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Oral history interview with Joe Overstreet, 2010 Mar 17-18

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Joe Overstreet on 2010 March 17 and 18. The interview took place at Kenkeleba House in New York. NY, and was conducted by Judith O. Richards for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Judith O. Richards reviewed the transcript in 2010 and made corrections and emendations. 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

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joe Overstreet,[at] 214 East 2nd Street in Manhattan, on March 17, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc one. [Joining the conversation is Corrine Jennings, co-founder of Kenkeleba House and Overstreet's wife.]

Joe, I wanted to start with asking you about your family—about your mother, your father, your grandparents—as far back as you remember and, of course, especially then the people who you grew up with.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. I was born in a place in Mississippi.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And what was your birth date?

JOE OVERSTREET: My birthday was June 20, 1933, and I was born in a town called Conehatta, C-O-N-E-H-A-T-T-A. It's a Chocktaw word. In the town there was maybe 200 people. Maybe 150 of them were my relatives. Fifty were Chocktaw Indians and I remember there was one white family that lived in this small town in Conehatta, Mississippi.

My grandparents I always was told they came from Nigeria—my great, great grandfather—and he was exceptional. He swam the Mississippi River three times to avoid slavery in one night. I was told this story all my childhood. Now, I felt—I've often felt that a lot of this have a lot to do with my impatience in the world and my activities and drive—that he was striving to be free.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So he was never a slave?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. In the town where he settled there couldn't have been any slaves because the town was rural. My grandparents own—oh, I guess maybe 300 acres of land where—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He's your great grandfather—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, this—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—and he also settled in—

JOE OVERSTREET: In Conehatta, Mississippi. This is where they all settled.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And was that after the Civil War? Before?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, this was in 1738 so—[inaudible].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, he's more than great grandfather.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right. Anyway, my great grandmother—I saw her grave and she was buried in 1833. But they—I took her [Corrine Jennings] there with me to see Conehatta.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That's a Chocktaw name too?

JOE OVERSTREET: Conehatta is a Chocktaw name for the town. It's an incredible place because it's a very rural place and there's not much life there. In fact, my grandparents owned land that they built—they grew pulp wood. This is how they survived. Pulp wood is what they used to make paper with. So they would cut part of this timber one year and next year and so forth—exchange to give it nearly 10 years to grow.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So this town was filled with your relatives because generation after generation lived in the same place.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right. Right. They all came—from one way or another they came into my family—my grandparent on my grandfather's side.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, so part of your family is Chocktaw?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, this is something I know but I can't trace that as well as I can trace the African-American side. Like the Chambers brothers—they're my first cousins. They were from there, the same as the musicians [Chambers Brothers]. Dorothy Donegan, the jazz pianist—she's from there. She's a cousin—a relative.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What about your mother's side?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, this is difficult for me to separate because my mother had—my grandmother and my grandfather, they were the producers of my mother and my aunts and uncles. I had seven I think—seven uncles and—no, three aunts and four uncles. Is that the way it was? Yeah. They were extremely productive people. Well, my mother was—they got a chance to go to college. My grandparent felt that college would be the way that they didn't have to be enslaved.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So all the—everyone in that town basically was involved in the—this industry of growing or the farming, you'd say, of this pulp wood.

JOE OVERSTREET: The pulp wood, yes. Everybody had made their livelihood growing pulp wood because the earth was very, very rough.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative]

JOE OVERSTREET: Corn and potatoes and things like that wouldn't grow as well as trees. So there wasn't many cotton fields or stuff like that. There was more pulp wood trees.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And yet your family—your parents—[and] grandparents even felt that their children should go to college. So where did the involvement with—was there active of educational—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, my mother she went to a place called Alcorn. Alcorn was a college in Meridian, Mississippi, and she had also gone—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How do you spell Alcorn?

CORRINE JENNINGS: A-L-C-O-R-N.

JOE OVERSTREET: And she had also gone to Tuskegee [Institute]. That was the main school because Tuskegee—when they were young everybody who got a chance to go to college from that area went to Tuskegee or Alcorn.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It seems that it would be rather exceptional—and I don't know if this is true of the whole community there or just your immediate family—that people from such a rural place would have the ambition and the educational background to go to Tuskegee and other colleges.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Was your grandfather a minister?

JOE OVERSTREET: My grandfather was a minister and my—yes, you remember that. My grandfather was a minister.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So there you go, yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: My aunt was my mother's—my mother was the youngest. Then she had two other sisters. The oldest lived to be 106. She was incredibly old. She never left Mississippi. My other aunt who lived here in New York that I used to come to visit she was a poet and she painted. Her name was Mary Emerson.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Where do you think this involvement in cultural—in painting and music and writing—come from?

CORRINE JENNINGS: It was probably out of the church.

JOE OVERSTREET: I always thought it came from Nigeria but maybe not. Maybe the church.

CORRINE JENNINGS: The church and—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS:—it being very rural in a very hostile—kind of this—kind of oasis in very hostile territory—

frightening even when we went there, I thought.

JOE OVERSTREET: It's close to where those boys—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Philadelphia—[inaudible].

JOE OVERSTREET: Philadelphia—very close to Philadelphia—as were those boys, [James] Chaney [ph] and then from—

CORRINE JENNINGS: [Andrew] Goodman and [Michael] Schwerner from New York were killed.

JOE OVERSTREET: And they were lynched there. So—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Close to—

JOE OVERSTREET: It was very close to that.

But Conehatta in one way—you see, you get me excited by talking about the damn place—I left there when I was what, maybe five years old, four years old. But it was a most interesting place. I would go back to visit my grandparents because it was a isolated—I was—could see and sit and look at butterflies that I never saw before anyplace else. Snakes. My god, we had snakes. I ran up on a spreading adder once and I didn't know the damn thing was poison. But—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A what?

JOE OVERSTREET: A spreading adder. It's a poisonous snake. My aunt killed the thing and I couldn't figure out why—because it was poison. This is the kind of—[laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then you said—so your father—your grandfather was a minister. What about your father?

JOE OVERSTREET: My father was a mason. My father was from Meridian. He was a young city slicker. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did your mother and father meet?

JOE OVERSTREET: She went to Alcorn and that's in Meridian and—well, just outside of Meridian—and she picked him up and brought him back to Conehatta to work. He was a good worker. He was a strong guy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You're laughing. Is that not the story? [They laugh.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: Well, it is a story [laughs].

JOE OVERSTREET: So they had three children. I have a sister. God, you don't want to meet her.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What's her name?

JOE OVERSTREET: Her name is Laverda.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Say that again.

JOE OVERSTREET: Laverda Allen.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Laverda?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. L-A-V-E-R-D-A.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And Allen, A-L-L-E-N?

JOE OVERSTREET: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] And she lives in Oakland—Berkeley. Actually she lives in Berkeley and what's the name of that place?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Discovery Bay.

JOE OVERSTREET: Discovery Bay. She's a very powerful kind of a person. She's like—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Older sister?

JOE OVERSTREET: She's a older sister. She goes through the line of being educated. She went to Berkeley—UC Berkeley when she was 14. So that's something we can't ever overcome. [Laughs.] Anyway—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you have another sister?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. I have a brother.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And what's his name?

JOE OVERSTREET: I have a younger brother who's an architect. He's in Oakland also. He is a—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What's his name?

JOE OVERSTREET: His name is Harry Lee.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Harry Lee.

JOE OVERSTREET: Harry Lee Overstreet. He's the younger one than I am. He's more polite.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was your family's name Overstreet all the way back to your great grandfather?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no. They were Huddleston. My grandparents were Huddlestons.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So let me go back. What is—was your mother's name?

JOE OVERSTREET: My mother, she was a Huddleston.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was her first name?

JOE OVERSTREET: Cleo. Here—here's a picture of her there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And H-u-d-d-i-s-o-n?

CORRINE JENNINGS: No, l-e-s-t-o-n—Huddleston.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Two D's?

CORRINE JENNINGS: I think so.

JOE OVERSTREET: And where was another name there—Childress. Was it Childress?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Childers.

JOE OVERSTREET: Childers. That was another—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that was your grand—grandmother?

JOE OVERSTREET: And then that was—no, no, that was a married name. They've got my grand—my Aunt Marion —[inaudible]—Chambers. That was—my grandfather had a brother who was a Chambers that was—that were half-brothers, and there was a Chambers name there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: So it [laughs]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you—then were saying you only lived there until you were five.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I had—yeah, because I remember I was born in 1933. In 1939, we left and went to Meridian and in 1941 we moved to—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Wait. Why did you—so why did you leave? Why did you go to Meridian?

JOE OVERSTREET: My father had to have work. He was a mason.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: He's a young man who was very active in the masonry and he would haul cement, finisher, and plasterer. So and what year, 1940—1940 we moved to Savannah, Georgia.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. I have—I have actually 1941.

JOE OVERSTREET: Forty-one then maybe, yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: One of the bios I read—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Maybe Savannah—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—where you went to Savannah also for your father's work?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. My father worked in the shipyards there. Well, yeah. He worked in the shipyards. You know what he did? It was very interesting. I get carried away with him. They—he and—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Tell me what was his name.

JOE OVERSTREET: His name is Joe.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh. So are you technically Joe, Jr.?

JOE OVERSTREET: I'm a—well, I was a—they don't want to say I'm a junior. I have a middle name. He didn't have a middle name. They wouldn't give him a middle name. I was rewarded with a middle name. [Laughs.]

What they did, there was a group of men from the South—black men—who worked in the masonry. They did something with cement that was very important. They found out how to dry it in a very short time. Cement takes 150 [ph] years to dry. They stained it and dried it.

So they got a—they moved in a circle of men. They went from Mississippi to Atlanta—to Savannah and they worked building barges. Now, all of this I remember very clearly because I remember being in Savannah and that's when I was in the first grade or kindergarten. I'm not sure which one—[inaudible]—1941, probably first grade. I was nine. Eight—I was eight when I was there. So I was probably first, second grade. When I was there I met—I got a chance to say hello—I didn't meet him—I got a chance to say hello to Dr. George Washington Carver.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Wow.

CORRINE JENNINGS: In Thunderbolt.

JOE OVERSTREET: In Thunderbolt, right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And Thunderbolt—

JOE OVERSTREET: He went there in the summer to Savannah College.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Savannah State, was it?

JOE OVERSTREET: Savannah—yeah. It's Savannah—it was—[inaudible]—school—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What's Thunderbolt?

JOE OVERSTREET: That's the town.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Outside Savannah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Thunderbolt, Georgia.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: It's right outside of Savannah—[inaudible].

JOE OVERSTREET: And up the Savannah River. And my mother recognized him. He'd sit on the porch and she says always passed by—we'd be walking. She'd say, say hello to Dr. Carver. I had no idea who he was. I found out later though. He's been my mentor ever since. He was a painter. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So then later in '42 you moved to New York City?

JOE OVERSTREET: New York City, where I got a chance to see the Metropolitan Museum [of Art].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, your whole family moved?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah. Well, now wait. Yeah, my father came here—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And all the kids and your mother?

JOE OVERSTREET:—and he didn't like it here. My mother and father moved here but—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that was also for the shipyards?

JOE OVERSTREET: He worked in Hoboken.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that must have had to do with the war effort.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah. The whole war he [avoided being drafted] because he had three kids and he worked in the shipyard. He had a special trade in the shipyards.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: He could make cement dry fast. And that's very important in the war.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Now, after that they heard in '43, was it—1943 I think—they heard that they were building the atomic plant. Oh, my god. We all got excited about the atomic plant. We had no idea what the hell we were talking about. [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Back when you were in New York, which was just for a year, you mentioned that you went to the Metropolitan Museum. So that shows that you already had an interest in art.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember when you started feeling—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. My—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—that was important to you?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. My—listen, my—my aunt bought me art supplies before I could talk. They wanted me to be a painter because I enjoyed painting. I could enjoy painting, and I lived in a place where there was nothing to do but look at beautiful things—birds I could recognize.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So your aunt identified a talent you had?

JOE OVERSTREET: And my mother. They were both interested in my being something. I couldn't speak and I didn't know much about language. So they thought I would be a painter. [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you say you couldn't speak, you mean you preferred to be quiet or you literally didn't speak?

JOE OVERSTREET: I was more willing to paint than to speak. So now, I thought they were just doing that to quiet me and to get rid of me. But it worked. Then in Savannah I had a teacher in the school that I was in that used to put my work up on the bulletin board and point it out to the rest of the students—"look at Joe's paintings." And oh, boy, that went right to my head. She was a very lovely young teacher and she used to invite us over to her house to play with her—she had these little skunks or something in a cage.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Skunks?

JOE OVERSTREET: They weren't skunks. They were those little—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Hamsters maybe?

JOE OVERSTREET: Hamsters, yeah. [They laugh.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: What was her name?

JOE OVERSTREET: Mrs. Kendricks.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I'm sorry.

JOE OVERSTREET: Kendricks was her name.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Kendricks.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes. And she was a wonderful teacher.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You don't remember her first name, do you?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, God, no.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No. We didn't—

CORRINE JENNINGS: You may not have known.

JOE OVERSTREET: So she was a person that really encouraged me to be a painter because she would put my work up.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, meanwhile, while you were growing up, was your mother, who was a writer, was she writing when the kids were young?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, my mother was teaching. She was a teacher in some of the Southern schools and she didn't probably respond it to the way she wanted to. But my mother was many things. She came—when she went to California she went to mortician school. She didn't like dead people. I said well, that's a bad thing to do [laughs] go to mortician school if you don't like dead people.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is before you were born?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. This is after I was born. Then she went to beauty supply—beauty college and she was one of the first people to apply hair to—oh, I remember one of her customer—what was that woman's name who—Ike and Tina Turner.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Tina Turner.

JOE OVERSTREET: Were one of her first customers out there. My family in Oakland had a beauty supply house where they—sort of, probably. Now, I don't want to get carried away with their success with this because I think they had a franchise on the supplies that people bought. And so I don't really know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Your mother went to college but she's pursuing these other—

CORRINE JENNINGS: She was an entrepreneur.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It wasn't because she couldn't get a job teaching or earn a living?

CORRINE JENNINGS: No. She could teach—I think she could teach in the South—

JOE OVERSTREET: She couldn't teach in Oakland. My god, she didn't have a degree to teach there. My aunt did though. My aunt taught in Richmond. She taught and she had gone to Tuskegee.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] So your mother not only wanted to learn these trades but wanted to make a business out of it, you're saying, in terms of being an entrepreneur.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Didn't she design—

JOE OVERSTREET: Lampshades. [Laughs.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: [Inaudible.] Yeah. Uniforms—uniforms, yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, right. She designed them. What did she call—we came here to do these things. Oh, you're getting me carried away with my mother. My mother is so wonderful.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Multitalented.

JOE OVERSTREET: My mother was so wonderful because she did not want to be put back into what the South had represented and this was her fight—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So—

JOE OVERSTREET:—and my father's fight.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Going back to the time when you were in New York when you said you went to the Metropolitan, I asked about your budding interest in art [that] had been nourished by this teacher, Ms. Kendricks, and your mother and your aunt.

JOE OVERSTREET: When I went to—when I got to—when I got here is why I'm here now. I went to P.S. 121. It's on 103rd Street in East Harlem—east side—103rd Street, east side. We used to take—the teacher—and I don't even remember her name now but I was a much older grade—would take us on tours to the Met and I remember the first tour I went on we went into the Egyptian room. I got a chance—I went out. I went totally out. I had never seen anything like a mummified Egyptian before and they had one there, and the whole idea I think carried me away the Egyptian—you know, they had this Egyptian tomb there on the side.

You've been to the Met. You know that tomb there on the side where they have those things there? I went in there and afterwards I would go back. My mother—I would tell her I had to go—it was a class project. And I had no damn class. I just had to get back in there. And at that time nobody was there but me. Damn museum was empty. So I had the guards—I was spending the whole day in the Met sometimes and I had the guards wake me up because I would go to sleep, you know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember what other areas in the Met you went to?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, I went to the French—I used to look at the Rembrandts and stuff like that. I enjoyed seeing that. But I was nowhere as fascinated by those things as I was that damn mummy down there that I thought was going to get up. [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you think that even at that age you thought you'd be an artist when you grew up?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I had no idea about what a artist was or what it would be. I did it all the time. I—you know what I'm saying? It was one way for me in a way to escape. Well, we moved to Oakland. I'm getting ahead of it probably.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, it's fine.

JOE OVERSTREET: When we moved to Oakland I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you went to Washington and Oregon in between.

JOE OVERSTREET: We went to Washington—right—after New York to work on the atomic plant. That was the one—in Hanford. My father—we lived in a place called Pasco.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Passgall?

JOE OVERSTREET: Pasco, yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How do you spell—

CORRINE JENNINGS: It's P-a-s-c-o I think.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right. That's it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh. Washington.

CORRINE JENNINGS: State of Washington.

JOE OVERSTREET: It was almost close to where the Mount—border line into Montana—very close on the border line. It was not close to the ocean side.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: East.

JOE OVERSTREET: My father—we lived in Pasco because my father worked in Hanford. Hanford, Washington, was the place that they built the damn bomb. The—I had no idea about this. My sister was my reporter. Of course, she could read and she would read all the news to me. I had no idea until they dropped this darn thing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, you said she could read. In 1944, you were 11.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you—are you saying that you had difficulty learning to read or—

JOE OVERSTREET: You're damn right. I was—I was a picture man. I mean, my sister was an English expert—

CORRINE JENNINGS: She would read to you in Mississippi, wouldn't she?

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Didn't she read to you in Mississippi?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. She read to me. She was my reader.

CORRINE JENNINGS: She read to everybody.

JOE OVERSTREET: She's like—she's my reader.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But did you—did you actually have difficulty learning to read for some reason, maybe some kind of—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, just some way the language and words I didn't know.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, just a matter of vocabulary?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. It was—yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It wasn't like you had dyslexia or something.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yeah. I—

CORRINE JENNINGS: I don't think—if he had it I don't think he was diagnosed.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, most people weren't then. Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Anyway, in Pasco we would have to come out—when the soldiers would come we went outside. We lived in a trailer shack cab where we all lived in these trailers in Pasco 30, 40 miles from Hanford where this damn bomb was being put together. We didn't know it. We had to come out in Pasco from the trailer camp. We were surrounded by a barbed wire fence and the soldiers would come in and inspect the bus that we would go to school. When we would go to school the soldiers would get on and come in and inspect the trailer camp every so often.

Now, I had no idea what was going on at that time. I know one thing—they used to have us stand outside and look up in the sky for balloons to see the Japanese was trying to send balloons across and knock the damn thing out. I had no idea about all of this was going on. We didn't [know] anything. We were just completely dumbfounded. We lived it—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you have the experience that when you left the South and came to New York and then living in Washington, et cetera, that you had a completely different experience in terms of segregation—a segregated, then a not so segregated society?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, in the South I never lived in segregate—in anyplace segregated in the South. In Conehatta there was no white people to segregate the kids.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And in—and Meridian?

JOE OVERSTREET: In Meridian, I stayed there for maybe a summer-and-a-half but most of the time I would spend with my family. I was very well protected.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So when you went to New York it wasn't—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I lived uptown. I lived up on 100th Street. I was there. So if you know 100th Street in New York you know at that time it was Puerto Rican people and black people mostly that was living there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: My whole life, up until I got probably to California, I had never experienced any racial prejudice because I was—

CORRINE JENNINGS: No

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: No. The swimming pool.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, right. Right. Right. Right. Portland, Oregon, was the first time—a place called Jantzen Beach because it—just between Columbus, Oregon, and Portland, Oregon on the Columbian River there's a little island called Jantzen Beach [sic] [Hayden Island]. They wouldn't let us on because we were black. I couldn't

believe it. I had never had experienced that before because I always felt that we were free.

Well, I came out of a very unusual family. They never told me about races and they never talked about anything. My mother, she would always show the bright side of my life. My father, he was a working man. Oh, boy, you should have met him. He would never tell a lie. He believed the only thing to live with was the truth. He was so spiritual who had never had any education whatsoever. My mother was educated. My father never had any education. I think he dropped out of the third grade or something. But he believed there was God. He used to tell me all the time, "Don't worry about anything because God is looking over you." I would love to hear that because when I got in trouble I was waiting for God. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You said that you escaped to art. Must have been difficult to keep moving. You moved so many times in your young days.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you—when you're—when you're that old I don't think it bothers you as much, you know. We move—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You moved from Portland, then you moved to Oakland one year later and then you moved to Berkeley—so that's going to different schools, right?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, see, Oakland and Berkeley is the same—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah. But each time you were going to a different school.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah. But I didn't think of school—see, I was given more information from her.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: From your mother.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, and from my family. I didn't give a damn about the schools.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What about friends you met? You might have met friends in each different school and felt disturbed about having to leave them.

JOE OVERSTREET: Let me tell you, I made friends with my art. If somebody would—in Oakland there's some big guys—black guys. They were tough. I'd draw their picture and they loved me. I became—[laughs]—I was good. I could draw a likeness and they could see it and they was, "Oh, my god, Joe drew that of me." Some of them probably still got the darn pictures.

But I got a chance to see how to maneuver the world with my art when I was very young to keep from getting beat up and I thought that that was incredible for me to do that.

Now, also I had a charming sister. She was very lovely. They all liked her. She was tough as hell and I would promise her to them. [They laugh.] So I had a lot of escapes. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: By the time you moved to Berkeley in '46 you're nearly old enough to go to high school.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were in high school that was in Berkeley?

JOE OVERSTREET: First I went to high school in Oakland.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: I went to Oakland Tech—technical high school—and I felt that because at Oakland Tech there were more black students and that I could go and become—or maybe it was the reverse. Maybe I went to Berkeley High first. What does it say?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I just know about Oakland High.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. Berkeley High first. And then I have found out certain things about Berkeley High—that I wasn't getting the kind of—oh, I expected something that I couldn't find at Berkeley. I wanted to really get trained as a artist and I felt that they weren't concerned about that. My friend and I—Ishmael—we went back in and challenged them after that. Look, I'm trying to put it together now so I can get it—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So Berkeley High [was] more academic or they just didn't have art?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I mean, let me explain to you about Berkeley High. Berkeley High had the highest academic for whites in California—highest standard—the lowest for blacks in California. All my kids I took out of

Berkeley High and raised them myself. My young son, I had him over here—he just left a couple days ago—he's getting his Ph.D. in robotic engineering. When I got him out of Berkeley High because they say he couldn't learn math. Berkeley High set up a standard—and I think it's the school board because I checked them on it—blacks couldn't learn.

The blacks had a problem with education. I went out—Ishmael Reed and I, we went out and we checked them and challenged them on the idea that—you can talk to Ishmael. He and I went there. He's there now. He taught at Berkeley. But this was in '70—1970—went into Unified School District at Berkeley High and I got up and I'd say you hurt me. You didn't help me—you hurt me. They did.

I went to Oakland Tech. They hurt me also because they didn't give a shit about black people other than the football players and that's what happened—I wasn't tough. I wasn't big enough to be a tough football player, I wasn't fast enough to be a track star, and I wasn't tall enough to be a basketball player. She knows what I'm saying. And that—and that's really what hurt black students.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you went there though did you find any classes that had to do with art in any way?

JOE OVERSTREET: I took all of those classes but, you know—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But they—but—

CORRINE JENNINGS: You know, I think you should tell her about—let's see, softball games. Two things that—

[Audio Break.]

JOE OVERSTREET: There was a baseball player—Curt Flood. You ever hear of him? Curt Flood grew up in Oakland—downtown in Oakland. His father was a baseball player. But he's not the one I'm talking about. He had a brother named Harmon Flood. Harmon Flood and I used to sit in the park and try and be artists. Harmon Flood wanted to be an artist. But my biggest and best influence of anybody in the world was Raymond Howell from Oakland.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is in—when you were in high school?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was his last name?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Howell.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: H-o-w-e-l-l?

JOE OVERSTREET: And he was my best influence because he taught me perspective. He taught me light and dark. He taught me things the damn schools would never in their life—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did he run a little school?

CORRINE JENNINGS: No. They ran a little crowd—artists—as opposed to athletes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In high school. So he was a fellow high school student?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, he was not. He was out of high school. He was a fellow artist out there surviving as a—he was selling his work.

CORRINE JENNINGS: It's more commercial.

JOE OVERSTREET: Very commercial. I wouldn't even look at that stuff today because at the time—you can go on a website and see his work.

CORRINE JENNINGS: He's in the Oakland Museum.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did he study art somewhere or is he self-taught?

JOE OVERSTREET: I don't know. Raymond was somebody that had gone the way—I had found from him the art—I'm trying to remember. Sargent Johnson was one of these artists who had helped him and—

CORRINE JENNINGS: And helped you.

JOE OVERSTREET: And helped me. And they—one way we had a lot of experience with one of the artists in California was that we can find each other and—right. I remember Ray Parker taught at California School—at Oakland Arts and Crafts [California College of the Arts].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: And I went up there, sat down to talk to him once and he say, "Well, come back and sit in my class." I had another friend was up there at the same time but I would go up there and hang around.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: While you were still in high school?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Well, but see, I left high school and went to sea. I went out to sea—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So how did you decide? That was the Merchant Marines?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why did that happen?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, because I wanted to go look at the damn world. [Laughs.] I wanted to get away from Oakland, California, and I went and got on the ship and boy, did I have fun. I went all over the world. I got a chance when I was 17 to go to Japan, to go to China, to go to India. I spent six months in India. Now, you tell me that's not a good education. That beats that damn high school stuff, doesn't it? I got a chance to spend time in Bangkok. I got a chance to go and to—what—South—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Panama Canal?

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: You mean South America?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Also South America. I got a chance to really travel.

CORRINE JENNINGS: And to Hawaii.

JOE OVERSTREET: I went to Hawaii. I worked from the ship when I went to Hawaii.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Through all those years was it a solid period of time or were you in and out?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. What I would do when I—I would get bored, frustrated I'd go to the ship.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I see.

JOE OVERSTREET: I would come back and I would live in—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Because you went to different colleges. You came—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. I went to—I went to—when I get off the damn ship I went to Contra Costa College. You got that down there?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, that stupid school. How you find all this stuff out? [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It's in one of the books in the back of the catalog of—

CORRINE JENNINGS: I probably put it there.

JOE OVERSTREET: You put Contra Costa in there?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah. Whatever I find.

JOE OVERSTREET: I went out there and I wanted to play football and they cut me and then I [laughs]—I never told you that story.

CORRINE JENNINGS: No. No.

JOE OVERSTREET: The stupid fools—I went there to play football.

CORRINE JENNINGS: What about Johnny Mathis in track?

JOE OVERSTREET: The who?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Johnny Mathis—the singer—in track.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh. I had track when I—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah. Was that in Oakland?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, it was at Oakland. Yeah. But, you see, the thing is I wanted to be an athlete because I felt that these—they had more fun.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you also wanted to be an artist.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, listen—look at the fun that Tiger Woods is having. My god.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you also wanted to be an artist.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. I wanted to be a artist too.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You wanted to be an artist at the same time.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

So anyway, I wanted to be an artist and I wanted to have fun being an athlete. But I didn't have the strength somehow to be an athlete—as strong as I would like to have been. I was sort of a skinny kid. I went to sea and I did things. I was always out there trying to discover something, I guess.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were at sea during all those years, were there any fellow Merchant Marines who you became friends with, who shared your interest in art so if you went to China or Japan or anywhere, you'd go with them to see the shrines or to see whatever sights—

JOE OVERSTREET: Those damn fools ain't going to do that [laughs]. Listen—listen. You know what I had happen to me? I was working on the SS *Laurel Lee* [ph]. That was the ship that went to Honolulu and back to San Francisco and to Los Angeles. And I met this guy on the ship. I showed him my drawings. And he got so excited because I would sit on the ship and I would—well, you know, at night you have a lot of time—I would draw the guys on the ship. And I showed him my drawings. He—when he got to Los Angeles he took me to Disney—Walt Disney—and introduced me to his brother—Walt Disney's brother—and showed him my drawings.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That was Roy Disney?

JOE OVERSTREET: Roy Disney?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is that the brother?

JOE OVERSTREET: I don't remember. Yeah. I couldn't remember—I know it wasn't Walt but I showed him my drawings and he liked them. He gave me a job at—working at Walt—and I got right off the ship I went to work for Walt—This was in '54 or '53.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was that a good job?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. At first I didn't know a damn thing about what animated movies were and everything I did was backwards. But they didn't just fire me. I never told you this before. I told you—they let—they put me on a bus and sent me to Disneyland.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: As a goodbye present?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, no. I could draw portraits. That's what—they hired me on the fact that I could draw portraits and draw caricatures. I went to Disneyland. They gave me a big Mexican hat and they gave me—

CORRINE JENNINGS: A sombrero.

JOE OVERSTREET: Sombrero. And I was sitting in the—in the Mexican section drawing caricatures of all the people who came and I drew Jayne Mansfield—all of these celebrities.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That—that was just when Disneyland opened.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes. Yes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The very, very beginning.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, at the very beginning. It had been open one year, I think. Yeah. And I went there and I was sitting there with a big sombrero on and I—with the big thing acting Mexican. And they were—I was impressed with myself until I got tired of them. No, what got—I tell you this story.

The guy picked—who got ticked off. I drew his wife. Oh, I was going to be—the woman didn't look best so I was going to make her—I was going to make him really proud of her. [Laughs.]

He took one look at it and threw it up [laughs]. I decided that wasn't a good career. I—[laughs]—I told you that story. I didn't know how to—how to become a portrait artist and tell the truth.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: So I decided to give that up. I went back to San Francisco. In San Francisco, I set up a little place and I made portraits. I had to survive.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, was that before or after you went to California School of the Arts?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, this is difficult because California School—California Fine Arts. Now, I went there to take night classes. I was involved with someone, excuse me, that was taking night classes there and I was there and I took drawing classes. Now—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A girlfriend?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I don't know what she was but I was there trying to impress somebody.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Now you didn't tell me that.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I didn't tell you that but I was there trying to impress, and I had a talent. I could draw with my left hand and my right hand. Well, they would set these models up—with three-minute models. I had—I'd draw with my right hand and one with my left hand. Well, that—well, everybody was impressed with that. I mean, there's some kind of freak sitting here who can [laughs]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were there any teachers who became really [important] to you?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Well, the teachers—the teachers I didn't think much of because I thought I had more experience. Now, the one teacher I did like, Olivera.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, he taught there? Nathan Olivera?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. You know who he is, right? Yeah. Also, I met—I met—I met Diego Rivera, who had started the damn school. I met him in '49 in San Francisco.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I was going to ask you when you met him.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did that happen? In '49, so you were 16.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. I was going around drawing and I [laughs]—I had a sketch pad and they had this bird room at the Fairmont—Claremont Hotel called Papagayo Room.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The—called the what room?

JOE OVERSTREET: Papagayo as—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Papagayo maybe.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. That's for bird, right?

MS. JENNING: Yeah. I—

JOE OVERSTREET: A parrot or something. Yes. Anyway, Al Williams was someone that I had met with my sketch pad.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Al Williams?

JOE OVERSTREET: Al Williams that owned the Papagayo Room and the Claremont Hotel and—[inaudible]—huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Fairmont?

JOE OVERSTREET: Claremont. It's not Fairmont.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There's a Claremont in Berkeley.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh. Fairmont then. You're right. Claremont's in Berkeley—right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Fairmont.

JOE OVERSTREET: Do you—you grew up there too?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, but I went to Berkeley.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, you went to Berkeley? Where'd you live?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When I was in Berkeley?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We'll talk about it later.

JOE OVERSTREET: You lived out on Sacramento Street?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No.

JOE OVERSTREET: You didn't? Okay. San Pablo? Okay. You lived up in those hills? Yeah, she lived up there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Close to the school. [Laughs.]

JOE OVERSTREET: I used to go up there and climb over that fence and go into the rad [radiation] lab up there and try to get to the—that thing that split the atoms. I was going to borrow—[They laugh]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The Lawrence Radiation Lab.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right. Right. I was going to borrow the damn thing. But when we were kids we used to go up there and at that—[inaudible].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You were saying how you met Diego Rivera.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, Al Williams, who owned the Papagayo, had became interested in my drawings and he was going to tell me to come up and draw the birds. You see, they had all these parrots and all these damn birds in the cages up there with—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did you meet Al Williams?

JOE OVERSTREET: I met him up there. I was walking around with my damn sketch pad. I had—I had—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean near the Fairmont?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Right in the Fairmont.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Up on Nob Hill?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, on Nob Hill. I had a friend that lived in the next block.

So I went up there and I was walking around with my sketch pad in the Fairmont and Al Williams came out and one day he came out and he said, "Come over, I want you to meet somebody." I went over and there's this huge fat Mexican guy sitting there eating with his damn hands and there was this, I guess, charming lady was with him and I couldn't figure out what the hell the two of them were doing together.

I shouldn't say that. Okay. Anyway, I went over and the guy didn't speak any English. He just sat there and looked at me like I was crazy. So Al Williams told me to show him my drawings. I showed him my drawings and then I took my [sketch pad?]. Al Williams had asked him to sign it. So I said, will you sign it please.

He signed it and I guess some had looked like Rivera—Diego Rivera or something. I didn't know who in the hell he was—didn't care at that time. I took the sketch drawing pad and it burned up in my mother's house when her house caught on fire.

But that was my first introduction with someone that I thought—afterwards I found out he was the first chairman of the California School of Fine Arts. And then I found out he had set up a lot of murals over in Berkeley, and then I found out a lot about him. I learned a lot about him. I learned—we were here—we showed a artist. What was that guy's name, Corrine—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Oh—

JOE OVERSTREET:—who had worked with him on that mural and—

CORRINE JENNINGS: David Venn [ph]—David—I'll think of it, he's a sculptor.

JOE OVERSTREET: He worked with him on the mural in Rockefeller Center. You know about that one. They took it down because of—he put—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: So this young guy—this guy was here that we met and he and I used to sit out and talk about Rivera. And another part of Rivera's story that I always felt close to he didn't like that other Mexican artist.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Siqueiros?

JOE OVERSTREET: That's the one. Because down the street one of the great—the great Russian minds lived on the street here and he was the one who set him up—Trotsky. Siqueiros sent—he was living in Diego Rivera's house. So Lenin—Lenin, I guess, was looking for him.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Trotsky—mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: And they—he's the one—Siqueiros the one that told him that he was in his house. So I always hated Siqueiros' work after that because of that snitch.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you—going back, you went to this California School of the Arts because of this lady, maybe?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I took some night classes there because—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You took some night classes.

JOE OVERSTREET:—I wanted to go there and learn to draw from the figure and I didn't learn. I taught them to draw.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And while you were there you said you studied with Nathan Olivera. Sargent Johnson, did he live in San Francisco?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. He lived on Grant Street.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you know him at that time?

JOE OVERSTREET: I knew him like I—well, not as well as I know you.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Not very well.

JOE OVERSTREET: But he wouldn't let anybody—he wouldn't let anybody know him. He—I had a studio on Grant—Grant Avenue and he was up the block on Grant Avenue.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So by that time you thought you were an artist and you felt you needed your own studio.

JOE OVERSTREET: Shit, what are you talking about I thought I was—I was selling my work. I was making $20,000 a year on my work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You were a successful artist.

JOE OVERSTREET: I was a successful artist.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you feel like you were part of the art community in San Francisco?

JOE OVERSTREET: I felt that I designed it, in a way, because I'll tell you why I felt that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When do you think you got that studio? What year would you think that was?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, then I moved in there in '58—in '56—'56 in my studio on Grant Avenue.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were 23.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Okay. Oh, boy, you can count. I can't even think that—Now, one of the things that I felt about San Francisco, Bob Kaufman published *Beatitude* magazine in my studio. You know what the *Beatitude*—you ever read that? You know—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I never read it but I know of it.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. The *Beatitude* magazine was published in my studio. Bob Kaufman was my good buddy. You know Mike's Pool Hall? Yeah, you've been hanging out in Mike's Pool Hall down on old Broadway there. We used to hang out down there and talk.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In San Francisco.

JOE OVERSTREET: In San Francisco. So one night I had this—well, first, this is before I moved to my studio. I met this woman. It was not a love affair. But she's a very nice person and I asked her—she had an apartment. She was living in Sacramento and working on her job. She had an apartment up on Telegraph Avenue up the street. So she had this apartment. She wanted to rent half of it. I rented half of her apartment.

One night in Mike's Pool Hall, I decided like a fool, like I always do things, to take Bob Kaufman with me to my house. He fell in love with the woman, kicked me out, [laughs] to make a long story short.

Eileen Kaufman. They had a child—Parker—and I don't know where the child is now. But anyway, they came to New York and I had—they became my responsibility here. So I—you know, I grabbed a hold of something. I had to care for a long time. I used to live up the street here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why do you say that he became your responsibility?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, because they came here and they couldn't find a job and Bob Kaufman didn't want to work and Eileen had the baby and the baby was walking around. So they were living in abandoned buildings. So I had to pick them up and take them in and feed them and take care of them until I got enough money to get them back to San Francisco. I finally did that.

You see, because Parker—he's a grown man now. If you ever meet him tell him to come give the old guy some money. But I have a son who was out there at the same time. Anyway, that's not a part of the story. I always talk about it with my art because I think that Bob Kaufman was very influential in my art.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was the Beat community and the poets, musicians—were they influential on you at that time?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I think we were all—see, there was two sides. There was—there was the musicians out there playing at Black Hawk and at Jimbo's Bop City and stuff like that. And then they had a few clubs—the Cellar—and they had jazz clubs. They were sort of spaced anyway, musicians—you know musicians. You can't really trust them. They play music. That's all they do. [Laughs.]

The poets were Bob Kaufman. I didn't believe anybody else could ever be a poet but Bob Kaufman. Bob Kaufman wrote in that *Abomunist Manifesto* [San Francisco, City Lights. 1958]. Also, Ferlinghetti swore by him and, you know, and City Lights Books—they carried his book so he was a hero. And then there was Eric Nord—"Big Daddy"—who we sort of—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What did you say before Big Daddy? Eric?

JOE OVERSTREET: Eric Nord, yeah. He was the one that really set the beat and swing because Eric was the one that had the—taken a loft down in the Montgomery district. We didn't know what damn lofts were, you know, because they were just big old open space. Nobody would live in something like that. Well, Eric showed—he had been to New York obviously and seen people live in the lofts. He—

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JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joe Overstreet at 214 East Second Street, New York City, on March 17, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc two.

We were talking about your time in San Francisco, but do you want to go back and talk about your father?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah, my father is very interesting, because my father was sort of thrown away at a very young age, and he had no connection to his side of the family, which—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean he was abandoned?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes. He was white and Indian. His mother was Shoshone and his father was French. And so my aunt raised him. She was his only relative—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean his—

MS. JENNINGS : His sister—his older sister.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—older sister.

JOE OVERSTREET: His older sister, yes.

CORRINE JENNINGS: And she was a couple of years older—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So their parents abandoned them both?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, well, they had different parents—they had different fathers. But her mother died. The mother died, Kelly [ph]. She was the one who died when they were very young.

CORRINE JENNINGS: What's interesting about her is that she was on the—she was marched out on the Trail of Tears, and walked back to Mississippi—[inaudible]—Mississippi. And her first child had to raise the second child—his father.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So your father was half white and half Shoshone?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, and African-American. They were both mixed, yes. But most of it was Shoshone and French. Okay, the mother was Shoshone and African-American.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I see. I see.

JOE OVERSTREET: And the father was French. The mother—my grandmother at this certain time, had gone to work for the French guy, and he's the one who gave birth—gave her the babies. That's the way it—the story goes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So when they abandoned your father and your aunt, where were they living?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, now, they were in Meridian.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

JOE OVERSTREET: But what happened was not—"abandoned" is a very, very, very strong kind of concept for it. I think she passed away. She had left that home. He didn't know. The only time we knew about this French guy was during the Depression. In the '30s he was sending food to my father, and stuff to my father when they lived in Meridian. I remember they'd say they used to get these packages of food from him.

Somehow my father never thought of this. He would never talk about it. He never thought much of it anyway. He was a difficult person to relate to things like that. You see, he had more ideas about what to go forward about than to look backward. [Laughs.] He was an incredible person. I always love him because he would always tell me, "Don't go back there; just keep going forward." And it is important, I think. It's what we do here. We go forward. You know, we build this, we build—

CORRINE JENNINGS: He wanted you to have a trade.

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] Well, yeah, he wanted me to have a trade. He wanted me to be a cement mason, and I won't be no damned cement mason. I wanted to be an artist. And I didn't want to be anything other than free, and I got a chance to express that. I think it has a lot to do with the kind of art I make—my constant struggle for freedom.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were your mother and father pleased with what you decided to do, and your accomplishments?

JOE OVERSTREET: They didn't—my mother didn't care one way or another. She was wonderful. She was right. She thought that was a wonderful idea. My father used to tell me, "Well, if something happened for you, you would be very lucky because white people do this; black people don't do it. And then if you get something, you'll be dead many, many years before your kids, your great-great-grandkids—[laughs]—get something from it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So he was more practical. He was thinking about your future and the likelihood of success.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yeah, he would tell me "my grandkids," if I was lucky.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were in San Francisco then—going back, you mentioned Ray Parker. Were there other painters whose work you saw and you think was influential?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I saw—[inaudible]—and Billy Sharp, and all those people. I liked those things—those San Francisco women, those San Francisco cityscapes, and stuff like that. I wasn't influenced by that as much as I was influenced by the people I was close to—Raymond Sanders—Raymond Howell, not Raymond Sanders; he came later—Raymond Howell and [Sargent] Johnson. Well, Johnson was a sculptor, and then he had—you know, he had looked at a lot of things.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So by 1956 you had a studio. You said it was on Grant Street?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you remember the address?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, god, no.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It was Grant, near what cross street?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, it was between Vallejo and Green, wasn't it? Right off—right between Vallejo and—

CORRINE JENNINGS: I don't know—

JOE OVERSTREET: You know Vallejo Street on Grant. Grant and Vallejo, that's what—that's the closest street between there.

It was called Overstreet Gallery. And people used to laugh—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you not only established a studio, but you established a gallery? Really, or are you just joking?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, but I would paint in the back, and put my pictures up and sell them in the front. I had my—I had the same thing I got here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You began that pattern way back, the first thing.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right, right, right.

CORRINE JENNINGS: He's an entrepreneur. [Laughs.]

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see the thing is that I had to have a way of making a living if I wasn't going to—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You had some very early shows—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—which is quite remarkable.

JOE OVERSTREET: I had a good show at The District [gallery in Oakland, CA]. I thought that was a good show I had the District. I sold some of those things.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah, 1954.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I sold some of those things.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did that show happen?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you know, I used to go in these places when I would drink coffee. And then I had my

sketch pad, and I'd always like to get around to showing them my sketches and my stuff on my pad. And people liked to just look at them, and they were unusual.

So I would ask them to—you know, they showed work there in The District at that time, and they showed young artists' work. And the same way with Miss Smith Connie's Tea Room. You know, they had a gallery; you brought people in the same way with Vesuvios.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah. That's a coffee house.

JOE OVERSTREET: That's coffee—well, Vesuvios is a bar.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, Connie Smith's Tea Room was a coffee house, right. So I would always get around to getting them to show my work. You know, I'd help them; they'd help me. And I would go there and get free drinks, and she'll provide it. So it was an exchange.

The Beach was good at that, because they supported me in a lot of ways.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: North Beach?

JOE OVERSTREET: North Beach, yes. And they supported what I wanted to do.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you started—when you had this first studio, and it was also the Overstreet Gallery, was that in part because it seemed impossible to get the kind of representation at a commercial gallery, that that might have been your goal?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, there was not that many commercial galleries. There was Dilexi [San Francisco, CA], which was a popular gallery, which it showed the big—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Dilexi, yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET:—you know, Clyfford Still, [Willem] de Kooning. I went—they weren't going to bother with it. I showed there once in a group show, but they weren't going to give me an exhibition. And there was that phase of it.

San Francisco was not—why I came here -- was not an art gallery scene, in the sense where it was almost like coffee-house. It was very coffee-house. Here, I came here and I showed—oh, my god, I had a wonderful time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Before you came here, when you were in San Francisco, did you go to the museum there, the Legion of Honor—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah, they had—but that museum, you ever go that museum in San Francisco? They have a new one now, but that museum was pretty awful. I think that that thing out there in the middle of Golden Gate Park—you been there? That's awful! [Laughs.]

I used to go there a lot. But I enjoyed going there to look at the trees, and to look at the Van Gogh's concept of the trees that the—that was paint there. These are the—this guy here I love.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Van Gogh?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Okay, now—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So obviously you were ambitious, and when you thought about going to New York [City], was that—

JOE OVERSTREET: Ambition was putting it mildly. I was on the run, child. [Laughs.] I came here because I felt that I outgrew San Francisco. And, in fact, some people told me that. I was in my studio one night and this guy came in—really good, he was a short, very dynamic man. He looked at me and he said, "You have no business being in this town. This town don't deserve you and you don't deserve it. Get your ass out of here and go to New York."

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who said that?

JOE OVERSTREET: I don't remember the guy, but he helped encourage me to pack up and to leave. [Laughs.] I came here—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At that point you had—your family was basically in the Bay Area.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was your mother or father still—

JOE OVERSTREET: My mother and father, they both live in Berkeley—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And your sister—

JOE OVERSTREET:—on Virginia Street; and then my sister—everybody lived—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were leaving everybody to go to New York?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I was leaving. But you see I had the kind of family—and I knew any time I needed something I could call them up and they'd send me money for food. I wasn't going to ever starve, and they would always help me.

CORRINE JENNINGS: And your Aunt Mary was still here.

JOE OVERSTREET: And my Aunt Mary was here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh. Where was she?

JOE OVERSTREET: She lived up on 100th Street. Well, we left her when we came here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you came here and you said at one point that you came with Bob Kaufman?

JOE OVERSTREET: Bob Kaufman came shortly after I came. And Bob and Eileen, they came here shortly after I came to New York. I was living on 85th Street on the West Side.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did you end up in that place? How did you find that place?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you know what that place was? Ella Fitzgerald lived there above me; Carmen—what's her name—

CORRINE JENNINGS: McRae?

JOE OVERSTREET:—McRae lived across the street. They all lived there. It was a jazz kind of—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Pretty wonderful neighborhood.

JOE OVERSTREET: A beautiful neighborhood. I went up there looking for a studio, looking for a place to live on 84th—83rd Street I think it was at the time.

And I got this place. I rented it. The rent was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think it was 85th Street, I—

JOE OVERSTREET: 85th, right. 85th; then I moved to 84th, yeah; and then I moved to 79th.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I meant to ask you something. I know a painting from 1957 called *The Hawk*—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: —[*The Hawk*]*for Horace Silver*, [1957], and that—

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, that was *The Black Hawk*.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—I wanted to ask you about. It was a very dynamic approach to painting and somewhat figurative. How did you arrive at that kind of imagery, that subject matter, that—

JOE OVERSTREET: Picasso was an African artist. The only, our aesthetic in the world, I think, is African sculpture. That stuff over there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The only meaningful one to you?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, no. That's all the stuff that makes—made culture African culture, that stuff over there. You can go over there and I'll show it to you.

But Picasso took that and made European cubes out of it, made—oh, I guess Cézanne—he took Cezanne's light, and he put African, and he mixed it together. So I did that with my Horace Silver painting I think.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who was Horace Silver?

JOE OVERSTREET: My god, everybody in the world know who Horace Silver is. [Laughs.] She can't—I can't believe it. He's the greatest pianist in the whole world.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh.

JOE OVERSTREET: No, he's not as good as Thelonious Monk. She [Jennings] don't think so. Or Bud Powell. You're right. Okay, so he's third. [Laughs.] He's fourth now—[inaudible]—that Dorothy's [Donegan] there. [Laughs.] Anyway—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And The Hawk—and The Hawk was a bar?

JOE OVERSTREET: The Black Hawk. Black Hawk was the bar. [Inaudible.] I used to go there to see Miles Davis and I would paint.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that's a painting on masonite I read.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you mainly painting on masonite in those years, or was that—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, it was easy. It was easy to buy; it was easy to get; and it was easy to prime.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you were always using oil paint.

JOE OVERSTREET: I was always using oil paint.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So when you moved to New York in 1958 you found a studio, where you also lived, on 85th Street?

JOE OVERSTREET: Right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And at that point I guess you started meeting artists in New York?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I went to this scene—I have to call him up today. I went down to—I was walking around looking at galleries on 54th Street and Fifth Avenue, next to the Museum of Modern Art. There was this woman, her name was Marks, Evelyn Marks who gave me—

Was it Evelyn Marks?

CORRINE JENNINGS: I think so.

JOE OVERSTREET: She gave a show and she introduced me to Merton Simpson. Merton Simpson was across the street. Merton Simpson is my buddy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Merton Simpson?

JOE OVERSTREET: He's always—he's always—he's almost—he was an African art dealer in New York City. So she gave me a show. And what really got me was while I had my pictures in the hall getting ready to hang them—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Where was her gallery—on 54th?

JOE OVERSTREET: On 54th Street. I had my paintings in the hall, getting ready to hang them up, and some guy came in there and he bought two of them. One of the paintings I called the *20th Century Cowboy*. And what was the other one? Anyway, I found out who the guy was later. The guy was the one who wrote *Fiddler on the Roof*. [Joseph Stein]. What was his name? He came by here years ago to see me.

Anyway, he was the one who bought out of the—before the show was put up. Anyway, so I sold maybe four paintings out of the show at the time. I showed something like 10, 12 paintings.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That was tremendous.

JOE OVERSTREET: It was fantastic. And the next exhibition I had was—What year was this, 1960? 1959.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You had a show—

JOE OVERSTREET: 1959.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I don't—yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right. Then I showed at Ira Spanierman's gallery [Spanierman Gallery LLC, New York City]. Ira calls me every day. He still likes to show my work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Spangerman, right?

JOE OVERSTREET: You know who he is, right?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Spanierman.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Spanierman?

JOE OVERSTREET: You know who he is? He's like a huge dealer. He was somebody who—his father owned the Savoy auction house [Savoy Art and Auction Gallery] at one point. And I used to sit there—and his father sold the Met all of those paintings, so I used to tell Ira, "You know, they're bad paintings. The students made them all. They're not really good. So you ought to get your father to give us our money back." [Laughs.]

He calls me all the time. He likes to show my paintings—[inaudible.] I don't want to show my paintings with a gallery. I want to build a museum—you're going to help me. I'm in the process of doing it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At some point I do want to talk all about those kinds of questions. Let's go through—

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, let's get—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—but I have it on my list. I won't forget.

JOE OVERSTREET:—we have to keep going—[laughs]—we have to keep going, okay. [Laughs.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: I think that was maybe his first show [(1961)].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] In New York.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Spanierman, Ira Spanierman.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And so you—when you got here, did you feel your work changing, your subject-matter or your—

JOE OVERSTREET: My work has changed—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—approach to painting?

JOE OVERSTREET:—from the first day—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But then?

JOE OVERSTREET: Listen, let me say this. I don't care who hears it. My work has changed every picture I've ever made, because I'm searching for the unknown truth to see how, what Picasso did to show; what Leonardo Da Vinci did; what Vincent van Gogh did—what they did to show the world a different way of looking at things. I'm looking for that. I want people to see something they never saw before that will help them.

And if [I] can't find that—I don't give a shit if I—excuse me, I don't care about people just finding art for their bathroom, the kitchen—[laughs]—or their bedroom, or their living room. I could care less about that. I want people to see something and it's going to change their thinking forever. When I look at this guy here, my god, I don't think the same way anymore.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Referring to van Gogh?

JOE OVERSTREET: He's the best artist that ever lived, right there, you see. And if I can't do that, it ain't nothing, right? And I'm trying, I'm trying, I'm trying. God gave me this space and gave this studio, right, and gave me a good woman to help me, right. So if I can't do it, I can't do it. I have to keep trying, though.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you got here you were painting in that space on 85th

Street—

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] You want to go back and keep talking about it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, I—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, okay. Go ahead. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And you gradually, I'm sure, met lots of other artists.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, I met them. Yeah, they were—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you go down to the 10th Street galleries? There was a—

JOE OVERSTREET: To where?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There was a active gallery scene on 10th Street.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, yeah. Oh, I showed there.

Listen, that was the thing that took art from Paris. Those guys—this is de Kooning, and Kline, and those guys. They—oh, they kicked butt down there. And I always—that's what I want to do, I want to build a museum and put some of them in there, because I believe that was the thing that changed my mind about what's possible.

You see this guy here? Let me see this. You see this guy here? This guy is very—so important to me. He's the Tiger—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Salvatore Scarpitta.

JOE OVERSTREET: You know his work?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: He's so important to me and I'll tell you why.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When did you meet him?

JOE OVERSTREET: Wait. I used to drink in the Cedar Street bar with all these guys. That's when I met all of them. Look at this, look at this. You see this? Now, this guy introduced me to—One night I saw him, I say, Salvatore, how do we get into this as black people? You know what he did? He—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Get into the gallery scene?

JOE OVERSTREET: The art business, the art world—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Art world.

JOE OVERSTREET:—into the galleries and everything, making the money, doing what they were doing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: You know what, don't put that—I want to show her the Rommy. You know what he did? He looked at me, he said, "Joe, you know what you've got to do. You got to make something to scare the shit out of them." Oh, I'll never forget that when he told me that, we were having dinner in Chinatown.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did someone do that and succeed? Did you see—[can you] think of an example in your mind?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I went and told Rommy. I said, Rommy, you know what, if we want to get—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Romare Bearden.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. I said, Rommy, you know what, if we—[laughs]—want to get into this world, we got to make something to scare the shit out of them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And what did he think of that?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I'll show you what he thought of that. I didn't have what he had. I didn't have the background he had. Here's what he thought of it. He scared the shit out of them. Because I showed it—I showed it, I showed the work, I showed the work up in Harlem and I watched the kids go crazy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: That's what he did for—He found out who she was. He knew who she was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah—

JOE OVERSTREET:—*Ebony* [Magazine]. I said we get the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Hannah Höch—we're looking at Hannah Höch.

JOE OVERSTREET:—we get the information out of *Ebony*. Here it is here. And we get the information—I don't mind, Rommy don't mind, I said, we get the information out of *Ebony* and we take it.

Look at that. Oh, my God, hold on. He scared the shit out of them, excuse the expression. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] So how did that piece of advice affect the work that you were doing?

JOE OVERSTREET: I have it all in there. I got five million paintings right there in that room. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But did it change—

JOE OVERSTREET: Listen—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At that point—

JOE OVERSTREET:—every time I made a painting I wanted to change the world.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you explicitly thinking about breaking new ground artistically?

JOE OVERSTREET: I didn't give a damn about that. I wanted people to see different things that they never saw before.

When I went to California, there was this guy out there teaching at Berkeley. He came up to me—his name was Arthur Monroe.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Arthur Monroe?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I don't know what the hell I'm using his name for. Corrine told me not to mention anybody's name that I didn't like, but I'm going to talk about him. [Laughs.] He came up to me and he interviewed me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: For what?

JOE OVERSTREET: Out there I was teaching at that school out there, Cal State at Hayward.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, right. Okay, that was in the early '70s.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, yeah. So he came up and he interviewed me, and he asked me if there was a "black aesthetic." Now, what kind of question is that? So obviously he had never heard of Africa. So I told him, "Well, not in America," something to that effect, in painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: I said I'm still looking for it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you think there was an answer he wanted to hear?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, I didn't care what he wanted to hear. I didn't like him and I didn't think much of the question.

You see, that is the problem with me. I've always had to speak what I felt was the truth. I had never known the truth, but I have to speak what I feel is the truth.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: There's another painting you did in 1959 called *Menagerie* that reflects a strong interest in African sculpture. There's a figure, there's a kind of a—

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, you know—[inaudible]—and there's a young woman standing there. Well, I showed that—you have that.

Do you have a picture of that?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Seems like there's a figure. There's circular forms.

JOE OVERSTREET: You all have that one there, Corrine?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah, but we won't be able to find it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So at that point, reflecting on African art had an important part in [your] thinking [about] the subject-matter of your work, and how it would look; and the ideas you were exploring. You were drawing from that work.

JOE OVERSTREET: All right. I'll answer that in this way. In 1959 I wanted—I would like to have started something to show. I created a concept I called "curvism," taken off of Picasso's cubism. But I didn't use the cubist attitude; I used the idea of the world was based on a curve, because I had been to sea—I had gone to sea and I saw the horizon on the curve. So everything that I had tried to do in that time I put on a curve. It's what I'm doing now out there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That's right.

JOE OVERSTREET: Everything is working on a curve. Where it would end is only how I treat it. It's like those shells. You see those shells there? That has a lot to do with the influence that I feel. You can see, you can see—okay, I would work with—Corrine's father taught me so much—Wilmer.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: [To Corrine Jennings] We're almost at the point of meeting you.

CORRINE JENNINGS: No. No, no.

JOE OVERSTREET: He was the one who showed me about Fibonacci, Gorlin squares, the Greek philosophy of numbers.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So that merged right into—

CORRINE JENNINGS: But that's later.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This earlier interest of—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yeah, he's the one who helped me to bring—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Curvism.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right, because I had found, while I was working with my father, Egyptians had used ropes to build the pyramids. That's why those things came off of ropes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You were living uptown on the Upper West Side, and then in 1963, I think, you moved downtown.

JOE OVERSTREET: It's '61.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Sixty-one?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, 1960 or '59. '60 or '61 I moved down to 25th Street.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, on 25th Street. I[t] was just around the corner from where Visual Arts is—School of Visual Arts.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: East 25th. And what precipitated that move from 85th downtown?

JOE OVERSTREET: I was kicked out. [Laughs.] No, I'll tell you why. I had an apartment, and I'd moved from there because the rent was more than I wanted to—work to pay because of my paintings, and I wasn't getting any

money for my paintings at the time. I kept moving my paintings.

One day my landlord got a court order and put my stuff out—I didn't care about the courts or anything, all my stuff was put out in the street. Then this guy came by. He was wonderful. His name was the same as that Gene Monroe. He came by—Gene was his name, not Arthur, Gene, yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Gene?

JOE OVERSTREET: Gene, G-e-a-n. Gene Monroe.

CORRINE JENNINGS: No, G-e-n-e.

JOE OVERSTREET: G-e-n-e, okay.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Monroe.

JOE OVERSTREET: Monroe. He came by and he picked all my stuff up. He had a car. He was way down—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You'd never met him before?

JOE OVERSTREET: I knew him in San Francisco. He said, "Is that you, Joe Overstreet?" I said, yeah. So he picked all my stuff up.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Wow, that's a great coincidence.

JOE OVERSTREET: He got a truck, and got all my stuff and put—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was he an artist?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, he was a writer. But he took my stuff to his—a house where he lived with his wife on 78th and York Avenue, in this big fancy place with a doorman. I couldn't believe myself. [Laughs.] I moved in with him.

So finally I got enough together. I had an—in his house he had four bedrooms or something. I had a bedroom; I had a studio, and all that stuff. But then I saw myself as being his slave. I said, I don't want to be a—you know, I don't want to be a slave for somebody who I'm painting for. I ran into that a couple of times, so I moved out. I moved to 25th Street.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At that point, were you doing anything else to support yourself besides painting and trying to sell the paintings?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, you know what I would do? Oh boy, I had a good time. I drove taxis. I drove liquor store trucks. I drove cleaning trucks, cleaning store. I worked for Bud Denihan, who had—[laughs]—who was a big—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Denihan?

JOE OVERSTREET:—cleaners in New York, and he—I had to take clothes all over the city. I worked for—what are those people's names, a liquor store on Park Avenue and 38th Street. I worked for a—I drove taxi. But the ones who really helped me was the artists, because I built bookshelves for them, painted their studios and did a lot of work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Wow.

JOE OVERSTREET: Al Held, I cleaned his studio. And he was a terrible painter, but he paid good. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you lived for a time then on East 25th Street.

JOE OVERSTREET: Then I met Willem de Kooning. Oh boy, that was a good time when I met him. Excuse me, she have to close her [Jennings] ears for this. I was really a handsome young guy. William de Kooning loved women. He's a Tiger Woods. [Laughs.]

Listen, all the girls used to like to come around for me to introduce them to him. I would. I introduced him to a young—[Corrine] met her -- young black woman. This woman I—this is the best thing I ever done in my life. I'll tell you why. She didn't have any teeth. She didn't have any—her clothes were raggedy. She was—hadn't had much help.

So one night she was in the Cedar Street bar and I'm sitting there talking to him. Something told me—I told him, "Just go take her home and screw her. She looks as good as anybody else you doing it with." He did. She had a

baby.

Remember that?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: This baby. Just before [de Kooning] died, I saw her and the baby. The baby was grown at this time. This was happening in the '60s in the Cedar Street bar. I told her, I said, listen—you know, he had one daughter. We knew Elaine and we knew—we didn't know the daughter, but we knew that the white daughter, you know, was getting most of his time.

I said, "Go and get some of the money." She was scared to. I don't blame her.

JOE OVERSTREET: You know what she told me? Remember what she told me?

She said, "I have his daughter, and his daughter have his energy, and we can get ours." I said, "Go ahead, girl." [Laughs.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: But he fixed her all up.

JOE OVERSTREET: Didn't she tell—didn't he—yes, she told me that. I felt so good for her. And the daughter was a singer—what was she, a singing waitress or something? And I felt so—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did she have the name de Kooning?

CORRINE JENNINGS: No.

JOE OVERSTREET: No.

CORRINE JENNINGS: I don't think people knew that—

JOE OVERSTREET: I felt so good for her. I felt so, so wonderful for her—that she had that kind of strength, that she didn't care. I'd say that's the kind of background I came out of. They don't care. You do it for yourself.

CORRINE JENNINGS: One thing that you didn't say was that Sargent Johnson sent you to Norman Lewis.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh.

JOE OVERSTREET: The what?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Sargent Johnson sent you to Norman Lewis.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, yeah. Yes. Oh, yeah, Sargent Johnson. When I was in California on Grant Avenue he had a studio up the street, Sargent Johnson. So I told him one day, I said I'm going to New York, man; the hell with you guys. [Laughs.] I told Raymond; I gave word to everybody that I was leaving.

So he told me, when you get to New York, see my friend Norman Lewis. I came here and I saw Norman Lewis' paintings. He had a studio on 125th Street and—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Where the—

JOE OVERSTREET: Right across from the museum where the—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah, what is that? The State Office Building—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, that was—

CORRINE JENNINGS: [Inaudible] Square

JOE OVERSTREET: There was three buildings there; they were like loft buildings. Anyway, Norman had a studio about the size of this room, and I went up there—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Had you known his work?

JOE OVERSTREET: I didn't know his work. I didn't know him. I just went up there and told him Sargent Johnson had told me to come see him. He brought me in—Norman Lewis is the meanest person ever lived. His eyes was totally red.

CORRINE JENNINGS: [Laughs.]

JOE OVERSTREET: And, "Come in and sit down, and don't say one word." [Laughs.] So I sit there for four or five hours. And he turned those paintings around. I couldn't say one word about them. He just kept turning them around, and he turned them around. So when I got through I said, "I like your paintings very much. Thank you for showing them to me." And I left.

And I spent 10 years, when we came here [Kenkeleba House], trying to get a grant to show his work. We finally did. And it was incredible, the show that we had.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you meet Romare Bearden at the same time then?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. I have my friend, Larry Compton—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh.

JOE OVERSTREET: Do you know him? Know who he is?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No.

JOE OVERSTREET: He went to California School of Fine Arts. He was one of the ones that I met in San Francisco, Bill Hutson and Larry—and Larry Compton. Larry Compton introduced me to Rommy, he was at Kootz Gallery.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.] Sam Kootz.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, Sam Kootz Gallery. Larry took me by and said, "Listen, I want you to meet this artist." He told Rommy that, and you know [what] Rommy did. Rommy was a wonderful person. Rommy helped me a lot.

But the greatest artist of all time is that guy sitting over there, Jacob Lawrence, I think. I can't ever get past him—his work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Just for a second, go back to de Kooning, then we'll come back the Jacob Lawrence. Somewhere I read about de Kooning helping you financially at some point.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, yeah, he did. Oh, yeah, he—I traded paintings with him. He would give me a letter to Sidney Janis. And I would take the letter to Sidney Janis with his—he gave four or five watercolors, and he gave me a letter saying, "I exchanged a painting with Joe Overstreet. You take one of these paintings and give him—and pay him for it."

So I took them to Sidney Janis. Sidney Janis was a real creep. The son was—you know, the son was not, Carroll Janis, I liked him very much. But Sidney Janis, his old man, was a creep. [Laughs.] He looked—[laughs]—he looked at me and he said, how much is your paintings worth? "My paintings ain't worth shit. What the hell are you"—[inaudible.][Laughs.] How much was his paintings worth, is the question.

So he got around, and what did he give me—$8,000, $1,000 or something, two, five, $3,000 or some amount? I took the money. I paid off—I had moved at that time to a studio on Grand Street, on Hester and Grand Street. I had moved in up there, and I took—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: From 25th?

JOE OVERSTREET: From 25th. Oh, no, no, no. I moved from 25th to East Fifth Street, 629 East Fifth Street; 629 East Fifth Street around the corner there. I moved to Hester Street over an egg store, in a loft.

So this is the way I paid for it: I took the money and I paid a year's rent. That guy had never seen no painter, and a black painter coming in and paying a whole year's rent. And I don't know, I was paying $35 a month for the studio, and I paid him a whole year's rent. And then I went to California.

So what happened when I was in California, things, you know, changed and he wanted me back, so I had to come.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He who?

JOE OVERSTREET: The owner. They had a egg store, and [laughs] so the owner—I had told him a lot of stuff that I wasn't ready to do. I was going to fix it up and make it—I just got into it with another place. I saw it yesterday. I went there—okay, I'll stay with one story.

Then I came back, and Lou Gossett, the actor, gave me a damned dog, and the dog was a female Doberman Pinscher that got up and ripped all my bed clothes, and everything I had, up. And so I had to move because of Lou Gossett's dog. When I saw Lou Gossett—[laughs]—I had to—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean, you had to move before you had lived there a year, even though you'd paid?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, when I came back. I had paid for a year. I didn't stay in California a year. I stayed there about, oh, four or five months and I came back. But my rent was well paid up because of de Kooning. You see it now?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, going back to Jacob Lawrence. So at that point—we're talking about the late '50s early '60s, right, were most of the black artists in New York, [who knew] each other, supportive? Was there a sense of a kind of a community?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yes, they—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Although, it sounds like people were living in different places.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes, yes, yes. I'll give you a sense of it. There was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: For you. I mean, for your experience, not—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, from my experience, yeah. Well, you see the Cedar Street bar was where everybody gathered, both black and white. I met Hale Woodruff in the Cedar Street bar and we used to sit and talk. Rommy Bearden used to go in the Cedar Street bar, we'd sit and talk. But they didn't go there as often as I would go there, because I didn't have anything else to do but go there and hang out with de Kooning. But—[laughs]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And drive trucks and taxis.

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] Well, I met most of them in the Cedar Street bar. Larry Compton, he and I would go there quite frequently. But the Cedar Street bar was the kind of place that artists would go in to just sit and talk. Now, this is before the other side got a hold to the dynamics of the arts—Andy Warhol and that group. They got it and they took it to the house parties.

When we were doing it, we were in the bars and we were fighting it out. You know, we'd get, like, Pollock and Kline. Those people, they'd go out and get in big fights. I used to walk around, and de Kooning would carry a big wad of money and he would tell people, "Well, I won't fight anyone; I let my money do my fighting," and stupid stuff like that. But it was fun—it was fun days. And I'm not trying to be facetious about this in any way.

Hale Woodruff was somebody who was very intellectual anyway. He stayed in a lot, but he lived a half a block from the Cedar Street bar.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At what point did you [move]?

JOE OVERSTREET: Over a block, huh? Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So after living over the egg place, is that when you moved to the Bowery?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, I moved to another place. I moved down on Jefferson Street.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, Jefferson Street. I read about that.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, 86 Jefferson Street.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—where is Jefferson Street?

JOE OVERSTREET: That's down there where the waterfront is.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Down near the South Street Seaport?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes, that's right. And I remember—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And how did you hear about that place?

JOE OVERSTREET: I'll tell you how it is. You see, I had a lot—a lot of, I guess, word of mouth. There was this young woman who worked at—she was a model or something at Cooper Union. She had a studio and she was in a huge place. You know, she couldn't afford it. It was $60 a month.

Somehow I met her at Cedar Street bar and she wanted [to] rent me half of it. I found out later she liked my paintings. And there was never anything between us. I had the front and she had the back.

Underneath us the biggest crook in America lived. His name was Jack Klein. He's the one who renovated all these lofts for artists in New York at the time.

He renovated the one here on Houston Street for Jasper Johns and all these people. I worked for him on the—[laughs]—Jasper Johns; Indiana on the Bowery; Lichtenstein, all these places. He's the one who found these places, and would go in and renovate them. He used me and four or five other guys to renovate. That was one of the ways I could make money. Anyway—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why do you say he was a crook?

JOE OVERSTREET: Because he used me. I got a place—this is before he started doing this, I got a place next to where she—her studio, Louise Farnsworth, she had—she's a young woman who had Louise Farnsworth. It had something to do with the painting at Cooper Union or something.

We never really—she's the one who brought Jack Whitten to my studio to look at my work. And I'll never forgive her for that, because—oh, she [Jennings] don't want me to say it, but to hell with it.

CORRINE JENNINGS: No.

JOE OVERSTREET: Don't say it.

CORRINE JENNINGS: No. Absolutely not.

JOE OVERSTREET: She uses her wife as a historian, see, and I can't say the thing because she uses Jack Whitten's wife to renovate—

CORRINE JENNINGS: She's a wonderful conservator, paper conservator.

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] Yeah. So I have to keep—

CORRINE JENNINGS: And so you—

JOE OVERSTREET:—I have to keep quiet.

CORRINE JENNINGS:—have to be discrete.

JOE OVERSTREET: I have to be discrete.

CORRINE JENNINGS: And also, you know, it's not funny—

JOE OVERSTREET: Anyway. Yeah, because I look back at my history and I see myself in a different sense, you know, very young, very energetic. I'm a older person. I've been through a lot of things. I had many more—many more avenues to walk.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you worked with this guy—

JOE OVERSTREET: Jack Klein.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—Jack Klein, and—

JOE OVERSTREET: And I got a—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—renovating studios, and—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, renovate—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—when you were living on Jefferson Street.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, and then I moved from Jefferson Street—and here's the key, next door from 76 Jefferson Street to 80 Jefferson Street. That's when I met Eric Dolphy. He wanted to move there. I met a lot of people there.

Jack Klein decided—I didn't have any other way of making a living except renovating lofts, and things for him. He fired me. I didn't have a way—I decided not to pay the rent. But there was a lot of people around at the time that I knew. Bob Blackburn used to go there; he used to come over. There was a young girl, Gail Paradise [ph] or

somebody lived—a young woman lived up there. A lot of—she was sort of cute; a lot of guys come by to see her—[laughs]—so anyway, I always looked at her as a avenue to find somebody would—do something to sell some paintings.

And then occasionally I would sell a painting, because that was the way the art world moved at that time. You had to find somebody who knew somebody who would buy a damned painting. It was extremely hard for black artists. Now, the ones I knew who did that, who could sell paintings out of their studio. Norman Lewis couldn't sell paintings out of his studio. The ones that I knew that would sell paintings—Emilio Cruz sold one or two, or Bob Thompson, you see. So Bob Thompson would sell with Martha Jackson.

So we would all try to find people who would try to help us sell our work, to keep going. Interesting way of existence, isn't it? Very, very, very, very—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Precarious.

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] Well, that's the word, yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I know by 1964 you were—I think your work was dedicated to social issues—

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, yeah, well yeah—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—being a form of social protest. Did that begin a little earlier, or—

JOE OVERSTREET: No—yes, it begins in San Francisco, because one of the things that I did in San Francisco—working with my father, and as a seaman, as a merchant seaman, I got involved with a union that was destroyed by the government. Now, I was out there in San Francisco when [Joseph] McCarthy came through and accused everybody black for being a Communist, and they had never heard of the word "Communism" before. [Laughs.] That's what burned me.

When we got—when I met Bobby Kaufman, Bobby Kaufman really was my teacher, you know, he explained to me what had happened. Also, one of my dealers later, Sam Dorsky, owned *Ramparts* magazine.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: And so a lot of things happened in my life that I thought was very important to make me understand why things were happening the way they were happening. And that was—in San Francisco was the birth of my understanding the affect of politics and racism in art, and it was very, very—for me, I said, I can overcome it. Jacob Lawrence couldn't. Jacob Lawrence is the greatest artist in the damned world and he couldn't overcome it. He was too black, I felt.

He had no idea how much respect I had for him, and how much love I had for him, and how dedicated he was to art, and how I think of him much better than Rommy or Bill de Kooning—William de Kooning. I think of Jacob Lawrence as being an artist who, if he painted a fireplug you would cry. You know, he's just so much in life. And I still feel that way about him.

I can't express in any way, other than this guy here, Vincent Van Gogh, the way I feel about the two of them—Jacob Lawrence and Vincent Van Gogh. I just think that they saw so much pain.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In the '60s—among black artists, it was more expected that your work would focus on social issues, political and cultural struggles, than pure abstraction. I mean, although your work at times was—

JOE OVERSTREET: But you see, I think that—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—in a sense—

JOE OVERSTREET:—one of the things that Jacob—that Hale Woodruff did really put that aside, totally abstract, but most of the stuff you couldn't even see. It's like you'd look at his painting—you see that little Chihuahua there in it, we got that from him—and you would see—[inaudible]—in his work; you would see a—[inaudible]—you would see all kinds of things in Hale's work that he would put there in his abstractions.

The difference with the abstractions that black artists saw—and Norman Lewis, you look at Norman Lewis, you see all those little people crossing—he called them "the little crazies" crossing the street. The one difference in what you would see in an African-American artist and what they would do would be the symbolism that they would make abstract.

When you looked at de Kooning you saw women. You see the—you know, the big brush—now, you look at Clyfford Still you'd see landscapes. Franz Kline, you would see buildings, and you would see railroad crossings,

and you would see bridges and all kinds of things that he would do. But you never associated it to that because he'd open up a telephone book and he would just do it.

Same way with African-American artists. Abstraction was not European totally. It was more United States—born, bred United States than Europe. You have—

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JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards, interviewing Joe Overstreet at 214 East 2nd Street in Manhattan, on March 17, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc three.

So you were talking about Jacob Lawrence and the whole atmosphere for painting and abstraction and representation that you used in your work.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, here is what I feel about abstraction. When you look at European abstraction, when you go back to Russian—what's it?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Constructivist?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. And you come up and you're looking at a design, a design pattern—architecture that's put together in it. When you look at what we do here, it's almost—Jackson Pollock. Come on, Jackson Pollock took—you know, Picasso drips, Pollock drips. And you can't take—you can't give Pollock to Europe. I don't care what you think. I don't care anything about it.

It's like anybody's art can be everyone's. If art is not universal, if it can't go around the world, if it can't be a part of everybody, it's not art. But when you look at Pollock and you think of the Navajo people dancing in rhythms, you're hard as hell to see it, right? But when you feel it, you got it. You say, this can only come out of this person's life. I don't want to get carried away with Pollock. Pollock's dead. He's gone. And he did his wonderful job.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were painting the paintings in San Francisco and then in New York that focused on the impact of politics and culture, racism, there was also an influence, besides the artists, of music.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, well, you see, my feeling about art is it has to carry a message to people. I was talking about Pollock because it carried a message to people, because it was a different message. I'm a different person. My feeling about my art has to come out of my living it—what I saw. I have three paintings that I'd like to share with you. One is at the [Anita] Shapolsky Gallery now. One painting I made in 1960. Oh, I just loved that painting so much when I made it. I called it *Carry Back*. You know about *Carry Back*?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Just from what I read. I haven't had the chance to see it.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, *Carry Back* was a horse owned by a woman—first time ever a horse that small, owned by a woman, ever won the Kentucky Derby, and all three races.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The Triple Crown.

JOE OVERSTREET: The Triple Crown. Now, I made this painting in 1960. I was so impressed with that painting because that painting—that horse reflected me, a misfit. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It was a self-portrait!

JOE OVERSTREET: That's what I saw it as. Yeah, that's what I saw it as, a self-portrait. And that was the one thing that I felt courageous about was that horse, at that time, because that horse, I thought, had all my feelings about life and about what I came from. Same way that one day I was working with my father and I ask him, I say: "Well, how did Egyptians make those big old pyramids?" Now, knowing something else I knew about him, "How did they make the mounds?"

The damn thing's 20 miles. He said, "Ropes." They made them with ropes, Egyptian rope-stretchers. That's what I'm painting—I painted you some of that. That's where the idea of my work came from in the '70s, was from Egyptian rope-stretchers—how they put together and made the ropes work, with the pictures, I never told anybody that because it wasn't necessary. The damn paintings were stretched out and held there with the ropes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You were talking about reflecting your own life. Would you say it's correct that all your paintings, from the very beginning, have always been some reflection of what's going on in your life, places you went, ideas you had, things you observed?

JOE OVERSTREET: That's the only thing that makes art, I think. The reason is that I can feel that. If I can't look at that and tell why I made it, and feel why I made those seven women stand naked trying to get out of the damn shower—if I can't feel that, with those shells, then there's no reason to make it, in my sense.

Now, I'm not saying anything. This is my heart; I had a triple bypass. Here's something you've got to call—a young woman wrote a beautiful poem about that, that, maybe, tradition. If I can't have something out of the painting that I can relate to, or associate to in my life, then I have nothing to work with.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: However, during the '60s, when your work was focused more—before the rope works in the '70s—on social issues, was it important—and maybe this is a question you could apply to anything, but was it important that the viewer could read it correctly, could read the message, the narrative that you were trying to communicate? Or did you feel that everyone would have their own reading of it and that would be okay?

JOE OVERSTREET: I always felt and hoped everyone had their own reading. I have a painting that I made in '64. It's in a book downstairs. The guy whose birthday we were celebrating, I thought was a jerk, but I—oh, I'm sorry. Excuse me. She's sitting here listening that I don't say things that I'm going to have all of these people coming back after me.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Censorship. [They laugh.]

JOE OVERSTREET: Anyway.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Which painting is that?

JOE OVERSTREET: It's called, *Tribute to Malcolm*. Get it for her and let her see it, please.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you want to wait until we—

JOE OVERSTREET: I wanted you to see the picture.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Right now? Should I pause it to do that?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

[Audio break.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Okay, we'll talk about *Strange Fruit,* which was from 1964.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, okay. And see, Billie Holiday meant everything—one of the things was, I went into John Chamberlain's studio in 1964.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Had you known him?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I knew him in the bar—in the Cedar Street bar. He had a photograph of these guys—black guys hanging in his studio. Big portrait.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why did he have that photo?

JOE OVERSTREET: I have no idea. Anyway, I ask him about it. He told me these were his cousins who were hanging these black guys in Kentucky. It's all right. You've told the truth I hope.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This was a blowup of a photograph from a magazine?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes. From a—no, from a—I have the photographs downstairs. I'll show them to you, if you like, of the guys hanging. Now, one of the things that I felt that Billie Holiday sang this song, *Strange Fruit*, "Black bodies swinging in the sycamore." And I felt that that expressed the feeling that I had when I saw those photographs.

I'm from Mississippi originally. Come on, you can't take that and do that to me and I not feel why and what it is. In a way, in a way, that feeling projected that painting, *Strange Fruit*. And that was one—here's another one painted same—a year afterwards, you see. Now, that—I made that painting because I felt old Giza. You know—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What do you mean?

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What do you mean you felt "old Giza"?

JOE OVERSTREET: Old Giza, the pyramid.

CORRINE JENNINGS: The Sphinx. The Sphinx at Giza.

JOE OVERSTREET: The Sphinx.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I see.

JOE OVERSTREET: And I gave it Malcolm. I put Malcolm's head there for old Giza. Old Giza was the first pyramid, but they shot most of his features off, the French when they went there. You see? So all of that I had to associate to—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *A Tribute to Malcolm*.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What date—was that painting about the same date as—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, it was close to the same time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—about '64.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. It was about my social realism, in a sense. I don't call it social realism; I just call it my expression of what it is I have to do for myself to—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah. You had a painting in a show that iCI [Independent Curators International] toured [several] museums that the Studio Museum [in] Harlem organized called "Tradition and Conflict: Images of a Turbulent Decade, 1963 to 1973." I don't remember which of your paintings was in that show. Do you remember that exhibition?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Jemima. [*The New Jemina*, 1964]

JOE OVERSTREET: Which one was it?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Aunt Jemima?

JOE OVERSTREET: Aunt—oh, my—[Laughs]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That's the painting that was in that show. Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: You know about Aunt Jemima? Now, that's my best painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Tell me about it.

JOE OVERSTREET: Aunt Jemima saved the pancake flour company. She made a million pancakes. And I had her shooting them out with machine guns. Now, everybody thought, oh, this is a revolutionary painting, but Aunt Jemima was shooting—making them so fast, she was shooting them out of a machine gun. She cooked a million pancakes.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yes, at the Chicago, what? Exposition or something? [World's Columbian Exposition/Chicago World's Fair, 1893].

JOE OVERSTREET: In 1906 [sic]. That's the same one—that's the same one that what's his name did, the descending the staircase. And the same one my guy was in.

CORRINE JENNINGS: George Washington Carver showed a painting—

JOE OVERSTREET: George Washington Carver. [Laughs.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: And they said there were no black artists in there, but he was in it too.

JOE OVERSTREET: And that was what, she saved—she saved the pancake flour company.

CORRINE JENNINGS: But it shatters, also, stereotypes.

JOE OVERSTREET: So that was my—that was my protest painting for her saving the company. She made them

so fast she shot them out. [Laughs.] I enjoyed that painting. The Menils bought that painting. They own it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Of course, all these paintings include formal issues, choices of color, composition.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, that was a box.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *Strange Fruit* has a very strong diagonal. Even though telling the story and communicating the message was primary supporting that, consciously or unconsciously, were all kinds of formal decisions you were making and that you were incorporating—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, I had a background in a way with construction. And so I could apply that background in my work in a way—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did all those paintings begin with preparatory drawings?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. Most—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you work directly on the canvas?

JOE OVERSTREET: Most of them I worked directly on them. With that painting, I made a smaller painting. I have a small one of that painting maybe—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The Aunt Jemima painting, you mean?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, it's somewhere in there. I have one about—Larry Rivers came up to me and he said, "Well, I can sell that for you if you make it six or seven feet tall." So I said, "I'll do better than that. I'll make it nine feet and [laughs]. I'll make a box."

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did he sell it?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. He sold it to the Menils.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right. You see. Now, Larry and I—you know this story about the Menils?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. When we went there—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: To Houston?

JOE OVERSTREET: Into Houston. Well, this one here, let me see. This one—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is this in the future or around the time you made—

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no. This one. Huh?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What year is this about?

JOE OVERSTREET: This was in '68, '69.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Because I know you had a commission.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh yes, that's the commission. I wanted to ask you how that happened in 1968.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yeah, right.

Now, we went there because I heard—and this is somewhat—the Menils never told me. She was a lovely woman. She came here to see my work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Which Menil is this?

JOE OVERSTREET: Dominique. She's been dead. She's the one who—and her husband. They were wonderful people. The rumor was when I got there that they wanted to change the bylaws of Rice University. That's where their galleries were, at Rice University. And the story goes that they were changing it because they wouldn't let any blacks or Third World people in Rice at that time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: As students?

JOE OVERSTREET: As students.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Wow.

JOE OVERSTREET: But they wanted the football players because the football players would bring in money. Now, Larry was asked to come there and I helped him to choose seven artists, including myself, to go there to have an exhibition to show Houston that black artists had some sense, I guess. Sensibility or something [laughs]—I don't know what we were showing. I don't think it worked, whatever. [Laughs.] But what happened with that—you don't know the story. Rice was poisoned in 1928 by a black chauffeur and a Mexican cook. But he had this bylaw where no Third World or Mexican or black could go to Rice.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You're saying that Mr. Rice was poisoned—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that's why they had that bylaw.

JOE OVERSTREET: No, he had wrote the bylaw before he was poisoned and it was there up until that time that we went there to try to break the bylaw. Rothko—they built the chapel. That was in back of the church—in back of the school, St. John's, the Catholic school. And then they had the—what—

CORRINE JENNINGS: *Broken Obelisk* [1963]?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Who did—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Barnett Newman?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah. I think that's Newman.

JOE OVERSTREET: Who?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think it's Newman.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. And they put on that, the *Broken Obelisk*, "Forgive them, for they not knoweth what they do." Now, you know those words, right? You know, those are familiar words, aren't they? Well, Houston—the politicians in the—they have wards in Houston. Each one of the ward—what do they call them? And when they had—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Districts?

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Districts or—

JOE OVERSTREET: District. District. Each one of the representatives of the district didn't want to accept it because they thought they were making fun of them. Forgive them for not knowing what they do.

CORRINE JENNINGS: They didn't want the obelisk.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right, they didn't want the obelisk. So they said, so the Menils took it and put it up in front of the Rothko Chapel because they were old buddies anyway. And anyway, Larry—when we went there because there was so much pressure, I was called, I was threatened and all this stuff I hear. This is my first show at the museum in Houston, at the one where they had the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah. 1972—

[Cross talk.]

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, this was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Actually I saw this. They have this at the Schomburg [Center for Research in Black Culture] Library.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Oh, they do?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. This was at the—out in the Lyons Avenue where—

CORRINE JENNINGS: The Fifth Ward? Was it—

JOE OVERSTREET: The Fifth Ward. Anyway, Houston—it had a lot of segregation problems. They killed—they poisoned Rice. And the day Rice would go every Thursday—the day was Wednesday—so every Thursday he would go to the bank and get money to pay his help: $30,000.

So the chauffeur went in to get the money. That day they changed the teller. So the teller didn't know the chauffeur. The chauffeur was black. So went in and he got Rice and he said, "Here is this guy, he's trying to get $30,000 for—out of his account for his"—so the president said, "Yeah, that's the chauffeur." He gave him money.

While he was gone, he looked at the slip at the paper that they wrote. They misspelled Rice's name. [Laughs.] So he took it and showed it to the president. The president called the cops. They caught the chauffeur and the cook just before they cross the border going into Mexico. Now, they say this is a true story about how Rice represented—got wiped out, his—but when I was there, I went through a lot of things.

I saw a lot of things about America on the top side that I had never seen before because these people are very, very wealthy. They're extremely cultured. They have done so much. They owned, at one point, the Congo. They paid the German army to stop [the] invasion on Paris for them to move their company.

They get one barrel of oil out of every barrel that's brought up out of the ground with their tools. And they—[inaudible]—other than—[inaudible]—they have tools can go that far down. They're extremely, extremely giving though. You can't have that and not give. John de Menil—I don't know if you know who he was. You know who he was? Oh, you know he's the one that made the mud to cool a bit?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No.

JOE OVERSTREET: Marriage made in heaven, isn't it? Her—*the Schlumbergers* is her folks. She's the one who made the bit. He's the one who made the mud to cool the bit. Now—[They laugh]—they both have been here. They liked me a lot.

She called me—I ran into a problem. The Whitney Museum once was going to give me a big show. They said they were—they would like to show my work. Some guys called me. Some of the old buddies called me and asked me—I'm not going to tell her [Richards], don't worry—asked me to pull it out. I pulled it out. She called me, she said, "Joe, please don't do that."

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When was the show supposed to be?

JOE OVERSTREET: It wasn't when it was supposed to be. This is when it happened. This was in '72 I think—'72 or '73, I don't remember. Whichever date would—when they called me, I pulled my picture. What date was that? They had bought my painting. They bought this painting. They had bought that painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Let's read it for the tape. This is a *Mandala* from 1970.

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no, no. This one they bought.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This one.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Which one is this one? We came from there to get here.

JOE OVERSTREET: To get here. So I don't know where—right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: 1970. Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Anyway, the Whitney had bought the thing. Sam Dorsky was my dealer at the time. He asked me not to do it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Not to sell it to the Whitney?

JOE OVERSTREET: Not to pull out. I tell him pull it out and give them the money back.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: They bought the painting. Then they wanted to get their money back?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, I wanted them to give—I wanted him to get the painting back from the Whitney and give

them the money back.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why?

JOE OVERSTREET: Because I was asked [by someone] to pull out because they wouldn't have a black person in as the curator. Now, if somebody called me up and asked—to tell me—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I see—so you were supposed to have a show and the person who—the black person who they wouldn't hire said—

CORRINE JENNINGS: No, no—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—as a sense of supporting her, you should—

JOE OVERSTREET: Wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait. No, no, no, no, no. Your friend who you interviewed—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Wait a second. Wait.

JOE OVERSTREET: I can say this. She ain't going to know. Who you interviewed called me up and asked me to withdraw my work from the Whitney show. Now, they—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is this somebody I know, really?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Somebody you interviewed.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, okay.

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] In a way, let them figure it out. They asked me to withdraw my work because they didn't have any black curators—any show.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you think it was important to have a black curator?

JOE OVERSTREET: They did. I didn't care.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You didn't care.

JOE OVERSTREET: I was in California.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You didn't care. You could have—

[Cross talk.]

JOE OVERSTREET: I didn't give any damn, given my work was going to be there.

CORRINE JENNINGS: But wait a second. They had never done anything with African-American art—

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay.

CORRINE JENNINGS: So it also speaks to the time.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you're saying that—just to make sure we understand—there was going to be a solo exhibition of Joe's work—

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no, no, no, no. You see. Wait, wait.

There was a group exhibition with my painting in it. The Menils—someone told me—Doty told me this later, that Dominique had—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Robert Doty?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The curator?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no, no. Now, don't do this to him. I want him in it [the story] because he called me up and told me please don't do it. That they are planning—the Whitney—the way he put it, the Whitney is planning to give you a solo exhibition. I figured the only way there is going to be a solo exhibition that Dominique de Menil

had talked to them because I got a solo exhibition at that museum up there after she came here to visit my work. Now, I'm putting it together. She's the only one who had the strength and the courage to do that for me.

Now, that's—we'll drop it at that. But I pulled my work out and I told Sam Dorsky to give them the damn check back and I didn't want to be bothered with it. [Laughs.] But that was a big mistake for me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did that happen?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Well, because of—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, it happened. That's when I met her.

CORRINE JENNINGS: But because, also, they had it in the catalogue.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: They had the image in the catalogue and they had to go through and cut the image out of their catalogs.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. They had to cut all the images out because I had pulled my work out of the show and gave them their money back.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: For political reasons?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yes. Yes, because I felt that it was necessary—the people who had called me, your buddies who had called me and asked me to pull my work out, I thought they knew what the hell they were saying. If they wanted a black curator—[laughs]—and I was going to help, why not?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I see.

JOE OVERSTREET: And Dominique called me, "Please don't do that, Joe. Please don't do that." I said, "Listen, you're a wonderful person. But I have to do this for my own sanity." And she understood. She said, "Okay, do what you like." She still came—before I had that show, she came here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When coming to this time, your work—there was a very definite change in your work in the early '70s when you started cutting up canvas, when you started—

JOE OVERSTREET: Geometry, yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You started using the ropes. The imagery became much more abstract.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What prompted that evolution? How did that change happen?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see—I had an exhibition at the Studio Museum in '68. And I have to give a lot of credit to Frank Stella because Frank Stella is the one who encouraged me to leave the stretcher. You know, he was a great painter. So I looked at his painting and I was young and Frank said, "man get your ass off the stretcher." [Laughs] So I started making constructions.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, you wouldn't have listened to that or heard what he was saying if you hadn't been searching for something different.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I'm always searching—I told you before—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I'm sorry. [Laughs.]

JOE OVERSTREET: You have to search in this—

[Cross talk.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you were thinking about is it possible to get off of the stretcher? Is it possible to go beyond the rectangle?

JOE OVERSTREET: Right. Right. Right. Then my buddies—you know, my homeboy Sam Gilliam, he was out there. So I had to—I wasn't going to let him just go out there from Mississippi and be the only one from Mississippi out there by his self. So Sam—[Laughs]—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Where is that painting *North Star*?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, it's in somewhere—it's in that—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: 1967. Is that—

JOE OVERSTREET: It's in that catalogue.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, is that the first painting?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, the other catalogue.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I was going to say, from what I could see, 1967 was the beginning—

JOE OVERSTREET: It's in that one. The one from New Jersey State.

CORRINE JENNINGS: I don't have that here. Let me get it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It seems to me *North Star*, 1967, might have been the first painting—the first major work—that was the start of that direction.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I think so. I think that was when I really decided that I was going to give up the stretchers and go with that because I liked the idea that it brought—same thing as sculpture. It brought it in. You know, it's like the—you see the design on the Chihuahua.

I like that idea that I was bringing in the African aesthetic into that when I changed. Also, I liked the idea of painting that was light. Light was always interesting. You can't paint without light. You know, so I always felt that that was something that I was interested in was changing the structure and changing the light.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were taking canvas unprimed—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah, you know, I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—canvas and cutting it?

JOE OVERSTREET: Wait, wait, wait. Wait, wait, wait, wait, wait. You see, it goes back further than that because there's that wonderful painter that lived down the street from me—not Louise Nevelson, Grace Hartigan. And I found out that old Gracie was sitting there using Ivory detergent staining that stuff and it was going straight through and she—and I started looking at that because we were all using acrylic. I'm using oil now, so don't tell Gracie that I'm stealing her stuff anymore. [Laughs.]

We were staining it. It goes straight through oil, which is such a wonderful thing. So I decided, oh, I'll do something really good here. I'll take a wire brush and I'll make these ripples and I can make all of these things like on the shells and things like that. And old Bill Hutson invited Kenneth Noland up to my studio and he stole all my damn ideas, but I was glad of it because it helped his art.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean about staining?

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean about staining?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, it was—well, he had the stain because everybody was doing it when Gracie did it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And Helen Frankenthaler—

JOE OVERSTREET: But my wire brush he took. [Laughs.] So I liked the idea that I was a part of exchanging ideas. I always have the idea that art you cannot—and trust me, you can't plagiarize art. Art has to come from the feel. It has to come from the soul. And plagiarism goes—oh, you can say it's borrowed or you can say—there is another word, but it's not plagiarism—because if it's not here, you don't—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Right.

JOE OVERSTREET: I would take that damn painting down tomorrow if I didn't feel it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you also purposely wanting to move away from what might be called social protest painting?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah, I've always tried to move it forward. I've tried to move it with these damn things. They're not protest. I've always tried to move—one of the things that I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Or from an obvious narrative? You're moving it away from that.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, protest painting was very important to me at this time because I came out of a society in San Francisco and in California of where I was with the Merchant Marines and they had taken our union—you know, and they had—we were mess boys and cooks anyway. So they had taken that and taken it from us and put us in jail and called us communists. And see, and I was a great friend of Paul Robeson. I mean, he's a wonderful man who was—

Here, you see. Oh yeah, here it is. Here it is. And there's my Frank Stella with him. [Inaudible.] [Laughs.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: There was this one. I just saw this.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: I thought that was interesting.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes. I wanted to get this catalogue. I couldn't find it. Yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Take that one.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, now—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Have that one.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You have more of these?

CORRINE JENNINGS: [Inaudible, cross talk.]

JOE OVERSTREET: We got whole boxes and books and—[Laughs]—I don't know how many. Anyway—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, this seemed when you painted *North Star* in 1967—that you drew from a Native American vocabulary of images? Would you say that consciously—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, one of the things is you're looking at the *Time* magazine. And that was one of the things that you could see in that. Okay, Native Americans were very important to me in a way that I liked Jackson Pollock because of the Native Americans in Arizona and New Mexico. I always thought I was close to Jackson Pollock because he did that for the dance and for the beat, the drumbeat. The idea of mandalas came out of Native Americans, I think, the idea of—I was always looking at that as—

CORRINE JENNINGS: But *North Star* is African-American.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, but she—I was talking about the one in *Time* magazine.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah. I know, but she—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, you're right. I was confusing those two.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah. *North Star* is definitely African-American.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, but that was when we were going up into Canada. We were trying to get—but I was thinking about the one in—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah, I know.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. You see, because I have—where is that one?. Corrine, do you have that? That picture in *Time* magazine?

CORRINE JENNINGS: In *Time* magazine? I had—the Xerox of it was not clear. [Inaudible.]

JOE OVERSTREET: Anyway, that was something that was—I felt—

CORRINE JENNINGS: There's another one.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, yes. That's not the *Jazz in 4/4*—

CORRINE JENNINGS: *Jazz in 4/4 Time* [1967].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, you guys got me getting ahead of myself.

Now, I felt that that was more important to me because of the Native American—it was too much sun, too much—what does that call that—too much sun, the one that was in *Time* magazine?

CORRINE JENNINGS: You want me to get it?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, let her see that because that's a political statement I made with the—[inaudible]. Oh, god, you got me talking all out of my head now. Jacob Lawrence was one of the people who really, I thought, I should have had here now explaining this to you. Jacob Lawrence was so good. He invited me to teach out at Hayward. You see, when he went out there, I stayed there.

And so I ask him, I said, "Jake, what should I teach them?" He said, "Don't try to teach them anything but what you know." [Laughs.] I said, "Well, man, that's easy. Shit, I don't know anything." [Laughs.] He was wonderful. He left. He went on up to St. Louis. But I had him to come by and talk to the students. They never understood what the hell he was talking about. Jacob Lawrence was probably, aside from this guy and Jacob Lawrence, the two best artists in the world in my books. And I think I see pretty damn good.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were starting in '67 there was a painting called *Boats of Ra*? I'm trying to get to the beginning.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh yeah, that's my good painting. Oh my god, that's Sun Ra—the boat [laughs]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I'm trying to get to the beginning of where you were painting, where you were creating these works that were—

JOE OVERSTREET: Political.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—painting acrylic on canvas with ropes not on the wall, away from the wall.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, see, Sun Ra now—Sun Ra and I—I always liked Sun Ra's music. We're back to—now we're getting to the music. Sun Ra was a musician that lived on Third Street. And one of the things about Sun Ra, I worked up at the Black Arts Repertory Theatre.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you actually one of the directors of it?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I don't know what the hell I was.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Or one of the co-founders?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no. LeRoi Jones was up there.

I went there as an artist. I went there as an artist and I went there because I was a good carpenter. I knew a lot about building. And I went there and I had the idea that people were not coming there to see Sun Ra. We had 30 people in his band sitting there and they—one person, two people would come. So I went to Amiri Baraka who was LeRoi Jones and I said, listen man. Since people won't come to Sun Ra—since the mountain won't come to—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Muhammad.

JOE OVERSTREET:—Muhammad, Muhammad has got to go to the mountain. So I made this flat to go on the truck. It was a huge thing. I could put it—I had figured it out how to put it on this truck, so we could get the whole band. We could take it around and stand it up and put braces under it and get the whole band on the truck. We went all through Harlem. So I got a chance for kids to hear Sun Ra. I thought that would be important, that they could—so Muhammad went to the mountains. And then Emory King—what's his name?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Emory Taylor?

JOE OVERSTREET: Taylor saw it and decided to write grants for the Jazzmobile [Inc, New York City].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: And that was where the Jazzmobile started. Something that I put up there for people to enjoy.

So I won't take credit for the Jazzmobile, but I helped it. Anyway—yeah, there it is. What's that thing called?

CORRINE JENNINGS: *Indian Sun* or—

JOE OVERSTREET: *Indian Sun*. Now, this is my Jackson Pollock of Overstreet. [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What's the date—that's 1970?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah, April of 1970. And this was the—this was the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We're looking at an image—

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, that—no, that's Aunt Jemima, huh?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We're looking at an image from *Time* magazine.

CORRINE JENNINGS: April 6, 1970.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: April 6, 1970.

CORRINE JENNINGS: At one of the mandalas called *Indian Sun*.

JOE OVERSTREET: And there's my—that's the one—I really liked this painting. This painting I like. I did it for David Henderson. It's a guy sitting in jail up in Harlem. I felt that, okay, the mayor of Harlem is somebody in jail [laughs]—so I got a chance to do that. I have the painting; it's a huge painting. And that's my Aunt Jemima.

CORRINE JENNINGS: This was the show that Larry Rivers put together.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh yeah, she's putting—she's up there putting the painting. She's up there making pancakes with a machine gun.

CORRINE JENNINGS: It was called, "Some American History." [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That was the one in Houston.

JOE OVERSTREET: So anyway—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So then in the early '70s, you began a body of work that [was] all shaped canvases with ropes, the reference to a sort of nomadic shelter, that these forms could go anywhere. They had this wonderful flexibility. You could tie them—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, that was the purpose.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—anchored to the floor and the wall and the ceiling.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, the purpose was—you know what I enjoyed. I got a chance to show them. I showed them in Ohio, California and Texas. And down in Chile. I could roll the damn things and put them under my arm and take them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that was a tremendous sense of freedom, as you told me—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah and also a cheap price of shipping them. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah, but also there was a moment when that work corresponded with what artists in so many parts of the world were doing, experimenting with how far you could take painting off the stretchers, off the walls.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, a lot of artists was working with that idea.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Certainly, certainly. Were you aware of all those experiments that were going on?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. You know what, I was always concerned about my little world that was on the Bowery. And these people that I would drink with at night, they were tight abstract expressionists. And I would go in there with guys like Scarpitta and we would talk about the idea—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you know Lynda Benglis at that point?

JOE OVERSTREET: Who?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Lynda Benglis, who lived on the Bowery and was experimenting with—

JOE OVERSTREET: No. You know who lived next door to me was Tom—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Oh, Eva Hesse.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, Eva Hesse. Yeah, she lived next door to me there. She was a good artist. And Tom [Doyle]—what was his name, her husband? Or was he her—? He lived down there.

CORRINE JENNINGS: He was a good sculptor, good—real good sculptor

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, he was a good sculptor. Also, what was the woman's name that lived in Larry Calcagno's building? I knew—I used to talk to her a lot.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Larry what?

JOE OVERSTREET: Larry Calcagno.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Calcagno.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Calcagno.

JOE OVERSTREET: And a lot of—[Haywood?] Bill Rivers. You know, all these people I knew very well after a while. We talked about art, aesthetics and things like that. We would always—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You talked about these structures like the one called *Power Flight* [1971], that was in "High Times, Hard Times[: New York Painting 1967-1975"] and there's a certain—you talked about a structure behind them, a geometry and—that, well, that you used all the time in your work, some kind of structure. But what was it that you used to come up with the forms that you were using in those paintings, in those—like the *Power Flight*?

JOE OVERSTREET: You know what I accuse—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *Mandala* [1972] or the *Saint Expedite* [1971].

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, I'll show you something.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *Revelation* [1972], all these paintings that—where did those—?

JOE OVERSTREET: I'll tell you. I accuse these people down in Florida of starting a bird factory and taking it from my work. [They laugh.] Now, these birds weren't taking from my work, but I accused the birds of taking my work because I got the damn ideas from the birds' wings and the way they fly. [Laughs.] I have one down there—[inaudible, cross talk].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, the way birds' wings fold.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes. So these birds stole my art. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And what about deciding on the colors and how they would work on those [forms ?]?

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, now, they were political. Red, black and green—that was Marcus Garvey. Marcus Garvey was saying, "we got to take our ship." She got to go see my painting up there—

[Cross talk.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So there's two paintings I've seen—that had red, black and green in different places.

JOE OVERSTREET: Tell her about it—yeah, Marcus—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—the green was—

JOE OVERSTREET: It's the flag. Marcus Garvey said, make a red, black and green flag. Now, I did that because it was political, again.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Some of the works—

JOE OVERSTREET: There's one of Marcus Garvey's flags. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. Some of the works, however, that we were looking at, like the one the Whitney bought and then—

JOE OVERSTREET: I took it back.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That has a much more complicated color scheme.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, the thing is a lot of times you see things—I think painters have to experiment with color. I see things, I'm looking at color all the time. But more than anything, you'll be looking at shape and color.

One thing I find about here—and I've been working with this attitude for quite some time now—your impression changes immediately, the light changes. It's like, I look out that window. I enjoy sitting here looking out that window and I get ideas about the way the color changes, the light changes. You can't hold that. You know, that's going to be there. It's going to be there and it's going to disappear.

And I feel that I'd like to be able to identify—I think the French Impressionists did more for the light and color than anybody could ever do. Now, I could go and open up a French Impressionists book and sit there and just start looking at the way they used it and not even look outside. But then I wouldn't do much for myself, for my spirit. I would just be another French Impressionist. Maybe that makes sense and maybe it doesn't, you know? [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You were talking about the Egyptians using ropes and your fascination with the Egyptian art in the Metropolitan, [and] your father talking to you about the ropes. And of course, then, ropes play such an important part in that body of work.

JOE OVERSTREET: Measuring. Measuring. I measured so many—listen, I always tell people my father and I, we built enough sidewalk to go to heaven. You know that freeway that fell down in Oakland, the freeway? My father and I built that damn thing in the '70—'60—'50s. All those things out there—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mean the freeway in Oakland?

JOE OVERSTREET: In Oakland.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In the earthquake [1989].

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, the earthquake hit it. We put that up there. But one of the things is when you put concrete down, you have to drive stakes and put a rope around it and stretch it. Well, that's an easy way I took out, right? I didn't drive in the stakes. I just put a grommet in the damn thing and took a rope and stretched it.

But how easy it is to translate from what I was doing physically with my father and he would tell me this is how they built the damn pyramid. He didn't know; he'd never seen a damn pyramid. But I could easily translate that to what I wanted to be. I wanted something to be in space. Then I look at a bird flying, what the hell, you got wings, you know, you can fly. So it's easy if you look at it without having to complicate it with some nonsense.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you were doing these pieces we're talking about now, did you plan them with paper and pencil—[inaudible, cross talk]—

JOE OVERSTREET: No. That's too difficult.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Oh, you made a lot of drawings.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You did make a lot of drawings. So they were planned—both the form and the cutting and the shape—but also the color. Maybe there were studies in the color?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see—you see, one of the things about painting is that you'd make 20 paintings and maybe one you like. Show her that room. You won't believe the paintings you're going to see. Only two in there are alike. So the rest are—[Laughs]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So if you were making 20 drawings, you would pick the one you thought would work best for a painting?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, maybe one. Yeah, maybe one.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So there was this experimentation.

CORRINE JENNINGS: There were also some paper works that were stitched and—yeah, he had a double-stitching

sewing machine.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh yeah, that was fun. Oh, that double-stitch sewing machine. I got one back there, but it's not double-stitch. You had to learn to sew. I learned to sew because of the canvas, because of stitching the canvas.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Stitching the canvas. Before that, you had them sewn?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, here the canvas had to have a dimension that would make the wings. Now—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And the forms are very complicated in order for it to hang right—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, here, here, here, here. Now, you see, this shape and this shape—they had—this shape and this shape—all these shapes came out of one canvas. So they had to come back together like that. Now, I always believed whatever shapes came back together was a shape that the picture should have. All right, now, here's something here. This is regular. Anyway, I haven't made these things. Now, here's something else. This is a different—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Tell her about this one.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, this one here. See these things—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: These are different concept—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Let me refer to this—what we're talking about is *Polytopal God*, 1972.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah—well, you know what that is?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What is that?

JOE OVERSTREET: That's a damn Egyptian pyramid who they taken—I found out. I did a lot of stuff, lot of imagination work. [Laughs.] That's the best way I can put it. I found out that they use water to raise them old big heavy rocks. And they had to use them the same way they use for opening and closing—what are—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Panama?

JOE OVERSTREET: The canal.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Panama Canal.

JOE OVERSTREET: And in Spain. They did it in—that's where I think—

CORRINE JENNINGS: In Seville. Sevilla.

JOE OVERSTREET: Seville. So they have these big things opening up. I always—then, when I went to Seville, I started looking at that and I felt before they had used that. They used water to raise these big old stupid rocks up and they did that because they know people—they couldn't get 25,000 people on the damn thing.

The thing was too big to carry—and they was little people. I figured they put them on lifts, water, they run the water in and they use a lot of papyrus wood at that time. They put the damn rock on, run the water in, the thing go up there and then they put it off and let the water out. Now, that's my theory on how they got the damn pyramids up there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Great.

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JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards, interviewing Joe Overstreet at 214 East 2nd Street in New York City on March 18, 2010 for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc four.

I think we got pretty far into the early '70s yesterday, but I wanted to go back and ask you about a painting called *Mafia* that you did, I think, in the late '60s or early '70s. And I know that it was purchased by the Port Authority for the World Trade Center. I wonder, what happened to it?

JOE OVERSTREET: It went up with the World Trade Center.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It went down with it, you mean?

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] It went down with the World Trade Center.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So it was purchased by the Port Authority and installed there?

JOE OVERSTREET: The Port Authority bought the painting through the gallery that was doing something for the Civil Rights Movement. And I think it was the Pace Gallery. And the Port Authority that bought the painting had put it in—they had a small gallery there or something. They showed a lot of paintings in the World Trade Center at the time. And I'm not sure how that connection made any sense other than—what was his name? The guy who was the director of the World Trade Center at the time, from the Port Authority? You don't remember his name. I don't remember his name now.

But anyway, he used the painting in one of the spaces that was in the gallery in the World Trade Center.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you saw it hanging there?

JOE OVERSTREET: In the World Trade Center—I didn't realize. I thought the painting had left. And I found out later that the painting was in there when it fell. So the painting went down with—I had two other paintings in there, too. Some drawings, I think. I had drawings in there. I lost, it's, what, maybe three pieces, four pieces in the incident of the World Trade Center.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, going into the early '70s, we talked about the shows in Houston, you were living on the Bowery at that time, at 185 Bowery, then you moved to 186.

JOE OVERSTREET: And 186, yeah. We was there. That's where—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That's across the street, right?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, right across the street. What happened with me there, 185, I had a wonderful landlord. No, 185 before 186. 186 was across the street on the west side, okay. At 186, I had a wonderful landlord. And I like to call his name, if you don't mind. I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That's, I think, in 1973.

JOE OVERSTREET: This is 19—oh, I went there in 1963 to 186 . Well, see, 1963, Jack Strausberg was his name. Yeah, it was Jack Strausberg.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, [you] were at 86 earlier, then you moved.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Okay.

JOE OVERSTREET: He used to help me, because he wanted to be a painter at one time, he told me. He knew Louise Nevelson. He used to brag on the fact that he knew Louise Nevelson. But Louise Nevelson lived on the next block on Spring Street. Well, she would say hello to me is as far as I ever got with her, but she was a much older person. And she gave her house to a friend of mine over here. She had a house on 7th Street she gave to a friend of mine. She gave the house, it was an apartment building. She had made quite a bit of money, so she gave it to him.

But I would talk to Strausberg about her, and he would just tell me all the wonderful stories. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you had a wonderful landlord.

JOE OVERSTREET: He was wonderful. Across the street, I had a terrible landlord.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is this around the time when you had to move across the street?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, this is something. I have to tell this story, because she don't want me to tell this to anybody.

My friend Ishmael Reed—listen—my friend Ishmael Reed, when he would come to New York, I had these three floors over there. It was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: On Bowery.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, at 185. Anyway, he would come, and he would stay with me. And one night, he came to

me, and he said, listen, "I'm invited to dinner up on 34 on the west side." Was it 35th? What street was it? Seventh avenue? Tenth avenue he said, and she [Jennings] had a loft up there. So we went up to eat. So you know, the food was all right. She had cooked. [Laughs.]

So I told her, I said, "Listen, you have to come to my studio for dinner." And this was something. Boy, this was something, so I called her a couple of days later and said, "Will you come and have dinner with me at my studio." I was fixing dinner. [Laughs.]

Wait, wait, wait. This is a marvelous meeting. So in the refrigerator, I had these wonderful grits that was cooked about two months earlier. [Laughs.] And I had some old vegetables that I had bought from store around, that had been there about six weeks. So I decided to make an egg stew for her for dinner.

She looked at it and she says, "I can't eat this." So I said, "Well, you have to cook for me again." Of course, she felt sorry for me. [Laughs.] So she's still cooking for me now.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But you had been married before, right?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yes, I was married. My wife moved. Well, I have to tell this. Yes. I had two sons, and my wife I had met—she lived on Spring Street. We went to California, she fell in love with California. She did not want to come back to New York. I felt that I had to be here. So I brought my sons with me. At one point, I brought them all back with me after I had completed this project of the building.

She wanted to stay there. I always felt that she was having health problem. She had a health problem. She couldn't live in New York. She had contracted tuberculosis, and the city wasn't good for her.

My mother had a lovely house. It was [on] Virginia Street in Berkeley. And she had a garden, and she had everything that she could want for her sons. And my mother gave her the house. So she didn't want to come back here, and I couldn't live in Berkeley.

So we decided to let my—she decided, well, our relationship, because of her illness and because of my wanting to be a painter, had started to deplete itself. You know, this was after two or three years, and my sons were 4 and 5 years old, 6 years old. So I wanted to come back here and see if I could really be a painter, which I still wanted to do that.

And somehow, that's when I met her. She took over the cooking factor. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Perhaps more. [Laughs.] When you first met, you—

JOE OVERSTREET: Don't threaten me. She's threatening me. You don't see it! [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Since Corrine is sitting right here, I'll speak directly to her instead of to Joe. But you had a background in art in terms of your father being an artist. And so, of course, that made you sympathetic or tolerant—[laughs]—of someone who wanted to be an artist.

JOE OVERSTREET: Both of her parents.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Both your parents were artists?

JOE OVERSTREET: Both parents. Actually, they were. Both parents were very good.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah, yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: And the mother was probably the second black woman to go to Yale painting school. Then they went to Rhode Island School of Design, both parents. And that's where they met.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And Corrine, you, at the time you met, you were, at that point, teaching English?

CORRINE JENNINGS: I was teaching, yes. I had—I thought I might be—when I came to New York, I thought I might be a scenic designer. But someone took me to meet the head of the union, and he said he didn't know which was worse, that I was black or that I was a woman, that they didn't have either of those in the union, and they weren't going to have.

So you know, it was—he lived in an amazing 5th Avenue penthouse with wonderful paintings. And he was just intolerable. So I decided—I should, you know, I did a little bit of work around. I still continued that. But eventually, I decided I should get a job, and so I did and began teaching. And I did that, because it allowed me to make a contribution. It was a black studies program. And at the same time, it provided a stable financial base so that we could do projects here that I felt the college ought to be doing.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, talk about "here." Joe, tell me the story about this institution that you founded. How did it begin?

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. Now, when we were on the Bowery, I had three floors. I moved from 185 to 186 across the street—just opposite—186 to 185.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And I think that happened in 1973.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, the landlord over there—1973, yeah—had given me a lease that was crazy. He put certain things in the lease. This was interesting. On the lease—I may have a copy of it, I don't remember—I was told I had to get a CofO [Certificate of Occupancy] which was very difficult at that time to get. I had to spend a lot of money to get it.

Then I was given a five-year lease, but he crossed it out. If at the end of five years I was to buy the building, if I got this, he was going to retire in five years. This was his story to me.

Well, I thought that, you know, it would be a good idea for me to have my own spot and fix it up. I always wanted to be secure in my real estate project here so I could have my kids come. Anyway, I worked. She had put all her money in. We put over 80 [thousand dollars], $90,000 into this building trying to renovate it for a CofO.

Then once we got it to a certain point, he gave us an eviction notice. We were trying to do projects. This is after I had decided that we would have to do something with this place, because we had three floors. And we were doing projects like, oh, we had booths for people to sell art and sell jewelry and their stuff.

CORRINE JENNINGS: African markets—

JOE OVERSTREET: African market in this floor. Which was a good spot, because we were under a lamp shop, there was nothing there. And he had a huge clothes store underneath that. So it was a wonderful idea. He got upset because we were making money. We weren't making—

CORRINE JENNINGS: So he thought.

JOE OVERSTREET: He thought we were making money. We weren't making a lot of money. We were—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Having fun.

JOE OVERSTREET: We were working. So I went to court. I went to the Supreme Court to protect my investment in the building. And this was five years, wasn't it? We went to court for five years. I had a lease for five years, that's all. So the Supreme Court decided that I had been used, but they only gave me one-third of the money back that I had spent. I never got a penny back, but they offered me one-third, because I had lived there for five years, even though I had to go to court. And they were not going to take him but so far.

Once that happened, I decided that day to leave. I said, okay, we went to court, we saw that we couldn't get anything, and we never got the money. So he appealed that.

I moved over here on 3rd Street with a friend of mine. And I stayed in his place until—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who was that? An artist friend?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, yeah, you know him. His name is Steve Cannon. He has Tribes Gallery over there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Steve Cannon? C-a-n-n—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. [Laughs.] So I went over there, and he had a terrible place that I had to fix up. It was falling in and collapsing. But I was really strong at the time, and I was a good carpenter. So I fixed it up for him.

In the meantime, I was looking for another place. I met this wonderful, wonderful black lady who weighed probably 600 pounds. How much did she weigh, Sarah?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Two hundred or something.

JOE OVERSTREET: She could barely come up. She weighed a lot more than that. She could barely move. I would pick her up and take her to a meeting. She was on the community board.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was her name?

JOE OVERSTREET: Her name was Sarah Farley. And oh, boy, she was something.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: F-o-l-e-y?

CORRINE JENNINGS: F-a-r—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, F-a-r—

CORRINE JENNINGS:—l-e-y.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, Farley. Okay.

JOE OVERSTREET: She was really a wonderful human being to me. She asked me—I told her I needed a loft to paint in. I need the space to paint in. She looked at me, and she said, do you know about asbestos? I said, well, not really. She said, well, I know of a wonderful studio if you are not afraid of asbestos.

CORRINE JENNINGS: A little asbestos.

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: She said "a little asbestos?"

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. The ceiling was covered with it. But we did a lot of research. She likes to research. We found out [what] asbestosis was. Steve McQueen, all the people who had died of it, how it would affect you.

So met this wonderful man, his name was Simon. What was Simon's last—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Menzies.

JOE OVERSTREET: Simon Menzies. I saw Simon. He was a black man, 6'4" and weighed, what, 250? He was a big man. So he was a contractor.

CORRINE JENNINGS: He was from Montserrat.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Montserrat. He was from Montserrat.

JOE OVERSTREET: He was from Montserrat.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Wait, Simon Menzies—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, but he's from Montserrat, the place that—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I see, from there.

JOE OVERSTREET: Anyway, I asked him if he knew about asbestos. He was a contractor. He said, "Oh, yes, I've went to Houston, Texas to study how to remove it." So I brought him here.

In the meantime, I had met Norman Siegel, who is the attorney who had the building with mobilization for Legal Aid.

So he was the one who really pulled my coat. He said, listen, "Don't do anything in that building"—they were moving out—"unless you make sure you get it from the city that it's going to be all right." So I went to the city.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So when Sarah told you that she had someplace in mind, you knew that it was this building here on 2nd Street?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, she told me where it was. She was on the community board. Sarah Farley was the one who told me to come here if I wasn't afraid of asbestos. So I met Simon. Norman Siegel said, hey, don't do anything until the city gives you the approval.

I went to the city. I met this wonderful man. His name was Maxwell Kaufman. Oh, boy. He was something, wasn't he? Kaufman looked at me and he said, "Listen, I'll be dead in six months." He had cancer also, he had some cancer that was killing him. He said, "I'll be dead in six months. But I'm going to give you a letter. And if you complete this statement on this letter, you'll be able to come back and buy it from the city."

He gave me a letter, and it stated, very short, if Joe Overstreet removes all the asbestos and have it checked by the EPA, Environmental Protection, he can come back and have a direct sale from the city.

And he passed away. I met Simon. Simon climbed up there, the scaffolds. That's a beautiful studio up there. We paid the price. Simon scraped it down.

You know how he did it? I said, "Simon, how are you going to take it down?" He said, "Well, I got a big can of Vaseline." We put plastic over every one of those windows out there. And he bought a little box of these face masks. Every morning, he would come, and it was in August. He would take his shirt off, and all his muscles would come out. He'd reach down and put this Vaseline all over him and put on a face mask. And he went up there and scraped it down. That was the best way to do it.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We found a—

JOE OVERSTREET: We found out that was—

CORRINE JENNINGS: We found a syrup that you could mix into water, that would cause it to congeal, because it stays suspended for many hours.

JOE OVERSTREET: For seven to eight weeks.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Seventy-two hours.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, okay.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Suspended in the air.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: And then we put a shower in there, and he'd go and wash the Vaseline off. And then I would do it with him, so would she. We came out there and scraped that—

CORRINE JENNINGS: And we washed this whole building down.

JOE OVERSTREET: We washed the building down. We brought EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] back to the building, and they told us there was more asbestos outside in the street than there was in the building. We had cleaned it. And we took this statement back to the city. [Laughs.] So the guy at the city, he looked at me, and he said, what asbestos? There was no asbestos in that building. I said, you wait to hear from my attorney. [Laughs.] I was sold this building direct. Only building in Manhattan—

CORRINE JENNINGS: At that time.

JOE OVERSTREET:—at that time—was sold direct.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, at that point—what was your vision of what you would do with this huge building that you worked so hard to get?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, it worked out. It worked out. It worked out in many ways, because when we came here, I wanted that space, that studio.

[In 1974 Overstreet and Jennings established the Kenkeleba House]

CORRINE JENNINGS: I wanted to do projects.

JOE OVERSTREET: She wanted to do projects.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What kind of projects?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Exhibitions, experimental projects.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you wanted to do exhibitions, experimental; and Joe, you wanted a big studio.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Of course, this is a how-many-story building?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Six.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Six stories. So , you would have even more space for—

JOE OVERSTREET: Now, we rent spaces out to artists.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was that something that you thought of at the very beginning?

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no. We rented the space out. We brought a lot of artists here with us.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We weren't going to do that at first, but then people—we kept knowing people who needed space.

JOE OVERSTREET: They were running artists out of Manhattan at the time.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We would, you know, one after another after another. And then we could get it out, that that would help maintain the building. Then we would try to raise money that would help to maintain the studio.

JOE OVERSTREET: What we were charging them was the light bill. This building had one meter, one light meter and one gas meter and one electric and one water meter. So we figured out what all of this would cost. We didn't have any tax at the time, because everybody was avoiding that at this time. So now it's very expensive. They can't live here now.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: But when you first got it, your vision was to have a nonprofit space that would present experimental projects.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Interdisciplinary projects, especially.

JOE OVERSTREET: And we would help artists. We've shown 5,000 artists in that gallery. And we've shown probably, across the street, another 2,000 artists. We've shown a lot of artists' work.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Joe, how have you balanced the time and effort it takes to run this space with Corrine and the others, with your own work?

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, here's one of the things that we—well, with my work, I always had an assistant up until recently, and I had bladder cancer, and I haven't had the energy. I'm getting it back now. We put the shows up. The shows we put up, and then the office would run it. Corrine would run the office. And we always had one or two people working to open the shows and to show them. That wasn't a lot of work. It doesn't take a lot of work once the shows are put out. We would get slides, and we would look at who needed exhibitions. We showed Norman Lewis. We've shown the—[inaudible]. We've shown a lot of important shows that we thought were important and gave people the opportunity.

Once the art was put in place, there was no work left other than, you know, to watch the gallery. So I would come up, and I would work here, and then I would go down and do that work, too. That was easy enough, you know. I had a lot of energy. And then I had her. We both had a lot of energy to work with, you know.

We would like to build a museum now, I think, because I think it's needed.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We also collected a lot of work.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, we've bought a lot of paintings.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Was it your original intention? How did the intention develop to actually collect work? This is works you've collected by artists you've shown?

JOE OVERSTREET: I've been collecting paintings since 1957 in San Francisco. I started looking at artists. Raymond Howell was somebody, I collected his work out there, different artists in San Francisco that I would exchange art with.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Always African-American artists?

JOE OVERSTREET: Always African-American, because that was easiest for me to get. Same way with Norman Lewis, I exchanged work with him. Sargent Johnson, I had Sargent Johnson's work. All these people that I didn't look at myself as being a good artist, I looked at myself as being part of their problem, part of what art meant as a problem.

They looked at me in a different sense that they would like to get my work, I wanted to get their work. I was after it. So we exchanged. We would exchange.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you exchange because you wanted to live with their work? Because you wanted to be supportive? What was the motivation? You had a vision to form a collection? What was the reasoning?

JOE OVERSTREET: In San Francisco?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: My assistant got all this stuff, and she won't give it to me. [Laughs.] And we had to figure out how to get it from her. Most of it was my mother, most of the stuff I would take to my mother's house. And she loved it, you know, so I would give it to her in a way that it was something that I felt was necessary. Because I think, and I always will believe, that the kids need to see it. All my kids got through school some way or another. They didn't go to jail, my sons, and they got their degrees. And I always felt that the art helped them to do that, looking at things that they could understand.

My son was here last week fighting with us about—she don't want to talk about it. But the grandma in his paper that he has to publish for his doctorate, you know.

So all of that is a part of what art is, I think, and how it works in your life.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And as you've continued, as you've gone along and live in New York, you've continued to collect. Why have you done that?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, when I met her, here's how I started here. There was this young—she sends us a card every year, a Christmas card -- a young Asian artist that lives in Oakland now; she lived here. And I saw her work [in] the Cinque Gallery [New York City]. Do you know the Cinque Gallery?

I bought a piece for Corrine. What was the—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Pat Jow.

JOE OVERSTREET: Pat Jow. I bought one of her—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How do you spell her last name?

CORRINE JENNINGS: J-o-w.

JOE OVERSTREET: I bought one of her paintings for Corrine. And we just started after that, looking at things here, she and I, we both started to look at things. But she didn't know I had gone with this exchange program.

CORRINE JENNINGS: He didn't know I bought—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, she had bought—

CORRINE JENNINGS: I found the Charles White Gallery by accident around 1967.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, and she had bought art. Yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: And I went in there, because I had been to someone's house, and I had seen that drawing *Juba* [White, 1962]. So I went in there, and I discovered, after talking to them, that you could buy art on time, payments. I used to buy my clothes like that. So I bought two portfolios of Charles White's prints that he made, in order for his work to be affordable to working-class people. And so I had—you know, my parents collected, but those were my first purchases. I still have them. But suddenly, we found—

JOE OVERSTREET: Now, you know, it's important, I think. We've ventured out. Like that's a wonderful collection of African art there. We have a bigger collection across the street. So we've tried to support what we believe in, in a way, that African art has mystery to it, I think. It's like that chihuahua there. It's very mysterious, I think, to see it and to, you know, to understand the sensitivity in it in a way that it meant things to tribes in Africa, you know. It was very sensitive in that. It wasn't big and obnoxious in a way, but very sensitive.

So we wanted to have that. And it's like looking at a lot of that stuff over there. Some of it she got from Hale. Hale Woodruff was her godfather. And that whole table there was his, not the table with all the art on it. Some of it came from her mother, some we got while we were here. The Nok [ph] piece, I traded one of my paintings for it, over there. It's supposed to be 2,400 years old. I don't know. It probably is not, but it doesn't matter.

There's a door there from Nigeria that we—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, I'm going to talk to you about that.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Well, we've tried to support the aesthetic, not in the same sense that when you look at Picasso and think, well, African, Cubans and came out of African art aesthetic. I have no idea about that aesthetic, and I'm not looking in that for that, to compare.

At the same time, I think we, as collectors, have to have a certain amount of African art from different tribes that we respect, in our collection, putting it very simply. The Nok, the Nigerian, the Liberian—we have a mass there, of a funeral from Gabon where the Fangs came, from Fang artists.

And all of these things we thought were so important to us being a part of what we want to be in our collection. And that's the most important thing we could ask, for our collection to be complete. We can't really get too much Chinese. I like that thing there. That's a wonderful piece. It's 400 years old from China.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Let me ask you, going back to your work after you met. Was that around the time when your work was changing, as always, and you started incorporating the Fibonacci series as part of how you developed the structure of the work. That was around the mid '70s, I think.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, you see—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And I also wanted to ask you how that [you] incorporated [that]. Also, you began using a different technique.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Okay, now, that's very interesting. I'm glad you got around to that, because that's when I met Wilmer [Jennings], around '72, '73. She [Jennings] tricked me to go up there to meet him. [Laughs.]

Anyway, he's a mathematician, and he was, oh, my God, he gave so much math. And he was a designer. That is his. This thing here is his, a woodcarving, a lot of stuff he gave to design. Because they gave him an honorary Ph.D. in math. So we sit and talk about compositions. He would talk about Greek compositions, and I would talk about Egyptian compositions. That's when we got to Fibonacci. And what was the other Greek guy who made the —Pythagoras. We'd get into all these ideas about compositions of Pythagoreanism and Fibonacci numbers—one and one is two and three to go forth.

So this started to open up ideas for me. I had already found that I liked the idea of the curve as reaching a conclusion of how the universe works. And it worked right into what I felt about Gorlin squares and the idea of a curve.

So my work had already been based on a curve. And maybe it was just because I was stupid and thought Overstreet had a curve in it. [Laughs.] But I always liked the idea of a curve in the work. And he was one who showed me how the Gorlin squares worked.

Now, we've done a lot of research on the Gorlin squares. And since, we saw that Bannister had used that composition in a lot of his paintings.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We wondered how he had such a perfect composition every time. And he would have known about that through the Allston Art Club in Boston. He wasn't allowed into the Boston museum, but he could go to the Allston—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was his first name?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Edward Mitchell Bannister.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. Now, I had worked with perspective in San Francisco, and I had learned a lot about perspective. I worked with Raymond, and I worked with a lot of artists. That one I showed you there, Cousin Jumbo's Bop City jazz worked with perspective. What you hear is something coming at you and leading you at the same time. And that was very difficult to put it down when you hear Miles Davis go way up and then he comes down and then he escapes into compositions that is based on music.

And in a way, I started listening to a lot of jazz music and trying to associate space perspective with jazz. My one thing that you were looking at in here Sun Ra was incredible with that content of jazz and space, time and imagery. Oh, he was wonderful. He's the best I ever heard could put all of that together, because he called it space orchestra. You know Sun Ra, right? [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: "Space is the place."

JOE OVERSTREET: "Space is the place," right. And Sun Ra used to tell me things like, black people are from Saturn. I said, wait a minute, Sun Ra, [laughs] how'd you find that out? He said, "Because we all think the same way and we are not"—he had some idea of what black people all came from Saturn. All of that had a lot to do with my version of the curve and how it comes back to time.

And if Sun Ra had one definite notion about him, he was the first musician I talked to who had a definition notion about space and time. Now, that's what we work with as painters, space and time, you see. So one of the things is, when I interview—my interview in that book [The Hearing Eye: Jazz and Blues Influence in African American

Visual Art] that's—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The influence on jazz—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, that was one of the things that I would liked for him to have said, but he was looking at something else. And it's okay, whatever you feel, whatever you feel is quite all right. But this is what I have to understand until what I believe to be how music and art come together in space and time and rhythm.

Now, I don't know anymore, because you can't tell me you can hear that painting. I can't believe that, you see.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You've talked about equating sound and color.

JOE OVERSTREET: Sound and color come very close. I mean, you hear Miles Davis, those big, red sounds coming out of that damn trumpet with a mute over it, you know, and I think that those are things. I hear John Coltrane, I hear a lot of yellows and blues in 'train, because I hear blues in a lot of musicians that I think because they tell me the blues is what you get when you feel bad, you see. I may be brainwashed, but that's all I do is say, I've got all this stuff out there I listen to all day long. And I'm trying to hear what colors I hear. And I can't say that these colors coming out of the music, because that's bull. But I can certainly hear from somebody singing the blues. You can, too. Everybody can. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You did a painting called *Seven Blues for Spring* [1978]. And you use a technique of pouring paint, I believe, and actually cutting the acrylic and making—

JOE OVERSTREET: This was something that I experimented with. *Seven Blues for Spring* was from something on that park over there by—[inaudible]—what was that park there?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Christie [*sic*].

JOE OVERSTREET: Christie's, yeah. Christie's Park—I was in that park, I have to walk around and have a feeling for something in order to make it work for me. I was in Christie's Park and I was looking at—in the spring—and things started to bloom. There was a few flowers coming up, trees were getting leaves and things were coming up. And I saw something that made me feel a way of placing things down because I could control them. I poured the paint out on the plastic, and I would pull it up.

Something that happened to me just before that. I was starting to poison myself because I was using Roplex. And it may have been something to do with my cancer. But I'm not sure. I'm not going to accuse anything of anything. When you work with the materials, you take your chance.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: So I had Rohm and Haas Roplex [inaudible] acrylics. And they sent me a 50-gallon barrel of Roplex. And with this stuff, I could take a dipper and dip it. Well, I smoked a lot at that time. And I'd dip it and stir it and mix my paint and pour it out on plastic. I could just throw it. I was free with it in the sense that I could —and then, if I saw something, I could cut it out.

But in the meantime, I was using my Fibonacci strips so I was cutting everything. [Laughs.] Cutting them out in that pattern, and I enjoyed the pattern, and I enjoyed cutting the—[inaudible]—and leaving what I didn't like and taking what I liked and putting it together. And that type of painting that I was trying to do came about my placing it down. Because it was easier for me to put it on the plastic, wait until it dried, pick it up, cut it, set it where I want them and then put it on a piece of canvas and glue it down with more Roplex.

Roplex was cheap for me until it started to kill me. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you hear about other artists being affected?

JOE OVERSTREET: Afterwards. Now, afterwards, I heard that—what was the name of the woman next store—had gotten a—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Remember the truck jack-knifed up near Co-op City [Bronx, New York City], and they were evacuating Co-op City.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Because of Roplex?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] Rohm and Haas cylinder

JOE OVERSTREET: Listen, listen, oh, this is incredible story I have to tell you about—[inaudible]. I called them to tell them—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What was the name of the company again? Roman?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Rohm and Haas—R-o-h-m H-a-a-s, I think it is.

JOE OVERSTREET: They made two types of Roplex, one indoor and one exterior—interior and exterior. I called them and told them I was having these burning sensations in both of my hands. The guy came out that next day. I never saw him—and he was in Cleveland, I was ordering it from Cleveland, and he was there the next day to talk to me about it.

Well, she found me a quack doctor. [Laughs.] I went to this quack in Brooklyn, this guy. He looked at my feet, and he looked at me, and he told me, you've poisoned yourself. I hadn't told him anything about this Roplex.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Because he was painting in his bare feet.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, I had poisoned myself, he told me. And he gave me a menu, a drink.

CORRINE JENNINGS: I think he was an herbalist.

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: He was an herbalist.

JOE OVERSTREET: A Bosc pear—what was in—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Carrots, sunflower seeds.

JOE OVERSTREET: Sunflower seed and soy milk and had to put it in a juice, and every morning I would drink it. Well, the damn thing stopped burning in, what, two or three weeks?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You also stopped using the paint?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I had to, because I stopped using—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you had this drink, and you also got that out of your life.

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] Then I went to another. I went to oil. I said, hell with acrylics. So I started making oil paints now. I'll show you how to make the oil paint. And they tell me that's not good. Either way, I'm doing that. I have the system out there where I heat it up and I put oil—[laughs]—she don't like it. I put a lot of wax in there, use a lot of beeswax. All this stuff got beeswax.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, let me go back to this—

JOE OVERSTREET: This guy here. You see this guy here? This guy [inaudible].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: De Kooning

JOE OVERSTREET: Anyway. You know what he used to do? He used to have these big old kegs, containers. They were like—oh, I have a lot of them out there. They were bowls. And he would put all these different colors, but you never knew all that stuff was in there. He'd want a little red, he's start with blue, green, black. He would put every damn color in his palette to make this red.

So I asked him, I said, "Why you doing that?" He said, "This is the only way it can dry even." It was necessary for all his colors to dry at the same time. That was the one thing he could do that he had learned to do. Now, I put a lot of wax in mine so it all dries at the same time, but I'm not sure how to get the same effect that he gets. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: As you were working with this method, there was a commission just a couple of years later in 1982, at the San Francisco Airport.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, yeah. I bought all this stuff with that commission. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And that involved using completely different materials.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you know about that commission?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: No, I don't.

JOE OVERSTREET: You've never been through that airport?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, I have, but I want to hear your story about the commission.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. Well, the thing is, see, my brother, my younger brother, is an architect. He had a commission from the San Francisco Airport to build two of the tunnels. They built a building. The first building when you go into San Francisco is my brother's building.

Now, there's a wonderful guy out there. He was Levi Strauss'—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Son-in-law.

JOE OVERSTREET:—son-in-law. He was over the—you know where Levi Strauss' building is in San Francisco? You know about Levi Strauss? Levi Strauss was the one who took jeans to San Francisco for the gold miners.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, right.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. Now, people think they were Westerners, but they weren't. They were there for the gold mine. So Levi Strauss has a museum in San Francisco. And I met—what was his name, his son in law—oh, he passed away many years ago. I can't remember his name. I met him, and I told him what I'd like to do. [Laughs.] So he was really wonderful. He said, do it and try. And if it don't work, we'll just throw it away. Now, we're talking about $3 million worth of—[laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You said you told him you know what you want to do. In other words, you knew there was a competition?

CORRINE JENNINGS: No, there was Ruben Kadish's sister.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh.

JOE OVERSTREET: I didn't have any competition. Ruben Kadish told his sister—Ruth Kadish told me, do what you want to do. So did the Levi Strauss; they just said, what you want to do.

CORRINE JENNINGS: She was on the San Francisco Arts Commission.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. And they said—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Her name is Ruth?

JOE OVERSTREET: Ruth. And she said, do what you want to do. Well, I had a good reputation from San Francisco, I felt. They didn't care. They felt it was going to work, whatever I tried. I had a good system of research, she and I, mostly her. [Laughs.] So we got in and researched. Oh, boy, did we ever! We found out all the Chinese people who were brought to San Francisco were brought there to sell them specifically to dig a hole into those damn mountains so that the railroad can get through. And anyway, they didn't have a chance because they gave them a short fuse and stuck them in these mountains, and they would blow up before they got out.

Well, we decided we would take the colors of the Chinese and put in the tones that are there.

CORRINE JENNINGS: They really like golds. Gold is significant for them.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, right. [Laughs.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: Native American colors, too.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. We'd take those colors—we went out there, we found out that the Native Americans wouldn't go to war because they were too lazy. That's what they told us. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who told you that?

JOE OVERSTREET: [Inaudible.] I always teased her about that. But they never went to war in California, the Indian people. They were just passive.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Peaceful.

JOE OVERSTREET: Passive, passive, very passive people out there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The California tribes.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, yeah. See, so one of the things that we found out—we went really deep into it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In other words, the commission, you felt, needed to represent the people—

JOE OVERSTREET: People who had lived in San Francisco. That was what we were looking for. And that's what we wanted to show.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How did you decide to make it with neon and steel?

JOE OVERSTREET: The steel was because of, what's his name, a wonderful artist, Richard Serra. I decided—I went to Spain, and I saw Picasso using that steel that turned—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Corten.

JOE OVERSTREET: Corten steel that turned color. And I saw Richard Serra blew it down here. And so I just fell in love with the idea that I could get the steel to turn the color I'd like to see it. I let it sit outside for six, seven months to get to the color I wanted to see. I found out that it wasn't something that was done with rust. It was done with pollution.

I set the—they were 20, 30 feet by eight feet, 10 feet. I set them up in Vallejo [CA] where the oil refinery was, so the oil refinery would give it good pollution. Now, it was interesting, because my father and I worked on the oil refinery up there, so it was a wonderful space for me to put them. And we set them out there and let them set there for six months. And when they turned the color that I thought would look good with the neon light—and I got the neon light, because I had to do the color of the Chinese people who had gone into the tunnel with these lights on their head and they couldn't get through.

So I thought that everything was working together. Maybe it didn't, but I thought so.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You spent quite a few years working on that project, right?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, how long did we spend on that? I spent maybe three years.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yeah, but it had to sit outside and rust.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, we had it set—

CORRINE JENNINGS: And had to wait for construction.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And during that time, were you also able to work on your studio?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Well, I would go out there and spend two or three weeks a month, you know, and then I would come back here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What kind of impact did it have on the work you were doing in your studio?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, the thing was that I felt that it had a lot of impact because, at that time, I felt that I was making a lot of canvases that had—well, she's going to show you in the back. I thought it worked well with what I wanted to do. In fact, I'm so one-sided with my ideas until it's hard for me not to do the same thing. I'm not the kind of person who can do one thing, go and do something else. I thought it all related.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Many watercolors.

JOE OVERSTREET: My watercolors, yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Many watercolors.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

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JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joe Overstreet, 214 East 2nd Street in Manhattan, on March 18, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc five.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, that's when I started to work, basically, in black and white, in the '80s. But here, I got an opportunity. Was it '85 or '86—to go to Chile—Santiago. What year was that?

CORRINE JENNINGS: You went to Spain.

JOE OVERSTREET: I went to Spain—right, that's when I really started to change, when I got a chance to go to Spain. It was when I went to Montserrat. That was not the same place down there, but that's where, at least, I saw this black Madonna that was 2000 years old. That was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: In Spain?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: In Spain, they said—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Maybe from between 800 and 1200. We went to the Alhambra.

JOE OVERSTREET: And then I went to the Alhambra and I got the chance to see what the Moors had done in the Alhambra. And I really started to look at different versions. You see, I had really wanted to see what role Africans played in European development. And in Spain, you can really see it, I felt.

You can see it more than anyplace, because you can see where Picasso got all of his—you know, he came out of Spain very close to where it is. You can see what's-his-name—Gaudi Temple [La Sagrada Família]. You can see, you know, the Alhambra. You can see a lot of things in Seville. The ways—you know in the water?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, the locks.

JOE OVERSTREET: The locks. All of these things that I had never had a chance to understand how they work and how they worked within European history. I had read and heard about Greek, and this is different from Greek, now. This is another version of what—you know, like, this is not Hannibal; this is after Hannibal taking the—you know, all of, one elephant over the Alps. [Laughs.] But I would like to say this Alhambra—have you been there?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, you know then. You know they had flushing toilets in the 13th century and—what was that place where the sun—

CORRINE JENNINGS: The Boabdil. The sultan's son wanted to marry a Spanish woman, and she wouldn't marry him unless their children—her children, her son—could become the ruler, because of that law of the first born. And so he took his two sons by his Moorish wife into that bathhouse with the dome and he cut their throats.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, that was something that I really was impressed with because it was in the way they kept time—the way the things would spout the water every hour.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Oh, on the way from one palace to the other, there was a sundial—a sundial fountain made of lions, I guess. They looked more like panthers to me, but they were lions. Anyway, the women of that harem opened those enormous doors and said "it's finished."

[Cross talk.]

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, a lot of that thinking at the time—I was involved in the San Francisco airport—a lot of that thinking, I wanted to project to not do what they were doing, but project that kind of thinking to that airport and give them something that they could enjoy looking at. And I was more concerned about how all those—that big park and that wonderful—see, we got that out there trying to catch up with that—well, we planted a few flowers. They had a lot of flowers. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were saying that during this time, in the early '80s, you were focusing a lot on works in black and white.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Before he—before—for a long time, when he shifted to oil, he was painting in black and white—a long time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why is that?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, I thought that black and white was something that would allow me to control shapes, you see. And one of the things that shapes is very important in painting—because at that time, I always felt, you know, colorblindness is very, very, very serious to painters. I'm not colorblind, I have had several colorblind tests, but you never know, because of light, that you're looking at the color that you see when you see the color, because light interferes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why did you have test[s] for colorblindness?

JOE OVERSTREET: Because I wanted to, and then I went to—there's that place down there on Spring Street—that clinic. I used to go in there. They'd test me for it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Were you worried that you were colorblind?

JOE OVERSTREET: I didn't even care. I just—they just did it. I went to the one here and was tested at the eye and ear clinic on 2nd Avenue and 14th Street. Oh you know that one? Yeah. They test you for colorblind [laughs] all the time there. I didn't think anything about being colorblind because I had always believed painters were colorblind anyway—men were colorblind. Because they had always told me that women could see color; men were colorblind.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who told you?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, that's just rumors that guys wanted to say. [Jennings laughs.] And you know, if you put too much color in that, they say, "Oh, you're a female." But see, these are old things that people carry through their lives with them. Because they always told me the bull couldn't see a red cape. I always thought the damn bull charged the red cape. But I found out that he charged the guy that's standing next to the cape. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Before we go to the Storyville series [1988-89] and other works, I want to ask you some more—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Oh, I think you also—we also went to Amsterdam, and we went to Rembrandt's house.

JOE OVERSTREET: Here he is here. There's the Amsterdam guy here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] I have to think about him.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Van Gogh, yeah. You had talked about Rembrandt, that you were interested in his work. When you went to Amsterdam, that was your first opportunity to really see—

JOE OVERSTREET: I spent a lot of time—I spent a lot of time with that picture, *The Night Watch* [1642]. I made several of them. And what I really thought about that painting—before I saw it, I went there to see it, and I was verified that I felt what I felt. The light moves. The painting is extremely animated. And when you look at those soldiers standing there with the little dog, his tail wags, and you know, things happen in that painting that I thought—and I think it was my imagination—that I thought was wonderful.

So we went to his house. We went to a church that he painted the darn thing in. And we sort of—I wanted to see him and Vermeer—where they came from, why they made paintings that way, that I thought were probably—at that time, were the best paintings in the world. And I think that Rembrandt was probably the greatest painter in the world at that time because of *The Night Watch*.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Not his portraits?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, hell. Anybody could have done those. I think most of those things were done by his students anyway. But—[laughs]—

CORRINE JENNINGS: The self-portrait?

JOE OVERSTREET: [Laughs.] Yeah, they called—[inaudible].

CORRINE JENNINGS: How many did we see of those?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, we saw thousands of it. But *The Night Watch*, I thought, was the painting that was really —

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you also had interest in Vermeer?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, Vermeer had an interesting take on painting. He'd sit by the same damn window all the time. And he had his models come in and they would always sit there with the same light. He studied that perspective better than anyone. Rembrandt, I don't think, had that sensibility, of what Rembrandt saw.

Now, I'm not an expert on European art by any means, but I always like Rembrandt. And I like Hals—Frans Hals. I liked his paintings because they were bold and they were just out there, very, very—I like the Dutch painters. I like this guy de Kooning because he was a Dutch painter. I have to get him in there.

But I think the Dutch painters probably were very sensitive—the Spanish painters always put them down. They were always, oh, here come these old Dutch painters—you know, Velazquez and all those people. Well, they were good. But I like the Dutch painters. I thought the Dutch painters—and I'm not just saying that, because I really feel that this guy's the best in the world. No one—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: [We're] looking at van Gogh.

JOE OVERSTREET: No one could do what he could do.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You changed, first of all, from oil to acrylic, and then, when you were having these problems, you changed back from acrylic to oil. And all along, you've explored different mediums. More recently, you've been painting on screens.

As you're working, do you just reach a point where you feel that you need a change, or are you coming to a point where you're struggling in a painting and the painting isn't working and you feel like maybe it's because I need to change the materials I'm working with?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I want to see something—I want to see—I would like to see something different in the world. I'd like to see a way—somehow, I believe, by seeing things, they become real. It's very difficult to explain. I want to change things—the way we view each other, the way we see—now, I'm not a holy person. I'm not a pope; I'm not a preacher; I'm none of that. So I don't want to try to impress you as thinking I'm spiritual.

I believe that art and what we see is how we respond to each other, and to the world. I believe that this guy [Van Gogh], if he hadn't had a mental problem and he wasn't sick as hell, and if he could have resolved a lot of his personal problems, he would have shown us something else in the world. But that wasn't meant to be. I think that the reason we see things the way we see them is because here, we have a different view in the world, on different things. And I'm not historically that intelligent about these things, but these people—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: [You're referring to] a book called *China: A History in Art* [Bradley Smith and Wan-go Weng. New York, Doubleday. 1976]

JOE OVERSTREET: These people are very important in what we see—how we see life, how we see things. Look at that damn dragon there. Now, my dragon is not as good as him, but I didn't see that dragon that way. I saw my dragon as being a part of a watercolor that was spontaneous. This is 1,000 years old. He goes on forever. He's sitting there trying to figure out how to get out of his skin. My dragon wants to stay in his skin, when I make him. It's a different philosophy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I asked before whether you did preparatory drawings at all, and it sounds like, mostly, you're working directly onto the [canvas], or directly onto whatever material you're working on. But in fact, you've done watercolors and you've done other works on paper. So the question is, what part does drawing play as an end in itself and as a way of developing your paintings?

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. Drawing, for me, gives me a lot of sensibility of space and technique, style, flair, in a way where I can take a drawing and make it a part of what I feel, and translate it. You see, my work don't come the way I think people look at work. My work builds inside me, and when it comes, it comes out. And I go out and I look. And on the way—and this has always been the way I have to approach my work. I walk around the neighborhood, which she knows. I walk around and I see things. I pick up a magazine, things hit me.

If, like, I pick up a magazine and Aunt Jemima is cooking a million pancakes, my god, you know, what I felt the day I saw that. There's a black woman cooking a million pancakes to save a damn company! [Laughs.] I thought about my grandmother. I thought about my mother.

I thought about all the black women in Africa coming here to save—cook pancakes for everybody. So I had a double sense of shoot them and then shoot the pancakes. And that was my version of how it had to work. I had drawings of it and I had different things of it. I have another painting that's very, very important to me. It's called *Big Black* [1961]. Let her see that painting.

CORRINE JENNINGS: I don't have that catalogue here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think I saw that. Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: The painting is so important to me that I had—at the time I came to New York—this is 1960, I think, I made the painting. You've heard of Dizzy Gillespie. Well, there used to be a conga player with him—what was his name?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Machito [Francisco Raúl Gutiérrez Grillo].

JOE OVERSTREET: Machito. Anyway—

CORRINE JENNINGS: He was Cuban.

JOE OVERSTREET: He was Cuban, yeah. Anyway, he told me once about these drums. He said there's a baby drum, a mama drum, a papa drum—all these different sizes of these drums. So I felt really touched about these damn drums because they were skin. And I made all these paintings with a trowel so this canvas was like skin. I had the paper on them, which was the way they were put together—the ropes, everything that was put together with them.

And I made these paintings that I felt were really wonderful paintings. But I couldn't tell people that I was talking about *Big Black*, the drummer; I was talking about big, black, period. The painting was big and black, so—[laughs]—it was like, *Big Black*, was this painting. It's in one of these catalogues. It's a wonderful painting. I felt good about it. And I showed it to a lot of people. A lot of people were influenced by it. And one guy was influenced by it so that he built him a tool that raked across all these paintings. [Laughs.] Okay. Shh, don't say anything about that. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is it important, when you're working, to have past work around you to see? Does it feed your new work?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, out there, I've got all these things. Sometimes, they're out and sometimes, they're not, you understand? I have these things—I'm working with the idea of collaging and being able to see through things.

Seeing through it carries a deep perspective for me. It goes back to [inaudible]. Then it comes forward to looking out a screen door, looking at it. Then it goes down to Maryland, where all those people who painted on screen doors and wives painted all of the seascapes and things. So I'm a part of all of it. I see myself as a part of it.

The wire is something that I've held, when Corrine and I—we went to Barbados in '73. We'd go out and swim and we'd—I saw this damn fish. And that fish, I tried to catch because I wanted to eat him. The fish didn't want to be eaten. So I went back and I got one of those curtains off of the window where we were staying and I went back out in the water.

And the little kids was laughing at me and the little fish was waiting for me to come back because the fish knew I hadn't given up and he hadn't given up. And I tried to throw the curtain over the fish. The fish kept playing with me. So when I came back to New York, I started looking through screen doors. I've been painting—how long have I been painting on this wire, Corrine?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Off and on since around '76.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. It's a long time. I've been working on it off and on. Because I think that the wire says something about my—who I am as a person. It says something about my childhood in Mississippi—keeping flies out of your house, if nothing else. It certainly does get to—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you start a work—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Or keeping in them in.

[Cross talk, They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Generally speaking, when you're working on a painting and you start with an idea, do you really know, at the beginning, what you're looking for, or are you finding it as you're working and the concept can change until you come to the end, to a very different place?

JOE OVERSTREET: My best work, I think—and what I think is my best work, probably people say that it's some more shit—but my best work is ideas that hit me. I can walk around, like I go into John Chamberlain's studio and I see these black guys hanging up there, and then I hear Billie Holiday's song, *Strange Fruit*, and I make a painting about strange fruit.

And then I show, in the painting, these guys who are standing there, hanging this—you don't see the person, you just see the rope stretch—but all these fools with these hoods and these Ku Klux Klan. And there are strange fruits there—I have them oranges, apples, plums. And they're strange fruits. And those are the strange fruits in the painting. So the painting has to have a double edge, a paradoxical edge to it. If it's not, then why bother? It's like the machine gun with the lady shooting pancakes.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So as you're working, you have a vision in your mind. Would you say that it's intuitive, how you develop the image?

JOE OVERSTREET: I think God works with that. I think God is there. I look at it and I feel something about what it is that I see. I saw a black jacket on the fence and I knew some Puerto Rican kid had crawled over the wire fence and put his jacket there to get into somebody's house. So I have a black jacket—where's my *Black Jacket* [*The Black Jacket*]?

CORRINE JENNINGS: I was just going to look for it. I couldn't find the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I wanted to talk to you about that painting, but I'm just going back to another small question. When I read about your work, it's defined by series. There's this series and that series. When do you decide that what you've painted is—

JOE OVERSTREET: Finished?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—[That] the series [is] called something? Where does the title come from? And when do you decide that it's over and—

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay, now, let's go to one of my—favorite—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS:—Storyville series, the Tension series , the—

JOE OVERSTREET: My favorite series is the one of New Orleans.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The Storyville series.

JOE OVERSTREET: Storyville.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. Now, the Storyville was something that followed me since I was a child. My uncle used to always threaten my mother and her sister and the rest of us, "I'm going to leave you all and go to New Orleans." This, like, was his favorite statement. He was a good singer. He could sing the blues. I would sit in bed at night and listen for him to come home and hear him singing so I knew he didn't go to New Orleans. [Laughs.]

But New Orleans—I had no idea why he would say that until I went there to see why he would say that. I said, he should have left. [Laughs.] But anyway, New Orleans was a part of my life in that sense, only because through my uncle. I was in Mississippi. And the word "New Orleans" became, why does he want to threaten everybody? Something was there, like, magnificent, which was a bunch of whores. I didn't realize [laughs] all of that because I went and found it later, why he was threatening everybody.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And the music.

JOE OVERSTREET: And the music, exactly. So I felt that I wanted to see what New Orleans was about. We went down there and went there, and we were there. Rampart Street, Canal Street, their cemetery, where Marie Laveau was buried—all of those places—Louis Armstrong—all of those places in New Orleans was what made New Orleans exceptional in his mind.

In my mind, it became, why? And I'm not being pretentious. I'm trying to show you why I wanted to make a series for New Orleans. And understand, what he was trying to say to us when I was four or five years old—I couldn't—no way in hell for me to have gotten up and gone with him—but I was hoping he wouldn't leave because he could really sing.

And I figured he was going there to sing. Now, he was going to see the girls. I didn't care which one [laughs] but I had to find out what was in New Orleans. I went there to find out. And I thought it was a wonderful story about African-American people who had, had an opportunity to practice voodoo, hoodoo, music and to do things that, it seemed, that was taken from African-Americans in near every other place. And that was one of the things—I thought that series of paintings that I made was one of my best efforts in a series of work, that I'm wanted to say.

You see, I got a lot of help from—when I was trying to make it—from the photographer.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, [E. J.] Bellocq.

JOE OVERSTREET: What was his name, Corrine?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Bellocq. Bellocq.

JOE OVERSTREET: Bellocq, right. I got a lot of help from him. I went to him. He had taken a lot of photographs

that helped me to understand what I was looking for. I made drawings. I made a lot of subject matter of it. And then he would—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And at that point, you introduced more figurative elements into your work than you had recently. You just felt that was the right thing at that point?

CORRINE JENNINGS: It was after those funnels, too.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, I never looked at art as figurative or abstract. Because of my political agenda, it had to be either way, which I could understand. I wasn't trained to believe in abstraction as the end to all ends. I wasn't trained to believe the figurative was the end to all ends.

I still believe the statement that you're making about what you're saying has to feel what you feel about it, and how it can come through. And that's one thing that Storyville could do for me. I just saw—a photograph. A painting. A book, not a painting. A book by a artist that we've bought his work.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Richard Demsey?

JOE OVERSTREET: Demsey. He went to Senegal and he looked in the—today was the first time—just before you came, I discovered this—he went into the "house of no return," Gorée—the slave house in Senegal. And he made his paintings. Now, I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is before you made your paintings?

JOE OVERSTREET: What's that? Yeah. I didn't know—you see, his paintings, he was making in his mind as the hereafter and all that. I didn't care—I cared about it, but I couldn't conceive of that. I could only conceive of what I felt when I went in that damn place. And you saw the book.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Before we leave the Storyville series, to talk about the Senegal—I [want to go back to the question] about the series. When you conceived, in your mind, that you were going to focus on your visions and your ideas, explore the ideas in Storyville—that history of the people and the music—the culture—did you say, this is going to be a series that's I'm going to be occupied for about a year, two years?

JOE OVERSTREET: You know, what happened with me—in 1956, I tried to make paintings about New Orleans in San Francisco. I didn't like them because they were too much like what I felt Picasso would do, and I wouldn't want it to be that way for me. Because I didn't know that much about New Orleans. I'd met some people, who—painters from New Orleans. I had a friend that was from New Orleans. He was a space cadet in the sense that he believed in astro-travel. [Laughs.]

So I thought that New Orleans would be a good thing for me to do. When I started making these paintings, I didn't have any idea how far I would take it. I didn't even think about that. I started looking at Bellocq and I started remembering my uncle. And one would dry and I would work it out, and I felt that I looked okay for me at the time, I would make another one.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Did you actually go to New Orleans?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, we went to New Orleans—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you first started the series, or just before?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Before.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Just before.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We went on a journey.

JOE OVERSTREET: I took her there.

CORRINE JENNINGS: You took me to Conehatta, Mississippi.

JOE OVERSTREET: I took her there to see where my uncle wanted to go.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We went to Memphis, too. That's where we saw that Beale Street was only a movie set. They had torn down all the buildings, and—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, that was another journey that I had in mind, because I had these uncles who left Mississippi saying, well, I'm going to leave you all now. One went to Memphis. And I had one there who had

become a lawyer, who had started a huge business. What business was that—insurance company or something. I never knew any of these people. They didn't impress me nearly as much as my uncle who wanted to go to—[laughs]—New Orleans.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Who could sing—really sing.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, he could sing. And I felt that the reason he wanted to go to New Orleans was to sing. And then I looked at it again, and whatever reason—but I got carried away with it. And Bellocq helped me to get carried away with it.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Also, you found a new paint, too—or a paint new to you.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Hmm. What was the paint?

JOE OVERSTREET: Old Holland paint—a historical paint. It's a great paint. Do you know about Old Holland paint?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. And Rembrandt paints—they are the best paints. I always use them—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You hadn't know about them before?

JOE OVERSTREET: Who?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You said you hadn't known about them?

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, before that? No, I didn't think of the paint quality.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Acrylic.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: But I used Grumbacher. And their paints are terrible; don't buy Grumbacher. Don't use that stuff. But anyway, it's okay. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: After you had done the[m], you decided to call it the Storyville series?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, there was nothing else I could call the damn thing but Storyville, because I found out—the thing that really impressed about it, which kept me working at it, was Sidney Story was a politician. And everybody wanted him to go to jail and to shoot him down there, because he was trying to close the district—the red-light district, is what they called it.

And I wanted him shot, too, because he [laughs] shouldn't close it, but this was in 1920, when he was in Congress. So he was down there and people were upset with him because he wanted to close the red-light district. Now, when I saw that, I thought, well, politician over the society of human beings who want to have a good time.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: [It was] named for him, though?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, they gave the name Storyville for Sidney Story, the congressman.

CORRINE JENNINGS: And he was honored. [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: After that, I think you began a series that was called the Tension series.

JOE OVERSTREET: The Tension series—that was at—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That was right after Storyville.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Those ropes—

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, when I was—oh, my God, yes. I enjoyed that.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yes, yes. And then you did the painting, *Black Jacket*, I mean, with all those paintings.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, and that was something with my painting that's up there—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you brought the ropes back, [that] you had been using earlier?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, yeah, because they were a part of my development. And they're a line. They make a great line. You don't have to draw a damn line; you can put a rope and it makes a—it's a line and it makes a great line. But my painting, *Black Star Line*, was made of that. Now, *Black Star Line* [1990] is very, very significant to me in my development.

When I came to New York, in 1958, there used to be a ship here on 23rd Street at the docks. And it was called Black Star. I found out that was the ship that Marcus Garvey had bought to take all black people back to Africa. The damn ship never left the docks. It was, well, [it had] a broken sail. Sure, it was tied to the docks and it never left. You've got to see the painting—in the painting—do we have a picture of the painting? Show her a picture of the painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I saw a picture of the painting.

CORRINE JENNINGS: It's on Shapolsky's [gallery] website.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Yeah.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, the painting—I like the painting because it's tied to the docks and the sail is split, and it wouldn't move. So I like the idea of Marcus Garvey having a ship docked, but it never got anyplace. Now, because black—

CORRINE JENNINGS: He was sold a ship that was not seaworthy.

JOE OVERSTREET: The ship was not. So the ship encouraged me to buy a ship. I used to go to sea. I took her to the Staten Island to buy a ship we were going to put our museum on it.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Really?

CORRINE JENNINGS: I opposed.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, this happened—what year was this? It's the same time I was making *Black Star Line*. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: That was 1990—*Black Star Line*.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, that's about the time I was going up—was that what time—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were imagining selling this building, leaving the city—

JOE OVERSTREET: No, no, no, no! We wasn't going to sell this building. We were going to—I had gone over and made a deal with the guy who owned the ship.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: The Black Star.

JOE OVERSTREET: No, this is another ship that was docked in—

CORRINE JENNINGS: It was docked in Staten Island.

JOE OVERSTREET:—Staten Island.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: A big ship?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. I took her with me to see the ship. I made a deal with the guy. I was going to fix the ship up and put a museum on it.

CORRINE JENNINGS: A traveling—

JOE OVERSTREET: A traveling museum—it was a good idea. The damn thing went out to sea and sank. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Hopefully before you bought it.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You didn't follow up that idea again?

JOE OVERSTREET: The ship sank. Well, I thought about the *Black Star Line* in the same sense.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you were putting ropes on the canvas. You also had, at that point, developed a

technique where you'd use paper kind of like a monoprint—

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh yes, that's my idea that I always enjoyed, because the story on the paper—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When did you start doing that?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I started that with the Storyville.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think the Storyville.

CORRINE JENNINGS: The children—yeah, but the children had gotten—it used to be a paper company.

JOE OVERSTREET: Oh, right, right, right! Oh, yes. This building was a paper factory there.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Near us? Across the street?

JOE OVERSTREET: Right in back of here.

CORRINE JENNINGS: On 3rd Street.

JOE OVERSTREET: So I went over there to get paper from the guy for the kids—we had a children's program. So he gave me a whole bunch of paper and the kids couldn't use it all. So I was trying to show them what to do with it. They make paint on paper. So they would take it and smash it on here—I said, this is great. So I started to make my paintings that way.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Inspired by children.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you'd put the paint on the paper and then put the paper on the canvas.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: It's like the acrylic, almost, where he was picking it up and—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, it's the opposite of that. So I would put—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then peel the paper off.

JOE OVERSTREET: Right, right.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you had a texture.

JOE OVERSTREET: I had a texture, yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And then you combined that with adding the ropes and even more elements. You talked about *The Black Jacket*.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, that was a part of the—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Some of those paintings came—there are a group of those paintings that developed from his walks around the neighborhood.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, that's something—I had a lot of extra time, at one point, to go out and seek ideas or see things—I didn't seek ideas; I saw things—that would impress me to make a painting about. The neighborhood—here, I have a painting in here about this building in back of us collapsing—of this one over there collapsing.

And then, one of the things that—you can see how people hung their clothes, and their clothes was hanging around. And you can see how they left.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Washing clothes in New York City and hanging them out to dry.

JOE OVERSTREET: And then you can see the color of the walls that they lived with. All these things is a part of what? Made my paintings, I thought—if some kid had a blue room, a red room, a green room and everything was torn down around it and all his toys and furniture was left there because he had to leave, then all of that became a part of what I wanted to do in my paintings—to show that this person who lived in this building and this apartment had a life, they wanted to be, and they had to leave. That was the Lower East Side, at the time,

when I came over here. You can only think that way—yeah, that's it there. That's one there. That's in Africa—this damn painting.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It's in Africa?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Where?

JOE OVERSTREET: I don't know. Some museum, they've got it there. Where in the hell is it?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We're looking at a painting called "sound in sight" and—

CORRINE JENNINGS: It's in French.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: *Son Visible,* from 1991. And it was purchased to go to—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, well, so you see, a lot of these things in—that we've painted—show her another one of those damn things. That's a—yeah.

CORRINE JENNINGS: This one is for George Washington Carver.

JOE OVERSTREET: That was my guy.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you say it was for George Washington Carver, how does one know that?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Well, there's Fibonacci in here, but George Washington Carver developed the way—he made paint for Sears Roebuck [Corporation]. And Roebuck was black. And so he made a plan for how people should paint their houses—you know, one color for the paneling, the door, the trim.

JOE OVERSTREET: Also, but his strongest concept was—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is a painting from 1991.

JOE OVERSTREET:—that light should be at the top, in the center should be medium, and at the bottom should be dark. He—this is not quite as strong as his idea of—I'll show you, when we finish this, some of his painting. And his paintings was really, I think, very, very good. Now, he was told not to paint because black people could not afford his paintings and art was not for black people. So he was sent by the guy who had raised him, who was a white guy, to school to be a scientist in Ohio.

It's very interesting. That's why he's my guy, because when I was young, my mother used to say, there's Dr. Carver; wave at him. And I would see him sitting on the porch and I would be out there waving, because I didn't have any idea who he was at that time. [Laughs.] But I found out later. I think he's magnificent—what he gave to the world. He gave us peanut butter if nothing else, but he gave a lot more.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: As you were working through these paintings, how did they become the Tension series? Where did that name come from?

CORRINE JENNINGS: The—I think the ropes pulling something—pulling those ropes in some of the paintings.

JOE OVERSTREET: I'm going to get something to show you. I saw it this morning back here waiting. It's a piece, and it's something I want to show you that came off of—

[Audio break.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What [are we] looking at?

JOE OVERSTREET: You're looking at rope stretching from the pyramids.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes, a diagram.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, see. So Corrine took this off the pyramid—let me—I have to go back here. Look at that for a minute. I have to go to this room.

[Audio break.]

Rope stretchers and the pyramids. You see how they laid it out in the pyramids? Well, this is something I didn't know at the time.

I had no idea of that. I just found that recently. My father looked at me and said, "Well, they built them with rope stretchers." Now, everything in that has a dimension because it goes up so—well, you can see where these knots start. Well, if I had known all that, I could have taken it a lot further, probably. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You mentioned going to Africa, and so I wanted to ask you about that. I think it was in late '92 that you took your first trip to Africa. Talk about that and about the series that resulted from that trip.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, when I went to Africa, I went to Senegal. And when I got there—we were with several others—you know, Frank Bowling—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, yes. Who did you go with?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, here—there was the catalogue of all these artists that we went with.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who organized the trip?

JOE OVERSTREET: We did. We got it through E.J. Montegomery, who gave us money to go.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Who was E.J. Montegomery?

JOE OVERSTREET: She worked at the State—you know, in Washington, D.C.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Department of State?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Yeah, so we went through that program. We went there to have an exhibition. This exhibition is this catalog here, see. This is the catalog from the exhibition. Fateen, the lady downstairs who works as our associate, she was our tour guide. She was a student there at the time. So we went to Senegal to have an exhibition in the museum because the museum was just opened. It was a really great experience for me, because there's a man named Papa Tal.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How do you spell that?

JOE OVERSTREET: You have to get Corrine to make sure it's spelled correctly. He made paintings from these other people that we took there with us. He made paintings from weaving. He made, you know, big paintings and embroidery out of—I was just looking at Mildred there, over there; she's passed away—out of embroidery and things. He's really—he has a big factory there and he does a lot of things. These are some of the paintings that I showed there when I was at the—in the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So you went there for this exhibition.

JOE OVERSTREET: For this exhibition. And when we were there, we had a chance to go out to the bush to see what people were doing in the bush. That's when I got a chance to see how African people live, in houses that they built and where things was not really stores and things. They lived as a community. They all lived in one very closed kind of society.

Then we got a chance to go to Gorée Island—the slave house. And once I saw that, I collapsed, because I couldn't believe it. I went inside and my imagination let me hear people crying. And the first—you walk in the door. To the left, there's a huge room. I stepped the room off. It was 12 feet by 40 feet. And someone told me they had, had as many as 200 people in that room at one time. They weighed men. They weighed them; they measured their penis; and they measured their head for good studs.

And that's what they—and then you go into the room. There's a staircase going up on both sides of the house. You go through that into a very narrow corridor. I always felt that, that corridor was put there so two big guys couldn't go through at one time. That house, I felt, was very geometrically designed. So it controlled—wouldn't you say that slave house was geometrically—

CORRINE JENNINGS: Absolutely. It's the architecture of enslavement.

JOE OVERSTREET: Let's go back for a minute. How do you spell Papa Tal's name?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Papa—P-A-P-A, T-A-L.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: T-A-L.

JOE OVERSTREET: So he had—tell her what he had there—he had a place where he produced paintings, and he produced some of our paintings there.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Well, he—he had been here in New York and in Paris. And there's a tremendous problem for Senegalese artists in that they can't really get materials—it's very expensive to import them. So what he did was develop a tapestry museum and workshop where they could reproduce paintings using traditional dyes and wool, because they have a lot of sheep, goats and whatever.

So it's a wonderful, round museum and workshop with enormous looms—maybe 10 feet, eight feet looms, which two or three or four people could work at a time. So it was very inspirational, in that he found a way to merge the traditional art forms with contemporary.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, he lived outside of Senegal.

CORRINE JENNINGS: Outside of Dakar, you mean.

JOE OVERSTREET: Outside of Dakar. And he lived in a place that was close to where we went into this village that was incredible. What was the name of that village? I was trying to remember some of the details about the village—about how people lived there and the school.

CORRINE JENNINGS: We can get it. I have it here.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: When you came back to New York after that trip, you immediately started painting.

JOE OVERSTREET: I started when I got my foot—I stepped in here and I went straight there and I painted for one year without sleeping. I made 14 huge paintings. I showed them to you.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And was that the first time you incorporated beeswax into the paint, or [had] you been doing that before?

CORRINE JENNINGS: With the—wanting the transparency in the—with the Old Holland—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. Well, you see, what impressed me about this house—the way it was put together to control.

One of the things about what it is that they had—control—because in Senegal, the city, you couldn't see what was happening from—

[Audio break.]

—Okay, here's one—couldn't see from Senegal—from Dakar—the little island, which the slave house—and the slaves were taken to. There was no way for people to know what was happening over there.

It was a big cliff in front of this place. And this is something I felt that was so diabolical. Now, Europeans didn't start this, the Arabs started it. I always think that this was one of the most diabolical places in the world, because of how deceitful it had been—

CORRINE JENNINGS: I think the Portuguese maybe built that, originally.

JOE OVERSTREET: The who?

CORRINE JENNINGS: I think the Portuguese built that fort.

JOE OVERSTREET: The Portuguese—yeah, they were—but they were not before the Arabs.

CORRINE JENNINGS: No.

[END TRACK AAA_overst10_1790_m.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: This is Judith Richards interviewing Joe Overstreet at 214 East Second Street, in New York City, on March 18, 2010, for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, disc six.

The *Gorée* Island series, is called Door of No Return or Facing the Door of No Return?

JOE OVERSTREET: Facing the Door of No Return [1993].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It's interesting that these paintings combine very disturbing subject matter with a wonderful sense of beauty and light. What were you thinking when you were approaching these works, thinking about the content and what you wanted to share with people?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, because one of the things, I was not there. There is no way for me to understand what

happened. All I could see is the beauty that surrounded me when I—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I mean, so the paintings weren't dark and—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, the towns were—a few towns were, but outside—it was a very beautiful island that—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So there's this irony there.

JOE OVERSTREET: *Gorée* was a wonderful island that were—beautiful trees, beautiful houses. And it was like—we enjoyed being there on the island. We went into the slave house above, we were where the people who controlled slaves. Only the dark passageways out into where the ships were kept did I see any of that. In most the places—

CORRINE JENNINGS: It was—just, I can still—my skin crawls when I think of that.

JOE OVERSTREET: Most of the places we were toured. We had a tour guide who explained what to us what was happening, like the ideal men being measured and young girls being captured to bring here for breeding purposes and different things that people didn't understand that was happening. Now, there's no way—no way in the world for us to feel any of that. I used the geometry that I felt—that I saw there. And geometry is always pure. So the paintings are pure because the geometry is pure.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: [After] you went through that intense year of painting, you felt that you had come to the end?

JOE OVERSTREET: Had I resolved it? Yeah, I felt that it was time to move on. I came here December 24th, the night before Christmas, and I start painting and I painted for one year straight, didn't I? And I painted 16, 17 hours a day and I would wake up and I would go back and I would paint some more and I would paint—I made—I got that door there while I was in Senegal from one of the big dealers. I have a door that I made of a painting that was—where—

CORRINE JENNINGS: It was the first or second one after watercolors and then—

JOE OVERSTREET: You see, I always felt that that door meant so much about how people would save their food, as granary doors and how they would eat and how they put—that's a very small door, you can't get much food out of that door at one time.

So I was interested in Senegalese people and how they fished. And they were—in one sense had a society where the fisherman was the highest of the society because he risked his life going out to sea to bring food back. The next one was the farmer and then at the bottom of the list was the comedian. So I always felt that Bill Cosby would have been honored by that. [Laughs.] Oh, take that off. [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I think he would think that was very funny. When you moved on, you were making works [by] painting on wire screens, as well as on a backing a couple of inches behind the wire screen. So you had two levels of paint plus the shadows that would be created. What prompted you to develop that technique—

JOE OVERSTREET: Looking into the sea. Looking out at the—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Oh, you were talking about that before.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, looking out into the water, feeling also—going back into space, looking a lot of things that I grew up wanting to understand in a sense like these shells and that one, you can see—you can see the shell—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You had been using this [screen material] since the mid-'70s, yet there was this intense focus on this when you were making the series which became Silver Screens in 2001.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So did you find that, the subject matter brought you to focus exclusively on this work?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you know, this series of paintings—

[Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

This series of paintings I tried to get with the series Silver Screen was the idea of my childhood in a way. I was

looking back at Mississippi.

[Phone rings.]

[Audio break.]

—Well, you know, here I have them all over. It's something we live with. We live with a lot of wire, a lot of screen wire to keep flies out, keep out mosquitoes. And I thought that that would be something that I would enjoy painting on because you can see through it. And I think that that's true of it, you know?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You can see how difficult it is to photograph your work because when I'm sitting in [right] front of one of these paintings, looking at it the way a camera look at it, you can't see the layers at all.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, well, they are difficult—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: It looks like a flat—

JOE OVERSTREET: We have somebody who photographed them very well, didn't we?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Barboza. Anthony Barboza did a pretty good job.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, he did a good job of photographing them.

CORRINE JENNINGS: He used—

JOE OVERSTREET: He brought a camera in—

CORRINE JENNINGS: He used film and then we had to transfer it to digital.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Uh-huh. [Affirmative.]

JOE OVERSTREET: That one there, that one I like a great deal. It's one of my last paintings, not the last one, but —

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What is the title of the painting you were pointing to?

JOE OVERSTREET: That one over there, I don't really have a title for it as much as—these last paintings, they are collages and I started with them because I felt, again, the collages would allow me to move in another depth, to take it to another dimension by making—putting collages on top of collages. But I was using—I enjoyed using the beauty of the flowers with them and then I was told I couldn't do that anymore because of my bladder cancer, so now I have to find—substitute something else to find.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: What can't you do because of that?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, because of the spray. It's very—

CORRINE JENNINGS: It's the—yeah, his—and also the aluminum.

JOE OVERSTREET: See, I use a lot of metal.

CORRINE JENNINGS: This is an aluminum collage and he made aluminum stretchers and—

JOE OVERSTREET: I have a shop downstairs that I make a lot of these things with and then I use a lot of different materials with them. But I enjoyed making them. I had to move on though—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] You said you're not sure what it's—what the title is. What is your process for titling work?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, the process—usually the title comes out of the picture and then when I—I could call it bladder cancer and that would be the closest thing. Like I call this my heart attack. [Laughs.]

CORRINE JENNINGS: So far.

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: So far it hasn't translated.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, usually when I look at the pictures, they tell me who they are. And I think that that's

what I enjoy looking at. I set up a goal before that I have something to do with what they're telling me when I get through with the title. It's sort of strange. When I would look at Aunt Jemima with a machine gun and called her *The New Jemima* because she had made a new sense of the old idea of how to really cook pancakes.

But I go all the way back to things like that to see how to get the—[inaudible]—of my idea of a*Black Star Line*, we would have a ripped sail. And these are the things that entitles these pictures for me. It's difficult to set up a title before the picture. You know, I'm not the kind of a painter that illustrates. I can't believe in what I do is illustration.

I search for—in my paintings, I search for a space that gives me a sense of emotional satisfaction. It gives me a sense of fulfillment in a way where I think that I've said something that's important in the way that I feel. And by feeling something, I think that I have reached somebody else—not necessarily so, but I believe that. I believe in my sensibility of finding something's that relevant, I reach you.

And maybe that's the one thing I work for. The rules and the regulations—I'm an abstract painter, you know, I mean -- I don't know anything about that. Or setting up propositions to make something work—I don't know anything about that. My feeling about how my work should be, I don't know anything about that.

I think that a process—I'll take a process of painting. I start with many, many layers of ideas. I first go out there and I try to get some wax, melt it so I can put some linseed oil, dammar varnish and turpentine in it so I can reduce it to the point where I can mix color with it. And the color won't be too shiny or too dark and it will dry properly.

After I get through with that, I get—I lay something out where I can work from. I know I'm clear and clean and the table I'm working on. I can put a piece of plastic down and I can put my—if I'm working on the wire, I can put it down and I put the paper on and I know what's going to happen with the paper when I put some hot wax on it and I put the paint on it.

I start building from that process. I start to think in terms of how I'm going to use this next step because I have a feeling about where I'm going—not that I'm there. I have a feeling of how I'm going to get there and through a process I'm going to get there with a collage, with a spray. I'm going to get there with understanding and perspective. I'm going to lay out my design on the canvas. I'm working with a considerable amount of discipline. I'm working with Fibonacci numbers. I'm working with Gorlin squares. I'm working with Pythagoras concepts.

So I have all these things that I'm working with that already I know where I'm going to where I'm going to end, how I'm going to end my painting. Now, I'm telling you how I paint. And I don't know if I get in each painting, if I get a complete painting. But then I have color I have to work with.

So after I lay my color out, I start with—always start with dark and I work to light. Now, I believe that that's the way light works. I believe light comes forward and dark rescind. So I want to go back with—I mean, I start with black. I put Rust-Oleum on the wire. And then I come forward with light. But I can always follow the light forward and then I can see the depth from the light.

It's like here. I can look at this and I can go back because I go back beyond this light to the dark and I can see how to come forward. And then the color comes in. The color doesn't mean near about as much to me now as the light and dark because I think that light and dark is what shows me the way. And that's black and white in one sense, but in another sense, it's how I have to work, what I believe in to build to the color. Does that make sense?

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: At this point, what would you say your biggest challenge is to keep going in painting?

JOE OVERSTREET: Energy. Energy now is what I need. I need excitement and energy to keep going because I get tired fast because of my—I'm 77. I'll be 77 in two months. And I get tired. And I had a huge battle. I've had two—over the past five years, I have had a huge, huge battle. I had a triple bypass. And I cured myself of that I thought. Then I had a bladder cancer. That's a hard one because I had to have radiation and chemotherapy. And they both took energy and they required a lot from me.

So I think that because of what that took from me, stopped me from moving at a rate that I was normal with. I always felt like I had a lot of energy that I could go in and I could make—I mean, this size of canvasses were big and I enjoyed making them. You know, ones I made from—with the ropes, they were huge things. They were 12 feet, 14 feet. I enjoyed that because I enjoyed looking at things that would make sense to me and they were always—I had never worked with much detail in the sense where it was a huge volume.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: We were going to talk about your plans for your legacy, for caring for all these big paintings and your thinking about building a museum. Can you talk about that?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, I would think that—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: I know that's not just for your work, but—

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, well, I would think that I would like to see my paintings because I made them here. I have really never thought of selling them. I never looked at that as an option for me.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: You have the gallery across the street and you show your work, but more other artists' work. Is that because that's the ideal situation for you or did you become frustrated with finding a gallery to represent you in the way that you'd want to be represented and felt that, for practical reasons, you should just—

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you know what happened with that is that I had always had a gallery.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Your own space.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, my galleries were—I can have a gallery now I feel. And Ira *Spanierman* would like to show [me] in his gallery. I've shows in galleries. I've shown in museum shows. I've seen so many African-American and other artists who've never had an opportunity.

We got a chance to get that building across the street and to use the space for a gallery. They wanted us to put a damn nursing home in it and there was no way we wanted to do a nursing home. So we put a gallery in it downstairs. We came in here with the idea that we would build an institution and show artists' work. We've shown downstairs, Norman Lewis. We showed a lot of major artists—Edward Mitchell Bannister. We've shown—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: And this system is preferable. You said that galleries would have represented you, but you prefer not to do that.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I have—I'm too—at this stage in my development, I have to figure out how—what energy I have left. Anita Shapolsky would like to give me a show. I was just using Ira as one. George N'Namdi [G. R. N'Namdi Gallery, Detriot, MI] would like to give me a show. I have done one show there. A lot of galleries would like to see—I've shown with before in the past would like to have shown my work to see if they could sell it. My work is difficult to sell because of the idea that I will move on my own to a certain degree.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Because you don't say with the same subject matter—is that what you mean? The same image?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Because it keeps changing?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I think it does.

CORRINE JENNINGS: I think that you always said that after your mother died that you didn't care as much about finding or having a commercial gallery. Yeah, you always said that.

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, art is—I think that I was given, I was blessed. I believe I was blessed. And maybe I haven't been. I may have been cursed. But I believe that I was blessed. And I believe that I can do it myself.

David Hammonds is my damn nephew. And he—[Laughs]—

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: He's your nephew?

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah, by marriage. [. . . -Ed.]

My father was a mason. He worked. My mother, she wanted to be a writer. She worked though. I feel that's my background. That's my blood. My blood is to work. If you're down, you work to save, you work to eat, you work. You work and work. And I believe that. And the same way with here. And we're so upset with myself because I don't have the energy now to work as hard as I worked. I built this. I built all this. I put all this sheetrock up. I built this damn thing. Didn't I?

CORRINE JENNINGS: Mm-hmm. [Affirmative.] The whole building.

JOE OVERSTREET: That's what I'm talking about. And I kept painting. I did it because I had to do it to give myself a place in this world that I was responsible for. I don't think that you owe me or anyone owes me anything. I can't believe that. I don't want to sell my painting to you because you pity me or I don't want you to have my painting because you feel sorry for me or you've had nostalgia for me or because—or I remind you of something

out of your past. I don't want my paintings used that way. I enjoy people looking at them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: So if someone wants to come and buy one of your works, are you actually analyzing their intentions about why they want to buy it? Are you testing them?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you see, I actually prefer to sell you a Bannister to sell my work. I prefer to sell you a Norman Lewis. [Laughs.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Now, does this connect with the idea for the museum?

JOE OVERSTREET: No. No, the museum is something for the community.

CORRINE JENNINGS: For the future.

JOE OVERSTREET: Huh?

CORRINE JENNINGS: The future.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: For the future.

JOE OVERSTREET: Yeah. For the kids in the community to see—the New Museum don't make it for what I think that they need. I think Tenth Street—these Tenth Street galleries were very important to this community. I think that—I don't think that the museum on Sixth Street, the Ukrainian Museum make it for this community.

CORRINE JENNINGS: For all of it. Not for all of it.

JOE OVERSTREET: For all of us. I look around. I see when I go—you see, most of this stuff is about what I see when I go to it. I see these kids. I see them disturbed. I see them crazy. I see them not having any place to go. I see the black, Puerto Rican kids and white kids that just—nowhere to turn. And I think a museum would give them something and they would believe in what they see. I think that would help them.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you take time—

JOE OVERSTREET: I think it helped me. I think the damn Met helped a hell lot to me. So that's why—[Laughs].

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Do you still go spend time looking at galleries and museums?

JOE OVERSTREET: I go to the Met. I went to the Modern [The Museum of Modern Art] a few weeks ago. I go up and go to 57th Street. When I go to my doctor, they're close by.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Are there particular artists, younger artists—[inaudible, cross talk]—

JOE OVERSTREET: I went to the museum last week. What am I talking about? I went Sunday—Saturday.

CORRINE JENNINGS: To the New Museum?

JOE OVERSTREET: To the New Museum. I hated that show that was there. It was all about skin and it's just some old big sick stuff that I thought that these kids won't—don't need—it's just beyond comparison of what humanity is, I felt.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: How has the art world changed since you've lived here [and] your relationship to it?

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, I don't know if the art world has changed. I know a lot of its people have changed. [Laughs.] The way I saw the art world when I came to New York was different from the way I see it now.

The main thing I see, I see artists being pushed out of the city and I think that's a damn sin because I think that art had made the city in a lot of ways. It gave the city a lot of hope. And mainly me is what I'm talking about. It gave me a lot of hope, a lot of aspiration, a lot to look for and believe in life and believe in a thing. I don't want to sell out and leave because I can go somewhere and sit on my butt forever. I don't want to do that. I don't think that that's the way out. I don't think that—I think it's terrible that the city has backed itself into a corner, where art doesn't mean as much.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Why do you say that?

JOE OVERSTREET: I say that because I think that all the studios and artists moving to Brooklyn, to Long Island, to Connecticut, to New Jersey, to Pennsylvania. And I think that if you're going to have a city like New York City where everybody in the world comes to visit, to see Wall Street, and the magnificent art, and listen to the music. You have to have a place for them to make the art. That's what we try to do here. That's one of the reasons I'm

sitting here is because I needed a place to make the art. And we have 22 artists—maybe it's not 22 now. It's 20—22?

[Cross talk.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is there a sense of community among the artists in this building and with you? Is that why you have three dining room tables? [Laughs.]

JOE OVERSTREET: Well, you know, these artists in this building, they go and come. They live other places and they have their spaces. I'd like to show you some of their spaces if you'd like to see it because there's a couple good artists in here. And they don't have the space that I have because they didn't buy the building. They didn't have the foresight that I think I had to get all this stuff together when nobody would come over here. I had to come over here and fight all the junkies and fight the dogs and the rats away. I had to put up a big fight. I felt like doing it. And now I don't know—they beat me up. [They laugh.]

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about during this interview?

[Audio break.]

One last question: Do you want to describe your vision for the museum? We talked about it a little bit, but I don't know quite if you had the chance to talk about what you want it to be.

JOE OVERSTREET: What we're doing now—she and I and a couple more people. We're sitting here every week. I got this guy who we've got to start working—we going to have a couple of years to do this. I'd like to make a building with a name. See, the New Museum doesn't quite register with me. It's not new, in a way. The Museum of Modern Art doesn't quite register with me. It's not the modern art. I like the idea of the Metropolitan Museum because it takes the metropolitan city. Studio Museum, well, that's for studio students. I don't know. We have to find first something that would entice the kids to come here, to look.

I once thought, well, maybe we'll call it the Museum of the World's People. That would certainly get everybody here because they would feel comfortable, won't they? If they're the world's people. So everybody's got to have a title for it. And then I thought, well, would I get the world's people in here when I'm collecting mostly black artists? And the reason I collect mostly black artists is because they were available, they needed help and a lot of things.

One thing that art taught me more than anything is not to feel hostile toward other people because there is never any reason that art would be anything but beauty. There's no such thing as race in art. There's only good and bad art. Now, how do you project that? How can I project that? Not just because you're white and I'm sitting here, but because—how can I project the fact I think that everyone needs art? It hasn't anything to do anything other than humanity. And I think that that's what we have to find in our museum, our consciousness in our museum.

Now, this lady [Jennings] is very smart. You know, I was very fortunate for her to find me. She's very extremely smart. She speaks the language perfectly in a lot of ways. She does things that's humane to people. And this is not I'm just saying this because she's sitting here. But we have tried—she's tried very hard to help educate a lot of these kids in this community. They don't even know it.

You know, she taught in the SEEK [Search for Education, Elevation & Knowledge] program of Queens College for 30 years. She's got a—well, she has two Masters and is working on a Ph.D. Well, she could have gone into a different program. I always respect the fact that she stayed in the program where she could do the most good. We're sitting here in a community where we've got to do the most good for the people who need it.

Now, not to say anything other than most white kids can take off and go to the Museum of Modern Art and be identified to as what they see. The New Museum, the Ukrainian Museum. They can go there and see what they identify to as seeing. I got these kids walking around with their pants below their ass and they can't get them up and they're looking like, well, what the hell is going on? They got to be helped. They can't live this world in this way.

Now, I'm not following Barack Obama's nonsense. But I think he's all right. Excuse me. [Laughs.] She loves him. But I'm thinking about the reality. I'm not thinking about the government and I'm not thinking about where it comes from, but the reality of these kids have never been—we've been over here for 30 years. Some of them have never been outside this community. This is absurd.

I had this kid downstairs working now who yesterday he calls up and he said he couldn't come to work because he just woke up at three o'clock in the afternoon. This is absurd. These kids got to know more. They got to have oversight.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Well, hopefully the museum—

JOE OVERSTREET: And that's my complete story for this day. [They laugh.] They got to have help. If I can't give them help, then I—you know, at one point I dreamt of being a Basquiat-like artist who was selling his work for a lot of money. My work ain't that way. I don't make no clown shows for people to look at—"Oh, look at them eating watermelon." I'm not that kind of an artist. I'll never make that and I never wanted it after I found out who I was.

And I'm not trying to impress you. I'm just trying to say who I am. And my work is—what it does is it doesn't fit in that particular perspective where it can go—Museum of Modern Art ain't going to ever come down here and look at this stuff and say—[Laughs]—"I'll buy it." You know? I don't think that that's what my work is.

My work is about my setting all the big old paintings out here where they were made and trying to get somebody to come over to look at them and figure out how—and these kids can figure out how he made them, why he made them this way. And the rest of it. I think that's where it'd be best. People come in here and look at this and go, "These are nice." That's all right. They are nice.

You know? Do you get my drift? And I'm not arrogant. I'm grateful God blessed me, God gave me a home, gave me a beautiful studio and God gave me a wonderful wife and gave me a lot of property in a small, small place where there is not much property. So I'm blessed.

JUDITH O. RICHARDS: Thank you very much.

JOE OVERSTREET: Okay. [Laughs.]

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]