



Smithsonian
Archives of American Art

Oral history interview with Paul
Waters, 2022 June 29

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Paul Waters on June 29, 2022. The interview took place over Zoom and was conducted by Melissa Ho for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Paul Waters and Melissa Ho have reviewed the transcript. Their corrections and emendations appear below in brackets with initials. 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

[00:00:02.97] MELISSA HO: Okay. And we are recording. This is Melissa Ho interviewing Paul Waters, who is in New York City. Um, and the date is June 29, 2022. And this is an interview for the Archives of American Art at the Smithsonian.

[00:00:20.91] Um, Paul, let's start at the beginning. Uh, you were born in Philadelphia, I, I believe. Is that right?

[00:00:27.48] PAUL WATERS: Yes, on May 30, 1936.

[00:00:34.38] MELISSA HO: Uh, could you tell me a little bit about your family? Who were your parents, and, um what were they like?

[00:00:38.20] PAUL WATERS: My parents—uh, sure. My father was born in Virginia. My mother was born in the Bahamas.

[00:00:48.57] MELISSA HO: Mm [affirmative].

[00:00:48.81] PAUL WATERS: They met on a beach in Ocean City, New Jersey and, uh, got married. And I'm the story.

[00:00:59.37] MELISSA HO: [Laughs.] You're the outcome.

[00:01:00.78] PAUL WATERS: Yes. There's something on the screen. I don't know if that's supposed to be there.

[00:01:09.62] MELISSA HO: Uh, is it, is it, uh, a prompt that is distracting you?

[00:01:12.59] PAUL WATERS: Yes. It's okay now. Yes, it's good.

[00:01:15.38] MELISSA HO: Great. Um, can you tell me a little bit more about your, your mother and father. What, uh, did—did they each have a profession?

[00:01:23.78] PAUL WATERS: My mother was very—my mother was very much much into education and, uh, was very strict about it. Introduced me to art in a very early age—at a very early age, and, uh, got me into a Saturday program.

[00:01:43.37] The Fleisher Memorial Art School in Philadelphia had a Saturday program for very young people. Uh, as a child, I attended—I started there in the fourth grade. I think I had stayed there until the ninth grade. And it was very rewarding. Because once a month, we, uh, were taken to the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

[00:02:09.03] MELISSA HO: Mm [affirmative].

[00:02:10.79] PAUL WATERS: So I had a exposure that was very, very valuable at a very early age.

[00:02:18.42] My father was, uh, not so much interested in pushing me as my mother was, but they—they were both very supportive and, uh, kept me interested—I should put it that way—kept me interested in the arts.

[00:02:41.37] MELISSA HO: And were—I believe that you had a lot of educators in your

family. Was that on both your mother and your father's—

[00:02:50.29] PAUL WATERS: Both—both sides. Both sides, yes—educators.

[00:02:54.84] MELISSA HO: And both your—both your parents as well?

[00:02:56.94] PAUL WATERS: Educators.

[00:02:57.90] MELISSA HO: Educators, yeah.

[00:03:00.54] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:03:00.78] MELISSA HO: You had no choice but to be educated.

[00:03:02.85] PAUL WATERS: I had no choice. I had no choice.

[00:03:05.34] MELISSA HO: I'm curious to hear more, both about your experiences at the Fleisher, and, um, if there were particular works that the Philadelphia Museum collection that made an early impression on you, you know at this grade school age that you're talking about.

[00:03:21.45] PAUL WATERS: My earliest—my earliest age was my fascination with trolley cars.

[00:03:28.92] MELISSA HO: Hm.

[00:03:29.37] PAUL WATERS: Trolley cars were very prominent in Philadelphia when I was growing up. And, uh, I was very attracted to them. My earliest paintings are of tra—trolley cars. Trolley cars. And Fleisher allowed me to use my fingers instead of brushes, uh, which made me feel very comfortable.

[00:03:52.27] I could do things with my fingers that I couldn't do with brushes. So, uh, they always hung some of my work in the exhibitions of the students. And, uh, it was very different from everybody else, as I remember.

[00:04:09.78] Most students—in fact, everybody used a brush of some kind. So, uh, that was unique to allow me that experience and not to, uh, coax me into using brushes I thought was rather extraordinary.

[00:04:28.07] MELISSA HO: And I—I know the Fleisher is in South Philadelphia. Did you grow up in that neighborhood or elsewhere in Philadelphia?

[00:04:34.26] PAUL WATERS: I grew up in North Philadelphia. I—I took a trolley car to South Philadelphia every Saturday. And, uh, it was about a half-hour trolley car ride from my neighborhood. But you have to remember that students came to Fleisher from all over the city. It was a citywide program.

[00:04:56.18] Uh, the Board of Ed at the time and Fleisher Memorial had a program where they would pick certain students from, uh, different schools and, uh, introduce them to Fleisher and the Saturday program. So, uh, my elementary school, George G. Meade's school-- General George G. Meade's school—uh, had this program and chose me as one of the participants in the Saturday program.

[00:05:32.01] And, of course, my parents were very excited about it when they, uh, understood what it was about. So it was, uh, definitely a big impression on me.

[00:05:44.32] MELISSA HO: Yeah. Yeah. So I think you said this started in fourth grade all the way to high school.

[00:05:51.55] PAUL WATERS: Ninth grade, yes.

[00:05:52.42] MELISSA HO: Yeah. And, um, what was Philadelphia like at that time that you were growing up in Philly?

[00:06:04.15] PAUL WATERS: Well, it was a—schools were very good. I had a good education, I think. Uh, the city was good. I grew up around Temple University.

[00:06:24.00] MELISSA HO: Okay, yeah.

[00:06:24.12] PAUL WATERS: Y'know, there was a lot of educational reinforcement, a lot of educational activity. There was always something going on.

[00:06:32.10] I lived around the corner from a library, so I was there—I spent a lot of time there. And, uh, it was good. I had a good experience. I would say it was very good—very good experience growing up.

[00:06:49.39] MELISSA HO: And you mentioned that both of your parents were, um, originally from elsewhere.

[00:06:56.34] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:06:56.79] MELISSA HO: How did they come to Philadelphia? Were—was their extended family in Philadelphia or—

[00:07:01.42] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Yes. Lots of family in Philadelphia—

[00:07:05.16] MELISSA HO: Oh, wonderful.

[00:07:06.41] PAUL WATERS: —and surrounding community—Uh, Chester, Pennsylvania, Pottstown—

[00:07:18.20] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:07:22.06] PAUL WATERS: Uh, Allentown, uh, Scranton, Erie.

[00:07:25.96] MELISSA HO: All over PA.

[00:07:27.25] PAUL WATERS: Yes, all over.

[00:07:30.08] MELISSA HO: And what was your high school experience?

[00:07:34.56] PAUL WATERS: Um, my high school was Northeast High School. I went to high school when they, uh, separated boys from girls. So all of the high schools were either girls' high schools or boys' high schools.

[00:07:49.09] Northeast was a very good high school. Uh, I did not have an art program, uh, but I did very well in the academics, especially in the sciences. I was very attracted to math—or mathematics. And, uh, I would say I had a good experience.

[00:08:11.09] MELISSA HO: Did you at that point, um, aspire to become an artist? Or were you interested in other paths as well?

[00:08:22.16] PAUL WATERS: I was, uh, always drawing, painting sketching. In fact, uh, I used to go to the Philadelphia Zoo and stand outside, uh, when I was in high school and sketch people on holidays. And I think I charged 50 cents for a sketch—

[00:08:47.67] MELISSA HO: Oh.

[00:08:47.79] PAUL WATERS: —in those years. So it was—I was always tuned into some form of art.

[00:08:56.81] And, uh, I had a nice experience doing that, as I remember. Uh, some people came back with different members of their families. I would see the same people over the course of time when I did this. I would always pick the same spot. And, uh, I just remember being received very well. People were very polite, uh, very appreciative. Sketching—sketching faces took maybe 10 minutes—

[00:09:36.40] MELISSA HO: You were an—

[00:09:36.70] PAUL WATERS: —not more than, not more than 15.

[00:09:38.05] MELISSA HO: You were an artist and an entrepreneur at a young age. [They laugh.]

[00:09:43.12] PAUL WATERS: Well, 50 cents apiece.

[00:09:45.46] MELISSA HO: That's not bad.

[00:09:47.07] PAUL WATERS: Fifty cents was a, y'know, it's a big deal.

[00:09:50.53] MELISSA HO: Absolutely. That's—that's terrific. Um, did you—did—did you have any other, um, artists in your family, or people that—that, um, were role models in terms of pursuing a career in art? I—I—I think you had mentioned to me on another occasion that your—your parents were collectors of—of art objects.

[00:10:16.73] PAUL WATERS: Yeah. My parents did have African art in the house, and it was very inspiring and very fascinating. So that had a lot of influence. Uh, as you grow older, you want to know where these pieces come from. So it's a, uh—it's an interesting, uh, search—

[00:10:36.04] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:10:36.37] PAUL WATERS: —to look, uh, at maps to see the countries and see the tribes and, uh, what kind of work they—what kind of artifacts came from those peoples. Yes, that was fascinating.

[00:10:51.65] MELISSA HO: So what years would that have been that your parents were collecting African art? Is this in—

[00:10:57.37] PAUL WATERS: During the Second World War.

[00:10:58.87] MELISSA HO: During the Second World War.

[00:10:59.86] PAUL WATERS: It would be from 1940 to 1945, 1946.

[00:11:04.87] MELISSA HO: Wow.

[00:11:05.05] PAUL WATERS: They had a friend in Philadelphia who, uh, sold African art. He was rather eccentric. Uh, went away for, uh—to collect art. And in those years, I remember him closing his house maybe for four or five months, and then coming back and—and opening it. And as a little boy, I remember running around and looking at all of the things. Uh, it was fascinating. Very exposed to—a lot of exposure.

[00:11:41.48] MELISSA HO: So this is a person who actually went and traveled himself and collected things, um—

[00:11:48.34] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:11:48.91] MELISSA HO: —abroad and brought them back to Philadelphia. That's fascinating.

[00:11:51.58] PAUL WATERS: Rather eccentric person, uh, yes.

[00:11:55.21] MELISSA HO: Was this an African American—

[00:11:58.03] PAUL WATERS: Uh, no. No, he was not African—

[00:11:59.72] MELISSA HO: —or a—okay.

[00:12:00.49] PAUL WATERS: He was not African American.

[00:12:02.41] MELISSA HO: Interesting.

[00:12:02.85] PAUL WATERS: His house was full of stuff. It was a three-story house, I think, on Chestnut Street in what we call Center City in Philadelphia. And, uh, like I said, he was eccentric.

[00:12:15.88] The, uh—a lot of the African items were in the front windows. I mean, you couldn't do that now with no bars, no kind of barricade. And, uh, he'd go off and close the house, and then come back and open it. So it was, uh, very unusual.

[00:12:37.55] MELISSA HO: And what kind of pieces were your parents attracted to that they collected? Was it car—sculpture, textile?

[00:12:44.38] PAUL WATERS: Sculpture.

[00:12:45.52] MELISSA HO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:12:46.64] PAUL WATERS: Sculpture, yes.

[00:12:47.80] MELISSA HO: Wow. Do you think that influenced your becoming such a traveler yourself? Uh—

[00:12:54.79] PAUL WATERS: I think it had a lot of influence on my traveling and my interest in, uh, other people, other parts of the world—

[00:13:05.00] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:13:05.47] PAUL WATERS: —especially Africa. I traveled extensively in Africa, uh, over a six-year period—

[00:13:15.61] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:13:15.88] PAUL WATERS: —was able to see many different attractions, many different persuasions artistically. And, uh, helped me in my imagination, although I kept painting. I mean, I was painting all of this time. I didn't stop. Uh, I did a lot of sketches. I had books of sketches from, uh, my—my trips to Africa. I still use them. I still use them as references.

[00:13:45.11] MELISSA HO: Really?

[00:13:45.86] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:13:47.54] MELISSA HO: Interesting. Interesting. Well, le—let's not entirely skip over your college years. Did you go straight to college from high school in Philadelphia? Or—or was there a gap?

[00:14:02.63] PAUL WATERS: I went—I went to college after three years of—of high—after I left high school, I traveled for three years and, uh—

[00:14:17.07] MELISSA HO: Oh wow.

[00:14:17.49] PAUL WATERS: —started college.

[00:14:18.45] MELISSA HO: Okay. I didn't realize that. So the traveling started really um—

[00:14:23.61] PAUL WATERS: I was 17—

[00:14:24.28] MELISSA HO: You were 17 or 18? And where did—where did you go on that first—that was your first time doing international travel?

[00:14:32.55] PAUL WATERS: I went to England. I went to London.

[00:14:34.41] MELISSA HO: Okay.

[00:14:37.15] PAUL WATERS: My mother said, if you want to see African art go to London, which I did. And then, uh, from London I went to, uh—I went to, uh—I went to Paris. After Paris, I went to Berlin and then, uh, to Africa.

[00:15:02.51] MELISSA HO: Wow. And that was a three-year period.

[00:15:08.06] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:15:08.75] MELISSA HO: So were you living in, uh, a number of places for extended periods, or were you really on the move that whole time?

[00:15:17.02] PAUL WATERS: Yes. I did very well. I did very well. I was very welcomed into, uh, living with different families. Uh, I, uh—I tr—traveled very cheaply. Y'know, in those days, you could get around, uh, uh, with very little money.

[00:15:40.36] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:15:40.63] PAUL WATERS: And then every now and then, I'd even pick up money by doing different chores for people. Backpacking was, uh, nominal. I mean, it was very inexpensive.

[00:15:56.71] MELISSA HO: Paul, was that an unusual thing to—so what year would this have been?

[00:16:02.98] PAUL WATERS: This was in 1954, '55, '56—

[00:16:09.09] MELISSA HO: And were there—

[00:16:09.87] PAUL WATERS: —or '57.

[00:16:11.13] MELISSA HO: Were—were there many Americans your age sort of hitting the road, so to speak, at that time?

[00:16:18.33] PAUL WATERS: No. It was—I think that—no. No. That—I think that was an advantage for me.

[00:16:23.98] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:16:24.28] PAUL WATERS: And so I was—I was—I think view it as something different from what a traveler—what a tourist was supposed to be. And that was an advantage. That was an advantage. It really helped me.

[00:16:40.86] And like I said, some people invited me to stay with them. I had—I met families where I lived, uh, for periods of time. And, uh, I did my sketches.

[00:16:53.91] Uh, it was interesting how I could get a sketch of somebody and stay with the family for three or four days, or sketch the whole family and, uh, get free meals. So that was an advantage.

[00:17:10.04] MELISSA HO: Wow.

[00:17:10.73] PAUL WATERS: I always had sketching books. I think that was the most important part of my travel to have sketching books.

[00:17:18.75] MELISSA HO: So would you set up in public, just as you had at the Philadelphia Zoo, and sort of sketch people and meet people that way? How did-- how did you connect?

[00:17:27.24] PAUL WATERS: I did it in many different—I did it in many different countries, many different countries. Uh, some—some countries, uh, it was very, uh, it was very encouraging. I would get three meals. I would charge, uh, a very minimal amount of money if I needed it. And, uh, it worked. It worked. It was a, uh, real good talent to have at my age. And it served me very well.

[00:18:12.10] MELISSA HO: So, um, you had gone to London, to Paris, Berlin-- these major metropolises. Then you went to Africa. Where did you go in Africa?

[00:18:24.86] PAUL WATERS: I started in Senegal, and I, uh, went to the North. I went to Algiers. From Algiers, I went to Egypt. From Egypt, I went to Ethiopia. From Ethiopia, I went down to, uh, the Sudan and down to, uh—well, I, uh, I did Kenya, and then down to South Africa where I stayed for 2 and a half months. Uh, and then I came up to Angola. Uh, and then to Ghana. I spent a month in Mali, and, uh, that's about it.

[00:19:22.42] MELISSA HO: That's, um—that's impressive. [Laughs].

[00:19:26.14] PAUL WATERS: Well, it was a wonderful experience. I was very young. I was a teenager. And I, uh, got away with sketching people—kept me going.

[00:19:38.29] MELISSA HO: And how—I'm curious. How, um-- how were you received in all these different countries as an American? Because it—it's sounding like there's probably not that many American travelers coming through at that time.

[00:19:58.06] PAUL WATERS: Well, that's an interesting question. You could feel the churning of—of, uh—of change—

[00:20:06.14] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:20:06.58] PAUL WATERS: Especially in Ghana. I remember talking to students, and they were talking about change—the way they thought, uh, change was coming to Africa.

[00:20:17.23] And this is before 1960.

[00:20:19.85] MELISSA HO: Right.

[00:20:19.96] PAUL WATERS: This is before things really started to happen. There was a lot of change after I left, uh. But you could feel it. I mean, all—all of the young people were talking about it.

[00:20:32.41] MELISSA HO: So you were able to connect with people your own age in each of these places.

[00:20:36.64] PAUL WATERS: Absolutely.

[00:20:38.79] MELISSA HO: That's amazing. That's fantastic. So, um, what compelled you—well, I have a lot—I have so many questions. Um, what did your parents think about this long, um, sort of wandering, and were they supportive? And, um, what ultimately—

[00:20:58.68] PAUL WATERS: They were very supportive.

[00:20:59.67] MELISSA HO: —made you come home?

[00:21:00.45] PAUL WATERS: They were very supportive—concerned about my safety. Always concerned about my safety. But very supportive.

[00:21:09.70] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:21:09.72] PAUL WATERS: Uh, I think they were annoyed a little bit with my, uh, need for funds after a while. But, uh, very supportive.

[00:21:19.82] MELISSA HO: When you left—when you left, did you think you were going to be away for that extended a period and just—

[00:21:28.74] PAUL WATERS: Well, I had saved \$600. So, I, uh—\$600, to me, was, y'know, a fortune. So, uh, \$600 got me to, uh, many places. Y'know, uh, I was very low maintenance. I didn't need much. I had everything that I needed in my bag, um. Yes. I—I think they were impressed with the fact that I did have \$600.

[00:22:01.78] MELISSA HO: [Laughs].

[00:22:01.87] PAUL WATERS: I had saved that, y'know, high school money.

[00:22:06.07] MELISSA HO: Sketching at the zoo.

[00:22:07.66] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:22:09.94] MELISSA HO: And what, um, what compelled you to return home after three years? Did you just—

[00:22:17.56] PAUL WATERS: Well, I wanted to go to college.

[00:22:19.33] MELISSA HO: Okay.

[00:22:19.69] PAUL WATERS: I wanted to go to college. And, uh—

[00:22:23.00] MELISSA HO: And where did you go and why?

[00:22:25.41] PAUL WATERS: I went to Goddard College in Vermont. Uh, the program there was very sensible for somebody that had my experiences, my life experiences. Uh, y'know, I started later than, uh, most students as freshmen. And, uh, most of the learning there was tutorial, which fitted me perfectly.

[00:22:58.22] And [phone rings] I met Joseph Fulop, Hungarian abstract expressionist. He was very encouraging and, uh, got me very interested in, uh, oil painting. I started oil painting while I was under his tutelage—very inspiring.

[00:23:28.64] MELISSA HO: So up till that point, you had mostly been drawing and not—not painting with oils.

[00:23:34.52] PAUL WATERS: No. Sketching, drawing, and watercolors, mostly.

[00:23:41.06] MELISSA HO: And were you an art major at Goddard?

[00:23:45.11] PAUL WATERS: No. I, uh, was very attracted to philosophy, science, mathematics.

[00:23:56.92] MELISSA HO: So that was [three -PW] years in Vermont?

[00:24:00.40] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:24:02.53] MELISSA HO: Um, and I believe you did another long travel after graduation, is that right, where you were eager—eager to go abroad again?

[00:24:11.41] PAUL WATERS: Yes. I did another three years. I certainly did. This time a little different.

[00:24:17.77] MELISSA HO: Yeah. What—what was the route this time?

[00:24:22.26] PAUL WATERS: Uh, the same route, but an emphasis on reading, writing—journal writing, lots of journal writing, uh, little more sophistication. But I was able to use the same—same technique of sketching to get by.

[00:24:44.95] MELISSA HO: And, um, what—additional countries, too, I think, right? Did you do Europe, Africa, and then beyond?

[00:24:51.97] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Yes. Yes. I, uh, spent a lot of time in South America, spent a lot of time in the South Pacific. Um, I went to New Zealand. I went to Australia—was fascinated by the Aborigine culture there. To know that they had been there for 75,000 years. That was incredible to me, to know that people could be traced back that far. And, uh, it was quite an education.

[00:25:34.54] The second time, uh, y'know, I was older. I was able to, uh, digest a lot of the experiences that I—I was absorbing, uh, in a, uh, very meaningful way.

[00:25:50.61] MELISSA HO: If I could just, um, recap and ask, um, about specific dates, if it's possible, if you remember. The—the years that you were traveling between high school and college, and the years that you were in college, and then the years you were traveling after college—what—when—when—when are we talking?

[00:26:15.54] PAUL WATERS: '55, '56, '57.

[00:26:22.21] MELISSA HO: And then college was—

[00:26:23.71] PAUL WATERS: And then college, and then after college, it would be '61, '62, '63.

[00:26:33.24] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:26:33.51] PAUL WATERS: And then I came back here to New York to go to graduate school. And I had a scholarship to, uh, teach in a, uh, elementary school—PS 108 in Harlem—East Harlem.

[00:26:54.23] MELISSA HO: So when you moved to—to New York, it's initially to do your graduate degree in education? Is that right?

[00:27:03.02] PAUL WATERS: Well, I had settled on the Bowery.

[00:27:09.17] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:27:09.35] PAUL WATERS: You could get a loft—I discovered you can get a loft for—
[pause] a large loft—2,000 square feet—for \$90 to \$100 a month, which at that time was—I mean, it was, you know—with a job, you were able to do that.

[00:27:33.24] So I had this job, and I found this loft, and it was a very big space. And I was able to, you know, get into oil painting. That's where it really started.

[00:27:49.69] MELISSA HO: Yeah. Because I'm guessing that the years that you're traveling

after college, you have no place to oil paint. You're on the go.

[00:27:59.41] PAUL WATERS: No.

[00:28:00.34] MELISSA HO: You're sketching and so on. So when you come back to the States, you're able to reactivate your painting.

[00:28:06.31] PAUL WATERS: Well, I found the art community on the Bowery. That's how it all started.

[00:28:14.60] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:28:15.17] PAUL WATERS: Everybody was on the Bowery. I mean, if you named all of the artists at the time, they were all somewhere in the community. And everybody had a loft.

[00:28:31.31] These were former factory buildings. My building was—I had two floors. It was a hat factory and a belt factory, and it had been abandoned for a number of years. So I converted it into a living space and an art studio. And I was there for many years.

[00:28:55.80] MELISSA HO: And just yourself or—

[00:28:58.62] PAUL WATERS: I was there with myself. And then I got married, and I had a daughter, and we all lived there for a number of years.

[00:29:05.67] MELISSA HO: Yeah. And what street—is this on Bowery?

[00:29:10.44] PAUL WATERS: Bowery and Bowery and Grand Street—across from the Bowery Savings Bank.

[00:29:18.04] MELISSA HO: So did you find the community of artists downtown to be easy to connect with, a welcoming sort of community or—

[00:29:31.36] PAUL WATERS: Well, we all knew each other. We didn't socialize that much, but we all knew each other.

[00:29:40.32] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:29:40.77] PAUL WATERS: Tom Doyle lived downstairs. He was a well-known sculptor. Eva Hesse lived across the street.

[00:29:47.25] MELISSA HO: Oh yeah.

[00:29:47.41] PAUL WATERS: She was very well-known.

[00:29:51.57] MELISSA HO: Yep.

[00:29:51.96] PAUL WATERS: Robert Frank lived up the street. He was quite a well-known photographer.

[00:30:03.73] People were very accommodating. We all, sort of, circulated in this restaurant, Moishe's, on the corner of Grand and Bowery. We used to see everybody there. Moishe was a man that if you were an artist and didn't have any money, he would still feed you. And everybody was respectful. I mean, he eventually got paid.

[00:30:26.87] But I remember times artists would come in with no money, and he would allow them to eat. It was a very small community. Everybody respected everybody. Everybody knew what everybody's work looked like.

[00:30:46.31] MELISSA HO: I was just going to ask you if—who did you share your work with? Did you show your paintings to people—other artists nearby?

[00:31:00.09] PAUL WATERS: Well they all knew me. But being a uh part of the Black community, there wasn't much exposure available—certainly in galleries—

[00:31:18.58] MELISSA HO: Yep.

[00:31:18.82] PAUL WATERS: —in the times we're talking about.

[00:31:20.95] MELISSA HO: Yep.

[00:31:21.40] PAUL WATERS: And it was—it was very—it was very difficult to go around and show your work to different galleries over and over and over again and get no response.

[00:31:38.93] However, I did have a friend, Romare Bearden, who lived around the corner who was very encouraging.

[00:31:46.60] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:31:47.98] PAUL WATERS: And he gave me a letter once, a letter of introduction. And I used that for several years to introduce myself to gallery owners. However, it got me nowhere.

[00:32:03.23] My work was um—well, it was different. I don't want to get away from the fact that I was very fascinated by the shadow. We haven't mentioned that. The shadow, to me, was very mysterious.

[00:32:24.91] And from childhood, I always paid attention to—tried to imitate the lines that you see in shadows. I still do—still fascinated by how the shadow can dictate time, and how it moves, and how it exaggerates. And I used that in my work. I still use it in my work. I mean, if you watch my—the way I cut things out, I'm imitating the reflection of the shadow.

[00:33:12.62] MELISSA HO: So there's this correlation between your emphasis on silhouette —

[00:33:19.61] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:33:21.14] MELISSA HO: —with this fascinating—fascination with shadows.

[00:33:24.38] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:33:25.85] MELISSA HO: And so when you describe the experience of bringing—I don't know if you were bringing original works of art or slides or photographs of your work to galleries, is it this body of work, the sort of cutout silhouetted shapes?

[00:33:46.05] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Yes. Discouraging at first. But then I just—I always had a job. I was always working.

[00:33:54.69] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:33:57.75] PAUL WATERS: So I didn't sell anything. I mean, I didn't get any response from—I got no response from my work, actually. But I found my great love in doing it. It didn't seem to interfere.

[00:34:13.98] After a while, I just accepted the fact that you do what you love, you know? And I kept doing it. I still feel that way. I haven't had much exposure.

[00:34:27.03] And then I just didn't—I lost interest after a while in showing my work. I think there was a 50-year gulf where there was no exposure. But I didn't stop. It didn't mean I wasn't doing the work.

[00:34:48.37] I find it funny now that people say, where were you? You did all of this work. How come nobody saw it? Well, I really wasn't interested. I was more interested in doing it.

[00:35:05.35] MELISSA HO: Can I ask when—it's interesting to hear you say that you were fascinated by shadows, going all the way back to when you were a child. When you were learning oil painting at Goddard, and working, it sounds like, with an abstract expressionist—a teacher who was coming out of, I'm guessing, gestural or some other form of abstract expressionism—when did you start doing your cut-out method, in terms of oil painting.

[00:35:44.14] PAUL WATERS: When I got home from the second trip, I started cutting using scissors. When I was in Italy, I found a store that sold left-handed scissors. I'm left-handed, and I was fascinated. I didn't know—I didn't even know that they made scissors for left-handed people.

[00:36:03.99] Using the right hand—if you're left-handed, use the right-hand scissors, that

lump started to hurt your thumb. You know what I mean? And I had used—I had started doing cut-outs. But I was—I had pain in my thumb from the way the right-handed scissors are made.

[00:36:25.41] But I found this shop, and they sold left-handed scissors. And I bought a pair. I bought two pair. I still have them. And that got me really more into what I was doing. So the tool-- the scissors as a tool was very important.

[00:36:43.65] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:36:43.74] PAUL WATERS: They're still very important. I have three pairs—very important.

[00:36:49.79] MELISSA HO: And would you work on the floor or—

[00:36:54.62] PAUL WATERS: On the floor, yes. On the floor.

[00:37:01.60] MELISSA HO: So that's very interesting to hear that getting that particular tool really unlocked a whole new way of working for you.

[00:37:09.28] PAUL WATERS: Oh, yes. Oh, very much so. It was explosive. I did a lot of work after that-- a lot. It changed the whole feeling and allowed me to just do more with my imagination.

[00:37:27.86] MELISSA HO: Yeah. And work very large, too—

[00:37:30.76] PAUL WATERS: Oh, yes—

[00:37:31.52] MELISSA HO: —I would think.

[00:37:32.09] PAUL WATERS: That's right. My work got very large after that. Yes. Yes.

[00:37:38.03] MELISSA HO: You had the perfect combination—a huge loft and good left-handed scissors. You could create these [they laugh] huge canvases.

[00:37:48.11] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:37:48.98] MELISSA HO: Were there other—

[00:37:52.69] PAUL WATERS: And I must say, nobody else was doing this.

[00:37:55.60] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:37:55.94] PAUL WATERS: I had a conversation some years ago with Frank Stella, and he was very interested in how I got the idea. And I couldn't really tell him because I couldn't figure it out. I couldn't figure out how it all started. It just happened. I do remember that.

[00:38:22.40] MELISSA HO: What can you say about—I was really struck seeing your work, how each one seems to have this story behind it—that there are these sort of narratives embedded in the [telephone vibrates] images.

[00:38:46.68] PAUL WATERS: They are stories. They are all stories.

[00:38:48.23] MELISSA HO: Is that you think about them—stories?

[00:38:50.24] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Yes. They are stories. They're all stories. I can tell you the story. I can look at the painting and tell you the story. The painting might be 50 years old, 55 years old, I can tell you this story.

[00:39:04.08] MELISSA HO: Well, yeah. Let's talk about a couple because I have several in my memory very strongly. I mean, one is *Mother and her Seven*—

[00:39:14.04] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:39:14.34] MELISSA HO: —just has a striking image. And—

[00:39:16.89] PAUL WATERS: Well, I met this woman who had seven children. And I was tutoring—I was working as a tutor in mathematics. And her neighbor introduced me to her,

and she welcomed me to her home. She wanted to introduce me to her children.

[00:39:38.77] And I was amazed that the apartment they were in. I mean, with seven children, I would have thought the apartment would have been a bit disarray—in disarray. However, it was immaculate, and I was very taken by that. And I couldn't get it out of my head, my thinking, my mind. So I started doing sketches of her and the children, which eventually got me involved in a very large canvas.

[00:40:12.60] MELISSA HO: Yes. The other—one of the other really large paintings I remember is [*In the Beginning*], which also seems to be based in personal experience for you. could you talk about that painting?

[00:40:31.62] PAUL WATERS: That's my first 33 years of being alive. What I did was try to journalize my life experience. And that's the story of my life.

[00:40:50.46] MELISSA HO: So each element is a reference.

[00:40:52.31] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Right. Right—as I experienced it. Another large canvas done on the floor.

[00:40:58.64] MELISSA HO: Yeah. Yeah. And then how—what's your approach to color? Do you—

[00:41:04.46] PAUL WATERS: Well, it's interesting you ask me that because the painting you're talking about—I was fascinated with the color green. If you remember, the painting was green and white with a white background.

[00:41:18.56] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:41:21.32] PAUL WATERS: And green was about life.

[00:41:23.39] And I've been using it ever since. I use it almost every—for every base painting, I always use a sap green. Because when you cover it with titanium white, for example, it becomes many colors. People see many colors.

[00:41:47.89] MELISSA HO: That's interesting.

[00:41:49.71] PAUL WATERS: Sap green is the base, and titanium white is the top color.

[00:41:55.93] MELISSA HO: Uh-huh [affirmative].

[00:41:56.11] PAUL WATERS: And on the cutouts, it can be any color.

[00:42:02.88] MELISSA HO: In the cutouts—I mean, I have—it's not—I guess it's not surprising that I've read comparisons to like Matisse and his cutouts. But to me, I also see, I think, echoes of perhaps Inuit art, or—and perhaps I'm influenced just knowing how much you've traveled the world.

[00:42:33.72] But I guess what I'm curious to ask is, especially knowing that you mentioned that you still refer to sketchbooks and notes that you took—

[00:42:44.67] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:42:45.15] MELISSA HO: —going back to the '50s and '60s when you were visiting all these different continents, all these different cultures and just soaking in all these different cultural references—what did you come home with in terms of the impact on your art-making do you think, from your time in South America, your time in Africa, your time in the Pacific? Are there things that you—

[00:43:13.20] PAUL WATERS: Don't leave out of Alaska. Don't leave out Alaska.

[00:43:15.48] MELISSA HO: Yeah. And you've also spent time in Alaska.

[00:43:17.58] PAUL WATERS: Yes, I certainly did. And I did—I was very moved by, um, by first people. Sorry.

[00:43:30.00] MELISSA HO: Yes.

[00:43:30.24] PAUL WATERS: Very captivated by it. I saw a lot of me in it. Maybe that's a better way to say it. I saw a lot of me in their work. I still do.

[00:43:42.30] MELISSA HO: What do you mean by that? Can you expand on that?

[00:43:46.65] PAUL WATERS: The lines they use.

[00:43:48.57] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:43:48.72] PAUL WATERS: The lines they use. My lines are close cousins, I think.

[00:43:58.72] MELISSA HO: That's interesting—so the lines and the outlines [telephone rings] of Northwest First Nations peoples. Are there other specific sources of inspiration from your travels that you could call out?

[00:44:22.15] PAUL WATERS: About the rock paint—rock painting—rock drawing. My last travel was to France. I crawled into the Cave Chauvet.

[00:44:43.18] MELISSA HO: Hm.

[00:44:43.45] PAUL WATERS: That was opened in 1994. And that was fascinating to see paintings on the wall that had been painted 30,000 years.

[00:44:53.63] MELISSA HO: I would love to see. That must be amazing to see.

[00:44:56.87] PAUL WATERS: It was incredible. Of course, the French have closed it.

[00:45:00.43] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:45:00.83] PAUL WATERS: But they built a replica, which I haven't seen, but I understand it's pretty fascinating. But to see—to be in a cave where people hadn't been in over 30,000 years, and to see that work of art, how beautiful it was and how they used the—how they use the formation of the stone to make the art look like it was three-dimensional was really captivating.

[00:45:37.73] MELISSA HO: Did you have no other artists who were also looking to non-European American, like the canon? Because it just seems to me that you self-educated in such a different—in such a different way than—like if you had just studied art history in college, you would have been indoctrinated in a completely different set of references. But you, from a very young age, were looking much more broadly. When—were there other artists around you in New York who were also interested in Indigenous arts and ancient art?

[00:46:24.56] PAUL WATERS: Romare Bearden lived around the corner. So I did spend—on Saturdays, I did spend a lot of time talking to him.

[00:46:32.45] MELISSA HO: How did you two meet?

[00:46:36.47] PAUL WATERS: And uh—I looked in the telephone—I heard him on the radio. I heard him on an interview show. And I looked in the phone book, and I saw his name and his phone number, and I called him up.

[00:46:46.97] MELISSA HO: Hm.

[00:46:48.80] PAUL WATERS: And I told him that I had heard him on the radio, and I was very interested in what he was saying about American art. And I asked him if he would like to come and see what I do. And I invited him to my loft, not knowing that he would show up the next day. So that's how we met.

[00:47:10.33] MELISSA HO: That's amazing.

[00:47:12.07] PAUL WATERS: It is amazing. He was an amazing person.

[00:47:16.73] MELISSA HO: So you saw him very—

[00:47:18.44] PAUL WATERS: He was very nice to me—very, very nice to me. I wish more older artists would be that kind and that thoughtful with younger artists—makes a big difference. It makes a big impression on you. It made a big impression on me. I met him

when he was 50.

[00:47:38.79] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:47:38.91] PAUL WATERS: He died at 77.

[00:47:41.33] So over those years, we had many conversations. And I went to many shows with him. He would ask me to come join him to see various exhibitions.

[00:47:56.92] MELISSA HO: And he looked at—and you showed him your art?

[00:48:01.00] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Lots of it.

[00:48:03.76] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:48:04.09] PAUL WATERS: Well, he saw all of it.

[00:48:10.38] MELISSA HO: Did you seek out other mentors—Black artists—senior Black artists?

[00:48:18.12] PAUL WATERS: Well, you could only show your work with Black artists during that period. There was no other—there was no other way to expose your work. And, like I said, I found that discouraging.

[00:48:33.63] MELISSA HO: Yes.

[00:48:35.42] PAUL WATERS: But I did have a—I spent a stint at the Newark Museum as Director of Community Affairs. So I did delve into African American art in the early '70s. In fact, I put an exhibition together for them in 1971 called *Black Art: Two Generations*. I used what they had in their collection and all of the new artists I could discover. So I did have exposure to what everybody was doing but not showing.

[00:49:18.78] MELISSA HO: I would love to hear more, actually, about your work at the Newark Museum, and also, what brought you there. Because I think it was before you went to-- before you were invited to join the Newark Museum, you are already working as an educator, including at a juvenile detention center, is that right, in Newark?

[00:49:39.51] PAUL WATERS: That's correct. Yes. Essex County Youth House. I was the principal of the school there.

[00:49:45.93] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[00:49:48.34] PAUL WATERS: And Samuel Miller, who was director of the Newark Museum at the time, met me at a social gathering and asked me would I come and put together a show for him—would I work on a show for him. And the idea was to get two generations of art together and um bring it to the museum, which we did. It was very successful.

[00:50:18.38] MELISSA HO: How did you put that show together? How did you find, especially the second generation of those two generations?

[00:50:26.42] PAUL WATERS: A lot of walking, banging on doors mostly.

[00:50:31.80] MELISSA HO: So literally going into the community and knocking on doors.

[00:50:36.39] PAUL WATERS: Absolutely.

[00:50:37.11] MELISSA HO: Wow. And you found a lot of—

[00:50:41.08] PAUL WATERS: Most of the—most people were polite. I did get a few doors slammed on me. Most people were polite. But the Newark Museum, it was whole new experience for them because it was a time when the city was really divided and hadn't absorbed completely the riot—or the—whatever that was that took place earlier—big disturbance in the city.

[00:51:11.53] MELISSA HO: So you were doing this community outreach and curating in 1970, 1971?

[00:51:23.73] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:51:25.44] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:51:25.62] PAUL WATERS: Well, we put the exhibition together for 1971. So it was—the whole year of 1970, I'd say—

[00:51:34.20] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:51:34.44] PAUL WATERS: —was committed to gathering the information. I'm going around. One artist would lead me to another. One artist would lead me somewhere else. And I knew a lot of artists—aware of them in New York. So that was much easier than what I had to do in Newark.

[00:52:07.15] MELISSA HO: And how long did you work at the Newark Museum?

[00:52:14.15] PAUL WATERS: Three years—three and a half years.

[00:52:18.04] MELISSA HO: Did you continue to organize shows in that sort of—

[00:52:22.36] PAUL WATERS: I got an offer. After three and a half years, I got an offer to be director of an up and coming art center in Jamaica, Queens called the Jamaica Center for Art and Learning. And it sounded like a challenge. And I did the same thing there, basically. Put a big exhibition on of Robert Blackburn, the master printmaker. And we did a big show on Black theater on Broadway.

[00:53:03.91] MELISSA HO: Huh. Wow.

[00:53:05.00] PAUL WATERS: And Eubie Blake was 100 years old at the time, as I remember. He came to the exhibition. He was—you know, we had a all Black Broadway hit show in the 1930s—*Shuffle Along*.

[00:53:24.92] And yeah. It was quite something. Gave me exposure to costume and dance and celebrity from that period of time. I had to do a lot of research, and it was exciting.

[00:53:54.02] MELISSA HO: That does sound very exciting. Did you have—in addition to the research and the pulling together of these exhibitions, were you also fundraising and—

[00:54:08.86] PAUL WATERS: I was certainly fundraising [laughs]. I was certainly fundraising.

[00:54:13.90] MELISSA HO: How was—

[00:54:14.47] PAUL WATERS: That was a big part of it. I had to fundraise for my salary. Of course, I was fundraising.

[00:54:20.04] [They Laugh].

[00:54:23.83] That was ongoing.

[00:54:27.07] MELISSA HO: And you said the Jamaica Center was brand new at that time. So —

[00:54:32.11] PAUL WATERS: It was only a few years old when I started.

[00:54:36.13] MELISSA HO: So was it a lot of public funds that made that possible, or private individuals?

[00:54:41.05] PAUL WATERS: Private and public. Private and public.

[00:54:43.57] MELISSA HO: Yeah. Are they still around—the center?

[00:54:48.61] PAUL WATERS: Oh, yes. It's going very well. Yes. Much bigger than it was when I was there.

[00:54:53.89] MELISSA HO: Yeah. And how many years were you at the Jamaica Center for Art?

[00:55:00.76] PAUL WATERS: Four and a half.

[00:55:04.89] MELISSA HO: So what year are we up to at this point? This is the late '70s?

[00:55:10.22] PAUL WATERS: It's 1980, 1981.

[00:55:12.45] MELISSA HO: 1981. Did you go on to other institutions after that, Paul? Or—

[00:55:19.28] PAUL WATERS: I painted. And I got involved with my hobby job. My hobby job was teaching. And I taught mathematics, physics, chemistry, and biology.

[00:55:39.59] MELISSA HO: Interesting. So there's this whole—

[00:55:41.24] PAUL WATERS: And I was there—I've been there since—I've been there—I'm still there. I'm at NYU. In fact, summer school starts next Tuesday. So this will be my 34th or 35th year. It's been a very good experience. Wonderful.

[00:56:00.22] MELISSA HO: So you've returned to more hands-on teaching and away from administration.

[00:56:07.02] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Yes.

[00:56:07.65] MELISSA HO: And not art. You're teaching—

[00:56:09.69] PAUL WATERS: Oh, I was doing art. I was doing art all the time. This this—I mean, this was an infusion of energy for me. I love teaching. But, of course, art comes first.

[00:56:27.43] MELISSA HO: So I know that in more—I think I know in more recent years you focused, again, on watercolor.

[00:56:36.84] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[00:56:37.02] MELISSA HO: Can you talk about that shift from, sort of, the large tactile cutouts to working more on a smaller scale, but with similar—still similar approach and imagery it seems like.

[00:56:51.84] PAUL WATERS: Well, there was a fire, and that changed everything. That took away everything. I had to put most of my work in storage—the work that was not damaged. And I had to get a smaller space. The space I had was no longer available. I mean, the building burned down.

[00:57:16.87] MELISSA HO: Wow.

[00:57:18.44] PAUL WATERS: And the space was no longer available. There was no way you could have a space that I had for the amount of money that I was paying. So that was yesteryear. That was—

[00:57:30.76] MELISSA HO: So the loft space that you moved into in the mid-'60s, it burned down.

[00:57:37.57] PAUL WATERS: That was gone.

[00:57:38.44] MELISSA HO: Yeah. That's in the '90s or—

[00:57:41.38] PAUL WATERS: In the '70s. In the 19—no. 19—the fire was 2010.

[00:57:51.60] MELISSA HO: Oh, wow. And you-- did you lose a lot of work as well or—

[00:57:59.43] PAUL WATERS: 35 percent was destroyed.

[00:58:05.40] MELISSA HO: I'm sorry.

[00:58:07.98] PAUL WATERS: Well, I was able to save a good amount of the work. I had work in storage already, which was very fortunate.

[00:58:16.20] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:58:16.41] PAUL WATERS: And then the gallery here—Eric Firestone Gallery—was able to do a magnificent job in restoration to the water damage and the smoke damage of some of the—well, you saw some of them work—

[00:58:31.74] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:58:31.98] PAUL WATERS: —what they were able to do.

[00:58:33.60] MELISSA HO: It looks fabulous. Yeah.

[00:58:35.25] PAUL WATERS: It really—it was amazing.

[00:58:37.21] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[00:58:37.31] PAUL WATERS: It was amazing to me. I'll never forget coming here and seeing it for the first time. I was totally amazed.

[00:58:44.52] MELISSA HO: Because that—

[00:58:45.15] PAUL WATERS: I had no idea—I had no idea that they would be able to do what they did.

[00:58:52.27] MELISSA HO: Had those paintings—because I imagine those paintings hadn't been stretched. You hadn't seen them stretched before.

[00:58:59.35] PAUL WATERS: That's right. Many years. Many, many years.

[00:59:04.19] MELISSA HO: So Paul, what—I'd love to hear your reflections on all of this recent recognition and visibility that you've gotten, now that you mentioned this recent show, and you've mentioned how difficult, especially as a Black artist in the '60s and '70s, it was to have your work seen or received. What are your thoughts on the changes in the art world and [crosstalk].

[00:59:32.95] PAUL WATERS: I think it's all wonderful. It's all wonderful. Doesn't slow me down. I mean, I'm still doing what I was doing. But I think it's wonderful what's happening.

[00:59:48.81] I think it's very exciting to see these young people and what they're doing, and their work, and how free they feel about everything. Me, it hasn't changed much. I'm still basically the same person, still doing the same thing.

[01:00:10.43] MELISSA HO: Yeah. No, you've exhibited incredible longevity as an artist. Are you—do you have younger artists that you have conversations with the way that Romare Bearden did for you?

[01:00:25.59] PAUL WATERS: Yes, I do. I do. Yes. Yes. Yes.

[01:00:31.90] MELISSA HO: [unclear].

[01:00:32.08] PAUL WATERS: We talk about—yes, we talk about their work. I'm not judgmental. I don't take sides.

[01:00:42.22] MELISSA HO: That's a good quality in a teacher.

[01:00:43.57] PAUL WATERS: I just tell them—yes. I just tell them to keep going.

[01:00:47.86] MELISSA HO: Yep.

[01:00:48.05] PAUL WATERS: That's the way I was treated. Keep going. Keep doing what you love.

[01:00:56.03] MELISSA HO: Well, you've lived that example, certainly.

[01:01:01.48] PAUL WATERS: Well, thank you. Thank you very much.

[01:01:06.39] MELISSA HO: Paul, are there any topics that you want to make sure that we talk about on the record?

[01:01:16.79] PAUL WATERS: I think you've covered it a lot.

[01:01:18.01] MELISSA HO: [Laughs] Okay.

[01:01:20.11] PAUL WATERS: I feel you have.

[01:01:21.06] MELISSA HO: Okay. Could I ask you about one more specific painting, to talk about it for this interview—that large blue and white painting that I really fell in love with of the line of figures called *Survival Committee*.

[01:01:41.83] PAUL WATERS: Oh, right. I was at a detention center.

[01:01:45.28] MELISSA HO: Yes.

[01:01:45.40] PAUL WATERS: I was the principal of a school.

[01:01:47.44] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:01:47.62] PAUL WATERS: And there were two energies happening at the detention center-- two different groups that were going at each other. So the thinking was, how do we get these two groups together, give them something positive?

[01:02:04.44] So I thought a lot about that-- ways of reaching out to them to stop the tension. And we encouraged them to get into the school program, which they did. Some of them did very well.

[01:02:25.33] I taught a class in math. Some of the students were exceptional.

[01:02:31.01] MELISSA HO: Hm.

[01:02:32.68] PAUL WATERS: And I used to go home every night and think about them. And I started this whole idea of sketching them, each one individually. Except I made them birds. And you saw the painting.

[01:02:45.21] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:02:45.54] PAUL WATERS: So there are ten different birds and ten different energies-- ten different students who were very provocative in their um--in their energies.

[01:03:01.16] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:03:01.37] PAUL WATERS: And we tried to turn it around and make it into something very positive.

[01:03:05.15] And I came up with ten students that would meet once a week—five students from this group and five students from this group. And we would get together and try to settle our differences, and it worked out very well.

[01:03:20.52] MELISSA HO: Hm.

[01:03:20.76] PAUL WATERS: And the painting is based on that experience.

[01:03:23.97] MELISSA HO: That makes a lot of sense—I recall it's pairings of figures sort of facing each other.

[01:03:31.62] PAUL WATERS: That's right.

[01:03:32.34] MELISSA HO: You're putting them in conversation.

[01:03:34.38] PAUL WATERS: Yes. Absolutely.

[01:03:35.73] MELISSA HO: Yeah. Yeah. And you mentioned to me that that painting, I think, hung in the Office of the Mayor of Newark for some time.

[01:03:48.09] PAUL WATERS: For a number of years of Mayor Ken Gibson—that was in his office for a number of years by way of the Newark Museum.

[01:03:56.22] MELISSA HO: Yeah. That's an apt painting to have in the office of a politician.

[01:04:01.28] [They Laugh].

[01:04:03.05] PAUL WATERS: Yes. It was nice to see. When I used to visit him, it was always pleasant to see the painting behind him.

[01:04:11.82] MELISSA HO: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. I guess I would like to ask you if you have anything to add, to elaborate on. I mean, just as a museum professional, I'm so fascinated by the way you put together the two generations exhibition.

[01:04:44.45] And for people maybe listening or following this transcript who are not familiar with that show, could you say a little bit more about what your aims were there—the concept, the sort of structure of it?

[01:05:03.14] PAUL WATERS: Well, the museum said, here. Here's what we had. Here's our collection of African American artists. And that goes back to the 1930s.

[01:05:15.71] So I had to learn what they had and how to put it together in a show. And then I had to go out and knock on doors to find artists that would match the energy that the museum already had.

[01:05:40.49] It was not easy. It was a—it was a journey. I had the museum's work already. I mean, that was very helpful the way they gave me curators. They gave me references. They gave me all the information I needed. And then I had to build on that.

[01:06:08.24] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:06:08.69] PAUL WATERS: That was the hard part.

[01:06:11.42] But it was a beautiful experience. I got to know a lot about museums-- how they work, what a curatorial staff does, how museums preserve work. That was all interesting. I saw how one painting had to be retouched. Yes—a challenge? Absolutely, in every way. A real challenge.

[01:06:42.81] MELISSA HO: Because you—had you organized other exhibitions at that point, or was that the first?

[01:06:49.77] PAUL WATERS: I had never done anything like that. The only experience I had earlier was the Brooklyn Children's Museum asked me to put an exhibition on of animals. And that was in 1968. And no, I had no experience.

[01:07:09.06] MELISSA HO: Hm. Were they bringing you in-- was there a-- had they reached out to you just—

[01:07:17.50] PAUL WATERS: Well, they knew I was an artist.

[01:07:20.48] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:07:20.63] PAUL WATERS: The museum knew I was an artist. And I worked in Newark.

[01:07:24.59] MELISSA HO: Right.

[01:07:26.53] PAUL WATERS: And I was out raising money, so they knew a lot about me from that point of view. So I was certainly asking them for support.

[01:07:36.01] MELISSA HO: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[01:07:36.22] PAUL WATERS: And that's how the collaboration started.

[01:07:40.51] MELISSA HO: Were there other Black employees at Newark Museum at that time? Were you unusual in terms of the curatorial staff to be there then?

[01:07:57.49] PAUL WATERS: There were very few. There were very few. I understand now that's all very different.

[01:08:04.77] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:08:05.26] PAUL WATERS: There were very few.

[01:08:06.74] MELISSA HO: Because I'm also wondering if this maybe was the first exhibition that they presented that focused on Black artists. I don't know if that's the case or not.

[01:08:20.46] PAUL WATERS: I think they had a show in the 1940s. I could be wrong, but I think in the early '40s they might have a show—African American art.

[01:08:29.12] MELISSA HO: Yeah. Right. Because they did have—

[01:08:31.64] PAUL WATERS: But this was extraordinary. This was extraordinary. I mean, they had never done anything like this before.

[01:08:36.49] MELISSA HO: Right. And there's a catalog and everything, so—

[01:08:39.77] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[01:08:39.91] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:08:40.71] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[01:08:41.29] MELISSA HO: And did you install the older generation, the younger generation integrated—

[01:08:45.67] PAUL WATERS: Yes.

[01:08:46.45] MELISSA HO: —or sort of one and then the next.

[01:08:48.94] PAUL WATERS: After a lot of conversation, yes. And the museum was very helpful. I should say that.

[01:08:54.97] MELISSA HO: Yeah. And what was the—did it make a big—did it really, sort of, move the needle for the Newark Museum in terms of impact on audience? Did it bring new people in the door for them?

[01:09:10.77] PAUL WATERS: Oh, it was big. It was big. The night of the opening was quite a celebration.

[01:09:19.00] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:09:19.12] PAUL WATERS: I mean, the mayor was there. Everybody was there.

[01:09:24.03] MELISSA HO: That's great.

[01:09:24.87] PAUL WATERS: It was a big deal. It was a big deal.

[01:09:29.77] MELISSA HO: Yeah.

[01:09:30.55] PAUL WATERS: And a lot of that work has gone on to other venues—a lot of the work.

[01:09:38.99] MELISSA HO: Yeah. No. When I looked at the catalog, I recognized a number of the works. No, it's amazing. It's a real milestone project. It's really incredible.

[01:09:53.03] Okay. Well, Paul, thank you so much. Unless you have more that you'd like to add, I can stop the recording now.

[01:10:02.95] PAUL WATERS: Sure. It's been wonderful. Thank you. Thank you very much.

[01:10:06.95] MELISSA HO: Of course. Okay. I'm just going to stop.