2012

Mack, Mary

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Damien Johnson

Gullah Project
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Damien Johnson, Hope Harrod and Dave Katchadurian
July 24, 2012
Red Piano Too Art Gallery, St. Helena Island, South Carolina

DJ: Not just myself, but myself and others, right?

DK (offscreen): Right, but I mean we missed that last time.

DJ: Oh. Okay. Alright, today's date is July 24th, 2012. We are here to interview Mary Mack at the Red Piano Too Gallery here in St. Helena Island. My name is Damien Johnson. I am accompanied by Hope Harrod and Dave Katchadurian on the camera. And first of all, thank you Ms. Mack for working with us and taking the time out of your busy schedule to interview with us. We're here in your gallery. Can you tell us a little bit about the gallery?

MM: Well thank you. Thank you for the opportunity to talk about it and for coming in to talk with me. The Red Piano Too Art Gallery is about twenty-two years old. It is primarily folk art; we originally had a lot of vintage, older folk artists from all over the country. This kind of evolved to show more work of indigenous artists and show Gullah art. I've had maybe, more than twenty-five artists who have started in this gallery. And some of them have gone on to become internationally recognized artists.

HH: Can you name who, some of those artists?

MM: Cassandra Gillens is one. The young man who is the graphic design director of Nike, Jason Murphy. (offscreen) Helen Stewart. Cassandra White's and her quilts and that's Cassandra Gillens' and paintings. Renny Sandra Smith. She has work hanging in the National Visitor Center in Dublin, Ireland.

DJ (offscreen): Excellent. So with that understanding, this studio being one of the launching pads for folk art and Gullah art, how does that make you all feel around here?

MM (offscreen): Well I feel very good about it. Actually, I'm gonna be 76 in a month and one of the reasons I keep working, I keep coming to the gallery everyday is to provide the opportunity for artists to have a place to show. And this my passion - art. Collecting is my passion and I really enjoy having artists being able to exhibit their or sell their works.

HH (offscreen): How do you find artists?

MM (offscreen): Mostly, artists come to me or they're recommended, referred by other artists, that kind of thing. I advertise a lot. I promote the gallery. People see my ads. They'll call and say, "I see you're having a show. Can I be a part of that?"

DJ: (offscreen) So Ms. Mary, there's so many different artists have gotten their start here, which says that you've been an observer and an interpreter of this folk art and this Gullah culture. (onscreen) Through the artists, how have you been able to interpret the Gullah culture?

MM: Well, so much of it is memory paintings. People paint from their frame of reference. They paint what they lived with, what they know. They paint from, a lot of them paint from an earlier time. Like a lot of images of seniors, they paint sweetgrass basket weavers, sewers, castnet people, plateau makers. Lot of food waves. That kind of thing, so the artist kind of interpret the culture and then exhibit it to public.

DJ (offscreen): Has the experience of having so many different artists come in help develop your sense of what the Gullah tradition is and what that means to you?

MM: Well, I guess. I grew up in this culture so it's a way of life for me. I was born in the next county up, but my grandmother like four generations removed was born in Beaufort district. And when the low country was the Beaufort district. So this is my culture and my heritage. This here.

DJ (offscreen): Tell us about this area. We know that we're down the street from the Penn Center. What relationship does this gallery or you in particular have with Penn Center?

MM: Well, I went to school when Penn was a school. And then I came… I went away for higher education. I lived in New York City. And then I came back here and had a healthcare career in the low country. But I became involved with Penn Center when I came back. And I am the first female to have Chair of the Board of Directors at Penn Center. There's been other females since then, but I was Chairman of the Board in the '90s. Which was a first, but I… Sometimes I say I have like a Dollar Tree relationship with Penn Center, with Penn because I think it's such a unique slice of American history. That at one time, I was talking with Senator Hollings, retired U.S. Senator from South Carolina. About… We were trying to get national attention and funding for Penn Center. And I attempted, well I did point out to him, that Penn Center is a very important African-American institution. But Penn Center is also a unique slice of American history. It's where education began for free Africans in the South.

DJ (offscreen): There's so much tradition at the Penn Center. Educationally, what were some of the programs historically that the Penn Center started?

MM: Yeah, well that was before my time. (Laughs). But actually, they taught farming, basket-making, wheel-riding, cobbler. They taught basic vocational skills and in addition to the

academic portion of it. Yeah, but when students left Penn, they were really ready to go out and learn to work. They were able to get a job. They had a skill. It was kind of like a… it was a agricultural and industrial school at one time. And then, they switched again to focus more on academic. But when I went to school there, we still had you know like home economics and they guys had shop. Now girls or guys can get shop and boys or girls can get home economics. But back then, mostly guys went to the shop and girls went to home economics.

DK (offscreen): What would you say is the mission of the Penn Center now?

MM: Um, to service a catalyst of, for the Gullah history and culture. Uh, to keep it alive, the history and culture. To tell the story. And to act as an advocate for the culture.

DK (offscreen): When did that change? From being like a vocational area school to…?

MM: Well, the school actually, the county took over, the state of South Carolina in 1948. It was a private school up until that time. And then, I guess, like as a forerunner to Brown v. Board of Education, I think the class of '48, I think. They're diploma was actually the only diploma that read it came from the state of South Carolina as opposed to Penn School. And those students lived with that for years and years and just a few years ago, they finally got the state to issue them a diploma that read Penn School. Because it was that important to be a graduate of Penn School. But it became a public school in 1948. And then the St. Helena School opened in 1953. And the students from Penn and from the local community schools were transitioned into St. Helena. Then, St. Helena was a K-12.

HH (offscreen): When St. Helena opened in 1953, how was it different from Penn Center?

MM: Well, I actually had left already so there are people that attended that school that could speak to it much better than I can. I went to New York in 1953 and I went to school there.

HH (offscreen): How old were you when you went to New York?

MM: Seventeen.

HH (offscreen): Okay. And your family…?

MM: No! (Laughs).

HH: (offscreen): You were seventeen.

MM: Yeah…

HH (offscreen): Why did you choose New York?

MM: I went to New York to get married. And I went to school after I got married, continued to go to school. And I got a general New York State equivalency. And I always tell people, I mean I used to be very embarrassed about that. The fact that I did not graduate formally from high school. But I would say that Penn prepared me to go out and compete. I mean, I graduated undergraduate from Queens College, which is a branch of the City University of New York. I got my master's from Fordham University and I was in the doctoral program at Teacher's College Columbia University. Then I came back to South Carolina.

HH (offscreen): So you came to commit health care?

MM: Yeah, yeah I became a registered nurse. And then I taught psychiatric mental health nursing for some time and I did clinical work, also. Then when I came back to South Carolina, the first nine years I was here, I worked with the mental health center here as a aftercare coordinator for the five-county area. And then, I went to the Beaufort Jasper Hampton Comprehensive Health Services. And I was a deputy executive director there for eighteen years. It was like chief operations officers is what they call it now. Yeah.

DJ (offscreen): You've done so many things!

MM: Yeah, it's been fun. Living's been fun. (Laughs).

HH (offscreen): So what was it that you decide that this was your calling?

MM: Art? Oh, I tell this story all the time. When I first went to New York, my husband took me to Greenwich Village. There was an open-air art exhibit and I thought it was the most fascinating thing I'd ever seen. And I just knew that I wanted to be involved with art. And I wanted to, actually I do paint. I do art. But I went out and I bought a paint-by-number set. And I would hide because I didn't want people to see me. That I was like teaching myself to paint. And I, then the business part of it, I actually backed into. Because I would… I was always trying to find African-American art. And people would come and sometimes, I mean I've taken pages out of magazines and matted and framed 'em. And then I bought posters first and then people would want to… They liked them and they wanted to buy them. So I'd sell them off of my wall. So I said, "You know, this is a business." So then I started a art business. Not this one originally, but I came together with Elaine Scott, who's working for me now. And we bought, took over this gallery. And then I bought her out about twelve years ago. And just recently, she's come back to work here.

HH (offscreen): Do you remember who the first artists were that you featured here?

MM: (Nods). The first original work that I carried was Diane Britton Dunham, who's a local artist and I still carry her. Yeah, she's good artist, too. I bought the first fourteen paintings she did. She came, and actually she was…

[End Clip 1]

[Begin Clip 2]

MM: … born in Cleveland. But lived down here for some time. And still does. But she kept telling me she was an artist and I said, "Well, you gotta let me see something. Let me see something." And she started painting and I kept buying them. And I bought fourteen and then you know, they started going up and I couldn't afford to own everything she painted anymore. (Laughs). Yeah.

DK (offscreen): What's the appeal to you of this type of art?

MM: It's the color, the form, it allows you to bring your own interpretation to it. But it's not a complicated kind of art. There's nothing hidden. You don't look for… I don't look for. I mean, some people always feel like you gotta, there's a message that you don't quite get that you got to study art. But I… This art is open. And it just tells it's story.

HH (offscreen): And would you say the same for your own work?

MM: Yeah, I think so. Yeah.

HH (offscreen): Can you talk about your work a little?

MM: Yeah, I paint mostly the Gullah lifestyle. I paint primarily women and water. That's what I focus on. I live on the sound and the way I… I live in a older, basic Gullah, like old ranch house. And when they built the house in the '50s, it's on the beautiful water view but they didn't fix the bedroom window so you could look out. So I still can't look at the water from the bed. So I started hanging women and water on the walls so when I wake up, I see these women and water there and so I kinda vicariously look at the sound through the art on the wall. And that's what I paint mostly. Not exclusively, I mean I do a few other things, but kind of.

DK (offscreen): Are women and water really emblematic of this culture?

MM: Yeah! I think so. I mean, you know. I have a, well she's become to be my friend as… There's a doctoral student down here now from California who's studying the Gullah culture, primarily she's looking at women. But like fisher women. I mean, women can cast nets and crab and all sorts of lots of things. And they work in the seafood industry! Off of canning,

pasteurizing crab meat for the national market. Used to be very common here and oysters. And the Gullah women showed the oysters and picked the crabs out of the shells and I think all of that. For me, it's so much a part of the diet. You know, seafood and rice. You know like, the day in the life of a Gullah person without rice is a day without food. (Shakes head and laughs). So it's like if you haven't had rice, you haven't eaten.

HH (offscreen): One of the things that we have noticed through our interview process is that lots of the people we've talked to, who are from this area. They have really strong memories of growing up, doing exactly that. Fishing and eating local crab. Said they may not have had a lot of money, definitely eat local from the land.

MM: Yeah. A Gullah saying - "If you're to starve on the island, you have to be lazy." Because there's no way you cans starve if you can go out and fish and crab and get oysters. I mean, it's here. You just have to bring it in. Course that's changed somewhat, with the development. There's not that much fish anymore. It's not… it's just a decrease in the amount of marine-life, but there's still some out there. (Nods).

HH (offscreen): Um, what do you tell people who are coming through and just so happen to come across your gallery? What do you tell them about this place as they're just stopping through?

MM: Usually people ask more than I tell. (Chuckles). When people come in, they're very curious. People come in so often, they say you know where the Gullah people. Actually, they say, "Where the Goo-lahs?" (Chuckles). I say, "We're all over the place. We're here." (Chuckles). But, you know, I talk about the culture, the rich history to you know, freedom came to people here in 1862 and the Gullah people are very proud people. They love the land. They're very… They guard it. You know, they're very particular about the land. The boundaries are very important. They don't fence the land in much and that's one of the things that people seem to… People get annoyed. Gullah people get annoyed about fences because they just kind of… They know it's there's, but it's kind of communal also. Yeah. (Nods).

HH (offscreen): Have you noticed… One of the other things that we've seen is there's definitely people that said things have changed a lot and over time in this community. Have you recognized any of the changes through artwork in this community?

MM: I guess… It depends on who's painting. Because I mean like, Jonathan Green, Jonathan's not a folk artist. He's an educated artist, but he paints the Gullah lifestyle. He's like, I guess the Father of the Gullah lifestyle images. And Sam Doyle was a folk artist. And he painted more primitive style. But Jonathan's people are never a subservient. The Gullah lifestyle art generally has people in very independent roles. And they're painted with dignity. I don't know if that's answer to your question but that's the way I perceive it.

HH (offscreen): It is. It is. For the students that we're working with, could you talk a little about the difference between folk art and educated art?

MM: Well, first the folk artists are self-taught. That's a primary thing. I mean, there are lots of different terms that people use. But what I'm talking about, primarily about self-taught artists. People that were kind of born to paint. They just, you know, they get up and they have to. It was something they had to do. And a lot of it chronicles the lifestyle. Some newer artists might paint more current. And even Sam Doyle, who's like the Father I guess of art on St. Helena. Sam also, he was a chronicle of history. I mean, he did paintings of Joe Louis, and he did paintings of Hitler, and he just portrayed. I mean, it was like a kind of current events thing as well as that which it'd gone before. Yeah, he painted… We have a painting he did of the first motor car on St. Helena Island and it was owned by the Chisholm Funeral Home. Stuff like that. You know, you could look at it and say, "Yeah. You know, that's one of the first motor cars. That's who owned the first motor car over here."

HH (offscreen): Did you find when you first started I guess collecting art in this area that there were people who, I think like the net creators, like at what point did that become art to them?

MM: Well, I don't know that it ever did. I think… I think they recognized that other people view it that way. But I think they see it more as utilitarian. Yeah. And the baskets. I mean, I think the sweetgrass sewers. They view it much more as an art now. But uh, originally the baskets were utilitarian, also. Yeah.

DK (offscreen): Do you have a sense of when that changed? The basket…?

MM: You know, there's a book on sweetgrass baskets by Ms. Coakley, I think is the author. I have it here but her name is Coakley. But back in the, I think late '20s, early '30s, during the Depression era, they… she talks about this guy. This is the Mount Pleasant basketweavers and where they have the roadside stands. And this husband said to his wife, he said, "What we need to do is put them basket out by the road and then bill come by and then people buy them basket." When the army bills, he call it bills. "Bill come by, then people buy the basket." So it kinda started as a cottage industry from that. And they do.

HH (offscreen): Yeah.

MM: Course they've grown up a lot since then. (Laughs). But that's all relative.

DK (offscreen): Can I ask you more about when you were President of the Board at Penn Center. What kind of things did you try to do? What was your…

MM: Thank you. That was… When I was Chairman of the Board, well I was a board member for some time before that, and one of the things during that time, the buildings on the campus were literally falling down. And one of the buildings, Darrell Hall, actually did fall down. It just collapsed on itself. And we just fought so hard to get funds for restoration. And during the time I was a board member, and Tom Bronwell was the Chairman of the Board and Harriet Cossling, who was in the South Carolina House of Representatives, and was also a board member. And some other people, Emory Campbell, who was the executive director. We went everywhere trying to raise money and we finally, from the department of the interior, we got money. We got some money from South Carolina, from the state of South Carolina. I was talking 'bout Senator Hollings earlier; he was very instrumental in helping Penn Center get money to restore those buildings. It was during my watch that, during the time that I was the Chair, that the buildings, that a number of the buildings were actually restored. Yeah, so that was a major, major accomplishment.

DK (offscreen): What kind of programs did you have?

MM: Well there's, you know, the history and culture, which is like the museum and that kind of thing. And then the PACE Program, which is the early childhood, well it's the childhood… it's a program for children, children and youth. It's the PACE is program for cultural enrichment, I forget what the… Well anyway, it's a cultural enrichment. It teaches the history. I should know what the acronym stands for but I can't remember it right now. And also the land use program. And Penn has become, more now a conference center to provide places. But Penn was always, I mean it was a conference center for a long time because there were only like two institutions, two places in the South, that you could host a integrated meeting. And Penn Center was one of them, some of the Civil Rights Movement were… Martin Luther King came here and worked. They say that he worked on his March on Washington speech at Penn Center. And then of course, there was the Highlander Center in Tennessee. But those were like the two institutions in the South that, were mixed groups could gather.

DK (offscreen): And was it very revolutionary that you were elected President as the first woman?

MM: Well, you know. The interesting thing about it, I didn't know it. (Laughs). I only realized later when someone pointed out that there had never been a female board Chair. And I said, "Aaaah! This is a major accomplishment." Yeah, it showed growth. Yeah, it shows growth all around. (Nods head).

DJ (offscreen): Speaking of growth, where do you see Penn Center growing? Where do you see it in the future?

MM: I see… Well you know Penn is done some changes recently. I mean, the library is coming on the Penn campus. They provided opportunities for the county to build a public library there. And then the health center, the Beaufort Jasper Hampton, the Roy E. Brown New Health Center just opened about a month ago. So, and then, they also…

[End Clip 2]

[Begin Clip 3]

MM: … provided some land for Habitat for Humanities to build, I think, five houses. So that kind of thing, but also, I think that it's been an area for research for some time and I think that it will continue to be. And I think that's a major role that, for Penn is to keep the history and to serve as an advocate for Gullah history and culture. The maintenance, the continuance to keep it alive.

DJ (offscreen): With that being said, is there anything that you can leave our students that'll be looking at this. Any words of wisdom or any advice that you can give the young people?

MM: One of the things that I think is important for the public in general, to become advocates for Penn Center. Because it is a unique slice of American history. And funding is so tight. Sometimes, people mistakenly think that Penn has money but it really does not have any money. It's a constant struggle. So that when people go out, they to always do some advocacy for Penn Center. To tell the story. To keep it alive.

DK (offscreen): Can I ask another question?

MM: Sure.

DK (offscreen): When you went to New York, you were there seventeen years?

MM: No, I was actually there twenty-six years.

DK (offscreen): Twenty-six years. What brought you back?

MM: I'd always planned to come back. I came back earlier because of family, a family situation. I actually came earlier than I'd planned, but and as things evolved, I just decided to stay. It's a good move. I love, I love St. Helena Island. You know, I've lived here longer now than I had before I left. But this is, when I think of home, this is where I think of. I mean, I was born on my parents' farm in Colleton County but that seems like such a long time ago. This is home for me.

DJ (offscreen): Well, Ms. Mary, we thank you.

MM: Well, thank you.

DJ (offscreen): The pleasure was all ours.

MM: Thank you, thank you. Alright. Here and in the photograph is this fly. (Everyone laughs). Same thing here.

HH: Um, so Ms. Mack, if you could talk to us a little about the room that we're standing in. And some of the work that's in here.

MM: Yeah, this is basically… this wall is generally my new exhibit wall. Although right now, it's… (offscreen) well sometimes it's gallery regulars that are on exhibit but this is Helen Stewart's work. And she's from more from the midland. She's from Orangeburg, South Carolina. And this lady, Eileen Harris, is from Florida. There was an attorney that was in a workshop over on Hilton Head and saw a commercial for the gallery. And she drove over here to tell me about Eileen because she said she knew that Eileen needed to be here. And so she's been with me… She's listed as an extraordinary interpretations for self-taught artists. Have a lot of pieces of her work in the movie "Nights in Rodanthe." I actually had four artists in that film and she was one of them. Cassandra was in it. Allen Fireall and Charles Desaussure. And that's uh, Charles' work is down here. He's one of the longer exhibiting artists in the gallery as well. He was born in Jamesy, South Carolina, which is in the South Carolina low country. But he lives in Charleston now. This of course is Jonathan Green's work or his images. Jonathan sells his originals from his studio up on Daniel Island. But he does a calendar every year. And many, many, many, many people have Jonathan's work hanging in their homes. Which are actually calendar pages. Yeah, I mean it's absolutely beautiful. They make wonderful works of art.

HH (offscreen): Well thank you very much.

MM: Okay!

[End]