

PROYECTO MISSION MURALS
Oral History Audio Transcripts

DEWEY CRUMPLER ORAL HISTORY
Berkeley, California, June 22, 2021

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This is an oral history of artist, muralist, and educator Dewey Crumpler for the *Mission Murals Project*. I'm Camilo Garzón. It was recorded on June 22, 2021, in Dewey's home in Berkeley, California. The voices you'll hear will be Dewey's and my own. When I first met him that early morning in his home on the Berkeley hills, [the] first thing I noticed were his red glasses, and he was eating an asiago bagel with cream cheese.

While his works occupy walls outside of the Mission District, an early encounter with one of the legendary Tres Grandes carried a heavy influence in his muralism practice. We are thrilled to include his voice in this canon of oral histories centering muralists, activists, and storytellers.

This oral history delves into Dewey's early life, his first drawings at school, the trips to his native Arkansas while growing up, witnessing the erasure of Black history from his education, and how that motivated him to create art that examines cultural power and in the United States. We also talk about his interest in theater, music, and performance, as well as an anecdote that includes finding a copy of James Baldwin in the basement of City Lights bookstore.

Here is the oral history.

Esta es una historia oral del artista, muralista y educador Dewey Crumpler para el Mission Murals Project. Soy Camilo Garzón. Se grabó el 22 de junio de 2021, en la casa de Dewey en Berkeley (California). Las voces que oirás serán las de Dewey y la mía. Cuando me encontré con él temprano esa mañana en su casa en las colinas de Berkeley, lo primero que noté fueron sus lentes rojos, y él estaba comiendo un bagel de queso Asiago untado con queso crema.

Mientras que sus obras abarcan muros fuera del barrio de la Mission, un encuentro inicial con uno de los Tres Grandes legendarios ejerció una gran influencia sobre su labor muralista. Nos emociona incluir su voz en este canon de historias orales enfocadas en muralistas, activistas y cuentacuentos.

Esta historia oral ahonda en las primeras etapas de la vida de Dewey, sus primeros dibujos en la escuela, los viajes a su Arkansas natal durante su crianza, ser testigo de cómo se suprimía la historia afroamericana de su educación y la manera en que eso lo motivó para crear arte que examina el racismo en los Estados Unidos. También hablamos de su interés en el teatro, la música y las presentaciones en público, así como una anécdota que incluye el encontrar a James Baldwin en el sótano de la librería City Lights.

Aquí está la historia oral.

CAMILO GARZÓN: All right. I am here with Dewey Crumpler, and this is June 22, 2021. And I'm talking to him on behalf of the *Mission Murals Project*. If you can just say your full name and where were you born?

DEWEY CRUMPLER: My name is Dewey Crumpler. I was born in Magnolia, Arkansas. And two weeks after I was born, my parents came back to San Francisco with me. So I grew up in San Francisco.

CG: How was the move? Do you remember it, when you were a kid?

DC: No. I was about two weeks old. But we went back to the South, where my parents were from, every year until I was a year out of graduating from high school. It was an annual trek back because my parents were a part of that second-wave migration group from the South, which had begun in the early twentieth century and had come in about three waves, of which they were the second wave, a third wave. Because, you know, it's clear the South was intolerable and was designed to be that way after the emancipation. So that's what drove us—or my family—west and others east/northeast.

CG: And that's, of course, something that you have explored in your art, which we will be getting into. I wanted to ask you about that upbringing now, as you were saying, because being born in Arkansas, now being in California—those places that we inhabit are places that end up having an effect on us totally.

DC: Indeed.

CG: How do you remember those years of just growing up? Like, what were the kinds of things you were interested in as a kid, as a teenager?

DC: Well, when I was a child, I was like—I can't say like all kids, because I don't know all kids. But my friends and I on Bridgeview Drive, which is where, at first, we lived in Hunters Point. And Hunters Point was actually the place that my family moved from. This was in the fifties. We first moved to a part of San Francisco, my parents, called Fillmore. And that's where I met my godparents, who were tremendously important in my life next to my parents. And they were the landlords of a triplex in San Francisco right down the street from where a very famous Black woman named Mammy Pleasant, who was a kind of a San Francisco legend — this was during . . . the nineteenth century. She was a powerful madam who ran a house, and that house entertained all the dignitaries and wealthy in San Francisco. And her ghost used to frighten us kids as I was growing up.

At about three, we moved to Hunters Point because my father, who had come to California from Arkansas before my mother—they were still in Arkansas. He got married. I'm sort of going a long way here, if that's OK. And so they came, and so they came to work in the shipyards, which he did.

And when we moved to Hunters Point, it was because he got a job at Pan American Airways. And this will be important later in my life. And so, because he got a job at Pan American Airways, we moved from Fillmore to Hunters Point.

And so I went to a school called—at five, four and a half—called Hunters Point Number Three School, which was—these were all barracks-like houses that look like—all of Hunters Point was on a hill overlooking San Francisco. Beautiful weather in San Francisco. The views were tremendous.

And I went to that school [and] left that school in the fourth, third grade. Yeah, in the third grade. And then I went to Jedediah Smith. Now, that was an elementary school too, but in this case, we went from kindergarten to the second grade at Hunters Point Number Three. And then we went to Jedediah Smith from the third grade to the sixth grade. But I only went to Jedediah Smith for about a year and a half, and then my parents moved when I was about seven and a half to Bayview, which was across the street, across a main separation highway, because San Francisco was segregated.

And one of the demarcation streets was Third Street. And Third Street was a very long street that went from the mouth of the southern part of San Francisco all the way out to Market Street. As you get closer to Market Street, it turns into Kearny. And that was a sort of art district. And farther down was North Beach. And North Beach would be important to me in a few years from this point, because at this point, I was in the—let me go back to Hunters Point Number Two, because [at] that school, I drew all the time as a kid, like most young people who become artists. I drew regularly. And I told stories in my drawings, either about wars and tanks or superheroes. And I'd sometimes copy comic books, which I was a great fan of. And my teacher was really enamored with my skills as a second grader.

And so, before I got ready to graduate, they had a competition to draw a picture about Johnny Appleseed. Now, my mother relays this to me many times in my life. And so, that competition, your piece would be hung up. So I took a butcher paper and drew a sign that was broken up with the history of Johnny Appleseed. And everybody was so impressed with this drawing of Johnny Appleseed and the story, [and] I won and they put it up outside so that the whole school could see it. And so that must have had something to do with me being interested in big, big-scale storytelling, visually.

Incidentally, later, I would come and paint a mural—after returning from Mexico—on that same school. And that was a kind of circle. Many circles in my life.

So then, Jedediah Smith, where I carried on my skill development. And then we moved to Bridgeview in Bayview. Now things shift a bit here, because as a seven-/eight-year-old, I moved into a new community, because Hunters Point was mostly Black. Many Hispanics, many Filipinos, mostly Black people, and Asians. A few Asians. East Asians, actually. And I moved from that community to essentially a white community in Bayview, because where we lived was on a hill. Hunters Point was on a hill too. Many hills. And we could see the city. Well, my mother wanted to see the city, so my father and her bought this house which overlooked a part of San Francisco. And it was a great house. Two levels. Typical San Francisco working middle-class neighborhood. Black doctors and lawyers lived in that area because it was segregated, and Blacks started to move in in the late fifties.

And I had a couple of white—well, a number of—white kid friends because I now went to Portola Junior High School by this time, because I had graduated from Bayview. So now, over that brief beginning, the street started to change, and my white friends, by 1961, had all started moving down to the suburbs. And huge numbers of them on that street started to move out, and more Blacks, a few Asians, and a few Hispanics start to move into this area. Now that part of Bridgeview was becoming darker. The other part of Bridgeview as you go around the hill was still pretty much white. But by the time we got to 1965, after Malcolm [X]'s death, it was primarily people of color. It was still a mixed neighborhood, but mostly Blacks. So that's what I grew up in.

Now, all this time, as I told you, when my parents came from Arkansas, they moved first to Fillmore next to Mammy Pleasant. And it was in that house, with my godparents being the managers of that building—they took a liking to me, and they sort of adopted me as their child. I'm still with my parents, but every weekend, my mother would let me stay with them. So, I stayed with them [on the weekends] and things began to change. All during this time, I was growing up in—they left Fillmore and moved to Lakeview, and so I lived in Lakeview as well. I got the full range of where Black people lived in the city of San Francisco.

Now, this is important. All of that talk about my past, my early past, is important, because it helped to formulate as you point out, what was happening to me. Because all this time I was drawing and painting and getting awards, while I was attending my classes. I was being taught by mostly white teachers who lived in the area when it was white, and they were sort of trapped and couldn't get to the suburbs to get jobs down there because whites were moving down there in droves. And so, I wasn't able to do the kinds of things that I was interested in doing because I was too young, in the beginning.

But by the time I got to junior high school, I was very much involved in the Civil Rights Movement because there were demonstrations all over the place that I saw on television. And now that I could take a bus in the eighth grade, I started taking a bus downtown, and I started marching with the people who were marching at the Sheraton Palace. And that's where I first saw Dick Gregory in person, at the Sheraton Palace. As a little kid, he was marching. I used to see him on television, so to see a movie star, from my point of view as a kid, who was also involved in the rights movement was tremendous. And he was not fooling around now. He was very serious.

And, you know, I was a great fan of Harry Belafonte, Dorothy Dandridge, all the Black people who were a part of the movement. And I followed very closely Martin Luther King, of course. I drew pictures of Martin Luther King and Medgar Evers. And then I got a commission at the Boys Club to paint a mural. It was a large painting. This was in '66 or something, for a health center that they were building on San Bruno Avenue. I was working in the Boys Club, and the manager of the Boys Club, Roy Walker, who was manager of the craft shop in the Boys Club. [It was] mostly a white Boys Club, because San Bruno Avenue area was white—Russians and Italians.

And we used to have fights in junior high school because the whites were trying to move, and they were trying to keep San Bruno Avenue white because Blacks were encroaching in the other areas. So they were trying to keep at least one enclave for white folks without Blacks changing the neighborhood.

So in that way, there was tension. And they built a school, and this school was called Woodrow Wilson, and all the kids from Hunters Point and Bayview were going to that school. And that really heightened the tension because it was a brand-new, beautiful school on the top of a hill. Very suburban-looking school. And whites didn't want to go to it in that area because that school was loading up with Black kids. This was about 1965 or '66. I graduated in '67. So anyway, that's the environment that's going on here.

Now, I was still going to Arkansas every year. So Arkansas was horrific. My family was—my grandfather had two hundred acres of land, so he grew pulp trees. He grew watermelons. He grew cotton. He grew all kinds of peas. He grew all kinds of stuff, and he, selling pulpwood—you know, he was self-sufficient because he had a farm. He had all that land. When the Depression came, it never touched them because they had their own land. And my grandfather, both of them, my father's father, who had about seventy acres of land, who grew peanuts, and who used to tell me about George Washington Carver, who was the only person they talked about in the history book. And that started a great problem in my life because— [and] I'm slightly skipping around here, but I'll pull it together.

You know, I used to, in class, especially during history class, raise my hand to the teacher and ask, “So how come—Black people never do anything in history?” And this is from elementary school all the way to high school. And in each one of those, the answer was always no. Blacks were not able to do anything, so they couldn’t create history. So Blacks don’t have history in that way because, unfortunately, they were slaves. These are white teachers.

And I had a couple of Black teachers. One was a Sunday painter, and he was my art teacher. That was great. That was Mr. Sims. He was a wonderful dude, and it was great to see him. But he didn’t seem to know much about the history of African Americans. But if he did, he just probably didn’t pay attention to a kid who was joking around.

So, when I was in Arkansas, my grandfather, having that kind of self-sufficiency, we would go downtown, where I was born—Magnolia, which is a town. And when I was real little, I remember, a group of Blacks—my grandfather, myself, and when they would walk by my grandfather, they would tip their hat like that, and my grandfather would tip his hat. And I’m a little kid. I’m looking up at this.

And then I would see Black people. I’m looking, and I see grown men my grandfather’s age, step off of the sidewalk to let these white folks walk by, with these little kids. Blacks stepping in puddles of water. And I’m about eight or nine myself, and I’m looking at this, and I can’t believe it.

And my father had a good job, so he bought Cadillacs. And when we used to go to Arkansas, we used to go in these Cadillacs. And every year, every other year, my father would buy a new Cadillac. Now, when we would go down [to] the South, he would drive long distances, and we would leave San Francisco. And in a couple days . . . we’d be in [Arkansas] because he’d be flying, and them big Cadillacs would just eat up the road.

I used to say, when I got a little older, “Daddy, how come we can’t go to the bathroom? How come you keep [going]? We can’t stop nowhere and go get something to eat?” And, you know, my mother and father would just say, “Well, we’re trying to make time.”

Now, after I quit going to Arkansas, because I refused to go after I was seventeen, I didn’t understand it. I didn’t understand why you’re spending all this money on Cadillacs. But see, we couldn’t stay in hotels because he would pull over and sleep. And I thought he was crazy for buying Cadillacs, because by that time, you know, I was looking at BMWs and Mercedes-Benzes because I was in the arts. And all the people I was hanging with, they love BMWs. And so I thought, “Why are you paying all that money?”

But my father was trying to make a ride comfortable because air conditioning was in Cadillacs. And my father was trying to make it as comfortable as possible for his children because he could only stop at certain gas stations that would permit a Black man in a Cadillac to get gas. And secondly, he would not want his children going to any place where they couldn't go to the toilet. A few times we had to go to trash toilets, but often we peed on the road.

Now all of that is in my body. That's shaping my body as a child. Because I see the South in its raw reality, and I see San Francisco echoing it, only with great beauty. San Francisco was beautiful, sophisticated, and racist just like Arkansas. I say that because when Willie Mays tried to buy a house in a predominantly upper-class white neighborhood, the whites went crazy and tried to buy the house back from him to keep the man they sit in a stadium cheering and going crazy [about] and making bets on—they don't want to live next to him. Now, I'm a kid, but I'm conscious, and because I'm being told by my teachers that there is no Black history. And I start listening—and I'm already listening—to and worshipping Martin Luther King.

But after they killed Malcolm, I started listening to Malcolm. And Malcolm said not only do you have a history, you have a great history. And it's your job in the face of these racists to find your own history because they are never going to permit you to know yourself. And it's your responsibility, like any sane human being, to know yourself.

And so that, as a seventeen-year-old getting ready to graduate, was a clarion call to get on a mission. And I started going to look everywhere. Fortunately, a Black bookstore was introduced to me by Roy Walker at the Boys Club. And by that time, I was hanging out at City Lights bookstore in North Beach as a young kid who wanted to be a thespian, because I was interested in acting. And I had a great teacher at Balboa High School, which was a high school for the arts. And she let me read *Othello*, and she coached us in the great plays of Shakespeare and some American playwrights. And so I started performing, and I started to come into myself as a person because I knew that it was my responsibility to teach myself. And so I began to do that both in the theater and in painting.

And it was in City Lights bookstore that I first encountered James Baldwin. I was coming down the stairs in City Lights bookstore into the basement, where we used to hang out, and a book [with a] white cover with Jimmy's face and them big, white eyes were staring at me as I came down the stairs. And I saw this Black dude floating in that white space. And I immediately picked up the book, of course. And I started tearing through this book. And the brother who was working upstairs—the book was fifty-nine cents, a paperback—and he said, "I'll get this book for you." And so I read *Notes [of a Native Son]*, and it was clear then that

you, this, right here is the clarity that you need. And I was on a mission. I was always on a mission, but it was clearer now than ever.

And so, as I was getting ready to graduate, I had a teacher who was hip. And I was attracted to his hipness, because to be hip in junior high school and high school is very important. And this teacher was hip, good-looking, stickler, hard. He was an art teacher. Very sophisticated. His name was Michael Ruiz. And we became real close friends, as you could get with a teacher and you, a student.

And so I was making a sculpture in his class, in clay, because he was one of the teachers at Balboa. That was a part of the arts magnet in the school that I was—that's how I got to Balboa, because otherwise my district was Woodrow Wilson. But because I had these skills—they had just opened up an arts school, and that art school was Balboa, was being tested at Balboa. It later became McAteer, which is a high school of the arts. But this was like a test case.

And, to just let you know, Santana came out of there, and I knew Santana. I didn't know him directly, because he was graduating in the next year when I got there, and I was a junior and he was a senior. But he performed at the school thing, and he was extraordinary.

And this other brother, named David Brown, who I knew, who was a bass player in Santana's band. The other was a Black classicist who attended the school was Calvin Simmons, who I used to make fun of. He was gay. And that was an absolute no-no in the 1960s. And he was very effeminate for a Black dude. And so one day, I made a crack, and his retort was so cold. He was hip. I made a crack about him being corny, and his retort was so inventive, I shriveled up. And because he was something I never expected, because I had been told Blacks are not—brilliant, they don't have history.

But Calvin Simmons, he was playing classical music. He wanted to be a conductor. I said, "Man, you wasting your time. You will never be a classical conductor because white folks will never permit you to do any of that. You don't have any—" So he starts spurring off this Leontyne Price, all these great Black opera people.

it's important because it helped me get clarity. One day I brought him a record. I said, "Man, you trying to play classical music, but our tradition is in jazz music, and that's a classical music. And let me let you listen to something." So I put Wes Montgomery's *Bumpin'* on. And Calvin started deconstructing the whole record. I mean, the whole thing I was playing. And then he said, "Well, he missed a something over third." And he said, "You know, no, that's—I know all about him."

But not only that, every year—and I didn't know this—he went to Berlin to study under one of the greatest conductors in Germany. And, you know, I'm a kid. I don't have a clue that this cat is a genius, and I'm standing up next to him. But that right there is the kind of environment that I was growing up in at the same time that I was dealing with crazy people—racists in both the South and in some parts of San Francisco.

So that's a part of what shaped my interest in storytelling. And now I'm jumping back to Balboa as I was leaving, because that's when Ruiz—I was painting a large painting in his class, the last painting I did there. It's a painting that Smokey Robinson bought, and I did it in Ruiz's class.

And while I was working on it, I told Ruiz that I had seen a mural done by—from my point of view, a bad mural—done by—and when I say bad, I mean terrible—done by these people in Chicago, called the *Wall of Respect*. And I thought I could make a better, more sophisticated mural. Although I thought the idea of the mural was profound, and all them heroes, and Black heroes, that was extraordinary. But the construction of it, and from my point of view at the time, that [was] sort of tacky.

Now, I told this to Jeff himself, so I'm not—that's the way I was feeling as a young, not very enlightened, young seventeen-year-old. But I knew what I wanted. And this white dude named Charles White was making murals I saw in magazines and in *Ebony*. And of course, I later found out he wasn't a white dude. That was just his last name. But it was really a Black dude. That's how ignorant you are when you don't have access to information.

So Ruiz said, “Look, the only place you can go to find great murals is in Mexico, where I come from. So you go to Mexico, and you'll see some of the greatest murals ever made.”

Now, first I got my father to give me a ticket to Chicago. So I went to Chicago to see the *Wall of Respect*, and while I was there, I saw this brother named Bill Walker who painted these huge, giant murals. I was knocked out. And so the idea of the *Wall of Respect* was just banging in my head because it was extraordinarily powerful. Even though I didn't want to just do a bunch of faces put up on the thing.

So I went to Chicago. I found out about Hale Woodruff. I went to Tennessee. My father's working for Pan American Airways made it possible for me to go all over the place looking at artwork. New York. So that's what shaped the burning idea for me. And then I went to college. I got a scholarship to go to the Art Institute.

CG: The San Francisco Art Institute.

DC: Yeah. And then I went over there, and it was so buck wild, so extraordinary. Weird, crazy people running around like that stuff I had read in Greek mythology—Bacchus and all them. You know, people naked and marijuana everywhere. And I just knew that I would never get work done here, and I had a mission, and I knew clearly what I wanted to do. I wanted to learn how to draw like Norman Rockwell or Charles White. So [at] the Art Institute, you had to find your own way, so they really didn't let—unless you had real good skills at that time. You know, like sophomores—they wouldn't let them come.

So, I went to [the California College of] Arts and Crafts, where I got another scholarship. This woman saw my work, wonderful woman, and she wanted to try it. Because San Francisco—the whole country was rioting and going crazy tackling this issue of race. They were on it—everybody, young people, and I was among them. So she wanted to help. So she gave a scholarship to a young kid if she could have one of their works every year. So I took that scholarship, and I went over there, and she came to get one of my works. And I didn't want to give it to anybody. And so I lost that scholarship. And I don't blame her, because I didn't hold up my part of the bargain.

So my parents footed the rest of that bill. And while I was there, I wanted very much to go back to the Art Institute. Because I developed real skills at Arts and Crafts, because they were fanatical on skills.

And so I left there. I couldn't get in when I graduated, so I had to wait a semester. And within that semester, I went to City College to stop from going to the draft. And then I wound up getting into the Art Institute, and I graduated from there.

So, now I'm in college. And before that, in 1968, I get embroiled—it was late '68. I get a call; they want me to come to Washington High School to talk about doing a mural. Because by this time, I'd done two murals, or two huge paintings. I'd gotten on television several times talking about my artwork because they were trying to contrast me with the riots that were going on in the city and all the marches. So they heard about me having won several awards in what was [a San Francisco] Arts Commission project of showing artwork in the Civic Center, for which they give prizes.

And so I wound up on KGO television and written about in the paper. And that, I think, gave these students a knowledge of me, because the work I had done was about the Civil Rights Movement, and I've drawn some pictures of the Black Panther Party. Because by this time I was in an organization that was organized by a friend of mine who was a student at the same time that I was at Arts and Crafts. And she was a powerful organizer, a powerful artist, a powerful thinker. She was profound, and she developed an organization of African American artists in the city that met at her apartment every once a month or every other month. And I met all these Black artists, all these freaks. Her name was [Evangeline] E. J.

Montgomery. And so I was beginning to think seriously about mural painting in 1968, and on a big scale. And I'd done that mural in the Boys Club for that health center, and they had put that up, that got written up about.

I did a television show with Melvin Belli, who was a big lawyer in San Francisco. And Melvin Belli was this really wonderful, bellicose, kind of giant personality. And he had a Black woman by the name of Gerry Lange who produced his show. And Gerry's son and I, while I was at City College, became real friends. And as friends—you know, he was in the theater, [and] I was in the theater, in the school theater, and we were doing a play together. He was doing *Othello*, and I was doing a play called *Gila Monster*, done by a soon-to-be friend of mine named Cecil Brown.

And we had this thespian teacher who was a director, and he had directed plays off-Broadway. And so he was teaching at the time at City College, and he later went to Stanford. At that time, her son, who went to Hollywood and got in these blaxploitation films and did a television program where he played a pimp. And then he went on to do this megahit called *The Love Boat*. So Ted Lange had a brilliant mother, a brother who was equally brilliant, and they were all art people. Real intellectuals. And he told his mother about me, and his mother put me on the show. And on that same show, Smokey Robinson was on it. And when I finished my segment and Smokey came on, because he was performing at Bimbo's downtown, and he was friends of Melvin Belli.

And Melvin Belli, Smokey, when I was getting ready to take my painting, because they were filming my painting while I was talking on the television show. And Smokey, when I was leaving, said, "Hey man, look. Look man, don't leave." I said, "You Smokey Robinson. If you say don't leave, I ain't going, because I can't believe I'm in the same building with Smokey Robinson."

And so Smokey came, and he said, "Look, man. I want that painting. And I don't care what you do. I want that painting." And I said, "Well, you can't afford this painting." So he starts laughing. He said, "Man. Look, man. Come to my room." And he gave me his, the hotel he was staying in. And he said, "Man, just come, and you tell me what it's worth."

So I went in and I told him, and he spent out these hundreds of dollars right in front of my face like it was—I hate to say this, but I don't think he—well anyway, I won't say that. But that was the most money I ever saw in one place, and he paid it right there. My father shipped that painting, and my mother really helped—got that painting and shipped it to him. He probably doesn't have that painting anymore, because, you know, I was a seventeen-year-old making a painting about the history of Black people.

Although, one day, I was in a clothing shop where I used to buy clothes, at this place called The Town Squire on Polk Street, and several of his band members came, and they saw me. And when I told them, they said, “You’re the one who painted that painting that Smokey has in his den? Hey, man, we tried to get Smokey to tell us who painted it, and he won’t give us no information, because he don’t want nobody to have anything like it but him.”

Anyway, that’s the framework. This is a sort of roundabout statement about what was going on in the 1960s. But it was a fiery moment, and everybody was trying to understand where this decade was going. And all of these intersections were shaping one of the most profound decades in the history of the country. And Black people were at the center of it.

And so I wanted to find a way as an artist who knew that I would never be in a museum—even though I had grown up going to them almost every week—that I would never appear in them because no Black people were in any of them. And I didn’t even think about that until I got close to graduating from high school. And after that, I never went to museums again. The last time I went to MoMA was to see the—before it moved—to see [Philip] Guston’s show and Oliver Jackson. Those two shows, which were extraordinary.

And then I quit fooling with MoMA. Although, I did paint a mural at MoMA, but they were paying me. And that’s the only way I would go to MoMA, if they paid me. Because MoMA was so racist as an institution, so absolutely unwilling to deal with people who were not white with the same degree of seriousness that they treat whites. And so all those years of being told that Black people never did anything in the museum, corroborating that at the highest level possible under the guise of quality, you know. Every time you made a statement. “Art is about quality, not about race.” I heard that all through college, of course.

And so that’s sort of how I came to really begin to take murals seriously, and the possibility of developing a language in muralism. Because I was very interested in history. I was learning a great deal about history and music and theater. But, particularly, music was the vehicle I used to counteract all of the Eurocentric ideas about the greatness of white thought, which I was totally in league with and still am. Great thought is great thought, and it doesn’t make any difference where it comes from if it’s useful and it helps you to understand the complex world that you’re in. And it belongs to you. But the idea that only one race owns that material, that I could never abide by.

And so under those circumstances, I began to find a way to do what I thought would be useful to the Black community. And because I, as I said, was following the Black Panthers around, when I took that painting that Smokey bought, I took it to LA, and entered it into the first festival of the arts in Watts. I couldn’t get in because I didn’t know the procedure, but Addison Gayle and Noah Purifoy let me set my work up on the lawn in the entry to the

exhibition. And that was real important to me, because that mural—people were able to come, and hundreds of people came up to it and looked at it, and I talked to them. And I met some movie stars there. I knew from the reaction that I was getting to that painting that I should take what Jeff and them were doing much more seriously.

And so I became embroiled in this exhibition, this mural controversy around the [Victor] Arnautoff murals at George Washington High School. And it was that engagement, that involvement, that sent me to Mexico because I was told by the arts commission—of which Ruth Asawa [and] several other people were commissioners, and Ruth was wonderful. But Ruth didn't want the mural to be painted by a professional, or she wanted the students to paint the mural. Because Ruth was about that, and I knew Ruth by this time. I had met her a few times because she had a relationship with the Art Institute and I was a student there. And Imogen Cunningham, I was one of her chickens, that—chicks, or little baby chicks—that used to follow her up to her house. And she was just a weird, wonderful person.

But anyway, Ruth felt that I was too young and immature, and that was the case with all of the commissioners, some of whom wanted an abstract mural to go up there. And so they said they wouldn't support me doing a mural because I was too young. And the students said, "Well, if he doesn't do it, nobody's going to do it." And so they said they were going to do an open call and do it internationally. But the students, Black mostly, [were] headed by Black Panther students.

And I knew Emory Douglas, who was the minister of culture [for the Black Panthers], and we were in that organization with Evangeline Montgomery. We were together in that organization. we would never hang out real close because he was about the business of that Panther business. We had discussed my joining once, but I'm not a joiner of anything, so that couldn't happen. But I was in complete and absolute support of the Black Panthers, and he embraced my following the Panthers and making drawings and paintings. So we were respectful of each other in our different directions, and he's an extraordinary artist. So that made it possible for them to only want to hire me, and if I wasn't it, they weren't going for it.

So at some point it turned into a problem, and someone threw ink on the mural because they said they were not going to take the mural down. And so the students said that if you didn't take it down, we're going to destroy it ourselves. So the next day some ink went up on it and the arts commission wanted to save the mural at that time. No cancel culture in the way of now. The Black students were adamant that that mural be painted over.

So, in a dialogue, the first among many, many, many, many, many, because this got drawn out almost four, five years, six years. I explained that I would do the mural, that I would make a mural that they would be proud of, and that I would make a mural that could stand in

relationship to this mural by Arnautoff. So I said that if you destroy the mural, I'm not going to paint over another artist's work. That's it! . But I found an area that I think would work. And it was right next to the mural as a dialogue between these two works.

And so that's when I went to work, even though it had not been—the arts commission had not yet agreed for me to do it. The board of education had not yet agreed. But a few days after that incident, they said OK. And when I told them what I would charge, they said we're definitely not going to do it. Because [they] wouldn't pay an amateur. Not even a professional gets that much money. And it wasn't much money. But to save Arnautoff's mural, they paid. They did it. They did what I said.

And so, with the first installment of that money, which was a research portion of money, I started traveling to really learn more about mural painting. And that's what sent me to Mexico. It didn't cost any money to go to Mexico because my father was with Pan American Airlines, so he got me a ticket. And I went to Mexico.

And Evangeline Montgomery was very close to Elizabeth Catlett, who I didn't know. And Elizabeth Catlett was partners with Pablo O'Higgins and [David Alfaro] Siqueiros. I'd heard of Siqueiros vaguely, but I didn't really know him, who he was. I was about nineteen—nineteen but almost twenty. I was twenty. I think I was twenty.

Anyway, when I got to Mexico, E. J. told me—she gave me Elizabeth's number. So once I got into this hustler hotel—that I got hustled into at the airport because I didn't know anything and I was terrified because I had never been in a foreign country. As soon as I got off the plane, I saw these dudes walking around with machine guns, and military—so my heart was pumping, like unbelievable. And I didn't know what to do.

And so this dude came to me, and when I was trying—I was going through customs or something. And I had this big, huge portfolio in my hand, and he said, "Well, you don't have the papers for this." And I said, "What do you mean papers? They didn't say I need papers." And so he took me aside, put his arm on my shoulders, took me aside, and then he said, "Well, you don't have the right papers, but if you give me—\$10.00." And then I told myself, this is a hustle right here. I know how to deal with a hustle. So I start crying. You know, I went paroxysm of tears. And he's standing watching me hold onto this thing, because when you come up in the ghetto, not ghetto, but you know a hustle when you get hustled, and I was being hustled. So I had that clear as a bell. So I was able to go through.

But then I got hustled. I got in this—on this card, it looked beautiful. Swimming pool. Just beautiful. Damn, this dude in this cab took me, and I wound up in some absolute craziness. And I could see at one time this was a pretty hotel, but right now, this is hell. And I went in the

room they gave me, and it was lizards. Great big old lizards all up on the wall, and I—oh man, I went crazy.

So anyway, I said, “I know I’m not going to be able to sleep in this room, so what am I going to do?” So I called Elizabeth. They gave me a phone—let me call Elizabeth. So I called Elizabeth. After a number of rings, she picked up, and she said, “Oh.” She said, “Where are you?” And I told her. And she said, “Oh, you, look. I’m going to hang up, and I’m going to send a cab. Tell them that you are not going to stay there and [to] give you your money back. And I will talk to them when I finish talking to you because you’ve been hustled. And I’m going to take care of—I’m going to send you to where all of my friends who come to Mexico stay. And they’re going to take care of you, and you just wait outside. And you’re going to get a cab that’s going to bring you to this hotel.” And she said, “Incidentally, you’re lucky, because tonight I’m going to have an artist here at my house. You said you were interested in muralism. He’s one of the greatest muralists in Mexico, and his name is Pablo O’Higgins. And I want you to come this evening.”

So they took me to this hotel. And I’m pretty sure it was named Hotel Sevilla, because I got lost and I remember saying that name. Hotel Saville, Hotel Sibia, something like that. So I get there, this nice little place. [The room] had a television in it. Even though I couldn’t understand anything, at least it was on. And later, they took me out. A cab came, took me out to her house, and I met Pablo. It was just that magical.

And that’s where they told me to go to see where Siqueiros was working on a mural, at this new hotel, and to tell him that, you know, who sent me over there. And that’s where I got to meet Siqueiros, who looked at the work that I had done and immediately asks me what the space looked like, which I had never considered. And asked me, you know, [to] work on the mural he was working on. But I wasn’t going to be in Mexico long enough to be working on a mural in the first place. I couldn’t even imagine working on a mural that big, which was a huge building.

But anyway, he took time to tell me stuff about what I need to be paying attention to. [What] he was telling me I didn’t know. I didn’t understand anything he was saying, really. And I didn’t really fundamentally understand how important he was as an artist—because if I had understood it, I probably would never have gone. And I didn’t know Pablo O’Higgins at all. All this would come clear to me once I was out of this fog.

So, Pablo O’Higgins invited me to come to his studio the next day. And Pablo O’Higgins had this huge space, fifty, ten—at least three or four times bigger than this. Twenty. It was huge. I mean, you know, I was a kid, so everything looks bigger when you were a kid than in reality. So, I’m in this room where these drawings—and he has hundreds of drawings. He pulls out

these drawings, which are maquettes for murals he did, and spread them all out, going, you know—and they got lines and stuff going all through them. And he started explaining to me what Siqueiros had said about organizing the flow, or the center, from the center of gold, of a painting. Which I knew nothing about, because they weren't teaching classical ideas at that time.

In fact, Pablo O'Higgins was telling me as we were talking in his studio that he was surprised I was there at all, because most Mexican kids that he was teaching were breaking their neck trying to get to America to learn Abstract Expressionism. They didn't have any interest in murals. Murals was like—that's crazy. And here you are, a Black kid coming down here interested in something that is crazy, an anachronism for young people in Mexico.

And, of course, it was similar in America, because nobody was interested in mural painting. Mural painting was connected to the propaganda of the thirties. And everything in every class that I was in was talking about how horrible Diego Rivera and all those muralists [were] who painted that didacticism. And we were in a Greenbergian age, where the flatness of the canvas, the distance from context and culture, all of those heavy things of the more sophisticated European qualities, was what you really needed to work. Because what happens when you start doing political art is what happened in Germany, when the degenerate show became the hallmark for the repression of freedom.

And so down with realism, up with Abstract Expressionism or abstraction, and particularly Pop art. That Pop art was horrible, but Pop art was more interesting than didacticism. So that was what I was being taught in these schools.

So now I'm in Mexico, and I'm talking to some of the didacticists that to me, are extraordinary. Because I went to this market, and I saw these murals, one by Guston. I'm a Gustonist. And then Noguchi, that thing with the—wall relief anyway, that building was just full of art. It was Essentially a supermarket.

Mexico was unbelievable. When I went to Mexico, art was just—in America, you're only important in America as an artist when you're famous and extraordinary. Then everybody kiss your ass because you represent money. And materialism is God in America. So as a materialist, having, making money—and above all, you famous. And if you famous, whatever you want to do, we for it, no matter. And so that's what I was in.

So here I'm in a place where I'm drawing in the streets, trying to understand how this mural [by] Diego Rivera was constructed. And I'm using the tactics that have been relayed to me by Pablo O'Higgins as I was understanding it in relationship to what Siqueiros had said about my own work. Now, these are just regular people, what folks would refer to as peasants. This is

the kind of language that was going on in the sixties and seventies, early seventies. Peasants bringing me lemonade because I was up here in the hot sun trying to draw some pictures. And if I have been in America in a place where people would try to step over me or they'd be running rather than trying to get me lemonade. Now they might not feel that way. But in the sixties? Wasting your time in the arts in America? And then here I am in a place where even on this, what is considered low level, these people love art.

Everywhere I turn, I'm looking at this extraordinary stuff. All these flowers, all these ways of painting—the colors on these houses is just kicking my ass. Excuse my language. But, I mean, it's just unbelievable. These clashing colors—colors I've been taught you don't ever put together. These are a total violation of the sophisticated human spirit. This is an indication of savagery to color.

Now, you're being taught this. You're being taught this not only in color theory, but you're being taught this in omission—and in snide talk, like the way these authorities are speaking about color combinations. Of course, by that time, I hadn't really delved into Matisse, because Picasso was God and Matisse was being seen as a decorative artist.

Anyway, this is [the] garbage I'm in. And that's why I had to go to music. I had to go get musicians, Black musicians, to help clear me up on what greatness really was. Because there's no doubt that what I was looking at was great. I mean, I love all of those works. I love all those artists. I'm not into edification. I don't have to kill the daddy of history in order for me to enjoy my—I'm not with none of that shit.

I was in love with these works that I was being taught. No question about it. But to tell me that there are no Black folks that make great art—well, you couldn't make that argument about music. So you talking this about white folks, but I'm countering every white person you bring with a freak musician who is even more revolutionary than these paintings you're talking about, or these sculptures. That was the only way I could survive in that environment.

And I came to be extraordinarily well versed in the history of my music and the music that those musicians led me to, which was music of the world. You know I was—upstairs I have thousands of albums from every form of music. Mostly jazz and blues. But many, many classical albums, and music from every corner of the Earth.

So, my point is that's a personal investigation. The school would never teach that, because I was being taught a particular thing. And Mexico helped to liberate me optically. So, you know, everybody was saying, you should go to Europe. And it was true. When I got to Mexico, all those muralists had studied in Europe. So they were right. I should have gone to Europe. But I went to Mexico.

CG: OK. And when you think about murals, and you think about just all of these arts and the ambiance that it creates, it's an interaction. And it is—you have this relationship to music. You have this relationship also about who you are, what is represented, seeing yourself not being represented on what you did, as well as all the examples that you gave about not only your childhood, your travels, your parents—including also that moment in which you were commissioned to do that mural right next to this other mural, in dialogue. That's a very particular decision-making that you're doing, because some people do paint over the mural with another mural. You decided to incorporate it, what you did, in dialogue.

And when you think of the San Francisco Bay Area, or San Francisco itself, you have the Mission District. When you think of the Mission District and what it did to the art form of muralism, *murales*, what do you think it did to muralism and to your own career as a muralist painter and also professor?

DC: Yeah. Well, the Mission murals really, really began in the seventies, really. That's when I became really clear on the Mission. Because the artists—I met Rupert García. And Rupert and I became friends, and Rupert was involved with the posters and stuff in the sixties. And there were lots of Chicanos and Latinos involved in poster making. And they were making extraordinary posters at the same time that these rock posters were being made. And then they were making these billboard murals. Mike Ríos. Ray Patlán.

I started hanging out around them too because we were all meeting up in various contexts dealing with moneys or dealing with interactions with the arts commission. And we just respected each other because of the commitments they had to their own communities, and by extension, other communities.

You could say there was a healthy competition for who could do the most extraordinary stuff, which drove the ability of the murals to become better and better, and better and better. And they weren't rival[ries]; they were just healthy political alliances that really helped to make San Francisco a kind of center. Also Oakland started to become involved in muralism through the Panthers and through other organizations, Chicano organizations, that were cropping up at the colleges, like Laney and also Merritt, and other communities. And there was an interchange.

And so there were lots of like talking engagements, where we would be on panels together. And so we were operating in different parts of the city, but we would come together—like that whole Balmy Alley and the Muralistas. I can't pronounce the—

CG: Mujeres Muralistas.

DC: Yes. Yes. Juana Alicia. All these powerful sisters just making ridiculous artwork. It was like what I experienced in Mexico, coming to the Mission. So they had created energy out of which their organizing created the mural, along with white folks who were doing, [were] very involved in this. The mural association that organized to get murals funded and done, and then they were developing the cultural center in the Mission, and what's his name put a gallery together.

CG: Galería de la Raza.

DC: Yes. Yes. And going there—that's where I met Rupert, at that gallery. And the person who organized it, you know, as I get older, my mind—his name was, he was a bad brother, boy. He was no joke. He didn't leave no air when he got through talking about history and all that stuff. Do you know who I'm talking about? He was the person who developed it.

Anyway, I knew him. I used to come to things that he would set up and invite me to. By this time, there were other African Americans who I had become involved with helping to get stuff done on muralism. And so San Francisco was like a precursor.

LA freeway murals and all that. Judy Baca. Judy Baca, I'm not sure. I remember her name, and I went to LA frequently, and I remember being on a panel in LA in the sixties and early seventies where I met her a couple of times. And I was going to move to LA and do some murals in LA. She, along with Alonzo Davis down there.

So the interaction between San Francisco's mural movement, which is really the Chicano community, had taken over that whole notion and really started to make it national and international. And African Americans were making murals, but not as powerfully or vocally as the Chicano brothers who had now connected their process with Mexico and Latin America, with the mural thing. And they had driven it almost as a straight-line dialogue, because I'd gone to Mexico several times after my first trip, and you could see palpably that relationship.

CG: OK. And when you think of your most recent work, right? Like we were talking about seventies, eighties, when you were talking about not only what's going on in San Francisco, but of course in the East Bay in Oakland, and what the influence of all of this *muralismo* in the San Francisco Bay Area had locally, nationally, internationally.

When you think of your most recent experiences, you've also been a teacher. And when I think of that, I also think of all of these full circles that you've been talking about, and I see a lot of them. And one of them, I think, is you did get your bachelor's in San Francisco State

University. You did end up, and are teaching, right? You teach and have been giving back some of that knowledge that you've gained over these decades.

DC: Indeed.

CG: When you think of these later years, like the 2000s, how do you think of these times, and how do you think of yourself now compared to before?

DC: Well, first of all, I got my bachelor's from [the] Art Institute in San Francisco. And then I left the institute and went to San Francisco State and got a graduate degree in educational administration, which was a mistake. And I corrected it. I corrected it fifteen years later by going back to school at Mills College, where I got an MFA.

What my experiences have permitted me to understand in that circular way that you have picked up in my conversation is that the shaping that you get is desperately important for one to cherish—in the sense that if you are privileged enough to engage another human being as a professor or a teacher of any sort, that you have taken deeply seriously things that shaped your life, the difficulties that you had to overcome, the joys, all that, the knowledge you have absolutely demanded to know and had the tenacity to gain.

Like a friend of mine, a great painter—oh, I should say artist, because he did other stuff. John Scott, who died. He used to say, “Each one teach one.” And that's the kind of Southern saying for, “Pass it on.” And that becomes a responsibility.

So, I quit making murals in 1983. And I never made another mural after that because I had expelled out of myself all of what I had to say.. And at the same time that I was making murals since about '71, I was making abstract paintings. And these seemed incongruent and were frequently seen by other muralists as me not being serious about mural painting and that I was also trying to straddle two fences. When, as a Gemini, I can never see just one way, and as a full person, I encompass many, many different things. Multitudes, as my man said in his great book. That I'm with that.

And therefore, when I was in those marches when I was—as a kid, a small kid—singing “We Shall Overcome” in those Sheraton Palace and Cadillac places when I was in junior high school and high school, and we were talking about freedom, I took that serious. I was serious as a heart attack about that. And then I was free as a person to make on my terms—and I was going to do everything possible to make that possible.

So when I went to school, I learned how to draw anything exactly like it looked—photographically real. I could do that. I could make something five stories tall. I could do that.

I wanted to do that. But at the same time, I wanted to go inside myself. That for me was abstraction, and that's why I paid as much attention to developing my skills as an abstract painter as I did a realist, and I see absolutely no difference.

Even though I was being taught that there was a dichotomy, I didn't pay any more attention to that than I did that these white boys were the most brilliant people on Earth and therefore, no Black people ever created anything great because the musicians taught me otherwise.

And then later, artists showed me that the entire circle of the universe is yours. That meant whatever you want to do, you can do. And like my parents told me, be the best, but be prepared to pay. Because if you're going to be great, you're going to pay. So you work hard to be great. But be prepared to pay, my son, 'cause payment is necessary in America. I paid attention to my parents. So I prepared myself to pay. And if that meant anonymity, so be it.

But I'm going to do Dewey Crumpler all the time, every day, every day of the week. And I've been doing that since I was a kid. I can only do Dewey Crumpler. And I don't give one damn about nothing else, and I don't care about what white people say—or Black people or anybody else—about what I ought to be making.

I live well. I live well. I made sure that I would live well. I could go anywhere I want, just like I did as a kid. And I could live well wherever I went. Now that's all I needed to do. I didn't need to be rich. I don't need to be nothing. I could get my children well educated. I could make sure that I contribute greatly to my family, along with my wife. Other than that, let me make my shit. That's it. I made a place for that.

So from my point of view, when I said that's it on muralism, because if I can't paint what I want to paint, which was abstract murals, then I'm not doing it. Fuck, excuse me. Forget the arts commission. Forget these folks who think that I'm supposed to make the kind of work that they put me in. I'm not worried about that. That's white folks' limitation on what they think artists are. And that's their limitation. But they won't affect me with that bullshit. So therefore, I got on my mission, and that meant move to the work that moved me.

I digress, so I forgot part of your question, but as it pertains to my work, and after I left muralism, I began to make artwork about what I was reading, about what was affecting my head living in the late twentieth century. And living in the late twentieth century—"change was afoot," to quote Conan Doyle. And that change meant that all that Eurocentrism, the revolutions throughout the world that began in the late fifties and by the sixties had tumbled and chopped the feet off of every group of colonialists everywhere in the world.

So they saw that this white man bleeds. And whenever you've got a god, and you see that god bleeds, it's over for that god. And them little bitty people that he referred to as savages in them places all over the world, in Latin America and in Asia, they chopped his feet off and he fell to the ground like Gulliver. And they tied his ass up for the rest of his existence.

But he is not to be played with. And because he is not to be played with, he may have fallen. But he was not permanently down. Because when you have been trained to revere a monster from the point of view of what he extracted from the world, then he going to regroup, which is what he did in the late twentieth century, twenty-first century.

And in order to regroup, he had to open up what looked like multiculturalism. So that those previous colonies, with their children, now in free states, having been trained that they were savages for most of the twentieth century, now they're free. What are they going to do?

Well, his education system, his way of seeing the world is still in place. Those young people want part of it, so they come into his environments through immigration. They come, and he got to build a defense. That's where we are in [the] twenty-first century. See, this is a defense. Anyway, I'm finished.

CG: Oh, thank you for sharing all of that. It's, I think, only fitting that we finish there, because we're still paying, as your parents used to say, and we will continue to be paying.

DC: Indeed. Indeed.

CG: And, Dewey, honestly, just thank you so much for wanting to share about your life and who you are as more than just an artist and an educator. Just a person. So thank you for letting us have this piece of you, your story. Your stories.

DC: Well, I say to you, I appreciate what you're doing. It's very important. And that you extended it beyond the Mission and included somebody like myself, I'm humbled by it. I appreciate it. And I want to just finish with this.

That while we are in what we are in, what is deeper in the twenty-first century, is all of us. And that means that there will be no winners. There will be a shared world, as it should always be. And that means vigilance, and this is a part, I think, of that vigilance. Connecting us through the past to the future. And it was an honor to be a part of that.

CG: I'll leave it at that too. Thank you, Dewey.

DC: OK, my man.

When we finished, I had an image latched on my memory. While we recorded the oral history, and on Dewey's right flank, you could see a small quote in his studio: "Painting is an act of spiritual aggression." I still think about this, about his words, and about the interconnected circle of memories that flowed naturally with me asking just a few questions. A master's class in stories, in art, in memory, and in being a Gemini, our shared sun sign.

Before I left, I went to the restroom. And as I was leaving the living room, I saw Dewey's extensive record collection. I remembered that he called himself and other Black artists "freaks," feeling, as a Black artist, like an oddity, and finding comfort in the company of other freaks, musicians, that, as he explained in the oral history, did more for music as an art form than other painters or sculptors that were white men.

I feel fortunate to be able to understand him more fully after this oral history and envision the abstractions and expression in the visual language that continues to permeate through his work today.

This oral history of Dewey Crumpler was a collaborative effort, like murals also are. The team behind it was:

ERICA GANGSEI: Erica Gangsei

MYISA PLANCQ-GRAHAM: Myisa Plancq-Graham

CG: Who served as executive producers.

NATALIA DE LA ROSA: Natalia de la Rosa

CG: Who served as a production assistant.

The rest of the team included:

JAVIER BRIONES: Javier Briones

KEVIN CARR: Kevin Carr

CHAD COERVER: Chad Coerver

CARY CORDOVA: Cary Cordova

STEPHANIE GARCÉS: Stephanie Garcés

MELISSA SAN MIGUEL: Melissa San Miguel

CG: And it was produced and mixed by me, Camilo Garzón.

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Thanks for listening.