



WALLACH ART GALLERY

COLUMBIA UNIVERSITY IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK

PRACTICE AND PROCESS UPTOWN TRIENNAL 2020 EDITION

Artist: Dianne Smith

Moderator: Betti-Sue Hertz, Director and Chief Curator, Wallach Art Gallery

TRANSCRIPT

Betti-Sue Hertz: So, I'm Betti-Sue Hertz. I am the Director and Chief Curator of the Wallach Art Gallery and we're here today speaking with Dianne Smith, who is an artist in the *Uptown Triennial 2020* (exhibition). And we're going to be talking to her about her practice as an artist, and then more specifically about the work that she contributed to the exhibition that's on view right now at the gallery, and also in the virtual tour online.

So Dianne, do you want to just give us a little bit of background about your connection and relationship to Harlem, as a starting point?

Dianne Smith: Sure, as Betti-Sue mentioned, my name is Dianne Smith. I currently live and work in central Harlem. I've been in Harlem now twenty... maybe about twenty-six, twenty-seven years, give or take a year or two.

I actually grew up in the South Bronx, but spent a lot of my childhood in Harlem. My family - I come from an immigrant family and we were in New York (and) Los Angeles. Specifically in New York (we were) in Harlem and the Bronx. So I spent a lot of time at Graham Court on 116th Street, where all the movies are filmed. So that's sort of my, my first intro to Harlem. And then I went to LaGuardia High School, the "*Fame* school", which was on 135th Street at the time. That was my second intro in Harlem. So I spent a lot of time in Harlem.

But my true fascination and love for Harlem, which is why this show is so special to me as in the first (*Uptown Triennial*), is that I was living in Los Angeles in my twenties - I had just returned from Italy, living abroad, and I was sitting watching PBS and a (television) special came on about the Harlem Renaissance. Now, although I grew up in New York City, I went to the School of the Arts right here in Harlem, we were never really - we were never told about the Studio Museum. Every museum trip we went to, we went downtown. So now I'm watching this PBS special on Harlem and (the) Harlem Renaissance, the Studio Museum comes up and all the Harlem Renaissance artists, and I'm like glued to the TV. And I decided right then and there that I was moving back to New York; I was leaving my husband and coming to New York to be an artist. And all of those things happened.

So that's what brought me back to New York - to actually move to New York, move specifically to Harlem to be an artist, and sort of live off of the synergy of the historical context of the Harlem Renaissance. That's actually how I got here.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Well that's incredibly significant for us, for this show. And so, what about the Harlem Renaissance did you find so intriguing, beyond the sort of place, the space, where so many of these cultural and artistic activities took place in the 1920s and 1930s?

Dianne Smith: I think, I mean, first and foremost, like I said, watching that PBS special, it was one of the first times that I had gotten a breadth of information regarding artists and creators/makers that look like me. So that was already pretty powerful and intriguing. And it took until my twenties for that to happen. So there was that. It was the creativity, the boldness, the freedom of expression; although I didn't know it then, the speaking to issues and concerns of the African diaspora. It was all of those things.

And as I continue to grow and evolve as a woman, as an artist, and as a Black woman, as an Afro-Caribbean woman, I really began to understand how those - that moment was pivotal to my growth and development in the now. And knowing that those men and women existed as creators and makers at that time was really important to help give me a foundation. Because all of my years of art history, all my years of study, there was never anyone that looked like me. There just wasn't. I mean, I think that has shifted a bit now but it - I still have my (Gardner's) *Art Through the Ages* book from high school, my art history book, and there was nothing reflective of me that I could kind of look to for inspiration, or for understanding "voice" as an artist. I was creating work through the lens of a Eurocentric paradigm, not a lens of my own per se in terms of what fine art is. So that's why the Harlem Renaissance - learning about that era was extremely important.

Betti-Sue Hertz: And what do you think carries through? So, you know, we're - we couple the (*Uptown*) *Triennial*, which happens every three years, with the centennial of the Harlem Renaissance this time. But what do you think has been carried through, you know, the Harlem Renaissance years, the World War II, the post-war years, and very importantly, of course, the Civil Rights Movement? And then earlier even, other kinds of things like the divestment from South Africa during the apartheid movement. What do you think kind of carries through to sort of the way you live now, and the way life is now in Harlem, or for African American and Black artists in New York City area, for example?

Dianne Smith: Well, that's a big question, let me see if I can (answer it)... but I love it! But I love it! So two things, you know, as you were formulating the question, two things came to mind. For one, one of my favorite quotes is by Nina Simone, where she says something to the effect: "It's the artist's duty to reflect the times". And I think each of those moments that you described, it is the artist's voice that helps to sort of cement a movement, if you will, or get messaging out. And even thinking about this time that we're living in, in terms of the Black Lives Matter Movement and how artists as makers and creators are talking about issues, and I think we've always - I think artists have always done that. I mean, when I think about the way Langston Hughes wrote,

when I think about Zora Neale Hurston, when I think about the work that maybe Elizabeth Catlett made, like it was always about, you know, speaking to what was happening in the now. But what was happening in the now transcended historically, right? So some of those things, you know, when I think about "I, Too, sing America" (poem by Langston Hughes), I can recite - and actually I've made work in reference to "I, Too, Sing America" - those words are very relevant for today. So there's that.

And I also believe that art is the epoxy that holds a culture together. And I think that - with that said - I think that with all of those time periods in history that you talk about, it's the artifacts that we have to sort of reflect on to really understand what transpired, and how people were moving through those time periods and spaces. And I think, I mean, when I think about now - and I was thinking about this earlier - even this conversation, I was thinking about movements and artifacts, and how this conversation is going to become part of those artifacts, and how movements and conversations are being documented. And, you know, because I've been hearing so much, "oh, we're still having this conversation", but I think how we have the conversations has evolved over time, because we're able to do this. And I think the level of transparency in the conversations, not just the oratory conversations but conversations through making and art, I think, has become more transparent.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Mm hmm. Can - this last bit about... what has become more transparent? I'm not quite sure how you mean that.

Dianne Smith: I think, I think what has become more transparent is the acknowledgement of - and, you know, I'm speaking in which I had been speaking through, (which is) the lens of my Blackness, through this entire time - I think what has become more transparent is the acknowledgement of the struggle of Black people in America. And then I think that level of transparency leads to understanding the struggle of Black and Brown people globally, right? Because once you begin to see one thing, then your lens becomes even more broader. And when I talk about transparency - and I'm not saying everyone is transparent - but I think for myself, I know that my need to be transparent about the things that I feel, and the ways in which oppression and trauma has been a part of my life, is at the top of how I communicate now.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Mm hmm.

Dianne Smith: Through my work and through my personal relationships.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Right, so you feel like there's more of a space opening up for... a visibility, and sort of coming into public view of aspects of yourself that earlier, in your earlier self, were closed off - not to you, necessarily, but to you communicating to others.

Dianne Smith: I think... and I don't want to be misleading in saying that artists and makers that came before me were not being transparent. And I think what I'm talking about in terms of transparency is more the receiving of it, you know what I mean? The willingness to receive it and hear it.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Be seen, sort of.

Dianne Smith: Right, the receiving of it. And I think that we have - again, because we just talked about the Harlem Renaissance, and those artists who were making and creating and talking about the issues in the now that are still relevant today. So they - we as people of color have always been transparent, right? We've always been talking about - and we've always been saying this is problematic, this is an issue, this is wrong. These are the things that have been ailing our communities: there's systemic racism, there's unconscious bias, there are microaggressions, there's outright brutality. We've been saying this, so we've been transparent.

But I think the transparency now comes between the, the one on one, the interaction, right? So we've been saying this collectively, but the willingness to talk to each other and to allow the space for the honesty - whether it's someone (who) says, "well, I didn't really know" and I say, "well, how could you not know", but there's still a more clear and open dialogue for that kind of conversation to happen where it wasn't before, right? Because all of - everyone's stuff comes up and you don't want to talk about it. And so that's where the: "Oh, no, no, no. You're just imagining it. It's not really happening. Oh well, she's just like that anyway." You know... I mean, am I making sense?

Betti-Sue Hertz: Yeah, I think, I think that that's very important, what you're saying. That the transparency was always there, but it wasn't seen, it wasn't received. And even if we go back now and look at what people did a hundred years ago, we can see it and receive it differently because we're in sort of a different place around sort of acceptance of, you know -

Dianne Smith: Yeah.

Betti-Sue Hertz: - the way that African American experiences actually define the U.S.

Dianne Smith: Right.

Betti-Sue Hertz: For everybody, actually.

Dianne Smith: Right, and I think, I think language becomes very important because I think there's a difference between seeing and acknowledgement, right? And because, you know, you're participating in the poor behavior, right? So you know it's happening right, but whether or not you want to acknowledge it is very different. And I think how we talk about things in this moment is really important and how we use language, right? Because I think that there were a large - I mean, of course, there are people walking around with blinders right? You're like, "how could you not see this?", there are those people. But there is, I think, a larger percentage of people who were unwilling to acknowledge the truth, right. So acknowledging truth then holds - makes you responsible for change.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Mm hmm. So let's switch to your - the work that you have at the gallery. And I think that so much of what you're saying now is made evident in the videos. So maybe we can start by talking about the whole piece, but let's kind of move into the videos first and then we can maybe talk a little bit about why you situate them in this sort of weaving, or this sort of reference to textiles and weaving and braiding and things like that.

Dianne Smith: Yeah, so, when this project first came about, and I was looking at James Weldon Johnson's work, and looking at all of the poems within *God's Trombones*, and I kept going over them and I was like "The Prodigal Son" (poem), and - because it kind of reminded me of my dad and his immigration to the States and then I was like "no". Then I went to (the poem) "The Crucifixion" and like, and then I stayed - I kept "The Crucifixion", and I just kept going back and forth because they were all so compelling.

And this work really took me back to my childhood in the sense of like my first time going to a Baptist church in the South Bronx. Growing up in Central America and in the South Bronx, my family were either Episcopalian or Methodist. So going to a Baptist church, I was like "what in the world?" It was something unreal, because the cadence of the preacher, the vibrancy of the congregation, the sounds from the choir, you know, I was very young but it moved me and I actually got baptized at this little Baptist church in the South Bronx. I must have been about eleven, but I wanted to be baptized at this church. And so over my lifetime, my experience with Baptist churches and listening to preachers and just the way they orate, and how they weave things, and they can bring, you know, they start somewhere and then you're thinking they're someplace else and they bring it all back together, and they create these narratives - that was very much in this work, and that's a lot of what this work was about.

So I settled on - what did I settle on? - "The Crucifixion" (poem) and I wanted to tell (the) story of African Americans since the enslaved Africans arrived here. So I started with "The Crucifixion", which is telling the story of Jesus. And then I went into (the poem) "Listen, Lord", which is a prayer, essentially. And the final was - I have junior moments, forgive me - (the poem) "Let My People Go" (which is) Moses telling the story of freeing the Hebrew slaves from Egypt; which that story, in the Baptist Church, is often equated with enslaved Africans and our story and journey here in the Americas. So that's how I came to select those works.

And then thinking about how do I tell this sort of cohesive story with all three works through video and audio, and I went about just researching and selecting images. I use a lot of images, sometimes that I take, or things that I hear. And I'm often in response to - particularly these last months - in response to what's happening immediately. One video has Jacob, the Jacob Blake incident. And another has Breonna Taylor and, you know, those kinds of things, because I respond to what's been happening. And I just thought this work called for that, because this is so much of what we've been talking about. And then I thought, how do I bring this to life visually, to give a visual - you know, there's always this dance between too much visual stimulation and too much... like it becomes that trauma porn. So I wanted to be careful of that too, but also be able to tell the story from a historical context into the now.

(TIME JUMP IN VIDEO)

Betti-Sue Hertz: Is each of these three videos linked to - is each video linked to a poem in *God's Trombones*?

Dianne Smith: Yes.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Okay. So, and then did you build... How did you build the images, how do you find images, how do you construct the montage, and how do you think about the rhythm and pacing as you start to do your editing and your cuts?

Dianne Smith: So, let's take - "The Crucifixion" is the first video, so I'm thinking about "The Crucifixion". So immediately I'm back on - I take myself through the transatlantic slave trade, enslaved Africans, and there's some images of shackles and the ways in which enslaved Africans were brutalized. And then they (the images) move really fast because the idea is to give like this, is (to) like give you a message and give you something, but not bombard you with it at the same time. And the pacing is always really important because I'm trying to give you a lot of information succinctly and effectively, but not to overwhelm you. So...

Betti-Sue Hertz: I mean, there is a lot of information in each of the videos, and so that's why, you know, I was curious as to how you were building (that).

Dianne Smith: And so as I'm putting it together, I'm thinking about it from... I'm looking at it, I'm making and looking at it sort of like from a viewer's perspective; like if I'm standing in front of this (piece) and I am looking at this, what messaging am I getting from this? So that's how I'm processing it. So I'm compiling stuff and then I'm moving away from it, and then I look at it as a whole, wherever point I stop, I look at it - I save it and look at it as a product already. And then I can see where the holes are, and what I need to do, and what I need to fill in. Where, where does the story need to be told more? And then I also think about, how many times has this story been told this way? So I'm very careful to not tell it the same exact way, but also give enough information that someone can call up "okay, yeah, Malcolm X, I heard him say that before but now it's related in this context...", that kind of thing. Yeah, so...

(TIME JUMP IN VIDEO)

Betti-Sue Hertz: I was saying I was amazed - I'm amazed at the way you work with the archive. And I was saying that you must have a very large archive of images, or maybe, you know, do you construct a list of like, "oh, I think I should have an image of this and this and this" and then go find it? Or (do) you just have a place on your computer where you store the kinds of images and videos, and found footage even, that you think you might use in the future?

Dianne Smith: It's very, very organic and in the moment. I have the project and I'm thinking, "okay", and when I start to work I just go - like, for instance, I may just Google *God's Trombones* let's just say, and then I'll see what comes up and then I'll, you know... And actually, there's so

many amazing performances of varying renditions of the poems (in *God's Trombones*). So I use those as like, things like that as sort of like a reference point, something to give me inspiration. Like how are people attending to this work outside of myself? So that's one thing I might do.

And, you know, I think about: how did certain things make me feel, what images didn't I see, how can I make - how can I connect things? Like I think - and I'm trying to remember now, which one of the videos - so one of the videos, I think it's "The Crucifixion", I sat and I went through all of the people killed by police from the (19)60s. I think I went (as) far back as 1968, somewhere around (19)63 - somewhere between (19)63 and (19)68, but up until the now. And I got all of like, all the names and all of the images and then... Sometimes, I have to say though, because I'm working with this stuff, it's exhausting, right? So I need to go take a lie down. Because sometimes it's a lot.

Betti-Sue Hertz: It's overwhelming to keep looking at that kind of imagery, it's just devastating.

Dianne Smith: You know, sometimes... I mean, when I did earlier - for the (Uptown) People's Assembly (event) - and I did, and I had the George Floyd (piece), I cried through making that (piece). Jacob Blake happened as I was installing this show, so that wasn't originally a part of my video sequence but immediately when I saw it, it just shook me, and I had to double back and add that to the work because I'm like I can't not attend to this in this moment that this is happening. It's very much, you know, it (the police shooting of Jacob Blake) was very execution style, right? And I'm talking about "The Crucifixion"; I could not leave that where it was. So sometimes things like that happen, you know, I hear stuff.

And I also sometimes - I'm not one of these artists that think I use something once and I'll never use it again. I think that's so much of what history is, it continues to repeat and we continue to evolve as human beings. So my work evolves and sometimes I may borrow something from something else and bring it - if it calls for it, if it works - and bring it into what I'm doing in the moment. Other archival stuff I'll just be, I'll just randomly look for stuff, and some... like I couldn't even tell you what comes into my - like random things come into my head when I'm working, and I go... And I'll just Google something, and I'll just go looking and looking and looking, and then I'm like, something pops up, I don't take a lot of time with it, and I'm like, "this feels right", and I'll use it.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Interesting. So, and so, I see this work is very, very much sort of in the moment, as you say, in terms of my experience of it, as a viewer of it. It's also taking me through time historically, so it's going kind of backwards right, and forwards all the time, in terms of when these events took place or are taking place. And then I'm seeing all three of them (videos) sort of at the same time, and they're not synced. So the relationships that are emerging from - between the three, across the three screens is, it's not going to be the same from one day to the next.

Dianne Smith: Right.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Can you talk a little bit about all of those decisions?

Dianne Smith: Well, so, you know, right before you said that, I was thinking I was going to mention something. "Listen, Lord" (video by Dianne Smith) has a sermon by (indecipherable), who's actually my pastor. And then I think it's the third video where there's the young, little girl - and that's "Let My People Go" - where she's talking about where she comes from, and, you know, she wants to see her mommy and her daddy. And what I was trying to create is this understanding that these things keep getting compounded, it's not just one thing, right, and it's isolated and it just happens. These are things that Black people are experiencing, and I kind of wanted the person that's standing in front of it to understand that this is forever present, and it is forever moving, and although people talk about, "oh, well, that happened back then", well, no, it's still relevant now, you know.

I was just thinking about Ruby Bridges, I think it's just, it was just about sixty years ago where she was the first - I think the anniversary just passed a couple of days ago, and her mother just died recently also - the little girl who integrated the school system, the little (girl), (I was) thinking about her. That was the past, but she's very much alive now, so she's still in the present. And I wanted to be able to create this idea that although some of these things have happened in the past and we're talking about history, but it's like this (CIRCLING HAND GESTURE ONSCREEN) it's cyclical, it keeps moving, it keeps moving. And just because it happened in the past, it's no less devastating to who we are as people of color, it's no less traumatizing to us, because - understand, when you don't deal with trauma, and every time something happens, guess where you're taken back to?

Betti-Sue Hertz: The trauma place.

Dianne Smith: Right, so, and it was kind of like wanting to - again, figuring out how to do this dance between creating those kinds of experiences, and I'm really honored that you even thought about (that), because that's exactly what I was trying to do.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Thank you. That's really interesting. And it definitely gives me more insight into how you, about - into the videos. And so maybe we can move into the other -

Dianne Smith: I'm sorry, can I, can I just add one, one more thing? I'm so sorry. I mentioned my pastor and the little girl, and I mentioned them because they're very, they're vastly different in terms of age, but their pain is the same. And that's the other thing I wanted to get across. We have a little girl - she must have been about nine, maybe - and we have my pastor who's in his seventies, but they're feeling the same pain. There's something fundamentally wrong with that. And that was the other thing I wanted to be able to get across.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Well thank you.

So, yeah let's move on to the other important component of this installation, which is the work that you're doing with paper, and how the paper sort of forms an environment for the videos that

we've been talking about. I know that you've done that before, and if you could tell us a little bit about how you came to work in this fashion, and what it means to you.

Dianne Smith: Yeah, so, maybe it was around 2011 or so, I was asked to do an installation - well, actually make a work of art, because I wasn't really doing like major installations at that point - talking about the history of African Americans in New York. And the way I kind of work, I like to say I'm a multi-disciplinary artist which for me just means that - and I know some people might frown upon this, but this is just what works for me - I figure out what it is I want to say and find the best way to say it. Because for me, it's always about clearly articulating what I want to say. So my language is to use whatever - it's like using whatever words I can to articulate; well, I'm using whatever medium I can to articulate, that's my language. And so I didn't have anything in my repertoire at that time that I could think of to really bring this to life. And I'm like: "Well, I don't want to be very, very on the nose with it, what can I do?" (TIME JUMP IN VIDEO) I didn't want to be very on the nose with it, so I started thinking about material. And brown butcher paper came to mind because...

Oh, this is what happened: I was down in the Wall Street area, and I was walking and I had my head down. I was just like lost in thought and I started looking at the cracks on the sidewalk. And I was like: "Wow, there's a lot of history in those cracks, they're like mark makings. They're like imprints of our history, like what has happened here?" And then that led me to thinking about the African Burial Ground that was found down there. And I was like: "Wow, what is, what's in these marks?" And then thinking about cargo and then I'm like: "What do you pack cargo with? Enslaved Africans were cargo." And butcher paper came to mind. You wrap meat with butcher paper, you wrap shipping with butcher paper; you push it in corners, you stack it, you do all of these things to it. And it's a very fragile, but very sturdy material all at the same time.

And (I) started thinking about the content of our character as Black people; our resiliency, with all that we've been through, like, you know, we're fragile but we're resilient, we're strong, and all of those things. And I like to talk about the idea of us being fragile, because I think to just leave us at strength dehumanizes us because it takes away all of the other things that we can attribute to all other cultures and nationalities; that if we exhibit them, you know, (if) we exhibit pain or hurt or cry, like something is wrong. It's misinterpreted, every emotion that we exhibit publicly. So just thinking about all those things.

So the brown butcher paper became really interesting to me, and I made my first installation with it, talking about this and it just reminded me of skin. And, you know, I remember thinking about my grandmother's skin and how she aged, and she had a beautiful brown complexion and the wrinkles... And (I) started thinking about what histories, what are in - they're like mark makings, they're an imprint of her life. They're an imprint of our history, our legacy. There are stories in those wrinkles that I know, and some that I don't know; some that are inherently part of me and (that) I move with. And so the brown butcher paper became about all of that. And the more I used it, the more things came to mind. It replicated my Granny washing in Belize in the backyard, you know, on a scrub board and wringing out clothes. It became about the braiding of

my hair. It became about kneading bread. So it was all of these things that came up with how I was using my hands to attend to the paper. So all of those things became part of why I use the butcher paper.

It's also, I mean, I think the paper constructs a narrative. I started this conversation about, talking about the way Baptist preachers weave and interlock things, and create stories and narratives, and go back and it comes back and it's later (indecipherable)... And so it seemed appropriate for *God's Trombones* too, you know, with that. You know, if you're listening to how those words are, if they were to be orated, you would find that same kind of layering and weaving and all of those things. So yeah, that's - and it works for all of the installations that I do. I have those things in mind, to be able to tell a story with the paper.

Betti-Sue Hertz: So how is your narrative about the paper and the braiding and weaving and crunching and twisting change when the content of the videos that inhabit that space have different - is different? In other words -

Dianne Smith: Mm hmm.

Betti-Sue Hertz: - is this a sort of set piece that you want to install these different stories into, but how do the stories change because they're in this setting, and then how is - how do we think about the setting itself differently because of what is in the videos?

Dianne Smith: Well, I think, I mean, first and foremost, I'm going to say on the most basic level, all of the things that I just talked about, for me, when I'm using work that talks about Jacob Blake or George Floyd or Martin Luther King (Jr.) or Malcolm X, for me they're people first. They're humans and they have families, they have lives. And so everything I described is what - is a part of who they are. So there's that. So it's just about me being able... if I were to talk to Malcolm X, I'm sure he can remember his wife braiding his daughter's hair.

Betti-Sue Hertz: So you're saying that there's a - it represents a kind of connectivity between people.

Dianne Smith: Between people, there is definitely that. And then our - from a historical context, right - our history is layered and textured in this country. It's multiple things, it's not one thing. We cannot have a linear discussion. And so when you look at the way those things move, and those - that paper intertwines and overlaps, it's like it's a journey, it's a definite journey.

But it's not just the journey for myself and for Black people in America. I've put these kinds of installations up in, from Berlin to Virginia, and the things that people tell me... Because I think that there's a certain point, when you make art, your hope is that people are going to connect with it based on your intention. But there's a certain part of me that has to be resolved - Maxine Greene talks about, the philosopher Maxine Greene, talks about the viewer being able to lend themselves, their lives, to the work of art. So part of me makes (work) in that way; that someone is going to come to this work with their own context, and their own feelings, and their own

emotions, and their own ideas and be moved or not moved, right? And I have to be well with all of that.

And to give some examples of that, I was in Berlin and a young woman - I think she was from Rwanda - and she stood in front of the installation I made, and she was just like, starting to cry. And she had been suffering from PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder) from some things that had happened in Rwanda, and the installation conjured it up for her, brought it to surface.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Very, very, very meaningful for the artist, I think, when that happens.

Dianne Smith: Yeah, but then there was a gentleman, a German man, who was like “oh it reminds me of hiking”. Like, but I, its nature - so when you look at it, it's like climbing the rocks and, you know, I can see that. And, but there is... that's okay. I think that's what art is supposed to do. The art is supposed to take us on unimaginable journeys and sometimes imaginable journeys. It's supposed to be able to transcend and transport us. That's what it's supposed to do. But whatever people are deriving from the work, I just have to be well with it. My ego cannot be so big that I cannot leave room for the viewer to be where they are with the work. I had -

Betti-Sue Hertz: But they're responding to the work, they're not responding to you. I mean, even though you put yourself into the work and you might have intentions -

Dianne Smith: Right, and that's truly how I (work). You know, exactly, exactly. I mean, I remember being in grad school and people would go “well, who's your audience?”. Anybody that can see; I'm like, “if you can see, you're my audience”, you know? And I think since grad school, I always fought against this like having to be this one - I'm like, it's art. Why are we pushing people into being this one thing, under this idea that this is what art is? Then for me you're away from the people, and you're making art for the people. If I'm concerned about who my viewer is, then I don't know that I'm making it for the people, I'm making it for something that I want from the people.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Mmm hmm. Excellent. I really understand what you're saying. And I agree with that too.

I have a completely different question which, you know, most... I've been thinking a lot about the - it's a little off topic, but I've been thinking about it a lot, so I'm gonna ask you.

Dianne Smith: Sure.

Betti-Sue Hertz: You know a lot of, you know - when we think about Kamala Harris and her father's from Jamaica, and you say your family and you were actually born in Belize, is that correct?

Dianne Smith: I was born in the South Bronx.

Betti-Sue Hertz: You were born in the South Bronx, but your family's from Belize, originally?

Dianne Smith: Yes.

Betti-Sue Hertz: You know, and then Abby Phillip, the newscaster, there's been some attention on her and her family's originally from, I think, Jamaica or (the) Caribbean, and I know Renee Cox's (another artist in *Uptown Triennial 2020*) family is originally from Jamaica. And I'm just wondering if you have anything to say about the impact that being from the Caribbean has on those African Americans that are here now and have - identify as African American, but have a different genealogical trajectory from those who's like grandparents and great-grandparents were in the States in the 18th and 19th century.

Dianne Smith: Well, I mean, I think -

Betti-Sue Hertz: - or is that relevant or not relevant -

Dianne Smith: No, I think it's a relevant, it's a relevant - Well, it's a great question for me because, having a hyphenated identity, right - because I am American-born, I'm American. But I am even more so now, as a grown woman, connected to my Afro-Caribbean roots. I wasn't always outwardly so, because (when) I went to school I was a Black American child. I came home and I was Belizean Afro-Caribbean, and I did the things that we did culturally and traditionally; I ate the foods that we ate, I danced to the music that, you know, the steel drums - I did those things. But then when I was out playing in, you know, in the fire hydrants, I was with my southern Black friends and I did those things. And I was always having to do this dance between what it means to be American and what it means to be Caribbean. Because I think in both cases, Black people have been given some impressions of each other, coming from these different places, that are rooted in whiteness; and what I mean to say is that some of the discriminatory practices that happen within whiteness can happen between these cultures because of a lack of understanding.

And so that was something that I was always very conscious of, and the immigrant story, right? Because you have all of these intersections. So you have the immigrant story which is "immigrant", and then you have the American story. So if you're Black and you're American, you're not an immigrant. If you're Black and you're from the Caribbean, you're an immigrant. So there's that kind of story. I grew up with my parents and I always tell people (that) if this was the now, my parents would have been among those groups of people having serious immigration problems under this administration, absolutely. I grew up with them having immigration issues, and going back and forth to court, and trying to get documented, and all of that stuff. So I understand that wholeheartedly. I lived it. I watched them go through it. I watched them help family members after they got situated. I remember my mother, her first time being able to vote as a citizen, how excited she was and she took that very seriously. I think that what we do have to realize (is), although (they are) not born in this country with some of the same baggage, people coming from the Caribbean were also, they were colonized.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Right.

Dianne Smith: So, and so they were also -

Betti-Sue Hertz: There's a commonality in the diaspora, right?

Dianne Smith: - and enslaved, right? So there are all of those things that are still there, but because how we live as humans, to separate (people) has been an effective tool, you know, whether consciously or subconsciously. And to find oneself like, something better or worse, to make myself feel better is also part of our human conditioning, right? So there are those things as well.

I don't see - I think I connect to both in that way because I don't see the struggle any different. I look at what's happening and what happens in Caribbean countries, from Haiti to Jamaica. I don't see the struggles any differently. I don't... yeah. I do, but I do, I do think about (it) - I have conversations about it. I've had fights about it.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Well, thank you. I'm, I just have been thinking about it myself lately, as you know, I guess because Kamala (Harris) has come onto the scene and her family story is so interesting, and I think really is somewhat, you know, similar to what you're saying that you're, you know, (a) child of immigrants but you're an American child and...

Dianne Smith: Well, you know what's really interesting to me with the Kamala (Harris) story, I think I heard on the news like when she... oh first, something about being the first immigrant - child of an immigrant or something like that. And I was like, but aren't they all children of immigrants like what are you talking about...? Like so, so here's how for me racism works, right? All those presidents were children of immigrants, like...? I mean, there's something... I'm like, hmmm?

Betti-Sue Hertz: Well, I mean, I think it's specifically like your parents came, and her parents came, where like Trump's grandfather came, you know? That somehow, that makes a distinction between your relationship.

Dianne Smith: Yeah, I - yeah.

Betti-Sue Hertz: His (Trump's) wife is an immigrant, right? And so... but I do think that the way that that immigrant story gets narrativized is different for Black and Asian and Latinx people in this country. And I think that -

Dianne Smith: Yeah, I think that's what I'm addressing, thinking about and addressing like the -

Betti-Sue Hertz: Yeah, I'm kind of trying to sort of think through it...

(TIME JUMP IN VIDEO)

Dianne Smith: I mean, first of all, I think it's - the show is brilliant. I love the show, the selection of artists - walking in to Whitfield Lovell is like, is superpurb. I think it's a really well curated show and I'm so sorry that people cannot be in that (gallery) space and take it in wholeheartedly. It's so magnificent. And I think for me - first of all, I'm really honored to be part of this second Triennial as well. And (to) always have space to make work where I live about where I live, where I come from, is really important and special to me. That's always something that brings me joy, and I'm so glad that the Wallach Gallery is in that place, and allowing for that opportunity. And to compile such a magnificent breadth of artists - the work is so dynamic and textural and there's a complete narrative in each and every piece. The Renee Cox (artist in *Uptown Triennial 2020*) piece is absolutely stunning.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Yeah. As always, yeah. Mind-blowing.

Dianne Smith: Yeah, I mean, there's so many works in that exhibition that I'm completely blown away by. Is that the Augusta Savage, is that Augusta Savage, the (*The Harp*)... ? You know, and when you're able to see stuff that you would ordinarily see in a textbook and see it in person, you know, things like that bring me great joy. That was pretty special. And that piece (Augusta Savage's *The Harp*), for some reason, I just always imagined it so huge and -

Betti-Sue Hertz: It is big, this is just a model (what's in the exhibition).

Dianne Smith: Yeah, but that's how I was waiting for it to be like, but to see it in such a (audio indecipherable) and precious way was even as impactful.

Betti-Sue Hertz: I think so, yeah, it's, it's just beautiful. And it connects so much to what you've been saying about your own work and being - feeling like you wanted to connect more deeply to *God's Trombones* and yeah... you know, she's also made a work about the songs, so.

Dianne Smith: And I actually orated all three poems on the videos (of Dianne Smith's "God's Trombones") too. Yeah.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Great, well thank you for that.

Dianne Smith: My voice is in the background.

Betti-Sue Hertz: And as you said, there's been so many versions of this, spoken word versions of the poems.

Dianne Smith: Yeah, and I had a friend contribute music to "Listen, Lord". There's an audio that he gave me, because I was looking for a gospel song - because I do like layering, layering things. So I was thinking of something like... the commonality between all of my work is all - whether it's the abstract work or the sculptures - is like this kind of layering, and putting things

together, and building. And so I really wanted some, some sound so he was so nice to let me use an original work of his, so I was excited about that.

Betti-Sue Hertz: Well, that's nice to be able to include other people's work in your work.

(TIME JUMP IN VIDEO)

Thank you so much for joining me today, and I certainly learned a lot about the work and also a little bit about your life trajectory and journey. And we all look forward to hearing more from you in the future. And we love having this connection with you, Dianne, you've really been a great partner in the *Uptown (Triennial)* -

Dianne Smith: Thank you.

Betti-Sue Hertz: - exhibition, and project, and Assembly, and everything.

Dianne Smith: Well, thank you. I feel the same. I'm honored to have been part of this exhibition, like I said, (and also to have been part of) the first *Triennial (2017)*, and to just be in conversation with the Wallach Gallery continually. I'm happy about that.