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Oral history interview with Jeffrey Meris,
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Contact Information

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

Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Jeffrey Meris on September 2, 2020. The interview took place at Meris's studio in New Haven, Connecticut and was conducted by Fernanda Espinosa for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution. This interview is part of the Archives of American Art's Pandemic Oral History Project.

This transcript has been lightly edited for readability by the Archives of American Art. The reader should bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of spoken, rather than written, prose.

Interview

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Hi, Jeffrey. Welcome, uh, and thank you for joining me for this interview. How are you?

JEFFREY MERIS: Thank you. I'm good. Thank you for having me, Fernanda, and the Smithsonian.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Sure. So, as you mentioned, this is an interview for the Smithsonian Institution at the Archives of American Art, uh. And I'm Fernanda Espinosa. I'm recording, uh, an interview for the Pandemic Project with artist Jeffrey Meris, um. And Jeffrey, if you can just start by telling me a little bit about how these past few months, uh, have been for you?

JEFFREY MERIS: So, I feel as though there's been—I think, ebb and flow would perfectly describe how the last, I think, six months now, seven, six, five months have been, uh. The first few weeks have been—were extremely disorienting and confusing. And there was the sense of panic and dread and disorientation. Having everything that I was so used to, my—in terms of like scheduling and being able to socialize and be in the world freely, having that cut off and having to mitigate being in the world in that way was extremely hard. But eventually, uh, I feel as though I settled into the solitude and being with myself and being with my art and really trying to find a new way of being in the world. And eventually, I finally found contentment in that. And so, lately, it's been, like, wow, I can't believe that the world is opening again. And somehow, I need—I have to leave the solitude and go back into, like, the madness of the capitalist machinery that we will also sort of used to pre-COVID.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. So, you're currently at the NXTHVN Residency with other fellow artists, um. Can you tell me a little bit about how it has been for you to share these community space with other artists during these these transition times?

JEFFREY MERIS: Again, it's been one of those things that was super interesting. Um, I, first off, have to say how much I love and respect the artists that I share space with because everyone approaches art-making in such unique, interesting ways. And that research and methodology and interest in materiality is also lively and engaging. But uh, COVID happened and that completely caused us to almost, like—well, it literally physically distanced us. So, once upon a time, we were all together and literally holding hands. And it felt like one team. It felt like the Dream Team. And it still is in a lot of ways. But we had to become very conscientious of how we were existing architecturally, how we were occupying space. And being that we're all inevitably tied and implicated and into one another's personal lives, it became this situation where the personal—where each one of our personal lives, I think, started to bleed into the communal space here. So, you have to be careful of where you exist in the world, because that has repercussions. You know, for instance, I was a frequent traveler to New York, pre-COVID. But once COVID happened and New York sort of being one of the epicenters of COVID, I had to curtail my involvement with that area, because I was existing in this space where my actions could affect others. So, just, yeah, being very conscious of what's good for me personally, but also what's good for the sake of this community.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. So, as you know, the pandemic is happening, but also there's been a lot of changes and uprisings, um, in the United States in the past few months, uh, especially since May. What are your observations, and uh, what have been reflections around these times, um, as a person, uh, in the U.S., also as a person that's, uh, from a country outside the U.S.?

[00:05:12]

JEFFREY MERIS: I think it's one of those things that I find extremely confusing that, you know, African Americans and people of African Diaspora in America asking to be treated equally. It's one of those things that really confuses me that there is resistance, uh, for people asking to be seen as humans. You know, there's resistance to people saying that America is a police state; there's resistance to people asking for an end of white supremacy, yeah. And there's resistance to, you know, people asking for a more fair and just future for all Americans. You know, it almost blows my mind, really. Coming from a country that is predominantly Black and having to assimilate into this idea of, um, Black inferiority in a lot of ways, even though we know that that's a fallacy. But, it simply is mind blowing that this is the state of race relations in America. And I—yeah, I feel as though it's really an educational problem because if a lot of these people that claim to be white supremacists in the way that they are, you know, if you really dig into history of America, I think no person with moral, sound conscious could ever be angry at a Black person for asking for equality, after almost 400 years of being exploited in this country, yeah, and being mistreated and being written outside of history of this country. Finally, there's a moment where the masses are saying, "Hey, this is really messed up. And we need to rethink this." Yet there's still mass resistance by people who find their identity in this fallacy of whiteness. But I think, I think it's an interesting time. And I hope that this resistance keeps up and that it doesn't become subdued or, you know, it doesn't die down. Because there's been a lot of movement lately, like Occupy Wall Street. I really wish that occupy it really formed into a more substantive movement that it turned out to be, but I really hope that the Black Lives Matter movement really continues on and that we really see some real change, whether it's in November, whether it's next January. But hopefully I'm alive to see the change.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: What have you been, um, working on? Not necessarily that it has to be in reaction or anything like that, but thinking of your work as something that talks about the collective but also the personal, uh, what has been your approach during this time?

JEFFREY MERIS: Very interesting. So, I've been working on a few projects that started, um, both pre-COVID and things that were either affected or was in direct conversation with COVID. I've been making these kinetic sculptures and these kinetic sculptures that sort of—these kinetic sculptures that confronts the white gaze but using the blackboard as the central mode of communication in that conversation. And from there, I've been making these drawings on roofing paper. But more importantly, I think the most interesting thing for me that happened during this pandemic era has been—so, it's been about 24 weeks now that we've been in this mode of pandemic crisis, and about 1,800—1,000—82,000 people have died, um, and millions infected in America. And just after the pandemic was declared, I was in a really dark place. And because my whole social fabric was disrupted, and I needed to take care of myself. And so, I started this practice called Self-Care Saturday. And so, Saturdays I wouldn't come to the studio at all—for the bulk of Self-Care Saturday, I wouldn't come to the studio at all. I started gardening, and I started taking care of plants. And I started becoming more attentive to my skin and sort of my own emotional wellness and my own emotional intelligence and developing, uh, healthier eating habits and learning how to, uh, practice somatic care that wasn't so tied to capitalism.

[00:10:14]

Because I feel like that's one of the big issues that this pandemic has shown us is that our reliance on capitalism is just unhealthy and unsustainable. So, my question then became, like, what are ways in which I could take care of myself that wasn't directly, um, in relationship or directly dependent on capital. And so, I've been doing Self-Care Saturday for about 24 weeks now. And Self-Care Saturday itself has, uh, evolved into a—from just a cute slogan, you know, because it's like SCS. And it, kind of—you know, it's nice and catchy. But it has evolved from just being a slogan into a way of life. And so, I've developed the Institute of Self-Care, which doesn't—which isn't solely about me, but it's about community. And it's about providing spaces of care and, um, cadence and levity, yeah. Because it's so easy in these times to turn on your TV to look at BBC or CNN or Fox News or whatever, open your cell phone, Instagram, and see a picture of Black people being harassed or being tortured or terrorized by the police. But how often you see Black people being cared for and being in spaces where our bodies are protected, where we are one both physically and emotionally and spiritually? So, the institute of self-care is something that I'm actively thinking about and creating an intentional space to care for Black people and to care for Blackness. And I'm really excited to see where it goes, um, as time continues to unfold. Um, I'm beginning to think of partner organizations that could continue to support the work that I'm doing with this. And I'm just generally excited to see—I mean, it sucks that it took a pandemic for me to come to this point where I've realized that self-care is really important, you know, and that we have to hold each other accountable and share this knowledge with one another. [Inaudible.]

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Sorry. Can you tell me a little bit more about how the Self-Care Institute is manifesting right now?

JEFFREY MERIS: So, right now, I—right now I have about five close friends, um, that have been walking this journey with me, um. And we've used—we've used Saturday as like the sort of prime meeting point, um. So, I always thought of a very beautiful brunch [laughs], breakfast. And I know that's like an extremely privileged thing, because there's people that can't afford to do that. But if you can, I recommend doing that. And then I take care of all of my plants. So, that looks like watering about 45 plants. That takes about an hour-and-a-half. And um, then there's a bunch of like skin regimens that I do. And then I read, um, for about two hours and then I work out and various other activities. Recently, I've started going to the studio again on Saturday, because I realized that studio is self-care. You know, it doesn't have to be separate from that. These things are always in conversation, so I do that. And I think that the highlight of the day is always a really decadent meal, um. So, recently, I've switched my diet over to about—being about 70 percent organic, um, organic, non-GMO foods. So, I think education is really vital—education, health care, food access. Um, I started gardening. So, in the Institute of Self-Care, these are all going to be—it's about self-care, but it's also about education. It's about making these sort of opportunities the same way that, you know, I have this knowledge about how to care for my body and how to live a healthier life, and how to be more present in the world, um. So, it's about making that space available for others.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: That sounds amazing. I think I've been doing Self-Care Saturdays without knowing I was.

[00:14:52]

[They laugh.]

JEFFREY MERIS: Yeah, right. Yeah. You know, I think, like—I think a lot of us have, right? If you just think about the amount of people that baked bread throughout this pandemic? You know, there's something about baking bread that makes you extremely happy. As a matter of fact, I baked bread last night.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: [Laughs.] Yeah. Going back to, um, who you are right now in the United States, I know for other artists that have their families, um, far away from them, it's been different to navigate relationships with the distance. How has that been for you? If you do have—I'm not sure if you do still have families—family in the Bahamas, but how have you navigated those relationships?

JEFFREY MERIS: So, all of my family is in the Bahamas. I have one brother that's in Orlando. But other than that, everyone's in the Bahamas. And um—excuse me. I'm here as an immigrant. I'm—yeah, I'm here as an immigrant. And I think this moment has really brought us closer together, you know, because it shows you to focus on the things that matter, you know. Specifically in this moment of Black Lives Matter, you know, I think Black Lives Matter is—and, you know, I think the word "radical" is such a suspicious word right now, because it has lost all of its meaning. But if we could think about the word radical pre-this administration, I think it really is that because I think at the heart of Black Lives Matters is like this question of race and feminism, yeah. So, I think about my mom whenever I think about that. And I think about all these women that are losing their children to the hand—to the hands of police, you know, and state violence. So, I think this moment has, like, really caused me to really think about my mother, you know. Because if something was to happen to me, she would probably be the person most affected by that. So, this—all this has just really brought us really close together, and we check in with each other. And she's extremely worried and, you know, just telling me to not get in trouble, even though getting in trouble isn't a reason for the police to ever kill anybody. So, that said, I think, yeah, it's brought us—you know, we're physically very far apart, but I think we're emotionally connected.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Um, Jeffrey, I like to start ending this interview by asking, where do you see yourself, uh, and your work going from here?

JEFFREY MERIS: [Laughs.] It's always the best question. I love this one so much. I think that's, uh—it's really hard to answer that because I think COVID has made vision extremely unclear. You know, I almost can't see to next week. But if—I think [laughs], yeah, it's, like, I don't know what's going to happen next week. It's, like, am I going to get COVID and die? I don't know. But I think more in terms of visibility and the sort of world that I want to live in, I would like to use my

practice to make space for others, um, because I come from a space with so many artists that are so creative and have so much to offer the world. But unfortunately, because we're in a small place where art isn't really the conversation that the Bahamas is known for, you know, it's not what we're—what's expected from us. So, going forward, I think if I could use my practice to make space for other people and to create nuance to the conversation that's happening back in my hometown, that would be what I would like for my work to do and for my life work to—that's the kind of conversation I'd like to have.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Awesome. And finally, is there anything that you'd like to, uh, document in this interview that I didn't bring up or that I didn't ask you about?

[00:19:48]

JEFFREY MERIS: Yeah, I think I just want to shoutout to all those Black women that are doing the work out there, you know. I think that's what I'd like to say. Because it's really Black women inside of the Black Lives Matter movement. You know, as Black women that are doing the work in this country, so I'd just like to shout them out.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: All right. Thank you so much.

JEFFREY MERIS: Thank you, Fernanda. That was really cool [laughs]. You got me feeling like I went—I feel like I went to church just now.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: [Laughs.] All right. Thanks, Jeffrey. I hope we can stay connected.

JEFFREY MERIS: Thank you. Yeah.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Take care.

JEFFREY MERIS: Yeah, I'm always around. Bye-bye.

FERNANDA ESPINOSA: Bye.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]