

**Oral History Interview of
Lahib Jadoo**

**Interviewed by: Andy Wilkinson
August 25, 2015
Lubbock, Texas**

**Part of the:
*Creative Process Interviews***

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Transcript Overview:

This interview features artist Lahib Jaddo. Jaddo focuses on her tattoos in this interview. As such, she discusses how she first became interested in tattoos, her incorporation of them into her artwork, and eventually getting her own tattoos. Jaddo also discusses her journals and her creative process.

Length of Interview: 00:55:19

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Keywords

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Andy Wilkinson (AW):

—in January.

Lahib Jaddo (LJ):

In Lubbock?

AW:

No, it's in Elko, Nevada.

LJ:

Where's Elko?

AW:

It's on I-80 between Salt Lake City and Reno.

LJ:

Oh—

AW:

It's like the original one, it's the big—it's like the—giant thing, for—

LJ:

Nice.

AW:

It is nice. It's a real honor, but here's the reason I'm mentioning it is not to pat myself on the back, but they always have a theme—you know, this is the thirty fifth of these gatherings—in this coming year it's "story."

LJ:

Ah

AW:

And I not only have the keynote address, but I'm doing workshops on collecting stories and also writing an essay about what is story and why is it important, so it's been really fun to sit down the last month or so to think about, Okay, here's all this stuff I know. Now, how do I—or I think I know—now how do I put it down, you know?

LJ:

Yeah

AW:

And as you know as a teacher, we are always able to do things that we're not always able to explain.

LJ:

That's right. We explain by doing.

AW:

—which is probably the best way, anyway.

LJ:

Yeah

AW:

But still when it comes time to get it down, well it's—when I first took the job at Tech teaching songwriting, I thought, Well, this is easy. I'll just show them what I do, didn't work out like that.

LJ:

It doesn't. Because you got to dumb it down, you got to simplify it so that they can—

AW:

And repeat it, and repeat it, and repeat it.

LJ:

So that they can do it themselves with their own little limitations.

AW;

And in fact, from that point on, can develop something themselves.

LJ:

Right, yeah. That's the whole point, to guide them.

AW:

Yeah. I don't want to—the last thing I want is another one of me.

LJ:

Right

AW:

You know, I don't—I've got a small enough share of the market as it is. I don't need two of me out there. [laughter]

LJ:

You don't need competition. [laughs]

AW:

Not in my one little niche.

LJ:

No

AW:

Well, I'm already running this because we always say smart things before we turn it on, so—Andy Wilkinson with Lahib Jaddo, the twenty-fifth of August, 2016, in her new house on thirty-eighth, this really cool house. And we're going to be talking—we've talked before about art and the course of her life—although her life is getting ready to take another turn.

LJ:

A new chapter.

AW:

A new chapter. So that's going to be interesting too. But we're going to be talk today about tattoos.

LJ:

Right. I'm so glad we're talking about this because I've been so passionate about tattoos for thirty years.

AW:

Thirty years. Okay. So that would be the first time you got one, or were you passionate about it before you got a tattoo?

LJ:

I got to it from a different angle. I think it was 1982 I went back home, back home is Baghdad in Iraq, and I hadn't been home in a long time. So at that time Iraq was in it's heyday—it was just glowing—just beautiful—sparkling streets, brand new buildings. Everybody's getting a free college education. Everybody has a job. It was a good place to be in. And I went to some museums—my mother and sister wanted to show me the artists that were doing, the kind of work

they were doing at the time. And I discovered this one artist that caught my eye because he was doing nudes at the time. And his nudes were all voluptuous with big hips and not those skinny ones.

AW:

Real curves.

LJ:

Real curves. But the interesting part about him is that each painting had a story, and the stories were woven around family life, you know, marriage—

AW:

And how were the stories presented with the paintings.

LJ:

The style was realistic, but it was a little bit improvised, but the stuff that caught my eye was that all the women were tattooed.

AW:

Oh really?

LJ:

Uh-huh.

AW:

You know, Okay this is an interesting thing because—you and I have talked before that—this had been an interesting thing to me. And two or three times I have—working with a figure, model—have tried to do a drawing or painting of the model with a tattoo. And they have all been failures, trying to reduce that to paint was so weird for me, so how did this artist do it? I'm really interested in that.

LJ:

His focus was not the tattoo. His focus was, like—the first one that caught my eye was a typical scene in Baghdad of the time where its winter, its cold, not—middle class people did not have central heat. They had one little heater that we called it Aladdin that sat in the middle of the room. And I remember—

AW:

Right. And were they coal fired?

LJ:

No, they were not coal. They were kerosene, kerosene, gasoline, you know, some liquid.

AW:

Yeah, they were propane or something.

LJ:

Propane, yeah, it wasn't propane, it was a liquid.

AW:

No, it was a liquid, yeah it probably was kerosene.

LJ:

And in this room there was a bed that was a typical marriage bed that was brass. And the mother was sitting in the corner, fussing with something. She was probably making something. And in the middle of the room on the Persian carpet was a nude reclining. So there was like a little family scene.

AW:

And like this nude would be a sister? Daughter? Who knows, right?

LJ:

Well the older lady had a little bowl in her hand, and she had some black thing in it, and she was tattooing the woman. So it was a tattoo scene.

AW:

Oh how cool.

LJ:

And what was she tattooing—she was tattooing all these symbols on her back. And they looked like they were celestial symbols—star formations—they were very abstract. And they were so beautiful because that's not the first thing that you saw when you looked at the painting. It took you a while to get there. You're first kind of absorbed the setting, the figure in black with the black bowl in her hand, and then the nude, and then the heater. It's cold. It's the middle winter, so that's why they were next to the heater. So the whole thing made sense, and then you ended up in the tattoo. And the symbols were very mysterious, and I thought, What are they? What do they mean? So I started looking into the work of that artist. I started asking about him—

AW:

Do you remember the artist's name?

LJ:

Falah Ghati

AW:

How would I spell that?

LJ:

F-a-l-a-h. And the last name is Ghati—is G-h-a-t-i.

AW:

G—

LJ:

H—

AW:

A-t-i

LJ:

G-H. It's a "gh," Ghati.

AW:

Yeah, G-h-a-t-i. Okay great.

LJ:

So I started asking about him. And my brother was in the army at the time. He knew about the guy. He said, "Yeah, this guy is a soldier in the army, and this is what he does." This is what he—

AW:

Wow

LJ:

Yeah, his profession, but he's drafted like the rest of us. So I started looking into other places to find other works by him, and I found a few more, and the tattoo symbols that I found on this woman that he showed in his painting turned out to be—the woman is his wife. And what I

learned was that women get tattooed when they get married. So they get the symbols of the family they're marrying into.

AW:

Yeah, now was that true for what group of people, that that custom—?

LJ:

He belonged to—he was probably—

AW:

Was it a tribe?

LJ:

Arab.

AW:

Arab?

LJ:

No, he was just—he was not tribal. He was just a city—from a city family. I don't know much about him actually.

AW:

Yeah, well I mean that's the first I've ever heard of that custom. That's very interesting.

LJ:

Not many know—not many people know about that sort of stuff because it's not a popular theme. And they don't like to show their women nude.

AW:

And so were the tattoos like on the back, or on the—?

LJ:

They were on the back. It's—if you can imagine—

AW:

That's what you said, right, earlier.

LJ:

Yeah. If you can imagine a bikini line at the lower back that's horizontal—it was one horizontal line with those symbols around it. It's almost like a language that had been forgotten, but the symbols remained.

AW:

What a nice way to put it.

LJ:

Beautiful. And then the line went over her bikini—over the bikini pants, and then it came down over her thighs. So on the edges of her thighs—

AW:

Oh how nice!

LJ:

—and the symbols continued over the thighs.

AW:

Yeah, and how far down the thigh would it go?

LJ:

It went, I would say, about four inches before the knee, and it stopped.

AW:

Oh, so it was a long line.

LJ:

It was a long line

AW:

Wow, what a—

LJ:

So, it was like, over and down.

AW:

Yeah, that's just beautiful to think of it—

LH:

It was gorgeous.

AW:

—just as a line without the symbols.

LJ:

So I started drawing that. I started thinking of the tattoo as a positive thing and not a negative thing. So in my mind, culturally—

AW:

So before that, it had not had that connotation.

LJ:

I mean, my exposure to tattoos had been very western. It's like, oh, sailor tattoos, or people who are very cheap—

AW:

People who work at the carnival

LJ:

Yeah, carnival. It was not something that I would get because it was not appropriate. So when I saw that it's—the first idea came to my mind that, Wow, these are beautiful, and they're private. Nobody sees them—except your husband—and it's a symbol of your togetherness, and you going from your family to his family. And there is no shame in that because they are mysterious, and it's not like a boat that sinking in the sea, or a—

AW:

Right. Or an eagle clasping a, you know, a dagger through the heart.

LJ:

Right. Those classical themes. So that's when it started changing in my mind to becoming something very cultural, art related, and connecting me to my homeland.

AW:

So you said you began to draw those in your own art.

LJ:

I began to draw them. I began to paint them. I made—

AW:

And did you make them up or did you find models who had them that you could do from life?

LJ:

I started by doing a self-portrait because I wanted them so much I thought, Wait a minute, let me just do a self-portrait with these symbols.

AW:

Oh, and add them to your portrait.

LJ:

And add them to my portrait. So I did this nude of me—a reclining nude where my back was facing the viewer, and on my back I put those same symbols. But in my mind, I thought of these symbols as—the universe was giving me clues as to where my life was going. So in the self-portrait I had a hand coming out of the sky and just writing those symbols on me—

AW:

Doing the tattoo.

LJ:

Yeah, doing the tattoo.

AW:

—and the symbols. Oh that's cool.

LJ:

That was a beautiful self-portrait. There's somebody in town that still has it. I wish I could get it back.

AW:

Yeah. I would love to see it.

LJ:

My second husband has it. Unless if he burned it down—I don't know.

AW:

Oh, are we talking about Jim?

LJ:

Yeah. He has that portrait.

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AW:

Oh, I don't think he'd ever burn a piece of art. (laughs) Maybe a house, but—maybe not, I don't know. Well that—I'd love to see it. So how long after this first painting that you saw was it before you did this self-portrait? Was it right away or was it—?

LJ:

No, it wasn't right away. I mean the idea kind of sunk in for quite a few years. I want to say there was about five years between the first time that I saw the tattoo on that painting and the time that I did the self-portrait. And I was also a very—at the time I was a traditional woman raising children. I was married to my first husband. I divorced him I married this second one. So I was still within that frame of mind that a woman of my status did not get tattoos. So that took a while to sink in. And I had to remake myself. I had to shed all those old norms and remake myself as an artist, and then say, "Okay, you know what? I can do whatever I want." And I started putting them on.

AW:

Oh, on yourself.

LJ:

Yeah. The first one—

AW:

Actually getting the tattoo. So actually doing this self-portrait was a step towards—

LJ:

That's right, yeah.

AW:

And so the first one, you're pointing to your hand.

LH:

Yeah, and at the same time I was into that changing of my thinking, I found out a—a portrait of my grandmother, a photo that my brother has taken of her before she passed away. She passed away in '82. And in this portrait she was just sitting down, not smiling—because she did not smile in photos—very stoic, and her hand was on her knee like this—and I saw the tattoo on her hand. And I remembered, Oh yeah! Grandma had a tattoo! (laughs)

AW:

Yeah. And for the recording, it's two dots and in between them is a chevron painted down toward, or tattooed down, toward the fingers, a dot behind and a dot in front.

LJ:

That's her tattoo. So I put it on—it's the first tattoo I got. I put it on my hand when I turned forty. I was having a very hard time with life, and I thought, If grandma could do it, I could do it. And I'm going to remind myself of her and her strength by putting this tattoo on my hand.

AW:

So not only the same tattoo, the same placement, but it's also a tattoo that you can see all the time.

LJ:

Right. Yeah, this is the only visible tattoo that I have. And that broke the ice. [laughs]

AW:

Yeah, so once the ice was broken, was it a flood or did you do one at a time? And how did you choose things, and were they—one of the things you and I talked about the other day at coffee was—my experience has been that people told me that an event triggered or was contemporaneous—not necessarily a response to an event, but they kind of happened at the same time. Was that true with you once you had made this—?

LH:

I think there were a few things going on at the same time. The first one was that I finished my education. I got my graduate degree in Architecture and my graduate degree in art, and I realized that that was it. I was done with getting degrees, and I had to start my professional life. But being an artist is very difficult, as you know. It just doesn't happen like that [snaps fingers], it takes a lot of building. So—and then my kids were little—in 1990 my kids were ten and eight, and I was in this role of raising children. And I was very dedicated to that, so that took a lot of my time, and professionally I found myself not able to find a job because Lubbock is so limited. And I was so foreign still here, even though I had been here for eight years at the time, so all those difficult things lined up. And I was also dating Jim Johnson, and he was not an easy person to date. [laughs]

AW:

No, I imagine.

LJ:

Now I can—in retrospect, I see that. The difficulties I was having. So all these lined up to a place where that told me, you know, if grandma did it, you could do it. So that's when I thought, Okay, Nobody's going to help me here. I have to make those things happen for me, for my life. And that was the symbol that I put on my hand was just the reminder that I've got to just get off my

seat and just go for it, just do something. So the tattoo on my hand happened, and then the next tattoo was three dots that is a symbol of me and my two kids.

AW:

Oh cool.

LJ:

That was also, again, I took it from the painting.

AW:

Oh, that was also, okay—

LJ:

That was in one of the paintings. And then, um, these happened in the nineties. And then when I got divorced from my second husband, I found a lot of freedom to do whatever I wanted, instead of have, you know, have my husband has a say in what I'm doing. So I started taking those tattoos from the painting.

AW:

That first painting—

LJ:

And putting them on my back, yes. The symbols

AW:

Oh, cool, very cool.

LJ:

So the symbols—

AW:

In the same way, the same placement?

LJ:

In the same pattern. I did not want to change it because the meanings of those things will be different if I change them.

AW:

Right, right, right. Exactly

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LJ:

And most of them are—the one that I got is a long line with dots above it and dots below it in a certain order. It's almost like a Morse code.

AW:

Yeah, and that's what was on that original painting.

LJ:

That's what was on that original painting.

AW:

Very interesting. So not symbols as in a crescent moon or a triangle, just the arrangement—

LJ:

No.

AW:

—of the dots.

LJ:

And in the middle of the line at the bottom of the spinal cord is a circle. And it's cut in half. The top part has a plus and the bottom part has a slash. And it has a little head like a turtle. It's like a Mesopotamian yin yang. It's gorgeous but it's still in symbols that are just dots and slashes and lines and circles. I put that on in 2000. And as time went on, I wanted—there was this urge to continue this art piece that started on my back. And I started adding things to it with time. Every two years I would go back to see Tim—Tim Kohtz at Inkfluence—he's a good friend of mine and he would—

AW:

Is that who did these for you?

LJ:

Yeah. This one was done by Coby. Coby Cox who was the tattoo artist here in town in the eighties, and then later on he moved to Louisiana, and he did really good there. So after that one I got the rest of them from Tim. And as the years went by, I started adding pieces of my life during that year on the tattoo.

AW:

And how would those pieces appear visually? What does that mean?

LJ:

I would—first of all, I would make a drawing out of them. I would design them, and I would think about them for a long, long time before actually putting them on. And a lot of them were triggered by life events, by people in my life, by things that I did. For example, I—in 2001—I went snorkeling. And I was in Corn Island off the coast of Nicaragua, the eastern coast of Nicaragua, and snorkeling was so amazing. Once I put my goggles on and I went down under and looked at this room under the water that went down forty feet, and it was crystal clear with the sunlight coming through, and all these colorful fish going by in all different sizes. You feel like you're on an acid trip. It is so beautiful. So I took two fish and I put them on my back. And the fish are flying out of the center. And my name is Lahib. In Arabic is means flame.

AW:

Flame?

LJ:

Flame. So I took that and designed some kind of a flame, and I put it at the bottom of the spine where the fish was kind of flying out of.

AW:

Above the circle—

LJ:

Yeah. Above the circle. The turtle circle.

AW:

The turtle circle.

LJ:

And so on and so forth, as I kind of discovered new things about myself, and how I lived life, I found out that I love nature. I love camping. I love to be out there. I would prefer to be in a KOA campsite looking at the stars than a five star hotel. So nature started coming to me with abundance, and I discovered the red-tailed hawks in this area. So that went on my back a couple of years later. I continued designing this tableau, in a way, that came together. And I added more things to it. But there was a point where I realized I was done—that I had to stop because it was becoming a bit visible, and I don't like it to be visible. So now all this tattoo that I talked about was just completely invisible to anybody. Nobody can see it. And the last one I got was—I discovered another tattoo from this guy, Falah Ghati, who painted his wife's other side—her belly. And there was the scorpion on her belly. So I took that pattern, the design, and I put it on my belly. And that was the last tattoo I got.

AW:

Really? So around the navel—

LJ:

No. I had a problem with my body. I thought my body was perfect—the vanity of youth—and then I had two cesareans—my kids were born cesarean—and there was this horrible scar that ran vertically between the navel—

AW:

Yeah, my wife has one.

LJ:

And I thought, My body's not perfect anymore. So I took the scorpion, and I put it around the cesarean scar, so that the cesarean scar became its back. And it just works perfectly.

AW:

Yeah. I just interviewed a young woman on campus who had—she had self—a problem when she was a teenager of self-mutilation. And she had a scar on her thigh. And she had a tattoo put on her thigh, not to cover it up, but it was a tree growing out of the scar. And I thought how interesting that was because it represented, for her, the triumph over having done that. And that's what I think about when you describe this scorpion. It's an incorporation, not a disguise.

LJ:

Yeah

AW:

So that was your last one, then?

LJ:

That was my last one. And I think I did that one around 2005, and that was it. I was done.

AW:

Do your children have tattoos?

LJ:

No. They don't.

AW:

What was it like working with Tim. And the reason I'm asking that is that the people I've interviewed have also said that one of the problems they had was finding a tattoo artist who was

interested in what *they* wanted as opposed to “Here’s my book of Sailor Jerry tattoos,” or “My book of—” that kind of thing.

LJ:

Well that’s the beauty of Tim, because he is educated as an artist.

AW:

Yeah. How do you spell Tim’s last name? C-o-a-t-s?

LJ:

K-h-o-t-z.

AW:

Oh. K-h-o-t-z— I knew it was not what I—

LJ:

Because he had—I mean, I met him in school back in the eighties. Because he was educated as an artist, so he had that openness about him. He was not coming to it from just being a tattoo artist. He was a graphic designer. So he’s really good to work with, and you go to him, usually, take a little sketch that you’ve done. And he embellishes it, and he takes your idea and he makes it better. And he puts it on.

AW:

Does he show it to you before he puts it on?

LJ:

Oh yeah. Yea he designs it. It’s funny that you should come here on a day like this because I’m getting ready for my moving art sale.

AW:

I know, yeah, and so—

LJ:

That’s Tim and his tattoos. He has these beautiful shoulder tattoos that are starfish, and his own kind of history comes with it.

AW:

Well, and that is interesting, too, because I need to speak with some men who have history because the ones I’ve spoken with so far have been not nearly so thought out.

LJ:

Yeah. He has tattoos on his back. He has tattoos on his thighs. His shoulders—they go all—they go down into sleeves. And he's been through life, so a lot of his life is on his body, too—with meaning. It's not just symbols on there that are just taken from a book. He actually designed all of these.

AW:

Yeah, it's very interesting. I think you and I have talked about this book before—the English-Indian or Indian-English curator of art from the thirties—Ananda Coomaraswamy—has that great book *Christian and Oriental Philosophy of Art*, you know, East and West—and series of essays he gave in the thirties about what is art—back in a time when people were arguing if we found a suit of armor from 300 years ago, is that art, is an African tribal mask art, et cetera. And one of the things that he said that has always struck me, and I always—because doing the work that I do, in the circles in which I do it, there are a lot of people that violate this rule—and that is, he said, “You cannot use someone else's symbol. You have to use your own.”

LJ:

That's right

AW:

And I thought, Boy, that is so true. And so when you were just talking about the symbols on the back of that figure in that painting, those were, in a sense, those were your symbols.

LJ:

They were. And they were open enough to be applicable to me.

AW:

Oh yeah. Well right. And he didn't mean—Coomaraswamy meant like if I'm a white guy and I decide to make a totem pole like an Inuit, you know, that's a mistake.

LH:

Yeah. That's not your culture. That's not where you come from.

AW:

Right. I'd have to—now if I went up there and lived for, I guess, a long—you could make them yours, but it would take some work on your part.

LJ:

Yeah. Yeah, that sounds right on.

AW:

So you plan not to have any more, or are you just—wait to see?

LJ:

Right now—I'm getting older—I'm sixty-one—and in the last few years—maybe it was the stress of my job at the college, maybe it was because I'm getting older—I started getting kind of achy. I would go through spells of being exhausted, and I'd have to just sit there and watch Netflix for a day or two until I kind of perk up again. And I went to the doctor and they said, you have fibromyalgia, and I said, "No way. I don't have fibromyalgia. I'm just exhausted." But I noticed that every time I got my tattoo I would get sick for two or three days. So I realized that my body cannot handle all that pain. The nervous system is not that strong.

AW:

Well, I mean, and—we don't have to have fibromyalgia when we're just getting older. That's the— [laughs]

LJ:

We're getting old. [laughs]

AW:

Someone asked me, "Do you have tattoos?" And I said, "No, because I'm at the age where trying to find a piece of canvas isn't going to—change so much." [laughs]

LH:

That's right.

AW:

I'm not sure I can find that, you know. I'm not opposed to the idea.

LJ:

And the other thing is, the tattoos fade with time, so I'd had to go back to Tim a couple of times for him to brighten them up and darken them up because they're fading.

AW:

So were some of yours color?

LJ:

They're all color. Well, the fish were added in color—the eagle—the red-tailed eagle is added in color, and the scorpion is added with a traditional black, but it has a body that is purple. So the color has been added to it. But the ones that fade mostly are the darks and the lights, the whites

and the blacks. So those need to be—the contrast needs to be pushed every so often. And I—last time I went there to get him to kind of do that, it was very painful.

AW:

Well, I would think too—especially on your belly—isn't that a particularly painful place?

LJ:

It all hurts. There's no difference. It all—

AW:

My son got one right here on his sternum, and he said even the tattoo artist said, "Are you sure? This is going to really hurt."

LJ:

They say the ones that you get on the bone—on the sternum—hurt mostly, but I thought, They all, you know, were killers. It's like, Okay. Enough. I'm going to stop here, but you know, you never know. I'm opening a new chapter in my life right now. And these new things are flooding in. And I went with my fiancé to Tim, and he got his first tattoo—

AW:

Really?

LJ:

—there. Yeah. So I was looking at this first tattoo and thinking, Hmm, maybe I should get that same one. I don't know. We'll see.

AW:

Oh very cool. What should I have asked you about that I haven't?

LJ:

There's still a lot of people who look at tattoos and they don't think well of them. They still, yeah—even though these are different kind of tattoos—it's not your regular butterfly on the ankle, or the cartoony character on your arm. But people still don't think well of them. They look at them as something very cheap and not cultured enough. But, you know, it's just the limitations of their own culture. And it's the limitations of this place—Lubbock is not a very open place. It's very conservative. And you go elsewhere and you see that open mind—the indulgence in new ways of looking at art. So one still has to be careful as to whom you show your tattoos to.

AW:

Well, and it sounds like that besides that—in your case the privacy, the intimacy of the tattoo in terms of the knowledge, is part of it.

LJ:

Yeah. They're private designs. They're covered—nobody sees them. Even when I go to the beach—and now I'm going to be living on the beach—I make sure I get bathing suits that cover me completely because I don't want that interaction with people about *them*. It's a private thing. It's not for everybody

AW:

Well I'm glad you said that. One thing I've heard several time from folks that I've been visiting with was that the last thing they want to do was have to engage in a discussion, which happens all the time. And so if they're visible, then people are going to ask.

LJ:

Yeah. And a lot of people get their tattoos and show them off. Well these are not tattoos for showing off.

AW:

And I think that's a fundamentally different approach to why one would get one. The ones that are put on to show say a lot more about what the person wants to let be known about themselves.

LJ:

They become a sense of pride.

AW:

Or a statement. Here, I'm this—or I'm different, or I'm whatever.

LJ:

But it's—We do a lot of stuff for the world, for the culture, for our families. In terms of our appearance—how we wear our clothes, how we do our hair, wearing makeup. And this is one thing that you do just for yourself.

AW:

And it doesn't matter if it's private. No one has a say over it.

LJ:

Yeah. It's nobody's business, it's just yours. There's a self-satisfaction that comes from doing them. It's almost like doing art, but making art is different because you actually put yourself out there, and you let it go into the world.

AW:

Well, it sounds as if—I mean, art as we know, is a communication with the outside world. But it sounds as if your tattoos are communication with yourself.

LH:

—with myself and with the world around me as I know it.

AW:

Right. And the spirit of it as opposed to the populace.

LJ:

That's right. And there's a mystery about it—like those symbols that I found on the Iraqi painting. It's like these are a secret language that I'm speaking to the universe, and it's between me and the universe. And it's nobody's business. So I acknowledge them by making them so pronounced as tattoos.

AW:

But keeping them private, so it is just you and the universe. Very cool.

LJ:

And I had a drawing of my tattoo, but you know, half my stuff now is in Florida.

AW:

Well, another question I have is—are you going to or have you already done a photograph of these to record them for many years from now.

LJ:

No, I have the pattern, the designs that I drew, but I haven't photographed them, photographing them is tricky because they're very—in a lot of light they're almost invisible. You have to really bring them out, and I think it's going to take some effort to make them come out at their best.

AW:

And you may not even need or want to do it.

LJ:

Yeah. I don't have a need to show them. If you photograph something then you have to show it to somebody else. It's—

AW:

Well, but except some of yours you can't see, right?

LJ:

Right. I can't see them. I keep on looking in the mirror, like, Oh give it up.

AW:

That's why I wondered if you wanted to have a record of that just for you.

LJ:

Yeah. Like the one on my back I don't think I've seen them for years.

AW:

Yeah. It would be difficult to do.

LJ:

And after a while they become invisible, so you stop seeing them too, the one on my belly—

AW:

You don't even think about.

LJ:

I don't think about it. I mean, I'm—how many times do you stand in front of the mirror, fully naked, looking at yourself.

AW:

Well—I certainly do that for a lot shorter period of time that I used to. Let me say that.

LJ:

Yeah—

AW:

Cool. Very cool.

LJ:

I'm trying to think if I had more than that one self-portrait—oh, I did a lot of—there were a lot of paintings between the first time that I discovered that artist and the time that I did my self-portrait with the tattoo where I hired models, and I photographed them—and I drew tattoos on them and photographed them.

AW:

Oh, you drew them on the model and then photographed them, and then you did the painting.

LJ:

And then I painted them—unfortunately none of those paintings stayed. They're all gone. Somewhere.

AW:

So what—that's a curious thing too. Did the model have a spiritual investment in that—?

LJ:

No. No, the model was just the vehicle. But the language that I put on the model, too, I had a—I used those symbols that I found in one. And in another I studied the Sumerian cuneiform language. And I started pulling out some words and letters that, in my mind, connected me to the universe that I was talking about. And I placed them on the model, and I photographed them.

AW:

Very cool. So is that where the symbols that you have used came from? From the cuneiform? Because as you were describing the dots and the lines—

LJ:

I actually don't know.

AW:

—it sounds—

LJ:

Yeah. I tried to look in to the languages of Mesopotamia. We've got the Babylonians, we've got the Sumerians, and we've got the Assyrians. And what I found was the Sumerian cuneiform patterns, and I couldn't see any link between them because they were completely based on a different source. But that's the place where I come from, and who knows how that history comes down from those cultures to what I saw. All that matters to me is that it's in the same place in that same area.

AW:

Yeah, well it's—while we're talking about old books and writers, Robert Graves book *The White Goddess*—one of the most interesting things about that was his analysis of the Ogham alphabet and how it was restricted—I mean people spoke orally, but only certain people were able to write. And so they—the alphabet was captured in a poem largely called “The Battle of the Trees,” and so he does this big, long investigation of it. The conclusion was very interesting to me, and that was that each letter—not just the words, but the letters—had a history and a spirit and a meaning, and that each letter used in a word was an invocation. And so added together, it made the word an invocation. And so as you've been describing these symbols, I think of that same idea.

LJ:

And back then I kept really tight, accurate journals where I would document all of these ideas and all the inspirations and all what was in my mind, and where I wanted to take it. And I have them in journals, but unfortunately, I've packed them and they're in Florida.

AW:

Well, and I think we talked about this when we interviewed the last time. Those journals need to be archived somewhere, so that when you're ready, that people can go back—

LJ:

You're right

AW:

I know it's—a journal is one of the most direct connections between you and your process. And so that's a really important thing. And we would certainly do this—but anybody else that you would archive them with would do it—and that is restrict them—

LJ:

Right

AW:

—for a number of years until they're—it's comfortable for you or your—

LJ:

Yeah. Well I—

AW:

—successors or whatever. Because, for instance, we have Betsy Sasser's journals. And they were restricted for ten years after her passing. When I looked at them I went, Oh dang. I could see that

she was pretty direct, but God, they were just beautiful journals. Wonderful, what a great observer.

LJ:

You get a glimpse of the life of another human being and how they're thinking works.

AW:

Yeah, and their thinking and how they went through it. So I would really encourage you to do that.

LJ:

Yeah. I have them very—the problem is I combined my emotional life with my life of the mind, and they're in the same journal, so that when you read the read the torment in one chapter and then you saw the artwork produced from it, that makes it very private, but it also gives you an idea of how the work came about.

AW:

Oh exactly. I think it actually adds to it. John Hadley, who is both a visual artist and a songwriter from Norman, Oklahoma, was showing his journals, and I haven't managed to get him to let us archive them. He would open it up and say, "Now, here's where I went bug shit crazy. I was in the funny farm." He said, "Look at this. Isn't this crazy stuff?" he would say, and he'd flip three pages. And, boy, especially with him talking about it, you could see this progression of his state right through it. And on top of all that, it was beautiful—it was a striking work, just to see it on paper.

LJ:

You don't get a glimpse of those journals often.

AW:

No. And you also don't get journals done by people who are visually, as well as orally, connected. And even the handwriting of someone like yourself, or like a John Hadley, or my friend Terry Allen—his journals are the same way—you look at, you go, "Oh this makes a lot more sense to me," because it captures both of those things together. Cool.

LJ:

So, when I look around in this room, there's none of that work left—it's—

AW:

Well, I would guess—I mean this would just be my guess—when you had a sale, that would be some of the first stuff that went.

LJ:

The pieces that I did were major pieces. The tattooed women were big, big paintings.

AW:

Oh they were large. So they were large works.

LJ:

Yeah. They were like five feet by four feet, and they had—the women, the nudes larger than life, and they were covered with all these vines, and the tattoos were written with hands coming out of the sky, so—they did really well.

AW:

Let me pause this.

Pause in recording

AW:

Yeah, so that would be—

LJ:

They were large paintings. And then the large ones went so fast, so I started making smaller ones of them. And they went too, but that was '91, so that was a long time ago.

Unknown:

Hi, would you like a beer?

AW:

No, I'm on duty

Unknown:

Oh!

AW:

Which means that if I have it I'll go to sleep, and I shouldn't—thank you, though.

Unknown:

You're welcome.

LJ:

But you know, that phase also ended when I started putting them on my body.

AW:

Oh, so that's interesting. So when you started putting them on you, you quit putting them on the canvas.

LJ:

I quit putting them on the canvas, Yeah, it's like, okay, I've actually made this a reality, and now I don't need the paintings to vicariously live through and feel like, Oh I have the tattoos in the self-portrait and the paintings, so—I think part of it also was that that when the tattoos went on the paintings, it made me not get them on my body. It's like a—

AW:

A substitute.

LJ:

—replacement. Substitute. Yeah.

AW:

As opposed—because the other thing I was thinking about as you were describing this was that—not so much a substitute but as a trial and error, what's going to work and what do I want and what's going to look right? I mean, was there some of that?

LJ:

No. because they were really—I went through a lot of effort in drawing them out, in taking the time to do it. It wasn't like a fast thing. It's not like I got up that morning, oh I went to get a tattoo—I went to the tattoo shop and got one.

AW:

Yeah. Because you designed it and then Tim worked on it, and so you had all that to do.

LJ:

Yeah. Yeah, we—it took me years, *years*, to get them to go on my body—especially the very first ones because it was so taboo.

AW:

Well, and also, it's pretty permanent.

LJ:

It's permanent, yeah.

AW:

So you have to make sure that—

LJ:

[laughs] —that you want them ten years later.

AW:

And there, and et cetera, everything else about it.

LJ:

Yeah, so—yeah, I don't think about this one before—once I put them on my body I stop painting about them

AW:

Wow.

LJ:

It's like, Okay, that became real, so now my mind wants to paint about other stuff. And at the same time, too, something happened. The war started on Iraq.

AW:

How did that impact—I mean this, this—

LJ:

This issue?

AW:

—this particular issue?

LJ:

It was '91, '92, and I started thinking that my people were going to get wiped out. And so my thinking transferred from the tattoos to painting about the culture and preserving the culture.

AW:

So rather than an inward or private thing, it became a cultural thing in terms of your art.

LJ:

It went from the private to the universal. It went from the personal story—

AW:

As opposed from the universal to the private—

LJ:

Right. Exactly.

AW:

Now it was the other way around.

LJ:

Yeah, it went from the personal story to the public story because I come from that place and that place is being destroyed. And I have a say as an artist. I can actually put the word out there and show people that this place is really precious and cultured. So I started painting about losing it. And I found in my archives, all these photographs that I had taken of the place as I knew it—beautiful spots in it. And I incorporated that into my art, and that body of work [snaps] went like that. That was '92, '93, '94—

AW:

Because its all of our—it's not just a story about Iraq. It's all of our stories.

LJ:

Exactly. It's about losing a place that you treasure, that you love, that you think—the world is over there is so precious, and then it's gone. Nothing stays forever.

AW:

And the object lesson is that ours can disappear that quickly too.

LJ:

Right. Nothing is permanent. And then that's the time that my work shifted into painting the cultural stuff—women trying to find freedom, trying to find place.

AW:

And I think that's probably when I discovered—most of what I knew about you to start with was about that same time because I remember those were the images that really—

LJ:

Yeah.

AW:

That really captured me.

LJ:

They were different.

AW:

Well, and I remember it—the thing I thought the most—that was most striking—other than just the colors and the, you know, that side of it—but the thing that really knocked me out was that here were these beautiful women floating along on carpets, over this place. The land looked just like here. [laughs] And then to get to hear you talk about how, well that's—

LJ:

Yeah.

AW:

That's not just this place; it's a lot of places.

LJ:

It's a lot of places. I had a lot of floating figures over a cemeteries and landscapes of the dead because in my mind, my culture was wiped out. It was all gone. And it's funny how one's work develops in that way. Once I started painting about the cultural stuff, it stayed with me for a long, long time. And I'm just, right now, coming out of it. So—

AW:

What are you coming in to?

LJ:

I'm coming back into the idea of nature and connecting with nature that is universal. Connecting to the sky, the earth, the water—so that's where those figures start—where her hair becomes the sky—the air in the sky—and her other braid becomes the earth and the ground.

AW:

And you know, of course, one of the problems we're having around the world is we're losing the sky.

LJ:

We're losing it.

AW:

Too much light.

LJ:

We're also losing the earth—

AW:

Oh yeah.

LJ:

And nature—the trees are going. The rainforests are going.

AW:

And the soil is washing into the ocean.

LJ:

And the global warming—and there's a big shift in our natural world and preserving it.

AW:

I've been writing about losing the grass for thirty years.

LJ:

Aww.

AW:

I mean, that's my—

LJ:

I should show you my buffalo grass in the backyard. My whole backyard is buffalo grass.

AW:

Yeah. We will look at it because grass, you know—people don't recognize this—but grass replaces or absorbs about the same amount of carbon dioxide and turns it into oxygen as does a rainforest.

LJ:

Really?

AW:

Well if you think about it—a rainforest—there's a whole lot of trunk and limb, and grass is all—there's hardly any stem to it.

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LJ:

Well I was really surprised to—I planted blue grama, sideoats, and buffalo grass in my backyard because I wanted something that was of this place and sustainable, and I thought I would get little clumps that are like I see in nature. They're dry most of the winter and then they come back in tufts—well this stuff ain't that because I've been watering it.

AW:

Well and also in a city like this, water falls on streets and concrete, if you're lucky, it goes to places like that, so they actually get more of the rain, and—

LJ:

It does. And it's so green, and it flows with the air, and my cat sits between the grass and the—hides. It's just beautiful and it's time to mow it, but I'd hate to mow it because it's about a foot tall. It's gorgeous.

AW:

I know it. I think it was put on this earth to be whatever height it is unless something eats it.

LJ:

I might just leave it alone.

AW:

Or buy a buffalo. You could have a buffalo—

LJ:

Buy a buffalo!

AW:

Might be easier to get a goat. I love the connection—the way that we've gone now from the tattoo now back to the art and the connection with the culture, and now the—and in fact, that, in some ways, almost makes a full circle back to the—

LJ:

Yeah. I mean for an artist, I really believe that your ideas are cyclical. You express one thing, you move to another, you move to a third one, and then you come back and you express the first one again in a different way. So it's the stuff of your head that's coming out on canvas. I see it in my work, like I fished these paintings out of my archives because I'm trying to lighten the load and move. And I painted this in 1989—women with babies—and I'm painting them again right now. Where are they? They're inside. I put them inside, so—there it is. She's back with the

babies. It's like this progression of ideas that goes back into this circle and connects back to where it came from. There she is with the baby too, on the buffalo.

AW:

Speaking of a buffalo—oh yeah, that's terrific.

LJ:

So, yep, the cycle of ideas. Oh, there they are again! The babies! [laughter] I think I made them in '89, but I made their crib this last year.

AW:

Oh really?

LJ:

Yeah. I love these guys. People think they look like Buddha, or they think they're dead babies. It's like, I like them! I think they're cute. Just don't go there with them.

AW:

Well very cool. They're cool. All right, well, thanks.

LJ:

You're welcome. I enjoy these talks.

AW:

Me too. I just hate it that you're moving so far off. That—

LJ:

I'm not dying. I'll be back.

AW:

I know that. That's okay, well when you come back we need to have a—we need to have a follow up talk. After you—the new chapter with the marriage—the new marriage—and the new place, I want to hear what's—what happens with your art.

LJ:

Yeah. Me too.

AW:

All right.

LJ:

I'll be back.

AW:

Good. Thank you again.

End of recording



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