

Interview with Jacob Lawrence and Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence by Connie Bostic held at the Lawrences' home in Seattle, Washington on December 20, 1999.

Interview with Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence:

Connie: *Could you tell us a little bit about your early life and how you came to be in Black Mountain that summer?*

Gwendolyn: Well, we were living in New York City, and Josef Albers called up out of the blue and asked if Jake would attend the summer institute and Jake said yes, so away we went. They arranged everything so we would be, so we would feel comfortable arriving there.

What were you doing in New York when Albers called?

Well, I was Jake's wife.... and painting on my own. I've always been an artist. I always thought I was gonna be an artist from [the time I was] a little child and it wasn't easy for a woman artist in those days....

So, you went from New York to Black Mountain. What was your first impression of the campus when you arrived there?

I thought it was a very beautiful campus. There were mountains around which some people liked to climb. I was not inclined to climb a mountain but, it was very beautiful and the atmosphere was so attuned to the arts that it was really a wonderful time.

Who were some of the other teachers who were there that summer?

Let me see, there was a Japanese man [Leo Amino] and the photographers Nancy Newhall and her husband [Beaumont Newhall]. There was Varda (laughing) have you . . . did they speak about Varda?

Tell us about Varda.

Varda was very theatrical. and you know he liked young girls. Oh yeah and [Concetta] Scaravaglione [one of the sculpture instructors] ... felt it very personal. But in any event, he was very dramatic and very flamboyant. And I don't know, he wore a red sweater all the time. I don't know if anybody told you about the big party we had there.

No. Tell us about the party.

Well, it was a Greek party and everybody had to come as a Greek person, and they built a wooden horse, the students built a wooden horse. That

was the horse that Jason invaded . . . and Varda and Leo Lionni [taught advertising design] was there at the same time. And he came as Varda with his red sweater on (laughing). The students had wonderful [costumes], some people came as Greek columns. They were very inventive. And it was a very, very wonderful party. But the next day there was a lot of dropped heads (laughing)....

Of the people who were there that summer, who stands out most in your memory?

Varda (laughing) and I think [Will] Burtin, it was Burtin who I think ... was connected to Fortune magazine? And Leo Lionni. . . but as a matter of fact, all of them stood out, you know

. . . the Japanese sculptor. And he was such a lovely man. He was a kind of a calming influence on me, I imagine on lots of other people too. So, he liked to fish and he would tell me why he liked to fish.

Why did he say he liked to fish?

Well it was meditative, you know. And then let's see, who else was there. I liked Mr. Albers, but he was a very strict person about the kind of work that he liked. But I did attend some of his classes, from which I learned a great deal.

What were they like?

Well, he was a wonderful lecturer and he really made you understand what his philosophy was, and you didn't . . . at least I didn't resent the fact that he didn't like any other art but that art because it taught me a lot. . . that art taught me a lot and I got it there at Black Mountain College.

Did he like your paintings?

Oh no! (laughing) No I'm a figurative painter you see, and his wife . . . showed him one of my paintings and she said 'isn't this a good painting?' and he was very huffy about it and said 'no!'

What about Anni, did you find her supportive?

Yes. Yes. I found most people there supportive. The only thing that Mr. Albers ever complimented me on was a costume I made once out of some curtains to go to that party! (laughing). I'd taken the draperies and the curtains down and made myself a Greek costume and so he thought that was wonderful so, he did compliment me once.

At the time you went to Black Mountain, that area of the country was still very, very segregated.

Yes.

Can you talk a little bit about how you felt going south at that time?

Hmm. . . how I felt about going south. Well, I didn't, I knew there was segregation. I knew I would have to adjust to that. But I was glad to go because of the Bauhaus and meeting people that I hadn't met before who were artists and who were. . . and then there was the music. That was the first time I heard 'Song of the Earth' by Mahler. And of course Mahler's widow was married to the [Bauhaus] architect ... Gropius. . . Yes. And so I went. . . I wasn't afraid you know, to go, but I certainly knew that I wasn't going to go anywhere but to that campus. Which was what happened. We never left that campus to go into Black Mountain, or into Asheville.

So, you stayed right there the whole time?

Stayed right there. But there was lots to enjoy there. There were parties, there was dinnertime, dances, and all sorts of things happening plus the immersion in the arts.

While you were there did you feel that the absence of grades had any impact on how hard the students worked?

I don't . . . I think . . . that most of the students who came there knew that it was a different kind of place. That you wouldn't be graded. As long as you learned what the Bauhaus was about. That was the main thing. To make you creative and to learn about the Bauhaus and what they used . . . Matière and papers and color, . . . I think they were very happy not to feel that they had to be graded.

Did you ever feel a sense of competition between the students or between other faculty members?

I can't say that I did. Maybe I was naïve then and didn't recognize it but. . .

Do you think being there affected your work later on?

... Yes, I think so. I learned some things that I might not have learned about something that was far away from something that I was doing. So I think that I applied these things to my figurative painting. These abstract things about the Bauhaus to my own paintings. . . . I think I really learned a lot there.

Was there a work program for the students?

Yes, there was.

Can you tell us a little bit about that experience?

Well. I don't know. I didn't have to do any of it. (laughing) But I thought, well, they all seemed happy to do their chores. They really did. I never heard of anybody complaining about what they had to do.

There was never any money at Black Mountain. And some of the students were heavily subsidized by some of the other students who had to pay full amounts and a little more. Did you ever feel that this was an issue with any of the students?

No. You know, ... the only time I felt that students, or a student was unhappy was that they were figurative painters, and that they had to meet Mr. Albers' strict [expectations]

....

Do you think the school's poverty affected the experience there, the fact that there was no money?

No. You know I don't think anybody, I, I never noticed that, that anybody was affected. Everybody was having too much of a good time what with parties and all that sort of thing, I don't think so, I just really don't think so but I may not, as I've said before, I may not have realized it if they did.

What effect did the environment have, I know you mentioned the beauty of the mountains?

That lake was just wonderful.

Do you think your experience would have been the same if you'd been in a different kind of a place? Maybe a little more urban?

No. I don't think so. I think that the atmosphere contributed to you felt, what I felt about Black Mountain.

Was there anything that you didn't do, or somebody that you might have gotten to know a little better that you've thought about since then and have regretted not doing while you were there?

.... Well I wish I had worked more (laughing). I do I wish I had applied myself to ... my painting. I did some sculpture there too.

How do you think that summer affected the rest of your life?

I think it made me think in a more intellectual way about the making of works of art. Because there was Albers teaching all these abstract theories and ... the use of materials ... it was really a learning experience for me, and I think I learned to assess works of art because of the knowledge I gained and more precisely.

Thank you so much Ms. Lawrence.

Well you're quite welcome.

Interview with Jacob Lawrence:

.... Could you talk a little about your early life? And then tell us how you came to be at Black Mountain that summer?

Well my early life was. . . .my family was part of the black migration from the south and north which started right after WWI, . . .and we made our way North and finally settled in New York City like many, many people from that part of the country. When I was 13, ... my family, it was my mother because my mother and father were separated, and I arrived in New York, ... in 1930, ... and I'll never forget the experience of seeing these tall buildings and . . . I'll always remember the fire escapes. that's why ... the fire escape motif repeats itself over and over again, and that was fascinating for me.

.... So, you came to Black Mountain in [1946]?

Yes, that's right.

And how did that come about?

... Josef Albers, who was very instrumental in the Bauhaus spirit, it was very strong then, I guess it's still strong. And he invited me to teach at the summer institute, and I've always thought of that. . . why did he invite me? Because I'm a figurative painter, but I think it was because, well I'd like to think it was because he felt I had something to offer. But I think it had something to do with my hard edge painting. And very, very limited palette, not limited in a way but using, um, primary colors, plus black and white, so I think that was his interest. . . inviting me to Black Mountain.

So how did he approach you about coming that summer?

I don't think I met him prior to that. All our correspondence was by mail. And that was it. I had never met him and this was my first teaching experience by the way....

How did you feel about that?

Well I felt very good about it, it was very exciting being around people who had different ideas, philosophies, and so on, so it was a very exciting experience for me.

What were the classes you taught that summer?

Well, we didn't have classes as such, ... we visited studios....The classes were very open, . . . it was like a university, ... very experimental, it reflected the philosophy of the school. You go in, you talk to the students about their work, they would talk to you about your work and that's what it was.

....

Do you think the fact that they weren't being graded made any difference in their incentive to work hard?

Well they were very highly motivated, I'll put it that way.... [T]here were a couple of students, about three, who were very young, and they had a problem because of the discipline, ... I don't mean it was destructive or anything but the kind of discipline that you brought to the school because you wanted to get as much out of it as you possibly could.

....

At the time, you were there, that part of the country was still very segregated. Can you talk a little bit about how you felt going to the south?

.... Well I knew it, I wasn't naïve. Although I'd never been south or had just been south a couple of times. I knew from reading, a bunch of my material, the subject matter dealt with what I thought the south was like, its interracial relationships and things of that sort. So ... it wasn't a new experience.

Did you have any experiences with any of the local people that you remember?

No. I never came in contact with them, I never came in contact with them.

And what about the people at the school? Were there any problems there?

There was only one person.... and I think her name was Sarah Lee, and I don't think we had any communication the entire summer that we were there. And she was very, uh, well what we thought was stereotypical southern with the relationships with others, and so on, and . . . but other than that I can't think of any unpleasant experiences, no.

But you stayed at the school, you didn't wander around . . . ?

Oh yes. I stayed at the school, oh yeah. Well I knew enough not to wander around a place like that.

....

Did you feel that the poverty at this school affected the educational experience there? There was no money for a lot of materials, or buildings, or laboratories, or any of that. Did you feel that that had an effect?

I figure it had an effect, but it was a good one. Because they used, like the Bauhaus, they used this, to ...build on its philosophy. So, you'd go out and you'd pick up a piece of grass or a dandelion or natural material, you see, you didn't have to go to an art school – it was all right there and I think . . . the school tried to, and was successful in getting the students to appreciate the natural environment and natural things that the students would come in contact with, so they used that ...

So, you think in some ways that was a positive thing?

It was positive, yes. And the other students accepted that.

What about the natural environment, the mountains and the lake and the woods? Do you think that made a difference in the experience of Black Mountain?

.... Yes, I think so. Again, not in a formal way. But you know, you have people you talk to, other students and professors, and they would talk about . . . climbing this mountain and, um, what looked like a mountain, it was just a big hill. But it looked like a mountain. . . . I think it taught you, or you became more aware, again I repeat, of your natural environment, it taught you to appreciate the natural environment, and even today when I teach, I try to bring this out, that there's so many things around you that

you can use. You ... don't just discard them, you use these things, so I think that was very good experience.

Is there anything you didn't do that summer that you regret not doing now? Somebody that you didn't get to know better, or ...?

Not really, no, because it was such a small community that we, we, I think all of us depending on how you felt, could make contact with anyone else, students, instructors, anyone. So, I can't think of anything.

How do you think that summer affected your work and the rest of your life?

Well, in my teaching, for one thing, and I use quite a bit, not all of it, but quite a bit of the Bauhaus method of teaching, and it's a very exciting experience when we communicate. ...I get all this from Albers, by the way – he was a very strong person, and I used to attend some of his lectures, I guess we all did, and ... he didn't have a command of English at that time, it wasn't very strong....but his demonstrations were so visual that you could appreciate, like he'd take a wire and twist it, and move it around, and talk about space and that type of thing, and spaces between objects, and ..., it was a wonderful experience to come in contact with that kind of philosophy. I don't know if everyone did this but surely for me, it was a wonderful experience.

Do you think your work would have been different if you hadn't spent that summer at Black Mountain?

I don't think so, no. I don't think so, I think it would have been more or less the same. Hoping that it would have more scope of course, greater dimension, but my work hasn't changed over a period of years.

....

I've talked to some students who were so intimidated by Albers that they were terrified of him.

Yeah, I can see that. I can see that.

....

He was quite a strong personality. You know it was very impressive too that there was a porch where we'd all have lunch, mostly lunch not dinner, and I don't know if you remember (looking at Gwen) and all the instructors

were invited to have shows there, like an exhibition, and Albers would move from one table to the next, during different lunch times, looking at and observing work. He paid attention. But what he was thinking, you don't know.

Did he ever talk to you directly about your work?

Not directly. Not to me. No. But the mere fact that you were invited by him had a meaning. It was a positive feeling on his part. You wouldn't have been there otherwise. You had something to give, something to give to the school. Even if he said he invited you there because he didn't like the work! (everyone laughs).

....

How many years did you teach after that?

Oh, off and on, I taught before retiring about 20 something years. 25, 26, 27 years.

How many different places?

Let me see, there was New School, Art Students League, Pratt Institute, University of Washington, several places, yeah. It was a wonderful experience for me. Teaching. I really enjoyed it. I retired in 1984 I retired from teaching, but not from my work.

Well that's the important thing. You know you never retire from your work. As long as the wheels turn, you keep doing that. What are you working on now?

Well I just finished a series of paintings called 'Games' and it deals with various games.... And I'll continue, what am I working on now, city scenes, my urban experience, things of that sort.

....

(Jacob talking about Gwen.) She left something out, she made a wonderful contribution to the dance. . .

Oh! We have to talk about that.... I understand that one of the more memorable events at Black Mountain had to do with dance and you were involved, could you talk about that a little bit?

Gwen: Yes. I had liked ballet a whole lot at one time, and then I saw Martha Graham and I was just entranced by that you see. So, Mr. Varda is

teaching ballet, so just to confuse and cause dissension I started to teach the Graham technique because I had been going to the New School in New York and studying with some of her troupe. So, I knew a lot, I knew some of the motions, so I started to take all his young students away....

Jacob: She was teasing him

What were the implications? So, what happened? How did he feel about that?

Gwen: Well he tried hard to keep his students you know, and I don't remember whether he said anything to me or whether he just knew what I was doing, but he, oh we had a little sort of discussion about the merits of ballet and the merits of the modern dance. There were a few little words, but not many....

So, this was something extra the students didn't expect.

Gwen: No, they didn't expect that class of Martha Graham, and that was a lot of nerve because. . . I really was not a Martha Graham dancer!

Jacob: And this is what went on at Black Mountain. It was like this. Things that were not scheduled, and not formalized, this could happen. You see, that was one of the positive things about the school

That wonderful spontaneity?

Jacob: Yes, that spontaneity.