

Interview was conducted by Willard Watson on February 4, 2022.

BRAHM: If you could start with your name, age, and where you're from.

LB: LaKisha Blount, I'm 43 from Murphy originally.

BRAHM: Where's Murphy at?

LB: Murphy is, as far west in the state, as you can possibly go, like they say from Murphy to Manteo.

BRAHM: Yeah, that's great. Well, I'm up in the Northwest corner of the state up here and Blowing Rock and Watauga County and everything. So yeah. Far northwest as you can go without hitting Tennessee or Virginia.

LB:

There you go. There's a Murphy connection to the Junaluska community of Boone.

BRAHM: What's that connection?

LB: So, Texana, who was my third generational great aunts. So she left a part of the Robbinsville Cherokee area, came to Murphy, and founded the community. And then when she turned 18, she met her husband. And he took her back home, which was, he was from Blowing Rock or a little community outside of it, but his home was destroyed. So he along with Texana, his then wife and other mutual friends. So between 18 and 21, a group of folks got together and created the Junaluska community.

BRAHM: That's wonderful. That's a cool connection. Yeah. I'm familiar with Texana just from Ann Miller Woodford's work with *When All God's Children Get Together*.

LB: Yes.

BRAHM: So, how long have you been making art?

LB: Gosh, I'd say since I was 21, really, I dabbled in it. I had a great summer camp teacher who exposed me to it and she got me to fall in love with, with just creating, but I didn't actually invest in myself as an artist until 21.

BRAHM: Now, do you have any formal training or background training as an artist?

LB: I do. So, I have a BFA in graphic design, and I did some photography, painting -- focusing in photography, but I ended with graphic design.

BRAHM: And, do you have a preferred medium to work on?

LB: Oil. Yeah. Give me oil all day. Oil sticks, oil markers, just oil paints and a pallet knife. I'm happy.

BRAHM: Yeah. Is there something about oil that you're really attracted to?

LB: I like how complex it is. Yeah. That's what I like.

BRAHM: Yeah. And it's difficult to work with. It takes forever to dry and hard to get out of your clothes or anything.

LB: Yes. Clothes, furniture, the walls. Yeah. I love it though.

BRAHM: Yeah. It's so rich and vibrant. Now, do you have, is there like a favorite type of work, uh, or a scale that you like to work on?

LB: I prefer big, which to me is like two feet by three feet and larger.

BRAHM: Okay. So have you had any kind of important teachers along the way? You mentioned a summer camp experience, but there've been others that have really influenced you on your journey as an artist?

LB: Fitz-Allen was the best teacher I've ever had. She was great. And then I had some influential professors in college, but I would say she had the most impact on just being creative, being confident in being creative. I'm completely blanking on her first name. She was an art instructor out of Silva, Jackson County. Yeah, she was fabulous.

BRAHM: So does anyone in your family, or is anyone else in your family, an artist or a painter or anything like that?

LB: No, in the genealogy, we've had some, instrument makers, a lot of builders, a lot of craftsmen, but not so much a painting -- quilting, but you know, you're talking about functional traditional crafts. So that was not considered an art form, but just a way of life.

BRAHM: You mentioned like a pallet knife. Are there any specific tools that you use when you create?

LB: Yeah, just, you know, brushes and a pallet knife, but I mainly will paint with that. I love to, layer, and that's the beautiful thing with oil. Oil will stay on the canvas. And so you can layer and layer and then scrape that off. And, you get the remanence of what was once there, which with me, that speaks a lot, because I'm really big on community and family history. And so you have these remanents of, of these people based on their stories and, uh, what they've left behind. So kind of like that paint that you strip off, you see the past, but then you layer on top of it and keep building upon what was already there. Yeah.

BRAHM: That's powerful. And then yeah, as you know, whenever you scrape away, it's still, you don't take away everything that you applied, you know. So then you create that

there's more texture to it and the layering there, and it really creates something new.

LB: Yes.

BRAHM: And then, do you remember when you decided that you were like, I'm going to be an artist?

LB: Yes. It was 2012. right after my dad died, I was the assistant program manager of the John C. Campbell Folk School. So I was running the daily operations. And all of these incredible, amazing people that were coming in from all over the country would stay for a week, teach their craft, and how happy they were. And not once did I hear anyone of them say, well, *"it's not about you liking your job. It's about you having a job."* They loved what they did. And I was so envious. So, I quit. I quit because I wanted to do what they were doing. And so, I cashed out my 401k -- worst decision I've ever made. That's another story. And I, I traveled for a little bit, but I mainly just holed myself up on the mountain and I painted for a good 10 months straight.

BRAHM: Let's see. So do you teach art, or have you ever taught anyone?

LB: I have taught. It was just, you know, two times. It was a little workshop, which was fun. I'm somehow being asked to do one or two teaching courses this year. So I don't know, I may like it. It may be fun.

BRAHM: Yeah. You know, it's cool, like you've got your, your style and what, and your following of like how you make, right? And so now it's kind of almost like full circle where you started out at the folk school, right? And facilitating these classes. And then now you're able to go places and then start sharing your craft.

LB: Yeah, that's really cool.

BRAHM: So what does art mean to you?

LB: Hmm, it means expression. It means history, documentation, freedom. There's no right or wrong. It is. It literally is what it is. Or it could be absolutely nothing. It's whatever you want it to be. That's what it means to me.

BRAHM: That's great. And the images I've seen of your work, it definitely that gets conveyed through it. And I think it's really cool how some of your paintings I've seen you incorporate your family history into it. I'm just thinking about the painting *Ah Shay* and the story behind that. And so that's really cool that you're able to bring, you know, yourself and your history into your artwork and then kind of create larger conversations around that.

LB: Yeah, she was one of my favorite. And then I think about the grandmother, who is kind of based around and what she would say if she saw that today, I think she would kind of flip on one hand. I don't know if you know the story behind that.

BRAHM: Could you share it?

LB: Yes. So, my mother Siler, she was my great-grandmother's mother-in-law. So I remember my great-grandmother. She died when I was like 9 or 10. So she would tell the story about when she met my great grandfather. Now he was half -- Was he *half* Cherokee? Either half or full, I'm not exactly sure, but very fair skin. And his mother was full Cherokee, spoke Cherokee fluently. And so when, he brought my grandmother home, which they were neighbors, FYI. So it was much easier for them to build a relationship by being next-door neighbors. Anyway, he brought her home and said, "Mom, this is who I want to marry. We love each other," blah, blah, blah. And she pulled out a brown paper bag. And she had a thing for dark skin, a thing against it. And it wasn't in a malicious or spiteful manner. It was a form of safety and protection. If you were darker skinned, you, during that time, would have received, harsher treatments, or just completely ignored. You know, you just didn't get a fair treatment. So she was looking out for him. Did not want him to be with someone who could not pass the brown paper bag test. They got married, so I guess she passed the test. But so the thought of her being painted. Jet black. Like she's absolutely beautiful. The painting is absolutely beautiful. But if she had seen that as a representation of herself, I think she would have absolutely flipped. She would have been fearful. She may not have even seen herself as attractive as beautiful. So that was interesting. Just for me, that was interesting.

BRAHM: Yeah. And it is a beautiful, beautiful painting and a way of kind of combining different elements of your heritage into it. And it just, that story just kind of reflects the types of like, institutional and internalized oppression that people have to deal with. And it's like something that she could not control at all. And then for it to be held against you, you know, that's just so wrong. And that, that's just wonderful that you're able to, you know, share that story through the painting and create something that's beautiful and powerful. And then kind of, you know, you flip that or it's like now it's like something that you can pride on, on to see that beautiful painting. And then I wanted to ask too, I saw that you were involved with the Black Lives Matter mural outside of the Asheville Art Museum. And so could you talk about your experience working on that and how that came about?

LB: Oh, certainly. Marie is a huge champion. What she's doing for black artists in western North Carolina and Georgia, just you know, Appalachia itself is incredible. We don't get seen, and I don't know if anybody knows that we exist, but by her asking, and recognizing us, and having this opportunity to paint, to put our voice in paint in a public setting was huge. It was absolutely huge. The setup was nice. It was nice for all of us to come into town because we're Western (Carolina University) alumni. We came in from all over the state, but it was a wonderful creative, protected bubble. So Marie lined it up to where all the artists were people of color. And our only focus was to get our voice out onto the pavement. And then there were allies around us. Protecting, you know, protecting the work, but also, engaging the outside public with conversation. So we did have a couple of people come up and say, well, you know, why are you putting this on the pavement? It's not about black lives, all lives matter. But then we were also getting, the allies were also getting a lot of nice questions of -- "The work is lovely. We see what's happening. It's very engaging. But I don't understand why is this so important, why is this a topic of conversation." And we didn't *have* to answer. Now,

as a black woman and as a black person, that was an absolute relief, that I don't, as a painter in the moment, I did not have to address anyone's hurt feelings, fragility, I did not have to protect and make sure that oh their feelings are not going to get hurt and they're okay. It was strictly about the voice. And again, that doesn't happen a lot, if at all. So, it was a really beautiful experience. And for me to be able to take my style, and how I interpret being in these mountains, and that was really special. It was really, really special.

BRAHM: Yeah. And it just the full mural, to see it, that I loved the aerial photos that were done of it. And you can, it just looks gorgeous with everything together. and then with the location right there, uh, with how kind of loaded that space. When I visited Asheville for the first time, and I went to that area, I was kind of shocked as like Dixie Highway, what is this? And then Vance Monument, you know, this giant obelisk right there in the middle of the town. And so then for you to be able to kind of transform that space into a place of power is very nice.

LB: You know, the DAR. We're flipping out, because it's the Daughters of the American Revolution, who made sure that these Egyptian-based obelisk "signs of power" were put all over the country. Now, what kind of forethought is that like? Ah, that's a whole another conversation.

BRAHM: Yeah. The loaded symbolism there.

LB: Yes.

BRAHM: And I'm kind of co-opting these forms, right? And then putting them on their head to like support, you know, these bigots. That's very, tough, right. But that's really cool that you're able to go into this space and create, and then to not have to justify your presence there, right? That's awesome.

LB: Uh, it was.

BRAHM: And so then the design, so you had the letter M. Could you talk about that design?

LB: Sure. So the whole purpose was, you have bits of a kin take cloth pattern on top of the mountain. So it's just a straightforward design graphically. I wanted to convey that we have always been in the mountains. We, you know, if you look at the mountains itself, it lines up with the African continent. I mean, you find similar plants, the same type of plant life that is in Africa specifically is only found here. Like that's not a coincidence. So I wanted to convey we've always been here. Always. No one thinks about black. I mean, the first thing I hear when people say, where are you from? And I'm like, Murphy. *There's black people in the mountains?* Yes. We've always been here.

BRAHM: Yeah. And then the fact that you can trace your family back to, you said 1741?

LB: 1841, and now, I'm finding more evidence of before that.

BRAHM: Yeah. And just the earliest, I mean, the earliest like Europeans to reach up to the Appalachian mountains were, Spanish Conquistadors and they brought enslaved people with them, right? So that even before there was ever an American, like the United States of America or the 13 colonies or anything, right? I think it was 1520 or something like that with de Soto's expedition. That he had people from Africa with him there so that, you know, it predates everything else. And, it's really kind of trying to correct that misrepresentation of the history or that eraser that's happened there.

LB: That's right.

BRAHM: Yeah. And it's just so interesting to me, just, you know, what we choose to hold onto as a culture, like as a society, right. What we choose to lift up. Right. And then what people choose to kind of brush away. That's one thing that is like invigorating about this project is that we're combining scholarship from different fields and showing that it's like, well, people have been here. As long as there have been people here, right? So, you know, that you just as much claim to this region as anyone else does.

LB: Yes.

BRAHM: And there was a powerful, one quote I liked from Marie in an article that was done about the Black Lives Matter mural was, she said, people start asking, "Oh, well there's black people. Well, what percentage?" You know, it's like, I don't want to talk percentages. It's like we exist, is trying to, like, now you're trying to, you know, Yeah.

LB: Yeah. Water it down. Yeah.

BRAHM: Yeah. And that's just really incredible. And then in like, learning that I've done and research and through this project is seeing that a lot of people that were brought here, enslaved people or skilled workers, because there were things like tannery mills or masonry places or mines that required skilled labor. It was like the plantation system did not exist in western North Carolina because there wasn't enough arable land for that. So then to, you know, it still is like denigrating the people and their skillset. And that, you know, these were trained skilled workers that were taken from their homes, because of the skills they had and brought to this area. And so I think that's just what y'all did. and Asheville was just beautiful and a great way to the kind of like shift some of the narratives and like start actually talking about what matters and how each letter had this such deep and rich symbolism to it.

LB: Yes. Everybody got to tell their story in their way.

BRAHM: And, just things like, I think, was it "R" red blood cells and like sickle cells as well, you know, in and another way that people get, you know, you think about not only existing, but also different ways of living and different ways of being, and some people like different things you have to deal with. And so just try --

LB: Or Rockies piece, the "A", where she had the banjo and, you know, iconic Appalachian instruments, but they all have African roots.

BRAHM: Yeah. And that's one thing that's really exciting to me about this work is that there's so many things that are iconic Appalachia, right. But that they have direct roots and African heritage where you can draw a straight line. There's no dots in there or anything. It's like, this is the evolution of this instrument or this art form.

LB: Yeah.

BRAHM: I think also about face jugs, right. The heritage of face jugs, and how it's been, co-opted where people just equate it with like white hillbillies, right.

LB: That's right.

BRAHM: And it's just interesting when you had these scholars come and start exploring this region in the like late 1800s, early 20th century, they were looking for remnants of the British Isles, right? They're looking for Anglo-Saxon heritage, pure unfiltered Elizabethan, English. And then when they encountered something that was contrary, they either misrepresented it or ignored it completely. I think a lot about the work of Cecil Sharp, who is a ballad collector and he explored far western North Carolina. And there are excerpts from his journals that he was told to go to a certain community, to get songs. And when he would get there, how upset he was, that the people there were black.

LB: Yes.

BRAHM: You know, and how he just ignored what they were doing, even though they had songs and dances and stories that are just as important, right. Or, iterations of songs that he heard elsewhere and misdescribed, right. One of the goals that we have for this project is to be able to make those connections for people and to show them that, you know, this is the heritage that we share together, right. And not only is it our shared heritage, but these are things that have happened that have either erased, you know, the African heritage for it or misrepresented it. And so just things from like the banjo and face jugs, or even to like, flatfoot dancing, these things that people think of, you know, as capital A Appalachian, right? That are actually, it's also a capital A African too.

LB: Yes. Well, I mean, it goes even all the way down to the food. What you think of Southern style cuisine is straight African. If you take, similarities of grains that are grown here but also, in Africa, the dishes are the same. Absolutely the same. Collard greens, red beans, and rice. You have couscous and rice, right? The gourds, I mean, when African women were brought over, their hair, our hair was braided up with seeds, right? So we brought over agriculture. Well, that's also why the women were forced to either shave to either their heads or no longer wear their hair in braids because they carried *life*.

BRAHM: Yeah, that's powerful. And, there's a great book that I read called *The Edible South*, and it's Southern culture through food. And it examines that and goes to show things like fried chicken, right? Well, there was like Guinea fowl and fried Guinea fowl in Africa. And then it was interesting hearing about, that after the emancipation, a lot of these white families were malnourished because they didn't know how to cook.

LB: That's right.

BRAHM: And then that was the, then all of a sudden, kitchens started being adjoined to the house instead of it being a separate cook shack. And just these, these ways that, are so important for our story as Americans and as what we consider our culture. Right. But these parts that seem to be almost intentionally left out, right?

LB: Yes. Very much so.

BRAHM: And so think, you know, it's just ways that we connect through expressing ourselves through the creative arts, like the visual arts or music, or cooking and things like that, this is really what makes life worth living, right. It's how we express ourselves and anywhere people gather, you know, we, we share these things with each other.

LB: That's right.

BRAHM: And, so I just love what you're talking about. I love what you're doing with your work and how you're able to tell these stories, and raise up your ancestors from a couple generations back and even further, you know, and make these connections for people.

LB: Yes.

BRAHM: And so then just the last question is, well I got two left. So, is making art part of your spiritual practice at all?

LB: Yes. Yeah, it for sure is. Because on days or I can go a block like a month or two without painting. And what I'm putting out, what I'm feeling is just so dark. Yeah. Painting is definitely a decompression as a way of processing is a way of taking any of these feelings, emotions, and putting them out, into a space that feels safe, safe to be heard, safe to be seen. It's kind of like the boundaries of the canvas is a hug, right? And it just, it holds all the pain or hurt in or whatever, whatever that emotion can be or is, it holds it in, but it holds it in a safe and respected space.

BRAHM: And then you create something sacred that others want to elevate and hang on walls, or you know.

LB: Well we want them to! Yes. Buy it, buy it.

BRAHM: So, uh, yeah. So do you sell 'em or exhibit your work in public?

LB: I do sell, but I have a disgruntled feeling towards galleries. I don't trust it. Anyway, so my selling is by way of interactions like this, you know, meeting people conversation. My work is, I liked my work. I did, my style is very unique, but, It's something else when you have the story along with it, the interaction. So I think I do better selling when I'm actually talking to someone, but I am not good at selling galleries.

BRAHM: Well, there's something loaded to that as well. and then it's like, most galleries are owned by old white folks, right. And then what's that mean? And then when they choose to sell your work, right. And what stories are they telling of your work when they sell it. That reminds me of an episode of the podcast Freakonomics that third recently. And it was like the economics of the art world. And they're talking about what happens when your work gets a high price at auction, and what does that mean for an artist. And one artist they interviewed, I'm blanking on her name right now, but she's a black woman. And her work focuses on black women and black women's bodies, right. And she said just the thought of her paintings being auctioned off sickens her, right?

LB: Yes. Yes. Oh man. That's definitely loaded right there. Yeah. It's just like another black woman bringing put on an auction block all over again. Yeah. Oh, but on the other hand, wouldn't that be an amazing performance piece in itself, it is kind of like Kara Walker, right. Have you seen, you're familiar with Kara Walker? So Kara Walker, does these ginormous cutouts, and she really puts the objectification of black women in your face to where you cannot escape it. You cannot ignore it, but she's never explored. She explored visually the auctioning off of a black woman, but to have a painting of a black woman, and then to have another, what a two-dimensional body to be sold again, that is a piece in itself.