

Kentucky Craft History and Education Association, Inc.

Interview with Lavon Williams

August 20, 2008

Interview conducted by Greg Willihnganz

WILLIHNGANZ: Thank you for giving us this interview. We appreciate it.

WILLIAMS: Thank you guys.

WILLIHNGANZ: It will help us. Okay. Can you, in a sentence or two, describe for me what it is you do? What type of work you do.

WILLIAMS: I'm a woodcarver.

WILLIHNGANZ: Woodcarver.

WILLIAMS: Woodcarver and a sculptor.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. How long have you been doing that?

WILLIAMS: I've been doing that ever since I was a kid, from the time I was about 16. Little bit earlier.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, did you grow up in this area? You were born here?

WILLIAMS: I grew up in Florida. I was born in Florida and my mother and father were divorced and then at the age of ten we moved to Colorado.

WILLIHNGANZ: I see. And, then, when did you get here?

WILLIAMS: I came here to, to go to school. I went to the University Of Kentucky.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. So, how long have you been here?

WILLIAMS: I've been here 30 years. Maybe 30 years.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. When you were growing up, how did you get into carving? What attracted you to it?

WILLIAMS: Well, the way I got involved with it was my brother. My brother was, probably the first person I had ever seen carve wood. He made little toy figures that he would play with. He made little wood trucks and boats, and little planes. And that was how I got interested in it, through him.

WILLIHNGANZ: And how do you do this?

WILLIAMS: No, no. I mean, I read a lot of books cause I like art, so, I studied art on my own. But mainly my biggest influence was my brother, you know, and his carvings.

WILLIHNGANZ: In school did you take art classes?

WILLIAMS: Not really. I took a few. A few, but not, it wasn't my primary focus at the time when I was young. I always drew and I always painted and I always did something on my own. But nothing, anything formal.

WILLIHNGANZ: And so when you got into college, you went to college, what was your major at UK?

WILLIAMS: I majored in Social Studies.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, and then you got a bachelor's degree or...

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Social Studies

WILLIHNGANZ: And then what did you do with your degree? What...

WILLIAMS: Not, not, I, I really didn't need my degree because from there I played basketball. So I went overseas for a few years. I played basketball in Europe and then I came back and I played basketball in Japan and then from there I spent a few years up in Chicago. I worked at a commodities market. Buying, selling commodities. And then from there I came back and I started, that's when I started art full-time. I traveled the country, did a few art circuits and you know just, you know, sold art all around the country.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, you were basically doing carving that you were selling at art fairs?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah. At that time I was selling, producing a lot of carving, little small, miniature stuff and I was selling, I was just selling my artwork. Just selling in different parts of the country and then I got involved with a few galleries, and a few agents, and that was how I got started, basically, really promoting my art and getting around the country.

WILLIHNGANZ: So when did you go full-time.

WILLIAMS: In about '84, about '84, '85 is when I really started full-time.

WILLIHNGANZ: And you've been full-time since then doing carving?

WILLIAMS: Doing carvings and also I, you know I work in Fayette County School System half of the day and the other half of the day I spend carving in the work room.

WILLIHNGANZ: What do you do at Fayette County Schools?

WILLIAMS: I work, I work over in the safe room at Morton Middle School. Just discipline, doing discipline. Just, you know, just, you know, just you know, kinda like, they come, they come to us before they go to the principal.

WILLIHNGANZ: I'm betting they don't argue with you much. (laughter—both)

WILLIAMS: Yeah, they do sometimes. But not really. They're good kids. They're good kids.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, so that's sort of your day job? The county school?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: And then you do this in your spare time, weekends and stuff?

WILLIAMS: No, I work everyday.

WILLIHNGANZ: You work everyday at this?

WILLIAMS: I carve everyday. . Even late into the night.

WILLIHNGANZ: How many pieces have you produced? Do you have any idea?

WILLIAMS: I really don't. (laughter--Williams))

WILLIHNGANZ: A couple hundred anyway?

WILLIAMS: I'd say a couple thousand.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow.

WILLIAMS: At least.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

WILLIAMS: At least, at least a couple thousand.

WILLIHNGANZ: As you do art, tell me something about how you work.

WILLIAMS: First I get the idea, well, basically get the idea. I do a theme, I might do two, two or three, two or three carvings from one theme. Like if I'm doing a dance theme, then I'll do three or four dances. If I'm doing a church theme, I'll do three or four, you know, different, different, different scenes within the church. You know, might move some figures around. And that's basically it.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, when you come up with these ideas for what you want to do, how do you, how do you put that onto, do you, on to the wood. Do you first draw a picture of it and think of it or do you photograph something that you want to carve or use as a motif?

WILLIAMS: I mean, kinda all those different ways, but mainly what I'll do is, I mainly draw on to the wood, so I'll put my carving on to, first I put, always before I do anything I put it in paper. So I always draw, I have a book and I always put my drawings down in a book first and then from that book I might, I might you know change some things here or there and then I put it onto the wood and once I get it on to the wood I'll study it for a while, look at it, and then I'll you know, see what my positive and negative spaces are. Depending on what I'm carving, if I'm carving a sculpture, the positive and negative spaces, if I'm carving a panel then I just make sure that my lines flow, you know the flow of my lines and then from there I start carving.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Do you work basically from your own conception and then sell what you can or does anybody ever buy you, pay a commission to you.

WILLIAMS: I get some commissions, but commissions, but, I don't take a commission unless its something I've already done. If I have something you've already seen or if its something, I might have a book or I might give you a few ideas of what I can do. But I never really sit down and try to do anything exact, exactly like this or exactly like that. Because its kind of boring for me after a while. You know I like to, you know, stretch the figures, move the figures, you know, just depends, you know.

WILLIHNGANZ: What kind of, what kind of message does your art carry?

WILLIAMS: It carries a message of hope, joy, and the biggest message always says welcome, come in, enjoy, you know, sit down and enjoy.

WILLIHNGANZ: You feel like it's important to you to make any kind of a social commentary statement, protest, or anything like that?

WILLIAMS: Not really. I mean, some pieces do, some pieces don't, you know. Some pieces in a subtle way, you know, might say this or that but not really, you know.

WILLIHNGANZ: Are any of your pieces historical in nature? Do they depict scenes from history or anything like that?

WILLIAMS: Some do. Some do. I did a series on like the cowboys. I did a series on the Buffalo Soldiers. I did a series on cowboys out West. And I also did a series on the Civil War.

WILLIHNGANZ: What sorts of pictures did you do from the Civil War?

WILLIAMS: Those were all, those were all standing sculptures. Like I did the army generals on horses. It was more, more like, it was mainly more like toys.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Maybe you can tell us some more about the pieces behind you a little bit. Like this oval piece over here.

WILLIAMS: This is, this is, this is a work I did for the National Black Theatre Festival. And this is the logo for the National Black Theatre Festival held in North Carolina. North Carolina. Winston Salem. Every two years they have, they have a festival, a theater festival where they invite companies from all across the United States and all across the world and they meet in Winston Salem. And this is the logo.

WILLIHNGANZ: That's a terrific logo.

WILLIAMS: Larry Leon Hamilton commissioned it, he passed away recently but he commissioned it, good close to 20 years ago.

WILLIHNGANZ: When did you do this?

WILLIAMS: I think I, well, I did it in '89.

WILLIHNGANZ: And then I noticed there's a face at the top that's sort of sideways.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, that represents the music in the theater. So that's the, that's the musician. The music of the theater. Also a guy playing a horn here. And then the two figures here are comedy and tragedy.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh wow. Interesting.

WILLIAMS: And then the romance of the theater are the two figures here and the woman underneath with her back to you.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh boy, I have, I am not seeing the woman, where's the woman?

WILLIAMS: The woman's here.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Oh, I see. And what's that hand at the bottom.

WILLIAMS: That the hand on her back, caressing her back.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, this is an interesting piece. How did you pick the oval for this?

WILLIAMS: Well, it wasn't my idea. The original piece was a square piece and it was Larry Hamilton's idea to make it into an oval piece. But when I made it into this oval the oval reminded him too much of a mirror so what he wanted was to be a shield, like a South African Shield and so, then this is the first piece, the next piece is made more like a shield, like an African, like a South African warriors shield. A (unintelligible) shield.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, tell us about this, this next piece over here.

WILLIAMS: This piece is, is called the educator and this is a teacher teaching a history lesson of African-American in the country and African-Americans in the south. And this is the mother father taking , taking the son to school.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, what is he holding? Is that a book?

WILLIAMS: He's holding a book.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, there's a lot of carving on the front of that book.

WILLIAMS: On, on the front of the book it gives, it gives a history of, of life in the South and also the history of the blues.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell me about that.

WILLIAMS: This, this represents the Blues. This represents the coming and going of the people through the South and the migration and this is the coming and going, the fish represents Christ and it also represent feeding the multitude. It also represents the coming and going of people from the North to the South.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, you use metal in there for earrings and whatnot?

WILLIAMS: Mmm, hmm. Mmm, hmm.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you do a lot of brining other things other than wood into you sculptures?

WILLIAMS: Recently I have. Recently I've started using, but I've been doing it for a while. And then the pencil, he's holding a pencil. Which is the instrument of, the tool of the student, is a pencil.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, you have, I assume this is the, the teacher up here? There's a lot going on that board that he's drawing on. What's going on up there?

WILLIAMS: He's giving like the history, he gives the history lesson here of, of African-Americans in the South and southern life so he's giving, this is the Blues lesson right here so you've got the music, you have, yeah, you have the coming and going of the people, you have the wisdom of the people, you have, again, you have these feet which means people are planted, are rooted in this place and can't be moved. It's just a history lesson that he's giving.

WILLIHNGANZ: How 'bout this, this piece here, the man in a red vest. What is he?

WILLIAMS: The red suit? He's a, he's....

WILLIHNGANZ: What do you call him, bellhop?

WILLIAMS: Bellhop, doorman.

WILLIHNGANZ: Bellhop doorman.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he's a door, he's a bellhop.

WILLIHNGANZ: When did you make that?

WILLIAMS: I made that about two or three years ago. No, it was about five years ago I'd say.

WILLIHNGANZ: And he hangs all the way to the floor.

WILLIAMS: Yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: And I noticed you put very elaborate links on his arms for his joints.

WILLIAMS: Mmm, hmm.

WILLIHNGANZ: Was he meant to be posed any or did you just think that was an interesting motif?

WILLIAMS: Well, well, it was just more of an interesting motif so he can be moved or he can be locked into place. Just interesting piece. Its just something I liked you know. It wasn't....

WILLIHNGANZ: Has he been hung anywhere else than where he is right now?

WILLIAMS: No, no.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Tell me about the drawing over there in the corner there.

WILLIAMS: This drawing?

WILLIHNGANZ: No, the other one there.

WILLIAMS: This one?

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah.

WILLIAMS: This one is a ballpoint pen.

WILLIHNGANZ: You do that with a ballpoint pen?

WILLIAMS: Mmm, hmm. Different ballpoint pens.

WILLIHNGANZ: Wow. And what is it showing us?

WILLIAMS: It's, it's the preacher, it's the preacher preaching. He's giving another history lesson. That's what these are based on. These are African-Americans within the ships so he's giving a lesson from the pulpit and he's talking about the ancestors we had, we had working through time and the coming and going of the people again and these birds are the last thing that people saw before they left Africa.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh.

WILLIAMS: And the greatest like, and so he's preaching, what they say, preaching the word.

WILLIHNGANZ: What is the significance of the figure at the top of that picture?

WILLIAMS: Which figure?

WILLIHNGANZ: The one in the red cap.

WILLIAMS: Again, that, those are, that's, that symbolizes working people. That symbolizes working people. You know, the ancestors who worked, who have, who've sacrificed so you can be where you are.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, you have long arms on this creature. How come you made them that long?

WILLIAMS: Just to give your eyes something to visually look at, just to pull you, to pull, so you get the feel and the movement of what he's saying.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Tell me about the, the cloth on the wall there.

WILLIAMS: The cloth on the wall there is just, is just, it's just a joyous piece of people dance, of people dancing and it was done for a children's program.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. So it seems like you have sort of a, I don't know if I'd call it a political agenda, but certainly a social, social message that you're carrying across.

WILLIAMS: At times. At times. These were just the works that are, you know, more, are more social in nature. That's what these are. That's what these works are.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

WILLIAMS: A lot of the works you see are the earlier works too, so a lot of was done 20 years ago, almost 30 years ago.

WILLIHNGANZ: Which ones were done 30 years ago?

WILLIAMS: This was, almost, I want to say about 25 years ago this work was done.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. What do you see yourself working on right now? What are you trying to do?

WILLIAMS: Right now I'm just working on some commissions. Working on some commissions from the church, a piece about the church for a woman in Florida and so basically I've been doing commission pieces. But recently been working on a scene from, another church scene from, for a guy, for a producer who does gospel music in Tennessee. So right now I'm just doing commission pieces.

WILLIHNGANZ: So when you get a commission like this, how does that work? They call you up and say, "We love your stuff. Do something for us...."

WILLIAMS: Yeah, yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do they give you any kind of guidelines in terms of what they'd like you to do?

WILLIAMS: Some, you know, that, they, they don't really. Like, the guidelines I do take, they don't tell me what to draw but they do tell me what they would like, what they would like and if I can do something that, that, that, if I could come up with something, you know like, I could come up with something that they want. And a lot of times, I don't really like to do commissions because commissions can be stressful. Because a lot of times, if you're not in the mood, like say, right now, if I wasn't in the mood to do the church then it'll be real difficult to do, say if I was in the mood to do a basketball series. It would be, it would be real tough 'cause I got to go back and do the church when I really want to do something else. So commission pieces are tougher.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, when you say, "do the church" does that mean you're actually doing a carving of a church?

WILLIAMS: Doing a carving of the church, not of the church but the feel and, like when I say, when I say like, I mean like, a part of the church, what makes the church up, like the choir. So right now I'm doing a choir in the church, singing.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

WILLIAMS: But, the woman who gave me the commission did not want preaching in the, in the scene, she just wanted the choir singing, so, and that was easy to do, you know, stuff like that.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, you go in to the actual church and listen to the choir and watch them and then base something on that?

WILLIAMS: At times, yeah. At times, but this was one I, this commission was based on a piece I had already done earlier. So I already knew kind of what I was going to do.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. And then do they tell you what size they needed.

WILLIAMS: (laughter—Williams) Yeah, they did. Well, it can only be a certain size. And one reason, it can be as big as you want it, but you want to make it, you don't want it too big because when you work on a panel, like if it's a big panel, and when you get a panel to big it has a tendency to barrel, what they call roll, so it can, so you only want it maybe four feet, it can be four feet as long as you want it. But it can't be too big. You don't want it too big. It gets out of proportion.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, these pieces involve multiple pieces of wood? Would that be accurate?

WILLIAMS: Mmm, hmm. Yes. Mmm, hmm.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, you use like plywood or something to paste those onto.

WILLIAMS: No, no you glue it together.

WILLIHNGANZ: You glue it together.

WILLIAMS: You glue it together.

WILLIHNGANZ: And then just hope it doesn't bend or warp or whatever.

WILLIAMS: Well, what you have to do, you have to put it in a frame another wooden frame so that keeps it from warping or barreling, you know, before, before it barrels.

WILLIHNGANZ: What kinds of wood do you use?

WILLIAMS: Anything. Mostly poplar though. And I carve, I carve sometimes oak, it just depends.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oaks got to be a lot harder to deal with than pine I would think.

WILLIAMS: It is. It's a lot harder, but since I've been making furniture, oak is better depending on whatever you want, you know. Oak will give you a better carving. Oak will give you the best carving.

WILLIHNGANZ: When you say, "the best carving," in terms of what?

WILLIAMS: It looks better. Oak and, but really the best carving comes from Maple. They just give you a better carving. Poplar gives you a nice carving but a better carving

comes in Maple. Those are the best because that wood, it's easy to shape. It's easy to shape but it's harder to work with for some people. But there's different grades of maple you know. You have some soft maple, some hard maple.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, when you're cutting a carving, are you just using chisels and exacto knives or....

WILLIAMS: No, no exacto knives. Chisels and mallets.

WILLIHNGANZ: Chisels and mallets.

WILLIAMS: Chisels and mallets.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you do any kind of (unintelligible) tool, anything like that?

WILLIAMS: No, no.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you use saws at all?

WILLIAMS: I use saws to get away the waste, like, anything to get away excess waste to get you down to your form is okay. But the (unintelligible) tools, it leaves a, it leaves a round mark which is really not, its not the sign of a carver, its just, you know its not the sign of a carver. A carver, has to have, if he's gonna carve, he has to have chisel marks, knife marks, but not round (unintelligible) marks. That's not the sign of a carver.

WILLIHNGANZ: And when you're doing these, do you, do you decide to paint them later in terms of the figure or is that in your head when you start out the piece.

WILLIAMS: The paint, the painting part is the worst part because that's, that the part that you have to, that I think takes the most concentration. Because you have to, colors have to be balanced just right and they have to move just right. They have to be in the right places in order to make the carving look, I want to say look, well basically say look good.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. And do you pretty much work alone?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Always alone. 'Cause I'm really the only person that can do it. My brother's a wood carver but he carves a different style. He does something totally different than what I do so really I am the only one that can do what I do?

WILLIHNGANZ: Is he here in Lexington?

WILLIAMS: No, he's in Colorado.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh, oh.

WILLIAMS: Yeah, he's in Colorado.

WILLIHNGANZ: Does he market his stuff too?

WILLIAMS: He does, but he does it a, all different way. He says he's the last, one of the last hippies left so his thing is totally different. So, his is a totally different theme, so.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, have you been influenced by his style, some of the things he does?

WILLIAMS: Yeah, we both, we both have influence each other, you know. He influenced me probably more than anybody I know. He's my biggest influence.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, so he's sort of your mentor?

WILLIAMS: Well, earlier he was. Earlier he was. Earlier he was. He's probably, like I say, he's one of my biggest influences. Arturo Sandoval. Arturo Sandoval was a big influence with me. Probably one of my biggest influences. Arturo Sandoval taught me how to understand patterns, how to work in a series. Before when I would work I'd, I'd work on one thing and then I'd try to jump to something else. But Arturo taught me what a series was, what a series of works and keep my building and that way I wouldn't be a frustrated artist. Some artist, they'll sit down and they'll draw a picture and they'll paint it and then they get done and they don't have anything else to do. But Arturo taught me, well, you know, you can do one dancer, you don't have to a basketball player, you can just keep going and going and going until you wear the series out. And so that was what he taught me.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, well, lets see here. So, your style, the way you decide to do things and your, your work is really something that you've learned essentially on your own, a little bit from your brother? You haven't gone to school and you haven't really studied the work of other carvers have you or...

WILLIAMS: Not really, well, I mean. I learned from my brother and which, he had a style and so it's a low leaf, a low leaf, a low relief style and so from there, you know from there, I basically studied him. And there are painters and people that I do admire that I did look at their work but I never really did go get a book or get anything. I didn't want, because my style is Southern style coming out of Florida which is in the Southern tradition so in order for me to go learn, like if I, if I was to go learn from, say if I was to go, from a guy, learn from a carver in Africa if I had been younger, well it would have changed my whole style. Now today that I'm older and I understand more what I'm doing and more rooted in what I do, now I do go look at peoples works, but I don't copy them. I don't copy them. But I do like to look at, you know, people's work from South Africa. Peoples work from, from Russia, people that work from all over, just wood carvers period, I like to look at what they do, but I, and I might take some things, like some tricks they have, I might take a pattern but I never do take, say their facial structures, and all that stuff, because it would change what I do, too much.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you try to bring the grain out of the wood or do you try to and hide it?

WILLIAMS: No, always, I always, I never cover it, you know like, even when I paint, my work, its always transparent so you can always see the grain. And I, you know, I learned that from my brother and that just comes from, once you paint something, you sand it back off and then you paint it again, and then you sand it back off. And then you get the paint in the grain, all work, it all works together.

WILLIHNGANZ: So you sand each one of these pieces.

WILLIAMS: Mmm, hmm. Put the paint on first and then you sand it back off.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you use like a wood stain for different things?

WILLIAMS: I use a wood stain, wood stain pigments and basically anything that'll give you, the way we learned it, anything that will give you a color, is what we use. You can use rust, you can use anything, use enough of it to give you a pigment and then you suspend it in the stain. You can suspend it in whatever you can suspend it in, you know.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, what would you say have been the influences on the content of your work?

WILLIAMS: Music, different music. Just living in general, going from one region to another. You know, coming form a deep, deep southern background and then going, you know, going to Colorado where there's more a Hispanic kind of background, western type of a background, and then just, just from dealing with every day living and dealing with people.

WILLIHNGANZ: It looks to me like most of your figures are black figures. Do you do Hispanics or white people or other people?

WILLIAMS: Nu, uh

WILLIHNGANZ: That's it.

WILLIAMS: That's, I mean, its not because I, I don't want to, its just, I just, its never, you know, just never have.

WILLIHNGANZ: Just never have.

WILLIAMS: I just...

WILLIHNGANZ: How has your work changed as you've been doing it?

WILLIAMS: Its changed in the way that when I first started out, I think I was one of the, one of the earlier wood carvers, you know, out of the south to expand the work, to make it bigger. So, I made it bigger you know, more, yeah, I, I think I made it bigger, I made it thicker and I made it more like furniture. A lot of its more like furniture.

WILLIHNGANZ: Is your work more about materials and technique or is it more about really the message you want to hear?

WILLIAMS: It's probably more about the message. The message.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, so you've been working in wood. Now you're looking at starting in stone?

WILLIAMS: Yes, mmm, hmm.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay. Have you ever worked in plaster or anything, any other, marble...

WILLIAMS: No, marble, plaster, nu, uh. I just think, you know, I was kind of looking for a change, just to do something different, just to see what, to see what will happen. That's basically why I'm doing it, to see what will happen. I don't know. I've never done stone, but I know I can get a shape, so I know if I can get a shape, if I can master the tools, I know I can get a shape, I'm going to get some kind of shape, so whether it's the shape that I want, I might get an abstract shape, but I'm gonna get a shape. And that's all that counts. In order to be a sculptor, a carver, you have to be able to get a shape. If you can get a shape then you can do anything.

WILLIHNGANZ: Now, you know Ed Hamilton?

WILLIAMS: Yes. Yeah. The master.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah. He's quite a, he's quite a sculptor. I was at his studio looking at his piece on Lincoln.

WILLIAMS: I heard about that piece.

WILLIHNGANZ: It's quite a piece. Yeah, he, he has it in his studio and its huge. I mean, this things like 14 feet high or whatever, up on a stand anyway. Sort of looking up at it. It's just huge. And then he's cast the whole thing, I guess he put a, some kind of plastic or something over it and then they cast the bronze into that.

WILLIAMS: (unintelligible). Yeah.

WILLIHNGANZ: Haven't you ever been tempted to use like, bronze or something like that?

WILLIAMS: Have you, have you interviewed Gary Peters?

WILLIHNGANZ: No, I don't.

WILLIAMS: Okay, I'm not gonna (unintelligible) but, he's a professor at UK, Dr. Peters, and he's been trying to get me to, to do bronze in a cast. But right now I have never come up with a piece that I really wanted to cast. I haven't yet come up with a piece that's made me say, "Okay, this piece should be in metal." I have, I'm getting there. I'm working towards it. I see that coming. But, yeah, I would love to do it, but not right now. I don't have anything that I really want to do it with.

WILLIHNGANZ: I have a good friend in Ann Arbor, Michigan who is a bookbinder and he does a whole bunch of different binding s for authors, I mean, he does 'em for restorations and stuff but he does 'em for specific authors too. He'll design a cover for presentation copies, so, he does stuff for Isaac Asimov and Stephen King and all these authors and when Stephen King did, did Fire Starter, he had 100 copies of it made with asbestos on the outside and he gave those to his buddies and all, signed copies (laughter—Williams). But, but my buddy has started to get into metal working and he's working in sliver and various metals and he's designing face plates that go on the front of these, these books and things and just sort of expanding his, his repertoire of just things he can do and design. Now, you said you've started to use a little bit of metals here. Have you used any precious metals or any minerals or anything like that?

WILLIAMS: I haven't used anything like that.

WILLIHNGANZ: Mother of pearl or anything...

WILLIAMS: Now, my brother, now he does that. He has canes, you know what marble cane is?

WILLIHNGANZ: I don't believe I do.

WILLIAMS: Well, basically it's just, whenever you just drill, drill a cane, you put a precious metal in, a stone, that's really what it is. And he's started doing that. I'm kinda looking at what he's doing. Seeing the ins and outs. But, the danger of that is, the danger of that is, it could hurt your work in a different kind of way. It can either help it or it could hurt it so you have to be real careful on some of these sculptures on, of not to, not to make it look whimsical. See, you have to have, you have to keep a certain kind of seriousness, a kind of respect to it. Its not, you can't be too whimsical. If it does, it loses its, it loses a lot, it loses a lot.

WILLIHNGANZ: So you don't much approve of, or do basically comic pieces at all?

WILLIAMS: Oh, I do, I do but, you know, I'm just saying, you have to know, with the materials, you have to know where they go, and where they don't go is what I'm saying.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

WILLIAMS: You know, I sat down, I watch my, I watched, I know an artist, this'll give you an example, name Willy Roscoe, Willy made a cane, he made, he made a cane and the cane on this side of the cane it had teeth in it, like raccoon teeth, you know going down, you know what I'm saying. So, then he had some metal going on one side of it and then he had some leather but when you look at the thing, it's a nice looking cane, Willy can pull it off, but if you didn't know it had raccoon teeth in it, you wouldn't know. But he can pull it off, where as some people can't pull it off. That's what I'm saying about knowing your materials because that could have been a disaster. (laughter—both).

WILLIHNGANZ: So, how has your working process changed over time? Have you experimented with things a lot?

WILLIAMS: Yeah. Lately. Lately I've started experimenting. You have to experiment with a lot of things, but lately I've been working, since I've been making benches and a lot of chairs and stuff I've started working with natural forms. So, when I find a piece of wood that's eaten up, now I have a better understanding of how to, to transform that into what I want.

WILLIHNGANZ: Tell us about that bench you're sitting on there.

WILLIAMS: It was, you know, I just, I just started liking the sculpture forms, furniture.

WILLIHNGANZ: You've done an enormous amount of carving on this. What is that carving that you've put on?

WILLIAMS: The carvings begin with fish, just, you know just fish more, this is one of my favorite symbols. You want to carve, you want to carve something quick like this, that's a quick image to put on.

WILLIHNGANZ: And what do you expect people to do with that particular stand?

WILLIAMS: They can either sit on it, some people use it as a table. Some people sit on it. Some people put it outside.

WILLIHNGANZ: How many of these have you made?

WILLIAMS: 'Bout four or five. You know, some women use them as, women, women tend to be the biggest market for them. They like them. Some people just do different things with them.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay.

WILLIAMS: Either you sit on it, some people, I would just use it as a sculpture itself.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, let me ask you some other things here. What, you know, when you look at the world of sculpture, wood sculpture, how has technology effected the wood sculpture?

WILLIAMS: Not a lot of guys, again, they can just, just, they can do a template, they can take this carving right here and, you know, basically, you know make a duplicate of it, you know, just by the computer scanning over the top of it. So, that's changed.

WILLIHNGANZ: How's that, what's the effect of that mean. Does that mean you get your work stolen.

WILLIAMS: You could get your work stolen, but also, it, it, it, it hurts them in a lot of ways because a lot of times you don't know if the artist really did it. But, it's mainly on a lot of little small sculptures that people call tourist sculptures. You know, a lot of those are made, a lot of those are made in China, you know, and a lot of times the Chinese would just take a design, they'll mold it and it'll just, you know, they might put it in a machine or they might do blanks of it and you got guys just sitting around just carving it and you know, a lot of stuff you got to be real careful what you buy now, like a lot of the masks you see, they're not really from where they say they are. So, you just have to just be careful. That's what's basically happened. But a lot of times the same, whatever amount of money you would spend, you know going and buying a sculpture from a, from a department store, you would do better just going and contacting the artists within your area, you know. It would be cheaper. It would be cheaper and you'd have an original and you'd have stuff you could pass on.

WILLIHNGANZ: How, how do you promote your work.

WILLIAMS: Through the galleries. Art exchange and the galleries up in Columbus Ohio called the Art Exchange. I'm in a gallery in Columbus, another one called the Kinney Gallery. And through the galleries in, in Morehead, University of Morehead supports me a lot. University of Kentucky, supporting me, and them a lot of its word of mouth, commissions, you know, people just, people call me a lot of times, people come through. It's just by reputation sometimes, a lot of it.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you go to a lot of art fairs?

WILLIAMS: Not anymore. Not anymore.

WILLIHNGANZ: You did at one time though?

WILLIAMS: I did at one time. But a lot of times you can saturate your market if you keep going to the same places. And then, and the road just kind of got to me 'cause you got to pack up every week and break down, pack up and break down, but, so.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you belong to any of the craft guilds, organizations or associations?

WILLIAMS: Nu, huh.

WILLIHNGANZ: You never joined any of them?

WILLIAMS: Never have.

WILLIHNGANZ: Have you ever been to any of their events?

WILLIAMS: I think I was down at one in Morehead. It's been a while. It's been a long time. But I, I used to go to them, I'd say, I used to go to them, but its been a while. It's been a long time.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you ever go to any of the big, the art shows, St. James Art Fair...

WILLIAMS: You know, I just found out about that thing. I, you know, I never knew about it. They've invited me to come. They've sent me things, but I, I just haven't been. I just haven't been.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, we've never seen, I've never seen anything similar to your work at those events. So I think you'd have a wide open field there.

WILLIAMS: I've heard good things about those shows. I've heard good things about it, but you know, I probably should go one year and just look at it and see what the layout is.

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, go Sunday morning when everybody's in church, cause let met tell you, it will be busy then, but later on it will be wall-to-wall people. I mean, you won't be able to walk down the streets (laughter—Williams).

WILLIAMS: Really?

WILLIHNGANZ: I mean it's unbelievable.

WILLIAMS: Oh, man.

WILLIHNGANZ: It is. I mean, its crazy. There are thousands and thousands of people that come through that little area. And its nuts, its nuttier every year too. (laughter—Williams). Okay, what kind of recognition, at this point, have you gotten for your work? Have you won awards in notable shows and things?

WILLIAMS: I won, well, guess I'm not really an awards person, but I won the Governor's Award in '06, I won that. I've won, you know, different awards here and there, but nothing really big. No major awards.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you teach at all?

WILLIAMS: I used to. I used to. But not anymore. Its, you know, in this day and time, there's some people that, some kids that value what I do and they like the wood carving, but a lot of times to get to, to get to do what I do or to get to do what a lot of artists do, it takes a lot more time and I don't know if kids are willing to put in the kind of time that it takes. You have to be real dedicated. I would teach a kid that's really dedicated or a student that really, really wanted to learn it, you know, I would teach 'em, but, like I used to teach all the time but most of my students didn't' really stick with it. A couple of 'em still do, no I guess that's where I'm wrong, 'cause a couple of them they still come by the house and they say, "Mr. Williams, you know, I'm still doing this and that." But they have families now, you know they have kids and obligations, so I tell them, you know, "when you get older, make sure you go back to it, you know, pass it on."

WILLIHNGANZ: Well, that's what a lot of us do, you know. We get caught up with families and then later on we do what we want to do. Okay, have your, your family's obviously been really supportive over the years

WILLIAMS: Oh, they have. Ever since I was a kid. Real supportive.

WILLIHNGANZ: Have you had a family yourself?

WILLIAMS: Oh, yeah. I have, I have two daughters, two daughters, one's 16 and one 26. But they don't carve. They're more into, doing what they do, more into sports. I got one daughter buying a house, so.

WILLIHNGANZ: So, what do you feel is the future of carving?

WILLIAMS: You know, I think we'll all, that's a good question, that's a good question. There's a lot of people still carving. I don't think it will ever, ever go away, you know. But, I wish it was more, its kind of a little of a dying art, but I kind of wish it was, but then I would say, recently though, recently a lot of Kentucky artists are becoming better known. I see a lot Kentucky carvings, you know, in different places that I go to. You know, Minnie Atkins was a big boost to everybody and a couple of other artists that have been out there, you know, making the way.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do you contact them? Are you in touch with those folks?

WILLIAMS: No, I used to see them out at Morehead, at the Morehead, at the, what's it called, oh, Minnie Atkins has a show, A Day in the Country that we all go to, so I see, you know see them, see people there and the folk art museum up in, up in Louisville you know, got a lot of good stuff.

WILLIHNGANZ: Do they market your stuff?

WILLIAMS: They used to when I first started, but I kind of lost touch with them. When I first started I was doing, I was doing clothing. I was doing more clothes and bags and stuff. I was doing bags and stuff like that.

WILLIHNGANZ: You mean you make handbags?

WILLIAMS: Handbags, leather bags and stuff like that.

WILLIHNGANZ: Oh.

WILLIAMS: But I wasn't carving at the time. So. But they, they, they promoted some of my stuff too.

WILLIHNGANZ: Have you been to the Artisan Center in Berea.

WILLIAMS: I just got in contact, I think it was Wednesday I just got in contact with them. So, I did do some stuff with them. I'll be doing more stuff with that organization too.

WILLIHNGANZ: Yeah, yeah. Good, good contact for doing stuff. Okay, any advice you would have for a young person wanting to get into doing sculptures or doing carving?

WILLIAMS: (laughter—Williams) Patience. Patience. And the one thing I would tell them is, you know, like what you do, even if, even if you don't think its done as well at that time, you'll, as you'll get older, you'll look back and say, "That earlier piece was my best work." So, that would be my advice to them. Like what you do and have patience.

WILLIHNGANZ: Okay, thank you very much. I appreciate it.