

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Tyree Guyton

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Guyton, Tyree, 1955-
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton,
Dates:	June 26, 2007 and March 8, 2007
Bulk Dates:	2007
Physical Description:	9 Betacame SP videocassettes (3:46:09).
Abstract:	Public artist Tyree Guyton (1955 -) founded the Heidelberg Project which, along with his other public art projects in Detroit, succeeded in bringing the world's attention to the East Side of Detroit, largely abandoned after the 1967 riots. Guyton was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on June 26, 2007 and March 8, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2007_078
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Public artist and Heidelberg Project founder Tyree Guyton was born on August 24, 1955 in Detroit, Michigan to George Guyton and Betty Solomon Guyton. He grew up on Heidelberg Street and Ellery on Detroit's East Side near legendary "Paradise Valley." Guyton attended Ralph J. Bunche Elementary School, Miller Junior High School and Northern High School, but the accidental fatal shooting of his cousin caused him to drop out of Martin Luther King, Jr. High School in 1972 to join the United States Army.

Guyton was released from the U.S. Army in 1973. He returned to Detroit, working at Chrysler's Jefferson Assembly Plant and the Ford Motor Company. In 1980, Guyton began art classes at Detroit's College for Creative Studies and at Marygrove College, where as a painter and sculptor he was mentored by Charles McGhee. McGhee introduced Guyton to the works of Romare Bearden, Jacob Lawrence, and Robert Blackwell. He was also greatly influenced by Al Loving, artist in residence at Eastern Michigan University. During this period, Guyton joined the Detroit Fire Department, serving there through 1984. In 1986, shocked by urban violence, he responded by painting found objects, throwing the objects into the trees and nailing stuffed animals and dolls to abandoned houses as memorials. Guyton's signature style featured bright clashing polka dots. He has been featured on *NBC Nightly News*, *Nightline* and the *Oprah Winfrey Show*. Through his art, Guyton succeeded in bringing the world's attention to the East Side of Detroit, largely abandoned after the 1967 riots.

Since 1988, Guyton has been a teacher or artist in residence at Marygrove College, City of Detroit, Syracuse University School of Fine Art, Cranbrook Museum, Detroit Institute for the Arts (DIA), Harvard University, University of Michigan, St. Olaf College, Ohio State University, New School for Social Research, Intuit Art Center, Central Michigan University and Brazil's Universidade Federal Da Bahia. Guyton's work became a part of the curriculum at Wayne State University under an honors course called Art Community and Social Action: The Heidelberg Project, under which, Guyton helped to develop. He has received the David A. Hammond Memorial Scholarship, the Spirit of Detroit Award and the Humanity in the Arts Award. Guyton's work can be found at the

Studio Museum of Harlem, Kresge Art Museum, Detroit Institute of Art, the Delaware Art Institute and the University of Michigan Museum of Art.

Guyton is married to Jenenne Whitfield and has five children: Tyree, Jr, Towan, Omar, James and Tylisa.

Guyton was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 8, 2007.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Tyree Guyton was conducted by Denise Gines and Larry Crowe on June 26, 2007 and March 8, 2007, in Detroit, Michigan, and was recorded on 9 Betacame SP videocassettes. Public artist Tyree Guyton (1955 -) founded the Heidelberg Project which, along with his other public art projects in Detroit, succeeded in bringing the world's attention to the East Side of Detroit, largely abandoned after the 1967 riots.

Restrictions

Restrictions on Access

Restrictions may be applied on a case-by-case basis at the discretion of The HistoryMakers®.

Restrictions on Use

All use of materials and use credits must be pre-approved by The HistoryMakers®. Appropriate credit must be given. Copyright is held by The HistoryMakers®.

Related Material

Information about the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview, as well as correspondence with the interview subject is stored electronically both on The HistoryMakers® server and in two databases maintained by The HistoryMakers®, though this information is not included in this finding aid.

Controlled Access Terms

This interview collection is indexed under the following controlled access subject terms.

Persons:

Guyton, Tyree, 1955-

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Gines, Denise (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Stearns, Scott (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Guyton, Tyree, 1955---Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Public Artist

HistoryMakers® Category:

ArtMakers

Administrative Information

Custodial History

Interview footage was recorded by The HistoryMakers®. All rights to the interview have been transferred to The HistoryMakers® by the interview subject through a signed interview release form. Signed interview release forms have been deposited with Jenner & Block, LLP, Chicago.

Preferred Citation

The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, June 26, 2007 and March 8, 2007.
The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection, 1900 S. Michigan Avenue, Chicago, Illinois.

Processing Information

This interview collection was processed and encoded on 5/30/2023 by The HistoryMakers® staff. The finding aid was created adhering to the following standards: DACS, AACR2, and the Oral History Cataloging Manual (Matters 1995).

Other Finding Aid

A Microsoft Access contact database and a FileMaker Pro tracking database, both maintained by The HistoryMakers®, keep track of the administrative functions involved in scheduling, researching, and producing the interview.

Detailed Description of the Collection

Series I: Original Interview Footage

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_001_001, TRT: 0:28:44 ?

Tyree Guyton was born on August 24, 1955 in Detroit, Michigan to Betty Solomon Guyton and George Guyton. His maternal great-grandparents were sharecroppers on a farm in Macon, Georgia, where they raised the landowner's children. Guyton's maternal grandfather, a musician who often traveled by boxcar, met mobster Al Capone while performing in Chicago, Illinois. Later, his maternal grandfather moved his family to Detroit in search of better opportunities, and obtained work in a scrap metal yard. Guyton's mother grew up in Paradise Valley, the cultural and economic hub of Detroit's African American community, where she worked in a pharmacy as a teenager. She became pregnant at sixteen years old, and did not finish high school. Guyton's father was born in Macon, Mississippi, and moved to Detroit as a young man. There, he had families with two women, one of whom was Guyton's mother. Although Guyton was not close with his father, he describes their likeness to one another.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_001_002, TRT: 0:29:23 ?

Tyree Guyton lived with his mother and ten siblings on Heidelberg Street in Detroit, Michigan. His father was mostly absent, and his mother supported the family through welfare. During inspections, Guyton's mother answered the state workers' questions, while he and his siblings hid their television set so as not to lose their public aid status. His great-grandparents lived down the street in a house painted with polka dots, and hosted Sunday dinners. Guyton's family belonged to the Bibleway Church of God in Christ, where his maternal great-grandmother served as a church elder. The neighborhood was close-knit, and Guyton attended summer programs at the Our Lady of Sorrow Church. He was encouraged by his art teacher at Ralph Bunche Elementary School, and often drew comic book characters in his school notebooks. However, Guyton's family did not support his artistic talent, as they did not consider art to be a suitable profession for an African American man. Guyton also remembers the riots in Detroit in 1967.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_001_003, TRT: 0:28:09 ?

Tyree Guyton's neighborhood in Detroit, Michigan transitioned from mostly German to mostly African American during his childhood. At the time, the Black Panther Party, the Nation of Islam and the Shrine of the Black Madonna were popular in Detroit, and Guyton listened to Malcolm X and Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. on the radio. Gangs were active in the neighborhood, and Guyton's mother struggled to care for her eleven children, often foregoing bill payments. Due to his difficult home life, Guyton struggled in class and had to attend summer school in order to enter Sidney D. Miller Junior High School. There, Guyton was mentored by his track coach; but, influenced by his mother's depression, lost the motivation to continue his studies. At sixteen years old, Guyton left school and enlisted in the U.S. Army. He hoped to serve in Vietnam, where his uncle and two brothers were stationed; but, upon experiencing discrimination from white soldiers, he became disillusioned with the U.S. military.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_001_004, TRT: 0:31:13 ?

Tyree Guyton was playing with a relative's gun when he shot and killed his cousin at fifteen years old. Guyton was ostracized by his family; and, in 1972, joined the U.S. Army. There, he experienced racial discrimination, and once

fought a white soldier who spat on him. Guyton initially used exercise to cope, but ultimately left the U.S. Army. While waiting for his discharge to be approved, Guyton was stationed at Fort Riley in Kansas alongside soldiers returning from Vietnam, and tasked with destroying fields of marijuana, which the government had grown to study its effects on soldiers. In 1973, Guyton returned to Detroit, Michigan, where he enrolled in GED courses. He obtained a position at the Ford Motor Company in 1974, and was promoted to inspector. During this time, Guyton had his first child with his girlfriend, and continued to create art. He also describes the impact of the Vietnam War upon his family members, who returned from combat with injuries and drug addictions.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_001_005, TRT: 0:29:31 ?

Tyree Guyton considered suicide after accidentally shooting and killing his cousin at fifteen years old, but endured with the support of his maternal grandfather, Sam Mackey. When Guyton was nineteen years old, his wife was murdered by drug dealers. From that time, he raised their two sons as a single father with welfare assistance. He earned his GED certificate, and enrolled at the Center for Creative Studies, an art school in Detroit, Michigan. Guyton then transferred to Detroit's Marygrove College, where he met Charles McGee, an African American artist in residence at Eastern Michigan University. For nearly four years, Guyton studied under McGee, who introduced him to black art. In 1985, Guyton moved to Tulsa, Oklahoma, leaving his children with his mother. He returned to Detroit when his grandmother and uncle fell ill, and found that crack cocaine use had spread through his community on Heidelberg Street. In 1986, Guyton began cleaning the neighborhood's empty lots, thus launching the Heidelberg Project.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_001_006, TRT: 0:31:13 ?

Tyree Guyton began cleaning the empty lots on Heidelberg Street in 1986, which had been neglected by the City of Detroit, Michigan. He decorated the lots with found object sculptures, which initially elicited criticism and confusion from the community. Guyton persisted; and, in 1990, the Heidelberg Project was featured in People and Newsweek magazines. Due to the City of Detroit's orthodox view of art, Guyton was charged with littering and malicious mischief. Despite academic testimony on his behalf, Guyton was convicted and sentenced to community service. Eventually, Guyton's project garnered worldwide attention, and he was invited to work with communities in South America and Australia. Guyton describes the symbolism in his artwork, which often incorporated lost shoes. On one occasion, Guyton filled a street with shoes to bring attention to police brutality against Detroit's homeless residents. Guyton also created the Party Animal House, Baby Doll House and numerous stuffed animal memorials in Detroit.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_001_007, TRT: 0:14:41 ?

Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project was almost completely demolished by Mayor Coleman Young's administration in 1991, but Guyton continued installing decorative sculptures at abandoned homes on Heidelberg Street in Detroit, Michigan. Over the years, the Heidelberg Project attracted many visitors, including celebrities like Beatrice Arthur, Run DMC, Russell Simmons and Pete Steeger. The project also led Guyton to meet his wife, businesswoman Jenenne Whitfield, in 1993. With her help, the Heidelberg Project was certified as a non-profit organization. In 1999, the City of Detroit again demolished nearly half of Guyton's installations, but he persisted in his work. At the time of the interview, the Heidelberg Project had been active for over twenty years, and Guyton was awarded funds from the Joyce Foundation to create a sculpture on

the campus of Wayne State University in Detroit. The university announced a course about the Heidelberg Project and social change, and published book on Guyton and his art.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_002_008, TRT: 0:27:00 ?

Tyree Guyton published 'Connecting the Dots: Tyree Guyton's Heidelberg Project,' a twenty-year retrospective on his public art project in Detroit, Michigan. He was invited to teach a course on social action and public art at Wayne State University in Detroit, and was commissioned to build 'Invisible Doors,' a steel sculpture, on the university's campus. With the help of his wife, Jenenne Whitfield, Guyton developed the Heidelberg Project into a successful non-profit organization, and purchased the lots where he had placed installations. Guyton also collaborated with Aboriginal communities on public art projects in Australia. He talks about his desire to travel abroad, his philosophy of life and the dots and circles motif in his art. Guyton also describes the growth of the Heidelberg Project, and his hopes for its future. He shares his message to future generations, and concludes this part of the interview by reflecting upon his life.

Video Oral History Interview with Tyree Guyton, Section A2007_078_002_009, TRT: 0:06:15 ?

Tyree Guyton narrates his photographs.