

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Camille Billops

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Billops, Camille
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Camille Billops,
Dates:	December 14, 2006
Bulk Dates:	2006
Physical Description:	6 Betacame SP videocassettes (2:59:17).
Abstract:	Fine artist, archivist, and film producer Camille Billops (1933 - 2019) worked in several media: printmaking, sculpture, book illustration and award-winning documentaries. Along with her husband, Billops founded the Hatch-Billops Collection, an African American archival collection of oral histories, books, slides, photographs and other historical references. Billops was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on December 14, 2006, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2006_171
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Artist and filmmaker Camille Billops was born on August 12, 1933, in Los Angeles, California. Billops' career has consisted of printmaking, sculpture, book illustration and filmmaking. She obtained her B.A. degree from California State University as well as her M.F.A. degree from City College of New York in 1975. Her primary medium is sculpture, and her works are in the permanent collections of the Jersey City Museum in Jersey City, New Jersey, and the Museum of Drawers, Bern, Switzerland. Billops has exhibited in one-woman and group exhibitions worldwide including: Gallerie Akhenaton, Cairo, Egypt; Hamburg, Germany; Kaohsiung, Taiwan; Gimpel and Weitzenhoffer Gallery, and El Museo de Arte Moderno La Tertulia, Cali, Colombia. She was a long time friend and colleague of master printmaker Robert Blackburn, whom she assisted in establishing the first printmaking workshop in Asilah, Morocco in 1978.

In 1975, with her husband, Black theatre historian James Hatch, Billops founded the Hatch-Billops Collection. This impressive African American archive is a collection of oral histories, books, slides, photographs and other historical references. Billops also collaborated with James Van Der Zee and poet Owen Dodson in the publication of *The Harlem Book of the Dead*. In 1982, Billops began her filmmaking career with *Suzanne, Suzanne*. She followed this promising beginning by directing five more films, including *Finding Christa* in 1991, which is a highly autobiographical work that garnered the Grand Jury Prize for documentaries at the 1992 Sundance Film Festival. *Finding Christa* has also been aired as part of the Public Broadcasting Station's *P.O.V.* television series. Her other film credits include *Older Women and Love* in 1987, *The KKK Boutique Ain't Just Rednecks* in 1994, *Take Your Bags* in 1998, and *A String of Pearls* in 2002. Billops produced all of her films with her husband and their film company, Mom and Pop Productions. They have also co-published *Artist and Influence*, an annual, in 1981 as an extensive journal of the African Americans in the visual, performing and literary arts community.

Billops and her husband reside in New York City, where they both served as archivists of the Hatch-Billops Collection.

Billops passed away on June 1, 2019.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Camille Billops was conducted by Shawn Wilson on December 14, 2006, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 6 Betacame SP videocassettes. Fine artist, archivist, and film producer Camille Billops (1933 - 2019) worked in several media: printmaking, sculpture, book illustration and award-winning documentaries. Along with her husband, Billops founded the Hatch-Billops Collection, an African American archival collection of oral histories, books, slides, photographs and other historical references.

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:

Billops, Camille

Wilson, Shawn (Interviewer)

Burghelea, Neculai (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Billops, Camille--Interviews

African American sculptors--Interviews

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews

Women archivists--New York (State)--New York--Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Fine 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 Camille Billops, December 14, 2006. 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 Camille Billops, Section A2006_171_001_001, TRT: 0:29:27 ?

Camille Billops was born on August 12, 1933 in Los Angeles, California to Alma Gilmore Dotson and Lucius Billops. Born in Birmingham, Alabama to Marion Adams Gilmore and John Gilmore, Sr., Billops' mother was raised by her grandmother, Louise Weston Adams, in Congaree, South Carolina after her parents died from tuberculosis. There, Billops' maternal great-great grandfather, William Moultrie Weston, was a white slaveholder. He freed his children and their mother, Phoebe Ward, from slavery, and bequeathed his property to them. Billops attended maternal family reunions in Red Bank, New Jersey, where her family moved after losing the land. Upon visiting the plantation in Congaree, Billops was inspired to preserve her family's history. Billops' father was born in Ennis, Texas, and moved to Beverly Hills, California. Her parents met at a dance in Los Angeles. Billops' father and maternal uncle were Pullman porters, and Billops' remembers riding a segregated train as a child to visit her aunt.

African American sculptors--Interviews.

African American motion picture producers and directors--Interviews.

Women archivists--New York (State)--New York--Interviews.

Video Oral History Interview with Camille Billops, Section A2006_171_001_002, TRT: 0:29:51 ?

Camille Billops remembers Frank Braxton, the first African American animator to work for Warner Bros. Cartoons, Inc. Billops lived in Los Angeles' Eastside neighborhood, and recalls the imprisonment of her Japanese neighbors during World War II. Billops' mother worked at North American Aviation, while her father served in the National Guard, and later worked as a merchant seaman cook. As a child, Billops enjoyed puppet shows, and sold handmade nameplates. After her father died, her mother married Walter Dotson, and Billops became close to her stepsister, Josie Mae Dotson. She attended Catholic Girls' High School in Los Angeles, and aspired to become a nun. She became disenchanted with religion after being rejected from the school choir. Upon graduating, Billops studied occupational therapy at Los Angeles City College and the University of Southern California. When she became pregnant, she transferred to Los Angeles State College of Applied Arts and Sciences, and taught children with physical disabilities.

Video Oral History Interview with Camille Billops, Section A2006_171_001_003, TRT: 0:29:08 ?

Camille Billops graduated from Los Angeles State College of Applied Arts and Sciences, and studied ceramics at Chouinard Art Institute. She appeared in the play 'Fly Blackbird' with Micki Grant and Robert Guillaume, and in 'Carmen Jones,' starring Harry Belafonte. In 1962, Billops designed costumes for her husband's plays in India. Moving to New York City, she lived next door to Vin Diesel. Unhappy with teaching art in New York City public schools and at the City College of New York, Billops quit to learn printmaking from Robert Blackburn. Benny Andrews invited Billops to the Blacks: USA art show at Huntington Hartford Gallery of Modern Art, where she began photographing gallery openings. Billops belonged to Faith Ringgold's feminist group, but left to start the journal 'Artist and Influence' with her husband to showcase African American art history. From authors and biographers, Billops learned to collect research for her books and archive. She remembers meeting Mohammad Omar Khalil and Vivian E. Browne.

Video Oral History Interview with Camille Billops, Section A2006_171_001_004, TRT: 0:30:55 ?

Camille Billops remembers the reactions to her interracial marriage. She also recalls how artist co-ops became popular, when rent in New York City was less expensive and major museums excluded most African American artists. With the rising cost of rent, the co-ops closed, and artists' interest in them faded. Billops recalls picketing the Whitney Museum of American Art to include more African American artists. In her loft, Billops and her husband, James V. Hatch, directed plays like 'If It Do Not Die, It Do Not Die,' and hosted readings featuring poets like Owen Dodson. In the 1970s, Billops devoted her time to curating the Camille Billops and James V. Hatch Archives, which included the works of Micki Grant, Hettie Jones, Krishna Reddy, Judy Blum Reddy and Talley Beatty. Billops talks about her short documentaries, including 'Suzanne, Suzanne,' which featured her niece and her sister, Billie Billops. She also describes reactions to her documentary, 'Older Women and Love,' varied based on age and gender.

Video Oral History Interview with Camille Billops, Section A2006_171_001_005, TRT: 0:30:26 ?

Camille Billops' documentary, 'Finding Christa,' followed her journey to find the daughter she gave up for adoption as a teenager. She describes her relationship with her daughter, Christa Liebig, following the completion of the film, which won the Grand Jury Prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Billops talks about her film, 'The KKK Boutique Ain't Just Rednecks,' and shares her views on racism. She explains that she created the film to prompt broader discussions about racial discrimination. Billops' short film, 'Take Your Bags,' explored the Middle Passage and African American history, and was featured at the Sundance Film Festival and Toronto Film Festival. Billops talks about her favorite filmmakers, including William Greaves. She obtained funding from the New York State Council on the Arts to preserve James Van Der Zee's photography collection, and collaborated with him and poet Owen Dodson to publish Van Der Zee's book, 'The Harlem Book of the Dead,' through Morgan and Morgan Publishing Company.

Video Oral History Interview with Camille Billops, Section A2006_171_001_006, TRT: 0:29:30 ?

Camille Billops recalls collaborating with James Van Der Zee to publish his book, 'The Harlem Book of the Dead.' Billops won the Skowhegan School of Painting and Sculpture's Governor's Award for mentoring the school's children in New York City. She describes the students and their artwork. She remembers painter Richard Bruce Nugent and the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art. Billops talks about George C. Wolfe, who was the protégé of her stepsister, Josie Mae Dotson. She recalls appearing in Wolfe's play, 'The Colored Museum,' alongside Carmen De Lavallade and Reggie Montgomery. She talks about her artwork, 'The Story of Mom.' Billops' favorite artists include Norman Lewis, Elizabeth Catlett, James Lesesne Wells and Albert Huie. Billops featured Stanley Crouch, Diane Weathers, and George C. Wolfe in her journal, 'Artists and Influence.' Billops concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.