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Oral history interview with Renée Stout, 2019 June 5-6

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Transcript

Preface

The following oral history transcript is the result of a recorded interview with Renée Stout on June 5-6, 2019. The interview took place at the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and the Smithsonian's Latino Center in Washington D.C., and was conducted by Nyssa Chow for the Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution.

Reneé Stout has reviewed the transcript. 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

NYSSA CHOW: So, let's start with this. So, this is Nyssa Chow, and we are at the National Museum of American History in Washington, D.C. The date is June 5, 2019, and this is an interview for the Archives of American Art, and this is card number 1. So, if you don't mind, would you say your name and maybe where you were born and when—where—when you were born and where you're from?

RENÉE STOUT: My name is Renée Stout. I was born in Junction City, Kansas in 1958.

NYSSA CHOW: All right, thank you for that, and thank you for doing this. We can start anywhere you want. But maybe—maybe, we can start with the memory of the first house that you remember. Maybe, just start there to get us in that headspace.

RENÉE STOUT: The first house I really remember was a house on the north side of Pittsburgh on a street called Charles Street. And I can remember being like two and three there. And we lived with—it's my mother and father—lived with my father's mother and father. So, it was the five of us in the house. So, that's my earliest memory of a home.

NYSSA CHOW: Who's—who—can you tell me a little bit about the five people who were there?

RENÉE STOUT: Well, my grandmother, Beatrice Stout, and my grandfather, Lawrence Stout, Sr., my father, Lawrence Stout, Jr., and my mother, Sarah Stout, born Owens, they lived there like for a few years after they got married. And you know, and eventually, you know, time would pass, and they would get their own house. But that's the earliest home that I remember. Like I said, I was born in Junction City, and people assume when—you know, when—on a resume or, you know, when they ask where you were born, and you say a certain place, they always assume that you were raised in that place as well.

But I wasn't raised in Junction City. [00:02:02] We were only there because between the Korean and Vietnam War, there was a draft, and every American male had to serve for two years. And so, my father had to go to Fort Riley near Junction City. And so, that's where they had me because they were married at that time, and that's when they had me. So, I was only there for, like, the time he was in the army. So, I have no recollection of being in Junction City.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh.

RENÉE STOUT: So, yes, so Pittsburgh is, you know, my earliest memories of being a young child.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, tell me about Pittsburgh then.

RENÉE STOUT: Pittsburgh was an—it was an interesting city to grow up. At that time, when I was living there, the steel mills were like a good—you know, a—one of the primary sources of employment. So, so many people in the city worked in the steel mills. And so, I remember the city being very, like, smoggy, and there was this—always a sulfurish smell, like, in the air, especially the closer you got to the neighborhoods where the mills were located. So, that's one of my earliest memories of growing up in Pittsburgh.

But you know, as far as, like, you know, what I was doing there at that young age, not much, you know, just being a toddler, but I can remember—this is the funniest thing. I remember drawing that early because on Charles Street, they had these like—the steps would go up, and there'd be like a porch that wasn't very big. And it wasn't closed in or anything with—it's not like there was a railing around it. It was just a platform, and then you'd have the front door.

And so, I can remember being three years old, or two and three, sitting outside on the steps. And when the

schoolkids came out, they would pass the—our house. You know, and I don't know how old they were. That—you know, they seemed old to me, but they could've been like second grade or, you know, third grade or whatever. But they would see me out there drawing. And they would stop and say, draw this, draw that. [00:04:03] And so, I would sit there and draw what they told me to draw.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, wow.

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know what it looked like, but—

NYSSA CHOW: Oh.

RENÉE STOUT: So, those are my earliest memories of actually drawing, mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: But you weren't the only one drawing? You've come—you came from a family of—

RENÉE STOUT: My father—well, I didn't know it then. But you know, as I—as I got older, you know, my father would talk about being in high school and how much he loved art. And my father's occupation was—he was a hauler. He had trucks. He had several dump trucks, and he would—you know, people would contract him to haul things away, like, whether from a construction site. I remember at some point in time, the Board of Education wanted him to come and haul away old, you know, books, and equipment, and things like that because they were getting, you know, new inventory in. So, he was always bringing interesting things home for as long as I can remember, especially books. He would bring the books from the Board of Education, and you know, so I learned to read very early.

But my father would tell me about how he always wanted to be an artist, a—you know, a painter. And his—one of his classmates was the artist Raymond Saunders. So, there was the kind of little competition there the way my father states it, right? He says, you know, I should've showed him how it was done, you know, but [laughs]—but my father was discouraged from being an artist because my grandfather, having grown up—you know, he was born in 1910. And of course, he would've experienced extreme racism. You know, and he lived for a time in the South as he was being raised, but then they, you know, moved up to the Pittsburgh area. And he told my father, "Son, nobody's going to buy art done by a Black artist." So, that discouraged him.

So, then my father had dreams of being a lawyer. And once again, my grandfather said, "Son, nobody's going to want the services of a Black lawyer." And the most interesting thing is that the two things that me and my sister grew up to be were an artist. [00:06:02] And my sister's a judge.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: So, that was kind of—and you know, I don't know how subconscious it was—you know, how that influenced our choices. You know, when you think back on this, like, it's almost like, well, we'll be the things that you were discouraged from being.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. How did you understand—I mean so he said this to you—when did he say this to you?

RENÉE STOUT: My father?

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: I had to be in probably, I think—it wasn't junior high. It was earlier than that. I had to be around in sixth, seventh grade, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: How did you understand that at the time, or what were you seeing that made that make sense or not make sense to you?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, at that time, you know, when you try to get in the mind of, like, a 12-year-old, I don't think I was aware of racism and the impact that it had on generation before me, you know, or fully aware that it was even going on. I felt protected in my middle-class family. You know, so I wasn't really as exposed to it as—you know, at that early age in Pittsburgh. You know, I mean, there's—not like I grew up in the South where there might've been water fountains where you, you know—but I, I can remember an incident once when—and this doesn't necessarily speak to racism, but it speaks to the idea that you didn't see yourself reflected in certain kind of ways, you know, in general.

Like, I remember one time being about maybe four years old and some—a Black man was being interviewed on TV. And I ran and got my father, and I said, "Look, look," because for the first time, I saw a Black person on TV. So, those are the kind of things that I can remember from that time, but not necessarily direct confrontations with racist people at that time. However, you know, my mother and father would talk, and you know, you would hear of incidences that, you know, they may have said that, you know, it was an issue. [00:08:05] And—but it's

not, like, an issue I was involved with. It was something that they may've been experiencing.

NYSSA CHOW: So, in some ways, do you feel that there was small things, or maybe large things, direct things, or indirect ways that either your grandparents or your parents were preparing you for the life that they had on—they—the life as it existed then, for like racism and the world?

RENÉE STOUT: They definitely did. And I think one of the—like, I can't remember specific incidences where they were trying to help me understand and prepare me until I was probably in 11th grade, 11th and 12th grade. I remember my father saying, in this world, you have to be twice as good as a white person in order to make it. You can't be mediocre. You're going to have to be twice as good. And that stuck with me. So—

NYSSA CHOW: Did you do that?

RENÉE STOUT: I internalized it. You know, and I think it made—and then the—and that coupled with the idea that my father and my mother were seriously about education. It's like neither of them went to college, but they both graduated from high school. My mother graduated from Fifth Avenue High School in the Hill District, and my father graduated from Schenley High School, which was just down the street from the Hill District. It was more in Oakland, but it was a school that children in the Hill District went to. And so, they stressed education.

And what I found interesting—and like a lot of these things are things that once I got older, I reflected back on, and I could understand how it shaped me. I didn't think about it then, but I realize now how much it shaped my thinking. I remember my father and mother would always say, "And when you go to college—and when you go to college." Not if. It's like, when you go to college—so that kind of thinking—you know, so when I got out of—out of high school, that was the natural thing for me to do because I—they had put it in my head that I was supposed to go to college. [00:10:05]

So, those kinds of things, they were shaping me to prepare me for society, you know, to do as well as I could to make it. And I remember all through school, I would get, like, pretty good report cards, like, for the most part, especially when I was young, all As and Bs, and mostly As. And I can remember coming home with report cards where, you know, there might be seven subjects or something like that, and I might get six As and one B. And my father would look at the report card, and instead of saying this is a good report card, he'd go straight to the B and say, "Why is this a—why isn't this an A? You're not applying yourself."

You know, so it was that kind of hard sort of, I guess, tough love in a way before they defined that as tough love, but it's like—but what happens is it kind of makes you a perfectionist to the point where you're afraid to fail or make a mistake. So, you know, it was a double-edged sword in a way. It's kind of—you know, it helped me to try harder, but it also—it's like—you know, it makes you, like, nothing's good enough, nothing's good enough, you know? So, you're always trying to make it better.

NYSSA CHOW: Did you always know that that tension was there, that perfection versus—that perfection?

RENÉE STOUT: I did in a—in a way. I didn't—you know, as a child, you don't know how to define what the feeling is, but you just—you know, it's especially coming from my father, not so much my mother. You know, my mother was a little bit more, you know, a little nurturing and a little—you know, a little bit more—and—but my father could be that way in that, you know, he wanted to make sure you were doing what you needed to do, what you were supposed to do. But I could feel that.

NYSSA CHOW: I think you—I'm wondering, is—was the way that you—the standards you were raised, the emphasis on education, and if you were to zoom out and look at the other kids in your neighborhood, the world that you were in, were you—was that normal, ordinary? [00:12:05] Was that outside of what everyone else around you was doing, or was that—that's the way the world was right then?

RENÉE STOUT: I—well, early on, when I was in grade school, they identified back then in the Pittsburgh public school system kids that they felt were probably going to end up going to college, and they developed a program called the Scholar's Program. So, when you were in, I would say about, sixth grade, they, you know, would speak to your parents and ask their—you know, tell your parents that you were probably a candidate for this Scholar's Program. And both me and my sister were.

And so, I think early on, we were placed in classes with other kids who were basically just like we were with our parents probably did stress education. And so, it was reflected in their performance. So, I was in Pittsburgh Public School's Scholar's Program from seventh grade to 12th grade.

NYSSA CHOW: So, the teachers were supportive and there, the teachers—the school—

RENÉE STOUT: The teachers were pretty supportive. Yeah, for the most part, they were. You know, every once in a while, you know, there would be a strange teacher that, you know, wasn't really a great teacher in

hindsight. You know, like, I can specifically remember having to take chemistry and hating it because the teacher, she couldn't have been that old when I think back. She might've been 40 years old, but she seemed so much older. And she had deforming arthritis in her fingers, and I could tell she could—she could barely hold the chalk to write on the board. And she was very impatient. You know, and I don't know how much her illness affected her ability to teach. But she wasn't very good at answering questions.

And I can remember being in that class, and I think that was around 10th grade, and not feeling like I could connect with the woman or understand what was going on. [00:14:01] And she wasn't forthcoming when you went to, you know, try to get her to be specific. And you know—and back then, they had classrooms that were kind of—you know, you had a lot of kids in the class. So, to get that kind of individual attention, you didn't really get it even though it was a scholar's class that I was in. So, I remember flipping over any paperwork we had, staring out the window, and drawing on it. So, I failed the class, and then I had to make it up in summer school, and I got a B in it. So, that was the first time I'd ever failed a class.

You know, so—but for the most part, we had really good teachers. And I can remember some of them to this day, even one that I had for—I had for English in, I think it was, ninth grade. His name was John Tarka, and we used to have to—you know, he would put all these vocabulary words, and we'd have to, you know, memorize the words and their meaning. And I found it kind of interesting. You know, it was a lot of work.

But what I realized as I got older and really started to write—you know, and part of me wants to be a writer as well—my vocabulary comes from reading a lot but also the fact that that teacher was really—you know, he made it fun to learn words, you know, and to do vocabulary, and that kind of thing. And so, I ended up writing him a letter, like, maybe about 10 years ago trying to track him down on the internet, and it turned out that he worked at the Board of Education then. And I emailed him is what I did, and I emailed him, and his colleague said that he'd been going through a really hard time at that period. And they even thanked me for writing him to tell him that he was one of my favorite teachers and that I owe a lot to my ability to write well from him.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow, that's amazing. Did you—did he reply? You should—

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah?

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, my God, yeah. He just thanked me and just thought that was the most amazing thing that I would remember something like that. [00:16:03]

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. Were they—were there other people who just immediately come to mind when you said, this is a person that I needed to meet to become who I am now?

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, God. It was—it was like him, there was another teacher that was also an English teacher that I had—oh, it was—I think it was—it wasn't English. It was—I can't remember what that class was called when you have to read—do a lot of reading of novels, like classics and things like that. What do you call that class? I can't remember.

NYSSA CHOW: [Inaudible] classics, but [laughs]—

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know, but her name was Linda Pogue, and she was a teacher that made it fun to have—you know to read certain things and—because the way we would dissect the stories and, you know, she would really explain a lot of things. And so, you know—I didn't really like reading as much when I was in high school. But I realized just in reflecting back on, you know, some of the times we did have to read and the enjoyment I got out of it, I started loving reading again. And so, I—now I just love reading everything.

And so, I think it was—a few teachers that I had were kind of—had an impact on me. You know, maybe, not as much back then, you don't realize how—what kind of impact they're having back then. You know, you're just in high school. You don't even want to do it. You know, you want to go hang out. But you know, when you—when you really look at what you're doing as an artist and you try to process how you got to that point and those things that influenced it, I can pinpoint certain teachers, certain people, certain books, you know, thinks like that.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, wow. Well, tell me the story of giving yourself permission to be an artist then since you—it started with them saying, no, don't do that, right?

RENÉE STOUT: It did because I can remember—like, all I ever did was draw. I mean that was just like second nature. It's what I did. You know, I was a homebody. I didn't hang out a whole lot. You know, sometimes, I would hang out with my high school friends. [00:18:02] But I can remember just always wanting to draw. And my mother had a brother who was a self-taught artist. So, she understood the impulse to, you know, create. And so,

when she recognized—at the age of three, when I scribbled on the toes of my Buster Brown Mary Janes, instead of her getting upset about it, she was like, okay, this child wants to, you know, draw. So, she started supplying me with, you know, various things, you know, all—lots of it.

You know, and so because that came, I kept doing it. I just kept doing it, and just—it's always what I did, all the way through high school. So, I can remember high school art class being basically a free period because we had a teacher that—he was older, and I think he was tired. And he didn't really seem to care that we were doing anything in there. So, what would happen is, you know, the kids would go to the art class, and they're sitting around. He might put some supplies out, but there was no instruction. You know, it was just there. So, some of the kids didn't do anything. Most of them didn't do anything. They just kind of talked and hung out for that period.

But it was me and one other young man, who I can't remember his name, we were self-propelled to get the paper and then just draw. And people would set around us while we were doing it and talk to us, but we would draw. So, it was the same thing I was doing when I was the kid on steps, people coming by telling me to draw things, and I was doing that in high school as well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, yeah—so you were saying you were—there was a question you were asking me about—

NYSSA CHOW: The story of the—of your—yeah, how you gave yourself permission to say, okay, this is—

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, and so I think because it was something that I just loved doing, when I graduated from Carnegie-Mellon, I—well, at—being in the Scholar's Program, during that time, which was the '70s, there was a push to recruit African American or Black students into engineering. [00:20:04] And because I was in the Scholar's Program, I was a natural candidate for them to kind of, you know, pull into this —you know, this recruitment for engineering. And I get invited to be an assistant to the engineers down at U.S. Steel building.

So, for the first half of the day, at school, I would have classes. But then for the second half, after lunch, I would go down to U.S. Steel, where I would work with the engineers, and all I was doing was really printing blueprints for them, you know, in this big machine, and you know, sort of in the—mixed with—you know, and sort of cataloguing these blueprints, you know, and hearing these engineers talk back and forth. But what was interesting, it was mostly men. You know, so you get all the lewd jokes being passed around, and you know, just like a frat house really.

You know, but anyway, it was interesting to be in that setting, but it let me know that I didn't want to be in that setting. So, when I graduated from high school in 1976, and you know, I had applied for college and everything, applied for colleges, and my parents said—they assumed that I was applying for engineering. And they're like, "So what are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to be an artist." And it's like, oh, no. So, then what happened was my father, reflecting back on what his father had told him, thought that I was going to have a hard time. And he's like, "I don't know why you would do that. It's going to be hard for you to find a job."

And so, we—I remember us being in the dining room, not in that other house on the north side, we had since moved to East Liberty. And we were in another house, and this was my parent's home. And so, we were standing in the dining room, and my mother's like, "Well, you know, this is what she really wants to do. I think you—you know, we should let her do that. And if it doesn't work out, she can change her major." [00:22:00] You know, if it —so he said, "Yeah, I guess so. She's going to Carnegie-Mellon, so she'll probably find a husband."

And I remember thinking in my head, yeah, right. You know, and I think hearing him say that—I don't know—I can't even articulate what I felt at that point, but I think, and looking back on it now, there was something in me that said, I'm not going to rely on anybody. Nobody's going to have to support me or hold me up. I'm going to do what I'm going to do. It's going to be about me doing it, you know, and I think that made me driven to succeed on my own.

NYSSA CHOW: Where did that come from? Just to—

RENÉE STOUT: Where did that—from him?

NYSSA CHOW: From—well, where did that come from you?

RENÉE STOUT: Watching my parent's relationship, I think, was part of it. I looked at their relationship, which—I mean they were together—for the first 33 years of my life, they were married. And they got a divorce when I was about 30—no, about 30, they got a divorce. Thirty-three, they got married again, but they never lived together again. And I watched their relationship. They—in hindsight, they were not well matched. My father was an extrovert. My mother was an introvert. But it's more—it went beyond introversion. I think she's—she was

agoraphobic actually. And she worked outside the home, but I think she went to work, wanted to come home, did not want to deal with people, so she didn't socialize. All she wanted to do was stay home. The only places she ever went was to visit her mother, her sisters, only family. She just wouldn't go out.

My father, on the other hand, was a very social person, had friends and that kind of thing. And I think that was a source of tension, you know, because, you know, she wanted him home. You know, and he wasn't the kind of person that just—always just wanted to stay home. [00:24:00] And I think also it was about the money. You know, my mother had a steady job. She worked for the state—later, you know, but early, she had like other kinds of jobs like, you know, she worked at—she was a switchboard operator at one point at a state hospital. And then she just like moved up and got better jobs. You know, and so she ended up working for the state as a purchasing agent eventually. My father was self-employed because he had the hauling business. But he wasn't as disciplined as he needed to be to be a self-employed person. So, money was always the issue.

You know, so there were—there was a lot of tension about that. And I think being a young woman observing that, I'm like, this is not what I want for myself. You know, I don't want to depend on anybody. I don't—there was something in me that just wanted to just do what I needed to do and not be—no codependences, no [laughs] any of that. You know, and I think that that's what drove me to be just an—you know, an artist on my own.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative], and is your—where—measure the distance between yourself and your sister and how that—did you guys sort of take that same path together?

RENÉE STOUT: Two years, four months apart, we grew up very much like—people would joke that we were twins because, you know, like you have the same brain. We were so much alike. We were inseparable growing up. And so—and we were same height and everything. And we were both in scholar's program. And just people just—you know, they saw us as best friends because we were growing up. And she wasn't just my sister. She was my best friend.

And unlike some people, you know, like I don't want to hang with my younger sister, I didn't feel that way about her because I can remember my mother, when she would leave the house to go to work, she would say, you two take care of each other. So, it wasn't like she singled me out, you take care of her. So, we were that kind of unit. You know, and we were latchkey kids, so we had to let—you know, we came home for lunch, let ourselves in. Our lunchboxes were sitting on the table. [00:26:00] My mother had made us lunch. We'd eat, we'd go back to school. So, there was a kind of independence at an early age that we both had. Yeah, so your next question?

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, yeah.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, well, let's return to where we were when you were charting how you gave yourself permission to do—

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, I think standing in that dining room declaring that I was going to be an artist is where the permission probably came from. I think that's where it came from, you know, just declaring, this is what I want to do, mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And so, you started Carnegie-Mellon?

RENÉE STOUT: I started Carnegie-Mellon in 1980—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —no, not 1980. I graduated in—high school in '76, entered Carnegie-Mellon in the fall of 1976, and I graduated from Carnegie-Mellon in May of 1980.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative], so talk about those early years in Carnegie-Mellon start—studying art, this is what I'm going to do now, good-bye engineering?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I—it was hard because, you know, I went to a predominantly African American high school. There were some white kids in it of Polish descent because the school was situated down from the Hill District, which was a Black neighborhood, which is the neighborhood that August Wilson grew up in and where most of his plays were influenced by that neighborhood. I wasn't even supposed to be going to that school because I wasn't in that district, but I wanted to go to the school that my father went to.

So, they used my aunt's address for me to go to that school, me and my sister to go to that school. But it bordered on another community that had a large Polish population, so we had a lot of white children in there from Lawrenceville. They lived in the Lawrenceville area and Oakland area and, you know, some areas like that. But it was mostly a Black school. And so, going to Carnegie-Mellon was kind of a shock because I ended up being

the only Black person in my classes.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, so there was another young woman who was African American who was in my same year, but we'd never had any classes together. [00:28:07] So, for every class that I had, I was always the only Black person in it which was okay. You know, my mother and father—you know, I can remember them saying that their way of dealing with race in a sense was my father would say, "You don't hate anybody. I don't ever want to hear you use the word hate. You don't hate anybody or anything. Hate is a strong word." So, that sent the signal that they didn't have any, you know, prejudices against people.

You know, and I can remember my father—you know, there were other truck people that he worked with who were white males. And he would—you know, if he had some business with them, he would take me to ride in the truck to go see them. And, you know, they would relate to each other in a certain kind of way. So, you know, I was used to him, you know, dealing with white people and the way he—they dealt with each other. So, I didn't get the sense that there was—you know, this tension. So, I think that him saying you don't hate anybody, I—that translated that to I don't go out into the world hating anybody. You know, they didn't specifically pinpoint people and say, you stay away from these kinds of people. You stay away from—I didn't have any of that.

You know, so being in the class, it was weird in a way, but I can't say that I was uncomfortable. I think the thing that made me uncomfortable was the fact that coming from that arts school—that class in Schenley High School, where the art teacher did not teach art class and being thrown into this class in Carnegie-Mellon with students who had went to wonderful private schools where their art classes were probably like early college classes, you know, they could speak about art in a way that was just like—you know, I was very intimidated by it. [00:30:03] It was—it was just like, you know, how do they know all these things? You know, this—I wasn't exposed to this.

You know, and they were—they could expound on ideas about art. And so, I was—I became very kind of shy and, you know, not really wanting to speak out. And that very first day of class, I can remember standing in design 1 class. And so, these students—you know, the professor, you know, he's putting forms on a table and asking people to tell—you know, interpret it, what do they think?

So, people were going on and on and on. And I'm standing up against the wall with my arms folded like this, and I happened to look across the room, and there was a white boy standing up against the wall with his arms folded across saying nothing. And we're at the opposite ends of the room. And meanwhile, everybody else is kind of like in the middle of the room. So, this was the very first day of this design 1 class. So, when the class ended, the two of us looked at each other, went straight to each other in the middle of the room. And he said, did you understand any of that, and I said no.

[Laughs.] We introduced ourselves, and we were inseparable after that. And to this day, Fred Mershimer, my classmate, we talk on the phone all the time. Every other day, we're on the phone until 2:00 a.m. just—you know, and when I go to New York, that's who I stay with. And we've been friends ever since.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow, so you found a home in each other right there?

RENÉE STOUT: Yes, yes. And I think the two of us are probably what got each other through college in a certain kind of way, you know, that immediate understanding. And he came from a similar background, a working-class background. His father was in construction. His father was a real macho. His father was like, you know, just the same as my father in an interesting kind of way. [00:32:05] And—but he came from a conservative Republican background. So, it was interesting that my friend, having left that small town of Sharon, Pennsylvania and coming to Carnegie-Mellon and being exposed to different kinds of people, he grew.

And now he's, you know, not a conservative person at all. As a matter of fact, he's quite the opposite. He discovered in college that he was gay. You know, that was a, you know, hard thing for his family—you know, or his father, at least. His mother never knew because his mother passed away when we were in college. So, you know, she—he came out after she had passed away. But his father eventually made peace with that and—before he died. And so, you know—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But yeah, he's been a lifelong good friend.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: And he's also an artist, so—you know, and a practicing, you know, artist.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh, wow. I'm tempted to ask—you said we just understood each other

right away. I mean I'm tempted to ask, what did he just get about you and vice versa?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, he told me a funny story. He said that he looked over at me, the same way I looked over at him, and what—he used to like the image of James Dean. You know, when he was young, he was obsessed with James Dean and Bruce Springsteen. And he said when he looked over at me, there was something about my attitude that was so like James Dean, rebel, like you know, I'm not a part of this. And I think—he says he thinks that that's what it was.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Is that how you saw yourself at the time?

RENÉE STOUT: No. No, no, not at all. It's just that I think he—we were mirroring each other. You know, and the—sort of the fear of being placed in a—that we didn't really understand, and we felt like we were on the outside. [00:34:06] It was an instant recognition of that through the body language. The body language told him. That's why we kind of just instantly went into, you know, the middle of the room and introduced ourselves.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative], what were your artistic—what were your questions at that time?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, it was interesting because I think I didn't have questions so much as wanting to be exposed to art that I had not been exposed to before. And Carnegie-Mellon is right up the street from the Carnegie Museum. And also, we had our—you know, we had to have art history class. And so, being exposed to some art history, but was primary Western art history, like I can remember one of our first art history textbooks was Varieties of Visual Experience, that I have to this day. And I can remember only seeing two Black artists in it, and it was like Romer Bearden and Jacob Lawrence. And there were some women but not many. It was basically white male artists.

So, that was my early exposure to art history. It was white, male, Western art history, mm-hmm [affirmative]. But it still—you know, I was still curious. I just wanted to see art. You know, and you know, you didn't even realize that women or, you know, minorities weren't being included because that's what you'd always see in these things.

You know, as a child, my parents took me to the museum. You know, I had Saturday art classes. You know, when I was in fourth grade, the art teachers of the Pittsburgh public school system were asked to identify our young people that they felt would benefit from having Saturday art classes at the museum. And I was picked by my art teacher to go. And my father took me there every Saturday morning from fourth grade to ninth grade. I went every Saturday morning to Carnegie Museum, where we were instructed by a man named Joseph Fitzpatrick. [00:36:07] And it was a big lecture hall full of students from all over the city that had been recommended for this class. And Joseph Fitzpatrick was a retired art teacher who just happened to be my father's high school art teacher—

NYSSA CHOW: That's—wow.

RENÉE STOUT: —when he was in high school.

NYSSA CHOW: Small and big world.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, so Raymond Saunders also was taught by Joseph Fitzpatrick in high school because he and my father were in the same class.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow, mm-hmm [affirmative]. I read—I've heard you say before that you had an early encounter with a very important object around that time too. This is my prompt to you to bring this in.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, this is why I need you to prompt me because I'll forget those little details that are really important to, you know, the artist that I am now. Okay, so those Saturday art classes, so—

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: After the art classes, you know, of course, I'd wander around the museum a little bit, and then I'd—you know, my father knew he was supposed to come and pick me up at a certain time. And if he came too early, you know, there was this part of the museum I always wanted to go to in the natural history part of it that had, you know, objects from other cultures. Like, there were mummies from Egypt.

And I remember always wanting to go to see the mummies, and then there were these objects from the Congo. Like there were—there were the—but there were also like shrunken heads from South America. You know, and I always wanted to see these things over and over again. And my father, I can remember him saying, "But you see these things all the time." I'm like, "But I want to see it again." But you know, I was struck by this figure that I saw in one of the cases. And at that time, the—Carnegie Museum didn't have a good system for cataloguing artwork that was from other cultures. And so, in the case, it simply said "Fetish, Congo." [00:38:03] That's all it

really said, right? But I was fascinated by it.

And it was—you know, it was a tall figure, and it had nails driven into it. And it was almost scary looking, but I'm not easily frightened by stuff. And I remember staring at it all the time, and I remember like a little, white kid, said, "That's look like a voodoo doll." You know, I remember him saying that because he was staring into the case too. But that was burned in my memory. That figure was burned in my memory. So, that stayed with me for a long time, and I don't know why. You know, I didn't—I didn't really think about it because one of the other early images in art that I saw was—in that fourth grade—the same fourth grade teacher that had recommended me for the art classes, she had given us these textbooks in our art class.

And I remember leafing through, seeing all kinds of artwork. And I came to a picture of Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*, which is, you know, an iconic painting of his with three people sitting around a counter in a restaurant late at night. And then you have the guy behind the counter with his white hat on and his, you know, white shirt and everything that's serving them food or whatever. And the street is dark in the background. There are no lights in the buildings. The only thing that's lit is inside the diner. And there was such a sense of mystery about that scene and what was it all about. You know, why are these three people up this late at night? Why is there nothing happening on the street? You know, it just—so mysterious that it was burned in my memory. And it—actually, I can pinpoint that as the thing that made me really want to become a painter.

NYSSA CHOW: Can you say more? What about that made you want to become a painter?

RENÉE STOUT: Just the idea that he had captured this mood and this sense of mystery. But see, I couldn't speak of it in language like that back then. I just know that this painting was fascinating to me—fascinating to me. And I wanted to be a painter. So, when I went to Carnegie-Mellon, I chose painting as a major. [00:40:03] And I started doing paintings that were, you know, based on photographs I would take of certain street scenes in Pittsburgh and that kind of thing. And then later on, I got fascinated by the photorealists like Richard Estes, Ralph Goings, Robert Cottingham. So, I was looking at the photorealists as well, and I started gravitating towards that style at some point as well, which is pretty much what I was doing when I, you know, graduated from Carnegie-Mellon, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: And what came—so talk about the evolution from that—from that stage to another. What's the—what took you in another direction?

RENÉE STOUT: What was the bridge?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: When I graduated from Carnegie-Mellon, I continued to paint. And I was invited to join a group of African American women artists called Visions. And Visions consisted of some women, you know, from around Pittsburgh—I would—at the time, I was the youngest, you know, at like, what, 22—21, 22. And I can remember the oldest being like 80-something. And they formed a group because—and this is where, you know, you start to realize how racism has an impact. You know, when you're trying to get shows, you know, these women wanted to show. And their work, you know, they weren't being able to get shows. And so, they formed a group as a way to like power in numbers and to support each other, and you know, generate work, like, you know, make sure you keep working, keep working.

So, you know, we're going to make sure we have shows. So, they started to approach various galleries and university galleries. And together, we started having shows. And that's how I started to, you know, build my young resume. And I saw these women as mentors because they had been doing art for a long time. [00:42:00] You know, even though none of them were nationally known, you know, but they were locally known, and that helped me to sort of understand the discipline of being an artist and how you have to continue to work, you know, and how when you're ready for an exhibition, you have to have the work ready to show and ready to be hung properly.

You know, and I even began starting to take slides of my work. I got a camera and started, you know, taking—and so that's where I learned to start, you know, being—thinking like a professional artist, being with these women called Visions, who just recently, they had an exhibition. They have an exhibition up right now at the August Wilson Center in Pittsburgh and invited me to come back because they're doing a documentary on, you know, how long this group has been going. And they wanted me to be a part of it as one of the original members of it.

NYSSA CHOW: Well, actually, I realize —I think there may be even another turn. You said just a little while ago you know how it can be—and this is where racism comes into it. But when did you learn that?

RENÉE STOUT: I learned it basically as I was older and started to be more perceptive about the world around me. You know, when you're young, you're more about like just kind of discovering things, and you're just all over

the place. You're discovering yourself. But then when you start to, you know, look at the dynamics of things, I think I started to get kind of an inkling of it in Carnegie-Mellon really. You know, I had a—I had a professor named Douglas Pickering who I did not get along with at all. And I don't think he understood me, and I think there was a frustration in some ways when—on his part, I think, not being exposed to Black students as much. He didn't know how to relate to me. And I got a sense that, well, if I was a white person, you could probably relate. I think—there's something about me that is—I feel this tension, not being able to relate. And so, there was an incident where I did a painting.

[00:44:01] And it was funny because it looked like something Kerry James Marshall would make. But I—you know, there was no Kerry James Marshall at that point. You know, I didn't—I didn't know of him—he's—you know, who did know of him at that point? This was like really early on. So, I'd done this painting, and it was a self-portrait, but my face was black, like the color black. You know, and in my eyes—and I had these red lips. But it didn't look minstrel-y or anything like that. You know, it was just that my skin was totally black. And it was like colorful. And he liked the painting—he—Professor Pickering liked the painting. So, he leaves a note on my little worktable where the paints would sit, and it's like, I really like your watermelon painting [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: Oh my God.

RENÉE STOUT: But when I think back on it, I know he didn't really—that was not his intent, but it was that latent racism maybe that he, you know—

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, what was the intent? Imagine that distance from us 100 years from now. How do you understand the difference between intent and what was?

RENÉE STOUT: Well, I think what it was is he liked the painting, but that racist part of him that saw that Black skin, that's the imagery that he's seeing. That's what he's reverting to that. So, it was this weird kind of compliment that wasn't a compliment, but it was like this weird thing. So, I'm like, oh, okay. You know, I should've kept the note. But you know, I'm just—it's probably gotten lost. I don't where it is. But anyway—so that kind of thing sort of let me know that, okay, there's some weirdness here that, you know, people don't know how to deal with me because they're not used to seeing people like me at Carnegie-Mellon.

There was one older student that I had met in the art program. His name was Leonard Walton, and he was a senior when I came in as a freshman. And he really helped me to adjust as well. [00:46:02] He didn't end up being an artist. He ended up being—well, he—in a sense. He went more into graphic design. And he moved out to California, started working for Lawrence Livermore labs where he stayed forever. But he may've been, you know, one of the first students—you know, like very few Black students came through in arts at that point in time at Carnegie-Mellon. And you could feel that they were not used to having you there. They didn't know how to critique my work. They didn't know what to say about my work. They didn't know what to say to me. So, that's when I started getting that sense that, you know, they feel that something about me is different that they can't relate to.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you ever suspect that your dad might've been right when he told you —

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I didn't really think about that. I wasn't going to let that affect me. I just—no, hm-mm [negative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So you started out. You realized, okay, they don't know how to speak—talk about my work. That might've been a little bit lonely for a little while there.

RENÉE STOUT: It was—it was lonely in that, even in critiques, it was kind of hard, when you'd have a group critique. You know, and plus, me being the introvert, I'm not used—you know, was not used to speaking about my work. I didn't know how to articulate my ideas and what I was trying to convey. And a lot of my work was trying to—you paint about loneliness and certain things sometimes, you know, and communicate certain things. And I remember doing a piece that as a mixed-media piece at some point. And it was in Pickering's design class where there was a—I had a picture of myself, and then I drew bars—myself behind bars. And I don't know why I did that. You know, and Pickering looked at it, and he was disturbed by it. And he didn't know what to make of it.

You know, and much later, you know, I would talk to my father sometimes about certain things that were going on. [00:48:08] I said, "and I can't stand Pickering. I can't stand him because he does this, this, and this, and this." And my father said something interesting. He said, "he may pick on you because he feels like you have potential." And in hindsight, it may've been true. You know, so the very man that was saying the watermelon painting, you know, there was something that, you know, that I think that he did sense something [laughs]—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative], mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —just didn't know how to talk to me.

NYSSA CHOW: —what to do with that.

RENÉE STOUT: What to do with that, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So when is the first time—or maybe one of the first times you remember someone getting it?

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: Ah, you're waiting.

RENÉE STOUT: Well, here's the thing. People got it when I was doing the realistic paintings. People love that. You know, but the major change came when I—okay, about 1983, I remember discovering a book in a dusty, old bookstore down in Pittsburg's downtown. And it was a book on an artist named Joseph Cornell who used found objects and created these boxes with worlds going on inside and collages. And I bought the book because I was fascinated with the work. And then shortly after that, I used to go to California all the time to visit my cousins, every summer. You know, and I started doing that from the time I was 17. So, every year, I was going out to Sacramento, and then one of my cousins, when she got a little older, moved to LA.

So, I was going to both Sacramento and LA. We might drive down back and forth and everything, you know, for—then we'd come back home. I remember the next year, which was 1984, going to Los Angeles. [00:50:01] And at the time, the Olympics were in Los Angeles. And there was a dude that I kind of had a crush on—we had a crush on each other. And he had this old, black Cadillac, the kind with the fens on the back. And I persuaded him, because I'd seen the writeup about Betty Saar in the *Los Angeles Times*, and she was having this big exhibition at the LA County Museum of Art. And so, I said to Stanley, you know, "I really want to see this woman's work." And so, we got in the car, you know, and it was hot as I don't know what. You know, and we're driving in all this traffic trying to make it to this museum. And so, we get there, and I saw Betty Saar's work for the first time. That's where I had learned about her, in that *LA Times* article.

And so, I'm in this—it's not the museum itself. At that time, I don't know if they still had this building. They had—there was an old building in the back of the museum that was brick, and it was small. And it was like a little—rough, little warehouse. And it seemed like the perfect setting for her work. And it was very quiet in there. And so, we're walking around looking at all the pieces. And it was the first time that I had seen like a show of a professional, Black woman at a museum. And so, I really took that in. And so, the combination of seeing Betye Saar and then discovering that book with Joseph Cornell's work in it and then reading that Betye Saar had been influenced by Joseph Cornell—when she saw his work, she was fascinated. So, these two people, I think, early on made me realize that I didn't have to be a painter, that art could be made in a different way, like using found objects.

You know, so when I came back home, you know, I remember going to a conference. There was this group, and I don't know if they continue to have conferences, but they were called the National Conference of Artists. [00:52:04] And they were Black artists all over the country with different chapters in different cities would hold the conference in different cities every year. And one year, I remember—and it might've been between 1983 and '84—going to one of the conferences. And it was in Richmond, Virginia. And I heard several artists speak like Jeff Donaldson, Virginia Perry, who was an art historian, and Dana Chandler, Jr., who was an artist who was a—you know, a—what do they call it—activist artist. And I remember seeing his work because when the Black Panther, Fred Hampton, was killed, I remember seeing a painting by Dana Chandler.

And I don't know where I saw it, but with—the painting was called *Fred Hampton's Door*. And it was a door, and he had—bullet holes were in it. You know, it was a painting of a door, and it had bullet holes in it. And you know, that had an impact on seeing that art so that I associated that work with Dana. And I knew he was an artist who was very political. So, hearing him speak about his work was really interesting and the fact that he had started an African American artist and residency program on the campus of Northeastern University—they had given him space in a warehouse on Northeastern's campus—to house this, you know, residency for African American artists.

So, I found a way to contact him, and I had a friend who was another Visions member, you know, the—of the women of Visions in Pittsburg, named Jacqueline Jordan. And she became a good friend of mine even though she was 18 years my senior. And so, we were, you know, real good pals. And so, I told her, I said, you know what? What if we applied for a residency here? [00:54:00] Let's—you know, let's just write and see if we can get a residency. So, we wrote and sent out resumes and asked if we could come and stay for like six months to do, you know, a residency, and he said yes. So, in the fall of 1984, I went to—she and I drove up to Boston and stayed at that African American, you know, Master Artists and Residency program until like the spring of 1985. And I hated Boston. That is where racism really—

NYSSA CHOW: Really?

RENÉE STOUT: —was in your face—not so much in Pittsburgh at that point in time. Boston was it for me. You know, we would come out of the NuTrek Arts store loaded down with supplies, and cabs wouldn't stop. We were told by some of the Black artists in the community, you know, when we wanted to go to certain places, oh, you know, you're not going to be welcome there. Don't go there. There might be trouble. You know, and so we kind of didn't do too many things, you know, outside of where we felt comfortable going, and you know, wandering into other neighborhoods. And so—and it was really cold in the winter, so we pretty much stayed in the warehouse that we were in. And I made work, but at that point in time, I think the fact that I was staying in the studio and never really coming out that much for anything other than shopping for food and art supplies—I really started to become more introspective and did not want to paint the outside world. There was—I was not interested in going into Boston, painting anything. And I think that's when I really started to consider, you know, changing my approach to creating art. And that's when Joseph Cornell and Betye Saar, that influence of, you know, found objects, you know, making things that—you know, just like, more expressive of who you are and not just a reflection of, you know, this building over here that—what—who are you?

And I think that my work really started to change at that point where I really started to kind of not paint so much and then started doing more three-dimensional objects. [00:56:10] And in that time, also, starting to really think about African art and—you know, and that nkisi started to come, you know, back because it was mixed media as well. You know, and its constructed object with mixed media attached to it. So, all these things started to come back into my head. So, in '85, when I got back home from the residency, there was an incident with my father that—my father had been seeing a woman for a long time that lived around the corner. And the woman used to call the house and hang up.

And see, this is the part where it gets hard to tell this story, but it's important to tell this part because this was the thing that made me leave. I don't know if I would have ever left Pittsburgh if this didn't happen. I may've left later. I don't know. But this woman used to call our house all the time and hang up if one of us answered, if me, my sister, or my mother answered. And when I got back from Boston, for some reason, I had just had it. You know, so I'm in there, in the kitchen doing the dishes. My mother's at work. Phone rings, and this woman—I knew it was her, but I didn't know where she was calling from. And she hung up on me. And I don't know. It just broke.

I went, and I wrote a note, "If you call this house and hang up one more time, I'm going to throw a brick through your window." And I went up there and stuck it in her—I opened up the—you know how you have a door, and you have the screen door? And I put it in the screen door, and I went back down the street to my house. Well, couple of hours later, my father comes, and he says to me—now, see, how would he notice if he wasn't going up there? [00:58:04] He says to me, "Don't you,"—he says, "You are not going to put your hands on anybody. Don't you ever"—blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. And he draws back his hand like he's going to hit me. And I said to him, "Don't you ever think you're going to hit me." And his hand fell down.

And I—that was a strange moment. I have never defied my parents in that way, but I was standing up at that moment, like, no, I've had it. You know, and I said, "And I will go break that window. I will go do it." You know, and the way I was standing up to him, you know, he was saying stuff back to me, but he left the house. You know, and I had stood my ground, and I was still standing in that kitchen. And right then and there, I said to myself, This is not my house. It's his house. And I don't want to deal with this. It's time for me to go. And about a week later, I had packed up my stuff.

And I had a good friend that I had grown up with that had moved to DC like three years earlier, and I used to come and visit. And that's how I saw all the Smithsonian Museums. I was—you know, take a bus ride down, stay for the weekend, come back. And I called him. I said, "Can I come down there and stay with you until I find an apartment? " And he's like, "Yeah." And his grandmother happened to be driving down because she was visiting, you know, her daughter, and his grandmother lived down in DC too. So, she had come up, and he gave her my number. She called me. She's like, I'll take—you know, you can put it in my car, and we'll take it down. And she took me to his house, and that's how I moved to DC.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: So, that was 1985, August of 1985.

NYSSA CHOW: That kitchen is a place of power for you.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, yeah, it was. And it's just like—you know, but it was a time that made me angry because it made me feel that my father was standing up for somebody that was not my family over me. [01:00:05] You know, now he has since apologized for that. So, you know, that apology came so many years later, but it came. You know, so—but we can get to that another time, I guess.

NYSSA CHOW: Did that change your relationship with your mom too, that moment, deciding to leave?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I feel that my mother was kind of hurt by my leaving, but she didn't talk about it. My mother wasn't one to express feelings. I just told her I was leaving, and I think it hurt my sister as well because you remember, I was saying we were inseparable. I didn't discuss my leaving with anybody. I just said, "I'm going," and started packing my stuff and was gone a week later.

NYSSA CHOW: And so, she stayed? Your sister was still there?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative], yeah, because at that time, she was in Pitt Law School, and so she was studying to get her law degree. So, she couldn't go anywhere, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, and you know, and it's not like I ever thought to say, you know, "After you are done, you want to come to DC?" You know, I realize that there was not a lot of communication in a certain kind of way in our family about feelings. You know, they really weren't expressed. So, you—it was a lonely kind of you keep things in.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, so like you were saying at Carnegie-Mellon, was there—you know, I just learned to be by myself. I just learned to deal with things by myself, yeah. So, it's just what I did.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And then DC, mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, and then—and then DC, you know, my friend, he and I would hang out and, you know, go different places. And you know, he would let me take his car, and I would—I learned how to drive downtown to go to the museums and you know, go over to Georgetown, do a little shopping. So, eventually, I applied for—like, one of the first jobs I had here in DC was in a daycare center, not in DC, it was in Maryland because he lived in Maryland, you know, just over in Bladensburg, and—

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RENÉE STOUT: —there was a daycare center down the street, and I worked there for a while with three-year-old kids. That was my first time working, you know, in that kind of situation.

And then when I finally moved into DC, the circumstances were that one of Vision's members, so the women back in Pittsburgh, she had relatives who lived on U Street Northwest. And her cousin lived in Atlanta, but her mother lived on U Street with her brother, who had Down syndrome. And he was like a 40-some-year-old male with Down syndrome, and so he went to a vocational school in the day. But after the mother passed away, the daughter knew she was going to have to sell this house, but they didn't have anybody to watch—the, you know, Charles, who had Down syndrome.

And they didn't want to take him immediately from the home, because they thought it would upset him. So, they felt that if they could get somebody to stay in the house with him until they sold the house, it would be a kind of weaning away from, you know, all that he had known. He only knew his mother, you know? And his sister, and then his sister had moved away and then he was there with his mother. And then his mother passes away—they didn't want to yank him from the house, as well.

So, Ruth Richardson, who is one of the artists in Visions, knew that I was in DC and needed a place to live. And so, she called me up and she says, "You know, if you want another nine"—you know, I didn't know it was going to be nine months I would live there. She said, "If you want another place to stay temporarily—" She says, "My cousin needs somebody to stay and all you'd have to do—" She said, "You stay rent free." She said, "Just make him meals, you know, and keep him company."

So, that's what I did for nine months in this house. And they had a basement and I would make art down there. I would paint, and I would make things down there. And then, you know, Charles and I—I would pack his lunch for him when he went off to the vocational school. He'd make his own breakfast. I'd pack his lunch, and then I'd make him dinner.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Can I ask you, so at that point you're funding your own life. Were you—did you have to fund your own life all the way through college too, or was that a break point? [00:02:04]

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I—in college, I did get some grants and loans.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that's how I got through college, because my parents really couldn't pay for it. So, I got grants and loans. And so, when I got out, I did have a loan I had to pay. But back then, you know, it wasn't the crazy thing that it is now, you know, when you're in so much debt. You know, kids coming out with hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of debt. I can remember having to pay back $6,000 and I thought that was a lot, you know? And it took me a few years to do it, you know? So, but that's how I got through college. I did not, you know—yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: So, you're in DC, and you start working—you're working there and at the daycare, both places. At once.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Because—so, what happened was, when Charles would be at work, I stopped working at the daycare center when I moved away from my friend's house in Bladensburg. I got a job at a thrift store putting tags on clothes, okay? So, when Charles was at the vocational school, I was working up there. So, by the end of the day, you know, I could come home, and you know, and cook his dinner, right? And what was interesting is the thrift store was the perfect place for me to get found objects, you know? I could—because they would give you an employee discount.

And so, by now, I was making work using, you know, found objects and stuff like that. So, kind of, you know—and I, on purpose, I would get these kinds of jobs so that it didn't take my mind power, you know? If I had a job where I had to think hard, you know, I felt that I'd be exhausted. I wanted something that was just like, where I could think about the things I wanted to make all day. And I could just mindlessly, you know, put tags on clothes. So, that's what I did.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, and then eventually, when they sold that house, you know, I had to look for an apartment. I found an apartment. [00:04:01] And I found that working at the thrift store was kind of getting on my nerves only because, you know, when you're in situations like that, when people—when you're working with other people who really will never have another kind of job, and this is as good as it may get for them—then these tensions flare up, and there's, like, this weirdness, and this, like, this—you know, this—it's full of women, and they were like at each other, and you know, that wasn't me. I just wanted to do my work. And so, I told the owner of the store that I was leaving. And he begged me to stay. He said he would give me a raise. And I'm like, "No, I have to go. I have to leave here."

And so, I ended up moving up on Park Road Northwest and getting a job at a Montessori school. That's when I started working in their after-school program, you know? And it was a way better environment, because the kids were from really, you know, good backgrounds. Some were, like, kids of diplomats. And so—and it was like a, you know, an international kind of school, you know, where there's different kinds of kids. And a well-funded school, you know. They had everything they needed, you know, and I was working with some really good people, so it made it easier to go to work.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: I'm going to steal a moment from before, but you were mentioning to me off-tape what it meant—what working with children taught you about art.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Do you mind saying it again?

RENÉE STOUT: In both of those instances where I was working with children, they were, like, three-year-olds. They happened to be three- and four-year-olds. And at the Montessori school, especially, I found that I had a really good time creating art projects with the kids. And the way they would just, you know, I'd suggest something we're going to do, and they were so excited, you know. And so, I became one of them. [00:06:00] And we would, you know, we would make things, and we would draw, you know, and I loved their art. And just being around them for the four years I worked there—and I like to say, it took—

NYSSA CHOW: Years.

RENÉE STOUT: —the four years of working with them to undo the four years at Carnegie Mellon that made me such a tight, tight artist. I think that kids—their expression is so free at that age, you know. They're just so unspoiled. Now, once they start to get older, you know, that's when their creativity—worry about what something looks like, you know. They even will stop doing it, you know, if they don't feel like it's a certain way. But, you know, the freedom that they had to create, I think it opened my mind more. And I that's about when my art really started to take off, too.

And as a matter of fact, what I would do—the reason why I would pick a job like that is because the summer, I had off. So, when the summers came, I would save, like, I would save up enough money, you know, during the school year that I didn't have to find another job in the summer. I could just be in my apartment working on my artwork. And I started creating this work, you know. And it's like I would go to museums, like every Saturday. I just felt like I had immersed myself in work and doing the art. And meeting people, very nice people at the Montessori school, and that kind of thing. And I started to develop a body of work that really is what put me on the map.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Let's talk about that. What art are you thinking of?

RENÉE STOUT: Well, the art was all influenced by the Congo nkisi. They weren't fetish pieces, as they were called by Western, you know, people, who didn't really know what they were. They were called nkisi, I would find out. And so, I started developing a series of works that were, like, inspired by these Congo pieces. All these power objects that were used for spiritual reasons. [00:08:02]

And that body of work caught the attention, in, like, 1993, of Wyatt MacGaffey, who is a, you know, an Africanist. What they call an Africanist, who—they go do field work in Africa and study extensively, the cultures, you know, and try to understand everything about the culture and the pieces that are being—you know, the objects that are being produced. The philosophy behind them, the language of the culture. He saw my work—oh, and here's how he saw my work. I fast forwarded a little bit too far.

When I started to develop this body of work, this woman had befriended me. And she was the friend of another woman in Visions who had suggest that she meet me, since she lived in DC. Her name was Clarencetta Jelks. And Clarencetta decided that she may want to be my agent. You know, she never worked with an artist before, but she decided she wanted to be my agent.

Well, she had a friend who ran a gallery on Connecticut Avenue, named Marie Martin. So, Marie Martin has this gallery on Connecticut Avenue. And she asked if I wanted to have a two-person show with this other person one day. So, Clarencetta had kind of, you know, facilitated that.

And I ended up doing this body cast that I called *Fetish #2*. And I put plaster all over my body and did it piece by piece. And then I could do the front, but I had to have somebody help me do the back and certain things. And in the end, I had all these parts and then I put them all together into the shape of my body, painted it. And of course, it's an iconic piece in, you know, my life's body of work. So, I had that piece at Marie Martin's gallery.

Well, this woman named Regina Perry happened to come into the gallery and see the piece. [00:10:05] At that point in time, Regina Perry and three other curators were working on a show for the Dallas Museum of Art called *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse in African American Art.* They had already chosen all of the artists that they were going to have in this exhibition. And when she saw that, she went back to them. She says, "We have to add on another artist." And they took four of my works and included in that traveling exhibition, which was a groundbreaking exhibition. And it went to four venues, and I can't remember them all.

But I know it opened at the Dallas museum, and then it went to, I think, the Milwaukee Institute of Art, or whatever. It went to the High Museum in Atlanta. And there was—oh, and the Richmond Museum of Art. So, it went to, you know, all those places—Virginia Museum of Art, in Richmond.

And that's where Wyatt MacGaffey became familiar with my work. And so, in 1993, he approached the museum, the Smithsonian's Museum of African Art, and, you know, they talked about this idea of getting these nkisi from, like, Belgium and other places where they have an extensive collection of these Congo pieces. And juxtaposing my work with this, so that people could see this direct relationship between these ideas between an African

American artist and, you know, these Congo pieces. And how influenced I had been by them, and you know, after he talked to me, how much the understanding of what, you know, of these pieces that I had, just from an intuitive point. [00:12:04] And they liked the idea. And so they did the exhibition, which opened in 1993. And I was the first American to show in the Museum of African Art, because they only show African art. And so—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: What are—let's talk about that piece for a moment. So, let's see if I can formulate this question to mean what I mean. If that—let's see. So, if that piece, the *Fetish #2*, was the answer, what was the question you were asking?

RENÉE STOUT: What I felt that I was doing when I made that piece, in knowing what the nkisi were for—like, they have various purposes—but one of them is protection. Protection of the village, the society in which these pieces are created, you know. Some have judicial purposes. But what I realized or what I think I was thinking at the time, because back then I really wasn't really that good at, you know, really talking about the work or articulating it. Now I am. I'm much better at it now. But what I realize I was doing back then was saying, "Okay, I'm in a new environment. I'm by myself, basically. I have to fend for myself. If this is the way my ancestors chose to create something that protected them, that's what I'm going to do. But I'm going to use my body as a, you know, the basis for this protection object." And so, I created—what it was, it was a life-sized nkisi that I felt I was doing for my own protection. And that's why I did it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Did you feel that that was understood at the time? Like how was—

RENÉE STOUT: It wasn't understood at the time. And it was interesting because people began to be afraid of my work. Now, you know, because they were dark pieces. [00:13:59] They were, you know—the same way they respond to those kinds of pieces in African art, you know. They responded to my work in that same way. And it was even interesting that there was a big controversy whenever they would have conferences on African art, and that would be—my piece would be shown. Because some of the African—like the Congo scholars, would say, you know, "How could she do this?"

"This is not"—you know—it's like, this, you know, "That is not done!" You know, it was like a female body, and it was like, you know—but it was almost like taking something that had been a tradition, and just sort of turning it on its head in an interesting kind of way that people were surprised about. So, I thought the controversy was kind of interesting. But they at least, in that world, understood what I was doing. In the world of the, you know, researchers on African Art understood the connections in what I was trying to do. However, the contemporary art world didn't understand it.

And so, some people liked the work, but even to this day, I think there's—it's hard for a gallery to gravitate towards my work because they don't fully understand it. And so, it's like, they don't know how to market it. You know, something that they can market—they'll gravitate—in this day of branding and marketing. It's like, they'd rather deal with somebody that has something that they can easily market and explain. You know? That it's not hard to get. And I think, you know, I have a tendency—my brain just works, works, works, works, works. And it's just like these layers and layers and layers of things. So, my art reflects the way I think. And it's like, so many layers whenever I create an artwork; it's working on, you know, there's so many layers. I think people, you know, they want the thing that they instantly can understand or recognize. They don't want to have to think too hard. So, it's always been hard for people to place my work. [00:16:01]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, we'll—let me ask this question, quick. So, you talked about how you knew that the Africanist scholars and people who were familiar with your tradition didn't understand, but how did you know that the contemporary art world didn't understand? What did you see? What did you hear? What was happening that made you—

RENÉE STOUT: The blank stares I would get when, you know, when they were looking at my work. And it's just like, "Well, what is it?" You know? And I'd start to explain. It's just like, they just—there's just like a shutting down of not, like—even the gallery that I show with now, I think they like my work enough to represent me, but I don't think if they were asked to really expound on what it's all about, they really could in a certain kind of way.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you care now? Did you care then?

RENÉE STOUT: I can't change that. I just have to do what I do. You know? I just, you know—there's—I'm not

going to compromise my vision or dumb it down for anything. I have a story I want to tell. Whether people get it or not—'cause you know, I always joke and say, "When I'm dead and gone, they'll look back at all my life's work." Some people don't even know some bodies of my work at all. There are bodies of my work that are hidden in places that collectors have that people really haven't seen, you know? Just—all kinds of things. And one day, if all those things come out, and they see that—you know, the way I've connected the dots with everything, it'll be like, "Oh!" [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: Oh boy, we have to talk about the whole narrative here today, though.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.] Yeah. So, it's like no, I can't lose sight of what it is that I'm trying to do, you know, just so somebody can understand.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know. Like, simply, there are people who do understand; there are people who do. I just wish more did, you know. Or had an open mind, or wanted to take the time to really, you know, think about it or research or whatever. [00:18:01]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Is there an audience that matters most?

RENÉE STOUT: No, no. I think—yes and no. I think, in general, humans, okay? But specifically, African Americans on some level. And the reason why I say that is because after having really looked at African art and African philosophy behind the art and objects that are created, and our history here in this country, I can no longer believe in Christianity.

And I think that especially now, with the way things are developing in this country and what Christians—what I've heard come out of so-called Christians' mouths—I feel like that as African Americans, if we continue to hold onto a religion where we're not welcome, I feel like we're going to continue to flounder on a certain level. And I think that if you start to look at your ancestors and, you know, kind of reclaim or reconsider, you know, that view of the world and the way everything fits together, you know, the way nature is important, you know, the way the balance of male and female energy is important, you know, I think that it would change us in such a way, and empower us in such a way that we could navigate this thing even better. You know?

But if you're going to believe in a religion that says "Women are less than," you know, or "Man has dominion over nature," you know, and you watch, you know, nature become, you know, people destroy nature and throw the balance of everything off. No, you know. A lot of African philosophies, you know, there are hundreds if not thousands of religions. [00:20:00] At the root of it, it's about a balance, you know, that nature—everything, you know, people have to fit in. Everything has to fit together for, you know, people to survive and things to work. And until we start to view the world in that way, I just think we're going to be lost.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I wonder if we can build a narrative around that, so that when people listen to it, they understand where you began with this idea and how you came to believe what you believe today.

RENÉE STOUT: How I began with that idea is—we'll start back in Pittsburgh again. And I guess this is going to be a thing that's sort of a spiral, because I don't think I can tell my story in a linear way, because something always triggers something else, and I have to go back again.

Well, in the Hill district, once again, where August Wilson grew up—so you know, him having written plays like that, how rich that environment had to be. And I was dating a boy—dude [laughs]—named David Hall, who lived on Perry Street. And we'd walk up and down the street, you know, hanging out and everything like that. Well, there was this woman that lived in the middle of the block. And these were row houses. And it was this old Black woman, and she'd wear these really long skirts, and her head—she had a scarf on her head. And she'd sit there on the steps and she'd stare at you as you'd walk by. If you spoke to her, she wouldn't say anything; she'd just look at you and just keep staring. Well, in her window was painted "Madame Ching" and it didn't say what it was, or you know, why that was—what is Madame Ching? So, I was always fascinated by that, and her, and looking at that house and seeing her on the stoop, and seeing this window with that painted in it. So, I asked my, you know, boyfriend about her. He says, "Oh, you know, everybody—nobody says anything to her. Don't pay attention to her." I'm like, "Okay."

So, maybe like months and months later, he called me up because he was an apprentice to a contractor, and he called me up at home and he said, "I was in Madame Ching's house today." [00:22:05] I said, "What did you see?" He said, "Well, there was a leak in there, and we had to go fix the leak, and you know, plaster, you know, the ceiling and everything like that." He said, "But she's got a lot of strange stuff in there."

I said, "Well, what did you see?" and you know, he wasn't very—he didn't know how to explain things very well.

And he's like, "There were jars with stuff in it. I couldn't tell what it was." He said, "Jars were everywhere." So, I'm like, "Okay." So, that didn't really tell me anything, right? Just that this was Madame Ching and she has a house full of jars with strange stuff in it. I'm like, "Okay." So, that image was in my mind, though.

Now, when I moved to Washington DC, I remember looking at the *Washington Post Magazine* one day. It's a little supplement to the *Washington Post*. There was a small article about a woman who had a spiritual supply store up on 14th Street Northwest called Cloverhorn. And the picture of her, they made it look mysterious. She was standing with these jars around her. And they made the light hit her face in a certain kind of way, where it made it look really mysterious. And I'm like, "I have to go there."

So, I found the shop. I went in. It was full of jars with stuff that I didn't know what was in it. Just, it was herbs. Herbs in jars. And so, I looked around. I bought a few things. And, you know, like, some graveyard—well, it was called graveyard dust. But it was like a saffron-colored powder, or like a turmeric-colored powder. It was a yellowish—I bought some of this power powder, and it was like green—like, a bright green. And I brought these things back home.

And for some strange reason, I started wanting to do research on, like, root workers, and herbalists. [00:24:05] So, I can't remember specifically what books I started reading first. But then I started to learn about how High John the Conqueror root, and all these things that are used in conjuring, okay? And I wanted to study root workers, and that idea that a lot of that root work has its seeds in African belief systems of charms and things that can do things, you know. You can create something to alter your circumstances.

That's what the nkisi were about—you know, altering a situation that's, you know—you're going through something. You know, you come to the nganga who was the African, or the Congo root worker. Okay? That was the equivalent. You know, and you'd tell them, you know, what was going on. And they would tell you, you know, to say something. They might even do a divination for you, where they're reading your—like doing Tarot cards, but they would toss out objects, and the way the objects would line up, they could tell you what was going on with you and what you may need to do to remedy this situation.

So, all these systems that, to me, pulled nature in, you know, and enabled you to empower yourself in a certain kind of way. I really started looking at that, and then started reading even more about the philosophy behind them, and really started to gravitate towards that.

Because when I was growing up, I did go to church sometimes. I wasn't forced to go to church. I would go to church with both of my grandmothers, my paternal grandmother and my maternal grandmother. One was Catholic, one was Baptist. And the churches were very different, you know. But it was interesting to have both of those experiences. So, when I got older, you know, I said to my father, I said, "You know, you never forced us to go to church. [00:26:00] Why didn't you?" He says, "Well, me and your mother were forced to go to church. We didn't like it. We felt like religion is something that you should be able to make your own choice about when you get older. So, we weren't going to force you to do that."

And as a result, you know, I didn't grow up indoctrinated in a certain kind of way. So, when I started to research, you know, these African religions, and Santeria, which, you know, is a mixture of Catholicism and, you know, Latin beliefs, and you know, African beliefs—I didn't feel like—that it was taboo. I didn't feel like that at all, you know? Like, "Oh, I'm afraid, that's devil's work." Like, you know, or that's—you know, how the way some Christian people will feel about certain things. I had none of that guilt about looking and researching, so I think I can thank my parents for that, as well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I think after really submerging myself in looking at Hoodoo traditions in the Southern United States, and Voodoo in Haiti, and Santeria in South America, and, you know, just making all these connections. And connecting the dots. I started to realize that I could relate to it. And I—it made me feel like a spiritual person, while I had not felt that way in—you know, when I was growing up, going to church. Church didn't—I didn't connect with anything, you know? My parents were spiritual in that they would talk about God. They would—they didn't define it for us, you know. You might do something—"God wouldn't want you to do that."

But they weren't religious people, you know—but they did—I did know that they believed in a higher power. I did know that. So, the fact that they allowed me to grow up and think about a higher power with an open mind, you know, it allowed me to become more expansive in my idea of what spirituality was. [00:28:05] So, even though I was looking at these, you know, African-based religious systems and other systems, I still was able to look at other cultures, as well. You know? Like, Asian religions and everything, and just try to see the similarities, you know, between world religions.

So, yeah. So, that's the way I think my spirituality developed. And as a result, I started getting really turned off about Christianity, you know. Because I don't like any religion that's, you know, "It's only this way. It's our way or

the highway." It's—you know, I interpreted that as a total kind of intolerance.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know. And to me, intolerance isn't spiritual.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, that's how I came to where I am.

NYSSA CHOW: Can you talk about the piece with your grandmother's altar and your altar? Can you talk about that piece and the oppositions there?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. You know that piece, okay.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: That show that I was in, it was called—oh God, let's see if we can—

NYSSA CHOW: Okay.

RENÉE STOUT: Can I sort of slide this here and sort of figure out when that was?

NYSSA CHOW: That's all right. [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: Okay, that would have been—[laughs]—okay, it would have been—

NYSSA CHOW: I have it, too. [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: You do have it?

NYSSA CHOW: We can both go through our—

[Sound of pages turning.]

RENÉE STOUT: Okay. Because I know it was around—

NYSSA CHOW: 1992.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay. I didn't know it was—

NYSSA CHOW: Is that right?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. It was called *Sights of Recollections: Four Altars and a Rap Opera.* And it was at the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, Massachusetts. And it was also a traveling exhibition.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, a curator—Oh, I can't remember who curated that show off the top of my head—decided that they wanted to do a show on altars. [00:30:01] And you know, back then I wasn't really creating what you would call altars. And I'm like, "Well, okay, what would I consider an altar?" Okay, I know the altars in the churches. But then, I realized a familiar altar to me was my grandmother's television, growing up.

So, I can remember going over to my maternal grandmother's house, and she was extremely religious. She went to church every Sunday. She would watch these tele-evangelists, you know, like, non-stop. So, you'd go over to her house and Pat Robertson would be on the television, which is a floor-model, you know, kind of wooden case thing. And on top, she would have family photographs of all of her grandchildren, and above that, there was a picture, like a chromolithograph of Jesus on one side, and Mary on the other, with a cross in the middle. And I realized that was an altar for her, you know. That was her power center, you know. She's getting her religious programs when she's not in church. She can sit on her couch and read her Bible and look at the TV. And you know, she can look at her grand—she's sitting across from this altar, looking at her grandchildren, looking at a picture of Mary and Jesus and the cross, you know. That was her altar.

So, I came up with the idea to say, "Okay, this is my first encounter with spirituality or religion." Let's say religion. And I'm looking at that from her eyes. But she's my grandmother, and so I'm of her, too, you know? And I decided that because I had discovered so much in really opening up my mind about spirituality, I created an altar to, like, world religions. Where you have bits and pieces from different cultures in this cabinet that I

created. And a lot of it—like, I had these two Voodoo flags hanging up, you know, I had all these other objects inside this cabinet. [00:32:02] And at the bottom of the cabinet, there were these two drawers.

And I, you know, I told the museum that I wanted viewers to be able to open the drawers and flip through things, and take things out and look at them, so I made it kind of interactive. But the interesting thing is that in the middle of the floor, between these two altars—because one altar was on one side of the wall, one altar was on the other, you know, on the opposite side, the gallery. The two chairs were together, but one was facing one way, and one was facing the other way. And the metaphor for me was that my grandmother is looking sort of backwards, in a way, you know. And stuck in that time of, you know, we're Christian and that's what we know. And me being the—another generation, was looking to another direction, you know, and in a weird way, I had to look back to look forward, in a sense. It was my looking back at what we were before slavery, you know, to be—to move to the future. So, it was, I was sort of playing with that, in a way. That idea of backwards and forwards looking, and—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And there's something of a disconnect very strongly emphasized there, too.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, that's why I did—the chairs were together on the same level with a little coffee table in the middle, but there was that disconnect in, you know, one's looking one way, and one's looking the other way. But I could still relate to her, that's why the chairs were together, you know, and not sort of back to—you know, like, one this way, one this way, but—you know, we're on the same plane, we're still, you know. And she was alive at the time when I did it, because I had to borrow those objects from her, you know.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh!

RENÉE STOUT: You know, the picture, the actual pictures that were hers.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, they were hers? Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. And the television was something that they found for me. [00:33:59] How did I find that television? I think the curators told me that they could find one of those. And what I had to do was write *The 700 Club*, and ask them if I could tape it on a loop, you know, a VHS, you know, cassette. And they said yes. So, I got the permission from *The 700 Club*. And this thing ran on an endless loop for eight hours of Pat Robertson on the television [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. And I can imagine how your grandmother might have felt about the things you were exploring and the stuff—what would have been on your altar, but were your parents, your sister, were they as—were they in the camp of people who were maybe hesitant to sort of go there, or were they completely like, you are—

RENÉE STOUT: Here's an incident that happened early on, when I realized my grandmother—in no way, could I ever show her my work after I stopped painting. I was doing an exhibition at the Pittsburgh Center for the Arts, which is in Shadyside, in Pittsburgh. And I did what I call—it was like a traveling root store, where I'd created this thing that looks like a case, and when you open it up, there are roots and jars of things, and you know, herbs and things like that. And I had a jar of chicken feet. And I set it on top.

So, my mother brought my grandmother to see this show. And my grandmother said to my mother, "If I had known she was going to have jars with chicken feet," and blah blah blah, "I wouldn't have gone there." So, of course, my feelings were hurt. But then I knew I could never show my grandmother any kind of work that dealt with African religions or, you know, Hoodoo, or that kind of thing. So, she never saw my work again after that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But your parents were—

RENÉE STOUT: My parents are so open minded. [00:35:59] Like, my mother, even though my mother hasn't really been exposed to a lot of different things, because she's such a homebody. Like I said, an introvert. You know, all she would do is go to work and come home. She doesn't really have a lot of exposure to things. But I could tell her about something. Like, I remember discussing with her, Erzulie, who is the Haitian goddess of love, beauty, and wealth. And why I liked the concept of this woman Erzulie, and you know, what the energy is. And she's just listening. And she may not even understand exactly what I'm saying, you know. But then the next time she came down to visit me, she had found this little brush with silver back, and a comb with a silver back, and a little, like, you know, dresser jar with a silver top. And she says, "Here. Erzulie might like these." So, it's like—

NYSSA CHOW: Still supporting you.

RENÉE STOUT: Still supporting, even if she doesn't understand.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. Maybe this is a good time to talk about Dorothy.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay, Dorothy. You know—

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: We have to go back again.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: We'll go back to that incident that happened in the kitchen of my house when I came back from Boston. That stand-off, or showdown, I had with my father.

When I moved to DC, I would say that for several years after leaving home, I was processing the idea of leaving my family, and the reasons I had to do it. And so, of course I started to look at—you know, examine their relationship, being away from it, you know. It's like, I could see it better being away from it. Because being in it was a big source of tension. I went back to journals and read some journals, and I could see every other day I had a headache. And I would say, "I have a headache." I'm like, "Oh, how could you have a headache?" And I think it was the tension that you're just living with and you don't realize what it's doing.

And I think that what I ended up doing was creating these characters. One was Dorothy, who was a seamstress and loved to sew, because my mother loved to sew. And the other one was Colonel Frank. And Colonel Frank was loosely based on, I think his name was William Sheppard. He was—are you familiar with him? In Howard University—no, no, it's not Howard. Is it Hampton? It might be Hampton University.

This William H. Sheppard was kind of an explorer and a scholar and a historian, and he traveled in the world. And he brought a lot of interesting things to Hampton. Objects from other cultures. And I remember reading about him and having a catalogue. So, I loosely based Colonel Frank on this William H. Sheppard. And because he mirrored my father in that he could go out into the world and relate to different kinds of people. So, you had this Dorothy, who, all she wanted to do was sew and stay home and wanted to keep him home. And I think it was my way of sort of, kind of, moving these characters around and trying to figure out how they related and to make them relate and to process my parents' relationship. So, I think that that's how that started.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Tell—100 years from now, tell us how did they relate? Dorothy and Colonel. Talk about—

RENÉE STOUT: To me, it's like I was trying to fix the relationship. So, they related better than my parents did. It's like, she would conjure. I created a conjuring table for her. And she would conjure to keep him home. So, it's almost like I'm trying to give my mother the tools to make it right. To make—you know. And—but, he never stopped travelling, you know. Even though she would try to conjure to keep him home. You know, but he would bring her wonderful things back from his travels. So, the relationship was more like, Okay, they're different. [00:40:00] And neither one is going to really change. But at least, you know, they can still kind of relate in a certain kind of way.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. I mean, I can keep going this way, because I have—I definitely want to talk about *Baby's First Gun* a lot.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: I don't know if this connects directly for you in this moment.

RENÉE STOUT: It doesn't, only because I skip a whole lot of stuff.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But we could talk about that. We could talk about that.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay.

RENÉE STOUT: Move to DC. So, it is related to my move to DC.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Being in Pittsburgh—Pittsburgh's not a political center in the way Washington DC is. So, when you move to DC, you know, you realize that you're in one of the most political cities in the world, one of the most powerful cities in the world. And so, I had never seen homelessness on the level that I saw when I moved, you know, when I first moved to DC.

Also, around that time, you figure there was like, a lot of drug activity. It was like the height of the crack epidemic. I eventually moved into an artists' building on O Street Northwest, which is right across from So Others Might Eat, which is a complex that feeds the homeless every day. They feed them breakfast and lunch. So, I am right across from this So Others Might Eat, in a neighborhood that is like, you know, sketchy, as they say. Shootings still occur there now. But anyway, I started looking at, you know, the way, the disparity in wealth, and you know, how there's poverty and wealth in the same city, you know. Homelessness right across from The White House and the park, right? And it's like, how do you live in one of the most wealthy countries, but yet this is what exists? [00:41:59]

So, around that time, I was dating a poet. [Laughs.] I might as well say his name. Because, you know, anybody who did research could find out who it was. But his name was Gary Lilley. And Gary Lilley had some other friends who were poets and we used to meet in my studio. And they would workshop their poetry. And then after we got done workshopping the poetry, they would come into my studio to see what I was working on. And they would give me their feedback. So, it was—and then we'd make dinner and have, you know, dinner. So, it was nice to be able to work with poets who were also very observant about what was going on around them. And their poetry, you know, spoke to issues that were going on.

So, I developed a series of pieces about, you know, like, violence and things that I saw happening in the neighborhood and in the city in general. And *Baby's First Gun* was one of those pieces that was in that body of work because, you know, when you look at it, like, in the Montessori school that I was in, they didn't get guns for kids to play—there were no toy guns, you know. Which is the difference between the other daycare center that I was in, where, you know, it was like a neighborhood daycare center. There were toy guns, you know.

And so, I thought about that, and I found a gun in a thrift store that was a metal cap gun—actual child's metal cap gun. But was interesting on the side, it said "ABC", like children's ABC on the side of the gun, like, you know, you're learning your ABCs. That was crazy. How surreal is that? Okay, here's a gun with ABC on the—like blocks would have on the side, you know, like, children's blocks. So, you're teaching a child, this is the child's first gun, right?

And so, I made that piece that was a box that was made out of pastel colors. [00:43:59] You know, they always—pretty pastel colors for children's, like, bedding, clothing, toys—so the box was made of pastel colors, and the gun was inside the box on a piece of yellow and white, like, mattress ticking. What they would—you'd see on a child's crib, maybe. And the gun was laying there. And it had an image of a little, you know, cut-out image of a little girl there.

And then I had a fortune cookie. I literally had a fortune cookie one day, and when I pulled the fortune out, it said, "Society prepares the crime, but the criminal commits it." So, basically, I made a correlation between the gun—showing children that guns are the things that you should have as a child. The society is preparing the crime. So, why are we surprised when people shoot people? So, the fortune cookie, is, you know, the fortune is inside the box. And on the outside of the box, in pink and blue, you know, there is a donkey on one side, and an elephant on the other. And they're having a kind of tug and war, you know? Because it's the Republicans and the Democrats.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I ask this question because to me, that piece seems that it's made at a point where you feel like, this is your home. DC, where we're sitting now, right? It was commentary on place. You started talking about, started to comment on body, right? You said turned inward. You're in Boston. You said, "Forget about this, I'm not going out there. I'm going to start looking at me. What is the body saying"—right?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And so, I thought that that was—those are two different—you made a home here now. Right?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: There is a—you describe your grandmother's—this vignette, which actually—a lot like Edward Hopper, right? This still life, it's a narrative.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: So, I don't want you to skip over the distance between Dorothy, your grandmother's living room, and finding DC as a home. [00:46:00] Did I miss something in the middle there? The journey between those two things—

RENÉE STOUT: There really isn't. You didn't really miss anything. Here—I could just string those two things together by saying that being in DC was a political awakening. And so, the root worker character, you know, she

was called Madame Ching. And in my mind, as young as I was, in my 30s, when I developed that alter ego, which was actually developed as a means to project a woman I wanted to be—that I was too shy, or introverted, to be. And I loved root workers. And I felt that they had power and knowledge, you know. Ancient wisdom. And that they were there for their community.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That's what was most important, that they were there for the community. And so, I projected a woman that I wished that I could be. And when I first thought of Madame Ching, I saw her in her 60s. You know, at thirty, I saw her in her 60s. I'm like, "Yeah, that's what I'm going to be when I get to 60. I'm going to say what I want to say. And I'm going to," you know, "I'll be fearless," and blah blah blah, right?

And so, she lasted for a while. But then, I realized when I turned forty, that I was really starting to come into myself. And so, a new alter ego developed. And I called her Fatima Mayfield. And the way I got that name was on that O Street, where I told you all this stuff was happening with the homeless, you know, place that they fed the homeless. There was a really nice woman in the apartment building across the street, and her name was Fatima. And she was just such a nice lady, you know. No money, very poor, you know, but very friendly, you know, and caring. So, I named the character after her. And the Ms. Mayfield was the woman who ran that first spiritual supply store that I read about in the *Washington Post.* Because I would constantly go buy roots and herbs. [00:48:02] And I wanted to pay homage to her because she was in the community and holding on to those old traditions.

So, I called the new alter-ego Fatima Mayfield. And she was, once again, a root worker, you know, a spiritualist, a seer, you know. But on top of that, she was very political, as well. So, that started to mesh those two things together: the spiritual and the political. Where this woman is basically, like, an activist in some ways. But she's also doing the work that she needs to do for the community. You know, being an adviser, a spiritual adviser, you know. People who don't have money or healthcare can come to her for, you know, the old remedies and the herbs that do work. Teas and things that they would need, and that kind of thing.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay. So, we definitely have to do this now. Just as we did before with the spiritual, can you tell me the story—what do I need to know to understand—you know, that move to this connection with community. And Fatima—where did that begin? You said, it was a spiritual—a political awakening in DC.

RENÉE STOUT: Just realizing that, you know, the powers that be are basically in it for themselves, and that, you know, it's all about them moving themselves forward or getting the people that they want to support—making sure that those communities have what they need, while other communities are neglected. And I saw that, you know.

It's like—and then of course, I'm a Democrat, you know. And I have issues with them too, but you know, when I looked at the Republicans and I saw patterns, you know, about, you know, the way the Republicans would mostly support people who were wealthy. You know, they were in it for them. And then, you know, Democrats might want to have more social programs, and then the Republicans are always trying to cut it, you know. [00:50:00] And so, it's like, how could you not want to help people? How can you see people on the street?

I am an Aquarian. And Aquarians are known to be humanitarians, you know? It's just—it's a trait that—you know, if you believe in any kind of astrology, Aquarians are the humanitarians of the Zodiac. So, it's in my nature to look at something like that and say, "This is wrong," you know. And to, you know, react to it and to feel powerless in some ways.

But then to say, "I can express what I feel through art, and put it out there." You know? And so, that's the empowerment that I felt in being an artist, that I can say these things through my art. I can address this issue through my art. And it can be shown, and people will come to see that, you know. And consider what I'm trying to convey in my work.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Paint this community for me. What were you seeing? What would be a scene?

RENÉE STOUT: What I was seeing on O Street, okay—picture a street with rowhouses up and down. In the middle, there is a building that used to be an old pharmaceutical factory, which had been turned by an artist into studios for artists. Some were live-in, and some weren't live-in. And I was in a live-in one. I eventually moved into this artists' building. And I had this big loft on the second floor that was like 2,000-plus square feet, probably about that big. And I had seven windows going—big windows—but I looked right over at SOME, So Others Might Eat. And I saw, you know, homeless people, drug-addicted people, standing in line to get their breakfast. And then, you know, because they might not want to go too far away before lunch, because they knew they'd be coming back, they would hang around on the street.

At both ends of the street, boys were dealing drugs. And when I first moved there, under the steps, like, in our building, there's this, like, these metal steps. And if you go under, you can go into the basement of the building. The boys were also hanging out right there. And so, when I first moved in, I went to the boys, and I said, "I'm going to move in here. And I know what you're doing, but I don't want to get killed in a drive-by shooting, you know, because of business that has nothing to do with me." I said, "So, you have that end of the block, and you have that end of the block. I don't want you to do this right here." They said, "Okay." And they never did—not while I was there, they never did. And as a matter of fact, those same boys [laughs]—if I came home in my truck late at night, they would stand there, and I could see them stand there making sure I got in that building.

One night, a strange man was coming up the street and I was going in. And the man started to approach me and come up the steps. And a couple of the boys had been walking by, and they stood there and waited until he stated his business. And I said, "No, I cannot help you." They waited until he went back down and left.

So, that's the kind of environment it was. I knew what they were doing, you know. But, as much as I didn't agree with what they were doing, I knew that I wasn't going to stop them. Nothing I said was going to stop them, you know. And a couple of them got killed while I was there. Ones that I would speak to every day. And I literally remember being in my studio one day and it was on a warm day, because I remember the windows were wide open. And I'm messing with something, I'm working on something. And all of a sudden, I hear six gunshots, and I jump up and immediately run to the window and see a boy on a bike pulling his hand back. He's speeding off. [00:54:00] He had shot somebody in a car that was parked on the street. So, that was—that was the environment, you know.

And then, one of the other ones that had gotten killed, I did a piece about him. And I remember it was, you know—and I had an opening down at the gallery that I was showing in at the time, called the David Adamson Gallery, down on Seventh Street—used to be down on Seventh Street. And so, I was going down to the gallery for something, and the boys were on the corner at the store hanging out.

And I said, "Why don't you all get in the back of the truck so you can see the piece that I did about Brock?" Who was one of the boys—you know, the boy that had gotten killed. And they were, like—they were afraid to leave the block. They were afraid to leave the block. One of them got in. And I took him down to the show, and he went through there and I showed him the piece about Brock. So, a few weeks later, when the show was over, one of the other boys came and said, "Can I see that picture that you did about Brock?" So, I said, "Come on to the studio." And so, he came in, and he saw it.

But they were fearful. It's like, they were afraid to come to the studio, they were afraid, you know, just to leave the block. That was their environment, that's what they were used to, and that's where they stayed.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Can you paint—just so we have—was that the same time you were working with the preschool, the young children?

RENÉE STOUT: No.

NYSSA CHOW: Not at the same time?

RENÉE STOUT: No. By then, what happened with the preschool, and the Montessori after-school program—in 1990, that same woman that I told you had suggested that I put the big figure piece in her friend Marie Martin's gallery—well, she was at Marie Martin's gallery one day. And this was around that same time. And a decorator came in with clients, looking for artwork. [00:56:02] Because he was doing their home, and then they wanted some artwork as well. And he saw one piece of mine in there, and he said, "Who did this?" And so, she said, "Oh, that's my friend Renée." He said, "I really like this." He said, "I'd like to meet her." And she said, "Oh, you should go meet her. You know, you would like her." So, she gave him my number.

So, one day, he called me. And he says, you know, "I met your friend Clarencetta, she suggested I come over and talk to you. I saw a piece; I really like your work and I just want to come over." At this time, I was living in an apartment on Fifteenth Street. Fifteenth and U Street Northwest. And he came over with a bottle of wine, and we sat and talked and talked and talked. And he said, "Can you give me some slides of your work?" He said, "I know some people who have galleries."

So, you know, I'm like, "Okay." So, I gave him, you know, a page of slides, I guess a page held about 18 slides. He went to a gallery that I had been in before, but I would have never approached that gallery, because it was one of the best galleries in DC. And I was intimidated, I didn't know how you approach a gallery like that.

Well, he went to this woman and showed her the slides. And she's like, "Who is she? I want to meet her." So, she asked him for my information. She came to my apartment. And she says, "I want to put you in a group show." And she said, "And eventually, maybe a one-person show." And she put me in a group show, and eventually I had a one-person show with her at her gallery.

So, what happened was, I was still working at the Montessori school when he had come to visit me. So, by the time this woman came to visit me, and she seemed interested in my work, I'm like, "Okay, what if I could make it as an artist?" But I didn't do it when the group show happened.

So, when she finally proposed a one-person show, I called my mother up. And I said to her, "I'm going to be doing a one-person show, but it's going to be hard for me to work and concentrate on making art." [00:58:02] I said, "I've saved some money." I said, "I'm thinking about not working for about six months to work on this show so I can get the work done." I said, "And maybe afterward I'll go find another job."

So, I said, "What do you think about that?" Because I was really afraid, you know. How do you go out, not having a job, and just work, you know? And she said to me, "Do you know anybody who is a full-time artist, and that's their job?" And I said, "Well, the only person I know is Raymond Saunders." Once again, you know, my father's classmate from high school. I said, "I don't know really anybody personally, but I know there are people who do it." And I said, "Some of them are famous." I said, "I don't know." And she's like, "What makes you think that you're not supposed to be one of those people?"

Now, that is not my mother, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Really, it's not?

RENÉE STOUT: No, no. My mother has to have a job, you know. She's a Taurus. She has to know where her money's coming from. And in hindsight, I believe that there—that she was a vessel for the universe, which is what I like to call—the universe—for making me go in the direction that I needed, to take the step without being fearful. Because it came from my mother, I felt secure enough to do it. But that is not her, you know? So, I'm like, "Yeah, why wouldn't I be one of those people?"

So, at the end of the schoolyear, I gave them my notice and I said that I wasn't coming back. It was the end of the schoolyear and I was going off for the summer, so I had all summer to do it, and into the fall to do the work.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that was my first one-person show. And that was, I think it was either 1990 or 1991. Do I have it on here?

NYSSA CHOW: I have '90.

RENÉE STOUT: I think I stopped at '91. [00:60:00] But it was about 1990, I think it was. Yeah, the end of 1990. And I never had another job after that.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. So, where would we go next? I don't want to take over again. Where would we go next?

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know. Is it break time?

NYSSA CHOW: Do you want to take a break?

RENÉE STOUT: Can we?

NYSSA CHOW: Sure. We're taking a break.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

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RENÉE STOUT: As I recall, I don't think that DC was necessarily my first political awakening. Although, it was a more mature political awakening in that, as an older young woman, I was able to process things that were going on in the issues and start to connect the dots better to understand—you know, get a better understanding of how the world worked.

But I have to take it back to Pittsburgh, because I can recall when Martin Luther King was killed. We had riots in both of the Black neighborhoods—the, you know, mostly Black neighborhoods in Pittsburgh. And one being Homewood, and the other one being the Hill District. And I can remember the Black Panthers being in the Hill District and you know, marching around the community and basically being like the security almost for the neighborhood.

And I remember driving through there one day on the way to an aunt's house because we would take this main drag through the Hill District coming from East Liberty. And it was called Center Avenue. And it would cut across town. And you could go downtown and go through—go across any one of the bridges that took you to one of the neighborhoods which were across the river, you know, where my aunts lived—one north side, one south side. But you had to go across the bridge to get to all of these neighborhoods.

But we were cutting through the Hill District. And I remember sitting in the backseat, and my mother watching a group of Black Panthers marching across in a line down Center Avenue. And she's like, "Look at them." And when she said it was such admiration that—you know, I realized that, you know, this was a positive force in the community after this turmoil that I'd witnessed on TV. You know, they would talk about the riots on TV, on the news at night, and that kind of thing. And you know, Martin Luther King having been killed and all that.

And so, I feel like that was one instance when I was aware of the racism that had created, you know, that turmoil in the community and the community unrest. [00:02:05] But also, I remember it was a time when Angela Davis was put in jail and put on trial. And she was, you know, in jail. And you know, there was a big campaign, you know, to free Angela Davis.

And I remember having like, maybe not an extensive understanding of the situation, but knowing this was wrong that this woman was being persecuted for something that she believed in. She was basically, you know, fighting for, you know, Black people and rights and things like that. So, they had these big 'Free Angela Davis' buttons. And I remember wearing one, you know, as a 14-year-old on my coat, and I wore it all the time.

And you know, I can remember standing outside the church in this green, what they call a middy coat with this 'Free Angela Davis' button. And then, you know, at the time, you know, I had like this really big Afro. And I remember my father saying, "That's what you look like. You look like her." You know?

And I think that my father really saw something in me. I think which sometimes is why he may have been so hard on me. Because I think he sensed early on that, you know, I was the type to be—rebellious doesn't sound like a good word because it implies something negative—but to stand up for something. And you know, my father being a father did not want to see a daughter have that kind of, you know, the assertiveness to—you know, it's like—you know, and at that time, you know, women are supposed to be, like, not passive, but you know, not really the kind of young woman he saw developing. You know? And just before I left Pittsburgh—and I've been journaling since I was like 17 years old, keeping a journal.

And so, I remember I had just recently graduated from college, and I started that thrift store job. [00:03:59] And he was making coffee in the morning. And I remember before I would ride off on my bike to the thrift store to work, I would sit in the kitchen and have coffee with him. And I was writing in my journal one morning. And he came in. And he looked over at me. He says, "You're always writing in those books. The authorities are going to use those against you one day." And I looked at him like, you know, "What is that supposed to mean?" You know?

But it's interesting because I do write my thoughts in the journal. And with all that's escalating right now, I can't predict how I will react with the way things are going. I—there's a soldier in me. There is definitely a soldier. And I feel like it might be that I also don't have children or people depending on me. So, I feel like I can risk sticking my neck out there. Whereas if I was a mother, I would be less likely to do that. So, there is that woman that's not afraid to stick my neck out.

And maybe I think he sensed that too. So, it was like he's trying to tell me, you know, "I don't know about you. Maybe you'd better not be incriminating yourself." [laughs] Who knows what that meant? You know, but I kind of interpret it that way.

NYSSA CHOW: Did you feel like being a mother made your mother not risk as much? Or that was just—that wasn't what she would have been anyway?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, my mother said one day that she always wanted to be an FBI agent. But you know, my mother is from a time when many women—you know, some women, you know, went on to do those things, but probably because of a lot of family encouragement. You know? But she didn't have that kind of encouragement and support growing up. You know, she had six children. They were from a poor family basically. And nobody went to college in that family. You know? [00:05:58] So, that's why her and my aunt, her older sister and the oldest of that six, really sort of pushed, you know, their children towards going to college.

Because, you know, they knew that we'd have better opportunities, and I think they had aspirations that they never could fulfill.

So, I think that she just accepted the fact that, as a woman she was supposed to be a wife and a mother. Even though she did work outside of the home because we needed the income, you know, her and my father both had to work. But I think she felt that that was her main job to raise her children.

NYSSA CHOW: So, those memories, Angela Davis, the Panthers, do you remember what conversations were going on across the generations in your home? Like between your parents and grandparents—

RENÉE STOUT: I don't remember them having any conversations about what was going on at all. You know? And if they did, I don't remember.

NYSSA CHOW: You didn't pick up.

RENÉE STOUT: I don't recall picking it up. Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, this—at 14, where did that pin come from?

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: I really don't know, you know, why I felt that I needed to wear that pin. And this is a woman that was fighting for something, and she had a cause. And that, you know, I wanted to show that I felt that I believed in her, and that she should be freed and that—and, you know, that kind of thing. But I don't know where I got the pin from.

NYSSA CHOW: So, today, the soldier in you, what are you responding to? What is today?

RENÉE STOUT: What I'm looking at is—you know, I'm a very intuitive, very perceptive—and I think I have to be all those things to be the artist that I am. But on top of that, you know, sometimes I'll kind of analyze myself, and I'll say, "Okay, why am I so sensitive?" And I think nothing of getting on the computer and starting to punch in words and then discovering there is a word for this particular mindset. [00:07:59]

I discovered that I'm what they call these days a highly sensitive person. And what happens is we can be affected by things that are beyond just our personal world. So, that would mean that if there was some injustice going on—even if it's in another country, if it's, you know, in another state, in another community, you know, we can take that on and really, you know, get distraught about not being able to do something about it. You know? And we can get overloaded with, you know, that kind of frustration. And it can be a source of—really, I won't say extreme depression or anything like that because I don't feel like I get depressed, not in the clinical sense of depression. But a little down at not being able to, you know, change circumstances.

When somebody like me knows that the answers can be very simple, you know, people treat other people the way they would want to be treated. Like you could alleviate most of this. But why do people have such a difficult time wrapping their brain around that idea? And why are some people thinking that they should be entitled to have more than somebody else?

So, when—okay, say 19—okay, already in the late '90s, I had already started, you know, looking really at the political things that were happening. And the work started to reflect those things that I was thinking about. But then at the same time, I felt a sense of since the civil rights movement. We may have been moving forward. You know, even though it's not as fast as I want it to be, we're still moving forward.

But what started to happen when 2015 hit, even before the 2016 election. I started getting this feeling, and I was telling my friends, "It's going to get worse." You know, there's some really crazy racist stuff. And my friends, especially the one that I went to college with, you know, who is white, who is male. He's kind of oblivious to what I would be saying as a sensitive person and understanding the subtleties. [00:10:01]

Like people don't understand when Black people are in a certain situation, there are a little microaggressions that we pick up on because we are used to dealing with it. We have to navigate it all the time. We acknowledge it. We keep on going. We don't let it stop us. But we see it. You know?

So, you—how do you communicate that to people who would never feel that? So, there'd be times, like I said, we'll talk on the phone late at night, and I might bring up an incident or I might say something. Well, of course his attitude is I'm being oversensitive, or "No, it's not like that." And I'm like, "Yes, it is." I said, "It's going to get worse." And so, I started doing this work in 2015 and I had a one-person show at Hemphill Fine Arts here in DC. And that's the gallery that represents me. And the name of that show was—I think it was called, *At the*

Crossroads.

And the reason why I called it that, when I would give— you know, when I give the talks in the gallery, I said, "This country is at a crossroads." I said, "We got some choices to make." I said, "And I'm afraid that they might not be the right ones." But of course, that's like going over people's heads because they had no idea. You know?

So, I had made these pieces that really spoke to this idea of what we could be losing as we move forward. And I did this one piece of all these pieces that look like—they look like radios, but they weren't real radios. I had constructed them, and they look like radios. And there were about seven of them maybe in this cluster that I joined together. So, in the radios, you know, a normal radio dial—I even created the dials, you know, with the frequency numbers and everything.

But in the frequency numbers, I would make a break, and it was a word inserted. So, that you could tune in to these numbers, but you can also touch on that one word. Each radio had one. And one was civility, tolerance, love, compassion. So, I had placed these words. And I said, you know, "We have to tune back into these kinds of things because society feels like it's falling apart to me. [00:12:04] And I'm trying to call attention to the fact that we're losing some of this, right?" Once again, people are like, "Okay. Mm-hmm [affirmative]."

Well, fast forward to the 2016 election. And in the past, you know, like for example, when Obama ran, you know, twice. So, I was staying up trying to watch the election results. And I would get sleepy. So, the first time, you know, when he ran in the—it was 2008, right? So, I went to bed and all of a sudden in the middle of the night I hear screaming and laughing and whistling. And you know, people sounded like overjoyed. DC was just screaming all at one time. And I realized that Obama had won.

So, I was like, wow, you know, so you got up with this feeling of hope. You know? And so, all through that first presidency, you know, I'm still feeling like, "Okay, we could be moving forward. We could be moving forward." Then he runs again, you know, in 2012. I got sleepy, couldn't stay up. Went to bed. Once again, DC erupts in joy. So, you know, I'm very happy about that. And you know, I still felt like we're moving forward.

Well, with the 2016 election, I was hoping that America was ready for a woman president. Not that Hillary was my favorite, but I felt like she would, you know, we'd still be in decent hands if she won. And you know, I would love to see a woman be president. So, couldn't stay up. Went to bed. And realized in the morning that I'm looking at daylight, and I had heard nothing in the middle of the night. And my heart sunk before I even turned on the TV.

And when I turned on the TV, I was just like—I was literally depressed. I was depressed. Because even before he was running—I have this good insight into people's character. And I knew how awful it could get. [00:14:00] I looked at him and knew what he would be. And I couldn't understand why other people would be saying, "Give him a chance." And I'm like, no, there's no chance. There is no chance. I see what he is.

And so, for about two weeks, I couldn't go outside. I could not go outside. And the reason why, like I would never come down in this area during that two-week period because I would look at these tourists. And the first thing I might think, "Are these people who we would now be calling the MAGAs?" Are they coming from some, you know, Iowa town? Did they vote for Trump? Did they vote for this monster? I don't want to be near them. I was terrified. I just did not want to even go outside.

So, I wouldn't even—I wouldn't even look at my *Huffington Post* page. I'd have to cover it up when I turned on the computer. Because the first thing that comes up, and I have to bypass that, go to Facebook, go to my email. I could not even look at headlines. That went on for a long time, you know, like months. And then finally, you know, when people started to really see what he was, and I realized that they did see what—they were starting to get an inkling of it. I'm like, "Okay, well, some people understand now. You know, so let me get plugged back into what's actually happening." And so, you know, I started, you know, following everything that's going on again. But you know, I saw it coming.

And so, after that show, the one where I was talking about being at a crossroads and realizing we'd made the wrong choice, then I did *When 6 is 9 in the Parallel Universe*. And *When 6 is 9*—and we'll talk about music. Because when I created my studio, it's important for me to listen to music. And I don't like any one particular kind of music. I like everything. So, it depends on what I feel like, and what mood I'm in when I get up, what I want to hear. But what I find that I like listening to sometimes is very socially and politically conscious music. Sometimes, I just need to have that. And Jimi Hendrix is one of my favorites.

So, I was listening to some Jimi Hendrix music while I was creating this *In the Parallel Universe* show. [00:16:03] And I looked up his lyrics to—his song was called "If 6 Was 9." And when I looked up the lyrics, it reflected everything that's kind of going on right now. He was pointing his finger at the corporate people being judgmental and wanting to control everything. And he wanted his freedom. He wanted to be who he was. You know? And I'm like, those lyrics speak to right now, you know, they're timeless, you know, as far as I'm

concerned, because, you know, they're still relevant. And he did those lyrics in the '60s. You know?

So, I thought about it. And he's saying, "if six was nine," and I—and so I decided to call the show *When 6 Is 9* because six has become nine. Everything is flipped and turned upside down. You know? What—the crazy people are running, you know, the asylum. It's just like our society has been just turned, flipped over on its head. And so, I thought that that was the perfect title to call it, *When 6 Is 9 in the Parallel Universe.*

And then the *In the Parallel Universe*, half of the title of the show was about me acknowledging what's going on. But at the same time saying, "Well, I'm free in my mind to create a world that takes me away from this." My body may be in it, but my mind doesn't have to be, you know, stuck here. That my creativity and the way my mind thinks can offer an escape to this. So, I wanted to show the viewer that I was creating escape plans. So, I was doing these drawings that are strange. They look like they could be maps. They could be, you know, points of, you know, where you could get to from one, you know, point A to point B. And I call those escape plans.

So, I'm setting up the narrative for you that I'm leaving this universe right here and going to another one that's more to my liking and, you know, more comfortable. So, I did a series of escape plans. Then I start to show you the guardians of this parallel universe that are the gatekeepers so that none of this can get through to contaminate that. [00:17:59] So, it was a whole lot of just kind of basically doing what a child would do with their imagination. You know? When they want to escape something, they just think a whole new world, you know. And that's what I was doing, you know, in this last one-person show.

NYSSA CHOW: I don't want to look my notes, so I'm just going to describe it to you. House, heart, fire—please talk about that one. [They laugh.] That one moved me a lot.

RENÉE STOUT: The funny thing about that one is, like I said, I was listening to Jimi Hendrix. And *Red House* is one of his songs. Right? So, you figure in all of this, I still live life. You know? And I have friendships, relationships, and whatever. And so, just in listening to him, I was transported back to a time in a relationship. And I'm like, "Oh my God, listen to him. He must've been in a real like, you know, heavy relationship when he made that one." And so—and been devastated.

So, I was listening to the lyrics. And they made me laugh. It's like, you know, "There's a red house over yonder. That's where my baby stays." Right? And then he said—he talks about going back to see his baby, but she's not there because he's been away from 99- and one-half days. Right? So, there's nobody there when he gets there.

So, I had actually made a smaller companion piece for that. And it was this house at night. And there was beautiful sky with these weird, beautiful objects floating in the sky. And this lush foliage around it. And you see the red house, but you don't really see how red it is. You see the window is bright and steamy. It's like steam is coming out the window. Right? So, that's when there was joy in the relationship. So, the red house, if you notice the background, is all forlorn and grey. It looks like a stormy sky. It looks like the house could be on fire. And that his heart is in the middle, and it is just bleeding all over the house. So, that's what the red is. If you notice, it was like real veiny and just like streams of almost like blood. [00:19:58] You know, just so empty and the, you know, there's a space around it's like forlorn and, you know, grey. And so, that's what that piece was about trying to—sometimes I like to capture, you know, a mood or a feeling. So, it was about trying to capture these two states of mind of this relationship.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There's a lot of grief in that show.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes. Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And I think that it's grief for, you know, trying to, in my way, interpret the song and listening to Jimi and paying homage to Jimi. But at the same time, there's grief in realizing that—you don't want to say it's hopeless. But the thing that hurts me to my heart is when—after Trump got elected, I was talking to my father on the phone. And he said, "You know, I never thought that I would see my children have to fight the same fight that I fought 50 years ago." And I realized, you know, it's just like he is 84 now. The last thing I want is for him to go out of here seeing this.

So, that's what frustrates me. It's not even about me. It's about my parents having to see this. And I don't want them to.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's wrong.

RENÉE STOUT: It's not right. You know, so I'm all right, but it makes me so angry. And that is what makes me the soldier. That right there. You know? Because they may have to go out seeing it, but I don't want to have to be saying the same thing to my nieces when they're my age, and I'm my father's age. I refuse.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, that's what that work is about.

NYSSA CHOW: I don't think people—not—I say people. Sometimes, it can be hard for people to even realize how deeply this feel is. [00:21:59] You know?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: How personal.

RENÉE STOUT: And it is personal because you look at us, and it's about somebody telling us that our personhood doesn't matter. And they—when you look at how they get angry because somebody says Black lives matter. Well, I try to break that down. Like why are they reacting in that certain way? And you know, they're hearing it differently than what is being—what's being said. The way it seems to me like they're interpreting it, is that we're thinking like them saying Black lives matter. You know? Because they think white lives matter. You know, white lives matter, and we're saying Black.

We're not saying your life doesn't matter. We're saying Black lives matter. They're not hearing it like that. You know? They're hearing that we're saying we matter, but it's not mutually exclusive. You know? It's not that we matter, and you don't. You know what I'm saying? They're just not hearing it right. So, they have this resistance, and you know, it's just frustrating to watch.

NYSSA CHOW: I wonder if you will let me ask you to do something. To put it on record for all time. I guess what is the nature of the grief you're grieving for your dad and your mom? It's a hard question, but I wonder what is it? What needs to be known?

RENÉE STOUT: Every generation, especially when you're—this is across the world though. But especially when you're African American and you know the history of our people in this country. You want each generation to know that all the hardships they went through were not in vain. And they made it better for the next generation. They fought for the next generation. And you want them to live to see the results of their hard work. And I don't want them to go out of here thinking that their hard work didn't matter. [00:24:02] You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What was the work you've been doing?

RENÉE STOUT: Oh.

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: Oh boy. Being the trickster. Being the duppie. You know? Being the—how can I say? I think every culture has a trickster in their mythology. And I love, you know, like when I look at West African mythology and spirituality, and how that translates to the diaspora through like Haiti. You know? And Caribbean and South America.

And there's this Elegua—Eshu Elegua is the trickster who's always at the crossroads, who's the guardian of the crossroads. And in some ways, you know, when I've had readings done, they tell me—you know, cause usually when you have a reading done by a Yoruba priestess or Apollo priestess. And these are, you know, religions based, you know, in Africa, in Nigeria, in areas in Congo. And they'll say to you, you have the energy of Ogun, which is the warrior, the iron, the, you know, the metal worker. Or they'll say you have Oshun, which is beauty and love and, you know, abundance and that kind of thing.

Well, every time I've ever had a reading done, they keep saying, "They're all around you." And—but I think in order for them to all be around me, I must primarily be Elegua the trickster, because he is the one that opens the door for them all to come in. So, I think I have this Elegua energy where I stir things up.

And I think my job as an artist is to look at the times we're in. [00:26:02] And not just kind of record what I'm seeing, but the possibilities for being something different. And so, that's what I think my work is. To say to—speaking primarily—once again, when you're talking about what is my community? What's the target of—you know, who is—do I want to see my work, my audience?

Everybody, of course, humanity. You know, I want people to look at my work and connect to my work on a human level. And a lot of people do. But at the same time, I live here. I'm African American. We are struggling in a certain kind of way—you know, spiritually and on, you know, many levels.

And to me, like I said earlier when we were in our discussion, I was saying that I think Christianity as it is now in this culture is not helping us. It's not helping us at all, I don't think. And I want to sort of put out there that maybe we need to redefine what spirituality is for us. Because you know, every culture has sort of a spiritual thing that helps ground you and helps you to sort of—even though things are not going well, you know, you can call on that, that inner strength that spirituality gives you.

And I think that we are calling on the wrong one for us. We're calling the wrong one. So, you know, we don't see

ourselves in it. You know? it's like it was something imposed, but we got used to it. But what about something else that we really see or something we created? Something that's of us, you know? So, that's what I think that my job is. It's to present that and let people think about that.

NYSSA CHOW: Is that the tension between—well, we can get back to that. But the Fatima and the Reverend, those pieces that kind of go hand in hand.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Because when I made those two characters, which was Fatima Mayfield, like I explained before, was the root worker, spiritualist, fortune teller. [00:28:05] You know, she's looking at the religions of our ancestors, and the spiritual beliefs and philosophy of our ancestors. And you know and that's how she navigates the world from that point of view.

And then she's looking at somebody like Reverend Beach. Who she feels is clueless as to how, in some ways—I mean, you know, when you look back at the history of Christianity. Not the history of Christianity, but, you know, the way slaves dealt with being Christian. And how during the civil rights movement, churches were the places that you know, you could really gather for strength. So, it served a purpose. It really did serve a purpose.

But I think at the same time, we should have never let go of our own belief systems. Because, you know, it's like when you talk about identity, other people come from other countries. And they hold on to some of their basic identity from where they came from. And they may be here now. And they may want to be American. But they're still at their core, you know, what they believed wasn't—they're not made to feel like it's bad or it's negative or it's, you know, of the devil or, you know, it's all those things.

Unlike us, you know, anything that we were, was made, you know, like it was a bad thing. And I don't—and I see how in some ways we've internalized that. And so, I think that that's what Fatima Mayfield represents. And Reverend Beach to her, to her, he has internalized all of that. And he is saying that our ancestors are bad, and she's trying to say, no, they're not. So, that's the tension that I've set up with that narrative.

NYSSA CHOW: Is that—before I lose it. Earlier you had said maybe—I think you said years from now they will understand what the work was trying to do. Is this where—is this what it was?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Because I think what's happening is that—you know, I read a lot. And you know I get up every morning and get on the internet. I love reading all kinds of stuff. [00:30:00]

And one of the things that has come up is that even young white Christian millennials are starting to leave that church. You know, their membership is falling off. And I think what's starting to happen is younger people are just questioning religion in general. You know? And I think once—you know, they want to keep pounding and pounding, "This is a Christian nation." No, it's not. It wasn't founded on that. As a matter of fact, you know, the so-called, you know, founding fathers were trying to get away from that, you know, of, of saying this is, you know, religion. And this is how we're going to govern ourselves through this religion.

So, I see that the country is moving away from that, which is probably the reason why they're digging their heels in now. You know? And I think that young people are going to start to have a more open view. And once that happens, I think my work seen in a different—you know, in a different time will probably finally make some sense.

NYSSA CHOW: What is the difference between spirituality and religion as you see it? Do you feel it? Is that the difference between the two different things?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, there's two. To me it's like—okay, so the way I like to kind of picture it, if you can—I'll draw with my hands.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay.

RENÉE STOUT: Let's say there's this room. It's a round room. And inside the room is spirituality. You know, just believing in a higher power. Not defined, you know, nothing specific, but that there is something greater than us.

We can say it's the universe or whatever you want to call that thing that we don't know. None of us can really define that. But around that round room, there are doorways, all these doorways. One could be Christianity, one can be Buddhism, one can be Voodoo, you know, Hinduism. So, there are these many doors to get into the room. Okay?

So, people have all these pathways to get into the room. [00:32:00] But what happens is they seem to get stuck in the doorway, and they never step into the room. Which to me is total understanding and tolerance and all the things that make human beings, you know, understand each other on a human level. Okay? So, if you're stuck in

the doorway, and you're stuck in the one way of seeing things, then it makes you intolerant to everything else going around it. And because these corridors are all separate. They remain separate if you're stuck in the door when you don't go through.

But when you step in the door and you realize that everybody's trying to achieve this way of just accepting that there's a higher power. Just feeling that and respecting other people's humanity. If you don't get to that room, you're stuck in the door. And we have what we have.

So, that's the way I see it. I think that spirituality is the ultimate understanding of what it is to be human and to feel like there's something greater than yourself, you know, and to be humble enough to feel that. Whereas religion is controlling and constricting. And so, to me, religion is just a system, but it's not spirituality. It's a system of supposedly getting to that point.

NYSSA CHOW: Sounds like a good way to link us into our new—another narrative about music and feeling. Those two things go hand in hand for you.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, yeah. You know, it's—like I said, every day when I get up, you know, I want to hear music when I'm creating. And it can be anything from classical music to rock, you know, hip hop, rap. It's everything, R&B, funk, you know. I grew up on funk. The—my earliest memories of music were walking with my mother and my aunts through my grandmother's neighborhood, which was called Hazelwood.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, you know, I'm going to ask you to describe that neighborhood. Right? [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: Okay. Hazelwood was one of the main neighborhoods where the mill was. [00:34:01] One of the mills was in—and so my grandmother lived on a street called Chatsworth. And if you went—we didn't even have to go down the hill. You could stand in her yard, look down in the valley, and see this huge smokestack that was the vent for the furnace that—where steel was being melted. And they had to vent the fire. So, there was this fire constantly coming out of the furnace. It was this huge fire that lit up the sky.

So, you know, it was raging in the day. And, you know, it never stopped because, you know, people worked all night long at the steel mill. The steel mill didn't shut down. And so, when it got nighttime, it was almost daylight looking because of this big furnace with this fire coming out of it. And so, that smell, that sulfur smell I was telling you about, was always in the air. And there was this black soot that always would get on everything. She had to dust constantly because she lived up the street from this mill.

My grandfather worked in the mill off and on, you know, during his whole life. But I remember sometimes my mother would say, "Okay, come on, jump in the car. we're going over to Gran." We called her Gran. "We're going over to Gran's." So, it'd be me and my sister, we'd get to Gran's house. My mother's other sisters were there, her children.

And what would be happening is in that paved, like, side yard, the men in the neighborhood who also worked in the mill would have musical instruments. And so, my grandfather would be, like, on guitar. There was somebody on drums. There was a younger dude that would be on the, like, bass. And they had this band, and it would be playing blues music into the night. You know? And then everybody would be dancing. So, I loved having that experience of actually watching my grandfather, you know, be part of this makeshift band of the neighborhood. You know?

And then when that wasn't going on, there was a radio station called WAMO. [00:36:02] And they had a man named Porky Chedwick who was a white guy that loved the blues. And so, Porky Chedwick would—you know, people's radios would be on. And you could hear it coming out the windows in the summertime. So, you could be walking down the street and just hear the radio going from house to house as you're going down the street. Right? And they would be playing like R&B and Blues music. So, I was always hearing music.

And then as I got older and started to really, you know, like music, and I had an allowance. You know? I would go to the record store and buy records that I wanted. You know? And there would be anybody from like, you know, like Marvin Gaye, you know. Who else? Temptations, you know, things like that. I was buying all these records. And had—you know, they bought me a record player for Christmas. So, of course I would listen to music.

So, I grew up listening to music. And I liked music so much that, you know, I really wanted to play, actually. Now mind you, I was always drawing still. So, I was drawing. So, I remember being in like, maybe, I would think around third grade. They had band at school, at my elementary school. And I saw a girl walking with a violin case. So, I wanted an instrument, 'cause you know, I like music. I wanted to learn how to play music.

So, I went to my father and I said, "Can I have a violin?" And he said, "Yeah, I'll get you a violin." But he never got it. So, instead of me saying, you know, keep bugging him about it. I didn't do that. I just said, "Oh well," you know, you—when you're young, you—especially in the way I grew up. I was very mindful that they were busy,

that they were working. Like maybe you forgot. You know, it's like, you know, maybe I shouldn't be nagging them about that. So, I never asked for it again. And I just channeled my creativity into the pencil and paper and the crayons and the paints and stuff my mother was buying me.

It wasn't until a family dinner—I think it was their anniversary or something. [00:37:58] And I was still—was I still in Pittsburgh? It may have been just before I left Pittsburgh. And I said, "Yeah, I remember when I was young, I really wanted to be a musician." Because we were having this conversation.

And we're all around the table. And I said, "But I asked daddy for a violin, and he didn't get it." And I looked over at my mother. She looked like she's getting ready to cry. She said, "But you never asked me." I said, "But I asked him, and I thought if he didn't get it then you know, that was a done deal." She was so hurt because I never asked. And she probably would've got it.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh. Please explain her hurt. Why do you think she was hurt?

RENÉE STOUT: Because anything that it took for me to be creative, she was going to get it. [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Oh.

RENÉE STOUT: Yep. So, she was feeling pretty bad that I didn't ask her. And to this day, I wish I would have, because I really do want to play music too. [Laughs.] So, I had that fantasy about, you know, being the drummer [laughs], the bassist. You know, it's like I would like to play anything, so.

NYSSA CHOW: Every step of the way, your mom, boy.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. As afraid as she was of the world, she wanted to provide me with the things that I needed to not be what she was.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. [Laughs.] Yeah. So, anyway.

NYSSA CHOW: Was it your grandparents on your mom's side or your dad's side who's playing the music?

RENÉE STOUT: My mom's side.

NYSSA CHOW: Mom's side.

RENÉE STOUT: But both of my grandfathers worked in the steel mills. That was the job you had. If you didn't have an education, you could make a very good living in Pittsburgh at that time in, you know, in the steel mills. And that's why it became sort of a depressed area after the steel mills shut down. And it also—what I noticed is, you know, during times of shortage of employment, that's when racism really comes out. [00:40:01] Back then, the reason why Pittsburgh seemed like such a decent place to grow up, there seemed to be plenty to go around. You had the steel mills. Anybody could work at the steel mills and make a decent living. So, you didn't have all these issues. You know? Even though it may have been there, you know, it just wasn't out front.

But then after the steel mills closed, I noticed that Pittsburgh started to get a little weird again. And now you hear in the news—you hear about—same way the police brutality is going on in everywhere else. There have been incidences like that happening there. You know? And also, even within the Black community, a lot of shootings and things like that. You know?

But when we were growing up, there were things to do. Like I remember I went to the skating rink. You know? That's one of the things I did every Saturday night. And then when I got older, I would go to the adult night at another skating rink two times a week. You know. So, I was doing a lot of skating growing up. And, you know, that's something that kids could do.

NYSSA CHOW: And was that a mixed space where everybody from all over would come is the skating rink?

RENÉE STOUT: No, not really because they were in the Black community. One skating rink was in the Black community in Homewood. And that was a Black owned skating rink. The other skating rink I started going to when I first started skating was called Bridgeville. And they had one night for Black people.

And I don't know if you ever had a chance to see—there's a documentary they have out now called "United Skates." Oh my God. It—I haven't seen the whole thing yet. I've read about it in the *New York Times*. And I know of it cause I was, you know, I heard when—cause if you're in the skating, you know, rink, you hear about these things that are developing in the skate world.

But they can illustrate how racism had an effect on skating and the skating rinks. And how they would create—like a white skating rink might have like a black night. [00:42:00] And you could go on that night. But they really tried to make it so you couldn't come on the other nights. That kind of thing.

So, what happened is, you know, the Black people would all come together and have this sort of community at the skating rink. You know? But they didn't feel free to try to come, you know, on any other night. So, it was kind of limited to that. And in some ways, it still is.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. Well you were—let's rejoin our journey with music as well. So—

RENÉE STOUT: Okay. So, the music—the skating rink was a good place to hear the music because the DJ had to be up on the best music. And that's how I started hearing Jimi Hendrix, you know, and, you know, rock music, you know. During that time, what's interesting about back then—which would have been the '70s, early seventies—there was a lot more crossover starting to happen in music. And right after the civil rights movement, what I noticed is that the culture started opening up more and more and more. And people were starting to mix a little more. That's when you started to get crossover. And you know, like WAMO, the Black radio station started playing like Edgar Winter, which was, you know, like rock—some rock music. And you know, playing various Elton John, you know, and the funkier Elton John songs.

And you started to hear different music, and people started to relate in a, you know, different way. It wasn't quite there, but you could feel that something was opening up. And what I think happened is the conservatives basically said—basically, that small percentage that runs this country and owns all the wealth realized that they would lose that position if the general population really got together and understood who was really oppressing all of us. [00:44:04] Not just Black people, but working class people across the board. You can't have these people coming together because they are the majority. And if they get on the same page, we're done.

And so, they saw that happening in the '70s after the civil rights movement. And then we had Reagan, and it pulled it all back in. Everything started getting—you know, from Reagan on, we started to see it almost go backwards to where—that's how we got to where we are now. It really is.

Because they are—and that's why it's important for them to create such division. Because as long as people are fighting against each other, and men are fighting against women and all this stuff is going on, you don't focus on who everybody's common problem is. And so, that's what I'm seeing. And that's kind of what I try to convey in the work, too. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: How is all of this—is there—how is all this running parallel to you just trying to move forward in your career as an artist? I mean, how has—have these—how do these things tie together?

RENÉE STOUT: How does it affect the—

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah. I mean, so you're making this very honest work. Right? Engaging with these very particular ideas, speaking to a very particular experience that you hope that—you know?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And yet you're in this particular art world [laughs].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, what I find interesting—and it's funny because as I go along, I start to say, "Wow, okay." I start to just discover how things work. And what I realize about my work—and you know, we're going back to how when we were talking earlier how I said that the art world really can't define what I'm doing.

Well the other part of that is—what I noticed is that because my work is not about being a victim. You know? [00:46:00] You know, the art world embraces, you know—and I don't want to make it—it's not that simple. It's more complex. But just to break it down just to try to explain what I'm trying to say what the issue might be with my work.

When—okay, let's say—we'll take Kara Walker because she's a well-known, highly visible artist at the top of the art world. And what she does is interesting. It's, you know, visually, you know, amazing, and she's dealing with issues. But what I find interesting is, even with the imagery that she's doing, there are white people and then there are slaves. And even when somebody, like let's say collectors, wealthy collectors look at that work. Even with what's going on in the work, they can see that the work is somehow about them. It's about them still. So, even if they're the antagonist or the villain in the work—you know how they say negative attention's better than no attention? In some sense, that work is still saying you are still being about them, you know, and that

dynamic. My work is not always about them. You know? And very often it's not.

NYSSA CHOW: It has a different center.

RENÉE STOUT: It has a different center. It's my universe. And it's what I say goes. And it's like, you know, my world functions without you. I'm off on some other plane. You know, you don't rule this world. And I think that I've figured out that this art world does not know how to interpret art that's not about it.

NYSSA CHOW: When did you realize that that was what it was, or is that intentional from the beginning?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-mmm [negative]. One day, it hit me. What—I asked the same question you were asking. I asked myself. "What is it about my work?" And then I said, "Most of it's not about them." It's not about the art world. [00:48:00] It's not about the art world's concerns. It's what I feel is an important topic. And I'm tackling that, and I'm trying to narrate a story where they're not necessarily in power. You know?

And it's like, oh. And I realized, [laughs] I very rarely do I ever feel like a victim. So, my art doesn't reflect that. You know? And I think that that's a big issue in the art world. You know, they talk about a lot about identity.

Okay. So, on some level, my work is about identity, but I'm not going saying, "Okay, I'm doing stuff about identity." I'm being who I am every day. I wake up every day just being who I am and wanting to make work. You know? And so, I don't wake up thinking, "Well, how's the white man in my way today?" [Laughs.] I get up like, "Where's my coffee?" You know? [Laughs].

And it's not until I turn on the TV or the computer or step out in the world that I still remember that there are these issues going on out there. You know what I mean? I have a world. And so, I think that that's when I started to realize that the art world in a sense really is a microcosm of this bigger thing. You know, once again, you have a few people selecting who they're going to decide are going to be the art stars, and the people whose work is relevant. Like all these buzzwords. You know, whose work is relevant.

See, my work is not deemed relevant, basically. And I say, relevant to whom? That's my question. It's relevant to me. You know, it's relevant to some people I know. But the art world wants to decide what art is relevant, and what isn't. And what they deem not relevant they're not going to look at.

NYSSA CHOW: This is incredibly powerful. Well, I'm going to ask—speaking of "it doesn't matter who's at the center," I'm going to steal some questions from some students of color that I know. [00:50:00]

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: They struggle with this a lot.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Actually, I'm amazed to hear you say it. I read—Toni Morrison said something about this too. She says, "It's okay. Don't worry. You know, don't worry about trying to convince anybody that you're worthy of this or that. Or, you know, you can go ahead and speak straight to me."

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: You know, it feels very familiar to what you're saying.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes.

NYSSA CHOW: Right?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: I'm really interested in how you got there though. How did you get there, or do you—were you just born there? [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, I think so. That's why my father said the authorities are going to get you.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Because I have my own insecurities. And I will speak to that, too, because I think they are important to my—you know, what we're talking about as well. But I've become my own best therapist, and I think it comes from long hours of being alone. You can't run from yourself when you're alone. You know what I

mean?

And so, I'm in my studio working and subconsciously and consciously, I start thinking about my own motives and my own feelings and why I do what I do and questioning myself and being hard on myself and being good to myself and, you know, the whole thing. And that's when I start to figure out some stuff.

NYSSA CHOW: I want to—I can't help but think of a little bit earlier in our conversation when—I can't remember the name of the teacher now. The one who said, you know, "It's watermelon."

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, Professor Pickering.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, Pickering. When you realized, "Oh, he's just not going to get it." So, I guess maybe why speak to Pickering [laughs] if he's not going to—

RENÉE STOUT: No. Yeah, he's from a time. He was definitely—he was older then. Pickering was old when I had him. Right? And my guess is he might've been—and I'm there now. I'm 61. Pickering might've been in his like mid-to-late 60s when I had him. And so, he was from a time. And so, he was not going to get it. You know?

It's just sometimes people can't move beyond the time. You know, some people can evolve. It depends on what their makeup is. [00:52:00] And I think he was somebody that, you know— he—as old as he was, he was not going to change. And he had not yet seen the changes that were coming. Because you figure, like, sometime in the 70s is when women really started saying, "Look, the museums aren't showing us." You know, after the civil rights movement, everybody started saying, "Look, wait a minute now, some things have to change." And that wasn't a time that he got to spend a lot of time in since he was already older. He was—he was already formed. He was who he was going to be.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There's a quote—there's—I read something that you'd said about *Fetish #2*.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: That I'm going to—I'm butchering your quote, but it was something like after making that, you said you felt like you—even if you'd never made anything else, you'd made the—you tell it. [They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. I think it's something like, "If I'd never made a piece that I, you know, that I had done what I'm supposed to do, then I had made the piece that I needed to make." And, and I think in some ways, even though I get sick of looking at that piece—because every person who writes a book on art, they always ask for that one. And I'm like, "I've been making art for 35 years." You keep asking for the same illustration for your book." You know?

But I think that that was such a major turning point and a major understanding in my knowing who I wanted to be and the things that I needed to say. That, yeah, I can see why it's become an iconic piece. And it still is for me. You know? But I still—you know, I feel like I—you know, even with that piece, people saw that piece and wanted—like I had a—the first gallery I showed in in New York, she said, "Oh." And she had a catalog with that in it. And she said, "See this, if you do 10 more of these, I can sell them." In my mind I'm like, I don't repeat myself. I'm not going to do that.

And I noticed that that's what artists do a lot. And that's what the branding is about. [00:54:00] And that's what people, you know, creating this—they have an iconic look to their work. And they continue to do that because that's what people recognize. You know, people are like, "Well, I want one of those." Someone—you know, when I have a dinner party, they recognize it's a so-and-so. You know?

I can't work that way. And so, I wouldn't do it. I just wouldn't do it because I didn't want to be typecast as this is what the—you know, this is what work she does. And people will try to pull me back to that. But what I've done was in the narrative, I needed to look at those Congo minkisi. That's the plural for nkisi, is one. Minkisi is several.

And looking at the minkisi, that was a jumping off point for me to understand some spirituality. How art can be protective. How, you know, the community, you know, reveres these pieces that they know or are sort of icons. Like Russian icons, they have their icons.

And I want it to evolve from that. That's the starting point. And I just want to evolve outward. And you know, to always, you know, be doing something that still has the same beliefs at the core but constantly, you know, re-examining those beliefs and, you know, bringing them along with me as I evolve. And understand who I am. And understand my place in the world that I'm living in.

NYSSA CHOW: Let's talk about some of those—I don't know—some of those characters that I've spoken for or with you. Right? So, there's the—first actually, I wanted to ask you about that. Why did you need, or maybe it

wasn't need, these identities or alter egos, as you say?

RENÉE STOUT: Okay. Because growing up, you know, you asked me about how my mother felt like—you know, even though she wanted to be an FBI agent [laughs]. But she never did that. Right? And I think what happens is—it doesn't happen so much to men. [00:56:01] It happens somewhat. But really to women that you are assigned a role and society expects you to fulfill that role. And along the way, if you could put your own stuff in it, you find a way to do it. But ultimately, generations of women before me felt that they had to fulfill these duties. You had to be the good wife, the good mother, the good this, the good daughter, the blah blah blah. Right?

So, coming—you know, when I was born, it was 1958. There's still that. There was still some of that. You know? Even though I was encouraged to go to school, so that I wouldn't be stuck in a certain kind of place. My mind could be expanded. But I might be of the transition generation when women really started to realize they can be separate from all those expectations.

And in order for me to shed that and not take on those expectations, I had to create a self that was of my own creation. That it was who I wanted to be for myself, or I needed to be for myself. And it wasn't who anybody expected me to be. So, I created a self, and I put her out there. And I did work based on what she—how she saw the world. How she moved through the world.

And in some weird way, it was a process of giving myself permission to create who I wanted to be and slowly moving toward it. And that's what I did. Which is why—and the funny thing, getting back to Madame Ching. Remember when I told you that she was 60 when I was in my, like, 30s? Because I was still kind of shy and felt like, you know, "I think when I'm 60, I'll probably be strong enough to say what I needed to say."

But then as I started approaching my 40s, I really felt my own power starting to emerge. And when I got to be like 42 is when Fatima Mayfield emerged. [00:58:01] Because you know, Madame Ching was no longer adequate for who I had become. I was starting to feel my power. And it's like she had the—you know, she had to be—you know, she wasn't some older woman like Madame Ching, you know, who was still in some ways kind of—

NYSSA CHOW: In what ways?

RENÉE STOUT: Because I still had the idea of what women are supposed to act like. And so, my projection of Madame Ching still had some, you know, old stuff going on, old fashioned stuff going on. But you know, she was still powerful, but she had to be old to be powerful. As if she had to have permission with age to be powerful.

And then when I realized when I was 40, I'm starting to feel like, you know, "I don't need anybody's permission to do anything." And Fatima Mayfield was very different. She was brazen, almost. Just very, you know—and it was funny because there would be days that I was in my house [laughs]. And I would put on like outfits and take pictures of myself as the Fatima character.

And one day, one of my poet friends, who had a habit of dropping in without being announced was ringing my bell. So, I opened up the window in the studio, which is on the second floor, and I'm looking right down at the front door. And I'm like, "What?" And so, he's like, "I came by for a visit. Let me in." So, I had on this crazy sequined short dress that I wouldn't be caught dead in in the streets [laughs] and with this wig on. Right? And these heels.

So, I go down there, and I open the door. And he's looking at me like—because he—of course, nobody has ever seen me looking like that, right? So, I start fussing at him because I'm in the middle of doing my thing. You know? So, he follows me up the stairs [laughs]. And I'm like, "Don't look up under my dress either." So, I'm trying to pull this dress down. He said, "Who are you?" [laughs] I said, "Fatima Mayfield." So, he's like—so he's looking at me, but he's watching me move around my studio. And we're having this conversation, and I'm wearing this outfit. But I'm just moving around my studio. [01:00:00]

So, it had to be—I don't know how long after that, he drops by again. And I say, "Why are you here?" He's like, "Why don't you go away and let Fatima answer the door?" [Laughs.] For some strange reason, I think he saw the transition when I got into this personality. And he would always tease me about that. After that, he would be like, "You know, you are very different when you're in that Fatima mode." He says, "It's just a totally different attitude." And I realized that I was basically just getting outside of myself and just being. You know? Not concerned about what anybody thought, just—you know?

So, what I used to do when I was making my artwork, I would—you know, I had an ongoing installation that was Fatima's room. That she would have clients come and she would sit down, and, you know, tell them what they needed or what remedy. They would tell her what was going on. And she would prescribe something for them.

At the time, I had never pictured Fatima. All you would see was the installation. Which had been presented in

different venues. And it would change slightly here and there. But I saw it as a backdrop for the character because where I got that idea from is, I love collecting and reading books on interiors. Like, you know, *Elle Decore*, *Architectural Digest*, I even have some hardback books on, you know, interior decoration and that kind of thing.

And what I realized is when you're looking at people's spaces, they're not in them. But you kind of try to get a sense of who the person is by what they want to live with. So, that's how I was kind of dealing with the Fatima character. So, the viewer would see her objects and her surroundings. And they would always end up saying, "But what does she look like?" So, many people would come to me and say, "But what does she look like?" Because they were curious because of the surroundings. So, eventually, after I was doing all that dressing up and playing around as Fatima, I'm like, "Why don't I start taking images of her?" [01:02:02] So, I set my camera on a tripod—

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RENÉE STOUT: —and I would put on outfits and run in and act out Fatima.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: So, you know, that's how I became—that's how I began to embody her. And then once I started doing that, I think that's when I gave myself permission to become her. And what I realized is each time I kind of grew into the alter ego, she was gone. People asked me one day, "Where's Madame Ching?" I'm like, "I don't know. Maybe I became her." And then I needed Fatima for the next part of my life. Now, all of a sudden, she's not really there, but I don't want to totally let go of her only because she becomes a character that I can actually write.

NYSSA CHOW: Interesting.

RENÉE STOUT: So, I want to start writing, so I created this character, and, like, you—like, Reverend Beach and all these side characters that I can then do a story or a screenplay based on. So, I don't want to totally let her go because I like—you know, I like her life, and I like what she does. But I think for me to create my art I don't really need her because I am that sort of spiritual, self-aware, political being that I projected her to be. I've become that.

NYSSA CHOW: Have you started writing with her? What is—

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, I've been writing for years about her, even when I was, you know, not thinking about it. There's, like, plenty of stuff in my computer that all I have to do—maybe one day I'll apply for, you know, a residency somewhere and propose that I can start my book or, you know, short story, whatever, series of short stories, whatever, based on her. But I do have all this, you know, dialogue, prose—

NYSSA CHOW: That's in her voice?

RENÉE STOUT: It's in her voice, mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's in her voice.

NYSSA CHOW: Ooh.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Okay. We'll follow up.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: So, who are you—in your recent work now, is it you then in your most recent work? [00:02:03]

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's just me—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —the traveler. Me, you know, that can go from universe to universe, you know.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And now I'm a hoodoo assassin.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: Do tell. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I've started this series of works—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —and they are women, and because I am sensitive to what's going on in our society, you know, I'm really having a time with these men deciding that they want to make abortion illegal. But not only, you know, just abortion, but in cases of rape and incest and, in some places, trying to say that the rapist has a right, parental rights. I'm like, "So, a woman becomes nothing but a vessel, and men—a man who has perpetrated violence against a woman has rights over her?" I'm like, "No."

You know, that soldier in me is like, "Oh, no, uh-uh [negative]." So, once again, I'm, like, thinking about this. How does my art help me to process this craziness? Oh, I know. They're going to be women—since we cannot, you know, count on men to protect us; oh, since they don't want to step up and, you know, protect us and yank their kind in [laughs] —

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —women become the soldiers who will protect. And so, I've done this series of women, and they're pretty women; they're all kinds of different women, older women. And when I do the drawing, they're—she has her choice of weapon. It could be poison; it could be a gun. And it sounds, like, extreme, but the funny thing is it only sounds extreme when women are going to literally fight by any means necessary for their freedom [00:03:56]. If we're talking about, let's say, the Revolutionary War and American—you know, these American men decided, "We don't want to be ruled by the British; we're going to—you know, we're going to have a war. We're going to fight them." Oh, that seems so natural to fight for their freedom.

But when there's a war on women, who are going to be our soldiers if we're not? And that's—so that was the logic behind it. But, you know, I think back to, like, the movie *Thelma and Louise*. There was such an uproar because these women were brandishing a gun, you know, and they chose to drive off a cliff rather than be taken alive, you know. Women just don't think like that, see. So, I'm going against that. It's like, "No. Okay, so what if"—see, sometimes I want my work to present these what-ifs. Can you imagine if women all of a sudden said, "You want a war on women? We'll give you one," you know? And really literally started arming themselves and fighting back and saying, "No, you are not going to rule our bodies." What if we did that? So—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Another narrative, though.

RENÉE STOUT: It's a whole other narrative. So, that's what I mean about all these narratives that are going on in my work, and I think that it's overwhelming sometimes for people to know that I'm—I've got all these simultaneous narratives going on, you know. It's like, how do you process all that? How do you explain all that? And you know, so it's just like sometimes they just would rather not, you know—and none of it is about being a victim.

NYSSA CHOW: No, mm-mm [negative]. No, because they're cast. I mean, you haven't cast one woman; you've cast an army [laughs], right?

[They laugh.]

Right? Yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And even in the *Parallel Universe*—Sun Ra, those are armies. They're sentries.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: So, I think, you know—

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. It's—I mean, it's powerful. It's there anyway.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: You know?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: So, I'm wondering if we shouldn't now sort of take a break now, because I want to ask you to go more closely into the work, but I don't want to start when we only have 30 minutes left [00:06:05].

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: And then—you know? So, do you—I almost want to save tomorrow to sort of go more methodically through the work. Does that make sense?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Is that okay?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay, so you want to stop now?

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, I'm thinking we can stop now, and then tomorrow we can—

RENÉE STOUT: Okay. No, I'm going to give you this—

NYSSA CHOW: Yes.

RENÉE STOUT: —to take with you.

NYSSA CHOW: I have this.

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, you do?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: The—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: But you can give me two. I'll have it.

RENÉE STOUT: I just want to make sure you have the most recent, because I even—when I printed this out, I realized that I didn't have my last show. The *Parallel Universe* wasn't on here. So, this has to—this is about the most recent.

NYSSA CHOW: I'm going to—stopping for today.

RENÉE STOUT: All right.

[END OF TRACK stout19_digrec_track04.]

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: Sorry, go ahead.

RENÉE STOUT: It's all right. No, you know, I just feel like, you know, as an artist, you know, I have a role, and I respect that there may be an artist that basically wants to paint, you know, like, flowers or landscapes and you know, the beauty of the world should be captured as well.

And I do some of that, too, you know, and there have been times when it was less tumultuous—that's saying that word, "tumultuous"—politically. I have focused on personal things like relationships and love, and the work has lots of humor. I'm laughing at myself. I can laugh at myself loudest, you know. I don't take myself that seriously that I can't laugh at my own, you know, absurdities.

And so, I respect an artist that can paint flowers and that kind of thing and find the beauty in the world, and I do, too. But at the same time, being the person that I am, I have to document the times that we're in from my point of view and contribute to that ongoing narrative that we're telling as, you know, a people or humans in general and the culture that we're in, you know. And it's like bearing witness to something. You know, I have to tell part of the story. I do have to contribute, and I feel like that is my responsibility because it's just me. I've taken on—nobody told me I had to do it. I just feel like I have to do it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What is—keeps striking me about your work is something you mentioned just a little while ago, is that it's—the conversation you want to have is two, you know, people like us, right? That you want to say, "Look at another way."

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: "Look at what we're going through." It's like you say, not trying to speak outside, not trying to convince anybody that this pain is real. Just not even about pain; just about life lived—

RENÉE STOUT: Lived—

NYSSA CHOW: —and how we're living it. [00:01:56]

RENÉE STOUT: Lived life telling a story. And, you know, there's that part of—my mother, when I was young, for some reason—you know, it's like let's say something went down during the day and somebody is telling a story about what somebody said or did. And then I'd come in, and I'd say, "Well, how were they looking when they said it?" "Well, where were they standing, and what were they doing?" And she's like, "Why do you need to know that?" And then she just looked at me one day and said, "You know what? You probably need to be an actress." And so, [laughs] that stuck with me because in a sense—I just have this need to know, and so it's almost like I'm telling the audience the story, and I'm acting it out, and I'm creating the work. It's just—I just—it's the way I tell the story. It just—

I have to have every little detail, you know, and give the viewer the detail.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, and I like to say sometimes I throw the kitchen sink into the work. I wish I could be more simple sometimes, you know, but it's just who I am.

NYSSA CHOW: Yes. It's participatory and performative.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Okay [laughs].

RENÉE STOUT: Okay, [laughs] let me shut up. We'll save it for tomorrow.

NYSSA CHOW: Save it for tomorrow.

RENÉE STOUT: Let's talk about flowers.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: Stop saying interesting stuff. Go home.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: I keep stopping this tape.

[END OF TRACK stout19_digrec_track05.]

NYSSA CHOW: Recording. This is Nyssa Chow. I'm interviewing at the Latino Center in Washington, D.C. It's June 6, 2019. And I'm interviewing for the Archives of American Art. We're here with Renée Stout and this is card number two. Okay. So, Renée, we just spoke.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: So, general question. Answer it however you like. What role has love, loving, or whatever form that may take, played in your creative life, your artistic life?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I would say that, you know, my first example of observing love was, of course, watching my mother and father and the dynamics of their relationship. And I think it formed who I was and the way I chose men, you know, for myself and that kind of thing. And I think it was very confusing to watch them because, you know, my mother was a very intelligent woman. You know, she graduated from high school. She never went to college. But also a very—she was introverted and sort of not very outgoing, you know? And then my father was the opposite. But my father also felt that women had their roles. And, you know, he would always say something that I felt didn't really make sense. Because if you have two parents, two parents raise the children.

But he would say, "Oh, women raise girls and men raise boys." And that never set right with me, you know? And so—and I think if you have that outlook, that's why relationships suffer. Because if you're trying to understand a relationship or life only from the man's point of view, and then women are only given their point of view, and you're not getting both in a certain kind of, you know, healthy way, then, you know, you don't really grow up understanding what relationships are supposed to be. [00:02:03] And so I don't think I really did understand it, you know?

I knew that I wanted to be in a relationship, you know? I knew I was attracted to people. But then once you get together, it seems like, how do you communicate? There wasn't, you know, I wasn't taught to communicate properly, you know? And then people have their issues. They don't know how to talk about it. So, I would say that throughout my life I never really—in the beginning mostly, you know, before my 40s, I would say the relationships were always a little just, like, you know, kind of not working in a certain kind of way. And I don't even know how to explain why, but it wasn't until, you know, in my 40s when, you know, you really start to learn who you are as a woman and—

NYSSA CHOW: I'm going to stop you there—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —for a second. Recording again. It wasn't until your 40s?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, when I, you know, really started to become self-aware and, you know, asking myself, "What do I want? What do I need? What are my shortcomings?" You know? "What do I need to work on?" That I really started to back away from having relationships until I could really, you know, figure out who I was. You know, and I would date. But I wouldn't, you know, wasn't serious. And when I look back, I think a lot of my art was about trying to figure out what relationships were about, you know? It had that underlying thing, which is one of the main reasons why I love blues and did a whole exhibition called *Dear Robert, I'll See You at the Crossroads* as in Robert Johnson, the blues singer, because I was in a particular relationship at that time. I think I was about 33, 34. And, you know, it was somebody I was really interested in. And it just wasn't working out, you know? So, I was listening to a lot of blues music and finding the humor in it. At the same time, feeling the pain of it, but also being able to, you know, find the humor in how absurd love is, actually, you know? [00:04:06] And so that show was a whole body of work around love and relationships, you know?

So, it has, from, you know, time to time, the idea of love has come into my relationships. And I mean, in my bodies of work. And that's one of the things, reasons why I created an alter-ego named Fatima Mayfield who serves the community because, of course, in her community, women are going to come to her about love issues. And she's going to give them, you know, whatever charms, or talismans, or potions that they need to, you know, generate love and that kind of thing.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? So, it's still like telling that story about love, but a lot of humor. The same way blues tells that story with a lot of humor.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But pain and humor.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you want to talk about that exhibition you just mentioned, the *Crossroads*, *Dear Robert*? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, it was done at—it was in Santa Barbara around, I think, 1995. 1995. And it was a traveling show that opened up at the—oh boy—the University of Santa Barbara Art Museum? Something like that. It's on my resume. But anyway, Marla Burns was the curator. And she invited me to, you know, to do that show and I

created this whole body of work that was a narrative, you know? I even evoked the presence of Robert Johnson by having a suit. You know, like, there are two famous photographs of him, one in which he's sitting down with his guitar that they even made, I think, a stamp out of.

And so, I had this suit and this, you know, dramatically lit, like, you could almost feel like he's coming into the room to get his suit to go perform. [00:06:00] You know, and so it was hanging in a certain—kind of with the hat and all, shoes and all. There was a bed, like, that—it was part of, like, one of those old rollaway beds where it's portable and you can fold it up. But I had removed the mattress and I had put, like, looked like teeth. Not teeth, but jagged edges around the edge of the bed that looked like it could fold like that. I called that *The Man Trap* and put a pair of sexy shoes in the middle, women's shoes in the middle. So, there were all these little funny things that alluded to, you know, the pitfalls of love and, you know, things like that. So, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Well, yesterday you started talking about, and maybe you want to continue, but the period of time where you were surrounded by poetry and poems.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes.

NYSSA CHOW: And maybe if you want to—

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: —the significance of that. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: In the mid-to-, like, I would say, late '90s, early 2000s, there was a period in DC where poetry was booming. And, you know, they would have poetry readings all up and down the U Street Corridor, you know, and poetry slams, and everything. And I was dating a poet at that time who, you know, I was hanging out with him and his friends. And we would go to poetry readings a couple of times a week. And whenever they would come to my studio, where I would let them workshop their poetry while I was working in the other room. And then sometimes I would sit down and listen to them workshop their poetry. And I learned so much about how words can evoke images. And what I realized is poets are painting pictures in concise little, you know, paragraphs of words that when you see good poetry, it evokes imagery. And so that struck me. And it's like words became very important.

And so then once again, I thought back to my, you know, junior high school English teacher who helped me to love words. And then I was, you know, sort of reunited with the love of words again, you know? [00:08:04]

Being a visual artist, sometimes I didn't think too much in terms of prose or that kind of thing. And so, working with them, I thought about how much words can evoke ideas and images. So, I gradually started working prose into my work sometimes. And that's, you know, that was a development that happened around that time, you know, hanging with poets and things like that. And to this day, I still continue to use words in the work and in snippets of, you know, thoughts, things like that. But I also feel like I want to write. Like, there's this part of me that wants to actually—even though I'm telling the narrative in a visual way, I feel compelled to actually write the story as well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I've been doing that. You know, right now, it's all in my computer, you know? I haven't really sat down to organize all the writing I've done into a book. But hopefully one day that's something that I'll be able to do.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, poetry is a visual medium. And then your sculpture really is a literary medium. A lot of times, the narrative is built in, the characters have a life that go beyond and past.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes. And it's so strange because I think in terms of the narrative and developing the characters, I can be in my studio and feel like a character came to me and—told is telling me what, you know, what they were doing. That's how real they've become for me. You know, they start to develop that way. And then I start to write more. You know, so the characters are alive for me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I wonder if we can do this. Your personal space, your studio, and your home seem to be such a place of power and importance in your work. I wonder if you can paint that space for us?

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, my God. Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: I'll paint it for you [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Here's the way I think that space kind of starts separate from the actual space. I'm living in the O Street Studios in a loft. [00:10:01] And I'm renting. But I keep having a recurring dream. And the recurring dream is that I'm walking through a very old house that's huge. And I just bought the house. So, sometimes the person, you know, the real estate agent is there with me and I'm looking around. Sometimes, I've already bought it and I'm in there.

And I'm moving about and, it's like, wow, this is a very big house. And then all the sudden, I'll come to a door that I've never seen before and I'll open it up. And there are even more rooms that I didn't even know were there. And so, I don't know why I kept having this dream about a house.

RENÉE STOUT: So, I was in a relationship and happened to be up in Rochester, New York visiting a friend who said, "You know, there is this tarot card reader, palm reader woman that I went to, and she seemed to be really right on. Would you like to see her?" I'm like, "Why not?" So, I went to see the woman. And the relationship that I was in with the poet at that time, I particularly asked about that, of course, because I wanted to know where that was going. And she said to me, "Oh, that relationship is not going to be the relationship that you carry on throughout your life. It's for now, but it won't be for long." I'm like, "Okay." And then she said, "And you're going to be buying property." Now, mind you, that was the last thing on my mind, buying property. Well, I would say about nine months after that reading, I was searching for a house because of some circumstances that happened in the loft. I wanted to remove a wall. So, I didn't realize you needed a permit to pull a wall down.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I had this contractor come in, pull the wall down, and then the police came. [laughs] Building inspectors came and they're like, "You have to stop this right now." [00:12:01] And then they proceeded to start looking around the building and wanted to tell the owner of the building that artists shouldn't be living there. Well, it all worked out that artists could be living there. You know, the city just didn't realize that he had long ago made it so that they could. But on their books, they couldn't find where he had permits for us to live there.

So, it worked out. But I'm like, you know what? I almost felt like I was going to lose my space and my home. I want something that belongs to me. I don't want to rent. I don't want to be in some precarious situation like that anymore.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I ended up actually buying a house nine months after that reading. So, when I got to the house, it was like it needed a lot of work. And I started walking around the house and I felt like I was in my dream. Like, you know, here I am in this house that needs a lot of work. But it's mine, you know? And at that point, I realized that the house was a metaphor. Also, in the dream, it was more of a metaphor for my being myself, that I'm walking around the space. I'm occupying the space. It's mine. It needs a little work, you know, but it's mine.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And when I discover the door and I open it up and there are more rooms than I even realized, it's how expansive I am. How I'm growing, how there's more to me than I realized.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, that was always a great dream for me. And I don't have it anymore since I've been in that house.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: But I'm looking to have it again because that means I might be moving to the next level, who knows?

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: You know? But the house itself, like I said, it's a fixer upper. And because it was my first house, I didn't realize how much money it actually takes to fix an older house. The house was built in 1905. So, it's over 100 years old. So, of course there's a lot of work that needs to be done. But in some ways, I've done the best that I can do to create a space for myself that inspires me. There are books in every room, books in every—including bathrooms, there are books. [00:14:05] There's art everywhere. Not my art, you know. My art's there. But I love to collect art by other people. And so, it's filled with art by other people.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: There are objects that are interesting. There's African art, you know, little things that I've found in my travels and in thrift stores, little objects that inspire me. There's my collection of roots, and oils, and herbs that I get from spiritual supply stores and hoodoo stores. People walk in and they'll say, "It's like walking into one of your installations. Your home is an installation." So, even though it's all in disrepair, and I fret over it, and I don't want to invite people there because it's not as perfect as I'd like it to be. When people walk in, they say it feels like walking into, you know, a piece of art.

NYSSA CHOW: And is that art evolving? Do your characters have spaces that are preserved, or is it a constantly shifting space with each new iteration? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I would say that the rest of the house may be a constantly shifting space. But there is one room in the house that I decided, like, years ago, I don't know, maybe shortly after I bought the house, which was 1999, that that space was going to be for the character Fatima Mayfield. So, I would collect all these things, spiritual objects from different cultures, and put them all around the room. And the room feels—it has a strange feel like it's a different time than the rest of the house. And sometimes I go in there and, you know, there are books, books on the occult, books on, you know, religions and everything like that. I call it the thinking room in some ways, because I can go sit and read sometimes in there. And I've done photographs of Fatima standing in the room, which is it was one of the first places that I actually embodied Fatima through a photograph to show people what she actually looked like. [00:16:07] So, it became a stage set for the character.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. I've heard that that room or versions of that room have inspired other artists as well. I was reading in your—in the book here about Alice Walker and other people who have been inspired by that room.

RENÉE STOUT: They asked me to recreate the installation down at the Spelman Art Museum at one of my shows, traveled there. Basically, the *Conjure Woman* show traveled to Spelman. And so, they wanted me to recreate the installation. And Beverly Guy-Sheftall and Alice Walker just happened to be there. And they saw my exhibition, so they have a photograph in the catalogue of the two of them sitting on Fatima's sofa.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: What was that like to have your space? Because it wasn't your space—it was Fatima's space when you encountered it in that gallery.

RENÉE STOUT: Well, when you encountered it in the gallery, of course I want to project that it's her, you know? I actually have a pair of beautiful shoes sitting by the sofa as if she had kicked them off and just left the room for a minute so that she could walk in at any time. And on a little, like, ottoman sitting by the sofa is, like, a ledger with notes. And you could actually read, you know, prescriptions she has, you know, given to her clients and notations that she's made. Because when you walk into a space like that, what I want the viewer to feel is that they're kind of like a voyeur who is looking in on something they really shouldn't see. Like, it's very private but yet they are seeing it, so they can feel like they're in somebody's space and that it's real to them. So, that's what I wanted to—you know, how I wanted that space to function.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. Well, maybe this is a good bridge to talk about these themes of protection and power that live through all of your work, really. I was wondering, I guess, maybe this has been an evolving feeling, but what do you need to protect? [00:18:03] And I guess, who did you feel like you needed to protect, or what needed your protection? You know, where are these ideas that—

RENÉE STOUT: You know, because—you know, we see the way the world is right now, and you know, specifically, you know, this country. Because we live in this country.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, this is what we deal with immediately. Even before this—and, you know, it's bad now. But even before this, being the sensitive person and very perceptive person I am, I still feel, you know, a kind of underlying thing.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, crazy people have come from under their rocks that they were hidden under for a while. But I still knew they were there. I never forgot it. And I could feel it always being there. The energy was always there. So, the protection was about making sure that I don't get distracted by that or I don't internalize it,

and I'm able to be my creative self, and just keep moving forward, and keep evolving the way I need to. So, the protection is about guarding myself against negativity that may be moving about anywhere at any given time.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, I feel that when I make these objects, what I'm actually doing is calling on ancestors. They've been through hell, you know, and made a way for us to be and continue to evolve, you know? And it's really hard and you feel like you take, you know, two steps forward, one step backwards. But you're, you know, constantly moving forward. But, you know, I tell people whenever I create in my studio, for some strange reason, I never feel like I'm in there by myself. The only way I can describe it is that let's say I'm on a stage, but my back is turned towards this big audience because I'm focusing on my worktable. But the big audience is back there watching me work, and I feel like the big audience are ancestors.

You know, relatives that have passed that have my back. [00:20:01] And they're watching me do what I do. And that's the way I always feel when I'm creating. And I think the energy is coming from them.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Have you ever felt alone?

RENÉE STOUT: I feel—you know, you can be alone, but not feel lonely. And I don't feel like that. I don't feel lonely.

NYSSA CHOW: So, you felt this army with you, I suppose, in a way, even when you were younger?

RENÉE STOUT: You know—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —I feel like I felt an army when I was younger. But it wasn't until I realized that, you know, in African cultures, ancestors were revered because you knew that their energy was going to be passed on for the generations even after they were gone. Their energy is there, and you call on them for guidance or you remember them for, you know, inspiration and power, and to empower yourself. When I discovered that my feeling was right, like, "Oh, yeah, there are ancestors there," you know, then that's when it got even more powerful.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that's the way I feel like I move through the world. So, no matter what somebody says or does, it's not going to undo me.

NYSSA CHOW: Not going to undo you?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. What a thing to say.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow. You mentioned before various relationships that have been really significant to—creative relationships, I mean.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: With other artists along the way. Your friend who thought you were James Dean very early on. [laughs] going all the way forward. I wonder if you can talk about some of those significant relationships, these creative, either partnerships, or just people who have been instrumental in your creative work? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, it's interesting because unlike a lot of artists these days, like, I know, like, artists who've had long careers like I have. They have a tendency to surround themselves, from what I see, with other artists and immersing themselves in the art world. [00:22:05]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I feel like I've always moved outside of that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's like I have a toe in it, but it's not what drives me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Because I do feel like it's sort of a microcosm of this other thing out here, you know, that, you know, is this machine that's driven by money and power, and that kind of thing. And I'm not interested. And so those relationships, you know, I may, you know, have connections with other artists and talk to them periodically. But I find that my relationships are with regular, everyday people who may not even be connected to art in any way because that's, to me, what generates my ideas and, you know, and the realness of what I'm trying to do to relate to real people and not the art world. My art is not—you know, it's like I'm inspired by art and other artists, but it's not my whole world. You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, my goodness, though, of course I want to meet some of the real people—

RENÉE STOUT: Uh-huh [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —that have—that are at the center.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, you know—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —it's like, I have a friend named Michelle, who is a young—Michelle's about 47 right now. I met her as a graduate student at Howard University. And she became my assistant on a project that I was working on.

But now we've formed a friendship that gets richer and richer because she's also a very spiritual person. And, you know, basically, sees things, you know? So, we compare notes about feeling spirits and feeling that kind of thing. So, she's one of the people that I think, you know, have become a good friend that inspires me. And we talk a lot about art and life in general.

And good traveling partner. I have a friend named Tina Burgess who was born on the same day that I was, but a year apart. [00:24:01] You know? We're a year apart. And she's not an artist at all. But she's a person that lives in Pittsburgh that I actually didn't meet until I was in DC because she was a mutual friend. And we've become really good friends. And, you know, she's such a crazy, wild person that she became the inspiration for a character called Pretty Poison [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: Do tell [laughs].

RENÉE STOUT: Pretty Poison is a good friend of Fatima Mayfield. And Fatima's very grounded, you know, and very disciplined and Pretty Poison is quite the opposite. So, I like to joke and say that each one could use a little bit of what the other one has. And in real life, it's true, too. Because I can be so focused and so, you know, got to do what I need to do and need to go out more and, you know, kick my heels up a little bit more than I do, probably. And Tina's, you know, quite the opposite. And she's like, you know, party, party, party. I'm like, she needs to settle down a little bit more. So, it's kind of funny that we're kind of a yin and a yang in a way.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But she's also Aquarius, of course. So, there's, like, we're two sides to one—you know, to the same coin.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, there are relationships like that that are interesting for me, you know, so.

NYSSA CHOW: Relationships to individual people. Yesterday, you talked about your relationship to that street and the boys down the street, too.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHO: And New Orleans is another—

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, New Orleans.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: The first time that I'd ever gone to New Orleans was in 1989. There was a national conference of artists, remember the Black conference that I told you would happen in different cities? Because they all had, you know, different cities had a chapter. So, they would hold this conference on—you know, and have artists

come and speak about their work, and workshops, and exhibitions. And that particular year, 1989, it happened to be in New Orleans.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And when I went there, the moment I stepped off the plane and put my foot. [laughs] on the ground at the airport, I'm like, "This feels like home." [00:26:09] And I have been going there every year since then. The only time that I didn't go was a three-year period when Katrina had hit, you know, after Katrina hit. But the strange story about that, just to tell you the connection that I do have with New Orleans in a strange way that I can't explain. In 2005, a big exhibition of mine was at the Ogden Museum, which is the Ogden Museum for Southern Culture in New Orleans. And I had been going to New Orleans all these years. So, to have them want to do an exhibition of my work made me almost feel like they're accepting me as, you know, part of them, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I was so happy. Okay, so the exhibition opened, I think it was August 6, the fifth or sixth, which they call White Linen Night. It's a big exhibition that they have down in New Orleans where all the galleries will have simultaneous openings, the museums do things, and people try to come out and they wear white linen and they go from place to place. It's like one big party. So, my opening, you know, happened on that night. And it was, like, a Friday or Saturday. Well, by Sunday, you know, it was time for me to go home. But on that day, shortly before they were going to take me to the airport, I was to come and give a talk in the exhibition.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I got up that Sunday. I went into the museum. I looked around. And then I went to go get something to eat before I did the talk and I was by myself. So, I went around the corner from the museum, found a restaurant to eat something at. On my way back, I had an unexplained sudden anxiety attack. [00:28:00] I couldn't breathe and I'm standing there on the street. There's really nobody out because it's a Sunday and it's a part of town where there's not a lot of people, you know? And I couldn't breathe. And I'm like—I had my cell phone and I called my friend in New York.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: The one that I, you know, went to college with.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I said, "I can't breathe. I don't know what's going on. I'm about to go in the museum and give a talk but I just can't move from this spot right now." And he said, "Well, what do you think it is?" I said, "I don't know." I said, "I don't want to leave, you know, I don't want to leave here. But I have to go give the talk and I don't know why I'm feeling like this." He said, "Can you get them to let you stay another day?"

And I'm like, "No, I have to leave right after I give the talk," you know? So, he says, "Okay, well, calm down." So, we talk and talk. Finally, I calm down. I went into the museum and gave a good talk. And then they whisked me right off to the airport. So, I got home and I'm sitting, you know, in my studio and working on a show that I was to have in DC that was coming up.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Three weeks later, Katrina hit. Now, interestingly, that time after the opening, there was a dinner for the artist who—you know, my exhibition was on one floor.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: The architect who designed the building, that museum, happened to be having an exhibition on another floor. And we were seated together at dinner at this person's house. So, he was explaining to me how he had designed the building so that the offices were all on this first and second floor, but the exhibition spaces were all above to protect the art just in case there was ever a flood. And three weeks later, Katrina hit. My art emerged unscathed. But sadly, it cut the exhibition short. It was only up for three weeks and it was supposed to be up for about three months.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. So, what was interesting is having the anxiety attack. [00:30:02]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It was a premonition.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And oh, I was just so hurt. I was so afraid to go back to New Orleans because I knew it was like, you know, just tore up, just totally torn up. And a good friend of mine who's an artist, who is a New Orleans artist named Jeffrey Cook, did not leave when everybody else sort of initially went out. He was one of the last people to be made to leave and stayed there and saw horrific things, people dead in the streets, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I can't even—I don't even want to describe some of the things that he said he saw.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But he said at night, he would take a candle and use a telephone book as a journal so that he could write what he saw, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And he said he could hear, like, gun shots. He could hear, like, all kinds of things going on. And he said every once in a while, he would try to flip up the mail slot to see if he could see, you know, what was going on out there. But one of the reasons why he didn't want to leave is there was an older woman who lived next door and he didn't want to leave her by herself.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: So, he would go check on her.

NYSSA CHOW: And she stayed?

RENÉE STOUT: And she stayed. But eventually, she had to be evacuated as well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Did—I mean, has your relationship to New Orleans changed since that?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I was so scared to go back because I was afraid that the magic had been—I had written somewhere in one of my pieces. I was afraid that the magic and the spirits had been washed away. And so, I didn't know when I was going to go back.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, a friend said to me, you know, "You want to go back? I'll go back with you."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, I did go back.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I went, and it was—I went back in—let me see. It happened in 2005. When did I go back? I can't remember. But it was, like, 2008. [00:32:00] I went back in 2008.

NYSSA CHOW: Was the magic still there?

RENÉE STOUT: It was, you know? It was a little different, but it's there.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's there. And the city, I felt like the city was saying, "You have to come back."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: "And you have to keep coming back."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, I have.

NYSSA CHOW: Bring the magic.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, contribute to the magic.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I've been going back.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I was there already this year I think, like, three times.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Is it too personal to ask if you've had these knowings before, these sort of premonitions as you call them? I call them knowings. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, I have.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That wasn't the first time something like that happened.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I remember one other one.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It was the time of the Rodney King verdict. And me and a friend were just walking down a DC street. And I just happened to look up at the sky. And the sky had, like, a strange light to it. I don't know if it's getting ready to be dusk. But the sky just had a strange light. And I just looked over at my friend and, "Something bad is going to happen." And a couple of days later, you know, LA erupted.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: The other time that happened, a friend of mine had come to pick me up and wanted to just ride around DC, you know, take me for a ride because he lives in New Jersey. He had come to DC for business or whatever. He's like, "Let's go take a ride and stop at a donut place." He was craving some donuts. So, we're just riding around DC one evening. And I was just sitting in the front seat looking out the, you know, front window. And I'm like—out of nowhere, I said, "This country's going to see something it's never seen before." And so, he says—he just looks over at me. I'm like, "I don't know what it is, but this country's going to see something it hasn't seen before."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And 9/11 happened a week later. And it—like, my friend Michelle, she sees, like, she feels and sees spirits, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I don't do that. I get these feelings and these anxieties and these—and start to feel like something's getting ready to happen. [00:34:05]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. but it seems powerfully tied to place, doesn't it?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: And I don't know why.

NYSSA CHOW: Neither do I. But, I mean, that is really significant in a way.

RENÉE STOUT: It is and fortunately, it doesn't happen often.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: Because, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But whenever I've said something like that, and I don't know why I say it or, you know, what the anxiety attack was about, or looking up at the sky and just announcing something bad is going to happen.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, space, and home, and community.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And it's very much your work, as well.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Space, and home, and community, inhabiting spaces.

NYSSA CHOW: I don't know if there's a question there, but I was just thinking.

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know. Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know what it is.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And part of me doesn't want that to happen, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's too scary to feel like that, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It's bigger than you. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Older, maybe.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, yes.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Well, I don't know. Okay. Maybe we can take a turn now to start talking about you, the narrative, you, and work, and career.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And how do you identify with this word, "career?" Do you identify with this word, "career?"

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, I guess in a sense I do.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Because it is something that I consciously need to nurture, you know, and make choices to keep, you know, going on and evolving, and showing, and developing. And I guess that is a career. But in a sense, it's so much a part of me. Art making is such an impulse. Like sleeping and eating, you know? It's like, I get an idea, I need to do that. So, to be an artist is a funny thing.

You know, like, people talk, you know, about my age. I'm hearing my friends talking about retiring. Tina just retired. And I don't even know what that means. You know? Because my thing that I do, my career, is not something I retire from. [00:36:06] So, it is a career, but it isn't.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Also, maybe that's a good way to ask it. Like, people must have and must continue to try and put you in different boxes and sort of define you. Have there been—does anything come to mind, ways that either this has felt like that fit or very much did not fit that you've been sort of put into spheres, boxes, categories, and spaces throughout?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, you know, what I do because I'm so stand my ground when it comes to my vision. Because if I believe in my vision, I'm not going to let anybody try to craft my vision for—you know, even if I need the money, you're just going to have to sell what you can sell. And I will let somebody else sell what you feel like you can't sell. So, I'm not going to stop doing something and only do this for you. And so early on, the gallery that represents me now has been representing me since 2003. And they were very familiar with the work that I was doing for that *Astonishment and Power* exhibition at the Museum of African Art with the body of work that was influenced by the nkisi.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And, you know, the aesthetics of that work and the dark look that it had, that's what they were attracted to. Even though they don't even understand the work, they knew that because I had become known for that work, that that was probably something that they could sell. And it was a, you know, a body of work that had a look and it was iconic for me at the time.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, when they took me on, I had already evolved to another place. So, they were a little bit confused. And I could feel that they were a little bit uncomfortable with the fact that I had moved in a new direction—not a new direction, but that the work aesthetically had moved. My ideas are still the same. The thread is still running through there, you know. But they didn't quite know how they were going to market that, you know? [00:38:02] What I was doing now was not what I had become known for in the museums.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But they also realized that I was going to do what I wanted to do. So, what happened was whenever I'd have an exhibition with them, they would say, "Can we come and do a studio visit?" And I would say, "No." And the first time, they were really, like, worried. And I created a body of work. I brought it in all finished. I laid it out and said, "I think this is how it could flow."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: They put it up, work sold. Well, of course, that made them happy, right? Okay. Two years later, we go through the same thing. "Can we do a studio visit?" "No." And I do the work. It's finished. Well, after a while, they realized that's the way it was going to be. And what I said to them finally one day is, "I don't want to let you in the studio when I'm working because you'll see things in progress, and you'll get something locked in your head. But anything could change, you know? I may suddenly take this piece in another direction. And if you get locked on that and that's what you want, you're going to be disappointed when I bring you something else. So, when you get the work, the work is done. This is, you know, where I've arrived, and this is what I'm showing." And I said, "And also, you don't panic until I panic."

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: So, they kind of laughed at that, right? And so, what has happened is they've come to trust my vision, even if they don't know where I'm going and I'm all over the place.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? It's not like I just do sculpture.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's not like I just do paintings. They don't know what they're going to get. They have no idea what they're going to get. But they've come to trust me. So, they don't—they still try to do the studio visit thing. And I think it's just a game now. And I say, "No."

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: A little tease.

RENÉE STOUT: Right. Right.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But I've also—you know, whenever I've been invited to give a talk for one of my openings and people come to the gallery while my exhibition is up, the owner, George Hemphill, he'll give a little introduction. [00:40:09] And one day, I remember him telling the group, "Renée will never let us do a studio visit. But I can always count on her to bring a body of work that's beautiful and ready to hang."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, you know, he's come to know that, you know, the work's going to get done. And I will surprise you just like I surprise myself.

NYSSA CHOW: It feels like there might have been a learning curve to get to that point where you can sort of call, you know, name your agency to say, "No." I mean, was there a time you didn't know you had permission or agency to do that or just literally didn't have the power to say no to that kind of thing [laughs]?

RENÉE STOUT: For some strange reason, I don't know what it was that made me say, "No."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, even though I've never—you know, I wasn't always the person that was so confident. There was some confidence in that for some reason. You know, that nobody was going to make or steer my work. I just—it was mine.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: It was yours.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: And you knew why it was—

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Which is why in some ways, you know, people have these dealers that are high-power dealers in the art world. And I hear stories about certain dealers who have dumped artists because they can no longer, you know, sell the work in a certain kind of way. So, you know, it's "Next. Let me get somebody else." And it's like the art world has become dealer-driven and collector driven.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And basically, I see the art world as having put the cart before the horse. The artists aren't calling the shots. It's people who don't even make the work that are defining what work is relevant and what should be done.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I don't want any parts of that. I don't want one of those high-powered dealers. Because even though they might make you some money, when you decide that you're evolving, and they don't like where you're evolving to, and there's the pressure, like, nobody's going to make my work go where they want it to go. [00:42:00] And I'm adamant about that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Have you ever had the opportunity or desire to mentor anyone else?

RENÉE STOUT: I do it all the time.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, is there anyone that comes to mind?

RENÉE STOUT: Well, you know Michelle, you know, she tells me all the time, "You're my mentor," you know? And there are Howard students that email me and ask for advice or to critique their work.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And it's not like it's a role that I feel like I've decided, "Oh, I want to be a mentor." It just falls in my lap sometimes. And I realize that it's something that I should be doing and giving it back because, you know, there have been people that have given me, you know, advice and things like that and been helpful. And in some ways, to me, you know, I just feel like I need to, you know, give it back.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, there's Madame Ching and Fatima and all of them involved in that—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —in a way, from what you were saying yesterday—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —too. Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay. So, is other—I don't know. What are some of the particularly important or meaningful exhibitions that come to mind, I guess, places or talks or any spaces along the way?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I think that one of the most important exhibitions for me was the *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy: The African Impulse and African American Art* exhibition that I was in. Was that 1999 when it opened? And what was interesting about that is because it was a groundbreaking exhibition, it was covered by *Sunday Morning*.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And they actually showed my piece on *Sunday Morning*. And 1990, it was still traveling. And it was the year that Nelson Mandela was released from prison.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And they covered the exhibition in that particular issue of *Newsweek* magazine.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: And my picture was the illustration for the exhibition. [00:44:03] So, to have that, a piece of mine in *Newsweek* magazine, you know, I was young at that time. It was like, oh, my God. You know? I was also one of the youngest artists—I think I was the youngest artist in the exhibition.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Then I would say *Astonishment and Power: The Eyes of Understanding*.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Which is the show that they did with my art. One part had my art and the other part had the Congo minkisi, focused on the Congo minkisi from, you know, around the world and museum collections. I think that was an important show for me because it actually put my work in a context where people could understand what I was doing.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And remember how I was telling you yesterday how people have had a hard time sort of understanding these different levels of my work? And I think because I can't be placed easily in a box is why I actually haven't really made it in the art world as, you know, a highly successful artist. I would say I define myself as successful because I wake up every day doing what I love to do.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But in terms of the way the art world measures success, I wouldn't be considered one of the successful artists.

NYSSA CHOW: And how do they measure success would you say?

RENÉE STOUT: By whether collectors are running to get your work.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And the gallery has, you know, your work on waiting lists.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And you're making millions of dollars, you know, the usual stuff that really has nothing to do with your art.

NYSSA CHOW: Right.

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: You know? So, I think that yeah, that's what has made it so that I'm constantly the "starving artist."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But like I said, I have to wake up, you know, go to sleep at night knowing that I've done the work that I believe in because it's meaningful to me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And it's the thing that what I think about that when I'm not here, I don't want my work to have been, "Oh, this is the trendy thing for right now." And then once time goes on, it's meaningless because the work itself was only for that time, you know, or only a trend, or only something. [00:46:05] I want something that speaks to the human condition, you know? It sounds like a cliché. But actually speaks to where we are now as human beings so that in the end—like, when I look at an artist like Francisco Goya, who documented the ugly times in Spain and, you know, and the civil stuff that was going on, and the atrocities. It's like even though that was of a time, it still tells you a period in human development. It is a record that we learn about those times. And I think that that's why I feel like it's important as an artist for me to say something real and say something meaningful.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Both of the exhibitions you mentioned, you defined it in terms of the conversations that it was engaged in in the larger context of the world, same with Goya, these much larger conversations that your work—with the world—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —world events, not even national.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: But international.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, because I—you know, I've always thought in terms of even though I was born here in the United States and I haven't traveled as much as I would like to, you know, travel, it's money. It's always money.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But I've been to Cuba, Jamaica several times, Italy, Russia.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I want to go more places, right? But the reason why I want to go more places, I feel like I'm

a citizen of the world. I view humanity, you know, I'm not just of—you know, if I was just—I'm in it, but I'm not of this, you know? If I was just of this, I'd feel like I need to lay down and die, you know?

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: You know, there's a—especially right now, you know? But there's a bigger world out there and I feel like I'm a part of it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I feel like that that's—you know, and my art has been in shown in places I've never been.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. [00:48:00]

RENÉE STOUT: You know? So, I want to go to more places.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What has been the international, outside of the U.S., reception or conversations around your art that you've heard, you know, thought about or stayed with you?

RENÉE STOUT: The idea that there are people out there in the world, scholars, or, you know, who have studied art and know about my art, that's amazing to me, you know? And I hear things from time to time, you know, mentioned by, "Oh, you know, I was over in so and so place and somebody was talking about your work." And, you know, and then people like Michelle, who is working on her dissertation and I'm part of it, she's been invited to, like, conferences like the portraiture conference that Deb Willis gives in different, you know, countries.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: She gave one in Venice. And, you know, people are—Nicki Green. People are going out into the world doing presentations about my work. And I think that that's amazing.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. I can't—so just to lean again on this conversation about mentorship, what do you think the priority—I don't know. There's no such thing as "should," right? But could be, if you had to name it, young artists, a mini you, I suppose, you know?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: If you were to start today what do you think the conversation should be about in the art, what are we engaged in, engaging with?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, that's an interesting question because right now there's a Howard student that it was, like—was that April? April, I had to go give a presentation to Howard students. And there were some students that you know they're going to go on to be artists. You could not, you know, once you're out there and you've been an artist yourself and you're dealing with students, you can walk into a room and pick the students that are going to be artists, you know? And you know the rest are just going to fall by the wayside. They just don't have it in them to do it. And this one particular young woman, you know, I was giving her a critique on her work. [00:50:00] But still, you want to encourage all of them, you know? But this one, I just know she's going to be an artist.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, she and I had a conversation. I gave her my email address. And she has asked me some questions and I've answered them. And I told her that I wanted to answer some more in-depth. But I have to—you know, I was going to be busy this week and I got to go to New York. And I told her soon as I got back from New York, I'm going to really answer some more questions that she has in depth. Because she's one of those people that I think needs the nurturing. And she's right at that point where I want to help her try to, you know, make the right decisions.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Because I want to see her be an artist, you know, an artist. So, yeah. That—I do want to be able to do that, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: What point is that?

RENÉE STOUT: Where you know that in today's art world, they can be misled in a certain kind of way and feel like once again, they have to create a certain kind of thing and be stuck to a brand and craft their art to what the art world wants. And they get caught up in doing that. But what happens is when they're young, instead of

developing their vision and who they are, and what they have to say personally, they're looking over there saying, "Oh, what's successful out there? Let me do a little bit of that or let me try to emulate that," instead of digging inside and finding out who they are as people ,and what kind of art they want to make, you know, and what story they want to tell, and how they want to contribute in their own personal way. So, I think that, you know she's at that point where I want to make her understand that, you know, that there—she could go the wrong way and make the wrong choices for herself and paint herself into a corner, and not ever want to do art again, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: So, young artists digging into themselves figuring out what they most want to do. What are the unanswered questions for you now, right now?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I don't think that I have unanswered questions. I just need to figure out how to get where I want to be. [00:52:03]

NYSSA CHOW: Where's that?

RENÉE STOUT: And that is to have a studio that is really a space that I can work in. I have never had that in my house. I don't have that in my house.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Like I said, I did have that in the loft, but it wasn't mine and I just felt, you know, like I wanted something that was mine.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But the house is very restrictive for me. And I work on the second floor in a 14x17 foot room. And so it's hard to kind of do all the work that I'm doing and store it in the house and, you know, it's just—so my goal was to try to figure out how I can get enough money to get an efficient space, you know, to really work in, you know? It's like, my questions aren't about my work. I know what I want to do and where I want to go. And I envision the things I want to create.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I never have a lack of ideas. You know? You know, I have sketch books like these Moleskines, stacks of them, with ideas I have yet to get to. If I just stopped having ideas and went through my—I still wouldn't get through every idea for the rest of my life. So, that's not my problem. [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: What's one that comes to mind right away that's in that sketchbook right now? Like, "Oh, I would love to bite into that." [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: I have this idea for this figure. Remember how I was telling you yesterday about the "Hoodoo Assassins?"

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, I get my ideas from anything. It could be looking at *Interiors Magazine*. Well, there's this show on TV right now, [clears throat] excuse me, called *Blood and Treasure*. I'm not really into the show so much. But the premise of this show, basically from what I gather, you know, watching snippets of it here and there is that the Nazis stole Cleopatra's sarcophagus. [00:54:01] And they were going to use it to gain power from it. And these treasure hunters, various treasure hunters, are all looking for it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But I think this one woman and this guy are trying to bring it back to its rightful place. But of course, there are other people just want it for monetary reasons. And some people, you know—so they don't know where it is. So, they're trying to go all over the world to track this, you know, Cleopatra's remains down.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, then I got the idea. Well, with the power of Cleopatra, and a woman that had that kind of power, right, over a nation. And I'm thinking, "Okay, well by "Hoodoo Assassins," what if I made a general that was a general that used to be the powerful general of this long line of assassins? And they have her body in a

sarcophagus on a special altar and that's where they help draw their power to keep fighting for women from—" so now I need to create this body.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And wrap it like the mummies I saw in the museum.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, wow.

RENÉE STOUT: You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Full circle.

RENÉE STOUT: And—yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And have the sarcophagus built and paint I myself with whatever symbols—not Egyptian or anything, but the symbols that, you know, would be meaningful to my narrative.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so that's one of the ideas that I had in my book [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: And so these women, you know, they have their leader, their original leader that they can draw on, like, the ancestors, drawing on the ancestors. So, I want you to be able to see that in the gallery, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Wow. So, maybe that's next? I don't know.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: I want to just give you the power to talk about now just, I mean, we can even use this if you like. Just the pieces, I guess, that still—I don't know—that still speak to you the most. I mean, maybe everything does. But the ones—you know what? Maybe this is a better way to frame it. What are the ones you want to be remembered for? I guess those are the ones, if you had to choose? Is that an impossible question [laughs]? [00:56:00]

RENÉE STOUT: It kind of is in a way. But, you know, and of course, you know, as an artist, you know, your new works are always the ones that you're, you know—I like—there are some older ones that I see and I'm like, "Wow," you know? That still really resonates with me. And the perfect story to illustrate how that can happen when you see an older work and how it hits you—there was a piece that I had done. And I guess it may have been in the, like—it might have been in the early 2000s or late '90s. I can't remember exactly when I did the piece. And this woman bought it. And then I didn't see it, you know, anymore after that. So, fast forward to last year when I was working on my one-person show that opened in September 2018 at Hemphill.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I was doing a painting where I was picturing the approach. I'm approaching my parallel universe.

So, you see this nebula in the sky, you know? And you see the stars. But around that nebula, there were the guardians of the parallel universe.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, there was this voodoo doll hanging down, but she had a real face. Because there's this voodoo doll in the window of one of these shops down in New Orleans that I see all the time.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I took a picture of it. But instead of having this voodoo doll face, I gave her a real face, so she looks like a voodoo doll, but she also has a face of a real woman. So, it's strange looking. Then there is this other character who's looking up and he is one of those derogatory dancing jigaboo toys that they used to

make, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But you just see his shoulders and he's looking up. And he's a guardian. Then you see a snake, which represents Damballa, you know, the Haitian, you know, snake of the cosmos.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: He's, like, floating in the air.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I had started this painting. [00:58:00] And I needed one more guardian for the fourth side of the painting, right? And I didn't know what I was going to paint there. Now meanwhile, the woman who had bought the painting passed away. I mean, the sculpture passed away.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And the way the sculpture looked, it was like, it looked like an altar. But it had this bird-like figure on it that I had created from an ostrich feather that I found on a hat, a vintage hat. That was the body. And it was Black, beautiful, shiny feathers coming down. And I found a real bird skull and put these cobalt blue marbles in for, like, eyes.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And it was called, *The Guardian*. Now, I completely forgot about that piece. So, they called me, and they said, "This woman's daughter wants to consign this piece to the gallery. Can you come in and check the condition of it since you haven't seen it for a while, make sure it's all in good condition? And we're going to sell it for her." So, I said, "Okay." So, I came in and I'm like, "Oh, my God. That's the fourth guardian." And the piece was called, *The Guardian*. And, you know, I had forgotten about it, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And then all these years later, I'm doing a piece called *The Guardians of the Universe* and I needed one more guardian. The bird became the guardian on the other side. So, it's like, you know, I see old works from time to time that I—they hit me like, "Oh, my God. I was already there thinking that I just got at that point. I was already there at that point."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? So, the work is kind of cyclical in that, you know, you evolve but at the same time, you always come back around to certain things, at least that's the way my work, you know, goes.

NYSSA CHOW: That's the evolution of a language.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. I do have my own special visual language and a set of things that I'm—questions that I'm always asking myself and, you know, ideas that I keep exploring, you know? [01:00:00] You may add more, but you always seem to want to spiral—because you're not yet—you haven't yet figured that out.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What is one of those ones that just keep following you evolving and growing?

RENÉE STOUT: It's like, you know, for some reason, you know, somebody asked me before, "Are you always going to deal with that root worker?" You know? And I'm like, "For some strange reason, even though I don't feel like my new work is so much, you know, like, tied to Fatima Mayfield, the ideas behind those works were spiritual power, talismans, the idea that I'm creating sort of this magical reality. That still keeps coming back around. Whether she does it or I do it, it's going to be done.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? Because, to me it's all about transcending this reality into one that I can create for myself that is magical for me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. This last little parallel universe feels like the spell itself. It almost feels like it's saying the time is now.

RENÉE STOUT: You know, that's so funny that you would say that because they did a review of it in *Washington City Paper*.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And a guy named Kriston Capps, who was the reviewer, you know, he doesn't really—he's a, you know, young white guy. He doesn't really have all the language there is to speak about my work. Yet, he got that feeling.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: He got that feeling that it was going down.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah, that's it. It was going down.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.] And it's going down.

NYSSA CHOW: It feels like that. It feels like an alarm.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: You know?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: You know, just even from pictures.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: But I imagine being in the spaces—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —it feels like that.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Like, the reds, the heat, the fire.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes. Yes.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. The immediacy.

RENÉE STOUT: And you know what? And, you know, my friend Michelle, she walked into my exhibition because she came to the opening of the show. She lives in Chicago.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: She came down, you know, specifically for the opening. She walked into the gallery and said, "There's fire, smoke, and blood everywhere."

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: And there was.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah. It doesn't—

RENÉE STOUT: And I didn't even realize it. [01:02:00]

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah. We're not invited to be a voyeur here.

RENÉE STOUT: No.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah.

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RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: We're in it. It's sort of just a feeling.

RENÉE STOUT: Yes.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, you know, when I work, you know, I'm making conscious choices. But when you work, your subconscious is working too. And you don't even realize what's coming out. And then when I finally—when she said that, and I looked around, I'm like, smoke was over here, smoke was over there, blood was over there, you know? Fire. And it's what I'm feeling right now. I'm feeling that, you know, these old structures, it's a metaphor for what we're in, have to almost be burned down so that something else can rise out of it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It doesn't work. It's not working.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I feel like if it's not going to be done by the powers that be, the youth are going to burn it down and, you know, make it be what it needs to be for them to thrive.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What is your hope for that, for what it could be, the parallel universe, thinking to the future? But what could it be?

RENÉE STOUT: Well, you know, they always talked about this Age of Aquarius that I'm waiting to happen, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: It's like, you know, The 5th Dimension sang about, you know, "This is the dawning of the age—" you know, it's like—so people talk about how the Age of Aquarius is going to be this more enlightened period where the world shifts and, you know, things start to happen where humanity realizes that it has to come together. But when is it going to happen, you know? So, basically, you know, you hear a song like that when you're young. And as an Aquarian, you know, you like what that song says and you, you know, you're looking at astrology and wondering when that period is going to come.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Maybe it's coming. Maybe this is what we see now, you know, these old structures digging their heels in because it worked for them. It worked for that handful of people that have always had the power and called all the shots that didn't work for everybody else. [00:02:03]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And suddenly, everybody else, be it women, minorities, everybody, you know, transgender people, everybody saying, "Wait a minute, you know, we live here. We pay taxes. We're part of this."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: "Why is your voice the only one that's heard?"

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I think that people are—there is going to be this power shift. And that's what I'm hoping. This is what I want to witness.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. If you—your radios are tuned to humility, and love, and compassion at one point. Are they going to be tuned to the same things if you made them today? What do we need? Is this—

RENÉE STOUT: Well, I made those radios—that piece was only made about, like, four years ago.

NYSSA CHOW: Quite a four years [laughs].

RENÉE STOUT: Four or five years ago. So, yeah. And I've seen us lose less and less—I mean, more and more of those things, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.] Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Compassion and civility and—you know, and so I think that that piece is as relevant as, you know, if I made it right now.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But like I said, I made it in, like, 2014.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. 2014.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Another world.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. Take a quick break. I guess we'll pause for a second.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay, so we're going to switch topics a little bit more. And I see here that you made some notes about where—significant places that you've lived. So, would you mind talking about that a little bit?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah sure because—

NYSSA CHOW: Sure. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —as we were talking yesterday, you know, you were asking me about different periods in time.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And it was triggering, you know, where I'd made particular works and that kind of thing. What, you know, what way was I thinking, and where was I when I was thinking the things that I was thinking. And it got me to thinking about the places that I lived in DC. And like I said, when I first came here, I was living, you know, in Bladensburg, Maryland with a friend who was originally from Pittsburgh. And he had come down, I think, in 1983. And I didn't arrive until 1985. So, and that was August of 1985. And I stayed there in Bladensburg until, like, 1986. [00:04:02] And then apparently, you know, a few months later, remember when I told you the woman of Visions knew that I was trying to move out of Bladensburg and she suggested that I stay, you know, at her cousin's home, you know, where she, you know, had the guy who—the brother who had Down syndrome?

And I could just stay there and watch him until they sold the house, which ended up being nine months later. So, it was a good, long time that I was able to stay there and just live rent free and just take care of him, which was, you know, a good, you know, period in time. I was at peace there. And like I said, I used her basement to make some artwork, you know, and enjoyed really spending time with him even though he couldn't hold, you know, conversations. He was a pleasant person, you know. And I wasn't by myself and he wasn't by himself.

But that was 120 U Street Northwest. And I stayed there until later 1986. And then from 1986 to 1987, I moved from there and found an apartment at 1507 Park Road Northwest. And I hated that apartment. It was a basement apartment in a building that was, you know, pre-renovation, you know. This was before the housing boom in DC. So, a lot of, you know, sort of run-down sort of, you know, houses that had been turned into apartments.

And I lived in the basement. And, you know, there was a "super" who lived on the other side of the basement who would come into my apartment and would take a few things whenever I was at work. And so, I never felt really comfortable there and couldn't wait to get out of there. Like I'd come home one day, I knew how many beers were in the refrigerator. Came home one day, I knew I had a sterling silver cuff bracelet sitting on my dresser that was gone. You know, just little things that had been taken. Then I wanted to move from there and I ended up moving to 1903 15th Street Northwest. [00:06:01] And I stayed there from 1987 to 1988 and got a nicer apartment from the basement up on the second floor. And it's a set of four buildings that are connected.

So, I moved from 1903 to the building 1905. It was a beautiful, you know, apartment that I really loved. And I recall doing some of my best work in that apartment for some reason.

NYSSA CHOW: Really? Oh my—why?

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know. There was something about where it was, the light that came in, the—[laughs] this is going to be funny.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: But it was the idea. [laughs] that the room that I was working in, because nobody could see in it, I could have the blinds up. But I could work with no clothes on in the summertime. [laughs]

NYSSA CHOW: Amazing. Now we know the tricks. [laughs]

RENÉE STOUT: But for whatever reason, I was very inspired in that building and did some of the work that was the work that got noticed for the *Dear Robert* show and also for the *Astonishment and Power* show, and also for the—no—yeah, those two.

NYSSA CHOW: What else was going on at that time?

RENÉE STOUT: I don't really know what was going on at that time, you know? I had just met the poet then.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But I don't think it was so much that relationship as just being in a space that I felt comfortable in. You know, that's also the space where I was able to quit my day job and be a full-time artist. Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Mental space as well.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, it was something about that space. Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And then after that, I moved to the big loft space at 52 O Street.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And continued to do some interesting things there. But there was something about that other one that I think I did, you know, the body of works that really put me on the map in a certain kind of way. [00:08:01]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Something—we were talking yesterday, and you mentioned—I asked you, this was off-tape—I asked you if you felt some sense of ownership about DC. And you surprised me when you said, "Not really," and said you had more of a relationship with New York and New Orleans than here.

RENÉE STOUT: You know, the interesting thing about DC, it's not a friendly city at all. And I've never felt that—you know, I could be at my garden, which was right on Florida Avenue, and I could look up at somebody, and I'm used to coming from Pittsburgh where if you're walking down the street, if you just meet somebody's eyes, whether they're Black, white, otherwise, you're used to somebody saying, "Hello." And when I got here, you know, I could be in my garden and I'll look up at somebody and say, "Hi." And they'll stare at you like, "Why are you speaking to me?" And just keep walking by. Sometimes, somebody might speak. But for the most part, you know, somebody might not. And, you know, I never understood that about this city and what it—what is wrong with it, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yet, when I got to New York, you know, all your life you hear these stories about New York being, like, this horrible, unfriendly place. I don't know. Maybe it is for some people. I don't know. Maybe it's what I project. I don't know. But New Yorkers have never been mean to me, you know? It's like, you know, somebody could look at me and we speak. Or, you know, I can get into a conversation with somebody on the subway.

I remember walking down the street one day and dropped a glove. Everybody—"Stop, stop stop!" You know? And "Your glove! Your glove!" You know? I remember one day shortly after, like, 9/11 when one of the lines was closed under a certain area. And I needed to get someplace. And I asked this man on the street how to get there and he told me, "Go down here and do blah, blah, blah." So, I go down there and I'm standing where he told me to stand. And the next thing I know, the man comes running up to me telling me, "I told you the wrong thing."

[00:10:03] You know? "No. Go here, here, here." You know?

NYSSA CHOW: And that would never happen here?

RENÉE STOUT: That would never happen here.

NYSSA CHOW: What is it about the city? Is it the transient—what is it?

RENÉE STOUT: It might be that it's just government, which is so, so impersonal. And it's transient. And it's always changing. And it doesn't really celebrate culture as much as it wants to believe it does even though it has all these museums.

Even the museums seem removed from the city itself, you know? Like, very rarely do they show, like, local artists or anything like that that, you know, everything just seems so compartmentalized and removed.

Whereas when you go to New York, even when it's crazy and it's not perfect and there's all kinds of stuff happening, yet the city seems—it has a personality. It has a solid, seems, personality that wants culture. Even though they're actually pricing culture out in a certain kind of way because there is a lot of money there. And to me, that's being driven by the people with the money and not so much the real, you know, New Yorkers who really, you know, know how to live around each other. You know? It's, like, there's so much music and fashion, and, you know, just creativity in the streets. You know? And that's what I get when I go there. That is not what I get here at all. And then you look at New Orleans. It's the same thing. New York has the same thing that—New Orleans has an identity. And the identity comes from the culture, you know? That love of culture, and the music, and the art that defines it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That's not here.

NYSSA CHOW: So, how come you live here?

RENÉE STOUT: You know—

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: I think the reason why I stay here, you know, like I thought I was going to like it. [00:12:01] Because I read it one way when I was visiting, and then I got here, and it wasn't what I thought it was. But I think it's the proximity to things. And it's easy for me to get back to Pittsburgh, a four-hour drive.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That's what was most important in the beginning because my mother was still living in Pittsburgh up until about 10 years ago. And I could go back home for holidays to be with her. But now she lives on the west coast with my sister, so I don't get back to Pittsburgh so often. I did, you know, a couple of weeks ago because I was at the August Wilson Center, you know, giving a presentation. But I can get to New York on the train. I can get to Philadelphia.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I can get to Baltimore. You know? I can get to, you know, New Orleans, hop on a plane. It's a couple hours. I love going to Art Basel Miami, hop on a plane. So, it's almost become, like, a base, or a centrally-located base where I can get to a lot of things. So, that's the only—you know, it's still a manageable city in a way.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Fortunately, I bought my house before the housing boom. So, it's not like, you know, my mortgage is, like, crazy. So, I don't have to have 23 jobs to survive. [Laughs] You know? So, I think that I've made peace with it. But I don't feel like it inspires me like I could—like it could. So, it's good that I'm able to get out of it a lot. So, it's like a base now.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh, wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Is there anything—what's that? But is there anything—[laughs] I'm pointing at a notebook right now.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: What am I looking at?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, when I get on Pinterest, there's this image of this woman who is a full-sized woman that keeps popping up. And it's not so much about what she's wearing, but her shape I keep seeing. And then there's this other woman at the skating rink.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: She's also this full-sized woman.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And it's something about her silhouette that for some reason, don't even ask me why. [00:14:00] This is how ideas start.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: There's just something that you keep seeing that then starts to morph into something. You're—there's a kernel of an idea in something. And so, these two women are the start of something and I don't know what that is.

NYSSA CHOW: Gosh. I'm glad I got that down.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: We're going to have to take a picture of this for the archives. I just want to let you know right now. Is there anything else on here that you realize that you would have wanted me to talk to you about?

RENÉE STOUT: In the book?

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah. I saw that you made some notes.

RENÉE STOUT: Oh. Oh. Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: So, sometime around when I was living at 1905 15th Street, which would have been, like I said, 1988, between 1988 and 1985. Somewhere in the middle of that period, probably more towards the early '90s, my father and a couple of family members came to visit. And I remember standing in my kitchen having this conversation with my father. And his words were, he says, I think—I have here it was 1994. He said, "I'm glad that you didn't listen to me when I tried to talk you out of going into art." He said, "You know, I always thought you were a flake. But you had a plan."

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: What did that mean to you?

RENÉE STOUT: It meant that, you know, all this fear he had about me going into a profession that he had been told he shouldn't because of the racism, because of everything, that he thought that I couldn't do it. He was probably only trying to save me the heartache of the failure that he thought may have come.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And when I was growing up, we didn't have such a great relationship because I was—there was a sort of rebelliousness to me. My sister was very different. She always seemed to try to, you know, please my parents in a certain kind of way. [00:16:02] Whereas I was just being myself. And I was an artist. I had this way of being that, you know, my father just, you know, felt like he couldn't control in a certain kind of way. And I think that kind of bugged him.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And he also saw me as being flaky or flighty and that kind of thing. So, he's thinking, this one needs to be reined in because she just doesn't know what she wants to do and she's going to fall flat on her face.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That's what he assumed.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But when he saw that I was having shows, and had by then, you know, a couple of works in museums, it hit him that, no, she is an artist. She is doing what she said she wanted to do.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, he said—and he said kind of recently, a couple years ago, he's like, "You know, I just see you happy doing what you're doing." And I said, "I am." I said, "I worry about money sometimes." I said, "But you know what? If I had it to do all over again, I wouldn't change a thing. I'm doing what I want to do, you know?" And I think that he's at peace knowing that it turned out this way.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did you ever expect to hear that from him?

RENÉE STOUT: No. No.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I also never expected to hear from my father when Hillary Clinton was running for president that she should be president.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Because here's a man who evolved. Because remember I was telling you how he was the type, "Women, you know, need to be doing this and women need to be doing that?"

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: He's evolved.

NYSSA CHOW: Your identity as a woman almost evolved in opposition to the ideas of what woman was.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. And both from your, I guess, just from the world, I suppose?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, because, you know, it's like I may be an introvert and, you know, seem like a wallflower at times in certain situations. But I have a strong personality.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That—and when I say a strong personality, not that I need to control anybody. But I'm going to be in control of myself. [00:18:05] And I'm not going to let anybody control that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? I have a vision for myself and how I want to move through the world. And I'm not going to let anybody take me off of that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, it's just the way I've always been. I was always like that. Even in high school, you know, you have, like, you know how high school is the Thunderdome basically? You know, you have the mean girls and the—you know, you know that set up, right? I was very different even in high school. And, you know, in some ways, was not liked because of that. And I realize it was the insecurity of some people to see somebody who just went their own way. You know, that can be threatening to see somebody at that young age that doesn't—is not trying to fit in. I never had that need to do that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I just was who I was.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, and I can remember my father and mother saying, "You know, you don't have to do what other people do." You know, there are little things that I remember my parents saying that made me have this independence in my thinking.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, your dad was a little worried about it. But was your mom worried about it?

RENÉE STOUT: No.

NYSSA CHOW: Never? Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: No.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. My mother in a sense. [laughs], I think she saw me in some ways as an extension of her that I was—she had a strong personality too, but she wasn't as outgoing in a way as I was. Even though, you know, I'm an introvert, I can socialize with people very well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know and have a good time. I just need to go back home and regroup, that's all. You know, I get overloaded. But she saw me as being a person who could go out into the world, who could travel and do things. And I think that she wanted me to be that because she could never be that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, she didn't worry about it. You know, there are times when she does worry because she watches too many of these programs like, you know, some crime shows. And, you know, I could call her and I'm walking down the street on a cell phone and she'll say, "Where are you?" [00:20:01] And I'm like, "I'm in New York walking down the—" "Oh, please be careful." I'm like, "Mom, I'm fine."

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, she worries on that level that people will harm me, not that I'll harm myself.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, like I'm going to go get into something. No.

NYSSA CHOW: Earlier, you said that the fathers were to teach the boys and the mothers will teach the girls. What are some of the lessons that only girls would have learned about the world, I guess, when you were coming up?

RENÉE STOUT: I think what he—what I suspect—

NYSSA CHOW: And boys, too. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —he was trying to say was that—and just in watching him and the way he saw the world—you know, girls are supposed to be obedient. Girls aren't supposed to take risks. Girls are supposed to gear themselves to be wives and mothers. You know, just the standard stuff. Whereas men are independent.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, men can take the risks. Men can, you know, go out and be who they are. Even men can sow their wild oats even when they're married, you know? Obviously, he lived by a double standard, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so that was the thing that, you know, me being an analytical person looked at that and like, that doesn't make sense to me. I didn't say it. But, you know, but I'm just like, I'm shaking my head no. That's not going to be me, you know. And, so like, even, you know, I wanted one of those—a minibike. You know, the little motorcycle, like, thing that boys used to—like, and still like. And I couldn't have that because I was a girl,

but yet I know that if he had had a son and his son asked for it, he would have got it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Can I ask you a strange question now, I guess? So, if we think about what it means to, you know, embody—what it means to live inside a particular body at a particular place in a particular time, right?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: There's expertise that only certain bodies can know about the world, you know? [00:22:00] And I'm wondering, as you understand your own body and all the different meanings that it has, what is that expertise? What can you know that maybe another body cannot know, whatever that body may be whether it be, you know, male identifying, female identifying, Black, white, gray pink, whatever it may be? What is your particular expertise in the world because you were born in exactly the vessel you were born into?

RENÉE STOUT: Okay. You know, one of the things that I think makes me who I am is that my father early on didn't say it, but implied and acted like he could be slightly resentful that I hadn't been born a boy.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: He wanted a son. He was one of these men that believes in, you know, you carry your name on through a son, you know? No matter how accomplished your daughters are, you know, and they have your genes, it's almost like that didn't count because the boy is the one that really makes you feel like you can live on into the future. And I internalized that and always felt that I needed to prove that I was as good as any boy or man.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And what it did was it enabled me to almost have this dual way of thinking, like, I can—I really feel like I can know what men are thinking and what they're going to do because of that. So, I have this kind of masculine edge in a way that I also move through the world with this this kind of confidence, in a sense, even though I'm small, you know? But I also have this feminine thing going on and I'm not easily readable. And I find that that's very intimidating to people.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I've found that. And I've had people say, you know, "You have this very masculine edge and it gets confusing," you know? And it's like, you know, I've been assumed—it's been assumed that I'm a lesbian. [00:24:01]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Like I care, you know? And I think what they're picking up on is that I have this way of thinking that's not locked into this feminine way of thinking, you know? It's just a different way of just viewing the world.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What does it mean to be a man? We never do ask women that. We always ask them what it means to be a woman [laughs].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, men have, I think this caricature. You know, most men because of society, have this caricature of what it is to be a man. And they keep communicating that down through the generations to the point where men don't deal with their emotions and they become these one-dimensional things in a sense because they haven't fully inhabited their own bodies. And so, because they can't inhabit their own, it's almost like they want to restrict ours.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And to me, if they fully lived as human beings with full range of emotions and the sensitivity, you know, and just being a human being, I think that we wouldn't have as many problems as we do with them. And I think it's about people being assigned—bodies being assigned a way of being. And I refuse to do it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. What does it mean to be Black and mean to be—you know, not Black, I guess?

RENÉE STOUT: Right. And it's just, like, like I said, when I wake up in the morning, I don't say, "Oh, I'm a Black person in the world."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I wake up and say, "Where's my coffee?"

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, when I come downstairs and, you know, it's like, okay, what will I work on today? What work do I need to do today? I'm not aware that I'm anything but a human being needing to do something.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's not until I step out into the world where all those things are assigned to me and shot at me and I have to deal with. You know? So, I don't know if that answered your question.

NYSSA CHOW: It does.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Very much so. The knowledge that that is a label—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Right?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Have those labels been attached to your work in ways that haven't felt like it fit over the years? [00:26:00]

RENÉE STOUT: Every once in a while—there's not labels so much as when people have seen my work and seen bodies of it over time but never met me as a person, or maybe haven't even seen a picture for whatever reason, and they meet me, and it's the weirdest thing. "I thought you were darker and taller."

NYSSA CHOW: What does that mean?

RENÉE STOUT: I don't know what that means.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: "I thought you were darker and taller."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And of course, I'm looking at them because I don't know what that means. I don't know why you would think that, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That's some language you can't translate.

RENÉE STOUT: I can't translate that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: Okay, darker and taller. Maybe—okay.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Very interesting.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Okay. It's been 30 minutes. Do you want to stop for the—

RENÉE STOUT: The reason why I was—yeah. We can do that.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah?

RENÉE STOUT: And the reason why I was saying—

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: —that is because if we have to be out of here by 4:45—

NYSSA CHOW: Yes.

RENÉE STOUT: —let's take the earlier break.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay.

RENÉE STOUT: And then we cannot have to think about it again.

NYSSA CHOW: Yes. That makes sense.

RENÉE STOUT: Have more time on the other side of it.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah. So, we do that.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: So, pausing the tape for now.

[END OF TRACK stout19_digrec_track07.]

NYSSA CHOW: Okay, recording. Okay. So, we're back from break. And I'm just going to be a person. We have been talking about a lot of different ideas. So, I'm going to try and introduce this midstream, these ideas. And one of the things you were just talking about—I mentioned to you that what struck me about your work is the way that it draws from all of these different cultures, but in a way that doesn't seem too ad nauseum as other, in any way.

Nothing in your work seems to even acknowledge the existence of this thing called other. It's all in the, sort of, the universal we. This idea of we-ness is in your work that doesn't draw boundaries, you know, national boundaries, even cultural boundaries. And that's really striking to me. And I was wondering if you could talk about that impulse.

RENÉE STOUT: You know, it's because I'm curious as a human being. And what I like to explain to people sometimes is, in order to be an artist, that very curiosity you had about the world when you were a child discovering things, you can't lose that, you know? And I'll tell people, "I'm every age I've ever been." So, if, you know, if I need to draw on that part of me that was 7, I can do that, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I think it's just the natural curiosity about the world. And, you know, they've done studies that show that young, young, young children don't really have any prejudices; they learn those things. So, you put a group of children together playing, they see each other as, "Oh, there's that child over there." And then, you know they might gravitate towards the one that they, you know, they like. But there's—they're not noticing the same things that adults would.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I think, for some reason, that I have never lost that, either. It's, like, when I initially count—encounter another person, no matter who it is, whether I know them or not, what I see is a person and I'm open to who they are. It's only when they show me that I can't trust them, or that I have to be leery of them, that I start to rearrange the way I relate to them.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But I'm open to the world and discovering people in the world. And I think that that's the way I approach my work, too, because I don't look at other cultures and feel threatened because I don't know what they are. [00:02:03] You know, it's, like, "Well, what's over there?" You know, I need to know that. And the first thing I'm always going to be gravitating towards is, "What kind of art do they make?"

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, "How do they communicate, you know, their ideas?" And I think that's just the way I move through the world. And I don't know if it's the museum experience that introduced me to other cultures young, when my parents took me to the museum, that I was open, that other cultures created. And it started there. But, you know, I've always kept that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. There's a lot of conversation now around this idea of appropriation. That does not seem to, you know, relate to your work, at all, where that is it seems for you it's a conversation with and a sharing with. But is that also how you understand and how you make the distinction between that and the current, sort of, debate and about what it means to appropriate?

RENÉE STOUT: That whole idea of appropriation, and what is appropriation, and what isn't appropriation can get really confusing and blurred, for me. Because knowing that I'm a curious human being that allows other art forms from other places to influence me, I would expect that other curious people would do the same.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But I—what I would hope they would do is do it with a kind of respect, you know, to say, "Okay, this is of another culture. I may not know everything about it, but let me learn some more about it," you know? But I what I also see is in this culture where divisions are set up so that people don't, sort of, bleed over into other places, so they can't relate. They, kind of, try to keep everybody boxed in. So, it seems to me like the idea of appropriation is just one more kind of boundary set up so that people don't start to look at other cultures and want to be curious and want to study more. So, it's, like, people with that word, appropriation, are so fearful of looking at something else because they—you know, somebody might say that, you know, "You're misunderstanding our culture," or, "You don't know anything about it. Why are you looking over here?" [00:04:02]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It—to me, it has been used to create even more boundaries.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. To exacerbate othering, it sounds like, to me, in a way, where if you're not—another way to create boundaries, like you say, to maintain this idea that there is such a thing as an other —

RENÉE STOUT: Right.

NYSSA CHOW: —out there. That's interesting because that's—you, in believing that you're sharing in another person's culture, it seems that's you're, sort of, erasing both things at once. This idea that there's mine, and yours, and there—and, you know, and then—and pretending that the history isn't shared between those cultures in the first place.

RENÉE STOUT: Right, exactly.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And it's like, you know, when you think about human beings and the idea of spirituality, and the way people live, and what people want for themselves and their family, you know, they want to prosper, they want to thrive, there's joy, there's love. And, as human beings, we share all those things, which means that every culture will evolve from those basic human needs to do that. So, how foreign is another culture if we're all human beings? And we all are really, basically, striving for the same things, as human beings, you know? But the cultures might develop differently and, you know, look differently, but, at the base of it all, there's a humanness.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I—that—I never lose sight of that, that there's a basic humanness, you know, that people want to be happy, people want to be healthy. People, you know—and so, if I start there, I can't see your otherness—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Because where would it even live.

RENÉE STOUT: Where does it even—yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Very good, yep. Off of that, we—I had mentioned to you, as well, that some—I know that what your work seems to do, for me, as—and I'll say, from of the record, I am from another country. I'm from Trinidad, where a lot of these practices, actually, also are very much as a part of our everyday life, right? [00:06:03] It—in a way, it emphasizes the fact that we have this shared history, as well—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —together, you know, that there's a, sort of, a vocabulary in the symbolism, in the iconography, that is so familiar to me in a way that even surprises, right—

RENÉE STOUT: Right, right.

NYSSA CHOW: —that—yeah. So, this idea of language across boundaries, transnational languages, yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: Well, I feel that one of the reasons why it's been so easy for me to communicate my life and my ideas behind my work to you, as the interviewer, is because there's a level where I don't have to explain myself, my humanity, my aesthetics, or anything like that because there is a kind of shared understanding. Now, if only we can get that to translate in the world to other people, you know, that if they just come to it as a human being, and be open to a kind of just receiving, you know, then, maybe, we can start to get more understanding on other levels in society. Instead of, like, you know, you and I, because we're women of color, we have experienced some similar things as we move through this environment we find ourselves in. But I'm also moving through this environment with a white woman.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But why is it that I'm different to her when I was born here, she was born here. But there's something other about me because, you know, my skin is different.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, that's the thing that I can't really wrap my brain around. And I see it as a kind of pathology in that you can look at another human being and just totally remove their humanity and see them as this foreign object in a sense that's threatening to you. And, to me, that borders on the pathological. And if you have those kinds of fears, I think you need to seek therapy for them. [00:08:03] You know, it's as simple as that to me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Because if I have not given you reason to fear, and you have it, then there's something wrong with you; it's not me. And that's—and that's the other thing that I've learned and why I move through the world the way I do. I am not going to let you project your fears on me because, first of all, they're unfounded. I don't know where they're coming from. You need to go deal with that. It has nothing to do with me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, off that point, too, I think it was yesterday we started talking about what is at the center and what is not at the center of your work. This idea of audience one, yes. But the idea that you know who you're speaking to—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —right? You're speaking to not familiar, but your own base of cultural experiences, too, right?

RENÉE STOUT: I speak to that first—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —because that's who I am, you know? I think about those concerns, like, because I have concerns for my community—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —and concerns for the way we are treated in this environment. And so, of course, that's going to be on my mind because it's in the news, it's in everything you read. But, at the same time, I know that if we lived in a world, or an environment, where those weren't our concerns—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —you know, I would—I would wonder—I'm speaking to everybody, but I need to—it's almost, like, I feel like I'm the medicine. I'm trying to be the medicine, or the salve, to help heal something and make us

better in order to navigate this. We're going to have to navigate it. We're not going anywhere. We're not going to suddenly be jettisoned out of here. We have to navigate it. How do I ease the way, in a certain kind of way, where I can open people's mind to a way of thinking, so they can navigate better?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that's what is at the center of my thinking when I'm creating my work. That is what is definitely at the center of it.

NYSSA CHOW: And how do you define community?

RENÉE STOUT: I think community, for me, is the people that understand the language. [00:10:03] But even if they don't understand the language, they're open to learning. So, they don't have to be of my immediate community. But people who are open and willing to be curious are my community as well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that's who I form relationships with, you know? All my friends don't look like me, you know? All my friends don't have the same sexuality or orientation that I do. But we are all in this together and willing to have dialogue. And even if we're wrong, you know, we can discuss things. People who are open to discussion, and learning, and evolving. Evolving is a big word for me because this is no finite thing. It grows, and it morphs, and it changes, and, hopefully, moves in a more progressive—and all those people willing to be a part of that, that's my community.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, if part of the solution and—

RENÉE STOUT: Definitely, mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, we mentioned, also, the particular—the priorities of your work. We had, as you spoke, you mentioned yesterday a little bit talking about Kara Walker and how her work implicates, I guess, whiteness differently, right, and engages more intentionally in that conversation; whereas, your work, sort of, doesn't trouble itself with that, and is that—in as purposeful as ways.

RENÉE STOUT: Right.

NYSSA CHOW: Can we talk a little bit more about what that center is? And do—can you think of anyone else who's, sort of, working with those priorities with that center in mind?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, it's interesting because in my—you know, being in the art world, somewhat and looking at—you know, I love looking at art and going to Art Basel Miami, and reading art publications, and just getting a sense of what the art world is about. Even though I don't feel like I'm going to let it run me, you know, or anything like that, I still feel like, as an artist, I need to know what's going on, and, you know, looking at ways of thinking, and trends, and that kind of thing, so I can always be aware of my context within it, you know, and how I want to position myself. [00:12:07]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, I used her as an example because what I started to notice when I wondered why, within the art world, my work is not looked at even more, even though I've had a really long career and more museums. My career developed in an odd way. And I've been told that by curators and everything.

Because what happened with the *Black Art: Ancestral Legacy*, which is one of the shows, like I said, in 1989 that put me on the map, was that museums, because of that show, started to know my work, whereas commercial galleries didn't. It was only afterwards that commercial galleries—some—started to know my work. And a whole lot just don't know it, you know? But in the museum world, my work is known more. And that's an odd thing to happen.

And so, I started to look at, "Well, why isn't that, commercially, I've not been more successful? And what I noticed is the trend when buzzwords are created—like, you know, identity, and this, and that, and, you know, and placing artists within categories to either write about, or market, or whatever—it's almost like this art world needs to have you fit neatly somewhere, where they can, therefore, have control in a certain kind of way, if they can, you know, put you in that box.

What I do notice is that they're more accepting of artists of color, women, transgender or LGBTQ people if they are dealing with their—themselves in the position as, in a sense, the victim of some greater thing. And, to me, that's, in some way, the dynamic in Kara Walker's work. [00:14:01] It works because she's creating this tension between the slave and the slaveowner. Well, in some ways, I've removed the victimhood from the equation. And

that's not a formula that works in today's art world.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I have my own world going on with my own language. And it's not, necessarily—the language of not being a victim is not understood right now.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That's the only way that I can, kind of, explain it—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —you know? And I don't know if that makes sense. But that's what I came to the conclusion that because I'm not dealing with my work. I don't position myself as the victim that's reacting to this thing, you know? I have characters that have their own power. They have their own—you know, they do what they do. Now, they may encounter a situation, but they're not driven only by that situation.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: They deal with it and then they move on to something else. That's what Fatima does, you know? She has her own sense of power. She empowers herself. And so, nobody gives her power, you know?

And this translates to—and the reason why there's a Fatima Mayfield is when I look at what's going on with the women's—with women right now, in this culture, and the attack on women's, you know, autonomy. Women still are using the language about, "Give us something. Give us our freedom. Give us our rights. Give—" but when I wake up in the morning, nobody—you don't give me something that is God-given. I have that already. And I'm going to protect that. And I'm not letting you take it away.

To me, I have it. You're threatening it. That's where I'm coming from. It's not, like, I don't have it, and you're not giving it to me, if that makes sense. It's, like—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —how did we allow a certain segment of the population to the—be the group that we have ask permission of? I have never felt that I had to ask anybody's permission for this. [00:16:03]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You don't give me—you're not in a position to give me—you know, you may own and run everything, but in my world, you don't, you know? You don't control this on a daily basis. And, for me, I think what has helped me maintain that kind of way of thinking is that because I'm a self-employed artist, and I won't teach at a university there's not really anything that puts, though—puts me in a position to have to feel like I need to ask somebody's permission.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

RENÉE STOUT: I don't go to a job. Who—you know, my boss can't tell me to do anything. So, it's a weird way I've just developed in this way where I don't know how to feel like I need to be asking [laughs] asking permission. And so, it's frustrating for me because, once again, I talk about that soldier in me. And it may sound crazy to whoever may be doing the research, in the future, to listen to this.

I am ready to fight. I am ready to go to war. Because how does this body that we feel like we have to ask permission of—they will fight for their freedom. They will go to war with another country to maintain their freedom. But they don't expect women, or minorities, or transgender people, or anybody else to be as adamant about fighting for their autonomy and their freedom.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, that's the only thing—

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: —I can say. It's, like, you know [laughs] I feel alone in that.

NYSSA CHOW: Talk about that. What do you mean?

RENÉE STOUT: I feel alone in that because—and I don't feel so alone anymore, though. And I'll tell you why.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Because the universe has always given me what I need just when I need it. So, I'm looking at all this stuff, gearing up, and the way things are going, and the way they're attacking women's rights. And I start to get—gear up, like the soldier. I'm ready to fight. [00:18:00] I want to go out in the streets. It's time to tear something up, you know? You know, if I can't tell you what I want and have you hear me, then maybe it's time to make you hear me, however I might have to do that. Well, you know, I met a guy who is a very analytical person and very politically aware.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And one of the main reasons why we got together is he would post things on Facebook. And my responses were so unusual from him, coming from a woman. And we started having these, like—you know, he would say something, friends would chime-in on his page, and then I might say something. And he's, like, "Wait a minute," you know? And so, then, it moved to, like, the private message thing when we would have these exchanges. Well, we went to college together. We didn't know each other in—like, he was in art, too. He started off in art, too. He was, like, a year or two ahead of me; maybe, I think, a year ahead of me. We would say, "Hi," on campus, but never talked to each other. We'd never had a conversation with each other.

And so, suddenly, he's, like, "I know her, but I don't know her. This is not the person that I thought, you know, that I saw." And so, we would start having these conversations. And he was, like, "Yeah, I understand exactly why you feel that. That is the way women should be right now."

You know, no fear in that—"Oh, why are you—" things like—you know, "women don't think like that." And, you know, I didn't get that, you know? I—and he's, like, "Oh, yeah, yeah. Women just need to get on the ball and just—you know, there's nobody going to do this for them," you know? So,—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —it's almost he's, like, "You do what you need. You say what you need to say. Yeah, right," you know? So, it's almost like I have this cheerleader and I don't feel so lonely about what I say. I don't feel like I'm crazy, you know what I mean, for taking the stance that I'm taking.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Even from other women, I'm like—you know, because women cannot wrap their brains around taking power, you know, for a woman to take power.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:20:00] Where did you see an example of that, women not wanting to do it? What—well, what are the most—

RENÉE STOUT: It's the language that they're still stuck in.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Me and some women on his page got into this exchange in—after a response to something he posted. And even the woman that I could tell sees herself as a feminist had said some language that alluded to the idea that she still needed permission from a man. And my friend, the guy, jumped right on in and—in on her and said, "That's exactly what she is talking about."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: "You still are asking permission." See, and then the women, they're always surprised because they don't even know they're saying these things. They have subconsciously felt like they have to ask permission to be. I don't feel like I have to ask permission to be.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And when are—you know, I'm frustrated because I want women to not—to get out of that way of thinking. It's such a—you know, it's the patriarchal thing where you have to go still ask Daddy, you know, to do this, to—you know? And I don't know if it's because I was always, sort of, questioning my father and what that masculinity imposing something on me. I questioned it early on. And then once I decided that I was grown and I don't have to listen to that now, you know, may—he was my father and he raised me well, I think.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, part of him did a good job, you know? And I could, you know—I can reflect back on the things

that he said to me, as a parent, that I feel made me a good person and made me independent. But, at the same time, that whole patriarchal crap was still a part of it, you know.

[They laugh.]

It's all—I had to separate the things that were good from the things that I needed to throw away.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, that's how I arrived at where I am now.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, you weren't surprised? [00:22:02] Or you weren't surprised? So, elections, we're talking about the polls—we're in DC. The breakdown during elections, like, how—just how many women voted for—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —Trump?

RENÉE STOUT: 53 percent of the white women did.

NYSSA CHOW: You weren't surprised? How did you understand it?

RENÉE STOUT: I was surprised that after he could say all the things that he said, that they would still vote for him.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I wrote them off.

NYSSA CHOW: Wrote them off? What do you mean?

RENÉE STOUT: These women, it's, like, because you obviously—your brain really is not even—it's just not there and it probably never—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: With that man saying and doing all the things he has, you know—the things he said, and he did, and what he continues to say and do if you could even vote for him the first time around, it's, like, it shows me who you are, what your values are, and how little you think of yourself.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, you're not going to be a soldier in this war. You're not—you're far from it. So, I don't even consider you, you know? And it sounds, you know, drastic, but I don't. I don't—I'm not looking to—you know, for you to have my back. You're not going to have it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Because, obviously, you're not identifying as a woman. You're identifying with a structure that is imposing something on you. And you, apparently, don't mind because you voted for it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Do you see a relationship between that, the patriarchal—the feel? Do you almost feel the patriarchy that you seem to be describing, the, you know, the loyalty to this thing and the, sort of, I don't know, the racism, the bigotry, and the other ideologies that, kind of—do you see a relationship between those?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah, there's a—yeah, there's a relationship because it seems that white women tend to take on the same fears and prejudices that their men do. And they feel protected by that. [00:24:00] And they're privilege that comes from that is what they're afraid to let go of and maintain. So, even though they might say, you know, "Oh, this is not right. Oh, you know, I see this—these injustices," there's still that innate fear that they've learned because the structure perpetuates it. It has from the very beginning. How do you undo that? There has been nothing—there's no structural change to undo that, not really—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —you know? And so, they still run with what's that safe space that they feel is, like, that safe space, so—for them.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But it's the safe space for them, you know, even as they're saying, "You will not have abortion available to you, even in rape or incest." They are still accepting that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: When does the—is it going to be the straw that breaks the camel's back?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, that you realize that we all have this common thing. Even you, as a white woman, there is a thing that is really trying to hold everybody down, you know, white, wealthy, straight, Christian men.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. It makes me think, can you connect that now to the ideas of religion and, sort of, people of color, specifically African Americans and really, as I make it transnational [laughs]—

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —all of us, you know, how that relates—how you see that connecting to the role that Christianity has, and why you think it's so important for us to look outside of Christianity to other forms of spirituality, other origin stories for spirituality?

RENÉE STOUT: Because the way I see it, Christianity is reflective. It's, like, it plays off of each other. It's reflective of the structure that's already here.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: When you ask a white person to describe God, they say, "A white man, with a white beard, and a white—you know, and white robes, and white—" everything's white, right? [00:26:00]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And it's this father-figure that's, you know, telling us all what to do.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, that's reflective of who they are. I don't see myself in that, you know? And that's the way Christianity has always been structured within this country. From the very start of this country, that's the way Christianity has always been. So, how is that, as a spiritual belief system, really going to give us true empowerment in a certain kind of way if that's the way our ideas of creation are filtered through that vision?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's almost like our idea of created—of creativity and what's beyond us is filtered through that lens and not our own.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I think that's my issue with it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. In your work and at the center of all this ancestral spiritual, you know, spirituality, there're women there.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]

NYSSA CHOW: Madame Ching [laughs], right? Can you talk about that?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Because I'm a woman. And so, of course, I'm always examining myself and what is my power.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Where do I get my power from? And how does my power affect my world around me?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And the idea of balance, because as I was explaining yesterday, if you look at a lot of traditional

African religions, they don't downplay the spiritual component of the woman in creation and the way, you know, women—you know, they have ceremonies that celebrate, you know, the idea that women are the child-bearers and that women are a strong part of the culture. And there's a balance between that masculine and feminine power that needs to be maintained. That's not what you see in Western culture or Christianity—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —you know? And I think that that's why I gravitate more towards religions that are outside of Christianity, or what I call the big three, which are Judaism, Islam, and Christianity. Because when you look at them, they all seem to have that tendency to believe that the man is at the center of everything and then everything has to fall under that. [00:28:08]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, women have to obey men; obey, you know, the husband, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I—that, to me, is out of balance. And I think when you have a culture where the very spirituality that is supposed to be the thing that holds the culture together is out of balance, the culture's out of balance.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow. Okay. I had a question there about the ideas that I've heard spoken that the women has the quiet power at home, even within Black cultures, sometimes. But they're the—they may not be the loud power, but they're the quiet power at home. I don't know if you've heard that. Maybe you haven't heard that.

RENÉE STOUT: You know—

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: —it's, like, I have heard it—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —but it wasn't like that in my household.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, my mother is no shrinking violet—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —[laughs]—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —you know? And so, I did see her as powerful,you know? And this may sound crazy, but there was an instance, an instant when—and the reason why I never saw her as not being powerful, and this—and, you know, a fierce protector—my aunt lived in the projects in Pittsburgh in Arlington Heights. She lived across from a woman who kept bullying her. So, one day, she, for whatever reason, came into my aunt's house, and grabbed her by the hair, and dragged her out, and was beating on her. My aunt called my mother.

My mother, who was like a lioness, would always grab her two cubs—her—she didn't go anywhere without her two cubs, right? She grabbed me and my sister, puts us in the car, drives across town. She goes up into the building. The woman would not come out. [00:30:01] And my mother is banging on this woman's door. I saw my mother rip a metal, like, you know, that was designed to protect the window—a metal grate out of the window and proceed to bang on this woman's door. And this was a metal door. And put dents in this door, banging on this door, wanting this woman to come out. And, you know, she had lost her mind.

She's like—my mother is that—is a fierce protector. She was going to protect her own, whether it was her children or her family. And just looking at her, I never saw her as, you know, the quiet, you know—oh, you know, the woman's quiet. And then, you know, my father's out there. No, that's not what I saw [laughs]. And now you wonder why I'm the soldier [laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: I was going to say. I think we figured it out. End of interview.

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. But your grandmother was something else. On both sides, right?

RENÉE STOUT: You know—okay. To talk about my two grandmothers and how different they were.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: My mother's mother, like I said, was very religious and in a sense, because she wasn't educated—she graduated from the ninth grade, but she had a lot of siblings and she was the youngest of several siblings. And when her mother became ill, the rest of the siblings had been in high school and whether some graduated, a couple of her brothers went to the military. Because she was the youngest one, they took her out of school so she could take care of her mother. So, she never finished her education. And so, she wasn't very worldly. You know, she was just content to be the mother and, you know, eventually the grandmother.

Whereas my father's mother was a very interesting woman. And I believe that a lot of that Madame Ching character came from what I sensed about her as far as not the magical thing, but the strength in this wise woman. [00:32:05] You know, she was very—even though she didn't travel a lot, there was something so elegant and worldly about her. You know, she and her husband, my father's father, bought a house and I can remember them having cocktail parties where people were wearing, like, you know, gowns and having like, you know, martinis walking around, you know.

And it's just like—and then she had worked. She was a domestic, like a whole lot of African American women who could never get jobs doing anything else. But she had a rich white woman that she worked for named Mrs. Wimmer. And Mrs. Wimmer was always redecorating her house, always giving my grandmother beautiful, expensive, elegant things, silverware. To this day, I have stuff that came from Mrs. Wimmer's house, you know. And, you know, silk curtains with linen linings. Just beautiful clocks, and just all kinds of stuff. And my grandmother would feather her nest with that, you know. My grandmother was elegant. And she had this bearing about her that is just—she was fascinating to me.

And as I got older—you know, when you're young, you don't realize that you really want to talk to these people while they're alive. You know that once you get older. It's like, so much I could have asked her about or talked to her about. But you don't appreciate that sometimes when you're young. And I've tried to instill this in my nieces. While, you know, your grandmother is here, relate to her. While your grandfather is here, relate to them. You know, they're not going to be here long, you know. But young people have a tendency to just kind of—they just want to be with their own.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And, you know, of course, you know, I might have been like that too a little bit. You know, just wanting to hang out with the dudes and my cousins and blah, blah, blah. But I did have a relationship with my grandmother. My grandmother did see something in me. And the thing that she recognized in me was that I loved interiors. [00:34:03] So, what we would do is we would share *Architectural Digest* magazine. And whenever she wanted to go to, like, a open house—she loved—she was curious. She wasn't going to buy the house, but she loved going to open houses to see what people did in the houses. I would go with her. You know, me and my mother would go with her. And this was my father's mother. So, this was my mother's mother-in-law. She got along with her. My mother told me that she always felt like, in some ways, that my father's mother was more of a mother to her than her own mother. Even though her mother was her blood. There was not this emotional thing. My grandmother, my father's mother, was very protective of my mother, to the point that when my father and mother were like fighting and in the process of getting a divorce, my mother left Pittsburgh and moved to where her mother-in-law was—

NYSSA CHOW: Why?

RENÉE STOUT: —and stayed with her for a while until she found, you know, a job. And she worked there for a while, but she ended up coming back to Pittsburgh after about a year. But she went to her mother-in-law.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that's how powerful my grandmother was.

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: So, why do you think she felt that way about her mother? Just because of the warmth?

RENÉE STOUT: It's not like my paternal grandmother was very effusive and huggy. But you knew she had your back and you knew that she was wise, and you knew that she would give you information to make you grow and protect you.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, and that bearing that she had and that elegance and that—you know, she was somebody to be emulated, you know. Whereas my other grandmother was, mentally, very not—you know, we hugged her. We loved her. But in hindsight, she was very self-centered. And so, she wanted everything to revolve around her. [00:36:00] Like, for example, when Christmas would come or something like that, she wanted everybody to come to her house. But yet, my mother would say, "Do you realize that I have a home and a family, and I want to spend the holiday? Maybe we want to be a family right here." You know. Some of my relatives would go to her house, but she wanted everybody always to be right there.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Sometimes we would go, you know. After we opened up our presents, we'd go and visit. But she always wanted it like that. She didn't want to let go. It's like all of her children had to always be around her and they could never almost give attention to where they needed to, their families. They had since been, you know, grown with their own families and she still felt like it should, you know, kind of revolve around her in a certain kind of way. She's the one that I said came to my show and saw—

NYSSA CHOW: Oh.

RENÉE STOUT: —the chicken feet in a jar and said, "Why would you—?" Everything about her revolved around her religion. Her and her religion.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know. They all took turns taking her to church and picking her up, you know. And that's the way she was.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Did your paternal grandmother ever come to your shows?

RENÉE STOUT: Oh. Let me tell you. No, because she lived in California, in Sacramento. She had moved from Pittsburgh in about 1970—oh, boy—about 1975. She moved from Pittsburgh to California. So, you figure, I was in high school.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh.

RENÉE STOUT: I wasn't yet an artist yet.

NYSSA CHOW: Before she went.

RENÉE STOUT: So, I was beginning to have some little shows that I was in with the Visions group.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: The Women of Visions in Pittsburgh. But she wasn't really coming back and forth to Pittsburgh at that time. You know, not as—especially not during a time I was having a show.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But she was alive in 1989, '90, when the *Ancestral Legacy* show opened in—it was 1989, opened in Dallas Museum of Art. [00:38:05] She was dying about the time that show was to open. And I was telling her about it. She was dying of lung cancer. And I was telling her about it. And, you know, so, she was really proud of me. But she never got to see it. But had she not been ill, she would have been with me. My mother and my sister and myself, we flew down for the opening. And she probably would have been with us had she not been ill. Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow. You know sometimes you can get a sense of, I don't know, what some people feel is the most important thing they need to teach you, they need you to know. Right?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Do you have a sense of what that most important thing was for the different women in your life? There seems to be a lot of strong characters there. What that would have been for each of those people. What they thought would have been the most important thing you needed to know?

RENÉE STOUT: Who?

NYSSA CHOW: Like, so you—

RENÉE STOUT: The grown-ups. What did they think that I was—?

NYSSA CHOW: Your grown up—the grandmothers. Your mothers. What do you think is the most important lessons that they felt like—the urgent lessons that you think they might have wanted, needed—felt like you needed to know?

RENÉE STOUT: The one that stands out the most is the one that I said yesterday, when my father told me I'm going to have to be twice as good in this world—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —for them to take me seriously. I'm going to be twice as good as a white person. And he was right about that.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And in some ways, you know, it makes me keep my focus and it makes me driven. Because, you know, you know that you can't be mediocre. You've got to always be driven and be—you know, strive to be the best for them to even take you seriously in operating in this thing, you know. And so, I think that that was probably the thing that—

NYSSA CHOW: That's the one that stays the most.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. And also—you just made me think of another incident. [00:40:01]

[They laugh.]

Which is why I'm the way I am, which is why I'm the soldier. When I was about 10, maybe. 10 or 11. We were playing around at my grandmother's house. And there was a family across the street. And they had about, like, four or five kids in the family. And, you know, in hindsight, you realize when a child is a bully, that there might be some emotional things going on. Well, there was a young girl over there our age. And she was bullying one of my cousins. And she beat her up, and then she comes to me one day and she says, "I'm going to beat you up next." So, here I am thinking that, "Oh, okay. I'm going to tell my father that, you know—." We'll call her Martina [laughs]. So, I say to my father one day, we're getting in the car to go pick my mother up from work, and I can remember sitting in the back seat. My sister might have been in the front. My father was, you know, getting ready to pull out of the driveway, because we were at my grandmother's house. And so, I said, "Daddy, Martina said that, you know, she's going to beat me up. She beat Ronnie up and she said that she's going to beat me up."

So, I'm expecting that my father's going to be like, "Okay, when we get back, I'm going over to Martina's mother and I'm going to talk to Martina." Right? And I can remember him at the wheel, and he turns around like this and he said, "If you don't kick Martina's ass, I'm going to kick yours." And he turned back around.

[They laugh.]

From that day on, I knew that nobody was going to be able to bully me because I better take care of this, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, in a weird kind of way, I moved through life like I was going to have to fight, right? And what I realized all through school, whenever the bullies came—because there was always going to be bullies all the way through school. [00:42:04] Sometimes, the bully would bully friends around me, but never confront me. Never. Then, when I got to high school, like I was saying—remember I told you in high school sometimes, you know, people thought I was, you know—"Well, she's got her own world going and we don't like that." Well, it took one time for somebody to think that they were going to come to me, and I nipped that in the bud and nobody else ever bothered me again. But it stems from that. Him not allowing me to be a victim. I was not allowed to be a victim. So, that's when I—it all ties in with my not taking on that role of a victim.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, so, that was an incident that I think formed me as well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That was all the permission you were going to get and all the permission you needed right there.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, you know, they sound like violent things, you know. But at the same time, if you ask me why I don't ask anybody's permission or feel like a victim, it all stems from that upbringing.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That I'm not—I was not watching anybody be a victim.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Oh. All right.

RENÉE STOUT: [laughs]

NYSSA CHOW: That's powerful. I wanted to—I don't know. There's something we haven't touched on yet, which is, I'm trying to get a sense of what that very first—I mean, it's true. You did have an unusual beginning, right? You went straight to the museum. Your work. What was that like? I mean, that was still a first for you at that point, to see that happen.

RENÉE STOUT: It was a first for me because that *Ancestral Legacy* show was my first museum show.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And the Dallas Museum, they bought that piece. You know, the iconic piece.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:44:00]

RENÉE STOUT: And that one as well as—they have another one. They have two. They have two. A smaller piece too. And that was amazing to me in that my work would now become part of a permanent collection of a major art museum, you know? And so, I don't know. You know, it's like, that's amazing to me. But still, in some ways, I'm outside of it in a way. It's like, "Okay." You know how they say, you know, "I'm not going to buy the hype." It's just like, just work. Just work. Okay, that's nice. And then, you know, as my—the collections of museums, you know—the collections build, I'm like, "Okay." Then one day, it hits me sometimes when I think about it. I'm like, you know, "When I'm dead and gone, these works are going to be in museums." You know? And I think the thing that hit me one day was when my work showed up in a textbook. And I'm like, "Oh my God." And then what hit me one day was my sister out in California. You know, she was in her office one day and she has a painting of mine hanging in the office. And one of her coworkers came in and was looking at the painting and said, "Oh, Renée Stout. We studied her in school."

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: So, to hear that is like—you know, it's mind boggling for me. But I'm still just Renée the artist that makes the work. And, you know, there's almost—I don't want to say it's a disconnect, but it's just not something that I really think a whole lot about.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Well, you're both Renée the artist and Renée, an idea, out in the world now. I mean, talk about an alter ego.

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: Right. Because people have assigned these personalities to me that have nothing to do with me, based on the art that they saw, you know.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yeah. I wonder what they're learning about you in school. Did you find that textbook? [00:46:00]

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah. Because whenever people ask me—see, they have to ask my permission since I own the copyright to all of my work. And I do it that way so I can kind of keep track of where the work is being illustrated, you know. And so, whenever they write for permission to use an image of a piece, you know, they'll ask me what is the compensation that I want. I never want money. What I want is at least one copy of the publication for my own personal archives. So, every time it's ever been printed in anything, I have a copy of whatever it was. And so, they sent me one of the textbooks.

NYSSA CHOW: It's okay? Yeah. It's fine. The framing was all right? How did they frame you in this?

RENÉE STOUT: Oh, you know, within the context of, you know, art history. And this is happening now. And this artist did this. And, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow. The thing that you're taking for granted here is blowing my mind.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: I mean, it's something, you know?

RENÉE STOUT: And you know, I don't know if it's so much that I'm taking it—maybe it seems like I'm taking it for granted. It's too abstract for me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, and too far, in a way, removed from the way I see myself. You know, I'm just moving through the world and you ask me, do I have a career? I have a career, but I'm not a careerist, if that makes sense.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I look at a lot of artists and they're careerists. What happens is, it's not so much about the work and the meaning of the work, it's like strategizing to create this career and this thing that achieves a certain kind of fame. I don't care if nobody knows who I am as far as, you know, recognizing me on the street. I don't want to be that. I want to make the work. I want the work out there. I don't want the focus on me. As a matter of fact, I don't even want to go to my own openings.

NYSSA CHOW: Really? Why not?

RENÉE STOUT: I go, but I don't want to.

NYSSA CHOW: What is the experience that you would rather avoid?

RENÉE STOUT: The introvert. I'm the introvert. I don't—I made the work. The work is speaking. Let the work speak, you know? [00:48:00] And then I have to be on at an opening and it's draining.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know, it's draining for me to walk into a room full of people. And even though I appreciate that people come out. They're curious about what I'm going to do. You know, one thing the gallery has done—and it's kind of funny to me but I understand why they do it. It's business. It's like—and I know it probably upsets the other artists in the gallery. But for several years running, I've been given that plum slot of the fall opening. You know how when, you know, the gallery year runs from basically September to like May. Then the summer is like, "Oh, let's do group shows." You know, nobody is coming to a gallery in the summer. Then when fall gears up and you want that first opening, it's going to pull people in. They've always given me that September slot, you know. And they know that they're probably going to get a crowd. And they do, you know. And so, it's pressure for me. And when I walk in, I'm overwhelmed. You know, you have to talk to people, but I put my Fatima face on, and I start talking to people. And then I go home and I'm just like wiped out, you know, for weeks.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But, you know, because I've worked hard, and it culminated in that. And then you just like—you kind of like crash. And so, in some ways it's always about me just saying, "Look at the work, not me. Look at the work. This is where I'm trying to speak." You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. You had mentioned a little bit before—I think I wrote it down—you were talking about DC and the arts and where arts live in the context of DC and what maybe is good and what maybe could use some improvement there.

RENÉE STOUT: What I think the problem is with DC is, unlike New York, which happens to be the financial district. [00:50:00] You know, the financial city. But with that, you have the art world. And I guess that kind of is related in some ways. You know, you're selling art. You know, artists gravitate toward that place. There are so many galleries. There's so much culture. New York has a personality. New Orleans has a personality. And these are two—you know, those are two of my favorite cities. But DC is about government. And somehow, within this country, not other countries. Within this country, government is at odds with art.

NYSSA CHOW: Where do you see that?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, it's like they never want to fund. You know, they're always attacking the NEA. It's always—they're always trying to censor. You know, government is not comfortable with art. And one of the things that I read the other day, which was an interesting article about why when a country starts to go towards fascism, artists are attacked. That's one—you know, we're the first part of the population that's attacked, is because we reflect what's going on. We're the ones asking the questions. We're the ones putting a mirror up to this. They don't want people to think. So, if artists are generating that kind of, you know, critique and analysis, then you're the enemy. Because you're showing the population something, we don't want them to think about. And this is what this is.

This is about, you know, where we are right now with this particular—and DC always seemed—I always say that no matter whether Democrats or Republicans are in, DC always has a feeling of being conservative. Because this country has—the government has never really forged the kind of relationship with the arts that it needs to. So, it still remains sort of conservative in that area. And in other areas as well. But, yeah. [00:52:00] It's kind of a weird thing because this is supposed to be the center of government of this country that it just doesn't really seem to allow the arts to thrive. And that the people in power, whether it be the local, you know, government or, you know, the federal government or whatever, they just don't get it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Okay. So, to switch gears a little bit here. So, are there pieces of yours that don't often get talked about or sometimes maybe not discussed as much in the public sphere that you want to sort of highlight, bring to the fore, make sure we talk about today?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. Yeah, there are like several works. And like, I may not recall all the names of those works, you know. Because, you know, sometimes I move on so fast to other things that I can't recall everything or where it is.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But, like I talked about the idea yesterday that that sculpture that is owned by the Dallas Museum of Art called *Fetish #2* that actually put me on the national stage and the international stage. That gets overexposed as far as I'm concerned, you know? It's like, I love the piece. And I think it was a very important, pivotal piece in my work and my development as an artist, but people get stuck on that. And even now, I get calls for, you know, or e-mails for permission to, you know, reproduce that in a publication. Meanwhile, my work has evolved to several bodies of work and several ideas that stem from that work, you know. But it's growing and I want—you know, I would hope that people would really follow the trajectory of the work instead of getting, you know, consumed by one idea that I tackled.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And sort of look at my way of thinking. And maybe that's being naive, thinking that the art world can do that in a certain kind of way. Maybe that's why, you know, an interview like this is good. [00:54:01] So that I can say it in my own words, that I wish that people would fill in the gaps of those iconic pieces that people seem to latch onto. And realize that there have been pieces that I have done that may have been sold to private collectors that may not be in museums that are important parts of the bodies of work that I've done over the years. And like, for example—I'll just use one for example. You know, I have been doing a lot of research on voodoo in Haiti. Or Vodou, as it technically should be termed. And I was fascinated by the idea of, you know, an overall higher power, yet this higher power had helpers. Like what they call loa or orisha. Or, like for people who are Christians, saints. You know, that help this higher power, you know, help humanity do what it needs to do. And these loa are made of—they're female spirits and male spirits. So, once again, there's this balance of power that I was attracted to.

So, I got this idea to do what they call the *Vodun Pantheon*, which is this group of spirits that together, their energy is very powerful. And it's male and female energy. And so, I ended up creating these mini altars for about seven of these loa. Like Erzulie had one. Damballa had one. Guédé, who are the spirits of the ancestors, had one. They were very elaborate in that I even gave each one the drink that they like. Like, Ogun had his rum, you know. And their iconography was communicated within the altar. Like, Agwe is the one of water. And so, of course he had a boat and it looks like he was floating on the ocean. [00:56:00] And then he had his clairin, which is a clear kind of alcohol, you know. So, all these little, you know, iconic things that belong to each spirit. And I felt that that was an important tableau that nobody really even knows about because one collector ends up buying it. It might have been shown like twice. And it's never been pictured anywhere else. It's not in any books or anything. And you start to feel like those are almost getting lost in some black hole. And you always want people to be able to see your work within the context of the rest of your work.

I feel like that as an artist because, like I said, I have an ongoing story. These are missing chapters, the way I feel about it. And it's almost like, "Okay, well I'm dead and gone." They might do some retrospective somewhere and suddenly the thing appears. Who knows? And maybe it doesn't. You know. But like I said, when you're a

narrative artist and you feel like each body of work is a chapter or certain works are an important sentence, and they're missing, you feel like the whole story is not being told. Like there are gaps in the story.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah, so you mentioned also the *Conjuring Table* as being another one. Is that right?

RENÉE STOUT: The *Conjuring Table* was one in that it was the first—one of the first tableau where I created an object or a thing that generated the spirit of a woman. Like, you felt the presence of a woman, and you felt that she had the ability to conjure. She had her own power, you know. And you are the voyeur, looking at her tools that she would use to sort of strengthen that power or to achieve, you know, a desired goal or whatever. And that's a piece that's in a private collection that really hasn't been seen that often either, you know. And these are, to me, important pieces.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. [00:58:00] I want to invite you to do something. I know it's going to be hard to do. But you've said it a couple times now, this idea that there is this narrative. You know, there are sentences missing. There is this narrative. And I wonder if you can take on the challenge right now of just articulating that narrative. Touching down on different works as you would want someone, researcher later, whoever it is, to understand it. To perhaps read it.

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I could use a good example. And this might help to make it easier to understand my way of thinking. I was in a show down in Columbia, South Carolina at a college I can't remember the name of. It's a Black college down there, but I can't remember. They had a, you know, one person show of mine. And an old curator friend who had given me a show at the Halsey Institute in Charleston, South Carolina, way back when the gallery was just this big room. Nothing really sophisticated. He gave me and another artist, Juan Logan, a two-person show. And I was on the first level and Juan was on the second level. And he really liked my work. And there were specific curators that I just love because they have one foot in this contemporary art world, mainstream art world. But they also are so open minded and have a broad understanding of art that they also love what is called outsider or folk art. They are my favorites because they recognize that my art falls somewhere in there. I'm not a self-trained artist, but my aesthetic can kind of fall into that and my aesthetic is very different from the slickness of the contemporary art world and the mainstream art world. So, I'm somewhere in between. And they get that aesthetic.

And so, that's why he invited me to show the first time. Okay, so, that was about 1998. [00:59:59] Well, about 2012 or '13, he approached me because he came to that opening down in Columbia, South Carolina, since all he had to do was drive from Charleston, to say hello to me and to see the show and be supportive. And so, we had breakfast the next day and he said, "I want to talk to you about something." He says, "You know, your last show was way back at the end of the '90s." He said, "I think it's about time for us to do another show. Now, you may not know this, but our gallery has since grown into a museum, you know, that is state of the art. And, you know, I want you to see that. And I want you to have a show in there." So, he said, "So, I want you to start thinking about the kind of show you would like to have." And so, he, in a sense, had given me carte blanche to, you know, curate my own show. It wasn't like he was coming to my studio saying, "I want this, this, and this."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And what happened was he gave me the freedom to say, "There are works from other bodies of works that are part of this long-running narrative that have never been seen together," so that I can create what is more of a narrative in this big, one person show. So, I got the chance to bring works together that hadn't been seen together that ran more like a story. So, and then I created more works for that show, you know. And so, in the end, what I ended up having were, like—I could set the story up for you where you realize, Fatima Mayfield, who she is, what she does for the community. So, one part of the exhibition, you see objects that she would use, like *The Rootworker's Worktable*, which had like a blackboard that actually was a painting. And you see her scribbling notes about some of the stuff that's on top of the worktable. The herbs, and the jars, and what they have in them. [01:01:58] And you know, there was machinery that I created that she would be tuning into the spirits to get certain information, these frequencies which she would be informed—

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RENÉE STOUT: —by spirits, you know, with information to tell her how to help her clients, and all that kind of thing. So, you saw that. You saw that she had a vending machine so that when the store hours, when the store was closed, if you needed that High John the Conqueror root, all you had to do was go to the store and put some money in the vending machine. You know, and I constructed the vending machine. It wasn't a repurposed one that I had found. I had built it, you know, from wood, and made it look exactly like something that was a found object.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, you saw that. Then at some point in time, you get the—from reading certain bits of prose

that I put in stuff, that even though she's working for a community, she has a love interest as well.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, she's actually working for, you know, her own ends, you know, in this.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, you realize at some point she needs to go down to New Orleans for something. So, there is that body of work where you can tell she's been consulting the spirits, and what she needs to do. And she goes down to New Orleans. Then you can tell that at some point in time, she needs to honor the ancestors. So, she has this space where it feels like she's underground because there are these crosses hanging from the ceiling and you're looking up at the roots of, you know, trees coming out of the bottom of these wood crosses. So, you're basically underground. And then there's a, like a, sort of, rug I created where there's a skeleton painted on it.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, you feel like—you're in the ground with a dead ancestor, and you're looking above at the—you know, you're under the ground. And it was called the House of Ghédé.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Right? So, she's with the spirits, and they're—it's just—it was like a whole weird thing. And it created this catalogue, you know, for that show that was *Tales of the Conjure Woman*.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And to me, that allowed me to really play out a narrative in a show in a way that I never had before.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that catalog ended up winning a prize for—they—I didn't know this, but in catalog world, [laughs] they give out awards. [00:02:00] And I think that one won something like third prize, or something, for catalogs. That year it came out.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-mm [affirmative]

RENÉE STOUT: And, the Halsey really puts out great catalogs, and so I was, you know, really thankful that I got a chance to have my work documented like that, because documentation is so important, which gets back to those works that haven't been documented in, you know, I don't have great slides of them, or I have no slides of them, and they're just out there. You know? So, documentation is really important.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I was really happy with that catalogue.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But the other thing that the Halsey does, is makes these wonderful videos to go along with shows to document the show. So, Mark showed me videos that he had done for other exhibitions. And I'm like, yeah, okay. That is really nice, you know? And they were, you know, creative. But for the most part, the videos were, you know, you're in the artist's studio. The artist is showing you their work. Then the artist is a talking head, sitting there saying something. Then it's back to them manipulating a work. So, he says, "I want a video. We're going to do a video for your show, and I'm going to send two filmmakers up to your studio in DC to do a video for you." So, I'm like, "Okay."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, at some point in time, you know, these two filmmakers come up, and they're sitting in my studio with me, and we're brainstorming about how this video is going to be done. So, I show them certain things in the house, and I say, "This is the, you know, the character." And they started getting excited. I started getting excited. So, I said, "I don't want a talking head video." I said, "I want to act out Fatima Mayfield."

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: You know? I want to show the viewer what she's doing. You know? Where she goes.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And they're like, "Yeah, yeah, yeah." So, we brainstormed. They came up with ideas. I came up with ideas. And together, we made that video that I showed you yesterday. Now, mind you, Mark didn't tell us what we had to do. He had no idea of what he was going to get. [00:04:00]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: He just assumed that they'd come, and they'd ask me some questions.

[They laugh.]

NYSSA CHOW: He should know by now.

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: So, fast forward.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: I'm down there and finally installing the exhibit, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And he said, "Oh, Brady"—Brady was one of the filmmakers. "Brady just sent the video." And so, the staff, and Mark, and myself, and my friend who had gone down with me, you know, to help take the work down, we went into the little viewing room. And so, we're sitting there. And I'm like the Cheshire Cat. I'm not saying anything, because I have an idea. I don't know how they put it together. I didn't know how they really edited it, but I know what all we did for two days, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I'm sitting there. So, [laughs] Mark watched the video, and when he got done, his mouth was hanging open. And he was just like, so happy. He was just like—he just shook his head.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I said, that's what happens when you got some partners in crime.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: You know? I love—it was two young white guys, you know? But they were as mischievous as I was.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs].

RENÉE STOUT: It was their idea to go get the boat and have me, like, rowing and all that kind of stuff, and you know? And then I—it was my idea to go to the root store. And we even had to approach a real, you know, a woman at a root store.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And she was, like—a lot of these, you know, women at the root stores, they don't really want—there is a kind of barrier they have. If they don't know who you are or what you're trying to do that's a very private world in a way. But something about this woman liked me, and so she was really kind of weird and stand offish, but then she said, yeah that we could come back. You know because we went up an approached her the one day, and then she says, "Yeah, you can come back and do it."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, we filmed, you know, and you know, me walking through the root store, looking at different stuff. And you know they have to do hours of footage to narrow it down to, you know. But at the end of the last day when we were in there, she says, "Come here." [00:06:00] She takes me back to her private office, shows me all of her altars, and she and I just sat there and talked. And I felt like she trusted me, and she let me into her world.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. So that was—

NYSSA CHOW: Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: —yeah, very rewarding.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Poor Mark, man.

[They laugh].

RENÉE STOUT: So, that's what I was—yesterday when I mentioned the video.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

RENÉE STOUT: That's—

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: —not probably what Mark had imagined, but I told him, I said—and so, in the end I explained to him. I said, "I didn't want just the talking head video."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I wanted to extend the idea of the narrative that the show started. Where you see her things, but then you actually see her moving. Her body, you know? The things that she does.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: She goes to the river. She goes to the root store. She, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Are those—the moments where it was shot from above with the hair, and the mixing. I mean, it's right here, isn't it? [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: The imagery is powerful there.

RENÉE STOUT: Thank you.

NYSSA CHOW: Yeah.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: You have to trust me that that was incredibly powerful, too. You walking us through moment by moment, through the narrative of one complete show.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: I wonder—you can choose another show to do that with, but I wonder if you would do it with *Parallel*, the most recent show, as well? Or is there another show that you can do that? Walk through the conversations of the pieces.

RENÉE STOUT: Well, you know, with the *Parallel Universe* I think I really did start talking about that yesterday but to go in more depth about it today, you know, like I said, after the election I'm like, okay, I can't deal with this. I have to find a way to escape even if it's a mental escape. And an escape through the, you know, the work. The work—you know, my studio always becomes the place where I can literally not feel like I'm not in this reality.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And even the phone ringing can kind of, like, snap me into reality. You know? It's like you get the zone. And I'm in this space when I'm creating that. It's just, it's like me and the work. And that is church for me.

[00:08:00] That is where I feel most spiritual, and that the ancestors are there, and the higher power is there, and that I am the worthy vessel for these ideas to come through.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, what I started to do is think about, you know, what does an escape look like? How do you draw up the plans for an escape? Well, I have to say that I got there in a really strange, abstract way for this show, because what happened was [laughs]—do we have much time?

NYSSA CHOW: We have much time.

RENÉE STOUT: Well, here's what happened. I have to—I think it's important to say this too, because this has been a turning point in my work as well, that is a very unlikely turning point.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It hasn't taken me off my original ideas, but it has challenged the way I approach the ideas aesthetically or added something. Let's say not challenged it, but added a layer. Well, there is a curator named Stephen Phillips who used to be the curator at The Phillips Collection. Now he has since moved to the—he is the curator at the Federal Reserve here in DC They have a collection.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Well, when he was still the curator at The Phillips Collection, he did a big retrospect of the abstract artist, Blue Chip—I have to add that—artist, Sean Scully.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Sean Scully, if you—if the researcher is not familiar with the work, is of—where does Sean come from—Irish descent, but he's American. He was raised here, but he is of Irish descent. He does bands of color, very abstract. Very almost totally opposite of what I do. You know? Nothing like what I would do. Well, Sean was at Stephen's home one day, and Stephen has a couple of—a few paintings of mine.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And Sean, you know, he was giving Sean a tour of his collection, because he has work by lots of artists, including Woodfield, Lavell, other people, Bill Christenberry. Sean gets to my work and says, "Who is this?" And so, Stephen says, "Oh, that's my friend, Renée." [00:10:00] He says, "Sean was standing there, looking at the work." He says, "She's a hell of a painter." So, he said, "I don't like some of this pop imagery that she has." He says, "But when you look at passages like right here," he said, "I see abstraction. I see this. I see that." So, you know, he said that. Sean, he told me that after this happened, you know.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And you know, it was a compliment because, like I said, Sean's work is nothing like my work. And to have an artist of that stature, you know, look at that work and recognize something that resonated with them was interesting. You know, another artist responding to your work is always interesting.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, fast forward ten years later, okay, which was in 2016. This was 2016, fall of 2016. Stephen was in New York for something, and he ran into Sean Scully. So, Sean Scully says, "Oh, by the way, how is your friend the painter?" All these years later. And he's like, so he's like, "Who?" And he's like, so he starts describing the work. He says, "Oh, Renée." He said, "Well, what is she doing?" He said, "She's in DC doing her work, doing what she always does." He said, "Well, you know, I've been thinking. I would like her to have a show in my studio in New York." So, Stephen calls me up immediately, and he says, "You know, I was in New York this past week, and Sean said that"—he said, "But, you know Sean, he forgets stuff, you know?" He said, "But I'm just letting you know he said that." I'm like, "Okay, that's nice to know." You know?

So, I didn't think anything about it. Well, a couple of weeks after that, Sean had to be in town for something. It was, like, two weeks later. So, Sean told Stephen he was there, and he said, "You know, I would like you and Renée to come to dinner with me and my wife," and, you know his son. So, they set it up, and we all went to dinner. So, Stephen warned me. He said, "You know, Sean can be very gruff, and you know, he and Jason, you know, Justin"—which is Stephen's friend, good friend. [00:12:00] He said, "He and Stephen got into an argument one day, and this was"—and you know, "Sean is like this, and he is prickly, and he"—you know, he's trying to warn me. And I kind of laughed. I said, "For whatever reason, men like that tend to like me."

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: You know? And so, we get to the restaurant, and I'm sitting at the bar, waiting for them, because I got there first. So, Sean walks in. I had never met him before, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: He walks in. He looks at me, and the first thing he does is grabs me and hugs me. Okay? And so, then we go—that, we're seated at our table, and he wants me to sit right beside him. You know, they pour some wine. We weren't even, we hadn't even really ordered yet, and Sean whips out his cell phone and says, "So, let's plan the day you're going to have your show."

[They laugh.]

RENÉE STOUT: He got that out of the way first.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, he only gave me about six months, and I wanted to say, "Well, give me longer," but you know, you're not—you're like, well, I can't be doing that. Let me just take up this challenge.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: So, he said to me—we talked about the idea that I had these abstract qualities in my work, yet I was a realist painter. So, he says, "I'm not telling you what you have to do." He said, "I really want you to do what you want to do." He said, "But it would be interesting if you would explore the idea of, you know, abstraction, and you know, how that comes about in your work."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I was telling him how it's very accidental, but at the same time, I've even recognized that I love passages in my work as their own little separate abstract, you know, areas. So, for the next six months, I'm sitting there, trying to do this abstract work, but I'm fighting myself, because I'm not an abstract painter and all those things would happen accidentally. So, to try to do it intentionally was the hard thing.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, the painting that you asked me specifically about yesterday, which is the red one with the heart, the, you know, the Jimi Hendrix dedication, *Red House*.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: That was supposed to be abstract, but yet you—it's realistic in that you have the house, but if you really look at it, and you don't see the house, and you look all over it, it's very abstract. [00:14:03]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, that was my happy medium. And so, I did the body of work, and I also included some works from the past that weren't necessarily my attempts at the abstraction, but were my realist, you know, work previous bodies of work that did hint at that thing of, you know, playing around with areas of abstraction. So, in Sean Scully's, Chelsea studio, which his huge, had this big show of work. And he had a dinner in there for me, invited curators, and you know, art critics, and things like that. So, it was a really nice opportunity. And, you know, he proposed the show in the fall, and I had the show by June of 2017.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I think that challenge to really see my work from a different angle as enriched my way of seeing. So, back to the *Parallel Universe*. So, I think in abstractions, and weird things, but now that I've experienced having to examine extraction from a painterly standpoint, it enabled me to create these abstract works that I called *Escape Plans*.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: They didn't have to be literal maps, but the title alluded to the fact that this is a mechanism, or a strange map, or strange coordinates that are going to take me out of this reality to a more desired space, which is the *Parallel Universe*. So, even though I don't feel like I'll ever be a completely abstract painter, I think that it has helped me look at my work in a different way, and added more of a vocabulary, expanded my vocabulary.

And I think in the *Parallel Universe*, I was doing two things. I was being the artist examining, you know, just art concerns. But I was also trying to communicate, how do I picture for the viewer, another space that is not of this reality? [00:16:04] You know? Take the viewer out of this reality with me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I'm taking you with me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Hopefully, it expands your mind too to see these things. So, as you move through—the way I set the exhibition up—well I, you know, I get feedback. I'll take a floor plan, and I'll put exactly where I think the work should be. But I'll hand the floor plan to the gallery, and I'll say to them, "I'm too close to the work."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I will leave here. I'll drop the work off. This is my suggestion. It only sets the—you know, it's just a road map for you, but while you're hanging—because that's a work in progress too if you see juxtapositions that might work better, do it. You know? Because I trust them enough now, that I've seen them in the past, respond to my work in a way that, I walk in, I'm like, wow, I would have never thought to put those two things together.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, when I came into the exhibition, *When 6 is 9 in the Parallel Universe,* they had set it up so that the escape plan starts you off. You know, I'm telling you right now, I'm trying to escape to someplace.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I identify the problem. You know, there's Pence surrounded by the posse of Sun Ra putting Pence in his place, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: There is the Haint Blue, you know, *Blood Beast vs. Haint Blue*, which is a metaphor for the blue and red ideologies in this country. And Donald Trump is basically the Blood Beast sucking up everything, looking like a germ that's a disease creating havoc. Where the Haint Blue, which your mother would understand perfectly. This laundry bluing, these little balls have been used the place into the corners of people's houses to ward off evil, and to, you know, block evil. So, I have all these little Haint Blue balls. So, this one side, you have this Haint Blue versus this Blood Beast.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, it's like that's the dynamic between the red, the metaphor for the red and blue ideology that's at war. And if you look down at some of the painting, it looks like the fabric, even though it's done in a trompe-l'oeil style, it's being pulled apart, and trying to be held together by this putrid green, pussy-looking tape, you know. [00:18:09] So, a lot of metaphors in my work. And then as you move around, you know, there's a bloody painting, you know, bloody—blood studies or blood dropping, or blood blotting onto a surface.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And you know, Sly and the Family Stone, there was a line in one of songs called, "You see it's in the blood." And, you know, it's about conflict. You know, family conflict, but conflict in general. And so, I did these blood studies. You know, because we're in a conflict right now, and you know, sometimes it turns bloody. So, you go around the corner, and you start to see guardians of, you know, single guardians. You see groups of guardians. And in—sometimes my ideas can become so expansive that there—I make more than I can make for one show. It's like there's too many things. I can't get it all in one show. So, my plan was, once you move to the, sort of the farthest end of the gallery, I was going to take you into the parallel universe. You start to get there, you don't quite. So, now my next show is going to be actually trying to put you in the—I'm getting you there. We're approaching it. You see the stars, you see the nebula, you see the characters that are the guardians that are getting you there, but you don't quite get there yet. I want to do landscapes, like you're in it. You see the interiors. You see—so, I have a show coming up at the University of Alabama's Sarah Moody Gallery. Now, the irony is, I—are we all right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: The irony is, I don't want to set foot in Alabama and Mississippi right now.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, you know, they approached my gallery and said, "We want to do a show of hers, and you know, we intend to purchase a work for our permanent collection. And we, you know, we want her to come down," and blah, blah, blah. [00:20:04] So, I'm thinking. I don't want a show down there. Why would I? Then I start thinking. Okay, universe, back to what we were saying about me never feeling alone. Even walking down the street, sometimes I can recognize that the spirits are having a laugh at me, because I might see something that might trigger something, and I know they're trying to show me something, or give me a clue to something.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Or I find something that I need, a book. It could be anything.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And I'm like, so I say, "Okay, so you're trying to throw me into the belly of the beast. What is it you want me to do there?" So, now the challenge is to say, I'm in the belly of the beast, what do I want to convey while I'm in there?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: And what is that?

RENÉE STOUT: What is that?

NYSSA CHOW: I don't know.

RENÉE STOUT: You know? And so, I did talk to the curator, and I explained to him about the hoodoo assassins, and he's an older white male. He gets it, but—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —you know, I do have some concerns because there—I was going to actually create some guns, but then we had a good discussion about—because I did a gun series before, and they were named after freedom fighters like Harriet Tubman, Winnie Mandela, you know, John Brown, just different people, right?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And they looked really real, and I did this in the late '90's.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But if you look at our culture now with so many mass shootings, I have to kind of rethink that, and find a way to convey that women are soldiers, but maybe not necessarily, literally, showing a gun, but to give you attitude maybe. Maybe I do it through attitude, you know? Because I am sensitive to that. I don't want people, you know, I don't want to, I don't want to censor myself, but I want to be sensitive to the possibilities.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. To find the right vocabulary.

RENÉE STOUT: To find the right vocabulary that stirs something— [00:22:00]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —but you know, can't be misread in a certain kind of way, or evoke a certain kind of violence that I would not want to see happen. Not right now. You know what I mean?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. That almost—that vocabulary has been stolen already. To something quite different, quite ugly.

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Interesting.

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah. So, while I could do those guns back in 1998, and have them have the impact that I wanted them to have, now, it's just like, it's too loaded in a certain kind of negative way for—I mean, I'm going to still do the series that I want to do, but I'm not going to show it there. I think that that isn't quite the right language I need to have for there. There's a better language that I could have.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I think that would be more pull somebody in more, and then hit them over the head, instead of immediately hit them in the head with the club. [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: What weapon would you—did—what weapon would you take to Alabama?

RENÉE STOUT: The words become the weapons. If I say something is a hoodoo assassin right away I'm in the Christian Bible Belt saying, hoodoo assassin is political enough to give you the message for where I'm coming from.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Yes.

RENÉE STOUT: So, I don't have to show the women with guns. All I have to do is say, this is the hoodoo assassins right here, and line them all up.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know.

NYSSA CHOW: What can hurt?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Interesting. Oh, I want to talk to you after that—

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs].

NYSSA CHOW: [laughs]—very much. Okay. Hold on.

RENÉE STOUT: We've talked about the works that have allowed me to sort of create the context for my work, instead of the—the curator—fortunately, you know, I've had some trusting curators and dealers that do not try to reign in my voice, or control my voice as much as, you know, some curators and gallery people try to do. [00:24:01] And so, I've been fortunate in that way that I've been able to communicate what I'm really thinking in a certain way that's very free. We talked about shows that have affected my aesthetic, like the last one. The, you know, the challenge to do abstraction and take me out of my box. You know? Occasionally, I went out of my box too, you know, because sometimes I can create the box. And the challenge came at the right time. You know, somebody recognizing some aspect of my work that I really wasn't exploring enough.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And that was important that, you know, that I had that challenge at that time, because I realize that that's going to be a—have a lasting effect on my work, and take me into this next body of work, too. You know? To continue. And who's to say, and you can never say never. What if one day I'm an abstract painter? But, even if I were to become that, I always tell students, like some, you know, people will title their work untitled. I can't do that, and the reason why, I've been around poets, and I realized the meaning, you know, the impact of words, and the imagery that it creates, and the way that a title can lead the viewer, you know, and extend the metaphor of the visual work.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And so, my works are never untitled. So, even if I did abstract paintings, they are still going to be of the mindset that I'm in right now. That subversive, sort of empowerment that, you know, alluding to the idea of women in power, you know, people of color in power, human beings taking power over, you know—what is the word I want to use? Injustice.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? And my broader community. So, that's who I'm going to continue to address, even if I were to become a totally abstract painter. The titles are going to give the clues to where my mind is going in the content of, you know, what I'm thinking.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. So, did the titling start, then, around the poet period? Is that when the title—

NYSSA CHOW: No.

RENÉE STOUT: —no. It was way before, I thought.

RENÉE STOUT: It—I've always titled my works.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: But then the titles became more meaningful, and more well thought out after hanging with the poets. I really became more aware of how important the titles were. And sometimes, the title for the show came even before the work did.

NYSSA CHOW: Is that right?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Which one?

RENÉE STOUT: Like, for example, *In the Parallel Universe,* I wanted to get out of here.

NYSSA CHOW: Right.

RENÉE STOUT: So, then the "parallel universe" was there before the work. [Laughs.] You know? And then the title starts to generate, or become the mantra that I keep repeating as I'm making the work to stay on point.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? So, that's how titles to a show can work sometimes.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Okay. So, did any other turning points like that that we've missed? Any of the group shows that meant a particular lot to you?

NYSSA CHOW: Well, we can circle right back around to the *Black Art Ancestral Legacy*.

NYSSA CHOW: Right.

RENÉE STOUT: That was an important group show.

NYSSA CHOW: Right.

RENÉE STOUT: That was one of most important group shows I've ever been in because that was the whole idea of taking these artists, many of which I've never heard of, all over the country, and putting us together in a context that said, there are African retentions in African American artwork. And these are the various ways in which they crop, you know, crop up and come up. And so, seeing my work in that context, you know, I had an awakening that, oh okay, so what I'm doing, I'm not the only one, you know, making these works, and living from a certain way of being, you know, and viewing the world.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I think that was important for me to know that there are people out there who understand what I'm doing. [00:28:05] You know, and they're—some of them are other artists. They may not be art stars. It doesn't matter. There are other artists. You know. And I have a tendency to gravitate towards self-taught artists because they're just making the work. They're not career caught up in jockeying for position, or having to know the right curator, and all that political crap that goes along with the art world. You know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's about talking about ideas, and trying to articulate something visually, you know, that communicates what we all seem to be tapping into.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Speaking of not, you know, the art world, have there been any

interactions with people, just regular folk, non-artist people who come to see your work? Have there been any interactions that have stayed with you, that—of any of the shows, that—responses to your work from people who just came to see it? Maybe are not trained, not, you know?

RENÉE STOUT: I can just, like for one, just to give you an example—

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: —or two. At my last show, this very elegant tall man was walking around. I didn't know who he was. I'd never seen him before. And he's walking around, he's walking around. Finally, he comes over to me, and he says, "You know, so-and-so—who I did know—is my friend. And they said to me, 'Oh, you're going to be in Washington DC, go see Renée Stout's show. You'll be glad you did.'" And he said, "I just have to hug you." He says, because—he really couldn't even explain—he knew of the African spirituality. He knew a lot of the meanings behind the work. He saw what I was trying to do. He says, "I just can't believe you've just—" he said, "you put this out here." He said, "I know exactly what you're talking about." We didn't have to articulate it. And he just hugged me. I could tell he knew exactly the place I was trying to put him. [00:30:01] He was there.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, that was meaningful.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And then in another show that I was in in the museum, I was putting the work up, and I had to come, like, several days a week to put them, the work up. And the—a museum guard, a Black museum guard, was watching me do it, you know. And he'd move around and every, and he'd come back. And then finally, he just started talking to me about the work, and why he connected to it. And I always tell people, I'm like, you know what, that's my audience. If the museum guard gets what I'm doing, that's important to me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? Because those aren't necessarily the people who are trained in art, and they see art come and go. But if they feel compelled to come up to tell me—whoops—come up and tell me, that you know, they understand something, then I hit my mark.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Wow.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Speaking of DC, and DC shows, and thinking in terms of local, community you had mentioned, you had said something about the mayor, there was this fragment, and we didn't get to finish. The mayor doesn't know who doeth art in DC You said something like that. But where would you—have you ever shown your work in the smaller context where the museum guard is the main audience, I suppose? Have you shown your work in these smaller places, these local spaces like this?

RENÉE STOUT: You know, I—you know, there are some artists, like—even, like, other artists or curators, you know, might tell me, "Oh, you know, you work so hard. Don't waste your time, you know, doing certain kinds of shows anymore."

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And for the most part, sometimes, you do have to be mindful of wasting your energy, because you only have so much and I'm running out of it. You know? I'm getting older.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: I'm running out of all, you know, I don't have that youthful energy anymore. I have lots of energy, but it's like, you know you really do have to make sure sometimes that you're showing and putting the effort in to where the work is going to be seen. But then there's that part of me that feels like, you know what, I get that, but then sometimes it's important for me to be a part of something that may not necessarily advance my career. But the meaning and the statement that the show is trying to make for the community is important. So, a graduate student from MICA recently curated a show that's still up right now in a little venue not far from my house that's not typically—well, what it is, is the Washington Project for the Arts has a little satellite space not far from where it actually is. And they just got it, and it's not well known. And this young graduate student decided to curate this show on gentrification in DC.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: And for whatever reason, he wanted me to be a part of it. And you know, some people might say, "Oh, that's just a graduate student doing a, you know, a thesis thing, but to me, what he's trying to communicate is very important and I wanted to be a part of that. So, he showed me the works of mine that he would like to have, and I let him come and get them. And so, they're up right now in the show.

NYSSA CHOW: Oh.

RENÉE STOUT: So, to me, it's like, yes, there are little venues that I will show in you know, in the local community, because they are important to me.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative]. Gosh, did you go to that one?

RENÉE STOUT: Yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: How did people react? I mean, those, that's—

RENÉE STOUT: What I love about it, it brings out a lot of young people.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: You know? I brought out, you know, a cross section of people. But what he did that was interesting was that it had artworks that spoke to the gentrification, and the way the city is changing.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: What, one of the main pieces that he wanted was a painting that I did of Fatima sitting in a chair advertising her products. Things like that are disappearing from the city. You know? Those very root stores that I was telling you about that I—they don't—they're going. So, he wanted to evoke the idea that there are things that are very cultural that are just—gentrification is just wiping out. But he also made it into a reading room, and he has all these wonderful books, and publications, and information, on the effects of gentrification on neighborhood and culture.

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I felt—I thought it was very important to be a part of that, you know? So…

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: It's very interesting idea that he had.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay. Well, is there anything that I have not thought to ask you about that, you can—now that we're at the last few minutes here?

RENÉE STOUT: Well, you know, of course I know I'm going to get home and say, "Oh man—

NYSSA CHOW: I know.

RENÉE STOUT: —I wish I would have thought of that."

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: But, I think that you did touch on, like, so many things, and you brought so many things out, that I think it, you know, pretty much gives, you know, an idea of the whole span of, you know, the ideas of, you know, how does one become an artist? What are the early childhood things that you remember? And how do you develop as an artist because of those things that affected you, and you know, and how you move through. You know, and we talked about my always wanting to draw all the way through high school, and then all of the sudden deciding I can't let go of this. I need to be an artist, and I'm going to go to school for that, you know?

NYSSA CHOW: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

RENÉE STOUT: So, I think you kind of touched on the whole development of—

NYSSA CHOW: Have we met everybody we needed to meet—

RENÉE STOUT: —Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: —to understand you?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: Your art?

RENÉE STOUT: Mm-hmm [affirmative].

NYSSA CHOW: All right. Well, what's the name of your cat?

RENÉE STOUT: Rose.

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: And I have to say, Spike and Pepper—

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.] Spike.

RENÉE STOUT: —were very important too, because when I did the couple of books with the poets, we had to make a press, because they were self-published. So, what press would it be? We called our press Spike and Pepper—

NYSSA CHOW: [Laughs.]

RENÉE STOUT: —after my two cats at the time. So, yeah.

NYSSA CHOW: Okay. Well, we have a—I'm going to say thank you very much, now. [00:36:01]

RENÉE STOUT: Thank you, Nyssa.

NYSSA CHOW: Thank you, very much.

RENÉE STOUT: [Laughs.]

NYSSA CHOW: And I can always add an addendum to this.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: If you remember.

RENÉE STOUT: Okay.

NYSSA CHOW: Thank you very much.

RENÉE STOUT: Thank you.

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[END OF INTERVIEW.]