

**Oral History Interview of
Lahib Jaddo**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson and Lynn Whitfield
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Transcript Overview:

This interview features Lahib Jaddo, who discusses his early life and childhood in Iraq, her family history, her relocation and life in America, and her career as an artist.

Length of Interview: 01:28:35

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Keywords

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Lahib Jaddo (LJ):

You like to hear about the biography—

Lynn Whitfield (LW):

Well, because that—you know, I want to hear about where you grew up, who your family were—because they shape your life. Then move through the school years, and then when we get to—then we start getting into career, and asking specifics about, you know—I know you're heavily influenced by women—and doing women and stuff, so—and I wanted to ask you about the Buddy Holly mess, too, and whether you actually got to exhibit those pieces again later in 2008 or 2009.

LJ:

Okay.

Andy Wilkinson (AW):

But I also know that, from having done this for a long time, that you will go off on a tangent, and that is perfectly fine.

LW:

Yes.

LJ:

Okay.

AW:

And I love tangents; we get, usually, more tangents—

LJ:

Andy, let me get you comfortable; you're sitting on the edge—pillows are just, there. You can sit back; it's much better.

AW:

Thanks. But if I get too comfortable, there's no telling, I might—

LJ:

(Laughs) We'll wake you up. (shouts) "Andy!"

LW:

So there's never an order. Feel free to jump in, there, and add whatever you want.

LJ:

Let's skip the biography—kind of cover briefly—

AW:

Like date or birth, just to start off with.

LJ:

April 17, 1955.

AW:

And where?

LJ:

In Baghdad. To parents who were—my father is an engineer, and my mother was a school principal, school teacher turned school principal. They were the very first generation of their people who were educated and went to college, actually, and had degrees. Their parents before them were—my father's side—they were farmers. They planted the wheat that all of North Iraq ate. And on my mother's side, they were more cultured. They believed in music and art, but her father was a *muaddin*¹—part of the culture where they do religious ceremonies and they sing. And I'm not saying it properly, because it's not singing. It's the Qur'anic words that they kind of—

AW:

Almost a chant—?

LJ:

They chant, they go to gatherings—celebrations of circumcisions, and rituals where they actually tie things together with their words. But it's a lot to do with singing—it's a religious aspect of the singing.

AW:

How would spell the name of what he was? What occurred to me was—

LJ:

Mulla—

AW:

Like M-U-L-L-A-H?

¹ In Islam, the crier who calls the faithful to prayer five times a day, also called a *muezzin*.

LJ:

M-U-L-L-A. Mulla Sabir, that was my great-grandfather.

AW:

Was that considered to be, at that time when they were growing up—not when you were growing up, but they were growing up—was that considered to be Iraq?

LJ:

It was—at the time—this was probably around 1920, it was Iraq. It was already Iraq. But, you know, that concept didn't get more clear until after the Second War. And at the time, people were a mix of many cultures. So that it was very common for my grandfather to be able to speak Turkmen—which is our mother tongue—and Persian—which is the language of Iran—and Arabic, which is the language of people more south to him; so when they read poetry, they actually mixed words from here and there, and that part was just delightful. As a matter of fact, my sister has made a film about that. She's a filmmaker. I have a copy of her film; I'll lend it to you.

AW:

I'd love to see it. And speaking of filmmakers, how's your daughter?

LJ:

My daughter has—just gave me—I was at her house last week for Thanksgiving—she gave me a copy of her film: *I Come from Iraq*. And I'm trying to figure out, what is the best way of showing it in this town?

AW:

Yeah. Oh, I'd love to see it.

LJ:

I know you would want to cover both of them, and I left them out—here they are. There's my sister's film and my daughter's film. And they're both current—they were both made like in the last year.

AW:

Oh, that's great.

LJ:

And they're premiering them all over the world—in Dubai, in Germany—Germany is a big supporter of Iraqi Turkmen. So maybe I'll get in touch with Jane Bell, and we'll have a nice

opening at the ICC [International Cultural Center at Texas Tech] when they can both be in town, and make an event of it.

LW:

Uh-huh. Maybe for Women's History Month?

LJ:

That would be nice, because they're two different generations. My sister is my age, she's almost sixty. And my daughter is in her mid-thirties. So two different generations looking at the same world with two different lenses.

AW:

Oh, that's an event in and of itself.

LJ:

Uh-huh. Exactly. Yeah. So—

AW:

We've strayed—there's another one of those tangents. Was—I'm really interested that your parents were the first of their families to move into that different sort of culture. What propelled them?

LJ:

I remember, as a child, listening to them say bad things about religion. My parents never believed in religion, because they saw how hokey it was. So, because they were surrounded by all of that, the constrictions of the conservative religion, they kind of wanted to go in a different direction. And at the time, the Arab world was kind of just opening its eyes to kind of intellectualism. And—

AW:

If I remember my history correctly, the north, towards Turkey, was the first part of the region to begin to adopt a more secular approach, is that right? And a little more intellectualism?

LJ:

Because of Atatürk. In Turkey around 1920 they had this amazing leader that turned everything upside down. They said, "Forget about religion, we're going to believe in education instead." And they changed the language; they let go of the Ottoman Empire's language that was written in Arabic letters. They appropriated the Latin script and they started writing the Turkish language with the Latin script to get closer to the Western world that was more educated. So north of Iraq was full of Turkmen who spoke the same language as Turkey. And they found that

that was kind of—you know, they liked identifying with that. And I don't know if they were thinking of those thoughts, but you know, you kind of see events next to each other and you make relationships between them.

AW:

Well, at the time just before you were born, that was happening in the United States, too. You know, if you think about the Beat generation, and you think about what was going on after the Second World War, in the West, the same attitudes towards religion were on the ascendency. And there was a lot more interest in secularism and ideas separated from that, so they were very modern, internationally, in that sense. That's a very interesting thing, too.

LJ:

And it all happened by accident, because my dad was surrounded by his peasant family, and they sent him to a school where he only learned the Qur'an—he memorized the Qur'an at the age of five or six.

LW:

Wow.

AW:

That's a big job.

LJ:

But they didn't have schools back then. So one day, a person from the government comes over, and he says, "We're going to open schools. Who of your children in this religious school can go to the public school?" And the teacher kind of pointed at my dad. So they told him, "Do you know how to read the Qur'an?" He said "Yes," and he started from memory, telling them that. So they immediately pulled him out of there and put him in public school. And when he got to public schools, they asked him, "Do you know how to add and subtract?" He says "Yes," they gave him exercises, so immediately they put him in the third grade. So all his life, he's been kind of pushed, not because of his parents, but because of things changing—the culture was changing and he was at the right place at the right time.

LW:

Was your mother experiencing the same sort of thing?

LJ:

My mother was a woman, so that was different. So women were kind of nurtured and were taught to be teachers. She did more than what her sisters did, or what her mother's generation did. She got out of her hometown and went to Baghdad to study to be a school teacher. So that

was big, but I think what helped it happen is that her brothers were getting an education. She had a brother who was studying in Istanbul to be a doctor, and another brother who was studying, again, in Istanbul, to be a pharmacist. So they pushed their sister to get an education, too. And then my mother was supposed to marry from the clan—from her family. She said, “I’m not going to do that, I want to marry from outside my family.”

AW:

That’s a big deal, too.

LJ:

That’s a big deal. And she ended up marrying my father, who was one of her brothers’ friends—close friends—because he was educated and because he was from a different town, and he would take her to the big city to start her life. But he wasn’t her sect, either, so that created a big problem. She is Sunni, Dad is Shiite, my grandmother threw a fit, they made it work. And then we came along—all five of us—five children.

AW:

What order are the children in? Where are you?

LJ:

I’m the oldest.

AW:

You’re the oldest?

LJ:

Uh-huh. I was very privileged when I was growing up, because my father was one of the first engineers in Baghdad. So the family was very well-off. My mother—soon after she had me -- she had to stop working, because she didn’t have to anymore, and she started just bearing children. And because they were affluent, she started getting interested in her visual world. And the way she got interested in it was she started beautifying it by Persian rugs. We had Persian rugs over the whole house; you’d go from room to room to room, and this would be the Persian rug with the blue motif, or the red motif. That and the garden became her passions. So those she kind of built our home and—until things completely turned upside down. When I was ten years old, the government changed, and the Ba’ath party came on. And my father was a nationalist—he wanted to kind of push the energy into the countryside and help make Iraq’s remote areas get electricity, get water, get schools, and he was highly educated so the new party accused him of blah-blah-blah, and they were going to hang him. So we had to—Dad ran out of the country—we thought he was dead for quite some time.

AW:

Really. And you were ten years old.

LJ:

I was ten years old.

AW:

I know it's impossible to just say "Well, what was that like?" but give me a little bit of an understanding of how your family could stay as a family with this question mark about your father.

LJ:

Well, our family life was just very rich with people. A typical night, when the times were good, would be—my uncle lived next door, he would come over with his *oud*, and my other uncle would drop by, and he played the violin, and my mother had a good voice. And when they were younger, they had a little band where they sang on the radio, and it's in one of those films. So a typical evening would be: they come over, they took the sofas all away, and they put a big spread on the floor, and—it's a maza—they drank beer or arak at night. They'd drink beer in the afternoon and arak or ouzo at night. And they'd start singing, and people come in, and it's such a beautiful, kind of a festive environment, and when the events happened—the bad events happened—it's like all of the sudden, there was no music in the house anymore. Everybody was kind of sitting quietly, kind of watching the TV, watching for news. We thought Dad was dead; my mom was wearing black. She was in mourning, because we didn't know where he was. We thought "Oh, he escaped, but they caught him and killed him." And six months later, we get a—in the Middle East, there are people called Qalandar, which are Sufis. And they don't work, they just meditate and they are famous for their wisdom. They go from door to door begging for food, so you give them what you cook that day. We get a Qalandar to our door, and my mother goes out there and gives him some food, and he slips her a note. The note is from my dad—it's in his handwriting—it says "I'm alive, come see me in Isfahan. I made it to Iran, and bring my son with you, I want to see him." So that started our life outside of Iraq. We go to see dad, we decide to settle in Lebanon, and the next ten years of my life are in Beirut, Lebanon, in the good days, before the war.

LW:

And what are the names of your siblings?

LJ:

Perin, the filmmaker, Falah, my brother, Yannar, who is dealing with women's rights in Iraq—she creates homes for women, safety, safekeeping, and changing their identity and educating them in Iraq -- and my youngest brother, Ibrahim. And we're all living all over the world, except

for Ibrahim, he's the one who stayed traditional, and he's raising his five children within the confines of Islam—the only one out of all five of us.

AW:

Really. And where?

LJ:

Baghdad. So we lived ten years in Lebanon, and Baghdad was conservative, Lebanon was liberal—was westernized—we could wear a miniskirt with our boots and go to the movies. We could wear our bikinis all summer long and sun on the beach all summer long. So that created a kind of a dichotomy in our upbringing. We were very familiar with the conservative ways of the Middle East, and our eyes got opened up in Beirut to the beautiful things in life for women, because my mother let us be. She let us do whatever we wanted—we had a lot of freedom, and I don't know why she did that. But it must have been a conscious decision on her own, because our friends were not that way. They were very conservative.

AW:

Really? Even in Beirut?

LJ:

In Beirut, yeah. Iraqi friends.

AW:

What about your father?

LJ:

My father was working really hard at the time; he was trying to remake himself and support the family. So he had to work here and there, he worked in Africa, he worked Switzerland; he worked in Arabia while we stayed in Beirut, and he would come and visit us there.

AW:

So if he came back and you were wearing a bikini and a miniskirt, it's just too much for him to fool with. (Laughing)

LJ:

He didn't really care because he, I think, believed in educating all his daughters, as well as his sons. He didn't have the Middle Eastern mentality of, "Oh, my daughters will marry somebody and will be somebody else's daughter, and our sons will stay with us, and we'll educate them." He didn't think that way. So that's where it all started, the mix of the East and West, of conservative and liberal, of seeing how the conservative side worked, but being liberal in your

ways, because life was about freedom. His freedom was taken away, so he gave us all the freedom we wanted to have. And my mom, at the time, when we were in Lebanon, took advantage of being in a liberal place and started educating herself again. She changed careers, she let go of being a teacher and a school principal. She started taking classes in art—in painting. And in *paysage*—they would go out to the countryside and sit and paint.

AW:

So that's a word for *plein air*, right?

LJ:

Plein air, yeah. Lebanon is a mix of Arabic, which is the main language, and the French occupied it for quite some time, so a lot of people speak French like it's their own language. And then the American University of Beirut is there, so there are some people who are English educated, and some people who are French educated, and they all know Arabic. So there—we went to English schools—we went to Catholic schools for starters, and then more private schooling up to the university. So we learned Arabic fluently, we spoke Turkmen at home—but we didn't know how to read it or write it—we learned English at schools from kindergarten and on, and we learned French at schools from kindergarten and on. So all—me and my five siblings—our intellectual language is probably English. Next in line is the Arabic, and the Turkmen is just verbal because in Iraq, they wanted to unify all the schools when we were children. And they wanted to teach everybody the same language to hold the country together. So we only learned Arabic to read and write. And the Turkish language became the mother tongue that was extra.

AW:

Do you have any of your mother's paintings?

LJ:

Man.

AW:

If you do, I'd sure like to see one. I just—it's a wonderful thing.

LJ:

Yeah, there was a fashionable artist at the time in Beirut called Hamawi, and she took lessons with him, and she would drag me with her. So she would sit and paint, and she would put a painting next to her, and I would paint. And his style was he painted with—what do you call that? —a piece of cardboard that you cut, and you dip the paint on and you—they call it—

AW:

Like pallet-knife—

LJ:

—pallet-knife painting, almost—

AW:

Almost, not a springy metal knife, but something—

LJ:

—but a piece of cardboard. And they would look at landscapes and they would replicate that in that method so that it would look like it's pixelated.

AW:

So it would be loose.

LJ:

Loose, abstract.

AW:

I'd just love to see that; I bet it's great.

LJ:

So she took painting classes, and then she started taking flower-arranging classes, and in Lebanon, they're so excited about flower arranging—they have so many different schools. So she would go to the Ikebana school for a while. And then she would go to the wild peasant-style of flower arranging, but after a while she kind of focused on *ikebana*—and she went to Japan to get—to kind of study some more about flower arranging. And at that point—this was ten years later—and the government gave an overall amnesty, for all Iraqis to come back to the country, so now we're about 1975. So my family picks up from Lebanon and goes back to Iraq, because the war had just broken out in Beirut.

AW:

So that was kind of convenient, to be able to—

LJ:

It was very convenient. So my mother goes back to Iraq with all this knowledge about flower-making, flower arranging, and she teaches it over there, and she becomes one of the florists for Saddam's palaces. So she'd make these huge flower pieces for the palace.

AW:

Okay, was she the same sect as Saddam, or your father? It would've been her, wouldn't it?

LJ:

No. It was her, yeah, her and Saddam. But that didn't matter at the time, because the government was not religious; they believed in education, education was free for everybody from kindergarten all the way through university. So any peasant could go to school and remake themselves in Iraq during the Saddam years—and the good years were between '75 and '90, when Desert Storm broke off. And that's when they kind of returned, and lived there. So my younger siblings grew up there. Me and my sister—

AW:

Whereas you—the two of you had grown up in—

LJ:

In Beirut, and we couldn't go back. Because we wanted a liberal environment, and Baghdad was a little bit more conservative than we liked. So we stayed in Beirut, and then we came over here.

AW:

How did you come over here? How did you pick, and where did you like—did you have family here, or friends?

LJ:

Um, my last year in Beirut was 1977. After my parents left, back to Baghdad in 1975, I was already in the University of Beirut, studying architecture. So I couldn't actually go back with them. I stayed there, my sister stayed there, and then the bombs were falling, we had to sleep so many nights protected in basements, or in the bathtub, or in the hallway, because our house was on the tenth floor—our apartment—my mother still kept it, after they returned, or our dorms. Bombs were just falling everywhere. So my sister decided to just pick up and leave. Her friends were going to Ohio State, so she said "Okay, I'll go to Ohio State." She applies, she gets accepted, she leaves. I'm the only one, now, in Beirut, and architecture—it took me a long time to get into the College of Architecture at the American University of Beirut—I didn't want to give that up. So I stayed there after my sister left, and one semester—my girlfriend and I spend a lot of time together, because when the war broke up, classes kind of didn't happen. You had to go and be with a family away from the university to be in a protected area. I would go with my girlfriend to her family's house. And she goes skiing, so whenever the war slows down for a day or two, we go skiing, which was very close, it was like forty-five minutes away. One time, while we were skiing, I lose my goggles and my eyes get burned, I have to come back to the university and see a doctor to fix my eyes. And my doctor—the first time I saw him, he was very fuzzy. The second time, I saw him when he was checking to see that the eyes were okay. We started

talking, we started dating, before I knew it, we were married. So we came here together. He had already arranged for coming to this country to do his fellowship, so I arranged to come with him. I got a transfer from American University of Beirut to Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute in upstate New York.

AW:

Oh, yeah, very good school.

LJ:

And when we were done with there—it was too cold over there—he found a position here at Texas Tech. We moved down here.

AW:

Wow. That's straightforward. What was your family's name—so your maiden name?

LJ:

Jaddo.

AW:

So that is—

LJ:

Yeah, I went back to my maiden name after too many husbands.

LW:

Why did you pick architecture?

LJ:

I really wanted to study art, but my father was an engineer. He said, "Artists die hungry." He had too many friends who were artists. He said, "Just do architecture; you'll appreciate my words later." Which was cool, because after I got my architecture degree, we moved down to Lubbock; I wanted to study art again. I wanted to be an artist. And my first husband said, "No, artists die hungry. You have to study architecture." And I said, "Okay, I'll get a Masters in Architecture." And by the time I got my Masters in Architecture, I had divorced him, so I continued my education and got my Masters of Art.

AW:

What years did you get your two Masters?

LJ:

Eight-eight and '90.

AW:

Eighty-eight and '90.

LW:

So which professor did you study under mostly in the art department?

LJ:

Hugh Gibbons, and Ken Dixon. They were my professors. I was a painter at the time, and my major area was painting, so both of these guys have completely different styles. Hugh Gibbons just lets you loose and he just checks on you every so often. The important part was that you did it. You had to do it on your own, and push yourself. And Ken Dixon sat there and analyzed every little speck on the painting, and talked about it. Which brings me to art-making. I think my voice got clearer when I started making art as a full-time studio artist after graduating in 1990. I don't consider the works I did at school as valid works; they were, you know, experimentations, practice. And I got out of school in 1990, within a year or two, Desert Storm happened. So at the time I had met my second husband, we got married, and he's an artist. So that helped me stay in the artists' world. I was getting child support from my first husband, who was well-off, and I was raising my two children. They were in junior high by then, maybe late elementary school. And I thought "Okay, I don't have to work. Let me just do my art." So I spent six years just doing my art full-time—raising the kids, cooking a meal every day, being with my husband, and going around Texas with my second husband, showing artwork. And all of the sudden, my—because I did so much work, I remember I used to do thirty-five pieces a year—thirty-five paintings a year, which helped the idea move forward really fast.

AW:

Yeah, that's a lot of work.

LJ:

And the idea might not be clear with the first piece, but by the sixth piece in the same body of work it becomes clearer and clearer. So I started painting things where my women were bound and they were placed in front of these landscapes from the old country. And the old country was a concept for me, in my mind. It wasn't a real thing anymore, because I had created so much distance between me and the old world. It had become something so poetic and historical. So I started to paint the old country in those terms. And little by little, the idea moved forward into unbinding the woman, and moving them from positions of weakness to positions of strength. And that process took years and years and years. You see my paintings in '91, '92—they're all lying down.

AW:

Uh-huh, I remember. What strikes me, though, is that you come from such a strong woman in your mother—

LJ:

And my grandmother.

AW:

—And your grandmother. So, them being bound, is that—and don't let me put words in your mouth—but does that have to do with the circumstances of the Middle East as much as it did with the circumstances of your own family, or more than your own family, I mean?

LJ:

Well, I think it had to do, mostly, with my first marriage. Because I come from a liberal family, but I marry this Arab who is from Yemen, who, on the surface—

AW:

And is there such a thing as a liberal Arab? (Laughing) I've never met—I'm just—

LJ:

I thought it was possible, but little by little, I realized that it was something that was nonexistent. So I was liberal, and then I got bound within the confines of, you know, being married to somebody who was—who couldn't erase his culture. So—and I think I made the wise decision of walking away from that and saying, "Okay, you know, you can be the father of my children, but I cannot tie my life to you."

AW:

I don't know your son very well. I've met him; I've had delightful conversations with your daughter, and she clearly hasn't fallen far from the same tree. What about your son? Has he been able to move in a little different direction than his father?

LJ:

Oh, yeah, yeah, because, as children, we shared them. Well, that's one of the reasons why I stayed living in Lubbock—because I didn't want my children to be raised without knowing their dad. So I said, "Okay, my priority is to stay in Lubbock so that my children come see me and go see their dad." We shared them. They would be with me all week and go to school; they would go see him over the weekend. And their dad sent them to the mosque in town. So they learned their religion, they learned the language, and my daughter had to get veiled in the mosque. (Laughing) So that became second nature to them. They don't mind it at all because, "Oh, yeah, that's what our people do." But what happened was that they would go to their dad's and it's like

“Okay, Dad’s rules and his house,” and they would come here, and me and Jim would be raising them, and there’s our artists’ rules where, you know, everything is open, nothing is hidden. And that helped them make up their own minds. So my son is even further along than my daughter in terms of being liberal. He believes in nature; he believes in going after what you want. He has a nine-to-five job he’s thinking of quitting—

AW:

Now, catch us up on what he’s doing now.

LJ:

My son is a replica of me. He looks just like me. But he is smarter, I think, because his dad is much smarter than me in terms of a scientist.

AW:

Yeah, both of my children are much smarter than me, too. I think it’s a generational thing. They take what we give to them and go further.

LJ:

So he went to school as—oh, he started with wanting to be a psychologist—psychiatrist. And he hated it, so he switched over to biology. He loved it. From that, he went to geography, and he got his Masters in GIS [Geographic Information System] Geography, and started going into wind energy, and solar energy, and now works with a company that deals with solar energy in San Francisco.

AW:

So that’s where he is, in San Francisco?

LJ:

That’s where both of them are. They both—my daughter went to Berkley; became a city planner, and she kept on doing her films because—she combined her artistic career with a career that helped her, you know, make some money. And they’re both in the Bay Area.

AW:

So in the bound paintings, did the paintings help you become unbound, or you becoming unbound changed the paintings?

LJ:

You know, I jump from one prison into another.

AW:

Don't we all.

LJ:

I mean, I got married to my second husband—why did I have to marry him? Because I was culturalized to think that a woman's life does not exist without a husband. So I was married to Jim for—we were together for eleven years; that was a long time.

LW:

What was Jim's last name?

LJ:

Johnson.

AW:

Jim Johnson.

LW:

Oh, okay.

AW:

Painter, yeah.

LJ:

We had a beautiful, beautiful family life for quite some time with the kids. Together, we really had a kind of energy that worked off each other, and I produced a lot of art during that time with him. But, as all marriages, they expire. Things change, I grow in a different direction than him, and all of the sudden, we find ourselves at opposite ends of the game.

AW:

What was it—and I ask this of my musician friends, as well as my visual art friends, but it's always—and I've been married, for a long time, to someone who doesn't do any art at all—and I wonder, does it require extra energy, as an artist, to be married to an artist? Does it take more work in the sense that you have—in some ways, you're never off-duty.

LJ:

Yeah, but at the time—you have to remember that I was just done with school. So when you're at school—when you're in art school—you're surrounded by all that art energy. And when you're fresh out of school, you don't have a way to express yourself in the community yet, because you're just fresh out of school.

AW:

Right, nobody knows.

LJ:

Nobody knows. So you need somebody to sound off your ideas, and somebody who believes in art-making to help you fulfill your needs in making art. So I think being with Jim helped me do that—he believed in art, so it meant that he believed in my work. And the work came first, unlike my first marriage, he was an ophthalmologist. So art, to him, was, “Oh, yeah, it’s a pretty thing, but it’s not necessary for life.” In my second marriage, art was so necessary. It was believed in, and it helped me push it in a way that it was never put down. It was never something that’s sitting on the side; it was always in the center of life. And that’s what happens with artists, because there is this belief.

LW:

Did you collaborate with any of your artworks?

LJ:

We did a couple of times, just for, you know, entertainment. One time we went to France, and we painted murals together. It was in the same chateau, but it was in different rooms. So on the same piece—we did a couple of times. Our styles are so—not our styles—what we want to say with our art is so different. So that never worked out. But that doesn’t matter, you know, we always pushed each other; we were always so excited to show each other what we did, because we knew that the other believed so well in the other.

LW:

The other question I had was: Many of your pieces have words on them, in Arabic, I think. And you had talked about—I think it was your great-grandfather, and doing poetry and singing. Do you think that’s why you incorporate words into your artwork—sort of adding poetry, or—?

LJ:

Hmm. The Arabic language is such a pretty language, if you see it written. And it’s frustrating to see so many American artists use the language and put it in decorative forms. And you look at the words, it’s like, “Oh, my gosh, do they know what they are writing on there?” So it started where—I have journaled for a long, long time—it started by taking my journals and kind of throwing some of that on the paintings to make life and art kind of come closer together. And I remember, in 1995, I painted this figure with the word “Elahe, Elahe, Elahe,” just kind of going across the piece over and over and over, because at the time, I was listening to this Persian song that sang that, over and over, as a meditation. And I wanted to translate the concept of that song in the painting. So I was working on many levels using the language; using what I was doing at the time, and using the outfits that my sister collected, and she would mail them to me and I

would photograph my daughter in them and paint her and then send them back. So, on many levels, it kind of combined many aspects of my life together, and the language was just one of them.

AW:

In what language—or languages—did you keep your journals?

LJ:

English. Sometimes, when I don't want anybody to understand what I'm saying, I start writing it in Turkish—and I don't know how to write in Turkish—but, I mean I can write the words—like if I say “hadika,” which is “garden,” I will write it as “H-A-D-I-K-A” in English, but it's a Turkish word.

AW:

Yeah, phonetically it's Turkish.

LJ:

So only my secret thoughts were written in my language, but English is my intellectual language.

AW:

Well, you had said that earlier, but then you were talking about the Arabic, and how beautiful it was, and I thought, “Well, I wonder.” You're keeping these journals, aren't you?

LJ:

Actually, I was—I'm having a party on December twentieth for the change of season—it's a burning party. And I asked all my friends to bring something to let go of—to burn—to remake themselves, and I'm going to burn some of those journals during those parties.

LW:

Oh, that sounds so—sorry, archivists, it just like stabs me in the heart.

AW:

We hate that. We would like someone two hundred years from now to be able to read your journals.

LJ:

Yeah, but some of them are journals of pain, and I don't want anybody to read those. I don't want to even read them. Because I went through a lot of pain in my marriages, in feeling like I'm in exile—

AW:

Someone two hundred years from now would like to know that someone else felt the same way, though. That's the other side of that.

LJ:

Yeah.

LW:

You could always restrict the journals until after your death.

LJ:

Yeah, I could do that.

LW:

What we're telling you is we would be interested in the journals. Don't burn the journals.

LJ:

Well, there are two types of journals that I have. I have art journals that talk about the art, and documentation of why this idea came on, and what was going on in my life. And there's the other journals that are journals of pain, where I felt so much emotion, and I just was so lost in both marriages, I didn't know what to do, so I would write it out. I would just pour it out in these journals, so they're just feelings and small events that lead into bigger things and I guess that's how I survived both.

AW:

And I don't want this to be a psychological probe or query, but it's interesting about the first marriage and the conservative—the reaction of the conservative nature of the culture—but here's the second marriage, which is about art, and liberal—

LJ:

It's the opposite.

AW:

—and it's the opposite. So yeah.

LJ:

Yeah, it's—I think it was very liberating for me to have my second marriage, and helping me kind of do some of the stuff that I envisioned. But I think the best state of mind or existence came after the second marriage—after I let go of Jim. It's been fourteen years.

AW:

Has it?

LJ:

Yeah, 1999. I started the new century single and that's the most learning I got. I got very close with people who were very, extremely liberal. I got closer to the gay community, the lesbian community in Lubbock, the artists—people who were way beyond what I envisioned as the possibilities of life. So I started re-teaching myself things. I would say things in front of those friends, and they would correct me, and say, "No, you know, this is how you switch over to changing your thinking." Take changing your culturalized way about life. So—man, that was a lot of work. So I kind of reached a point where right now, I feel like life has become very peaceful and centered, and I really don't need another human in my life—a husband -- to validate me. I think I finally understood that the validation has to come from me and my insides, and my children and what I do. When I paint this painting here, where she's opening up her head cover, and her head cover is blue and it becomes part of the sky—this is a statement about spirituality—that she is part of the world, and the world gives her so much. And it's her doing, it's not anybody else's doing. Nobody empowered her to do this; she empowered herself. And I'm so excited about this new idea, because it came to me this summer, when I was—I hadn't painted in a couple years, I don't know if you know that.

AW:

No.

LJ:

I thought this summer, "Let me go to Turkey. Let me get in touch with my homeland—my conceptual homeland." So I went to Turkey—the language is the language of my people. The food is the food of childhood. The landscapes look so familiar, so I got into this amazing hillside that spoke to me. I photographed it and photographed it, and I came back and these paintings started happening—where part of her was just kind of spilling open to the landscape, and opening her head to the sky, so that it was like she was getting fulfilled by both these entities that was the world around her. And I think that is a big step, because she got away from people; she got away from cultural norms, and it became something that is more of how do you exist in the world, wherever this world is? Wherever this spot is, is it Lubbock? Is it Ankara? Istanbul? Is it Baghdad? I mean connecting with the world in that way is my conclusion right now of feeling centered and feeling fulfilled with life. So I translate that into my garden. I feed the birds. The birds make guano. It feeds the grass. I pick the leaves and I put them in the compost pile. I bought worms. I put them in the compost pile. I collect rainwater. I water the compost pile. I turn it over, and I spread it all over the garden. So the cycle of life—the metaphor of my garden -- is the same as my life has been going. And I'm a human being—my feet are planted on the earth. I bring all of my energies like a tree, from the ground, and my head opens up into the sky to pull it

in and out. And I find Rumi's words very close to my heart with that way of existing—of living life.

LW:

All your artworks seem to have a human figure in them—or the ones I've seen.

LJ:

All of them do.

LW:

Okay.

LJ:

All of them do. (Whispers) All of them. (Speaking regularly) I cannot get away from humans, because I'm ultimately trying to tell the story of the female as she has come from the Middle East and been exposed to openness in the world. So, every painting I have has the female figure in it—no male figures, all female. I feel like that that's, you know, I'm honest in trying to tell the story of a woman. I'm a woman, I don't know how men think; they're made differently than women.

LW:

Well, that brings us to the Buddy Holly protest, because you did some artworks that were—I think one was a mother breastfeeding, and one was a pregnant woman who was naked, right—or partly naked? And you had already shown those pieces before, and then they pulled them right before the First Friday in 2007, right?

LJ:

Yeah, they were never shown before.

LW:

Oh, they weren't shown before? Okay.

LJ:

Huh-uh, that was the first time they were being shown, and at the time, a bunch of us artists were having trouble showing our work. And the Buddy Holly Center was one of the public places in town that was the only—one of the only places we could show work at. And they were starting to tell us we couldn't show nudity. So a friend of mine and I talked about it—John Chinn, who was another artist in town—and we said, "Let's challenge that a little bit. Let's put some artworks in there for our show—there were seven of us, faculty who worked at the College of Architecture and did art—so we—John and I—talked about it, and said, "Let's put some artwork

in there that challenges this.” And I thought, “Yay, let me paint a couple of pieces for that concept.” And I showed up, I brought my pieces, I put them up, and John showed up, brought his pieces, and he didn’t bring any nudity. (Laughing). John forgets a lot.

AW:

He does. And it takes John sometimes a long time to get around to doing the thing that he set out to do.

LJ:

Yeah. So I thought, “What the—what happened, John? We agreed on this.” He said, “What?” (Laughs) So that’s how it all started. And the director—Brooke was the director at the time—she called her superiors and she asked them about it. They said no, we don’t want to show any nudity. So they took them off the wall. That was about it. So I went away from that—it wasn’t a big deal, because I had other pieces in the show. And I was talking about that to a friend of mine who writes for the AP Wire, Betsy Blaney. And all of the sudden, she started writing about it, and it turned into something that was much more than I anticipated. Later on, they apologized, and they gave me my own solo exhibition there.

LW:

Okay, so you did get to show the pieces, then.

LJ:

No, not those pieces. I didn’t want to open that bag of worms again, because my work is not about nudity, or being censored. My work is about something else. And sometimes, when you get pigeonholed in those things, they are not good for the spirit of an artist.

AW:

When did you come to Rumi, and how?

LJ:

Rumi. Well, at the turn of the century, when I became single again, and I started finding all sorts of empowering things. I stumbled on his books, and I can’t remember how I stumbled on his books. I’ve always known about Rumi, because he’s from my, you know, area of the world. And I thought what is this thing everybody’s talking about, Rumi? Let me read him. And I read a lot—I always have a book or two or three on my nightstand. So I started reading him, and I started asking about what his best translations were, and I started finding magic in his words. And I started taking his words and putting them on my paintings. I have a few paintings with his words. And I started giving presentations of my work—reciting poetry from Rumi and at the same time showing my paintings that coincided with the poetry. And I coupled that with music—the meditation music—Sufi meditation music that’s from the Middle East and Iran. So, I think

that's how it started. [pause] And when I went to Turkey this past summer, we went to his city in Turkey, and visited his grave. And his cult is amazing; there's so many people there.

AW:

Well, the reason I was interested was not only how important he is with artists, I mean just across the board, regardless of their culture, but also, I wondered how he fit—the study, or appreciation of Rumi—fit into the culture in Turkey today, and Iraq and Lebanon—

LJ:

He's a religious sect of Islam. And it's kind of—bypasses—it doesn't have boundaries just with Islam, it kind of crosses over into Sufism. And Sufism has older roots in the Middle East than Islam. So during the time of the Atatürk, when he changed the whole country to become more Westernized, they were not given much attention, because they were kind of religious. But lately, Turkey has changed it a little bit, so they're allowing those religious forms to kind of come out into the surface again. And I think that's when people started paying him more attention. And Coleman Barks did such amazing translations of Rumi's—

AW:

Is that your favorite?

LJ:

He simplifies the words, so that you can understand them. I mean, let me show you what I have here, and it blows my mind that I cannot deal with it. These are Rumi's books in Arabic. I found them there, when I went to Turkey. One, two, three, four, five, six—six books he wrote. And when I open these to read them, I don't understand anything, because it reads like the Qur'an. It reads like classical Arabic, so I get this flavor of religion in it and I just want to put it away. I don't like religion. But when I read Coleman Barks's words, he makes them sound so open and not so restricted by the tightness of religion—that, you know, you have to do this to get this.

AW:

Yeah. Translators are so incredibly important.

LJ:

They are, they are.

AW:

What are you working on now, besides more becoming unbound and opening—?

LJ:

Umm. I'm turning sixty next year.

AW:

You're just a child.

LJ:

It's—and I'm only talking about it because it's not a marker, but it's a point where I feel like things have changed in my life. Maybe my—I don't know if it's about the hormones in my body as a woman, or passing those years where I only paid attention to men in my life. It feels like things have shifted, and my priorities are different. And I still go through dark periods, and I really don't know how to deal with them. I don't know if they are triggered by what's happening around me, or is it more internal? It's hard to work with so many people in a job where you have to be the same every day. You can't be the selfish artist, so you have to just keep all of that bottled within, and you have to solve these problems. Teach that class of students. Deal with the administration. Deal with the faculty. And all that bottling-up, I think, turns me into a deep dark place that is not very pleasant. And it's finally becoming so clear to me that that's what's happening; that's where my darkness has come from. So recently I started fantasizing about not having to do that. What if I woke up every day and I woke up with the sun and watched the squirrels jump from the wires in the alley to the trees, and then I got up very peacefully and fed the birds and the cats, and just sat in my swing in the backyard and drank my tea and just looked at the sky. And then I would go in and have breakfast and start a painting. And I didn't have to talk to anybody. Or deal with anybody, or solve any problems, or do any of those missions that are way beyond me, but I have to try and understand them and figure out how to figure it out. Man, I've done so many of those things since I worked at Tech for seventeen years, now. It's like one challenge after another after another, and I've reached a point where, you know what, I'm ready to reap some rewards, and just be selfish about life. And I actually can do that pretty soon.

AW:

Uh-huh. I was going to say, seventeen plus sixty gets you really close.

LJ:

I know. It's like May, 2016.

AW:

Yeah, you know, actually, that's about the date for me, too. And I wake up with these same fantasies. I've got so many things I'd like to do, my goodness.

LJ:

Yeah, the list is long.

AW:

Yeah, it is. And the time is short.

LJ:

Yes, I think, “What if I die next week? What do I want to do this week?” The list is very long. And the other thing that I also found out, that when we focus so much about working with others and giving so much of ourselves to students, I feel like I ignore my emotional side. It’s like it’s stifled, it’s put in a box and locked up. It cannot come to life. I have to focus on my intellectual side, my social side, my work as a faculty, and my paintings keep on wanting more. And my emotional side gets locked up and that adds to the darkness. And when that emotional side gets satisfied with all the other sides, I think that’s a time to bloom.

LW:

Is that why you escape to the garden? Because that’s what I do when I need to de-stress. I go out in the garden and I forget about the world and I work in the ground and I think of the garden as a living palette, where I move things around. And you know, if I don’t like this rose bush, I’ll rip it out and I’ll change the color—the garden is so much wilder for me than—I could never have one of those manicured, perfect gardens. I want the color to be free.

LJ:

That’s boring, the manicured.

LW:

And so when I walked in here and I thought “Oh, your garden.” I thought, “That’s where you escape.”

LJ:

Yeah, and there’s something about sunlight—when you’re out in the sun, your skin gets all that goodness, you transform. You feel so good. On those days that we don’t have much sunlight, and you go outside for just five minutes and feel the sun on you, there’s this feeling of well-being that comes over you, and I want to keep that—keep that with the sunlight and the different things—the different facets of life, including the humans I spend my time around. They have to be from that genre of people who believe in those things, who believe that sitting in the sunlight every day is as important as breathing air. And I’ve found some people in Lubbock. I’ve been here thirty years—yeah, thirty-two years in Lubbock—and it took me a long time to find my people. And they’re mostly outsiders, they’re mostly people who are on the fringes of the community in Lubbock, but they think like me. They believe what I believe in. So being around them, I don’t have to explain myself, it’s second nature. And it makes you feel like you’re home. I don’t have to go back home, because there’s no back home; it’s destroyed. Home is where I’ve made roots and where my friends know who I am and believe in me, and I believe in them, and

that's my community. It's—they're very hard to find, but when you find them, it's like okay, I'm not going to let go of these people. And it's not just one person; it's a group that believes in the same thing.

LW:

None of your artworks have any Lubbock or West Texas landscapes, do they?

LJ:

Umm. I've painted West Texas landscapes that look like the old country in my head. There's a landscape near Tucumcari, where they have these hills of rocks that are red. I've gone there time and time again and photographed them and painted them. And that is a rock that is from Turkey—it looks just like the rocks from Tucumcari.

AW:

I was going to say, every time I look at your paintings, I know that you're taking them from somewhere else, but I'd say I could plop them down right out here. That's why I felt so at home the very first time I saw one of your pieces, I went "Oh, this is my home, too."

LJ:

Well, if you take a horizontal line from Lubbock, across the Earth, Baghdad is on that same line.

AW:

Oh, really?

LJ:

Yeah. So the weather is very much the same. When I came here first—my husband was interviewing for the job at Texas Tech—I had one in a stroller and one in my belly, and I decided to take them out for a walk while my husband was doing his interviews. We stayed at the Lubbock Inn, and at the time, the medical district was not happening there, yet, it was all still houses. I started walking and I started looking at the gardens and the cactus, and the dry dirt. It was March and everything was still dry. And the air was all red, we had a dust storm. I could hardly push that stroller and walk with all the dust coming my way. And I felt so good; I felt at home. (Laughing). I remember being in Baghdad as a child, flying kites in the dust storms. So it felt like home, it smelled like home. The sunlight felt like the same, so I told my husband "I love this place, let's move here." And I haven't regretted it.

AW:

Well, we're all glad you moved here. We're certainly glad.

LJ:

I covered a lot of ground. I don't know what—what were some of your questions? You asked me something—

LW:

I was going to ask you about some of the themes that you did with women. You covered a couple of them. I think fertility was maybe one of the themes that you covered. And then I was going to ask you about the clothing for the women. Do they always—do your women always wear traditional clothing? Except these, of course.

LJ:

They did. Except what?

LW:

Except the nudes, of course.

LJ:

The nudes, yeah, the nudes don't wear any clothes. They did, but I'm at a point in my life where I'm kind of letting that go, because it was part of my growth—that I came from this place and I'm envisioning going to this other place where the culture is not so emphasized with the clothing. So my new body of work—when you look at them you can't tell their identity through their clothes any more. I want to open that a little bit and make it a bit more universal so the connection between the sky and the Earth becomes more—closer to people's understanding, wherever you are. And those things cannot be forced; you just have to go through the stages of expression until they come naturally. And I think they finally happened this season. And I'm saying right now because I have two paintings right now that don't have this traditional clothing. And I have a show in LHUCA [Louise Hopkins Underwood Center for the Arts in Lubbock] in the small room in February. I'm hoping to make a few paintings that are in that theme. And that's very dangerous to do, when you talk about it and haven't done it yet. I've done two. Am I capable of doing the extra ten?

LW:

So they're letting go of the tradition and becoming more western.

LJ:

Not Western, I want to say more universal. So that she's not veiled; she's not wearing long clothes with everything covered. She's wearing a cover of some sort that is a dress that could be worn in China or in Thailand or in the Middle East—something more universal. And I need to really focus. I suffer from the ADD of art making, because I have five or six different media. And really, when I stopped painting three years ago—two years ago—I started making tables.

That's one of my tables. And then I made the metal sculptures where, you know, I welded the metal and blew it up into this shape. I made shrines in small wood. I made prayer flags. I made soft sculptures, they looked like dolls. I made laser cuts, where I burned the image on the wood. So this year, I'm promising myself to focus on painting. I want to come back to painting. I want to decrease the scale, so that they will be a bit more precious, jewel-like, and I want to express those ideas that I have been telling you two about, and see if I can make myself do what I say. (Laughing)

AW:

You do know what you call an artist without ADD, don't you?

LJ:

What?

AW:

Dead.

LJ:

(Laughing)

LW:

(Laughing)

AW:

We all suffer from it, it's just channeling it—that's the only hope we could have,

LJ:

Channeling it, that's a good word for it.

AW:

Yeah, we can't get rid of it.

LW:

I thought you were going to say they'd lost their imagination.

AW:

No, no, they're just gone. No, you just have to channel it, you know. But that's the energy. Well, one of the things that is very interesting to me about your work is that the content of your work trumps, by a great margin, the technique. And not that your technique is not great, we love your

technique, but your concern about technique is—it almost seems to me like what I want to know about technique is what do I have to do to get this idea across? Is that accurate?

LJ:

Well, let me tell you what happened last week. John Chinn works with me. I teach on this side of the hall, and he teaches on this side. When he's lecturing, his voice comes into my class, and I'm lecturing and my voice goes into his class, and at some point, we both close the door. He always brings his work, and shows me what he's doing. So he brought in this painting that was eight-by-twelve; it was tiny. It was a shack with a tree next to it, in West Texas landscape. Boring. I looked at it, and it just blew my mind in terms of the technique. This thing was jewel-like; the colors were vibrant; it was so sharp-focused, and the sky looked like amazingly blue and gradient to warm. I thought, "Wow, that's why I'm envisioning—I'm channeling my paintings this year to get to that phase." So I'm going to take a couple of lessons from John Chinn. I'm going to go over there to his studio and say, "Okay, John, tell me what you did to get that," because I'm incapable of getting it with my acrylic paintings. I mean, that's the most recent one, not those. I'm incapable of getting that high accuracy with my acrylic paintings, and John has a few tricks up his sleeve, because he likes experimenting with media.

AW:

Oh, yeah. He does experiment. I've never met anyone in my life that understands the airbrush in the way he does. And that's not an easy machine.

LJ:

But these painting were brushed. They were not airbrushed. He said, "I'm doing it with Wicked paintings, and these paints are—" he went through this technique of, you know, you spray it, blah, blah, blah, you know, it's just gibberish. I thought "What are you talking about?" and then I looked at the painting, and then I realized that there's something there I don't know. So maybe this will satisfy my ADD into going into something new, but it's the same thing.

AW:

Yeah, but still, it's serving your interest in what the painting says. I mean you and I both know painters that what they want to do—the content is not nearly so important as the technique. And that's—you're worlds away from that.

LJ:

Yeah, yeah. I'm the opposite. I have a lot of content, but the technique doesn't live up to it, because I'm impatient.

AW:

Oh, no no. That—I don't think that's true, either. I mean I think your technique is terrific, I'm saying the technique doesn't drive the painting.

LJ:

True.

LW:

So you're not a technician.

LJ:

Yeah, but I would like to up it up a little bit.

AW:

Well, I mean all—like I would like to play better guitar, but really it's not important in what I do. Writing the song is what's important. It's what is the ultimate part of it, as opposed to—no, I've always liked your—I mean the technique of your work I've always liked. I think it's very good. But it's always been clear to me from your paintings, without ever having talked to you, that it the idea of the painting was the preeminent thing.

LJ:

That's what makes me paint. It's not the *how* I paint, it's the *idea*.

AW:

You, know, on the other hand, I think—talking to lots of painters and a lot of people who collect paintings—is that hardly anybody buys technique. They buy ideas.

LJ:

I don't know, I want to buy John Chinn's painting.

AW:

Yeah, but you know John, he talks about it in a different way, but John had a reason for having a shack and one tree. (Laughing) You know what I'm saying.

LJ:

Yes.

AW:

There are people who wouldn't—you know, you'd set them down, and say "Here's the thing—" You know, sometimes I think Paul Milosevich, whose work I admire a great deal—Paul says that

"I'll paint that." And it'll be a beautiful painting, but it won't start from the place that yours start from.

LJ:

Yeah, like do you know Toni Arnett? Her work is that way. The technique is just amazing, and she sits and talks about these points of how to achieve what she's doing technically. She's giving me a lecture right there. "Technically you do this one, and this, too, and the complementary colors and the—" It's like I don't like that way. I can't work that way.

AW:

Yeah, I know. Plus she uses those transparent washes, and—how long does one of those things take, forever? I would think, I mean, because of all these glazes that she does over and over.

LJ:

Yeah, and the color is so acid-looking. And it's very hard to do, but she's made a name for herself doing that kind of style. Very exciting, some of them that I look like, it's like "Man, how did she do that?" Wow, we covered a lot of ground.

AW:

We did. I would like to—after we digest this a little, we'll probably have some more questions. And in a moment, I'll have a form I'd like for you to sign that says the intellectual property is still yours, but the interview is available to scholars for scholarly use.

LJ:

Sure.

AW:

Yeah, you didn't sing or recite any poems, so I don't think there's much intellectual property on this one, but we need it anyway. Now, I always like to come to the endpoint of a particular interview by asking you what should we have asked that we didn't?

LJ:

You covered a lot of ground. I think I would have liked to talk about the isolation of artists.

AW:

That's a great topic.

LJ:

The psyche of artists, and how we deal with isolation and how we cannot deal with isolation, either, because it's self-imposed.

AW:

Yeah, I was going to say, we can't—we've got plenty of time, if you have, if you'd like to talk a little bit about that. Are you okay?

LJ:

Yeah.

AW:

In one sense, we isolate ourselves to be able to work, but then you can't be isolated, so...

LJ:

All writers, all musicians, all artists do that to themselves. They impose this isolation to push them to do the work. But then that, it has—it's kind of a two-edged sword, because in one way it kind of gives them the space to create, which is very gratifying. But on the other hand, it puts them in a corner, where they're kind of detached from humanity. And when we humans get detached from humanity, it creates a stark world that doesn't work, really, that's what I meant when I said I need to access my emotions a little bit better, and kind of let 'em get what they want in terms of contact with other humans. For example, in the past year I have imposed this isolation on myself where I haven't dated anybody, and all my contact with other humans has been through work or through my friends who come and play cards every Wednesday, which is just amazing for me, because it helps me be around other human beings. But I've made myself kind of forget about certain aspects of me as a human just to satisfy this other part. And I have the privilege of doing that because now I live alone. I don't have to raise a family, I don't have to cook for any husband or boyfriend, and I don't know if it's a good thing. I mean, yeah, it helps me get all the time to create—all this space in this house—where I can create without anybody interfering, because I really—I cannot stand it when I'm just starting to paint and I'm into it ten minutes and I get a text or a call or I have to look at my emails and I have to answer emails. It doesn't work that way. So I don't know where I was going with that thought, but—

AW:

Yeah, that makes plenty of—you know, there was a time when an artist could partition their day. You know, one of my favorite writers about writing is Ernest Hemmingway, and he said here, you get up in the morning and the first thing you do is you read what you wrote yesterday, you start writing, you don't do anything—no lovemaking, no drinking, no eating until you've written for the day. And in the afternoon, and then you go out into the world and you do something else. But in Ernest Hemmingway's day, he didn't even have a phone to ring, and he certainly didn't have a text message or an email. So how do we, in this world, partition a space out where we can be isolated to work, but not isolated completely? I think that's a great observation.

LJ:

As a professor at the College of Architecture, I find myself during my semester just so involved with all these—I have ten things in front of me that I have to accomplish in the semester. And as I go to bed at night and sleep, all these things are running in my head, and lack of sleep comes from all that stress, and then you wake up, you start thinking about them. And that happens day after day after day, what happened to the art? And I look at my studio it's like I haven't been in there for a month. So it's a different way of life—of living, for an artist, when you want to be functional in the world, how do you continue creating when you have all that going on? We start compartmentalizing, where we create between semesters, because we've got a month, and it's happening now; it's happening this week. We've got a whole month to grab for ourselves and say, "Okay, I don't have to answer e-mails anymore." I'm going to just say, "I'm out of town, can't answer your e-mails." And the summer—the three months of summer are just glorious in that way. But there ought to be another way of doing this. Really, an easier way where you say "Every weekend is mine." But can I do it?

AW:

I'm no good at it.

LW:

Not if you have academic status, you can't.

LJ:

You can't, no.

LW:

You take your work home with you.

AW:

Well, and the other thing is we—I'm the world's worst about waking up in the middle of the night solving the problem—but, you know, the next morning I look at that solution and go "That's dumb." (Laughing)

LJ:

(Laughing) It's never the right solution.

AW:

Yeah, it never works. I keep a—I finally decided to keep—a notebook, I've been doing this for a year, by the bedside. Not because there's a gem that I'll wake up with, but because if I'll just write it down, I'll go back to sleep.

LJ:

Exactly, that's the point.

AW:

And then you can throw it away the next morning.

LJ:

Yeah, because the sleep is so important at our age. If you don't have sleep one night, you can't function, not like when you were little—younger.

AW:

Yeah, I've got to have it. Well, in terms of the isolation, is there an isolation that goes with that of ideas and not just physical isolation, communication isolation, is there a—?

LJ:

There is something about seeing too much art. I know this is bad to say, but sometimes, when I see a lot of art, I get depressed because everybody and their aunt is doing art these days.

AW:

Oh, yeah. Try being a songwriter. Get on YouTube, let me tell you.

LJ:

So I try to isolate myself from seeing art. Because if you see so much art, you say "Who wants to see my art anymore, when there is so much of it out there?" It's like everybody's throwing up this art. So the isolation has to also come from that side. A lot of times—I've been through a lot of travel and countries, and I go—I've been to museums and seen a lot of the famous art, but I've reached a point in my life where I have to protect myself. I stopped going to museums. And I know this is not good to say to my students. My students need to go see the museums, because they haven't seen them yet. But when I've been to the Met five times—enough, stop. And I have to kind of come in and say "Okay, I have to kind of neutralize my head so it can be able to bring out those ideas."

AW:

But you know, I think you have the solution, and I will tell you why. I recently—I say recently, the last couple of years—have become bored with music, and I'm a musician. I hear it on the radio, and I go "turn that off." I'm so tired of that, I've heard that, and listen to the new, new thing and I go what's new? And it's because there's a well-known quote from Gertrude Stein, talking about her hometown of Oakland, California, where she said: "There is no there, there." Now the one thing that is very different about Lahib Jaddo artwork is there's always "there" there. And the thing that makes your's different—so different—is the idea behind what you're

doing, you know? And that's whoever else is showing a LHUCA at a given time, it's not that none of them have ideas—they do have ideas, but the ones who do have ideas—their ideas are different than your ideas, and your dedication to exploring these things like—just the description of this new piece is terrific.

LJ:

Well, it's the landscape of the mind is that—that's where I feel at home, because I fell at home in my garden, and that's a replica of that, only upped a notch.

AW:

Well, and you've had—listening to your biography today—you've had to recreate a home so many times, in different places, with different people, different circumstances, so—

LJ:

Yeah, this is—one, two, three, four, five, six—this is my sixth home that I've tried to remake—recreate—and I think I'm done, this is it. Now my kids want me to move one more time and go to Oakland and live with them—I don't think so. I don't think it's going to happen, because it's hard to recreate at the age of sixty.

AW:

Yeah, plus they may or may not be in Oakland forever—

LJ:

And they're so busy, it's better to keep the contact between us so beautiful and short-termed.

LW:

I guess when I look at your artwork, I think, "This artist has an identity." I can recognize your works, and it's not just still life; it's—I look at it and I think of it as you, and I think part of the reason I'm drawn to your works is I lived in the Middle East, part of my childhood—

AW:

Did you? I didn't know that.

LW:

I lived in Iran and in Saudi, and so the first time I saw your artworks—

AW:

How old were you, Lynn?

LW:

We got out of—we were one of the families that were flown out of Iran when Tehran fell. So I've gotten out of two countries right around revolution.

AW:

And the other one was—?

LW:

—was Vietnam, we got flown out of Saigon. But I look at these, and I can identify with the works because of the women—the way they're drawn, and they're clothing, and stuff, so it kind of feels like home to me. But I look at them and I think "Well, the person who did this knows who they are; they have an identity. They don't just go out there and draw the nearest tree or something." So you know you talk about reinventing yourself—I can see that in your works, but at the same time, it's always you, all the way through them. And I don't see that with all artists. I think they're trying to find themselves, and so that's why their styles change, maybe their subject matters change because they haven't really figured out who they are, and how they want to express themselves.

LJ:

Yeah, one of my artists that I kind of looked up to when I was a full-time artist at home, after school—you know, after I graduated—was Frida Kahlo because she put herself in the middle of all her works. It was like a journal of her life. And I read her books and her journals and looked at her images and studied them real carefully, and I thought "You know, it feels so close to my heart." And I think there aren't too many women artists who have done that.

AW:

There're not too many men artists who have done that. Artists of any kind—you have—I see on your shelf—you have one. You know, but that's a difficult thing to do. For one thing, when you—not only do you make yourself completely naked to the world, right down to the core, you're also giving up on making a living. Your father said, you know, "I know a lot of starving artists." When you're taking just what's you out there, there's a good chance people might not want to buy "you." They may not want to support that, so it's a huge leap.

LJ:

Well, that's the other thing. The buying part—if you're making art for that, it's like, "Okay, I'm not going to make this subject matter, because I don't think people want to buy this." It's like, "Don't even make it! Forget about it! You're not making it for anybody; you're making it for you!"

AW:

But haven't you found—I know I've found this in my music—that the more personal and important it was to me, the more everybody else liked it.

LJ:

Oh, yes.

AW:

And so I sit in Manara² with people—friends—and they look up and they say “That is interesting.” And they start talking about one of your pieces, and they don't know you, they may—I mean, they do know that this is Middle Eastern, they can tell from the clothing, and besides, we're in Manara (laughing), but you know the fact that there's so much of you in it that that's the thing that connects with them. And I think that's incredibly important.

LJ:

Uh-huh, yeah, it's that personal angle that people identify with.

AW:

Even if they're from a very different place.

LJ:

Yeah.

AW:

Very cool. Could we stop this and you show us a piece with the ordinary clothes? Or the universal clothes?

LJ:

Oh, yeah, yeah.

AW:

Okay, let me say before we switch this off. Thank you very much. There'll be more to come, I hope. And this is the eighth of December—the day after Pearl Harbor Day—2014 in the afternoon. Lynn Whitfield, Andy Wilkinson at the beautiful home and garden of Lahib Jaddo.

End of recording

² Manara Café served Mediterranean food and was located near 50th and Memphis in Lubbock, Texas. It closed in early 2016.