Jim Acord

Starlight Interview, Seattle Tape 73

7/11/02

01:00:30 to 01:30:16

01:00:36 We are at 5300 Ballard ave Nw. We are in a 16 room unit hotel called the starlight hotel. It's one of the last inexpensive housing for people on sort of on the float that I know of in Seattle and I called literally dozens of motels over a two day period and this was the least expensive at a hundred and fifty dollars a week. And there is something for that saying that the poor pay more, but no damage deposit, no first and last months rent , no utility hook ups and I've been actually quite happy here.

010118 Turnover rate must be 50% a week., Most of the people who are my neighbors here in the starlight have just experienced a speed bump in life. And suddenly they are homeless and friends chip in or they've got just enough money to rent here for one or two weeks. and though I believe I'm the oldest person here now, I mean there are people in their 30's down to like teenage pregnant girls, you know and most people are here just a couple weeks and they either get into social services or get into a Seattle housing thing or the police come and get em and they get to go to jail, you know so I have senior status here at the Starlight hotel after tow and a half months. And I and I have to say too that a couple of the people that have been neighbors here on this floor were like basically dropped off by their parents with like a weeks supply of Thorzine you know. And they stopped taking their thorzine and the police carried them out in a straightjacket. You know, I mean I've seen some real tragedies here. Tragedies, perhaps that's not the right word, but most of the people that pass through the starlight hotel are in transient into either a better or worse place.

010250 The police kicked in the wrong door a quarter to 3 in the morning. I was suddenly facing policemen in flack vests and they had the wrong room. The guy went beserk ahh two doors down and like threw all his furniture out the window and screamed and yelled and the police had to kick in his door and stuff. One of the young hookers down on the first floor who had jumped her pimp actually about 6 weeks before she was on her own she was running a personal ad in the Stranger and the Weekly, and her pimp caught up with her and started beating her up and some another member of the Starlight Hotel got involved to try to keep the girl from being beaten up by her pimp and that brought fire trucks and police cars and the guy went to the hospital with skull fractures and still at Harborview. And I mean there are really strong things that happen here. It's a it's a place where people come here to work things out and that's one of the reasons that I do feel comfortable here. I came here to solve the last compositional problems for the 4th reliquary. And I needed my own space, I needed my own time and I didn't need any art hanger oners you know questioning me about what I'm doing. I mean, nobody questions me about what I'm doing here. You know. People ask me if I got any

dope or if I've got tobacco that's all they care about. So. They don't ask me about why I'm doing the artwork I'm doing.

010440 This has been a marvelous spot for me. In Fact, I've never bought a lottery ticket in my life, but if I won the lottery, I would purchase the Starlight Hotel, I would keep the current building manager in his position in perpetuity, I would take this room over and I would let this place run exactly as it's running forever. Never be condo-ized. It's been a really wonderful place for me. And it and it it's funny too, I have trouble explaining this to friends sometimes, you know like the residence that I get in Neil's Yard in London out in the east end and stuff I mean, they are so hip, They are so cool and I'm more comfortable here. You know where people aren't wearing expensive designer clothes to make em look poor. Oh and that's not quite the right way to say that but, I mean here people look like what they look like because that's what they got to wear.

010554 I mean I'm really not in transition as much as most of the people that are here, I mean I've got a job in London, you know, I've got a big exhibit coming up you know I've got stuff going on much more so than many of the people staying here at the starlight. What makes me fit in is that too am kind of a damaged person and don't fit in real well and don't feel real comfortable in sort of the daily intercourse and exchanges that most people take for granted. And as I said most of the people here have problems...what was it that they told me at Harborview hostpital..one of the last times I was there...Serious underlying mental health issues. Yeah, I went there, I had broken a bone in my finger you know and you go through the whole input, intake routine you know. And that was something they wrote on.... serious underlying mental health issues, based on a ten minute interview with somebody or other. And so I think that's one of the reasons why I think I feel comfortable here is you know the people here hardly ever speak to each other in the hallway. We sort of nod in passing. Eye contact is at a very minimum you know. Everybody here is working on their own thing. And there's a respect for that too. It's like people aren't gossipy and pushy and nosey. I mean everybody's kind of you know...you're doing what you're doing cool, we're sharing the same bathroom, we're sitting on the same toilet seat, we're working off the same roll of toilet paper, but other than that you're doing what you're doing and I'm doing what I'm doing. And I actually feel very comfortable with that. I mean when I was over in London this last time or other times, you know, people are always telephoning, they're stopping by, there's an opening to go to, there's a concert I gotta see, there's a new movie opening, there's a party I've gotta go to and I'm not comfortable in that world. And I mean that's my own personal problem and that's why I'm happy here. No phone. No pool. No pets. I think that's an old Roger Miller song, King of The Road. The phone never rings for me here. And I don't have to answer the door if I don't want to and that's been really good for me and it's allowed me to really solve the final compositional problems for the 4th reliquary. As well as work with some personal baggage.

010848 Or work on some personal baggage... I don't want this to sound very final.

010931 I have not successfully balanced them and that is one of the reasons why everyday I work on this drawing. These are my keys from my 10 year

stint on the Hanford Nuclear Reservation in Richland Washington. And you saw me at a number of different stages of that. Ahh A lifetime career sculptor, I went there thinking that I could bring sculpture to this weird community and I invested myself heavily in studying their culture, their science, their engineering. And all that did was further alienate me from my environmentalist and artistic friends. And I didn't fit in in a nuclear engineering culture. So I've never reconciled it. I can reconcile it in the sculpture but not in my personal life. And my sculpture will speak for me. And I lost a lot of skin you know going through this and I don't have any bad things to say about anybody. There were a lot of physicists and engineers and chemists at Hanford that did try to connect with me. The gap was too big. And part of that was my own personality and part of that was that they just had no cultural background what so ever. Art to them was what bored housewives did on Sunday afternoon. They didn't see it as a profession, as a lifetime dedication, as a passion. You know, and and I mean in the arts community, Freemont, Belltown, the communities that I was connected with here, people saw me as being not a traitor, you know, but as somebody who had split from the flock. So I mean I hope that answered your question. And I'm hoping that this next round over in England will go better. And I think being at Oxford university instead of being at Imperial College is probable going to be better. Imperial College I was in the physics department there, Blackett Lab. That place was so hard core science you know I mean it's not that I didn't make friends there and that they didn't all come to my openings and stuff, but it was just like Richland in a way, it was just like the Hanford Nuclear Reservation. WE sort of respected each other for what we were doing, but there was really no understanding.

011235 DW: What does it take for that understanding to happen? JA: Oh if I could answer that I could probably answer a whole bunch of problems that this world has. There was a time I think, obviously the Italian Renaissance comes to mind you know, where art and science were truly parallel Siamese twins. They were two ways of looking at the world. Especially in the last hundred years and especially, especially in the last 50 years there has become a real chasm between art and science. And there's a host of reasons for that. I mean, science has become extremely narrowly defined. I mean I know so many people with PhDs, tenured professors that understand one tiny tiny brick in the wall and nothing else. Even in their own field. You know They're in astrophysics and all they're concerned with is the first second of the universe and they can't sit in the faculty lounge and drink sherry with the guy who's working on the first hour of the universe. And they're both tenured professors in astro physics. You now so that's part of it. But the other part is too as a career artist and I mean I got to say this in all honesty; art has gotten detached from our culture and our society quite a bit. Artists have been working for each other. Not so much for the people as a whole. And when I was doing commercial stone carving, you know, and carving statues and doing lettering and stuff, I was sort of working for the people. And within the circle of contemporary sculptors, I mean that's just hack work. You know. And yet, I mean I you know at unveilings and dedications the person you know who'd commissioned the work and it commemorated their deceased

husband or the archbishop that the respected or what ever, would come out with tears in their eyes. You know, they loved the work that I had done. I was connecting with people that were not black-clad Belltownites. And so art has in many ways cut itself off from being a contributing member to society, to being part of what makes our society whole. And I mean the fracturing, the disintegration er the compartamentalization of our society. it's just it goes with what were doing, it goes with the year 2002. You know we're all so specialized anymore, nobody knows what anybody else is doing. There's no broad generalization, there's no panacea in art or science anymore. And of course what goes with this, and this is something that I feel has contributed a lot to the way that the last ten years in my life has gone, is that we all tend to fear what we don't understand. And if we fear something, we're resentful against it, and defensive against it. And I mean, thats happened to me on both sides of the art/science fence.

011610 DW: Well radioactive material is kind of scary stuff... JA: I've got to tell you, Diana, it is the logical tool for sculpture in this age. You know, I've carved stone, I've cast metal, I've welded metal, I've carved wood and I'm the richer sculptor for each and everyone of the projects I did, everytime I dedicated myself to learn something. But when I realized that we could finally transmute one elemental substance into another, and that we were creating elements that had not existed at least since the dawn of the universe, I mean most of the things we call man made elements probably existed in the first 1/2 billion years of the universe and they've all decayed away, like technesium. You know I mean we couldn't find it because it all decayed away billions of years ago. So we call it a man made element and that's strictly speaking not true. When I realized that the age old dream of turning one elemental substance into another, what a tool of sculpture, I mean what am I wasting my time carving granite for? That's not true, I love to carve granite and that's a valuable and wonderful thing to do. You know everything in sculpture can be beautiful when it's done with love and skill and reverence and respect. But when I realized that we human beings, you know when they pull a fuel rod and as you know from the news we are about to start..it's gonna be in the courts another five years...but congress has decided that Nevada is going to be the place and I mean I think everbody could see this one coming ten years ago...When they pull a fuel rod there is very nearly 6000 radioactive isotopes in that fuel rod. Many of which like I say have not existed since the birth of the universe if there was a big bang, I'm not an astrophysiscist, but it seems reasonable. And of course a host of those decay away in the first seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, months, but we do end up with stuff that's gonna last years, decades, centuries. And we human beings have created this and that gives us custodial ship over it. Sculpture is one way in which we can contribute to resolving issues of long-lived high-level radioactive waste. And I mean, I'd just be happy to transmute you know I know how to turn mercury to gold, you know. Although stripping is really difficult, I could turn lead to gold, you know, I mean, I've researched this, I've talked it over with really brilliant physicists that will probably all get Nobel prizes 5 years from now. it can be done. But to utilize this technology to turn a dangerous long-lived

substance into a non radioactive precious metal and create a work of art with it I cannot think of a more important sculpture project that I could work on. And I'm gonna do it.

011930 Over twelve years now, which is a really long time. I mean I only spent three years learning how to carve granite and I got really good at it. But this one's a little stickier.

012033 I moved to Hanford...I visited Hanford and put in an off to purchase a house in the fall of 1988. The deal finally closed in February I believe of 1989. I married the girl that I had been living with for a number of years, a very talented painter and we moved in. And part of the reason that we married is that I had a hunch that this was going to be a real conservative community and I wanted to look as straight as I possible could. And so I moved in and I began taking science classes. Right away, you know, I needed to know what was going on and I went to all the breakfast meetings that the dept of Energy put on, the Kiwanis club, the rotarians, you know all this stuff. So I could learn about this community that I had voluntarily chosen to adopt. I had moved as a self-directed residency. And I mean, when I took radiation detection principles and instruments, and this happen class after class that I took there, I was the only person they're not wearing a DOE security badge. And I was considered to be an outsider. I had two enormous strikes against me. I was from western Washington and i was an artist. And so as a way of integrating myself I began volunteering to be the guest speaker at luncheons, after dinner meetings, off all the various organizations. It's fraternal. The women suropidous.(?) and of course every engineering group you could imagine and many you've never heard of have monthly dinner meetings. And so I trundeled my two slide projectors around, you know and I tried to talk about art and science in the nuclear age. And I had a lot to learn. I was talking about post deconstructionalism and whole bunch of stuff and I mean the lights went back on and I looked at my audience of 50 chemical engineers, they were slack- jawed, they were asleep. So I had to back way up and talk about art from ice age and renaissance times and showing examples of representational sculpture as a way of trying to teach them art history 101 at the same time I was learning nuclear science 101 sat the Tri Cities Graduate Center. And so certain members of the community and we are 3 years into it now and I've given my talks oh I'll bet no less than 30 or 40 times. You know I mean I'm there, I'm volunteering, I speak for free, you know. And so some people in the community began to realize "well this guy's , and he is serious, he's caring for his aged father, his married, keeping the lawn mowed, you know, the house is painted, they fixed up this..we bought the cheapest house in Richland of course...barely got in on that, owner carried contract.

012401 And so there were people in the community who were reaching out, as best they could thinking that there's something to this artist coming over here and trying to connect. And there was an element in the community that said, "we can use this guy". "This guy has access to the media" And of course by this time, the New Yorker article had come out on me, and you were involved with some of the television people, CBS people and stuff came it's like a 3 minute news shot, you know. But the science and

engineering community at Hanford was having the greatest difficulty in getting any sort of publicity that wasn't negative and coming from the environmental Hanford watchdog groups. And they saw me in a way in which they could get into the mainstream media and not look so bad. And i gotta admit I played into that. I mean this was a card that I had to play. So I'll tell you one story and if I've told it to you before, you can cut me off.

012505 Meanwhile, I'm having to earn a living. I'm driving forklift at Tator Boy in Pasco from midnight to 8 in the morning. And one very memorable day, I'll never forget this one, I had on a white shirt and tie, my gray suit, I gave a stand up lecture with two slide projectors to the American Nuclear Society's monthly meeting that evening. Ten o'clock, I finish shaking hands with everybody. I went in the restroom, I took off my white shirt, tie and suit, I put on my insulated Carharts, my steel toed work boots, I got in my little red pickup truck, I drove to Tater Boy, I worked and 8 hour shift. I put one million 80 lbs into a boxcar bound for Cheyenne Wyoming and I was done 10 minutes early. I was working with 2 young Hispanics, Jesus and Jose. I got off a 8 in the morning and I drove to the Hanford house for the morning breakfast meeting of the dept of energy adisory council. I went in the restroom, snuck in the restroom, changed from my insulated Carharts and work boots, back into the same white shirt, tie and grey suit. Nobody ever noticed. And I mean that is an extreme example, but that was very much my first 5 or 6 years there. And meanwhile I'm getting asked to lecture outside of Washington State. I'm flying to California and Houston and Boston and Chicago and, but I'm a novelty, nobody's listening to me. "Oh this is the nuclear artist" And I'm going yeah well what do you say we set up a transmutation project I've got this great idea you know.... "well yeah ah ah atta boy, atta boy. You know ah, can't use my reactor" And this is when i began to spin out behind this.

012710 My wife, Margaret, god bless her soul, she said, "Jim, this project is going to destroy you, and I'm not going to stand around and watch." And I was so I was so full with the certitude that what I was doing was the best idea I'd ever had, I couldn't let go. So with Margaret gone and the house sold and now I'm so busy being a famous artist, I can't earn a living, you know. I set up a studio and it didn't work, you know. It just didn't work. I had no source of income, you know, I was ...I just spun out behind it, it was just tough. And what what finally happens, you know I got invited to go to London, I got an artist in residency, I got invited to go back the next year, I had an exhibit you know and I began to realize that it wasn't going to work in Hanford. Although that's certainly where it should have worked, where I thought it would work, where I'd hoped it would work. And so I mean things just you know, it's like sand in an hourglass, my own spiritual, strength, my own mental balance you know it just ran out like grains of sand in an hour glass. And I mean, there were people in that community that were making things difficult for me, you know, in strange sorts of ways, I'm speaking of science and engineereing stuff now,. But I mean, I was constantly being inspected by the fire dept, and sited for not enough fire extinguishers, you know i mean, I was getting picked on. And that's cool, I was getting picked on because I stood out, I was doing something too different. And so in any event, I don't have any regrets.... you know if I had it to do all over again, I really think Diana, even knowing what I know

now I would probably try it again. There are a few minor things I might have tried to do a little bit better you know. I might have tried to keep my mental health a little bit better. I might have made some steps in that direction. But I mean basically, I made the right decisions. The ability to create sculpture with the transmutation of elemental substances...and Hanford's the most polluted site on, well outside of one place in Russia is more polluted, the most polluted site in the United states i was exactly what they needed. I can help them turn radioactive waste into artwork. Great Idea. I haven't given up on it yet, but it looks like I'll do it in another country.