

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Nicole Smith

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers®1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Smith, Nicole, 1940-2016
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Nicole Smith,
Dates:	March 2, 2012
Bulk Dates:	2012
Physical Description:	7 uncompressed MOV digital video files (3:23:42).
Abstract:	Curator Nicole Smith (1940 - 2016) founded the Nicole Gallery in 1973 which came to represent one of the finest collections of world renowned Haitian, African and African American artists. Smith was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on March 2, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2012_093
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Curator Nicole Smith was born in the Republic of Haiti. In 1971, she began her career as a curator at the Centre d'art in Port-au Prince, Haiti. In search of new adventures, Smith moved to the United States in 1973.

At first, she sold Haitian work from her home and automobile before opening the Nicole Gallery in 1986. Smith was instrumental in bringing Shona stone sculpture from Zimbabwe into prominence and the Nicole Gallery maintained one of the most comprehensive collections of Shona sculpture in the United States. The gallery came to represent one of the finest collections of world renowned Haitian, African and African artists. With many of these artists, Smith represented them and fostered their careers including Nigerian artists such as N'Namdi Okonkwo and the Haitian artist Franck Louissaint. Smith also championed the careers of Chicago Artists Allen Stringfellow and George Carter. In 1988, Smith began working with the Haitian artist Fritz Millevoix who had just moved to the United States. She helped bring his brilliantly colorful and dreamlike paintings of villages to prominence. In 2005, she curated an exhibit of Fritz Millevoix paintings at the Daley Civic Center in cooperation with Chicago's Department of Cultural Affairs. In 2010, after the Haiti earthquake, Smith organized a fundraiser at the Nicole Gallery to benefit displaced artists who were affiliated with the Centre d'Art and also to rebuild the center itself. Also in 2010, the Nicole Gallery featured the work of Afro-Caribbean influence artists Alexandra Barbot and the microscopic sculptor Willard Wignan. The Nicole Gallery closed in 2011 after celebrating its twenty-fifth anniversary.

Throughout her career, Smith has been celebrated for her dedication to Haitian, African and African American art. In 2002, she was featured on the cover of Chicago Gallery News. Smith was honored by the Chicago Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta Sorority in 2009 and in 2010, she was named a Chicago Defender Woman of Excellence. Nicole Smith lives in Chicago, Illinois.

Nicole Smith was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on March 2, 2012.

Nicole Smith passed away on March 29, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Nicole Smith was conducted by Larry Crowe on March 2, 2012, in Chicago, Illinois, and was recorded on 7 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Curator Nicole Smith (1940 - 2016) founded the Nicole Gallery in 1973 which came to represent one of the finest collections of world renowned Haitian, African and African American artists.

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:

Smith, Nicole, 1940-2016

Crowe, Larry (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews

Smith, Nicole, 1940-2016 --Interviews

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Curator

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 Nicole Smith, March 2, 2012. 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 Nicole Smith, Section A2012_093_001_001, TRT: 1:29:23 ?

Nicole Smith was born on December 8, 1940 in Port-au-Prince, Haiti to Sibrune Beaubrun Smith and Pierre Smith. Smith's paternal grandfather was Jamaican, and raised fourteen children. Her father was his youngest child, and was born in Soissons, Haiti in 1896. Smith's mother was born in 1898 to a woman of Taino descent and a Frenchman named Monsieur Beaubrun in Duval, Haiti. She grew up in Port-au-Prince, where her father worked as a coffee exporter. He remarried

after Smith's maternal grandmother died. Although neither of Smith's parents finished school, her father worked as a coffee trader, and her mother was a skilled storyteller. They were married for five decades and had nine children, of whom Smith was the second youngest. Smith lived in the mountain village of Kenscoff, Haiti until she was eight years old. At that time, her family moved to Pétion-Ville, a suburb of Port-au-Prince. There, Smith listened to classical music and attended the St. Pierre Church with her family.

Video Oral History Interview with Nicole Smith, Section A2012_093_001_002, TRT: 2:30:09 ?

Nicole Smith grew up in Kenscoff, a village located in the foothills of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She attended Les Soeurs de la Sagesse, where she was taught by black Haitians and white nuns from Canada and Europe. From a young age, Smith was influenced by her mother, Sibrune Beaubrun Smith; and her aunt, who was a real estate entrepreneur and supported her husband after he lost his fortune during the German occupation of France. At this point in the interview, Smith describes the history of the Haitian Revolution, and remembers learning about the heroism of revolutionary leader Toussaint L'Ouverture. Smith also talks about the Haitian interest in art, which became a popular endeavor during the presidency of Francois Duvalier, who was elected in 1957 and exiled tens of thousands of citizens during his twenty-year rule. Smith concludes this part of the interview by talking about the history of voodoo in Haiti, including the role of Vodoun priest Dutty Boukman in the slave rebellion of 1791.

Video Oral History Interview with Nicole Smith, Section A2012_093_001_003, TRT: 3:30:53 ?

Nicole Smith enrolled at the École Anne-Marie Javouhey in Pétion-Ville, Haiti in 1965. While there, she developed an undiagnosed illness that prevented her from attending school. Eventually, in 1968, Smith was able to continue her education at the École Externat la Providence in Port-au-Prince, Haiti. She went on to attend École Elie Dubois, a professional school for women in Port-au-Prince; and the Durham College of Commerce in Kingston, Jamaica, where she learned to speak English fluently. At this point, Smith reflects upon her experiences in Haiti as the child of a light skinned mother and dark skinned father. She also describes the Haitian emphasis on music, art and manners. She talks about the Haitian Creole language, the country's public education system and the high rate of illiteracy among the citizens. Additionally, Smith describes her experiences with Haitian Vodoun, which she learned about as an adult at the Le Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince.

Video Oral History Interview with Nicole Smith, Section A2012_093_001_004, TRT: 4:29:36 ?

Nicole Smith began planning to leave Haiti in the 1960s, during the presidency of Francois Duvalier. After his election in 1957, Duvalier faced a coup d'état led by Alix Pasquet, who had been exiled to the United States. After the rebels were defeated, Duvalier began executing their families and his other political opponents. As a young adult, Smith left Haiti to attend the Durham College of Commerce in Kingston, Jamaica. In 1971, she returned to Haiti and became a curator at Le Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince. There, she was influenced by curators Francine Murat and Pierre Monosiet and artists Castera Bazile, Hector Hyppolite, Philomé Obin, Wilson Bigaud and Rigaud Benoit. When Benoit visited the center, Smith asked to buy one of his paintings. He decided to give her a piece for free, and inspired a number of other artists to do the same. After two years at Le Centre d'Art, Smith moved to Evanston, Illinois. She initially lived with her brother's family, and hosted her first art show at a friend's home.

Video Oral History Interview with Nicole Smith, Section A2012_093_001_005, TRT: 5:29:53 ?

Nicole Smith worked for two years as curator at Le Centre d'Art in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and then joined her brother in Evanston, Illinois in 1973. She

secured a permanent visa with help from a friend in the U.S. Department of the Interior. After coming to the United States, Smith held her first public art show at the Aurelia Gallery in Evanston, where she exhibited fifty-three pieces of Haitian art. Subsequently, she showed the collection at a number of libraries and museums, including the DuSable Museum of African American History in Chicago, Illinois. In 1986, Smith opened the Nicole Gallery at 1723 North Halsted Street in Chicago. The gallery relocated to 734 North Wells Street in 1987, and then to Huron Street in 1996. At this point in the interview, Smith describes her acquaintance with Chicago Mayor Harold Washington, dancer Katherine Dunham, gallerist Eva-Maria Worthington and the Nigerian sculptor Nnamdi Okonkwo. She also talks about the legacy of Chicago's founder, Jean Baptiste Point du Sable.

Video Oral History Interview with Nicole Smith, Section A2012_093_001_006, TRT: 6:29:43 ?

Nicole Smith was the owner and curator of the Nicole Gallery in Chicago, Illinois. Early in her career, she represented the Haitian painter Frank Loussaint. She went on to curate exhibitions for such notable artists as collagist Allen Stringfellow; William Carter, who helped found the South Side Community Art Center; Henry Munyaradzi, a Shona sculptor from Zimbabwe; and the oil painter Fritz Millevoix. Her exhibit, 'Paper and Stone,' combined Stringfellow's collages and Munyaradzi's sculptures. At the time that the Nicole Gallery was founded in the 1980s, it was one of the few black-owned art galleries in Chicago. In the subsequent years, Smith's colleagues included Isobel Neal, George R. N'Namdi, Samuel Akainyah and Bayo Iribhogbe. At this point in the interview, Smith describes her artistic philosophy, and shares her advice to aspiring black artists. She also talks about the decision to close her gallery location in the historically black Bronzeville neighborhood.

Video Oral History Interview with Nicole Smith, Section A2012_093_001_007, TRT: 7:24:05 ?

Nicole Smith was the owner and curator of the Nicole Gallery in Chicago, Illinois, where she represented notable black artists like Allen Stringfellow. At this point in the interview, Smith talks about the Haitian art aesthetic, and the importance of choosing an appropriate frame for a painting. She also describes her hopes and concerns for the African American community and the Haitian community, and talks about her family in Haiti and Chicago. Smith reflects upon her life and legacy, and concludes the interview by describing how she would like to be remembered.