my mother. She wanted me to come be with her, in Little Rock.

PK: Were your parents separated, then?

JW: My father had passed, as it were.

PK: I see.

JW: And we had a step-father. So my mother was living in Arkansas, Little Rock, and so I went up there to stay with her.

PK: How old were you then, about?

JW: Well, I was grown at that time.

PK: Okay, you mean in your twenties or something?

JW: Well, yes. Twenties or early thirties. That was in 1942, something like that I went there, '40, or '41. Well, anyway, I got a job. Shortly thereafter, after getting there, I got a job with the government. This job was at Camp Robertson, right out from Little Rock. And I was working first as a shoe repairman. In fact, it was one facet of shoe repairing. I had charge of replacing all the welts. When the welts get bad in shoes, they'd send all of 'em over to me, if the welts was bad. I had to do all the welts, and then I'd turn 'em over to the laster for them to put the soles on, and then the stitching and all like that, kind of like an assembly line.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: And then afterward, I noticed that there were a need for orthopedic work to be done there, then I applied for the orthopedic job. And then after a while they put me in charge of the orthopedic department. They reluctantly put me in charge of the orthopedic department.

PK: Why do you say reluctantly?

JW: Well, in Arkansas, or in Little Rock, they didn't want me to have that job because some of the other men in there were mostly white, and they didn't want me to be getting more pay than they. . . .

PK: A better job.

JW: . . . a better job. But anyway, I got the job, but then I had to contend with the little pressure and the little bickering that went with it from some of the whites. And of course I had to tell them off, I told them just where I stood, you know. And then the captain who was over the repair work, he got in the wind of it, so he called me and asked me what was going on, and I told him. He said, "Well, you remember you're in Arkansas." You know, this is what he told me. I was a Civil Service employee, but he was an army officer, and he told me, "Remember, you is in Arkansas." Other words, I couldn't rebuttal, was what he was trying to tell me. And I told him that I realized I was in Arkansas, and I say, "I have the same position. I treat everybody right, as best I can." I say, "Try to do something to me, I will retaliate." I say, "And that goes for you, too." I asked him if he understand that, and he say, "Yes." I said, "Okay. I treat everybody right, and I expect them to treat me right." So then I stayed there until the army called me. I had registered in Mississippi, to go to the army. And then after I had taken over the orthopedic department, they had no one else that could do the work, so the captain, he interceded and tried to keep me out of the army. In fact, he mentioned that he was going to do it, and I told him not to because he'd get me in bad with the army. Previous to that time, I had wanted to go to the army because you learn, and I wanted to learn something. But then after he tried to keep me out of the army, the draft board found out about it, and I became, you know, kind of frustrated, and I said, "Well, I don't want to go now." So, what happened was that they called me up for examination. I went and I stood in the line, for the Second World War, stood in line for examination, and I passed. As far as I was concerned, I passed like the rest of the other fellows did. And when I got out of the line, a sargeant, he called me and told me that the colonel wanted to see me down to the office. And I said, "Want to see me?" He said, "Yes." And I went down to the office, and the colonel, he called my name, and he said, "Yeah," he said, "you've been working for the government quite a while, huh?" I say, "Yes." He say, "You used to work with Secretary of War, [Patrick J.] Hurley." I say, "Yes, well, what that have to do with me going into the army?" (chuckles) I say, "What that have to do with my getting examined to get in the army, what that have to do with it?" "Well, we ain't going to send you to the army. Something might happen to you." I just look at him: a white colonel afraid about something happen to me, you know. (laughs) I say, "Sir, nothing ain't gonna happen to me." "How long have you been in the hospital? Have you been in the hospital any length of time?" he asked, trying to find something to justify his action. So they kept on, so I finally realized he wasn't going to let me go, so my captain had got to him. So when I went back to work, my captain was elated, you know, that he had thought he got his job done. Several weeks later, I think—well, it might have been two weeks—I received another letter from Mississippi. Evidently they had got the report from the examination, and they told me that they had been trying to get me in the army, and I had rebelled, I had done this, done that. So I had the local board to write 'em a letter and tell them, "No, he must be wrong, because he's been coming here every other week asking when would he be called for the examination." (laughing) The Mississippi board wrote me a letter and told me that if I didn't get a job they considered worthy of exempting me, that they was going to put me back in 1-A. That means, they are taking me out of the lower grade.

PK: Right.

JW: So, I said, "Now these people are messing around with me. I don't want to go to army now." So then what I did I called up Civil Service and asked them whether or not they had some jobs elsewhere, and if so give me a list of 'em. So they brought me a list, give me a list of 'em, and I noticed in there, marine wiring. I had done some electrical work, and this intrigued me, the marine wiring on the ship. So then I say, "Well, I believe I make out for this." I didn't tell them—the captain and others—but I made it out. So when I got ready to turn it in, I was supposed to turn it in at the same place [Civil Service office—JW]—so when I turned it in for the job, marine wiring, I said, "Now, I've done electrical wiring, but marine wiring, and that would be at Bremerton, Washington. Maybe I better take helper job, because I don't know what the marine wiring entails. Might be different than the regular house wiring." So when I had taken that slip there, and showed it to the Civil Service man, he looked at the slip and my records, he said, "Well, who put 'helper' on here?" I told him, I put it, I put it on there. He say, "I thought some of those people down there put it on here. You ain't going as no helper." I say, "Well, I didn't know," I say, "marine wiring, I didn't know whether my experience as jotted down, whether that would qualify." He say, "Yes, you have the experience we need." And then he rubbed that out, 'helper,' and he put on there 'journeyman electrician,' and the amount I should receive per day. (laughs) So that's how I came to Bremerton as a electrician journeyman, and wiring turrets and everything at the Bremerton Navy Yard. So that's how I came

out to the Northwest.

PK: And by that time you were married. You had met your wife.

JW: I met my wife in Little Rock, and married her.

PK: I see. Was this 1942, I suspect, ‘forty. . . .

JW: About ‘forty. . . . That was about ‘42. We married about last of ‘42, or ‘43, I forget, right in that area, um hmm.

PK: Okay.

JW: And then shortly after that we came out here.

PK: So you didn’t actually come here until ‘43.

JW: Something like that. We came to Bremerton.

PK: Okay. Did you know that George Tsutakawa was stationed at Camp Robertson in Arkansas?

JW: No, I didn’t know that!

PK: Who knows, it might have been the same time.

JW: Isn’t that something?

PK: Yeah, I just found that out.

JW: Isn’t that something! I didn’t know.

PK: He was interestingly one of the few Japanese that was conscripted, actually went into the army.

JW: Yeah? I got to mention to him about that. (chuckles)

PK: Well, during these years. . . . This is many years that we’ve jumped over now, because you must be somewhere in your early thirties when you came to this area. What kind of art experience, if any, did you have? How did you feel? Did you feel by that time that you wanted to be an artist? Had you had an opportunity to see works of art? Did you know much about what was involved? What was your situation at that time?

JW: Well, I was aspiring to be an artist when I was thirteen. So I didn’t just start in Little Rock, and I did start previously to leaving Mississippi. I was painting and doing what I could in the arts.

PK: But I mean, you actually were painting? You were. . . .

JW: I was painting.

PK: . . . drawing and. . . .

JW: Painting and drawing.

PK: Before you ever arrived here at all.

JW: Before even working with the boats in Vicksburg. Working on the boats, government boats—I was painting.

PK: What did you think you could do with that? I mean, were you doing it just because you enjoyed it, or did you see it as a career? Did you hope to make a living doing that?

JW: Well, I must have hoped to. . . . When I say must, as I had planned it, it wasn’t something that haphazardly came into my life. What I did when I started working with the government—this is what I said to myself—and I’ve said it to others since then, that I was going to use my job with the government as my vocation. I was going to keep proficiency in my art—and in this case it was painting—and use my art as my avocation. And when I get so that I didn’t want to work for the government, or the government didn’t want me, then I would switch and make my avocation my vocation. And this is the way I had it planned all of my life. From the time I started to work for the government. And this is how I did it. Later on I’ll probably tell you how the switch was made, if you want to.

PK: Oh yeah, we’ll certainly talk about that.

JW: I mean, not only from painting to sculpting, but the first transition was from the government and using my avocation as my vocation as a painter. I made the transition from the government, from my vocation with the government, to my avocation as a painter. I hadn't started sculpting then.

PK: All right, when did you do that? How did that come about?

JW: Well, how I made the shift from painting. . . .

PK: From vocation. . . .

JW: Well, let's see, from, let's say from painting to sculpture.

PK: Okay, do you want to do that now, or do you want to wait just a little bit, because that was in the fifties already.

JW: Yeah, that was in '51.

PK: Yeah, and we have some ground I think to cover before that. But you said there was another shift. How you managed to shift from the government job, your vocation, to art, your avocation.

JW: Well, that'd be the second place.

PK: Oh, okay. Okay, gotcha.

JW: Yeah. Because the first shift was from painting to sculpture and that was in the fifties. And the shift from the government, from my vocation to my avocation, was in the sixties.

PK: Okay, let's do this. Let's hold that just for a minute, and let's try to polish off this early period. I'd like to know how you learned the skills involved in painting. Were you painting with oil? Watercolor?

JW: Painting with oil, watercolor, tempera, pastels, and gouache.

PK: How'd you learn to do that?

JW: That's a good question. (chuckles)

PK: Did you teach yourself? Did you read a book?

JW: Well, I learned what. . . . I read books, and mostly taught myself on the mediums, how to utilize the mediums. In fact, I had always kept a library of books on the different mediums.

PK: So you would consider yourself then fundamentally self-taught. I mean, it's true you studied with Tobey for three years and with Glen Alps and all, but how do you view yourself?

JW: Well, I view myself as not totally self-taught, but picking up information of education everywhere: in books, in observing, and thinking, and just picking it up wherever it's at. It's out there, and you have to get it! If I'd've had somebody to teach me sculpting, I wouldn't have been doing the things that I'm doing now.

PK: I'm sure that that's the case.

JW: (chuckles) And if I had been taught by somebody who was to teach me painting all the way through, I wouldn't be any good. Tobey wouldn't have said that I'd like to have fifty of your paintings.

PK: How many?

JW: He say, "I'd like to own fifty of your paintings," or more.

PK: Did he ever end up with any of your work?

JW: Those two up there. . . . There's two up there that he gave me for one small sculpture. The last time we swapped was in Basel, Switzerland, when he asked me what I had in my pocket when I visited him, and I pulled out a little pocket piece, a pocket feeler, and he said, "I got to have that." So he told me to come down to the studio and he give me those two paintings for it. He said, "How'd you like to have these? I've got to have that one." And so we swapped. We didn't swap as much as I could have, but I have any number of his paintings. The first time I swapped, I had two paintings about 12 by something, at his studio, and he brought down thirteen of his large paintings, and wanted to go back and get some more. I told him, "No, that's enough." And I picked out a self-portrait of his, and he said, "Well, are you satisfied?" I say, "Yeah."

PK: What's that up over on the wall there?

JW: That's a Tobey. That's one of his white writing. . . .

PK: Yeah. When did you. . . . Do you remember the circumstances of that swap? That was another swap, right?

JW: Yeah. Well, I have quite a few of 'em, and different times I made swaps. I can tell about some of them, and some I can't. One time, I'll tell you about the time that I'd taken two paintings to his studio. . . .

PK: This was here or in Switzerland?

JW: It was here. And he told me he wanted to swap. So, and I told him I had two. He said, "Okay." He went upstairs and brought down thirteen paintings, but when he got to the thirteenth, I was looking at a self-portrait. So then I told him I think I've made my choice. He say, "Well, now, I can bring another one down if you want to." I said, "No, I think I made my choice." He say, "You satisfied?" I said, "Yes." So then he had big ones and little ones and medium-size ones brought down. I could have picked any of 'em I wanted.

PK: [That's interesting.]

JW: When he came over, after he seen that I meant that I had what I wanted, he said, "Okay. Let me see your two." He said, "Now this is going to be the hard task for me." So what he did, he put 'em down on the floor, against the wall, and then he stretched out, he proned hisself out on the floor, and looked at 'em. He said, "Now this is going to be the hard task for me to figure out which one of these I want." (laughs) So finally what he decided on was a street scene, with a service station in the foreground. I have a picture of it here somewhere—with the service station in the foreground, and trees lined up in perspective, linear perspective. So he said, "Now, this is it. This is what I need." (laughs) So that was a kind of pleasant swap.

PK: Well, so your contact then continued—with Tobey—obviously continued well after those two or three years that you studied with him.

JW: Oh, yes.

PK: Did he ever come to your house, did you ever visit him, or. . . .

JW: Well, I visited him more times. Then he visited my house, and Graves visited my house. He had invited me to his studio, and then we would leave his studio and walk down to Broadway, and we would have lunch, and then we would catch a bus and go downtown into the Market [Seattle's Public Market], and then we'd spend some time there in the Market just looking at the people.

PK: Looking at the fish? [said with a smile]

JW: At the people, different people passing: how they ate, how they look, and then we would leave, he with an appointment, and I would leave for home.

PK: What did you talk about?

JW: Well, we talked about life and the beauty of life and we talked sometime about Bahai. He was a Bahai.

PK: Right, that's right.

JW: Yeah. And we talked about life in general, not anything in particular. And what constitute being a good artist.

PK: What did he, do you remember what you two would point to as a quality for being a good artist? I mean. . . .

JW: Well, one thing he told me that I find to be true: he said a good true artist was not prejudiced. You understand? And he said they're open-minded and they have a quality different from the ordinary person who are predjudiced and all that kind of stuff. He said the true artist was much freer, much more free-going, you understand, and had more to offer, and things like that, and. . . . Many things that we talked about, you know, about what constitute good art, and we didn't go much in depth as some of the things I'm talking to you about. It seems to me that I didn't have to question him. It seems like to me I just felt that I knew where he was at. You didn't have to question him, you know what I mean?

PK: What about his interest in Eastern philosophy and Zen and so forth? Did he talk much about that? You said he talked about Bahai. . . .

JW: Yeah.

PK: . . . and so it seems to me that some of your conversations were about belief, philosophy.

JW: Yes. Yes. Well, it's all in the same vein, you know, about Zen and Buddhists and all like that. He believed in those religious philosophy, that had to do with good living and good thinking, regardless of whether it was Zen or Buddhist, same as I did. As we were walking, we would talk about those things, very deeply.

PK: Seems to me that one of the differences, though, between you was that Tobey, from what I know, what I understand, was really quite a student of the Eastern masters and the ideas, and that he read a great deal about these things. . . .

JW: Well, he read a great deal. . . .

PK: . . . and he was influenced by them.

JW: He read a great deal about 'em, but I wouldn't say influenced by them. Only to the extent of the broad strokes, not of the white writing, but of the other. . . . You know, where they use the very broad strokes.

PK: Sumi?

JW: Sumi. I think he observed them doing the sumi with the very free strokes, wide brush strokes. He believed in that, which is very good. I think also Callahan eventually got to some of that sumi painting style. Graves got to some of that with his waves, with his water, things like that. He got into some of it. Not as much as Tobey. Of course, Tobey thought that I was one of these ideal students, as it were. In fact, he didn't think much of Graves, as such, because he said Graves didn't give him any credits for what he, Tobey, had done for him. He said that I was the only one that would give him credit.

PK: Yeah. Well, I'm looking at one of your earlier paintings up there. This is a bird by the sea. What year is that? Do you know?

JW: Uh, it's on there. I can't recall what year.

PK: Let me check that. 1947. And it's not titled, but it's a seagull.

JW: It's a seagull.

PK: It's eating some fish.

JW: Yeah, well. . . .

PK: And I would be interested to know if you think that's typical of your work, and what it might have to do with Tobey or Graves and the Northwest imagery.

JW: Well, I knew Graves at that time, because when I was in that class up there, Graves sent for me to have tea with him. I don't know whether I was doing that painting on that particular night—but he sent somebody in there for me to come out and have tea with him. And the teacher didn't know Graves.

PK: Really?

JW: Yeah, she didn't know him.

PK: How interesting.

JW: But here's what happened. This teacher [Ms. Yvonne Humber—JW] was supposed to have been from the University of Washington. She had been teaching up there; I don't know how many degrees she had from there. So I was in her class, extension class, up at Edison. And I was the only black in her class.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: Okay, every evening we'd go in, she'd set up those little blocks and things on the desks, and I'd have to copy 'em, in fact all the students had to copy 'em. You know, copy 'em this way tonight, and the next night copy 'em a different way, or a different angle. And I walked in on this particular night, when I drew this, when I painted this painting of the seagull. "Now I'm sick," I say to myself, "I'm sick of it. I'm sick of this approach. She is the teacher, but I'm sick."

PK: You're sick of the seagull approach?

JW: No. I'm sick of what she was presenting for us to copy, those little squares and angles.

PK: Yeah.

JW: And I called her, I said, “Teacher, would you come over here?” And then she said, “Wait till I get through with this pupil; I’ll come over there. You’re next.” So she came over, and she say, “What you want?” I said, “I want to just paint tonight.” I say, “May I just paint?” She said, “What you mean?” I said, “I just want to paint. So that means I want to dispense with that other junk.” (chuckles) ‘Cause I wasn’t getting anywhere, not creative, in a creative way. So she said, “Okay.” So when she left, then I began meditating and I visualized painting the splitting of the atom. I was going to make a painting of that, the splitting of the atom. And I selected the very strong hues, like the red, some of the reds up there, and oranges. I selected those hues, and then I said to myself, “That would be too elaborate.” Other words, well, “It’d be too meticulous, you know, to try to paint that, and I better do something that’s much simpler for this class,” to myself. So then I retained the reds, and I said, “Okay, I’m going to make a seagull in the foreground, and I’m going to put a ship in the background, way in the background. And in the middle ground I’m going to put the ocean.” And I say, “I’m going to have the seagull pecking fish, that supposedly have got injured,” you know, wounded. So then I visualize that, and then I began painting it. And one of the pupils came over. She saw I didn’t have anything on my desk, or on the table or desk. She came over, and then she looked to see what I had on my board, on my easel. So she looked on there. She said, “Where’d you see that at? Where’d you get that from?” And I pointed to my head. (chuckles) And she stayed over there.

PK: And watched you.

JW: And then after a while, another pupil came over, to see what she was staying over there for. Then another one came over, and then after a while the teacher didn’t have nobody, she had to come over. (laughs)

PK: Now is this the same time you said that Graves wanted you to have tea with him, the same evening?

JW: Yeah, well see, what happened was Graves sent for me to come out and have tea with him. Okay. So previous to me painting this, I had brought in a brown church. I still have the church, an oil painting. And this woman, she tried to criticize the perspective. So when I went out with Graves, he said, “I want you to have tea with me.” I said, “Okay.” I said, “Graves, you remember that, when you was down in my home I showed you that brown church?” He said, “Yes.” I say, “That teacher didn’t like it.” I said, “She didn’t care about the perspective.” He said, “Oh, hell. Tell her I like it.” (laughs) So. . . .

[Tape 4, side A]

PK: Do you want to finish that little Morris Graves anecdote that you were telling?

JW: Yes. I went out with Graves and we had tea, and I came back and I asked the teacher whether or not she knew Graves, whether or not she had met him, “No,” she didn’t know. She hadn’t met him. (chuckles) So this teacher told me, “Let’s keep this painting and we’re going to show it when our session close. We’ll exhibit it.” Other words, she didn’t know anything about helping the individual find him or her self. All she knew was what the university had taught her about the curriculum, and that on page 99 you set up a little gimmick for them to paint.

PK: Right.

JW: On night one, and night two she change the little gimmick. (chuckles) And that’s all she knew, seemed like, about creativity. And I got sick of it after about three nights.

PK: Well, did you. . . . You didn’t continue with her as a teacher, right?

JW: Doing my painting.

PK: Huh?

JW: Yeah, with my painting. Doing painting.

PK: Oh, so you went to her class but you then kept doing seagulls with brilliant. . . .

JW: Yeah, and other subjects.

PK: Where do you suppose that imagery comes from?

JW: Well, it come from the recesses of my being.

PK: But beyond that, don’t you think it’s possible that living and working in this area and being associated with some of the other artists—and also, the elements in the painting are very much a part of the Northwest

environment, the seagulls. . . .

JW: Well, you think it's because of the water, you think, this Northwest environment, and of course seagulls, seagulls. . . .

PK: Um hmm, and the fish.

JW: Yeah, well, that's part of environment, but it didn't come from no particular artist. I'm not concerned about what they are doing. Not even Tobey. I never did want to depict anything like Tobey or Graves and nobody. I always wanted to be myself.

PK: Well, weren't you attracted to some of the images of Graves, say? You saw Graves' work, right?

JW: Yeah, I've seen some of it, but I didn't want to copy him or them. During that time I hadn't seen too much of his work.

PK: Oh, you hadn't seen anything at that time?

JW: Not too much of it. I've seen, I seen enough to get acquainted with him, at the museum, but not enough. . . . In other words, I never see enough of Graves or Tobey to emulate them or want to.

PK: So what you. . . .

JW: You understand, I never emulate anybody. Why should an artist copy when he can create? If you can create, you don't stoop to that.

PK: Yeah, but on the other hand, if you like the ideas and the attitudes of another artist, you feel an empathy, and they, oh, have bird imagery, for instance. . . .

JW: That didn't mean nothing to me. That didn't mean nothing to me.

PK: It's all right. I mean, it isn't copying them necessarily.

JW: But that didn't mean anything to me.

PK: You weren't interested in that.

JW: I wasn't interested in it. I was interested in depicting whatever I could. I was more interested in how they get the quality, in any subject, and (chuckles) whether or not I could produce that quality in any subject that I want. If I wanted to copy them, I'd've copied their birds, and then I would have to copy just like they did, in order to make it, you know, and then I'd've been a copyist. I don't copy.

PK: Still and yet, if you had stayed in Arkansas, do you think you would have been doing a seagull on a nice Pacific beach there, with a sunset in the west?

JW: Depend on my environment. They had seagulls there. But it depend on my environment, see what I mean. Other words, environment is greater than inheritance. I debated that once, you understand, with a debating team, that environment is greater than inheritance.

PK: Okay, so you feel strongly then, that your work or anybody else's working here in this area would naturally have, show some response to the natural environment.

JW: That's right. Not necessarily coming through another artist, but the environment itself.

PK: Okay, so can you tell me why there seems to be—seems to be—some similarity in point of view, even in imagery, between a number of these Northwest artists, the so-called visionaries? What do you think about that?

JW: Some of them copied the other artists. They want to copy the other artists if the other artist has been somewhat successful, they want to copy his work. But it's not theirs. They have not realized that they possessed the quality with which to depict the subject as they want to depict it, but still have the quality that they're able to inject in the subject matter, and this is what you have to do. You understand, the subject matter is not enough to convey a spiritual force. It can be any subject.

PK: Well, do you see anything then that unites, any unifying principle. . . . You know, you talked about your admiration for Callahan, for Tobey, Graves, Guy Anderson, a few others. Do you see any unifying theme or principle that would unite them as a school called Northwest Visionaries. What do you think of that idea?

JW: Well, the idea of uniting, I think I explained that first off, when I said I went to study the universality of life

and the universality of art. When an artist is true, he is unified at the spiritual level, not only subject level—at a spiritual level.

PK: Okay, I understand that.

JW: Yeah.

PK: What, if anything, distinguishes this group of Northwest painters—many of whom, some of whom were your friends—what distinguishes them and sets them aside from other artists (elsewhere in the country) who may have this power?

JW: It can be stronger and it can be weaker, depending on the artist and the subject matter in which this strength is obvious to those who are receptive. But whether or not Tobey's work is more powerful than Callahan's, or more powerful than Guy Anderson, this is the sum total of where they stand. This is what puts them in the big league, as to whether or not it's stronger, regardless to the subject matter depicted. You see what I mean? And any artist, whether he live in New York or in England or wherever it is, if he has this force, then his art will be strong. And he can be equal with Tobey, it can excel Tobey, and then some people are carried away after subject matter. You know, subject matter. . . . We have three things that people can be persuaded by. Three things, only three things in art. That's subject matter, composition, and spiritual force. Some have the first two, subject matter and composition, and are void or weak in spiritual force. And some people could care less what the subject matter is. They perfer quality of any subject. It can be an abstract, a nonabstract, a nonobjective, but as long as it has the spiritual force, and they perceive that—people who are able to perceive that—then to them that's a great painting.

PK: Okay, I think I understand this—I'm beginning to—but I don't think you're quite answering my question. . . .

JW: Okay, okay.

PK: . . . which is this: There is, there was a group of painters in the Pacific Northwest who have been talked about together as having something in common that sets them a little aside from very good artists elsewhere in the world. It's what supposedly gives the Northwest its special flavor and character. That is not to say they copied one another; they share something in common. You know these people. . . .

JW: Well, that's a clannish group.

PK: I was wondering if you feel that's true?

JW: Well, that depend on the person's reasons for saying that. They're together, they display together, they're the big three, some of them say.

PK: Yeah, but do you think there's any basis for that other than the fact that they happened to be here at a certain time?

JW: That's all, and you'll probably question this person, he couldn't tell you, he couldn't tell you where the validity lie in the different one's work.

PK: Well, with that in mind, I'm certainly not going to ask you if you feel you're part of the Northwest Visionaries. (chuckles)

JW: (laughs)

PK: Because I guess you would say no.

JW: I don't know what you're talking about. (laughs)

PK: You're about the only person in Seattle that would answer that way. Okay, so let's forget the Northwest Visionaries. (both still laughing) But before we move on, can you tell me a little bit what your experience was, beyond what we've talked about. . . . When you came here to Seattle and you began to meet some of these interesting people with whom you became friendly, you apparently exhibited together at one time? I remember you said you showed with [Paul] Horiuchi and [George] Tsutakawa. Can you tell me a little bit about those times?

JW: Well, they were struggling times—we were struggling—to the effect that we didn't have many places to exhibit our work, and we had to display in this particular place—which were the international settlement. . . . I don't know who was promoting the exhibition but it was out on the streets. Some of it was on easels and kind of like a little fair, and it was quite a get-together for the artists, and some of the best artists in the city was at the exhibition. In fact, I sold one of my block prints to Tobey, the first piece I sold in that type of exhibition here in Seattle. Tobey came by and he saw it and he bought it. It was a block print.

PK: Is that when you met? Or had you met a little before that?

JW: Well, I think—I'm just trying to figure that out. That's a good question. I hadn't met him before that. As I said, I think I told you previously this Mrs. Theodora Harrison at the Frederick & Nelson store, she was the one that suggested that I meet with him, and I had never met him previous to that time. So that must have been shortly afterwards that I had this show and he bought that thing. I'm pretty sure it was after that, because I hadn't met him. . . . When I arranged for the show at Frederick& Nelson I hadn't as yet met him.

PK: What about some of the others? Do you recall how your association developed with some of them? Obviously some were closer to you, better friends, than others. Who were the ones that you felt most close to?

JW: Well, I felt close to George, George Tsutakawa, as well as Mark Tobey, Graves, and Callahan.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: I felt close to him. That is, you know, I felt the sincerity of him, and also Namura, Kinjiro Namura, I think his name is. He was a very nice person, you know, you feel the vibes around him. And then there were John Matsudaira. I don't know where he is at now. I think he was one of them that was in that group.

PK: So you had a pretty close connection, I gather, with the Asian artist community.

JW: That's right.

PK: Yeah, that apparently was a very closely knit group that gathered at a frame shop, I believe, down there. I can't remember the years, maybe it was a little bit earlier.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: I think maybe that was before the war, but that these artists did exhibit together, and there were some Chinese artists as well, if I'm not mistaken.

JW: Fay Chong and Andrew Chinn. And then we used to show over at Bellevue, Washington. In fact we would paint on the scene over at the Bellevue Art Fair [Pacific Northwest Arts and Crafts].

PK: Yeah?

JW: Yeah. And we, I remember, I have a painting that Andrew Chinn and I did together. You know, it was a Chinese philosopher that we painted, both of us painted. Bot of us painted on that one painting. And we sold paintings over there. I wasn't sculpting then. And we had a nice group.

PK: Did you ever paint large-scale works? What I've seen, which isn't much, they seem to be pretty standard format.

JW: Mine was all portable.

JW: Yeah, and they didn't exceed over six and eight feet, in one dimension.

PK: Six by eight feet?

JW: Six by eight feet in one dimension.

PK: Well, that's pretty big!

JW: I didn't exceed that.

PK: You actually did six-foot paintings?

JW: In one dimension. That would mean horizontal.

PK: That's wide! That's not a little painting, you know.

JW: It isn't? (chuckles)

PK: Well, maybe it is to you, I don't know. Not very portable.

JW: (laughs)

PK: What kind of things would you do on six feet? Let's call that fairly large scale, okay? What would they be,

maybe four by six? Four feet, foot, by six foot?

JW: Something like that. A good proportion.

PK: Yeah. And what kind of imagery would you do on that?

JW: Well, let's see. Probably the last one I executed in about 1950 was for the government. I was working at Auburn, Washington, at the paint shop, and the colonel down there, he wanted me to do a painting of Smokey, the bear, you know, that forest bear.

PK: Smokey?

JW: Yeah, Smokey the Bear. And he had a small one that was about, it was probably seven feet by twelve feet.

PK: This was a commercial commission.

JW: But I didn't treat it as such.

PK: Okay. Well, that's interesting; tell me about it.

JW: Well, he wanted me to do one of Smokey the Bear. He gave me one about, a one-foot picture of Smokey the Bear, and then I had to use Smokey the Bear and create the entire scene that I wanted. So I created the water, and then I created the forest, and the trees, some of the trees falling and burning with a big fire. (laughs) And Smokey the Bear was only in the midst of it. I have pictures of that now. Well, Smokey the Bear was over there trying to get out. He had to run for his life. (laughs, claps hands)

PK: So you feel that you were basically then, in a way, being subversive. You were using this commission as an opportunity to fool around with the parts in a different way. Is that what you. . . .

JW: Well, yes. When you get a painting, a small picture of a bear, about a foot long, and then you have to increase that to six or seven feet, and then create all the other scenery—that's art. Then you're going into creativity, not in a commercial.

PK: Well, on the other hand, a good commercial artist uses a lot of imagination in putting together. . . .

JW: I'm not complaining about another commercial. . . . But then we have to define what constitute commercial as opposed to creative work.

PK: All right, well what. . . . Do you draw a distinction between, let's call it fine art, and. . . .

JW: Commercial art.

PK: . . . commercial or craft, you know, what would the term be, popular art or commercial art? Fine, popular, commercial?

JW: I would say that commercial art would most likely be. . . . If I'd of taken the bear and drew a picture of him, and then were trying to convey an idea from a commercial standpoint, for selling a product or something, or selling an idea, other than just the forest burning, well then, I would say that's strictly commericial, somebody dictating to me. If I was being mechanically inclined, you understand, then I could do it; but when you create, there might be a fine line, but. . . .

PK: Okay, well, so. . . . I understand what you're saying. Were most of your paintings representational? Did you ever do nonobjective or abstract?

JW: I've done some, I've done some abstract. I've done semi-abstract. Collage, I've done collage, yeah. I did one of the making of the charter, the United Nations charter. Yes. Where I depict the making of the charter, United Nations charter. I still have that one. That's about three or four feet long.

PK: Well, let's move you along a bit then. We've been holding back. We've been very patient.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: We've been holding back on the important shift, when you decided, for reasons that you will tell us, that painting was fine, but you wanted to place an emphasis on—I guess you felt that sculpture was more your medium, that you wanted to try sculpture. How did this come about?

JW: I was a painter, and I decided that I wanted to go down to Mexico City to visit with Diego Rivera. I had never met him. And I wanted to meet with any other artists down there of note. And I proceeded to go down to Mexico

City.

PK: Did you ever meet Diego?

JW: I went down to Mexico City, and then I had in mind to meet Diego Rivera. I'd never been there before, so I asked some people on the train—and there was a deaf-mute and somebody else who was instrumental in telling me where to stay—the best place I could stay after I got off the train. And the place that they directed me to, I was surprised the next morning to inquire about Diego Rivera and was told that his gallery was downstairs in that building. First of all, they told me, when I asked them where was Diego Rivera, and they said Diego Rivera was out to Chapultapec Park, doing the [Lerma] waterworks mural. Other words, he was doing the reservoir through which all the water in Mexico City was to come from the mountain. And he was in charge of that project, and also painting, he was painting a picture of the Mongolian and Negro in the water. So then I met Diego Rivera. I got a fellow to take me out there, so he could talk Spanish, if I couldn't get through to Diego Rivera.

PK: What about the universal language?

JW: Well, during that time I wasn't concerned with that.

PK: This was before?

JW: Yeah, I wasn't into that then. So it was. . . . It was after that in the 'sixty-something that I decided on the universal language. Okay, after I got out there, then I was able to greet him. I greeted Diego Rivera first. Then I found out that he spoke broken English, then I told the interpreter that I didn't need him, and I paid him whatever I had agreed to pay him. I told Diego who I was, and everything, and showed him some slides of my work. And he said he liked them very much, slides and everything. He asked me how long I had been in Mexico City, and I told him—I think it was a day or two days—he said, "Well, how come you hadn't contacted me before now?" And then he asked me where I was staying, and I told him where I was staying. He said, "Well, that's Emma Hurtado's place," he said. "I'm gonna send a note to her by you. You take this note." He got a paper and he wrote on it.

PK: Who was she? Emma. . . .

JW: Emma Hurtado. She was a publisher of one of the papers [periodicals] there, in Mexico City, so he told her that he had met me and he liked my paintings very much—he put that in writing—and he asked her whether or not she could plan, at his expense, a banquet for me and my guests. And I was asked to take that note to her, and in the meantime I had an appointment with [David Alfaro] Siqueiros that same day. He was one of the master painters.

PK: Sure.

JW: So, and I told Siqueiros that I'd been over to see Diego Rivera, and I showed him the note that Diego Rivera had given me and the accomodation he had written on there, which I have, I have it here now. Siqueiros wrote an accomodaiton on the same paper.

PK: That's part of your papers.

JW: Yeah, that's what you're gonna get.

PK: [Uh huh, (chuckles)]

JW: So then I showed him the slides. then he, Siqueiros, he wanted to set up appointment for me to meet with him and his wife, so I could have lunch with them.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: So that was all set there, and so several days after that, some fellows was going down to the pyramids—that's about 50 miles out from Mexico City, and I told them I'd like to go with them, so we all got together and went out to the pyramids, and we looked around and saw the old ruins and everything, and so I wanted to see the excavators and see some of the figurine pottery. And I saw one of the excavators and I acquired a piece, and some of the fellows, one of the fellows with us, he asked me what I want with that stuff. So I knew I was with the wrong group, so I followed them back to the bus stop and saw that they got on the bus, after we had taken some pictures, and then I told them I'd see 'em in Mexico City that night. So I went back by myself, and went up the Pyramid of the Sun, and then when I was up there I made a view, and I had my sketchpad with me. So then I asked somebody how you get to the Pyramid of the Moon, and so they told me to go up the Avenue of the Dead, and they showed me where the the Avenue of the Dead was. Go up there, they said, to follow that on up to the Pyramid of the Moon. So when I got up the Avenue of the Dead about a hundred feet or something, then I saw a stone. I was going to pick up the stone, but I didn't. I went on, about another hundred feet. I had an urge to pick

up the stone, and went back and picked up this stone. And I put it in my bag. And I didn't know it had anything to do with the petition I had made on entering the train. On entering over from San Antonio, Texas, to Mexico, while we was waiting for the train to get ready to take us down to Mexico City, I was standing there with some people, women and men, and they said that when the train get ready to go, we was going back in the air-conditioned car, and I agreed. But then, when they reminded me, say, "Well, I think it's ready now," then I say, "Well, I have to go in the station and get some money changed," some American money changed into pesos so I could buy something on the train. And they went on back to the air conditioned. . . . When I went in the station and got some money changed and I started out the door, then I was told by the spiritual force to not go where they were. In fact, I haven't seen them since. And I was admonished to go and find a place that was private, an isolated place, and I went and looked on the train. All Mexicans was in there, so finally I found a place over in the corner, and I went and set in that corner. And then, after I set there for about a minute, then it came to me what to do. I petitioned, and my petition was, that as a result of that trip, I'd be uplifted in the arts, as a result of going to Mexico. I didn't know that stone that I picked up in the Avenue of the Dead was as a result of that petition. Because I didn't go down to Mexico to be a sculptor. I hadn't thought about sculpting. But it was on that petition I made that evolved [to] me picking up that stone and getting into sculpting. When I brought the stone back—that's this stone here.

PK: That one that I liked?

JW: Yeah. It was in the rough. And when I brought it back, then I put it down in the basement, and I didn't fool with it—that was in '51—and I didn't fool with it or think about it much until about two years after that. And then it came as though I was in school, and the information I received was that everything that I see had possibilities, and my imagination was the key to it. And then from that time on, everytime I see a stone, I could visualize its possibilities. So then I went to see what was this all about in this stone, and then I reached the conclusion that it was sculpting that I was supposed to do. And then I say, "Sculpting?" you know. [sounding puzzled]. Then I went and got me a book on sculpting. And then I looked at the book, and everytime I'd look at the book and read it, I'd get sick. There's nothing in the book that I wanted to do, and all kind of sculpting were in there, and so I showed it to the late Ambrose Patterson, he say, "Well, that's a good book." But I don't know where it's at now. I know it's in my library somewhere. So then when it did actually dawn on me that it was sculpting that I was supposed to do, then I called George Tsutakawa. I asked him what kind of tools could you get to do stone sculpting. I knew he was doing sculpting. He was the only artist that I knew around doing sculpting. He was doing it in wood and things like that. I thought maybe he might know, and he said, well he didn't know. He said maybe I could go to the hardware, maybe I could find what I wanted. I went to a hardware and nothing there that had to do with sculpting in stone. Had something there would probably do in marble. And wood, things like that. So then, I said, "Now. . . ." It kept on dawning on me, sculpting. I said, "What am I going to do?" So then I recalled that over in Bremerton I had worked as electrician, and I'd frequent the machine shop where they grind and sharpen tools and all kind of metal, and I know one fellow that told me once as I was looking at him in one of those lathes, those metal lathes. He said, "Well, see this stuff here?" He said, "That's the hardest metal that man made." I say, "Yeah?" And he said, "A German made it; he started it." And I said, "Yeah," so I said, "Well, maybe I can use some of that to make some etching tools for engraving." He said, "I'll make you some. What shape you want 'em?" I told him, "Make some this way, make some that way, and all kind of shapes, and then put 'em on a little welding rod, a brass welding rod, weld it on that." So he did that, and I still have some now. But then I thought about them, that they would be a good thing to cut the stone.

[Tape 4, side B]

PK: You were talking, James, about the difficulty you had in finding tools. You wanted to work stone, and. . . .

JW: Yeah, so what I did, I looked and I realized I had about fifteen of those tools, or more, and I said, "Let me try those on stone." And I tried them on stone, and they worked very good, but they didn't hold up. They'd break. So then I said, now what will I do? So I went to this fellow who had given me them over there in Bremerton. He'd given me a little pamphlet on the composition of this metal, so then I looked and saw that there were different composition of it. Some of it was tougher than others. So then I decided, I said, "Now, I'm gonna see where can I find somebody who makes that metal, who can make something that will stand the shock of sculpting." I think it was Detroit that I found such place. And then I ordered some. . . . All they made was blanks, and I had to get the stock to have them weld, to have the blanks welded on this stock. So then I did that and then I had a fellow to sharpen 'em for me. And then I began making some sculptures. The first sculptures I made was two Biblical characters. This one [of the stone from the Avenue of the Dead: Little Boy of Athens] was the first one I made. I didn't display this right away; I just kept it—and the next two I displayed was two heads. One King and one of Luke, little bitty small heads, just pocket pieces, pocket size.

PK: King? You mean Martin Luther King, Jr.?

JW: No. Just a king.

PK: Okay.

JW: So previous to that year—this year ‘56, I think it was—I had been invited to show at the Chi Omega at the University of Washington, and I had been showing paintings, so that year I taking out two sculptures, two of the small sculptures, of which I have pictures now. The night of the preview I went out there, and a friend of mine, I think Professor [Walter] Isaac, University of Washington, he was standing drinking tea. He was the Dean of Art. And I walked in, and he told me, say, “I saw your sculptures. They’re good.” Say, “One of them sold.” I say, “Yeah?” I say, “Good.” Then he say, “Whyn’t you go over and look? They’re back in that room back there.” So I went back there. I said, “Okay.” So I went back there to look, see if the sold tag was on it. When I went back there, another lady had the other one up in her hand looking at it, and she wouldn’t leave it till she went and found somebody to sell it to her. So I sold both of them that same night. So that was in 1956. So I been behind ever since.

PK: (chuckles) Is this then what made possible the shift, turning your vocation/avocation around?

JW: No.

PK: No?

JW: (chuckles) No, so this is one transition,; let’s go to another.

PK: Okay.

JW: So I began sculpting, and I sculpted and didn’t do much painting or printmaking from then on until about in the sixties. So I was working down in Auburn, Washington. They were threatening to cut the force. They were going to do some cutting and some transfer. My job would have been transfered down to Utah.

PK: You were still working with the electricians?

JW: No.

PK: Well see, we never got you to change jobs, that I noticed.

JW: Well, you want me to change jobs?

PK: You went from one to the other. After the war probably you shifted, right?

JW: Well, from the electrician, over in Bremerton Navy Yard, I got kind of tired of working and commuting. Well, I stayed over there for a while, at Sinclair Heights; then we moved over here, we bought a home over here. And I got tired of commuting over here. I came over and joined the painters, Painters 300, and I started painting in the homes, and decorating.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: So then they called me back over there, and I went back to work in the Navy Yard [Bremerton], and then they put me in charge of DBM radar, and give me a office. And during that time it was very taxing, because working with the DBM radar, in all that, they wouldn’t allow me to write down anything. Other words, I had to put new gadgets in most of the equipment, and in addition I had to keep it all in my mind. And they wouldn’t let me do nothing but that. I just had to keep my mind on the radar. And in fact I got kind of nervous, with other jobs I had to do after I left there—like Scoutmaster over in Seattle—and I got kind of nervous and my flesh began to quiver and my eyes began to quiver, and I knew it was nerves. So I told the Civil Service that if they’d get me a job over here with less pay then I would give up that job over there, because of my health.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: So then they called me one day and told me they had a job over here, “Well, you know, you told us that when we got a job over here in Seattle to let you know, even at a cut rate.” I say, “Yeah.” She say, “Well, it’s a little less than what you’re getting over there,” she said, “but you don’t have to commute.” And she said, “We have a place out to Fort Lawton. We have a building out there that we want a shoeshop put in there, and we want somebody who can requisition all the machinery that go in there, and then operate the shoeshop, and then supervise the enlisted men plus the civilian.” And I say, “Well, I’ll take it.” (laughs) So I came over and I requisitioned all the machinery, the stitchers, the sanders and finishers.

PK: Where was this located?

JW: At Fort Lawton, out from Seattle.

PK: Where's that?

JW: That's right out here, north of Seattle. Yeah, right out here where the soldiers are.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: And I stayed there and did that for quite a while, till there were a misunderstanding with my boss. It wasn't no trouble so far as I was concerned, because I could handle it. My supervisor, immediate supervisor, he was very heavy on the bottle, and he would (chuckles), he would go in the storeroom, in my storeroom, and get stuff out and give it to truckdrivers for whiskey, and then expect me to requisition more. See, I had to give him an account of how many pair of shoes I repaired and what material was used. And I had to finagle the things, and I got tired of it and I told him that I was, and that he couldn't do that.
So then he got hot with me. I had a grade nine rating, and he decided some way to try to get me out of there—he got it in for me. He was going to have to transfer up to the commissary where I would be loading the basket for people who were buying groceries, then knocked me down to a grade four. Gonna knock me down to a four. And I went to Civil Service and asked them, the Civil Service on the base, and they said he could do it. Other words, he had got in cahoot with them, you understand. I say, "He can do it?" "Yeah, yeah. Yeah, he can do that." And then they tried to justify it with the Civil Service manual. I didn't have a manual, so I said, "Okay." What I did, I went down to the Civil Service man down on First Avenue in the Federal Building, because he's the one between Washington and all the Civil Service people out here, and I told him what they said. He agreed they could do it. They'd got in with him. "Yeah," I said, "somebody's trying to pull one on me." But they didn't know me. So what I did, I said, "Okay." (chuckles) I knew another government office, way down there on the—oh, what's that street name? [Marginal Way]. But anyway, it was a engineer's office, and I went down there. Never been in there before. I walked in there, and I saw a man, and he was coming towards me as I walked in the door, and I said, "Are you a foreman in here?" He said, "Yes." "My name's Washington." I said, "Do you have a Civil Service manual?" He said, "Yes." I said, "May I see it?" "Yeah." He said, "Here it is. You can sit down right here." And I sit down in there and I found out what was best for me in the Civil Service rules and regulations. So then I memorized the page, the paragraph, everything—the chapter, the paragraph. Then I went back out there. When I walked in, well, the fellow in the Civil Service, he kind of greeted me and tell me to sit down, you know, trying to be nice. You know, nice—cut my throat at same time. I told him, "You bring your Civil Service manual, and you sit down and rest, too. We'll both sit down and rest together." And I said, "Would you turn back to that paragraph relating to me, what you told me that fits me?" And he turned to it, and I said, "Hmm, _____ read it?" "Yeah," he read it. I told him where to turn. Then (chuckles) he read that. "Well, under this you can have me to send out [monitoring] letters of every job you can hold. I'll have to get my secretary to do it." I say, "Yep." "[Monitoring] letters." "Uh huh," I say, "Yep." I say, "And the government projects who has some of the jobs listed and the people to whom I send the letters have to respond within 24 hours, if they have a job available that you can hold." "Yes," I say, "that's right." "How many jobs can we list you for?" I say, "Let's start at five." I say, "They're in the government record. They're all journeymen." I say, "I've held these jobs for the government as journeyman," I say, "you put five." "What are they?" I told him, and he said, "Okay."
Here's the next one he pulled. He's gonna get the secretary to do it. Next morning I showed up there when we's supposed to finalize the project. He was off. Couldn't be found. A lady was in his place. I asked her where was Mr. Lamure. She said, "He's not in today. He's off." I said, "Will he be in?" "I don't think so." I said, "Okay, who is in his place?" "Well, I'm supposed to be in his place." I said, "Did he pass on any information to you?" "No, he didn't pass. . . ." "Uh-huh-huh, so he didn't, huh?"

PK: So how did this resolve finally?

JW: Huh?

PK: How did this resolve? Did you just quit?

JW: No. No, I don't do that. That's not me.

PK: _____ _____, yeah.

JW: (chuckles) Other words, other words, they figured they had a playboy, understand? They thought that I had a slave mentality.

PK: Yeah.

JW: So what I did I went to the office of the Civil Service there in that building. Mr. Lamure was off. I had to talk with Mr. Lamure's boss and ask him what was going on. I told him that Mr. Lamure was off and left no turnover sheet. I said, "This have to be settled today." You understand? I said, "Before other action is taken." I say, "He have to be finished _____ today." So he called up my boss. I know the boss laughed on the other end, because he figured he had me. This is the guy who would drink all this whiskey, and he figured he had me. I told Mr. Lamure's boss that we have to get this done. So what he did, he sent out those letters of the five jobs that I

could hold, and within 24 hours I had a offer of twelve—a Grade 12, not 9. I got the Grade 12, okay, offered to me. When I went out to the place where the Grade 12 job was, to work on the Grade 12, out here to Kenneydale, I was supposed to bump another man out there, for the job. The captain out there was from the South, he didn't want me to have the job; he tried to find every way that he could so I couldn't get the job. When I made out the papers, he made every effort he could so that I couldn't get the job. And I went back out to Fort Lawton, and that evening the Civil Service called from down here on Lander Street. "Mr. Washington, you went out there and seen Captain Turner today." I say, "Yeah." He said, "Do you want the job?" I say, "Yeah, I want the job." He said, "That man sent all this mess in here on this paper. If you want the job, you've got the job." (laughs) Other words, he had messed up the paper when I left, he put all the junk in, but I got the job anyway. And I was supposed to be a sign painter out there.

PK: A sign painter? That's what you became then?

JW: A sign painter out there. So the first thing, job he give me was a big job with a sign that was about 15 feet long. And about three or feet wide or a little wider. And I'd taken the sign down; it was hanging up about 12 feet in the air—10 feet or 12, you know, over a gate—and I'd taken down the sign, had it taken down, and put it down on the floor, and I was gonna paint it, gonna do it over. He sent a order out there for me to erase everything off of the sign. Other words, what he wanted to do is make it hard for me. The normal procedure is to take something white and go over the sign, after you clean the board, go over it and put a neutral base, gray or light, white. If you're going to do the same lettering over then you can do 'em from that point of perspective. [Interruption in taping]

PK: You've. . . . It sounds to me like you suffered enormously from something that affects us all—that is, the bureaucracy—and you managed to work the bureaucracy, it worked out that you ended with a nice grade. They tried to knock you down and you ended with a 12—only people that worked in the government are going to know what this means. And you actually ended up as a sign painter, and I would be curious to know, did you view that then as a good opportunity for you, as another outlet for your art? Were you able to relate that on-the-job activity to your concerns as an artist.

JW: Actually, when you consider—to backtrack a little—when you consider shoe repairing and sign painting, you cannot separate the two, or any of 'em, from the arts, if a high degree of proficiency is made. And sign painting is an art, if a high degree of proficiency is made in it. So as long as you are in the same ballpark, you can't go wrong, because they are all art. So what I did, I let him dictate his prejudice, then I overcame his prejudice by showing him that I was creative. Other words, that I was an artist.

PK: Did he appreciate this?

JW: He didn't appreciate nothing. He didn't want me there in the first place. Why? Because I was black. He didn't want me there. How you gonna appreciate anything with prejudice on your mind? I could go on, but I think I'll wrap it up. I could go on and tell you the other things that he did, but the people in the head office, they liked me, they appreciate me, they talked to me, more than they talked to him.

PK: Um hmm. . . .

JW: Some of the officers came to Kenneydale. They came out there to inspect, from the head office. And they were up, elevated about 15 feet above me up on a kind of a mound with a fence, were leaning against the fence. The inspector knew me. And I was down there painting, and they said to me, "Washington, you hear what the captain said?" The captain was up there with them. I said, "No." They say, "He said that you're the highest paid painter down there, and you should have a brush in both hands."

PK: (laughs)

JW: And I said, "Yeah," my response was, I said, "According to what the captain say, I should have his job." (chuckles) Then I ask them, "Now what did he say?" And they said, "He said he had other ideas." (laughs)

PK: How long did you work with, in the sign-painting job?

JW: Oh, till the job was terminated there. I won't involve you with the other tricks that he played. But I overcame all of 'em, you understand?

PK: Yeah, I think we get the point. (chuckling)

JW: (laughs)

PK: But how long was this? How long a period? A couple years, or. . . .

JW: Probably. Probably that long, yeah.

PK: And then you made this other shift. You were starting to tell us about the career shift.

JW: Well. . . . Oh yes. That, shortly after that then I went to Auburn. I was down to Auburn as a painter. And there was another person there who had prejudice—my boss.

PK: Boy, again. It sounds like it was worse for you here than it was in the South.

JW: Yeah, it wasn't worse for me. Their attitude was just the same as in the South, and worser than within the South, but it wasn't for me because I knew what to do in spite of them. I knew how to advance under adverse circumstances. It just so happened that at Auburn the general superintendent, he liked me, and the colonel, he liked me—they liked me. So this foreman who didn't care about blacks, well, I didn't have to worry about him, because he didn't want me there, anyway. He didn't want no blacks. And my job'd be transferred down to this place where the Mormons. . . .

PK: Salt Lake?

JW: . . . in Utah. And this superintendent who liked me said, "Washington, you said that whenever you get ready you were going to make a transition from your general occupation to your avocation. "Now I understand that you're behind in your studio. We'll send you down there [Utah] if you want to go, but you might consider whether you want to make the transition now." He said, "You want to consider making the transition? We'll work with you. You'll get some money, you know." So I told him I'd talk to my wife, and she said, "Yeah, we can do it." So then I told them I wanted to make the transition, you understand, to make my avocation my vocation, and we did. . . .

PK: In other words, sculpture. You've become a full-time sculptor.

JW: That's right. And so then I, we came here, I built this studio here, and then he came up afterwards several times—he and his wife—and he said, "You made a good choice."

PK: What was his name? He sounds like a good person.

JW: His name is [Forest E.] Kimmerle. Yeah. He lives at Auburn, Washington. Very fine person. This little foreman, he didn't care about, you know, black. In fact he had a fellow down there, a white fellow, he was, that came on as a sign painter, and the sign painter asked me what I had done previous to coming down there, and I told him, "Well, I was over to Bremerton as electrician, and then I was over to Fort Lawton, the shoe repair." He said, "How can you do all those things, and I can't do but one?" (laughing) I said, "Well, that's your problem." So whenever this executive officer [Forest E. Kimmerle] who liked to do artwork for the colonel, he would always send for me to come up there and look at the drawings and tell him what I thought of it. And wouldn't pay no attention to the little foreman. He'd send for me to come up there, and I'd go up there, and he'd keep me there, he say, "You don't have to work. I'm the boss."

PK: Well, this was obviously an important historical moment, because you then finally were able to devote your full attention to your studio. You built a studio, isn't that right?

JW: That's right.

PK: Right here?

JW: That's right.

PK: What year was that? Do you recall?

JW: That was, I think it was in 19. . . . Well, it's in 1960—'60 or '66, I think. I can't pin it down to the date, but I think it's. . . .

PK: 1960 or 1966?

JW: Well, yeah, I think 1960.

PK: So that means for the last—if that's the right date—last 27 years you've been supporting yourself as a sculptor?

JW: Yeah.

PK: How did you manage to do that? You know, it's hard for artists to support themselves on their work. You've been fortunate, I guess. . . .

JW: Well, this is the whole thing, and I hope that the things I have said would bear out that once you find yourself, and once you become cognizant of your innermost force, and once you utilize that force in your work, the very gates of hell cannot retard your progress, and you'll have no problem whatsoever. You understand? My first display was in '56; I haven't wondered where I was going to sell a piece since, who was gonna buy a piece. I haven't caught up with the commissions. I haven't had no problems, you know. . . . Other words, it shows what you can do when you are synchronized with the cosmos. It's no problem whatsoever. And as a result, that something put you in your orbit. When you get in your orbit there's no exterior motivation that's necessary; you're motivated from intuition. And that goes for each individual, not just for me. The reason why people have problems is they're exteriorly motivated, materialistically oriented. They don't know about these things that we're discussing.

PK: Still, to have that kind of sustaining support over those years is a remarkable thing, and certain people must be key in that. I would assume, perhaps your dealer, Don Foster, would be a factor in that, and he wasn't the first. Your first dealer was. . . . Who was, what was your first gallery representation?

JW: Well, oh, David Hall Colman was one of them, yeah. Well, the first one was Frederick & Nelson—Little Gallery at Frederick & Nelson, I told you about it. That's the one that put me in touch with Tobey.

PK: Right.

JW: Yeah, Frederick & Nelson. And the gallery, or the gallery dealer, is no more than the artist. It take the artist to make the dealer; not the dealer to make the artist.

PK: Oh, no question, right.

JW: You understand? (laughs)

PK: No question. Nobody would argue with that.

JW: You see what I mean? So if you don't have it, he can't give it to you.

PK: Yeah.

JW: And if you don't produce the things, he can't sell them.

PK: Yeah, but there's this to consider, that it often takes somebody to bring. . . . They're like brokers. Because the artist doesn't want to spend time, most artists don't want to spend time, trying to go out and beat the bushes and all that. They have to have someplace to be seen, and for the deals to be done.

JW: One thing the artist have to realize: Every person to whom he sells a piece that person become one of his agents.

PK: True.

JW: He have to realize that. He has to not sever his relationship with his clientele.

PK: So you obviously feel that a personal relationship with the people who have, are enlightened enough. . . .

JW: That's right. Acquire your work.

PK: . . . and enjoy and understand your work, and acquire it. . . .

JW: And they'll talk about it while you sleep.

PK: So it sounds to me as if you feel it's almost a special community that's created around these works of art.

JW: That's right. Other words, the community and the artist make their contribution in unison. Or the connoisseur and the artist make their contribution in unison. The dealer is just an agent, hopefully there to try and sell what he or she find worthy.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: But that's not the main thing. Some artists have gone astray by thinking that the dealer gonna build them regardless of what they produce.

PK: No, I understand.

JW: (laughs)

PK: I'm sure though that you don't mean this as an offense to nice Don Foster.

JW: No. That's my friend and agent. But I mean, but I'm just saying what is generally understood.

PK: Even though you don't need him. . . .

JW: No, I didn't say I didn't.

PK: "Hey, Don, did you hear. . . ."

JW: (laughs) "Hey, Don. . . ." No, but Don know; he know how I feel. Other words, you have to have a relationship with whomever you're working with. But then, they are not the prime mover of your work.

PK: No, no, it has to be the work.

JW: Other words, if I have to produce a piece, and take it down to Don Foster and say, "Is this piece good?" Or, "How much I should get for this piece?"

[Tape 5, side A]

PK: We were talking, on the last cassette, about your really moving into your career, your calling, as a sculptor. And about the good fortune, I think, that you've enjoyed in never having to, apparently, desperately seek for sales or find people to buy your work. And you had some pretty nice commissions, as a matter of fact—mostly I think in this area. How many large-scale pieces have you done? And what would be the ones that you would point to as the most prominent examples? I'm thinking of public, in public places, and so forth.

JW: Well, I have quite a few large pieces, for instance at the Meany school—that's on 22nd Avenue, Meany Middle School—and that's about a six-ton piece in size. It was one of my creations. It's a very large piece, and it was commissioned by some of the committees and boards of the Meany junior school—I think they call it junior. [It is now Meany Middle School, formerly Meany Junior High—Ed.] But anyway, that's one of my large pieces. The next, one of the next largest pieces is down at Olympia, Washington, just in on the property of the [Washington State] Highway Department. That's about five- or six-ton piece, uh huh. It's one of my strongest pieces.

PK: What's the, what's the title of that one? Do you recall?

JW: Uhh, I can't think, I have it. . . . [The Three Mysteries of Life—JW]

PK: What's the subject, though.

JW: Well, it's. . . . I have symbols and I have birds, and I have animals on there as the main subjects. I'm afraid to venture out a subject at the. . . . I could find it for you, but I just can't reach out for subject, but it's one of my stronger pieces.

PK: But it incorporates those subjects and elements with which we are familiar from your. . . .

JW: Yeah. Yeah, what I'm trying to do in my work, and you'll find that in most of my pieces, I'm trying to say things symbolically, in symbols. Yeah, I'm trying to say it in symbols because the average person can't change it; he got to first find out what I'm saying.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: Yeah, and you could do it in words, and he'll change them around to mean certain other things. But he got to first, once he understand what the symbols mean, then he got to stick with that or find his own way of saying it in a different way, you understand.

PK: Where do you get these symbols?

JW: Well, everything we deal with is symbols. And all symbols lead to truth. To begin with, it's not normally looked at this way, but every character we have in our alphabets is a symbol. And every time we write a letter, the first letter is a symbol of sound, the next letter's a symbol of sound, until we create a word, which is a symbol of thought. And then we go on with the sentences and a series of symbols of sound, until we get to a complete thought. So then we have symbols all through life. The symbols I put in my art are more abstract than the characters we write. And of course the symbols are all in nature; they always has been in nature. They're all through our Bible, and they're all through life.

PK: Can you tell me some of the more frequently used symbols in your work?

JW: Well, the more frequently used symbols, we'll find that the two equilateral triangles, and sometime I have the equilateral triangles separate. And when I put them together, when most people find them together, one of the triangles is pointing up, and one pointing down. That's in combination. And then most people say that's the Jewish star, or the Star of David.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: In fact, David just used that because it's a universal symbol. And he just used it. And it was before David, it was before the Jews were called Jews, or before they were called Israelites. So the two equilateral triangles, then, is an old symbol. First let's take the one equilateral triangle. It means that every side, the three sides are equal.

PK: Yeah.

JW: And that means that everything in life was created in three. And you take the one, when they're put together, one pointing up and one pointing down, which constitute what they call the David's star, then you, if you refer to First John, fifth chapter, and seven and eight verse—First John, fifth chapter, seven and eight verse—you'll find in the seventh chapter it says that, "There are three that bear record in Heaven." And it says that, "They are the Father, the word, and the Holy Ghost," and it says, "These three are one." One. And then the other one. . . . Then you go to verse eight, which would carry you to the second triangle that's pointing down, and it says, "There are three that bear witness on earth," and that's, "the blood, the water, and the spirit, and these three agree as one." They're not one; they agree as one. Other words, every time you drink a drink of water, you're drinking one of your witness. Or your blood, floating through your body, that's one of your witness. And then the spirit combined in your body, that's one of your witness. Understand. So all these have meanings if you, if you find out the meanings of them, but if you just say, "Well, this is the King David, this is the David's star," and that's all you know, you're bottlenecked in symbols. All symbols supposed to lead to truth, and if you don't know how to follow and obtain the truth, then you get bottlenecked: "This is a David star." Other words, one of the great symbols we have, and that's used in Christendom, is called the Christ's monogram. And you will see it with a 'P' and a cross.

PK: Like you have on that. . . .

JW: Yeah, that's a 'P'. . . .

PK: . . . on that wonderful thing around your neck.

JW: Yeah, a 'P' and a cross.

PK: Um hmm, right.

JW: Yeah, on it. Now people say, "What is that?" It was Constantine, the Roman Emperor, who went to Constantinople, went there—what is Istanbul, as we know it. When he and his soldiers were out in the field one day, they saw this in the midair. And then they became frightened and they went to camp, wherever they went. And that night, Constantine in the bed, he saw this sign again. He woke up and he saw this sign, he said, in the middle of the camp or house or whatever place he was in, you know, and he said that he heard a voice saying, "With this, conquer." So on all his letterheads and his scepter after then, you'll find this on them. And every battle he would get in, he would win it. This is one way symbols came about. And then the Children of Mu, they started some of our first symbols.

PK: The who?

JW: The Children of Mu. Short for Mu—it's a long name, but the M-u is the common one. And they started some of our symbols. In fact, they were supposed to have been the first one that coined the equilateral triangle. But the first symbol they coined, [which is] a symbol, it's a circle depicting the sun. And so they depict the sun, which is a complete round circle. And they say that was equivalent to God, for the circle had no beginning or ending. Then they inquired as to what about man, where did man fit into the picture, so then they dispensed with the idea that the circle represented God, and they say it represented man, because man had no beginning or ending. Now they combined the two, God and man, they drew the circle, and then they put a dot right in the center of the circle. You'll find that now, one of the outstanding symbols—a dot right in the middle of the circle, right in the center—and they say that's God in man.

PK: Yeah and then we see that in your work.

JW: Yes.

PK: It's one that you use.

JW: Yes. It's how you put 'em together and what you plan to say and what they mean, not what they just mean to me, what they meant to others, who think it's a universal language. And that's why David picked it up.

PK: So these. . . . So, many of your symbols are taken from ancient sources you've. . . . You've become familiar with them, and you see them maybe reappearing, and used in slightly different ways, but they're universal symbols used in the past, in ancient sources in some cases. Are there any symbols, though, that you've appropriated or invented that really are more personal to you, that one would need to decode your work, let's say, to better apprehend it?

JW: Well, most of the symbols I have, people might say, "Well, a bird." But I wouldn't say that. Because inasmuch as I love birds, I'm concerned with life in general. If they would say, "Well, his work is strong with that intangible force," then I would say that would be it, but then that's not in the realm of the tangible.

PK: No.

JW: You see what I mean? But then. . . .

PK: But there's a reason you choose the bird.

JW: Yeah, it's the symbol of escape.

PK: Okay.

JW: You understand?

PK: See, that's specific. . . . And that of course contributes—I think it's probably true—to this intangible force.

JW: Yes.

PK: It becomes a vehicle for that. But it does obviously mean something to you, and in many cases it is a known symbol. What about the. . . . Does the fish have something. . . . Well, you said that has to do with Creation.

JW: That's right, um hmm, yeah.

PK: That has that Christian connotation that you. . . .

JW: Yes, yes. Other words, it has to do with Creation meaning that life is just one. And I would dare say that the last breath of an individual could be the first breath of a calf or cow. Because life is one and the same. Every thing—be it a thing or person—try to protect his or her life.

PK: What about. . . . You told me an interesting story just, on our way to lunch, and that was about trees. We parked under a nice tree. . . .

JW: Um hmm.

PK: . . . a little bit of shade in the parking lot there, and remember that story you told me?

JW: Oh, I told you about the time that I had wanted to study with an Indian medicine man.

PK: Um hmm.

JW: I wanted to see what made them tick, what they had to offer. And I had such a chance, and studied with the Indian medicine man. After the session, we were able to go out in the woods and to deal with nature and to explore Mother Earth. And one thing he told me was that when you go off into the woods, like this. . . . He say, "You see those trees over there?" He said, "If you feel like hugging one, now or any day," say, "go over and hug it." He say, "The tree has something to offer you, and offer me." And he said, "The same thing goes with human beings. We have something to offer each other—whether we want to give them that, whether we want to share it with them or not—we have something to offer each other." He said, "We, in America, became too mechanical, in a way, to offer that something." He say, "We don't embrace." He said, "The closest we get in fellowship," he say, "we reach out our hands and shake hands with you," and he said, "What that means, 'I don't have a gun in this right hand', you know, and they extend it to prove it." He said, "But always if you wanna hug a tree, you hug a tree." And he said, "Remember to respect Mother Earth." He told about how she give you what you need and everything, and those are some of the things he told me. Many others of which I can't recall at this time, but it was quite interesting. And then I was thinking about this, about my thoughts, of leapfrogging, as it were, to using the tree as a point to move from. "The tree is somewhat like a human being. That the force of a tree, anything that a tree is, must come from its inside. And the sap that moves up through the tree is what conveys that force. The same thing is with a human being. Whatever he or she is to be, that force must emanate, must come from

within. First it came from Mother Earth, and then it come through us, to the individual." And that's how it is with anything that you find in life. There is where your talent lie, or any area of responsilibity or concern, [where] you can get that power with which to promote whatever that something is in a constructive way.

PK: Some of your most potent works, I feel—small sculpture, large sculpture—incorporate, oh, an owl or a bird of some type. I can't tell what kind they are. They look like Washington birds to me—I mean, James Washington birds.

JW: Um hmm.

PK: They have their own personalities. But they often are emerging from the stone, they are one with the stone, they appear as if they're being born, maybe out of eggs. This is obviously a conscious symbolism—or imagery—that you repeat. And I'm sure you've been asked this before, but I'll ask it again, can you tell me what that means?

JW: Well, it means that all life come from an egg. Or all life emanates from an egg. I had a doctor in here once, and he had commissioned me to do a piece of sculpture for his wife, and I showed him on the screen there a bunny coming out of an egg, being hatched, and he said, "Washington," he said, "a bunny doesn't come out of an egg; a rabbit doesn't come out of an egg!" I say, "Do you know, Doctor, that all life come out of an egg? It takes only three things to produce life? And the egg is the largest cell, or the only cell, you can see with the natural eye? First we have the egg sperm, and the genes. Do you not know that?" He say, "Well, you had a ready answer for me, didn't ya?" (laughs)

PK: Did he take the piece?

JW: Well, he taken the piece he had commissioned me to do. Oh, yeah. That wasn't the piece that he had commmisioned me to do, but he had taken it, he came for to pick up the piece, but I showed him on the screen the rabbit coming out of an egg, so after then, I'd kid him about it. I say, "Doctor, you know where life came from?" He say, "Well, I didn't know you know, I didn't know you knew enough about biology." (laughs)

PK: Why a rabbit?

JW: Huh?

PK: Why a rabbit?

JW: It could have been most anything coming out of an egg. It could have been a fish, coming out of an egg. It could have been anything. It could have been a human being, out of an egg. In other words, no limit to it.

PK: What about those cases where the animal seems somewhat trapped in the stone? I mean, that's my word, but they seem, the animal seems part of the stone, not fully. . . . They're hiding in the stone. Sometimes you look at your sculpture and you say, "Oh! That's a little animal!"

JW: Yeah. Well, this is the thing. All life come from an egg, and the stone is the matrix—or egg. And therefore you can show it partially revealed or completely revealed. It depend on what stage of development you want him in, and sometime it has greater significance if you partly reveal it. You observe the innocentness of the thing in question. And that innocentness is that spiritual force that it takes to really energize or sensitize anything. And you become more sensitive and aware of that. Just like if you, if some men and women would be in here now, and we were talking and possibly drinking or not drinking, and eating or something, and all of a sudden somebody bring a little baby in here. You'd get a different feeling.

PK: That's right. I'd hope so.

JW: Yeah, you would. You'd see a little young baby. You'd look at that little baby and you would just feel, there's just some energy about him that wasn't in here before.

PK: Is that why you are attracted in your work to the small animals, that sometimes seem vulnerable and. . . .

JW: Yeah. What I'm trying to do, I'm trying to see what is that the artist in his attempt to depict subject matter, what is it that makes that subject matter stand out? Is it the subject, is [it] the subject in question, is it the composition, or is it the spiritual force? And I say it's the spiritual force. So then, if there's a spiritual force, I'm trying to see how much of that force I can use. Whether I have the capacity to really make that thing come alive each time, more and more, whatever that subject. And all through my life. The more you make them come alive the better you feel. Because you become a part of that life, because it come through you. And you feel that life emerging from you. And you become energized, you become rejuvenated, as a result of this life flowing through you, and you inject it into the subject matter. For instance, if I would just do things according to what the books say—or what my teachers told me to do such as proportion and all like that—and I be exteriorly motivated, I

won’t have that sensitivity. But if I’m looking for and feeling for that quality, then I might distort the anatomy, like ElGreco, but still instill life.

PK: Does ElGreco have the power?

JW: He has the power to a great degree. But he can distort the anatomy and still have it.

PK: Well, some people would say that therein lies the power, that it’s the distortion. . . .

JW: No.

PK: . . . that can help bring out, help express the power.

JW: No.

PK: No?

JW: No, well, you can say this: That if you have the liberty to do it, if you have the force within you, then the freedom you get from distorting the anatomy will lend itself more to it under those circumstances, than if you adhere to rigid proportion. If you adhere to rigid proportion, then you’re in a straightjacket somewhat. If you can distort the anatomy, and still get that in there, that’s the sum total of your art—the power—and not whether or not you did or did not distort the anatomy. See, the artist is at liberty to sacrifice the detail for the whole.

PK: Right.

JW: Okay? And then you have to define what the whole consist of. The whole is spirituality and not subject matter, or how much paint he put on the canvas. The whole is how much force he put into his work. That’s the whole. Most of the rest can be eliminated. But still, you get on to something you perceive rather than see.

PK: And so we get back, we end up sort of where we started, in a sense.

JW: Well, everything goes in cycle. (chuckles) You know? Even the Scriptures say, “Everything that has been is now.” That’s the repetitive of the cycle. “Everything that has been is now. Everything that is to be has already been.” (chuckles)

PK: And maybe everything that is now will be.

JW: And then it says, then the next verse, the next part of [the] verse say, “And God expects that which is past.” Other words, he expect that which is past to come around again. (chuckling)

PK: Is that what makes possible this universal language, this sort of system of force, of universal force, the fact that it is, there’s an order to it. . . .

JW: There’s an order.

PK: . . . things are repeated. . . .

JW: There’s order to it.

PK: . . . no matter what the time, who the people are.

JW: Yes.

PK: And would you say that that’s then what you’re trying to make visible?

JW: That’s right. Other words, how can man reach his zenith so far as acquiring and utilizing this force? As it involves him and his talent? Not just doing another job, but involve him and his talent. And you acquire this quality depending on the talent you use. You might have three or four talents. But you’ve got to know which one to use to get the most out of it, in order to use more of this quality. You’ve got to know the right one. It might be painting; it might be sculpture. You might leave ‘A’ and go to ‘B’. And if you find a stronger urge at ‘B’ than you found at ‘A’, then you stay at ‘B’ or go to ‘C’. If you go to ‘C’ and not find it, you should go back to ‘A’ or ‘B’. This is what you’re supposed to be looking for, spritual force and not another fad.

PK: So the key is finally to recognize that skill, that ability through which you can best channel the force, or express [it].

JW: Yes, other words, you must be able to perceive this force. Whether or not it’s there. And not just because somebody else was successful at it or was not successful. It’s what you can do. And if you find this force in a

certain tangent you pursue, that’s your niche.

PK: Well, it certainly seems as if you’ve found your niche.

JW: Thank you.

PK: And I. . . . I think this is a perfect place to end. I can’t think of what more we can add at this point. So thank you.

JW: You’re welcome. Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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