

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Synthia Saint James

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Saint James, Synthia
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Synthia Saint James,
Dates:	November 16, 2004
Bulk Dates:	2004
Physical Description:	5 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:23:05).
Abstract:	Visual artist Synthia Saint James (1949 -) created the first Kwanzaa stamp for The United States Postal Service. Her artwork has also appeared on numerous book covers including the Terry McMillan title 'Waiting to Exhale'. Saint James was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on November 16, 2004, in Los Angeles, California. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2004_234
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Visual artist Synthia Saint James was born in Los Angeles, California to Henrietta Ellastein Talbird and William Jasper James on February 11, 1949. James attended public school in both Los Angeles, California and New York City. During her senior year at Los Angeles High School, she was crowned as the first African American homecoming queen. After graduating high school, James briefly attended Los Angeles Valley College, worked as a writer for Shelter Records and later worked in the media department of Disney Studios.

James' career as an artist began in 1969 when she sold a painting in New York City to one of her co-workers. She continued to work in corporate America in the accounting department, only painting in her spare time. In 1984, she developed her unique style of painting human figures without facial features. She has completed more than forty commissioned works for individuals and organizations such as Mridgitte Matteuzzi's School of Modern Jazz Ballet, The Los Angeles Women's Foundation, *Essence Magazine* and attorney Johnnie Cochran. In addition, her artwork has appeared on the covers of numerous books, including works by Alice Walker, Terry McMillan and Julia Boyd. In 1997, James was chosen by the United States Postal Service to create the first Kwanzaa stamp.

James has written more than a dozen children's books, she is the author of two books of poetry and prose, entitled *Girlfriends* and *Can I Touch You: Love Poems and Affirmations* and wrote a multi-cultural cookbook *Creative Fixings From the Kitchen*. James' pieces have been featured in galleries around the globe, including exhibitions at the Musée Des Duncans, The Chicago Art Institute and Cosmopolitan Artists. She has received numerous awards, including a 1997 Coretta Scott King Honor and a Parent's Choice Silver Honor for her children's book *Sunday*.

Synthia Saint James was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on November 16, 2004.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Synthia Saint James was conducted by Larry Crowe on November 16, 2004, in Los Angeles, California, and was recorded on 5 Betacame SP videocassettes. Visual artist Synthia Saint James (1949 -) created the first Kwanzaa stamp for The United States Postal Service. Her artwork has also appeared on numerous book covers including the Terry McMillan title 'Waiting to Exhale'.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Saint James, Synthia

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Saint James, Synthia--Interviews

African American artist

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Visual Artist

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Synthia Saint James, November 16, 2004. The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Synthia Saint James, Section A2004_234_001_001, TRT: 0:29:00 ?

Synthia Saint James begins the interview by discussing her family history. Her mother, Henrietta Ellastein Talbird, was born October 27, 1928 in Bronx, New York. Henrietta was named after her father, Henry Talbird who was born in Haiti. James' father, William Jasper James, was born on August 22, 1926 in Bronx, New York. James believes that her artistic ability was inherited from her father who drew as a hobby. At age five, James knew that when she grew up she

would be an artist. After her parents separated, James and her mother moved to Los Angeles, California. While in Los Angeles, James chose to live with her father and stepmother. When she was eighteen, her father moved the family back to a neighborhood in the Bronx, New York, where the James' were the only African American family.

African American families--New York (State)--New York.

African American parents--California--Los Angeles.

Divorce--United States.

African American children--California--Los Angeles.

Art--Study and teaching.

Haitian Americans.

Video Oral History Interview with Synthia Saint James, Section A2004_234_001_002, TRT: 0:29:50 ?

James describes the types of art courses that were offered during her primary and secondary education in Los Angeles, California. In high school, James was crowned the first African American homecoming queen of Los Angeles High School. She believes she won because of her ability to discuss any topic, a skill that was honed at the Kingdom Hall, a place of worship used by Jehovah's Witnesses. As a senior in high school, James recalls Grauman's Chinese Theater being threatened with boycotts if they did not hire non-Asian employees. She was hired as the first African American usherette at the theater after her boyfriend, a Chinese man, suggested her name to management. During her early twenties, James pursued an acting career and was cast in the films, "Drum" and "Emma Mae" also known as "Black Sisters Revenge."

Art--Study and teaching (Elementary)--United States.

Jehovah's Witnesses.

African American college students--California.

Motion picture theaters--California--Hollywood.

African American women in motion pictures.

Discrimination in public accommodations--California--Hollywood.

Video Oral History Interview with Synthia Saint James, Section A2004_234_001_003, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Synthia Saint James describes the beginning of her art career in the 1970s in New York City. The first piece of art she sold was a commissioned piece to a co-worker. Early in her career, her painting style was similar to Monet and Van Gogh. In 1984, she developed her renowned style of painting people without facial features. James joined Bunker Hill Art League, whose mission was to bring awareness to the black art community. Her notoriety increased when Richard Pryor purchased five of her paintings. After Pryor purchased her pieces, Terry McMillan used James' painting "Ensemble" as the cover for "Waiting to Exhale." James' paintings were now in demand both nationally and internationally. The only time James did not paint regularly was during her career in the record business as a writer. Working in the record business helped her easily transition into the world of commercial art.

African American painters--New York (State)--New York.

Monet, Claude, 1840-1926.

Gogh, Vincent van, 1820-1888.

Pryor, Richard.

McMillan, Terry.

Commercial art--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Synthia Saint James, Section A2004_234_001_004, TRT:
0:30:50 ?

Synthia Saint James discusses designing The United States Postal Service's first Kwanzaa stamp. She was chosen to design the stamp because of the book cover for "Seven Days of Kwanzaa" by Angela Shelf Medearis. After the first issue of the stamp was released to the public, there was controversy over the colors depicted in the flag. During the late 1990s, James began to work in different mediums producing murals, stain glass windows and other pieces of public art. Charles Bibbs told James that he bases many of his color combinations on her paintings. James remembers art dealers refusing to purchase her work because she did not have a degree in fine art. Her advice for aspiring artists is to research what niches in the art market needs to be filled, and to produce art to fill those niches.

United States. Post Office Dept.

Medearis, Angela Shelf, 1956-

Kwanzaa

Postage stamp design--United States.

Public art--United States.

Mural painting and decoration, American--20th century.

Glass painting and staining--United States.

Video Oral History Interview with Synthia Saint James, Section A2004_234_001_005, TRT:
0:23:55 ?

Synthia Saint James believes that her Haitian ancestry is expressed through her art work. James did not graduate from a university because she did not recognize the importance of a college education after becoming successful in accounting without a formal education. James hopes that she will be given an opportunity to produce more public art. She discusses working on her inspirational biography "The I Wills of Saint James." At the time of the interview, James was working on an art project with Judge Mablean Efford. James never married or had children instead she chose to focus on her art career. To clear and focus her mind, James walks six miles every day on the beaches on California. James would like to be remembered for her art work. In closing, James narrates a collection of photographs.

Fathers.

College dropouts--United States.

Public art--United States.

Childfree choice--United States.

Walking--Recreation.

African American judges.