Oral history interview with James Newton, April 11, 2013

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JAMES: I went to the military, and then I left there and went to North Carolina Central University. Ed Wilson’s a sculptor out of Binghamton. Did some things on Kennedy—some [inaudible] on Kennedy. He was the teacher there—the professor—and Ernie Barnes was two years ahead of me. Know Barnes? Ernie Barnes is the one who did those things in Good Times—elongated figures, with the basketball and all that. We all went to the same school—myself, Willie Nash and others—and all had tutelage from Ed Wilson, who was a pretty well-known American artist, one of the first to get some kind of acknowledgement—first black to get some kind of acknowledgement at North Carolina State Museum.

MARGARET: Now, was he—was Ed Wilson—he was at UC Chapel Hill?

JAMES: No, he was at North Carolina Central University.

MARGARET: He was at North Carolina Central. Okay.

JAMES: That’s the African-American art school. I’ve got some things that might help you.

MARGARET: And that’s before he went to SUNY Binghamton?

JAMES: Before I went to Chapel Hill, yes.

MARGARET: Right. And before—
JAMES: He left and ended up in Binghamton.

MARGARET: And he left and ended up in Binghamton. Okay.

JAMES: Yeah. He became well known for his sculpture pieces, commemoration for Kennedy and stuff like that. He passed away not too long ago, and I think his things might be in Carolina.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: A. lot of the background I’m talking about is in that. That was the show at Delaware recently.

MARGARET: This is good. And we don’t have this in your vertical file.

JAMES: You can have it.

MARGARET: Oh, wonderful. Thank you.

JAMES: Everything I just told you will be in there.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Background and all, so—

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: When I left there and I went to Chapel Hill, I was in—at Chapel Hill, there were no African-Americans there at the time, so I worked under Professor Ness, and Ness was an accomplished artist who became a chairman of the department and art professor at Chapel Hill. People under him was, like, Dray Cass out of New York. He was a friend of mine—Frank Faulkner, Dick Hoggins—all these people were down at Chapel Hill trying to build Chapel Hill as the [inaudible] of art in the South.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I was the known African-American at the time. Most of my friends were Jewish guys out of New York. They seemed to understand. I’m from the northeast. I’m from New Jersey, myself—south Jersey—and at Chapel Hill, there were—most of the artists were into abstract art. Realism was not a big thing. I was caught between the ethnic based type art—social consciousness—and this abstractions. I just liked it, and that’s what I pursued. I did hard edge construction sculpture pieces, wood constructions and all. I was a painter and then Ness told me that I should—my paintings were looking like prints, so I got into printmaking. Printmaking and graphic design seemed to be something I liked. Now, most of my early works were political statements about America, race and things like that. In those political statements, sometimes they were just social conscious art more so than anything else.

MARGARET: Do you have any images of work from that period?
JAMES: Not many. Let me see the catalogue you just had. Let’s see. The images then were pretty much—that.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: *The Hour of Black Power* is a small print. I just sold it to some guy from New York.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: This is called *The Pill*. That’s in that zone, but I was pretty much in—I’ll give you a copy of this recent thing in Atlanta—gun collages and things like that. I was very bold about the statement but very conscious of civil rights and stuff like that. I still have some of those older pieces, but every now and then I’ll pull them up. Because I didn’t have much money, they were either on just newsprint and sketches. I seemed to be better at sketching and things than, say, just painting. I liked sketching and that’s what I did. I might have some of those back there. When we go back there I’ll show you what they are.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: This would have been—see this piece here—probably the last—one of the few pieces I’ve got left from Carolina. This is my 1970 type stuff.

MARGARET: Okay. So, printmaking, painting—okay. And after your MFA at UC-Chapel Hill, you moved up to Delaware. What brought you to Delaware?

JAMES: I moved primarily—I was going to stay in Carolina, but my wife is from West Chester State, and I journeyed to Carolina to Wilmington, Delaware, where she was a schoolteacher and later she became a counselor. And then I started teaching the early courses in graphic design at West Chester College at the time—West Chester State University now.

MARGARET: And was that right after your MFA? Would that have been in 1968?

JAMES: Yeah, 1968. In the interim, myself and Simmie Knox were studio partners right there in the heart of Wilmington.

MARGARET: Were you—where was your studio?

JAMES: Across from—adjacent from the public library.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: If you look at the Wilmington Institute Library, it’s on a corner there.

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: Well, this is adjacent—the banks over there—it was almost directly across from there. And there’s a corridor and stairs go straight up.
MARGARET: Oh.

JAMES: So Knox and I met, and we ended up as studio partners, and we both were doing abstract art. Matter of fact, Knox didn’t do portrait or anything like that at the time. Nor did I, and we had several exhibits. We had a two-man exhibit in north Delaware on Main Street at a small studio there. We had a show at Lincoln University—a two-man show—Knox and Newton. And then we exhibited with Philadelphia artists, Nathanial Richter, one of the arts people in Delaware—in Pennsylvania. And so we did those kinds of things, but we were both kind of young, struggling artists trying to make our way, but we did not do figure or portrait stuff.

MARGARET: Okay. And any exhibitions in downtown Wilmington?

JAMES: Any exhibitions where?

MARGARET: In downtown Wilmington, where you’re—

JAMES: Individually, we had exhibitions at the Tatnall School. I did exhibitions of drawings and stuff at Tatnall School. Knox might have done some exhibiting with—the pioneer art educator was Percy Ricks. He was a product of Howard University who ended up being the first African-American art educator in Wilmington, Delaware. And he became the catalyst for promoting African-American art from the 1960s on up until the time he passed away three years ago.

MARGARET: What organizations was he involved with?

JAMES: Do what?

MARGARET: What organizations was he involved with?

JAMES: Was who—

MARGARET:—was Percy Ricks involved with?

JAMES: Percy Ricks had a group called Aesthetic Dynamics. Aesthetic Dynamics was a group that he established to promote and preserve the African-American art tradition, based on his mentor James Porter, who was the dean of African-American art. He wrote *Modern Negro Art* in 1941, and he became the pioneer in African-American art. In commemoration of James Porter and in tribute to him, Ricks started establishing these African-American art shows in Delaware. And he had one in the Delaware Armory, and then he had another in the Historical Society of Delaware, then he had shows. He would go out and ask individual African-American artists to provide a work or two, and we would put him together and then we would break them around. He really was out of Eaton, Pennsylvania. Philadelphia connected, and I used to go up there with him when we had an exhibit or someone up there had an exhibit. He would be the person that would know most of the people in the area.

He also was one of the key anchors in establishing Christina Carter Art Center. He really was the brain behind taking Christina from a recreational basketball type thing to the arts. And I was kind of his mentis. I was always with Rick. We worked together. I have some of his works.
MARGARET: And where would some of those exhibitions take place?

JAMES: Where did what?

MARGARET: Where did some of those exhibitions take place? I know you mentioned a few—

JAMES: In the heart of Wilmington. Historical Society of Delaware gave one that they called the Dingy House at that time. Grace Methodist—he had art shows there. He had art shows in the Delaware National Guard, the armory. We had shows anywhere we could probably get shows.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And he wrote articles about the marginalization of African-American art in general and in Delaware. He adored Theodore Wells, who was an art teacher at Bancroft School. Both around the same age—kind of promoted things—and Ricks would have—Ricks would primarily dedicate it to his Aesthetic Dynamics. Everything came under that umbrella. The artists in the area all knew about it. We all supported him. We would write grants up, and he would get grants and things like that. This was our way of getting promotion. He and Simmie Knox and others were able to—during the bicentennial—get art purchased through the Delaware Heritage Commission.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And I and Mr. Carrie established this idea that African-American artwork should be purchased, so we got purchases from Ed Loper, Simmie Knox. Simmie Knox did a portrait of Peter Spencer, the church founder. Let me see—James Collins. Several artists put their work in this. Their kind of a Delaware African-American art collection still in existence at Howard High School, I believe it is.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I was in charge of the committee and purchasing works, and I know the first work we got was Ed Loper for $500.00—something dealing with Market Street.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I inventoried Ricks’ things of over one-hundred and some pieces—I think they went with his daughter to Washington D.C.—and he had a range of African-American—of his artwork—many figural things. Some abstractions, but Ricks had started out as a muralist at Howard University. Prior to the war effort—and some people in schools were going into the war—they—Works Projects or whoever it was got students to work on murals, and it would be put in YMCAs and things like that. Howard had one. It’s no longer in existence, but Ricks ended up in Ogden, Utah at a military base. And he did murals, but I can’t find any of them. I’ve got pictures of him showing the mural that he did at Howard. So he viewed himself as being a muralist and came out of Philadelphia, but it can get very difficult to get commissions and Delaware was not really into that kind of public art orientation.
MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: So Ricks contented himself with really aiding and assisting students. He was really a teacher at heart, and kind of denied his own work—didn’t try to sell it. He wasn’t that entrepreneurial when it came to that. He just seemed to have a big feeling about the need for aesthetics. That’s why, I think, he named his group Aesthetic Dynamics.

MARGARET: Okay. Oh, this is all good. So, when did you go back to Illinois State University to receive your Doctorate?

JAMES: At the time, see, I had an inclination that I had two shots given, so my professor—Professor Ness was my favorite professor—and a lot of them were urging me to go to an Ivy League school or somewhere where you could get more exposure. And Yale was a consideration. Princeton was a consideration. At the time, there were very few African-Americans on campuses, and so I pretty much would have had a pick as to where I could go. And I’m just a regular country boy from New Jersey, and all I was worried about was pursuing art, not necessarily the political, et cetera. So, when I married my wife, I had jobs that would deal with me staying in the South. She wanted to come back this way. Her job was here and all, and she wanted—she was more content with somebody working 8–5. The result was, in order to deal with academia, I was at West Chester State. I had a Masters of Fine Arts, a terminal degree in art.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: I taught there, and they only seemed to acknowledge people who had Doctorate degrees. And so I looked all around to see what fit my bill, where I could pursue my art and at the same time get the desired degree I needed to go into college teaching. I think that I liked it. West Chester State—my wife is from West Chester—and I enjoyed it there, and I taught—my area was the history of Western art. I taught the History of Western Art, and then Studio Art. I taught graphic design, drawing. So when we packed up and went to Illinois, Illinois had a Doctorate in Art, specifically Art Education, Administration, History, and it fit my bill.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I could pursue my art and pursue the degree at the same time, and my wife came out there with me for two years.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And I finished up the degree in the next year. I stayed for that year.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Meanwhile, got a chance to expand my art, and lo and behold, it went to printmaking. You see that? That’s what I was doing there.

MARGARET: Okay, that’s when you were at Illinois.
JAMES: That’s what I was doing, that kind of art there.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I’m a minimalist—I thought they did in Carolina—but the minimalist type of collagraph that’s not a metal plate.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: See, it could be masonite, plastic, or even board. So I really got engaged in that, and the more successful ones—that one there called The Pill—

MARGARET: Oh yes.

JAMES: I’ve got lots of art awards for that one. It’s an inverted, kind of symbolic political statement about the pill, which became a big thing. What do you call those things? The pill to keep you from becoming pregnant and all that.

MARGARET: Contraceptives.

JAMES: Yeah, that’s my—it’s like a [inaudible], but that’s a collagraph—it’s a graphic, embossed, cut out paper collagraph—because I did not have that patience with the acid on the metal plate. I did them, but I preferred masonite, cut out objects, plastics and things like that.

MARGARET: Okay, and what year was this?

JAMES: Oh, boy, you got me on the years now. It had to be between ’69 and ’72—mostly ’72. As a matter of a fact, let me see. I’ll be right back.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Yeah, I became known as a printmaker. As a matter of a fact, I get calls now from people saying am I still doing these collagraphs. That’s Zodiac II.

MARGARET: Oh, wow.

JAMES: It’s a combination of—you see the pill, and you see here—that’s a metal plate. This is all metal plate.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I mean, I could do the etching and stuff, but this becomes board, and masonite, and cut out forms.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Okay? And then I did the other thing, but Zodiac II was—the Herring School of Art, they put out an annual Young Printmakers show. That was featured in that travelling show
throughout the nation, but that one an award. Herring—Young Printmakers of America used to come out of Herring School, and this was the feature that I had in it. And it was—if I had experimented with this collographic cut out, do this—I sort of played around with the metal plate, random metal plate—cut it out on a saw, and then treat these forms.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And they got a lot of attention because at the time, most people—well, they’d do the monoprints and all that, but I really like cut and whatever, and I started using red a lot more than I had before. I used to not deal with subtle tones. I started using red, and I started mixing up red with other features in blues and things like that. And this one—you see the date on there? It may not be on there.

MARGARET: This one is not—there is no date on there.

JAMES: That could be 1971 or ’72.

MARGARET: ’71 or ’72, okay.

JAMES: All of them are in the same vein, and I went minimalist. That’s—see, I was getting to that, and that’s when I started really getting into—and I came back to Delaware after I got my degree—and some of these things were continuous. Playing around with that—

MARGARET: Okay, so you were back in Delaware in 1973?

JAMES: Summer of 1972.

MARGARET: Summer of ’72.

JAMES: I took my resignation at the university, and I got my degree in—I’m kind of like a—I’m eclectic. I took every course in history that you could take, and I was a German and art major/minor.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I took 27 hours in German.

MARGARET: And that was in undergraduate?

JAMES: Yeah. I thought that I was—I could get a job with the State Department as an interpreter or something. I was the president of the German Club, president of the Art Club. I was kind of in a little bit of everything, so people had a little bit of difficulty talking—what is Newton? Is he art, is he history? I just did stuff, and I didn’t try to be pigeonholed, and I taught everything. I taught History of African-American Art. I taught—what do you call it—history courses, blacks to the Civil War, through the Civil War—so people have a hard time. Well, if you get promoted at the university, should it be in this, this, or this? They had a hard time because everybody’s
trying to say, “You’re this, this”—and I don’t like that. You’re pigeonholed. You’re limited. I just figure you do everything you can do.

MARGARET: And how did you do that with the Black American Studies program because it was—I guess—kind of solidified under your direction, correct?

JAMES: What, the African-American Studies program?

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: I came there in 1972 in the College of Education. No. Yes. In the Cooperative Center for Education and Development and Services as a result of my degree. I was recruited by the art department also.

MARGARET: I was wondering about that.

JAMES: Professor George Nocito was there. He wanted me to come and teach about these collographic printing stuff. As a matter of fact, there’s a potter down there named Victor Spinski. You know him?

MARGARET: Yes, he just passed recently. I know his work.

JAMES: Spinski was one of my best friends from Illinois State.

MARGARET: Really? Oh.

JAMES: Spinski came from Illinois State. I didn’t know him very well then, but when I came to Delaware, he was the one that saw these prints—

MARGARET: Okay—

JAMES:—and liked them and got Nocito—the chairman of the art—to interview me.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: But I chose not to go. I’ve still got the letter.

MARGARET: That’s interesting, and—

JAMES: He invited me to teach art, but I wouldn’t do it.

MARGARET: And why was that, if you don’t mind me asking?

JAMES: Because academic politics is fuzzy, and so—I had done my dissertation in Student Knowledge of African-American History and Culture, and at the time, nobody in that area of Black Studies—there were very few people out there. They were just snatching me. Everybody was giving me a job. Virginia Commonwealth, with the big time art history department. They all wanted me to come. I’m very eccentric when it comes to “Well, where should I go?” My wife
was here. There was a man named Ralph Duke. I had studied Education, was a teacher, and I’d known him with no connection to Black Studies at all, but then they got me to teach courses over there.

And so, I was teaching African-American Poets in America, stuff like that. African-American Culture in American Society—and so, Black Studies at the time was in transition, and while I taught there, they had some [inaudible] with the directorship and all that. And so they had a committee to get together to find out what to do with it, and they selected me to write the report, so I wrote the report. They liked it, and they said, “Jim, would you like to be the director of the program?” And so I got kind of drafted, and I committed myself to that. That was the rationale behind art. See, when you’re in the department, these are the things you have to do to do that. I’m a wild card type person. In Black Studies, I had my own—you couldn’t relegate me. This is what I do.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: So, is there any question about race or sensitivities about race diversity? I don’t have to be in art for everybody to try to refer to me as a “black artist.” I’m an artist. Do you understand what I’m saying? I didn’t want people to pursue that. I’m over there, I’m doing artwork. It may be socially conscious, it may be this, but it’s not outside the realm of just being another person producing art objects. I didn’t want to be—so if I’m in Black Studies, I got licensed to do it. I can pursue it, I can promote it, and I can—

MARGARET: Okay, so it really gave you that—

JAMES: Someone gave me that for my job.

MARGARET: So you had that flexibility to really—okay.

JAMES: The only thing I regret is that I could not pursue the art like I wanted. Unlike some people who teach art, I did my teaching, but not the producing.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: It was not necessarily—some people see their art—I mean, I’ve sold art and all that, but it’s more vocational to me. Once I took a fulltime job in academia, then it was. So I got—a bit problem came when it got time for me to be promoted. Was I going to be promoted as an artist? Was I going to be promoted as an—you understand—an academician, a historian? I mean I got—people said, “Did you—” Well, I wrote. I wrote things in—what do you call it—I wrote things in journals, I did—I would be the person who did—I mean, I was trained, I knew how to write and all, but most of the things were—when I got into Black Studies—were connected somehow. I and Ron Lewis did that.

MARGARET: Oh yes.

JAMES: The others—Slaves, I think that’s it. Is that it?
MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: I and Ron Lewis edited this book. It was about slave artisans and craftsmen. And I did an article on the roots of African-American art, and that’s what—and I did—I didn’t do—because I was in African-American Studies and because I was an artist, I made the connection between the roots of African-American art and gave presentations and all these things. And the result was, you know, you satisfy the requirements. That’s what they call it.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: You satisfy the requirements. That’s the kind of stuff I was doing in academia. I always did enough just to get by. I wasn’t trying to be a top-notch scholar. You don’t have to be the top guy, but don’t be at the bottom of the pit. Just do what you have to do. So that’s what I did. I did enough to meet the requirements and make full professor.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And I pride myself in being the first black professor at the University of Delaware who went through the ranks. There were other ones who came in at the higher level, but I went through. See, you start from down here. I went through the ranks at Delaware, and it was not an easy task. But based on the criteria, the report showed that I could have been promoted to full professor in Art and in History and Black Studies.

MARGARET: But you remained in the Black Studies program.

JAMES: Twenty some years.

MARGARET: And were you Director the entire time?

JAMES: No. The first few years, I was Assistant Professor, and then a year or two later, I became Director of Black American Studies and stayed there 20 some odd years. I recruited people every—during that time, I think every—we were at the top of the chart for promotability. I recruited Dr. Carole Marks. I recruited Dr. Ron Lewis. I recruited Dr. Howard Johnson, all of them went on to become either full professors wherever they were or Chairs. So I recruited good people, who could do the work, and I wasn’t a hands-on director, but I understood academic politics and believed it was my role to make sure professors had what they needed to promote Black Studies. The reason I stayed there is because with artists, it’s a little different.

I could easily—all my friends, Ray Cast and all them—they have their own studios and they pursued art, and they taught in art departments and all that. Mine’s a little different. So, I’m over here in academia, so people get confused. A lot of people didn’t know I was an artist when I retired from the University of Delaware. They said, “Jim, I didn’t know you were an artist.” See, I only exhibited very few times while I was at the University of Delaware.

MARGARET: And did you exhibit in this area?
JAMES: No. You’re probably familiar with the fact that most of my stuff is not going to be a big hit in the state of Delaware, so most of my—

MARGARET: Most of the artists have had that [inaudible]—

JAMES: Most of the stuff I sent outside of—like, they had a bit printmaking show come through Howard University, Latin America, all these different places. I mean, I had to send my stuff outside of Delaware.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: I had difficulty, [Inaudible] and then ultimately going to [inaudible] Washington D.C. We had no venue here. And even today, if I called some people up, most people would come. They would be out of New York or somewhere, and they would—I’ve got more collectors out of New York than, say, I would have out of this state. I do have a following in Delaware—professors I know who came and viewed my work. The biggest marriage between the academic side and my art side is in narrative. See this group here? They Came Before Columbus. That’s the title of this series. I work in series. This eighth series is They Came Before Columbus, centered around the idea that the African explorers ended up on the west coast of Florida. That’s explorers. This is my interpretation of They Came Before Columbus. The [inaudible], the conflict between man and mammal and all that. Ultimately, they overpowered things and ended up in a power struggle.

This is—you know John Crawford?

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: Well, Crawford—he was going to do something with these pieces. He said he’d never seen anything like it. They’re narrative, but I put all of the things—I put the design and the structural things all together with this kind of whatever, and it is eight pieces of this.

MARGARET: Okay, and when were these made?

JAMES: These were made a few years ago.

MARGARET: Oh, okay. So recent.

JAMES: This is the coronation of all my later activities. This is one of them. See there. There’s a story to them.

MARGARET: Oh, interesting.

JAMES: African tradition of storytelling.

MARGARET: What’s the medium?

JAMES: Medium? A little bit of everything.
MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I had to start cooking that—I always use crayons, pencils, markers. It’s kind of a mixed media thing. And acrylic. And this is the—they’re usually done on 12x16 grey board. Pencil, paper, colored pencil. Everything’s in there. And acrylic. I love this blue and I use that.

MARGARET: Do you mind if I take pictures?

JAMES: You can, as long as they don’t end up in the wrong place.

MARGARET: They won’t go anywhere.

JAMES: Yeah.

MARGARET: Except in my own research purposes.

JAMES: Now, you’ve got to remember what I was doing before these abstract things—these prints. This is probably the thing I’ve been working for—trying to marry—trying to put two things together that aren’t supposed to fit, okay? Like storytelling in art. Because this is a part of the storytelling, and this storytelling is what goes back to my childhood, where the men tell stories. I was a newspaper boy, and I would go through the old people’s homes and they would be telling me stories. And I’ve got a recollection of all these kind of stories in the back of my head. I feed on that, even though most of the art people who taught me were abstractionists. Ed Wilson distorted the human figure but indicated to me that he didn’t have to be abstract to be powerful. My inclination was—and he always pointed to—what’s his name—Rouall—big, massive, dark figures. Look at Ernie Barnes’ stuff and all that. You’ll see this [inaudible] delineation of this—see that there?

MARGARET: The delineation of the figure?

JAMES: Yeah, see you begin to see that. He was emphasizing to me that you can—there’s power in whatever, so I started doing—where’s that one at? This one over here is *Homage to Haiti*.

MARGARET: The one that’s on the easel?

JAMES: That’s one that—what do you call it? It’s a combination of—the thing that I’m getting at is, that’s a statement about, when Haiti was having that ravishness with the forces of nature, that is the one that I seem to want to [inaudible] the design with all that delineation to make a clear, almost narrative statement. That’s a digital print. I like birds. That’s called *Bird Sanctuary*, and the result is—that started out years ago as a collage, and I went back in it prior to this—I worked back into it, and that’s what I came up with. And I’ve been experimenting with that for a long time. This is—this series really tells what I’m trying to get at.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Okay.
MARGARET: I’d love to take pictures of these, but I’d also like to hear a bit more about the work you would have been making in the ‘80s and in the ‘90s that you couldn’t show here in Delaware.

JAMES: Okay. The ‘80s and ‘90s—this is a big story. The late ‘80s and ‘90s, I was moving on to not as much involved with painting or whatever per se, so in the mid-1990s, I thought it—getting a little leery about—I was getting—I didn’t have my hand in art like I had before—not caught up with a lot of other things—so the result was that in order to keep my hand in art, I’d come home and my young daughter looking at the T.V., I start doodling. And years later, this doodling—as a matter of a fact, that’s what they referred to me—they referred to me as a professional doodler. I started doing doodlings and went back to a circus-like, cartoonish atmosphere. You know Burrell? See, that’s me. Frederick Douglass rides again. You see that? These collages—that’s me—‘70s. That’s me.

MARGARET: When was this?

JAMES: It’s a huge piece. It got destroyed.

MARGARET: It got destroyed? Oh no. That’s the worst thing to hear. So when was this show? This was ’84 at the state building. Had you received—

JAMES: This was like—I would have—let me get it right now. I’m trying to get the dates right. I came back here in 1972, went to the University of Delaware, started the continuation of these prints, and this is a continuation—an extension—of what I’d done in Illinois. The result was that I begin to do these figural things—collage type things.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And in the collage, I started using—what do you call it—spray technique—spray—spray—

MARGARET: Like—right. Like airbrushing?

JAMES: The best example of this which I later exhibited in this area and it came out like Frederick Douglas rides again. It was in Black Art International. They had a feature of me in Black Art International. They featured this one and The Pill.

MARGARET: Do you have any other works from this exhibition?

JAMES: From what?

MARGARET: From the show at the state building.

JAMES: Most of it would have been—most of it would have been things that were in this vein. There are some things there. I’ll take you around there.

MARGARET: Okay.
JAMES: Most of the things were in that zone.

MARGARET: Okay, so this show was in downtown.

JAMES: Do what?

MARGARET: This show was in downtown Wilmington. Did you receive [inaudible] as part of this exhibition? Tell me how this—

JAMES: No, no. I was working here. While I was here, I was on the Delaware state division of the arts group, Simmie Knox was on the Delaware Division of the Arts Group, and later I became a trustee of the Delaware Art Museum. So I was involved in art objects, even though I was not pursuing art per se. So this Delaware Arts Council present was to show Charles Burrell—were you familiar with his work?

MARGARET: I am, yes.

JAMES: Out of Yale, wasn’t he?

MARGARET: Was he from Yale?

JAMES: I think he was. He did a group type thing, and at the time the collage thing that was in was pretty much where I was.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: The other thing didn’t come until years later.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: See, there’s a line between how I could start it and this line is interrupted by leading this collage type thing and moving on to something almost close to the collage, but it ended up on flat surface. He’s gone from ‘80s—it’s almost like a dormant period, but it was the 1990s that I started to come toward [inaudible]. Now, I’m a diabetic so I was ill for a while, but flat surfaces became my big thing.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And it—let me go—I just recognized something that might be of interest. When you say 1970—this is 1973.

MARGARET: Oh, wow. I’m just going to put that right there.

JAMES: More collected by people than anything I ever did.

MARGARET: 1970 —
JAMES: It’s a woodcut done in Wilmington, Delaware. It’s a street, these are armor stickers, and these characters are called Sam’s Brother Bo, short Sambo. And it’s an elusive figure. West Chester State has it in their collection.

MARGARET: Oh, they do?

JAMES: The association [inaudible] has it in their collection. There’s something about that.

MARGARET: May I take a picture?

JAMES: Yeah, go ahead.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Sam’s Brother Bo. And I had done a host of wood cover cuts at the time, and there are very few of them around now. My stuff was either lost in traffic, storage and somebody got this and got that, but this was a heavy [inaudible] in 1973. After I left Illinois, okay, and those are the distinctions. That becomes a [inaudible] thing, but those other things are. See?

MARGARET: Abstractions.

JAMES: I was told, “Where you going with this?” I said, “I’m just doing art, I’m not even worried about this other stuff. I just do what I do and I don’t try to make up an issue out of it. Whatever my feel is, that’s what I come up with.” So sometimes I could up with really heavy ethnic conscious things. Like, the Nubian series, this is more recent, but it’s fallen into a certain vain. It’s not to be categorized. I did an eight series and then the Nubians. That’s the queen and this other guy is the king, but I do a series and then I stop. I don’t try to push it, I just keep doing it. There are eight of these—the Nubian series. King and Queen.

MARGARET: You said these are recent?

JAMES: More recent. Matter of fact, it’s almost like I—consciousness comes up and I do. This is purely magic marker on 12x16 grey board, and I just sketch and do and do what I do. Do you understand?

MARGARET: Are these after the doodles?

JAMES: Yes.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: The doodles—the Couch Potato Drawings were the thing that got people’s attention, and the result was that when I was an administrator at the University of Delaware, to keep my hand in art—you know what these tablets look like? The grey backs of tablets?

MARGARET: Oh yeah.
JAMES: Well, I—every time somebody has a tablet, I would tell them to keep the card back of the tablet. And I carried magic marker around with me, and I would doodle. The result of the doodle are these things. They’re called Couch Potato Drawings. Now, the University of Carolina gave me a show in 1993. They asked me to come back and I did this show. And at the time, I was trying to get some stuff together, and I had all this other stuff. And so I said, I had sketched these things and I would put them under the couch, and I’d sketch them—my daughter and I would be looking at T.V. I think I was relaxing or seeing art as something. I just liked doodling, so I kept doing them. I did 100.

MARGARET: Oh my.

JAMES: The series—panels of 10 at 100.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: There are 100 of them. So, they all showed at Chapel Hill.

MARGARET: So 10 panels—ten—

JAMES: What I call higher education did their black thing, and they chose these three. That was interesting. They had a series they could choose from, and the group got together and they chose Going Fishing Number Five—that’s my favorite one—Whistling Willie, and Creature Haven. And that was featured in the Chronicles of Higher Ed. The whole black thing was these three.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: The rationale behind these were, I was just doodling, and when I put them all up, they made sense. All of the sudden, I saw sequentially this was autobiographical. Where I live at, over in south Jersey, the men stand around and they fish and they this, and so, it becomes almost like—I could go through and tell you I used to like to go to carnivals. That’s a personification of when I first met my wife. That’s what she looked like. We called them “foxy lady” type person. That—when I went to elementary school, I was usually the only black kid in the class, and I would see these little girls. They always seemed to be smart, and they always had their books with them. So I would record them.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And I played baseball, cracked a window, and I wasn’t conscious of these things, but they started jumping at me. We lived about Halloween where I come from. See? Scary night, guys playing marbles, voodoo man. A lot of black superstitions. Still believe in dollar tree, voodoo, hoodoo. People coming from other places instead of church, they believe, oh, put a charm around your neck. So I just recorded it in my brain. I was a newspaper boy and would hear people tell stories, and I would just listen to the stories, and I had a good mind of trying to capture—there were rivers nearby, young boys catching pigeons. This was just like—there are 100 of them.
MARGARET: These are incredible.

JAMES: People looked at them. I’m looking for a home for them, but I’ve decided I’m not giving them away. I was going to—you know. They’re almost [inaudible] to my whole thing. There’s a whole story in there, and meanwhile—this is the same thing. This is original—

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: —cut out paper. Cut out paper in lines. That’s what that is. It’s hard for you to distinguish between is it the original or is it not? It’s a cut out paper design. That’s what it is.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: But I—and this—this might be 1990. These come in and around the same time.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Now, I’ve got bad vision, and the bowlines because I can see what the image is. Okay?

MARGARET: But certainly some of this referenced back to earlier time—

JAMES: Do what?

MARGARET: Certainly some of these reference back to an earlier work as well with the delineation of the figure.

JAMES: Yeah, that’s right. And so, I did portraits and stuff when I was young, but I didn’t like them. They were boring. I just didn’t like it. I just liked to work out of my mind’s eye and go from there. So, this is the very—this is one of the few that I’ve got left from Chapel Hill.

MARGARET: Do you mind if I take a picture of this one? Is that okay?

JAMES: You can take a picture of it. It’s in that catalogue, too, if you’d like to have it.

MARGARET: Oh, it is?

JAMES: Yeah, the thing I just gave you.

MARGARET: Oh, if it’s in this one—

JAMES: I don’t know if you know—what’s her name? Julie Magee.

MARGARET: Julie Magee. I do know Julie.

JAMES: She’s down there in Sol—no, somebody had a print of this of mine, and she saw it and wanted to see my work, and she came down and saw.

MARGARET: Oh, okay. There we go.
JAMES: Now, that one is the only one I’ve got left at Chapel Hill, I think.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Because I put a homemade strep frame on it. What date does it say there?

MARGARET: 1968.

JAMES: Yeah, see—

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I’m going from North Carolina Central. I graduated in 1966, and I’m an MFA at Chapel Hill. So this is the epitome of what I had done there.

MARGARET: So that’s a culmination really of your MFA—right at the end of your MFA.

JAMES: Yeah.

MARGARET: I love this. This is an artist-made frame? You made this as well?

JAMES: Yeah.

MARGARET: I love the frame.

JAMES: Well, it’s an interesting thing. Back then, we always did all our frames, but this was like an afterthought, and I just decided that, “Why should we just frame it this way or that way?” and I stuck this in there. I wasn’t ready to build—I was ready to make this another dimension—ready to make this with MA frames structure itself, almost architectural. All the way down from there to there, with this kind of thing on the side and the back. It was just a prism type thing, and I just got carried away with it when I started doing it. I stopped when I needed to because I said, “Oh, I’m going to go to the lumber yard and get me a few more slots.” And that’s what I did. It was fun.

MARGARET: I like that.

JAMES: The sequence here is clear. Your eye is sharp enough, then you see that.

MARGARET: And going into that, and then seeing these.

JAMES: This here is 1990

MARGARET: Right, okay.

JAMES: ’93.

MARGARET: Okay.
JAMES: This 1993 stuff is vintage to me because I’m—I’ve had several people look at this. I had an Indian guy who bought—I had more here—well, I had more than 100. And so, so far what people have done—they want to select something from this group and pick them out. The story’s within the 100—

MARGARET: Right, that’s—

JAMES: So I decided I’m not going—

MARGARET: That’s a good thing, though.

JAMES: And so what happened was, people think I’m trying to be goofy or something, but I tell them that I can’t break up the set.

MARGARET: Well that makes sense if your work is a series, as well.

JAMES: What happened was, the series is too close to home for me.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: I got—

MARGARET: Here, let me.

JAMES: You see this one here? You see that figure right there? This female figure right here? That’s my mother.

MARGARET: Oh.

JAMES: She was kind of a gruff lady. She was always hanging clothes out and stuff like that, but the—it’s a story that—well, I know the story.

MARGARET: Well it’s so personal.

JAMES: See these men? They were men who were business men. I got them, and I got these figures. When I was little I would look up and their faces looked like that to me.

MARGARET: Wow, this is great.

JAMES: They had hats on, and I was just a kid, and so my buddies—people playing baseball. And see that woman down there? That’s my mom. She had nine children, she worked hard, and she was very, very philosophical and this is—see this guy here? I’ve named him—they’ve all got names. And see their faces? I was a newspaper boy, and I would look up. If this was Jake Bloomfield, that’s how I saw him. I’d look up and see his face. I saw nothing but their face or their—that’s what I looked at. See him? He’s behind that desk, and I took papers in to these guys, and I’d look up and see their faces. That’s what I tried to measure when I did these. Well, I
took them to Carolina—the original Couch Potato Drawings—and I came up with that term, couch potato drawing.

I finally realized that this statement was in the whole group of figures and that these figures were just a reflection of my own childhood. And Going Fishing, there’s seven of them. I’ve got about seven women. My mother is most of the females. I like carnivals. I remember the young girl studying all the time. I played hooky so much, I thought studying was just not boring, but it wasn’t exciting, I’ll put it that way. So, here—see this one here?

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: My mother washed clothes and put them on the line. My sisters got to be so old; they got the new machines in. She wouldn’t buy a machine because she said it would make them lazy.

MARGARET: Yeah.

JAMES: Make them lazy. So, see, the storytelling thing comes behind because of that. If you look at this one here, I still want to do collages. I call them construction drawings. They’re like inlaid. You see what I’m saying? Cut out, inlaid. It’s something about me wanting to cut and paste and all that, so that was 1990. These came in 1993.

MARGARET: After that.

JAMES: I still see this body of work as they’re saying something about me inside. Not necessarily artistically, but something emotive that says, “This is a scenario that”—a lot of people come down and look at them. They all want to look at them and take—

MARGARET: Take them apart.

JAMES: Yeah. If you want to buy the whole collection, fine, but I’m not going to —

MARGARET: Oh—right.

JAMES: See this? This is In Between the Cherries.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: ’90, ’90—that’s probably ’90.

MARGARET: Okay, so around the same time as those [inaudible] figures? Okay.

JAMES: The Negro Athlete. Hear No, Speak No, See No Evil.

MARGARET: Okay. Which is the—okay, so, the same time period as this.

JAMES: Hear No, Speak No, See No Evil. And they are cut out, paste out collage. But I’m into what they call—the Museum people have trouble with it because they be trying to figure out
what the original is because if you digitize that, you can’t tell. So some people have to get up to see.

MARGARET: How do you mean, “What the original is”?

JAMES: Okay. Is that signed? That signed, I just know by it being signed, this is the original.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: If it had been replicated, you can’t tell that.

MARGARET: When it’s printed—

JAMES: If you digitize this and whatever, you can’t distinguish whether it’s—you can’t do that.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: See, this is paper pasted, right?

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Okay, and this is markers, and the way I do this is that these are kind of symbolic sneakers. I just—I make the leg and the sneaker and I paste them. This whole thing here might be just—but his arm may just come down to hear and it might be—that’s what I do. I’m pasting and cutting and putting this together like that. It’s—so—I’ve got a box back there and I’ve got legs and sneakers and all this, and I put them together like a puppet man.

MARGARET: Oh, okay. I understand.

JAMES: It’s tricky.

MARGARET: Okay, so it’s—

JAMES: It’s a unique process.

MARGARET: It is a unique process.

JAMES: I don’t know how I started that way, but here’s—this part here may not be connected to that part.

MARGARET: I understand.

JAMES: It’s not like they’re connected—the head is just a head.

MARGARET: Well it’s interesting thinking about this when you were experimenting with those different printmaking techniques.
JAMES: Same thing—but it’s not. It’s closer to—I used to like Matisse because it was the same thing—this idea of throwing stuff up and it coming down—and so when I started making sneakers, I just cut the sneakers. And I’ve got a box back there now, about a face and a sneaker and so I come up with the National Football League. And then I would draw. I would marker that and cut it. This part here might just be cut out. Its hands may be cut out. You got it? And so that’s a process, and it’s a process I don’t want to share with everybody—but that’s a part of the process.

MARGARET: Who are you studying—oh, wait; let me look back at my notes. Okay, you were teaching graphic design at West Chester.

JAMES: That’s right.

MARGARET: Was that part of your undergrad or graduate work as well?

JAMES: What, teaching graphics?

MARGARET: Or studying graphics. You studied with Ed Wilson who is primarily a sculptor.

JAMES: Ed Wilson was a sculptor.

MARGARET: Right. But you were doing hardedge construction and some graphic design.

JAMES: A man by the name of Robert Kennedy was the drawer, but there was another man called John—I forget his name—he was the drawing teacher, and I started doing nature studies. And most of these nature studies were done with markers and pens. John Gordon.

MARGARET: John Gordon. Okay.

JAMES: John Gordon gave an assignment and said, “Go out,” and he wanted 50 drawings done for your final—whatever. All of the students went out and did their 50 drawings. I wouldn’t do 50 drawings and he said, “Why didn’t you do 50 drawings?” I said, “I’ve got three drawings. They’re the only ones I could do.” When he looked at them, he was astounded because they were drawings. Most of them were weeds, like weeds. And he just said—he told me that he didn’t see—see, 50 drawings to me was like, “Why would I go out and do 50 drawings?”

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: I told him I wanted to do 50 really good drawings—anatomical. So I got into these weeds, and Gordon just—he just couldn’t stop looking at them. What I had done was, I kept going into these weeds as though I was right in there with them. I don’t have those pictures to this day.

MARGARET: Oh, I would love to see them. It must have been incredible—the density. I’m just imagining.
JAMES: They were on newsprint and they were—that’s where the delineation comes from because Wilson and all them said, “That line you got—” and I didn’t know. I was just sketching—just doodling, doodling, doodling—and it just became the art student goes to school and wants to create art. The art’s within you, not—it’s like Tolstoy and “What is art?” Suddenly, you’ve got all this stuff that’s like inside the artist, pulled out. And not to censor himself. Censor yourself with like, “This is a nice drawing.” So, I finally got out of that. But it caused me some aggravation because I didn’t go by the standard. And I wasn’t trying to be—what do you call it? I just didn’t have the discipline to say, “Well, my goal is this.” I didn’t have a goal. So, if you look and find out I don’t have any sketch of this. It just comes out. I don’t have a sketch of this. This creature and this face just comes out. There’s no beginning and no end to them. Do you understand what I’m saying?

MARGARET: I do.

JAMES: And when I started out here, vegetation—this is the thing that she’s washing the clothes. This is the clothes she hung up, but there’s no beginning and end to this.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: And so, people are always looking at this like these are guys I grew up with. We were ornery characters. We were always in the corn fields sneaking around, busting watermelons, doing something ornery. So, and we were always hiding in the cornfields.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: But see—the old black men that that time, they’d go to their inaudible] and then put their [inaudible] down and drink a lot of beer or something. But they always had their—

MARGARET: Their hat.

JAMES: They always wore—that meant something to me. But why—my brother come home from the military, he’s standing by the railroad track. I had always seen him in his uniform with his cap on and the tapestry around him. That fascinated me, but I didn’t know “Is that drawing? Is that art?” And so I finally recognized after a certain time that you just do stuff and there’s no end to it. You just do it. So the artist should be inside whatever his imagination and creativity is. It can’t be orchestrated or programmed. It’s just what it is. It’s not stream of consciousness as much as it’s just consciousness itself.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: My mom—she was tough, man. But her image was something that people would say, you can’t—that’s how she appeared to me. It’s not like I’m trying to dramatize or glorify—it’s just the feeling that I get.

MARGARET: Right.
JAMES: And so it’s more difficult to subtract the feeling from art itself. So that is a—and I do
my thing. All these things are done very rapidly. They’re not pondered.

MARGARET: Had you done preparatory sketches for earlier work?

JAMES: Had I what?

MARGARET: Had you done preparatory sketches for earlier work?

JAMES: I don’t do that. These are—in and of itself—when I put out my [inaudible]—there is no
preparation for this. The only preparation seems to be coming to a serial mood. I’ve done one.

MARGARET: Working in series.

JAMES: I’ve learned that, unlike some of these folks who do one painting, which is 15 paintings
in one, I just keep doing them until I run out. When my mind is done, I’ve got eight of them,
that’s it. Not doing any more. I can’t re-do this. Now, I have done some things—there’s 100 of
these, right? There’s eight of these. Everything I do, there’s a finite number.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Okay? This series I’m very close to. I might get stokes to do a series. But this series has
a different meaning than this does, okay?

MARGARET: Of course.

JAMES: Okay. The most recent series is—it’s something I don’t usually do. I took the couch
potato drawings and when I went to Chapel Hill to—these things ought to be blown up—some
are digitized. Some are going to be even larger than that. The idea was that I was going to select
25 and blow them up.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: So, what happened was, after I did that series there, I got—after I did that series there, I
went and got a home—nobody’s had—most of the stuff in this studio nobody’s ever seen before.
I hoarded everything I had.

MARGARET: And you weren’t showing it locally?

JAMES: I don’t show it anywhere. Most of these things have not been seen.

MARGARET: You haven’t shown them anywhere. Not even outside of Delaware? Okay.

JAMES: It was just hoarded. It was just getting on my wife’s nerves because there were so many
of them. I’ve been contacting museums to look for purchases. I wasn’t an entrepreneurial type,
but I have sent out to a few that had any interest in—I wanted to put them—I wanted these
placed in decent places, but I decided that limited donations. I’m just always strapped for money. This series here is called *Couch Potatoes Drawing II*. They’re cards.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: See? This is a statement about the environment. *This is The Ecological Man*. You see him?

MARGARET: And that’s—

JAMES: This is *Couch Potatoes Drawing II*. They’re still drawings but they’re much more—there’s color involved and they’re orchestrated.

MARGARET: Is that acrylic?

JAMES: Yeah.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Now, there’s 100 of these, but guess what? They come here or go to the boy in the attic. It’s almost architectural. See that? And chimney—and white around the eyes and his ethnic hairstyle. Now, I just keep—now, you’ve got to remember, I work really fast. Most of these were done—this guy is an eyeball. His eyes, they’re all done—now, that ear—I’ve got a whole stack of them—12x16, some acrylic and some color. And this is what I was doing on a flat surface. There’s a whole series of urban youth. Sometimes I don’t know what they are. They’re just things I did. I don’t try to classify them, I just did them.

MARGARET: Do you still have the sense that these are as personal as the *Couch Potatoes Drawings* were?

JAMES: No, these are—they are in a way because I don’t get away from the personal. Take your hand and do this—that’s the image. I don’t anticipate what’s being done. There’s grandsons there, I say, “Let me see your hand.” I’m not trying to do a portrait of them; you understand what I’m saying?

MARGARET: Right, right.

JAMES: I’m not trying that. And so, I get on a roll, and all of the sudden I’m dealing with urban youth, the old bebop cat, the eyes, the nose. See? Architectural background, but they’re only symbolic. Not trying to do detail renderings of anything.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: They go on a bit. I mean, they’re—I do a lot of stuff. You guys call it Bo-Bo.” Like, in a neighborhood, you see people and you see characters and you see figures. They say, “That’s Bo-Bo.” Who is Bo-bo? Kind of a generic figure out there. You see him on every corner. He’s like the hobo that stands on the corner with his hat in his hand looking for money. It’s not a
stereotype but something that registers in my brain, saying, “Yeah, I remember that guy there.”
Guy like that. See? Now, this one. I’ll be right back. This one is a series that—there’s about 100
of them. I had a series called—you ever heard of the Red Hatters?

MARGARET: The Red Hatters?

JAMES: The Red Hatters.

MARGARET: I don’t think so.

JAMES: The old group that started in England with older women, where they’re over—well, my
wife and them—they belong to the Red Hatters.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: So in a satirical mood, I decided I was going to do a series of the Red Hatters. Now,
these are still a part of Couch Potato Drawing II.

MARGARET: Okay, that’s part of that.

JAMES: Color. 12x16 board. Their colors are directly related to the board. This is the negative
space.

MARGARET: Right, right.

JAMES: So, she’s like the queen mother. See her blue eyes? Look at the hair. This is the board.
This is the board—the space. And so, I did nine of those. The Woman With Nine Lives. She’s the
bitch. You see—

MARGARET: Look at her eyes.

JAMES: This is the color of the board.

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: But I’m just having fun. I’m just doing this, okay? The Woman With Nine Lives It’s
acrylic, acrylic, marker. And their hair space—see that? Always done in the same vein in 2000-
something.

MARGARET: 2000s?

JAMES: Yeah, I don’t have the exact date, but—okay, you see the one there?

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: Jimi Hendrix. I told [inaudible] I’d digitize them, but—Hendrix, I like Hendrix. That’s
just—I’m not trying to do a Jimi Hendrix. It’s a caricature of him.
MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: And it’s a figment of my imagination—how I see him in my mind’s eye, okay? And so, then they have—a lady said something to me once about stereotypical things, like clowns. How come there are no black clowns? Now, think about it. It’s the dumbest thing because they do something similar to minstrel makeup. Think about the clowns—the minstrels. It’s a lot of minstrel make up. But what’s behind the clown? Tell us the person’s—this is a brown clown. Okay? See him?

MARGARET: Mhm.

JAMES: *The Brown Clown*. Some big eyebrow with the white eyes, the negative space coming through, and I used the same—I just got a whole bunch of them and start—get out my markers and my pens and everything and I start doing them. Now, you—

MARGARET: Are you still working on this series or is it complete?

JAMES: Well, the series itself—here they are right here.

MARGARET: Oh, wow.

JAMES: They go on forever. These are the poker players, different characters; these are one of these investigators. This is Mr. Tibbs. This is each character. That’s all they are. I don’t label them. Then I get serious, and here’s a number five, and here’s some females, and here are some females. And this is—now, in between things, I was getting serious. This is the *Flight to Egypt*.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: See? And here I go back to that. *Flight to Egypt*. Moses and the Ten Commandments. Okay? More illustrative, right? Yeah. More illustrative, but whatever I start with, I don’t end up with that same thing. I just get carried away and I don’t try to—*The Happy Fish*.

MARGARET: Oh.

JAMES: I don’t try to—I just do things, I don’t try to—is there rhyme or reason? No. It’s just when I was whatever—I was doing those and I went—there’s over 100 of those.

MARGARET: My goodness. You’re prolific.

JAMES: What.

MARGARET: I said, “My goodness you’re prolific.” Oh, another *Red Hatter*?

JAMES: This is the one I like the best for some dumb reason. That’s one of those—what do you call them? Red Hatters. They’re multi-ethnic. This might be a German lady, this might be Hispanic. Louisa. This may be Asian [inaudible]. There’s a whole series of them. This is the
most satirical looking one. This is the White Woman. Lazy Lu. See? They’re a part of the 100 Couch Potato Drawings II.

MARGARET: Two. Okay.

JAMES: And by the time I get done counting them, it’s probably over 100, but so the guy from India came, [inaudible], and he wanted something from these things here. I told him he could look at the—I had about 10 more than what I have there—but this is Couch Potato Drawings II that I started and kept doing.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I know there’s over 100 but I don’t count them. I stopped counting, and they’re all different or unique. They don’t have—most people have never seen these before.

MARGARET: Can you tell me about this piece?

JAMES: About what?

MARGARET: About this piece?

JAMES: This piece here?

MARGARET: It must have been right around the time as the—

JAMES: Is there a date down there?

MARGARET: There is not.

JAMES: Okay, so, from the time I left Illinois—1972—around 1972, I came from Illinois, and Spinski and them had seen all of these and looking for those collage type things. This is Mickey Mouse Tyme. There’s an embossed Mickey Mouse in the center there. And each of these are inverted skeletons, you know, with the—

MARGARET: With The Pill. Right.

JAMES: Look at these characters. Do you remember those popsicles? Orange stick, red stick, yellow stick—remember the popsicles that people used to put on the stick?

MARGARET: Yes, yes, yes.

JAMES: Well, my wife used to eat these—what do you call them? The ice cream with the chocolate outside?

MARGARET: Right. There’s a name.

JAMES: Yeah, it’s chocolate on the outside, then—
MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: The shape of them. That’s what I was going with here.

MARGARET: I forget what those are called.

JAMES: It’s called *Mickey Mouse Tyme*. I’d get in trouble with that image now because everybody’s—but that image has been around—

MARGARET: It’s appropriated.

JAMES: Yeah. But *Mickey Mouse Tyme*.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And so we’ve got the spin dial clock, watch time thing. One of the pieces I like. Yeah, this is around the same time when all those—

MARGARET: It’s around the same time. So, would you have been in Delaware, or were you—would you have been in Delaware when you made this?

JAMES: It would have been around 19—let me get it right. I came around 1970, ’71, ’72. This would have been a remnant of what I made at the printmaking stage.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And the epitome would have been here. Now, the interesting thing is, I jump from here to the Sam Brothers wood cut in 1973.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: So, in a way, people were looking and saying, “What the heck did I come from that to that?” That’s the nature of how I work.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Okay? And so, even this would have been *Couch Potato Drawing II*, which would have been 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006 or something like that.

MARGARET: Early 2000s.

JAMES: There would be a sequence to it, and when I left these things here, I started—I still do my series stuff. This is before—

MARGARET: This is before all the *Couch Potato* drawings?

JAMES: This is before—this is back there. That’s what I was doing. I’ll show you stuff in the back.
MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: This is what I was doing more recent than one might imagine. I live close to Cape May, so seascapes and all that. I started doing seascapes—got about five or six of them, and they’re like life. When I was in North Carolina, I did a lot of wildlife drawings. And I did—I started mixing up things like shoe polish.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And the shoe polish effect came like this, but they were mostly bought. Some of the instructors bought it. I was just doing them. So here, again, images that I remember for like a flash thing. I capture that as best I can, but I don’t have a picture in mind. It just is what it is. They’re more a combination of the pain, the this, the that, and the other. These are more closer to a few years back. I did sculpture. Do you want anything to drink or anything?

MARGARET: Oh, no thank you. Thank you, though. Oh, when was this? What’s the date on this?

JAMES: This is 1967–68 at Chapel Hill.

MARGARET: At Chapel Hill.

JAMES: As a matter of fact, one of my biggest pieces in ’72—by the time I got to Illinois, I don’t have the catalogue but I’d show it to you. It’s down at Clark Atlanta University. Tina Dunkley. The lady, she’s the curator down there. She has that large African-American art collection. The Negro thing from 1942 to 1970. My sculpture, the gun collage, one first prize in 1970, the last show they had there. They thought that the all-negro art show had to merge into a new generation where we were dealing with more abstract artwork. That was the decline of the all-back exhibition—when blacks begin to get mainstream. We begin to be able to exhibit and compete in mainstream galleries and exhibitions. See, it wasn’t until then that they thought blacks only relegated themselves to dealing with profiles and figures of African-Americans.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: My latest series is more like a jazz series. Nothing but jazz figures. See that? Do you like it? I was trained in graphic design. What do you call it? Magazine things, billboards, record album covers, so that jazz is America’s music. Club Rio. You go to Jamaica somewhere; you go to the down places that are offbeat. Club Rio. You’ve got to remember, when I do a series, they’re done very rapidly and they’re done. Jazz: America’s Music. This is Jazz: America’s Music. Jazz: America’s Music. West is Best. It’s a whole—and the street guys down in Atlantic City. Street guys, musicians. And then when I do the jamming in Jamaica. They’re jazz figures, too. Jamming in Jamaica. The horn players [inaudible] and Miles Davis—and that’s called The Horn Blowers. The guy from New York got the originals. That’s a whatever—the original.

MARGARET: That’s a print. Okay.
JAMES: This one here’s totally out of sync with me. This one’s called Abyssinian Terrors—it’s really early Ethiopian, then the Muslim, the reign of the Monarch and the whatever. It’s a who—Abyssinian Ethiopia has a whole—over there their own world—Orthameli invaded and comes out with the Monarch. The European domination under their feet. But it’s very symbolic. Even the animals are fighting within their dominion, but this is an allegory. This is unusual to me. They don’t do this kind of thing. A guy wanted a copy, so I sold him a copy and kept a copy for myself. The original I got stuck somewhere.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: All these other things that you see—let me get through. That’s one of my latest ones.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: That’s a Matador’s Habitat. The matador in his dominion. The colors are coming out. Here is—he’s getting prepared for the bull, and he’s drinking. See that cup, that goblet? He gets his—

MARGARET: Liquid energy.

JAMES: That’s right. That is the Matador’s Habitat. That’s what I call it. The colors are popping out again with what I’ve been doing, but they didn’t do that before in other things. If you—see, I use colors raw, I don’t mix colors. See, some people mix colors and do their own—I have my own color scheme in my brain. It’s not like somebody’s saying, “Oh, you’ve got to go by this.” I don’t do that. This one—all these are prior to the Couch Potato drawings. This is my heyday. This is Malcolm Mania. These are—these are all prior to. You see?

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: The linear thing is there. I did these and decided that—

MARGARET: Were you showing any of these works?

JAMES: No.

MARGARET: They’ve never been shown?

JAMES: They’ve never been. Matter of fact, some of them—see how—

MARGARET: Oh, wow.

JAMES: See that? Turn. Major Domo. The whole world is a stage. Hieroglyphics. I like Egyptian stuff. I like to put things in rows and tell stories.

MARGARET: Yeah.
JAMES: And sometimes the stories are what they are, but I don’t do a—what do you call it? I just do things. Unless they capture my imagination, I call them a series. I don’t do things that are in that similar vain.

MARGARET: Okay. There’s not that kind of planning.

JAMES: You see these red things? This is one of my favorites, for some reason. It’s the old guy in the field whose farm—and he has his whatever, and he’s like—he’s like the Grim Reaper. And the Grim Reaper is always there. He’s by himself. He’s wide-eyed. He has his hat. He’s in his [inaudible] thing. He’s got his barn here. It’s—this kind of thing in this—who is he? The old guy? The medicine man?

MARGARET: The solitary man who’s all watching. Yes.

JAMES: Don’t get in his space. So, every now and then my mind flicks that way. That’s the *Mardi Gras After Katrina*.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: And it—more people bought that, and there’s a copy over here. I’ve got the original. It’s a 10x20 on board, and it’s about three or four years old, and it’s got this image that I’ve begun to chop up some. And it’s flat. It’s linear. It’s not—whatever. Chapel Hill, 1967. ’67, I think. It’s called *The Love Machine*. The stuff that you see here, my later stuff is this stuff. These are—yes they are called *Borderscapes*. And I really am playing with them a lot. That’s more vegetable environmental, and they’re unlike what I do—but they’re a real—

MARGARET: It’s interesting to see how different these are. But there’s obviously a consistency from the earlier work.

JAMES: You think so?

MARGARET: I think so. Well, certainly that focus on line. You have such a strong line.

JAMES: Well, see, some of these—when I pursue something, I try to look at it and think, “What is it I’m trying to do?” These come off. You can vary the color and come up with this series. That’s the same print. Okay? It’s the same one. And I’m going to do something like this. And you see that piece right there? Now, see if I can find the—if I can find what I do them from, you’d be interested because these are all done on—I call it envelope art. They’re all doodled on envelopes.

MARGARET: On envelopes?

JAMES: They’re all done on envelopes, and then I get them big. Envelope art. I know I’ve got a copy of them somewhere that you can see, and they—they become almost like this one. See that?

MARGARET: Yes. Okay.
JAMES: This is one of my favorite ones. I’m getting that one blown up. Somebody wants it. I’m getting that four or five feet blown up. The colored ones are trends. I only did black and white before, and I went in and started coloring them. And they’re done on—let me see if I can find it. I think I do have them right here. They’re done on envelopes. I don’t have it with me.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: They’re done on these little small envelopes, and by them being done on envelopes, if I like them I go get them blown up and do something else with them, but those are the latest things I’ve been doing, and I’ve been going outside the box because I haven’t been able to—maybe this is it. See if I can find one for you. I don’t know if I can. I’ve been looking for it. Here are some of them. That’s what they—

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: There are different types of them here, but I’m just doodling. That’s all I’m doing. I’m just doodling. See if I can find one of these things. Where’d you say you’re from?

MARGARET: I’m originally from central Pennsylvania. I grew up close to Shippensburg-Carlisle area, so very rural. That kind of middle-of-nowhere space between Philadelphia and Pittsburgh.

JAMES: Oh, okay.

MARGARET: My mother has an MFA from Maryland Institute.

JAMES: From where in Maryland?

MARGARET: Maryland Institute.

JAMES: Yeah, yeah. I’m familiar with Maryland.

MARGARET: And my father is a broom maker. He makes brooms.

JAMES: A balloon maker?

MARGARET: No, a broom maker.

JAMES: Oh yeah. I’ll be darned.

MARGARET: Yeah. And they wanted to kind of live off the grid out there in central Pennsylvania.

JAMES: [Inaudible] out of Chapel Hill. Desperate Faith. Printmaking, that’s a print.

MARGARET: So that’s an etching. That’s interesting.
JAMES: Yeah. I got tired of something; I just got tired of them and wouldn’t do them anymore. But the Carolina press always asked me if they had any books that needed illustrating, I would do them.

MARGARET: Do you still have any of the early etchings?

JAMES: No.

MARGARET: No?

JAMES: No. Might have sold the last one recently to some guy form New York. I’ve got one. One left.

MARGARET: One left. Okay.

JAMES: One left. This is the original—one of the envelope types.

MARGARET: Okay. And then you have these blown up?

JAMES: Do what?

MARGARET: You have these blown up?

JAMES: Yes.

MARGARET: Enlarge?

JAMES: Yes. They’re all envelopes, but—

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Okay. They started out black and white, some of them I just took out my covers and did that. I save all these and I get them lined if I want to get them done up, I just get it done.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: People bought these. They see something. I’ve sold a couple of them and signed them, but I don’t—

MARGARET: Are they numbered for chronology, or—

JAMES: Do what?

MARGARET: Are they chronological? Are they in order?

JAMES: No. They’re numbered according to, if I get a guy to look at it, I just tell him what the number is.
MARGARET: What the number is. So that’s for enlarging.

JAMES: I’m—what do you call it? That’s the one you saw there back on the thing.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: That’s what they look like. See, you know how the art market is. Like I say, I’m not erratic, but I’m just entrepreneurial enough to pursue it, but I do have people who follow my work.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: The one person that’s probably got—that bought The Hour of Black Power, then there were some small metal etchings that I did. Some of them are in the back. But these are—these are some of those that you saw that I just got replicated for my own purpose, and my intent was to have a show just of these.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Only these in large scale. They were going to be, like, huge. Like this would be—I mean it would be blown up to—and there’s—there might be fifty of them.

MARGARET: Have you worked on that size scale?

JAMES: That what?

MARGARET: So when you’re creating this smaller envelope drawing and you’re having it enlarged, have you ever worked straight onto that large of a size?

JAMES: Yeah, I’ve done that. Sometimes you see things there that ought to be, but sometimes you can visualize—I don’t do that too often because my whole thing is centered around “When it’s done, it’s done.” You can digitize it and enlarge it and do what you want to, but this piece is what it is.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: I don’t author—see, the idea versus original versus something else. When the artistic puts his hands in it, it’s viewed not as a proof but an original. I let people know that what I do—this is a proof, as opposed to something else. Now, the most—you have to—walk around here and I’ll show you, okay?

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: Here’s just me when I’m trying to be—okay. This is called Bird Tree. I’m a bird freak. I like birds. I don’t know what it is. It’s New Jersey birds, and I like them to have some kind of animated—this is a character in and of itself. Bunched in by color and a sense of tranquility.
Now, this one is *Serenity*. You see? The water, the vegetation. It’s symbolic. The water, the habitat. See, that’s something that—I played with that for quite a while. Birds.

MARGARET: I like this different handling of the border.

JAMES: Oh yeah?

MARGARET: Which is interesting to see.

JAMES: Yeah, I’m playing around with that, and a lot that leaves space that’s not supposed to be—like this thing that goes around.

MARGARET: And that’s wonderful what’s happening on the left—what’s happening up here, too.

JAMES: Here, something that’s happening where his eye could be. I don’t know where I got that from, but I do know there’s a—that I know—if I did this and all the sudden didn’t have that, you’d find it repeating itself, okay? That particular shape. My whatever series is—okay. Is this series here is called *Rufus the All-American Dog* series. See, Rufus here is in a time machine, *Rufus in the Time Machine*. This is *Rufus Going Airborne*. Again, this Rufus is a part of that, too. 12x18. Notice? He’s not the same Rufus. *Rufus Going Overboard. Hip-hop Rufus*. See?

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: The hat, the glasses. The sneaker. See, that’s *Hip-Hop Rufus*. That’s not Rufus, but that’s *Black Elvis*.

MARGARET: Do you see this series as distinct from the *Couch Potato Drawing* series?

JAMES: No. This is—

MARGARET: Is this a part of—

JAMES: Just like the women’s—what’s that—

MARGARET: The *Red Hatters*?

JAMES: *The Red Hatters*, and these are similar and a part of. Only the ones that are 12x16. There are other aspects of it, but I’ll show you that. This is *Rufus the Guard Dog. Rufus the All-American Dog* dog series: *The Guard Dog. Rufus At the Dinner Table*.

MARGARET: I like that.

JAMES: Okay, so you’ve got two, four, six Rufuses, and then you have the enhanced Rufus. This is my favorite. This is *Rufus at the Mummer’s parade*. See, Rufus is doing the Mummer’s strut. And I might play around with this. This might look like a dog type figure. And this kind of
backyard kind of fence. I don’t know why I like that, but it does something. But the greenery coming in has come in and it hasn’t gone. This is Rufus at Coney Island. See?

MARGARET: Yes.

JAMES: Here’s Rufus again. It’s Coney Island, the immigrants coming in. These are different from the smaller cell size.

MARGARET: Right.

JAMES: That series right there is an aqua series. See that? That’s the Pride of Delaware Park horse racing. My father was into horse racing. And they had the tents come out, and the winner comes out and they parade them around. The aqua series—this is the—what do you call it—mermaid.

MARGARET: Okay.

JAMES: See, it’s a mermaid where they’ve got these character creatures in there?

MARGARET: And these are—

JAMES: These have never been shown.

MARGARET: And these are all what you’ve been working on really in the last three, four, five years?

MARGARET: Yeah.

MARGARET: Three to five years.

JAMES: I just work and work. Nobody’s ever seen most of these. These kinds of sea creatures in the aqua series. Sea creatures with the vegetation of land. Then you have these sea creatures, just as a statement about the entrapment—the environmental thing. The upstream, downstream—they get down here because man has constructions there. Then you have—that’s just a sea urchin character. If you go around some of these junk yards around the river front, you see these dogs or pigs. Whatever they are. They appear to be dog-like characters. Scavengers. See, here, you’ve got a fish mentality. But here, you’ve got a scavenger mentality. They’re out to do whatever it is, but they’re always close to the water. They could be [inaudible] of anything. But those are the ones I’ve been—the dog series. I just do stuff and wrap it up and hold it. So a lot of this is new to anyone. They haven’t seen it before. People say, “Newt, I didn’t know you were an artist.” Because I didn’t expose it. And it wasn’t because I was trying to keep it hidden.

MARGARET: Well this is all wonderful. I want to make sure—I have an appointment I have to go to, but I hope you won’t mind if I take a few more pictures?

JAMES: Yeah, you can.

MARGARET: Okay. And I’m going to take a picture of one of these.


MARGARET: And as I—did I explain when we spoke? This exhibition is focusing on the 70s and 80s in Wilmington, so just one last question. I’ll try not to get us into an extended conversation about this, but so many of the artists I’ve spoken with—because I’m focusing on contemporary art in the 1970s and ‘80s—were having similar problems of having a place to show the kind of work that they were making.

JAMES: In Wilmington?

MARGARET: In Wilmington.

MARGARET: And there were a few galleries, but short lived, certainly. So I was wondering if you were familiar with Fifth Street Gallery in Wilmington.

JAMES: Yeah, I’m familiar with it.

MARGARET: And it was run by Rob Jones.

JAMES: Who?

MARGARET: Rob Jones. He’d been at the University of Delaware. He studied with Julio [daCunha] primarily.

JAMES: Julio, yeah.

MARGARET: He had exhibited his work. And I just wondered if you had any memories of that space?

JAMES: Not much of the space because Fifth Street Gallery because—like you say—Julio and them were with the Art Department with the University of Delaware. I think the University of Delaware has most of his stuff, don’t they? I think they do.

MARGARET: They have a fair amount.

JAMES: Julio daCunha? Yeah, yeah, yeah.

MARGARET: Yes.
JAMES: We weren’t as much in sync as we were with Main Street, Newark, Tatnall School, Lincoln University, Ricks—Simmie would have been involved in the armory shows, I would have been involved in later shows. We weren’t—the venues for exhibiting were just rare. I particularly had problems. While there were some people who wanted to exhibit, they wanted to not censor. They wanted to determine which paintings or which things would be exhibited. I’m very peculiar about that. If they say, “I want you to exhibit here.” And then they limit you to five pieces. They say, “Oh, we want this or we want that.” I understand that, but they were being very, very—whatever. The work would not have represented me, so if it was just going to be some pastoral things that I might have done in my—but I was really zeroing in on things that were outside the zone of Wilmington at the time. So a forgone conclusion, if I came here after looking around. I would be familiar with people like that—I’m going to die a slow death here as an abstract artist. So therefore—I mean, you understand.

I was Black Studies director, very rarely exhibited in that area, and only Lincoln University—Ricks would go up there and teach and there was a man up there. Wimbys up there in the library were arts conscious. Myself, Simmie Knox, and I—two-man shows and all that. The heart of Newark would also do that. I was in there. We exhibited down there and we had openings. People would come and see the work, but a lot of things that I did even today—most people would think this is just outside their zone. They’re not going to embrace it. Even my wife’s friends. They react different about it. So I don’t invite everybody down here, but I got a good following from New Yorkers. I get a lot from New York.

MARGARET: Which is good. It’s hard, though. Abstraction had a really hard time in Delaware. There is a strong tradition that goes against abstraction. It is strong.

JAMES: Lucas Seri and Ed Loper teamed during the time that Andy Wyeth came through the Museums, shows together at some point in time even though it’s not always recorded and acknowledged. But he could move his landscape type things into a kind of shattering seasons—whatever. Which allowed a tradition to follow, which some of us don’t come out of that mold. Then, you’re going to get this kind of esoterically or eccentric look, and people think “forms,” and “What does that mean?”

There’s questions. The art is that sometimes belabored by that and can’t—you just can’t contemplate that, so you say, “My buddies at Howard, they’re having a show down there. They’ve got printmakers.” So you call, and go in the printmakers show. You understand? In North Carolina, we’d show there. I have university people, works, and stuff like that, but you’re not going to—keep this under wraps. If you’re Simmie Knox and you’re coming to Delaware, the question would be that—while his works are held in high esteem here, and there, and everywhere—he—I would—after the show he had down at [inaudible], would anybody buy any pieces? No, probably not. I mean, I could almost predict that wasn’t going to sell anything. And he’s dedicated his life to his work. Here’s his—what do you call it—occupation.

MARGARET: It’s his vocation, yeah.

JAMES: Whereas, with me, I honed everything and kept it on hold until now, but still. I seek out certain galleries. I’ve got a couple of galleries that are really interested in certain things. I’m
really interested in finding a home for these guys, but people want to not break it up. And I'm not asking peanuts for it because I think it merits a place that—there's a story in there that can be told. As the artist, I know the story's in there. I can narrate it, let's put it that way. People wanted to do a coffee table book. It doesn't take much. It's just commentary. My wife keeps getting on to me because I just keep doing stuff and crowding her out.

MARGARET: I know. Well, you're incredibly prolific. I'm going to turn this off.

[End of Audio]

Duration: 122 minutes