Jim Acord Interview
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Tape 75
TC start 03:00:51

030055 I'm in the habit of saying all I ever wanted to be was be a sculptor and I'm' sure when I was 5 I wanted to be a fireman or something you know. By the time I was 12 and 13 I made things all the time. Both my mother and father worked and I made models and I used toothpicks and built little castle. And I mean. I loved making stuff. And I was interested in sculpture. And I used to carve bricks and get in trouble for dulling my fathers' chisels and stuff. And then bury them in the yard. I thought, that's what you did with sculpture so that people could find them later. So I mean the sculptor element was there really early and really kind of never left. The science stuff is a little bit harder to pinpoint. I was always an avid reader, so stories on science and Einstein's life and stuff were always really fascinating to me. And I think that's really where the interest came from. But nev., I got two years to go to finish high school. I'ts not like I came out of high school with any math. I mean it was really a decade later you know when I started avidly reading stuff like this. When I was doing a lot of clay work and ceramic glazing, I began reading chemistry you know and I mean there's a fair amount of chemistry that goes with ceramics you know. And if it sort of spills over into ceramics for nosecones for space projects, that's even more interesting. So in a way it was always my pursuit of sculpture and my interest in material things that lead me to an interest in science. And I do have to state unequivocally you know math is my weak link. That's that's my weak spot. I can sit down here with my little HP11C calculator and I can do it out of the book and I do it 4 times and throw out the high and the low and figure that's close enough. You know But I've never really had an understanding of mathematics beyond geometry and algebra. I mean. That I understand. Partial differential equations? I've just finished working some of the chapters in that book. Tomorrow you can ask me to do em. I won't be able to do em. It doesn't stick.

030343 DW: You didn't take that shotgun to your head that night? JA: I did not. But I also knew that the dream was basically done at Hanford. That, I mean, I wasn't gonna live like that anymore. It had been sort of an all-downhill decline for a couple of years there. And that's personal, spiritual, economic, societal by any standard that you want to measure. And of course I mean I was, I was receiving acceptance and I guess recognition is an OK word to use you know in Europe that I had never gotten in the United States. I mean, I'd been in prestigious shows here in Seattle, you know COCA, LAMA whatever you know. But in both the artistic and scientific community I was much more respected and listened to if you will in England than I was in the United States. And so, I'm sitting there freezing to death in the dark, literally, ha ha ha, literally. My cat had died, you know, it just didn't get any worse, you know blow after blow after blow. Poor Eddy the cat, you know. And I just knew I couldn't do it anymore.

030512 Now if something miraculous happened, I'd go back. I'd design the warning markers. I'd use the Breeder Blanket Assemblies. I'd carve that 50-ton piece of granite. That'd be great. I'd love to do it. But I'm not going to go over and load french fries into boxcars and still lecture morning and evening around that you know. I just can't for a host of reasons, I just can't. I think I was making like $7.40 and hour or something at Tater Boy. That's another thing too you know. Artists cut themselves off from the financial wherewithal of supporting themselves when they leave a major urban area. You know. My drawings sell in London for 500 to 750 pounds. That's over a thousand bucks. You know. I can't give em away in Richland. And when a friend gives me 250 dollars for one of the key drawings, I feel blessed. And so I mean, there's a host of things. And I suppose the emotional and the societal have been the most important to me. You know that when I sit down with a group of physicists even at Imperial, you know or Oxford, or Cambridge or out in Cartive Whales when I went to the ah annual meeting of The British Association for the Advancement of Science.... They're actually paying attention to me. They're listening. They're asking insightful questions. You know. They're not trying to trip me up on my science, they're curious about my art. Never got that at Hanford.

030815 DW: One last thing about Hanford...was it a mistake? JA: My last year there, and the first year after I left, I was pretty sure that it was. And I beat myself up over it a lot. That I'd overreached myself you know, completely. I hadn't the skill level or the wherewithal to do what I had clearly recognized as being a great idea. i look back on it now. I've got a little bit more insight as I draw my old house keys over and over again. You know. I get to think about this. In the end, I don't believe I would change going over there and trying to do what I did. Look at what I learned. You know. I went from being a granite carver to somebody that understood the concept of transmutation. Fast Neutron capture. You know. Why it's an anti-neutrino and not a neutrino. I mean this is really rich stuff for an artist. You know I mean. I was having lunch at Oxford. I knew a couple of the people there and I didn't know 3 of the others and we're talking about this and the question came up and I couldn't quite remember the answer to it so I reached in my shoulder bag (the same one that's there on the floor) whipped out my periodic chart of the elements-this is the complete one you know-and opened right to what it was and looked. Everybody went," Are you the only sculptor on planet earth that carries around a complete copy of every isotope of the element?" And I said "well maybe". You know. So I wouldn't have any of that had I not moved to Richland and been there.

031000 And there were other good things too. I did care for my aged father the last couple years of his life. And that was a good community to do that in. He like the church I took him to on Sundays. You know. The neighbors looked out for him. He was failing mentally. And you know, you know. The police would bring him home at 3 in the morning you know I mean if he wandered off in his pajamas. You know. So it was a good community for my dads last couple of years. That was great you know. And wouldn't have been as easy in Seattle. Can you see me in an apartment in Seattle with an Alzheimers stricken father you know. It wouldn't have been as good.

031045 As far as my pursuit of sculpture goes, the things that I have learned in my 12 year residency at Richland. The images that I have seen, my understanding of materials, both radioactive and non-radioactive, has greatly enriched my understanding of the art of sculpture. And I'm looking forward to putting that in effect. And even some of the physics and math I've used are starting to show up in the sculpture now. I mean and I couldn't have done it if I hadn't gone over there and lived. you know It's I try not to sound judgmental, you know artists will go someplace for a month and they understand Barcelona you know. They go to Mexico for a month and they come back and they understand Mexican culture. You know. It doesn't work that way. You live it you know. Year in year out. Summer and winter. Fat times an lean times. And then you know it. Then you understand it. So even the societal understanding of what I came away with of what is both wonderful as well as terrible about the nuclear industry. The people that run it, how it's being run, the decisions that are making for us behind closed doors, why everything is running to hell in a handbag, politically, and societally the way the world is managing nuclear energy. ii wouldn't have that understanding if I hadn't gone there and lived it. And as with any learning experience, you know you lose a little skin off your elbows and chin. You know. In the course of doing that.

031241 DW: I wanted to find out about the keys. JA: That ring of keys are the keys to my studio, the house that I no longer had at even that time, a couple tool boxes and my pick up truck. And so when I left Richland for my 2nd residency in London, of course I had my keys with me. And actually before that when I went to Lubiana, I had these keys with me. I came back to the United States, I went to London again, I came back to the United States, I went to London.

031320 I've been carrying these keys back and forth across the Atlantic Ocean. They don't fit anything anymore. They fit a lost home, a lost studio, lost toolboxes, you know. And yet I always had them in my pocket. So when I had my first residency here in the Starlight, beginning late December, but primarily through the month of January, I thought I gotta deal with these keys somehow. They are so emotionally charged. Ten thousand times, I've opened the door to my own space with them you know. I've open the box of tools you know that I'd hand made and carried from Vermont you know, I mean this was just so emotionally charged. And you gotta realize I'm a sculptor so physical objects have maybe more of a charge for me than they do for some people. So I thought, well I'll draw them. And so I just threw them on the table and I did a drawing of them. and I. I felt a little bit of the pain of the dolar associated with those keys dissipate. Just a little bit.

031435 And I said. "I know I'm gonna throw these keys away. I'm not going to keep em. I don't want em. It's all broken dreams, lost hopes,. But I'd like to dissipate this. So I began casting the keys onto a sheet of paper. Putting a couple drops of glue on it and I'd draw em exactly as they fall. I make no conscious effort to control the way the keys fall. And I have now done this I'll bet over 20 times. I'll bet everybody I know has got sets of these keys, including people in London I've mailed em to. People have difficulty..."this doesn't look like a James L Acord drawing. " I mean the line work does but, "7 keys on a key ring, what's going on here". So if you don't know the story it's a little hard to understand. But every time I have

drawn them, I don't know whether you draw or not... You know you are only using part of your brain, well I guess you are only using part of your brain most of the time anyway. but I can draw and think at the same time. Does that make any sense? In other words, my eye, my hand, the line coming out of the end of the pen on the paper, I'm paying attention to the composition, I'm trying to do a neat job.

031550 But I can meanwhile be remembering you know the last load of clothing that I took out of the house-the B house down on Cullum Ave.-to the studio. I had to be out by midnight, the house had sold, done deal, it was over with. And I had this beautiful remembrance. So it was like 11:30 at night. I have a three-drawer dresser with the last of my underwear and socks and clothes in and a couple tools. I mean basically I'd pretty much moved everything I was going to salvage from the house to the Richland studio out on Saint St. And you know how you came out highway 240 and you made that tight left turn to get into Saint St. Well as I made that, and I was driving a little bit fast, and I was crying you know I mean this was a tough night... The drawers fell out of the dresser into the street.

031655 Fuck just what I need, one more thing going totally wrong. So I stopped. My pickup truck blocking both lanes of highway 240 at midnight now. And I got out and started picking up…one of the drawers had broken, underwear and socks all over the street and I just went berserk.

031715 And I'm kicking the drawers and I'm gathering up my underwear and I'm throwing it in the open passenger window. And traffic begins stopping for me you. Semi truck and trailers you know this is midnight on highway 240. Nobody honked, nobody said a word. Whatever I was going through, everybody recognized it as being really serious.

031740 Well, I'd forgotten about that you know and that's one of the memories that came back in the course of drawing these keys. And there have been hundreds of them. And this is one of the ways in which, you know when I lectured at art schools I always tell my students, especially the graduate students that aren't drawing any more, I say you know, "draw without fail. You learn about things when you draw. You have to look at things so closely, even if it's an image in your own mind, not a physical reality, to be able to draw it and you learn about that. And so here I've been doing it.

031814 I'm learning about a 12-year residency in the Tri Cities of Eastern Washington state by drawing seven keys that no longer fit anything that I've been probably carrying 20,000 miles, 30,000 miles. I mean, what's 6 transatlantic flights? So that's the story of the keys. And they've been very popular with my friends. I mean everybody that comes to visit here you know. God I really like those, they're great.

031847 You know there is a half-life to enormous sorrow, pain, loss and grief. And I'm working on a theory of a dolar. And this is like as in Dolores, as in sadness. And I'm probably not using the word quite right, but I'm going to use it as this: I am assigning the value of one dolar to any visual image or solid object that causes you enormous grief when you come in contact with it, when you see it, when you hold it in your hand.

031925 and then the half-life is every time you draw, that reduces some. It will never get to zero, half-live's never do. But I think I can come up with a formula, and I'm not going to do this while I'm here drawing. I can work

on this when I don't have drawing tables and stuff set up. But I think I can equate this with as a half life in dollars of objects of grief.

032002 I don't finish a drawing everyday, but my normal routine. Is I get up every morning I go for a short walk and while I still had bread I was feeding the sparrows in the vacant lot next door. And I come back, and if I have coffee I make coffee, if I don't I have a glass of water and I sit down and draw the keys for at least an hour. And that's my introduction to the day. And then I move on to the other drawings I got going. Another project is I'm trying to improve my penmanship by copying from William Blake. I have terrible penmanship.

032110 I can remember refinishing the floors in the b house. I can remember painting all the windowsills. I can remember all the hopes that I moved out to the Saint st studio and even though I sort of traded my home and a wife for that. You know " this can be a great studio, I'm right here, I'm right on the edge of the Hanford reservation" I can remember the emotional charge of all the buildings, the tools the materials that those keys are related to. And of course some personal people like my wife and my father and stuff while I had my B house on Cullum Ave

032235 Jim draws mws
032258 keys on wall, zoom out to Jim in above shot
032333 tight on bottle top with pen into ink
032436 ms push in to tight on jims face
032502 TS Jim face through pens
032531 ts fingers drawing
032623 ms through pens, bottles foreground
032704 zoom in from previous nice tight with brushes foreground
032738 ecu eyes
032800 over shoulder, see keys
032825 os same, begins to draw, pushes in to keys
032851