Interview with Jacob Lawrence, Seattle, Washington, October 3, 1992

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This interview was conducted by Elizabeth Hutton Turner, former Senior Curator, The Phillips Collection, on the occasion of the national touring exhibition *Jacob Lawrence: The Migration Series* (1993–1995).

BT: Elizabeth Hutton Turner (Interviewer)

JL: Jacob Lawrence

GKL: Gwendolyn Knight Lawrence

SS: Stanley Staniski (Filmmaker)

[BEGINNING OF TAPE ONE]

SM: This is the Jacob Lawrence *Migration Series* tape one on the video camera.

BT: I was trying to think about the first time you and I spoke and how long you and I have been talking about this upcoming exhibition at The Phillips Collection. It seems to me we have been talking about this for about two years now, and I thought we could begin by asking you what do you think about the upcoming exhibition at the Phillips, the idea of reuniting *The Migration Series* for this exhibition and national tour, which will end at the Museum of Modern Art?

JL: I feel very good about it, I'm highly complimented and highly honored. I mean, I remember my first knowing of the Phillips was through Edith Halpert, who arranged—didn't arrange, I guess the Phillips arranged it—but it was through Edith Halpert that I received this recognition by one of the top collections in the country, and I think, not think, I know it was one of the highlights in my career. And over a period of years the Phillips has always been very good to me, in giving me this recognition, I feel very good in having the show united there and having this exhibition. I've had some wonderful experiences with the Phillips—I remember Mr. Phillips, the father of the present director, I remember meeting him. He was a very quiet man—this is a memory that is very almost surreal in a way because you know this is many, many years ago, and I think that that show, not *The Migration Series*, took place between 1945 and 1950, and it was quite a recognition, and it is only in retrospect I realize how important that was to my career. Later I had the opportunity of going, Gwen and I had the opportunity of being taken through the Phillips by Mrs. Phillips, the mother of the present Mr. Phillips, and she gave us a wonderful tour of the collection and making comments and she talked about her own paintings and we had a wonderful discourse, and of course she had a gallery there. In a way it is like coming back home, this exhibition, and it’s a wonderful, wonderful thing for me.

BT: So revisiting then, what launched you, perhaps, and put your work first into a museum collection?

JL: I would say it was one of the first, I can't say it was the first, maybe it was, in a major museum, of course now the Modern Museum and The Phillips Collection, they split the series, so it was surely one of the first and one of the most important showings of my work, exposure of my work, was the Phillips along with the Museum of Modern Art. I don't know how else to explain that—as I said it's only in retrospect that I realize how important this recognition was and has been to my career.

BT: And of course Phillips bought your paintings from Edith Halpert, from the Downtown Gallery, so could you take us through that story of how it happened that *The Migration Series* was exhibited, first exhibited at the Downtown Gallery, at Edith Halpert's Downtown Gallery—how did all of that take place?

JL: Edith Halpert was one of the top galleries in the country, I would say at the time she was like [Leo] Castelli [Gallery] is now, she had some of the top artists in the country in her gallery—Ben Shahn, [Yasuo] Kuniyoshi, Bernard Karfiol, Charles Sheeler, Stuart Davis, some of the top names. And she had an idea—this was just prior to World War II—she had an idea that she wanted to explore and see what was going on, what the black artists were doing, what was happening. She was a business woman, of course, and she was thinking that this would also add further to her own development, or to her own contribution to the art community. So she along with several other dealers, I think it was Antoinette Kraushaar was one of the main ones—they were very good friends—decided to organize a show which was partly—they received help from the Harmon Foundation and from Dr. Alain Locke of Howard University, the first black critic, I think, of the arts, I can't bet my life on that but he surely was a very important man, writing on the arts, blacks in music, painting, and drama, and so on.

The show was organized and I had just completed *The Migration Series* of 60 panels, I didn't know what would happen to it, I had no idea of selling or anything like that I just wanted to do it. I think that came about because I had been doing single works of my experience in the Harlem community. So the paintings were available and they were selected, out of this, each one of the dealers of which Edith Halpert and Antoinette Kraushaar were two—and then there were others I don't remember their names—decided out of this show each dealer would take or invite one artist to become a permanent member or be on its roster [as] a member of the gallery. Edith Halpert selected me. We were not at the opening of the show, Gwen and I had just recently married, had been married for a few months, and we were in New Orleans when the show took place. It was due to open on December the 8th, 1941, and that date is very significant because we know that Pearl Harbor occurred on December the 7th, 1941; as a result of that many businesses and enterprises and things of that sort were completely at odds, you know this was a very catastrophic thing that had happened.

JL: The show was due to open December the 8th, which was a Monday, nineteen hundred and forty-one, which it did, if you recall, December the 7th has been a very important date in our history because this was the date of Pearl Harbor which took place Sunday, December 7, 1941. As a result of Pearl Harbor all of the dealers backed out of this idea of taking one black artist onto its roster, they weren't taking any artists at that time, in fact they were cutting back. Edith Halpert was the only one who went through with the original idea, and I was that artist selected. And I said this was one of the highlights of my life, and I didn't realize the real importance of that at the time. As I said Gwen and I, we were in New Orleans, *Fortune* came out, *Fortune* reproduced 26 of the works, this was all through Edith Halpert and her connections. And it was a wonderful thing I realized later and still realizing because of this show too, how important that recognition was. And it was very important for me that The Phillips Collection and the Museum of Modern Art—they were interested and they decided each one wanted—I think each one was thinking of buying the series, so they came to an agreement that they would split the series each taking half, so the Museum of Modern Art purchased 30 of the works, The Phillips Collection bought 30, each an odd and even number. And this was just a wonderful thing to happen to a young artist coming along. I was—let's see, this happened in 1941, so I was like 23, I guess 23, 24, or somewhere around there. And it was a wonderful, wonderful thing to have this kind of attention given to the work, given to my work.

And this is how that happened, and it was my first—really when I say professional—my experience as a professional artist with a recognition outside of the Harlem community. I had received some recognition by being on a Federal Art project, by being hired to do several paintings, two paintings every six weeks, in which we were working in a water media, it was two paintings in oil, it was one, and we had quite an art community in Harlem. Older artists taught and did works of sculptures, murals; Gwen was on the mural project and that's the way we met. We met at the Harlem Arts Center, and we had a real community. I mention this because I don't want to give the impression that my only recognition came from outside—my first recognition and my first mentors came from within the Harlem Community, but it was surely important that I received this recognition outside the Harlem Community. So this show that Edith Halpert helped to organize, or organized was very important for that reason, and of course having two major institutions interested in the work and a top publication like *Fortune* magazine publishing the works meant one of the great highlights of my career.

BT: The idea of this series splitting up, you didn't want the series to be split up did you?

JL: No, I did not. In fact, Edith Halpert, mentioned that to me and she felt that the series would be more stronger, more powerful, if the series was kept together, and I'm sure had I not had Edith Halpert's encouragement in keeping it together I don't know what would have happened because I wasn't strong enough at that time or positive enough to say, “No, we want them to stay together.” Had it been another dealer maybe they would have been sold individually and just completely lost, but she was strong enough and she had the respect of the art community to get these two major institutions together to purchase the work.

BT: So now the series does go from beginning to end at each institution, is that right?

JL: Yes, they have shared over a period of years. I don't know how many times the entire series has been shown; that's what's so good about this now. But each institution I know has shown their half periodically, and I don't know since that time how many times it has been shown in its entirety. I don't think many times, so this will be one of the times.

BT: I think this is the first time in 20 years that it has been shown together, but it is the first time since its creation that it has had a national tour, so those are the statistics that our public affairs office seems to come out with. I wanted to go back a bit and talk about this *Fortune* magazine article because it all seemed to happen so quickly, there have been scholars working on this project that have given me a chronology, so I have the benefit of being able to go back and know when certain letters were exchanged when. It seems that Halpert contacted Locke in June, and by July 1, *Fortune* magazine was contacting you and asking you to come up their offices and explain these, 30 of *The*

Migration Series panels. My question to you is how did those panels get up to *Fortune* magazine, do you remember anything about how that transpired?

JL: It must have been again through the Downtown Gallery and Edith Halpert.

BT: Do you think that Edith came to your studio? Did she come?

JL: That I don't remember, I don't think so. I think this was through Dr. Locke, and I had applied for a—by the way, the series I should say was supported before it was done [by] the Julius Rosenwald Foundation. I received a fellowship in 1939 to do this series and on my application I said this is what I wanted to do, this was my project, so Dr. Locke was very instrumental; in fact, he was one of my references, and I think I should explain, too, the role of the Harmon Foundation. The Harmon Foundation—it's out of existence now—but up until that time I think it was the only organization that encouraged and sponsored and gave medals to minorities artists, and think it was the black, the Native American, and the Southern whites, I think that is what they supported, and of course the black art community benefitted greatly from this. Now, I think that *Fortune* magazine always had a connection with the arts and was very much involved in what was going on in the art community—they wrote about art, they commissioned artists to do works and so on—so *Fortune* was always in contact with what was going on. Now this was a completely new idea of giving an all black show, as far as I know, on such a scale, there might have been others, but not on that scale. So naturally *Fortune* magazine, through Edith Halpert, through Dr. Locke would have been interested right from the beginning in this project and I think that's how they knew about—among other works by other artists, from other artists, it would know about *The Migration Series* and the show.

BT: Did you ever go up to *Fortune* magazine offices and explain those 30 panels?

JL: That I don't remember, I can't remember going there, and I don't remember meeting the personnel.

BT: Debra Calkins?

JL: Well, I knew her after that but maybe I did, but I don't recall going there. I surely didn't go there before because as I said we were in New Orleans at the time.

BT: You were in New Orleans by August of that year?

JL: July.

BT: You left in July?

JL: We were married on July 24, and we left July 25 or 26, and it was the first time that I—

GKL: It was August.

JL: I thought it was July?

GKL: It was August.

BT: Your wedding anniversary?

GKL: No, when we went to New Orleans.

BT: Look, I'll tell you where I'm headed before you start, I want to just sort of piece together some of this, I want to get across the idea that you weren't in New York, and sort of reinforce how you were hearing this information. Some of the things that I found out from Diane Tepfer's chronology, for example, is the fact that you're getting letters from Locke telling you about the exhibition—how Alfred Barr has been there three times, how Edith Halpert is really interested in you and wants you to be one of her artists—you're hearing these kinds of things. Also the other thing is [Harmon Foundation Director] Mary Beattie [Brady] visited you, isn't that right?

JL: It's possible, she did, yes.

BT: And brought you 10 copies of the *Fortune* magazine, something like that?

JL: That I don't remember.

BT: You don't remember that.

JL: I do remember receiving a copy when we were in New Orleans. November, 194—

BT: One.

JL: One it would have been, wouldn't it, I remember—

BT: Before the exhibition actually.

JL: Before the exhibition. I remember we went and we purchased a copy—no it was forwarded to us on Bienville Street, we lived on Bienville Street, and we received the magazine, and there was this exchange of letters that was going on with—those letters and communications and correspondences are all in Syracuse, The University of Syracuse, that was before we started sending out material to the Archives, and you know we're dealing with over 50 years ago and I'm trying to recollect and piece together. I think the important thing is here that I still do not know the significance of what was going on with this communication with Dr. Locke with the Harmon Foundation and with Edith Halpert. I was old enough to have known but maybe it didn't interest me to that degree, I didn't know what it would mean to my career, I'll put it that way. It was quite a bit of communication, people I'm sure in those letters would jolt my memory if I had the opportunity of seeing them and reading them, but I don't remember.

I do remember the main force was Edith Halpert, Dr. Locke, and the Harmon Foundation. And I had worked on this for about a year and a half, on *The Migration Series*, and I had a studio on 125th Street. This is where Dr. Locke and Mary Brady—you see, they used to give these annual shows and annual medals, so they used to go around and visit the artists' studios to see what was going on, and Dr. Locke came—I'm sure with Mary Brady—came to the studio. Gwen and I, we worked on these panels, not painting, but actually preparing the panels, and we both worked in the studio, 33 W 125th Street, and I didn't know what was going to happen to these works, I had no idea. I knew that I would always be painting and I would have to support myself probably by doing other things, working in a laundry, which I did do and if I was fortunate enough to receive some fellowships, but I had no idea up until the time that I was hired by the Federal Art Project to do creative work, do paintings, I had no idea that I would be selling works or that my works would be purchased. I did sell some works to school teachers and librarians in the Harlem community prior to this time but that was very minimal so I had no idea.

So therefore if I think about the significance of this and what it meant, it didn't have the meaning that it has now in many years. Hence it didn't have that same meaning, and sometimes I shudder to think had these things not happened, had these forces not happened to be there at the right time, and the series was available, there are many things that happened there that didn't have to happen, but somehow I guess that's the mystery of life—these things do happen and we can't bring them about, we can't force them, we can only work and be prepared, hoping that we will receive the attention from our fellow artists from our peers and from the community, that's it. I don't know if all the artists would agree with this because many artists think that we should hope for more support, maybe more government support and more private support, but at that time maybe I wasn't sophisticated or knowledgeable enough to think in these terms.

BT: Well one of the things that has impressed me with what you say about, you didn't make this series to sell, you really weren't thinking about an exhibition at the Downtown Gallery, you weren't thinking about what price you were going to get per panel, I think you had mentioned to me some time ago most dealers wouldn't have taken 60 paintings at once like that, and Edith Halpert did take them on—it just sort of leads me to ask why did you paint *The Migration Series*?

JL: I think the motivation for painting *The Migration Series* is that I grew up in a period where we all knew about it, we were a part of it, my family was a part of that Migration. My mother was born in Fredericksburg, Virginia, I think, and my father was born in South Carolina. Somehow they met on the way north. I was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, so I grew up knowing about these things from the first time I could understand what words meant. And as we moved further north, I remember Atlantic City; we didn't stay there because we were on our way north. I remember eastern Pennsylvania, living there, I remember that because eastern Pennsylvania has a lot of hills and I fell on one of these steps, and I still have a scar on my leg where I fell and I must have been a child but I still remember that. It was probably quite a traumatic experience although not very serious, but serious for me at the time. Then we moved onto Philadelphia, eastern Pennsylvania, I don't remember how long we stayed in these places, from eastern Pennsylvania to Philadelphia. And we were about to—I guess the Depression occurred, the stock market fell in 1929—and in 1930 we arrived in New York's Harlem community. I was 13 years of age. It was a very vital, very energetic, very alive community, I didn't put in these words at the time. And like most young people you work with color, you're given crayons, you're given poster paint, and I just started putting down colors, and I remember my mother like all families at that time used to decorate our homes, our home in all sorts of colors and patterns. And in thinking back I think that was to alleviate the depression period which was pretty drab and could have been more so had we not had these other elements to help us. We've always gone through this even in good times—the certain minorities, blacks—it's always been a depression so again we grew up with this.

I used to hear—especially in Philadelphia—my parents would talk about another family arriving and people who had been there a year or so before would give them clothes, take clothes to them, take coals to them there for the furnace and things of that sort, so I grew up very conscious of people moving from one section of the country to the other. Now when I arrived in the Harlem community I started to put paint on paper. I wasn't doing figurative images, just designs, but out of that I started doing scenes that I would see in the community: churches, peddlers, people peddling produce, market places, stores, parades, fraternity parades, sorority parades, political parades like the Garvey Movement, and I started putting these things down on paper.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE TWO]

JL: In retrospect I realize that it was almost inevitable that I would arrive at a stage that would lead me to *The Migration Series*. Previous to this period, I had [become] very much involved not only in the street scenes, the life of the community, the churches, the people selling produce, this was the content. And of course in form, in formalistic terms I was very much involved with seeing the fire escapes and thing of that sort that I had never seen before, if I had seen it before I was unaware of it. Prior to *The Migration Series*, I think it is important for us to realize that I had executed several series before, [such as] *Toussaint L'Ouverture*. I was becoming very much involved with black history, and this was through the schools, school teachers, librarians, street corner artists telling us, the audience or the students, about what certain people had accomplished—also preaching certain ideas, these were the street artists like the Garveyites saying the Back-to-Africa Movement, the Communists preaching the virtues of Communism, the religious leaders encouraging people to, if they were not involved with the church, to go back to the church—so I was getting all of this information in growing up in the Harlem community and beginning to have some understanding of what was happening. There was a great struggle going on throughout the country and this struggle I imagine in various communities took different forms. In the Harlem Community—although the people throughout the country, many of them desperately poor, not all but most—but there was always a feeling of hope, a feeling of encouragement–and I think this had to do with the, it was expressed by means of color, by means of recreation like the Savoy Ballroom, people dancing, people seeming to have a wonderful time. So although it was a traumatic experience for all of us, it might have been less traumatic for the black community who had always been involved in a kind of a struggle; it was not new to us.

My first paintings dealt with non-figurative design and I think seeing imitation, Persian rugs, wallpaper, and that type of thing. And then I moved to doing figurative works, that's when I did the various scenes that I would see throughout the community. And I imagine, I was still seeing people on the move coming up, I say up because that was true, they came up from the South and [settled] in the North people also from the Caribbean. We usually don't think of the Caribbean as being a part of that. Directly I guess it was not, but like many other immigrants from Europe and places like that, you also had people coming up from the Caribbean, so we were very much aware of this. I think since I was very much involved in the storytelling element, I think it was almost inevitable that *The Migration* would be one of my major works. I think that's how this came about, I think that was the motivation for that.

BT: So it was a logical next step for you, with [*The Life of*] *Toussaint L'Ouverture* series you described economic slavery and then liberation, you'd already addressed the theme of struggle for justice and empowerment with *The Life of Frederick Douglass*, and you talked about the idea of flight and struggle through the story of Harriet Tubman, and *The Migration* seem to embody many of those themes and incorporate those themes, but without a historical protagonist. Could you talk to me a little bit about the special challenges of incorporating those kinds of themes or would that be something you could comment on?

JL: Themes in *The Migration Series* and thinking of what the Migration meant, what movement meant. I don't think it was a deviation from what I had been doing, I don't think so. I think we think of, well, just take the word migration, [it] means movement from one place to another so I have a symbol of movement: the train, of people carrying sacs and bags and suitcases, the railroad stations, probably there were more bus stations than railroad stations at that time. So right away you get the feeling, I get the feeling of movement, which has always been a very beautiful thing to me both in content and in formalistic terms, there's a forward, I think in terms of something moving forward not something retrogressing. So I went to the library although I knew much of the story, I read books, I started taking notes, which helped me to sort of pull this feeling together, pull the story together and from out of that developed *The Migration Series*. That's why there are repetitive elements or images in *The Migration Series*, the train, the bus and people moving along with the other parts of the story, the professional, the factory worker like we think in terms of from field to factory—I didn't know that then but that's what it was because in the South you thought of us experiencing a more agricultural, it was an agricultural community for many of us, in the North it became an industrial situation.

And it wasn't all happiness, it wasn't all peace. There was struggle, and I would say that through this struggle developed a certain kind of beauty. There were the blacks [who] moved from the lynchings that took place in the South to the riots, which took place in the North. There was contention; there was one group becoming involved with another group. I would imagine with many of the Europeans, there was a struggle for existence, many of the Europeans on the lower economic level coming into the United States. The blacks, who had always been here, so therefore there was this clash of peoples, this clash and I try to put this into the bombings, I try to put this into *The Migration Series*. I mentioned that I went to the library and read books, and I don't know, I got something out of the books, I guess a sense of the certain kind of imagery, but I got just as much from listening to the street orators, or the people talking on the streets, *The Amsterdam News* telling what was happening, coming out every week with blaring headlines telling what was going on in various places throughout the country. And at that time, blacks were challenged if they moved outside the Harlem Community, especially black males dressed in a suit. And the cops could be pretty brutal without any reason, they would—this was reported in the papers—they would actually approach a person and challenge their reason for being outside the community, outside what they felt was the Harlem Community; it never occurred to them that anyone had the right to be outside of any place, so unless you were a maid or delivery boy or something like that, but if you looked like the average person you were—these stories were very common—so this was all as I was involved in, well I knew this before, led up to my executing and doing *The Migration Series*.

BT: I think that's one of the most remarkable things to me, is that when people do ask you about your sources for *The Migration* or for this particular series or for any of your series, often times you speak about the community and what you drew from the community to create what you did. You talk about growing up and loving history, about wanting to be an artist from the time you were 15 or knowing you would be an artist from the time you were 15, about reading history and visualizing scenes and the importance of this storytelling element, and you also mention librarians and how they communicated and also teachers and how they communicated this story to you. Do you remember who first told you the story of the Migration in formal school type of way?

JL: I don't remember a personality—

BT: Who first told you these things?

JL: I don't remember a particular personality telling us—I say “us” because so many people in the community were involved—the younger people, but I do remember the feeling, the passion the way these stories were told; the librarians, the school teachers, and our parents, those of our parents who told it from a different point of view, in a different way, always told about the struggle that we were going through. And I think much of it had to do with a feeling of, a very good feeling of being, of having a biblical association, I think that was part of it, and you were made somehow, we could expect this kind of suffering and this kind of tribulation and so forth, and this came through and I think this helped me or surely contributed to the way I put down things, the way I would perceive things, the way I would see them. Today people will—it's pathetic, it's sad how people will attack the homeless or attack certain people who are not like themselves in certain economic or physical situations. We would never think of doing that because somehow this was this biblical association with this person. We went to church, I would go to church two or three times a week. I went to Sunday Service and then we had clubs and the Sunday school teachers used to invite us to his home once a week, a group of us.

So this was a passion that we all experienced—I say "we all," the people of the community—experienced this on various levels. I experienced this as a young person first in Philadelphia when I heard of another family having arrived—let's take them something, let's take them clothing, or coal or things. Then moving on into New York where this story, this kind of oral history continued and there was this association with, although far removed from the Caribbean leader Toussaint L'Ouverture, he was held up, he was highly thought of because of what he had achieved overthrowing a big power, not overthrowing it but defeating it and liberating Haiti; of Harriet Tubman, a woman who in academic terms would be considered illiterate, but yet the feat that she performed in making about 19 or 20 trips from I think it was Cape May, New Jersey, up into Canada through the underground railroad—this was a wonderful feat, I don't think just wonderful for the black people, but for people in general, for the American people. And that's why I sometimes question, I guess it has to be said in that way, black history—it's American history, it's very much part of our history. I always question that when we say black history—it's American history and a very important part of American history; you think of Frederick Douglass, of Harriet Tubman, of all of these people and the contribution that they made and people still making a contribution today.

BT: You speak often of the encouragement that was given you by the community and it does seem to me that the community, living and working in this community, reinforced your own very special way of seeing and creating images. How important was, for example, going to the Apollo Theater, and learning about or seeing the way community life was demonstrated there and how did that influence your special way of seeing or did it?

JL: Sometimes in thinking back again I can't separate the recreational from the work responsibility or commitment that I had working in the laundry, delivering newspapers, delivering and picking up laundry, and for recreation I used to walk the streets of the community of Harlem. I would know all the, not all the faces, but I used to see the same faces over and over again, it was such a compact community. One of the most vivid forms of recreation that I had, as many in the community had, was visiting the Apollo Theater, and the Apollo became an institution in the community. There were the comedians, there were the chorus girls, and there were the big bands, and I would go once, they would change the show every two weeks I think, and I would go, and you would hear the comedians. What was so significant about this is that the comedians especially would reach a degree of pathos through comedy of almost making fun of the community on a superficial level, but it was really very deep pathos. They would talk about the cockroaches, the bed bugs and things of that sort, and the way they dressed only exaggerated—it was like the comedians were almost copying what people from outside, what whites from outside the community, would see the blacks as. It was sort of a reversed kind of a thing. And I didn't separate what was going on on the stage from what was going on on the street. I would leave the Apollo, go out on the street, and it was like a continuation of what was going on on the stage, and that has always remained with me. And I always remember the comedians especially because they seemed to touch a certain nerve, they seemed to dig deep into the psyche of the community, and that was a wonderful experience. Now that was part of my education, I would say—the Apollo. The 306 Studio was another part where I came in contact with people, older people in the theater, musicians, artists, older artists, of course, and they would talk about the challenges in their various fields. The actor, Leigh Whipper, would talk about space, texture, movement, the same thing you would have in a work of art. Someone else would talk about the challenges of composing a piece of music, someone else would talk about the challenges of the dance and so on.

Now although I couldn't participate in these conversations, I overheard them because I didn't have the experience to participate. That was one of the wonderful things about that period, not only in the Harlem community, but throughout the country how the administration set up these various arts centers, plural, throughout the country so that it gave older people work—when I say "older" they may have been college age—work to teach in these centers; people of my age, it gave us the opportunity to go in these centers free and to receive instruction and direction in whatever we were interested in. And I can never give the community enough credit for the encouragement that it gave me, the teachers who purchased some of my works, the librarians, for very, very little, you think in terms of almost giving it away, but that five or 10 dollars that they would pay for a small work meant more than the five or 10 dollars. It was the idea of you doing something of worth that somebody else wanted. So that was a wonderful legacy that the Roosevelt administration left behind: the arts centers that so many of us who would not have had the opportunity to go on to college or to an arts school were able to go into the arts centers and just receive this kind of experience.

In fact, my first studio, it wasn't my studio, I rented a place at 306 on 41st Street from an artist by the name of Henry Bannarn, he was a sculptor mainly and he came from Minnesota, and I rented a place for a couple of dollars a month, it was a corner of a studio, up until that time I had no studio of my own. But then I applied for a Rosenwald Fellowship, and I received it. I had very good references, very important references. I had people like Alain Locke, people of the Harmon Foundation, I think, and this is strange because a person like Walt Kuhn (who you wouldn't think of having any positive feeling about what I was doing, but now I can see that, I couldn't see it then), and the person who recommended him was Jay Leyda, a filmmaker, in fact he was a very important filmmaker who set up the—was it the film or the photographs at the Museum of Modern Art?

BT: Film.

JL: He died within the past couple of years. Film, yes, and he was very excited about my work because he thought I had the feeling of a filmmaker by the progression of working in the series form. And Irving Jacoby, he was another person, he was also a filmmaker, and so I had people like this. In fact it was Jay Leyda who arranged for me to meet the Mexican muralist José Clemente Orozco, who was working on *Dive Bomber* at the Museum of Modern Art, the fresco. And he arranged the meeting, he thought I'd like to meet him. And I went to meet Orozco, and I was very surprised because, one, in looking at his work—again, this is with the very little experience I had, you'd imagine a kind of fiery kind of person like you hear of [David Alfaro] Siqueiros being, and Orozco was very quiet, he hardly said anything but [was] very warm and very supportive—I asked him where was his cartoon or his design for the mural, and he said he didn't need any and he showed me an old cardboard that men's shirts come in when they come from the laundry, and there were a few scratches on it, and I have never forgotten that. He was a man who had so much command and so much authority that he was able to work in such a direct manner on a medium like especially fresco where you are working in a wet ground. And you know these are things you remember for the rest of your life, and I was only with him for about a half an hour. And when I left, I asked him if I could get him anything and he said yes that he would like to have a bag of cherries, so I went out on the street (this was at the Museum of Modern Art and you know how they have the people selling chestnuts), and I got him a bag of cherries and took it up. Well this is an experience I will always remember—

BT: It was thanks to Jay Leyda.

JL: Thanks to Jay Leyda, that's right.

BT: And Jay Leyda was someone who was very supportive of your Rosenwald application for *The Migration Series*.

JL: That's right, it was wonderful.

SS: Let's try to ask this question this way, let's ask why you applied for the grant and maybe how you learned about it, but why you applied, sort of why that application, not what it was for but why going to the grant as a source.

BT: A source for the series?

SS: Yes, make sense?

BT: I guess so, I'm just trying to figure out where it might go but Jake is the one that will know that. That then is the question: why did you apply to the Rosenwald Foundation to do *The Migration Series*, it was a brand new source for you wasn't it?

JL: Oh yes, I think like many artists at that time we were very sensitive as to monies. Many of us wanted monies to work, and I think that was the first reason, not *The Migration Series*. I had to have a purpose for applying, and there was no better purpose than to give a project. I think these foundations ask for a project, and I gave *The Migration Series* as a project. But we all knew about these foundations because older people had always applied. In fact, I met Augusta Savage who just came back from Europe, I'm moving back now, and she was able to go to Europe because of a Rosenwald Fellowship. So we knew of fellowships, I guess all artists know of fellowships, you know, you know of monies you hope to get that will sustain you and help you in your career and help you to continue on with your work. If you don't get this kind of support (except those artists who are fortunate to have a patronage outside of a foundation), if you don't get this kind of support then most of us are forced to do other kinds of work in order to support our art. So we grew up knowing about Rosenwald, and especially the Rosenwald because it was focused toward minorities to support the minority artists and what they wanted to do. So we all knew about this.

BT: This particular application, this particular Rosenwald Fellowship that you received in 1941 enabled you to do something or enabled you to get something you had never had really before, which was your own studio space. Could you talk to us a little bit about your studio you were able to get with the Rosenwald?

JL: Yes, well, prior to my receiving the Rosenwald, I rented a space in Henry Bannarn's studio for a couple of dollars, I've forgotten if it was for a week or a month or something like that. When I received the Rosenwald it enabled me to get a studio of my own for the first time, which was a very big thing, and I rented a studio, rented a loft which was located at 33 West 125th Street, and the rent there was eight dollars a month. And the reason it was eight dollars a month instead of 10 was because I was on the back, and I rented this place and I had this great big room, and I didn't have a refrigerator or anything like that. So we used to—I say "we," Gwen and I worked there—and we used to go out and we'd buy a box of non-perishable things like beans and things like that that you keep without refrigeration. And I think I had a two burner, a little two burner place that I could have franks or bacon once, I couldn't keep it. And that enabled me to really spread out and to realize *The Migration Series*, otherwise I would not have had room to do that.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE THREE]

BT: We're talking about your studio, the first studio that you were actually able to get because of the Rosenwald application, and you were talking about the size of the studio and you were describing it on the back of the building and the fact that you could spread out, and it made *The Migration Series* possible.

JL: Well, I think one of the highlights of my life, too, was getting my own studio. It enabled me to spread out, it enabled me to think in different terms. I think—I don't know if that came before *The Migration Series* or after—but it surely enabled the concept to become more concrete in carrying out *The Migration Series*. So I purchased these boards and Gwen helped me to put the gesso on, we were able to put them on—we had a table with two horses, one horse on either end, and a board, and we put the boards on and some of the boards on the floor. We put about two, three coats of gesso crossing each way, one this way, one vertical, one horizontal, each coat. And we would sand it, and we both worked there. Gwen worked there at that time, not every day, but she would come up and do some work. I was making my drawings for *The Migration Series* and transferring them onto the boards. I don't think I went into detail, but just the larger areas, the boards were 18 by 12 inches, I remember that. And the colors I used, I always used very primary, secondary colors plus black and white. It was very minimal and I used it more in a very direct manner. Later I began to explore the medium of egg tempera to a greater degree where you get translucencies, but this was a learning process and I was beginning to learn the beauty of the medium and how you could use textures and things of that sort. So this whole period was a learning experience not only with the medium but how to use the medium, and this is what came out of that. And I look at some of the panels now and I am really amazed at how successful these panels are for me at that time in both content and form. I couldn't do that today because you can't copy yourself, it would be a fake, but I try to now even, at this late date I try, I hope my work will have the same dimension that many of the works in that series have, or the entire series.

I think of the series by the way as one work, not a number, 60 panels, but as one work. And even then, in order to achieve that oneness, I executed the works all at once, color by color going through each panel—the blacks, the reds, not in that sequence, yellows—thinking that it would hold it together to a greater degree than if I had executed each panel separately because I would surely maybe feel different from the 60th panel than I would from the first. So the size helped to hold them together, the medium helped to hold it together, and working them all at once, doing it that way hoping to hold it together as a unit. So it was, again, it was my most ambitious series, 60 panels. I didn't have to go out to look for material because I had been experiencing it, because I read some, and we were very conscious of, I think blacks as a whole, were very conscious of the Migration, of people moving because it was one of the great periods in American history of people on the move. It was all around me so I didn't have to do the kind of research that I would have to do, say, in doing Toussaint L'Ouverture or Frederick Douglass, I wouldn't have to do that kind of research. This was almost contemporary history, it wasn't history, it was contemporary because I was such a part of it, people I knew were such a part of it, so it wasn't historical, it was contemporary.

BT: Did you think because it was a contemporary point to you that it might have had, presenting this series talking about the Migration explaining the struggle, a contemporary and ongoing struggle that linked you through time with historical figures in the past but then watching it transpire both within your family, your parents' generation and your own, did you think that it might be a political story? Is this a political story? Does it have political ramifications? What kind of impact did you hope that it would have in telling the story?

JL: I can't remember thinking of it in those terms. I can't think of it as being a political statement or sociological statement, I guess it was that. It's almost like saying that I am such a part of this that I can't see outside. I'm seeing from inside, I'm doing my life, I'm making an association with Toussaint L'Ouverture, with Frederick Douglass, with Harriet Tubman. So it's not like I'm looking out a window, so I'm not thinking in these terms. I guess it's like the comedians at the theater Apollo, I don't think—I can't say I don't think they thought—but they were such a part of their content, such a part of the community, I don't think they thought in terms of making an editorial statement, they were such a part of this. If you would ask them, say, "What is your condition?" they would probably be amazed by the question because they were such a part of it. They would leave the Apollo, they would probably go home in the community, they experienced everything they talked about on the stage, about welfare, they made jokes about welfare and things of that sort. You know, my family was a part of the Migration, so I didn't have to think. I guess that's why I did it, because it was such a part of what my life was, you see, so I didn't have to move outside to do it.

[break]

JL: In selecting to do *The Migration Series*, or a series on the Black Migration, I didn't think in terms—it was such a part of me—that I didn't think in terms of making a political, a sociological, or editorial statement. It wasn't like I was inside looking out or outside looking in, it was just a part of my life, I grew up with it, my family was a part of it. And this was a continuous part of the—I started to say the black struggle, but the American struggle, from slavery, from Harriet Tubman, Frederick Douglass, so really a continuation. I don't think in terms of history in that series, I think in terms of contemporary life, and it was such a part of me I didn't think of something outside that I was doing a portrait of something. If it was a portrait, it was a portrait of myself, a portrait of my family, a portrait of my peers, that's what it was a portrait of. So in that way it was like a still life, a still life with bread, a still life with flowers, it was like a landscape, you see. So I didn't think in terms of editorializing or anything of that sort. It was such a part of me, such a subjective statement, subjective feeling I had about this content.

BT: Well, I wanted to ask also about, getting back to this whole subjective way of seeing and the community, supporting your special way of seeing, really encouraging you to develop these unique ways of seeing and gathering up your experiences from the community and communicating them through your art. It strikes me that among the things that you talked about has been the Apollo Theater. When you were growing up in Harlem and thinking of the Apollo Theater, or maybe not thinking of it, did you do panoramic boxes? Were they a part of or did they contribute to your way of seeing when you were growing up and making these boxes, sort of panoramic shelves of space and having the figures move in and out of those spaces?

JL: Yes when I first got—I think I mentioned this a moment or so ago—my first content was not figurative it was just designs. Design—working with color and seeing color move about and just getting the pleasure of moving color on a flat surface. And then, as far as I can remember, I'm trying to get the sequence right, I guess I was moving close to theater. My next content, I did a series of gargoyles, of plaster cast working in plaster of Paris, just faces not representing any particular characters or anything of that sort, and I remember someone introduced me to the famous mask maker [Wladyslaw Theodore] Benda. They thought I would enjoy seeing Benda's work or seeing reproductions of it, and that was Charles Alston and he recommend me seeing, I've forgotten Benda's first name, but he was a famous mask maker. From there I went to the—now these periods might have lasted six months—I went to do corrugated boxes of a corner of my neighborhood and putting figures inside. Sometimes the figures would be painted on the walls of a corrugated box, sometimes they would be standing in the middle like cutouts and things of that sort. So I think I was moving very close to and going to the Apollo Theater at the same time. It was a way of expressing content in these various forms. So logically these sequences take on a logic now: first the non-figurative design, then the plaster masks of the face, then the corrugated boxes. So I think there was a logical sequence here.

I want to say also that—I think I've mentioned this—that I must give the community credit and support for what I was doing because I don't think that maybe I would not have had the courage, had I not met people in the other fields, people in the theater, artists, people who had a certain kind of training that I had not had, my peers—I remember there was a person named Ronald Joseph, Bob Blackburn, Walter Christmas who was a writer, Gwen Knight, who since became my wife, who was a painter—and we used to go around the galleries and museums and we'd talk about what we were seeing and what we were looking at. They weren't lecturing or teaching, but it's just that again this was a community spirit and the people who purchased my work, a few people like teachers and librarians. And my first show was given by the James Weldon Johnson Literary Guild, it was a women's group and they were interested in James Weldon Johnson and his contribution and collecting memorabilia and that kind of thing pertaining to him, it was that kind of society. And they gave me my first show, I think it was held at the YWCA in the Harlem Community. As I say that was just as important as the show I had at the Downtown Gallery, just as important to my career in having a show like this.

BT: It was your first one man show?

JL: As far as I can remember, yes.

BT: So that show was your first one man show?

JL: The James Weldon Johnson, my first one man show, yes. And I think it was the *Toussaint L'Ouverture* series, I think it was that series.

[break]

JL: The first one man show I had was supported and given by the James Weldon Johnson Literary Guild, it was a guild made up of black women who wanted to perpetuate the name of James Weldon Johnson, and that show consisted of my series on the Haitian liberator, Toussaint L'Ouverture. It was held at the YWCA in Harlem and to me, in retrospect, that was just as important as my later show of *The Migration Series* at the Downtown Gallery.

BT: Before that show, your teacher Charles Alston introduced you or wrote a catalogue introduction, introduction for your catalogue, in which he says that he is quite proud of the fact that you don't bear the taint of academia, that you're not an academic artist, nor do you—I mean he's praising your differences, your unique way of seeing. You're not like an academic artist, people can't call you a cubist, or a futurist, or put you in anyone of those categories of the modern movement. Could you talk a little bit about Alston as an encouragement of you?

JL: I was about 13 or 14 when I came in contact with Charles Alston, a mentor, and I came in contact with him through the Utopia Children's House, where he was a, I guess you would call him one of the staff people in arts and crafts. And he was very encouraging throughout the time that I knew him and I'm sure that this was a very important period for me being a youngster. I could easily have been squelched by people telling me, "Well, it's done this way and not that way," and, "You do it that way, you don't do that, that's wrong." But it was just the opposite, and I received from Alston, along with many other people, a support that was very, very important that what I was doing, the way I was seeing had validity, it was very valid. And I even try to tell students that, with whom I come in contact today; it gave me a lesson that I have never forgotten. You know when you are 13 or 14 you don't have the authority, you don't have the experience, and you don't have the know how to reject certain kinds of philosophies regardless of how valid that philosophy is. You say, "Well, I must be doing it wrong if everybody is saying you do this way and not that way." So that was a very, very important period, and I was around people, not only older people, but my peers who had had experience in structured school situations. I think of Ronald Joseph, he was quite an intellectual person, and many others. Gwen had training at Howard University Arts School, and beyond that they were people I respected, you see. I respected them for this, they could have easily said, "What are you painting that for? Why are you doing it this way? Why are you doing it the other way?" So that was a very, very important lesson for me.

BT: I think they really did provide you with a certain kind of encouragement. It is interesting the way you came up with this very unique format for history painting. This was the era of the WPA. When people think about WPA artists they think about muralists and of history paintings, paintings on the walls of public buildings, large, great scenes portraying events in times past and making great statements about people in history. Why not a mural for *The Migration Series*.

JL: Well, I don't think—I'm glad it didn't happen. I'm glad I didn't receive a commission because I didn't have the experience at that time, but even had I had it, I wasn't a part of the Federal Art Project. I developed, well I didn't develop it, it's a very old form by the way, Pre-Renaissance, Byzantine, but I guess it was new to me and it was new to many of my peers working around me at the time. And I thought of that because it was the only way I could tell a complete story. You deal with people like Toussaint L'Ouverture, or Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman—their lives are so big, so all-encompassing that I couldn't see a way to do this in one or two paintings. So I thought of the series form, and I guess that's why Jay Leyda took to my work, too, because he thought of it in terms of a film where you carry it on like a person would develop a film. And I thought of doing it that way for that reason. I wasn't going to be given a wall; it's just in recent years I've been given a wall now, so I wasn't going to be given a wall to express myself. And it was difficult enough for the more mature artists, and they did some very fine work.

That's why it's a shame that we're not getting more support. I think we should get government support and private support to carry on the work that was done in that period, although it was done to alleviate a great economic trauma the country was going through. I think some great things came out of that, one of the most creative periods in our country's history. And I like to think that I contributed to that through the efforts and through the encouragement and being motivated by people whom I have mentioned and encouraged me—because I think *The Migration Series*, I was supported by the Rosenwald Foundation to do that, but I think the spirit at that time was very high in the arts, in writing—John Steinbeck, Clifford Odets, people like that coming out of that period, very, very high—and there was an energy, a vitality. Maybe it's happening today, too, but in a different way, but I'm talking about for a youngster like myself, coming along this was a very important period. Although we were poor, although we didn't have material things, but we had the spirit, there wasn't a knocking down of the creative spirit because you happened to be different. It was the opposite kind of thing.

You know the story I always mention about what we call the left, the left wing. I was given a scholarship at the American Artists School and I remember—what was the sculptor's name? He was sort of discovered, a black sculptor—well in any event, he was discovered and many key people called him a very fine sculptor—[William] Edmondson—and the Museum of Modern Art gave him a show. He was a tombstone cutter. They gave Edmondson a show and the American Artists School scheduled a talk for that evening on Edmondson's work and many of the students and teachers were quite agitated because Edmondson said (he wasn't at the forum), he said, "God just touches me and I do it," and people jumped up and said, "How can he say that? How can he say God just touched him and he does it and this and that?" And I remember once, as long as you were doing something pertaining to labor, or the plight of the working man, or the troubles and tribulations of minorities, you could have six, seven, eight, fingers on one hand, as long as long as that content dealt with that part of the human condition. So I think out of that there was just a fine spirit, I don't think it was all good or great, but there was a spirit there which enabled greatness to come out of that period which we are benefitting by today.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE FOUR]

JL: One of the people who was so beneficial to me and supportive was Claude McKay, the writer, you see, and he was from the Caribbean, and as I mentioned before Gwen being from the Caribbean. This was content that was right there, I didn't have to go outside to look for other people's interpretation of what I wanted to do, I had it right there. I didn't have to go anywhere, it was so immediate.

BT: Were you aware that you were among the first?

JL: No.

BT: To depict this?

JL: Well, if anybody had asked me did I see another series of Migration I would have to say no I didn't, but I didn't see everything, so I didn't picture myself as first, second or I just didn't think of that, you know.

BT: Were you at all thinking or experiencing the pictures in *LIFE* magazine of people on the move?

JL: No.

BT: Displaced by drought, the Dust Bowl, or any of the FSA photography that was being published at the time about hard times?

JL: No, I don't recall. Even had I by chance seen these kinds of materials I don't think it would have meant much to me because you are talking about something that's a photograph on a paper, and I'm talking about something that's a reality on a table, you see. I'm not talking about some photograph that some photographer takes of Dust Bowl and things like that—that to me is unreal. It's not unreal to the person involved in that material, who is interested in that kind of material or reportage, it's not unreal, but I'm not involved in that; I'm involved in what we are in now, which is the ’30s. So I don't have to go outside to find out what people were wearing or what a train station or bus station looked like.

BT: You mentioned John Steinbeck, for example, who did address in his novel *Grapes of Wrath* the very conditions of people on the move going through hard times. Had you read any of John Steinbeck in the ’30s?

JL: I don't know if I read it but I heard so much of it.

BT: There was the movie in the’40s.

JL: Maybe I did see it, I don't know.

BT: But it was out there. I mean you stressed this when you talked about the Migration being a contemporary experience and how it wasn't in the past, it was something ongoing and before you, and I guess I wanted to ask a question that would perhaps point to other ways of sensing that, either through film or through movies, the way they were conveying this experience or through documentary photography, the way it was conveying the experience through *LIFE* magazine, as well as going to the Schomburg and reading the text.

JL: Well, if I came across these other ways that you’re talking about I wouldn't be aware of it. I would look at it the other way and say if I thought at all that these other kinds of statements would have come from the sources I knew, my sources—I wouldn't look at it as saying I experienced it through someone else's experience or through someone else's eyes, that was not true. I couldn't relate to the Dust Bowl, I had no relation. I might be interested, hearing people talk about John Steinbeck as this great writer, but here I am on the streets of Harlem where everything is concrete. How could I relate and say, “Well I'm going to do a *Migration Series* so I want to see what John Steinbeck says about the Oakies?” See, it wouldn't make sense. I didn't even have to eliminate that as a possibility. I would see kids coming up from the South, black kids who were two and three years behind their school age in school, well that was reality to me. I didn't see Oakies walking the streets of Harlem and coming up like that. I couldn't make that kind of relationship, or Dust Bowl and things of that sort. Their situation was just as pertinent, and John Steinbeck became very involved in this humanitarian or human drama and trauma, and I was just as involved in the same thing, but from my own experience out there. But I couldn't relate to Dust Bowl and say, “Well, I'm going to do a *Migration Series* so therefore I must see what the Oakies did.” I couldn't do that.

BT: Getting back to what's in *The Migration Series*, the points that you addressed. You talked about the importance of struggle—or the beauty of struggle—and the idea that these struggles go from South to North and exist in both areas. Could you just talk about some of the things you decided to include in *The Migration Series*, what's in it, the kinds of struggles?

JL: Well, it's all through *The Migration Series*. The symbols of poverty, like what we call the strickalean or strickafat, and people having very little meat, or the lynching, the riots. The struggle was not only in the South, but it was throughout the country, South and North. The separation of peoples just sometimes by a rope, it was the idea that you could be in the same room but as long as that rope was there it made a difference psychologically. These are some of the things, the professional, the doctor, the death, the funerals. The last panel which depicts education, a goal achieved or hoping to be achieved by the three figures.

BT: Do you see hope coming out of that struggle? Do you see something positive coming out of that change?

JL: Well, historically, yes. If we refer to history, even in my day, there is surely a different perception, a different attitude that exists today that didn't exist 50 years ago. This is ironic because on the other hand we have situations that seem to always—we seem to move back because we are surely having tensions in this country now, so it's difficult to make—but despite that I think that there is a positiveness that didn't exist 50 years ago that exists now. Sometimes we, you know, it's like the old saying of the something before the storm, and these can be positive things, it's like an upheaval, trauma, tremor, and sometimes you get this. So we have some terrible things going in this country—we have always had—but we have some good things going on in this country too.

[break]

JL: Oh, I feel very good about—I wouldn't say very good, that qualification—but I feel, I have a positive feeling about things, about things in general, and I guess I would have to see hope. I couldn't think in any other terms, I'd have to see it. Now how that hope manifests itself, you know, I'm not a sociologist, I'm not a historian in that way. So much of what I—is a feeling, is a subjective feeing that I get from things, of things, from people, and I can't say more than that. I can't analyze it, I'm not writing books or things like that on this.

SS: The question I want to ask is, it's been 20 years since the whole series was shown together. It's not so much the show, but the series being seen together—what role, what place, what significance can it have now? What role can it play now? I want you to tell that to Beth.

JL: If I think in terms of the role that the series might play, by its showing, I think that's such a vast area that it would depend on the individual. It would depend on the spectator. It would depend on those seeing the show, their motivation for seeing it. I can't project, but I hope it would be one of showing what human beings can endure and survive, I would hope. I don't know if I could ask for more than that, I would hope that. And thinking in terms, too, of one of the great movements of our country and what people have contributed to that movement by their actions, I don't know if there is more that I can say on that particular subject.

BT: I think that it presents an example for us, and when we were downstairs earlier we were talking about what lasts and what maintains its strength visually and the solutions that speak from generation to generation in terms of artistic solutions. We talked about a classic resolution of forms that can be translated from one time to the next. Do you think *The Migration Series* is a work that can speak from generation to generation? That it speaks to our time as well as it spoke to the generation of the 1940s, for example?

JL: I would hope so. I would hope in both form and content that it would have the dimension and the scope, that scope would continue, the dimension would contribute. And as I think of the work as being one work and not an individual work made up of separate panels, I would hope that it represents a fabric of our of people, of our history. And when I say our history I mean American history. And I would hope that a part of that link, it would be a link in the chain. I would hope so.

BT: I think that really answered our questions beautifully.

[break]

BT: Here some 50 years after its first exhibition, *The Migration Series* is going to speak again to yet another generation. And what is that legacy or message? What comes through this series? What do you hope comes through?

JL: The only answer I can give would be a general one that I have given, that our ability as human beings to always struggle, to meet challenges, to realize that through these challenges we grow, we develop. We make contributions. So it's a very broad statement. I would rather answer it in that way, but not break it down into illustrative comments. I think that could diminish the work itself, whatever you're talking about, parts of the work. That's my feeling.

[break]

BT: What do you see is the importance of *The Migration Series?* The importance of exhibiting *The Migration Series* today?

JL: I think the importance of seeing *The Migration Series* exhibited today, if I were asked that question, I would say there are two answers to that. One is a very personal one, and that after some 50 years this work is still being looked at, it's still being appraised and evaluated—that's personal. And in that way I think it's a success. The other answer would be that by a major museum selecting to exhibit this work, is a compliment and an honor. So I see those two answers.

BT: And for today's audience coming to see *The Migration Series?*

JL: My hope is that audiences viewing this series will look at it in two ways, the content as being a major movement, part of American history, a very major part of American history. Each person who would make up the audience would bring to it his or her own experience, as to the interpretation of the various panels; I would hope that that interpretation would not by a negative one, I would hope it would be a positive one. Whatever that audience, as a group or individually, would interpret it.

I've often been asked: what did I want to say in this series? It was not one of pessimism or dejection or loss of hope. I wouldn't have done it otherwise; I can't see myself doing that. So I hope in all that my reason for doing it was one of expressing a certain struggle, which out of that struggle can come some beautiful things. It can mean growth, development, it can mean a contribution. And that's what I would hope the implication of the series [would be] if we are speaking in terms of content. In formalistic terms, I hope that it would be a contribution to the creative process in general. By that I mean I would hope that artists and art students would appreciate it not only for its content, but appreciate the series in formalistic terms.

BT: Okay, then I will just say could you describe the vitality of the times, the late '30s and 1940, which became the context for your creating *The Migration Series*, could you describe that vitality?

JL: You know in retrospect I think—well I don't think, this has been stated many times by writers and people who weren't even born yet evaluating that period—it was a period of vitality, much energy, much creativity. One of the most creative periods in our country's history if we think of it in terms—well I think not just, I started to say in terms of art but I think in many areas: engineering, the building of dams, many of these vast programs that came into being in that time. So I guess it's a good lesson of where you have a great trauma, a great trauma this would have been a depression, that again can be the struggle thing, out of that can come some very good things and things that have developed that we are feeling today, many of us, not myself, but many of us who weren't born yet are benefitting by the kind of programs that were established through the Roosevelt administration at that time.

It seeped down—or up, down I guess however you would say it—to people like myself who might not have had the experience of developing visually as I did or maybe someone else musically or in dance or theater. These various centers that were established throughout the country to get people work. They were the arts centers, arts plural, so if we were interested in dance, theater, music, even writing you could go into one of these centers free of charge receive direction and instruction in whatever discipline or area you were interested in. Many of us did—I was one of the fortunate ones in that I went into the Harlem Arts Center and received this direction, encouragement, and motivation that enabled me to reach one of the high points of my creative life which was *The Migration Series*—that came out of that. So we all benefitted and these benefits can only be—some of them are so far removed we don't even realize what came out of that period. But it was a great period, the energy, the creative vitality. And you go around now to some of the post offices and you see some of these murals are still there. Murals that were done in the '30s. Some of these murals unfortunately have been destroyed or been covered up for various reasons, some were thought to be, even at that time, too pornographic or too political and they have been covered up. Some have been completely destroyed. Many of the easel works or portable works can't be found, but even with that I guess destruction or whatever you might call it, good things came out of that, very good, excellent things. And we might forget that out of that I think the museums, many of them had a different attitude toward their philosophy and the community as a whole. When people were invited in to the museum, people that might not have been invited in or welcomed, I should say welcomed, at other times.

Our poster project, which did posters of the various—what was going on in theater. The index of American design, which cataloged the folk music, writing about the states and the areas and the making a statement about what was happening in Georgia or what was happening in the Carolinas, in Florida, you see. So it just wasn't the art, it was an awakening and a sensitivity as to what we had contributed as a people, what we were contributing, and what we hoped to contribute in the future, which is now. So I'm only a speck, I'm only a small part of [people] that benefitted from this period.

To our parents, it's a much more, maybe a much more traumatic experience because they had known a better life. But I grew up in a period, where I had no relative way of guessing what was the '20s like. So I grew up in a period where there was government support and private support and I still think we need both. I think we need the government support because it is broader, it has a broader meaning. We need the private support because it will support things that agrees with it in concept and philosophy, but we need both. And I think as long as we have both, if we can have both, if that can happen, I think we can have another great period. We might, I want to say here, we might be having that period now, but we are so close to it that we might not realize it. There may be great things happening, which, you know, we don't see, you don't see the forest through the trees, so it could be happening now too. I'm not saying that everything was rosy then. There was a struggle going on, there was a fight against the pink slips, people being laid off after 18 months. Could you satisfy the welfare requirements in order to be given work on we called it the Project. See there were all of these problems, but despite that that was a struggle that breeds and seems to encourage growth and development and that's what happened in this country.

BT: You want to restate the fact that your work was published before it was exhibited. It was published in November and exhibited in December.

JL: Yeah, what I wish to say here, I think I mentioned a moment or so ago, how I felt about my work being exhibited. It was a wonderful thing to have my work exhibited for the first time outside of the Harlem Community in a major art gallery. Now the other very important fact was that one of the most prestigious publications in the country, *Fortune* magazine also published 26 of the 60 *Migration* panels from *The Migration Series*, a beautiful publication, beautiful illustrations, and imagine that me thinking six months prior to that time that I would have 26 of my works published in this prestigious journal. It was published November 1941 about a month before the show opened officially at the Downtown Gallery, which was Edith Halpert's gallery. And that was a wonderful honor, a great recognition for me, and I'm sure that publication now is a collector's item and one that I will always treasure and always value. I think the thing that too—as I talk here and try to explain things—are many of the people who helped me and contributed to my growth and development, and in thinking of *Fortune* magazine, I think of Debra Calkins, who was, I don't know what her official title was on *Fortune* magazine—

BT: Assistant Art Editor.

JL: Assistant Art Editor of *Fortune* magazine and she was a very close to Edith Halpert. They both had a very high respect, one for the other, and I think all these things coming together made it possible for *Fortune* to publish my *Migration Series*.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE FIVE]

JL [reading his original captions for *The Migration of the Negro* (subsequently renamed *The Migration Series)*]:

1) During the World War there was a Great Migration North by Southern Negroes.

2) The World War had caused a great shortage in Northern industry and also citizens of foreign countries were returning home.

3) In every town Negroes were leaving by the hundreds to go North and enter into Northern industry.

4) The Negro was the largest source of labor to be found after all others had been exhausted.

5) The Negroes were given free passage on the railroads which was paid back by Northern industry, it was an agreement that the people brought North on these railroads were to pay back their passage after they had received jobs.

6) The trains were packed continually with Migrants.

7) The Negroes who had been part of the soil for many years was now going into and living a new life

in the urban centers.

8) They did not always leave because they were promised work in the north. Many of them left because of Southern conditions, one of them being great floods that ruined the crops and therefore they were unable to make a living where they were.

9) Another great ravager of the crops was the boll weevil.

10) They were very poor.

11) In many places because of the war food had doubled in price.

12) The railroad stations were at times so over packed with people leaving that special guards had to be called into keep order.

13) Due to the South loosing so much of its labor the crops were left to dry and spoil.

14) Among the special conditions that existed, which was partly the cause of the Migration, was the injustice done to Negroes in the courts.

15) Another cause was lynching. It was found that where there had been a lynching the people who were reluctant to leave at first left immediately after this.

16) Although the Negro was used to lynching, he found this an opportune time for him to leave where one had occurred.

17) The Migration was spurred on by the treatment of the tenant farmers by the planter.

18) The Migration gained in momentum.

19) There had always been discrimination.

20) In many of the communities the Negro press was read continually because of its attitude and encouragement of the movement.

21) Families arrived at the station very early in order not to miss their train North.

22) Another of the social causes of the migrants' leaving was that at times they did not feel safe, or it was not the best thing to be found on the streets late at night. They were arrested on the slightest provocation.

23) And the Migration spread.

24) Child labor and a lack of education was one of the other reasons for people wishing to leave their homes.

25) After a while some communities were left almost bare.

26) And people all over the South began to discuss this great movement.

27) Many men stayed behind until they could bring their families North.

28) The labor agent who had been sent South by Northern industry was a very familiar person in the

Negro counties.

29) The labor agent also recruited laborers to break strikes which were occurring in the North.

30) In every home people who had not gone North met and tried to decide if they should go North or not.

31) After arriving North the Negroes had better housing conditions.

32) The railroad stations in the South were crowded with people leaving for the North.

33) People who had not *yet* come North received letters from their relatives telling them of the better conditions that existed in the North.

34) The Negro press was also influential in urging the people to leave the South.

35) They left the South in large numbers and they arrived in the North in large numbers.

36) They arrived in great numbers into Chicago, the gateway of the West.

37) The Negroes that had been brought North worked in large numbers in one of the principle industries, which was steel.

38) They also worked in large numbers on the railroad.

39) Luggage crowded the railroad platforms.

40) The Migrants arrived in great numbers.

41) The South that was interested in keeping cheap labor was making it difficult for labor agents recruiting Southern labor for Northern firms. In many instances, instances they were put in jail and were forced to operate incognito.

42) They also made it very difficult for migrants leaving the South. They often went to railroad stations and arrested the Negroes wholesale, which in turn made them miss their trains.

43) In a few sections of the South, the leaders of both groups met and attempted to make conditions better for the Negro so that he would remain in the South.

44) Living conditions were better in the North.

45) They arrived in Pittsburgh, one of the great industrial centers of the North, in large numbers.

46) Industries attempted to board their labor in quarters that were often times very unhealthy. Labor camps were numerous.

47) As well as finding better housing in the North, the migrants found very poor housing conditions in the North. They were forced into overcrowded dilapidated tenement houses.

48) Housing for the Negroes was a very difficult problem.

49) They also found discrimination in the North although it was much different from that which they had known in the South.

50) Race riots were very numerous all over the North because of the antagonism that was caused between the Negro and white workers. Many of these riots occurred because the Negro was used as a strike breaker in many of the Northern industries.

51) In many cities in the North were the Negroes had been overcrowded in their own quarters they attempted to spread out. This resulted in many of the race riots and bombing of Negro homes. 52?

52) One of the largest race riots occurred in East St. Louis.

53) The Negroes who had been North for quite some time met their fellow men with disgust and aloofness.

54) One of the main forms of social and recreational activities in which the migrants indulged occurred in the church.

55) The Negro being suddenly moved out of doors and cramped into urban life contracted a great deal of tuberculosis. Because of this the death rate was very high.

56) Among one of the last groups to leave the South was the Negro professional who was forced to follow his clientele to make a living.

57) The female worker was also one of the last groups to leave the South.

58) In the North the Negro had better educational facilities.

59) In the North the Negro had freedom to vote.

60) And the migrants kept coming.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE SIX]

JL: Well, at this stage we've come to one of the most ambitious projects of my career, and that is *The Migration Series*. And I'm going to try to anticipate your interest and talk about things that I feel you might be interested in, and how I came about doing *The Migration Series*, how it was developed, how that series differed from previous series where I dealt with one hero or heroine and her or his contribution to our society.

Well let's start with *The Migration Series*, I think that's what we want to do. This was always a fascinating subject for me. I grew up the son of migrants. We were on our way, my mother and father were on their way North when I was born in Atlantic City, New Jersey, so at the very beginning of my understanding of communication with words I was very much aware of this movement which took place starting right after World War I and continuing on through the late ’30s. You know as these things are, there is no cut off point, it surges and then it subsides and this was the Migration. I would say the peak of the Migration was probably in the 1920s and 1930s, it reached its peak. I would hear my parents talk about another family coming, another family just arriving and the neighbors, the families who had been there a few years before contributing to their arrival by giving them clothing and things of that sort.

I've selected a few paintings here which I have tried to—in working the 60 panels, in painting them I've tried to do my impression of what the Migration was. And the first painting, the one we are looking at now, deals with three of the major centers the migrants arrived in, Chicago, New York, St.

Louis, and I tried to show the excitement, the crowds, the tension, through the use of color, through the use of shapes, forms—I started to say texture but we don't see much texture here—and I try to get a surge of movement in this particular work. The overall title of the work by the way is, "The migrants kept coming." And I don't know if I can say any more about this particular painting, but I hope as we move on to give a different statement to each work so we can move onto that.

BT: Could I interject a question when you were talking about form and texture, could you talk a bit about the medium and say what you liked about or the fact that the medium itself, the tempera, reinforced the pattern and the matte finish of the tempera.

JL: Well the medium is casein tempera, which is matte. I've always worked in a water media, and tempera is a water media, water solvent and I've always worked with that. I'm having a wonderful learning experience here by the use of a relatively new media. I had, I think, two other works, previous works, the Harriet Tubman and the Frederick Douglass work were both egg tempera, which gives a slight sheen to the surface. It's a very beautiful medium. It's very translucent, the casein medium is opaque whereas the egg medium is more or less translucent, and we build up by overlays not putting it on in thick layers. If you're not used to, if you are used to working in oil, it's a very difficult medium to adjust to. I don't work in oil and I think I have found the perfect medium, the watercolor medium, the water media, rather, for my temperament; and it's just a beautiful media as all media are if you find a medium that fits your temperament, it's very beautiful. It's like the violin and the piano, where as you can play the same piece, but it's different because you are working with a different instrument. So I'm stuck with this [tempera], I like it.

[Number 11 of *The Migration Series*] is a good example probably of the texture, the use of texture, of not closing everything up but letting it come through as I move my brush, sort of a dry brush technique over certain parts of the board. I always use this to point out to students certain compositional aspects. I like the very strong vertical movement in the center of the work, in contrast to the very strong horizontal movement, and I think it gives it a tension, it gives it a pull, and I feel that for me at that time at that time it was a very successful work. The symbolism of course represents a degree of basic need, of food, it's what we call in certain cultures, our culture, fat back, it's strickalean, strickafat, and so many people throughout our country live on this substandard. Notice I say here "of our country" because I don't think this is particularly Southern. We have poor people throughout the country so it's not just a Southern phenomenon, it's a national phenomenon, and of course with the migrants I guess it's most prevalent throughout the South because that is where most of the migrants came from, so that's this particular work.

BT: You are a painter of the American scene. You deal with the life that is around you. You draw from what is real, and many times today you've talked about, "Well, that wouldn't be real," you would say, "That wouldn't be honest," and talking about realism and being concrete. Yet your style, there is an interesting combination of dealing with subjects from reality, but using metaphor and abstraction, pattern and abstraction to compliment the metaphor in your narrative. And I just thought that you might want to characterize your style as you go through, that yes you're using these shapes and forms to depict certain subjects and something real or concrete, but actually your style is quite abstract and modern, I think expressive, expressionistic.

JL: Expressionistic, yes.

[break]

BT: Number 6.

JL: Number 6 represents a train, a coach in which people are riding partly asleep napping, and it's a long ride. People took buses, it could be a bus, it could be a train, and it's a long arduous ride from where these people came. I tried to create a staccato like rhythm over and over and over again [through] the shapes as they move. I have been most fortunate and I'm so glad I've drawn on this, [lacking?] a certain kind of geometric composition in contrast to an organic composition. I built on that, I built on the geometry, and I love it. I love the mystery of it along with the figurative element and the manipulation of color, the manipulation of value, of texture and throughout the series I tried to repeat this throughout. I guess my thinking at the time was to create a continuity. I'm dealing with one work not 60 works, although there are 60 panels I really feel that I am dealing with one and that is why I developed the work as I did. Not finishing each panel but finishing using a color—one color and moving through the 60 panels going back to a color moving through—and I adopted this method because I felt it would hold the series together as one work. The size of the panel, each panel is 18 by 12 inches, and so it's the same size, some are vertical, some are horizontal, so my thinking was at the time that if they were shown as a unit that this three verticals one horizontal, three horizontals one vertical would give it a certain interest, a certain rhythm, and I tried to maintain that approach that process throughout the series.

BT: Number 9.

JL: This image is the boll weevil. Up until 1941 when we were married I had never been into the deep South. My mother told me that when she was a child her mother and father took her to Virginia, which is not the deep South but it is Southern in culture, and a very dynamic part of our American culture, and her grandmother, her mother took her on a farm. So when Gwen and I were married one of the first things we did after *The Migration Series*, I wanted to see and experience an urban Southern community. We selected New Orleans because it sounded very romantic and we had heard so much about it, and then since Mardi Gras had been suspended at that time because of the war, we decided to go to a rural community and that rural community was Virginia, Lenexa. And my mother had told me that I had distant relatives there. I wrote asking them if they had the facilities to—could we come there and so on. They wrote back and they invited us and we rented a room. I make this statement to say that I had never seen a boll weevil. I had never seen cotton. To this day I don't think I've seen cotton, so I had to improvise, I had to improvise a bug or what I thought a boll weevil was, maybe I looked it up—I like the design, I liked the design element. That's how this particular work evolved like many of the works here. So I was far removed from the culture I knew, but yet I was very close to it through my mother and through her friends. So there's a paradox here being close and yet far away, because my culture, although it's not Southern, although it's Northern (urban Northern is Southern), because my background, my family's background, the friends of my family were all Southern in culture, food everything else. So this is the boll weevil. I enjoyed doing this because it's rather organic in development, much different than some of the other compositions. So I, well, I enjoyed doing all the works of course, but again it gave me something different to work toward.

BT: Jake do you want to say anything about that, the song or make reference to that at this point?

JL: Yeah, there's a famous folk song and I think one of the folk singers that's made it most famous is Ledbetter, Huddie Ledbetter, and he talks about the boll weevil, and he's a famous, he's dead now, famous twelve-string guitarist, and think many of our folk singers have. It's a part of the American folklore the boll weevil, and, it [the song] tells about the destruction of this little bug. I can't paraphrase it because I don't remember it, but it is quite a haunting melody and it tells about the power of the boll weevil and how it has influenced the economy of a region, and the economy of the area where South is king or had been king and is king. So, although I had never seen it, I didn't know anything about it, but by these stories or by these songs and as projected through the songs of the folk singers this painting evolved, came out.

BT: Number 15.

JL: This has been one of the symbols of our experience, and I say "American experience" now, I'm not just talking about a Black experience or a Negro experience, but it has been. Some paintings you can't talk about they're so subjective, they're so—if you try to talk about them it diminishes the visual element and this is one of those particular works. I wanted to create a work that was very sparse. You'd see it immediately, the dark the light values, very high in contrast, the warmth of the red. I can talk about it in those formalistic terms, but in content I can't discuss this work because it's too subjective and we've experienced this—and when I say "we" I'm talking about the American people as a whole have experienced this—it's a part again of our American heritage, American history.

BT: Would you think it's safe to characterize it as, or fair to characterize it as—when you say an experience would you want to color that with your impression? Would you want to say that is a grave injustice, a powerful—

JL: I wouldn't want to say that, but I would want to say that it's a lynching. It's a lynching and I think we all know what a lynching is—it's a trial and conviction without a court. It's a way that people can vent their problems or frustrations or their illnesses on others, and they can take it out on others in this manner. As I say this is so much a part of our country. I want to say here that we also had very good things going on in our country, and this is one of the very negative aspects of that thing.

BT: Number 19.

JL: This represent the segregation. It's a symbol of segregation in this instance the black the white separated, and sometimes these separations were just a cord, a string running through a schoolroom when this was breaking down, just the idea that there was this boundary, there was this movement. I remember the signs throughout the South how they would move back and forth, white, black, and as the bus would drive through one area of the city that was predominantly black that sign would move forward saying that blacks can start their seating here two or three seats in back of the bus driver; when it moved through a predominantly white community it was the other way around. You know it's amazing through all of these problems and things that we have, there's always a degree of humor when we can get away from it and see it in those terms. Now here it was very important just to have that psychological element that said, "You're and I'm here," it was tragic sure but along with that tragedy was a great deal of comedy. And here it's amazing when I look at this, one represents a white, one represents a black, they're both women but except for the color they look exactly the same. They're dressed the same way, they have the same kind of coats, the same kind of hats, apparel, the landscape is the very same. So what's the difference? It's a psychological barrier and this is the way I notate it.

BT: What was the metaphor for the barrier in this panel?

JL: For the what, oh the separation is that what you mean?

BT: What did you use as the barrier or the metaphor?

JL: Oh, the separation, the thing that separated the element, that separated just like the cord that I mentioned separated people, here it was the river, the stream—that was the separation. It was much more formidable than the cord, much more a sense of reality.

BT: Number 22.

JL: That represents the law as certain people experienced the law. And when I say “certain people” I mean the black or the Negro, these terms become sort of interchangeable; I think now we use mostly black or Afro American. And the feelings about the law, what does the law mean to me, just thinking in terms of the law, how do I relate to the law and how does the law relate to me? This again becomes a part of a people and when I say a “people,” the Afro-American people, so much a part of our lives. If not directly experiencing the law (which in most situations could be very violent), there was an indirect contact with the law. We didn't always feel this directly, but it became so deep in our psyche that we always felt that the law was against us. It was our enemy, rather than being our protector it became the enemy. It kept us in bondage; it helped to keep us in bondage. It was an instrument of the more powerful elements of our society to maintain this suppression. And here we see the handcuffs, we see the bars which represent the jail, and we see three figures.

BT: So these people are not going North and the idea of creating barriers here, visual barriers—

JL: That's right, to keep them—that market in the Southern region to show that there were certain elements in opposition to this freedom to make this choice and to intimidate those who were thinking or moving or thinking of moving into another area, and the police or the law became a part of this instrument, and this is what this represents.

BT: Visually what keeps you from moving, how are these barriers expressed formally in this painting?

JL: Physically—

BT: In this painting as artistic elements in this composition, do you see certain elements serving, becoming metaphors for that barrier?

JL: Yes. I use the barrier here.

JL: The metaphor here happens to be the bars. I think you would be interested in knowing, well what keeps people from moving, what keeps people from doing certain things. Again, that’s a symbol and I use the symbol of bars here because I was raised and I was taught to fear certain elements of society—if not fear them consciously, but then surely be aware of them. I remember in Philadelphia I didn't realize what was going on, we lived in an area and I'd hear the screaming and I realized that much later there was a prisoner probably being beaten, and I can remember that to this day. And I never mention this it hardly comes up, but it stays on my mind, I think about it. And so there is this barrier, and all this does not have to be a physical barrier it can be a mental barrier, a person looking at you and this is what certain groups especially Afro American groups in this country were in many cases just intimidated by a look, it didn't have to be a physical or concrete barrier, you go to a railroad station and you see a policeman there or somebody representing the law, just looking at you and you lived in this community, well you may have been reluctant to go and buy a ticket because you couldn't escape this kind of suppression that was more psychological, but could be stronger than any physical barrier, and that's what I tried to do here.

BT: Number 25.

[BEGINNING OF TAPE 7]

JL: I think this is one of several paintings, very few, maybe two or three where we don't have a figure, a family, a father, a mother, children. It's one of the few paintings in the series and it represents emptiness. And when you think of leaving, when I think of leaving some place, of people leaving—and I'm sure many people throughout the community, in this instance the Southern community felt this both black and white especially in the smaller communities where the blacks numerically predominated the area—there was this feeling that affected the economy, affected the social relationship that people depended on. And when I say this I mean both groups depend on a certain kind of social relationship that was very, very structured and very strong and that structure was beginning to crumble, and this symbol is my interpretation of that crumbling social or work structure or ethic or whatever you might call it. I've often times heard and I think it's true that in the South (as I mention the South, I don't want to bash the South by any means), but the races are very close despite all the friction and problems. There was a closeness there that did not exist in many areas in other parts of the country and I can understand that. I think this is one of the problems that became so deep psychologically, it was a very close kind of structured society, each depended on the other. See, you didn't have the situation to that extent in the Northern communities. So this particular painting represents an emptiness, a void that has occurred or [is] about to occur, and in the technical terms I begin to explore the medium. I explored more by using a dry brush technique over the surface. I've become very fascinated with the element of linear perspective, moving deep into space not only through value, but through the manipulation of the linear or the line. The contrast of the very dark area of the window, I guess this could almost represent people moving out into an unknown situation, unknown psychological situation, moving from something that's protective into something where you don't know what's out there, what exists, and I think that's the reason for the dark color value.

BT: This is number 27.

JL: This represents a station either a bus terminal or a train terminal, more than likely a bus terminal because the buses were less expensive to travel by than a train, and it represents a family, maybe a family that's split, part of the family being left behind while another part of the family, the patriarch or the father in this instance is leaving to go North to make room for the family, which might follow later. That great division between the vertical movement of the father, the man and the group seated on the other side of the panel, and there's this great gap. I think much of my work in looking at it again has a kind of a psychological element to it the way space is handled, the way color is [used], so it's not exactly a concrete, or not exactly an illustration of something. Someone else might look at this and read something else into it, but I would think the content here which deals with the black experience can only be interpreted in one way, a division, a separation and we're very much aware of that even from our ancestors being brought from Africa. One of the devices used was to separate, breaking up families, breaking up the tribe—we may not express it all in the same way but it exists, so this might be a metaphor for that experience.

BT: 31.

JL: This represents my interpretation of the urban community. You know, before I became conscious of my environment, or fully conscious, my first—I'll put it this way, my first consciousness of my physical environment came about when we made the move from Philadelphia to New York. I was 13 years of age and I was seeing what I call tall buildings, many of them, and tall to me meant six stories high. Tenements, fire escapes, and just blocks and blocks of geometric shapes, and I don't think I ever got over that feeling that—it wasn't a shock, it was a revelation. And I was always open, I played in open fields, I played marbles, and here we arrive in New York and kids were playing marbles in the gutters and you played the same games, but you were playing it on concrete and in between buildings, so there was not this openness. So there was this geometric kind of design and rhythm throughout that appeared over and over and over, and this is my—I didn't put it in those words then, but it was like a dance, like a musical composition that appeared over and over and over again—and this is my response to the migrants facing the big urban community. I would imagine someone looking at this would not associate—if they didn't know the story of the migrants—would never associate the migrants with this particular work, but it is a part of that series and I think its significance in formalistic terms in that it's so different in the handling of content than other images throughout the series. But I enjoyed doing it, as I enjoy doing most of my work, the placement of the various geometric shapes, squares, the colors, values, some very warm, some relatively dark in value and just moving, going back and forth. As I said I worked on the entire series, so I wasn't back and forth but in developing one color throughout then moving back, but I was able to retain that feeling throughout each panel and this is one of those panels.

BT: Do you want to say anything here about—in using your colors or laying down your colors, how you went from dark to light by naming, say, I would use a number through the whole series and then move to, ultimately move to yellow, going from dark to light.

JL: Yeah, well, that's what I did, I used the darker values, darker colors, again, to hold it together. I used these colors first. Many of these things are subjective. I can't say why the dark first, maybe the dark meant to me something negative, maybe it was that, so I can't always say because I have used from light to dark, this was used, many of it from dark to light. And I worked in this manner throughout in developing the 60 panels in order to hold it together as a unit, I never thought of it as 60 individual paintings, but as one work. So therefore in order to achieve this feeling, to carry it out, I thought it better to use one color at a time in developing the work rather than developing and finishing each panel, because I would feel different between the first work, I could feel different between the first work and 60th had I not developed this method of working, so that was my reason for that.

BT: 44.

JL: I think this represented well-being, it represented a new kind of a full stomach. If you had a job you could partake of these various goodies, and this represents the steak and a loaf of bread and the basics of life. This becomes a metaphor for that. So many of the migrants prospered by making this move, and I use this symbol to show this degree of prosperity. The meat and the bread—it's a very common symbol of well-being. Here you can see the texture, how the texture develops throughout using dry brush, sometimes in the background and other times using the brush that's opaque, putting the color on in an opaque manner.

BT: Do you want to say anything about being conscious of the border around each panel?

JL: Sure, it was part of the aesthetics. I don't know if each border varies between panels, but I would surely take that into consideration and I don't remember putting the border on, but I probably did since it's in the same technique and the same type of paint. And I probably used it to finish, to carry out—rather that carrying out the imagery to the very edge of the picture plane but stopping it—and that was my way of doing that.

BT: Number 45.

JL: I remember this exactly. It's moving into the steel town up of Pittsburgh, and you see the basket of plenty there, I think the people look rather, they've reached a destination, they have escaped certain kinds of desperations, and they have arrived in a goal where they hope to prosper, relatively speaking, not to become rich, but just to prosper, and become a part of the work force and to realize the American dream, become a part of that dream, so they arrive in the great industrial center of Pittsburgh. I show this by the manipulation of color—again you see the very dark colors and the light colors almost being equally divided, each supporting the other, appreciation for the lighter warmer values because of the dark colors, dark values and vice versa. The smoke coming out of the smokestacks are soft in treatment. Again, I think for me it's a successful work in a structure that's geometric, and I don't know what else I can say about that. It's a family.

BT: Do you want to say anything about picking out details? Like hats or particular forms that get repeated?

JL: Well, that's part of the composition, the picking, the use of certain forms, the use of certain color, the use of certain values and certain textures, repeat those. Also the attire, like if we think in terms of the hats, it becomes a symbol of how I knew people dressed, how they looked. The things they wore, and I was used to this. I use it over and over again in my paintings because it represents a certain kind of cultural symbol. And I use this symbol, hoping, again, to add further dimension to the content; and that's why I use that.

BT: Would it be fair to say you were attracted by certain shapes?

JL: Aesthetically, yes. Formalistically, yes. Here in this particular work I mention that the darker colors or values and the lighter warmer values were almost equally divided, but if we look at the work we see that some of the round shapes, the round forms throughout are equally divided to the geometric shapes in the background representing the factories, their geometric squares and rectangles, and the seats in which the people are sitting. The shades at the top of the picture plane are geometric. So I use these elements not only for psychological reasons but as part of a culture, as part of the way people dress, the way they're attired.

BT: Number 53.

JL: Well, this represents a more affluent element that had been in the North for a number of years. They were maybe offspring of the people who were freed slaves many, many years before the turn of the century, and this is not a new phenomenon—where people of the same racial or cultural background would often times look down on country people or they're not welcome. These people have become affluent, some of them have become successful professionals in their field. Now I don't want to give the wrong impression, some of these people were very supportive of the migrants coming, but there was an element always that did not, they were so far, felt so far removed from the rural communities that they considered it rough and uncouth and not having the educational background, and many times this took different forms. There was no association, and I think it's true of peoples in general and this is a metaphor for that the way that they are dressed, you can see that they're affluent, they don't have a need for the basics in life, and I use this as a metaphor for that.

BT: 54.

JL: This is the interior of a store front church, and when we use store front it's literal. Churches that would dot the black community and I understand other communities too, right off the street level and they were like store front churches and that's what they were. And people, many people, migrants, gravitated towards these kinds of churches because they were warmer, there was a greater contact with the minister and with the elders of the church than they found in the larger churches, the larger ethnic type churches. So they gravitated toward the store front churches, and there was a warmth there that they felt, they felt welcome. And they were very prevalent throughout the Harlem community, and I imagine throughout many, many communities throughout the Northern states where the migrants settled, and this represents that particular church.

BT: When we were in New York, Jake, you particularly picked out this painting, Number 54 as a particularly strong work that it would stand on its own. Could you talk a little bit about what makes this a very strong piece?

JL: Well, to me it represents a certain kind of a—I'm not dealing in symbols, well it's a big symbol of course—how can I put that it's so elusive. It represents something that people need. I'm not just talking about church now because they're in a church, but people need this kind of contact, one with the other, and you can get this in other ways in other forms too, but somehow the street corner church had this, gave support in a certain way. Now I don't mean support of bread and butter and milk, I don't mean that kind of support, but I mean the support of the, of your inner needs, and that's what I meant when I said it's one of the stronger works in the series. It's not an illustrative work; it's a work that does not illustrate anything, and I would hope it shows this feeling of "communal"—maybe that's the term I'm seeking, it's a communal-like experience. It's a thing that you just have to experience it, I guess to be a part of it, and this is, was a great need for the migrants. A great spiritual need and this was a way of survival for many people throughout their experience with the new world, this kind of spiritual need that was manifest in the street corner church. That was it.

BT: Do you communicate this in visual terms as well with the two upward thrusting lines in the composition, the way the figures are securely housed in the space. Does any of this relate?

JL: I don't think I thought of that in those terms, I think that's one of the reasons it's one of the most successful works. It's not illustrative in that way. Much of this is so "inner" that—you know you do certain things and you can't say why you do them because your whole life you've been building up to this. Certain things you can talk about, but there are others that are so subjective that it's difficult to say why certain things develop in a certain way at a certain time. But I think some of the works, the more successful works or works that I think are quite successful, all have that subjective characteristic which I like very much.

SS: Number 52.

JL: Well this represents, it's a metaphor for a clash of cultures, a violent, violent clash, which many times we experience today. Off and on we've always had that in our country and throughout the world we have it. And this represents that kind of violent turbulence where people are killed, beaten, just all kinds of things happening to them. And it's more than just a person involved in a confrontation; it becomes a group or groups involved in confrontation. It usually happens on a certain level, on the lower economic level where the needs become very similar, the need for sustenance, the need for jobs, the need for housing. And I think many times these elements are used one against the other, and it's used in various ways throughout the country. In the South it was used against the poor white farmer who was frightened, that somehow these people represented some sort of standard or was threatening their way of life. So you got the same thing in the North, only in a different way. It was manifest through the factories and through the living quarters and it's a very frightening kind of experience. We hear of these things happening today—clashes and people being used, frustrations—and I've been told our sociologists say these things happen many times in the worst of times when people are not satisfied with their lives, they're frustrated so they find some other outlet and unfortunately that outlet takes the form of certain kinds of violence and this is a metaphor for that.

BT: Number 58.

JL: This represents educational opportunity which the migrants did not have in the Southern communities and sometimes in the Northern communities. But there was always this star out there, there was always this hope of adding further dimension to your life. And people in my age group have benefitted from the migrants making this move and adding further to our quality and to our dimension and scope because they had the foresight to realize the importance of the element of education, taking advantage of it as much as you could and adding further to the quality of life. This represented a metaphor for that particular need, for that particular experience. I use the “two,” “three,” “four” moving up again as a metaphor for progress, and this is it.

BT: That's all.

[END OF TAPE SEVEN]