

Interview with Jacob Lawrence at his home in Seattle, April 2000

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JF: Jackson Frost (Interviewer)

JL: Jacob Lawrence

GKL: Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence

This interview was conducted in consultation with Elizabeth Hutton Turner, former Senior Curator, The Phillips Collection

[BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE]

JF: My first question is, do you have any memory of Atlantic City? Or when is your first memory of being interested in art that you can recall?

JL: Is this from Atlantic City that [you're] speaking of?

JF: Even before, but when—

JL: I would say my first awareness or interest in color and art and so on was when I was in Philadelphia. My parents were part of the black Migration, moving up from the South. I was exposed to a settlement house, in the Harlem community, where we were given materials and poster color and paper and brushes. And there was a counselor or a teacher, he was a much older man. I realized much later that he was really a college student and he received this job. We were like 12, 13 years of age and he supervised the department. That was my first awareness of working with color, using color as a means of expression.

JF: And his name?

JL: Charles Alston.

JF: And was that the Utopia House?

JL: Utopia House. That's right.

JF: This was in New York, in Harlem—did everybody go? I mean, did all the kids go? Were you unique in that way, Jake? Or did everybody want to go, spend their time after school in this child care?

JL: I don't know what percentage, I couldn't say that. But there was surely an awareness of these centers throughout the community. In churches and settlement houses, after school places where kids could go. Parents would send them for a couple of hours after school or during the lunch period. So I went to one of them—Utopia House.

JF: Now all parents, and all families, in urban city settings were worried about keeping their kids off the street or giving them something to do that was structured. Was your mother concerned about this? Was this just the place to go? Did she see something in you that said art? Were you drawing at home? How did this happen? Why pick that? Or was that just one down the street, the day care down the street?

JL: I don't know how she happened to pick that or select that particular place. Maybe it was through the church. It's very possible it was through the church that she selected this place, or friends, or community activity, something of that sort.

JF: In reading about you, two things struck me as a non-art historian. These are the experts, as you well know, I'm the lay person. In this entire room, I think, I am the lay person. However, what struck me over and over again is in the things that you have said, the interviews that I've read and read about you, and about you, Gwen, two things come up to me. Community—you seem to always be talking about the community. And that might vary when you talk a lot about how you define community, who you see as your community, has that changed over time. And b, contribution—you mentioned Charles Alston in the earlier interview and how he contributed to his society, his community, and how you tried to do the same. So I want to keep coming back to these themes. Alston, would you consider him a mentor to you, and what was his contribution to you?

JL: Yes, he was a mentor. I was about 13 years of age—12, 13 years of age—when we arrived in New York City. And my parents were separated. So he was the only male figure with whom I came in contact at that time. So yes, you would call him a mentor. He suggested things that might help me, again, in expanding my, if you could call it, knowledge at that time of paint and color. I like to do masks. I loved masks, like [Władysław Teodor] Benda. He introduced me through books. He introduced me to the great mask maker, Benda, I don't know Benda's history. And so he was like a mentor. He was about 10 years older. I was 13, he was 23. But he was a man; to me, he was a man.

JF: That's a big difference.

JL: That's a big difference at that age.

JF: Did he pull you aside ever and say, "You have this talent. I recognize the talent"? Did he treat everybody the same or did he pull you away and say, "You've got something here, I am going to help you develop it."

JL: I think that you are putting it very well. His interest was to the degree of my interest or our interest. Because there were many kids in the center, and I can imagine he treated all of us the same. I think he liked teaching. He liked it.

JF: Now what did he—I know this was a long time ago—but what did he teach you specifically on how to organize your paper? And are we talking about the structure of a painting, did he get into that at an early age with you already? And this is how you fill the space—

JL: Yes, he talked about these things, about the elements, but not in an academic sense. Not in an academic way. But he talked about color. In my memory, this is like 60 years ago, so I can't say exactly. But it was the overall concept, the overall idea of working on a flat surface. See I was interested in two-dimensional design. I didn't realize it at the time. Some of us were interested in sculpting, three-

dimensional work. So, yes, he talked about [it] and I think he was giving us, or people like myself, the same thing he was getting in school. He was passing it onto us.

JF: And that passing on fascinates me because you guys, the kids, were all about 13, right?

JL: Yes.

JF: That's a young mind to reach, but obviously he reached you.

JL: Yes.

JF: He did something correctly.

JL: Yes, that's right.

JF: To reach kids that age. And I was hoping something struck you like how did he reach kids that age. And I wonder if it is still going on?

JL: Well, I think he reached us because, this is very important, he permitted us to move in any direction that he could see us moving in. This is very important. In other words, don't try to push in this direction or that direction. And I think that is why he was a good teacher. In taking what you had to begin with and building on that, rather than saying, "You don't do it this way, you do it that way"—I think that is where the value is of coming in contact with Alston at an early age.

JF: The mark of any good teacher, find the interest and make them go with it.

JL: Yes, you build on that.

JF: Yes, shape that. Fascinating. So then what happened with you? Utopia House lasted about how long? You went several years after that?

JL: Probably maybe less than a year.

JF: And then you were studying at The High School of Commerce during the Harlem Art Workshop.

JL: Yeah.

JF: Gwen, are you not quite in the picture yet, are you?

GKL: No.

JF: But you were there. You were in the neighborhood?

GKL: Yes.

JF: Then, when Harlem Arts Workshop moved to 306 West 141st Street, this is when you two met? How did this happen?

GKL: Well, what happened was that I used to go to Augusta Savage's Center for the Arts.

JF: Augusta Savage. Explain who that is to me, please.

GKL: She was a woman sculptress who opened her studio to children in the neighborhood. Anybody could go there and work, so it was an open place. And a child with any sort of wish to be an artist or even just wish to be curious about what was going on in there, they could go in. And so I had been to Howard University and we didn't have any more money for Howard University. So I was in New York City, and one day a lady said to me, a friend of the family, "What are you doing?" And she took me by the scruff of the neck to Augusta's center.

JF: So it was her idea at first, not yours, perhaps?

GKL: No—well, maybe I was 17, 16 and hadn't been really that serious about most things I studied. So I hadn't thought about that, although I had wanted to be an artist. I was in the art school at Howard University. But I didn't think of Augusta, or perhaps I didn't know about her. I don't remember exactly. But somehow I hadn't thought about that. But then it became a sort of second home to me.

JF: She reached you somehow.

GKL: Yes.

JF: How did she reach you, do you think?

GKL: Well, I was welcomed there and I felt loved and I felt that someone thought I was an artist. So all of those things. And then there was companionship with other young artists. There was a core of us that kept coming there, maybe eight of us, I would think. While other people came and left, came and left. So we became sort of the heart of Augusta Savage's community center. And that was about it.

JF: And was this gentleman to your left part of those eight? Or how did this happen?

GKL: No. He was at a different center. You have to ask him about 306.

JF: But before I go to 306 and meeting you Gwen, Augusta Savage's studio, and then Charles Alston. Companionship, there is companionship on the street. There is probably some pretty bad companionship around, right? Like in any city, in any community, that parents, someone is worrying about their kids getting involved with. I am sure you were too young then, but maybe you did. But what a gold mine for the community. To have these kind of people providing this opportunity—do you think that this is where, Jake, you first got this sense of community? Because I keep seeing it coming up in your art and what you say. I mean, this idea of contributing to one's community. Is this where it came from? Do you think, did you always have it?

JL: I think I would say we, because I think it was many of us. We were very much interested in the community. We participated in the community through the church and schools, the social workers. So that was part of our life, our life style. We knew everyone on the block, or beyond that. And it was a different period, of course. You're dealing with 60, 70 years ago. And although you didn't know the people on the streets, you didn't know their names, you got to know their faces on the street. You would see these faces, day in and day out. You would see them on Sunday going to and from church, on holidays, like Easter and that type of thing. I think a good example is what Arthur Mitchell did with the young dancers. These kids skipping rope, off the street, and he took them in and created this many years ago. I guess he's had two or three companies since then, came out of this. And he said, well, this is the way—you are moving like a cat, or you are moving like this, or you are moving like that. I've seen it several times on TV. It is a beautiful experience. So we had the same thing. We had exactly the same

thing. It was a wonderful experience. And I think now maybe it was going on throughout the country, some form of community that kids like myself benefited by that contact.

JF: And you both picked art as your means of expression. Now I noticed that you haven't changed that. Did you ever have an urge to go to oils or anything? I know that this is a lay person question, but you have stayed very close to your medium, and why is that? It just satisfies you?

JL: I think one of the reasons was economic. Oils were expensive. Paper and brushes were inexpensive, brushes were easy to come by and they were available. Very easy. I could get a piece of brown wrapping paper, and some of the paintings that I have now come from that period. It was tough, strong, durable. And a jar of color—red, yellow, blue, the primary colors—were like 15 cents a jar from the five and dime. If I thought of material, the expense of material, it never went beyond that, because I was dealing with very inexpensive material and it suited me. It benefited me.

JF: That reminds me, Count Basie told a story once. When someone asked him how he became the Kansas City sound in Jazz. He said, "You know how I became the Kansas City sound? It's because that's the city that I happened to be playing in when the white promoter stopped sending any money." And that's where he stayed after that for a number of years. I thought that was great. So economics too. But at the same time you concentrated on that flat, two-dimensional graphical representation in many ways of the figure. And I just wondered if that was always your interest, if Alston, if Augusta Savage got you there, or has it just always been there?

JL: This, again, is the significance of the community, where people, not necessarily artists or people in the arts, encouraged me among others to continue. Alston was one of these people; continue working the way that you are working. Don't worry about if a hand had six or seven fingers and that was not true in reality. Don't worry about that. Get the expression of what you are trying to say—that's the important thing. And I think that gave me courage. It gave me the courage to [know] what I was doing had some value. No one said this is not the way, not how you do it. This is the way that you do it because this is a form of expression.

JF: That's the way you do it, you with a capital Y.

JL: That's right.

JF: To me, it's so important that kids, young developing talents, because the sooner you tell them no, you are doing it wrong, I would say that 90 percent say, okay and then quit.

JL: Yeah, that's right.

JF: Okay, so now let's talk about how you two met. You are at 306 and what happened that day or those days to suddenly distract you from your work, shall we say?

JL: 306 was one of about four centers in the Harlem community. These centers were established or set up throughout the country to help to alleviate the depression. It gave people work as teachers, as counselors. And 306 was one of these centers. The Augusta Savage Center, where Gwen went, was another one. She went to that one. Then there were a couple of others. So since we all had this similar interest, I guess it was inevitable that we would meet and come together, that we would get to know each other. And this is how that happened and a friendship developed. There were about four or five of us, we would go around to the galleries, to the museums. We were young, very young people, and we

would talk about the works we had seen, or we were about to see. There were one or two of us who were maybe more aware of certain things going to schools like Pratt Institute and places like that, that had a little more knowledge in a certain way. Like Gwen went to Howard. See, I didn't go to a college like that. So we learned a lot from these people, from people who knew a little more than we knew.

JF: And you'd compare notes.

JL: That's right. And we asked questions. 306 was significant too because it was like an open house. It wasn't just people in the arts who would go there. There were musicians. There were actors, painters, sculptors. They used to talk about the challenges of their craft. I couldn't participate because I wasn't old enough. I didn't have this experience. People like Leigh Whipper, people like Langston Hughes would talk about these things, and you don't consciously listen but you realize years later that this is what is taking place. And it has a great significance. A person will talk about space and they are not talking about space in a painting, they are talking about space on a stage or they are talking about color or texture. And so all of these art forms are sort of interwoven, which contributes to your own expression. I wasn't aware of this at the time; it was only later that I became aware of these elements.

JF: Do you listen to music when you work? Does that help you or not?

JL: Yes, I have listened to music. I don't consciously turn on the radio. But I listen to it.

JF: Well you know, I've seen a lot of the old photographs of those early days. And I must say, Gwen—this was just simply a friendship, was it, Jake—that this rather gorgeous woman, if you don't mind me saying so, and she was just your friend and you were comparing notes around painting? You never looked across the room and said, wow, huh?

JL: No. I don't think I had that sophistication.

JF: When you were comparing notes, you are looking at a painting or a work of art, let's say, where would you be able to go in New York? Were you prevented from going any place? Or where did you go to look at art and compare notes, this group of people you are talking about?

JL: Well, I lived within walking distance of the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

JF: And did you go there?

JL: Oh yeah, you could go there. Sometimes, some places, especially the galleries, they looked a little—what term would I use. What are you doing here? You are not going to buy anything, or you got that feeling. Now maybe it wasn't true. Maybe it was a projection. Remember we are living in a segregated society, more or less. Not by law, but it takes place. Most of our families were from the South. So you carry these feelings with you, you know? So you didn't go to galleries, at least I didn't, as much as I went to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, to places like that.

GKL: Well, we went to galleries to see exhibitions. I think the American Place was a favorite of ours.

JF: Stieglitz, yeah?

GKL: Yes, Stieglitz. And any gallery show that we read about then we bought, or at least I bought, some books to read about the arts. It seemed to me that I knew more about the arts, about the

visual arts. When I left Howard University I thought that my education began after I returned to New York in many ways. I mean, it was academic at Howard University. You learned how to draw—charcoal from the model, first the cast. But this was a sort of university that I could tap any time I wanted to and go to things that I didn't know existed because I was curious. So I found that I got a really good education from going to museums and going to exhibitions. And especially if I went to one that was outrageous.

JF: Define outrageous for me?

GKL: Outrageous is something like the Armory show. That was outrageous. So you would find people who were doing outrageous things according to the culture.

JF: And that expanded your awareness of what might be done?

GKL: Yes, it did. That you could be relatively free, even if you produced things and were not good, you were relatively free.

JF: A very good point. I just finished, speaking of academic, a show on John Singer Sargent. And when he went to Carolus-Duran, his atelier, if you will, Duran said he had been at the École des Beaux Arts, and he's learned a lot, so much. He said, there is much you have to learn. His first line to him. He was 18 [years old] going, oh great. Anyway. It sounds to me like you went anywhere where something was opening, going on. Whatever was happening, you went, you wanted to see that. Was there a specific artist that you were trying to follow? A kind of art that was catching your eye at the beginning or not?

GKL: I think at the time it may have been Matisse and Picasso and people of that sort because at that time it was relatively new. Not really new to me, but relatively new to the other art population.

JF: The cutting edge of what's going on, something new happening. That sort of ties in with this idea of migration, things are changing, a constant time of change.

JL: Well, this is one of things too that I want to add to what Gwen has said here. That the significance of what was happening in the art world beyond Harlem—see, we were confined. There was talk, there were conversations about how people talk about Jacob Epstein and how he made the ape man. He made a human being look like an ape. Many of the people in the art world were outraged by this and they talk about Modigliani and all the people—this was news. And it offended quite a few people, it was offensive to them. And I don't know how far their criticism went or the criticism of those in the studio, but I am sure that it reflected what the general public felt about—

GKL: And there was that huge show of African art at the Museum of—

JL: Modern art, yeah. That was before they had the—

GKL: I had never seen anything like that. I didn't know anything about African art, but it touched something in me, and I thought it was beautiful.

JF: So even having studied at Howard, you hadn't had a course—

GKL: No, they weren't offering African art. Although James Porter, who was my professor, we met him in Africa many years later and he was collecting African art. But I think he took us—didn't he

take us to the Museum of Modern art to see?—so he was well aware of it. But I hadn't learned about it at Howard University. I don't remember. Maybe they did have it and I just didn't remember it.

JF: And that struck you strongly?

GKL: Oh, yes. It was really fascinating to see what the African artists or the carvers had done. It was so full of energy.

JF: And the subject matter was so different, wasn't it?

GKL: Well, no, there were portraits of people and everyday life, but it was twisted in a different way to look at.

JF: Now, Jake, at this point in time, I have this image of all these wonderful street scenes that you were doing and what you saw going on with life in these streets at this point in time. Was there something that was really important to you to try to depict? Or were you just practicing, if you will? Were you just picking out a scene that struck you every day?

JL: Well, I am doing the same thing that I have been doing in content for a number of years. Again, now we go back to the community. And ideas that register, ideas I pick up, not in an illustrative way, but in a feeling way. So I deal with content now, the same content that I dealt with 50, 60 years ago. The difference being, I hope, that what I am doing now is I have added more dimension and more scope in dealing with the same content—that has not changed. I just love doing genre work, of people in everyday life, of what they are doing. And working with tools, which I think are very beautiful. They are very beautiful. They are like a piece of sculpture. When I was about 16, 17, I was exposed to three brothers and they were cabinet makers. They took over 306 after the project folded and they carried on their cabinet—Pace Brothers—work at 306. So I was around them, and seeing them working around tools. I didn't know what significance that had for me at the time, but gradually I began to use this as content, people working with tools. So I am doing exactly the same thing. But, as I said, I hope I've added scope and development to what I did some years ago.

JF: When you produced a piece of art then and now, both young and now, did you have an audience in mind for it? Are you making it for a particular community or not? Universal? For yourself?

JL: I would say for myself, but this is a very fine distinction. I am the audience also. I can't separate the two—the audience, from my own observation, my own feelings about things. Those feelings about going to church, coming from church, people on the street—I would say that it has broadened, because I am still dealing with the same content. But this content has, I think, broadened out beyond the Harlem experience.

JF: I want to get back to when you started doing the *Toussaint L'Ouverture Series*, but had you guys been to New Orleans already on your honeymoon? When did that happen?

JL: 1938.

GKL: We hadn't been to New Orleans.

JL: No, we hadn't been.

JF: What was that like, going to New Orleans, did that strike you? There must have been a range of art and lifestyle that is so different and the whole French influence. Was that significant to you now in your development?

GKL: I really don't know because when we went to New Orleans we couldn't go in the museum. So we had very little contact with museum arts or gallery arts or anything like that. There was an organization—[Louis des Enfants?]-that were New Orleans artists of color and we did meet a couple of writers—Lyle Saxon. But relatively we were on our own. It was what we had learned in Harlem and New York.

JF: I guess what I'm getting at is that it is a very special community in those days versus a good rest of part of America. And I wanted to know if New Orleans was a huge shock to you or if you knew what you were getting into?

JL: Oh, yes. I think that we were old enough to know. We had been around people, we grew up. Our families, if they weren't migrants, they were immigrants from the West Indies or from Harlem itself. So we knew, we weren't like children, so we knew what to expect. Of course, there were things, feelings that we experienced that we would not have experienced. But we knew that some places you weren't welcome, and some places it might not have mattered. So we played it by ear. We weren't naïve.

JF: Did you pick New Orleans for a specific reason?

JL: Well, yes. We were thinking of Mexico. And I guess we were looking for adventure. And we heard about New Orleans and its music, its drama, its romance and that type of thing. And we thought it would be wonderful. I hadn't been outside the community since I was a child. That is, where I would have the knowledge of where I was. My first trip outside was New Orleans. So it was a wonderful experience for us. But we knew the Jim Crow car. We knew all about these things, it was not a surprise to us. I didn't have any experiences that were unpleasant because I didn't put myself in that situation. They had the signs that moved up and down when you got on a conveyance, a bus.

JF: They had a sign?

JL: Yes. White, black. If you were black you sat behind the sign, if you were not black you sat in front. So we knew all these things.

JF: Now in Harlem, also, besides people migrating from the South, there was a good international flavor, was there not? You've written about that.

JL: Yes.

JF: How did that affect you? Other places entirely.

JL: The people I met mainly were people from the islands, people from the West Indies, like Gwen was. These were most of the people I came in contact with. We knew about the Puerto Rican community, of course. But I didn't come in contact with them, not purposefully—it just didn't happen, the culture. I remember where they were situated, mainly in lower Harlem, in the lower Harlem community. And your question was how did that affect me, the foreign influence?

JF: Yes. Open your eyes, or give you some feeling that you were learning more about who you are?

JL: No. Because, again, I go back to that term sophistication. I didn't think in those terms. It was probably taking place, like accents and things like that, but I didn't go beyond that. I had very good friends in the Harlem community, like Claude McKay, one of my wonderful mentors. He wasn't a painter, he was a writer, a very well-known writer I came in contact with who encouraged me. I came in contact with Augusta Savage, who was responsible for me receiving my first job—being paid to create on a Federal Art project. And others in the community—if they weren't from the islands themselves, their parents were. So I came in contact with all these people, among others. So Harlem was a very exciting community. It was a very explosive kind of community, it was a very vital community.

JF: What was that first job in [19]39?

JL: Our first job?

GKL: Augusta was from Florida.

JL: Yes, she was from Florida, by the way. That's right.

JF: That's close to the islands.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE TWO]

JF: Gwen, I will ask you this question first. Let's go back to the American Place. It just came up recently when I did the Duncan Phillips show. Did you have personal contact with [Alfred] Stieglitz and if so, how?

GKL: No. I saw him there. He was a very austere man. So I saw him there and I think even nodded my head or he nodded. But, no.

JF: He and Duncan had a few tips themselves. So let's start—*Toussaint L'Ouverture*—was that your first series that you conceptualized?

JL: I think it was.

JF: It was early on, I know that.

JL: Yes. About 1937, 38.

JF: You saw the play, *Haiti*. Did the play or drama that you saw—what got you into that?

JL: Well, it was a period where there was a great, for people of my age group, a great feeling or sensitivity to racial issues—lynchings, things of that sort. And here was *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. And the street corner speakers used to always use this as an example of people who freed themselves, in Haiti. And these people, street corner speakers, were very inspiring. And since I was dealing with subject matter pertaining to the black experience, I decided to do a number of paintings on *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. And you would walk along the street and you could hear them talking about this. I am sure much of what they said was romanticized, but that didn't matter. What mattered was that you had something to be proud of, something to look up to. And that's how that came about.

JF: It could be done, because it was done, it had been done. Fascinating. Then Frederick Douglass came next, I understand. You also had studied with Anton Refregier, Sol Wilson. Is there any one person still influencing you? I guess I am after how does one develop? We are fortunate to have had

Alston and others, Augusta Savage. But did others come into play right away? Was this mostly on your own—I am talking about both of you now—in developing your art? What kept you going? The fire within, or both, or other help from other people?

GKL: Just sheer stubbornness, I guess. And going to all the galleries and museums is an inspiration, even now. If you are having a gray day, you go to a museum and your spirits are immediately lifted and you think you can do something of value. So I think that it's just that if you become involved with an art, you keep it always. You feel that you must be involved and you learn that you don't depend on approval. So if you learn that lesson, I think you keep doing what you want to do.

JF: That's a great line. You can't depend on approval.

GKL: No.

JF: But it also isn't paying very much, I'm guessing, at the moment. Augusta Savage got your first painting. That must have been thrilling by the way. What was that painting?

JL: As you know they had several, more than several divisions on the Works Progress Administration umbrella.

JF: Some great writers.

JL: Yeah, the literature. People writing books and essays and people doing sculptures, small sculptures, big sculptures. It was one of the most creative periods in American history. Augusta Savage comes to mind here because she was a mentor of many of us in the Harlem community. And she liked us, the young people. She worked with the young people and she took an interest. And I was one of those fortunate enough to have her take an interest in me. And she felt that I had the talent and should be given a job on the Federal Art Project. She took me down—that's downtown, because that's where it was relative to the community—with some of my work. I was 20 years of age. And they told me that I was too young, come back next year. Well, I went back to Harlem, went back uptown. I had completely forgotten about it, but she hadn't. Next year came about and she took me again, downtown. I was given a job, signed up, where I was making a fabulous salary of \$23.86 a week. Now, you can imagine for a young fellow, I had just turned 21, to make this kind of money was fantastic. It was tremendous. A man's suit—a three-piece suit, you couldn't wear out—cost \$22. Transportation fare—a nickel, a dime.

JF: And paid doing what you wanted to do.

JL: Yes. That was a tremendous period for many of us.

JF: Did that last, Jake?

JL: No, I came on at the very end. Every six months you had to resign and reapply for welfare. You had to come through welfare to be taken on. That was a prerequisite.

JF: So then you thought you probably had it made. I would have thought at 20 years old, being paid for my art, "This is too easy." But then that did dry up. And then how does one survive after that?

JL: Well the war came along for one thing, so many of the older fellows were drafted and things. This was all the Roosevelt administration, all these various projects. So people were able to find work and get work, and we all benefited from this. So the Depression was just about ending. But there were

other means, other ways, other things that took its place. And, of course, the army was one, the navy, things of that sort.

JF: And you went into the service.

JL: Yes.

GKL: Also, the awards. Like the Rosenwald.

JL: Rosenwald Fellowship. That's right.

JF: Let's talk about that. Let's talk about these fellowships. You did apply. You had to apply, right? These didn't come out of the sky.

JL: Yes, you had to apply.

JF: How did people hear about these kinds of fellowships?

JL: Well, we all heard about it. If you were in the arts, any free money that was around, you heard about. No one had to tell you. You just heard about it—like someone coming and tapping your ear and saying there's the Rosenwald, \$1,500 a year. I got three. One was \$1,500, the other two were \$1,200. We were married then, and we had enough money that every month we would have some left over, and we had to spend it. We had to use it somehow. We never thought of banks or anything like that. We weren't brought up like Rockefellers, people like that. So we had to find some way of getting rid of this extra money. So Gwen would figure out and buy a sweater, or do this, or that, and the other. And that was what happened.

JF: That's awful. It's burning a hole in your pocket.

JF: Obviously we talked about the community and how Augusta Savage had a place, Alston had a place. They didn't pay and you got the one job. But then how does one keep going? And you left laughing, saying where there's money available, artists find it. You have to, right? Word's out. Let's talk about the Rosenwald Fellowship. What was it? How did you hear about that? Once you received that grant, what did that produce?

JL: I finished *The Migration Series* on the Rosenwald. I received \$1,500 for the year. And that's the story of it. It was a wonderful thing to get. Fifteen hundred dollars at that time was a lot of money. This is in 1941. So that represented quite a bit of money. And we got married then.

JF: Well, everything has a downside. No.

JL: Went to New Orleans.

JF: Of course, not on the Rosenwald Fellowship.

JL: No, not on the Rosenwald money, no. And we both painted there.

JF: Now Rosenwald continued. You got two more?

JL: Two more, \$1,200 a year.

JF: And what did that income allow you to work on?

JL: Let's see. I did the *John Brown* series on one. And I got two on the *Migration*, so that was three altogether.

JF: Now *The Migration Series* we're going to ask about a million times, and inspired by the Migration to the North. What made you focus on John Brown? Did something special happen to you?

JL: Well, he was a very special person in our history. I don't think he always gets credit for that. But he was an abolitionist, of course, and a very bitter man, very religious man. And he was just inspiring. And I had never done anything prior to that time of a non-black figure. And he was a figure who was Caucasian and he gave his life for what he believed in.

JF: Very much like Toussaint.

JL: Yes, that's right. And, of course, I think Harpers Ferry is in Virginia, isn't it?

JF: West Virginia, right?

JL: West Virginia. That's where they raided because all of them were killed. And John Brown came to trial and he was sentenced to be hung, which he was. So it was a very inspiring story, a tremendous story.

JF: It is. And Harpers Ferry I know well because my wife works there actually, at the National Park Service. Explain, if you would, how Alain Locke got involved. Did you know Alain Locke at Howard? He wrote *A Negro in Art: A Pictorial Record of the Negro Artist and of the Negro Theme in Art*. And then you got him to give you a letter of recommendation to get the Rosenwald? He was a powerful guy; he knew what he was doing.

JL: Yes. He was what you would call a philosopher, or something of that sort. Although he was not an artist himself, he wrote about blacks in art, what they were doing and so on. And he was very closely associated with the Harmon Foundation, which was at that time a religious foundation. And its purpose mainly was to, its origin, was to support blacks in the arts, Native Americans, and southerners. I think that was the purpose of it. And of course we all knew about Alain Locke—he was a very influential man. And what he had to say about his support was welcome in the community. He came out of the black Renaissance. So his support was very highly appreciated. Not by me—well, yes, by me too, later. But many of the artists they all knew about the Harmon Foundation and Alain Locke.

JF: I did a show in the Howard Theater in Washington in its heyday, and he was on the board of that, too.

JL: Yes.

JF: So he led you then—was he the contact with Edith Halpert? Tell us about that and your contact and then representation by the Downtown Gallery. This must have been a major—

JL: Well the Downtown Gallery started out—it was Mary Brady had this idea—no, Edith Halpert had the idea of the Downtown Gallery. She was a businesswoman, a very good businesswoman, and did a lot for the young American artist. And she wanted to find out what was happening in the black art community. That is, the visual arts. She wanted to know what was going on. She held a meeting with several of her friends, art dealers—six, seven, eight—something like that. And they decided to give an all black show and they all agreed on this. And out of this show—there were no black artists in galleries.

Maybe there were one or two, like [Richmond] Barthé or somebody like that. And they decided to have this show of all black artists. And out of this show each gallery would select a black artist for its roster. Well, I was fortunate enough for Edith Halpert to select me, as she did. And *Fortune* magazine reproduced 27 of the works. That was the beginning of my receiving this recognition. It was one of the most important parts of my career. One of the most important things that happened in my career. Yeah, that was it.

JF: That must have been really gutsy of them, wasn't it? That suddenly they decided to do this all black show—

JL: That was Edith Halpert. Edith Halpert was that type of person and she could foresee, I guess maybe she foresaw what was happening, or about to happen. And she was that kind of a person.

JF: Had you seen her up in Harlem checking out the art or anything? I wonder if she had been doing her research.

JL: I think I saw her one or twice before I had their support, with Alain Locke. I think I did.

JF: Then you decided to continue this here. Did you fall into, Jake, this whole idea of you telling a story always with your art, this narrative form, if you will, was that a conscious decision? Or did it just kind of happen? Whether it is about a certain individual, John Brown, about the Migration, about life on the farm, Coast Guard. Has this been a conscious part of your choice here?

JL: I think it was conscious, yes. It's telling a story, it was telling a story like a film. And I think you mentioned that, Gwen. Gwen said that I was probably influenced greatly by films, which many of us were. I couldn't do one painting and tell this story. It would have to be a number of works, which I set out to do, and I did. So instead of one painting—I didn't get mural commissions, I didn't have the experience to get mural commissions, so I decided to do a number of works, which I did too.

JF: When you did more than one work like this, these panels, and I know *The Migration Series*, of course, the best, how over time did you match those colors? Because I notice the colors between the panels, the yellow doesn't change. It's the same yellow. Isn't that hard after a while or not?

JL: Well, I had a very simple palette for one thing. And I painted all the panels, I went through all of them painting yellow, greens, blues. So they were all the same. I didn't mix color; I left it pure, as it was, because I wanted the series to hold, to be a unit. I didn't consider this, by the way, one work. I considered it 60 works, which turned out to be one work with 60 panels, and not 60 works like that. So I did this by handling the texture, the color, the shapes, all very similar in each panel. Had I not done it this way, I feel that I would have finished one panel and there wouldn't have been a relationship between the one and the 20th panel. They would have all been different. So that is why I decided to do this.

JF: Right. That's how I was thinking, I was thinking too literally. I was thinking one, two, three, four. But, in fact, you had them all designed in your mind.

JL: Yes.

JF: And then you went and did the yellows, etc. Interesting. Well, that is one work in a way, isn't it?

JL: Yes, I consider it one work, not 60 works. Gwen helped me prepare my boards for that work. That was at 125th Street.

JF: Gwen, how are those boards prepared?

GKL: I think gesso and a lot of sandpaper in between layers.

JL: That's right.

JF: How long would one board take to get ready?

GKL: I don't know. I really don't remember if it took a long time. But I suppose it took a good deal of time for one board because then you had to do all of those 60 panels and then put the next layer on and sandpaper it, until you got all 60 done.

JL: And let's remember, too, we had a lot of energy in those days. We were young people. You can do things when you are young that you can't do 30, 40, or 50 years later, which seem insurmountable.

JF: And isn't that a shame. Well, how long did *The Migration Series* take you?

JL: Oh, I have been asked that, and I can't remember. But I would say less than a year.

JF: A year is a long time.

JL: Well, maybe it was less than a year because I worked very fast. The shapes, the colors are very sparse. I've been asked this but I can't really guess. It is hard for me to guess. But I would say it may have been—remember the drawings are all done. You're talking about the concept of the drawings to the completion of the works? Oh, that may have taken six to eight months, something like that. I don't think it took longer than that.

JF: Did the concepts come to you fairly quickly?

JL: Oh, yes, because I knew stories. Yes, rather quickly. I did research, but I didn't have to do much, I knew the story. I am part of the Migration, my family is a part of it, I have seen people come into the Harlem community from the South.

JF: They kept telling you these stories.

JL: Yes, that's right. So, no, I didn't. I had the concept.

JF: You made a comment on *The Migration Series* when you talked to Linda last time. Why use three colors when two would do? Explain that to me.

JL: Well, the idea being that you have a tendency. There can be a tendency to have too much material, and, therefore, that could have a tendency to dilute what you are doing. So instead of buying a sky blue or a green or something from a paint store, if you make your own, the idea being that it might be a more interesting color. That's the idea. When you have a lot of things to select from, you are not as inclined to be—how can I put that?—more selective. I don't know how else to say it. But that would be it.

JF: I know what you are saying: if you have too many choices you get involved in making those choices instead of the point of your picture.

JL: That's right. That's a good way to put it. Yeah, that's right.

JF: So do you still make your paints now?

JL: Oh no, I buy them now.

JF: That has nothing to do with youth, I am sure. So what happens now after Duncan Phillips comes into the act, fairly shortly thereafter, doesn't he?

JL: Yes.

JF: I know that you haven't met him, but how did you first hear about this? Was this Edith again?

JL: Edith Halpert. She was a very good friend, not only in a professional way. But I think in respect and so on, Edith Halpert was one of the greatest dealers at that time. And fortunately for some of us, myself included, she has this contact with Duncan Phillips. And he advised her, I think on many of her choices. Not all, but some of her choices. And I was one of the people that she advised him to look at.

JF: And then how do you feel about, forgive me for asking for the thousandth time, but *The Migration Series* as you know, being split up half and half, which is performing as a whole again, thank goodness, at the Phillips coming up in this next exhibition of yours? So how do you feel about that? Does that really bother you? Or is that just the way it is?

JL: Oh, no. I was asked by Edith Halpert, again, did I want her to break up the series, which meant selling one, two, three, like that, and it would no longer be in existence. Or she had these two possible clients, Duncan Phillips and the Museum of Modern Art. So I had this choice and, of course, I selected the two galleries, or museums, which turned out to be a very wise choice.

JF: And thank goodness they both kept—

JL: They worked together, yes. Cooperated.

JF: After Edith, who was the most important person that came along?

JL: Well, that's a hard one. Gwen was surely important to me all my life. So, I would definitely say Gwen. But I can't select a person, other than Gwen, who has been most important to me throughout my career. Because people that I have come in contact with have all been very important to my growth and development. I can't—I am just trying to think—well, a person in the art field, of course there are artists. But a person in the art field, I would say, was definitely Edith Halpert. Definitely.

JF: Now you had her support, and then *The Migration Series* was sold in *Fortune* magazine, and you are off and running, fortunately and rightly so. So did you run into any resentment from people who hadn't had that good fortune?

JL: I wouldn't know that.

JF: Well, you might had they told you. But nobody told you that?

JL: Well, I guess there is resentment in the field, in general, of those who achieve a degree of success from those who don't. And I guess I came in from some of that resentment. Like many artists, young artists, the old artists feel that, "I have been around longer, I should have this, I should have that." That's understandable. In many fields, it is understandable.

JF: I think they saw you as sometimes a shock to a creative person. I've found, in talking to other creative people, where if they have had great mentors and great opportunities to get going, and then they came up to that first, usually barrier or baseless resentment and how do you handle that? That's why I am asking. It can be a real shock sometimes to some people.

JL: Well, I guess again, naivety comes in the air. I guess it didn't mean much, I had support. I had Gwen's support. I had Edith Halpert's support. So any resentment that would have come from outside of this support wouldn't have meant anything because I felt strong—I felt positive, I had confidence. If I hadn't had this confidence and support, it might have had an effect. But it didn't.

JF: And then there was the Coast Guard. How did you end up in the Coast Guard?

JL: At that time, during the war, blacks were being recruited, of course, and they gave you the choice of what branch of the service you would like to be in. And we were all led to steward mates, blacks, stewards. And that was a good branch because you had plenty to eat and that type of thing and so on. So I was put into that branch of service. And most of your service people at that time aboard ships were either blacks or Filipinos, many of them, because this was your place in the American structure during the war.

JF: What I find fascinating is that you are still painting, still telling the story.

JL: Well, that's Carlton Skinner. He was the captain of the ship. He was not a career person. I think he was a newspaper person. And he was made captain of the Sea Cloud, which was a weather patrol ship. And we used to go out to sea, spend two or three weeks, and come back and go off the sea again. And he pushed me for a rating, he achieved my rating of Third Class Petty Officer. And that was the end of my service as a steward mate.

JF: At least you could paint.

JL: Yes, I was able to paint.

JF: How did you like being at sea, Jake? Did you enjoy that?

JL: Yes, it was fascinating. I had never been to sea before. It was a new experience for me, so I enjoyed it.

JF: It didn't give you, for your art, any kind of new horizon or anything?

JL: Not that I thought of, no. The material I used was what I had always been doing. I did the content pertaining to what I saw aboard ship, except confidential things, you know.

JF: No painting national secrets.

JL: That's right. That's right.

JF: Gwen, where were you when he was off to sea? What were you up to at this point in time?

GKL: Well nothing much, actually, except we had moved to Brooklyn to be closer to my family and we got an apartment in Brooklyn. And then I went on to do what work I wanted to do. And that was it.

JF: When the war ended were people better or worse off, do you think, in the community? Was there still a sense of that strong community or had it changed now from where you had been in Harlem and now in Brooklyn?

GKL: Well, wasn't the economy better?

JF: The economy was definitely, yes.

GKL: Well, it leaked down to us. The economy was better. Jake was with a gallery and having exhibitions that got good reviews. He was selling paintings. So we were doing pretty well, I think.

JF: That's great. I have read sometimes that people thought that things were getting more diverse and diluted and not quite as cohesive as they used to be. How did you get hooked up with Black Mountain College? Again, you are always on the cutting edge to me, Jake and Gwen, of what's happening in art and not just sitting back and already on your laurels, even though you are still pretty young, at this time. But how did you hook up with Black Mountain College? And why did you even bother going there?

JL: I was invited by Josef Albers.

JF: Right. But you are comfortable, painting at home. So why did you agree to the invitation?

JL: Gee, I don't know. It was a compliment. The odd thing about this was all the problems that we have had, we as a nation, have had and are going through. He was a German [Josef Albers] who invited me to teach in a very highly segregated environment, Black Mountain College, North Carolina—this was amazing, a German who did this. Many of them came over to escape the Hitler thing, during the 20s and 30s. And I accepted the invitation, we both—Gwen went with me, of course—accepted the invitation. And it was my first teaching experience, Black Mountain College. I enjoyed it. I was very glad I accepted because I enjoyed my association with the students and with the instructors. I was there for the Summer Institute, there for ten weeks. And it was a wonderful experience coming in contact with Josef Albers. He was a man at that time who did not have what you would call a very skilled degree of language. His English was very, would you say, wanting? But at the time he died, of course, he was very highly literate in the language. And he was one of the great teachers out of the Bauhaus, one of the great teachers of our time. And I learned quite a bit from him and how to approach the class. It was just so wonderful. That was one of the highlights of my career, that association.

JF: Was it sort of like a little microcosm of the way that Harlem had been, too, with all this great mixture of intellectual energy and different kinds of people creating ideas? Did it remind you of the earlier days of Harlem?

JL: No, I don't think so.

JF: It seems to me—what a vast array of people you must have met at Black Mountain.

JL: Maybe had I been there longer, it might have, because we did meet some interesting people there.

JF: And he brought a special railroad car down, right, because you guys don't take the train normally? So he didn't want to insult you.

JL: That's right.

JF: That's fascinating to me. How did that affect your art? The Bauhaus—that whole function of art. You were already sort of there, weren't you, in some ways?

JL: Yes, I guess that is why he, maybe that's why he invited me. I was working very hard edge, with very minimal color, and that is where that quote comes from, I think: "Why use three colors, when you can use two?" That is very Bauhaus in thinking. What was your question again? I lost that.

JF: It seems to me that you were attracted, I am guessing, but it might be attractive to you, this mix, the intellectual stimulation like you had in Harlem, like you had in New York.

JL: Now that I think of it, it was almost like a continuation of the centers in Harlem, of 306. We came in contact with all kinds of people, people in all walks of life. Not all, but the artistic community, came in contact with. So from about my beginning of my life, my career as an artist, starting with the Utopia Children's House, I can say, and moving all through the war years, Edith Halpert, and so on, there was no break in my art education. So Black Mountain College would have been a continuation of that.

JF: Was it Black Mountain and your association there, what was it later—

[BEGINNING OF TAPE THREE]

JL: I had never met Josef Albers. I didn't know much about him. Well I was gradually learning about the Bauhaus, but I didn't know any details of it, philosophy, that type of thing.

JF: And out of the blue this letter comes saying, "Hey, I admire your art." How did he put that?

JL: Gee, I don't remember.

GKL: I don't know if he said that. I guess he just asked you.

JL: I don't know if he wrote the letter, or his secretary.

GKL: "Would you be interested in teaching at the Summer?"

JL: Summer Institute. I said yes.

JF: Well, you talk about that great mix of people there.

JL: Yeah.

JF: It was Albers—in one of your other interviews, Jake, you had mentioned—that used the term "the magic of the picture frame." Would you explain what that means?

JL: Yes. That was the Bauhaus philosophy—the language and how the picture frame, or how the surface would have a very plastic—they used the word "plastic"—meaning. And he would talk about this. We would square this way, that way. You take the same space and you make it round instead of a square, same color, same texture. And that was the magic that he would talk about. It fascinated me. He would talk about and show how you would take a coat hanger, a wire coat hanger, and bend it and how

you get the space, spatial relationship. And he really made me, enabled me to think, which I used in my teaching from then on. Space—he dealt quite a bit with space. And Albers made me aware of this, aware to a greater degree. I think I was using this in my work but not to that degree because I didn't have that experience.

JF: That's an interesting technique too with the coat hanger. In a way it is not lecturing, it is actually showing it. Anti-academic.

JL: That's right. Well, I don't know if you would say "anti." But it was as if many of the people in the visual arts had gotten away from certain concepts. And I think the Bauhaus wanted to take you back to these kinds of concepts and how important these concepts were.

JF: Such as space?

JL: Space. The elements: space, texture, shape, color, line. These are the things that Albers would talk about. That's where the saying comes in: Why use three lines, when you can use two? The significance of these elements. "Elements" is a very favorite word that he used.

JF: Pattern or form?

JL: Yes, pattern, form, yes.

JF: Gwen said yesterday, I love this line, she said, "You know when you are having a gray day, you go to museums to view art, anybody's good art, to feel better." Is this part of the pattern? How does that affect you? What do you look for when you look at a piece of art like that? That's a very vague question, I know. But I want to tie in this idea of the use of space, this magic of the picture plane.

GKL: It's a thing of beauty, an accomplished painting, or a sculpture, or a drawing. Any of the things. A thing that is perfect and a thing of beauty really lifts your spirit and also makes you feel, "Well, there is something that I can do, and I am going to try to come to this point where I, too, can make a thing of beauty sometime." It makes you feel that it exists, for instance. It exists. So there was a thing that you can head for.

JF: Striving again.

JL: Yes, striving.

JF: Striving to be better. We were talking last night at dinner about the sense of beauty and trying to instill that in people. Let's let them recognize what beauty is because then you don't want to destroy it if you have it. An appreciation.

GKL: It's a spiritual thing almost, your reaction to a work of art, an accomplishment of art. Perfect.

JL: I think after coming in contact with Albers and Bauhaus philosophy, I am able to look at the stands here, look at you, and see you in a different way. What does that space between the heads mean? What do these stands mean? It's related to you. It's a Bauhaus theory, how you walk across campus day in and day out, week in, week out, then all at once you stop. Why do you stop? Because you have discovered, all at once, a tree or a bush appears. Well, that's been there all the time, or course, only you have really appeared, not it. It's fascinating.

JF: You are seeing it for the first time.

JL: You are seeing it for the first time because you are seeing it relative to space and color and shape, texture. Seeing it, and you stop, and you look at that.

JF: I understand that. My house, sometimes I look at the same window for 14 years and some days I will go, “Whoa.” Walker Evans, “In the Heart of the Black Belt.”—he did a lot of traveling for *Fortune* magazine. What kind of experience is that, Jake? That, to me, you must have really been traveling a long place. It says here Mississippi, Alabama, New Orleans, Memphis, Tennessee, all over. Did you travel with him? Did you go on your own?

JL: I went on my own. This is the peak of the black activists, the student activists. All of these things were happening. And *Fortune* had used 26 of *The Migration Series*, so they felt that I was familiar with this theme, this particular theme. And they gave me a commission to travel south and if I would do several paintings, several works of art that they could use in essays. And I did that.

JF: And were some of these new places for you?

JL: Oh, most of them, many of them, I had never been to before.

JF: Eye opening for you?

JL: In a way, yes, and in a way, not. Like I said the other day, the Southern experience was not new to me. Although much of that experience I have gotten through books and talking to people and so on. So it wasn't completely new, no.

JF: But it reinforced those stories that you had heard?

JL: That's right.

JF: What about the Langston Hughes's “One Way Ticket”? That must have been a thrill.

JL: Of course, that came out of *Migration* too, because I had just finished *The Migration Series*. Again, that is not new to me. I guess that is why he asked me to do a series of drawings on that particular theme.

JF: I just finished this John Singer Sargent documentary and his mother instilled in him complete at least a sketch, if not a painting, every day. And, as far as we can tell, he practically did that, at least in sketching. Do you set yourself, when you have these commissions you usually have a deadline, but do you as an artist, and you too, Gwen, do you set yourself a deadline to finish something? Like *The Migration Series*, did you set a deadline? How do you set your work schedule? Or does it vary painting to painting?

JL: No, it doesn't vary. I have no other commitment but my work, unless I receive a commission, of course, then they set it. But otherwise, I just work. I read. I sit in my chair. I look around at my old paintings that are just completed or recently completed. I am not teaching now, so I can afford to give all my time to my work.

JF: When you say you look at the painting you just completed. Do you ever look at a painting, like in *The Migration Series*, and then look at it from your perspective now versus those several years

ago? Do you see that differently? After time passing, do you look at your work and rejudge it or relook at it?

JL: I am always looking at it. Yes. But if I rejudge it, it's in a very positive way. How was it that I did that that way then and do what I do now? Is what I'm doing now up to a certain standard? And you have all these thoughts, all these things enter your mind. How is it I was able to do this without having a broader experience, say? That's apparent in these works.

JF: Do you ever feel like you want to change it? Who is the painter who comes to the Phillips, Beth, that wanted to change his paintings all the time? Bonnard, it's a great story. I love it. He would see his paintings exhibited at the Phillips Gallery and say, "Can I borrow your brush?"—and of course, they're going, "Please don't." But it was his painting I guess.

JL: Evergood, Phillips Evergood was like that too.

GKL: Evergood, yes, used to want to take his paintings back from a collector and work on them.

JL: Varnishing day, and he would really varnish it.

JF: Now here's a tough question to be asking, but I think that it is important to talk about this. In 1949, you voluntarily entered this hospital because of the press. What happened? Or why?

JL: I don't know. I think I was having problems like many of the former servicemen had coming out of the service. And I guess there is maybe confusion and you want to get things straight and you realize this will be a good experience to have. This hospital experience with a doctor. I think that was it, and that was true, that was not unusual. Fortunately they had places like this where you could go for help.

JF: What I find fascinating about it is that you still painted and did art on that subject. And then you were asked by, I can't remember who, *New York Times Magazine* asked you to write about it. So you are still incorporating this as part of your life story.

JL: That's right. It's autobiographical.

JF: Would you say that all of your art is autobiographical?

JL: I would say that. Either directly or indirectly.

JF: Explain the difference.

JL: Well, indirectly would be my experiences being with my family, being part of the Migration, being in the Migration, but not realizing the role that I was taking at that time. An indirect experience would be that from books, the black experience, which was happening way before I was born. That's the difference. I think one is direct, one is indirect. But it is still your experience, it is still so close to you, it's so much a part of your life.

JF: This ties into—I understand when you make your public speaking and awards and those who have attended have told me that you tend to start your public speaking expressing gratitude to different people or different groups. You usually do see yourself as part of this larger context.

JL: That's right.

JF: You think most artists do?

JL: I wouldn't say most. I can't make that kind of an observation because there are so many attitudes. So much of our artists' approach, how they think, how they develop. That's a pretty broad statement for me to make.

JF: Well, it is a pretty broad question for me to ask. When *The Migration Series* was first exhibited by Edith Halpert, you two were in New Orleans, I believe. Right?

JL: That's right.

JF: Did you know it was happening? Did you not want to be there? Were you not invited? Or it wasn't a thing one did to be there in person?

JL: I didn't know the significance of this. I was a young man, young fellow. 1941, what am I 23, 24?

GKL: Seven from one, seven from 11, four.

JL: 24. So I didn't realize the significance. I didn't realize that this is one of the top galleries in the country. I just didn't realize it. And it is just like things that you don't know at certain ages. And I am in that period. Like I told you about the checks. You get a check from the Rosenwald every month because I received a fellowship. And every other month we had some money left over and we didn't know what to do with the money, so that was it. No, it wasn't that I was just so naïve that I didn't want to go. That wasn't it—it was that I just didn't realize what this experience meant.

JF: It says here in my chronology you started going to more theater performances with Charles Alan and he had the performance series. Did you guys find performance and drama a major part of what was inspiring you?

JL: I always like the theater. I used to go to the Apollo. Not the Apollo uptown, but the Apollo on 42nd Street that showed the foreign movies. Or the Apollo on 125th Street which showed the comedians, the dancing girls, the big bands, and so on. And I would leave the show and the same thing was happening on the streets. So there was this interconnection. And the theater is a fascinating thing. It's again, like magic. You're back to Albers, that's what he was talking about, this magic, and lights and things of that sort. And it's just fascinating to see the comedians, how they walk across the stage and make jokes. Jokes, some of them so subtle, that only the community could understand them because they were ethnic.

JF: Based on real experiences.

JL: Real experiences, yes, and that is why they were so popular. So I used to go, I think they would change the shows every two weeks. They had a movie and then the stage show.

JF: You said the same thing was going on in the street. Let's expand upon that for a minute because I think now the streets are sort of overtaken by automobiles and the life is somewhat not there. What does that mean for people, younger than we are, when you say the same kind of thing was going on in the street? Describe the street as you saw it.

JL: Well, the street was color. It was design, texture, people moving. Some people moving fast, some slower. All these things were going on. All these things were taking place.

JF: And there were the playgrounds too.

JL: Oh yeah, the playgrounds, the policemen, the firemen, all these things, I didn't know their names but I knew their faces. And you see the street corner artist talking about socialism and communism and the church people talking about religion. And this was all happening, all at once. What do you call it? A kaleidoscope? Just happening, all around you, it's happening. And, again, very fascinating, the movement.

JF: Like Duncan Phillips wrote, an artist "sees differently." You see that movement, that kaleidoscope, in a certain way, where a non-artist, like me, I might just walk blindly, if you will, I hope not, but blindly through it and not really notice all these things going on around me. Because your art seems to be showing that: the drawing, the sidewalk art, the hopscotch, and the laundry woman. That was the center of life in those days there, you think in Harlem?

JL: For me, definitely. And it still is a very important part of my life. I think everything that I do goes back to that period of being around people who talked about their experience. If they were in the arts, they would talk about their craft and so on. And I was taking all this in. The actor and how he handled space on stage. I couldn't participate because I didn't have the experience. But I realize now how important this was to me to hear these older people talk about their experiences, what they were doing, why they did it, their interpretation of a role. Leigh Whipper, who played the black in *Of Mice and Men*, he used to talk a lot about his craft. A fascinating thing he would talk about, and how the actors responded and acted to each other, some in a friendly way, some in a not so friendly way. You would hear all this was fascinating. You have to remember I am 16 years of age so I don't have much experience. So I am hearing all of this. Or musicians playing, like Frank Fields or Josh Lee, telling me what's happening. I am not a musician, but he is talking the language of a musician, he's talking that language. The playwright, same thing. The artist, go to the arts, same thing.

JF: One of my favorite musician quotes is the jazz one where they talk about, "Sure you can play the notes, it's the spaces between the notes." Talk to me about that again. The fact that your training or your awareness of who you are reading and working with other artists and performers, that you can notice things that normally you might not.

JL: Well, it's a revelation to look at things and note things that I would not have noted had I not had this background. How important a blade of grass is—it looks so simple, it looks so ordinary, but it's not, of course, because you are seeing it in context of other surroundings, of other things, how you relate to it and it relates to you. So you see hands, and you notice how hands are moving about, and what's happening with fingers. And I think I extend this to my study of tools, which I love and which are so beautiful to look at. And this was a very perfect tool, the hand, so the tool is an extension of that. You see, things like that you begin to look at.

JF: Do you think that it ties into your builder's theory?

JL: I think so. Definitely. Definitely, yes.

JF: The hands are at work. The tools are there.

JL: Yes, that's right.

JF: There's one, you have an artist with tools, I think *Artist with Tools*. So you see an artist as a working man, working person. Not somebody different than another person, but the brushes are your tools.

JL: Yes, you could put it that way.

JF: You declined the invitation by the USIA, the international travel, an extra program, to counteract the widespread ignorance that exists regarding the United States with regard to racial prejudice. What was all that about in 1952? Do you recall that? The USIA apparently asked you to travel overseas to, I would guess, put a good spin on how to races are getting along in America in 1952. Do you recall that? You declined that.

JL: Well, I am sort of mixed up on this. I have heard several sources on this thing. And many people declined it because they disagreed with the United States policy and so on. And like my colleagues, I followed suit. I didn't have to make a personal statement or anything. I said well I agree with the stand that they are taking. I think Kennedy was the president then. No, that was before Kennedy, it was 52. I think we played a part, the artists played a part in these things.

JF: It probably came back to haunt you later with McCarthy—we will get to that—but he haunted everybody. [Edith] Halpert and [Charles] Alan split up their gallery. I am not sure why. Is that relevant to this story, what happened there? And then you signed up with Alan, what happened there?

GKL: At the end of the war when Edith had promised Charles that she would retire at some time and he would have the gallery. Well, this time never came. And then Edith decided that she wanted to keep only the artists who were over a certain age, like Stuart Davis, [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi, and the others. And Charles took the younger artists. So that is how that happened.

JF: How did that affect you all? Was that a good move or good news or bad news to you guys?

GKL: Well, it was fine. Charles was a good dealer. He was eccentric in his behavior, but he was a good dealer. Well, I can't say that he was a good dealer, because he offended many clients.

JL: Or would-be clients.

GKL: Or would-be clients. He would say, "Stand away from that painting, don't get too close to it." But, in any event, it was all right except that I think Edith regretted that choice and she began to woo young artists back.

JL: Like Jack Levine, people like that. And, of course, many of them made other commitments at that time. They didn't go back. And she was not functioning to the degree which we had been used to seeing her function. Very bright woman, very smart woman, but she had problems, I think, which were interfering in her function as an art dealer. She was a very smart woman, though.

JF: That always must be a tenuous relationship between an artist and a dealer in many ways. I am doing a story on Duncan Phillips. He had various relationships with various artists, and some of them felt he was too overbearing with trying to help them improve their art. What did you find with your various relationships with dealers? They are representing you. Are they representing you well enough? How do you handle that as an artist?

JL: You have problems. You have good days and bad days. You put it that way. Sure, Edith was, I don't know what else to say. She was a very positive woman, highly respected. And those of us who were part of her roster got the good days and the bad days. And I was one of these people, you see? And she did so much to enhance one's career—let's remember that. So how good a dealer it is depends on what they do. It has a lot to do with how your career was enhanced, how it grew, what they contributed to the growth of your career.

GKL: Well, she was a great promoter.

JL: A great promoter, yeah.

GKL: I mean, almost as good as—who's the man who died recently, a gallery dealer?

JL: Fellow down in Soho?

GKL: Yeah.

JF: Leo Castelli?

JL: That's right. I didn't know Leo. I had met him, but he had this reputation of really building his artists and promotion.

BT: The roster of artists in Halpert's gallery, the interaction with that roster, [Stuart] Davis, [Ben] Shahn, didn't you become good friends with them?

JL: Oh, yes.

GKL: They were very welcoming.

JF: Name some of the names for people who wouldn't know that, like me, who is part of that roster and your relationship with these other artists?

JL: Charles Sheeler, Stuart Davis, Ben Shahn, Yasuo Kuniyoshi—those are the older artists. Some of the younger artists like Jack Levine, [Edmund] Lewandowski, Mitchell Siporin. Of course, I can't name everybody. But, as Gwen said, they were very supportive, very welcoming. And again, it was a wonderful experience.

JF: You met each other because you had the same representative and went to each other's shows, exhibitions. Do we have again a small microcosm of intellectual stimulation going on again?

GKL: I would think so.

JL: I would think so, yes.

JF: Now here to me is an amazing commission. The Chapelbrook Foundation Fellowship wanted you to do 60 paintings on the history of the United States. You talk about a broad subject—that's a huge mandate—and you accepted this, you wanted to do this.

JL: I don't know if it was put exactly that way. I think what the Chapelbrook people were thinking about, or its directors, was for me to carry on and do what I was doing. That was my interpretation of this. I don't remember this kind of statement being made, history of the United States.

JF: Kind of a grandiose title.

JL: That's right. So when you apply for these fellowships they have to make it very clear, very precise, what they would like for you to do. It's up to you, of course, to reinterpret that relative to your own life experience and so on. I think that that's what that is.

JF: I notice you did 30. You call it *Struggle*. I find that a fascinating title. It says here *Struggle—from the History of the American People*. Why pick that title?

JL: Well, it's a title. It's a subject I have been dealing with throughout my career. And I said, why not continue, why not continue with this, what you are doing—the riots, the lynchings, the things of that sort. So that was my history of the history of the American people.

JF: The mural competition for the United Nations building—murals are this grand tradition of public art. John Singer Sargent thought that was the best thing that he ever did. Art historians don't seem to agree. But that was, from his point of view, his crowning achievement. How do you feel about murals? You haven't done a lot of murals, I don't think. But certainly you have been asked. Remember *The Kingdom* that we talked about yesterday? How do you feel about murals as an expression for your art and then tell me about this United Nations thing.

JL: United Nations, I think, it was a committee of women. I don't know what their relationship was with the United Nations, but they wanted murals. They commissioned several artists to present plans for a mural. And I was one of those artists. And I think they wanted figurative works, artists especially who worked in a figurative manner, and I was one of those people. I have always been told that my work had a mural quality to it—how it related to its surrounding area, how it related to forms and shapes and so on was very architectonic. So it fit well into the geometric design of many interiors and exteriors. And I guess most of the people that they select—Stuart Davis, and I have forgotten the third person, there were three of us—and the murals never went up, I don't think.

JF: It says here they ran out of funding or something.

JL: Usual story. I have done about eight to ten murals now, and I enjoy the challenge. It's not like an easel work where you can move it about, move it around, and it still functions. But a mural, of course, you are dealing with space again. I love space. And you are dealing with this design and its environment. How does it fit with the environment? Or how is the environment going to fit with what you are doing? You see?

JF: It's hard work, isn't it? In a different way.

JL: Oh, different. It's different. I think all of it is hard. It's different work.

JF: Sargent wrote on his murals for the Boston Library. He said he had to relearn how to make art. He had to relearn this because this was the first time he had ever done it. And he said, you have to understand the nearest person to this art can be 60 feet away and how his figures change in the space.

JL: Well, it is an amazing thing. You study the Renaissance. I guess we all have, and there is a period where everything was like trompe l'oeil and you look up here and the ceiling paintings looked as if they were at eye level. I remember an experience that I had going to the Metropolitan Museum of Art years ago. I came across this gallery, it was some feet away from me, and I looked—I was a young fellow,

16 years old—I looked at this exhibit and as I walked nearer to it, I realized that everything was inlaid wood. It was a kitchen, Dutch kitchen, inlaid. And again, it's like the magic that we talk about. The kitchen door, the cabinet door opening, the table—everything was just beautiful, very beautiful to see. I understand at the academy one of the tests they used to give was to paint a white tablecloth on a white marble slab and an egg—all white. This was beautiful. That can go too far, of course.

JF: In what way?

JL: Well, it can be so that you develop only the craft of these elements, and not the overall beauty, the kinds of beauty. Wonderful craftsmen in this period.

JF: Would not get the soul of the—

JL: That's right. That's a good way to put it.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE FOUR]

JF: About 1959 or 60 you would be denied a US passport. Were you going with Jake on the African trip? Was this a deliberate thing or a mix up or what?

GKL: I think that they thought Jake had set out to bring the United States down. And that was really right after the McCarthy era, wasn't it? Yeah. And so he hadn't really. And so they wanted to stop us from going to Africa, which was a touchy place at the time. So they were making it pretty difficult for me to get a passport.

JF: Under what auspices or what grounds did they give?

GKL: They never give any grounds, they just say you can't have a passport. I was born in Barbados, and I was British so I said I will go to the British and get a British passport. So I did, I got one right away. But then I finally got an American passport, a United States passport.

JF: Finally. And did you have trouble too, Jake? Did they try to stop you? They could deny you a passport.

JL: No, but they tried to stop both of us from making that trip to Africa. As Gwen put it, it was a very touchy, tenuous situation. Weird, because I remember we arrived in the capital, Lagos, and somehow we had to go to the, was it the American Consulate?

GKL: Yes.

JL: The American Consulate to try to get some things straightened out. He was very affable, very nice man, and so on. And he said, "Well, you come back this afternoon and I will have all this straight." And he brought in his mother—not physically—and he told us an experience his mother had had getting a passport or something like that. And, again, there are certain things that you are sort of naïve and don't know about, the State Department and how they function and this type of thing. So he said, "Well, everything is going to be all right." So we went away and we went back in the afternoon, and he had completely changed—it was weird and he was talking in a different personality. What he had probably done was to look up some papers or something, things that we had signed, or he got information that we were on some list, which was very ordinary. Everybody signed papers. It was the declaration of independence. People wouldn't sign it because they were afraid that they would be accused of

something. So we got caught in that sort of a web. But you see, people changing, people in official positions. And, of course, what happened, we found out later that they weren't excited about American blacks going into these former colonies, or about to become independent. And somehow we were going to upset the English government, or the English and the Americans were working together, and we were going to go in and start trouble. The farthest thing from our minds, innocent people. So AMSAC, the American Society of African Culture, they were the representatives of the US, and they were told, I think, to give us something to do. If they let me in, they gave me something to do. So they set up seminar sessions, and I would meet with some of the African artists and so on. So that's what I did.

JF: What did you sign? Did you guys join the Communist Party?

JL: No.

JF: A lot of people did. It's fine. What happened? Was it just this total overall umbrella of fear in those days?

GKL: Who was the man who had dossiers on everybody?

JL: Hoover.

GKL: Evidently, I was not involved because I hadn't done anything to be associated with the Communist Party. But Jake had gone along on some things, I guess.

JL: Signed papers.

GKL: But it was so minimal that it was really ridiculous, you know. But I think Hoover, I guess you could even get what you are accused of now.

JL: Freedom of information.

GKL: But I told this man, the one who had changed completely, I said Jake had just come out of the service, he was serving his country. And I thought it was a great disservice to us to carry on like this. Finally, I guess when they found out that Jake had a reputation as an artist, we were assigned to different places to go and we would get the driver and the car. A complete change.

JL: I can see why some people would have a breakdown because of this kind of treatment that were involved in what we were.

JF: It's terrible.

JL: People lose jobs. They lost their means of livelihood. Just hounded.

JF: Just because of general fear.

GKL: And there were a lot of people who informed wrong information about other people.

JF: You always come to reflect that which you are afraid of. You know you sort of look like Russia a little with all these anonymous informants. Why did you stop? You didn't paint all 60 of those *Struggle* series. Did you get too busy in other things? Why did you stop that? You painted 30 it says here and then you decided not to continue.

JL: I don't know. I guess I had planned to go on with that, planned to continue. I don't think I stopped. It just happened that way. I did do a number of paintings, which I called *Struggle* that dealt with some elements coming in contact with other elements and there was a struggle going on. But I didn't stop. I didn't say well, I am going to stop. It just sort of petered out.

JF: Well, the Civil Rights Movement was gaining such great momentum. For the longest time you were involved in that, in documenting that if you will.

JL: Yeah.

JF: I just wondered if one flowed into the other. Terry Dintenfass, is that sort of where you started your art about the Civil Rights Movement? Had you done that already? This again is part of your story and part of the whole struggle. Tell me about that gallery. I don't know much about the gallery. Is that a significant period in our story about you?

JL: Yes, that's a significant period. Terry, we call her Terry, she was opening up a gallery for the first time. She had a gallery established in Atlantic City, and she wanted to expand. She was first associated, not as a dealer, but as an agent with the ACA Gallery. And she was very socially involved or connected. She liked certain kinds of art work, like Phillip Evergood, and people like that in that period. And so she associated herself with the ACA Gallery—I think it meant American Contemporary Artists. And we had good friends, one is Bob Gwathmey. And Terry was anxious to build a roster. And I was one of the people that Terry approached to join her gallery, if I'd become a partner. Well, I wasn't getting along with Charles Alan because I did not care for his method of buying paintings, just buying things outright and then selling them. I didn't like working that way. So I finally accepted under [the urging of] Phillip Evergood and Bob Gwathmey, and I said okay and I joined the Terry Dintenfass Gallery. That's the way that developed.

JF: That must be a tough decision trying to figure out your career path and which gallery, etc.

JL: Well, yeah, you have to join a gallery that you think will be good for you at the time. It may be good for you this year and not good for you next year—the same gallery. But again, that takes experience. What's good for you? What do you need at that time that you might not get? Do you need a gallery? All these things enter into it.

JF: Jake, you are a founding member of the Museum of African Art in Washington.

GKL: No kidding.

JF: I find that wonderful. What a great honor. I love the architecture of it, underground like that.

GKL: I don't remember at all.

JL: You have so many things to sign and you sign.

JF: I'm trying to think about it now, thinking about your relationship with these organizations, like I think the New School for Social Research. There is a fascinating group. How did that happen?

JL: Well, I am in the New York area. I am building a reputation. And they want certain kinds of artists, with a certain philosophy. So I was approached and I took it; it was very easy for me to make that decision and I took it. And it was a good school, one of the top schools in the country of that type. I

guess they were made up mostly of the retired European professors. This is the way that they were used. Very brilliant minds, and so I became a member.

GKL: They couldn't stay in Germany.

JL: They couldn't stay in Germany. That's right. It was the peak of Hitler coming into power. They couldn't stay in Germany.

JF: So they got out. And again, a mix of different kinds of genre, not just art, but drama and—

JL: Oh, yes. Music. Everything. History. Everything.

JF: Now what happened this next time? The next trip to Nigeria, it says here that you are blacklisted on arrival in Nigeria, unable to secure housing, and you threatened to leave for Italy to pursue legal action somehow. Now who is putting pressure? Same thing as in 1964?

GKL: We already told you about that.

JL: That's right.

JF: So that was the one.

JL: That's the one, yeah.

JF: So it's the same trip. The *Harriet Tubman* series for Windmill Books, Simon and Schuster—the editor does not include one of the paintings of Harriet carrying a gun. I would love to see that image, Harriet Tubman carrying a gun. What happened there?

JL: Well, this was a children's book, a book written for children. And I was approached by an old acquaintance who was starting his own publishing firm or house. And he wanted artists, he wanted to get artists that had never done a children's book before to think in terms of children's books. And I was one of those people he approached. And he approached several people who had done different things, but not a children's book. I could select my own story. So I decided to select Harriet Tubman because it is a very dramatic story, it's a wonderful story, a beautiful story. And I select especially the part where she leads the fugitive slaves from Maryland up to Canada. And I did 18 works on this. The book was published and well received. And oh, the gun thing. In one of these works that was not published, I was advised not to use a gun, because somehow the profession would not look upon this kindly because it was an aggressive instrument, that's how it was interpreted. So I did another work on the same subject with a gun because she did carry a gun. And I did three works after that. One of them was the gun picture. Another one was the one with Harriet Tubman walking across the snow with red on her feet. This represented, in my way of thinking, it represented blood. And, of course, they didn't want that. So I was told, you know children don't buy children's books, it's parents and librarians, people like that. And, of course, I wasn't happy doing that, but I did it. So that's how that came about.

JF: The ever present cleaning up of history to make it more gentle.

JL: That's right.

JF: Well, what about *The Migration Series*, along the same light? Beth [Turner] calls it a cautionary tale itself. People look at *The Migration Series* socially in America as sort of "hey folks, open your eyes here, this is what is happening in America." I mean, most of your stories are about the

struggle and social justice, which means that there is going to be conflict and times when people have to stand up for themselves and take what's coming and make life uncomfortable for those that they are trying to change. But would you look at *The Migration Series* now, looking back on it, as part of that whole thing? I don't know if when you painted it you were thinking along those lines of "this will give a warning out there to America."

JL: Well, it's a continuation of what I had been doing. Only I had been working with my content or subject matter, dealt with individual works, easel size works. And I just decided to expand this. I arrived in Harlem at the peak of the Migration. A flow, then a slowing down, a flow and a slowing down of people coming from throughout the world: migrants, immigrants, from the West Indies, Europeans, Asians. And the black experience is only one of those experiences. And I saw this experience and the result of it, some of it, in the Harlem community. So this is really an extension of what I had been doing all along. That's what that is. I didn't think, again, I wasn't doing it, saying this is what's happened in America. I did it because I just wanted to do it. I thought it would be an interesting subject matter, and it was for me, a very challenging one.

JF: —having a picnic on their way north.

GKL: Well, that was one of the—

JL: Complaints.

GKL: Complaints. This big hand, she's scrubbing floors. So this big hand, you know, was very knotted.

JL: And I got a letter, I guess there were other letters too, which I didn't receive, to the publisher stating, "What have I done to Harriet Tubman?" I had this hand scrubbing floors, gnarled and so on. And I wrote back and said, "Well, you must remember she was not on a picnic, you know." So that was, yeah, that was it.

GKL: That was one of the complaints.

JF: She was supposed to have beautiful hands that had never seen labor.

JL: Yeah, that's right. That's right. Nice hands.

JF: Amazing, isn't it?

JL: And the same people who would make this complaint would be the people at that time who would not have accepted Harriet Tubman.

JF: Exactly.

JL: It's a paradox, isn't it?

JF: We want to see things always comfortably.

JL: Cosmetic.

JF: And the artist opens the eyes.

JL: Cosmetically.

JF: Now the symposium of black artists in America at the Metropolitan Museum exhibition *Harlem on my Mind*. This was 1968 here. It opens to tremendous criticism. What kind of criticism was that? Do you recall that? *Harlem on my Mind*, what was the problem there?

GKL: I think they thought, some people thought that the Met had just chosen people without any consultation or not even what the black people wanted in the community, that it was done without consent, almost. And so I think they, the black people in Harlem, were sensitive about some other group of some authoritative group taking over their lives and what they wanted to say about them.

JF: So the criticism came from Harlem.

GKL: It did, yes.

JF: That this huge organization which had little to do with Harlem was trying to depict life there? I am not sure where the criticism—

GKL: What is the title again?

JF: *Harlem on My Mind*.

GKL: Yes. Well, it would be what has gone on in Harlem, how it was faring, what were these people doing now. And so they said it was autocratic almost for the Metropolitan Museum to just say, well, to pick people.

JL: Maybe too Jazzy.

JF: I'm sorry?

JL: Maybe too jazzy in places.

GKL: No. You mean the people that were selected?

JL: Yeah.

GKL: No, I don't think so. I think they were interested in the money of doing—you know, if you got the money to do it, and maybe thought they had a point.

JF: That's good. I didn't know where the criticism came from.

GKL: It came from the community.

JL: The community, yeah.

JF: Your mother passed away in 1968. Was this an issue for you, Jake, or not? Sometimes one's mother's passing is a tremendous rite of passage for an artist. Did this affect you in that way or not?

JL: No, I don't think it affected me in that way. I guess like most people you regret the passing, especially a very close relative. I don't know what else I can say about that.

JF: Well, sometimes it is a major thing. Then you became a professor. How did the University of Washington come into this picture?

JL: Well, you know the schools outside the East have a very difficult time getting people to accept positions, in various departments. In the East, it's almost like a revolving door. You can get people and you don't have to give them tenure and things like that. So the University of Washington, in its search for people they thought would fit, contribute something to the school, asked me if I would consider a teaching position as a guest professor. I said yes. Gwen and I had not been to the far West at that time. Well, before that we had gone to Hayward, California. But that was not a permanent position. Neither was the University of Washington. But during that time that I was at the University, the director of the arts school, Spencer Mosely, asked me would I consider a permanent tenured position. We didn't have a family, we had no commitments back East, and we accepted, and we thought we would take this for three, five years at the most. That was in 1971—we are still here. So I miss the East, by the way.

JF: Do you?

JL: Oh, sure.

JF: How has living here and working here affected your art?

JL: To begin with, I would say that space thing. I can't say because it is so subtle. People have asked me this, and I never know how to answer it because it is just a subtle—how can I put it? Well, in terms of content. In the East, my statements or my things that I would do pertaining to the East, the big cities, the tenements, things of that sort, this is on a certain level, of course, which I don't have here. We have a different kind of a thing. But my content and using the human element remains the same. That always has remained the same. People at work, people at play, genre, that kind of thing. So it hasn't changed. Yes, the use of color—graying of color, not gray color, but the graying of color—space. That is more apparent in my work on the West Coast.

JF: It is different. It's hard to say. But there is a different feel. It's more open or something.

JL: Yeah, that's right.

JF: Not quite so teeming, to me.

JL: Yeah.

GKL: I wanted to say on this, this was the era of affirmative action and the University was seeking people to teach.

JF: Charles Alan was writing the biography on you and then he committed suicide. You knew him, but you had left his gallery. But was this a terrible shock to you or not? This poor man.

JL: It's a shock, any suicide is a shock. But, on the other hand, if you knew Alan, got to know him as we did, it was not surprising. It was not a shock. He was this kind of a person. And I remember he told us this—I don't know if you remember—how he fixed up his home so it would look nice, everything was straight. He got a book of poetry, went to the couch, lied down, started reading poetry. And he took an overdose of pills. That's how he did it. We always said, it was just like Charles that he wouldn't want to mess up somebody's sidewalk or something like that. See, he was very, very careful about himself and his relationship to people and so on.

JF: Jake, as one has a certain position, in any community, and a certain amount of power, and the people are interested in what you think and what you see, and then of course there are always

people arguing about whether you are doing it the right way. And you must have come into this. In the Civil Rights movement I heard there was some criticism of how you portrayed Eldridge Cleaver as a portrait. I think that was the portrait that maybe wasn't quite flattering enough or something.

JL: Was it Cleaver or was it Stokely Carmichael?

JF: Stokely Carmichael. I mean, you must have said that it is only natural that people are like this. But how did you handle people wanting to change your art? Because what I am trying to get around to is that an artist like John Singer Sargent said he loved being outside. He operated in wealthy circles, but he really wasn't one of the rich. He was American by birth, American citizen, but yet he operated in France and England and that helped his artistic vision, he thought, by being slightly outside looking in. Do you feel that same way? Do you agree with that or not? Do you see yourself as an outsider, looking in? Or are you on the inside? It seems to me that you want to contribute to your community, this idea of contribution and community is so important to you. Yet, you had come under criticism from your own community about how you were doing things.

JL: Well, that's quite usual with artists in general, I think. Your style might not be a style that is acceptable or people are not used to seeing certain things worked in a certain way. And this is the story of art, where you get this branching off into something else, either because that's the way the artist has made the statement and he wants it, or he can't adjust to certain philosophies that are common at that time. So I grew up in a period like that. This was very usual for artists. I think it started around the end of the last century, or what century are we dealing with? See, this is about community support. At the same time I received support from the community that I was doing things right. You see these weren't artists necessarily—teachers, social workers, people like that. They liked the subject matter. Some. Some did not, like the Harriet Tubman thing I was talking about, what had I done to Harriet Tubman. You see, like that type of thing. So this community support sort of balanced things out, any criticism. Now this criticism, negative criticism, could have been very devastating had I not had the community support. But I did have that. You say, how did I handle it? I didn't have to handle it because I got the support.

JF: You weren't alone out there.

JL: That's right. That's right.

JL: Is your sense of mission or sense of responsibility—I am sort of interested in what that is, Jake, to the community, to art, and whether it has changed over time or has it remained constant for you?

JL: My sense of contribution to the community? Do I have a sense of contribution?

JF: A sense of responsibility.

JL: You put it very well when you said outside looking in or inside looking out. I am the community. So I can't make that separation. What is my contribution to the community is to the degree that I have a contribution to myself. Maybe that's a good way to put it. I don't say that. Sure I want people to appreciate my work, I want people to like what I am doing, and I am one of those people, you see? I am one of those people. That's the only way. I don't sit down and say, "Well, I am going to do this." Mural work is different. When you receive a commission then you expect that commission comes from some element within the community where you have to satisfy that element. You have to satisfy

the community through that element. And if you can't do that then you don't accept the commission. You don't accept it.

JF: And for The Phillips Collection, which is very interested in education as Duncan Phillips was, and not just exhibiting art, but being part of the community in teaching. Tell me about your experience as a teacher versus an artist. Talk about a contribution to the community. Do you enjoy it? How important has that been to you?

JL: I have enjoyed my years in teaching. It has expanded my vision. I always say if I had not taught, I would hope that my development would have been this way. But having taught, it is not only this way, but it is this way. Because it forces you, or me, not you, to develop a technique, a communication—that is very important. I think that's why so many artists who were known to work in their studios were invited to teach at the various universities because they would bring their problems that they were working on, their personal problems, into the classroom or the studio. So you don't quit at five o'clock and not paint, not be involved with it. You are actually bringing this experience to your students. And I was one of those people who benefited from that. Prior to the time I taught, prior to World War II, all of your teachers had degrees in education. You see? Your importance as a creative artist was not that important, but your degree in education became the important thing. And after World War II, of course, that shifted.

JF: Thank goodness. The commission to paint the portrait of Jimmy Carter, the Presidential Inaugural Committee—you didn't paint Carter, you painted a crowd looking for him. How did that happen?

JL: My choice of content?

JF: Yes, your content, your choice of content.

JL: Well, you know when people ask me or many other artists to accept a commission they know what your work is like. You don't go off and paint something that you are not known by. So the minute they asked me to accept this commission, and I guess this was true with the other poor artists, you don't change. This has happened where artists do change and it is not a very happy experience for anybody. So I just continued doing what I usually do, how I do it, you see. So there is no problem there.

JF: Do you think, going back and talking about being in Harlem and missing the East Coast and being here in disaffect, do you think the Harlem, Seattle areas, Harlem especially, can produce another Jacob Lawrence? How is that community doing? Do you feel qualified to answer that? Are those opportunities? Do they still exist for kids?

JL: Oh, I think so. I gave the example of Arthur Mitchell, I think yesterday. Where he takes these kids off the street and he says, "This is a way a cat does it"—you are doing like a cat or you are doing like some other animal. I saw that show a couple times on TV. It's a very interesting show. Or a person like (unint.). I saw a show on him and somebody was doing sound, and he said [claps] that's music. Kids had never associated this thing [claps] with music. So it is happening. And museums, you go to museums where they have a children's gallery, many of the museums have this—a children's gallery where they're dealing with [construction] paper and things of that sort. And it is not separate from what you would call their major shows, but it becomes a part of that. And more important yet, is that the museums have become a part of the neighborhood, not apart from it. You see? But your schools and your museums

during my lifetime have become a part of this. Where it is going out and reached, outreach, and brought people in. When I was a young kid people didn't feel closeness to the museum or art galleries. Nobody said you weren't close. Nobody said this, but the attitude. Now that's happened. Yes, there are 60 years where people have gone out, outreach programs have become very important.

GKL: Well, you forgot the Harlem School of the Arts.

JL: Yeah, Harlem School of the Arts.

GKL: They use all of the arts. We saw a young opera singer there last time we visited New York. We saw dancers. We saw people playing instruments. So this was started by Dorothy Maynor, who was an opera singer, a great opera singer.

JL: So you do have this.

JF: Just say the name of the school again for me.

GKL: Harlem School of the Arts. Dancing, ballet, everything.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE FIVE]

JF: The years, the different places, and the different students that you have taught—Jake, what is the most important thing that you have taught those students?

JL: Well, I think the most important thing that I have given, or tried to give them, and I think this is true with most people who teach art, we go about it a different way, is how important the creative part of doing something becomes very important. Now this depends on a school, what it tolerates, how they want the faculty to move, and they get people who have this philosophy also, or try to. But that's what I try to do, with colleagues, people with whom I have come into contact with.

JF: Expand on that a bit more, if you would. You mean, like when Charles Alston might let you go in this direction that you were already headed in? Give them encouragement in the direction they want to go already? What exactly do you mean by the creative part of it?

JL: Well, to observe the techniques, the craft of what you are doing, but not at the expense of what you have to offer in a creative way. This becomes important, the creative factor, which will give the craft maybe a greater degree of importance. In other words, you don't do one and leave off the other. They become very important to you. I guess a good example would be in teaching, I give this as an example too. You have two students in a class. One student keeps a very immaculate drawing pad—everything is very neat; the other student everything is just the opposite—messy and all that type of thing. Well, one is not superior to the other, but take each student and give something of what the other might have.

JF: How did you get onto this eight vignettes of Hiroshima after the detonation of the nuclear bomb? That didn't seem to be part of your immediate community. But what interested you there?

JL: Well, a number of artists were called in by the Limited Editions Club which is located in New York City. And they had books, mainly books that are classics. And they will call artists in to select a book you would like for that artist to illustrate. And they called me in, and I had such freedom that I selected *Hiroshima* because I thought for our time this is very important. We have created great minds, great

scientists, great musicians, just great everything, artists. And at the same time we've created the means to destroy, to devastate all that we have accomplished over the period of centuries—it's fantastic. So I selected *Hiroshima*. I didn't try to do Japanese, that was not my intent. But you can say, well, man's inhumanity to man. The Japanese did it, everyone did these things. So I selected that. That's how this came about.

GKL: Who was the poet? Who wrote it?

JL: Williams?

GKL: No. I can't remember either.

JF: John Hershey.

JL: John Hershey. That's right. Yeah, he did it. It was first published in 1946. And I think the New Yorker did this.

GKL: Yes, it was a series.

JL: And then they put it in the—

JF: I find it a fascinating choice on your part. All the books out there, again you didn't pick somebody having a picnic, did we?

JL: Well, I tried not to.

JF: Then you had the Washington State Capitol, you were commissioned to do some things in the rotunda, two murals, *Debate I* and *Debate II*. But you withdrew from that because another professor's work was deemed obscene. What the heck did he do? Is that what happened?

JL: Yes, well that was Michael Spafford. And there were three of us involved in this particular project, which was handled by the Washington State Arts Commission. It was myself, Michael Spafford, and someone else I've forgotten.

GKL: Alden Mason.

JL: Alden Mason. All of us from the University of Seattle. And the Washington State Arts Commission for years had been trying to get commissions to do something for the capitol. Not just the three of us, but even artists before that. For some reason it was never accepted by the legislature. And I selected the theme of debate because that's what it meant to me. Well, the problem we ran into was there were questions about, many people did not support the idea. Did not support these three artists, or two of the three artists, or one of the three artists doing murals of the capitol. And they fought it. And, of course, people rose up against the idea.

JF: They didn't support you three artists. Was there a particular content issue?

JL: Well I think with Michael Spafford it was content. He has a work in there you see on the wall.

GKL: *The Labors of Hercules*.

JL: *The Labors of Hercules*. If you have any certain kind of imagination, that could be very prurient, you see. And they saw things in his mural. Well, black and white, the technique is black and

white, that he uses. And there were some people who confuse Michael Spafford of making a statement of the races to somehow mix and become involved and that type of thing. They saw all kind of things in his mural, more in his than in mine. There are some people who didn't want the mural altogether. There were others who could tolerate maybe two of us, but not Michael Spafford.

JF: And you felt that you didn't want to be part of that. I read that you withdrew.

JL: Yes. Well, I tell you there was another thing too. I am getting older. This rotunda was huge. And it would have taken quite a bit of energy. So in a way it was—

GKL: Well, really it was because of Michael.

JL: It was because of Michael, yeah.

GKL: I think so, I think that he withdrew in support of Michael Spafford.

JF: I would love to do a show sometimes where you get artists throughout the century, you both included, talking about your art and how the different people mistakenly interpret what you are trying to say. That would be food for thought, over a drink. Wouldn't that be hilarious? Just compare notes. How everybody over analyzes everything.

JL: Oh, you see some strange things in art schools.

JF: Really?

JL: With students and teachers and teaching art school. The interpretation of things. And some of them look very—well, it's as if the artist is—the person—some of them are quite—are disturbed people. This is rare. It is not frequent, but it's there.

GKL: Or the wish to shock.

JL: Or the wish to shock.

GKL: The thing is not the technique or the art—it's can I shock you?

JL: And if you have anything to shock.

JF: Which is the easy way out, isn't it?

GKL: Well, I suppose so.

JL: I would think so.

GKL: You can do lots of things to shock people, can't you?

JL: And that's how it is now in these days.

JF: What do you think of today's socially committed artists or people? Is anybody grabbing your eye that gives you great optimism? A young artist that you have seen, do you notice?

JL: Well, the artists that I have seen, they are all very—you look at their work, you are curious. You look at it. I don't think you have to make a decision—is this valid? Or is it good or not good? Some artists, some works you can do that, because it fits in with your philosophy. Others, in order to answer

that question, I would say all of it, so much of it is very interesting. Some of it you say why? Some of it you say well it has no point. You have all these, but you don't reject it. At least I don't. There are others who reject it outright. I don't do that.

JF: What is it about art, especially visual arts? With music and reading and literature, it's okay to say, "Well, I enjoyed it"—we don't necessarily feel like we have to say it's bad or good. But it seems like this tendency in the visual arts, right away, this judgment has to be made. Is this good or is this bad? And, in fact, you say you don't have to make that decision, do you?

JL: Well, you can answer this in two ways, I think. Some will think it's weakness if you don't make a decision; others think it's a way out. You have these two points of view, and maybe it's both.

GKL: Others will say to each his own.

JL: To each his own, yeah. And all of it's valid.

JF: It's all valid. That's the point.

JL: Whatever your feelings or your attitude. It's valid as long as it's not destructive, as long as you've got others. People make their own statements, but when it becomes destructive than that's something else again. How do you feel about somebody trampling over the Stars and Stripes? That type of thing. Is that good or bad? It depends on the interpretation. Does it mean you are stamping out the country? You are vilifying your country? Or on the part of the artists, is he just there to shock the public?

JF: They [The Phillips Collection] had you, Horace Pippin, and Richmond Barthé [on exhibition] in 1946.

GKL: That was after '46, that we met.

JF: The years are probably irrelevant. But tell me, what caused you to finally visit the Phillips and meet Marjorie? Were you just on the East Coast?

JL: Yeah, we had been on the East Coast. We know that.

GKL: But why we went?

JL: Maybe she invited us.

JF: She probably did.

JL: Because she had a gallery there and some paintings there. And she was a very friendly woman. Told us her philosophy. She liked baseball, wasn't it? She loved baseball. And she was very generous with her time and showed us the gallery. Did she show us any other works, do you remember?

GKL: Yeah, we went to see some things in the museum.

JL: Yeah, that weren't hers. That's right.

JF: Do you remember that she has a picture—she painted one of the Senators playing in Griffith Stadium? Beautiful baseball stadium.

JL: We had a good time.

GKL: Yeah, she was a very talented artist, I feel.

JF: She was. Before we look at specific paintings, which Beth has picked out for us, let's talk about content. Over the course of time now, Jake, your content, would you say it has changed or not changed? And if it has changed, how?

JL: The content has not changed. The same content—genre works, genre theme. People at work, people at play, everyday life. I love tools, I use tools quite a bit. And I built up to that—I didn't always use tools to the extent that I use them now. And my work is autobiographical. It's remained that over a period of years. My own life experiences and so on.

JF: But you said yesterday that over the passing years you think you've increased your scope within your work.

JL: Yes.

JF: What do you mean by that?

JL: The elements of which I work—line, texture, shape, space. I like to feel that I have added to these elements. And just that. That I have added to them. I use them with some degree of selectivity. Maybe that's a good way to put it. Yes, that's what I meant.

JF: Space and composition and that balance within the frame.

JL: That's right, that's right.

JF: Color. Any changes in your use of color?

JL: Yes. Especially after coming out here. My colors, I have grayed my colors. That is, I was using more of a full prismatic palette. Now that color has been grayed. Gwen has always worked that way. She grays her color.

JF: You mentioned color and it has changed since you've been working out here.

JL: Well, not changed as much as I've explored color more, the possibility of how I could expand color. A good example would be to not just depending on the illusion of distance by using linear perspective, but also involving the element of color by indicating, creating an illusion of distance in a painting. By graying a red, by graying a yellow, by using its complement, the complement of these colors. So the area might be the same size, but you hope to create depth by graying, say taking yellow and using purple to gray it or taking a green and using red to gray it. So it gives the illusion of distance.

JF: And then graying it makes it seem further back?

JL: That's right. That's right. And we can go it the opposite way with some color upfront that's not grayed, or that's grayed least with color.

JF: That's fascinating. Now what about repeating elements in your work? We are going to look at some paintings here in a minute that Beth has picked out. But repeating elements, Beth mentioned she noticed there are a number of tools and builders and others. But also I think in *The Migration Series*, birds. I mean, you talked about the symbolism there. Did you consciously put in that this is a flight?

JL: Yes. Yes. That I remember. I think of that—flight, and the birds are a symbol of that. We think of birds migrating. So, yes, definitely. It seems very natural for me to use this.

JF: Have you always used, at least I've noticed in your work, the flowing of outlines like the edge of a board? This picture right here: the white edge of the board in the background, a man sawing, then it also becomes, the same white becomes the spaces between his fingers. You know what I'm saying? The idea of one form becomes the other form.

JL: I see.

JF: Does that make sense? Am I making myself clear? His arm, the man in the foreground's arm is also the same as the floor, the background floor.

JL: Oh, I see what you mean.

JF: See what I'm saying? The blending of forms.

JL: Well, that's a relatively element in my work in that I wanted to create not a line around everything to bring out the shape of something, or indicate that this is a saw, this is an arm, but to create a sort of a mystery between background and foreground. So it is trying to create like this [fingers intertwined], instead of like this [fingers on top of each other].

JF: Let's go back, you're talking about the white egg on the white paper and you can spend too much time worrying about getting everything exact and forget that it's the soul or essence of the egg is what you're trying to show.

JL: That's right. Yeah. It adds further mystery to the work, you hope, mystery of space. And space is very abstract. It is a mystery. You do things with it that you don't do in sculpture, say.

JF: Explain, please.

JL: Well, in sculpture one feels form, mainly. You take a person, the eye is covered, make it walk around that form and feel it. And they've taken blind people to museums and given them the experience of feeling an object or objects; whereas in the painting it's all two-dimensional, it's flat. So you don't get the same sensation.

JF: And hence, the challenge.

JL: Yeah, that's right.

JF: Let's look at some [reproductions of your work]. You can pass me those, Beth, please. Jake, I am going to just hand you these, and Beth has these in a certain order and I want us to talk about these. Some of these are from *The Migration Series* and some of these are not. And I want to talk about the elements and content and how you use that composition to get the point across.

JL: [Panel 53] Well, it shows the different elements of society, even within the same ethnic group, and these are people who, we use the term somewhat relatively speaking, made it in contrast to those that haven't or those who are striving to make it. And I use the symbol of the top hat, fur coat, and that's the symbol I use in this particular work.

JF: So there is more than one kind of migration going on, perhaps.

JL: Well, these people have passed through a migration, see? Where others are still, the migration is still in effect.

JF: This image, this is the lynching of the *Migration*. I love her outfit there by the way, it's glorious. Did you model for that? This is one of the most hard-hitting ones, I think, that people find at first glance. But what strikes me there is the solitude.

JL: Well, you know you select symbols. They are your own symbols. I don't mean they haven't been used before. But you hope that others—this is your symbol, you select it. And this is what it means—emptiness, solitude, sparseness. All of these things are negative factors, we hope, in a particular work. So that's why you see this as it is.

JF: A sense of loss to me there.

JL: That's right. Sense of loss. That's right. Yeah. So that's how this came about.

JF: And what strikes me with that is it's so different from the ones around it. The panels around it when it's up, is that there are these groups of people moving a lot of movement. This is very still and it is not a group, it's a single person. Do you know what I mean?

JL: Emptiness. Put it that way.

JF: The contrast I thought was glorious. Now, this is the [*Harriet*] *Tubman* series and I love this. Explain this symbolism of the eyes.

JL: Well, this represents the symbol of Harriet Tubman on the move, with the fugitives. And it is a symbol of fear, of being apprehended, of being overcome. And this is the symbol I used for that.

JF: Sort of grasping.

JL: That's right. Yeah, she's a fugitive. That's it.

JF: Now this I'd like to talk about for a second [Panel 38]. Your use of curves in *The Migration Series*. Because I see this there in the Olympics a little bit. What gave you the idea to use that, just the curve of the track, and suddenly you feel the motion. How do you show motion? Because you sure do it so well there.

JL: Well, I try to show motion by contrast of curve next to a rectangular shape or movement and by contrast. If I had it the same, maybe the spectator wouldn't feel this, this movement, this contrast, this change of one side of the paper to the other. Or from top to bottom. You see? So I use the curve to indicate movement. You can put it that way.

JF: And it works so well. The way that you put it on that paper, it sweeps past you, and it continues on past the edge.

JL: Yeah, well, you hope so. That's what you hope to achieve.

JF: It's wonderful. This is Number 54. This, I get two different emotions in Number 54, the church scene. Both salvation and it's a little ominous to me. Did you mean it to be a little ominous?

JL: You mean of something coming? And it is not quite arrived. Something of that sense.

JF: And a little scary. I don't know why.

JL: Yeah, well, the church has always been a very important element in the black community and I use this symbol to show that. And the church going people, very religious people and the figures are not black. They are Caucasian figures. And it is what we would see in the churches, street corner churches.

JF: And were these people maybe perhaps repenting there or something because I feel like there is something, I don't know, maybe I am analyzing too much. But it seems like a little bit of, ominous is not the word that I was looking for, but enclosed, kind of enclosed. Didn't feel like salvation to me—

JL: You are bringing an experience to it, which I hope that the spectator would bring.

JF: I'm bringing myself.

JL: Yeah, that's as good as how I would feel about it. Your explanation is just as valid as mine.

JF: And this is one of my favorites, *This is Harlem*.

JL: Rooftops.

JF: The movement in this is unbelievable. To me, there is so much, without seeing every little bit, there is so much going on in this. It is unbelievable.

JL: Well, I think I remember my feeling about this. You touched it when you said so much going on. And I always thought of this particular work as music, as a scale in music. So much pattern, so much movement, so much color. And you get staccato-like movement. And this is what I tried to achieve in this particular work. So much happening, so much vitality, so much energy. And I think this is what I felt when we first moved into the Harlem Community. All these people on the street, various colors, and the pool halls, looking in the windows, and seeing the pool balls, and storefronts, and things of that sort. So this is my feeling of the Harlem experience. My first experience that I am aware of, of being a part of a Northern city, Northern big city. This is true in Philadelphia too. But I wasn't aware of that. Here I became more aware of the sensation.

JF: It's amazing. It must have been, for a 13 year old boy to hit the big city like that must have been a real eye opener. Now this one is called *Strike*. And I have heard more analysis of this picture.

JL: Probably all of them true.

JF: The catcher is black, but the batters, the other players are not. Talk about this for me.

JL: Well, I think this indicates the excitement, the joy, the happiness of the color bar being broken in sports. In this particular instance, in baseball, the catcher could be Roy Campanella, of the Dodgers. The other figure, the Caucasian figure could be any ethnic group. And there was a lot of excitement at this time. It was probably during the 40s, I think. I think it was 1949.

JF: Perfect.

JL: That's right. Just after the color bar was broken.

JF: And it looks like the audience, to me, is mixed. Which is great.

JL: Yes, so there was a lot of excitement.

JF: I noticed the batter missed. *Sedation*. This, again, the faces are so sad. But I love it. What gave you the idea of the single, I guess they are single capsules all by themselves, instead of a whole pile of them? Meaning each one is so powerful or something? Did this come from the hospital experience?

JL: Hospital experience, and they are patients waiting to get their medication for the evening. And this is my notation of this experience. And, yes, they are capsules.

JF: These are not happy people to me, Jake.

JL: Well, they are happy to get the capsules. Put it that way. Well, it's not a happy experience.

GKL: It's something that sustains them. They are eager for it. Hungry.

JL: Yeah, see, that's that. I guess that's what I was trying to say. How important this was in these people's lives to have this medication, this capsule in the evenings. And this is my interpretation of that.

JF: They probably couldn't sleep without it.

JL: That's right.

JF: 1956, *The Cue and the Ball*. This, I think, what a great study of concentration. Both men's eyes looking to me, the line of the shot.

JL: Well, you know, pool, if we look at pool, even if we've never played it, it's a beautiful game. Most games are beautiful. But this is a very unique experience, if you appreciate it, because you are looking at things that are moving. You have rectangle shapes here. What you were mentioning before, in contrast to the round shapes, colors and things like that. So it's my observation of this particular form of play.

JF: Surrounded by pictures of boxing.

JL: That's right. That's right because boxing is very important to this community. Who is winning? Who will win? Who will lose?

GKL: That's when Joe Louis was boxing.

JL: Joe Louis, yeah.

GKL: That was early on. This is 50, which, you would have gone back and—

JL: You didn't just do things that are contemporary, you did do things from memory.

GKL: You went back in memory.

JL: Yeah, that's right.

JF: This is *Struggle Series 27, The slave rebellion for freedom we want*. And this is, I mean, I could look at this in 14 different ways because it is one of the few pictures of yours that I can go and look at it

from eight different angles, like this, and they all make sense because this is just one big fight. Am I not mistaken?

JL: Yeah, struggle. I don't know what else you could say about this particular work. It represents struggle.

JF: Like many of your works, you know, this is definitely top and bottom. Do you know what I mean? There is definitely a top and a bottom—that's what I love about it. If you look at it this way, somebody, one person, is on top and then you look at this way the other person is winning. I don't know if you meant to do that.

JL: Well, a lot of things you can't explain, they're subjective. You can't explain everything. You can't cross every t and dot every i. There's a lot that deals with your subjective feelings about a thing. You can't analyze it. If you could analyze it, you would be dealing more, I think, with the form rather than the art, put it that way. You see? And another thing, too, when you, when one talks about a work, sometimes the more you talk about a work, the less you are saying. Because you become so vocal, you see, you become so, you try to explain everything. You can't, I can't do that. I try to.

JF: I've said some of this art, not so much at the Phillips, but some of these huge tomes of art gallery catalogues, after a while you say, "You know, it's just really a nice painting." And you read paragraph after paragraph and after a while it all sounds the same. But the painting isn't the same as the page before that, but the description is. But I love that one because to me there is no one axis in it. That's one of the few paintings of yours where you can spin it around and it still works. *Dominoes*. Now I learned dominoes in Barbados.

GKL: Did you?

JF: Yes. I mean, I played dominoes here. But I didn't learn dominoes as a real game until I studied, my Peace Corps training was in Barbados. And the men slap it hard on the table and slide it in there. And then it became an athletic game, dominoes. So that's an important game, isn't it? Or was?

JL: It's important in some communities. You go through, you mentioned Barbados, this is also very important, I've noticed going through a place like Spanish Harlem, the Puerto Ricans, Cubans play this game quite frequently on the sidewalk. And I don't know why these groups play it more than other groups. I don't know what that is. Maybe it's an inexpensive game. Maybe that has something to do with it.

GKL: Dominoes?

JL: Inexpensive.

GKL: I thought you said expensive.

JL: No, inexpensive. So maybe that's one of the challenges.

GKL: That's an exquisite hand putting that domino down.

JL: Yes. So that's—

GKL: This hand is exquisite.

JF: It is exquisite.

GKL: You know delicately handling that domino.

JF: Probably going to beat the guy.

GKL: Yeah probably.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE SIX]

JF: 1962. This is *Praying Ministers* in 1962 and this is very reverent, I have a feeling. But the two figures, Jake, with the helmets and the sort of soldiers of God look. Is that what they are? The one on the right especially, seems, again, very scary to me. This is my baggage in the church, coming in, I know, my own experiences.

JL: Well, it's from the peak of the Civil Rights Movement. And it shows the various religious sects getting together and praying. And, of course, we have the Christians, the Jewish, and the Catholic. Again, I don't know what else I can say about it.

JF: Are these soldiers who are there protesting again?

JL: Yes, they were called out, the National Guard, for instance, to maintain order. The National Guard wherever state this was—I think Alabama was one of them. And they were called in to keep the “peace.” That's what it was, yes. What was this shawl, and they may have a name for that, the Jewish—

GKL: I don't know.

JF: Yes, they do. I know what you are talking about.

JL: I can't remember the name of it. But there is a name.

JF: 1963, I love this, *Invisible Man among the Scholars*. This work here, talk about mystery. Now who is this invisible man among the scholars?

JL: Well, the invisible man is—did Ralph [Ellison] do this book at that time?

GKL: He called it *Invisible Man*. Black people were just invisible to the general population. They acted as if they just weren't there.

JL: This inspired this particular work, I remember that.

GKL: And it is. That's the way they see the people. The black people who attempted to attend these colleges and schools. They put them—what do you call that when you isolate?

JL: Segregate.

GKL: No, isolate. In the classroom they isolated them.

JL: Just the rope as the symbol. We can be as close as we are here, but just that rope across there became a symbol of separation.

JF: That's what I wanted you to say. Thank you. That's wonderful. Now Nigeria 1964. I think about your picture of Harlem and everything going on, here everything is going on, but it's that wonderful feeling of the open air, African market, tropical.

GKL: And crowded.

JL: And crowded.

JF: But everybody is moving in this picture.

JL: Well, that's the way you feel when you get there. A great deal of color and movement and excitement, energy, vitality, people selling and trading things. That's the feeling I got from this particular work. That stimulated this particular work.

JF: Gwen, you might recognize this man, Gwen.

GKL: Self-portrait. Didn't he make himself look—

JF: You might recognize this man. Gwen, you might want to talk on that. Pretty handsome devil there, huh?

JL: Looks Japanese.

GKL: Knowledgeable. A little bit brutal.

JF: Why do you say brutal?

GKL: Well, I say that because of this line right here. See if you took it off I think that the portrait changes; if you didn't have that line right there that ends and nothing happens then you have to imagine. But if you took this line out, it changes, doesn't it? You put it back.

JF: Yes, it does.

JL: This was done when we were at Brandeis as a guest instructor. I remember that. That's when this was done.

JF: Another one of those left-leaning colleges that Joseph McCarthy loved to dearly. Jake, did you do a lot of self-portraiture? I don't know.

JL: Not a lot, no. I've done a few.

JF: That must be tough to paint one's self.

JL: Well, I guess it depends on the style. It depends on the skill of the artist. Gwen does some beautiful self-portraits. Not only self-portraits, but portraits of me. She's done some really terrific ones.

JF: It's the revealing of one's self.

JL: That's right. That's right.

JF: It's almost like taking a picture of oneself.

JL: That's right. I guess that's why they are so important to many artists. Rembrandt, I think, did about six or seven self-portraits at various stages in his life. And they are challenging, depending on your style. A self-portrait is just that—it's an inward search for a particular feeling.

JF: Van Gogh did so many. He said, in his letters to Theo, "I wouldn't be doing these if I could afford a model."

JL: He had the best model he could afford.

JF: Here is this picture of the *Munich Olympic Games* [1971]. And you talk about movement here. The finish line rope is just exquisite there, how it parallels the mark on the track, down at the bottom here.

JL: The track is very beautiful. Before coming out here, we used to go to the track meets at Madison Square Garden. About once a year we would go to four or five of them. They had six. And the human body, well I guess any body, but the body in motion is one of the most beautiful things you can see. It's one of the most beautiful, and I don't know what else you can say here. And I tried to get that feeling in this particular work.

JF: Coming off the page is a beautiful curve, the motion of the track, the curve again.

JL: She selected some good works.

GKL: Yes, she did.

JF: 1975, *Confrontation at the Bridge*. One of the scariest portraits of a dog I have ever seen.

JL: Well, this represents one of King's marches. And I think it was in Birmingham, Alabama. Again, I don't know what else I can say about this particular work.

GKL: That water down there is very, it's terrifying.

JL: She's talking about the water here.

JF: Terrifying water, yes. The dog, of course, is just—everything on the left is ominous. Everything on the left is negative.

JL: The bayonets, the dog, and so on. Yes.

JF: And on the right the people have paused, they haven't stopped. It looks like they have paused. And about now they have to make a decision.

JL: That's right.

GKL: That represents King's non-violence.

JL: Non-violence.

GKL: They are standing there.

JF: The bravest you can be. *The Studio* [1977]. Jake, is this you?

JL: That's me.

JF: I thought so.

JL: Yes, that's my studio here, in Seattle. Not in this apartment, but it's Seattle. And this is what my studio looked like going up the steps. And my neighbor, our neighbor is an architect. And these buildings back here bring somewhat of the tenements of New York. In reality, this is an empty wall. So I decided to put that back, to use that as a sort of symbol of my thinking of the big city, of New York.

JF: And I understand that Frank Lloyd Wright once said that you would make a great architect, which is a wonderful compliment, isn't it?

GKL: Yes, coming from Frank Lloyd Wright who hated everybody anyhow.

JF: You know, I did a show in Milwaukee, Frank Lloyd Wright's birthplace, and not a person in Milwaukee liked him. "Oh, he owed me money." This is *Bread, Fish, Fruit* of 1985. What were you trying to say there?

JL: No, it's a continuation of my work in general, of a theme. It's a religious group. They are praying and beginning to partake of a meal. Bread, fruit, and fish are symbols throughout the bible. And these people represent paying homage to this symbol, or these symbols. And, of course, the tool is one of building, of construction.

JF: And the coveralls hanging there with a hammer. It speaks to me, again, it depends who is looking at it, but what I bring to it is this calm moment has an end and then it will be time to go back to work. Probably good work, but work. This is a moment in time, and then we take up our tools again.

JL: Yes. I did this particular work especially for the book that Ellen Wheat wrote, that was *Jacob Lawrence: American Painter*. And Bruce Guenther wanted a painting. He gave me the option of either they would use a work already in existence or I had the choice of doing a work. And I selected this.

JF: 1998, [*Builders—*] *Man in Blue Jacket*. I didn't realize it was this recent. I have one quick question. I love this. You talk about tools, I see several along the bench behind you there, several of the shapes. *Man in Blue Jacket*. I like the cloth hanging off on his lower left.

JL: Back here?

JF: Right there, keep going down. See over there? There is a little cloth hanging off.

JL: Oh, here.

JF: At the corner of—I love that little cloth. I don't know why. It just caught my eye. I just love that. He's not using it yet, but he will.

JL: That's a nice one.

JF: I love the geometry.

JL: I like seeing these works again.

JF: I love the geometry in that.

JL: You made a good selection.

GKL: That's very abstract in many ways.

JF: Gwen, please, if you have observations. Please feel free to speak up, obviously. Now this *Paper Boats*—the color of this is, to me, truly wonderful. It is a hot street scene—I would say summer—it is hot in the street. That's what I thought anyway, when I saw it, because of the color. Are these folks putting the boats in the curb and there is water running down the curb? Kids playing.

JL: That's right. This is one of the things I noticed in arriving in New York City's Harlem. That so much of the games and the play took place in the streets, the gutter. I remember games being played on a sandlot, like marbles and things like that where you played it in the dirt, in the sand. But here they play it in the gutter, which is an indication of the way people lived, what was available.

JF: There was no sandlot.

JL: That's right. That's right.

GKL: You remember Ring a Larry?

JL: Huh?

GKL: Ring a Larry.

JL: Oh, yeah. Ring a Larry.

GKL: All summer long you hear kids in the lot. Ring a Larry.

JL: So this represents my observation of that. And the fire escape—

JF: Talk about the fire escape. You use this all the time.

JL: Yes. Well, that's one of the things that I will always remember. Because we, on our way north, we probably did see, I say my family, did see fire escapes, many of them. But coming into New York's Harlem, there are all these beautiful grilled works throughout the city, and especially in a city like Harlem, in a place, a community. And these, to me, struck me as very beautiful. I didn't think of them in these terms then, but they became a symbol of the big city, or one of the symbols of Harlem, the fire escape.

GKL: People call it Jacob's Ladder.

JL: Yeah, Jacob's Ladder.

JF: Jacob's Ladder. Here is a whole other wonderful perspective [*Games—Pocket Pool*]. I love the way the people are purple.

JL: Well, again, we talked about this kind of content, what it meant to me and how I was fascinated by the game, fascinated by the game of pool. It's so alive. Well, many games are, of course. But this is one of the symbols of my Harlem experience.

JF: Did you play a lot of pool?

JL: No. Very much aware of this activity.

GKL: That color is quite different. That purple man and the half yellow, half black jacket; it's fantastic.

JF: *Harriet Tubman* series. We're back to this. This is Number 4, *On a Hot Summer Day*.

JL: Children at play.

JF: This movement, you talk about dance. If that isn't a wonderful composition of dancing bodies.

JL: Well it shows dance. A happy period in a child's life.

JF: They are going every which way.

JL: That's right.

JF: To me it's like an explosion of joy.

JL: So that's this particular one.

GKL: Everybody loves that one.

JL: Which one is that? Oh yeah. That's [Panel 58 of] *The Migration Series*. It's next to the two or three from the last panel, I think. This is one of the things that the people appreciate—education. I use this as a symbol. One of the reasons for the Migration was economic, social, and education, among others. And that is what this represents here.

JF: And so well, too—your basic education.

JL: Yeah.

JF: Now following right on the heels of drawing on the blackboard, here is the other kind of education.

JL: Oh, these sidewalk drawings [1943].

JF: I love this one.

JL: I think it's this way—it's horizontal. People like that too.

JF: Now those are all actual games, or did you make up some designs yourself in that? Because I see hopscotch.

JL: Hopscotch and a drawing on the sidewalk. Drawing tenements, the sun, a boxer, flag, the boat on the Hudson probably.

JF: This must be a universal human need to express yourself when you have a big surface, like the street. Like my son when we had chalk and stuff, and he was supposed to be drawing inside, the next thing I know he has drawn over all over our driveway.

JL: Like the caveman. Beautiful things.

JF: He also drew on my car. In our interview and chats these last two days, we talked a lot about just people speaking on the street.

JL: Yeah. The street corner.

JF: This was happening, wasn't it, all the time in those days?

JL: Yeah.

JF: Tell me more about that. I don't think people younger than we understand how common it was for somebody to be up there on a soapbox or something.

JL: It was very common. And, of course, during the Depression it was a form of expression for the entire community. There were these people, talented speakers, some not so talented, but they would get up and they would talk about religion, in a very positive way. The Garveyites, the Back to Africa movement, all of these things, they would discuss and try to fire up the audience. Tell them how important it was and how important it is for you to get relief, to help your economic situation. I call it four corners. And in each corner there was a speaker who would be talking about a different subject: the importance of going back to the church, the importance of joining the Communist Party, the importance of—and speaking of Toussaint L'Ouverture, who created the first black republic in the Western world, I think. So this is what inspired this one.

JF: And we could go from one corner to another.

JL: That's right.

GKL: So what does the sign behind signify in this particular painting?

JL: I don't know what it signified.

GKL: Is it signifying that their eyes are being opened?

JL: Yeah, maybe so.

GKL: By these speakers.

JL: Maybe so. This is 1937, you know.

GKL: As you said, everybody brings a different—

JF: That's what's so great about the art.

JL: This is a significant work for me, if we think in terms of form and content. It is the first painting that I can remember where I try to create an illusion of—what would you call that?

GKL: Of modeling?

JL: Modeling, yeah. Where there's a change between the left and the right side of the faces. And I think it is about 1936, very first painting. So it has that significance for me.

JF: Consciously you are trying to make the modeling?

JL: Yeah, see. And I did it in this way.

GKL: In this sort of Cubist way.

JL: Yeah, Cubist.

JF: *Interior Scene*, 1937. Now this one, you are talking about kids looking in the window. This one, my favorite part of this, of course, if you can have a favorite part of a work, I love the three guys peeking in the window. Three kids. I love that. Now they are probably witnessing a scene here. Is this a brothel?

JL: A brothel, yes.

JF: And looking in, I would too. I found this fascinating.

JL: Well, you know, in the depths of the Great Depression, many of the people who were poor even when there wasn't any Depression, when the Depression came along they had to survive. They had to make a living, they had to do just that. So any way that they could survive they did.

GKL: Madonna and Child are there in that picture.

JL: Yeah, Madonna and Child.

GKL: And those little boys are probably giggling.

JF: And elbowing each other. That is the human condition, that is exactly it. Here, speaking of fire escapes, these people are actually escaping. You are not partying on a fire escape. They look scared to me. They are actually escaping from a fire. Am I correct on that?

JL: It could be a part of *Migration Series*, but I don't think so.

JF: I think on the back it usually says it's part of—

JL: No, it just says *Fire Escape*, 1938. But it could have been part of *The Migration Series*. And the fire escape too is such a part of the life of the people of this community. When it was hot, they would sleep on the fire escapes, in the hot weather.

GKL: What is this carrying?

JL: A suitcase or a bag—a suitcase.

GKL: Is it a robbery?

JL: No, I don't think it's a robbery. No, I don't think so. It could be, but I don't think so.

JF: In their faces they are actually escaping and somebody grabbed their valuables.

JL: Yeah, it could be that too.

JF: Now this is one of your performance series, Jake, from, it doesn't have a year on it—*Vaudeville*. The edges of her outfit and his, you talk about geometry here. This must have been a moment in your artistic life when you were very—I love the sharp edges in this painting. This painting is one continuous sharp edge. Look at that.

JL: Yeah, well, these were the comedians that appear. I call it *Vaudeville*, and you got to know people associated with this kind of activity—chorus girls, comedians, big bands—things like that. You got to know them, the community got to know them, especially at this time because these actors and players didn't have a wide audience because of segregation. So they mainly had to make a living in the

black communities throughout the East that were predominately black. So this was one and the Apollo Theater was one of those. And some great people came out of there. Ella Fitzgerald—I think she was about 18, 19 years of age when she made an appearance.

JF: She won an amateur night.

JL: Yeah. And Louis Armstrong came out of that period.

GKL: Louis Armstrong was before that. I mean he didn't come out from the—

JL: No, they were different ages.

GKL: He came out of Louisiana.

JL: Yeah.

GKL: Whether he performed there—

JF: Well, Pearl Bailey and I became great friends before she died because at the Howard Theater we did a show.

JL: Did she die?

JF: Yes.

JL: Pearl Bailey? I didn't realize that.

JF: She had an operation on her knee in the 80s in Louisville and her husband was with her and the operation was fine and then she was having dinner and apparently a blood clot after the operation. She was talking to Louis at the restaurant and all of a sudden she looked at Louie and the clot had hit a heart and she was just gone.

JL: That was Bill Bailey's sister, actually.

JF: Yes it was.

JL: The dancer.

JF: "Won't you come home Bill Bailey"?

JL: Yeah.

JF: And Pearl told me all about it. She called it Chitlin' Circuit.

JL: Did she play the Dolly? That's right. I probably knew she was dead.

JF: One of her first singing jobs was in a brothel because she could sing and serve drinks and all. She told me some hilarious stories. Harriet Tubman, again. I want to talk about what you have done to Harriet Tubman's hand here. It is obviously not a graceful hand again for Harriet.

JL: Well, it is a woman working, cutting wood, and that's the symbol of Harriet Tubman. A strong woman. And her experience as a slave woman. This is it.

JF: This is your *Migration Series*, symbolizing, I think the blacks providing all the labor. I think this with the giant nails and the stark open window.

JL: I think it represents the industrial community like Pittsburgh. And this is one of the places that attracted the migrants, because there was work there and so on. So this represents that.

JF: You once mentioned in a talk, in an interview you gave, that this, I think it's laundry, in the *Migration*—

JL: Yeah, the women following the men into the North. Yeah, I use a symbol, laundry worker.

JF: I love the colors you've got there, Jake, especially in the laundry.

JL: It's nice seeing these works again.

JF: It's nice for us to study them. Now this looks like it is going to be—Gwen, you are going to like this—this is a picture of a young up and coming painter, up in the upper right here, Gwen. And this is the top of it. *The Ironers*. I love the size of the irons here. It was a whole lineup of ironers, I guess. You might recognize that artist.

JL: I worked in a laundry at one time, as a delivery boy and as a pick-up boy for laundry. And I worked up around—what's that street?

GKL: Broadway?

JL: No the street next to Broadway.

GKL: Oh, Amsterdam.

JL: No.

GKL: Riverside Drive?

JL: Maybe Riverside Drive. And I would pick up laundry over the weekend, or Monday or Tuesday, and deliver laundry back at the time of the weekend. I was in art school. We made tips. Some people would tip a dime, some a quarter—a quarter was a big tip. And so that is that experience here. And seeing the women sewing buttons and darning socks and ironing shirts and things like that.

JF: How about that picture of the artist up in the right hand. Very small picture.

JL: Oh, yeah.

JF: How old are you in that picture? Do you recall about when that was taken? Gwen, maybe you could tell us.

JL: Well, if I was in art school I must have been about 16, 17 years of age. That would have been the time that I had been working in the laundry.

JF: And how about that photograph of yourself? How old are you there? I am just curious.

JL: I guess quite young, 16, 17 years of age.

GKL: You think so? You look like you may have been 20.

JL: 20, you think. Well, it could be. It could be.

GKL: What year was this painted?

JF: It's on the back.

JL: No it's here.

GKL: It's on the back too, isn't it? Yeah, where you can read it.

JL: [19]43.

GKL: [19]43.

JL: We were married.

GKL: Yeah.

JF: I love this geometry and the angle at which you decided to paint this so we're looking through—looking down into the bilge of the ship—is that the coast guard?

JL: Yes, yes.

JF: Is that what that angle is for there, are you looking at all the piping and painting?

JL: Yes my way of expressing piping and pipes—the guts of ship.

JF: And the angle to me, that black triangle on the right there, so it's not symmetrical, it's sideways, makes me feel—I can feel that boat—the last place I want to be on a boat in the waves is in the bilge, painting those pipes, I got to tell you, without getting seasick.

JL: Well that's what this is. I remember that.

JF: Now speaking of architecture and builders, this combines both in one. *The Architect*. And look at the edifice. We always talk about art being autobiographical. Do you see yourself there? You're a blueprint, you as the artist?

JL: I think this was inspired by the Bates brothers, whom I mentioned yesterday. And they were, they didn't call themselves architects, but designers. Now, I think this is so, because I was very much aware of geometric shapes and forms and so on.

GKL: That looks like an architect there, not a cabinet maker.

JL: Well, I was around people building.

JF: I like the expanse of it. Look how huge this building is that's going up.

JL: Yeah. And of course the buildings in the Harlem community. That's what this is.

JF: *Artist with Tools*. This is what I was referring to in your earlier work, after all the works of men with their different tools. You recall that one?

JL: Oh this one. Yeah.

JF: Tools of the trade, and I love your still life in the front there.

JL: A banana and a pear. A flower. That's right.

JF: They look so dainty and fragile compared to this artist, big strong artist with tools and this very fine—I just love that. Here we have again from *The Migration Series*.

JL: That's the cover, isn't it?

GKL: Yeah of the book.

JL: Of the book?

JF: Yeah, Number 3. This is *Migration Series* Number 3.

JL: Yeah.

JF: And again we have the birds, the people and the birds both flying.

JL: Yeah, it's a good symbol to use for migration.

JF: They're both moving. I love that.

JL: Yeah.

JF: Well, that's the last of them then, Jake. Well, thank you very much.

JL: Well, thank you.

JF: We could go on for days if we could.

JL: Yeah.

JF: Is there anything, Gwen, you too, anything we haven't heard? Is there anything we've left out?

JL: I can't think of anything.

JF: In the thousands of interviews you've given, has somebody missed something? I can't imagine, but I'd better ask it.

JL: I can't think of anything, can you?

GKL: No.

JF: Good, okay, well let's wrap this up for today then.

JL: Alright.

[END OF INTERVIEW]