

**The Project in Interpreting the Texas Past  
Dr. Martha Norkunas, Project Director**

**African American Texans  
Oral History Project**

**Interviewee:** Deborah Roberts

**Interviewer:** Clare Croft

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**Transcriber:** Clare Croft

Questions developed by Erin Murphy, Summer, 2006

**Teacher Questions**

**1) Race and Gender: Community of Artists**

**How has Deborah Robert's art changed as she has traveled to other areas to show her work? What has she realized is happening in the African American arts community? How has her work changed as a result of this experience?**

**Running Time: 5 min**

CC: Do you feel a sense of community with artists of other backgrounds and races now?

DR: Yeah, actually I do. Actually I do and I'm really quite surprised by that. The people, I just was telling someone this today, three years ago the people I

thought were the most important people in my life as artists are no longer in my life and I have a whole different group of people. And it's so weird because I thought these people would be my friends forever. And it's so totally different because once the work moved, your sense, your broader sense of who you are opened up. I went to Chicago for a whole month to really push my work. And I realized once I was gone and away from certain influences, I realized all I talked about was race. And I may have talked about that today. I may have been here too long. That my whole existence was what I didn't have and it was because of my race. And, "We wasn't being shown in certain galleries because of our race. We wasn't du duh duh duh."

And so when I went to Chicago for a whole month and really started pushing my work and started going to dinner parties and talking with other people from different walks of life, yeah, we still affirmed our Blackness, but it wasn't the major thing. And there are so many other things out there. Once I started seeing that broad scope and I realized that I was bogged down into this Blackness. That is what happened in the Black arts community right this moment. It's going on right now. It's that we're so concerned about not getting opportunities because we feel like people don't understand our work and the different types of work that we do. We never turned the spotlight on ourselves and I think that's a harder spoon to swallow. Because hey, you're not doing the work. You got to put in the time.

One thing I realized is that art is a lot of hard work and you can't be a now and then artist. Either you are an artist or you're not. And people can tell that, who know about art, can see when you work and when you don't work. And so, yeah, I'm still doing things. Yeah, I'm still painting pickaninnies, but it's more than just that. My work is slowly moving toward feminism, which I am getting very excited about. And I want to tell the story, a woman's story – not a Black woman's story, not a Hispanic or Asian, but a woman's story. How we are perceived as woman and how feminism has helped and hurt us through our art. So that's my vision and I can see that five years down the line now and before I didn't.

CC: What has sort of precipitated that shift for you?

DR: The only difference between Black women and white women is a degree. And that's about it. And the same issues that we face, they face too. There is no difference. I mean, it's just you know. It's a racial difference because society has set that up, but, you know, we have weight issues. We have issues of fair pay. We have issues of being marginalized. I mean, childcare – all of these same things just by being women. And how we are perceived through society and how that it's men in ties who are deciding what clothes we wear and when we wear them and what size we should be and why we're wearing these clothes,

what foods we should eat to try to fit into these clothes. And it's just not women. So I want to move my work more toward that. And the race issue will always be there. That's not going to change in my lifetime, but I do want to hit a broader audience and a more collective voice. Because right now I'm speaking in one tone and I want to, I want to speak in a symphony, you know? I don't want to be a solo symphony. I want to sing a choir. And I think that a choir tends to project a louder, you know, voice.

## **2) Images of African Americans: Her Development as an Artist**

**Who was Ms. Robert's favorite artist? What sort of art was she inspired to create after looking at his work? How has Ms. Robert's work changed since? Why did it change? Why has it been hard for her to "let the work move itself?"**

**Running Time: 7 min 10 sec**

CC: When you talk about art you do you talk about how the art develops. What sort of, how do you go about approaching your art, what's?

DR: Oh, wow. Well, I'm just going talk about my past experiences about how I approached art.

CC: Okay.

DR: It was all based on what I saw in the community and how I figured that African Americans were not being seen. So, what I wanted to do was create everyday scenes of everyday life. My favorite artists and it has--God it's changed--was Norman Rockwell. I loved Norman Rockwell. Man, I was hot for Norman Rockwell. And I loved the fact that he just painted everyday scenes and they were great; it was Americana. But he only rarely ever painted Black people, and maybe three times: "In God we Trust," "The Little Rock Girl" and that was Little Rock 7, 6 or whatever--and one other time. I just knew that I wanted to be the Black Norman Rockwell. So, if he excluded us from his paintings I definitely was going to put them in mine. My approach to art was to show African Americans in everyday life and not what you saw on T.V. So, and that was very important to me. And it was always the human experience. And so, I would just paint these large paintings dealing with that. And then it was okay.

But as I grew older you know, and society grew sexier then painting things of little kids running through fields was just not important anymore because things had changed. People did not want see those, I didn't feel, I think there are still people out there who that would love that type of work, who will buy it. But it didn't really work for me anymore because I've done all of that. We know this about ourselves. We don't have to see it in paintings anymore. So, what I wanted to start working on was how others saw us, not how we saw us, we know how we look. I wanted to start, like you know, flip the switch and do it how I felt

others perceived us. I started letting the work move itself, instead of doing stuff narrative, I would start doing things more symbolically, whereas--

CC: When you say, "I let the work move itself" [DR coughs].

DR: Right.

CC: What do you mean by that?

DR: I used to control it. There were times in different types of paintings where I let the work--I don't know. You know, I think everybody paints a certain way. Norman Rockwell painted a certain way. He never did abstract work because people knew him as this one type of illustrative painter. And if he was to come out and start doing abstract [paintings], then people would think, "Well, what is he doing? We know him for this?" And so, he may have always wanted to do abstract [paintings]. And so what I did was when I was painting, anytime something came out that was a little you know [abstract], I would add different types of techniques to [it]. I would always start controlling it, because I said, "Well, that's not what I'm known for and people wouldn't understand that." So I would control those urges to do something different with my work. And so, it only took, I mean it was five years ago that I started letting the work move itself. And what happened was, when you do that you tend to lose sales and customers

and your fan base because what you doing is you're letting whatever type of artist, and when that happens it may not even be the artist that people are used to seeing. And that's what happened with my work. When I stopped controlling it and started allowing it to develop this whole new avenue, this whole new process of art making emerged. And it's nothing like what I know. I fight it a lot because the first thing I think of is that people think I can't paint, when I've spent years and years and years of trying to make my paint look very painterly and to make the canvas move and not just be a still portrait or somebody's life canonized in that one moment. I always wanted the work to move across the plane and it took a lot of work to get that to do that.

So, when the work started to develop and to go even more abstract, I allowed it to happen. And I'm glad I did because now I'm at a point with the work that I'm producing that I'm very comfortable with and it's showing the type of work that I wanted, the type of image that I felt that needed to be projected. I think it's very self-rewarding. If nothing else no one else thinks of it as being that, to me, I can know, I know now as an artist I allowed the work to grow. Now it may make, eventually make a big ol' circle and I might just be right at the arch of this and then I might continue to let the art grow and it may just come all the way back to me painting those harmonious types of paintings. I mean, who knows? Life is a circle. And it's always ever evolving and repeating and so I don't know if that's happening or not. It doesn't appear to be happening because I don't miss

painting. I love painting, but I don't miss it. And for me not to miss it, this has to be working. Because, you know if not I would be doing paintings on the side and still doing this. But I have no need to paint right now in the sense of adding oil to brush, brush to paint, because I'm getting that same type of fulfillment out of what I'm doing right now so.

### **3) Racism and the Local Arts Community: Galleries**

**How has Ms. Robert's work been received in Austin? How does she feel about the local galleries versus the more nationally known galleries?**

**Running Time: 4 min 39 sec**

CC: What are spaces that you're really interested in getting in?

DR: Well, because I felt, true or untrue, that there were a lot of spaces in Austin closed to me, I have systematically decided that Austin was one part of the country, in the world it's a little speck, and that I need to, you know, look in different, other parts of the country for recognition and acceptance. So, early on I always wanted – my father never believed in me as an artist – and, I don't think, I know my mother did. But, I always wanted that when she would go and clean other people's houses or whatever, and she would ride the bus [through] downtown Austin and, if she went past one of the museums, that maybe, maybe one day one of my works would be in there. Now, I always wanted that. I wanted her to know that my work was in one of those buildings while she was

waiting for the bus. And that had always been my dream. And I wanted that for her. Then when it didn't happen and there's no chance of that happening and I was ok with that because that's not what she wants. She wants me to succeed as an artist the best way I can, you know. So once you go through all that garbage, you know then you can really move forward.

So there is no space in Austin that I hope to be in anymore. If I'm in, they're going to ask me and I'm either gone accept or not accept. But as far as the world is concerned, I want to be in the Studio Museum of Harlem so bad I can taste it. I mean, I want, to me that is the top African American art museum in the country. To go there will really be something special. I want to have a show in New York; I don't care where it is. I want to have that once in my life you know. So, those are my aspirations. I have shown at the Museum of Science and Industry along with fourteen or fifteen other artists and I always thought, "Man, the Museum of Science and Industry, that's a damn big museum."

You know, you look at the Austin Museum of Art, the Arthouse, the Blanton, I mean this is the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago. And, so having a show there was really great-, having a show at the Cultural Center in Chicago was great. You know, those are venues that if my work is good enough to show at those venues, then it's good enough to show here in Austin, Texas. And when you get to that point where you say it's not even about you any more, it's just not

the direction these spaces are going in. You just have to grow up and just let that go and find other avenues to show your work. Because I always just thought I was an okay artist until I went to Chicago and had different galleries fighting over me showing in their space. The goal with the Cultural Center, I brought twenty, I brought forty pieces and five or six of them were already sold, I borrowed those. I sold the most anyone has ever sold in that place. I sold seventeen original paintings. And you know so, I have to be somewhat good you know. So when you have those type of successes, that helps you fight when things don't work your way. We all get rejection letters. Rejection letters went out last week and the week before to most people in Austin applying to certain events and, everybody, we called around. "Did you get your rejection?" "Yes." You know, "Yes." It's disappointing, but I'd rather be rejected from Skowhegan than La Guna Gloria. The big difference--rejection is rejection--but by golly I'd rather be rejected from the Queen of England instead of Barbara Bush, you know.

#### **4) Education – Racism and Inequality: Public School and Art School**

**What were Ms. Robert's experiences in middle school? How did she see herself in relation to others who attended the art school? How did her experiences impacted her pursuit of the arts?**

**Running Time: 7 min 32 sec**

CC: How long were you at Allen?

DR: Two years, then you go to high school in ninth grade. I went to Johnston High School and that's when I met Judy Dillam who was my art teacher and, who really, I give pretty much most of the credit to her as far as me becoming an artist and my honing in on my skills and teaching me about the different processes of art and the different--you know, I only thought about drawing and I didn't know about people who did ceramics and you know dealt with clay and painting and crafts and type of arts. I was able to really go to a lot of different classes and learn. Then I was in the gifted and talented program, that really now they call A.P., but in our day it was gifted and talented. So, I only went to school in eleventh and twelfth grade half a day with regular classes and then I went to gifted and talented at Austin Community College (ACC). It was an area-wide [program]. They would bring all the art students from all the different high schools who were nominated by their art teachers and we would go three hours a day in art class. Yeah, three hours. We did lunch and then we did three hours of art. And so, that was my high school years.

CC: So, I know you were bused in sixth grade.

DR: Right.

CC: But were you on the East side for the rest of the time?

DR: Umm hum, thank God. Yes. I mean, yeah. Well, when I went to the gifted and talented that was right here on Rio Grande – at ACC now, but Austin Independent School District used to have that annex building. That's the only other time that I wasn't in an East Austin school.

CC: So how was it different being in your home high school in the morning then going there in the afternoon?

DR: It was totally culture shock. Like I said, you don't know that you're poor until you go and you see people who have money and who have expendable income, who are spending money, I mean who are just buying anything they want, and you barely have enough to catch the bus home. And whatever the lunch was, you know if you were on assistance. I never ate lunch because we had lunch at that school, but I was on assistance. And I would never eat lunch because I would say I wasn't hungry, because I didn't want them to know that [I] was poor. All of a sudden you don't fit in. You could be a great, incredible, talented artist and they can't take that away from you, but you're Black and you're poor--that becomes a stigma. So, I never ate lunch in high school for two years.

CC: Wow.

DR: Yeah. Rich kids. I mean they came from all over--Austin High, McCallum, you know, Westlake. They all had money and we didn't. Of course I went to a whole college and, well, you're the only Black person. You don't have anyone who can relate to you. You know, there were kids from Travis, but the class wasn't very big, it was maybe twelve kids, but everyone had money. We didn't have any money. I mean, I was there on a shoestring budget, you know. I was, well, that was the Austin Independent School District thing, so I don't think that I was singled out, but it just, I didn't have money to purchase the things that they did. You know, we had, you know at school you have, you could just go get anything you wanted and if you're on a certain meal plan and you have to -- it was so embarrassing. Yeah.

CC: You mentioned being exposed to things other than drawing. What sort of artistic training did you get in the program?

DR: That was great. My teacher at that time was Carol Rogers. She was a local artist and she took us on field trips. And that's when I first went to the museums. I went to, I think it was the Harry Ransom Center, was the first one, then I went to La Guna Gloria, and, in fact, I was accepted in one of their little scholarship programs at La Guna Gloria in the summer. I had to stop taking it because I had to ride the bus. And these kids, I don't know if you ever been to that place, but it's in West Austin. And the bus only goes to a certain point and

you have to walk down this long street and it's like in a wooded area. Yeah, it's grounds and they have art classes. And you know in the summer in Texas, believe it or not, it's hot. I don't know if you've noticed that. I would be walking down that street everyday to go to that class and I would come up drenched in sweat and these people, these kids, would drive past me, going and coming, and no one ever offered me a ride, to the bus station or whatever, to the bus stop. It was a long walk and I stopped going. It was this so totally different cultural thing. I would never do that. If I saw a kid and I knew they were part of this class, I would never drive and let them walk to class and I drive past them. I think that [it] was cruel. So I stopped taking that class. So, that was an avenue that I probably could have learned more as an artist, but once again my background and, I guess, my pride, got the best of me. That happens today, still. I did not benefit from that experience. So I guess I could have been further along as an artist at that time, had I-- But I had to get up so early to catch the bus and get out there and then you get to class and you're just drenched with sweat and you got to have this whole big panting part where you try to cool off and by the time, you know, this is not worth it. It wasn't worth it to me. It's hot, hotter than hell at 8 or 9 o'clock. I think the class started at 9:30 or 10. The sun would be up. It would be hot. So, I don't like La Guna Gloria to this day. It had nothing to do with them but I don't support them. So, those were my, you know like I said, I never really went to museums, so I didn't really-- Everything I learned, I learned from books and magazines and how to be an artist was trial and error.

## 5) Images of African Americans: The Pickaninny

**What image is Ms. Robert's focused on in her present art? Why is this image so important for her? What does she hope her work conveys about today's society?**

**Running Time: 9 min 45 sec**

DR: It's a pickaninny. It's a little girl who was drawn between 1910 and 1929.

And it's different versions of her. But she's eight years old and she's highly excitable. She's ignorant, in the sense of what they consider ignorant. And she's not precocious like, what is that little, Betty Boop, or [that] little girl with little, I can't even think of her name right now, she has blonde hair with long little pigtails. She's not anything like that. She's frightened. She's barefooted, she never has any shoes on. She has a polka dot dress on that's hiked up in the back and she has very long skinny legs. Her eyes are bucked and her mouth is open. And she's always, I thought that was a stereotypical image of what, if that's how you see someone that's less than human, then, you know, then I thought, well, let me put this in my work and see what type of response I got. And when I started challenging videos because I felt that they were the catalyst. First of all, rap videos were never meant, when it first started, Run DMC and all those rappers never meant for that work to be so denigrating to Black women. Rap music was about the disadvantaged the, you know, the kids who didn't have a voice, the voiceless. It's for the urban youth. It was sayin' this is how we're livin'. We're livin' in poverty. You know we're committin' crimes because we have nothing to

eat. We're human. Why haven't anybody noticed us? Things like that. Why have we been harassed by the police and things like that. It was all about the impassioned youth. And now, somehow from the beginnings of rap music to now, it's this whole thing about conquest, materialistic values and degradation of Black women. And that, Black women have always been the core, the core since we have been brought over to this country and was made Americans; that the Black woman has always been the foundation. It was set up like that. It wasn't something that we started to do. They used to bring Black men into certain types of camps and he would impregnate Black slave women and then they would move him to different ones. They would call him a buck. But the Black mother, the mammy, whatever stereotype, had always been the foundation. And if you attack the foundation of a certain group, it tends to start to erode and that is what is happening right now. When you see that African American young girls are moving into poverty – I mean puberty at an alarming, three times the rate faster than any other race, then you have to wonder what is the problem here? It's because they, a lot of African Americans, sometimes let the TV raise their kids. They're influenced by their culture. If they look out the window and they see women walking up and down the street with really, really short dresses on, men yellin' at them and calling them certain names, then they feel like that's them, and that's not them. That is not the image that they need to see, but it's constantly being beamed across the T.V. So, these girls are not staying young, they're not staying little girls long anymore.

And that's alarming because that means now that the birth rate among African American girls is age twelve and I just think that's just – that's horrible. You be twenty-two, I mean twenty-four, and have a twelve year old daughter. To be thirty-two and have a twenty-four year old child. Only twelve years difference. And so, once I started looking at the numbers and seeing what the outcome, the end result was with rap music and how it was being projected. And then I said, "You know, this type of polarization had to be defined more in my work." So, I started doing these big, big paintings with all this symbolic stuff. I would put this Raggedy Ann doll in and all this stuff that people didn't even get – the black crows with ties on with mirrors and different types of things. It was just so much involved in the painting that you needed a text next to it to explain it. And so what I decided to do was simply say, "This is a black white issue and I don't mean skin color." I just mean technically this is a black and white issue. Either you do it or you don't do it. Either you see it or you don't see it. So I started paring down everything I was doing, dropping away all the other symbolic messages and just totally focusing on this pickaninny. What I wanted to do was not paint her. I didn't want to use that image because that's not our image. That's their image. So what I wanted to do was take--

CC: Who's "their?"

DR: It was, you know, the white culture who created her. It's their image of her. That's not our image. I wanted to take that image and deconstruct it and reconstruct it by modern day standards. So, now if you look at it from 1910 to 1929, when African Americans were still in the midst of Jim Crow and stuff like that and so making those type of images was not seen so much as racist. That's how people perceived Black people, so that's why I said those were not our images. I mean we didn't walk around with black face on. I mean that wasn't an everyday thing you know, minstrel and things like that. So, that wasn't our image. So, what I tried to do with my work is I wanted to reconstruct that image and say, "Well, what's the difference between a modern day minstrel and a minstrel of 1929"? And it's, that guy had to do it. He had less power. Blacks weren't in a position of power. He didn't have an audience and then you look at the minstrels of today, the rappers, that's what I call them. Because, they have a choice. They don't have to sit there and degrade and put that stuff in their teeth and doing that cognitive aping and prancing around. You know, those issues are very relevant and if people don't see them and you know, know that's it's harmful then you know. I think that's one of your responsibilities as an artist is to--if there are some social issues and you feel that you need to speak on them, you know, you should do it. I have friends who say, "Well, I don't do anything like that. I don't want to deal with anything to do with politics or social issues or issues of identity. I don't want to touch it. I just want to paint paintings." And that's okay. If that's your destiny in life, then that's what you should do. But I

always felt like from early on when we talked about being a child in my family is that my grandma always made us stand up. If there was an issue and someone needed a volunteer, we always had to volunteer. We were always people who worked in our communities. So it's important to me when my niece said at eight years old, tell me she wishes she was white. She said, "They seem to have it easier." And you just, you think, we're in the year 2006 and we still have those issues where we still are not happy with our skin tone. I mean eight years old. So, that was one of the main reasons why I started doing the pickaninny, a little girl, because I wanted to see how her image was being projected under the current climate of this rap music and that who she was as a person was derogating and disappearing, that she was ever changing. So, when you look at the work it's not even a solid figure. It's always, you know, it's this invisibility point of it, you know, that you can't see who I really am because of the way we're being projected.