

ISRAEL McCLOUD

Artist - Houston, TX

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FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEW

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INTERVIEWER: Amy C. Evans

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Amy C. Evans [00:03]: All right. This is Thursday, October 14th, 2021, and I am on Zoom with Mr. Israel McCloud, and this is Amy Evans for the Houston in 2020 documentary project. So this is my follow up interview one year later. So much has happened. It's a little more than one year. I interviewed you in August of 2020, but so I wonder—and this is just a quick follow-up interview to catch up and see how things have changed or remained the same. But my first question for us today is: How have the experiences of last year with Covid and all the social injustices and police brutality and so much that was so intense a year ago, how has that inspired your creative practice today or what has remained?

Israel McCloud [01:13]: Well, that's a—you came out of the blocks with a heavy one. Well, a lot has transpired in the course of 365 days. Of course, life itself is just a perpetual ongoing, unpredictable, Ferris wheel, so to speak. But the advent of Covid has definitely been a factor in shaping and influencing the mindset, the modes, and the temperament of society, in general. Which translates as, for me, as potential clients, my customer base, I myself feel, and if we also factor in a double whammy, which is Covid, as well as the heightened atmosphere of our racial consciousness and et cetera, that's a lot to digest. It's a lot to articulate. I feel that people, in general, have a more heightened sense of identity of self, of belonging or not, of inclusiveness or exclusion, just depending on what those particular dynamics are, social groups or communities, or what have you. [02:35] But I have seen that, and therein lies the paradox, actually, because on the one hand you have that coming together, that kind of consolidation for the sake of survival and identity. And then you have Covid, staying six feet apart, social-distancing. So it's an interesting kind of paradox there. But I have certainly experienced it in my day-to-day movements as a independent freelance artist, just more of a guarded kind of mindset in general.

And certainly that is practical and the most pragmatic approach. I think that people were, prior to Covid, just maybe a little bit too loose, a little bit too casual in terms of how we interacted with each other. I'm from the old school where my mom always told me [to] wash off my hands anytime, anyway, so that was something that was just a given. But I just certainly see a lot more attention. [03:47] But at the same time, it's said that out of adversity comes something very beautiful, prosperity or enlightenment. So even with the reality of all these things that have been kind of imposed on society-slash-humanity, it creates a dynamic for us to just kind of examine and reexamine our own selves and hopefully come away as better people, better individuals, better citizens.

ACE [04:16]: Absolutely. And wonder, too, in the summer of 2020 when I spoke to you the first time, you were really busy that summer, doing a lot of public murals and working safely outside. Your practice lent itself to being able to continue working. I wonder if what your clients are asking for has changed, at all, the kind of work that you're doing?

IM [04:42]: Yes, in a sense. And I don't say this in any kind of bragging or conceited tone. I don't mean to come across that way, but it seems I've been more busy since Covid than I was prior to Covid. I mean, since we last spoke, I have not stopped in terms of commissions and public projects. I'm putting the finishing touches on a piece right now that's part of the mayor's ongoing revitalization of parks in Houston. And this one is at our park at the SHAPE Community Center [in Third Ward]. And that particular theme focuses on, again, the awareness and the consciousness of the family, of unity and the family unit. The executive director there, Deloyd Parker, he asked only one thing: that I incorporate a generational theme. He said, "Well, I want

some elders, I want a family unit, and I want the youth." So I approached it from that particular perspective. **[05:45]** And it's a piece that I initially started in the hopes of—like so many commission murals, particularly, there's a kind of a designated time slot, but I found myself really having to just kind of decelerate because I wanted to give this particular mural some extra focus. And so it's been very organic for me, as well as, to some degree. I kind of like the interaction that I'm having with this particular piece and wanting it to be something that is long lasting but also a day-to-day reminder and incentive for people, particularly those with residents of that particular community, to just consolidate their efforts to be more unified, which is one of the keys to surviving in this day and age.

ACE [06:36]: Do you think—and this is just occurring to me. Do you think that people now are more interested in original works and works made by hand—analogue over digital—since we've been so—had to connect virtually for a year? I wonder if there's more of an interest in exactly the kind of work that you do.

IM [07:02]: I think that there's always going to be a clientele, a specific audience, that loves originality, loves one-of-a-kind works. There's going to be people who, they like the plus of Amazon: it'll be here tomorrow. It takes a certain kind of person to—it's kind of like ordering a specific theme from the menu. The waiter tells you, "Well, this is going to take longer to prepare." So, I don't necessarily think there is an increase. I think, if there is an increase in anything, it is individual artists creating more unique works and putting more individual effort into selling and marketing their works directly to the public. So you kind of have that synergy, which is increased, I've seen in the course of the year, amazingly. It kind of reminds me of New

York and Chicago where you see a lot of street vendors and exterior commerce going on. I've seen that increase in Houston, which is a good thing.

ACE [08:10]: Have you made any changes to your art practice or the way you work as a result of Covid that you might maintain?

IM [08:23]: Not particularly. I'm vigilant of and diligent in terms of my own safety and my own, not only physical, but spiritual hygiene, as well. And by that I mean, I work in the public lot. I'm around people a lot, and they have a tendency to approach me and want to engage me, which is a very beautiful thing. But at the same time, it's important for me to maintain and create barriers and to do so in a way that is not offensive to anyone but, at the same time, to be able to have that open dialogue because public art, it produces and creates that kind of intersection where people want to engage the artist and ask question and just be involved with the process. So, but I find myself doing pretty much what I've always done, and that is just being careful in how I do engage people and being conscious of my own vulnerability.

ACE [09:29]: I love the phrase “spiritual hygiene.” That's so on point. So my next question is inspired—my next series of questions, actually, are inspired by that *New York Times* review of the Netflix series *High on The Hog*. Have you seen that by chance?

IM [09:48]: I've seen bits and pieces of that, yeah.

ACE [09:49]: So Osayi Endolyn wrote *The New York Times* review, and her perspective on it was that the entire series was ultimately a show about unbridled joy and how the history of African Americans and Black southerners has been such a positive influence on Southern food

and celebrating that. And I love that you made a food analogy a minute ago about waiting for the special item to come out of the kitchen. But so I wonder—and also in there the host, Stephen Satterfield, he says that, "Oftentimes when our stories get told, it's the hardship story. And I don't even mean celebrating resilience. I mean, look at all these beautiful Black people in a centuries-long tradition of how we shape culture, celebrate, and make a living." And so while I know that we have all had personal and professional losses over the course of the past year, I wonder what you think about the idea that Black artists are not just celebrating resistance but shaping culture, especially now.

IM [10:59]: I am definitely in agreement with that. Coincidentally, I don't—well the irony of it but also, coincidentally, I was just looking at some footage of Nina Simone the other day, and she, to paraphrase that quote: "Artists, it's incumbent on us to echo the times and to give visualization to the ongoing narrative that is day-to-day life, particularly as African Americans in a society that is not—more and than not is in harmony with our existence, our culture, our contributions, et cetera." So I think it's imperative that, for me, particularly, and artists, in general, to be the mouthpiece for society. I find increasingly more and more of that. And particularly with the dynamics that we're dealing with now: Covid and the heightened fluctuation of racial injustice, these incidents that pop up radically. People are at a loss for words. Protest is kind of like the condensation of a lot of frustration and—and anger and emotion, but there are points between the incident and the protests, and it is there that the people are open to and vulnerable to modes and mediums of articulation. **[12:44]** And along comes the artist, along comes a songwriter who hits it right on the head. These particular lyrics, this particular visual manifestation that speaks to that frustration and that pain and that anger. So I think it's very

important for us to know the power that we wield, with the brush, with the voice, with the literary word, and to commit to that and be willing to commit to that without shying away from or being encumbered by the term role model. A lot of people don't like—subscribe to that. I don't want to be anybody's role model, but I've always been of the mindset that this gift, these skills, the talents that I have, they're not for me. I am one of amongst thousands who have this particular—so I know that it comes with the weight and with a responsibility and accountability. So I think it's incumbent on us to be willing to lend ourselves through the message for the sake of social articulation.

ACE [13:49]: Is there a piece of work by another artist that has spoken to you this year that relates to what you just shared?

IM [14:04]: I look at so many different works by so many different artists in the course of the day, but I believe that the people, the artists who, again, who have committed to that particular mindset, that is what they're doing. And they are consistent with that. There is a theme, there's kind of like an ongoing consistency in their body of work. So Bisa Butler [contemporary artist, the sister that works with the quilt, she does really remarkable work. I'm not real good at dropping names, but I know that there's a lot of artists who, again, they've taken the torch, so to speak, and moved forward with their determination to create works that speak to the moment.

ACE [15:02]: Well, and my next question also speaks to this moment now but, again, to reference *The New York Times* review of *High on the Hog* [Netflix series] that is based on a book by Dr. Jessica B. Harris, and she's quoted in the review as saying, "Our joy is enduring. It's the

thing that most defines us." So I wonder how and if you've been able to claim joy for yourself this year or the past eighteen months.

IM [15:36]: That's a good one because, I'll be honest with you—and on a personal note, I've always—and that may just be some man stuff. When you talk about joy and happiness, I just kind of always put those things on the bottom shelf and just kind of just subjected and subjugated myself to doing what has to be done and the matters at hand. Joy, for me, is and has always been the fulfillment of what I believe my purpose is. Why I am here and validating my individuality and my blessing. Joy for me is manifesting any subject matter that speaks to the higher consciousness of human beings and of humanity in general. And by that, I mean in the process of, or no sooner than, or at some point by their digesting and experiencing something that has been the product of my hands, it makes better, it makes their moment better, their day, better, their life, their spirit better. **[16:59]** That's important to me, always. That's a consistent obligatory kind of second-nature thing for me. That's very, very important for me—is to do what I truly believe that I'm here to do. And particularly being a third-generation artist. And I've had this conversation with you before. I mean, I am kind of more or less the last of the McCloud clan that's still producing. And particularly the men and all the men in the McCloud family over the generations, they were artists, uncles, and my father, et cetera, my brother. **[17:43]** So I feel a special obligation and weight to create and produce something that is tangible. And that is relevant in this particular day and age. I just don't give myself or think I have that particular luxury of being able to approach the canvas with a attitude of mediocrity. And that's not to say that the work itself cannot be light, cannot be gay, cannot be bright because art, at the end of the day, is always viewer interpreted. But I think the most important thing is the—we have a term we

use in Arabic, it's called the *niyat*, and the *niyat* means the intention. What is the intention of the purpose of the artist in creating this particular work? So I always examine that before I approach any blank canvas.

ACE [18:35]: Intention has been a word that has come up in every follow-up interview I've done so far. Everybody's working with so much more intention and focus, I think, and perspective now. Pretty powerful. I wonder, though, since I happen to know that music brings you joy and satisfaction, I wonder if there's a piece of music that has carried you through or an artist that you've really leaned on this year.

IM [19:04]: I am such a hardcore music buff. I guess the most, and this is really old school—and there's just so much, really beautiful, powerful, just new stuff out there—but [singer] Leon Thomas: "The creator has a master plan: peace and happiness for every man. The creator has a master plan: peace and happiness throughout the land." A love supreme. That, for me, is just a constant. Play that at my funeral. That's it. Just understanding that there is a master plan, there's a blueprint, there's a template. All we've got to do is just abide by that, recognize and respect that, and we've got a better life.

ACE [19:50]: Yeah. I love that. And Imani Stevens, who I interviewed for her follow-up interview, she said she's leaned on gospel a lot this year, which I loved hearing from her and someone of her generation that that has been really a familiar place for her to sit.

IM [20:07]: Definitely, definitely. And at the end of the day, it's always the gospel, according to—*[Laughs]*

ACE [20:11]: Yes. *[Laughs]*

IM [20:11]: It's always interwoven.

ACE [20:16]: Yes. My last question for you, Mr. McCloud, is just, if you take a minute to reflect on being a part of this project, Houston in 2020, and my intention was to document kind of what was going on in the world in Houston with artists—Black artists, specifically—in the summer of 2020. And, if you reflect on that, what do you think that will mean for the future or in the future, or [might you have] any significance or thoughts about Houston in 2020, the project?

IM [20:55]: Well, first of all, hats off to you for the project, just the conception of it. And the reality of it's a very poignant, very powerful, and a very specific project, and I'm very honored to be a part of it. I think that it's really important. Anytime artists are given spotlight and given recognition, particularly visual artists, but it's all even with the different genres that you are exploring. I like that. I like the collage approach that you have taken in terms of your selection. But I think that it is always a beautiful thing when artists are able to be recognized for what they are creating and producing and contributing to the bigger picture. **[21:47]** There's a lot going on in Houston, being one of the—what is it, the fifth, sixth major city? But I forget what particular status or rating is, but just in the course of not only this year, but as a native Houstonian, I've seen so much change taking place, whether it's in the hub of area like Third Ward or whether it's a suburb, there's just a tremendous amount of growth and transition taking place. And it's real easy sometimes to feel lost or not a part of any one particular flow or current, and that's the challenge, again, that goes back to identity, self-awareness, and there's not a lot of ways to do

that within the context of positivity. I've never been of the mindset of monkey see, monkey do, so. And I think that what you've done as a curator of this particular project is, you've selected particular mediums and individuals that you felt there may be contrast, but there's also a cohesiveness there. [23:01] And I think that that's very powerful and very important. But I think it's a great project, and I'm just really honored to be a part of it. And I would love to see the continuation of it. I was just talking to someone the other day about how there's no longer any more poetry readings. I remember during the [nineteen] nineties, I had spearheaded this whole campaign. We had poetry readings everywhere, in people's houses and night clubs and little venues where people were coming together just for the sake of self expression. And there wasn't any slam or any competition. It's just that people had something to say and they were looking for venues in which to express themselves. [23:41] So I just love what you've done with this, and particularly the follow up, because so much happens in the course of a year. I've suffered a tremendous amount of, you know, personal loss in terms of loved ones. And I know people who have done the same, so it's been a very powerful season, if you will—a season of change and transition. And I think that is something that makes people more attuned to projects like Black artists and—I mean, self-employed in Houston—who you are looking at, and for people who are doing things outside of the mainstream, but nonetheless finding joy and fulfillment in doing that.

ACE [24:28]: I certainly appreciate you being a part of it. And I think that, as with anything, it's really hard to see it when you're in it, and we are still in it. I mean, Covid is still a reality and, definitely, a whole lot has changed, but I really hope that the value of this project is in the future, ten years down the line, twenty years down the line, when people reflect on what this season has

been and how people processed it, right? I hope that, with hindsight, it will be—your stories will be important documents of this time. So, thank you so much.

IM [25:06]: And I wanted to share something real quick, too. There's one of the participants in the project, I forget, and then there was a cook, then there was the deejay. And I don't like the term, but who was the individual that you—the drag queen?

ACE [25:21]: Chloé Crawford-Ross.

IM [25:24]: Okay. Her dad is a client of mine. I did a mural for him quite a few years ago and, actually, it's the Maybriel [Memorial] Mortuary on Alameda [Road]. I don't know if I may drop names or not but, initially, I did that mural in the—I think the very beginning of 2000 and he called this past several months ago to restore it. It had been there quite some time and had deteriorated. So over the process of doing it, it was very interesting the project itself, because I approached it with such a mindset because of being inundated by all things Covid and racial injustice, I had this strong message kind of mindset incorporating messages into the mural. And he and I—my client—we kind of had a clash there because he said, “I don't want any messages. I want it to just showcase different personalities and pleasantness and all things positive and uplifting.” [26:33] And initially, I was really kind of taken aback, and I was a little bit defensive, as most artists are, but—and I just mentioned this to him the other day. I thanked him for that because I had to get past where I was. And even though, again, wanting to carry this banter and address what is going on in this particular day, in this particular moment, and there are canvases for that. There are specific outlets that the artist has to find and to identify as being the opportune time to do that. But at the end of the day, as they say, the client is always right. So it was a very

good and powerful teaching point for me. And I thanked him for that. And we laugh about that right now. And it was not until I started the project he had made me aware that he had a daughter who was connected with your project[, Chloé Crawford Ross]. So that's just kind of—stuff like that is part and parcel of self-employed artists in 2021. *[Laughs]*

ACE [27:31]: Well, that's amazing, that connection! I'm so glad that you told me. I haven't done my follow-up with her yet; we're going to speak next week.

IM: Great.

ACE: But what an incredible connection. And that's very Houston to me, when things come back around in those kind of—

IM: Absolutely. Absolutely.

ACE: And I really look forward to because—outside of you having the virtual event with me and the university of Houston with Imani, that—that y'all don't know each other, the five artists who are part of this project, so to have a gathering in December, which is the plan for all of us to be together, I look really forward to that. And I think that will be a—

IM [28:12]: I do, too.

ACE [28:17]: So thank you so much, Mr. McCloud. It's a treat to see you, always, and thank you for your time this morning.

IM [28:23]: Thank you, Amy. I appreciate, again, the inclusion and being a part of this. And if there's always anything I can do—rather, to help to contribute to the success of it—don't hesitate to let me know.

ACE [28:36]: Thank you so much.

IM [28:39]: Alright. Take care.

ACE [28:39]: Okay.

[END]