

T. Harry Williams Center for Oral History Collection

ABSTRACT

INTERVIEWEE NAME: Ronald Joseph Trahan

COLLECTION: 4700.1599

IDENTIFICATION: Multimedia artist and sculptor living in South Baton Rouge

INTERVIEWER: Vanessa Hunt

SERIES: McKinley High Oral History Project – Social Organizations

INTERVIEW DATES: June 19, 2002; July 11, 2002

FOCUS DATES: 1950s-2002

ABSTRACT:

Session I

Tape 3180, Side A

Introduction; Trahan born in Baton Rouge in 1945; connection with South Baton Rouge because his mother was from there, attended St. Francis Xavier school; other schools attended during childhood; main childhood activities were visiting relatives, going fishing and hunting; childhood fishing spots; interest in art started at twelve or thirteen years old; studied sculpture with Frank Hayden at Southern University; influence of New Orleans culture on his art; likes to portray simple pleasures in his art; fishing with mother and sons; harder for youngsters today to enjoy simple things in life; description of copper wire he uses in his art; techniques he uses with wire; feeling of his art, "This is the New Orleans that dances in the street"; spirit of Louisiana people, despite financial and other woes, "My father loved to dance in the kitchen in the mornings"; Trahan supported himself with carpentry and house painting; father and grandfather were bricklayers and carpenters; shows interviewer some new sculptures; shows interviewer a sculpture of Chuck Berry; family relation to Baton Rouge blues singer Tabby Thomas; started painting in junior high school; fellow student artist who had a nervous breakdown; portrait that resembles Trahan that he acquired from another artist; parallel between art and teaching; his feelings and moods naturally express themselves in his finished pieces; use of brazing rod in his sculpture; description of some of his pieces, a sculpture of Whitney Houston, a *Playboy* model; tries to capture movement more than facial features; artists feel most comfortable when working for themselves, not trying to please anybody else; learning to detach from people's rejection, focusing on connections with people who appreciate his art; description of technique used for another artwork; commemorating some of the people he knew from the streets as angels in his artwork; teachers as angels; prefers sculpting people to other subject matter; description of sculpture of a man and a woman; difference between working with wood and metal wire;

Tape 3180, Side B

Interviewers take photos of Trahan; description of artwork involving hunting dog; when first

started doing construction work, some jobs weren't available to him due to his race; he worked around discrimination, taking what jobs were open to him; more interested in self-expression than money; sells more small pieces than large pieces; worked carpentry jobs when there was work, worked at art when there wasn't; art ability not related to age and intelligence, "ability to do art comes from within and with a gift"; similarities to his work and some art in Africa and Virgin Islands; his use of wire is like gesture drawing; therapeutic benefit of art, example of man he worked with in correctional facility; importance of art in his life, but need for periodic breaks from it; instant gratification of wire art; working in schools; kid who made self-portrait sculpture of himself as a devil; kid who wasn't good academically but was a talented artist; fostering kids' natural talent; he knew he would be an artist even before he knew what an artist was; teacher encouraged him to draw on paper as big as a door, which felt freer than a sketch pad; TV show he saw on drawing helping kids with learning disabilities; working with both sides of the brain; mind techniques that help him make art; portraying the concentration of a hunting dog in a piece; description of artwork involving crawfish; doesn't sell much to people in Baton Rouge; more successful selling work in New York, California, and New Orleans; new art block that might be developed in Baton Rouge in conjunction with LSU museum; street festivals might not be reaching his potential customers; connecting with more affluent customers; why everybody should have art in their home; connection with kids through teaching art; Michael Smith, Louisiana toothpick artist.

Session II

Tape 3181, Side A

Activities and workshops with Black Artists' Network; recognizing artistic talent in young people; art as motivator and relaxer for people; for kids from bad neighborhoods, "Art helps take them out of their environment"; never let discrimination against African Americans limit what he thought he could do; success is about freedom of spirit and mind, not money; always felt he could express himself through any artistic medium; used his experiences fishing and traveling in his art works; grateful to his mother for exposing him to different places and experiences; other mothers should do the same; tried to raise his son this way; works with kids through the Art Council; can tell nine times out of ten which kids have artistic talent; nature's influence on his work; working around discrimination; hearing problems, he can't hear high-pitched vowel sounds, has a special hearing aid; parents feeling unable to help their children because of their own problems; Black Artists' Network also wants to include white people; hard to sell art to black women, "black women basically going to buy jewelry and clothes"; Trahan is working on line of pins and other jewelry; was brought up to do jobs that needed to be done, even if he didn't like them; hard working example of Baton Rouge blues musician Tabby Thomas; lots of kids these days want to be a superstar, and if they can't make it they turn to drugs; art, alcohol and drugs; friends with drug problems; helping prisoners relieve their tension through art; a promising little girl artist who wants to be an art teacher; feelings about teaching; black parents don't always appreciate what art can do for their kids; teaching children about using body language and expression in sculptures; prisoners expressing violence through sculpture; ways young girls express themselves through sculpture; helping kids to express themselves without limitations; Trahan has simple desires, doesn't need a lot of stuff; some people would still choose criminal way, even if they are exposed to virtuous options; more kids he's worked with; school systems need to develop artistic talents of kids;

Tape 3181, Side B

Friend who is a self-taught musician; closeness between art and music; need for solitude to work; problems of his friends like drinking, past abuse; expressing pain through art; body language of musicians expressing themselves through music; mechanic friend who values independence over money; Trahan's learning disability, reading problems; acquaintance who worked hard to be able to afford a vacation and a boat, then was so tired he slept through it and never used the boat; ways to live more cheaply and spend more time doing what you want; lives of Mardi Gras Indians of New Orleans; culture of New Orleans; advises kids to find out what they enjoy; getting comfortable with yourself; artwork he did at age thirteen titled "Emptiness"; "Time," carving he made at age twelve out of grandmother's walking stick; carving he made called "The Beggar"; child's chair called "Nightmare"; discussion and description of more sculptures; finding a piece of wood along Highway 190 that inspired sculpture; problems of single mothers raising children without male authority; co-parenting with the mother of his children; difficulty of raising children alone; sharing simple joys with children; importance of parents spending time with their children; how artists are different from other people.

TAPES: 2 (T3180, T3181)**TOTAL PLAYING TIME:** 3 hours, 5 minutes

Session I: 1 hour, 31 minutes

Session II: 1 hour, 34 minutes

PAGES TRANSCRIPT: Total: 61 pages

Session I: 32 pages

Session II: 29 pages

OTHER MATERIALS: None**RESTRICTIONS:** None