

Finding Aid to The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History with Thelma Golden

Overview of the Collection

Repository:	The HistoryMakers® 1900 S. Michigan Avenue Chicago, Illinois 60616 info@thehistorymakers.com www.thehistorymakers.com
Creator:	Golden, Thelma
Title:	The HistoryMakers® Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden,
Dates:	August 9, 2016
Bulk Dates:	2016
Physical Description:	13 uncompressed MOV digital video files (6:10:28).
Abstract:	Museum director and curator Thelma Golden (1965 -) became the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2005, having served as a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1990s. Golden was interviewed by The HistoryMakers® on August 9, 2016, in New York, New York. This collection is comprised of the original video footage of the interview.
Identification:	A2016_006
Language:	The interview and records are in English.

Biographical Note by The HistoryMakers®

Museum director and curator Thelma Golden was born on September 22, 1965 in Queens, New York. In 1983, she graduated from the New Lincoln School, where she trained as a curatorial apprentice at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in her senior year. In 1987, she earned her B.A. degree in art history and African American studies from Smith College. Golden worked first as a curatorial intern at the Studio Museum in Harlem in 1987, then as a curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1988. From 1989 to 1991, she worked as the visual arts director for the Jamaica Arts Center in Queens, New York, where she curated eight shows. Golden was then appointed branch director of the Whitney Museum of American Art's Philip Morris branch in 1991 and curator of the Whitney Museum of American Art in 1996. While at the Whitney, she organized numerous groundbreaking exhibitions, including the 1993 Whitney Biennial and 1994's *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary American Art*. She also organized *Bob Thompson: A Retrospective* (1998), *Heart, Mind, Body, Soul: New Work from the Collection* (1998), and *Hindsight: Recent Work from the Permanent Collection* (1999). Golden also presented projects by artists Alison Saar, Glenn Ligon, Gary Simmons, Romare Bearden, Matthew McCaslin, Suzanne McClelland, Lorna Simpson, Jacob Lawrence, and Leone & MacDonald. She also worked as the special projects curator for contemporary art collectors Peter Norton and Eileen Harris Norton from 1998 to 2000. Golden returned to the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2000, where she was named deputy director for exhibitions and programs, and director and chief curator in 2005. Golden organized numerous exhibitions at the Studio Museum, including *Isaac Julien: Vagabondia* (2000); *Martin Puryear: The Cane Project* (2000); *Glenn Ligon: Stranger* (2001); *Freestyle* (2001); *Black Romantic: The Figurative Impulse in Contemporary Art* (2002); *harlemworld: Metropolis as Metaphor* (2004); *Chris Ofili: Afro Muses* (2005); *Frequency* (2005–2006); *Africa Comics* (2006–2007); and *Kori Newkirk: 1997–2007* (2007–2008). Golden also lectured at several institutions, including Columbia University, Yale University, and the Royal College of Art in London. In addition, she contributed essays about Lorna Simpson, Carrie Mae Weems, Bill T. Jones, Kara Walker, and Glenn Ligon to various publications.

Golden received honorary degrees from Moore College of Art and Design, Smith College, and the San Francisco

Art Institute. In 2008, she was a member of the advisory team of the Whitney Biennial; and in 2007, a juror for the UK Turner Prize. Golden served on the graduate committee for Bard College's Center for Curatorial Studies, and on the boards of Creative Time in New York and the Institute of International Visual Arts in London. In 2016, she was awarded the Audrey Irmas Award for Curatorial Excellence.

Golden is married to London fashion designer Duro Olowu.

Thelma Golden was interviewed by *The HistoryMakers* on August 9, 2016.

Scope and Content

This life oral history interview with Thelma Golden was conducted by Julieanna L. Richardson on August 9, 2016, in New York, New York, and was recorded on 13 uncompressed MOV digital video files. Museum director and curator Thelma Golden (1965 -) became the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2005, having served as a curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in the 1990s.

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:

Golden, Thelma

Richardson, Julieanna L. (Interviewer)

Hickey, Matthew (Videographer)

Subjects:

African Americans--Interviews
Golden, Thelma--Interviews

African American museum directors--Interviews.

Organizations:

HistoryMakers® (Video oral history collection)

The HistoryMakers® African American Video Oral History Collection

Occupations:

Museum Director

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 Thelma Golden, August 9, 2016. 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 Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_001, TRT: 1:32:03 ?

Thelma Golden was born on September 22, 1965 in Queens, New York to Thelma Eastmond Golden and Arthur Golden, Sr. Her paternal grandmother, Anna Campbell Golden, immigrated to the United States from Jamaica, and was later joined by Golden's paternal great-grandmother, Miriam Garvey. Her maternal grandparents, Larta Eastmond and Evans Eastmond, emigrated from Barbados and settled in Brooklyn, New York, where Golden's grandfather was a construction laborer. Her maternal family were members of the Siloam Presbyterian Church in Brooklyn, New York. Golden's mother attended Brooklyn College, and worked at the New York Telephone Company in New York City. Her father served in the U.S. Army, and attended New York University. He then opened his own insurance brokerage firm, and eventually earned his law degree at Brooklyn Law School to expand his services. Golden's parents met through mutual friends and eloped. Golden grew up in Queens, New York; and often worked in her father's firm as a secretary.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_002, TRT: 2:28:34 ?

Thelma Golden's mother, Thelma Eastmond Golden, lived on her own throughout her young adult life, but was still close to her parents and large extended family. On the other hand, Golden's father, Arthur Golden, Sr., was an only child, and came from a small family. Golden was raised in an affluent African American neighborhood in Queens, New York with her parents, younger brother, Arthur Golden, Jr. and paternal grandmother, Anna Campbell Golden. As the only daughter, Golden's childhood was more restrictive than her brother. While he was allowed to go off on his own, Golden was kept at home under the tutelage of her mother and grandmother, who taught her proper etiquette and decorum. Both women had differing ideas about Golden's chore responsibilities, but nevertheless worked together seamlessly to take care of the household. Golden's family attended the First Presbyterian Church of Jamaica in Queens. As a child, Golden was inquisitive, and enjoyed listening to her parents' conversations.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_003, TRT: 3:28:38 ?

Thelma Golden's parents, Thelma Eastmond Golden and Arthur Golden, Sr., were unhappy with the New York City public school system, so they sent Golden to the Buckley Country Day School in Roslyn, New York. Although Golden and her brother, Arthur Golden, Jr., were the first to integrate the school, they did not experience any discrimination while there. It was at the Buckley Country Day School that Golden was first exposed to the study of art history. Golden also began visiting OK Harris Gallery, and attending the productions of the Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Negro Ensemble Company. Golden was also deeply inspired by the films 'Mahogany' and 'The Wiz,' and became interested in fashion and the black aesthetic. Golden attended the Millbrook School briefly before transferring to the New Lincoln School in New York City, where she had a close relationship with the head of the school, Verne Oliver. While there, Golden became an intern at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_004, TRT: 4:26:03 ?

Thelma Golden's mentor at the New Lincoln School, Verne Oliver, encouraged

her to attend an all-girls college, but Golden was more interested in co-ed liberal arts schools. After visiting a few schools, Golden decided to attend Smith College, an all-girls school in Northampton, Massachusetts. There, Golden studied under Walter Morris-Hale and James Baldwin, who taught Golden about a number of artists, including Beauford Delaney and David Driskell. During the summers, Golden worked in retail in New York City; and during her sophomore year, interned in the public relations department with Cheryl Lynn Bruce at the Studio Museum in Harlem under director Mary Schmidt Campbell. At that time, the museum's curators were diversifying their collections and exhibitions to include minority artists. Through this internship, Golden developed an interest in becoming a curator. She graduated from Smith College with a bachelor's degree in art history, and became a curatorial fellow at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_005, TRT: 5:25:02 ?

Thelma Golden was a curatorial fellow at the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York City, following her graduation from Smith College. Golden helped curate exhibitions, and worked with artists like Kerry James Marshall through the museum's artists in residency program. At the end of her fellowship, Golden applied to be a curatorial assistant at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City. She failed the typing exam during her first interview, but the interviewer allowed her to take it again. Golden was hired for the position, becoming the first African American curatorial assistant at the museum. Working under Jennifer Russell and Richard Armstrong, Golden assisted the lead curators, and learned about the responsibilities of the curator. After leaving that position, Golden worked as an assistant to Kellie Jones, the daughter of Amiri Baraka, at the Jamaica Center for Arts and Learning. She then became the exhibition coordinator for the Whitney Museum of American Art at Philip Morris.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_006, TRT: 6:32:49 ?

Thelma Golden became the director of the Whitney Museum of American Art at Phillip Morris under David A. Ross, who was the director of the main location in New York City. In this role, Golden curated exhibitions featuring African American artists like Carrie Mae Weems, Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson. Golden also acquired a large drape painting by Sam Gilliam called 'Golden Element inside Gold.' In addition to her work as a director, Golden visited local studios to develop relationships with artists and commission their work. Golden also worked with private collectors, such as Raymond J. McGuire, to build their collections. In 1991, Golden returned to the Whitney Museum of American Art, where she became the associate curator. She organized a retrospective exhibition on painter Bob Thompson, and the exhibition, 'Black Male' in 1994, which received negative reviews from the press, who assumed Golden was a Jewish curator. She remembers curator Lowery Stokes Sims.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_007, TRT: 7:31:39 ?

Thelma Golden curated the 'Black Male' exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City in 1994. Her parents attended the opening, as did other notable artists and historians like Henry Louis "Skip" Gates, Jr. The 'Black Male' exhibition showcased works that displayed the African American male experience, and incorporated themes like sexuality and masculinity. The exhibition was received well at the opening, but Golden was criticized by media, as they felt the show was derogatory towards African Americans. Many critics published articles, and went on local radio shows to attack Golden not knowing that she was an African American woman. With the support of her colleagues and parents, Golden went to the press and fought against the media's backlash to

explain the purpose of the exhibition. Along with curating exhibitions, Golden also expanded the museum's collection by fundraising and acquiring more artwork by African American artists.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_008, TRT: 8:32:10 ?

Thelma Golden left her position as curator at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York City, to become the chief curator and deputy director at the Studio Museum in Harlem under director Lowery Stokes Sims. In this role, she curated several exhibitions including the F series, which started with the exhibition 'Freestyle,' in 2001. It showcased the talent of young black artists such as Julie Mehretu and Mark Bradford. In order to find emerging black artists, Golden visited private studios and met with art dealer Christian Haye. At the museum, Golden was also able to develop a curatorial department that focused on education and providing hands-on experience to curatorial students and aspiring curators. With the help of the museum's board members, she was also able to raise money for the museum to expand the collection and physical space. In 2005, Sims stepped down as president, and Golden became the director and chief curator at the museum. She remembers working with artists Glenn Ligon and Lorna Simpson.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_009, TRT: 9:28:00 ?

Thelma Golden worked as the curator at the Studio Museum in Harlem in New York City. Golden created exhibitions of African American works from both established and emerging artists such as sculptors, Richard Hunt and Martin Puryear. Golden also showed Painter Glenn Ligon's collection of six paintings at the museum, inspired by James Baldwin's essay, 'Stranger in the Village.' In addition to the museum's exhibitions, Golden worked with the artists in residency program at the Studio Museum in Harlem, which allowed rising artists to practice and develop their style and craft. Throughout her career, Golden developed strong relationships with many of the artists that she worked with, which influenced her curatorial style. Lowery Stokes Sims stepped down as president and director of the museum in 2005, and Golden became the director and chief curator. Golden describes the structure and space of the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_010, TRT: 10:36:16 ?

Thelma Golden became the director and chief curator of the Studio Museum in Harlem in 2005. As director, Golden created new educational programs at the museum for the local students. She also expanded both the physical space and art collection of the museum. In 2016, another expansion, designed by architect David Adjaye, who was also the lead designer of the National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C., was scheduled for the museum. During the four yearlong project, Golden planned programs and exhibitions in the surrounding area to engage residents in the community. Golden coined the term, post-black, to refer to a new generation of African American art, but the term caused controversy within the art world. In 2006, Golden met fashion designer, Duro Olowu, at a party through mutual friends. Even though Olowu was based in London, England and Golden lived in New York City, the two began dating, and were married in New York City in 2008.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_011, TRT: 11:34:04 ?

Thelma Golden married fashion designer, Duro Olowu, in 2008. Due to their professions, the two have a long-distance marriage, with Olowu based in London and Golden in New York City. They divide their time between the two locations, and also in Lagos, Nigeria, where Olowu was born. Golden and Olowu's family backgrounds and ideologies were quite different, but they

bonded over their love of family. In addition to acting as the director of the Studio Museum in Harlem, she was also a Henry Crown Fellow at the Aspen Institute in Washington, D.C. and a presidential appointee to the Committee for the Preservation of the White House under President Barack Obama, whom she hosted at the museum with the first lady, Michelle Obama. Golden was also invited by the president to the state dinner for French president, Francois Hollande, held at the White House in 2014. Throughout her career, she worked closely with prominent people in the art world such as Peggy Cooper Cafritz, Holly Solomon and other women museum directors.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_012, TRT: 12:32:40 ?

Thelma Golden reflects upon the life and works of Maya Angelou. Golden also remembers the influential women in her life, including her mother, Thelma Eastmond Golden, and her school principal, Verne Oliver. Golden shares her hopes and concerns for the African American community; and reflects upon her life and legacy. She concludes the interview by narrating her photographs.

Video Oral History Interview with Thelma Golden, Section A2016_006_001_013, TRT: 13:02:30 ?

Thelma Golden narrates her photographs.