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Gullah Digital Archive

Interviewee: Omar Patterson

Interviewers: Hope Harrod, Damien Johnson, David Kachadourian

Location: St. Helena Island, South Carolina

Date: July 17, 2013

HH: My name is Hope Harrod and I am here at the...

OP: CLSR.

HH: Yes, with Omar Patterson, it is July 17th, interviewing, it was me, David Kachadourian and Damien Johnson and...let's begin. So, thank you so much for sitting down to talk to us again, uh, we met last year with quite a bit of your family in a different location to talk about your work. We wanted to revisit that conversation and talk to you about, sort of, where you are now in your work, sort of re-visiting what your vision is and how it's changed at all. First of all, I'd like you to talk to us about how, how you define your artwork and what your artwork is for you.

OP: Um, my artwork is expression of like what I feel the world should look like, you know, sort of like, it has sort of a like a smooth sort of radius to it. You know, like very smooth you know, I tend to do a little too much sharp edges but you know, that can be fixed. But um, yeah.

HH: And so can you talk about maybe your influences, what influences, or how do you get your inspiration.

OP: A few of my influences are one of the Hudson River School. I love the works of Frederick Church, Albert Bierstadt, you know, Asher Durand you know, people like that. Their work reflects on like the colonization like um, like coexistence between human and nature. It's very beautiful and include a lot of vast landscapes, you know, it's just, it's just beautiful.

HH: And when we saw you last you talked a little bit about your cultural influence and how that impacts how you do your work. Is that still part of what you do?

OP: Yeah, my cultural influence the Gullah/Geechee culture yeah, it definitely has a strong impact on me as far as like my artwork. The Spanish moss, the palm trees, I mean I can't escape that so yeah, that's home, yeah.

DK: Is there a, is there a resonance between those two? Between Hudson River School sort of the way of looking at nature and the way you saw nature growing up here?

OP: It's a little bit different, I have to stay because up north it's a lot of mountains and you know stuff like---you don't see that in the local country, so you know. It is a little bit different but as far as like, trees, trees are still the same so I mean I can do trees, water pretty much. It's those, it's those type of landscapes that make a pretty huge difference.

DK: Do you think the feel is the same?

OP: Um, I think so. To me. Because I can make it work, I think it is for me.

HH: Uh, where are you now? Just in your artwork, compared to where you were last year.

OP: Compared to last year, I'm a lot more busier now. Because of the 16th Annual USCB Art Exhibit. I won first place with, with my piece here the...this um, Asher Durand's "The Black Mountain from the Harbor Islands" done in 1890. Yeah the original was much smaller, the original was much smaller, but I felt like I had to enlarge it a little bit. There's a, there's a few similar differences, but yeah. So with that I had a lot of exposure lately, so I've been real busy just doing a lot of commissions and you know stuff like that.

DJ: What are some of the pieces that you've been asked to---or that you've commissioned, or people have commissioned you to do.

OP: There's this one piece right here, this is on St. Helena Island near the area of Capers, deep in the woods, very deep so.

HH: You wanna talk about it?

OP: Yeah this is, a relative of mine and um, this is a place where she grew up and she just wanted me to just, just capture the moment. The tree um, she really liked the tree 'cause it's very huge. Not as huge as the tree I did for y'all but you know. It is pretty big, a lot of the trees down here are pretty big, so. You know, a lot of people wanna try to preserve that history because you know like some of it's being cleared so you gotta keep some of this history, so people asked me to capture that 'cause they know it's very special to them, in their own way.

HH: Did you go there to paint it or did you take a picture?

OP: It is---it was raining the time I started the project, it was raining a lot so I didn't really consider doing a plein air painting. I really would have though, I mean, it's always a joy to go like outdoors and paint, it can be a pain sometimes but, you get through it. It's always the wind and the bugs, oh man, I had one piece like fall into the dirt one time. I had to get that off and I

had to scrape all that stuff off and then like get back on track, so. It can be troublesome but you know, it's, it's always a joy to go outdoors.

HH: So you talked about how, your're doing this piece of art that was commissioned from a family member, and you're also doing your entering, and performing, and showing your art in the contests. How, how are you getting your name out there, how are you getting your work out?

OP: Just advertisements and you know, a lot of fliers, you know, Facebook, you know that sort of thing. That's just pretty much how I'm doin' it now. I had, I have a few pieces over in some of the galleries here, yeah.

DJ: What's that process like, getting your piece in a gallery?

OP: Some of the galleries in Beaufort, they charge a high percentage but you know, you gotta get your name out there somewhere so, yeah. I go to some of the galleries there. Sometimes it's not, they don't always accept your work because you know, like they want a certain like subject matter, to be displayed in their gallery so you gotta like be attentive to that. So yeah. Like even sometimes, like when I find that out like I should be doin' a piece according---and then I sort of enter myself in. Yeah.

Unknown: What's been some high points as far as you entering your pieces in the galleries?

OP: High points, exposure is definitely the number one thing, definitely exposure. You know, just getting your name out there, people like, recognize your work and once they see your face, usually I have a picture or something to show that that's me, you know, and people want to meet you. And that's how you get work.

HH: How did you know you were an artist? When did you decide that this, this was for you and how did you know that it was something special?

OP: I have to say like way back when I was maybe five or six years old. Just, just like any other elementary kid just doin' little doodles in class, you know, gettin' in trouble we're doin' that sort of thing too. Yeah, I guess that's pretty much where it started and then I just got interested in one point, at one point to do like, like more. I just wanted to like challenge myself, you know 'cause most kids, they'll just do like you know the little doodles in art class and just leave it alone. I was one of those ones that just wanted to stay there and you know, let me see what I can do with this and let me see what I can do with that. And it just got more detailed, and detailed to the point where I was doing portraits at like seven or eight.

HH: And did you know that it was something before someone else told you?

OP: Um, pretty much yeah.

HH: Did you---at what point did you start to share your work?

OP: To share my work, probably somewhere down the road, maybe, twelve, thirteen somewhere in there, but yeah. Soon I was displaying my work at flea markets or stuff you know, gotta start from somewhere, so yeah. That's where I was started.

HH: Um, mentors---

OP: Mentors...

HH: Do you have mentors or have you had mentors?

OP: I have one. Hank Herron is one of my mentors, he's at the Green Street gallery---Green Fish, I'm sorry, Green Fish Gallery. Another that---who resides in Yemassee, James Denmark, I don't know if you heard of, pretty well known in this area also. Haven't got in touch with Jonathan Green just yet but I'm hoping to meet him too. This area speaks highly of him, they really love his work.

HH: So do you work directly with them or are you just influenced by them?

OP: A little of both, they teach me like the financial side of art as well as, like, you know like how to help me with my work you know visually, to see things that people can't see, so that's one thing.

HH: Is there a place that you're trying to go, like what'd you, what'd you---what's your vision, where are you trying to...

OP: At one point, a lot a people tell me that I should probably go to schools like SCAT and Art Institute, I'm still thinking about leaving this area. You know, I'm still in the process of figuring myself out like where I'm at in the art world right now. I think it will come sooner than later, 'cause my work, it definitely shows a certain quality that, you know, it belongs in a gallery. So, I believe that so um, I'm not really sure yet. I'm still trying to accomplish some things, right here in Beaufort. But I'm definitely considering venturing out you know, into the world 'cause you know that's what an artist does. So.

HH: You said when you were little that you'd start with these pictures and you'd draw these doodles and you'd say, well what if I try this and I go in this direction or what if I try that and

then you would draw and it would become something even bigger and greater. Are there directions that you're trying to push yourself, you know, with your individual work that you're just moving towards that you've got a quite---that you're trying to get that challenge?

OP: You know, I always feel that way like I have to like, get better. I'm always pushing myself, I can be a little competitive too, sometimes you know like when I see something I like, like I know somebody and I see something that I like. Like what if I try that, you know that sort of thing. But yeah as far as my work is concerned, I'm always trying to get better. Like every st---I'm always like willing to learn new things 'cause I know that can help me, like with my work, so.

DJ: What are some challenges that you have, as far as pushing yourself and your art?

OP: I tend to do sharp edges sometimes, you know, but that can be fixed. Sometimes I do things a little too smoothly, like sometimes I need to sharpen it up a little bit but yeah. There's always things I need to improve on like color is another issue, you know, and it just takes a little bit of studying, just seeing things.

DJ: Can we talk about the painting in here because you said you're doing for your Aunt who lives in Chicago, is she from Beaufort, or St. Helena or...? Where is she from originally?

OP: Um she is from, she's from St. Helena that's why she wanted me to do this, this is, this is her home, pretty much.

DJ: Ok. So in a [inaudible] sense, metaphorically speaking, it's making her think of home, because when you, when you look at the tree it has all these roots, and it has all these branches, and it's a scene that's in the backwoods somewhere special, somewhere serene. Can you talk to us a little bit more about this and a little bit more about how this painting helps your family identify with your roots, where you come from?

OP: Yeah, this piece was very special to her, and not only to her but people in the area. Like um, once they see this, like they haven't seen it yet but once they do see it, they'll know exactly what it is 'cause, you know, this is home to them. I mean they used to, my Grandma told me they used to play like baseball a lot near this tree. It wasn't nearly this big when they were growing up but I think they gonna love it when they see it. They identify with that, you know, it's like traveling back in time, reminding them of a special moment. You know, so I just wanted to give them that, give them my painting.

DJ: What type of emotions, do you think will come out once they see this?

OP: I think they'll probably be overwhelmed. You know, some people take it different but I think they'll um, yeah.

HH: So when you come up with ideas, outside of when someone asks you to paint something in particular, are you pulling from your own, sort of, memory or your own experience with what it is you want to think about, in terms of your connection to nature and your connection to your culture?

OP: I think, I think so. As far as like what I put into my work, I just do it how I see it pretty much, you know. Some of the stuff that I've learned, like it does influence, like if I'm doing a certain gradient or something like that. Like, you know, it does remind me of like the fundamentals, but yeah.

DK: In this painting did you pick this particular view or did she pick it?

OP: She picked the view we discussed like through emailing, we discussed like how she wanted the tree, you know she was well um, very particular about how she wanted the tree. Like she wanted this particular angle and she wanted the whole tree.

DK: And did she say she wanted part of the house in it too? Or is that not important?

OP: I kind of suggested the house being cropped in it, you know 'cause I thought that'd be a nice touch, I mean, the house pretty much part of the---I mean it is pretty much the centerpiece, so that's where she grew up is in that house.

DK: When I look at this I'm thinking about, you know, the composition. And the composition is really good and it looks to me like, like an artist picked it rather than a client.

OP: Yeah, I did give her several suggestions other than the house. Like I suggested this particular angle. You know, we see, artists see things that someone---like normal people can't see, so. Like when we like, when we sound like we don't know like we kind of what we're doing, we know exactly what we're doing, so. Like we can see these things, so. I mean, you might get it first time around but we can see these things.

DK: How much time did you actually spend here on your painting?

OP: I'd say it might have been four or five weeks, you know. This one didn't take too long.

DK: And did you---how much of that time did you paint in the studio and how much of the time on site?

OP: Like I said, I didn't do any plein air because at the time it was raining a lot, like every other day it was raining, so. Yeah, I couldn't do a plein air painting. I really wanted to because I just really wanted to capture the, you know, wanted to feel that way, 'cause it was like to be how they used to be, so. Unfortunately I didn't get that chance, I had to work from a photo.

DK: Omar why do you think that is? That when your there in plein air that you get more immersed?

OP: 'Cause we get there like and you feel it, then I think the painting turns out much better than you expect it to. Much rather than looking at a picture, you know, like real flat, you know, and you're not there, so. You know, it is a big difference for an artist, to actually be there at the, at the scene of the painting and looking at a picture, so it is a big difference.

DK: Would you have to like go back and check things?

OP: Um yeah, I think I worked from like several pictures 'cause I couldn't do on the site I think I at least ten or fifteen pictures, I took. I mean 'cause I'm a very particular artist I like to see what I'm painting. Not every little detail but you know enough where you can put the image together.

DK: Do you think there are to many sharp edges on this painting?

OP: Like I said, I think I'm getting better at that. Not too many in this one 'cause the tree is what actually makes the painting like mostly the tree takes up the whole painting, so. Not too many sharp edges on this one.

DJ: Well Omar it's obvious that from the last time we met you to now, your work is getting so much stronger. And it's a pleasure to see you grow. I wanna go back to when you said you were little and you started doodling. What could you tell, like a middle school art teacher, or high school art teacher to look out for in their students because sometimes the doodling is really artistic. And you know, if I were a teacher, well I am a teacher, but if I were an art teacher and I saw somebody doodling I'd be like, just make sure you get your notes down but keep doodling. What are some techniques or what are some things that middle school teacher or a high school teacher in art could kind of pull, extract from a student to get thinking artistically and creatively?

OP: I think it's very important for like elementary, middle school, and high school to like, like get in touch with the art students, the art teachers. Especially for the schools that are not really inclined to art, I went to that school like where we---art wasn't a concern at all. I mean I had to like do this all on my own so. I don't think I was always self-taught, I had a few people there by my side to show me the way, you know. But as far as art in our school we didn't really have that

much focus on that. As far as like art teachers I think like when they see something, or even if they don't see it, they should encourage the students you know to express themselves. Because you know, a lot of kids get in trouble nowadays and they need some sort of outlet and I think art is a very good outlet. I mean, even if you can't do something like I can do, I mean it's still a good way to express yourself, a good way to vent out some of that, you know, some of that, that bad stuff you get like on the streets or whatever.

DJ: What was that like for you because you said you played football and you're an artist, that usually, those two....?

OP: Yeah usually wouldn't think a football can paint like I would, but I had to turn to kind of juggling art and football, and also track too, so. Yeah, I had a mural that I did at my old school, I don't know if I told y'all this last time we met but yeah. I had, I had, I juggled football and doing this mural like right after practice I would put down my gear like sometimes even have my gear on and just be painting on the wall, so. It worked out though. I mean, it came out nice.

DJ: What was it a mural of?

OP: It was an aircraft carrier, two fighter jets and a submarine. Like I sort of had like a, like a panorama sort of panorama view like of, you can see underwater, and you can see up top. It's like three planes too, it was a submarine, an aircraft carrier, and then it was the fighter jets, so three planes.

DJ: Did your teammates ever give you a hard time?

OP: Not really, I mean, not really I was pretty cool with my team. They didn't have a problem with that at all my coaches they didn't have a problem with it, I mean they actually encouraged me to do it. I mean, 'cause you know a lot of, a lot of everybody on the team, you know they're not always doing what they're supposed to do. I mean, it's a good thing to like try to push a young man to do like something good.

HH: Sounds like the school was supportive of that too to be doing a mural at the school.

OP: Yeah.

HH: Right, so how did that come about? Did they.....

OP: No, it was actually my, it was the ROTC that I did this for, so my commanding officer. He saw a drawing of mine and he asked, if you could do a painting for us. And I told him I do

murals too and I guess it kind of, sort of went in that direction. I guess that's what ended up happening is me doing a mural, so.

HH: Have you done other murals?

OP: I have, I wouldn't say that I do murals often but they do take up a lot of time but it depends on what you're doing. As opposed---like doing a whole wall as opposed to, you know, like something small. Yeah.

DK: Omar if I gave you a canvas and said, "Paint what you want to paint, what *you* want to paint", what would you paint?

OP: I've done paintings like that, surprisingly enough they didn't turn out the way I want them to. It is different for me like as far as like working from someone, what someone gives you like directions and stuff, and like doing it yourself. I have a few paintings that I've done, I've done a few portraits sort of, like I've done a Christ portrait and you know, different things. I tend to go religious when it comes to like doing stuff that I want to do they don't turn out like the way I want it to, as detailed, but they seem to have a certain quality that's different from the others.

DK: Could you describe that? I'd like---so that, describe what one of those paintings would be like?

OP: It can be very emotional for me sometimes, you know, and I just be going like a million miles and hour it's just very spontaneous. I don't think I can even describe the feeling it's, it's just overwhelming when I do a painting like that.

DK: And, if you wanted that to develop, to make it better what---and you tell us that there's specific things you're working on with these paintings what would you work on in terms of those, to make them better, make them more satisfying?

OP: The paintings that I get right now with commission-wise or?

DK: No the religious paintings you do for yourself.

OP: Ok, I think I could probably improve on, like working on them a little more. Like 'cause they are like mostly spontaneous so they're very fast and you know, I don't know why I tend to go that route. I can still like go the same route with doing paintings, that are commissioned to me. But, I don't know why 'cause I tend to go spontaneous like that. Just like when I'm feeling a certain way I just gotta do it like so I don't lose it in my mind.

HH: So when you're painting, I know that sometimes writers when they start writing a book, they say they don't really know what the characters drive them in a certain direction and they don't know until they get there and they get there kind of, and they're just the vehicle. Is that the case for you, do you have the idea in your head and you're trying to create it on the canvas or are you literally with each brushstroke, you know following whatever the energy is that's driving you?

OP: I usually do plan out my paintings I do sketches like before every painting I do like sort of a rough sketch of what I want to be captured. My sketches aren't, they don't go too much into detail, I guess. But yeah I do plan my stuff out before, even the spontaneous paintings I plan them out before I do.

DJ: Speaking of sketches and making connections with your emotions, and your feelings, um you gotta step in front of the camera, I'm gonna have the camera take a shot of this one. Can you talk to us about this 'cause this one of my---or one of our favorite things from South Carolina and can you tell what this means and what it's all about? And how it connects? Here I'm just gonna do this.

OP: Alright, what you're wearing is the Kooray Dey t-shirt. It's something me and my Mom came up with to remind people not of the Lowcountry, like of the Lowcountry, you know, we wanna give them a little bit of Gullah. So what it says is Kooray Dey, it's an expression we use when we see something we go, wow, you know, Kooray Dey, you know that sort of thing. So, yeah that's what that means we're currently---we still have that shirt in stock. We're working on a few more other designs we're trying to get that going so yeah but that's the only we got in stock right now.

DJ: Sounds like you're very enterprising, you got t-shirts.

OP: We're trying to get an app set up for, yeah be looking out for that.

HH: Oh, nice.

OP: We're trying to get it on things other than t-shirts, you know hats, you know that sort of thing, maybe shoes. We want it to be more sort of a clothing line for Gullah/Gechee people. Hopefully we can accomplish that real soon. With um, as far as Kooray Dey.

DJ: Can you talk about where you are now as far as Gullah/Gechee and just an understanding and a celebration of the culture as opposed to when you were younger was it always like that?

OP: Um younger, I didn't really pay too much attention to Gullah/Gechee culture I mean, I really wasn't that into it as I am now but, I glad I am now. I mean 'cause it's, it's definitely a lot history here it's a lot of, it's a lot to learn about the Lowcountry. I mean, most of everything came from the Lowcountry that's what I'm taught, you know most people won't agree with that most people have come from the Lowcountry.

DJ: Is there any parting information that you want to share? With the young people that'll see this artistically or educationally or just....?

OP: I say find that one thing that makes you happy as a, as a young person just find what makes you happy, 'cause you know a lot of kids get in trouble nowadays but seeing the Treyvon Martin thing it's just, it's just horrible. A lot of young black people gotta find like some sort of a, creative way to vent our anger and stuff, 'cause it's not just whites killing blacks, it's you know, blacks killing blacks, whites killing whites. I mean, you just need some sort of a creative outlet, you know, we need to encourage like young people to like get into you know better things, you know. Instead of pickin' up a gun pickin' up paintbrush or pickin' up a mic to sing. You know, something.

DK: Omar can you tell me about this painting here?

OP: This piece is a---was done in school project. It was one of our final projects in painting, one of those spontaneous paintings that I've talked about that tend to go into religious, yeah. The title is "Salvation Saves the Sinner's Soul". I don't know why that just came to me like after I finished it. I just thought salvation does save the sinner's soul it's quite an alliteration but yeah. Really long title but that's what I came up with. There's some things structurally that I want to fix with this it's not complete. But what I thought about this one was the light, the light of Jesus Christ really saves people. And um, that's what I felt on that. Salvation is definitely the key.

Unknown: Is the blue color significant? I didn't want to use too much blue but I love phthalo blue for some reason---or was it green, yeah it was phthalo green I love that color. But I didn't, I didn't wanna use too much of it but that color is really hard to take out of paintings but, like I chose that color because it represents a certain mood like when a person gets saved you know, it represents a certain mood. You know, you're happy, you're overwhelmed, you're overjoyed to be saved. That's what I thought about when doing this piece.

DK: Hands look caucasian to me is that deliberate or accidental or is it not?

OP: I mean as far as like the color of the hands?

DK: Yeah.

OP: I really didn't ha---intend for it to have a color so to speak, it's what the viewer sees. So um, I want to viewer to feel that this is a person getting saved it's anonymous it's not a certain color, so. Yeah it represents a soul being saved.

DK: Now is that a painting you're willing to sell or is that one that you want to keep?

OP: I'm willing to sell this piece.

DK: Do you have any paintings that you say, I just need to keep this painting?

OP: There's very few paintings that I keep, I think, I think I probably should---there's drawings that I keep because you know, they're sketches and stuff like that. Very few paintings I keep because I want the world to you know, catch---I want the world to see, what I, what I do. And I want to share it with the world, you know, I don't wanna keep it to myself, but every now and then I do keep a few pieces that really mean something to me.

HH: Can I ask you about how you prepare to do a piece and the process you go through in preparing to begin a piece? Maybe that's an emotional process maybe that's a planning process but what does that process look like?

OP: At first, I get the idea in my head you know, I sorta think about a little bit then, then I kinda sketch you know, for the sketch I observe what I'm gonna be doing if it's a still life or something like that. You know, or a scene like I have to look at, I have to picture the perfect angle you know that sort of thing and then I draw it out, I draw out what I see, you know.

HH: Are you able to proceed---or beforehand 'cause you said there's some pieces, when you're just in the pre-form are sort of emotional to you. Are you able to know ahead of time that this is something that's going to be pulling a lot out of you and if that's the case how do you prepare for that. Because if you know you're going to be something that's religious, and you know that's gonna, how do you prepare for that and how do you not feel drained you know, as you're working through?

OP: Sometimes like even though I said I plan things out like with the spontaneous ones, like, I kinda just not do any thinking at all, I just pick up a paintbrush and just go. Well, I mix the colors first and then I go. So, and you can't paint without colors so yeah that's pretty much, sometimes in those cases yeah, I won't plan anything out I won't, I won't even like you know, think about angles and you know that sort of thing. You know, color is the only main concern and I just go about it like with those paintings. But the ones that I do plan out like yeah I do sketch everything out, I plan out, I think about it, yeah.

HH: Well um, thank you very much. Before we---I guess we should leave you with some final words, just about where you see yourself and what you---in ten years what do you see yourself to be doing, what do you see yourself to be accomplishing.

OP: With my art I think in ten years I should've been able to be already to like---reached the community as far as like expressing yourself in art or whatever you do, you know, and just giving people a certain feeling about like something they see or something they can relate to. That's what I wanna have accomplished in ten years.

HH: Well thank you again for meeting us again, it's been a pleasure, we---I it's been a pleasure having seen your work, you know, and your labor and see how much you've grown and also just how familiar it all feels. Thank you so much.

OP: Only plan to get better, so yeah.

DK: Great, thank you.

OP: Alright.